

# Sheffield Hallam University

*The cultural construction of history in museums and heritage attractions.*

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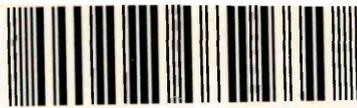
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THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY  
IN MUSEUMS AND HERITAGE ATTRACTIONS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Council for National Academic Awards for the degree of Master of  
Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the curator in the interpretation of history in museums and heritage attractions. The research uses data from twelve case studies collected from observation and interviews to examine the decision-making processes undertaken by curators in devising exhibitions and displays.

The study examines the different interpretative opportunities available to the curator in determining their construction of history, in the selection of artefacts and the choice of historical interpretative approaches and interpretative techniques. The study demonstrates that the curator has to mediate his or her interpretative choices with a number of constraints. These constraints include the availability of artefacts, finance, the market, institutional structure and the ethics of the museum profession.

In examining this decision-making process, the study argues that the construction of history in museums and heritage attractions represents a microcosm of the wider processes involved in the cultural construction of history. The study examines the role of history in society in upholding current beliefs and practices. Museums, as cultural institutions concerned with the past, are on the forefront of presenting society with its selective tradition, and as such are symbols of present values and attitudes. Curators, by virtue of their institutional role, are part of this wider cultural dynamic. Therefore their constructions of history in exhibitions, remain firmly within the current socio-political boundary, even though those constructions may also act to test and extend that same boundary.

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## CONTENTS

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS		p.4
CHAPTER ONE-	INTRODUCTION	p.5-16
	Introduction	
	The research problem	
	Methodology	
	The Analysis	
	Conclusion	
CHAPTER TWO-	PUTTING THE PAST ON DISPLAY	p.17-42
	Introduction	
	The collections	
	The use of reconstruction	
	Interpretative panels	
	The use of sound	
	The audio-visual	
	Live interpretation	
	The interactive exhibit	
	The use of modern technology	
	The use of publications	
	The 'friendly' museum	
	Making history familiar	
	Whose history ?	
	Messages	
	Conclusion	
CHAPTER THREE-	THE PAST AND ITS INTERPRETATION	p.43-73
	Introduction	
	What is history?	
	Using the evidence	
	Turning the evidence into history	
	Narrative history	
	Annales School	
	Marxist interpretations	
	People's history	
	Feminist history	
	New historicism	
	Conclusion	
CHAPTER FOUR-	THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF HERITAGE	p.74-100
	Introduction	
	What is heritage?	
	The national heritage	
	The social construction of reality	
	The cultural construction of national heritage	
	The authority of the institution	
	The role of the curator	

CHAPTER FIVE - THE COLLECTION AND ITS INTERPRETATION p.101-117

Introduction  
The power of the object  
The creation of the artefact  
The availability of the past  
Selecting the past  
Exhibiting the past  
Conservers or educators ?  
Conclusion

CHAPTER SIX - MAKING HISTORY p.118-142

Introduction  
The importance of historical research  
The heritage debate  
The search for authenticity  
The objective museum  
Determining the historical approach  
Whose history ?  
History from the bottom up  
The representation of women  
The socio-political boundary  
The values of the curator

CHAPTER SEVEN - INTERPRETING THE MESSAGE p.143-167

Introduction  
Letting the past speak for itself  
Continuing the message  
Education or entertainment ?  
From written history to exhibitions  
The Cognitive map  
The use of popular genres  
Presentation  
The hands-on museum  
Reconstruction  
Sound and the use of live interpreters  
Conclusion

CHAPTER EIGHT - MANAGING THE INSTITUTION p.168-196

Introduction  
The Audience  
Understanding visitor needs  
Education Market  
The Local Community  
The Leisure and Tourism Industries  
Marketing  
Finance  
The Shop and the Cafe  
Sponsorship  
Institutional Structure

Exhibition Planning  
The Institution and the Professional  
Conclusion

CHAPTER NINE- CONCLUSION p.197-201

Constructing the Model  
The Model

APPENDIX I - LIST OF CASE STUDIES A 1-3

APPENDIX II- CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE A 4

APPENDIX III- PERSONNEL INTERVIEWED A 5-6

APPENDIX IV- STANDARD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS A 7-8

APPENDIX V - THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY  
IN MUSEUM AND HERITAGE ATTRACTIONS MODEL A 9

PRIMARY SOURCE BIBLIOGRAPHY

SECONDARY SOURCE BIBLIOGRAPHY

## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations will be used throughout this study:

ARC	Archaeological Resource Centre
D.E.S	Department of Education and Science
Kelham	Kelham Island, Sheffield Industrial Museum
M.A	Museums Association
M.G.C	Museums and Galleries Commission
N.M.L.H	National Museum of Labour History
N.F.H.C	National Fishing Heritage Centre
Y.A.T	York Archaeological Trust
Tolson	Tolson Memorial Museum

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

"Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (George Orwell 1966: p.199).

#### INTRODUCTION

Along with television, radio, drama and printed publications, museums and heritage attractions are one of the media by which society confronts the past. Unlike other communicative media, museums and heritage attractions give the public the opportunity to actually witness the physical traces of the past, in the forms of buildings, objects, photographs and even film and sound. In placing history on display, museums and heritage attractions act as society's collective memory, shaping an understanding of the lives of past generations and providing a definition of the present. Lumley (1988) has characterised late twentieth century museums as;

" a potent social metaphor and as a means whereby societies represent their relationships to their own history and to that of other culture's. Museums, in this sense map out geographies of taste and values [1]" (Lumley 1988: p.2).

Museums and heritage attractions stand at the interface between historical academic scholarship and popular perceptions of the past, using the former to inspire and generate their constructions of history and the latter to ensure those presentations remain accessible to the lay person. This quasi academic status, bolstered by their possession of the actual physical traces of the past, gives museums and heritage attractions a very influential role in shaping how society understands and comes to terms with its past. Myna Trustram, Keeper at the National Museum of Labour History, in an interview conducted during this

research, highlighted the extent of the power and authority of museums, by remarking;

*"We are saying this is what we think your history is. And that's an incredibly powerful and privileged position to be in, because of the status of museums in our society" (Trustram 1992).*

Central to the functioning of museums are curators and interpreters who design and plan the exhibitions. It is they who decide what is worthy of collection and display, they who interpret that evidence and through that interpretation propound certain messages, whether consciously or unconsciously. The curator, because of their institutional role have the power to determine the construction of history in museums and thus influence society's selective tradition by facilitating the absorption of certain interpretations. Indeed Hopper-Greenhill (1988) commented;

*"Curators speak from the security of institutions that are sanctioned within society as places of worth and value. Their words and deeds have a legitimation and power that is accorded them by this institutional context. The institutional context meshes with other institutions within society. Museums operate in a linked network with other agencies that organize and control social life....The discourse of a museum reinforces and is reinforced by governmental, educational and cultural agencies" (Hooper-Greenhill 1988: p.224)*

Although museums and heritage attractions are only part of a wider cultural discourse with the past, their role as guardians of the actual physical traces and 'presence' of the past, means that their construction of history contains a powerful and influential dimension. Within this institutional context curators and interpreters, as the main decision-makers in determining those historical interpretations, are central to the understanding of the cultural construction of history in museums and heritage attractions.

## THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The research set out to look at decision-making in museums and heritage attractions and place it within a wider cultural and social context. In the initial literature review there appeared to be little written on the way curators and interpreters examine and explore the thought processes involved in the creation of an exhibition. Much of the existing literature consists of case histories of good or innovative practice, such as articles in the Museums Journal or Thompson's (1984) Manual of Curatorship. The other main body of literature is in the form of cultural criticisms by commentators such as Horne (1984), Wright (1985) Shanks and Tilley (1987) and Hewison (1987, 1991a 1991b) and the defenders of the new museology like Iddon (1988) and Lewis (1991). Hooper-Greenhill (1992) has pointed out that the;

"lack of examination and interrogation of the professional, cultural and ideological practices of museums has meant ... a failure to examine the basic underlying principles in which current museum and gallery practise rest" (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: p.3).

There are some obvious exceptions, in which writers such as Lumley in The Museum Time Machine (1988), Vergo (1989) and Kavanagh (1991a, 1991b) have sought to provide a more cultural and ideological examination of museum practices. Lowenthal's (1990) seminal work on the role of history in society, The Past is a Foreign Country also places the presentations of museums and historic sites within a broader social and cultural context. This research, by focusing on the way curators and interpreters evaluate and understand their own decision-making process seeks to fill the present gap in the field of museum studies.

In this study, the practice adopted by the Museums and Galleries Commission of using the generic term 'museum' to denote museums, heritage attractions, heritage centres and historic sites, will be used. The term Museum, adopting the 1984 Museum Association's definition therefore denotes:

"an institution which collects, documents, preserves, exhibits and interprets material evidence and associated information for the public benefit" (M.A 1991)

In focusing primarily on examining the perspectives and experiences of a group of museum professionals, the study will adopt the generic term 'curator' to embrace all those individuals involved in the care, conservation, research and interpretation of objects from the past.

#### METHODOLOGY

The research problem demanded a qualitative approach to enable the collection of in depth information which would facilitate a more detailed understanding of the experiences of the organisations under study.

Although it would have been possible to use a quantitative approach in the form of a questionnaire to several hundred curators to gain access to a large quantity of data, this was rejected because this approach would not allow the researcher to gain a true insight into the thought processes of different individuals. Furthermore a quantitative approach would be inflexible because in order to devise a questionnaire it would necessitate the identification of pre-determined categories which would have stifled the naturalistic character of the research. Therefore a relatively small number of case studies were chosen for in depth examination. As Yin (1989) has argued;

"the case study allows the investigator to maintain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events" (Yin 1989: p.14)

Twelve organisations were finally selected to act as case studies. A list of case studies and a brief description of each can be found in Appendix I. In selecting these case studies, it was decided to choose a heterogenous sample so that any trends that emerged from the study could be accorded greater significance. Three variants were chosen: subject area, organisational structure, and the 1991 visitor numbers. Appendix II provides in table form a breakdown of the sample. This sample, known as a mixed variant sample, has the advantage of providing high quality data and as Patton (1987) explains;

"Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the experience and central aspects or impacts of a programme" (Patton 1987: p.51).

Six broad subject areas were selected. These have a predominantly historical character unlike scientific, ethnographic or biographical inspired exhibitions. The subjects chosen were industrial/ social, transport/maritime, archaeological /ancient monument, open air/folk, country house and local history, and were selected on the grounds that the researcher had an existing background knowledge and interest in these areas and was better placed to evaluate the historical content in these displays.

Organisational structure, in terms of ownership was used to ensure the selection of a wide variety of different organisations with differing aims and perspectives. The case studies selected included a range of national organisations like English Heritage and The National Trust; local authority institutions; independent trusts and private ownership. The 1991 visitor numbers were used as a 'rough' guide to indicate the size of the operation in terms of visitor facilities and resources

available to the organisation. The sites chosen attract between a few thousand visitors and nearly half a million visitors a year.

Once the sample technique had been devised, the various organisations were selected. As there were a large number of museums and heritage attractions to choose from, which would provide a sufficiently heterogeneous sample, the case studies were selected within reasonable travelling distance from Sheffield (three hours). The organisations were approached by letter requesting their co-operation. The majority were willing to be involved, and in the three organisations which were unable to take part, suitable substitutes were found. The data collection period ran from the beginning of January 1992 to the end of April of that year.

Three methods of data collection were adopted to enable the research to benefit from the various strengths of each method, and to ensure that the deficiencies of one method would be off set by the others, thus enabling a more rounded understanding of each of the case studies. This method has been termed by Denzil (quoted in Patton 1987) as methodological triangulation and uses a multiple of research methods to study a research problem. In this instance the methods used were observation, documentation analysis and interview.

Each organisation was visited at least twice. Observations were structured into four broad areas: themes and stories depicted, the interpretation of the past, utilisation of interpretative techniques and the extent to which exhibitions were tailored to the audience. The

research was particularly interested in noting the way different institutions interpreted the past. Evidence was sought of different historical approaches, provision of alternative interpretations, the depiction of familiar historical events to introduce the unfamiliar, and the use and presentation of evidence in their constructions of history. Within these broad areas very detailed field notes and photographs were taken of each exhibition, paying particular attention to the wording and content of interpretative texts, the use of illustrative photographic or pictorial images, the actual presentation and arrangement of artefacts within the exhibition and the use of other supporting interpretative techniques. At each site published interpretative material was taken away for analysis. In adopting this approach the aim was to enable the researcher to "draw large conclusions from small densely textured facts" (Geertz quoted in Eyles and Smith 1988:p.4).

Some of the case studies were able to make a considerable amount of internal documentation available. These included Museum Registration documents, Directives to Live Interpreters and interpretative planning documents (see primary source bibliography). The latter were of particular interest in the examination of the way in which interpretative strategies evolve, and, in some instances provided evidence of the thought processes involved in exhibition planning.

Having visited the museums and begun to evaluate the documentary material and field notes, interviews were arranged with the members of each organisation who were primarily responsible for interpretation. In the majority of organisations two individuals were available for

interview which was particularly useful as it enabled access to two different perspectives on the decision-making process involved in one specific exhibition, enabling later correlation. A list of the interviewees and the dates of the interviews are provided in Appendix III. Also listed is the pilot study in which the observation and interview techniques were tested with Janet Peteman of Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet. After this interview some of the questions were slightly reworded for greater clarity and reordered.

The interviews consisted of standardised open ended questions which "permit the respondent to describe what is meaningful and salient without being pigeon-holed into standardised categories" (Patton 1987: p.13). The open ended questions were based on considerable background knowledge which had emerged during extensive reading of museum and heritage literature before the data collection period. The long interview was adopted because it gives the researcher the opportunity to;

"step inside the mind of another person to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCracken 1988: p.9).

Throughout, it was important to build trust between the interviewee and researcher. After the original letter requesting co-operation, where possible each of the interviewees was visited before the interview, when it was explained in more detail the purpose of the research and a closer working relationship was established. In some instances this relationship was very warm and supportive. Occasionally interviewees were guarded in their responses and remained slightly suspicious of both the researcher and the research and this did affect the quality of the

data. Except in two cases, where co-operation was dependent on seeing the questions before the interview, the large majority of the twenty interviewees did not see the questions beforehand. This ensured the interviews were spontaneous, and prevented carefully prepared answers being given which might hide the interviewees true views and perspectives.

The interviews took between half an hour to two and half hours to complete. All the interviews were taped and full transcripts made which also included the asides made by the interviewer and interviewee. Notes were taken during and after the interview to gauge the mood of the interviewee to ensure that when the interviews were analysed they could be placed in context. The tape occasionally hampered the interview either through technological hic-cups, but more usually by making interviewees more self-conscious than in normal conversation. This was overcome by providing two 'warm up' questions at the beginning of the interview which requested relatively simple information about the aims and policies of the organisation and the images and messages curatorial staff wished visitors to leave with. All the respondents were provided with copies of the transcripts following the interview and reassured that information provided in confidence would not be widely circulated. Whilst maintaining academic integrity, the research has sought throughout this study to respect those confidences.

The interviews were designed to maximise the time available and consisted of a series of carefully worded open ended questions arranged so that each respondent went through the same sequence of questions in

the same wording to minimise the variation for the analysis. These questions are listed in Appendix IV. Following these general questions, the interviewee was then asked a series of site-specific questions. These questions derived from specific observations or from comments found in documentary material and focused primarily on clarifying how various decisions about the depiction of a particular historical event had been made. Where two interviewees came from the same organisation they were asked the same or similiar site-specific questions. This part of the interview was deliberately less formal and respondents were given more opportunity to give more in depth answers to questions. As Cottle has argued;

"without allowing people to speak freely we will never know what their real intentions are, and what the true meaning of their words might be" (Cottle quoted in Eyles and Smith 1988: p.8).

Often, as a dialogue developed additional provocative questions were asked, so that interviewees were made to articulate their views clearly. In cases where this occurred and examples quoted in the study, this is clearly stated in the main text so that comments can be seen within the context of the interview.

#### THE ANALYSIS

The great strength of qualitative research is that it does not impose pre-determined categories on the research. It allows these to emerge and even subtly alter during the period of research and analysis. As the subject of this research was on human decision-making, it was particularly important to retain an open mind throughout the study. However any such analysis is not underpinned by statistical evidence and can be especially vulnerable to the personal bias and predelictions of

even the most objective researcher. Whilst recognising this, the research was devised to include three forms of data collection to enable cross referencing to take place to ensure that conclusions could be verified.

The core of the analysis is based on the actual interviews of museum professionals and great care has been taken to avoid taking comments made by individuals out of context. Therefore where quotations are used they are usually given in full and as actually spoken, and further substantiated with comments from other interviewees or data sources. All quotations from the interviews have, in this study, been written in italics to differentiate them from other sources.

Once the data had been collected, the researcher was faced with a huge body of material to evaluate and contextualise. In framing the analysis broad themes were firstly sought and then, through careful correlation of the different data sources clear patterns were identified which provided a conceptual framework from which a theoretical model was developed. The analysis and conclusions which finally emerge although based on only twelve organisations, derive from a heterogeneous sample which means that the conclusions have important theoretical implications emerging from shared experience and opinions.

#### CONCLUSIONS.

The research was concerned with examining the decision-making process in museums and heritage attractions. It began with no pre-determined theoretical model to test, other than a sense of the importance of the role of the curator and the different interpretative models of history

available to the curator in their constructions of the past. The model that emerged from the analysis of the data provides an explanation of that decision process and attempts to place museums and heritage attractions within a wider cultural framework. A diagram of the model can be found in Appendix V, which seeks to represent the cultural construction of history in museums and heritage attractions. Central to the study's conclusion is a recognition of the dialectic that exists between the museum which shapes society's understanding of the past, and the demands that society places on its cultural institutions. Whilst curators remain central to understanding the decision-making process of the cultural construction of history, they are as much a product of society as the institutions they serve.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PUTTING THE PAST ON DISPLAY

"For a museum today is not so much a storehouse, or a provider of knowledge, but rather it is a place where knowledge is created. And this process of creation involves curator and visitor alike"  
(Gathercole: 1983 p.43)

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine the key themes <sup>and</sup> trends that have emerged from the detailed observation of the case studies selected for the research. It will examine the main techniques used by museums to interpret the past. It will also provide evidence to demonstrate the attempts that have been made by museum professionals to make history more accessible to a wider section of the population. In considering the construction of history a key theme which was identified is the increasing shift from the primarily object centred approach of earlier museums to a more personal interpretation of the past.

#### THE COLLECTIONS

The feature which distinguishes museums from other cultural media concerned with the past, is that they have the actual objects from the past on which to ground their interpretations. As Lowenthal (1990) argued; the remnants of the past provide a direct physical link with past generations. The authentic objects have an inherently 'romantic' quality providing concrete evidence of past existences.

For museums in particular, the collection is of central importance in constructing history, as the objects provide the focus for any interpretation of the past. Indeed, the early museums such as the

British Museum and the Victorian Municipal museums were created as collections of objects to be admired for their authenticity, exotic beauty or costliness (Horne 1984). Typical of such a collection is that of the Tolson Memorial Museum (Tolson) which was founded in 1922 as a local municipal museum devoted to the local and natural history of Huddersfield and its surrounding environs. The museum's extensive collection embraces transport, natural history, the history of <sup>the</sup> town of Huddersfield, clocks, household implements, toys, archaeology, ceramics, geology, industrial technology, textiles, agricultural equipment and coins. These items form the backbone of the museum's interpretation of the past.

Automobilia has taken a predominantly object centred approach . The Museum focuses on early Austin and Morris cars and has twenty six vehicles, as well as a large collection of period motorcycles and bicycles. Each vehicle has been given a simple label stating the model, the date it was built, the engine capacity and its top speed. Some of the cars are provided with an additional witty personal comment from the owner of the museum, Brian Collins, such as the Austin 7 Saloon : "Cosy transport for four but don't take too much luggage!", or in another instance identifies the car used by James Herriott in the TV series All Creatures Great and Small. Except for a small interpretative panel on the early life of Wiliiam Morris, the museum has little formal interpretation, rather a collection of motoring accessories and memorabilia are used to contextualise the vehicles. These collections of lamps, spark plugs, road signs and household implements such as mangles, ancient carpet sweepers, hairdryers and mannequins dressed in period

costume, together with the sound of Traditional Jazz and Big band music are used to create an atmosphere of the days of early motoring. The surrounding ephemera, with its jaunty labels declaring 'those were the days' act as memory jerkers to the older visitor and, to the younger, stimulate a nostalgia for a time popularised in TV drama and film that has become part of popular mythology.

Benningborough Hall has also adopted a predominantly object centred interpretation. Its spacious 18th century rooms with their delicate wood carvings have been used as a backdrop for a collection of period furniture, the once fashionable blue and white chinese porcelain and a collection of portrait paintings. Lacking the original contents, the National Trust came to an agreement with the National Portrait Gallery for the loan of over a hundred paintings which are displayed throughout the house. Benningborough is designed as a visual experience and the room settings give the objects on display a meaning and coherence that would be lacking in a conventional museum exhibition. This is especially true of the Chinese porcelain which, when displayed on the tiered 18th century chimney breasts, gives the visitor a real insight into the aesthetic tastes and fashions of the time.

The National Museum of Labour History (N.M.L.H) bases its interpretation on 'some of the highlights of 200 years of Labour History' (interpretative panel). The museum charts the history of the trade unions, radical reformers, Chartism, socialism, suffrage campaigns and the co-operative movement through a collection of objects. Tom Paine's story is told through his lock of hair, death mask, pamphlet, bust and

anti-Paine tokens; the women's suffrage movement through sashes, pamphlets and badges; and the trade union movement through their banners. Ryedale Folk Museum also uses remnants of the past to retell the history of the Ryedale area. On site are thirteen buildings, most of which have been brought to the museum and rebuilt to house furnishings that date from the Elizabethan era to the late Victorian period. Collections of old tools testify to the past trades and skills of the region- the tinsmith, the wheel wright, the cobbler. Old waggons and agricultural implements show the changes that have occurred in farming. Redundant material culture becomes illustrative of the passage of time and of changing technologies.

Sheffield's Industrial Museum, Keiham Island (Kelham) has used a collection of objects to good effect in its exhibition 'Made in Sheffield', which is designed to dispel the notion that Sheffield's industrial strength was based solely on steel and cutlery. On entering the museum the visitor is greeted with a vast collection of objects that range from baths, food and beer, to surgical implements and handtools, before proceeding to the main display on Sheffield's industrial development.

Jorvik's Skipper Gallery, which includes most of the significant artefacts found during the Coppergate excavation, plays a different role. The collection is not the central core of the interpretation, rather the artefacts act to substantiate the reconstruction of the Viking street. The objects on display are themed around the various crafts seen in the reconstruction and include sections on subsistence,

trade, textiles and clothing and leisure. The objects themselves are presented very simply in hessian backed cases whilst interpretative panels provide further information about aspects of Viking life. The panels are illustrated not only with contemporary drawings but more importantly with photographic illustrations of the Viking reconstruction to provide a direct link for visitors between the reconstruction and the actual artefacts.

#### THE USE OF RECONSTRUCTION

Increasingly many museums are seeking to use reconstruction to help visitors get a much more rounded understanding of the past. Many museums reconstruct scenes to provide a backcloth to the objects on display or to illustrate a story. At Wirksworth Heritage Centre a reconstruction of a Quarryman's houseplace helps tell the history of the town's quarries and the men who worked in them. Tolson has used reconstruction in several of its galleries, but particularly in its transport gallery where small reconstructed scenes are used to contextualise objects. The early history of the turnpikes is told through an interpretative panel illustrated with contemporary maps and modern day photographs of the Kirklees turnpike system and standing nearby on a half built road are two life sized models of a surveyor and labourer each holding the tools of their trades, a way master for measuring roads and a pick. The display represents a text in which different media are employed and interwoven to help construct the history of early road building. As a text it can be read in many ways: the importance of the new turnpike system, the skill of the engineers and the contrast between the finery of the professional and ragged appearance of the labourer.

Jorvik represents an attempt to create a three dimensional archaeological interpretation, moving away from the glass case and erudite labels of many archaeological displays such as found in the Ryedale Folk Museum. The reconstruction of the Viking street was motivated by the discovery during the Coppergate excavation of a series of closely packed tenth century timber buildings, some of which were up to eight metres long and two metres high. The buildings were linked by a system of alleys and surrounding pits, wells, latrines and rubbish dumps. It was decided to attempt a detailed reconstruction of an alleyway off Coppergate based on the archaeological evidence that emerged from the excavation. Each building and activity represented in the Jorvik reconstruction has been carefully researched and based exclusively on excavated evidence or deduced indirectly from other archaeological or historical data (Addyman and Gaynor 1984).

The visitor to Jorvik travels around the reconstruction in specially adapted electronic 'time cars'. These take the visitor past caricature Viking figures exchanging goods or pursuing their crafts before entering a house where a meal is being prepared and a woman weaves at a loom, telling stories to her children. Finally the visitor passes the wharf where men are unloading boats and fishermen swap stories. It is actually impossible for the visitor to absorb all the detail in a single visit. Jorvik provides a very in depth reconstruction of Viking life, from the smells and vegetation, to the dyed wool hanging ready to be woven, or the cat sleeping in the leather off cuts. As Addyman commented;

"The interpretation is in a form that can, in a sense, be appreciated by a five year old, yet contains levels of information to provoke and stimulate the most expert and fertile archaeological mind" (Addyman 1990: p.261).

Immediately preceding the Viking street is a reconstruction of the archaeological dig in which the actual timbers of the excavated buildings can be seen, alongside the outline of the hearth that appeared earlier inside a reconstruction of a Viking house. The visitor then passes the finds registration hut and a reconstruction of the laboratories where the finds are conserved and soil analysed to discover further information about what the Vikings ate and the plants they grew. This part of the reconstruction is designed to help visitors understand the processes by which archaeologists can unearth a site and through detailed research discover the information which enabled the reconstruction of the Viking street.

Oakwell House, originally built in the 16th century but substantially altered in the mid 17th century, takes a different approach. In the mid 1980s, having decided to undergo important restoration work, two sets of rare 17th century painted panneling were revealed under layers of Victorian paint and it was decided to try and recreate the Hall as a lived in home of the 1690s. However, the Hall had only a limited number of pieces of furniture of that period, and few soft furnishings, floor covering and crockery have survived. It was therefore decided that where original pieces were unavailable they would be reconstructed based on detailed historical research. The curators at Oakwell spent considerable time researching the most likely way in which each room would have been furnished using evidence from a 1611 inventory of the Hall and other inventories from surrounding Halls in the region, as well as evidence from contemporary descriptions and from Dutch interior paintings (Galister and Davies 1989).

The 1986 Display Policy document details how each room is to be set out, justifying the decision from historical evidence, and discusses which items will have to be reproductions. The result provides a fascinating insight into the domestic life of a 17th century household. Reproduction furniture has been deliberately left unaged to show that, contrary to popular perception, the furniture of this period was originally light in colour. The bare rooms presented in other historic houses of the period are dispelled with rush matting on the floors, cushions and bedding strewn on furniture and beds. Crockery, glassware, pewterware and china is placed in cupboards, on tables and in the kitchen. Personal items, clothing and domestic implements have all been carefully reproduced from either surviving originals, or from documentary sources, so that the rooms are made to appear as if their occupants have just left. In a nearby barn an exhibition 'New for Old' explains in depth how the reconstruction was compiled, how it was researched and how the actual reproductions were made and why such an interpretative approach was adopted. The exhibition concludes;

"While we made use of reproductions in both Red House and Oakwell Hall, we have gaps in our knowledge and understanding of appropriate furnishings for both houses. As research continues displays will be upgraded bringing in original and reproduction items, but many questions about both the pasts of both houses must go unanswered".

The panel goes on to list those questions: were the family up to date and fashionable and what was the original colour scheme and arrangement of the rooms.

The National Fishing Heritage Centre (N.F.H.C) uses reconstruction in its interpretation of a 1950s trawler. The centre has used actual pieces

of a trawler and many period items alongside reconstructed pieces. All the reconstructions are based on old photographs and the Centre used retired trawlerman to advise them on additional details. The result is a full scale reconstruction that provides a complete visual interpretation of a fishing trip. Passing through an exhibition gallery, the visitor enters a Grimsby backstreet and continues to the docks and on board the trawler. On board the visitor visits the radio control room, the bridge, the Captain's Table, the deck, engine room, galley and fore-cabin (sleeping quarters) before returning ashore where the lumpers unload the catch and the trawlermen receive their wages before returning home and to the pub. Outside the pub stands a simple fishing smack surrounded by period shops. Throughout the reconstruction sound and movement play important roles. The visitor is given the opportunity to experience the roll of the deck at sea as they watch the trawlermen hauling in their nets and packing the fish in ice. Temperature change is also used to great effect. An ice covered deck and cold blast of air graphically illustrate conditions for trawlermen in Arctic waters. Descending down some steps the temperature is then abruptly raised as visitors enter the boiler room.

#### INTERPRETATIVE PANELS

The majority of the museums use interpretative panels to some extent in their representation of the past. Often the panels are used to explain the significance of a collection. For example at Kelham, files and file cutting tools provide the physical evidence for the Sheffield file making trade and a panel explains how files were made and the division of labour between men and women.

Wirksworth Heritage Centre uses text panels almost exclusively to tell the story of the town's development, the growth of its rail and road network, its local industries, customs, architectural heritage and the potted biographies of famous people linked to Wirksworth. The panels are illustrated with appropriate contemporary drawings and maps, photographs and excerpts from documents which, together with the artefacts, act as supporting evidence for the main text.

Tolson also uses text panels extensively throughout its galleries. However the panels have been designed to encapsulate the information in one short paragraph written in clear language and in bold type; further details are then provided below. The Museum has fairly strict rules for its interpretative staff on the length of text allowed on the panels and, where possible, illustrations and photographs are used together with models and dioramas to explain the significance of the artefact on display. A particularly successful use of interpretative panels is made in their textile gallery 'From Sheep's back to Man's back' where alongside early spinning frames and looms, are life sized photographs and illustrations of the machinery, showing better than any written text how the machines were actually operated.

#### THE USE OF SOUND

At Roche Abbey, the small visitor centre introduces visitors to the Abbey through a series of gilt edged interpretative panels which explain the history of the abbey and the Cistercian order, monastic life, the layout of the abbey and its estates and the abbey's history after the Dissolution. Together with a collection of small artefacts found on the

site including pieces of carved masonry, keys, a thimble and some decorated book clasps, the exhibition is designed to give the abbey a significance above that of an attractive ruin. The panels are illustrated throughout with mediaeval illustrations and photographs of the abbey, but the text is often long and detailed. A more user friendly approach has been the recent introduction of an audio tape produced by Sound Alive in conjunction with English Heritage which is available to visitors at a small additional charge.

The tape begins with the sound of mediaeval monks chanting immediately providing a meaningful context for the visitor to begin exploring the twelfth century monastery. The commentary guides the visitor round the site explaining what they are looking at and how it would have appeared in mediaeval times. Extracts are used from contemporary descriptions, and sound effects help stimulate the imagination: bleating sheep suggest a busy courtyard; a hollow cough signals the monks making their way to early prayer down the night stairs; and the discussion of how to raise the money requested to pay Richard the Lion Heart's ransom provide an exciting human dimension. The tape succeeds in helping the visitor construct historical meaning and context from the ruins of the Abbey.

Sound creates atmosphere and is an effective means of providing visitors with effortless means of contextualising the artefacts on display.

Jorvik recreates the sound of a Viking street to enrich its reconstruction, with the babble of Norse voices, the sound of a baby crying and men singing as they unload ships. Above the noise the voice of Magnus Magnusson explains to the visitor what they are actually

seeing and highlights certain activities and features which are later shown to have derived from specific archaeological evidence.

Automobila uses its 1930s jazz and big band music to create a mood of nostalgia, as does the N.F.H.C, which greets its visitors with 1950s swing blaring out from a period taxi in the entrance hall. Bill Hayley and the Comets are heard from a transistor radio juxtaposed with the scene in which the trawlermen struggle to haul in their nets in the wind and rain. The Centre uses sound throughout with the clicking of morse code in the radio room, the screech of seagulls and the radio report of the sinking of the Lafarey. Particularly effective is the use of recorded memories of retired trawlermen whose <sup>enc</sup>reminisces are played throughout the reconstruction providing visitors with a first hand account of the work of a trawlerman; shovelling coal into the engine room or balancing the pots in the galley as the ship tosses from side to side. The oral history provides an important human dimension to the interpretation of the fishing industry.

#### THE AUDIO VISUAL

Audio-visual productions have long been a popular way of orientating visitors to an exhibition and providing them with introductory information. Kelham uses an audio-visual presentation to tell the story of the development of Sheffield as a centre for steel and cutlery. The film blends contemporary and modern photographs and illustrations to explore the growth of the city and the various technological breakthroughs which established Sheffield's pre-eminence as a steel city. The visitor is introduced to the variety of goods produced in the city by

the Little Mesters and to the growth of the heavy engineering sector. The presentation acts to 'flag up' or highlight various themes that are explored in the main exhibition. In a separate film theatre, original film is shown of the huge River Don Engine in action, providing a much needed contextual framework for the visitor, showing not only the engine in full operation in the rolling mill, but also the working conditions of the men who worked there.

