

MUSEUMS AND 'THE PEOPLE'

One can say that until now folklore has been studied primarily as a 'picturesque' element. . . . Folklore should instead be studied as a 'conception of the world and life' implicit to a large degree in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part implicit, mechanical and objective) to 'official' conceptions of the world.

(Gramsci 1985: 189)

The issue to which Gramsci points here – that of the political seriousness attaching to the ways in which the cultures of subordinate classes are studied and represented – has assumed a particularly telling significance in connection with recent developments in museum policy in Britain. Although somewhat belatedly compared with Scandinavian countries and North America, the post-war period has witnessed a flurry of new museum initiatives – folk museums, open-air museums, living history farms – orientated towards the collection, preservation, and display of artefacts relating to the daily lives, customs, rituals, and traditions of non-élite social strata.

This development is, in its way, as significant as the legislative and administrative reforms which, in the nineteenth century, transformed museums from semi-private institutions restricted largely to the ruling and professional classes into major organs of the state dedicated to the instruction and edification of the general public.¹ As a consequence of these changes, museums were regarded by the end of the century as major vehicles for the fulfilment of the state's new educative and moral role in relation to the population as a whole. While late nineteenth-century museums were thus intended *for* the people, they were certainly not *of* the people in the sense of displaying any interest in the lives, habits, and customs of either the contemporary working classes or the labouring classes of pre-industrial societies. If museums were regarded as providing object lessons in things, their central message was to materialize the power of the ruling classes (through the collections of imperialist plunder which found their way to the Victoria and Albert Museum, for example) in the interest of promoting a general acceptance of ruling-class cultural authority.

The extension of the social range of museum concerns in the post-war period, then, is a new departure. Yet while, in a relative sense, it is one to be welcomed, the consequence is often as Gramsci suggests: namely to represent the cultures of subordinate social classes not in their real complexity but 'as a "picturesque" element'. As a consequence, the terms in which the ways of life of such classes are represented are often so mortgaged to the dominant culture that 'the people' are encountered usually only in those massively idealized and deeply regressive forms which stalk the middle-class imagination. There are, of course, exceptions and I shall discuss some of these shortly. First, though, an example of the processes through which museums, in portraying 'the people', also sentimentalize them.

A COUNTRYSIDE OF THE MIND: BEAMISH

Visitors to the North of England Open Air Museum at Beamish, set in the heart of County Durham, are encouraged to make the Visitor Centre their first port of call. For there, the guidebook informs, they will find 'an introduction to the North East and its people, and an explanation of what Beamish is all about' (*Beamish: The Great Northern Experience* n.d.). This explanation takes the form of a tape-slide show which offers two interacting accounts of the region's origins. One strand of the narrative, organized in terms of geological time, traces the basis of the region's fortunes to the mineral deposits laid down in the volcanic period. A second strand, concerned with the human time of the region's inhabitants, tells the story of a tough and resilient people – retrospectively regionalized through cartoon sketches of, for example, cloth-capped Iron Age settlers who, in assimilating successive waves of invasion (Roman, Viking, Yorkshire), none the less remain the same throughout all ages, the embodiments of an undiluted and unchanging regional spirit. It is the convergence of these two strands of the narrative in the nineteenth century that purports to account for the North East's unique history conceived as the product of a region blessed with plentiful mineral resources and with a people sufficiently tenacious, inventive, and, above all, canny enough to exploit its natural advantages.

A mythic story, then, and, on the face of it, a fairly innocuous one for it doesn't take itself, nor asks to be taken, too seriously. Yet its significance consists as much in how it is told as in what is said. In the early and concluding parts of the show, those which set the scene and define the terms in which the region's history is told, the commentary is carried by an impersonal narrator whose 'neutral' accent and carefully modulated tone clearly identify his voice as that of the home counties or the BBC. However, at a key point in the narrative, the point at which the region's people and its mineral resources come together in the nineteenth-century development of the North East's mining industry, this narrative voice gives way to another voice – that of the region's working classes – as the story is picked up and

developed in the thick Geordie accent of a fictional miner ('we call him Jonti') who tells the story of the region's industrial development as the result of 'me and me marrers' pulling together. The device is a familiar one from many television documentaries where the voice of the dominant culture is usually accorded the authoritative role while regional voices, often reduced to signs of some local quirkiness or eccentricity, occupy clearly subordinated positions. And so it is here. It is the voice of the south that is dominant in the narrative, deriving its authority not merely from its familiar BBC associations but also from its anonymity and the fact that the role accorded it is that of narrating the hard truths of geological time. It is, in short, simultaneously the voice of the dominant culture and that of impersonal truth. Jonti's voice, by contrast, is the voice of local experience. It embodies the people – but the people as envisaged within the dominant culture; as a regional folk which is as endlessly cheerful and good natured as it is enterprising and industrious. The voice of Jonti – that of a cheeky and cheerful (jaunty) Geordie chappie – is that of the regional people as 'spoken' by the dominant culture in much the same way as the voice of the 'common man' is spoken by the popular press.

In this respect, the tape-slide show does indeed prepare the visitor for the museum proper where 'the people' of the North East can be seen, and see themselves, only through the cracked looking-glass of the dominant culture. In the guidebook, Beamish states its aim as being to exhibit the factors which 'influenced the life and work of the people of the region a century ago, when the North East was in the forefront of British industrial development' (*Beamish: The Great Northern Experience* n.d.). As such, it consists of a series of linked sites (see Figure 4.1) spanning the period from (roughly) the 1790s through to the 1930s, but with the greatest emphasis falling on the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. There is a model farm dating from the late eighteenth century but restored to an approximation of its mid-nineteenth-century layout and operating conditions; a colliery meant to represent the technology and working conditions in the mining industry on the eve of the First World War; a row of pit cottages, their interiors designed and furnished to exhibit changes in the tastes and ways of life of mining families over the period from the 1890s through to 1938. The centre of a market town has also been reconstructed, complete with cobbled streets, a Co-op, pub, and bandstand – a slice of urban history from the 1830s through to the 1920s which abuts on to a country railway station restored to its 1910 condition. Archaic forms of transport (coach and horses, a tramway) connect these sites while, within them, costumed museum workers act out their parts in this constructed past by displaying traditional industrial and domestic techniques.

