

# **Living History: Magic Kingdoms or a Quixotic Quest for Authenticity?**

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to look at the practices of interpretation involved in specific examples of heritage tourism. It refuses the idea that heritage can be interpreted solely as artefacts or as images of the past. Instead it focuses on the interpretive and communicative work needed to make sense of the built heritage of the UK. The examples chosen are a Tudor manor house in the south east of England, where each year a living history event is staged in order to bring the history of the house 'to life', and a re-enactment society that portrays the events of the British Civil War at historic properties. By means of participant observation the activities of research, interpretation and education are examined along with the sources on enjoyment they provide. It is suggested that this is closely entwined with producing a sense of realism and 'authenticity'. However, both these concepts are seen to have problematic implications. The paper argues that heritage is a much more self-reflexive activity than commonly portrayed with a complex bundle of 'enjoyments' and knowledges being created. These are then posed as one way of interpreting built heritage as oppose to more academic models.

## **Introduction.**

The growing academic commentary on the heritage industry has been broadly critical and highlights a variety of problems with heritage events. Commentators have consistently suggested that a focus on an eclectic mix of historical artefacts/replicas produces a surface of 'historicality' rather than an understanding of history (Walsh 1992, Fowler 1992, Hewison 1987). Such a superficial image of the past tends to cover the history of social strife in the country and concentrate instead on the aesthetic charms of the past dwellings of principally the rich and thus portray a pastoral myth of the British past - through the disproportionately large percentage of resources devoted to preserving country and manor houses (Walsh 1992, Wright 1985). However the reflective language of portrayal and image used is symptomatic for, by and large, such authors concentrate on the past as made present in images. Preserved buildings are not seen so much as sites for interpretive practices as facades that represent an appearance of 'pastness'. Such a focus on images fits with an idea that surfaces and appearances are growing dominant - a theme resonating through the work of such as Harvey (1989) on postmodernity. Fowler, for instance, makes strong appeals that we should not become obsessed with a wildly eclectic mix of aesthetically attractive bits of the past (1991, 1989). Rather he calls for a return to scholarly analysis, to history that cannot be reduced to snippets and interesting little vignettes. Heritage, it is suggested, is a tabloid history that turns to 'shallow titillation' (Walsh 1992:1) with the standards of Citizen Kane (if there is no history then invent some) and the clichéd human interest story. My purpose is not to deny these ingredients are in this potent cocktail. Rather I wish to recast the ways in which they are seen and experienced.

Bound up in this conceptualisation is often an idea of heritage as a series of false or misleading images that obscure the true past (Wright 1989). An idea that relies on a one way flow of knowledge (true or false) from the 'imagineers' to the people and an often unacknowledged model where culture is used to 'dupe' consumers (Wright 1985). However I argue that one cannot fully assess the way heritage is produced and consumed in terms of a reflective model. I wish to suggest that this is an oversimple model of how history is consumed in heritage *practices*. There are important implications in the idea of heritage *sights* (Urry 1990) but we cannot forget that historic buildings are just as often *sites* for interpretive activities. I hope to demonstrate how the built heritage can be experienced as an event, through a self-conscious articulation and creative process of understanding, that contains elements of a quixotic quest for the 'authentic'. Such a quest has been argued to be at the core of contemporary modern subjectivities and exemplified in the figure of the tourist (MacCannell 1992, Morris 1988, Redfoot 1984, Culler 1981, Abbeele 1980). In the dislocated western world, a decentred subject can never experience the authentic but always ends up faced with the markers of that experience rather than the experience itself. We may go to see an historic house but all we encounter are the signs of tourism (Morris 1988), the markers that direct us and tell us 'this is historic as oppose to that which is not'. There is no unmediated encounter with the past and everything becomes a sign of itself (Culler 1981). "This in turn motivates a desperate search for the real thing, in which people happily borrow the personas and accoutrements of those whom modern mythology defines as quintessentially real" (Handler 1987:339).

With Handler, I suggest that the conjuncture of living history and tourism provides a stage on which these wider problems of knowledge and

experience are performed. Living history and re-enactments are surely one avenue through which heritage interpreters have tried to access 'The promotional milieu of the late 20th century, [with its] informal education, tourism, the appetite of the mass media for events and "docu-drama" or "edutainment", a social premium on experiences and self-awareness, all [of which] have popularized Living History as a picturesque and intriguing activity' (Fortier 1987:2-3). However, I suggest that the quest for the real in re-enactments is considerably more of a self-knowing performance than is often suggested - and that it is this that makes living history such an exemplary dramatisation of modernity.