The Archaeological Resource Centre (ARC) uses an audio-visual presentation to introduce visitors to archaeology before they begin to experiment with the centre's interactive exhibits. The visitor is presented with popular images of archaeology such as Indiana Jones, the Pyramids and people digging holes in the ground. Taking these as a base, the audio-visual looks at the many different aspects of archaeology preparing the visitor for the exhibits which will demonstrate some of the techniques used in archaeology.

#### LIVE INTERPRETATION

One of the most effective ways of interpreting either the past or the environment is through live interpretation. As Michael Dower once commented 'People stop at people' (quoted in D. Herbert 1989 p.196). Personal interpretation enables the interpreter to tailor his or her presentation to the needs and interest of the audience. The National Trust have used this approach in its simplest form by employing voluntary room stewards who are there to answer questions. Ryedale Folk Museum invites various craftsmen to the museum in the summer to demonstrate traditional crafts to visitors. Kelham has installed

workshops within the museum which are rented to working Little Mesters producing surgical instruments, penknives and <sup>c</sup>issors, giving the visitors the opportunity to watch genuine craftsmen at work.

Beamish has chosen to use live interpreters in its construction of life in the North East in 1913. The Museum consists of a small town, colliery village and pit, a farm and railway junction. The buildings that make up the site have been brought from all over the North East and rebuilt on site and appropriately furnished with fittings and objects from the period. The curatorial staff at Beamish have spent considerable time on research to ensure the accuracy of their reconstructions. The costumed interpreters act as facilitators providing visitors with information to help them absorb their surroundings. Beamish uses dramatic convention to help interpret the past to its visitors. The interpreters perform actual tasks such as baking bread, serving behind a shop counter or cleaning a stove so that interest in their activity encourages a dialogue between the interpreter and the visitor. The interpreters are carefully trained, each of them has a handbook detailing the area they work in, providing detailed historical information about, for example, the colliery cottages, the furniture and background of historical events of the period. The handbook is supplemented with period illustrations, photographs and reminiscences of a miner that once lived in a similiar cottage. At the beginning of each handbook the interpreter is given six simple key messages which the curatorial staff hope to pass<sup>on</sup> to the visitor. For the Francis Street Colliery cottages these include the importance of mining to the North East, the close knit nature of the mining communities, the relative prosperity of miners in 1913 and their

taste for richly decorated furnishing in their homes and the large families that would have lived in the cottages(1).

Oakwell Hall has regular historical re-enactments where a group of 'enactors' recreate the social and domestic life of the late 17th century. The re-enactments are based on careful research of the costumes, manners, food and living conditions of the period. Like Beamish the 'enactors' are given a handbook which gives biographical details of the characters that are to appear and provides background information on the history of Oakwell, contemporary events, as well as a series of extracts from 17th century documents detailing how to clean windows and perform other household chores. The enactments are intended to portray a typical day in the 1690s and though they usually cover issues like illness and child rearing, they are unscripted. The idea, as a publicity leaflet explains, is to transport visitors " into a 17th century household to watch servants go about their chores and listen to tittle-tattle, experience the sights and smells of a busy kitchen; listen to the Master of the House as he conducts business" (2). During the re-enactment red T-shirters are used to explain occurrences to visitors and answer questions.

ARC also used red shirted demonstrators who as the Staff Training Manual (1991) explains "We are not 'guides' spoonfeeding information. We are here to facilitate 'visitor participation'". The demonstrators act as catalysts encouraging visitors to experiment for themselves with the interactive exhibits and to answer questions.

## THE INTERACTIVE EXHIBIT

ARC is designed primarily as an interactive museum with the aim of demystifying archaeology. ARC invites visitors to touch the past by sorting through a collection of finds, by studying soil samples through a magnifying glass and by comparing Viking and modern bones and handling pieces of broken pot. ARC also explores early technology by letting visitors handle a reconstruction of a Viking loom and select the right key to unlock the barrel lock of a Viking chest. Visitors are invited to try spinning wool or sew a Roman sandal or write their name in runes. Alongside the red demonstration tables, grey shelves contain more fragile material which can be shown to visitors by demonstrators in answering visitor questions. By encouraging visitors to actively participate in the various activities, the York Archaeological Trust (YAT) who founded ARC hope that visitors discover how historical knowledge is constructed from archaeology thereby giving them an active understanding of archaeological processes.

Interactive exhibits are increasingly popular as museums encourage visitors to become involved in the actual historical presentation. Kelham is planning a series of interactive exhibits to help visitors understand how the River Don engine operates (3). At the N.F.H.C there is a series of interactive exhibits aimed particularly at children operating at both an educational and entertainment level. They include a set of brass rubbings of different types of fish caught by trawlers, a jigsaw puzzle of the marine food chain, a chance to make a net and try heaving a huge bucket of ash up from the engine room. On arrival, visitors are invited to take a crew card from a choice of ten, each of

which details a different job on board the ship from Captain, Engineer, Cook and Ship's cat complete with a job description, conditions and pay. These act to involve the visitor in the reconstruction, by personalising the visitor experience.

An interesting approach is used in Wirksworth Heritage Centre to retell the story of the discovery of the bones of a pre-historic woolly rhinoceros in the 1820s by a group of leadminers. The Centre has built a representation of the 'Dream Cave' which a child or agile adult can explore. The cave consists of a series of passageways to crawl through and the choice of route is decided by answering a number of questions, with wrong answers leading up a blind alley.

#### USE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Increasingly museums are also adopting modern technology to communicate to younger visitors in their own terms by using familiar media. Both Wirksworth Heritage Centre and the N.F.H.C use computer games in their interpretation, which in the former asks visitors to rescue an injured miner or answer questions on different aspects of Wirksworth's history.

ARC also uses computers to demonstrate the technology now used in archaeology. Visitors are invited to fill in computerised record cards and on other terminals have access to information on a specific excavation to demonstrate how 'three D' graphics help the archaeologist in interpreting a site. Finally a series of computerised photographic images of the Coppergate Dig are used to help visitors, through a question and answer exchange, to explore the excavation looking in

detail at the outline of buildings and position of wells and rubbish tips.

#### USE OF PUBLICATIONS

One of the most enduring methods of interpretation is the museum guide which even in its simplest form directs the visitor around a collection. In some cases, such as at N.M.L.H, this is a simple A4 folded sheet, in others a beautifully illustrated guide provides detailed historical information. The new 1992 Benningborough guide is designed to be read at home and supplements a simple folded sheet.

Many publications such as the one produced by Jarvik or the N.F.H.C are designed as souvenirs, providing little additional information for the visitor. Ryedale Folk Museum produces a very effective booklet which acts both as souvenir and guide around the site. It provides a much need context to the static displays by the use of contemporary pictures and illustrations of the buildings, and of the men and women who lived and worked in them.

At Beamish, publications are seen as an important means of providing the visitor with more detailed information than it would be possible to give (or be absorbed by the visitor) from live interpretation. Its main guide is clearly written providing background information on all the areas of the site explaining where the origins of the buildings, and more importantly how they would have been used by the people who lived or worked in them. Other, more in depth guides, are in the process of being prepared on the chapel, the school and on shopping so that those who

have been stimulated by their visit can learn more. Indeed the purpose of many of the publications produced by museums is to build on the interest stimulated by exhibitions, to provide more information and in depth analysis.

#### THE 'FRIENDLY' MUSEUM

Increasingly museums are seeking to throw off their old fashioned image by reconsidering the way in which their collections are presented. Entrances have been made more welcoming, security staff taken out of uniform and bright colours and lighting have replaced dark sombre interiors (E. Hooper-Greenhill 1992). Over the last decade Tolson has spent considerable time and resources removing the old glass cases and displays that dated back to the 1930s and replacing them with exhibitions in which the artefacts are placed in brightly coloured display cases or set into reconstructions. Galleries have been given witty titles like the transport gallery's 'Making Tracks' and the new archaeology gallery's 'Incomers' and have been designed to tell stories that are relevant to modern audiences.

Museums have also been keen to infuse their educational role with a new informality to create a more friendly atmosphere. A re~~pe~~curring motif in many of the museums was a deliberate attempt to create a sense of fun among the historical representations. N.F.H.C has a series of large foot prints leading to its main gallery and throughout its publicity leaflets it has adopted a deliberately gimmicky approach with its scratch and smell leaflet and exploding leaflet to advertise its 'Trawlers at War' exhibition. Humour has been injected into many of the displays. At

Jorvik, the visitor catches a man squatting on the loo and intercepts two Viking children shouting names at each other in time honoured fashion. At the Ryedale Folk Museum a small hut reveals on inspection a stuffed witch complete with cat and cauldron, and though<sup>it</sup> alludes to the area's folk legends<sup>it</sup> is designed to delight younger visitors. In Tolson's transport gallery a special section 'Transport of Delights' has been set aside for children, consisting of a display case in the shape of a tram containing a collection<sup>t</sup> of transport toys, a large wooden train and canal barge to clamber upon, and a selection of children's books on the transport theme, for them to look at.

Museums are becoming increasingly aware of visitor needs and several places had facilities for the disabled and mother and baby rooms. Benches and seats were also available in most of the museums visited as well as retail and refreshment facilities. In some institutions the retailing consisted of a small counter at the admissions desk selling a small range of souvenirs and publications. At others there were large themed shops such as the 'Bonded Stores' of the N.F.H.C. or the 'supermarket' approach at Beamish.

Alongside this desire to make museums more user friendly has been a movement to explain to visitors how museums operate in terms of reconstructing the past. Some museums like ARC and the N.M.L.H have allowed visitors to see behind the scenes with glass fronted offices and, in the latter's case, the conservation studio showing how banners are conserved. Others such as Oakwell Hall have explained to visitors how their exhibitions and displays have been compiled. It is an approach

that seeks to demystify the institution and de-centre the authority and knowledge of the curator by providing alternative interpretations, admitting gaps in knowledge or presenting the visitor with open questions. Typical of such an approach is this label at N.M.L.H

"Museums organise the things we leave behind us. This is just one way of organising the things in our collection. We could, say, have put all red things together or everything connected with women".

#### MAKING HISTORY FAMILAR

Alongside the move to make museums more fun and accessible, there has been an increasing attempt to make history more comprehensible to the lay person through the use of stereotypes and familiar genres to orientate the visitor.

A particularly successful approach has been the use of a time tunnel at Jorvik in which the visitor passes representations of the thirty or so generations that have elapsed since the Vikings. Other museums have used familiar events or well known monarchs as 'sign posts' to help visitors identify different periods in time. Tolson, Kelham and the N.M.L.H have deliberately adopted a chronological narrative to make their interpretations easier to understand. Another popular approach is to contrast the old with the modern as at the N.F.H.C where a kitchen of the 1950s is compared with one of the 1990s. The issue of making history more accessible to the lay person will be considered in later chapters.

#### WHOSE HISTORY ?

The past is reinterpreted by each generation, who construct history according to the values and perspectives of their time. It is therefore inevitable that there is no single history, however, despite the range

of subject areas within the twelve case studies, two dominant themes did emerge: the presentation of history on a personal human scale and a fascination with the ordinary and the mundane.

Although Benningborough Hall adopts primarily an object centred interpretation of the 18th century, space was also found to tell the stories of the two families who lived there, the Bouchiers and the Chesterfields. The National Trust is often accused of only portraying the lives of the rich and famous (Hewison 1987) and so it is interesting to note that its 1992 promotional leaflet invites the visitor to "imagine the 18th century ritual of the State bedroom and the drudgery of a Victorian laundry". A potting shed has also been carefully restored enabling Benningborough to sell itself not on its fine decorative arts but on the human dimension.

The history of the 17th century Batt family who lived in Oakwell is told in interpretative panels and publications, but their story is not primary, nor are the objects in the house, rather the details of everyday living remain the core of the interpretative message. Beamish and Jorvik also concentrate on interpreting the way ordinary people lived and worked. At N.F.H.C the visitor is promised an exhibition "based on real people, genuine exhibits and historical facts" and indeed much of the interpretation occurs through first hand accounts of the trawling industry (4).

At Wirksworth Heritage Centre the life of a quarryman is told through the recorded reminiscences of Jack Doxey telling his grandson, Mark, about

life in a small Quarry man's house place. Wirksworth's lead mining history is personified through the eighteenth century miner Daniel Wilson who is represented by a large cardboard cut out alongside his wife and other officials of the mine ~~and~~ who tell their story. Daniel's wife Sarah comments;

"Jest enough ter git by I'd say. Owd man's dowl mine, while little uns clean, crush and bundle ore. So much is tecken from us in dues it dus na give ye much 'eart te carry on."

The N.L.H.M. was established to tell the story of how ordinary men and women have fought for better working and living conditions. The plans for the new Pump House site is to make that story less about the leaders of those campaign and more about the ordinary people that become involved. At Tolson the focus is on the story of the people of Huddersfield as they appear in the archaeology, transport and textile stories. Kelham too celebrates not just the inventors of new technology but the skills of the men and women who helped built Sheffield's industrial strength. A publicity leaflet reads:

"People of the past have created today's society. Most of them are individually forgotten, but their legacy can't be ignored."

At Ryedale Folk Museum and Automobila the emphasis is less on reconstructing the lived experience of people through history, but on the admiration of the simplest object as symbols of the craftsmanship and skills of earlier generations and as signifiers of past domesticity. Indeed in many of the museums visited, it was the everyday mundane items that were accorded importance over the ornate and exotic, for the clues they provided about lives of people in the past.

## MESSAGES

Historical exhibitions and displays are created to impart information about the past and will therefore inherently contain various messages in their interpretations. By the very nature of the institution museums propound a dominantly conservation message through explaining the significance and importance of their collections. There are, however, a whole series of other overlapping messages and values which can be found in exhibitions and displays. Some are deliberately overt. At the N.F.H.C which in its desire to explain the dangerous nature of trawling, bombards visitors with information of the high instances of injury and fatalities. Jorvik and ARC are both designed to popularise archaeology and assert its importance, by making it fun and accessible whilst underlining archaeology's scientific credentials.

Other museums seek to impress upon visitors the skills and craftsmanship of previous generations. At Benningborough visitors wander through the 18th century rooms admiring the works of art and an exhibition in the attic, learn<sup>ing</sup> more about the artists and their patrons. The dominant theme inherent in the architectural history as interpreted at Roche Abbey is to stress both the beauty and importance of the ruins and the part played by the Cistercian monks whose faith, dedication and commitment caused its building.

A sense of place and roots are important to communities and regions and museums like Beamish and Tolson, in different ways, present interpretations of the past which enforce the strong identity and traditions of their regions. Beamish is also keen to show its visitors

how similiar but different 1913 is from the present, by challenging liberal progressives and nostalgics alike. Conversely Automobilia deliberately seeks to evoke nostaglia for the 'good old days'.

Wirksworth Heritage Centre was originally conceived as part of the town's regeneration strategy and its entire interpretation is intended to make visitors feel they have visited some-where special with its own unique identity. Civic pride infuses much of Kelham's display which concentrates on the skills and innovation of Sheffield people.

However, many of the messages contained within interpretations in museums are less overt, even unconscious. The carefully landscaped lawns with their maypole, gypsy caravan, village stocks and surrounding thatched cottages at the Ryedale Folk Museum could be hinting at a more simple and idyllic past, where people unquestioningly knew their place in society. The representation of women in domestic roles at Jorvik could be seen to be saying something about the role of women in history. The complete absence of black faces in museums could be read as meaning that ethnic groups have no rightful place in Britain's heritage. The construction of history in museums is a complex process and in addition to its key storyline each interpretation will inevitably contain subsidiary messages, many of which will be subliminal, but which nevertheless will influence the way visitors to museums come to understand and value their selective tradition.

## CONCLUSION

A visit to a museum is no longer a slow promenade around glass cases filled with objects and erudite labels. Whilst objects from the past are still important in historical presentations, visitors are now increasingly being asked to participate in the interpretations. New interpretative techniques are being used to engage the visitor's senses and emotions through what David Uzzell (1990) has termed 'hot interpretation'. Objects are contextualised by their relevance to human experience; the personal and the subjective have replaced the objective classification of artefacts.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Beamish "Information for Demonstrators- Francis Street"
2. Oakwell Hall Leaflet "Winter Events at Oakwell 1991-2"
3. Kelham- Discussions held at Kelham Island Working Party, March 24th 1992
4. N.F.H.C 1991 publicity leaflet

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE PAST AND ITS INTERPRETATION

"History is a shifting discourse constructed by historians and that from the existence of the past no one reading is entailed: change the gaze, shift the perspective and new readings appear" (Jenkins 1992 : p.13-14).

#### INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of the past in museums represents a microcosm of the wider cultural construction of history. This chapter will examine the construction of history, demonstrating that there exist an infinite number of ways of reading and interpreting the surviving evidence from the past. The chapter will explore some of the different approaches used to interpret the past and argue that in effect, the construction of history directly reflects the cultural and social reality of those involved in its construction.

#### WHAT IS HISTORY ?

In English the terms 'history' and the 'past' are often used to describe the "grand total of all that has happened in the lives of human beings" from the beginning of time (Oakshott 1967: p.1). But as Jenkins (1992) has argued 'history' and the 'past' are not interchangeable. The past is what has already occurred. It has happened. History is the written or recorded knowledge of what is known about the past and represents a large body of knowledge that is continually being added to and adapted as each generation seeks to give meaning to the past in terms of their present social reality. History is about selection; deciding from that great body of inherited, amorphous data, what is important and what is of interest in terms of the historian's present day viewpoint and predilections. Each generation of historians will subtly change the emphasis of

of history to select current concerns and beliefs. History therefore reveals as much about its creators as it does of previous generations and eras (Oakshott 1967, Jenkins 1992, Carr 1986, Lowenthal 1990).

"History is not the past, nor yet the surviving past; it is a reconstruction of certain parts of the past (from surviving evidence) which in some ways have had relevance for the present circumstances of the historian that reconstructed them". (Gordon Connell-Smith & Howard Lloyd quoted in Tosh 1984: p.120)

Historians can never recover the totality of the past, they can only represent parts of it. Even the most detailed historical account can only incorporate a tiny fraction of even the relevant past. As Lowenthal (1990: p.215) has argued "the sheer pastness of the past precludes its total reconstruction". In order to create meaning from this vast body of data, historians use analytical and methodological tools to select and interpret this material into a comprehensible framework. However, there is no set pattern for these selections or readings and there are an infinite number of interpretations open to the historian.

Again, this helps illustrate the distinction between history and the past; history is an account of the past and the past merely a set of events and situations that in themselves have no logical underpinning except that imposed upon them by historians. History is about the creation of stories by making links, emphasising relationships, compressing time and minimising discourse to aid comprehension. As Arragon wrote;

"Time is foreshortened, details selected and highlighted, action, concentrated, relations simplified not to alter or distort the actors and events but to bring them to life and to give them meaning". (Arragon, quoted in Lowenthal 1990 :p.218)

Narrative linear explanations are widely used by historians because they provide a clear temporal sequence and progression. The very nature of narrative explanation means that some events are given prominence, whilst many others are ignored to provide a clear and comprehensive story which is then given an interpretative meaning or value. Lowenthal (1990) has compared the construction of narrative to a pearl necklace;

"The pearls of history take their value not merely from being many and lustrous, but from being arranged in a causal narrative sequence; the narrative lends the necklace meaning as well as beauty" (Lowenthal 1990 : p.224).

Lowenthal (1990) has argued that the very process of writing history makes the past much more comprehensible than it was to the actors at the time or even in reality. The historian unlike the actors of the time, knows the outcome of the events they are studying, so inevitably hindsight will shape their interpretation, even altering the tempo and contradictions as they appeared at the time. It is not only hindsight which shapes a historian's reading of an event but subsequent developments after the period under review. As Lowenthal explained, the Second World War was regarded in a completely different manner in the mid 1980s than the 1950s, as a result not only of new evidence now available but, because of the impact of the Cold War, the United Nations and the economic power of Japan and Germany.

Although the passage of time enables historians to gain a better perspective and understanding of the impact of the event, it also prevents them recapturing the atmosphere and social reality of the era they are studying. As Maitland observed " it is too late for us to be Early English", (quoted in Jenkins 1992).

No matter how immersed the historian is in the past it is impossible for them to divorce themselves from their own knowledge and perspectives without in some subtle fashion relating them to what the historian needs or desires to know.

"To explain the past to themselves and their audiences, historians go beyond the actual record to frame hypotheses in present day modes of thought. Editing data from his chosen era, synthesizing commentaries, the historian reaches an understanding distinctly of his own time" .  
(Lowenthal 1990 p. 216)

The language of the historical account also restructures images of the past. The historian translates his impression, gained from an examination of the traces of the past into words. The very language used imposes its own conventions on the historian's understanding of the past. Indeed when a reader absorbs the historian's text, the reader reconverts the word images into their own personal images which may differ radically from the historian's originals. As Lowenthal has argued any distance in space and time, culture or in point of view widens the gulf between narrator and audience. This holds true for the historian's own analysis of historical documents.

Collingwood (1986) argues that history is created in the mind of the historian. A historian cannot observe the past, but the experiences of those in the past have to be acted through in the historian's mind in order for him to comprehend them. Collingwood concludes that a historian can only know aspects of the past that he or she is able to rethink. Conversely, where historical data remains unintelligible to the historian it demonstrates that they are no longer able to conceptualise the thoughts of a previous era. For Collingwood history is therefore the history of the mind, in which language plays an important role as

a provider of meaning. Written material provides the bulk of the evidence by which historians construct the past, but language, both in terms of vocabulary and syntax, is continually evolving. Words (symbolic codes) are constantly shifting their symbolic meaning to reflect new social and cultural realities, making it impossible for the historian to ever truly recapture the motives and thoughts of previous generations. For Lowenthal (1990: p.215) a historical narrative "is not a portrait of what happened but a story about what happened".

Elton (1967) has argued that the study of history amounts to a search for truth that is achievable, because history is ultimately firmly grounded in reality. Although Elton acknowledges that the search for truth remains a continual process of research and reinterpretation he believes that historical methods guard against bias and provide " a recognised and tested way of extracting from what that past has left, the true facts and events of that past" (Elton 1967: p.65). However no 'true account' of the past exists for historians to prove their accounts, as Jenkins explains;

"the world/past comes to us always already as stories and that we cannot get out of these stories (narratives) to check if they correspond to the real world/past, because these 'always already' narratives constitute 'reality'" (Jenkins 1992: p.9).

Histories can therefore only be verified by comparing their work with the established body of knowledge in the form of other trusted accounts rather than the actual events themselves. Yet as Lowenthal argues, unlike personal memory the construction of history is a very public activity and ensures that the historian has to justify his or her interpretation to the reader through reference to other historical accounts and other sources.

History, unlike the past, is not fixed in time and space but remains open to different interpretations which will be influenced by the background and perspectives of the historian and by their own place in time. History is therefore subjective. However, history remains firmly grounded in the past, using real events as its inspiration, and it maintains a tight methodology in order to justify the conclusions that the historian draws from evidence or historical sources.

#### USING THE EVIDENCE

Historical sources encompass every kind of evidence left behind by past generations. A historian will select his or her evidence from a variety of sources including landscapes, inscriptions, material culture, first hand accounts, documents, pictures photographs and oral evidence. The traces of the past are not complete, rather the historian, in order to understand an era, has to piece together fragments of information to base his or her interpretation upon. The further back in time one goes the fewer fragments survive and consequently less can be extrapolated from them.

The primary sources available to historians are an incomplete record, not only because so much has been destroyed by accident or design, but more fundamentally, because a great deal of what occurred in the past left no material trace. This is particularly true of conscious and unconscious mental processes (Tosh 1984). The written records of previous generations, consist only of facts that were considered of sufficient interest at the time. As Tosh (1984) has pointed out this inevitably means that the historical record tends towards the

ruling class, from whom the vast majority of the surviving sources derive. Mediaeval chroniclers like William Malmesbury or the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers were more interested in the activities of kings and churchmen than the peasantry.

The primary source used by historians is the written word, in the form of letters, diaries, treaties or records, kept at the time for future posterity. Bagley (1965: p.1) explains that for the historian nothing can take the place of the written word; field patterns, coins, place names are impersonal compared with manuscripts, since the historian is ultimately concerned with people, their lives, thoughts, actions and beliefs, "his truest and most valuable material must always be the words and pictures men and women have written and drawn on clay, stone, parchment and paper". A good historian will learn to examine the evidence and interpret it. Nothing is taken at face value. The historian weighs one piece of evidence against another to try to spot inaccuracies and distortions in particular sources, and considers the subtext. Documents, by their very nature, are subjective and liable to error and personal bias. Often, written material was produced for a specific purpose—perhaps for propaganda or the justification of previous actions, and this will slant the perspectives of the author. The author's background and perspectives will also affect eye witness accounts of various events; inevitably a British Official of 1919 would regard the Amritsar Massacre (1919) differently to an Indian observer.

Historians have gained valuable insights into the past by ignoring the original intentions of the author and concentrating on what other information the text

will reveal. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie 's (1990) study of Montaliou, uses the incidental detail in the records of the Inquisition's investigation into the French Cathars, to reconstruct the mental, emotional and sexual life of 13th century peasants. Similarly Wrigley and Schofield pioneered quantitative methods in their examination of 18th century Parish Registers to calculate demographic trends in Britain in the 18th century (Lee and Schofield 1984).

Although museums will use written material in constructing their interpretations of the past, objects provide the main historical source. Surviving objects from the past are often seen as valuable clues in the understanding of the past providing visual evidence of how people lived, in the form of buildings, domestic implements or machinery. In a recent article Gaby Porter (1989) criticised museums for using artefacts as value free evidence, as a direct reflection of the past. Even in the more recent past it is usually the special or unusual that survives, the jewelled medieval cross, the Michaelangelo painting, the 19th century wedding dress. More often than not it is the possessions of the wealthy and important that survive, rather than those of the lower classes whose possessions were used until beyond repair, before finally being thrown away. Although objects provide important clues to how people lived, they are not a comprehensive record. Inanimate objects cannot help the historian understand the emotions and thoughts of past generations.

Increasingly historians are using paintings, drawings and photographs to provide further insights into the past. Again, these have to be used with care; the historian has to consider the motives for the painting and make

allowances for artistic convention. Museums use contemporary drawing to help contextualise objects and illustrate stories. In exhibitions on industrial England it is quite common to see the same illustrations appearing in different museums. Typical is George Walker's painting of a woman using a Spinning Jenny or Eyre Crow's painting The Dinner Hour, Wigan (1874), which is often used to show visitors what factory life was like, but is rarely qualified. At Kelham visitors are shown a picture of a group of buffer girls dressed in the 'traditional' red scarves; the picture is provided as evidence despite its romantic genre. Gaby Porter (1989) has also criticised the use of photographs in museums, in which they are seen to "offer instant gratification, history at a glance". Porter feels that many curators simply accept the conventions of realism ascribed to photographs and fail to grasp the context in which photographs were taken. She is particularly critical of those curators who crop promotional photographs for use in exhibitions to illustrate working conditions or domestic life, without assessing the photograph's value as historical evidence.

For more recent periods of study historians are using oral history. Ordinary members of the public are interviewed about aspects of their life and work, giving these people a direct role in creating knowledge. Many museums have used oral history to acquire new information about objects in their collections and about social conditions, customs and many other aspects which do not appear in printed archive or photographic sources (Howarth 1982, O'Connell 1992) Beamish uses oral history to help its reconstruction of North East England in 1913. Other Museums, like N.F.H.C in Grimsby use recorded oral history in their

displays, enabling visitors to hear first hand accounts of life aboard a trawlership in the 1950s. However, as Tosh (1984) has pointed out, oral history has to be used carefully. Memories are filtered through subsequent experiences, and are often subtly changed as the individual absorbs information from other sources or the memories become overlaid with nostalgia.

#### TURNING THE EVIDENCE INTO HISTORY

The study of history involves the gathering of relevant evidence together and then its interpretation. Elton (1967) argues that the historian having amassed all the evidence and considered the sources for bias or distortion should allow the past to speak for itself. In other words Elton believes that the weight of the evidence will manifest its own meaning, irrespective of the predilections of the historian. Yet as has already been argued epistemological fragility, in terms of the fragmentary nature of historical sources, means that the historian cannot simply discover the facts and display them, rather they have to decide in terms of their particular enquiry what is relevant. As Levi-Strauss has argued "historical fact has no objective reality; it only exists as retrospective reconstruction" (quoted in Lowenthal 1990: p. 215).

History is often seen as a body of known facts from events that happened in the past which all historians accept as the backbone of history (Elton 1967). However as Carr has argued historical facts do not exist in themselves but as an 'a priori' decision of the historian;

"It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is of course untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them; it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor and in what order or context" (E.H.Carr 1986: p.11).

Collingwood asserts that when historians describe certain historical facts as data, they mean that for the purpose of that particular historical enquiry there are certain historical problems which for the present they propose to regard as settled. This does not mean, however, that those historical problems cannot be reopened in the future and indeed, previously accepted versions of the past are discarded as historians unearth new evidence which casts into doubt previously accepted facts.

Crucial to the construction of history is what Collingwood has termed historical imagination whereby historians infer various conclusions from a study of his or her sources to decide what really happened. Collingwood argues;

"we know that truth is to be had, not by swallowing what our authorities tell us, but by criticising it; and thus the supposedly fixed points between which the historical imagination spins its web are not given to us ready made, they must be achieved by critical thinking" (Collingwood 1986: p.243).

Historical knowledge is therefore constructed, not only from direct evidence from the past, but also through circumstantial evidence derived from traces of the past and influenced by the historians own presuppositions. It is from reading between the lines that the historian seeks to explain the unrecorded motives of past generations, and go on to explore the causes and consequences of an historical event. Jenkins (1992: p.33) highlights the dichotomy between the creation of facts and their interpretation. History has to be based on real life events in the past, yet the selection of 'relevant' facts, in order to be meaningful, need embedding in interpretative readings. The selection of facts is dependent on both the predilections of the historian and the framework of analysis or 'model' adopted by that historian in constructing his or her

interpretation. There is no established method of analysing the past, rather a range of overlapping models that guide the historian in constructing their interpretation. The most common of these is narrative history.

#### NARRATIVE HISTORY

Narrative chronology is adopted to some extent by most historians including those using a predominantly different framework of analysis. It consists of a constructed narrative story about various events in the past in which events are described and explained through causes and consequences. This form of history seeks to unearth what happened at a specific point in the past by selecting significant reasons for a particular situation and then considering the subsequent consequences. The causes and consequences of many events are not clear cut, often causing conflict amongst historians who will emphasise different 'facts' to prove their explanation of events as the most likely. Complex events like the First World War (1914-1918) and the English Civil War (1642-48) cause heated debates among historians. In the latter these debates polarise between political and religious explanations for the outbreak of War. Yet as G.E Aylmer (1987) concludes in his book Rebellion or Revolution?;

"To enumerate the sufficient causes of almost any significant and complex event in human history is perhaps so difficult as to be beyond our capacity. The historian is not God, and should not try to be" (Aylmer 1987: p.102).

As Furet argues (1983: p.397) "traditional historical narrative obeys the logic of narrative. What comes first explains what follows". Even if historians do not overtly pinpoint causes and consequences, the construction of a chronology describing events and situations in the past involves both the selection and

emphasis of specific happenings (dates) in order to construct a story. Often that story has been concerned with major political history, in which ecclesiastical, constitutional, cultural or social and economic history have been subordinated. This is because nation states are considered to be the major agents of change, and also because politics in the widest sense represents the 'prime repertoire' of change, in that it is the form that most modern societies experience and interpret transformation (Furet 1983). Political history is conventionally defined as a study of those aspects of the past which are to do with the formal organisation of power in society, which for the majority of human societies in recorded history means the state. It embraces the institutional organisation, the competition of factions and parties for control of the state and the relations between states (Tosh 1984). Indeed political history remains the backbone of the National Curriculum (D.E.S 1991) taught in British Schools, though children do also study social and economic history.

In recent years there has been an expansion in the concerns of academic history to embrace all sorts of new subject areas including topics as diverse as medicine, folk traditions, sexuality, community, family, popular protest, education and crime. This broadening of subject matter reflects the changes in our own society as Lawrence Stone argues (1979: p.15): "They are more relevant to our own lives than the doings of dead kings, presidents and generals".

Implicit in many narrative chronologies is the belief in progress. It is a framework of analysis with a long tradition, dating to mediaeval times, when writers represented man's existence as a linear transition from the Creation to

the Last Judgement and specific events were dictated by God's Providence. In the 18th century 'Progress' was secularised in the belief of Man's ability to improve and civilise his environment through time, that the world would be a better place to live in (Tosh 1984). It is an approach which recognises only one directional and irreversible change stressing the long term, rather than temporal fluctuations (S. Pollard 1971). This concept was epitomised by the Whig Approach to history and historians such as Lord Acton and Macaulay. Butterfield (1965) characterised the Whig Historian thus;

"He is apt to imagine the British Constitution as coming down to us by virtue of the work of a long generation of Whigs in spite of the obstructions of a long line of tyrants and Tories"(Butterfield 1965: p.41).

Although few historians overtly demonstrate their belief in progress, it is a concept that still underpins many historical interpretations. This is demonstrated by the very language used; for example in the terms modernisation, urbanisation or industrialisation. The narrative chronological approach to history is not only widely used in academic history but is commonly adopted in the construction of history in museums. Many exhibitions use this approach to explore of the local town as at Wirksworth Heritage Centre or the Tolson Memorial Museum, or in Automobilia's display on the development of Morris and Austin cars.

The narrative approach to history is not the only 'model' that can be used by historians and there are a number of approaches which challenge many of the assumption and techniques used in mainstream narrative history and illustrate the various methods that can be used to construct history.

