

## **Archaeology, Conflict and Heritage: Some thoughts and perspectives from the northern hemisphere**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Much has been made of conflict heritage in recent times. Perhaps coincidental, perhaps not, but interest escalated significantly as the end of the millennium approached, and as the big anniversaries of the Second World War began to pass. It also coincided with the increased frequency of our veterans (and our relatives of course) dying, often taking their memories and insights with them. Whatever the cause, archaeologies of conflict (and the heritage spin-offs) have become immensely popular, amongst practitioners and the public. English Heritage and other agencies are protecting sites for the benefit of this and future generations, as well as presenting recent histories of those 'guardianship' sites in their care to visitors who increasingly want to know. Cold War museums and heritage trails are being created all over Europe and the US – bunkers in the former East are opening up and vast numbers of people are visiting them. Conflict archaeology features in British television and radio broadcasting, covering both fact and fiction. Students too are taking up the challenge (as often it is): studying these modern remains and their cultural values and legacies, trying to isolate what it is that makes an archaeological approach distinctive and beneficial. The subject is regularly taught at universities: three British universities offer MA courses in conflict archaeology. Projects are also emerging which are collaborative or co-operative, funded for example by the European Union. And the archaeologies of conflict are seeking symmetry in their methods and scope: studying peace camps at Greenham Common and in Nevada, alongside the monumental military architecture, for example. This paper will review these developments, as a comparison to developments further south.

### **HISTORY OF STUDY AND HERITAGE**

It is true for the northern hemisphere at least that studies of a period often begin with its military legacy, its fortifications and battlefields; and artifacts of conflict and warfare. It was true of studies of the later prehistoric period, which began with excavations of Iron Age hillforts, the Roman period (forts and fortresses), and the medieval (castles). It is also true for the modern period, which came to our attention as archaeologists, through the activities of enthusiasts studying Second World War defence structures like pillboxes. Gradually our interests have expanded from these concrete structures to their wider landscape setting and the more ephemeral traces of conflict that surround them, and to the wider world of which this conflict was so much a part. But we begin here with the enthusiasts who laid the foundations for what followed.

Much of the early work on fortifications originates in the UK, and with the enthusiasm and energy of people like Henry Wills and Andrew Saunders. Wills conducted years of study into pillboxes and defence lines before documentary sources were publicly accessible, while Saunders' role with English Heritage ensured that some at least were afforded statutory protection. With key anniversaries in 1994 and 5, the bar was raised significantly. English Heritage and the other UK-based heritage agencies began key programmes of work, mostly thematic but some geographical, while local authorities, who maintain the Sites and Monuments Records which form a basis for planning decisions, also routinely recorded modern defence structures. Landowners such as the Defence Estate also began to take things much more seriously, realizing the need for balance between the main purpose of a military force, and their responsibility for conservation. The thematic work is significant as this provided the basis for all of the other subsequent initiatives, creating a degree of information and understanding that ensured all conservation, heritage protection and planning decisions were made on the basis of knowledge, not guesswork. Documentary sources were key for this. In the 1970s documents were released en masse that related to Britain's defence during the Second World War, enabling the national agencies to

commission work that revealed accurate information on site typology, location, date and occupation. Information was available in other words on what was built where, when and why. The accuracy of plans and drawings ensured that information was held enabling archaeologists and others to identify sites in the field, from their (often scant and illegible) surface traces. The site distributions meant that geographical information could be included in heritage databases, such as the National Monument Record, and Sites and Monuments Records (now referred to as Historic Environment Records).

Interest was not confined to the UK. The end of the Cold War in 1989 meant that massive areas of previously militarized land was being abandoned, vacated and sold-off for redevelopment. Previously such 'brownfield' sites were considered clean slates for redevelopment, whereas this emerging interest in recent military heritage, and a realization that it held value, made this process more complicated. Nevertheless records were often made, in Berlin for example, and the US where work has focused on landscapes such as the Nevada Test Site. Museums have also started to emerge on some of these sites, and heritage trails to feed the increasing public demand for information.

In only ten years the subject had gone from being a fringe interest, barely on the radar for serious purveyors of cultural heritage, to a major focus of interest and investment in both staff time and resources. It had also started to emerge as a specific area for research and study within the higher education sector. There has also been a move to increasingly cross-disciplinary working.