In this paper, I sketch a few dynamics of a typical 'heritage' strategy to make an 'experience' out of the built environment - the costumed interpreter and re-enactor. I begin by arguing that one dynamic is the democratic nature of knowledge formation in living history and go on to assess just how appropriate metaphors of shallowness and superficiality may be. This discussion raises issues of authenticity and accuracy in portrayal. But then I ask how these portrayals fit with the way in which living history interpretation is structured. I suggest that by providing a re-production, a re-presentation in the strongest sense, of one period difficulties of interpretation are produced. But there are strengths amid these problems. Finally, I argue that these strengths and weaknesses cannot then be separated from precisely the forms of titillation so well critiqued in the literature. The production of historical interpretations is by a constellation of pleasures/knowledges and different forms of 'enjoyment'. By illustrating some of these I hope to argue that if we are not careful critiques of the heritage industry end up advocating a single means of enjoying the past - and that this discards much that is positive in other ways of experiencing the past.

## **Experiencing the Past.**

The study leading to this paper has been based on participant observation with two re-enactment groups which promote themselves with the claim that they 'bring history back to life'. Such 'living histories' have been divided into living museums, experimental archaeology and recreational events (Anderson 1984, Glassberg 1986). The first category is that organised as an educational and interpretive strategy with paid employees in museums or heritage centres; the second is where historical evidence is used to research and recreate artefacts and to test theories about them deduced from remains. The third type is where volunteers take part in a recreation (in all senses) for their own enjoyment. I focus largely on this last category. I hope to show that elements of all three are embroiled and one cannot separate the practices of interpretation, research or pleasure entwined around living history.

I joined markedly different groups in order to research these issues of heritage presentation. Firstly, I was involved in one of the smaller societies recreating the British Civil War for 2 years 'campaigning' over a season from April to October. In the course of this season, units organise and travel to 'musters', varying in size, frequency and theme, to restage different parts of the conflict. Some events were held in 'open fields' but the majority were promoted by English Heritage (the government preservation quango) to attract visitors to their sites, such as castles, which had played a role in that conflict. The largest recreations have up to 1800 participants for a weekend and might occur 3 or 4 times a season while other smaller events, such as skirmishes or living histories, fill in the calendar. It might be possible to go to 6 to 8 events up and down the

country in a normal season, though not everyone would. What events you attended was dependent on the unit in which you 'served' and your own commitments. Like most of the other participants I encountered, I joined a unit to which I had some connections, via a friend, which happened to be the 'Parliamentary Trayne of Artillery' and began, like many others, by borrowing equipment until I/they could make or purchase it from the 'traders' that attend major events.

The second society I joined is dedicated to the recreation of Tudor domestic life, based at a Tudor house in the south east of England portraying a different period year each year. Each summer participants are recruited (via contacts or newspaper advertisements asking whether readers would like to "Live as a Tudor") and undergo a process of interviewing and seminars to train them for the event. Each one receives notes on costume of the period (25 pages for humble figures such as myself, more for gentry characters, and another 15 pages on shoes) from which they must make their own costume. This is vetted at a further interview. There is no subsidy towards either attending the seminars or the cost of the costume (£70 for a pedlar to up to £300 for gentry depending on luck, and cloth prices). The event itself lasts for a month with participants staying from one week up to the whole event. It is visited by members of the public on weekends and school children wearing homemade costumes on weekdays. The Tudor depiction is designed to show daily life at the height of the family who built the manor and also chimes with the national curricula which has the Tudor period as a topic of study.

I would emphasise that, while I made no effort to conceal my interests, I functioned more as participant than observer since commentators stressed

that re-enactors ("history buffs") sought an authentic, subjective experience, that would feel and not just look real (Anderson 1984, Handler 1987:338), thus participation seemed to be the key to understanding this particular heritage experience. Such an emphasis on participation does cause problems, both at the time, and now in terms of distancing myself from the re-enactors (Fyfe 1992). It will become apparent that the degree of overlap between my position and theirs is a strong undercurrent in this paper and for this reason I have tried to be explicit about my own positionality and engagement rather than retreating into a third person account. Many participants knew my purposes, but I did not wear a lapel badge with a 60 word summary of the project. Partly in acknowledgement of this, and after speaking to many informants, I have kept them anonymous. I trust the reader will bear with the various inexactitudes in descriptions, which would be highly untypical of my informants, that I have used to uphold this promise.