## ANNALES SCHOOL

The Annales approach has been very influential in reconsidering both change and collective consciousness. It was a movement which was French inspired, and takes its name from the journal Annales d' Histoire Economique et Sociale founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929. Bloch and Febvre rejected event orientated history- 'histoire événementielle'- arguing that a narrative history, with its primary political content not only failed to grasp the fullness of human reality but limited historical knowledge. As Febvre explained; "Man cannot be carved in to slices. He is whole. One must not divide all of history- here the events, here the beliefs" (quoted in Breisach 1985 p: 371). The Annalists sought to move away from an emphasis on events to embrace 'total history' by seeking to grasp the collective consciousness or 'mentalite' of a group at a given period in time. Mentalite represented the mental and psychological structure of a group which prescribed the range of possible ways within which individuals thought, felt and acted. This concept necessarily widened history beyond politics and the concerns of a small elite and the confines of an individual psychology, to include the study of all social groups and all aspects of culture (Breisach 1985).

The Annales school, in seeking to gain a fuller perspective on past societies pioneered the use of other analytical techniques borrowed from the social sciences. They concentrated on understanding the homogenous phenomena and long term trends rather than superficial changes. They studied collective behaviour rather than individual choices, and examined economic and social determinants rather than institutions or governmental decisions (Furet 1983). Peter Burke

commented on the logic of the Annalists: "The historians of mentalities are concerned with change over a long period, for societies do not change their modes of thought in a hurry" (quoted in Kaye p.224). This approach has enabled historians to identify long term and even immobile history.

Fernand Braudel's seminal work The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II (1949) sought to define this concept of change and continuity. He argued that everything in the world changed at three different rhythms. Land, sea, climate and vegetation change so slowly that they appear immobile- the *longe duree*. A more rapid rhythm of change characterises the phenomena with a cyclic aspect (conjunctures) orientated towards social and economic life and encompasses cyclical pattern or trends in prices, land holding or population movements. Some cycles run their course within human life time, many transcend it. Finally there are life's episodic aspects, typical of political history with its individual actions and rapid change- the fleeting event.

French historians of the third Annales generation like Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Pierre Goubert have established an alternative model of total regional history based on the regions within France. In their work the social and economic dominate, with the *longe duree* or geographical dimension appearing only as a context at the beginning of each study and not as a guiding spirit. This model of historical explanation is similar in that climate, biology and demography rule over the long term alongside economic trends, but social relations constitute a second order of reality and political, cultural and

intellectual life a third. Ladurie and Gourbet concentrated on the relationship between the first and second order of change.

The Annales School has been particularly influential in pioneering the extension of research into quantitative methods to understand trends in births, deaths, prices, tithes and net agrarian output and climate. More importantly they have sought to understand how Man is influenced and interacts with his environment. It is an approach that has been developed by Georges Henri Rivère through the Ecomusée. Indeed Rivère's definition of an Ecomusée reflects the ambitions of the Annales School;

"It is a mirror for the local population to view itself to discover its own image and in which it seeks an explanation of the territory to which it is attached and of the population that have preceded it. It is a mirror that the local population holds up to its visitors to be better understood and so that its industry, customs and identity might command respect. It is an expression of humankind and nature both in its wilderness and as adapted by traditional and industrial society" (Rivière quoted in K. Hudson 1992: p.29).

As was argued earlier many of the 'models' identified in this chapter are not exclusive and many of them overlap, as each historian reinterprets them. Several historians from the Annales School have been influenced by Marxist ideas. These include the historians Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul.

#### MARXIST INTERPRETATION

The marxist influence amongst historians has often been identified with a few relatively simple, if powerful ideas, which are not necessarily representative of Marx's work but derive from Marxian perspectives. Eric Hobsbawm (1973) has defined this approach as vulgar marxist. It is the belief in economic

determinism; the belief that the economic factor is the fundamental determinant on which all others are dependent. It argues that the nature of the productive forces (tools, raw material and the labour force) determine both the relations of production (division of labour) and the superstructure (law, politics, religion) which acts to justify and uphold the existing system of production. Vulgar Marxism reduces Marx's writings to class and historical materialism.

However as Steve Rigby (1987: p.299) has argued Marx's ideas are complex and often contradictory and it is possible to find many different theories in Marx's writings. The question to ask is not which is the real Marx but "which is more useful as a tool of analysis". Both Rigby and Hobsbawm regard the emphasis on the primacy of society's relations of production and the concept of base and superstructure as the most useful to historians.

The concept of base and superstructure presents a model of society composed of different hierarchical levels which interact for the purpose of production and reproduction. It insists on the existence within any society of internal tensions (contradictions) which counteract the tendency of the system to maintain itself. Marxism explains why and how societies transform themselves through a continual process of destabilisation and restabilisation. This form of Marxist analysis represents a dual dialectic between state functionalism and revolutionary change.

A group of British Marxist historians have been loosely grouped together as a new analytical tradition which has sought to widen the base-superstructure

model from its inherent emphasis on economic determinism by developing a theory of class determination embracing class struggle. Kaye has identified Christopher Hill, E.P Thompson, Rodney Hilton, Maurice Dobb and Eric Hobsbawm as being part of this tradition arguing that they represent a "theoretical tradition which seeks to reconstruct historical studies and theory by 'class-struggle analysis' and the perspective of 'history from the bottom up'" (1984: p.221). Typical of this approach is E.P Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class (1963) which argued that in reaction to proletarianisation and political repression, the English labouring classes developed a new consciousness and identity, not as a by-product of the factory system, but from the existing native radical tradition.

British Marxist historians do not study radical groups in isolation but in the context of class relations and confrontations. They argue that class relations are political, and thus always involve subordination, struggle and accommodation. Most of their work has looked particularly at class experience and culture rather than productive relations, reflecting their belief that the social relations of production are simultaneously economic, political, cultural and moral. This school of thought has tended to emphasise resistance and rebellion rather than the more conservative and reactionary practices and actions of the lower classes, primarily because they write in opposition to the 'prevailing paradigm' which has tended to consider radicalism as deviance and sedition. At the same time the historians are realistic about the limitations of these struggles and the limitations of lower class modes of accommodation and incorporation (Kaye 1984). Much of the British Marxist tradition is inspired by

the political convictions of the individual historians. Christopher Hill's The World Turned Upside Down (1987), in which he explores radical movements in the 1650s, acknowledges this when he argues that each generation asks new questions of the past and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experiences of its predecessors. Hill concludes his introduction;

"We may find that the obscure men and women who figure in this book, together with some not so obscure, speak more directly to us than Charles I or Pym or General Monck, who appear as history-makers in the textbooks. This would in itself be a satisfactory upside-down thought to come away with" (Hill 1987: p.18).

The British Marxist historian's main contribution is, however, the insistence that the "lower classes themselves have been active participants in making history, rather than its passive victims" (Kaye 1984: p.229). This approach has influenced the History Workshop Movement which aims to reconstruct working people's experience as a source of inspiration and understanding. Their first editorial reads:

"We believe history is a source of inspiration and understanding, furnishing not only the means of interpreting the past but also the best critical vantage point from which to view the present. So we believe that history should be properly capable of shaping people's understanding of themselves and the society in which they live" (H.W.J 1976).

This 'bottom up' approach to history challenges the concept of a historical process which accompanies history from above in which the rich and powerful in society are regarded as the sole agents of change. Although few museums in Britain have been prepared to create Marxist inspired exhibitions, several have been prepared to look at working class resistance, particularly in the Labour History Museums which have looked at Trade Unions, Women's suffrage, Chartism and the Labour movement.

## PEOPLE'S HISTORY

People's history derives from the 'bottom up' approach to history, which though deriving from Marxist inspiration is not necessarily of socialist orientation. The term is used to describe a history that is local in scale focusing on the region or locality, and which seeks to recover subjective experience. It often involves the detailed study of letters, diaries, photographs and analysis of oral history to help understand past events as they appeared to the actors of the time. Raphael Samuel characterises people's history as a shift from places to faces. It is an approach that has been widely adopted by local historical societies and community history groups who have seen it as an important way of understanding their local heritage.

Politically committed historians have used people's history as a means of shaping awareness amongst the 'workers' of the importance of social action and of reassuring them that history was on their side if only they will keep faith with the heroism of their forefathers. As Tosh (1984) has argued, the aim of this construction of history is to rescue working class histories of work, locality, family and politics with all the pride and anger so often expressed through them, before they are pushed into the improved national version of the past. The History Workshop Journal became a forum for this approach. In their first editorial in 1976 its founders explained;

"our socialism determines our concern with the common people in the past, their life and work and thought and individualism as well as the context and shaping causes of their class experience" (H.W.J 1976).

People's history has been adopted by several museums as a means of giving local people an access to their own pasts. At the People's Palace in Edinburgh, Wigan

Pier and Beamish, the history of a community is constructed from perspective of ordinary working people using oral history, photographs and contemporary letters and journals. Interestingly, although they have adopted a 'history from the bottom' approach they have been criticised by some historians on the left for neutralising the radical inspiration of people's history. Raphael Samuel (1987) commented;

"This new people's version of the national past was originally radical in inspiration, egalitarian in its bias.....whatever its egalitarian intentions, it feeds on a nostalgia for visible difference, 'the world we have lost' where people knew where they stood where classes were classes, localities localities and the British were an indigænous people" (R. Samuel 1987: p. xlviii-xlix).

#### FEMINIST HISTORY

Like people's history, feminist history or women's history was originally politically inspired. It arose from feminists' desire to understand women's economic and sexual exploitation, which they believed had been the experience of most women throughout time, and to explore the efforts of activists to redress this. Feminist history not only explores women's experience through the ages but also sets out to explain why women's contribution to society in terms of reproduction, production and the servicing of labour power has remained invisible (Davin and Alexander 1976). Feminist historians like Sally Alexander and Anna Davin argue that where women do appear they are incidental; the wives, daughters and mothers of men. Indeed only where women adopt a specifically male role such as Elizabeth I or Joan of Arc do women stand out.

Women's history is therefore about putting women into the picture "through the predilectation of generations of male historians for writing about masculine

orientated subjects such as war, diplomacy and affairs of state been largely excluded" (James McMillian in Hufton et.al 1985: p.40). Feminist history is about giving women a voice and an identity. As Sheila Johnasson explained;

"It is not surprising that most women feel that their sex does not have an interesting or significant past. However, like minority groups women cannot afford to lack a consciousness of a collective identity, one which necessarily involves a shared awareness of the past. Without this a social group suffers a kind of collective amnesia, which makes it vulnerable to dubious stereotypes, as well as fuelling prejudices about what is right and proper to do or not to do" (quoted in Tosh: 1984: p.7).

The desire to give women a profile in history resulted in a series of books and articles in the 1970s consciously seeking to explain women's oppression in their own society and an overt desire to end it. The most famous of these is Sheila Rowbotham's Hidden from History (1974) subtitled '300 years of women's oppression and the fight against it'. Inevitably as Anna Davin (in Hufton et.al 1985: p.48) has argued, a creative tension exists between the historian and the feminist. The feminist political commitment makes "some findings and analyses more palatable than others". As feminist history becomes more established many academic historians argue that it is important that it must not be marginalised, but become fully intergrated into and enrich the discipline as a whole (McMillian 1985 in Hufton et. al). Sally Humphreys asserted that;

"There are now signs of increasing awareness that history written exclusively about by and for women can never achieve more than ghetto significance" (Humphreys in Hufton et.al 1985 p.42).

For Jenkins (1992) the absorption and acceptance of women's history into the dominant discourse, though welcome, represents an incorporation into mainsteam history that dilutes the radical inspiration of feminist history, neutralising its original political motivation. Museums have been slow to incorporate feminist perspectives into their constructions of the past,

primarily since many of the surviving objects from the past have been to do with male sphere's of influence outside the home, in the affairs of state or production. Where women are presented it is often in stereotypical domestic roles caring for children or cooking. Recently, however, with such pioneering exhibitions such as 'Women in Mediaeval Southampton' at the Museum of Archaeology in Southampton (Sian Jones 1991), museums are beginning to reassess their portrayal of women's history.

#### NEW HISTORICISM

Over the last fifteen years a group of historians have begun to look at the way different discursive practises could provide further insights into the interpretation of the past. They have been particularly influenced by anthropology, linguistics and literary criticism. This broad based movement has been termed new historicism or cultural history. The accent is on the close examination of texts and actions with an openmindedness for what they will reveal, rather than the construction of elaborate narratives or social theories.

Louis Montrose (1989) argues that because documents or historical texts are passed down to us by chance, the historian can never create an authentic past. Furthermore those texts are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are constructed as documents upon which historians ground their own texts called 'histories'. This process is called intertextuality. Montrose argues that historians must be aware of the process and recognise their participation within it;

"If scholarship actively constructs and delimits its objects of study and if the scholar is historically positioned vis à vis that object, it follows

that the quest of older historical custom to recover meanings, that are in any way final and in an absolute sense authentic, correct and complete is illusory" (McIntrose 1989:p.23).

New historicism questions the status assigned to documents by historians as reflections of the facts by highlighting the mechanisms by which they are given context and shape. It criticises the false unity imposed on them by historians exploring pre-determined themes and chronology. New historicism argues that history is an ideological construction rather than an empirical record of past events. "Historians thus do not reflect the past- they signify and construct it: meaning is in the eye of the beholder" (R. Samuel 1981 :p. xliv).

New historicism strives to create a rhetorical strategy by exploring the constitutive acts of textuality and the dialectic of past and present. This approach demands a shift from the real world of objects to the reading of texts as forms of historical discourse and power relations. It finds its inspiration in the writings of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Derrida pioneered deconstructionism in which the text was examined to reveal that "certain relationship unperceived by the writer between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language he uses" (Derrida quoted in Henning 1982:p.162).

Foucault was particularly influential in challenging the conventions of history. Foucault argued that the texts of the past can be viewed without resort to the subject and can reveal a level of intelligibility all of their own. For Foucault documents are simply 'monuments' or inert traces whose decipherment depends on their being allowed to remain as they are during the act of interpretation: in

other words for the historian to resist "the temptation to attribute them a human form, a unity and familiarity that bespeaks needs that are within him or her, not the history" ( Mark Foster 1982 :p. 144).

Foucault's work shows that the origin of what we take to be rational (the periodisation of history, the search for cause and effect and pre-determined themes), is rooted in domination and subjugation and is constituted by the relationship of forces and power. Foucault, in his interpretation of the past, sought to emphasis discontinuity, and rupture, fragmentation, anti-method and eclectism. In the The Archaeology of Knowledge Foucault stated that his aim was "to untie all the knots that historians have patiently tied; it increases difference, blurs the line of communication and tries to make it more difficult to pass from one thing to another" (quoted in Mark Poster 1982 p. 145)

Foucault's use of the word archaeology was a metaphor for his own approach to history with the belief that the historian should dig in all directions, breaking old boundaries to find new coherences that defined the texts in terms of themselves, than previously imposed formulation.

Patricia O'Brien (1989) argues that Foucault studied culture through a prism of the technologies of power, which he located strategically in discourse. He argued that power cannot be apprehended through the study of conflict, struggle and resistance except in the most limited manifestations. Power is not the characteristic of class or ruling elite, nor is it attributable to the state. Foucault asserted that power does not originate in either the economy or politics but looked instead at the construction of what he called an

'ascendending analysis of power' which started from "an indefinite apex of networks of micro-powers of power relations that permeate every aspect of social life"(Foucault quoted in O'Brien 1989: p.35) Power is omnipresent and is interwoven with other kinds of relations such as family and sexuality each of which have their own history, development, trajectory and specific techniques and tactics in terms of the power discourse (O'Brien 1989, Weeks 1982). Foucault located power in the most "uninspiring places" - in the operation of feelings, love, conscience, instinct, in prison blue prints and doctors' observations. In examining the discourses of power Foucault argues that it not only represses, but it also creates. Most challenging of all is Foucault's assertion that power creates truth and hence its own legitimisation. As Mark Poster (1982: p.150) argues, discourse becomes the vehicle of social control.

New historicism has also been influenced by Geertz's model of thick description. Thick description examines public behaviour for what it says rather than what it does. It 'reads' the symbolic context of action/anecdote by framing it as a text and then interpreting it as signs, in such a way to reveal through analysis of tiny particulars the behavioural codes controlling a whole society (Biersack 1989: p. 74-75). Robert Darnton who has experimented with Geertz's interpretative strategy asserts that the aim is to read "for meanings-the meaning inscribed by contemporaries. The deciphering of meaning, then, rather than the interference of causal laws of explanation is taken to be the central task of cultural anthropology" (Darton quoted in Hunt 1989: p.12). Darton has sought to use 'thick description' as a means of recapturing the mentalité of past generations and discovering forgotten or marginalised zones of 'culture' to

locate the existence of autonomous communities and resistance to the oppression of the dominant classes and State (Mah 1991). Mah, in highlighting the 'utopian tendency' of the proponents of 'thick description' demonstrates that its major flaw is that there exists no extra textual repository of symbolic meaning of what is and what is not a 'fully significant signifier'. It is a criticism echoed by Chartier, who warns against historians replacing a reductive theory of culture as reflective of social reality with an equally oversimplified assumption that rituals and other forms of symbolic action, represent a central and coherent communal meaning (Hunt 1989). However, use of 'thick description' has proved to be a useful tool, but historians are still debating how to ensure such interpretations are grounded in empirical evidence.

The use of literary theory has had an important impact on new historicism expanding the boundaries of research, even obliterating the distinction between non-literary and literary texts. Hayden White and Dominik LaCapara argue that the historian should read context with sensibility to the literary process of intertextuality, rather than the causal notion of reflection. White ascribes primacy in historical thinking to literary tropes and verbal structures in an attempt to make the unfamiliar world familiar and states that histories are themselves literary products containing a plot, structure and sequence of events representing tragedy, comedy and romance (White 1978);

"Viewed in a purely formal way a historical narrative is not only a reproduction of past events reported in it, but also a complex set of symbols which give directions for finding an icon of the structure of these events in our literary tradition" (White 1978: p.88).

LaCapra develops the Russian literary critic Bakhtin's theory on dialogue, to argue that the text or social realities of past societies evolve through a constant dialogue that must be examined and entered from a variety of perspectives and that cannot be simply reduced to a simple monolithic meaning. The dialogue approach to history opens up the discussion between opposing and overlapping categories on a number of different levels: the dialogue between opposing ideas within specific texts, the dialogue between historians and the past.

Kramer (1989: p.125) has argued that White and LaCapara have used literary theory to help expose the "deep structures, assumptions, interests and relationships that pass unnoticed through the historiography of social elites politics and culture". As with other forms of new historicism this approach represents a major challenge to established historiography by concentrating not on what history will reveal about the past, but on the present. Ankersmit (1991) argues;

"the modernist historian follows a line of reasoning from his sources and evidence to an historical reality hidden behind his sources. On the other hand in the postmodernist view, evidence does not point towards the past, but to other interpretations of the past for that is what we in fact use evidence for"(Ankersmit 1991 p: 145-6).

The ideas of new historicism are complex, but challenge the assumptions and conventions of the academic discipline of history, forcing historians to reconsider established practices in framing historical constructions. New historicism<sup>is</sup> has forced historians to question the way sources are used and interpreted, and highlighted the infinite number of readings that those traces of the past can generate. New historicism also effectively challenges museums'

authoritative position in society as guardians of the selective memory, by demonstrating that their constructions of history are but one among many interpretations of the past. However, some museums have begun to show the processes involved in the 'manufacture' of history, by explaining how exhibitions are created, allowing visitors to see behind the scenes or providing a number of alternative interpretations to the main display. There have also been experiments to link the presentation of history with more creative art forms blurring the divisions between different disciplines. Many museums regularly hold community or educational music drama, sculpture, creative writing and drawing workshops which, in directly engaging the emotions and senses of the audience, enable a more direct confrontation with the past than is possible in more formal exhibitions.

#### CONCLUSION

Interpretation is crucial to the construction of history, it is the interpretation which gives a meaning and value to the amorphous past. However in constructing a meaning a historian or interpreter can only conceive the past in terms of their own beliefs, judgements and circumstances. Since each individual is a product of their own social and cultural background, history is in effect an ideological construct in which the chosen subject area and interpretation will reflect the individual's social, political and cultural background. History is therefore continually reinterpreted by subsequent generations.

For Jenkins, this process represents the continual shifting power relations between the dominant and the subordinate groups in society who are seeking to legitimise their current views and practices through the construction of history. He argues that history is basically a contested discourse, an embattled terrain, where people(s), classes and groups construct interpretations of the past that reflect their own social reality. Jenkins continues;

"There is no definitive history outside these pressures, any (temporary) consensus only being reached when dominant voices can silence others either by overt power or covert incorporation. In the end history is theory and theory is ideological and ideology just is material interests".  
(Jenkins 1992 p:19)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF HERITAGE

"History is collective memory, the storehouse of experience through which people develop a sense of their social identity and their future prospects" (Tosh 1984: p.1).

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine the role of history in society and demonstrate its crucial role in creating identity and legitimising current beliefs and practises. The previous chapter argued that history is not constant but a changing discourse reflecting the different cultural and social realities of each generation. History is a cultural construction and represents the discourse between different groups in society seeking to establish their own versions of the past as the authoritative and dominant view of society's history. This discourse can be witnessed in the construction of history in museums which, in their role as cultural institutions, uphold and legitimise the current dominant view of the past. Central to this discussion is the role of the curator, who it will be argued by the nature of their position act as the agents of the institution, rather than in their own right. The cultural construction of history in museums and heritage attractions is therefore, a reflection of society's shifting discourse as defined by the current socio-political boundary, rather than the personal views and perspectives of the individual curator.

#### WHAT IS HERITAGE ?

The Longman's dictionary defines heritage as "something that is transmitted by or acquired from one's predecessor or predecessors; a legacy". Heritage is therefore perceived as something to value, which

has been handed down from previous generations. Each society determines what that heritage is. At its most formal it might be the great treasures of the nation, the stately homes and castles, the landscape. Increasingly in the last twenty years it is a concept that is broadening, as a former French Minister of Culture commented in France's Heritage Year';

"The notion of heritage is no longer the coldness of stone, the glass separating us from objects in the museum; it is also the village laundry, the little rural church, local speech and song, family photos, know-how and skills" (quoted in Bommes and Wright 1982: p.299)

Today's definition of heritage increasingly encompasses the everyday, the mundane and the ordinary, as well as the objects and traditions from the powerful and wealthy. Although the majority of individuals do not actually own the land and properties that form most of the official heritage, the access they are allowed as either visitors or through media images, provides the nation with a clear sense of common ownership of the collective heritage. Heritage in that sense acts to unify society, dissolving difference in terms of class, gender, inequality and ethnic background. By extending the concept of heritage away from the unique and the grand, all society can make a contribution to the national heritage, enabling it to encompass and incorporate alternative and subordinate heritages or histories.

Inherent within the concept of heritage are the notions of familiarity, identity and legitimacy. Heritage gives meaning to the past by reaffirming a people's sense of identity and roots, by rendering the present familiar. Lowenthal (1990:p 39) comments that the physical traces on the ground and mental images in our minds of the past let us

make sense of the present. He argues that without habit and the memory of past experience no sight nor sound would mean anything; we can only perceive what we're accustomed to. Familiarity makes our surroundings comfortable, individuals surround themselves with memorabilia from their own or family's lives in the form of objects like a grandfather clock or sampler or old photographs. In his article My Life is in that Box, Jeremy Seabrook (1989: p.35) explored the importance of old family photograph collections asserting that "they amplify biographies, even destinies; a spur to memory, a quickening of the sense of importance of what has happened to those we care...".

It is not only objects and memories from the past that create a sense of familiarity, but also the physical landscape. The last forty years have seen massive social and economic upheaval in Britain which has led to unprecedented and rapid change in the familiar physical landscape of our conurbations through the construction of motorways, suburbs, shopping precincts and high rise buildings which have generated increasing feelings of placelessness and alienation (E. Relph 1976). Arthur Raistrick's observed in 1970;

"The new town centres, to the older generations seem to be undistinguished mazes of almost identical multi-storey blocks, supermarkets, giant roundabouts and subways, with nothing to distinguish Sheffield from Halifax or Bradford unless one can catch through some concrete canyon a fragment of the friendly hills which used to seem so near and refreshing". (Arthur Raistrick 1970: p.167)

Since 1970 there has been a blossoming of a grass roots conservation movement in organisations like the Civic Trust and local historical societies (J. Urry 1990). There has been a new concern to preserve not only our rural landscape and built heritage, but also old crafts and

skills, folklore and traditions which are seen to be in increasing danger from the onward march of progress. The conservation movement has been partly spurred by the sheer extent of the demolition of the built environment generating a new concern and interest in our early industrial heritage which seems in danger of disappearing for ever under new developments. Other commentators like Bommes and Wright (1982) have seen the conservation movement and the increasing popular interest in heritage as an escape mechanism from the complex 20th century world. They argue that the heritage site;

"..provides that momentary experience of utopian gratification, when the grey torpor of everyday life in contemporary Britain lifts and the simpler pre-political and usually pre-industrial measures of Albion stand revealed to the initiate's gaze". (Bommes and Wright 1982: p.294)

There is no doubt that much popular enthusiasm for the past is underpinned by feelings of nostalgia. Fred Davies (1979) has characterised nostalgia as a bitter sweet emotion infused with sentiment for the past and he asserts that nostalgia is felt most keenly at times of discontent, anxiety or disappointment. Individually nostalgia may be for one's youth, but collectively it supplies the deep links that identify a particular generation; nationally it is the source of binding social myths.

"Nostalgia becomes in short the means for holding onto and reaffirming identities which have been badly bruised by the turmoil of the times. In the collective search for identity which so pervades our post-industrial epoch - that same constant soul searching which calls forth a thousand different fashions, ecstasies, salvations and utopias- nostalgia's gaze looks backwards rather than forwards, for the familiar rather than the novel, for certainty rather than discovery" (Fred Davies 1977-8: p.422).

Identity is an important part of people's interest in the past. There is a natural curiosity in individuals to discover and understand how the

society and world they live in became the way it is. Each individual has their own personal history in which they conceptualise the events in their own lives which they piece together through memory and accounts of their parents' or even grandparents' lives and thereby reaffirm who and what they are. Similarly awareness of history enhances communal and national identity, legitimising self perception. As Jenkins (1992: p.19) comments: "History is the way people(s) create, in part, their identities".

Lowenthal (1990: p.39) argues that identification with a national past often serves as an assurance of worth against subjugation or bolsters a new sovereignty. People deprived by conquest of their proper past strive hard to retrieve its validity. The surge of Irish Nationalism spearheaded by Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association, founded in 1823 to fight for Irish emancipation, encouraged a revival in the Gaelic language and Ireland's past. Indeed, O'Connell actively used symbols of Ireland's past to bolster his campaign hosting a huge open air meeting at Tara, the seat of mediaeval Irish kings in 1843. In the 1890s the Gaelic League actively promoted the traditional language, history, dancing and Irish games and helped turn St.Patrick's Day into a national holiday, with the aim of recreating a separate cultural Irish nation (Moody and Martin 1991). It is interesting to note that the reclaiming of their language was crucial to Irish nationalism in asserting their power to create national identity. It provided an important symbolic framework from which to launch their campaign.

Breuilly (1985), in his study of nationalism, also argues the importance of history to the creation of identity. In his examination of 19th century Czech nationalism he considers the work of the Czech historian and nationalist, Palacky, who describes the conquests of the Czech people in the framework of national resistance, interpreting the 15th century religious Hussite movement as symbolic of Czech resistance against the German state, mirroring the 19th century experience of the Czech people. Plackay hoped that "his history would help restore a keen sense of national identity which was, in turn, a necessary condition for a reassertion of Czech rights" (Breuilly 1985: p.339). The use of history by the 19th century Irish and Czech nationalists illustrates the way the past can be used to help legitimise present aspirations. As Jenkins remarked;

"[history is] reworked and re-ordered by all those who are variously affected by power relationships, because the dominated as the dominant also have their versions of the past to legitimate their practices" (Jenkins 1990: p.17).

History plays an important role in legitimising current social practices and institutions. The past validates present attitudes and actions by affirming their resemblance to former ones, and thus asserting their authority and authenticity. Historical precedent legitimises what exists and current practices are continually justified by referring to 'immutable' traditions that have remained unchanged by time (Lowenthal 1990 p.40). These traditions may take the form of state rituals like the State Opening of Parliament or Coronation, or of folk customs, language and traditional dress that reaffirm the national character of a nation.

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), in exploring the way the past is used to legitimise the present, have identified certain 'invented tradition' which they characterise as rituals of a symbolic nature which seek to "inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by reputation which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1983 p.1)

Typically these would include emotional and symbolically charged signs such as a national flag or anthem but might also, in the case of Scotland, include the Kilt which, despite its relatively recent invention in the late 18th century, symbolises Scotland's ancient nationhood. David Cannadine (1983) examined the creation of the invented tradition in relation to the Royal Family between 1820 and 1977. He studied the development of rituals such as Coronations, funerals and weddings to illustrate their evolution from disorganised and low key affairs into grand displays of royal splendour by the beginning of the 20th century, that bespoke centuries of history and influence. Indeed the very nature of the invented tradition is its implicit oldness from the moment of its inception.

It is not only States that use the past to legitimise their current concerns. There exists a whole 'invented' tradition amongst radical groups, from the Levellers in the 16th century and the Chartists in the 19th century, who have attested to the imposition of the Norman yoke upon the Saxon peasantry and who have struggled for freedom and liberty ever since, thereby providing a pedigree of legitimate resistance. The previous chapter considered the work of socialist and feminist historians who have sought to bolster current political aspirations by

examining the experience of the working class and women throughout time.

As Jenkins argues;

"Thus people(s) literally feel the need to root themselves today and tomorrow in their yesterdays. Recently such yesterdays have been sought for (and found, given that the past can and will sustain countless narratives) by women, blacks, regional groupings, various minorities etc. In these pasts explanations for current existence and future programmes are made" (Jenkins 1992: p.18).

Language, whether in the form of words or symbolism, plays a crucial role in asserting identity and legitimacy. The struggles to reassert various rituals, histories, symbols and languages is illustrative of the discourse between dominant and subordinate groups. Each seek to redefine the social reality in terms of their own specific interests, be they nationalist or political.

That there exists a plurality of different interpretations of the past, makes the phenomenon of a national heritage particularly interesting acting as it does to unify and blur difference. How, therefore, does heritage become "suddenly concrete and coalesced within the monumental geography of nationalism" (Bommes and Wright 1982: p.265)?

#### THE NATIONAL HERITAGE

The dominant view of British national heritage celebrates a country built on a long tradition of evolving democracy and struggles for constitutional rights. These have become embodied in such 'great events' as the signing of the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution and the great Victorian reforming parliaments. It is a view of the past which charts the growth of Britain as a world power and the creation of an Empire. Typically it is a national heritage built on white male

achievements in which popular folk heroes such as Alfred the Great, Henry VIII, Sir Walter Raleigh, Lord Nelson and Winston Churchill fought against all adversity to protect the sanctity of the British nation. Crucial to the understanding of the nature of British national heritage is the importance of actual material remains in the form of landscape, buildings, paintings and material artefacts and relics that uphold and embody the national myth. It is therefore a heritage grounded in castles, rural scenes and works of art which can be visited and admired by the general public. Bommers and Wright (1982) have also pointed to the other side of British National Heritage which is enshrined in emotive folk myths such as Robin Hood or the Arthurian legends but which appear in both popular culture and high art forms like Pre-Raphaelite paintings. These they argue channel feelings of national hope, fear and dissatisfaction towards an imagined utopia of both past and future. It tends to do so in a way that diverts these potentially disruptive energies into the separate and regulated space of leisure, of museums and heritage sites.

In his conservation polemic Heritage in Danger, Patrick Cormack wrote;

"When I am asked to define our heritage I do not think in dictionary terms, but instead reflect on certain sights and sounds. I think of a morning mist on the Tweed at Dryborough where the magic of Turner and the romance of Scott both come fleetingly to life; of the celebration of the Eucharist in a quiet Norfolk church with the mediaeval glass filtering the colours, and the early noise of harvesting coming through the open doors, of standing at any time before the Wilton Diptych. Each scene recalls aspects of an indivisible heritage and is part of the fabric and expression of culture" (Cormack 1978: p.14).

In this passage Cormack epitomises both the physical and ephemeral nature of heritage that is more to do with emotionally charged symbols

than a clear articulation of British identity. Corner and Harvey (1990) have sought to categorise British national heritage into four typologies nationalist, rustic, aristocratic and industrial.

The nationalist side of heritage is encompassed within 'visionary hallowed symbols' such as the monarchy, national flag and other associated signs like the English Oak, the crown and English Rose. Corner and Harvey argue that country-life imagery is central to most renditions of Britishness (or Englishness). However it is an image that tends to be embodied in the landscape of the Cotswolds and its white thatched cottages, rather than the Scottish Highlands, Yorkshire Dales or Peak District. The English rural myth equates the village with everything that is traditional and authentic about English life and which has remained constant despite the 'ravages' of industrialisation and urbanisation. The village attests to a simpler way of life and social structure in which the local gentry are still seen to play an influential role. It's a myth that is celebrated through the revival of folk customs like Morris dancing, the Allendale Fire Ceremony or the Haxey Hood Game (Bob Pegg 1981). Rural Folk Museums commemorate and in some cases even uphold that rural myth in elaborate displays of farming implements and tools and other ephemera that belong to a world we have lost in terms of values, skills and know how. Typical of such an approach is the Folk Museum at Hawes in the Yorkshire Dales or the Ryedale Folk Museum in North Yorkshire.