## **VALUES AND CONSERVATION**

Key here is an understanding of the values that we apply to military heritage sites, and here I want to focus briefly on what I consider the most significant of the values that are placed on sites and other pieces of material evidence: communal value. I have singled this out because, for the recent past, there is the added complication (and benefit) of people who worked and lived in these places being available to comment, to opine, and to observe and criticise the actions of those claiming to act on their behalf. In Australia this has been referred to under the heading 'social significance' or 'heritage as social action'. In English Heritage's (2008) *Conservation Principles* communal value is defined as deriving from the meanings of a place 'for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory'. There are three categories of communal value, all of which are relevant here:

*Commemorative and symbolic values:* These are values which reflect the meaning of a place for those who draw part of their identity from it, or have emotional links to it. War memorials are cited as obvious examples, as are places associated closely with a conflict and the actions that defined it. These are places that remind society of uncomfortable events, attitudes or periods of history and are often preserved precisely with the intention of doing so. The *Conservation Principles* guidance goes on: places valued for their commemorative and symbolic values,

are important aspects of collective memory and identity, places of remembrance whose meanings should not be forgotten. In some cases, that meaning can only be understood through information and interpretation, whereas, in others the character of the place itself tells most of the story (ibid.).

*Social values:* Social values relate to places that people perceive as a source of identity, distinctiveness, social interaction and coherence. Some such places will be modest and everyday; some reflective of regional and national identity. Sites surviving from the Battle of Britain and the home front in the First World War are examples of sites conveying meaning and significance in terms of regional and national identity. The English Heritage guidance stresses that the social values of places are not always clear amongst those who share them, and may only be articulated when a place is threatened. Equally these values may relate more to activities associated with a place rather than its physical fabric.

*Spiritual value:* Here we are dealing primarily with the spirit or sense of place, the sense of inspiration and wonder that can arise from personal contact with particular places or things.

This reminds us also of the connections that exist between archaeology and the sociology of conflict, artists seeking to understand through the creative process, but also to document the impact of militarism, often in a very archaeological way by visual documentation, auditory recording and characterisation.

Documenting place can also be achieved with words, a carefully crafted passage that itself paints a picture and conveys eloquently the message and meaning of place. Michael Symmons Roberts (2001) wrote of the fence at Greenham Common:

Now, in its senility,  
the base has lost whole chapters,  
bailed up like a harvest  
between pointless concrete posts  
like standing stones.  
There is no longer any difference  
between outside and in.  
(*The Fence*, 2001: 59).

In *The Wanderer* (ibid.: 63) he described a return to the protest camp at Blue Gate:

On a still October day – when  
bonfires spin the summer into cloud –  
Jason Jones back after a decade,  
takes time out at Blue Gate  
on his way to Pyle Hill Woods.

Blue camp-site is black with mud  
and cinders, even after all these years.  
Giant concrete boulders – to ensure  
no tents return – are odd now  
as freak hailstones.  
In the woods Jason heaps up sticks,  
tips a can of lighter fuel,  
drops a match, shrugs off his olive  
Air-force jacket, hangs it on the flames  
as on a chair-back.

The picture is presented, the scene set, and the place enlivened.

The Cold War era Regional Government Headquarters building at Brooklands Avenue, Cambridge was the inspiration behind Adrian Mitchell's (1981) poem, *On the Beach at Cambridge*, which contains the lines:

You're a poet, said the Regional Commissioner,  
Go out and describe that lot.

The University Library – a little hill of brick-dust.  
King's College Chapel – a dune of stone-dust.  
The sea is coming closer and closer.

Again the words are narrative, describing in this case a hypothetical situation, but one that conveys the essential purpose of the building, to police and co-ordinate and supervise in a place that 'used to be East Anglia'. Again the essential character of the place is conveyed by artistic mediation.

These are some of the values that underpin conservation decision-making, whether it be decisions about subtle changes to landscape, that will impact upon its defining characteristics, or a building or monument for which conservation measures are sought, or decisions on statutory protection have to be taken. It is also the case that these modern sites are now routinely recorded on the Historic Environment Records provided by local authorities, meaning that the sites are taken account in development and planning matters. Informed conservation is key now, and a values-led approach to determining what it is that makes these places special or different, or which gives them value as examples of the ordinary, the everyday and the mundane, is key also.