### **Hierarchical Knowledge and Democratising History.**

McIlwraith (1989) suggested a role for academics in arbitrating and deciding on the boundaries of what should be classed as heritage. He suggested that, once one got beyond national monuments and towards parts of the everyday landscape, disputes would escalate. In this he is correct, but I am less sure of where his positioning of the academic leads us. His academic is the "legislator" who informs the public of the significance of traces of the past. It has been argued that much of the drive of heritage and contemporary society consists in previously silenced groups striving to overturn this hierarchy (Bauman 1991). The nineteenth century development of the museum also sought to position the public as a passive recipient of knowledge brought to them by legitimate experts, in

an attempt to create both a singular public and a singular history, and this has been challenged by new groups focused around amenity politics and forming a mass of "passionate minorities" (Ashworth & Tunbridge 1990:4, Wright 1985). The rise of re-enactments seems to occur at the confluence of grass-roots activism in the early 70s and the popularity of new interpretive strategies for heritage (cf. Fortier 1987:3).

In re-enactment societies I would suggest that what we witness is a chance for some of that previously silenced public to assume the role of researcher themselves. For instance, I was trying to think through issues about how they\we were interpreting the civil war. I thus began looking for academic histories that might inform my research. I mentioned one to some members of the group (Carlton 1991). The first said he had not read it but began to cite the review of the book in the group's newsletter, while another member actually had read the book and began to list a specific set of criticisms. While attending an event near this latter person's home, a group of us slept in the attic where he and his partner kept about 150 source books on the civil war. If this were not enough to indicate a depth of understanding of the period, on the floor were replicas of 2 cannon barrels he had made from wood and which would be used to make moulds and cast replica pieces for the society. After some people expressed interest he began recounting the precise sources he had used in creating these patterns - based on archaeological finds in Britain and America.

Much of the above discussion was based around articles in academic or technical journals with the swapping and comparing of 'new finds'. The thrill of discovering new texts and sources for the period, that most academic enjoyment, was also a part of this experience of living history - and is, in my experience, the most common topic on internet discussion



lists set up around re-enactors and historical costumers. But these re-enactors had become convinced that disciplinary divides limited academic historians from understanding parts of the 'British revolution'. For example, historians often had scant understanding of ballistics and so made errors in assessing artillery. Likewise, experience of re-enacting indicated the limits of relying on texts about past practices since practical experiments by re-enactors had shown how far these texts diverged from probable practice. In these cases some re-enactors may be providing new information to historians - not definitive ideas on how things were done but another view at least (cf. Shaw 1992). It is possible to add that re-enactors place a different emphasis on some historical theories. For instance, I had become familiar with academic discussions of how conventions in representations led to women being depicted as frail and incapable of physical activity. Some of the women re-enacting gentry roles saw this from a different angle, as when one grumbled at the Tudor event, 'you can't breathe in these bodices ... it is only some years when the men have to wear boned costume as well and they suddenly realise what we go through every year'. The re-enactors focused on the way clothes did not just reflect conceptions of gendered activities but played an active role in ensuring compliance with these conceptions. I suggest this dynamic is one that sets in play a more active relationship between realism, felt as verisimilitude to a possible past, and verification (Enscore 1993) than is often suggested in the literature.

### **Devil in the Detail: Research and antiquarian obsessions.**

Re-enactments also served to educate participants by encouraging research and providing more information on the topic to be covered. In recreating the Tudor domestic environment every participant was told to

go off and look at period illustrations and sources in order to get patterns to make up costumes and, since the year portrayed alters, the participants have to learn trends in Tudor fashion. There is no room here for 'coarse costume', the sort of rough smock theatres use to indicate peasants of all periods from 500AD to 1600AD. And should a participant wish to be a gentry personage then they have to research the biography of the character (for peasants this is optional though all have to invent a plausible biography). Other groups go further and actually do recreate known biographies and events with details given in packs to each participant to build "mental maps" of the time, society and area (Robertshaw 1992).

