

People and their Past

This view of museums and educational work on the development of technology sees the various elements in a broad context. The writer is now responsible to the Metropolitan Borough of Calderdale for developing a specialised tourist industry in a traditionally textile manufacturing part of Yorkshire. Visitor centres, trails, interpretative panels are there being considered in order to communicate something of the area's pride in its own past to the general visitor. A conclusion is drawn in the case of museums that they share some of the characteristics of the mass-media, and it should be recognised that museums interpret history from a particular viewpoint in the same way that a newspaper or television commentator does. The author was previously on the staff of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust with responsibility for some of the interpretation.

Power, moving through well-oiled machinery, is symbolic of technology. The development of industry has usually been seen to follow technical lines, and to quote one example, the achievement of railway locomotive design between the wars has been viewed as the outcome of improvements. This must be too limited a view - yet one which is still held. A strong case can be made out for seeing 'Silver Link' and 'Mallard' in the light of rival groups of railway shareholders: or the competition between the new airlines and railways; or the influence of streamlined forms on the design of objects moving at high speed.

Technical advancement does depend on other influences: need, economics, political and cultural requirements and possibilities. Kew Bridge Pumping Engines are not only steam techniques applied, but the result of the needs for clean water for the capital of Victorian England. Textile machines were developed because the needs of the growing home and overseas populations of the Empire required them. Prince Albert's interest in philanthropic societies helped get the famous 'model house' built at the Great Exhibition of 1851. This small structure was in fact a four-apartment modular unit which influenced very much larger schemes of building in London in subsequent years. The adoption of technique in this case owed much to the prestige conferred by Prince Albert and the effect of the Exhibition, which in turn depended on political, cultural and scientific factors. More, the Exhibition owed its success to the improved communications of newspapers and journals which promoted it, and railways which provided huge crowds of visitors. Wonderment in achievement was born on a grand scale. Queen and commoner came to absorb the confidence and imperial pride which the great show set out to foster. It was self-education in the pre-eminence of Britain.

The growth of industry left a varied heritage, of which some is now displayed in museums. Some is visible as part of the man-made landscape, but among the cultural heritage is the enrichment of art, literature and music. We adopted new habits, customs, working methods, traditions and organisations, Blue prints, rules and laws.

When we step back and view industrial Britain in perspective these details combine into a whole, but they are still details, and we need to ignore the wood at times and understand the trees.

Heritage is an overworked word, but it is perhaps the best one to represent the wealth of physical and abstract heirlooms which we have inherited. Not all of this, by any means, is kept in museums. Libraries and the landscape contain the publicly-accessible parts, but in our homes and minds there is much more. This accumulated wealth has cultivated the way in which we see our world and our own place in it. We associate what we see, hear, touch, smell or taste with other parts of our experience, which through maturing and teaching, arguing and informing, has left us with our own historical viewpoint. When we read an account of the past or look at its physical remains we interpret what we find according to our view. Does a coal-mine mean warmth, wealth, strength, industry, or exploitation, cold and damp, pollution, grimy people in a grimy world? Is it one of these things or all of them? There is no answer, only the accumulation of views of many individuals.

Education is a narrowing concept, suggesting to most the formality of school and college. It has overtones of compulsion towards learning about subjects about which we don't care. It need not be so. By education we gain in our cultural wealth of knowledge and comprehension of all kinds of things: the taste of good beer besides the facts of its brewing, the enjoyment of the seaside besides the geology of its formation. Sand on the beach means sunbathing, sandcastles and swimming, but also the erosion of the coast, the art of the Japanese garden, the making of mortar for house and factory. By tradition we learn the latter in school, the former outside our formal education. In fact it is not so clear-cut, and through children's books, our parents, television and our own travels, we learn a great deal. The media which educate us are many, fixed neither in place or time. The happiness of the wise man might be gained from his acquisition of understanding about his place in creation, fitting together the jig-saw pieces which reveal the growing picture.