The English rural myth is closely linked to one of the most established myths in national ideology, that of the aristocratic country house with

its attributes of family continuity, spaciousness, tranquility and elegance (Corner and Harvey 1990). The Country House symbolises the traditional social order and often affirms and enhances the power and wealth of the English landed gentry both past and present. Personal items and memorabilia lying around the Great Halls provide tantalising glimpses to visitors of a way of life the majority of them will never experience except in popular television series such as Brideshead Revisited and Upstairs and Downstairs, and as such assumes a fantastical quality.

A more recent addition to the British national heritage is industrial development. This has been absorbed into the rural myth aided by the attractive settings of many early industrial sites in remote steep sided river valleys. Typical of such sites are early mills such as those in Calderdale, West Yorkshire or Quarry Bank Mill in Cheshire. Standing amidst imposing stone structures in tree filled valleys, it is easy to expunge the hardships of the operatives who worked there. Indeed, even where hardships are alluded to, they often become enveloped in grotesque genres that negate any understanding of what it was really like. With increasing de-industrialisation, as Britain moves towards lighter industries and the service sector, the old industrial sites stand as monuments to the pioneering spirit of the first industrial nation.

National heritage evokes feelings of familiarity, identity and legitimacy through the notion of essential continuity. National continuity is not assured. It is invented by enhancing and maintaining the nation's dominance over other identities which threaten to fragment

it through regionality or differences in religion, politics and ethnicity. In the 1990s the fragility of the nation-state has been brought into focus by the crumbling of both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. National character does not exist; rather it is invented over time to provide identity and to cohere diversity. The success of the national myth is its ability to bind a community which is essentially pluralist, by both incorporating and excluding subordinate heritages.

#### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The past, both in terms of its physical traces and through tradition and precedent, provides a society with its heritage, which each subsequent generation uses to enrich and legitimise their present. Inevitably heritage, like history floats free of the past and represents not the reality of past events, but is the symbolic extraction of meaning that is given by society to its present reality. Crucial to this discussion is the social construction of that reality.

It has been argued by Jenkins (1992) Tosh (1984) and others, that individuals construct history in terms of their own social and cultural reality. Before considering the construction of heritage, it is important to understand the processes involved in the construction of culture. Raymond Williams (1983) has defined culture as the way of life of a group or society. This theory of culture envisages culture as interwoven with the social practices which form a common human activity. It defines culture as;

"both the meanings and the values which arise among distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical

conditions and relationships, through which they 'handle' and respond to the conditions of existence; and as the lived traditions and practices through which those 'understandings' are expressed and in which they are embodied" (Raymond Williams 1983 p.51)

Berger and Luckmann (1972) argue that culture is constructed and reconstructed as a continuous process in which there exists a dialectic between the self and the socio-cultural world. The socio-cultural world is a subjective reality constructed by human beings, which although man-made, exists external to the individual who experiences it as objective reality. Individuals internalise reality and place their own subjective meanings on the world around them. For Berger and Luckmann, culture exists as an all-embracing socially constructed world of subjective and intersubjective meanings, a symbolic framework. Berger argues that in society as a whole those meanings become objectified into common knowledge or artefacts of culture in the form of ideologies, belief systems, moral codes, values, myths and institutions which will reflect a particular society. These in turn become reabsorbed into individual consciousness as subjective plausible definitions of reality or mutually sanctioned codes of personal and collective behaviour (Wuthnow et.al 1984). Berger characterises the dialectic between self and the socio-cultural world as the simultaneous interaction between three moments: externalisation, objectivation and internalisation.

"It is through externalisation that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality sui generis. It is through internalisation that man is a product of society" (Berger 1967 quoted in Wuthnow et.al 1984: p.40).

Externalisation is the ongoing outpourings of the individual's physical and mental being into the world. Berger (1967) argues that, unlike animals, humans lack a biologically grounded structure of instincts to channel thought and behaviour and therefore rely on human structures.

Objectivation is the process by which the individual confronts the world. It is something external to themselves; an objective reality not simply a reality perceived by the individual and no one else.

Objectivity despite its all embracing nature as perceived by the individual, is still produced by human beings. Internalisation is the process whereby the objectified world is 'reabsorbed into consciousness itself'; it becomes shared knowledge. In this way the individual not only comprehends the objective socio-cultural world but identifies with and is shaped by it. The world becomes their world.

Internalisation occurs through the process of socialisation, a lifelong and continuous process whereby individuals are shaped and initiated into the meaning of culture and learn to accept the roles and identities that make up the social structures and institutions that constitute social reality (Wuthnow et.al 1984 : p.39-40).

Language, as a systematic means of communication through words, symbols, signs and body language, plays a crucial role in objectifying<sup>y</sup> shared experience, by creating a symbolic framework to contextualise and give meaning to the world. Language makes available to the linguistic community the collective stock of knowledge that has been accumulated by previous generations and enables new experiences to be objectified and incorporated into the existing body of tradition. Berger and Luckmann (1972 p:82) argue that the edifice of legitimisation for the current social organisation and institutions is built upon language, which superimposes the quality of logic on the institutional order.

Institutional meanings are therefore objectified through language and

are internalised by the individual from the moment they enter the social process. These institutional meanings have become simplified into easily graspable formulae, as recognisable events, objects, experiences and practices. Needless to say language is a powerful tool in the control of society. It defines meaning and frames thought processes. As will be argued later there is therefore a continual struggle amongst different groups in society seeking to rearticulate and control certain signifiers.

The legitimacy of the institution is based on their historical objective reality, which each new generation has to accept and recognise. History therefore is vital in the process of socialisation. It gives precedent and legitimation to the institutional structure. Whilst society and culture changes over time, history is continually being reinterpreted to secure the present social reality. By virtue of that objectivity, institutions are coercive, containing within them an implicit claim to legitimacy that provides a degree of moral authority that conformity is morally right and non-conformity is morally wrong. Many institutions also carry mechanisms of social control which enforce their reality, for example law and order;

"The expanding institutional order develops a corresponding canopy of legitimations, stretching over it a protective cover of both cognitive and normative interpretations. These legitimations are learned by the new generation during the same process that socializes them into the institutional order" (Berger and Luckmann 1972 p:79).

Berger and Luckmann therefore argue that history and tradition emerge from this institutional linguistic foundation and are important in terms of upholding the present day social reality and value system. The construction of history takes place at two levels; that of the

individual and that of society. For the individual their heritage is personal encompassing their life experience, memories and family history, encapsulated in familiar objects, photographs and stories. At societal level heritage provides what Berger and Luckmann (1984 p:116) have termed universal symbolic codes, a totality which provides "the ultimate legitimation of the institutional order by bestowing upon it the primacy in the hierarchy of human experience". The demarcation between private individual heritage and societal one is important as Tosh (1984) explains;

".. whereas the individual's sense of his or her past arises spontaneously, historical knowledge has to be produced. Society has a past which extends back far beyond the lives of individuals' which happen to comprise it at any one time. The raw materials of which a historical consciousness can be fashioned are accordingly almost unlimited" (Tosh 1984: p.2).

It is this production of historical knowledge and awareness of society's heritage that is of particular interest to the study of museums. As cultural institutions they are part of the mechanisms used to communicate those universal symbolic codes that represent our collective heritage, and as symbolic codes are culturally constructed.

#### THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL HERITAGE

National heritage is not based on a natural consensus that emerges out of society, nor is it imposed by class interest, rather it is a product of a whole range of social institutions and forces which include the apparatus of the state (institutions and cultural agencies), private enterprise, academics, voluntary groups and the media. In their analysis of cultural construction both Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall and others have deployed Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony holds that cultural domination or more accurately 'cultural leadership' is not achieved by force or coercion, (as some Marxist would argue), but is secured through the consent of those it will ultimately subordinate. The subordinate groups consent because they accept the view of the world offered by the dominant groups (Turner 1990: p.66-67). The achievement of hegemony is sustained only through the continual winning of consent. Hegemony is never total but a shifting discourse between dominant and subordinate groups. In Marxism and Literature Raymond Williams (1977) asserted;

"A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships and activities with specific and changing pressures and limits.....It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited altered, challenged by pressures not at all of its own"  
(Williams 1977: p.112)

For Williams the concept of hegemony goes beyond ideology. What is decided is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived social process as practically organised by specific and dominant meanings and values. He sees the relations of domination and subordination as an actual lived experience in the sense that they form a practical consciousness that goes beyond politics and economics embracing "the whole substance of lived identities and relationships" (Williams 1977: p.110), that create the culture and way of life of a society. Hegemony therefore constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society, since it equates with their actual lived experience and reality, consciously and unconsciously framing their perceptions and values. Stuart Hall has looked at the struggle or discourse over meaning and significance in the construction of language. Hall argues that

meaning is a social production in which language and symbolization produces meaning.

"The signification of events is part of what has to be struggled over, for it is the means by which collective social understandings are created- and thus the means by which consent for particular outcomes can be effectively mobilised" (Stuart Hall 1982: p.70).

These collective meanings are at their most pertinent where things appear to have been given only one unalterable meaning. Hall argues that the creation of one meaning is the result of the establishment of an achieved system of equivalence between language and reality, in which the effective mastery of the struggle over meaning has been achieved. Language shapes thoughts, beliefs, ideology, and reality, but the struggle over meaning remains a continual shifting discourse. A simple example given by Hall is the word black, a signifier which in the dominant meaning-system equates with despised or inferior and the struggle by black people to disarticulate this signifier and rearticulate it in terms of black is beautiful (Stuart Hall 1982).

The concept of hegemony has proved a useful means of analysing cultural construction and understanding the production of popular culture be it football, rock music or fashion, and in the analysis of everyday confrontation in the workplace, street or pub (Tony Bennett 1986, Bommers and Wright 1982). It is a concept that is also a useful analytical tool in understanding the creation of society's selective tradition or national heritage.

Raymond Williams (1983) argues that within any society the selection of tradition will be determined by various interest groups, including

classes, and will reflect current aspirations and values. The selective tradition is not fixed but is continually changing. Different groups in every generation will struggle over meaning in order to legitimise their current social reality. For Williams this process represents the cultural dialectic in which the dominant cultural forms and activities are a constantly changing field. The dialectic is a process of incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation and recuperation. The previous chapter illustrated the way both feminist and socialist inspired history has been recuperated<sup>at</sup> into the main body of academic history. Yet as was argued any incorporation neutralises the challenging and radical inspiration of the alternative and subordinate discourses. In the same way that the rebellious punk is rehabilitated into 'youth culture', popular versions of the past such as Robin Hood, a "pugnacious popular myth [becomes] robbed of political significance" (Popular Memory Group 1982: p.208).

National heritage is a publicly structured phenomena which, in establishing unity of purpose, both absorbs and excludes traditions that challenge the dominant discourse. For instance much of black experience and history has, until recently, been excluded from the dominant white national heritage, and where it does appear, exists only as interesting ethnic contrast that reaffirms British identity. Typical is Bradford's recent tourism promotion of its Asian population (about a third of the city's population) in 'Flavours of India' presenting an exotic eastern contrast to the industrial heritage of a city that was born from the

wool trade. At the national level, local community history which may in the case of Tyneside, Cornwall or Yorkshire have its own strong traditions and identity in apposition to the dominant British ones are contextualised and then absorbed under the umbrella of national heritage. As Bommes and Wright comment;

"The balance of forces is weighted from the start in favour of dominant representations, for a sense of tradition constructed solely in terms of locality can be appropriated independently of any critical perspective on the larger framework of capitalist social relations" (Bommes and Wright 1982: p.299).

Indeed the politically inspired people's history has also become revised and transformed away from its emphasis on the struggles for equality to an assertion of ordinary people's contribution to the national heritage. There has been a move away from a concentration on public symbols of state towards a celebration of the ordinary, mundane and personal, that has been characterised by Raphael Samuel as:

"Hearth and home, rather than the sceptre and the sword become the symbols of national existence, samplers and patchwork quilts the signifiers of tradition" (R.Samuel 1987: p.xlvii).

In fact this shift represents the renegotiation of the consensus surrounding national heritage, resulting from the unprecedented economic and social changes of the last twenty years. These changes necessitated a rearticulation of the selective tradition to uphold the new emerging social reality. David Harvey (1989) has observed that much of the change in cultural consumption results from the changing modes of production away from Fordism to flexible accumulation. For Harvey flexible accumulation has brought new systems of production and marketing which are characterised by technological innovation, more flexible labour processes and markets, geographic mobility and a shifting pattern of consumption towards mass consumption of both goods and increasingly

services. Raphael Samuel (1987) too has noted changes in the socio-economic make up of Britain since the mid 1970s, towards increased home ownership, the revival of the small business, the increasing importance of private property and individual freedom over public service, public ownership and public spirit.

For commentators such as Robert Hewison (1987) de-industrialisation has created a sense of loss within the nation and nostalgia for a rapidly disappearing world. It has created alienation, placelessness and a loss of identity for many ordinary people who have seen their landscape, social structure and economic production change beyond recognition. Linked directly to such feelings has been the emergence of the grass roots conservation movement who have sought to preserve and protect objects, buildings, landscapes, skills and memories before they disappear for ever. The same period has also witnessed a growing interest in local history, genealogy and a fascination in discovering the details and concerns of everyday life (Urry 1990). Although this collective nostalgia arose spontaneously as a result of rapid change, as Hewison (1987) has argued, it has become quickly institutionalised, as a social construct in the media and in cultural institutions such as museums and heritage attractions. Popular reaction against inevitable social and economic upheaval was therefore channelled into specific coded sites, symbols, images and events that acted to reaffirm social identity and continuity.

The National Fishing Heritage Centre in Grimsby was built to celebrate the town's long fishing tradition. In capturing the heyday of the

trawlers in the 1950s, the Centre actively channels the frustration and anger of local people at the decline of their main industry into a pride for their fishing heritage. Likewise Beamish was begun at a time when the North East was suffering massive economic decline in which traditional industries such as mining, ship building and steel making were replaced by unemployment and huge empty wastelands. Beamish acted to reaffirm regional pride and identity by celebrating the distinct character and history of the North East through the everyday lives of its people in past generations. Countless other museums and heritage centres whether they be steam railways or working farms have served similar purposes. Indeed Raphael Samuel (1987: p.xli) has commented "a cult of the ordinary could be said to be the dominant motif in contemporary representations of national life". Alongside the use of ordinary, familiar objects to confirm continuity and identity, has been a re-interpretation of the past to rediscover 'Victorian values' such as the work ethic, self help, thrift, good housekeeping and enterprise that have been used to help justify and uphold the new economic and political framework. The incorporation of the ordinary and mundane into the selective tradition therefore represents the emergence of a new consensus that has resulted from what Raymond Williams (1983) would term 'the lived experience of a society'.

Fred Davies has asserted that whereas the landscape of collective nostalgia was previously inhabited mainly by persons, places and events of a political or civic character, it is increasingly and perhaps predominantly inhabited by media creations, personalities and images (1979 p.125). This has been partly facilitated by the development of

mass media, utilising technological innovations in communication to enable images to be reproduced quickly and widely distributed through the printed media, television and other cultural institutions. David Harvey (1989) in his study on postmodernism has argued that the communications revolution helped facilitate new forms of cultural expression that have concentrated on the ephemeral, pastiche and anti-aesthetic. In postmodernism, commerce and culture are indissolubly intertwined (Urry 1990). Many commentators, including Robert Hewison in his polemic The Heritage Industry (1987), have documented the influence of postmodernism on museums and heritage attractions. Hewison argues that in response to industrial decline the heritage industries have created bogus history in which the past has become trivialised and expunged of real meaning and significance. Whilst Hewison exaggerates in order to crystallize his argument about the degree to which the past has become a commodity, David Harvey has asserted that the recent changes in the economic and social framework have made the commercialisation of the past inevitable.

"The assertion of any place-bound identity has to rest at some point on the motivational power of tradition. It is difficult however to maintain any sense of historical continuity in the face of the flux and ephemerality of flexible accumulation. The irony is that tradition is now preserved by being commodified and marketed as such" (David Harvey 1989: p.303).

New landscapes are familiarised with 'Victorian' street furniture. Old designs are resurrected and adapted for use in late 20th century homes. Old photographs are used to add authenticity to new products. Old objects are innovatively recycled to give continuity and style to the modern. As with previous generations, the late 20th century is merely using and re-interpreting the past to represent and legitimise their new

social reality. Commentators like Hewison (1987) have argued that the present day heritage industry is a specific phenomena resulting from industrial decline; however this chapter has tried to illustrate that throughout history, societies use and continually re-interpreted the past to affirm and uphold their present day. The only difference today, is that this generation has at its disposal much more sophisticated means of exploiting the past. As a result of both changes in economic production and the technological revolution in communicative media, present day cultural institutions are able to utilise the past in ever more varied and exciting ways that both respond to the market and preempt it.

#### THE AUTHORITY OF THE INSTITUTION

Together with other cultural institutions like television and the printed media, museums play a major role in the cultural construction of history. Museums have a sanctioned place in our society as the guardians of our collective memory, preserving and conserving objects from the past so that they might instruct society on its collective heritage. As storehouses of objects from the past, and as institutions of historical learning their historical interpretations are accorded an authoritative surety and influential role in shaping society's selective tradition. As Stuart Hall (1981) argues;

"The cultural industries do have the power constantly to rework and reshape what they represent; and by repetition and selection to impose and implant such definitions of ourselves as fit more easily the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture" (Stuart Hall 1981: p.232-233).

Museums do not, of course, exist in isolation. They are part of a discourse in which they both reflect the values and beliefs of society,

whilst at the same time are involved in a continual process of testing and redrawing the socio-political parameters which constitute the selective tradition. Indeed Hall states: "Educational and cultural institutions, along with the many positive things they do, also help to discipline and police this boundary" (Stuart Hall 1981: p.236). The interpretation of history in museums, undertaken by curators, is therefore part of the wider dynamic that exists in the construction of culture.

#### THE ROLE OF THE CURATOR

Berger and Luckmann (1972) have argued that only through representation in performed roles can the institution manifest itself in actual lived experience. The role of curator is therefore the personification of the museum. Berger and Luckmann contend that in an organised society, knowledge can be categorised into general and role specific knowledge. The individual, in adopting the role, in this case of curator, is inducted into specific areas of socially objectivated knowledge, not only in the narrower cognitive sense, but also in the terms of knowledge of norms, values and even emotions that are attached to the role. The role provides the individual with status and as in the case of the curator, with an institutional nexus of conduct and professional ethos that are embodied in the various museum qualifications and in the Museum Association's Code of Conduct for Curators (1983).

By adopting the institutionalised role of curator, the individual participates in the cultural construction of history, selecting objects from the past from which to base an interpretation upon. However, the

curator may only frame that interpretation within the socio-political boundary laid down by the dominant ideological discursive field, or existing hegemony. In the 1990s, whilst it may be acceptable for a museum to construct a feminist interpretation of history, a strongly marxist, imperialist, fascist, or homosexual interpretation is likely to attract strong censure, if indeed the individual curator was in the first place, able to get support and finance from his or her institution to put such an exhibition on.

Stuart Hall (1982) in his seminal essay on the role of ideology in media considered the way broadcasters, whilst free of direct compulsion and constraint, still "freely articulate themselves systematically around definitions of the situation which favour the hegemony of the powerful" (Stuart Hall 1982: p.86). Hall argues that the media does not merely reflect a consent already existing in society, but plays an important role in its manufacture. He explains that the media;

"...must be sensitive to and can only survive legitimately by operating within the general boundaries or framework of 'what everyone agrees' to: the consensus..... But, in orientating themselves in 'the consensus' and, at the same time attempting to shape up the consensus, operating on it in a formative fashion, the media becomes part and parcel of that dialectic process of the 'production of consent'- shaping the consensus while reflecting it- which orientates them within the field or force of the dominant social interests represented within the state" (S. Hall 1982: p.87).

Turner (1990) argues that there exists a dialectic between the autonomy of the individual and the existing socio-political framework which structures the articulation of ideology within both language and within institutions. Hence the broadcaster, or in this case the curator, might frame his or her own specific view of the 'truth' but will do so 'within an ideological framework' which prefers some truths and excludes others.

This ideological framework, is in fact the current socio-political boundary which itself defines the cultural construction of heritage. The curator, while central to the construction of history through the processes of collecting, selecting and interpreting the traces of the past in museums, is dependent on society's existing symbolic framework if they are to enshrine those remnants from the past with historical significance. The interpretation of history in museums therefore remains a cultural rather than a personal construct, in which the curator must work within the current socio-political boundaries.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE COLLECTION AND ITS INTERPRETATION

"Objects are triggers of chains of ideas and images that go far beyond their initial starting point. Feelings about the antiquity, the authenticity, the beauty, the craftsmanship, the poignancy of objects are stepping stones towards fantasies, which have aesthetic, historical, macabre or a thousand other attributes" (L. Jordanova 1989: p. 23).

#### INTRODUCTION

As guardian of society's heritage, the museum acts as both a conservator and educator in which the traces of the past are pivotal providing physical evidence on which to build a construction of history. The construction of a museum exhibition involves a complex series of decision making processes before it can finally be put on public display. This chapter will begin to examine curatorial decision-making by examining the role of the curator's raw materials, the objects from the past. In particular the issues of availability and selection of artefacts will be explored by drawing on data from interviews with individual curators. Finally, the chapter will consider the conservation and educational functions of a museum and question to what extent the objects remain primary to the construction of history in museums.

#### THE POWER OF THE OBJECT

Although museums use photographs, written text, videos and other communicative media, it is their collections of objects which provide visitors with a direct physical link with the past. It is these objects which differentiate museums from other cultural media concerned with the past. As John Rumsby, senior Curator at Tolson Museum argued;

*"What we have that television doesn't have is original three*

*dimensional objects, and that is what people come to see...it's the one thing that we do that nobody else does. We could put books on the wall, but you could get books out of libraries. It is the object that is special to museums" (Rumsby 1992).*

This point was also made by Myna Trustram, Keeper at N.M.L.H. The Museum had recently had a temporary exhibition about the Professional Footballers Association (PFA). As Myna explained the attraction for visitors was;

*"..being in the presence of Tom Finney and Stanley Matthews football boots... is why people come to the museum, they come to see those things. They don't really come I think [to learn] about the history of the P.F.A, they can buy John Harding's book and read it in their own home" (Trustram 1992).*

Objects from past provide society with direct images of the past. The object is a powerful communicator in its own right. Seeing history on the ground at a historic site or examining an old object is, as Lowenthal explains "a less self-conscious process than reading about it: texts require deliberate engagement, whereas relics can come to you without conscious aim or effort" (Lowenthal 1990: p.245). At the most basic level objects speak for themselves. Mere observation enables an appreciation of shape, colour, fragility or size, before the observer then questions its purpose, age, method of production and origin. Further the actual fact that the object exists and can be observed, that it is an observable phenomena, provides evidence of previous human activity. It provides proof that history is not merely the figment of our imaginations. Andrew Tulloch, assistant curator at N.F.H.C remarked;

*"Without the objects from the past we have no real story to tell. We could tell anything, we could use all sorts of ... wonderful techniques that are available to make up stories if we so wished ... People are excited by, and hopefully stimulated, by knowing that something is real, as opposed to when something is just a mock up. When you show someone something that is old, it sparks their interest more, they look at it more carefully, especially if you're showing it to them personally, you actually see this happen, they begin to examine it, they pay more attention to what you're saying*

about it" (Tulloch 1992).

Museums, through their collections seem to offer through visible and tangible objects, "obvious and value free evidence of the real and of the past. Objects are seen as natural and direct reflections of the world representing the past simply and unambiguously" (Gaby Porter 1989: 31). Objects and relics of the past are deemed to have authenticity, which in its literal meaning conveys 'authority': the objects provide evidence from the past, and hence authorise the construction of the past presented to the general public. Nicola Moyle, Assistant Keeper at Kelham remarked; "*Museums always have that one face saving grace. They always have the authentic objects, so yes they have authenticity in that sense.....The danger is that, when interpreting that authentic object*" (Moyle 1992).

#### THE CREATION OF THE ARTEFACT

When an object is placed in a museum, it undergoes two forms of transformation. Firstly, it is taken from where it was identified as being 'important', is conserved and protected and displayed in attractive surroundings and in that process iconized. As David Lowenthal (1990) argues;

"showing off the past is the conscious result of identifying it. Labelling a relic affirms its historical significance; displaying it enhances its appeal. Antiques in museums are enshrined in glass cases, mounted on cushions, flattered by spot light. Relics in situ are freed of surrounding encumbrances" (Lowenthal 1985: p.271).

This process of enhancement not only affects objects from the past, but also historic sites. The following passage from the English Heritage Guide Book to Roche Abbey describes the site;

"As it now stands, the site exemplifies two very different approaches to a mediaeval ruin. From the eighteenth century comes

the overall woodedness and greenness with terraces, cascades and asymmetrical planting; from the twentieth century comes the severer exposure of walls and the stripped lineaments of plan, set off by shaved lawns and framed by earthen verges. One is evocative, the other didactic- neither is mediaeval" ( P.Fergusson 1990: p.31).

Roche Abbey was landscaped in the eighteenth century by Lancelot

'Capability' Brown. Two hundred years later the foundations have been excavated and exposed and adorned with tiny metal plaques: both are interpretations. This is the second form of transformation undergone by an object from the past, in which they are explained and interpreted and given a meaning and value. Each curator will interpret the object in terms of their own social reality, perspectives and knowledge. At its most simple that interpretation may be the placing of an object in a glass case with a label. As Myna Trustram commented;

*"All museums have got interpretation even if you were just putting a row of tokens or coins in a case, they say something about the value that you attribute to those objects, by simply putting them in a case on their own" (Trustram 1992).*

In terms of the power of the curator, this role of deciding what to conserve and how to interpret it, is crucial in determining the form of history presented to the public in museums. Yet, although it is the curator who makes those key decisions, they are constrained by a number of factors. One crucial factor is the availability of the traces of the past.

#### THE AVAILABILITY OF THE PAST

Historic sites survive by accident. Previous generations either deemed them of sufficient value and importance not to demolish them, pillage the stone or rebuilt the site or the historic site was not in a key location and escaped redevelopment. Collections too, reflect more what

has survived, than any comprehensive record of the past. As Richard Doughty, Heritage Manager of the N.F.H.C observed;

*"I think one of the biggest problems that the museum community has inherited is, from the way in which collections have been built up that they have to a very large extent collected passively and they have relied on people coming forward with offers of objects or collections of objects and they have not in any way sought to build up a representative collection and of course obviously the further you go back in time the harder it is to have a representative collection so it is a subject fraught with problems" (Doughty 1992).*

For a museum like Ryedale, which explores the local history of the area, the museum is swamped by gifts of flat irons, old sewing machines, christening gowns, butter churns and the like. Its curator, Martin Watts, argues that in many ways the museum is as much a product of culture, as the actual curator who selects and displays those artefacts. The Museum has been interested in acquiring a stone water trough of the type once found in most farm yards, but because these are now popular as garden tubs, the museum is yet to be offered one and would be unable to purchase one at their present cost. Ironically the museum could have as many stone mill wheels as it wished, since these are not presently in demand. Museums, contain the objects society no longer has any use or need for. As Martin Watts remarked; *"No one wants a hearse in their back garden, but somebody ought to have it. So you end up having it in the museum"* (Watts 1992).

As with historic sites many of the objects that still survive are products of chance and accident. It tends to be the less fragile and hard wearing that survive- the flat irons and the mill wheels. As one goes further back in time, much less survives. Tolson is in the process of planning a new archaeology gallery, in which one of the key messages, as John Rumsby explained, will be;

*"we are trying to say in the archaeology gallery, that everything in the gallery is exceptional simply because it has survived and therefore what it tells us about the past is biased in those terms"* (Rumsby 1992).

It is not only the less fragile material that is likely to survive, but that which society deems of value. Like many other museums the Ryedale Folk Museum has a large collection of Christening gowns, which have been carefully looked after and preserved by their original owners and then donated to the museum. This process can be seen in the extensive collections of paintings, fine hangings, porcelain and objet d'art found in many Stately homes. As Roger Whitworth, the Yorkshire Regional National Trust Historic Buildings Representative commented;

*"The everyday mundane objects, purely because they are mundane and common place, tend not to survive, and are no longer available for display. It is the beautiful objects that have survived and the paintings of the wealthy who could commission portraits that have survived, which makes it inevitable that it is the objects of the rich that dominate displays such as Benningborough"* (Whitworth 1992).

This tendency to preserve objects connected with the rich and powerful, was a theme taken up by John Rumsby who gave an example from a Military Museum he had previous worked in;

*"You get lots of officers uniforms, very few other, very few other ranks uniforms. It is simply that they don't survive. Officer's uniforms were made of better material, they were more expensive, they were worn for a shorter time. Officers who left the army or what ever, had the space to put a uniform in and keep it for sentimental reasons, whereas other ranks, if they still had their uniform after they left the army, wore it"* (Rumsby 1992).

The accident of survival can therefore make the collection that the curator has to work with unrepresentative of the period they are seeking to recreate. The lack of material evidence thus constrains the themes or stories that can be explored. It is also the case that certain aspects of the past did not produce substantial material evidence. Martin Watts

further developed this point by giving the example of the history of farm animals in Ryedale. Cows, horses and pigs have a much larger archive of material than sheep merely because they have much more "clobber" associated with them. Yet he argues;

*"The sheep had an enormous impact but there is nothing left really to talk about. Sheep are sheep, just a pair of shears, full stop. There is no special milking machines or anything. So you are inevitably giving a coloured view of history" (Watts 1992).*

#### SELECTING THE PAST

Although the curator is constrained by what has survived and what society delivers to the museum, the curator still has the power to decide what is accepted. It is they that determine the museum's collection interest, decide to accept or reject donations and actively seek objects to fill perceived gaps. Christine McDonnell, Keeper of Finds at Y.A.T commented; *"Collections often reflect the culture and background of the person who made the collection. It is all subjective"* (McDonnell 1992).

This is clearly illustrated by 19th century museum collections, which are often of a very antiquarian nature. They are a product of the imperial values of that generation, in which exhibitions and collections focused on the richness and variety of the British Empire and the 'civilising' influence of the British on the 'barbaric' cultures of India, Africa and South America. Many museums still retain their core 19th century collections of carefully labelled birds eggs, and exotic carvings, costumes and shrunken heads from the far reaches of the British Empire (Hooper-Greenhill 1992).

The decisions about what a museum accepts as part of its collection is increasingly placed in writing. Since 1989 the Museums and Galleries Commission (M.G.C) have been gradually introducing a Registration scheme in an attempt to set clear standards for museums. Museums are now required to develop and produce a collecting policy. This policy has to state the nature of the collection and the criteria used to define the scope and subjects, themes of the collection, and the periods, or the geographic area. The Policy also has to declare the limitations on that collecting policy in terms of space, staff shortage or conservation requirements and provide a very clear acquisition and disposal policy (M.G.C 1989:7). The M.G.C is therefore curtailing arbitrary collecting by demanding clear boundaries and guidelines on the collection. The Kirklees Museum Service of which both Oakwell Hall and Tolson are both a part, clearly state in their Collecting policy, that they will not accept christening gowns, cradles, kodak box brownies, sewing machines and flat irons, but go on to highlight areas of interest where they wish to acquire further material (Kirklees Metropolitan Council Cultural Services 1991). The M.G.C Registration scheme, by codifying accepted museum practice, actively influences the construction of history by forcing curators to define the selection criteria used in building their collections from the available traces of the past. Having determined the nature of the collection, the curator begins the process of deciding which artefacts should be placed on display.

#### EXHIBITING THE PAST

Most museums have collections which are far too extensive to display in their entirety. Yet the selection of artefacts is crucial in

determining the history presented to the public. As Peter Lewis,

Director of Beamish said;

*" I'm sitting here with two and half million objects, a third of a million photographic images and therefore what I make available and what I choose, does actually I suppose in a way edit and move collective memory if I'm not careful" (Lewis 1992).*

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in her book the Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge (1992: p.6-7) details the role of cataloguing systems in helping to determine both the actual selection of artefacts and the causal links and interpretation that is made between different objects. She gives the example of a 18th century silver teaspoon made in Sheffield, which would be classified under 'Silver' in the V&A , 'Decorative Art' at Stoke on Trent, Industrial Art at Birmingham City Museum and 'Industry' at Kelham. Such a classification system, though developed and determined by the museum profession, acts to restrict the linkages that a curator is able to make between artefacts.

Once the selection of artefacts has been made, the curator, even before constructing any formal interpretation around those artefacts, will influence the way the audience regards them, not only by the method of display, but also in the way some artefacts are given greater prominence than others. This can be clearly seen in the Skipper Gallery at Jorvik where, the exhibition is segregated into exhibition panels and glass cases surrounding the room, whilst six round cases in the centre contain the 'most important' finds. It was deliberately designed this way, so that visitors who had either a low boredom threshold or who were short of time could still get an overview of the archaeological finds excavated at Coppergate.