To put this for an academic audience, I might liken the seminars, background information and costume preparation involved in 'becoming a Tudor' to preparing to carry out a classic ethnography - but of a Tudor manor. I would use all the problematic maxims that the ethnographer/re-enactor is *trying* to get inside the world of the 'Tudors', that they are *trying* to empathise with the world of the subjects, and all the provisos that ethnographers/re-enactors know they will never totally succeed but that the attempt is crucial to the endeavour. Of course, the difference is that the Tudor community only exists because we are all studying it. It is a totally discursive and reflexive object where everyone is learning the culture by studying everyone else studying the culture. This reflexivity leads to the possible creation of "fakelore", a consistent performance that owes more to the participants' dynamics than the period where, because an influential participant starts something, everyone follows until it becomes an orthodoxy. But I would stress this is not my insight, for there were warning notices about just such re-enactment 'myths' in the

participants' rest room at the Tudor manor. Failings were noted and striven to be corrected.

The participants were very much aware of the limitations of what they tried to achieve. Throughout my time with these groups I repeatedly heard the word 'authenty' meaning historically accurate, when referring to pieces of 'kit' (equipment/costume). Quite often participants would proudly document the sources and materials used to recreate items that a visitor might never see or appreciate (a dice pot, or pieces of cutlery). The quest for ever more and better 'kit' also organises pleasure around authenticity and a technical argot that may well amount to 'a sophisticated antiquarian concern for detail' (Woods 1989:43) or almost a fetishisation of the material forms of authenticity.

The tension in this appreciation of detail is between the typical and the authentic. If re-enactors care about detail they are labelled 'buffs', if they do not they are accused of 'bending history' (Hewison 1991), and it is an important practical issue. Thus on the recreated Tudor manor there were activities of which there was no precise historical record - they may or may not have been there at the time, but it was useful to run them in order to give a sense of the period's life style. Likewise sometimes it is almost dangerous to play up the authentic, but atypical, history for fear that it will provide a misleading impression - a documented historical exception can become a rule for re-enactors and a myth is born.

Alternately, all summer there is a sort of peripatetic warfare going on each weekend. Imaginary battles were refought wherever they could be - original topography or battle plans were a savoured rarity - so generally the Royalists won on Saturday and the Roundheads on Sunday. To a large extent the focus was on the typical or illustrative rather than the actual.

However, the events focused upon are climactic battles rather than equally common sieges - one averaged a day the other 54 days (Carlton 1991). And there are no casualties, no crying of the dead and maimed (though event commentators do emphasise this). The 'armies' have not marched several miles, slept under hedges or suffered the ravages of disease. But I have sat in on discussions about how many of us should have scabies, how well or poorly dressed we should be, and so on. In the last few years replica encampments have been set up for visitors to see, as well as the battle, and there are quite a few smaller events where a few re-enactors portray the daily life of a garrison of a castle or fortified house.

There are differences between the itinerant displays of re-enactment societies and the living history display on a period site. While one is aimed more at display and the other at a more informed interpretation both have worrying sides. A simple battle display does come close to images of history rather than an analysis. But in doing so it knowingly and paradoxically discards much of the obsession with authenticity in the name of education. Living history sites, on the other hand, have to rely on marketing themselves as 'time capsules', as re-creations allowing one to smell the smells of Tudor times, hear the speech patterns (Phillips 1984) - to experience 'the way we were', whatever 'we' that was (Hewison 1991). It is this promise of an authentic recreation that distinguishes them as places to visit. Yet the participants know that they are only producing interpretations of what *might* have been there. Indeed, the participants tend to be much quicker than visitors to spot anachronisms since it is the participants who have put in the effort researching the period and tend to want to make the best possible job of it.

Criticisms of accuracy or the ethics involved in restaging horrific conflicts for entertainment can be argued over. Whether it is better that these wars be forgotten or commemorated and how best to do so is a live issue both in terms of glorifying conflict (Walsh 1991:2) or whether re-enactors do not try and portray the human level of suffering, and in terms of retaining or domesticating the only 'British revolution'. But, as re-enactments must justify their often militarist trappings, academics need to also explain their intense hostility to re-enactment. While doing this research I have encountered persistent scepticism from colleagues, at a most visceral level. It is true that much of the attention to detail is almost obsessive over minutiae. But I am forced to ask myself whether researching a PhD, as I was, provides the most Olympian height from which to sneer at this. The real doubts seem to concern the way in which the past is enjoyed. There is an emotional and empathetic bond with what is depicted and this seems to provoke a hugely intemperate response from academics that overlooks the self-reflexivity of the re-enactors that I have encountered and invokes the superiority of a rational understanding of the past. But one has to ask then whether this dismissal of all 'emotive' and 'affinitive' knowledge is not dangerously phallogocentric, and whether rational research does not itself also form a way of 'enjoying' the past. One must also question the dichotomisation of entertainment and education implied and to what extent academia is an interested party in maintaining one side of the dichotomy as legitimate knowledge and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1988, 1990). The enjoyment of re-enactments brings together research and a more empathetic approach but stands as a middlebrow art in seeking recognition in the terms of the legitimate culture (bookish interpretation) while exploring the scandalous possibilities of other ways of knowing (empathetic or holistic approaches). I believe this empathetic

approach is crucial to understanding how living history works and what its benefits and limits are. It is to this topic that I now wish to turn.