Undoubtedly the significance of 'the Beamish experience' consists as much in what it excludes as in what it includes. No museum can include everything, of course, but, at Beamish, there is a pattern to the exclusions which suggests that the museum embodies, indeed is committed to, an institutionalized mode

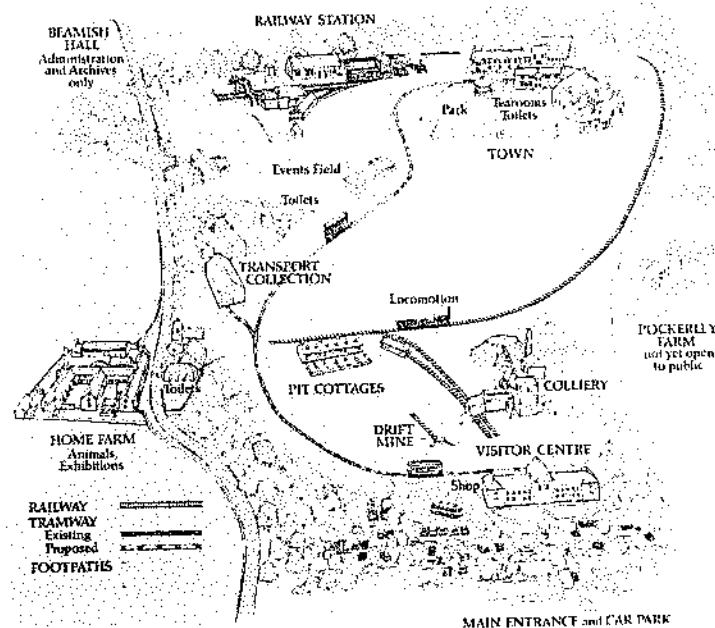


Figure 4.1 Map of Beamish, North of England Open Air Museum
Source: Beamish, North of England Open Air Museum

of amnesia. One would be hard put, for example, to find any materials relating to the history of the region's labour and trade union movements, and the activities of the women of the North East in suffrage and feminist campaigns go entirely unremarked. In short, the conception of the regional people installed at Beamish is very much that of a people without politics. Nor is this entirely a matter of the museum's absences. Many of the artefacts displayed might well have been exhibited in such a way as to suggest their associations with popular political movements. However, the tendency is for them to be severed of such associations and to serve, instead, as vehicles for the nostalgic remembrance of sentimentalized pasts. The premises of the Anfield Plain Industrial Co-operative Society, one of the major showpieces of the town centre, have thus been arranged so as to remind visitors of old pricing systems (pre-decimal), serving technologies (bacon slicers), and advertisements (the Fry's boys). No mention is made of the history of the co-operative movement, its aims and principles, or its relations to other socialist organizations. Similarly, the row of pit cottages, while showing shifts in interior decor and domestic technologies, represents these as solely concerning changes in taste rather than relating them to changing social relations within the home – changes in the sexual division of labour brought about by new domestic technologies or by shifts in the structure of the mining industry, for example.

None the less, important though such absences and omissions are, 'the Beamish experience' must ultimately be assessed in terms of what it *does* say rather than of what it leaves unsaid. Of crucial significance from this point of view are the respects in which the very conception of the museum as an embodiment of the region's history has been realized by bringing together buildings and artefacts from different areas of the North East. The railway station, for example, has been reassembled from the components of a number of different disused stations dating from the period of the North-Eastern Railway Company, while the town centre includes, in addition to the Co-op from Anfield Plain, a bandstand and a row of Georgian-style middle-class houses from Gateshead. Similarly, while the colliery buildings and much of the pit-head machinery are from the museum's immediate environs, the row of pit cottages has been brought to the site from Hetton le-Hole, near Sunderland. It is only by severing these buildings from their particular and local histories and bringing them together on the same site that Beamish is able to organize that conception of the North East as a distinctive region with a distinctive people whose interacting histories the museum then claims to realize.

Rather more significant, perhaps, is the fact that these diverse buildings and the artefacts they contain are also imagined as belonging to the same essential and unified time. And this in spite of the fact that the museum spans the period from the 1790s to the 1930s, with all the major exhibits being clearly dated. For the differentiation of times within this period impresses itself on the visitor with less force than the overwhelming sense of an undifferentiated time suggested by the museum's setting. At Beamish, everything – no matter how old it is – is frozen at the same point in time: the moment of transition from a rural to an industrial society. It matters little whether some parts of the town date from the 1830s and others from the 1920s, or whether the interiors of the pit cottages are meant to span the period from the 1890s to the 1930s; the very fact of reconstructing these earlier industrial technologies and associated forms of social organization in the heart of the countryside has the effect of installing the visitor in a twilight zone between the rural past and the fully industrialized present. At Beamish the processes of industrialization are represented on a human and manageable scale, taking the form of little islands of industrialism and urbanism which emerge from, and yet also harmonize with, the surrounding countryside.

Not just any countryside either. The museum is set in the grounds of Beamish Hall, family home of the Shafto family until 1952 and, before that, of such notable families as the Eden family in a line of ownership traceable to the period of the Norman Conquest. Beamish Hall still stands, serving as the administrative centre of the museum and housing a further exhibition of local history artefacts. But it is also the museum's controlling ideological centre, a bourgeois country house under whose controlling gaze there is

organized a harmonious set of relationships – between town and country, agriculture and industry, for example, as well as between classes which, in occupying separate zones (the middle classes dominate the town while the working classes live by the colliery), seem to live side by side and in harmony with one another, each accepting its allotted space. The consequence is that the story of industrial development in the North East, rather than being told as one of ruptures, conflicts, and transformations, emerges as a process that is essentially continuous with the deeper and longer history of a countryside in which the power of the bourgeoisie has become naturalized. It is, in this respect, similar to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum which, as Bob West puts it, 'ironically reconstitutes a sense of the industrial through an arcane idealisation of an organic ruralism' (West 1985: 30).