In the interpretation of their collection or site, curators are further constrained by conservation needs. There may be certain forms of interpretation that the curator would like to adopt, but which would be incompatible with the conservation needs of the collection. It is a situation often faced by managers and interpreters of historic sites in which they must balance the desire to provide public access and interpretation of the site, whilst ensuring its continual preservation. Indeed the provision of public access can literally erode the very 'object' the public have come to witness. Ray Barker, the administrator at Benningborough Hall, highlighted this dilemma;

*"We have got a very fine eighteenth century saloon, last year we had to replace some of the floor boards. When we took them up, we saw that they had last been laid in 1834, as there was a date on the back of the plank. Now we have got new floor boards in place, if this process was to continue then eventually there will be no old floor boards, all that we will have left are new ones, and then can you really say that people are looking at an eighteenth century floor" (Barker 1992).*

#### CONSERVER OR EDUCATOR ?

The debate about whether the museum is a conserver or an educator is an interesting one. Museums present the past to the general public, through actual physical traces of the past. The collection and conservation of material from the past is therefore of prime importance, if a museum is to act as the storehouse for society's collective memory. In recent years, however, many museums have begun to move away from a primarily object centred approach, in which exhibitions consisted primarily of glass cases of objects with little supporting interpretation, to a more narrative genre. Whilst museums are no longer simply public archives, but are involved in communicating ideas, few of the interviewees were

prepared, as Martin Watts and Peter Lewis were, to state that their museum was primarily an educational establishment.

There seems to be a 'professional or institutional culture' within the museum world which ascribes primacy to conservation and preservation. It is perhaps an ethic which derives from the Museum Association's own definition of a museum (see chapter 1), which stresses the traditional curatorial functions of collection, documentation, research and conservation, above interpretation and education. Indeed Richard Doughty half hinted at this when asked about the role of N.F.H.C as an educator or conservator.

*"It is fairly difficult for any museum professional to differentiate between the two. Yes, I mean, obviously any museum curator is going to have to say that the overriding priority is to conserve in perpetuity the collection that they are responsible for and I'm certainly not going to say any different to that" (Doughty 1992).*

Indeed his colleague Andrew Tulloch talked quite passionately about the need to preserve objects because, he argued *"they have prime importance, that is what people come to see"* (Tulloch 1992). Many curators asserted that their primary duty was to preserve their collection. Peter Smithurst, Keeper of Industrial Collections at Kelham said:

*"I think the duty of museums is to collect and conserve. I think that is the primary function, so one preserves artefacts or evidence of the past, for future use. I think we also have a duty to interpret the evidence and use it as an educational tool" (Smithurst 1992).*

For employees of the National Trust the balance between conservation and education is clearly laid down by the various National Trust Acts, but as Ray Barker explained;

*"Within the terms of the National Trust the main emphasis here is to preserve and look after the property for ever and to provide access. Education is subsidiary to that, but that is because of the terms of the National Trust Charter. But of course the quality of the visit here is much enhanced, the more people understand both the historical past and what the Trust is trying to do and how it is trying to do it" (Barker 1992).*

It was a view echoed by Christine McDonnell of Y.A.T who, whilst stressing the need for proper conservation of the archaeological finds to the best of one's ability, felt that unless the collection was to be used for academic scholarship or educating the public, there was little purpose in their preservation or storage where they may remain forgotten, since they then might as well still be in the ground. There is a clearly a balance between conservation and education, with the conservation function acting as a constraint on the role of the museum as a communicative medium. As John Rumsby acknowledged;

*"So if we do not conserve our collections we wouldn't have a tool to use for education. It's the equivalent to a school's computers and blackboards and so on. It's our tool for education so the two are inseparable really" (Rumsby 1992).*

#### THE PRIMACY OF THE COLLECTION ?

So far, it been argued that the power of the curator is constrained by the extent and size of the collection, and its conservation needs either actual, or those imposed by the museum community as a whole. These constraints provide a framework within which the curator is still free to decide on the nature of the display or exhibition. The final part of this chapter will examine the extent to which the curator is actually hindered by the nature of their collection. For Jane Whittaker Community Curator at Oakwell, the collection remains fundamental to the construction of history;

*"Museum curators tend to design exhibitions around the types of artefacts that they've got and that may be a reason that you have decided to do the exhibition on this particular subject in the first place because you have got a good collection-you think it*

would look well in an exhibition, so that . . . . the artefacts come first and you try and build the evidence and text around the artefacts" (Whittaker 1992).

For some Museums this clearly remains the case. As Brian Collins of Automobilia explained: "Our exhibitions or our exhibits have all been planned and designed by people in the past. We are only showing the results of former motor car designers". N.M.L.H's recent exhibition "Banners" was planned with the intention of showing part of its extensive collection of trade union and political banners. At the present time, the Museum is beginning to draw up an interpretative plan for its new site the 'Pump House', in which its unique collection of over two hundred banners will have an important place.

Those visitor attractions which centre on an actual site or building, for example Roche Abbey or Benningborough Hall, are naturally object centred. With the main subject of interpretation already pre-determined. The decision-making process concentrates more on which period of the site's history to focus on and, within that, which themes and stories to explore. In 1988 such a debate took place at the Oakwell Hall which had, until then, been displayed in a 'mishmash' of periods. 17th century furniture stood amidst 19th century clutter and references to Charlotte Bronte, who had used the house in her novel Shirley. Oakwell Hall had not been substantially structurally altered since the late 17th century and the house also had a good collection of late 17th century furniture. It was decided to maximise the potential of the site and collection by interpreting Oakwell as a late 17th century home (Galister and Davies 1988-9).

A similar process occurred in the planning of the Jorvik Viking Centre, as Richard Hall of the Y.A.T and Director of the Coppergate Dig explained;

*"Exhibitions usually come out of a particular facet of our work, the Jorvik Centre was very simple in its initial inspiration, having had an exploration site which was visibly yielding spectacular structural remains of a type never before seen in this country ..... We chose to go for a period for which we had the best and complete evidence for, which happened to be the 970s.....[it] was fairly easy to come up with what we wanted to display in the tenth century, with a number of very well preserved buildings and to display the activities and crafts, trades, professions and the general lifestyle that was going on around, which luckily because of the degree of preservation we could do it" (R.Hall 1992).*

Although the nature of the collection remains central to the interpretation of many museums, its role is more of a catalyst. At Tolson, the planning of an exhibition or gallery is a two way process between the the collection and historical research. John Rumsby explained that the individual responsible for drawing up the detailed design brief usually had a background in the subject, but;

*"...will be reading up and at the same time going through the collection and something they find in the collection may direct their research in a particular area. On the other hand when they are doing their research they may well say , well, yes, that is an important area that needs to be dealt with, have we got anything in the collection that deals with it. May be they haven't, collections are always patchy on different subjects, so we may have to look at some ways in which we can fill out that gap using our resources" (Rumsby 1992).*

Peter Smithurst explained the danger in allowing oneself to be constrained by the collection;

*"[the] story line will be skewed to steer round the artefacts you have. I think you should look at the storyline first, and say or decide what you want to say, and then decide how you are going to say it by mixing artefacts or images or whatever else to try and build up a complete picture" (Smithurst 1992).*

He went on to describe the decision-making process in the creation of the main exhibition at Kelham;

*"Obviously we wanted to present a broad picture, we wanted to present it truthfully, and pick out salient features, so it involved a lot of research, culling a lot of information which we knew wouldn't be of any use in the final display, but was useful in arriving at that final display, providing the information or that platform from which the display was built" (Smithurst 1992).*

Richard Doughty was prepared to go even further by acknowledging that the curator should be in no way constrained by the collection.

*"I think the topics come first, I never have been intimidated by not having material readily available. We don't sort of look at our collections and scratch our heads and say what the hell can we do, we are actually trying to identify topics and issues which we think will be of interest" (Doughty 1992).*

When N.F.H.C was first conceived by Grimsby Museum Service, they did not have any meaningful collection on Deep Sea Fishing, but used as their starting point Grimsby's close association with the fishing industry. Although there are many original objects within the main exhibition, these have been collected to illustrate the story. Where original material was unavailable or too large or heavy for display, a series of reconstructions and tableaux were used to continue the narrative. At the time of the research the Centre was planning a 'Blockbuster' exhibition, 'Trawlers at War', in which the Museum was reconstructing a German type seven U-boat based on photographs of submarine interiors. Further detailed research was undertaken to source submarine equipment so that the correct grilles around radiators, and types of wheels for gauges were used. In Richard Doughty's words they were "presenting as close a reconstruction as we conceivably can" (Doughty 1992).

A similar process is underway at the N.M.L.H whose present collection includes two hundred banners, Labour movement memorabilia and ephemera. However the Museum intends to present a much broader picture of the Labour Movement at its new 'Pump House' site and is presently actively seeking material to enable, as Myna Trustram remarked, the story to be told of those *"who don't appear because they are not active within the organisation, don't appear in the collections or in the stories"*

(Trustram 1992). In the present exhibition a notice reads:

"The museum's collection falls as the organisation of the working class movement. We are keen to add to the collection and would like to hear from anybody who may have things to donate. We are particularly interested in everyday items from people's homes and work places".

Museums are therefore only partially constrained by the limitations of their collections, since they can actively collect new material that supports their construction of the past, or where that is unavailable, use reconstruction or replica.

#### CONCLUSION

Objects remain important to museums in providing tangible evidence of the past to uphold and support their construction of history. The placing of an object in a museum decontextualises it from its previous purpose and surroundings and then recontextualises the object in an exhibition or display, giving it a meaning or value. The object is thus transformed and given a symbolic importance. Once transformed, the object can make a powerful impression on the observer, who places that object within their own symbolic framework. To some the Magna Carta evokes the beginning of English democracy; for others it is the

suffragette sash that excites their imagination :yet both of them are part of a construction of history created by the museum curator.

The curator, like the historian, is dependent on the accidental survival of objects from the past to ground their interpretations. The availability of objects from the past is also determined by the values placed on them by society. To be identified as meaningful traces from the past, objects must be codified and recognised as such by the cultural institutions who act as the guardian's of society's selective tradition and which therefore both reflect and shape the current socio-political boundary.

The curator in selecting the artefacts from the existing traces of the past, is crucial in determining the nature of the construction of history in museums and heritage attractions. It is the curator who frames the collection policy of the institution, and the curator who can overcome the limitations of their existing collections by either actively seeking other material or, more controversially, using reproductions and replica, in their constructions of history. Yet, in determining their construction of history, curators work within a clear framework laid down by the museum profession which will influence their interpretative choices, and which is in turn, shaped by the constraints faced by individual institutions. Whilst providing freedom of action, this framework ensures that the delicate balance between artefact and artifact is maintained to ensure that museum s retain their unique differential.

## CHAPTER SIX

### MAKING HISTORY

"In museums, the process of *making* history is removed from view: visitors consume only its oblique form, the displays, a finished, polished product. The display appears to be self-generating, effacing any human or methodological traces: no author or curator is acknowledged: the processes of research, selection, classification and interpretation are masked" (Gaby Porter 1989:30).

#### INTRODUCTION

History plays a crucial role in the interpretations of museum collections or sites. History gives a meaning and context to three dimensional artefacts from the past and bestows them with value. The battered old trunk sitting in N.M.L.H, is not merely an old brown trunk, it belonged to Ben Tillett, leader of the 1880s Dockers' Strike. The display of tools at Wirksworth Heritage Centre is not simply a collection of chisels and hammers, but 18th century lead mining tools, when Wirksworth was the lead mining centre of Derbyshire. History helps give the material culture of the past meaning, placing it into a systematic narrative.

Museums are at the interface between academic scholarship and public perception of the past, and play a major part in influencing society's collective memory. Roger Whitworth of the National Trust argued that museums;

*"have an important role in helping people to understand the past and history. I think for most people that [museums], and television is most probably their most common sort of access with history. Not that many people read history books, I don't think, but their most common understanding and introduction to the past is either through the media or visiting historical properties in their own free time"* (Whitworth 1992).

Museums have a powerful position in shaping society's selective tradition or collective memory. The process of seeing a description or display of a past event or happening, which merits inclusion within an institution confirms it as a historical fact in the visitor's mind, and therefore as an important part of their collective heritage. 1992, is the three hundred and fiftieth Anniversary of the outbreak of the English Civil War, and all over the country museums have planned commemorative events and exhibitions reaffirming the importance of this conflict in the nation's heritage.

Yet, the inclusion of certain historical events in museums results not only from the decisions of the curator, based on the collection and their research, but on the social and political acceptability of certain versions of the past. Sian Jones (1991:p. 24) has argued, "Museums are social institutions and are socially and culturally constructed. As institutions they select or legitimise current norms and values and uphold the values of the ruling elite".

This chapter will examine the decision-making process involved in the 'making' of history in museums and discuss to what extent professionals are willing to expose that process to the scrutiny of their public. It will be argued that the construction of history in museums represents a discourse between the views of the curator and the views which society itself deems socially and politically acceptable. The presentation of history is therefore a dialectic in which the curator is both constrained by the current socio-political boundary, and at the same time able to extend and renegotiate that boundary through the

institutional nature of their role. The extent to which the individual curator can meaningfully renegotiate the socio-political boundary is itself constrained, by the individual's own social, cultural and political reality.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

In exploring the role of museums in the interpretation of the past, a dominant theme which emerged during the interviews was the assertion that the history presented in museums was based on a solid academic base of historical research. As Catherine Hall, Senior Curator at Oakwell Hall explained;

*"I think a site has to have academic credibility, the public have got to feel fairly confident that what they are seeing is based on some credible research, that it relates to the physical evidence that survives and the history of the locality". (C.Hall 1992)*

Many of the interviewees are themselves history or archaeology graduates, with further degrees as well as museum qualifications. They were more than aware of how historical evidence could be used and interpreted. George Muirhead, Keeper of Interpretation at Beamish believes *"academic history and academic research is a mine, in a sense that we can plunder in terms of the museum site"*.

There is a reciprocal relationship between academic history and museums. Museums use and present the work of academic historians in more accessible form to the lay person, and they are influenced by trends in academic thought. Over the last thirty years academic history has moved away from strictly political history to a new interest in social and economic history. This has been reflected in museums in recent years

with a flourishing of exhibitions concerned with the every day and the mundane. The other side of this relationship is the concern of many museums, including Beamish and Oakwell Hall, to actively encourage scholars to use their archives for historical research. John Rumsby of Tolson criticised historians for their 'paper-orientated' or document centred approach;

*"The curious thing I think is not that we use historical research in interpreting objects, but that historians doing historical research so rarely use objects in their researches" (Rumsby 1992).*

This desire by some curators to unite the two professions of historian and curator is reflected by Myna Trustram (herself a historian) of N.M.L.H who is actively seeking a more pro-active role in encouraging the study of material culture.

*"One of the problems is that most Labour history has been 'done' through documents and has been done by academics or students or Labour movement activists..... so our job is to bring people's attention to the fact, that there is a lot of ephemera which can also be used in doing Labour history" (Trustram 1992).*

It was also pointed out, however, by Martin Watts (1992) that within the museum world there existed a tremendous amount of "standardised history", in which curators often do little original historical research themselves, and were happy to use the same facts and illustrative material as other museums.

#### THE HERITAGE DEBATE

Alongside the assertion that museums are based on thorough research and careful interpretation of the facts and the objects in their collections was a hostility of many curators to the term 'heritage'. Indeed, in certain interviews this word had to be omitted from the rest of

the questions, after the initial adverse reaction. Myna Trustram

explained;

*"The usual complaint against heritage attractions is that there is no history in them, or what history there is, is a very partial view, which stresses the positive rather than historical, and removes any sense of conflict or struggle, that things were rosy. It panders to people's desires of having security in the past, whether their own personal histories or national histories" (Trustram 1992).*

Few were prepared to give examples of the target of their criticisms although Camelot, Canterbury Tales and Wigan Pier were mentioned by a few. Heritage was seen as a 'pop' or a marketing word. Martin Watts (1992) remarked; *"It is often used to make things sound important, that are not. It is used as a cloak to cover up and excuse a lack of precise thinking"*. Others rigorously defended 'heritage', with many returning to the original meaning of the word. Ray Barker of Benningborough Hall defined heritage as;

*"what all social classes have inherited and can enjoy from the past, but enjoy in a perceptive way. Some of our heritages are dreadful and cruel, and some of it is wonderful and beautiful" (Barker 1992).*

Peter Lewis of Beamish, who has lead opposition to Robert Hewison's (1987) assertion that heritage is bogus history, commented;

*"all history even the stuff we do is highly edited. I am always very worried in the kind of history/heritage debate that history is always regarded as being this fixed mark, the kind of academic truth and that heritage is somehow vague and bla<sup>nc</sup>mangey, whereas really heritage is that is what is handed down to us and very often that means the objects and the kinds of literature, the various papers and everything else" (Lewis 1992).*

Beyond this discussion on whether heritage is syn<sup>y</sup>onous with commercialism and 'tackiness', the heritage debate is more about who has the authority to present history to the public. Professionals in museums pride themselves on their authentic artefacts, and their commitment to high conservation standards, historical research and accurate

interpretation of the evidence. The emergence of many pseudo-historical attractions has made many of them defensive about their right to be seen both as the authoritative keepers of society's selective tradition and as educators. Indeed it is their role as educational establishments which underlies their commitment to a solid academic research base and authenticity.

#### THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY

N.F.H.C has adopted an unorthodox interpretative approach using mainly reconstructions of parts of a deep sea fishing trawler, rather than actual objects from the period. Richard Doughty, who was responsible for most of the interpretation, was keen to explain that it had been "*done so from, I believe, the museum professional standpoint*", in which the industry had been thoroughly researched and real artefacts incorporated into the displays. He commented;

*"I feel very very strongly that we have actually succeeded here in producing an authentic and genuine no holds barred account of what it was like to work in the 50s as a deep sea trawlerman and by God we couldn't have a more critical audience immediately on our door step, and we have passed the test. People come and clap me on the back and say 'lad you have even got the bloody rust in the right place'" (Doughty 1992).*

The whole concept of authenticity is a difficult one. Though a museum may possess 'authentic' artefacts they cannot achieve 'authenticity' in its literal sense, since they can never fully recreate the past.

Paradoxically, museums actively strive to achieve it, whilst accepting and recognising that they can only ever have partial success.

Authenticity is not so much achievable, rather it represents an assertion by museums of the quality of their exhibitions and displays.

Christine McDonnell explained that it is not possible to know what authentic is, and therefore;

*"I think it is not so much reconstructing the past as we are constructing our interpretation, our view, our best bet based on what we know and what research tells us in our particular field". (McDonnell 1992)*

The search for authenticity is a compromise, as many of the interviewees remarked it is not possible to re-create the death, disease and squalor of earlier eras, it can only be hinted or inferred. Richard Polley of English Heritage explained that a similar compromise has been made in replacing the damask hangings at Brodsworth Hall, which if replaced strictly authentically using silk, would have cost £90 a metre.

Catherine Hall senior curator at Oakwell Hall commented;

*"We do make compromises and things like curtains are sewn on a machine, we could have them all hand stitched but then we couldn't have been able to afford them all hand stitched. We could have had all the linen sheets hand stitched but we just couldn't afford the cost. So cost does tend to limit some things" (C.Hall 1992).*

As in academic history, the curator can never recover the totality of a event, because the historical context is simply too vast. The desire to achieve an authentic presentation of the past is grounded in the professional's commitment to research, and is a justification of the time and resources that are required in its pursual. As Peter Lewis of Beamish said;

*"We can't reconstruct the past, because it is too big. All you can do is actually to take bits out of the past which seem to you in your limited judgement..... a fair representation, a fair balance of the past" (Lewis 1992).*

At Beamish, a school is being erected in the colliery village, and its interpretation has been the work of several curators who have spent months researching the architectural history and structure of the building, the actual history of the school building itself and an

overall impression of daily life at Board Schools in the North East, just before the outbreak of World War One. Peter Lewis gave an example of the detailed nature of that research, over the decision to place an abacus in the school. Although the museum possessed an abacus, there was some doubt as to whether this would have been a standard piece of equipment in 1913. A detailed search was made through their photographic archives and the Registers of equipment kept in schools, which confirmed the abacus as a very common teaching aid in schools.

The Jorvik Viking Centre is based exclusively on the academic research undertaken by Y.A.T on the Coppergate Dig. Richard Hall maintained;

*"We did want to be as truthful and as accurate as we can be. We didn't bend any facts and we didn't put in anything for which there was no evidence..... so we believe that the minor detail anyone quizzes us on we could eventually come up with chapter and verse to why it's like that, why is a person wearing a red sock, why is that person drinking out of a pot that is that big or whatever. We could come up with the evidence" (R.Hall 1992).*

It may be a further twenty years before all the material from the actual excavation is finally analysed and amalgamated into a final report. As new discoveries and interpretations are made by the archaeologists these are being incorporated into the Jorvik display. A case in point is the faces of the Viking figures in the reconstruction. At the outset there was no archaeological evidence to determine exactly what the Vikings looked like, rather than pretend evidence existed, the faces are caricatures based on people who either live in York or who were closely associated with the excavation, like Richard Hall and Peter Addyman. Recently new scientific techniques have enabled one Viking face to be reconstructed from a skull. Eymund the Viking has now replaced one of

the figures. It is hoped when funds allow to gradually recreate many more Viking faces.

The National Trust was hampered in their interpretation of Benningborough Hall by their lack of evidence and collection of period furniture. In the late 1970s it was decided to restore the Hall back to its 18th century glory and repaint the 19th century stripped pine panneling. Careful samples were taken of any remaining flecks of paint and matched with known colours of the period. It was, however, only possible to;

"recreate the spirit of the House rather than a restoration of its precise appearance at the time it was built. Much of the usual evidence for attempting an authentic scheme of decoration was not available. There were no accounts, no inventories, no plans- a complete lack of documentary evidence" (Jacob Simon 1992:30).

The researchers at Oakwell Hall faced many of the same problems, in reconstructing the Hall as it would have been in the 1690s. Very few documents survived, there were no probate inventories of the Batt family and instead the researchers had to rely on an inventory of goods from 1611 and a series of stewards accounts from 1609-1611. Though these helped identify how the rooms were used, the documents were too early to give any real insight into the late 17th century. Therefore the researchers examined a large number of inventories relating to houses of comparable size and status in the region in the years 1670-1710. These gave an understanding of the type of furnishings that would have been found at Oakwell, and together with actual items surviving from the 17th century and period illustrations including Dutch wood cuts and paintings a picture of the actual style of the furniture and soft furnishings was arrived at. Items from their own collection, together with loans and

commissioned replicas were then used to reconstruct a 17th century home (Galister and Davies 1988-9).

#### PLACING RESEARCH ON DISPLAY

Many museums are increasingly showing how exhibitions were researched and compiled. ARC has been designed with the sole aim of demystifying archaeology. Not only can visitors participate in activities demonstrating different archaeological processes, but they can watch 'real' archaeologists at work, analysing finds and doing mundane administrative tasks in glass fronted offices. N.M.L.H in their initial planning for the Pump House site were keen to have sections of its exhibition devoted to displays which look as much at the nature of the historical sources used and the assumptions made about that evidence by the curators, as the actual subject area itself. This continues their policy of demystifying the museum, established with their glass fronted conservation studio.

The desire to explain to the general public how exhibitions are put together, how evidence is used, and the provision of alternative interpretations, reflects the increasing trend in the museum world to make history less conclusive and more open to debate. Museums have experimented in devising two sets of labels for exhibitions, in which the oppressed and oppressor interpret the evidence, or the two opposing armies of a battle. Recently Manchester City Art Gallery provided an alternative feminist guide book to their galleries alongside their standard guide. However, Jane Whittaker (1992) argued that the good

museum display should enable the visitor themselves to arrive at alternative interpretations.

Many of the interviewees, whilst accepting the desirability of explaining the creation of displays and the provision of alternative interpretations, felt that implementation could lead to boring and more complex displays. Many felt there was simply not the physical space or that they had insufficient material or time. One of the most dominant criticisms of this approach, was that it could confuse the story line and the central message of the exhibition. Nicola Moyle argued;

*"I don't think that it is realistic to indicate all the sources, because a lot of the information has been pulled from all sorts of places, and to hang that on to a display would detract from the message, it would be<sup>an</sup> extremely long list. People would be confused as to whether or not they should read the text, or the sources that you have got the sources from" (Moyle 1992).*

The majority of curators, whilst accepting the idea in principle, felt that it was impractical to subject the manufacturing of history to the public gaze. Myna Trustram (1992) whilst a strong supporter of showing the construct of exhibitions, remarked; *"I think the temptation is there to create exhibitions for other exhibition organisers"*. Perhaps hidden beneath assertions that such an approach was 'self-indulgent' and fraught with difficulties were fears that it would undermine their authority as the provider of objective displays on society's history. An exhibition was to be enjoyed, consumed and digested. For Peter Smithurst, to explain to visitors how sources had been used and selected, would remove the 'effortlessness' of visiting a museum.

## THE OBJECTIVE MUSEUM

Among museum professionals there seems to exist an ethos which regards museums as neutral environments where the very acts of collection, conservation, documentation, and exhibition guards against subjective comment. This ethos of accuracy and objectivity is enshrined in the Museum Association's Code for Curators which declares that;

"Museum objects on public display, with all forms of accompanying information, should present a clear and accurate and balanced exposition... and must never deliberately mislead". (M.A.1983: p.4)

The extent to which the processes of collecting, selecting and interpreting can guard against bias is debatable but for Matthew Burnby, Chair of the Wirksworth Heritage Centre, the role of a museum was to be purely factual.

*"we do attempt to show things on a factual basis, it is not our business to be social historians here, purely for its own sake, which I think sometimes gives a distorted impression" (Burnby 1992).*

But as Chapter Three has argued, the ascribing of a happening as a historical fact is itself open to interpretation. Certain facts are chosen and presented and others are ignored. As Matthew Burnby later acknowledged, Wirksworth Heritage Centre is based in a small old silk mill and there is not the space to tell all the stories, or all the histories about Wirksworth: the presentation in the Heritage Centre picks out facts that the interpreters view as important.

History as a discipline is open to a variety of interpretations. Each generation, each sub-culture will interpret the past in terms of their own social reality. Ray Barker (1992) described his image of history as a revolving dance ball, covered in small mirrors, providing the dancer or historians with ever changing views of the past, yet never giving the

full picture, since the mirrors at the top of the ball always remain out of view. Peter Smithurst also acknowledged the countless ways of interpreting the same fact but, he argued, that in the final analysis that interpretation has to be based;

*"on logic, on common sense and on gut feeling as well, it is not something you can define, but somethings just stand out as being totally acceptable or unacceptable means of reasoning" (Smithurst 1992).*

#### DETERMINING THE HISTORICAL APPROACH

The interviews examined why various institutions had chosen a particular way of interpreting the past and whether alternative approaches had been considered. The majority of those interviewed had only considered one way of telling the story. For some the collection or theme dictated the approach, others had wanted to design exhibitions with a particular purpose and the alternative ways of presenting the past were never explored. As Richard Doughty explained, of N.F.H.C, the main exhibition was planned in less than a year. Once it was decided to focus on deep sea fishing in the 1950s, there was never time to look at alternative stories. N.M.L.H was one of the few museums who seemed to have consciously spent time developing their approach. As Myna Trustram said;

*"We certainly don't think there is only one way to tell the story absolutely not, and there are different ways, different theories of history that we can use.....chronologically or thematically, different resources objects and photographs" (Trustram 1992).*

Where museums like Tolson or Kelham have looked at different approaches, more often than not they have decided to adopt a chronological approach.

Peter Smithurst commented;

*"I think the decision to pursue it chronologically in the first instance was probably the simplest one to do and the one that the public might find easier to accept and relate to" (Smithurst 1992).*

In presenting history as a chronology, it is difficult not to suggest within the displays an underlying acceptance or belief in progress. Whether it is through technological inventions or the improvements in living conditions the visitor is presented with a unconscious upward sloping graph of progress. For all the outward protestations of neutrality, there is in many museums, a benign liberal humanist view of the past, which belies man's ability to conquer the forces of nature and make the world a better place.

In recent years museums have experimented with different approaches to the past. In France the Eco Musées, who have been influenced by the Annalist school of history have sought to examine the history of a community in terms of the way it has evolved with the environment. Other museums have boldly incorporated different ways of looking at the past within the main body of the display, providing both feminist and Black interpretations of the past. Some have even been prepared to experiment with a Marxist or economic determinist view of history. At Tolson, in the newly planned gallery on archaeology, a panel will explain that little is known about the ordinary people in Mediaeval England, since little has survived. It goes on to say;

"Yet the whole wealth of the community depended on their efforts. It was they who built the castle for the lord, and the church for the priest, they grew the food that everyone ate and made the clothes they wore".

This panel is illustrated by a mediaeval illustration from 1130-40 of Henry I dreaming of rebellious peasants. The term exploitation is never mentioned and the facts are left to speak for themselves, yet the underlying interpretation is very clear.

## WHOSE HISTORY?

Alongside the decision on which historical approach to adopt, the curator also has to decide whose history is to be presented. Previous chapters have demonstrated the many different interpretations available to the curator depending on their chosen perspective. For commentators such as Donald Horne (1984), the Popular Memory Group (1982) and Sian Jones (1991), museums tend to interpret the past through the eyes of the wealthy and powerful. Where subordinate groups do appear they act only to confirm the values of the dominant elite. A particular target of criticism by commentators such as Wright (1985) and Hewison (1987) has been the historic Stately house of which many are owned by the National Trust. They argue that in effect these act as guardians of the values and life styles of the rapidly declining landed aristocracy. Yet, as Roger Whitworth of the National Trust observed, little evidence other than that of the owners of most houses survive. The hundreds of servants have left few records and are often destined to be anonymous. He continued;

*"I think that it is inevitably the case, actually. One is seeing Benningborough through the eyes of the rich and wealthy and the landed classes and to a large extent that is something the Trust does in a wider field that most of the houses we preserve are the grand houses of the past, and so one is showing people to a greater degree the quality of life of the rich rather than the common man" (Whitworth 1992).*

Benningborough has a special arrangement with the National Portrait Gallery and contains over a hundred 18th century portraits, which are displayed throughout the house. Yet as Ray Barker acknowledged;

*"one of its founding rules is that it collects pictures, no matter how good or bad of people who are in the Dictionary of National Biography and you can't get in there if you are just Joe Bloggs" (Barker 1992).*

In Wirksworth Heritage Centre, there is a small display of famous men and women associated with Wirksworth. It includes such names as D.H.Lawrence, Richard Arkwright, and Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot ). During the interview Matthew Burnby was asked whether history was made up of the great and famous;

*"They play an important part. There is a view that tends to disparage the efforts and effects which these people have had. Sometimes its over emphasised and there is I think unfortunately at the present time, generally that is, to represent these people in an unfavourable light. What they did has to be looked at in the relations to the times in question, my own view is these people did great things". (Burnby 1992).*

#### HISTORY FROM THE BOTTOM UP

In recent years there has been an increasing movement within museums to explore the lives and belongings of ordinary people. As John Urry has argued, it reflects a move in society itself away from the spectacular and special to the ordinary and mundane.

"There has been a quite stunning fascination with the popular and a tendency to treat all kinds of objects, whether it is the 'Mona Lisa' or the old cake tin of a Lancashire cotton worker, as almost equally interesting" (John Urry 1990:130).

People's history, or history from below, attempts to reconstruct the detail of everyday life. Characteristically it is local in scale and concentrates on subjective detail, on oral histories, diaries and letters from ordinary people. It is an approach which some museums like Beamish have enthusiastically adopted. Beamish's Director, Peter Lewis, explained their conscious decision not to interpret the 19th century Beamish Hall, but to retain it as a local authority educational establishment, archive and administrative centre for the museum, since there are already a plethora of stately homes telling the histories of the upper classes. The introduction to the Beamish Guide book states;

"we know that it is impossible to understand totally what life was

like for a past generation. The most comprehensive telling is only a partial record of what one generation finds interesting in another. Most museums have traditionally told the stories of richer members of society. Their possessions, records and costumes tend to survive. Working clothes wore out and were thrown away. Records lost.....Thus most history is written from the top downwards. Beamish exists to tell history from the bottom upwards".

This desire to explore history from below, also features in the aims of N.M.L.H which seeks to explore, "*the lives of people who are normally ignored in history*" (Trustram 1992). In their presentation of the last two hundred years of Labour history, the Museum at its Pump House site wants to broaden the normal accepted version of events which, as Myna Trustram said, have "*by and large been told through the history of organisations and important people, primarily famous men*". The Museum wants to tell the story of the people behind the public face of the labour movement, particularly women's experience, examining subjects such as domestic labour both paid and unpaid, and women's work in the sweated industries. Myna Trustram believes museums have an important role to play in presenting the history of all sectors of society.

*"there is a lot of pressure in black communitites now to present their history and we started to collect materials from the gay movement here in Manchester. There are all sorts of history not represented so assuming that museums do play a role in creating a collective memory it is important that we cover all those areas, other wise, well, it's like 20 years ago about women, that women were written out of history they're hidden from it"* (Trustram).

#### THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

As Myna Trustram notes until twenty years ago, women did not on the whole appear in history books. The 60s and 70s women's liberation movement sought to change that with books like Sheila Rowbottom's Hidden from History which represented a turning point in placing women's experience firmly on the history agenda. Feminist historiographers have sought to place women at the centre of their studies, identifying the

private sphere as the prime location of women's experience as opposed to the public world of men. It is a movement which has sought to explore the history of women's work and of procreation, women's control and power over reproduction, and women's position, in terms of power and gender dynamics, in society and in the home (S.Jones & S.Pay 1990). Women's history has now been recuperated firmly into the mainstream of academic history. However, this movement has been slow to infiltrate museums. Donald Horn commented in The Great Museum;

"With exceptions such as the Virgin Mary or Joan of Arc, women are simply not there. They make their appearances as dummies of sturdy peasant women in folk reconstructions of peasant kitchens, or in other useful supporting roles; they may be seen nude, or partly nude, created as an object for the male gaze" (Donard Horn 1984:4).