If this is true, there is no division between school and out-of-school, or exploring our heritage for 'education's' sake or for pleasure. By teaching, or television, or travel, we pick-up more pieces of the picture. Through being teachers, or broadcasters, or providers of tourism, we help others find the pieces and ourselves gain at the same time. Our provision of museums, publications, guided walks, films, broadcasts, teachers, information panels, is then the means to the end. These media interpret parts of the world for people, who themselves interpret what is provided through their experience. Interpretation is the activity which

makes the bridge between the heritage and the individual, between the past and the people.

In the last ten years the range of people providing 'interpretation' has grown. In addition to teachers, countryside wardens, museum staff – and even actors, in the educational world there are writers, journalists, coach tour guides, historical house curators, tourist operators and even advertising copy writers.

The purposes for which interpretation is used are many, including education, entertainment and commerce. Teachers provide the formal side, and people such as museum staff reinforce them. Museums also interpret for the general visitor, as do historic houses and some country parks which have guide books, information panels or visitor centres. Interpretation has a management function in these places, besides that of imparting information. It is a useful tool in controlling the flow of visitors, and combined with the techniques of pedestrian and traffic control can help to keep the tourist manageable. Therefore interpretative techniques can be applied to schemes aimed at much more than the educational field alone – because in an informal, entertaining sense there is much to be gained from educating the tourist about the history and content of his chosen area.

Any teacher, or museum interpreter, should be able to influence these facilities. Teachers, or teachers' centres, can produce trails or resource materials. Museum staff, though hindered by lack of time or cash, ought to consider doing the same. They should look at landscape features in their areas which extend the content of their collections. This is not to say that they should do the teacher's work – they can only present a fairly standardised block of interpretation – but can provide a series of informative 'sockets' into which both teacher and taught may plug themselves.

Resources, skill and finance may need to be found elsewhere. It is important that design and execution be carried out to a high standard in just the same way that the educational content is. The needs of conservation must be served when considering interpretative panels. Each element should be integrated into a properly conceived scheme in which the individual parts complement and support each other and do not oppose or duplicate unnecessarily. Information panels on a trail can reduce the sales of printed booklets, whereas if well integrated they would improve them. For example, if the visitor thinks the panels give the information he needs he won't buy a booklet: but if panels provide illustrative material, perhaps changed according to season, and leave the text to the booklet – and say so, and where to buy it – then they help its sales.

Good interpretation, however, brings further back than many curators would admit. In deciding what to preserve in the landscape, or what to collect for the museum, the significance of the object is considered. It may then be decided that preservation is all that is needed, and interpretation is not. But if interpretation is proposed, certain things

follow. One may be the need to collect other relevant objects to help interpret the first. One may be the need to keep, say a machine, in working order, rather than just static, in order to show just how it worked. Again, thought has to be given to context: should a building be removed to a museum, or kept in situ? A signal-box is almost meaningless away from its tracks and control rods. A tram running through green fields is almost nonsense – yet the world of the tram in the north-east is shown at Beamish by one operating past cornfields.

Transport projects are often poor users of interpretation. The enthusiast may see their *raison d'être* in the opportunity to preserve and cherish the near-living vehicle, but if this is all then opportunities too great to lose have been lost. Not many steam railways communicate with their visitors, who are merely a source of income, passengers, customers in the shop – and nuisances. One has the uncomfortable feeling that many visitors wander around rather lost, having gone in because of some sort of folk-memory that requires them to congregate around their sacred relics every now and then, but they've forgotten why.

Railway preservation is expensive, and the growth of projects may have passed its peak. The Derwent Railway in York has now closed down, unable to pay its way. In an inflationary world the competition for visitors could get keener, and for financial survival as well as educational reasons it will become more and more important to succeed with visitors, which means satisfying a growing critical awareness of what makes a good museum. This means no tatty souvenir shops: or scruffy refreshment kiosks (railways were supposed to be accomplished suppliers of good cuisine); neatness, tidiness, and pleasantness to the eye: and the ability to communicate certain things to the paying customer.