Speaking of the ascendancy, in the late Victorian period, of ruralized conceptions of the 'English way of life', Martin Wiener writes:

This countryside of the mind was everything industrial society was not – ancient, slow-moving, stable, cosy, and 'spiritual'. The English genius, it declared, was (despite appearances) not economic or technical, but social and spiritual; it did not lie in inventing, producing, or selling, but in preserving, harmonising, and moralising. The English character was not naturally progressive, but conservative; its greatest task – and achievement – lay in taming and 'civilising' the dangerous engines of progress it had unwittingly unleashed.

(Wiener 1985: 6)

Beamish may boast of the North East's inventors, such as the Stephensons, and sing the virtues of its canny and industrious people. And it may claim that the North East spearheaded the processes of industrialization, leading in areas where the rest of the country would only follow later. At the same time though, and outweighing this regionalist rhetoric, Beamish succeeds in taming 'the dangerous engines of progress' in seeming to materialize the countryside of the mind of which Wiener writes and, thereby, to make actual a purely imaginary history. And yet an imaginary history whose cultural power is very considerable. Why else might it be thought that the history of a century and more of large-scale industrialization and urbanization might be adequately represented by dismantling industrial structures from their original locations and reassembling them in such a country-house setting? How else might we account for Beamish's ability to attract visitors from Gateshead and Newcastle, where the ravages of industrialization are only too readily apparent, to this constructed idyll unless, to borrow from Michel Foucault's designation of history, we recognize it as 'a place of rest, certainty, reconciliation, a place of tranquillised sleep' (Foucault 1972: 14).

PEOPLING THE PAST: SCANDINAVIAN AND AMERICAN FORERUNNERS

Much of this is not too surprising. As was noted earlier, Beamish forms a part of a more broadly based extension and democratization of the interests and concerns of British museums in the post-war period. Opened in the 1970s, it was the first open-air museum in England – but not in Britain: that title goes to the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagan's which opened in 1946 – and, like most other such museums, has been deeply shaped and influenced by the earlier history of this museum form. The first such museum was opened by Artur Hazelius at Skansen, near Stockholm, in 1891. Consisting of re-assembled farm buildings, a manor house, craft industries, a log church, stocks, whipping posts, and the like, the museum was staffed with guides dressed in folk costumes, with strolling musicians and folk dancers re-enacting traditional customs. The popularity of the museum led to similar ones being established in other European countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The interest in folk culture, which developed earlier in Scandinavian societies than anywhere else, had originally been a progressive phenomenon, a part, as Peter Burke puts it, of 'a movement of revolt against the centre by the cultural periphery of Europe; part of a movement, among intellectuals, towards self-definition and liberation in regional or national terms' (Burke 1977: 145). By the end of the century, however, Michael Wallace suggests that this interest in folk culture had degenerated into a form of a backward-looking romanticism:

The Skansen movement blended romantic nostalgia with dismay at the emergence of capitalist social relations. As the new order had introduced mechanised mass production, a burgeoning working class, and class conflict, these museums, often organised by aristocrats and professionals, set out to preserve and celebrate fast disappearing craft and rural traditions. What they commemorated, and in some degree fabricated, was the life of 'the folk', visualised as a harmonious population of peasants and craft workers.

(Wallace 1981: 72)

And worse was to come when, in the 1920s and 1930s, the open-air museum form was transplanted to American soil. Throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century, the USA's élites had displayed comparatively little interest in the development of museums or the preservation of historic sites. Moreover, such interest as there was came largely from representatives of the older American families whose wealth derived from inherited land, mercantile activities, or the early phases of industrial development. Indeed, many of the leading organizations in the preservationist lobby – the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), for example – explicitly required that their members be able to trace their descent to one of the early colonists.² If the

(Scottish, Irish
'villages' & expos)

representatives of corporate capital, the real driving force in the American economy in the late nineteenth century, displayed relatively little interest in questions of museum and heritage policy, this was partly because such matters had been colonized by the USA's patrician élites in ways which were clearly intended to exclude the vulgarity of the *nouveau riche*. But it was also because a disinterest in, even disdain for, the past could find strong support in those elements of the American republican tradition which contended that, just as the USA had been founded through a series of breaks with the past, so it could continue to be true to itself, to its own dynamic essence, only if it continually regarded the past as fit only for the rubbish dump of history rather than as something to be fetishized and memorialized. Nathaniel Hawthorne summarized this view nicely when, in 1862, he recorded his reflections prompted by a visit to the Warwickshire village of Witnash:

Rather than the monotony of sluggish ages, loitering on a village green, toiling in hereditary fields, listening to the parson's drone lengthened through centuries in the grey Norman church, let us welcome whatever change may come – change of place, social customs, political institutions, modes of worship – trusting that . . . they will but make room for better systems, and for a higher type of man to clothe his life in them, and to fling them off in turn.

(Cited in Lowenthal 1985: 116)

Michael Wallace argues that the influence of this tradition declined appreciably in the aftermath of the First World War. So did the balance of influence within the preservationist lobby as, in the context of serious labour difficulties on the domestic front and the spectre of revolution in Europe, 'corporate capital moved to the forefront of the return to the past' (Wallace 1981: 68). It is one of the ironies of history that Henry Ford, who had earlier denounced history as bunk, was a prime mover in these developments and, in Greenfield Village, opened in 1929, was responsible for one of the first open-air museums in the USA – yet one which significantly transformed this hitherto exclusively European genre, just as it also embodied a break with the priorities of earlier American preservationist organizations. Wallace conveys something of this dual transformation of earlier museum forms effected by Greenfield Village in his discussion of the kind of 'peopling of the past' embodied in this imaginary township of yesteryear:

Ford's Greenfield Village can best be understood as an Americanised Skansen. Ford celebrated not 'the folk' but the Common Man. He rejected the DAR's approach of exalting famous patriots and patrician élites. Indeed, he banished rich men's homes, lawyers' offices, and banks, from his village. This museum-hamlet paid homage to blacksmiths, machinists, the frontier farmers, celebrated craft skills and domestic labour, recalled old social customs like square dancing and

folk fiddling, and praised the 'timeless and dateless' pioneer virtues of hard work, discipline, frugality, and self-reliance. It was a pre-capitalist Eden immune to modern ills, peopled with men and women of character.