As more women enter museums professionally, and society increasingly accepts female equality, women are slowly appearing. At Kelham, the early history of Sheffield's metal working industries is illustrated by a mediaeval illustration from the Hokenham Bible (1325) of a female smith, with the jaunty caption, "Equal opps in mediaeval times- a female smith at work". Peter Smithurst explained why it was chosen;

*"It was the oldest illustration we could find, which showed hand forging. I thought it was very nice that it happened to be a female smith at work. I suppose there was a slight tongue in cheek comment there, in the light of women's liberation over the past few years, that it wasn't something new". (Smithurst 1992)*

The representation of women is not always clear cut, since it can be open to other readings. Gaby Porter (1991) has interpreted the use of the female smith at Kelham not in terms of equality, but as a confirmation of the main male story. She argues that in representing the mediaeval period through a women it confirms that;

"Sheffield industry began when it was lifted from the chaos in which women laboured into an organized and highly technological industry.. with a clear division of labour and processes".(G.Porter 1991 p.112).

One of the problems for curators, is that like the working class, women simply do not appear in the historical records. Catherine Hall remarked;

*"One of the things which is fairly obvious from any reading through the documents relating to Oakwell, that women don't really appear, they appear in snippets and you have to elude things from the documents" (C.Hall 1992).*

Oakwell Hall is exploring the possibility of an exhibition on the role of the housewife, examining her role and illustrating this through equipment associated with food preparation and housework. Myna Trustram, in her preparation for an exhibition at the Pump House, has taken a different approach, using the autobiography of a working class woman called Hannah Mitchell, who was a suffragette in Manchester and active in local politics and the co-operative movement. As well as describing her political life, the autobiography also talks about ordinary daily activities associated with the home and role as a mother, providing a unique insight into women's experience in the early 20th century.

N.M.L.H intends to quote passages from the autobiography and illustrate Hannah Mitchell's words by some of the objects she describes in her home.

Some museums have adopted an even more radical approach. In Tolson's planned Archaeology gallery, one of the first life sized models the visitor will meet, will be that of a flint knapper, but unlike the normal convention, this will be a woman making flints. John Rumsby asserted;

*"What we are always presented with in archaeology, is the man the tool maker and there is even a book called Man the Tool maker and there is no archaeological reason why in the middle stone age it was man that made the tools, we don't have any evidence either way. So we put that in because it fitted in with our general policy of equality and the presentation of women's history, really just to make a point that you have to keep an open mind" ( Rumsby 1992).*

Jorvik has recently been criticised by Nancy Jo Chabot (1988) for its representations of women as either old hags or in traditional domestic roles cooking, looking after children, weaving and carrying water. Men are shown making goods, loading ships and trading. There are also more men than women. Christine McDonnell of YAT agreed.

*"If you have a lot of men producing figures in The Viking Centre then they are likely to be immersed in the culture that said men went out to war, men did the work, women did the domestic things, I think also it worries me slightly that there might be a trend the other way 'we mustn't depict women in any domestic role whatsoever', because that is as false as to suggest that women played a very secondary and subservient role. I don't believe they did in history" (McDonnell 1992).*

It should also be said that Chabot's criticism is itself a product of late 20th century perspectives, in which domestic work is devalued and not viewed as it would have been by contemporaries as an intrinsic part of the Viking economy. This point is taken up by David Lowenthal (1992) in Museums Journal where he argues that it is important that society's new concern for 'political correctness' does not distort what actually happened in the past.

Richard Doughty was also influenced by Chabot's arguments. When questioned why, in a dominantly male industry, N.F.H.C began its exhibition with three women models working in a the fish factory, a fish and chip shop and mending nets, he admitted with disarming honesty;

*"Well I am afraid it was very conscious actually, yes, because I had read in an article somebody was actually going round and counting the ratio of male/female figures in an exhibition gallery. Yes, one thought oh cripes you know, what the hell are we going to do. We couldn't obviously put women on trawlers it is a nonsense they weren't involved in the fishing operation or even in the handling side of the industry, but they were of course involved in the processing. So it was an opportunity to make the point....that women were involved in the industry" (Doughty 1992).*

The representation of women in museums is interesting, because it illustrates the discourse in which, on the one hand there are curators who wish to show society women's experience through history, but there also those who feel under pressure to reflect the changing views of society in which women are seen to play an increasing equal role. It will be interesting to observe this process when museums begin to tackle ethnic and gay history. Black or ethnic history is still relatively marginalised in museums, although increasingly as society recognises its multi-cultural dimension, some museums are looking to explore black experience. Hackney and Leicester Museum Services, both based in strongly multi-cultural areas have begun to exhibit ethnic history (C.Johnson 1991). Tolson is looking to incorporate the different ethnic communities in a new gallery depicting 20th century Huddersfield. Yet, with few black curators, museums are as yet unwilling to attempt exhibitions on black history. The portrayal of gay history is more complex, the subject is to a certain extent, still a taboo area of discussion in society as a whole, and it is debatable whether a museum would actually be able to put on such an exhibition at the present.

#### THE SOCIO-POLITICAL BOUNDARY

Museums do have an important role to play in extending the boundaries of social acceptability, as Nicola Moyle remarked;

*"I think it is important for a museum to raise issues if you like for the average visitor, make him or her think about potential problems or potential controversial issues, which I think an average museum visitor might not necessarily 'think or want'" (Moyle 1992).*

Unacceptability can include being too authentic. As Christine McDonnell argued you cannot show a pig with its throat cut, in an exhibition on

life in Mediaeval England, since that would be regarded by both the public and museum trust directors or local authority, as being in bad taste. Some subject areas are also too controversial. Richard Polley of English Heritage is designing an exhibition near the site of the battle of Flodden, and was very aware of the political sensitivity of that event for the Scots. Therefore the exhibition does not;

*"..present it as a shameful rout for the Scots, though that was probably what it was, but we have to present it as a very balanced view not in an overtly anglicised way" (Polley 1992).*

George Muirhead recounted an experience he had had at a previous museum, where they had placed a coffin in the exhibition and been inundated with complaints from the public. Beamish itself failed to attract sponsorship for the interpretation of the colliery village in the aftermath of the miners' strike. Mining became, suddenly, too politically controversial.

George Muirhead continued;

*"We could also build a workhouse. Why not? They were still being used largely for the infirm and old people in 1913; there were still work houses. The Workhouse and Poor Law Board Infirmary why not? And they still survive as buildings. Do we assume there are certain aspects of history that people find unsettling" (Muirhead 1992).*

This was a problem for the interpreters of N.F.H.C. The deep sea fishing industry had a very high death toll among trawlermen, even higher than that of the mining industry. It was an issue that the interpreters wanted to explore, but realising its sensitive nature decided to use a fictitious incident as illustration. They were, however, overruled by Grimsby Councillors who wanted to use a real life incident. The Laforey was chosen which disappeared in Arctic waters in 1953. Richard Doughty said;

*"We contacted all the living relations and sought their opinion and their reaction to that and in the main in fact..... they were proud that the Laforey had been selected as the example of the*

*representation of all the trawlers that had been lost at sea. I don't think it was a controversial decision, some people are unquestionably moved when they go into the space where we look at that story but I think that it should be. We are reaching the parts that other museums perhaps don't reach!" (Doughty 1992).*

The approach they have used depicts a woman sitting in her living room listening to a period radio announcement of the Laforey's disappearance, whilst a man stands close by, confirming the news that a member of her family has been lost at sea. It's a powerful scene and interestingly, one that was criticised in a review of the Centre in the Museums Journal as being in bad taste (Cox 1992). This case provides an excellent example in which a museum is prepared to test and perhaps extend the boundaries of what is acceptable to display to the public.

#### THE VALUES OF THE CURATOR

Curators in museums are both constrained by society's socio-political parameters, but are able to question and exert pressures on that framework. The extent to which they are able to do that is itself constrained by the individual's own social reality, and own frames of reference.

Catherine Hall argued very strongly in her interview that museum training protects the professional against personal bias. Indeed many of the interviewees denied having any deep social, political or religious views that shapes their view of the past. Yet as Richard Doughty acknowledged;

*"Well like all museum professionals one tries to be unbiased in the way in which one tackles a project but at the end of the day I am white, I am middle class. I can't believe I am saying this, but I am middle aged. I may remain unpolitical publically but I obviously have my own political beliefs which tend towards the left wing rather than the right wing and perhaps unconsciously that sort of*

*sub-culture group that I belong to has influenced the way I see things" (Doughty 1992).*

Curators' own views do shape the way they interpret the past, since the historian or museum professional can only interpret an event in terms of their own experience, no matter how far they seek to empathise with ~~the~~ past. Peter Lewis explained the debates on how to interpret a Methodist Chapel at Beamish. Many of the curators at Beamish did not have strong religious beliefs and many felt that they should not offer any religious interpretation, since they felt it would be embarrassing to talk about God or have any type of prayer meeting. This was strongly resisted by Peter Lewis who felt it would be wrong to ignore such a key element of life in 1913. In accepting that a curator could not be objective George Muirhead (1992) contended, it meant that *"my view of the past such as it is, is just as valid as everybody else's"*.

Although some curators admitted the influence of their background or religious values, none were as frank as Myna Trustram. She argued;

*"There is some suggestion, and some museums have done it, is to actually autograph your displays and to authorise them, (that's an interesting use of the word). To say I did it and I am 38, a feminist and a socialist and I am a curator and I grew up in Wiltshire so people know where your interpretation is coming from" (Trustram 1992).*

An interesting theme that did emerge during the interviews and informal discussions, was the slightly anti-establishment streak that existed in many of the interviewees, regardless of political views. It was almost universally expressed by a desire to challenge existing values, to say something new or slightly shocking, a whiff of cynicism or to question assumptions about both the past and the present. In a perceptive, but off-the-cuff comment, Peter Lewis said;

*"I suspect, with exceptions most curatorial staff in most museums are anti the establishment, regardless of who the establishment is and therefore to some extent or other they tend to look for a slightly rebellious system of interpretation, perhaps they don't always succeed. Perhaps they think they do, but are inherently conservative". (Lewis 1992).*

In analysing the twelve case studies, whilst there was plenty of information within the interpretations which stimulated and challenged the visitor, there was nothing that seemed to infringe the boundaries of social and political acceptability in the way that other cultural media such as art and television have done in recent years. Could it be that the streak of rebellion which pushes the curator to explore and extend society's boundaries of acceptability, is tempered to a much greater extent than in other cultural institutions, by a combination of professional ethics, economic dependence and their own highly institutionalised role?.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### INTERPRETING THE MESSAGE

..."No longer can objects or works of art speak for themselves: they have to be explained in elaborately designed displays often with buttons, switches and flashing lights, which tell the visitor what to think. As well as being ugly these displays are patronising- even to children- and are as totalitarian as anything practised behind the iron curtain, for the interpretation is invariably that of standard semi-Marxist liberal history" (Private Eye quoted in Schalda-Hall & Davidson 1982)

#### INTRODUCTION

Interpretation is the process of explaining or giving meaning to specific phenomena which may be events in the past or present, a landscape or a collection of artefacts. Even by placing a collection of objects adorned with simple labels in a museum and presenting them to the public, is an interpretation, in which the objects become legitimised as important relics from the past, to be treated with a mixture of deference and wonder. In his seminal book Interpreting our Heritage, Freeman Tilden (1967) argued that the aim of interpretation was to provide a structure of understanding or a contextual framework, rather than merely factual information, to stimulate the interest of the observer. In examining the contextual frameworks that curators place on objects, this chapter will also question the need for interpretation and explore whether the past can be left to speak for itself. It will look at the messages museum professionals seek to promulgate, and examine the processes involved in presenting the past in accessible formats.

It will be argued that for the curator, the demands of presenting history in an accessible form, in mediating between academic scholarship and popular perceptions of the past, acts as a major influence on the

exhibition decision-making process. Interpretation is about making the unfamiliar, familiar (Silverstone 1989). It relies on interpreters using recognisable or even stereo-typical images to introduce the public to the subject of the exhibition. Above all if interpretation is to be effective, messages have to be clearly and simply presented, with a strong story line, inevitably giving little room for history's contradictions and alternative interpretations.

Exhibitions are three dimensional communicators, in which there is a finite space in which to fully explore issues. Curators are constrained by the amount of time the public is prepared to spend in the exhibition, and often good design is more important in arousing visitor interest than the message it contains. Interpretative techniques act as enablers by stimulating the public's imagination, but may also limit an exhibition's historical content. The choice of interpretative technique is also constrained by the conservation needs of the site or collection, by professional pressure, the nature of the institution and by cost-benefit analysis.

#### LETTING THE PAST SPEAK FOR ITSELF

All the museum professionals interviewed adopted a didactic view of interpretation, in which visitors are presented with information on the importance and value of the site or collections on display. Catherine Hall of Oakwell Hall believed strongly, that interpretation was the one of the key roles and duties of a museum. It is the interpretation, the contextualising of the objects, which distinguishes museums from

archives, and places them in the role of educators and communicative media;

*"the arguments that you don't need any interpretation is a load of rubbish to be honest. The public do need to have things explained to them, they can see that there is a chair over there, and they can see that there is a table over there, but if you are not explaining how these objects come to be here, or why they are there, I don't really see the point in the whole exercise. You might as well send them, to an antiques stall". (C. Hall 1992)*

Many museums, especially those founded in the 19th or early 20th century, have collections of artefacts presented to the public for their own sake, with little accompanying information. Such exhibitions allow the past to speak for itself. Tolson has one gallery of this type which is devoted to a collection of objects presented in simple glass cases, and labelled merely for identification. The objects are themed with spectacles on one shelf, irons on another, cooking implements, glassware, fancy waistcoats and old cameras on others. The visitor is free to browse amongst these objects, and to focus on those which particularly arouse their curiosity. Each visitor brings their own ideas and perceptions with them and, unconstrained by formal information, is free to interpret the gallery and its contents in their own individual way John Rumsby of Tolson admitted;

*"I would have put more interpretation in, but maybe I am wrong ....because as I said people do like them and you don't actually need to say very much about a collection of irons, most people know what they are" (Rumsby 1992).*

Historic sites like the ruins of Roche Abbey which possess their own intrinsic beauty and special atmosphere, which for many visitors can be more powerful than any explanation. The setting of Roche Abbey in a secluded steep sided valley hidden from the intrusive world of the late 20th century, enables the visitor to wander through the crumbling

masonry and develop their own perceptions of its value and meaning. Richard Polley of English Heritage, who is committed to the importance of interpretation acknowledged;

*"there is an argument for retaining some sites as being relatively unspoilt and where people can wander about and just experience the atmosphere of the site themselves" (Polley 1992).*

The elegant 18th century Benningborough Hall with its fine portraits and porcelain retains a special atmosphere of historic grandeur and of the power and wealth of the landed classes. Without a guide book the visitor could if they wished visit the house and receive no formal interpretation. Roger Whitworth of the National Trust argued that to a certain extent the sheer quality and beauty of the wood carvings in some of the state rooms at Benninborough, do speak for themselves, but argued that the visitor experience is enhanced if visitors are told who was responsible for the wood carvings and how long it would take to carve a piece. This was a view shared by his colleague Ray Barker;

*"If you know nearly nothing about the eighteenth century or portraits, you can enjoy the house by going round it and enjoying it on your own level. If what you want on your visit though, and some of our visitors do, is to learn more about the past, there is no way into some of the information necessary without either written text or video or tape slide sequence..... The more information people have, the better can be their quality of thought" (Barker 1992).*

This need for further information to provide visitors with a quality experience, and to explain the importance and value of the objects was a theme that emerged in a number of interviews. Automobilia's main purpose is to display carefully restored vintage Morris and Austin cars, but as the owner Brian Collins explained, the cars' ability to speak for themselves;

*"depends on who is looking at them. People in the over forty age group can probably draw knowledge that they need to interpret the vehicles themselves, out of their own memory but for younger people I think it is important that you put as much information as possible*

*with the vehicles because they have no experience to draw on"*  
(Collins 1992).

Interpretation provides the public with an understanding of the past and adds to the enjoyment of the visit. Interpretation has another function, it has the power to change and alter opinion and attitudes, however subtly. It is this function that underlies the importance of the curator in contributing to the cultural construction of history.

#### CONSTRUCTING THE MESSAGE

Every individual has their own system of beliefs and knowledge, of which only a fraction is based on incontrovertible facts. This combination of belief and knowledge, together with emotional feelings and a pre-disposition to behave in certain ways, is what psychologists have termed attitude. When an individual receives new information this is encoded and used to modify previous schema and beliefs about certain phenomena (T.Lee 1991). As communicative media, museums are in the business of providing knowledge and information and in doing so have the potential to alter visitor preconceptions and opinions. It was a role Peter Lewis was well aware of when he remarked that he hoped that when visitors come to Beamish;

*"I'd like them to feel slightly provoked or questioned and I'd like them to feel that any preconceptions which they've actually brought with them we had slightly reformed" (Lewis 1992).*

If museums are to have an influential role in the cultural construction of history, their message or story line has to be both simple and relevant to their audience. The construction of the message or storyline is taken very seriously by museums and is deeply enmeshed into their aims and collecting policies. For many

institutions the message may simply be a desire for the visitor to understand more about the objects they have chosen to display. Brian Collins of Automobila seeks to give people a better understanding of the development of the motor car. Oakwell Hall aims to give visitors an insight into life in the late 17th century. For others like Peter Smithurst of Kelham, the museum acts as an ambassador for the city of Sheffield.

*"[I] would like them to take away with them the idea that Sheffield is very diverse in its manufacturers. It's not just steel or cutlery but a lot of other things besides. I would like them to take away with them the notion that the city is not just living on its past glories, but has a future as well with regard to the manufacturing industries" (Smithurst 1992).*

In designing ARC, the Y.A.T wanted to continue its policy of demystifying archaeology, a process which had begun with the creation of Jorvik. They wanted to show archaeology as approachable and not as an academic and erudite subject of little interest or importance to the general public. As Christine McDonnell commented there was a desire to take archaeology *"out of its ivory tower and or perhaps perceived ivory tower and make it more understandable to laymen or specialist in another field"* (McDonnell 1992). Richard Hall explained the purpose behind the development of Jorvik was to try and expand the existing public perception of archaeology;

*"one of the things the Viking Centre tries to do is, yes, you see people digging, that's actually when most people come face to face with archaeologists, and you see us finding things but you never see what happens to most of those things. A few of them end up in a museum display. We are going to try and show you what happens to a wide range of material, things that you can't even see us digging up, things like the bugs and the slugs...and we try and make the point, that there is an enormous quantity of data, horn, animal bone things like that and we try and show what information you can get and so we hope we are trying to demonstrate that archaeology is a very interesting science because it embraces so many different strands" (R.Hall 1992).*

Richard Hall also commented that by demonstrating the potential of archaeology, Jorvik is a "*bit of good propaganda for rescue archaeology*" (R. Hall 1992). Nowhere in ARC or Jorvik is it stated that archaeology is important and deserving of proper funding for its continuation, but having established the significance of the Coppergate finds, this is if you like the hidden, unconscious messages behind both visitor attractions. The previous chapter examined the selection of histories and their interpretation in propounding certain values whether consciously or not. Commentators like Donald Horne (1984), Gaby Porter (1988, 1991) and Robert Hewison (1987) have identified various hidden assumptions made in museums about the role of women, the power of the landed aristocracy, or nostalgia for lost values. They argue that the unspoken, unarticulated, subliminal messages can be as powerful as any overt promulgation of certain beliefs or values, and thus underlies the importance of interpretation in the cultural construction of history in museums.

#### EDUCATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?

Although the creation of key 'take home' messages plays an important part in devising exhibitions and displays, the majority of curators perceive themselves primarily as catalysts, in which they seek to spark an initial interest in a specific historical period or subject and encourage their visitors to discover more. George Muirhead, Keeper of Interpretation at Beamish said, that the museum wanted;

*"to excite their curiosity, so they may just go away and enquire themselves or come back to Beamish and look at something in more detail of that particular aspect of the site. I think if we look to do that for every visitor, we will do very well"* (Muirhead 1992).

Many museums provide publications to let their visitors find out more about the subjects explored. The desire to stimulate curiosity and to inspire the visitor to discover more for themselves, puts the museum firmly in the realm of an educator. However, it is more complex, as Peter Smithurst acknowledged; *"I think people want to be entertained rather than educated"* (Smithurst 1992). A visit to a museum is a leisure activity, people come to have <sup>an</sup> enjoyable day out, to see something different, to be entertained and not necessarily instructed. This creates an interesting tension within museums who as part of the new leisure age have to entertain their public, while still adhering to their commitment to sound academic scholarship.

The recently opened N.F.H.C has tried to overcome this tension. Its interpretation is firmly grounded in an academic discussion about deep sea fishing and the high mortality of deep sea trawlermen, and yet it is very overt, in its desire to entertain the public. As Richard Doughty explained it is designed to build *"on established museums traditions of display and exhibition and combine it with what I might call family entertainment"* (Doughty 1992). He went on to enthuse about the success of this approach;

*"I'd never in my experience worked or visited a museum... where people buzz in the way they buzz when they have been round our attraction. They genuinely and very visibly enjoyed themselves and this is endorsed by the feedback that we get through the press, through repeat visits, through the excellent visitor numbers we have been attracting"* (Doughty 1992).

Others were concerned that the pressure to entertain the public rather than educate could undermine curatorial standards and scholarship.

Nicola Moyle of Kelham felt there was a danger that the pressures of the

tourism industry, could subvert the academic integrity of the museum professional. She felt it was important to achieve a balance between what the public want in terms of entertainment, which might well be Alton Towers and;

*"what you think they need and want, and I don't mean that in a patronising sense at all, but it is very easy to supply a display to a museum that is an extremely popular display, but it is too easy if you like for the visitor, that they don't go away having thought about any issues at all" (Moyle 1992).*

Learning is a complex process, people have to be interested in order to absorb information and many interviewees argued that education and entertainment were entirely compatible in a good exhibition. Myna Trustram remarked;

*"I don't think there has to be a tension between education and entertainment, ideally the two go hand in hand. One doesn't learn if one isn't interested and having a good time" (Trustram 1992).*

Museums are informal learning environments and are characterised, as Linda Blud (1990; p.18) has argued in her article 'From Horns to Cooking Pots', "by free choice, lack of prerequisites and credentials, heterogeneity of learner groups in background and interests and the importance of social action rather than individual effort". Museums place original objects from the past on public display. It is these artefacts that provide s them<sup>with</sup> their product differential and creates the initial interest in the visitor to discover and learn more.

Interpretation is therefore primarily a teaching aid, in which the objects are contextualised and given meaning. Museums are communicative media, whose construction of history derives from their primary focus on material culture, and though inspired and influenced by academic history, are less concerned with debates about historical interpretation than the presentation of objects from the past in an accessible form.

## FROM WRITTEN HISTORY TO EXHIBITIONS

Museums not only mediate between academic history and popular perceptions of the past, they also represent a metamorphosis in which the two dimensional discipline of history, the dialogue between historian and sources, is translated into a three dimensional visual experience. It is a complete transformation, in which the objects from the past assume greater importance for the visitor, than the explanatory written text. As Peter Smithurst explained;

*"If you find for instance that there is something that is vital in the story, that you cannot represent it by means of an artefact or image, then I think you should explore every possible avenue and try to obtain what you want to enable you to do it. Only as a last resort fall purely back on words" (Smithurst 1992).*

Academic history is all words. Words to explain, comment on, qualify and interpret the complexities in the construction of history. Museums use different communicative techniques to impart information, they can not simply provide a book on the wall. John Rumsby remarked;

*"You have to bear in mind that we are talking about three dimensional displays and there is a limit to the amount of text you can convey before people just stop reading it. One of the big mistakes in the past which was when people tried to put books on the wall, now I have a rule here.....we don't have labels of more than a hundred words at outside and I normally try and keep them below fifty words because after that people will not read them". (Rumsby 1992)*

As John Rumsby went on to explain, the creation of exhibitions requires extensive synthesising of information, much of it very technical and erudite, so that it can be presented in an accessible form that the general visitor can understand and enjoy;

*"you may have a very long excavation report which may run into hundreds of pages with all sorts of details, specialists reports and so on, but you have got the finds you know and you may be displaying half a dozen of those finds and you have got to boil all that down into something which somebody has to stand there and read for about two minutes" (Rumsby 1992) .*

Many of the curators were familiar with this process. Richard Polley of English Heritage described his role in turning the highly academic historical information provided by the Historic Buildings Inspectorate into a 'palatable' form for the general public. Yet for other curators, the process of translating the history of academic research into a three dimensional display was difficult. Jane Whittaker joked that the process of simplifying and cutting down her text for exhibition panels, came as a real "body blow". Myna Trustram was particularly concerned that objects in themselves could say little about the complexities of historical interpretation;

*"I think we learnt through the exhibition that you can't really use those objects to tell a story, because we use words to tell narratives, to tell chronologies and I don't think you can beat words, but we use objects to provide the presence of" (Trustram 1992).*

In order to present the past in an accessible form museums simplify history and eradicate its contradictions to present a stable homogenous world. As George Muirhead remarked, Beamish in many ways presents visitors with a very stable 1913;

*"Society before the First World War was in absolute turmoil, strikes you know, women's suffrage problems, Lloyd George and the House of Lords and we don't actually give them an idea of the turbulent society that it was". (Muirhead 1992)*

However, Beamish is increasingly attempting to show more of the political and social life and conditions of 1913, using special events to re-enact militant 'Suffragist' rallies and the 1913 Houghton-le-Spring by-election. The colliery cottages which show typical living conditions of mining families of that era, have also been themed. One house is the home of a Methodist lay preacher, and another a Catholic

household which will, sometime in the near future, also be the home of a trade union and political activist.

The majority of the interviewees were very aware that there was a limit to the written or verbal information that visitors could absorb. Many argued, rather than overload interpretative panels with additional qualifying or alternative texts, that these would be better placed in publications, like simple guide books, additional leaflets or in teacher resource packs. Beamish, which uses live interpreters rather than interpretative panels to explore aspects of life in 1913 in the North East is currently producing a series of additional guides on different aspects of the site. Peter Lewis explained;

*"What we've also done is to realise we can get an awful lot of information across in the way we do, but in certain very detailed subjects you need publications written in a way to bring it through". (Lewis 1992)*

#### THE COGNITIVE MAP

Exhibitions and displays expunge history's conflicts and contradictions, to make the past more accessible to the layman. Curators were also well aware of the need to provide the visitor with a sense of direction and guidance for them to understand and appreciate the subjects explored in the museum. As the Leverhulme Project group maintained;

*Visitors require a 'cognitive map' which they can use to guide their journey through the re-presented past in a meaningful way which ties up with their own experience" (Uzzell et al 1988).*

This cognitive map may take several forms, and could include simple chronology, the use of popular historical motifs, or a comparison of past and present. John Rumsby observed;

*"If you can relate the past, presenting it to something within the knowledge of the person who is looking at it, then it is a much more immediate link. You can either do that by reference to something*

*that is very similiar to the present day artefact or is quite different but serves the same function" (Rumsby 1992).*

Richard Polley described the new interpretation at the English Heritage property Rievaulx Abbey in which the monastery was likened to a modern business where the Prior was styled as the Managing Director, the monks as the executive board and the lay brothers the workers. Even if the comparison is not so overt, in the case of many domestic and household items, visitors will often automatically compare early vacuum cleaners or irons with the modern day equivalent. This approach appeals to the popular view of history, "the way we were", in which there is a popular fascination with the mundane details of everyday living in the past. Tolson uses old photographs of familiar land marks in the transport gallery, to draw links between the past and the present, In the new archaeological gallery there will be a comparison of language, whereby visitors will be able to listen to tapes of Anglo-Saxon, Norse Viking and modern Huddersfield dialect.

In a recent temporary exhibition at the N.M.L.H on the history of the Shop Workers Union USDAW, the museum constructed an Edwardian shop counter and a modern supermarket check out, to illustrate the changes in shopping and in shop workers' experience during this century. This comparison between past and present is one that N.M.L.H tend to use a lot. As Myna Trustram said;

*"I mean I have never really questioned that, it is one of those things that you assume is important, [to] encourage people to be able to think about the past, it seems quite important that ..... people start with the present and go backwards. That is a bit of an assumption to make, that because we feel defensive about presenting history to people there is a general assumption that people have to be encouraged to develop an interest " (Trustram 1992).*

Christine McDonnell acknowledged it was a useful way to build a meaningful link or bridge between the visitor and the past but argued;

*"On the other hand I think there is a great danger, therefore, that you perhaps over simplify the past and that by encouraging people to think of the past as being just like them, you are telling a greater lie as to say that they are so different" (McDonnell 1992).*

#### THE USE OF POPULAR GENRES

Many of the museums studied adopted a chronological approach to the past, because it was perceived as the easiest one for the general public to relate to. Another technique is to adopt populist approaches to history in order to create familiarity. In England there exists a readily identifiable sequence of monarchs, which Robert Cobb has characterised as "a national timescale immediately understandable to any English child." (Cobb quoted in Lowenthal 1990 p:221) This is often used to provide a sense of chronology, particularly in popular historical narratives. Periods of history are characterised by the ruling monarch into Edwardian, Georgian and Elizabethan eras. Each of these eras possess their own popular mythology and imagery. The 19th century becomes embraced in an all encompassing term 'Victorian' and in doing so can invest sixty years of dynamic change into a homogenous whole, of pseudo-Dickensian nostalgia. Martin Watts termed this the pre-1900 syndrome;

*"If anything is old it's Victorian. If you're going to come dressed up for what ever reason, perhaps educational or what ever else always come in a flat cap or mob cap because somehow that is seen to be old and somehow considered to be appropriate" (Watts 1992).*

The 19th century is a period of history which excites considerable popular interest, although much of it is shrouded in a popular mythology of Hansom cabs, crinolines, cluttered drawing rooms and a universal acceptance of hard work and thrift. Richard Polley explained that in a

recent re-interpretation of the English Heritage property Mount Grace Priory, it was felt that the mediaeval period has little relevance to the modern visitor. It was therefore decided to begin the interpretation with the 19th century history of the Priory, a period which has<sup>a</sup> much clearer image in the public mind, than the amorphous middle ages, and then work back in time to the 15th century. This case demonstrates the demands of the audience or market shaping the decision-making processes of the curator. This is not unique, many museums will choose to put on displays and exhibitions on periods of history that have already captured the public imagination. In 1992 many English Heritage properties and museums including Oakwell Hall are using the 350th Anniversary of the beginning of the English Civil War as an excuse to put on special events and exhibitions. The Second World War is another popular theme, Benningborough Hall is planning a temporary exhibition on the role of the Hall during the War, whilst at N.F.H.C the 1992 blockbuster exhibition is 'Trawlers at War' which Richard Doughty acknowledged: "*We are guaranteed an audience straight away because of the subject matter*" (Doughty 1992).

Famous events and dates in the past like the Norman Conquest, the Spanish Armada and the First World War, are often adopted by museums as artificial focii to provide the visitor with recognisable landmarks. Richard Hall explained that this was the rationale behind the Jorvik Time Tunnel. During the Coppergate Dig, many visitors were unsure whether the Vikings invaded before or after the Romans;

*"If you want to try and answer that painlessly and subliminally you have a time tunnel where people get into their little cars and they go back past modern, Victorian, Edwardian, Mediaeval figures, but there aren't any Roman soldiers there. The key marker is you just go*

*past the Norman Conquest and up to that point you are going in silence, but at the Norman Conquest you are told you are at the Norman Conquest so that is simply putting a thing into an easy time frame for people" (R.Hall 1992).*

What is also interesting about Jorvik's time tunnel is the use of easily recognisable, even stereotypical figures, from the past; The First World War soldier, the lady in her Victorian crinoline, the Georgian and Elizabethan Courtiers, the Cavalier, the Mediaeval minstrel, the monk and the Norman knight. The vast army of ordinary workers and peasants are barely represented.

Yet stereotypical images, as well as being used to reinforce popular perceptions, can also be used to revise the received image of the past. This technique is used in Jorvik. Visitors are greeted by two simple statements; 'The Vikings- They came from the Sea'; 'The Vikings-they raided and slaughtered'. From then on, the visitor is provided with a series of interpretative panels on Viking settlements, trade and life style before entering the time tunnel and the reconstructed village. Richard Hall explained;

*"We know from talking to people or rather we knew ten years ago when we started this Viking caper..... that people really had very little image of the Vikings other than they were looters, pillagers and general n'er do wells. We hope that they see from what we have found that there is another side to what those people did". (R.Hall 1992)*

Fictional characters are also used to introduce the visitor to an unfamiliar subject. Until relatively recently Beamish used the Geordie character Jonti to introduce visitors to the history and culture of the North East. ARC begins its orientation video discussing Indiana Jones and the pyramids. As Richard Hall explained;

*"I suppose it's true, that when archaeology hits the headlines, it's because spectacular things have been found. There is a great substrata of archaeology that is going on month after month, day after*

*day which never makes anything but the most parochial headlines. So for very many people it is the spectacular in one way or another: they associate archaeology with Indiana Jones and all that" (R.Hall 1992).*

Museums not only use familiar images of the past, but also use the legends and folklore that fuse popular perceptions of the past, characters like King Arthur, Robin Hood, ghosts, spirits and witches. The new archaeology gallery at Tolson will have a whole interpretative panel devoted to the legends of Castle Hill, Almondbury and Wirksworth Heritage Centre explores its local customs in its exhibition. However, as at Ryedale Folk Museum the existence of these popular historical narratives can cause problems for interpretation. The museum has a display of various ephemera connected with witchcraft, and for Martin there remains a delicate "balance between recording it and not pandering to a salacious interest" (Watts 1992).