### **Time Capsules, Actors and Interpreters.**

It is necessary to differentiate between what might be termed third and first person styles of interpretation. Third person styles use a costumed interpreter who explains the significance of what is portrayed. They can comment on what *'they'* did *then* and its connections with the present, or how it might fit into wider social trends of the period. In many ways the costume is decorative and the interpreter works as an 'interactive display' (Woods 1989:46) *telling* the audience what is going on. By contrast, the less common, first person interpretation involves the participant acting in period role and *showing* what would have been going on.

It was this latter sort of performance in which I/we were most engaged in and which the Tudor manor was 'famous' for employing. The experience such living histories attempt to provide is the recreation an entire environment, and thus a world apart from the present, a 'magic kingdom' where the past lives. They are described in terms of time travel, and time ships (eg "Time capsule", "the Museum Time-Machine"). Thus in the Tudor recreation of the year 1593 visitors might ask what was being done and would be answered in period terms. Thus if visitors asked a lowly pedlar (me) what he thought of an issue of high politics, let us say relations with Spain, they would receive a response appropriate to a pedlar's knowledge - not a historian's treatise. It is to sustain this sort of role playing that many devices of 'time travel' are employed to prepare visitors. To enter the Tudor recreation visitors had to pass through a 'time tunnel'. As a concept (and as a plywood construction) this appeared

laughable. But it can equally be looked on as a way of accustoming visitors to this interpretive strategy. They approached the manor but could not see it behind a gate-house. They must then pass through this 'tunnel' and when they emerge the manor farm and house are suddenly revealed. It is a device to create a dramatic space on which, with the willing collusion of the visitors, a performance can be inscribed (Chaney 1993:17). Rather than see an old house which has undergone change and alteration as time flowed by, it must be made out as 'in the past'. The capsule effect, then, involves denying the passage of time - despite the presence of all those anachronistic alterations.

This does cause problems. A Tudor re-enactor commented that 'we never recreate the past, just produce interpretations of it - ones that might be of more interest than dry books' (cf. Wexler 1988:67). Or as a couple of Civil War participants describe it, 'it's an effort to produce something not totally dissimilar to what might have happened and we just have to try and get as close as we can within the limits'. But as a period character, you cannot explain that there are competing theories when you would have known; thus over-definite statements of disputed issues get given. And just as re-enactors cannot show ignorance of what the characters would have known they cannot be knowledgeable about what they would not have known. Participants on the Tudor manor may have attended seminars that covered political repression but they cannot suggest that good Queen Bess runs/ran the equivalent of a police state since (a) they would not know of this parallel and (b) since she does/did, the character would not dare say it. At the heart of the effectiveness of the medium is then its holistic realism and its immediacy yet at the same time we can begin to see why this is also its greatest drawback.

Attempts to address the issue tend to be sidetracked into discussions of 'authenticity' of materials - and re-enactors seem to end up in a quest for an impossible absolute that will answer all the questions (Fortier 1987:4). Indeed, making such efforts lays the display open to the charge that it creates an isolated pocket, a static cameo (Walsh 1992:104), which, however authentic it may be, is poor at illustrating abstract concepts and historical change (Leon & Piatt 1989:90, Stover 1989:13). Or as it has been phrased "Academicians have frequently charged that as a teaching and a research method, living history fails to analyse historical information critically. Instead, some have charged living history presents self-indulgent antiquarian history dramatized by buffs in elaborately detailed recreated environments." (Woods 1989:43). This I would suggest is where living history does have most problems when it easily becomes a self-contained narrative episode that does not bring in wider issues - what Thomas Schlereth (1978:39) criticised as 'peaceable kingdoms'. However, there are coping strategies if not solutions to this. One that is used occasionally is to have 20% of participants in red T-shirts acting as third person interpreters (Robertshaw 1992). Another is through adequate orientation material. For instance, the Tudor re-enactment is designed to fit into the national curriculum for school visits, so the hope is that such issues may be covered in the class room. Participants may also use teleological explanations - that is that apparently innocently invoke future events 'as if' by accident without mentioning them. This can be almost teeth gratingly irritating if it goes wrong but if/when the visitor makes the connection their normal burst of pride and enthusiasm is worth it. For example, a Tudor re-enactor refers to tensions in the church (a long run social issue), by cursing the curate for shutting the ale-houses. This gets blank faces, so she calmly adds that she cares not for 'these purists that



would have everything from the book' and no pictures. Suddenly visitors make the connection to puritanism.