## **RESEARCH AND THE WIDER FIELD OF CONFLICT STUDIES**

All of the energy and investment in the archaeology and architecture of recent conflict is paying off. There is huge popular interest in the subject, reflected in the number of popular publications (which sell well), and the range of media interest, in television and radio programmes, and stories in the press. Something that connects with key events of the First or Second World War, or their anniversaries is almost guaranteed success. Students of archaeology, anthropology, media studies, history and cultural geography often express interest in this field, while many artists are also practicing in this area. Within the area of archaeology, a taught within the British higher education system, three MA programmes in conflict archaeology have recently been established; there are at least two journals devoted to the subject and numerous book series. Students of historical archaeology and heritage studies often focus on conflict archaeology for dissertation topics and essays. At a wider pan-European level, the Culture 2000 funding stream within the European Union has supported a three year 'Landscapes of War' project, with partners in Italy, Spain, France and Germany, and an extended network of experts that encompasses Poland, Sweden, Malta and a range of other countries. A significant area of this work (and a focus for our Spanish partners) is the Spanish Civil War, a conflict which continues to run deep through contemporary Spanish society. The release of documentation has also meant that archaeological research is emerging from the former Eastern Bloc. The subject is now widely recognized and studied, with much in the way of geographical co-operation. There is no sign of this enthusiasm letting up any time soon.

But what makes all of this so interesting, and so constructive, is the cross-disciplinary nature of it all, and the willingness of practitioners and researchers to recognize common ground in much of the work we undertake. Archaeologists and heritage practitioners have worked with artists in documenting the drawdown, closure and after-life of an iconic RAF station in England, generating a series of linked documentations and narratives that reflect on the upbringings and interests of the participants. There is also the focus on difficult, challenging and often dissonant heritage, which can be the most interesting of all aspects of cultural heritage that we have to deal with. And it draws us into the whole minefield of ethics, with issues of reburial, or the exposure of war graves, and how we deal with witnesses on both sides of a conflict and where the divisions still run deep. It is at once a difficult, fascinating and challenging area of research, which may be why it has been taken up with such alacrity, especially in European and north American contexts.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Which leaves future directions, and where we go to from here. In England we have recognized that militarism does not, and never has, existed in isolation, so recent work has sought to contextualize the military through a wider, broader and deeper analysis of contemporary landscape character, placing militarism in its rightful context of political landscapes, alongside the social, economic and leisure landscapes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The book *Images of Change: An archaeology of England's later twentieth-century landscape* (Sefryn Penrose, 2007) has proved popular, attracting much critical acclaim. As we have seen, work in this area has become increasingly cross-disciplinary, and notably most recently through a funding council initiative in Science and Heritage, whereby a project that explores the famous cipher school at Bletchley Park is addressed by materials scientists and others from the fields of archaeology, geography and the arts. Key areas to emerge from this include studies of decay and conservation of specific materials designed not to last, and what dust can tell us about sites and their occupants. Can dust be dated, and does it contain DNA? Can dust provide a key to

analyzing wartime buildings? A whole host of PhD studies are emerging now, from universities across Europe. Key to this is the emerging recognition of a need for symmetry in the approach we take: put simply finding a balance in the way we study a militarized landscape, such as an examination of the Nevada Test Site that includes its peace camps. And the conservation challenges are being recognized and tackled in a proactive not a reactive way: climate change for example. Finally, the administrative frameworks for managing this heritage are in place. Special interest groups such as the Fortress Study Group are well-established, whereas other groups such as the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Fortifications and Military Heritage is comparatively new to the scene. As always, much remains to be done, but recent military heritage, as it exists in the northern hemisphere is in a healthy state, and has reached that position comparatively quickly albeit with a significant investment of resources. Importantly the community involvement that did so much to develop this topic in the first place has not been swept aside by the emergence of professional interest. Rather this has served to harness the enthusiasm and give it clear focus – the publicly funded and hugely popular Defence of Britain Project for example, which was almost entirely a voluntary effort, and the work of Subterranea Britannica, whose research focuses on underground sites and situations, much of which is military (<http://www.subbrit.org.uk/>). Heritage and archaeology should be inclusive, and has proven to be so in this case. There is nothing positive to be gained from exclusivity.

### **SOME KEY READING**

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See also: [www.english-heritage.org.uk/military](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/military) for free downloads of publications and further information.