#### PRESENTATION

So far, this chapter has explored the mechanisms involved in the construction of a clear and meaningful message, but if that message is to be received and understood by the visitor, presentation is crucial. In deciding how to present the past, the curator adopts the role of theatre director in which they have to create a visual experience in which the visitor can actively participate and be stimulated. It is through the choice of interpretative techniques and their implementation that the curator can engage the visitor's interest. However, the choice of interpretative technique is mediated by a number of factors; the pressures and demands on the professional within the individual institution, the professional code of conduct, the nature of the site or

collection and perhaps most importantly financial constraints. As Richard Polley pointed out, English Heritage properties first undergo a cost-benefit analysis before any installation of site graphics or exhibition;

*"We look at different media in interpretation like the possibility of doing audio-tapes, site graphics, all those have cost benefit implications, so it's not simply a case of choosing the best media for the site. We have to bear in mind the revenue implications, and visitor numbers and income in everything we do" (Polley 1992).*

It is, however, a 'chicken and egg' problem. In order to generate sufficient visitors, interpretation has to be both interesting and fun. Christine McDonnell stressed the need to design attractive exhibitions that were both eye catching, in terms of the layout of the exhibits, and visually interesting. Chapter Two has already examined the use of colour and lighting in panels and the adoption of different sized print on panels to enable visitors to grasp the salient points of an exhibition. Richard Polley explained, English Heritage's interpretative panels are increasingly being planned to give a greater emphasis on pictorial images than text, because he argued the written word was increasingly less relevant to the younger generation;

*"I think people have heightened visual sense because of television, because of computer games, slick advertising and in order to communicate with those people you have to use those media" (Polley 1992).*

Richard Doughty of the N.F.H.C has adopted many of these approaches using reconstruction, sound, simulation of movement to create a visual and interactive experience;

*"I am a very visual person and I like to go away and create a mental picture of what an exhibition is going to look like and this is very clear from the main exhibitions I have created in the past. So I find the most useful references for any exhibition to be photographs or paintings, sketches or whatever and I like to build my ideas around visual imagery". (Doughty 1992)*

In the last twenty years exhibition designers have been increasingly influential in shaping the presentation of history in museums. Many designers in the bigger museums are part of the curatorial team. Smaller museums, if resources allow, rely on freelance designers to help produce interpretative panels, or the layout of entire galleries. John Rumsby of Tolson characterised the relationship between himself and the designer as a "two way process";.

*"I try not to have preconceptions about what the gallery is going to look like. I know what I want it to say, and I know what I want to display, but apart from that I try and convey that to the designer and I rely very much on the designer coming back with ideas that can be discussed and worked up into a final design". (Rumsby 1992)*

#### THE HANDS-ON MUSEUM

Even where museums have been unable to afford to involve designers, the curators themselves are increasingly seeking to make their museums more friendly and participatory. Martin Watts said, *"My contribution to the museum is to get more fun and more doing"* (Watts 1992). Typical of his approach are two interactive exhibitions, the first one aimed at children is called 'Accessions' and consists of a huge wooden box covered with small windows and doors at different heights and angles, each represent a letter of the alphabet, and containing various small artefacts. The second exhibition "Ring the Changes" is about bells, from bell flowers to church bells, and contains a series of bells for the visitor to ring. Martin Watts commented;

*"if you want to change the atmosphere you just ring one and then everybody rings all the others and it all gets lightened up, and equally if you go in to the village shop, if no one is there it's reverential, quiet, they don't stay very long, put someone behind the counter and the atmosphere changes and it's all go. They take much longer and they enjoy themselves more" (Watts 1992).*

Exhibitions are changing and, as Peter Lewis explained, one of the reasons why Beamish no longer has an introductory audio-visual has been a re-orientation in the use of interpretative techniques;

*"Twenty years ago when the museum was founded it did seem sensible to be very didactic and take people into your museum and sit them down for anything up to half an hour and say in a minute we are going to unleash you on the objects, but this is our received wisdom. . . . partly it was a change in taste and expectations of people and partly the change in how curators see their role". (Lewis 1992)*

This change is partly a new understanding of how people learn and absorb information. N.F.H.C have deliberately created interactive exhibitions in order to stimulate visitor participation in the story. Kelham is planning a whole series of interactive exhibits demonstrating various industrial processes which, Peter Smithurst pointed out, are firmly grounded in a professional museum ethos, presenting the information in "an educationally viable way as possible, not just a sort of amusement arcade"(Smithurst 1992). ARC's interpretation is almost exclusively interactive. This has been especially popular with school and family groups. Soon after the centre opened it was found that in order to maximise visitors benefit from the exhibits, demonstrators were required to act as catalysts. Christine McDonnell explained ARC's philosophy;

*"If I'm shown how to put on a plug on something people show me a hundred times and I won't remember. If I am asked to do it then I remember and it is as simple as that. It's messages through contact, through participation and we are lucky because we are dealing with material some of which can't be handled some of which that can. So we can get away from things behind glass" (McDonnell 1992).*

#### RECONSTRUCTION

In addition to participation, reconstruction has proved a useful educative tool. N.F.H.C have reconstructed the insides of a trawler, Jorvik the layout of a Viking street, whilst other museums like the

N.M.L.H. Kelham and Tolson have reconstructed various room settings and workshops. John Rumsby argued that physical reconstruction was often more effective than words;

*"So, for example, if we have a collection of things that would have been used as ornaments on a mantelpiece in a cottage of a weaver in the 1840s. Well, OK, we could put them on a nice glass shelf and light them tastefully, with a sign underneath saying 'These would have been used in a cottage of the 1840s and would have been next to the chimney breast'. If we have actually got a reconstruction of a cottage in the 1840s we can say something about the cottage, and we can put these ornaments on the mantelpiece, we don't have to say these are ornaments on a mantelpiece, they are there. People can relate directly to them."* (Rumsby 1992)

Richard Polley also favours reconstruction and argued that there are several English Heritage properties like Conisborough Castle which could be *"authentically refloored to create a greater experience of the interior of a castle"*. However, so far this had not been implemented because of internal pressures within English Heritage, who were anxious not to commit themselves in case they were later proved wrong. This is a clear example of a curator being constrained by pressures within their own organisation. Some of the interviewees were concerned about the accuracy and authenticity of reconstruction, and where they did use this technique, they were keen to point out that it was underpinned by rigorous historical scholarship.

#### SOUND AND THE USE OF LIVE INTERPRETATION

Although the actual visual three dimensional experience remains the core of successful interpretation, audio-tapes are becoming a popular medium. English Heritage have currently introduced these to a number of their northern properties including Roche Abbey. Richard Polley observed;

*"they are a cheap method of interpretation, they stimulate people's imagination through sound, using sound effects, using actors' voices which people actually experience whilst they go round the site"*

..... [providing] information, dramatic reconstructions and conversations which is related to the building." (Polley 1992)

The advantage of audio tapes is their ability to add a human dimension into a previously empty historic site. Other institutions use oral history recordings to provide visitors with first hand personal accounts of the past. However, it was almost universally acknowledged that taking that a step further and using live interpreters was one of the most effective forms of communication. Individual interpreters are often able to adapt their presentation to the needs of their audience. As Richard Doughty commented;

*"you can convey in a much more sort of flexible and versatile way the significance of an object through a person than through the written word. Any other experience is in my opinion second rate". (Doughty 1992).*

Kelham has, however, chosen to use actual working craftsmen, rather than demonstrators, to show visitors the work of the Little Mesters in Sheffield. Peter Smithurst was quite suspicious of using live interpreters;

*"We could have people doing those jobs, not earning their living by it and spending more time talking to the public about what they are doing. To me that would be play acting. If they were not earning their living by it, if they were not actually trained in that particular craft or skill, I am not sure if they are getting a totally truthful picture from them". (Smithurst 1992)*

Yet although live interpreters cannot authentically recreate the past they can provide valuable insights for the ordinary visitor. Oakwell has regular Historical Re-enactment Workshops lasting two or three days in which they seek to recreate domestic life in the late 17th century. The strength of this technique is that it allows the visitor to understand the human context of the house; watching how people cooked, chopped wood and lit fires and where they slept and dined. As both Catherine Hall and

Jane Whittaker explained the re-enactments are not drama or theatre but an attempt to understand the period through actually re-enacting it spontaneously. Jane gave an example of when one of the women playing a servant dropped a large serving vessel, the other re-enactors spontaneously reacted in period to the incident, threatening to dock her wages.

It is this belief in the superiority of live interpretation, above other techniques which underlies Beamish's entire approach. The site is staffed by demonstrators who as George Muirhead explained;

*"do things that people in the past used to do, they blacken stoves, cook bread and so forth. But it's not meant to be living history, it's not meant to be a seamless reality". (Muirhead 1992)*

The interpreters are involved in various tasks to provoke comment and conversation as well as to demonstrate various tasks that were common place at the beginning of this century. All the interpreters undergo careful training and each are provided with a detailed handbook containing copies of original documents and illustrations to familiarise themselves with the subject they are seeking to interpret. It is not an easy interpretative technique to use; it is labour intensive, expensive and requires careful management and implementation. Beamish has recently begun to develop the technique to explore subjects such as politics, social relations and religion.

In 1990 Beamish opened a Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in the Colliery village and immediately revealed all the sensitivities that live interpretation can cause, on where to draw the boundaries between strict accuracy and a meaningful interpretation. As Peter Lewis explained many

of his curatorial team felt distinctly uncomfortable with the idea of attempting a pseudo religious service. Nor would it have offered the visitor any real experience if they had decided to simply place a woman in the chapel to sweep the floor, as would have been the case in 1913 on a week day. Instead as Peter Lewis explained, they had to find "*a dramatic convention, just as anybody producing a play will look for a structure*" (Lewis 1992).

Beamish used the convention of the annual Chapel Anniversary which enabled them to keep the chapel open all day with a series of events, as there would have been in Anniversary week in any Chapel. Beamish uses a Magic Lantern show to provide visitors, through four different slide sequences using original illustrations and photographs. Different aspects of the social and religious life of the Chapel including Missionary work, the Chapel Year and 'The Demon Drink'. Beamish has also produced a follow up publication for visitors interested in learning more about Methodism. The interpreters at Beamish were therefore able to use live interpreters to explore a 'difficult' subject area in which they had to be careful not to offend both modern day chapelgoers and non believers alike.

#### CONCLUSION

In creating an exhibition, a curator has various interpretative opportunities available to them including the selection of artefacts, the historical interpretation, the choice of interpretative techniques and the construction of the message. Whilst there exists a reasonable degree of freedom in making these choices, the curator has to remain aware of

the constraints upon him or her. The most important of these is the need to create exhibitions which are both comprehensible and enjoyable to the lay person. The curator, unlike the historian, has to create their construction of the past through a dialogue between their own personal perceptions of history and those of society. The curator cannot control the way in which their audience will interpret their exhibition. Jane Whittaker argued;

*"each individual person sees or interprets a museum or a room setting in their own individual way, based on their past experience or their knowledge of the past and also their 20th century ideas"*  
(Whittaker 1992).

That each visitor brings to the museum their own perceptions and opinions through which they confront and absorb the displays, dilutes the authority of the curator to a certain extent. As Peter Lewis commented, the curator cannot legislate how individual visitors will interpret the construction of history within the museum and frame their own judgements;

*"If they make the wrong judgement you can't reprogramme the visitor, because they're actually human beings!"* (Lewis 1992).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MANAGING THE INSTITUTION

"Museum people are rightly proud of their care of objects and learning. As managers they have to be stewards of what exists. Whether they like it or not they have to be administrators. They also have to be innovators, risk-takers and entrepreneurs, so that the services they offer and the artefacts they preserve survive beyond the life span of one generation and speak to a new and different future" (Peter Lewis 1991 b).

#### INTRODUCTION

So far, the construction of history in museums has been examined in terms of the opportunities that exist for the curator to decide the nature of the collection, the stories or histories they wish to interpret, the interpretative techniques they wish to use and the messages they wish their audience to absorb. The power of the curator rests in their ability to help shape society's selective tradition. However, as it has already been argued, this is not an unfettered power. The curator has to mediate between the interpretative opportunities available to them and the very real constraints involved in the presentation of history in museums. In this chapter these constraints on the curator's freedom and creativity will be examined. It will look at how they operate, and assess to what extent they do represent checks on the curator's authority.

In the previous chapter, it was argued that the freedom of the curator to interpret the past was tempered by the need to present history in an accessible form, and to translate that interpretation into a visually attractive three dimensional display. This chapter will consider further the influence of the audience on the museum and will explore the role of

the leisure and tourism industries in making museums much more market orientated.

Linked closely to understanding the needs of the market, are the financial constraints museums operate under. Although many museums, even those in the independent sector, receive grants from both local authorities and national government bodies, there has been an increased squeeze on both national and local government resources. This has had a major impact on curators forcing them to look at ways of becoming more self-sufficient (Audit Commission 1991, Wilding 1985). National and local authority museums have introduced charges, others are under pressure to attract more visitors and increase sales at cafes and shops (J. Andrew 1987, Pemberton 1986). At the same time museums have started to look at outside sponsorship to enable them to put on new exhibitions (J. Malcom-Davies 1990). This often has its implications for interpretation.

The chapter will also look at the nature of the institution, in terms of the size, ownership and organisational structure and the influences these factors have on the decision-making process involved in creating exhibitions and displays. Finally, the profession of curator will be examined, exploring the code of ethics to which professionals work. In discussing the integrity and independence of the professional, it will be argued that the nature of the position or role in the institution, is itself a constraint on the individual's own view and perspective of the past. It is for this reason that, though individuals in museums often regard themselves as radical and anti-establishment, museums ultimately

do not challenge the values of the establishment and work within the current socio-political boundary.

#### THE AUDIENCE

Museums are becoming much more visitor orientated. Part of this trend is a desire to retain and even increase visitor numbers to justify their existence and generate income, but there also seems to be a real concern for the quality of the visitor experience (Eilean Hooper-Greenhill 1988: p.215). The previous chapter illustrated curators' concerns to make history accessible, using familiar genres to interest the visitor and innovative interpretative techniques to bring their presentations to life and relevant to their audience. The research was interested to see to what extent professionals felt that they were meeting audience needs. Although many museums did carry out visitor surveys, they seemed to provide little real information on whether museums were offering the right product for their public, rather they gave detailed visitor profiles. Many of the interviewees argued that since visitor numbers remained constant or were on the increase, they were giving people what they wanted. Several of the interviewees alluded to positive comments in visitor books or congratulatory letters they received. Others relied on observing visitors in their exhibitions. Richard Doughty commented;

*"The main motivation for coming here is simply, unashamedly for entertainment and enjoyment and the very fact that they go out of here buzzing and that they are proud of the centre is an indication that we are giving them what they want" (Doughty 1992).*

Both Oakwell Hall and Tolson had done quite detailed visitor surveys to discover whether they were giving people what they wanted. It appeared that their visitors were satisfied with both institutions. Yet, as John

Rumsby explained, in the Tolson survey visitors were asked what they would like to see more of in the Museum and the museum received a different answer in each questionnaire, so he concluded;

*"You might say that you are not actually satisfying anybody, because everybody has a different thing about what they want. Another way of looking at it is to say that because we are getting demands for such a wide variety of things, then probably we are getting it about right" (Rumsby 1992).*

He went on to say that the museum received few complaints, but while he was prepared to acknowledge that this was partly because the museum was giving people what they wanted, he felt it was also because people do not have very high expectations about what they want from museums; *"so what they get here is Ok for them" (Rumsby 1992)*. This was a theme taken up by Richard Hall of Y.A.T on Jorvik;

*"I don't think that many of them really had a very clear perception of what they were going to see before they came, so I don't think we can claim to have fulfilled or not fulfilled their preconceptions, because they probably didn't have many preconceptions as far as I can see" (R.Hall 1992).*

Matthew Burnby from the Wirksworth Heritage Centre asserted that in general the public was fairly undiscerning and characterised his visitors as;

*"Public of all ages 7-to 70 plus, all types of backgrounds, they are in my terms the rubber neckers equally well they might be at Dudley Zoo one day, Alton Towers the next and hopefully here the following day" (Burnby 1992).*

Janet Peteman of Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet, interviewed in the pilot study, argued that people didn't know what they had come for, and so *"it's up to us to try and put into their minds as to what they have come for and to make sure that they go away feeling they have achieved something" (Peteman 1992)*. So although curators were constrained to the extent that their exhibitions had to be accessible and fun, the lack of

perceived clear visitor expectations, ensures that they retain a large degree of freedom in the content and perspective presented to the public. This freedom represents the division between the professional and the lay person. Peter Lewis explained that he was once criticised at a Museum Association Conference for arguing that "*the function of a museum was to give the public what they needed, not what they wanted*" (Lewis 1992).

The curator has the knowledge to know what is available for display in an exhibition or display, they have the knowledge to research the historical background of the objects on display and give them a meaning and value. Armed with this knowledge, the curator has the authority to present their interpretation of the past to the lay person. As Myna Trustram commented; "*I think part of our role is to introduce ideas to people and things they didn't know they previously wanted*" (Trustram 1992).

It is their role as guardians of society's heritage that provides curators with the right to ignore to a certain extent the demands of the market. As Martin Watts remarked, curators were also constrained by the nature of their site and collection;

*"they get what they are given in this museum and I presume in a lot of other museums because we can only give them what we have got to give them"* (Watts 1992).

By asserting their professional integrity and academic scholarship, the curator avoids the need to provide the purely escapist or entertaining displays, found in other types of visitor attraction. Jane Whittaker argued that it remains a delicate balance;

*"I think that more and more these days the emphasis tends to be more and more on entertaining the public and to a certain extent that is what we want to do here, but sometimes there has to be a compromise between entertainment and what we as curators consider to be more curatorial, in the sense, of what is right for the objects in the museum's care" (Whittaker 1992).*

#### UNDERSTANDING VISITOR NEEDS

Whilst curators have maintained their main role as the guardians of society's selective tradition, this has not prevented them from being aware of the different needs and motivations of their visitors. All the interviewees had a good idea of the type of people who visited their museum in terms of age group, socio-economic backgrounds and origin. At the larger museums like Beamish detailed visitor statistics were available from in depth visitor surveys. Ray Barker, Administrator at Benningborough Hall, was also well aware that his visitors came for a variety of different reasons. Some arrived specifically to admire the 18th century portraits, others came simply because the Hall was in the National Trust Handbook or was an afternoon trip from nearby York, and a sizeable proportion came to enjoy the gardens or bring the children to play in the grounds.

Museums have tried to satisfy the needs of different types of visitors, both in terms of visitor facilities, but also in their presentations of the past. As one interviewee asserted 'Customer Care' is now the buzz word in museums (Rumsby 1992). Many museums have designed their interpretation panels with bold text and graphics, so that visitors do not have to read all the information on them to grasp the salient points, whilst those visitors who are interested in the subject can linger. Some institutions have also sought to cater for children,

providing interactive exhibits specifically targeted at young people. Tolson have devoted part of the Transport Gallery to a section entitled 'Transport of Delights' (see chapter two). A further small gallery, targeted at children, is planned for Tolson in the future. John Rumsby admitted that part of the reason behind the gallery came from first hand experience of his own young daughter, but he explained the basic philosophy behind 'Transport of Delights';

*"I think that it's important for very young children that they should feel, if they've been dragged there by their parents, and find there's something to do, [then] they are going to regard museums as being interesting places to go and they're going to keep coming back" (Rumsby 1992).*

#### EDUCATIONAL MARKET

Museums are committed to education and one of their most important markets is school visits. For ARC school children make up the largest group of its visitors. The introduction of the National Curriculum in the 1988 Education Reform Act has had an important impact on museums. Museums Journal recently commissioned a survey to assess the effects of the new legislation and discovered that the National Curriculum appeared to be acting as a positive force for museums. It showed that, for the first time, museum curators were clear about what is being taught in schools and the objectives teachers are working towards (Wilkinson and Webb 1991: 25).

The National Curriculum (D.E.S 1991) is geared towards the use of primary sources to develop the skills of observation, documentation, research, analysis, and the detection of bias. This has meant that teachers are now regarding visits to museums not as an end of term treat

but as integral to their own teaching and an invaluable resource.

Oakwell Hall, who have been running education days for several years to introduce school children to domestic life in the 17th century, now find themselves inundated with requests for visits and for primary source material from schools studying 'Tudors and Stuarts'. Like Oakwell, ARC's approach was already formulated before the introduction of the National Curriculum. As Christine McDonnell explained;

*"It just so happens that somewhere along the line that converged and ran parallel with the National Curriculum and it is very useful for us to be able to offer schools elements of the National Curriculum, and of course we took the National Curriculum and we looked at it and we said this fits beautifully lets move it slightly in emphasis but the plans were there before the National Curriculum came into fruition" (McDonnell 1992).*

Tolson has used the National Curriculum to help shape the interpretation in their galleries, as John Rumsby remarked;

*"Yes we plan all our galleries round the National Curriculum at our elbow .....I don't say we follow it slavishly because obviously it wasn't written with museum displays in mind" (Rumsby 1992).*

Tolson's new archaeology gallery is designed to accommodate the National Curriculum's core topic 'Invaders and Settlers: Romans, Saxons and Vikings' although the gallery actually does begin its interpretation of the archaeology of Kirklees in pre-historic times. The emphasis in the National Curriculum on the interpretation of evidence and bias was influential in the decision to adopt various panels within the exhibition entitled 'Look at the Evidence'. This is a clear example where the needs of the audience or market helped shape the construction of history in a museum. Because of the importance of the schools' market to museums, the National Curriculum is likely to be increasingly influential in the designing of new exhibitions, displays and publications. The National Curriculum is an interesting case, because it

represents the official government construction of the past. This is now being incorporated into museums and illustrates their role as institutions of the establishment, legitimising the views of the dominant elite.

#### THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Another major market for many museums is the local community. All the interviewees asserted their commitment to the community, and many of them like Oakwell Hall have a local friends' association, or like Beamish were committed to loaning artefacts for use in schools and for occupational therapy. For those institutions concerned primarily with the history of the local region, that role assumed a greater importance as Peter Smithurst explained;

*"I think we are a focus if you like for a lot of roots with all the changes that are taking place within the community, whether it is physical in terms of buildings being torn down, new buildings being erected, streets being altered disappearing.... Once the landscape has been cleared in a physical form, they are there in memory. We need to try and preserve fragments of them so they can see some physical evidence of where they lived, where they spent their life, how they spent their life" (Smithurst 1992).*

Those museums whose interpretation derives from their own local community have a delicate path to tread, in both serving the community's desire to understand its roots and past whilst simultaneously retaining a professional detachment. A community museum also has a wider duty to ensure that it serves all sections of the community. This is an issue which is particularly concerning Tolson. They want to ensure that their exhibitions are relevant to all the ethnic minorities in Huddersfield. They are planning a gallery on twentieth century Huddersfield and intend to devote sections of the exhibition to the story of the different

ethnic groups who have over the last hundred years moved into the area and become a part of the local community. As John Rumsby commented;

*"If we want to get people from the local ethnic communities using this museum in the proportion of the population they represent, we have got to make sure it's their story as well and they are not excluded" (Rumsby 1992).*

This is an example of a museum shaping its interpretation and choice of histories, because of its desire to attract a specific sector of the community to visit the museum; a desire that is motivated both by the institutional nature and duty of a local authority museum and the political and social beliefs that place importance on the greater integration of ethnic groups into the local community.

#### THE LEISURE AND TOURISM INDUSTRY

Ian Robertson (1988), in his Presidential address at the Museums Association Conference in Belfast, pinpointed a growing split in the local authority sector between those museums whose parent authorities had decided upon a tourism policy which has given the museum service a greatly heightened profile, and those who perceive the museums as a local community service. N.F.H.C is typical of the new breed of museums which have been developed by local authorities as part of their strategy to encourage visitors to Grimsby and to raise the town's profile to help its regeneration. Richard Doughty commented;

*"This idea of a centre celebrating deep sea fishing also began to take on a new dimension as a focus for a new direction for the town and it became part and parcel of a tourism strategy that was being developed by the Economic Development Unit and as such, it then became this dominant feature, really the flag ship for the redevelopment of a site that was immediately adjacent to the town centre" (Doughty 1992).*

Sheffield City Council has commissioned several consultancy reports to examine the ways in which the profile of the cities' museums could be raised, to develop them into major tourist attractions. The reports have examined ways of improving museum marketing and more importantly, redesigning exhibitions to be more attractive to outside visitors (Brown 1990). It was a move that deeply concerns Peter Smithurst of Kelham;

*"I think there is political pressure for museums to develop along the lines of the Wigan Piers of this world, or whatever else and become to my mind not so much museums but theme parks. I think we have a greater duty than that" (Smithurst 1992).*

In the last ten years museums have been regarded as important sources of income for towns, attracting visitors who spend money in local shops and cafes, and acting as flagships for regeneration projects (Urry 1990).

Wigan Pier, the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry and The Maritime Museum in Liverpool are often cited as successful examples. Even in more established tourism cities, museums are seen as important contributors. Jorvik holds an annual Viking Festival, in association with local businesses, to attract visitors to York during February, a month in which the local tourist industry is at its nadir.

Beamish is a major tourist attraction in the region attracting visitors from across the country. The Museum, though formally owned by eight local authorities, is no longer dependent on their financial assistance, but as Peter Lewis explained there is, for a successful museum, a danger of being a victim of that very success;

*"I don't mind Beamish coming out of a reliance on local government and into an independent trust, if I thought that the trust itself was sufficiently rooted in the region, but I would be very worried if that trust was Northumbria Heritage plc, because there are a number of people who think Beamish should pay for itself like Alton Towers and have a funfair in the middle of it and we might then turn ourselves into a Geordie Heritage Park" (Lewis 1992).*

## MARKETING

In discussing the pressures from the leisure and tourism industries, curators tend to assert their professional integrity and commitment to standards as a protection against commercial excesses, and the need to compete with other leisure attractions. In their approach to marketing Jorvik, Richard Hall asserted that it was important to have good quality marketing to maintain their visitor base;

*"I'm all for advertising, no problem about being commercial. There is no point setting up what we believe is a good Centre and then for want of good advertising, or good commercial manager, not getting people to come to it. It's a total waste of time, but that must be subordinate to the academic aim, we don't want topless Viking dancing girls, for example treading around the streets saying, 'come to the Viking Centre!'" (R. Hall 1992).*

N.F.H.C has been particularly innovative in their approach to marketing the Centre. As Richard Doughty remarked, "one ignores the areas outside of the normal traditional domain of museum curator at ones peril." The leaflet that launched the Centre included scratch and sniff sections on it with various fishy smells, which attracted several column inches in the national press. For the 'Trawlers at War' exhibition, the centre has produced an exploding leaflet. Other publicity material plays on the 1950s theme. In the guide book the introduction reads; "The National Fishing Heritage Centre recreates the industry in its heyday, capturing the atmosphere and essence of the period- from Bill Haley and the Comets to Brylcreem and Cod Liver Oil". During the interview Richard Doughty was asked why such stereotypical images from the 1950s were chosen;

*"Its not an accurate account of any bias that we may or may not portray within our exhibitions, it's simply unashamedly recognised from the fact that many people wish to visit museums on the sort of nostalgia ticket.....People like to wallow in the past and we certainly have deliberately wooed that relationship as part and parcel of our marketing strategy to bring people to Grimsby". (Doughty 1992)*

Interestingly, there has been a shift in the way Beamish has chosen to advertise itself, moving away from promising visitors 'Acres of Nostalgia' and the chance to 'Step back in time', to presenting the museum as an opportunity to learn more about the past. The 1992 Beamish leaflet provides snippets of information on life in 1913 and is backed up by a TV advertising campaign which seeks to give snap shots of life in 1913. George Muirhead, Keeper of Interpretation at Beamish, felt there still exists a tension between curatorial staff and the marketing department. Whilst the curators seek to maintain curatorial standards, he felt that the marketing department is more concerned to promote and put on events that are exciting and visually attractive, than necessarily compatible with the Museum's academic aims. George cited the marketing department's preference for wearing suffragette costume at promotions which he felt gave the impression that the suffragettes and the death of Emily Wilding Davidson was the only thing that happened in 1913. Yet he conceded;

*"I suppose curators have to argue their corner and say why these things are important. In other words it's not enough just to sit down and sit there and say isn't it dreadful aren't these people crass, commercial and vulgar, the museum has to survive in the market place, so we have to say why we believe that our curatorial standards are important" (Muirhead 1992).*

One of the problems facing many curators is not the tension between themselves and the marketing department but institutional pressure to become more commercial and market orientated in their own roles as curators. Peter Smithurst commented;

*"Museum curators, and I include myself in that, are not trained in marketing or financial management or anything else. There is obviously a need for us to move into that area of operations and pick up those skills, because they are needed. I don't think any museum can become totally financially self sufficient. It worries me that the emphasis seems to be placed on forcing them into that corner to make them become financially self sufficient. I don't*

*think they can be, they can be more efficient."*

## FINANCE

Few museums are self supporting or as in the case of Jorvik, able to fund the Y.A.T's research work, or N.F.H.C who are able to subsidise other areas of the local authority museum service. Museums in the independent sector have to rely on funds they can raise themselves either from grants, sponsorship or visitor receipts. As Victor Middleton (1990) wrote in his report New Visions for Independent Museums in the UK, whilst independent museums ~~are~~ able to demonstrate a remarkable degree of self reliance and revenue earning, built on the dedication of their founders and curators, as well as the enthusiasm of their volunteers;

*"The great majority of independent museums are seriously undercapitalised now and are not able to budget annually for refurbishment and replacement funds which are certain to be needed in the next decade. For the foreseeable future, grants and other forms of annual support from local authorities and agencies cannot be relied upon to continue or even to keep pace with the effects of inflation" (Middleton 1990:47).*

This lack of a solid financial basis has a direct effect on what the museum can do in terms of interpretation. Brian Collins, who owns Automobilia, has taken a piecemeal approach to his interpretation, adding additional interpretation panels as resources allow. He has just introduced a guide book for the museum;

*"Since we opened we have wanted to have a guide to the museum. In the early days, it wasn't economically sensible because the collection wasn't settled. Now it has settled down and it gives us the opportunity of offering people a guide to show them round the museum which helps on the interpretative side" (Collins 1992).*

It isn't only the independent sector in which resources are stretched. As Richard Polley of English Heritage explained, the department's 1992-3 Grant was frozen with no allowance made for increases in VAT or

inflation, and yet it still has major commitments as a funder for other bodies including the National Trust. Many local authority museums have found their resources severely cut with the introduction of standard spending assessments and poll tax capping limits on local authorities. As non-essential services museums are often at the forefront of Local Government cost cutting measures. Peter Smithurst outlined the impact these measures were having on Kelham;

*"Our financial resources for next year are curtailed even more than this year, and we are going to have to be looking to pull in 70,000 next year, just to try and cover our financial deficit. That is not making a profit, that is 'keeping the show on the road' and to do that from a baseline of probably 40,000 visitors is going to be pretty hard work" (Smithurst 1992).*

As the Audit Commission's (1991) report The Road to Wigan Pier highlighted, the community charge is focusing attention on cost and museums services need to demonstrate that they are giving value for money. It was an ethos that Nichola Moyle was familiar with;

*"Our viability is being determined very much more now on how much money we bring into the museum, whether it is in terms of sponsorship, admission fees, charging for exhibitions that sort of thing and there is an increasing need to be able to bring in money to be able to survive the next financial year, and you know we may not like it, but we have to live with it, and play that game, because if we don't, if we are not seen at least to be a reasonably viable museum, both in terms of the amount of money we bring in, whatever measure you use, people will start to question whether it is worth giving them this budget or is it worth our while to have us" (Moyle 1992).*

The financial constraints facing museums are major obstacles on the power of the curator. It limits both the choice of interpretative media, the ability to add to collections and reduces the time available to research subjects, as the professional becomes involved in financial matters. Myna Trustram explained often the choice of exhibitions is determined on its ability to attract visitors;

*"Finance is the problem... We always feel anxious about it, I*

*sometimes think that I am having to think more about what exhibition will bring visitors in than what exhibition do I think it would be good to do, given the state of knowledge of labour history or given the state of our collections, ..... [or] what I personally want to do" (Trustram 1992)*

Commentators like Robert Hewison (1991a) have argued that the political and economic conditions of the 1980s forced museums into the market place in which they were increasingly judged in terms of satisfying the optimum number of customers. For Hewison this trend marked the growing commodification of history, in a decade when the enterprise culture reigned supreme, and in which the public function of museums as guardians of the selective tradition, and their commitment to scholarship and stewardship were threatened (Hewison 1991a: p.176). The research was interested in the impact of this more market orientated approach on professionals. Interviewees were asked whether they felt that the need to be more commercial and market orientated undermined the museum's commitment to education and conservation. Although many in the public sector were prepared to admit to the pressures on the institution to become more market orientated, their comments were tempered with a new realism in which they acknowledged that in the present economic climate it was important to look towards ways of becoming more efficient and user-orientated, and find ways to raise some of their own income.