But above all living history allows some measure of connection to ordinary people, for so long the goal of the 'new' social history, and this is by far the most popular aspect (Robertshaw 1992, Wexler 1988, Woods 1989). The Tudor event occurs at a manor house, but rather than just see a building that has been preserved and restored it creates the possibility for an affinitive link with the people of the past, a sense of identification, a sense of understanding the life of different people so long ago. As such it tries to offer a privileged vision into the 'back stages' of history, the previously private and domestic. This surely is part of its appeal as an *authentic* version of the past which shows not just the bare elements but the whole of past lives. We can dream of seeing the world as they saw it even as modern society cannibalises its past and stages it for its own amusement (MacCannell 1992).

Instantly I know that this is not so, that we cannot think like past people (Handler 1987:340, Peterson 1988:29). Some claim they try, but most know this is not so. But it is extremely difficult to write about the feelings of re-enactors without slipping into dangerous clichés - Wexler for instance starts talking of 'reverse reincarnation' (1988:62) and Anderson starts talking of seeing life from 'the point of view of stone age peoples' (Anderson 1984). I would suggest the experience is like that of watching a play or a good movie, perhaps a horror story where the atmosphere draws you in until, suddenly, you leap out of the chair in shock. Afterwards, laughing a little nervously, you are embarrassed at once again falling for all the obvious cues. Likewise there is something stirring about hearing Civil War drums echo around a valley and seeing a column of troops

emerge from a wood. And people feel something. Just for a moment. And then it is gone.

It is this feeling that means school children remember their visits as the highlight of a term. It is why they come back as participants or can recount the whole thing ten years after visiting. It is the "magic" of a visit that participants mention, that is a dramatic experience, perhaps truly modern in its requirement to stage, to dramatise to create an 'authentic' feeling. It is not an immediate confrontation with the past 'brought to life' that creates the feeling of reaching the previously hidden reaches of history. Rather in a truly modern manner it is also an acceptance and inclusion of the mechanisms of staging that past, and a self-consciousness of their own artifice that produces pleasure. Not just voyeuristic pleasure in viewing the hidden but pleasures in recreating and re-presenting parts of it.

### **Magical Realism or Critical Distance?**

What this does all do, though, is to shift the interpretive burden onto the visitor. The participant may try to subtly guide ideas but basically they become informants providing information that is then actively interpreted amongst the visitors, democratising still further the research process some would argue:-

"By capitalizing on the public's preference to make the study of history an active rather than a passive pursuit, living-history museums can turn museum visitors into investigators of the past."

Leon & Piatt (1989:92)

I cannot count the number of times parents would point a child to something and say 'See that isn't that like?..' or 'how is that different to what we do now?' (cf. Fortier 1987:7). Elderly visitors started telling children about life before electricity or drew connections to some practices they remembered. But, if in error, they could not be corrected since participants could not comment on 'future' periods. Meanwhile to make the whole sense work there had to be the willed suspension of disbelief. Visitors had to enter into the spirit of things if they were to really get anything out of it. As one participant put it, "We are just trying to delude the public out of their ignorance". Which is why I earlier raised doubts about how myths could so easily be promulgated; by portraying 'the past' and asking for a suspension of disbelief visitors are given few ways of criticising or challenging what is going on.

And yet if they were to get a better appreciation of what is being attempted then they also had to maintain a critical distance. While such distancing did occur to some extent in myriads of discussions about how (recreated) history compared with present life (Robertshaw 1992) visitors also needed the interpretive wherewithal to assess the re-enactment, to argue with it (Walsh 1992:99). It was worrying when such comments as mentioned earlier could be framed about half-remembered eras - in the fertile territory on the edge of memory and domestic folklore (Hewison 1991) - seeming to occasionally assume that once we were safely in the past it was all much of a much muchness and that it was static (Lowenthal 1989). So grandmother's life was not just compared to but likened to Tudor period activities. Meanwhile the realism did give a powerful aid on occasions - as when one visitor announced that the brick-making was inauthentic since 'they didn't have bricks in those days'. It was immediately possible to ask, a little pointedly, what he then thought