(Wallace 1981: 72)

But it was an Eden destined to develop beyond itself, and for the better, inasmuch as the village also contained an Industrial Museum which, in celebrating the inventions of men of genius, supplied the mechanism of development through which the idyllic past embodied in the rest of the village had since been improved on. In this way, Wallace suggests, Greenfield Village had it both ways in offering a vision of 'the good old days' since when, due to capitalist progress, things have only got better. 'The two messages together', as Wallace puts it, '– life had been better in the old days and it had been getting better ever since – added up to a corporate employer's vision of history' (ibid.: 73).

The message of Beamish is much the same, except that the engines of progress are attributed to the qualities of the region's people rather than being portrayed as the fruits of individual genius and, rather than being housed in a separate museum, are dispersed throughout the site, seeming to grow naturally out of the countryside. And this, as we have seen, is not just any countryside but that distinctively bourgeois countryside of the mind in which the present emerges uninterruptedly from a past in which the presence and leading role of the bourgeoisie is eternally naturalized. This ability to transform industrialism from a set of ruptural events into a mere moment in the unfolding of a set of harmonious relations between rulers and people may well turn out to be a distinctively English contribution to the development of the open-air museum form.

In brief, then, there are grounds for caution regarding the effects of the more demotic and socially expansive orientation towards the past that has been evident in post-war museum policy. And this in spite of the arguments often advanced in its favour – that it has at least acknowledged the importance of the everyday lives of ordinary working people. For while *what* is shown in museums is important, the question of *how* museum artefacts get displayed and represented – and thus of what they are made to mean – is at least as significant. From this perspective, if Beamish is anything to go by, the development of museums concerned primarily with artefacts relating to the daily lives and customs of 'ordinary people' has resulted in a 'peopling of the past' in which the cultures and values of non-élite strata are subordinated to bourgeois culture and values just as effectively as they are in the great public museums which developed in the nineteenth century. However, this subordination is wrought rather differently, the result of a different ideological economy and one which, perhaps, has a greater capacity for organizing the visitor's experience precisely to the degree that it is more likely to pass unnoticed.

In the nineteenth-century museum the cultures of subordinate classes were – and largely still are – a simple absence, excluded not only as a matter of definition (the working classes were not regarded as having a culture worthy of preservation) but also as a matter of deliberate policy (of ‘improving’ the people by exposing them to the beneficial influence of middle-class culture). To visit institutions like the Victoria and Albert is, accordingly, to experience and witness the power of the ruling culture, a power which manifests itself precisely through its ability to exclude everything which, through its exclusion, is defined as other and subordinate. There is, as a consequence – at least for most of us – nothing familiar which might help us to relax and feel at home there. However, if we know that we are out of our place, we also know that this effect is not accidental, that we are in the midst of an object lesson in things which, in some measure, instructs through its capacity to intimidate.

Beamish by contrast, works on the ground of popular memory, and restyles it. In evoking past ways of life of which the visitor is likely to have had either direct or, through parents and grandparents, indirect knowledge and experience, the overwhelming effect is one of an easy-going at-homeness and familiarity. At the same time, though, what one is at home with has, so to speak, been shifted elsewhere through the specific political and ideological associations which are lent to those remembered pasts by means of the rhetoric – the countryside of the mind – which governs the ways in which a past is selectively recalled and reconstructed. Of course, there is no reason to suppose that each and every visitor will consent to this restyling of popular memory, or experience it without some feeling of unease or contradiction. For the ground of popular memory – that is, of the institutions which organize the terms in which the past is most commonly perceived and ‘remembered’ – is not an even one. If Beamish works along with certain dominant modes of styling a sentimentalized past (a visit to the museum is a bit like spending a day as an extra in an episode of *When the Boat Comes In*), the traditions of labour, trade union, and feminist history provide resources which, if the visitor is so minded, might be called on to resist the lure of that past. Nor is the text of the museum entirely without contradictions of its own. It has its cracks, some of them occurring at the level of those practices which are least susceptible to planned control: the conduct of museum workers. For example, when I last visited Beamish the carefully contrived illusion of an authentic historical milieu (see Figure 4.2) was nicely undercut by a costumed museum worker who, in the midst of demonstrating traditional techniques of bread-making in a carefully reproduced pit-cottage kitchen, chatted with a colleague on Dennis Norden’s performance in the previous evening’s episode of *It’ll Be Alright on the Night*.

However, these are general points that might be made in relation to any museum or, indeed (for this is how I am suggesting we should regard museums), any text. And, however valid they might be, their implications are