Myna Trustram remarked ;

*"I accept that we need to raise part of our income ourselves, I mean that is a fact of life that the local authority won't provide 100% of our funding, so we either close or we raise some of the money ourselves. Obviously there are dangers, but I think, I suppose I have got sufficient confidence to think we have got enough integrity for it not to be much of a damper" (Trustram 1992).*

## THE SHOP AND CAFE

It is interesting that once again curators assert their professional integrity to protect their institutions against the excesses of market forces. One of the ways museums have attempted to raise funds is through the provision of cafes and shops. Shops can be a particularly effective means of raising additional funds, and all of the sites studied had a retail outlet selling guidebooks, post cards and a selection of souvenirs. Beamish has a huge area devoted to retailing in which there are a wide range of goods for sale, few of which are related directly to the museum, but which provides an important source of income. Jorvik's takings in its shop match Marks and Spencer's figure at £1,500 per square foot (Varlow 1988:17). The importance of the shop and cafe to the museum of the 1990s was highlighted by Myna Trustram, in her comments about the new site, the Pump House, which is to re-house N.M.L.H;

*"When we talk about the development of the Pumphouse with the architect, we talk as much about the cafe and the book shop and what they are going to look like, as the gallery" (Trustram 1992).*

Whilst accepting the realities of the situation, it remains a delicate balance between finding ways of raising income and remaining true to the aims of the institution. As Ray Barker of the National Trust explained;

*"In an organisation like the National Trust, which is a charity, there is a need at times to be commercial, you can be professional about it and not let it destroy standards. However, how historically wonderful is a mug which says Benningborough Hall on it. I don't know" (Barker 1992).*

## SPONSORSHIP

Professionals not only have reservations about trading, sponsorship can also create a range of dilemmas. Beamish was dependent on sponsorship to develop the colliery village, but after the Miner's Strike in 1984,

potential sponsors, including British Coal, felt that the subject was too politically sensitive for it to bring credit to the organisation. The Museum was therefore forced to concentrate on developing other areas of the site, until funds allowed them to progress with reinterpreting the pit cottages and building the school and chapel. This is an example of present day political opinion shaping the construction of history through the power of sponsorship.

Peter Lewis explored another aspect of sponsorship, in which potential sponsors had approached the museum offering financial help in return for various advertising concessions. He gave the example of Beamish Stout and explained that so far the museum's professional integrity had resisted all approaches since the beer is an 1980s Irish export and has little to do with the Museum's curatorial aims of presenting life in the North East in 1913.

W.M.L.H has been successful in attracting sponsorship for a number of temporary exhibitions, including one on the Professional Football Association and another on shop workers. The latter exhibition, "Behind the Counter", attracted sponsorship from the Shop Workers Union USDAW. As Myna Trustram explained, having accepted the sponsor's money, the museum felt obliged to concentrate, to a certain extent, on the history of the union, rather than their original intended wider brief;

*"We started off having got sponsorship from the shop workers union, but we wanted to do more than that, we wanted to talk more generally about the history of shop workers and conditions and the way things have changed" (Trustram 1992).*

An interesting example of the power of potential sponsors is provided by Kelham, who are planning a temporary exhibition on the history of the city's armaments industry. Nicola Moyle is compiling the exhibition. She was asked whether she would be prepared to bring the story up to date by tackling the 'Supergun Affair', which involved a local firm 'Sheffield Forgemasters'. Although acknowledging it would be a useful means of introducing the audience to the subject through a recent event, she explained that there was little space in the exhibition and there was difficulty in getting hold of suitable material. She was also concerned that there could be pressure from her superiors who might regard the topic as a;

*"little too sensitive. Sheffield Forgemasters.....might not want it talked about, written about and they have been fairly good to us in the past" (Moyle 1992).*

#### INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

The temporary exhibition on armaments also illustrates changing political and social opinion. Until fairly recently, such an exhibition in a local authority museum in Sheffield, would have been politically unacceptable with a City Council committed to peace and nuclear disarmament. More importantly it demonstrates the extent to which local authority museums as local government funded public services often have a wider duty to the community they serve, directly influencing the nature and content of their exhibitions. As the Audit Commission's report The Road to Wigan Pier asserted;

"authorities support museums not only to conserve objects (and historic buildings) but to contribute to the quality of life and to support education; museums can also help attract tourists and contribute to place marketing and the attraction of new investment to an area" (Audit Commission 1991: 5).

The importance of museums to local authorities as a means of attracting tourists to the area has already been discussed, with the example of N.F.H.C, which was so important to Grimsby's regeneration strategy that elected members were involved with both the officers and consultancy firm Leisure Solutions in determining the main story line of the exhibition.

But as John Rumsby argued local authority museums also have a special duty to local people by ensuring they receive a quality service and "we have given them value for money for their poll tax". Yet as he went on to argue museums have suffered during the recent reorganisation of local government, and have been affected by both Compulsory Competitive Tendering (1988) and the Local Management of Schools (1988) in which schools are empowered to run their own budgets reducing the role of Local Education Authorities who are the main funders of museum education services. It was <sup>an</sup> issue that John Rumsby felt very strongly about;

*"Local government is under attack and its services are being pruned and its finances are being pruned. Its grossly unfair and inaccurate attacks are being made on it, with those aims in mind, denigrating the authority so they can be destroyed. And I think that certainly has its effect on the museums" (Rumsby 1992).*

Ownership therefore has a major impact on the power and authority of the curator and directly effects their ability to mediate between other constraints, and the interpretative opportunities available to them in their construction of history. It is a dilemma that effects even national institutions as Richard Polley explained. English Heritage is primarily a national government body and therefore has a wider duty to the tax payer. In justifying the large amounts of money spent on conservation it is important that the public have access to the

properties in terms of visiting them and also in understanding a little more about their history. However, Richard Polley argued that English Heritage's national status also acts as a major constraint on the different approaches that can be taken in interpreting the past.

*"The fact that it is largely government funded, there is a feeling that we ought to be fairly moderate. Whether we will die if we don't, I don't know. I think there is a sort of inbuilt feeling that we've got to be fairly conservative about what we put into things" (Polley 1992).*

The National Trust, an independent national charity, was incorporated in 1907 by an Act of Parliament with a mandate to promote the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest. Such a mandate had a powerful influence on both the land and historic properties chosen to be preserved, and almost inevitably as Roger Whitworth explained on the construction of the past presented to the public;

*"Most of the historic buildings that we own are grand country houses, and just by the type of property we own, many people might think we are trying to preserve some archaic way of life, but I think we just see it that these are very beautiful buildings, they are dedicated not only to the people that own them, but also the many craftsmen that built them. It would be a tragedy if many of these houses that we have preserved, had been knocked down. We are just trying to preserve them for the benefit of everyone" (Whitworth 1992).*

Independent museums were often established on different criteria than local authority or national institutions, but this too has an influence on the way they construct the past. Museums like the Ryedale Folk Museum or Automobilia were established through the enthusiasm of a small group of people who wanted to share their love for a particular subject with the general public. Brian Collins explained that the original impetus for Automobilia was;

*"to give a space for fellow enthusiasts to work together on these vehicles, sharing jointly such things as welding equipment and other*

*machinery* " (Collins 1992).

Automobilia was born out of a love for early Austin and Morris cars and the 1920/30s: it is that which shapes the museum's presentation of the past. On arrival the visitor is greeted with a sign that reads "Brian and Sylvia Collins welcome you to a nostalgic interlude among their collection of transport and antiques from the 'good old days'".

Wirksworth Heritage Centre was established with the help of the Civic Trust as part of the regeneration of the town to provide both a tourist attraction, and a resource to enable local people to understand the history of their community. The Centre is built on the desire to foster local pride and a sense of identity. As a publicity leaflet announces "Visit the Wirksworth Heritage Centre and find out why this Derbyshire town is so special".

#### EXHIBITION PLANNING

Ownership of the institution has a major influence in shaping the aims and policies of the museum, whether it is a trust, a national body or a local authority. Size and organisational structure are also important in the creation of an exhibition. In all but the smallest institutions, where there is often only one curator, an exhibition evolves from the work of several people, who help shape the research, design and implementation, even if one person takes ultimate responsibility for the end product. The development of ARC was undertaken by a working group made up of representatives from all parts of Y.A.T. The initial concept was established by a senior member of the Trust, Dominic Tweedle, for an exhibition that enabled visitors to touch the past through hands-on exhibits. The group held long discussions in which different ideas for

displays were 'thrown around', after which various individuals developed the ideas. These were in turn discussed further and, with the help of a designer, the group was able to visualise the interactive displays and either develop them further or reject the ideas because of either cost or technical implications.

Few of the institutions that were studied during the research has such a structured approach to planning galleries and exhibition as Tolson, where the museum curators draw up an outline brief and assign an individual who has specific knowledge in that area to develop this into a detailed design brief to be used by a designer. These briefs include the artefacts which are to<sup>be</sup> used in the exhibition, alongside the text of all the labels, captions, interpretative media, a list of other illustrations, and notes and guidance for the designer. The curator responsible for the brief then works closely with the designer to transform the two dimensional interpretative plan into an actual three dimensional exhibition.

It is inevitable that size and organisation of the institution will help determine the decision-making processes. A museum as small as Ryedale Folk Museum with limited curatorial staff has little time to devote to interpretative planning and evolves almost organically. While Roche Abbey, an English Heritage property, is part of a huge organisational structure in which expertise is pooled between a number of properties both in terms of site management and interpretation.

Despite these very distinct differences in ownership, structure and size, the research revealed that the same set of opportunities and constraints operated to different degrees within all the museums studied, with the professional acting as mediator in determining the construction of history within the institution.

#### THE INSTITUTION AND THE PROFESSIONAL

A complex dialectic operates between the professional and the institution. The curator, by the very nature of their institutional role, has the authority to construct history through the interpretation and contextualisation of the artefacts. The fact that this process takes place within a museum, legitimises that interpretation as authoritative, but places constraints on the curator in terms of a set of professional ethics. These ethics are themselves defined by the institution. Gaynor Kavanagh (1991) in her study on museum professionals argued;

"The power of the workplace in creating or destroying professional attitudes cannot be underestimated. Codes or no codes, it is often the environment in which people work... that establishes norms and values... The priorities of the museum as a workplace easily become those of the individual" (Kavanagh 1991a: p.51).

The authority of a museum lies in its name and all that it stands for: integrity, scholarship and a high standard of curatorial care. It is therefore interesting that in recent years there has been a move away from the term museum to heritage attraction. Heritage Centre is a relatively new term. It evolved from the civic concern of the 1970s for the preservation of local architectural heritage (Gee 1985). It was originally a community inspired initiative in which local groups sought to protect their built environment and understand their own past, but the movement has been gradually subsumed to include any tourist

attraction that concerns itself with the past. Richard Doughty explained that one of the reasons why N.F.H.C was not called a museum, was to fit into the guidelines of the European Development Fund who would only pump-prime tourism projects. However, more interestingly was the bias of local councillors to the term museum.

*"The members also had a rather archaic view of the museum being equivalent to peaked uniformed attendants and cobwebbed objects"  
(Doughty 1992)*

N.M.L.H is presently considering whether to include the title museum at its new site, the Pump House. Beamish was chosen as a name in preference to its longer subtitle 'the North Of England Open Air Museum', because it was perceived to be more user friendly. However, Peter Lewis believes that it is important to change the public apprehension of the term museum;

*"I believe it's right to use the word museum, not for any doctrinaire or curatorial reasons, because if you like it's my cold blooded marketing gut reaction, that it is right for the general public to now begin to understand what museums really are and so they actually trust a museum. We are a museum, we do have integrity, that is what we are all about". (Lewis 1992)*

One of the elements that emerged during the interviews was the need curators felt to establish their institution firmly within the mainstream tradition, before they could tackle 'difficult' subjects. Peter Lewis explained that his predecessor Frank Atkinson, who had presided over Beamish's inception, had consciously avoided collecting anything to do with trade unions or politics "because the economic organisation of the museum was probably too fragile to cope" (Lewis 1992). It is a problem that is familiar to N.M.L.H which is relatively new to Manchester and is keen to establish itself as a serious museum. As Myna Trustram explained "We do have to spend quite a lot of time

establishing credibility" before considering sensitive subjects like contraception and abortion, although these subjects fall well within the museum's brief. One member of the curatorial team had also been interested in doing a temporary exhibition on Irish History, but as Myna Trustram commented;

*"We always had in the back of our minds the controversial nature of it and the need to establish ourselves as a bona fide museum, if you like, before we moved into areas that might be difficult" (Trustram 1992).*

This need to be accepted as a serious museum, was a problem faced by Richard Doughty. He complained that, despite N.F.H.C's commitment to professional museum standards, the museum community was suspicious of their more unorthodox interpretative techniques;

*"The biggest problem that we have got is being accepted as a museum, a serious museum service. I am totally bemused that anyone should question that. I am greatly saddened personally by the attitude that some of the more established figures in the museum community have about what is happening in Grimsby, that is for us probably, the biggest problem that we face" (Doughty 1992).*

Indeed there appears to exist among professionals, an informal policing network of what is considered acceptable in a museum. This underlines the hostility of some museum curators to the work of their colleagues in heritage attractions. This 'policing system' exists more formally in the Museum Registration Scheme introduced in 1989 which establishes minimum standards for museums, whether they choose to adopt that title or not. The Registration scheme is designed to further develop the 1977 Code of Practice for Museum Authorities and the 1983 Code of Practice for Curators. The Museum Registration Guidelines assert;

*"The experience of museum development in this century has led to an evolution of a broadly accepted philosophy of how a museum and its functions may be defined, This philosophy centres around the responsibilities a museum owes to its collections and its public". (Museums and Galleries Commission 1989:3)*

That responsibility to the collection and the public is invested in the curator through their institutional role and embraces conservation, storage, documentation, research and interpretation. For the professional, collections management is as integral to their work, as their historical knowledge and understanding (J. Murdoch 1992). This professional ethic transcends the voluntary, public and private sectors and is embodied in a desire to present accurate and unbiased exhibitions. Catherine Hall (1992) remarked; *"the code of conduct for curators...., does say that curators should give a balanced view of the past"*. Professionalism, therefore, acts to subdue the personal beliefs and opinions of the curator in an all embracing adherence to professional integrity. Harnessed with the actual physical remains of the past, that public face of honesty and incorruptability ensures the public's trust in the curator. Peter Smithurst (1992) argued that the visitor has to take a lot of what they see in a museum on trust, since *"they [the curator] are not trying to pull the wool over their eyes"*. Martin Watts (1992) drew parallels between the professions of museum curator and the doctor who *"is trusted to give you the best medicine within the parameters of the time and his knowledge and all the rest of it"* .

That the institution invests the curator with the power to present society with a polished and finished view of their past, has led N.M.L.H to look at ways to demystify the museum and *"expose the museum as a factory of history"* (Trustam 1992). Myna Trustam described their approach;

*"One way in which we are edging towards it, is to expose all the different functions of the museum, the conservation studio, the*

*reading room showing that the museum is just a pretty ordinary place with people employed there who repair banners and make documents available to other people. It is not something which goes on behind closed doors". (Trustram 1992)*

What the N.M.L.H wants to do is break the the artificial divide between "history makers and history producers", by challenging the notion of what a museum is and questioning the authority of its interpretations. Already the museum has begun to experiment by using a question format in some of its interpretative panels leaving visitors to use their own judgement. The authority of the institution is something that has fascinated curators at N.M.L.H, who decided to use classical columns in its main gallery. Myna Trustram explained;

*"We put four classical columns, that classic imagery, which when it is at the front of the British Museum, stands for permanence and you know status quo and dominant ideology...."(Trustram 1992)*

Trustram went on to argue that in the same way that the trade unions had once adopted symbols from the classical and Christian tradition to assert their legitimacy and respectability, the museum could "*use its credibility to bring credibility to the labour movement*". Yet, although to a certain extent the museum can legitimise various views of the past, by simply placing them within its institutional walls, it remains a cultural institution subject to the processes of incorporation. Raymond Williams (1983) has argued that the meaning and values that lie outside the dominant system are continually reinterpreted, diluted or at least put into a form in which they do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture. The inclusion of the history of the labour movement within a museum simply confers that past with an institutionalised respectability, diluting its radicalism and the

challenges it poses to the established order, by confirming those events merely as part of the rich political heritage of a modern democracy.

#### CONCLUSION

The very nature of the institution as a cultural medium makes it impossible to divorce the museum's authority from its role in presenting history to society. The museum has a sanctioned role in society as a mediator between academic history and popular perceptions of the past acting as guardian of society's selective tradition. As an institution it serves to instruct society on its beliefs and values, by reference to that which has occurred in the past. It has already been argued that history plays a vital role in society acting to legitimise and uphold the present social reality as expressed through the socio-political boundary. Therefore museums, as institutions which present history to society, contain within them a clear framework of professional ethics which act to constrain the authority of the individual curator and thus guard against any personal desire to challenge the current socio-political boundary.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CONCLUSION

"As museums become everyone's property, they become organs of state purpose and policy. More and more they represent national identity, their artefacts its icons, the nation-state's collective heritage" (Lowenthal 1992 p.26).

#### CONSTRUCTING THE MODEL

This study was undertaken to examine the decision-making processes involved in interpreting the past in museums and heritage attractions. Twelve case studies were chosen for detailed study and observation.

The focus of the research was primarily on the creators of those exhibitions and displays, the curator. The research adopted a qualitative approach in which individual curators were given long in depth interviews to try and understand the decision-making process undertaken in selecting and interpreting the physical traces of the past. The research sought to establish the different influences that shape the construction of the past within museums. It consciously imposed the minimum structure on the interviews and on the field work, so that the results and analysis, whilst enabling comparisons, would not impose a rigid theoretical framework. During the analysis a model did emerge which seems to provide a means for understanding the processes involved in devising a museum exhibition. A diagram of the model can be found in Appendix V.

Although the case studies were carefully selected to represent a wide variety of different types of institutions and covered several broad subject areas, the model that arose from this study, cannot offer a

definitive blue print of how history is constructed in museums. Further research, perhaps of a more quantitative nature involving many other institutions, will be necessary to assess whether this model can be applied more generally. The model does, however, offer some interesting theoretical explanations of the role of museums and heritage attractions in the wider processes of cultural construction.

#### THE MODEL

Like historians, the curator begins with the physical traces of the past from which to ground their historical interpretation. These physical traces may be in the form of land features, buildings, personal objects, machinery, written documents, photographs or drawings. In different societies and at different moments in time, particular traces of the past will be recognised as part of society's selective tradition, whilst others will be simply ignored. The traces of the past are by no means comprehensive and are dependent on accidental survival. The actual availability of objects from the past, especially of the remote past, therefore, directly affects the history that can be both recovered and interpreted in museums.

Selection too, plays an important role. It is impossible to show everything that has survived from the past. Therefore curators must choose, through collecting policies, what is to be taken into the care of the institution and, more importantly, what is to <sup>be</sup> placed on public display. Each generation of curators will be influenced by the current interests and values of society in deciding which objects are to be transformed into artefacts. The very process of placing an object in a

museum gives it a value and declares it as a signifier of previous human activity.

In order for an object to have a value or meaning for the audience who have come to gaze at it, the object has to be contextualised through words or images which familiarise and define it. It is at this point that the curator, having decided to select a particular object, is free to decide its historical significance and choose the interpretative techniques that will convey the object's importance to the audience. In shaping that interpretation, the curator mediates between his or her own interpretative choices and the constraints that act to check the individual curator's complete freedom of action. These constraints limit the curator's interpretative opportunities in the form of finance, institutional structure and the demands of the audience. In the diagram these constraints are listed separately, but in reality overlap. Museums differ greatly in their size, structure and finances and in different organisations these constraints assume a varying degree of influence on the freedom and flexibility of the curator.

The profession of curator itself imposes a fairly rigid framework around the individual. A code of practice or ethics, which derives directly from the curator's institutional role, affirms the profession's commitment to accuracy, truthful presentations and high standards of scholarship and conservation. Even where the individual has no formal museum training, the role of curator contains within it certain norms of behaviour as regards the care and presentation of objects from the past. The curator's work is policed by the museum world through the M.G.C

Registration Scheme, the awarding of grants and a body of professionals who are ever ready to censure activity regarded as incompatible with that of a curator or guardian of the nation's heritage.

The values and beliefs of a society shape the way in which the past is represented in museums, determining which traces from the past survive and which are selected to be interpreted. Interpretation is firmly grounded in the social reality of a specific generation. Each generation in order to assert the legitimacy of their cultural identity will reinterpret the past through present familiar genres that uphold and support their present beliefs and practices. The socio-political boundary influences not only the historical interpretation, but the techniques used to communicate those interpretative messages. The new user-friendly museums with their interactive exhibitions and brightly coloured displays are as much a product of society's adoption of new communicative forms, as the desire by curators to make museums more accessible to the lay person.

The constraints that influence the curatorial decisions are also shaped by the existing socio-political boundary which determines the extent to which financial support is made available to museums. In recent years there has been a move away from direct local and national government support, and an increasing acceptance of the need for museums to raise more of their own income through entrance charges, retailing and sponsorship. This move from public funding represents a change in the socio-political boundary, allowing the wider adoption of new institutional structures for museums, in the form of charitable trust

status. This has enabled the rapid growth of independent museums since the 1970s (V. Middleton 1991).

The needs of museum visitors are also shaped by the socio-political boundary. As views and opinions change within society, audience expectations change and alter. Certain interpretations of the past are no longer acceptable or credible. The audience itself changes and new interpretations of the past are required that reflect the greater sexual equality and ethnic diversity in society. As ideas change the functions of museums, audiences increasingly want displays that are less didactic and more participatory. Museum visitors expect and demand facilities such as refreshments, seating and even play areas.

Museums are cultural institutions and, as such, participate in the wider cultural dynamic by which a society defines its current beliefs and practices. History upholds the values of society by providing identity and legitimacy to the current socio-political boundary or consensus. The achieved consensus in any society is a constantly shifting discourse in which the socio-political boundary is continually being tested and extended. Curators, in creating exhibitions, participate in that cultural dialectic. In their institutional role, and as individuals, the views and perspectives of the curator are defined by the current socio-political boundary, but as communicators and educators they also work to shape the opinions of their visitors and therefore participate in the continual renegotiation of the cultural construction of history.

## APPENDIX I

### THE CASE STUDIES

Automobilia, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire- A small privately run museum based in an old textile mill. The museum focuses on early Morris and Austin vehicles, bicycles and motorcycles. These are displayed amongst period ephemera and a background of 1920/30s jazz and big band music.

Beamish, County Durham- A large open air museum concentrating on life in the North East in 1913. The site includes a farm, railway station, a pit village with a methodist chapel, school and drift mine, as well as a town complete with park and bandstand and various shops such as the Co-op, print shop and dentist. The various parts of the site are linked by tram and vintage bus. Live interpretation is used throughout the site.

Benningborough Hall, nr. York- A fine 18th century house in the care of the National Trust. The house is displayed to create a period atmosphere and contains over a hundred portraits on loan from the National Portrait Gallery.

Jorvik and Arc, York - Both these institutions are owned by York Archaeology Trust (Y.A.T) and are designed to complement one another. Since the same individuals from Y.A.T are involved in the interpretation of both institutions, it was decided to regard Jorvik and Arc as one. Jorvik is, primarily, a reconstruction of part of Viking York based on the excavations from the Coppergate Dig. The archaeological dig and the laboratories involved in analysing the archaeological finds are also reconstructed. The artefacts found during the excavation are displayed in a separate gallery. Arc seeks to help visitors explore the work of an archaeologist through various interactive exhibits, enabling visitors to touch objects from the past.

Kelham Island Industrial Museum, Sheffield- A museum exploring the history of Sheffield's main industries of steel, cutlery and tool making. The museum focuses on the period 1860 to the present day. Part of the interpretation

includes a number of Little Mesters who carry out their work within the museum demonstrating traditional metal working skills.

National Fishing Heritage Centre, Grimsby, Humberside- A Centre devoted to the history of the fishing industry. The interpretation is based around a full scale reconstruction of parts of the trawler and docks. The Centre has chosen to focus on the 1950s which was the heyday of the fishing industry in Grimsby.

National Museum Of Labour History, Manchester- A new museum which is in the process of expanding to a second site, the Pump House. The present exhibition concentrates on the history of the Labour and Trade Union movement. Its collection includes over two hundred Trade Union banners and Labour movement memorabilia. The museum is planning to broaden its scope and examine working conditions at home and work, within the general theme of organised labour.

Oakwell Hall, Birstall, West Yorkshire- A 17th century Hall, which has been carefully restored to reflect the domestic life of the Hall in the 1690s. The house contains many reproductions of furniture, textiles, matting, pottery, as well as genuine pieces. Interpretation concentrates on the 17th century home and also looks at the way the re-construction was created.

Roche Abbey, Maltby, South Yorkshire- A ruined mediaeval monastery which is in the care of English Heritage. There is also a small museum containing a few artefacts, but the interpretation is very low key.

Ryedale Folk Museum, Hutton-le-Hole, North Yorkshire- An open air museum which features a number of buildings dating from mediaeval times to the nineteenth century illustrating the life and crafts of the Ryedale area.

Tolson Memorial Museum, Huddersfield- A local history museum concerned with the history of Kirklees from pre-historic times to the present day. It contains galleries on transport, farming, the development of Victorian Huddersfield and

textiles. In preparation is a new gallery on local archaeology which will open in 1993.

Wirksworth Heritage Centre, Wirksworth, Derbyshire- A voluntary led organisation which arose from the work undertaken by the Civic Trust in the town. The centre explores the development of Wirksworth and examines the local architecture, lead mining, quarrying and local communications.

APPENDIX II

<u>Type of Attraction</u>	<u>Attraction</u>	<u>Ownership</u>	<u>Visitor Numbers (1991) *</u>
Industrial	Kelham	Sheffield City Council	38,000
	National Museum of Labour History	Association of Greater Manchester Authorities	10,000
Local History	Wirksworth Heritage Centre	Wirksworth Heritage Centre Trust	10,000
	Tolson Memorial Museum	Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council	50,000
Open air/ Folk	Beamish	Joint Committee N.E. Local Authorities	500,000
	Ryedale Folk Museum	Crosland Foundation	44,000
Archaeological Ancient Monuments	Jorvik/Arc	York Archaeological Trust	791,225/ 50,000
	Roche Abbey	English Heritage	8,500
Country House	Oakwell Hall	Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council	33,368
	Benningborough Hall	National Trust	70,000
Transport/ Maritime	National Fishing Heritage Centre	Grimsby Borough Council	70,000
	Automobilia	Private Owner	6,500

\* Estimate visitor numbers for 1991 provided by each organisation.



OAKWELL HALL

Catherine Hall: Senior Curator - 1st April 1992  
Jane Whittaker: Community Curator - 1st April 1992

ROCHE ABBEY

Richard Polley : Regional Presentations  
Manager, English Heritage - 2nd April 1992  
David Holdsworth: Custodian - 2nd April 1992

RYEDALE FOLK MUSEUM

Martin Watts: Curator - 3rd April 1992

WIRKSWORTH HERITAGE CENTRE

Matthew Burnby: Chair of Wirksworth Heritage  
Centre - 12th March 1992

TOLSON MEMORIAL MUSEUM

John Rumsby: Senior Curator - 24th April 1992

PILOT STUDY

ABBEYDALE INDUSTRIAL HAMLET

Janet Peteman Curator - 19th January  
1992

APPENDIX IV

INTERVIEW

Lydia Speakman

Interviewee:

Position:

Place:

Date:

Do you consider that this museum/ heritage attraction has clear aims and policy? What are they?

When visitors leave this museum/ heritage attraction what images and messages would you like them to take away with them?

What do you feel is the role of history in museums and heritage attractions?

Do you see your museum as having primarily a conservation role, or is it more educational?

Do you feel there is a tension between curatorial standards, scholarship and the need to entertain the public?

Do heritage attractions/ museums have an important role to play in society's collective memory of the past? Can they fulfill this role or do you see problems ?

Are you giving the public what they want? And who are your public?

What do you see as the role of your museum in terms of the community?

How do you plan and design exhibitions, how are they researched?

What evidence do you find most useful in putting together the exhibitions- artefacts, documents or oral history?

Is it necessary to show the visitor how these sources have been used and selected ?

Is your heritage attraction/ museum more artefact or story led?

How were the decisions made on the themes and stories to tell?

Were there any debates over which stories to tell?

Were there any alternative stories put forward but rejected either through resource implications or other convictions?

Once the key theme or stories were selected was there any discussion at the time, on the different approaches which could be adopted in explaining or exploring them, or was it felt there was only one way to tell the story?

There are many way of interpreting history, do you feel that you have any deep convictions either social, political or religious that have shaped the way you interpret the past?

Do you think the visitor should be given alternative interpretations of the past, to let them make their own minds up about what the past was really like?

Do you try and relate the past to the present and if so how, do you feel that this is important to help visitor orientation?

How far do you attempt to reconstruct the past?

Can heritage attractions achieve authenticity, do you strive to achieve it in your museum?

What is the role of heritage interpretation, do we need it and are you concerned that it might be value loaded?

What do you think of the modern interpretative techniques like drama or live interpreters and multi-media presentations, do they have a place in your museum?

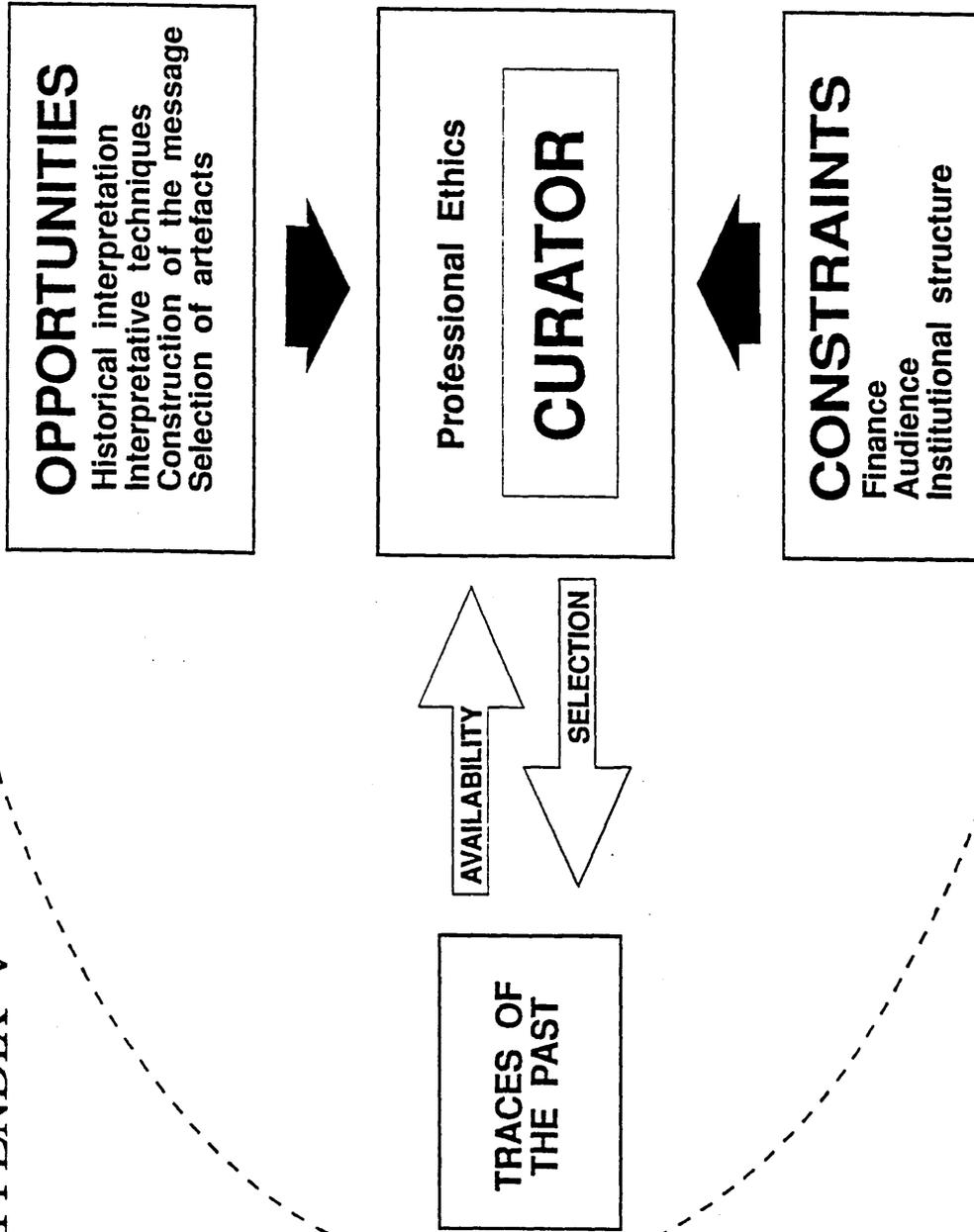
Do you feel that the value placed on scholarship and curatorial functions are increasingly being pushed to the sidelines with more emphasis placed on running a more commercial and market orientated heritage attraction?

What are some of the main problems that this museum/ attraction is having to overcome- finance, attracting new and repeat visitors or some thing else?

How did you personally become involved in the museum/ heritage attraction world?

socio-political boundary

APPENDIX V



The Cultural Construction of History in  
Museums and Heritage Attractions

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