the Manor house (all three wings and outbuildings) was made of but not possible to point out that the Romans had also made bricks. By and large I would agree with the findings of Moscardo & Pearce (1986) that most visitors felt such sites were realistic. The problem they over-look is that this not a sufficient answer, what has also to be considered is what they term 'the definitional absurdity of denying authenticity to environments where every effort is spent to achieve this very characteristic' (1986:477). We have to ask, not just whether the promise of a glimpse into the past can be carried off successfully, but what that success may involve. For as visitors seek 'back stage' knowledge, as they become interested and curious, as they seek for insights they almost inevitably push the interpreter into the unknown. The interpreter can then maintain a realistic effect but only at the price of deception about how reliable, not how realistic, that portrait may be (Fortier 1987:5, Enscoe 1993).

### **The Social Life of history.**

This all sounds too pristine, too noble. While the above debates are known and discussed they are not the central experiences at events. I want to bring in more carnivalesque notions to expand our understanding of "authentic experience". Earlier the idea of time/space apart was mentioned in terms of history. I would also apply this to the lives of the participants. For the Tudor re-enactment, people travelled from as far as Edinburgh and Wales to take part. Many stayed there three or four weeks. Then each day was a routine of breakfast, re-enactment with no glasses or watches (obviously), lunch of Tudor cuisine as and when ready. Living on such a site it was quite a shock when the public were admitted - I had quickly grown accustomed to the whole being filled with period

costume. It was the public that seemed anachronistic, indeed entry prices have been raised ostensibly to limit the numbers coming so their modern dress does not detract from the effect. Later each day there was supper from the kitchens and then the pub after the visitors left. In the pub it was still a world apart for most were in costume. Then at midnight we returned to sit around a camp-fire with a few more tinnies, smoke and chat away the night.

As an ethnographer it was very tricky to assess what was going on since not only was I playing a different role from my normal self, but so too, I quickly realised, were a large number of other participants. They enjoyed the chance to be different, to be quiet, or to be 'lewd and bawdy', or to be exhibitionists in entertainments. Teenagers were let loose away from home with parental blessing in this enclosed environment. Adults took the joys of not having the pressures of home. As one teenage boy put it "I'm staying here on my day off. When I'm at [the Manor] I like to stay in. Leave the outside alone." I felt this myself with few ways of keeping up on current events it was (happily) easy lose touch with the anxieties of supervision/thesis - though there were underground systems for passing on cricket test scores. This sense of estrangement from the outside world was added to and reinforced by relations with the outsiders. After several days it was easy to forget that you were in costume - until getting shouts of 'hello sailor' in the middle of Bradford reminded you sharply. While re-enacting, the tendency to stick within groups was strengthened by the perceived hostility and probable foreignness of the area around. This served to reinforce the group bonding of re-enactors, which was added to by the hours of yarning. For instance civil war musters tended to bring out comparisons with past musters and adumbrations of the latest research on, say, clothing.

Another ludic aspect must then be worked through. This idea of a separated space licences more possibilities (Stallybrass & White 1986). As one couple of participants put it:-

"I never understand it you talk to these people at musters and you would never believe they could hold a responsible job." A "That's because you have never understood the switch off effect. You see these people on the 5 weekends a year when they are completely out of control" *G*

This was most noticeable among the civil war society but has echoed elsewhere. This society had had to ban rugby socks initially, indicating both the sort of pleasures sought by some and a determination to become more materially 'authentic'. There was still a huge scale of drinking at major events. The unit I was with prided itself on being able to turn almost the hardest of stomachs with 'earthy' banter - such as lengthy digressions on the relations of complexities of dress to toilets. These sociable 'pleasures' are also a part of living history and are profoundly rooted in modern society. But Handler's suggestion that "buffs expect simulation to deliver an authentic subjective experience" (1988:339) seems to miss the mark. Yes, I hope my continual references have shown that there is some fetishisation of authentic appearance. I must stress that this is almost a self-caricature of re-enactors, one of whom announced, on a particularly idyllic day, that they had come over "all Breughally". In one remark, they combined a sense of documentary sources, their research (they were advised to look at period art), of verisimilitude, visual cliché, intertextuality and an ironic self-awareness. The idea that they are dupes of the creative anachronisms (actually the name of a US based society), that they do not see it is their modern valuation of this past as worthy that drives the re-enactment, seems bizarre.