What could a railway project communicate? Steam power, track engineering, block signalling, rolling stock operation, and company tradition, are all fit subjects for interpretation, as they represent some of the main characteristics of railway systems. The enthusiast knows that they are fascinating – the casual visitor needs to be won over. There are some rail projects which do acknowledge interpretation. Supported by the Countryside Commission, which has been a leader in applying interpretation, the North York Moors Railway has begun a scheme under a full-time officer, with a visitor centre at Pickering station and interpretive panels along the route. They also have a system of 'Listening Posts' which provide recorded messages via earpieces, and are the first visitor attraction to use these commercially. A visitor centre is also planned at Edge Hill for the 150th anniversary of the Liverpool-Manchester Railway in 1980.

One of the larger users of interpretation for technical and associated history has been the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust. It interprets its sites and collections by a number of well-designed facilities including a visitor centre, slide-and-tape



Blists Hill Open Air Museum at Ironbridge recreates the working environment of local people just before the First World War.

*Photograph by
Dave Austin*

shows, videotape, Listening Posts, demonstrators, guides, publications and postcards, with a bookshop and reference library in support. Films can be used for evening lectures and visiting parties may book a volunteer guide for the day.

Ironbridge has pursued a deliberate aim of excellence and pre-eminence in the museum world, and has won a series of awards since 1974 which have steadily built up its visitor numbers. As a private charity this publicity has been a necessity in order to bring in sufficient visitors to pay its running costs, and the shortfall which has generally arisen has been partly made good by the high quality of its commercial operation, which is based on a high standard of publications and the modern Coalport China associated with one of the main sites.

Sadly, the needs of pre-eminence have arguably produced an emasculation of the message which Ironbridge gives. Its claim to have seen the start of the Industrial Revolution in 1709 with Darby's smelting of iron with coke is perhaps understandable as an advertising ploy, and of course so many other places claim it — Manchester, Cromford, the Black Country among them — that the very phrase has become a little meaningless. But 1709 is half a century too early: there was no one event launched the Industrial Revolution, for this was a phenomenon to be marked out with hindsight by historians, and its true beginning should be interpolated amongst the events around 1750-70.

Rather more interesting is the view that the interpretation based on this claim to revolutionary significance fails to show the effects. The Ironbridge

message is nostalgic; come and remind yourself, it says, that we were the workshop of the world, the honest artisans of great and beautiful things, in surroundings quaint, simple and good.

The Severn Warehouse Visitor Centre is a beautiful creation and properly gets across the feeling of design and thought that shows the museum's standards to be high. It is a fine curtain raiser to the show which follows in four or five acts around the Gorge. It uses historic documents to tell its story — and thereby comes unstuck in so sophisticated a fashion that most people don't notice. The visitor is introduced and orientated to Ironbridge and its cultural significance. The innovatory nature of eighteenth and nineteenth century industry there is revealed. The impressions of contemporary travellers are recounted. Then, after the central slide-and-tape show, comes what should be the pivotal section, discussing the good and bad effects for which Ironbridge might have been in some way responsible. Much of this fails, because the interpretation tries to convey its message by displays which are too reliant on implication and a clever idea. This latter is illustrated by a well-set-out 'cut-away' construction of a house, with parts of nearly every room visible. Hardly any visitor will guess why it is shown here — because by the late nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution had created mass-production and everything in this display is mass-produced. The message has been lost because the medium was allowed to be more important — consciously 'good' design but a lack of essential modern commentary.