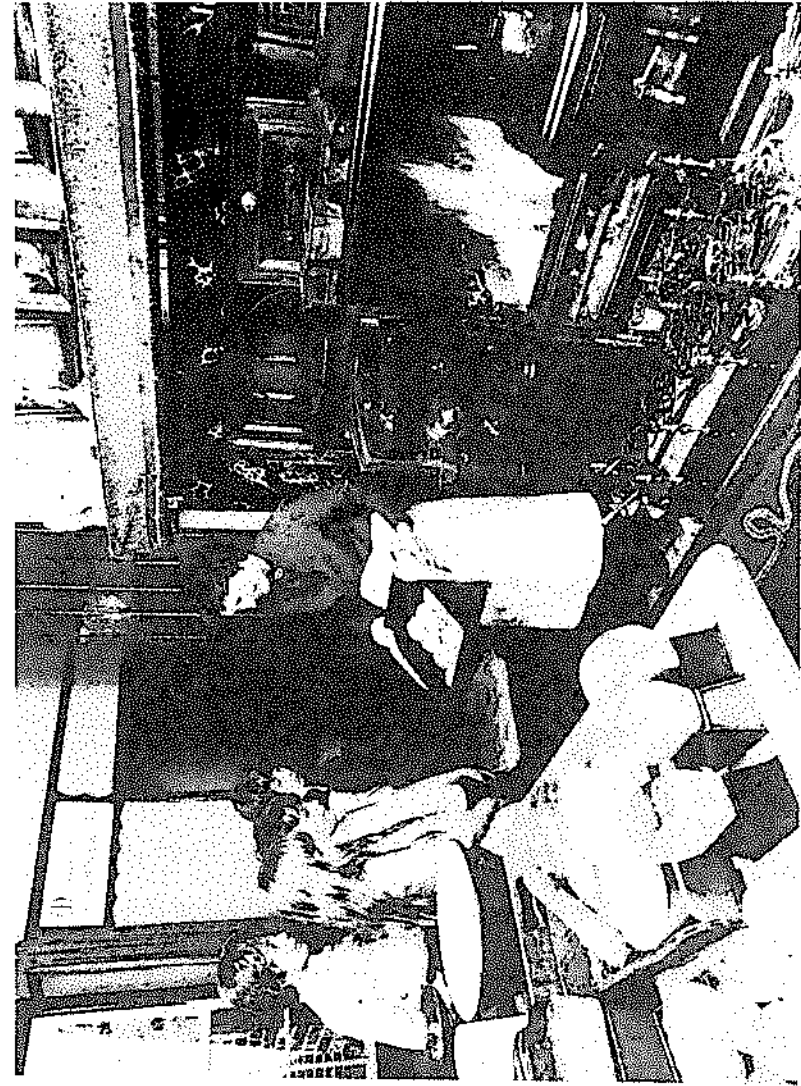


Figure 4.2 Demonstrators at the pit cottages, Beamish Museum, do routine cleaning and demonstrate breadmaking and rugmaking
Source: Beamish, North of England Open Air Museum

limited. No matter how true it might be that the ideal text of Beamish may be disrupted by its performers or that visitors may read against the grain of that text, it remains the case that the museum exemplifies a deeply conservative 'peopling of the past' in which the legacy of earlier moments in the development of the open-air museum form is readily apparent. Equally, though, this is not to suggest that the same result necessarily follows whenever and wherever museums concern themselves with the preservation and display of materials relating to the daily lives and customs of 'ordinary people'. While a conservative romanticism may be strongly associated with such practices historically, this connection is not an intrinsic or necessary one. It can be and, in view of the increasing popularity of 'museuming' as a leisure activity, needs to be broken.³ The realization of such an objective on any significant scale would, of course, be dependent on changes in the structures of control over museums and a radical reorganization of their relations to different groups in the community. To pursue these questions properly would require another article. However, something of their significance can be gleaned from a brief consideration of two museums – Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney and People's Palace in Glasgow – which have been clearly committed to the project of producing other peoples and other pasts free from those socially dominant forms of the sentimentalization of the people which have plagued the development of open-air museums, folk museums, and the like.

OTHER PEOPLES, OTHER PASTS

According to the official guide

The Hyde Park Barracks presents a social history of New South Wales. Rather than a history of great individuals, it is a history of people's everyday lives and experiences. The exhibitions cover two centuries of Australian social life: people celebrating, immigrating, coming to town for the show, building homes, living in the Barracks.

(*The Mint and the Hyde Park Barracks* 1985: 16)

Like Beamish, then, a museum concerned with the everyday lives of ordinary people. Unlike Beamish, however, those people are not reduced, to recall Gramsci's terms, to being 'a picturesque element'. Located in the centre of Sydney, Hyde Park Barracks is concerned mainly to recall and commemorate moments in the popular history of that city. 'The people' represented in the museum is thus primarily an *urban people* and one that is in good measure defined in opposition to 'official conceptions of the world'.

This aspect of the museum is most conspicuous in the display 'Sydney Celebrates' which, in exhibiting materials relating to the public celebrations through which the city's history is conventionally punctuated, systematically undercuts and disavows the consensualist rhetoric which formed a part of

those celebrations and has governed the terms in which they have since been represented within official discourse. This is achieved partly by drawing attention to those groups which were excluded, or excluded themselves, from those celebrations. The text accompanying the materials relating to the celebrations in 1938 of the 150th anniversary of Australia's European settlement thus notes that floats depicting convict life or the activities of trade unions were banned from public parades in the city in the interests of representing Australian history as a process free from bitterness and conflict. More tellingly, the text also informs us that 26 January 1938 – the anniversary of the founding of the first European settlement at Port Jackson – was also chosen as the date for a Day of Mourning Conference organized by Aboriginal leaders. Similarly the section of the display relating to the opening of Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932 – a public celebration in which there was an unusually heightened degree of popular participation owing to the vital role the bridge's construction had played in the city's working-class economy – stresses the deep social divisions of the depression years. In further noting that the Labor government of New South Wales had declined to invite a representative of the royal family to open the bridge on the grounds that there were more pressing claims on the public purse, an anti-colonialist edge is lent to the pro-working-class sentiments which animate the display.

In these respects, then, the exhibition of artefacts relating to popular involvement in the city's public culture is informed by a conscious political didactic. The same is true of some of the other main displays. In the room devoted to the theme 'Bound for Botany Bay', for example, the story of successive waves of immigration to Australia is told by means of a series of individual narratives selected for their typicality and organized to promote critical reflection on the relations between past and present social conditions. Thus the story of the period of transportation is told so as to stress the similar relationships between unemployment and rising crime rates in nineteenth-century Britain and contemporary Australia.