## **Conclusions.**

What I aim to have shown is how some of the dynamics in living history suggest a refashioning of the issues raised in the heritage literature. I would suggest that it is insufficient to focus on images of history that may be discerned in re-enactments. Nor do they conform to an analysis which separates pleasure and learning. Some re-enactments are an 'historical laboratory'. Some aim to provide a chance for participants to learn more about techniques, such as Tudor brickmaking or felt making, they would otherwise be unable to learn about. At the same time, they aim to communicate an interpretation to the wider public. In my fieldwork the practices of historical research, interpretation and recreation were entangled one in the other. Amid all this, the pressure is to move to an ever more rigorous authenticity, as if this will in itself justify living history; a quest for detail that does perhaps represent an antiquarian inclination and a fetishisation of authenticity (Peterson 1988, Handler 1987:339, Woods 1989, eg Robertshaw 1992). Yet at the same time, this authenticity fetish is both supported and held back by the large numbers attracted by the other ludic, good-time aspects of recreations. The interaction of the two can produce both worthwhile and crass historical material.

It is not enough to simply dismiss recreations as images obscuring an understanding of 'real' history (whatever that might be) which too quickly degenerates into mutual accusations of inauthenticity. Such accusations employ a decidedly unreflexive idea of authenticity and of the touristic process. Analysis of performances at these sites reveals much more is

going on and for multiple audiences. The participants may seek a time apart, an escape from modern society, but the means whereby they escape are entirely modern and very reflexive. Rather than accept the charge of seeking an escape into some authorising 'real' period, some will comment that their study of the past has revealed much mythology of the past, some women recounted finding that their Tudor counterparts had more powerful roles than they expected and as a consequence have found strength in that knowledge to be more assertive in their own lives. Turning to the past may be a strategy to find an authentic experience, but most re-enactors were firmly aware that it was a quest motivated by the present.

Given this awareness, the attempt to 'bring the past to life' must be read as both shot through with present concerns and reflexively constructed *about* the present. The reflexivity, even the irony, of the re-enactment does not render it inauthentic, rather it is what truly marks it as modern drama (Chaney 1993). The 'time apart' was never referred to as 'the past' among the re-enactors I observed, the time apart was referred to as 'the Manor'. The authenticity was not so much found in the past as in the '*communitas*' felt with others equally both trying and admitting the impossibility of ever achieving it. It is this reflexive construction that makes an ironic commentary on playing 'nymphs and swains' in someone else's pastoral myth. To most, but not all re-enactors, these were not so much 'authentic' people as pleasurably constructed roles. There was an immense level of attention to 'being authentic' defined in terms of material accuracy - an obsession not unknown in academia. However, coupled with this was a strong sense of the drama, theatricality and artifice - in short a sense not just of the power of the illusion but also of the means used to sustain it (Chaney 1993:22). In marked contrast to this



internal self-knowledge, many re-enactors were painfully aware that visitors often placed them into some periodisation of 'Victorian-Mediaeval-prehistoric' (cf. Addyman 1990). One of the stumbling blocks of living history is visitors assessing realism in terms of previously held notions and images (Enscore 1993). It was this that many were trying desperately hard to counter by using, perhaps hoping to use, imagination to get to the parts traditional historiography had so conspicuously failed to reach. But the tendency to create a suspension of disbelief, the magical realism of a dramatic space, for visitors rather than provide the tools of critique means that 'fakelore' or 'Tudorbethan' or whatever myths can be peddled with remarkable ease. The great strength of living history is that it attracts people's imagination but there is a great deal of danger for any one who sets out to 'delude the public out of their ignorance'.

One of the reasons for looking to living history is that it problematises many of the categories often used to interpret tourism. Theorising tourism has often remained fixated around the ideas of myths and authenticity. So often tourism is equated with commodification and the ruin of authenticity. However, in this case presents a more complex situation where people attempt to become authentic for tourists; instead of actors becoming tourées, we have people like tourists becoming re-enactors, often hoping to change tourists ideas of what constitutes a realistic portrayal. Such a process suggests that experiencing a realistic past must be a more reflexive process than is often suggested. Touristic realism and knowledge about the past may not be solely defined in terms of verisimilitude, of images, but in terms of a staging process where all actors are entering into the construction of an interpretive frame. The dangers and limits of this 'realism' are best understood as a practice, not by looking to the creation of 'true' or 'false' images.

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