If modern comment had been used it might have made some important points about the achievements and failures of industrialisation which have great relevance not only in studying the immediate past but also the modern world and the way in which our view of ourselves has been shaped. Our preconceptions affect the way in which we order our lives, and these preconceptions are rooted in our interpretation of the past. Teachers need to be aware of this, and to understand that this is the real reason for studying history. Historians, of course, are partial viewers and interpreters, and we allow for this in drawing our own conclusions on reading history. The key lesson for teachers should be that museums are also partial, through their collecting policies and their interpretation. They are closely allied to the mass-media in their behaviour and influence. Most curators, one suspects, would have us believe that their interpretation is impartial and balanced. It is generally not. Their collecting policy is selective, for a start, and the fact that displays are object-based leads to a concentration on technique and design in the interpretation. Objects are then usually seen as achievements or failures in themselves, instead of as reflections of people and their society, culture and tradition. A teacher is better placed to interpret themes like this than is a museum, because to a teacher objects are just more illustrations to the theme: to a museum they are the theme itself, and man is a mere agency which handles them.

Ironbridge is an example of a museum whose interpretation relates to the artefact and does not make clear the broader significance. Only at the open-air museum at Blists Hill, the place where an attempt is made to recreate a total environment, does the human condition become central. The Shelton Tollhouse, the Miner's Cottage, the Coal Mine, the Saw Mill, the Printing Shop, are places for people to see where their ancestors lived and worked. It has been a pity from this point of view that this has been the neglected site while the Warehouse, Coalport and Coalbrookdale have been created. In those museums the artefacts are most important: good taste in design is the rule and one has the impression that the smell of sweat from a hungry Victorian factory-hand would be too much for the designers to bear. Blists Hill is different: it was not created by designers but by bricklayers, carpenters and mechanics; the hand of the craftsman and the workman who knew how things were.

One of the best museums in Britain is not in fact open to the public, and that is Clarke Hall near Wakefield, the specialised teaching centre operated for a consortium of West Yorkshire schools. It owes much to teaching by acting and doing, or what the Americans call 'first-person' interpretation. It is really a classroom set up on a seventeenth century stage, a genuine hall with the furnishings and equipment of the time. School classes go for the day, in

costume, to perform some of the jobs necessary for life three hundred years ago — preparing their own lunch by spit-roasting; spinning and weaving, sewing

and writing with quill pens. Their teachers wear costume too, and the day is guided by a teacher — or interpreter — who 'becomes' a seventeenth century farmer for the day, and the children find themselves having to react to him in this guise. This is a very powerful and impressive form of interpretation, and the challenge to British museums is to adopt it for the wider audience which they receive.

A final lesson may be learnt from Afan Argoed, inland of Port Talbot in South Wales, where is situated the Welsh Miners' Museum. This new centre is low-budget and grew out of the local community's efforts to establish a miners' museum close to the former coalmines at Glyncoirwg. It is a museum which perhaps makes many mistakes: internally devoted to Welsh mining valleys, pit heads and cottages, it is found amongst new forests in what is now a beautiful part of upland Wales. In its displays are captions placed too high for children, too poorly-lit for adults. Its reconstructions may use mannequins unusually tall for Welshmen, in coal-workings which owe much to the properties of plaster of paris as a modelling agent. Buile Hill Park in Salford may have reconstructed better: Chatterly Whitfield in Stoke might be the real thing. The joy of Afan Argoed, when compared with most of the too-precious Ironbridge display, is that it gives the view of the miner that is held by the community who made the museum.

In Afon Argoed the feeling is of triumph, of trade and of industrial wealth: it is also of disaster, death and exploitation. It is the view of the miner, not the coal-owner, which comes over. This may dwell too much on the catalogue of explosions, roof-falls, fires, dirt and disease, but the other side is there as well. The miner himself had to live with these dangers, and they shaped the environment and system which shaped him.

It seems right that museums should accept that they do a historian's job, and having presented and weighed the evidence they draw conclusions and state them confidently. In the same way that we need many views to understand history, we need many museums to interpret it. Just as the mass-media of press and broadcasting communicate many viewpoints to their huge audiences, museums have to accept that they are also of the mass-media and entertain, educate and provoke their own visiting public. Their success should be measured by their ability to communicate something about the world man has created, and the contribution that they can make to help him shape it further.