In sum, Hyde Park Barracks not only differs from Beamish at the obvious level of its content, but also manifests and embodies a different way of conceiving and representing a people and their history. In part, no doubt, these differences reflect the different gestation periods for the two museums and, related to this, the different kinds of curatorial inputs which conditioned their development. The initial planning phase for Beamish occupied the period from 1958 to 1971 with the responsibility for collecting and arranging materials relating to the cultural lives of the popular classes being allocated to folk-life assistants at a time when, in Britain, the tradition of folk-life studies was (and remains) deeply influenced by romantic conceptions of the people as parts of a picturesque landscape (*Beamish One* 1978). Hyde Park Barracks, by contrast, was transformed into a museum over the period 1979–84, a period of renewed vigour in Australian historical scholarship owing to the challenges of important new work in labour, feminist, and

Aboriginal history – intellectual currents which fed into the conception of and planning for the museum via the emphasis that was placed on social history as its main curatorial focus.

A fuller appreciation of the distinctiveness of Hyde Park Barracks and an assessment of its significance within the Australian context, however, requires that it be viewed in the light of both adjacent and earlier developments in Australian museum policy. For the fact that the museum is concerned with *Australian* social life is at least as significant as its orientation towards the everyday habits and customs of the ordinary citizen. Or rather, its significance consists in its combination of these two points of focus. For in being concerned with the everyday lives of ordinary people who, in being identified as Australian, are thereby also distinguished from and opposed to colonial conceptions of Australia as an outpost of the British empire, Hyde Park Barracks materializes and makes present what had been conspicuously absent from earlier Australian museums: the sense of a national people with an autonomous history.

This was commented on when, in the 1930s, the Carnegie Corporation commissioned a survey of Australian museums. The resulting report, published in 1933, drew particular attention to the relative lack of interest evinced by Australian museums in the collection and display of materials relating to the history of the continent's European settlement. Only three museums, it was observed, were given over entirely to aspects of post-settlement history – and one of these, the Australian War Memorial, was not officially opened until 1941. Nor was post-settlement history particularly well represented in other museums, and least of all those aspects of Australian history relating to the lives of ordinary Australians. The authors of the report thus remarked particularly on the fact that 'in no museum are there reproductions of the buildings occupied by the earlier settlers', regarding this as 'one of the most notable gaps in the whole of the existing museum collections' (Markham and Richards 1933: 44). Yet museums had been established in Australia from as early as the 1820s and, by the 1930s, many of them had built up impressive geological and natural history collections as well as extensive collections of Aboriginal relics and cultural artefacts (Kohlstedt 1983).

Why, then, should the period since 1788 have seemed so devoid of interest to museums? A part of the answer consists in the disciplinary specialisms (usually geology or biology) of their curators. However, this in itself was merely a symptom of a deeper cultural problem: the perception, owing to the predominance of Eurocentric conceptions, that Australia, a fledgling among the nations of the world, had no history that was worthy of preservation, display, or commemoration. This was less true of the 1930s than it had been of the late nineteenth century when, at least to the members of the colonial bourgeoisie, it had seemed that the post-settlement period did not furnish the kind of raw materials out of which a past could be forged which could claim sufficient dignity and solemnity to vie with the European pasts which

supplied their point of cultural reference in such matters.⁴ Compared with the British national past – a past, as materialized in public ceremonials and museums, organized primarily around the deeds of monarchs, military heroes, and great statesmen – the activities of the early colonists (the convicts, the marines who policed them, later settlers, gold diggers, bush-rangers) seemed lacking in substance of a similar kind.

It's not surprising, given this background, that the first museum to be conceived as a national institution and to devote itself entirely to the history of the post-settlement period should have been the Australian War Memorial. In its remembrance of the heroism of Australian troops in Europe and the Middle East (the theatres of 'real history'), this institution – intended as both a museum of the nation's military history and a shrine to its war dead – enabled there to be figured forth and materialized an Australian past which could claim the same status, weight, and dignity as the European pasts it so clearly sought to emulate and surpass.⁵

What is perhaps rather more surprising is the fact that the War Memorial is still the only fully national museum in Australia and will remain so until the Museum of Australia opens in 2001. This will constitute a significant moment in the development of Australian museum policy, particularly as one of its three main galleries will be devoted to the post-settlement period. It is important, however, to view the development of this museum in a broader perspective. For its opening will constitute merely the culmination and most visible manifestation of a protracted phase in the development of Australian museum and, more generally, heritage policy, in which the earlier lack of interest in the preservation and display of materials relating to the post-settlement period has been significantly reversed. Apart from the marked increase in the degree of importance accorded these overlapping areas of cultural policy, both have manifested a similar commitment to the production and organization of a more clearly autonomized Australian past, one which, by severing the ties of dependency through which (although always with some degree of ambivalence and tension) the Australian past had earlier been associated with the longer past of the British state, stands more clearly on its own.

The legislative peaks of these developments are soon summarized: the establishment of the Australian Council of National Trusts in 1967; the establishment of a Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate in 1973 leading, in 1976, to the enactment of the Australian Heritage Bill and the subsequent compilation of a register of protected properties; and, finally, the establishment, in 1974, of a Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections with, as its most significant legislative outcome, the Museum of Australia Act, 1980. This is, by any standards, a quite exceptionally concentrated rush of legislative activity aimed at increasing the scope of those spaces, buildings, and artefacts which are officially zoned as belonging to the past while, at the same time, nationalizing that past.

Moreover, and as distinct from the situation in Britain where the politics of conservation and those of conservatism too often go hand in hand, anathematizing both past and present alike, the greater part of the impetus for these developments has been supplied by Labor administrations. And by Labor administrations backed by a fairly strong groundswell of popular support for their heritage policies which, in general terms, evinced a clear commitment to increasing the presence of the past within the public domain while simultaneously nationalizing and democratizing its associations. The inquiries referred to above were thus all inaugurated in the Whitlam years and fuelled by the 'new nationalism' of that period. Indeed the willingness of Labor administrations, state and federal, to preserve historic sites from threatened destruction by developers served as a key emblem of this 'new nationalism' and its commitment to representing the interests of 'all Australians' against what were seen as the socially and environmentally destructive activities of both international corporations and domestic elites. Nor was it merely at the level of governmental policies that this rhetoric was enunciated and put into practice. The campaigns, in the early 1970s, of residents' action groups to save historic sites and buildings threatened by inner-city development projects and the support offered those campaigns by the Builders Laborers Federation in banning work on the sites in dispute are the best indices of the degree to which the issue of conservation had acquired popular and democratic associations (Nittim 1980).

