

1. The Importance of Local History and Archaeology

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It is a great pleasure for me, as a university archaeologist and museum curator, to chair this second annual conference of the Renfrewshire Local History Forum. I understand that the Forum has taken on some of the roles of the Renfrewshire Archaeological Society which was formed about twenty years ago from the members of the Fieldwork Group of the Glasgow Archaeological Society. At the time this seemed a pity to me -as a founder member of the Group because it thereby lost several of its most energetic members, but it is now clear that the separation in the end had good results because it established the tradition of an active Renfrewshire society interested in the past, a tradition which -Judging by today's conference - is alive and well. This is shown by the fact that there are affiliated societies at Paisley, Renfrew, Linwood, Barrhead and Neilston, Bridge of Weir, Lochwinnoch and Eaglesham.

It seems to me that the idea of a 'History Forum' - embracing all aspects of interest in the past - is an excellent one. We have to accept, I think, that in any community there will be a limited number of people prepared to be actively interested in and concerned with the past, and in many places more specialised groups - concerned purely with local history or with archaeology for example - are bound to be small and ineffective. Surely it is much better to combine forces and thus to broaden the interests of all members and bring more effective pressure to bear when needed? I noticed from the last number of your Journal that such pressure in the interests of conservation is very much needed over building development in more than one place in Paisley.

This active nature of your History Forum is well shown by the annual conferences, each of which has a distinct theme. Last year's was on 'Work' and the current issue of the Journal has several interesting papers on this topic. Those on past agricultural and mining communities in Renfrewshire made me think how rapidly the modern age is losing touch even with the quite recent past and how urgently knowledge of this past needs to be saved. There have been so many fundamental changes in working practices over the last 100 years -- even over the last 40-- that a great gulf is opening up between modern experience - based on machine manufacture and hugely expanded professional classes and bureaucracies - and the world our grandfathers knew, based on craftsmanship, labour intensive industries and working practices many of which were directly inherited from ancient times.

When we look back at 19th century agricultural workers, for example, we are beginning to have similar feelings to those experienced by Captain James Cook and his crews when they first encountered the Stone Age Pacific islanders two hundred and twenty years ago. This `experience gulf' as one might call it, means that the increasingly remote world of the recent past needs to be urgently recorded before it vanishes for ever. How much more remote and hard to understand therefore are becoming the worlds of even earlier times when written records become fewer and eventually non-existent.

The theme of this year's conference is 'Archaeology' -- my own profession -- and the programme looks very promising. It is worth mentioning that archaeology has undergone a tremendous expansion over the last twenty years, due mainly to the rise of rescue excavation supported by government funds, and also to the increasing number of archaeologists employed in local government as well as in universities. It is sometimes said that because of this expansion amateur archaeologists now have no useful role to play but I think that this is nonsense. It is rare for any government to spend money on what one might call 'luxury' interests unless there is pressure from voters to do so and I doubt whether the much greater concern now evident for the recording of threatened ancient sites, and thus for finding out about them before they vanish, would have come about unless there had been obvious widespread public interest in archaeology. The public concern over the remains of the Rose Theatre in London is a good recent example.

Committed amateurs can also play important roles in guarding our historical and archaeological heritage, by watching out for threatened sites and encouraging interest amongst the general public. Most professionals know quite well that this public interest is essential and most feel, as I do, that the fascination of reconstructing and bringing partly to life the forgotten past hardly exists unless we can communicate the knowledge, and the fascination, to the community and occasionally, if we are lucky, to the nation. The local historical and archaeological societies perform an enormously important service here which we often take for granted but which we urgently need nonetheless.

I can give a simple example of the extent of this public interest and of its tolerance. I recently gave my presidential address to the Glasgow Archaeological Society to which more than 300 people came. The subject concerned Iron Age brochs and included a long section on the rotary querns found in them, mainly to show how the detailed examination of an artefact could sometimes produce insights of much more general interest. I hope it was all clear and straightforward but it was certainly not in the category of 'My travels in Peru' or whatever. Afterwards a friend who had helped me on a broch excavation commented that he found it remarkable that such a large audience of non-professionals would turn up to hear quite a complex lecture on an archaeological topic whereas the same would never happen in his own subject of economics. I did wonder whether this was a way of saying that the lecture had been too abstruse but the general point was clear. We are extremely fortunate that there is a widespread and benevolent interest in our subject.

It is also worth mentioning that the Department of Adult and Continuing Education in the University of Glasgow runs an excellent three year course in archaeology which leads to a Certificate. This is resulting in the steady enlargement of a body of informed and skilled amateurs which should help local societies immensely.

The last point I want to make is this. Professional archaeologists and historians, and the societies of laymen interested in these subjects, all approach the study and interpretation of the past as objectively as they can. We try to represent reason and rationality, use the evidence to reconstruct a sensible picture of those vanished worlds of the past and not to support some preconceived dogma or ideology.

But there are others who are not concerned with reason and objectivity and who want to use the past for different reasons - perhaps for selfish gain (as with some owners of metal detectors) or to promote a political creed. An example of the latter is simmering away at the moment in Fife, over the Pictish caves at East Wemyss (1). If there is not a large and articulate body of informed archaeological and historical opinion -- formed both of professionals and interested amateurs working together -- we may find that parts of our heritage are being destroyed and exploited for entirely the wrong reasons.

For all these reasons I am delighted to see such a good attendance at today's conference and to know from it that the Renfrewshire Local History Forum is in excellent health.

(1) Article in The Glasgow Herald of Feb. 3rd 1990, p.9.
Latter in The Glasgow Herald of Feb 9th 1990.

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