It was against the immediate political context of these campaigns that the decision to transform Hyde Park Barracks into a museum of the city's social history was taken. Initially a convict dormitory from its opening in 1819 to 1848, when the era of transportation drew to a close, the building subsequently served a variety of functions (a reception centre for female immigrants and a lunatic asylum, for example) as well as housing a range of government offices (the Vaccine Institute and Inspector of Distilleries, for instance) until the 1960s when, together with the adjacent Royal Mint, it too was threatened with demolition as part of inner-city development schemes. The decision to preserve the building and open it to the public as a museum was clearly a response to both the campaigns of local resident action groups and the strong support these had received at the federal level.⁶

It would, however, be a mistake to posit too direct or immediate a connection between this originating political context and the orientation to the past that has since been materialized in the museum itself. There are too many intervening variables for this to be credible. Moreover, the text of the museum itself is an uneven and contradictory one. The influence of different curatorial visions is readily discernible as one moves from one room to another. While those I have briefly outlined manifest an intention to disrupt and call into question socially dominant conceptions of the past, there are others of which this is not true. The room devoted to changing styles in domestic architecture, for example, fails just as signally as do the pit cottages

at Beamish to suggest any critical perspectives on changing social relations within the home.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the museum, however, consists in the degree to which it conceives and represents the social and cultural history of the city as something distinct from, and having no organic connections with, its political history. While thus evoking popular cultures and ways of life, these are not connected to any political traditions or constituencies. At least, not except as a movable feast. When the Barracks first opened as a museum, one of the temporary exhibition rooms was given over to a display of trade-union banners and other mementoes of the city's labour movement. The subsequent removal of this display, and, to date, the failure to replace it with displays of an equivalent kind, has profoundly altered the whole ideological economy of the Barracks in depriving it of a point of political reference to which the representations of popular customs, traditions, and ways of life might be connected and thus be lifted above what often remains a level of purely anecdotal significance.

This point can be underlined by means of a brief contrast with the People's Palace in Glasgow, an institution which altogether justifies the claim of its present curator that there 'is no museum, gallery, arts or community centre quite like it anywhere else in the world' (King 1985). It was exceptional in its conception as housing under one roof a museum, picture gallery, winter garden, and musical hall, a place of both popular instruction and popular entertainment. It has been exceptional, as a museum, in having had the good fortune to be administered since its opening in 1898 by a city corporation with one of the longest and strongest traditions of municipal socialism in Europe. It is also exceptional in its location as the focal point of Glasgow Green, an important centre of Glasgow's popular culture – the place where the Glasgow Fair was held and where, now, the annual People's Marathon both starts and ends – as well as of its socialist and feminist political cultures (the place where Glasgow's trade union movement began, where suffrage marches started from, where anti-conscription campaigns were launched). But it is perhaps most exceptional in the degree to which, as a museum of the city's history, it represents that history primarily in the form of a set of deeply interacting relations between, on the one hand, the ways of life and popular entertainments of ordinary Glaswegians and, on the other hand, their political traditions. Nor, moreover, is this done didactically by means, for instance, of separate rooms or displays devoted to the political history of the city. Rather, and more often than not in an understated way, political traditions and concerns are injected into the very tissue of everyday life, in the spheres of work and leisure, by exhibiting artefacts relating to political campaigns side by side with those illustrating facets of the history of sport in the city or the development of different forms of domestic space.

There is, in other words, a clear attempt to connect a way of life to a way of politics, and in ways which suggest continuities between past and present

political struggles. Displays of old fashioned tobacconists and cinema foyers; the history of the local press; displays of tenement interiors depicting the history of housing conditions in the city; photographic displays of local strikes from the 1920s to the 1980s; an exhibition of local artists' depictions of the events, characters, and leaders of the 1984 miners' strike; pro-suffragette playing cards; accounts of the 1930s unemployment rallies side by side with salutes to local soccer heroes; exhibiting John MacLean's desk in the same room as Billy Connolly's banana boots – the juxtaposition of these different histories in such a way that their associations are carried over into one another conveys the suggestion of a radical political culture which grows out of and, in turn, suffuses the daily lives of ordinary Glaswegians. And of a political culture, moreover, which is – within the ideological economy of the museum – the dominant one. At the People's Palace, it is not 'the people' who are reduced to the level of the picturesque. Rather, it is ordinary Glaswegians – their culture and their politics – who supply the norm of humanity to which implicitly the museum addresses itself.

QUESTIONS OF FRAMEWORK

The development of museums in the nineteenth century was governed by the view that it would be possible to achieve 'by the ordered display of selected artefacts a total representation of human reality and history' (Donato 1979: 221). Museums, that is to say, were to arrange their displays so as to simulate the organization of the world – human and natural – outside the museum walls. This dream that the rational ordering of things might mirror the real order of things was soon revealed to be just that. Yet, both in the practices of museums and, as visitors, in our relations to them the illusion that they deal in the 'real stuff of history' persists. Few museums draw attention to the assumptions which have informed their choice of what to preserve or the principles which govern the organization of their exhibits. Few visitors have the time or inclination to look beyond what museums show them to ponder the significance of *how* they show what they show. Yet, as it has been my purpose to argue, this question of *how* is a critical one, sometimes bearing more consequentially on the visitor's experience than the actual objects displayed.

Indeed, to emphasize this point: there is relatively little difference between the types of objects displayed in the three museums I have considered, but there is a world of difference between the rhetorics governing the processes through which those objects have been assembled into particular display configurations with, as I have sought to show, significant consequences for the kinds of ideological meanings and associations likely to suggest themselves. If this calls attention to the political significance of the representational frameworks museums employ, this is not to suggest that there are not other aspects of museums equally in need of critical interrogation or that such

representational issues should be considered in isolation. It's clear, for example, that the question of how things get displayed in museums cannot be divorced from questions concerning the training of curators or the structures of museum control and management – very material constraints which considerably limit the room for manoeuvre of radical museum workers.

However, these are not matters which can be readily influenced on a short-term basis. Nor are they ones which it lies within the visitor's power to do much about. But, if read in the right way – as a lesson in ruling-class rhetoric rather than as an object lesson in things – even the most conservatively organized museum can be put to good use. An afternoon at Beamish can be most instructive provided that it is looked to less as providing a lesson in industrial or regional history and more as a crash course in the bourgeois myths of history.

introduction which explains why – out of political prudence – these bodies fought shy of controversial museological issues.

- 16 For the most telling discussion of the temporalizing strategies through which modern anthropology made its object, see Fabian (1983).
- 17 For a parallel discussion of the inter-epistemic character of the anatomical theatre at Leiden, see Cavaillé (1990).
- 18 Owen was engagingly precise in his formulations on this matter when submitting his estimates to parliament regarding the space requirements of a national museum of natural history. Allowing for the number of specimens already collected, for the recent rate of discovery of new species and projecting this forward to provide for an increase in the rate of discovery, and allowing for display principles that would allow the visitor to see variations within a class as well as the historical succession of different forms of life, he calculated that a two-storey building spread over five acres would allow for an adequately representative collection.
- 19 Johann Geist, in tracing the network of relations between the architectural principles of arcades, exhibitions, museums and social utopias, suggests that it would be meaningless to assert a historical priority for any one of these architectural forms over the others. Rather, he argues, they have to be understood as an ensemble whose different elements interacted from the outset. See Geist (1983). Be this as it may, museum architecture often followed on, rather than leading, developments in other fields. This was partly because the influence of earlier building types intended to house valued objects (temples for the arts, royal palaces, etc.) inhibited the construction of buildings that were specifically designed for the museum's new purpose of mass instruction. This led to frequent complaints on the part of reformers anxious that culture should perform its reforming labours in a custom-built environment. 'We have thirsted for knowledge,' James Fergusson complained in 1849, 'and our architects have given us nothing but stones' (Fergusson 1849: 8). See, for similar complaints two decades later, Wallace (1869).

2 THE EXHIBITIONARY COMPLEX

- 1 This point is well made by MacArthur who sees this aspect of Foucault's argument as inimical to the overall spirit of his work in suggesting a 'historical division which places theatre and spectacle as past' (MacArthur 1983: 192).
- 2 For discussion of the role of the American state in relation to museums and expositions, see, respectively, Meyer (1979) and Reid (1979).
- 3 For details of the use of rotunda and galleries to this effect in department stores, see Ferry (1960).
- 4 For further details, see Miller (1974).
- 5 A comprehensive introduction to these earlier forms is offered by Impey and MacGregor (1985) and Bazin (1967).
- 6 I have touched on these matters elsewhere. See Bennett (1983) and (1986).
- 7 For details of these interactions, see Rudwick (1985).
- 8 I draw here on Foucault (1970).
- 9 For the most thorough account, see Mulvaney (1958: 30–1).

3 THE POLITICAL RATIONALITY OF THE MUSEUM

- 1 I have, however, touched on this matter with particular reference to Australian museums. See Bennett (1988b) and Chapter 5 of this volume.

- 2 For details of the changing fortunes of Cuvierism and Darwinism at the Natural History Museum, see Stearn (1981).
- 3 See on the first point, Cooper (1974) and, on the second, Stallybrass and White (1986).
- 4 This aspect of the rational recreations movement is vividly highlighted by Bailey (1987).
- 5 I intend the phrase 'supervised conformity' as a means of foregrounding the contrast between the museums and what Ian Hunter has characterized as the space of 'supervised freedom' of the school playground. See Hunter (1988). Whereas the latter encouraged the free expression of the child's culture under the supervision of the teacher in order that the values of the street might be monitored and corrected, the museums encouraged, instead, exterior compliance with the codes of behaviour.
- 6 For further details, see Altick (1978).
- 7 For fuller information on the sources of nineteenth-century museum architecture, see Giedion (1967).
- 8 Foucault, in reminding us of this aspect of Bentham's vision of panopticism, notes the respects in which it echoes the Rousseauist dream, so influential in the French Revolution, of a society rendered transparent to itself. See Foucault (1980b). In this respect, a further architectural lineage for the museum could be suggested in tracing its descent from various architectural arrangements proposed in revolutionary France in order to build a principle of public inspection into the design of political assemblies. For details of these, see Hunt (1984).
- 9 See, for example, Mann (1986), Heinrich (1988) and Dixon *et al.* (1974).

4 MUSEUMS AND 'THE PEOPLE'

- 1 For useful surveys of these developments, see Minihan (1977) and Pearson (1982).
- 2 The most thorough survey of these matters is Hosmer (1965).
- 3 It has been estimated that, in Britain, a new museum was opened on average every two weeks throughout the 1970s when the number of visitors per annum also averaged out at 25 million. See Bassett (1986).
- 4 One of the best discussions of these questions is the penultimate chapter of Inglis (1974).
- 5 For the best account of the War Memorial, see Inglis (1985).
- 6 For a brief history of the Barracks and its conversion, see Betteridge (1982).

5 OUT OF WHICH PAST?

- 1 The reference is to the campaigns of John Ruskin and William Morris against the often somewhat violent practices of nineteenth-century restorers. For details, see Prince (1981).
- 2 By way of emphasizing this point, my position differs from that of Hodge and D'Souza who argue that, in museums 'An artefact communicates by being what it is. It therefore communicates or signifies that perfectly' (Hodge and D'Souza 1979: 257). This ignores the fact that, once placed in a historical frame, an artefact never is what it was and so, simply by virtue of this difference, cannot claim a meaning which is identical with itself – for that identity is split. The historical frame, in opening up a distance between the present and past existence of an object, enables the artefact to function as a sign. But it can function as a sign only within this gap which can therefore never be entirely closed down through a circuit of perfect communication such as Hodge and D'Souza suggest. It is solely