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Developing a Management Plan for the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site

By the end of the eighteenth century, Coalbrookdale in Shropshire was famous. It had one of the largest ironworks in England—an enterprise symbolized by the renowned Iron Bridge, the first such structure ever built on a large scale (Figure 1). Abraham Darby's Coalbrookdale Company pioneered the mass production of iron following the breakthrough in coke smelting in 1709. The ironmasters of the East Shropshire Coalfield went on to make the first iron wheels, rails, boat, aqueduct, and steam locomotive, as well as early steam cylinders. The great Iron Bridge was a key step in the use of iron in construction, and has become a universal symbol of the Industrial Revolution. Other industries, based on locally sourced materials, an industrialised working population, an advantageous transport network, and local entrepreneurs, also prospered. Coalport China (Figure 2) and decorative tile ware in particular gained an international reputation.



Figure 1. The Ironbridge reflected in the River Severn. The bridge is currently swathed in scaffolding for a repaint. The Institute is using the opportunity for a detailed survey and record of the structure.

**Archaeology and the National Park Idea:
Challenges for Management and Interpretation**



Figure 2. Bottle kilns at the former Coalport China Works, now a museum. Part of the site has been converted into a youth hostel for visiting school groups. This site illustrates the difficulties of physical access to historic buildings. The circular footings of the middle kiln raise the debate over restoration and reconstruction of historic monuments.

But this prosperity gradually ebbed away, and so did the population. As people moved away to find new jobs, buildings fell into disrepair. By the time the New Town (later to be named Telford) was created in 1963, the Ironbridge Gorge had become an industrial backwater, but many monuments to early industry survived. From the late 1960s, the furnaces and other major industrial archaeological sites were directly protected and managed by

the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust. Other buildings and areas were protected under the powers of the planning acts.

In 1986, the international importance of the area was recognised by UNESCO through its designation as a cultural World Heritage Site. This followed a nomination by the U.K. government, which is a party to the World Heritage Convention. This provides for the identification, protection, conservation, and presenta-

Archaeology and the National Park Idea: Challenges for Management and Interpretation

tion of cultural and natural sites of outstanding universal value.

A prerequisite for World Heritage status is the existence of effective legal protection and the establishment of a management plan to ensure the site's conservation and presentation. In the U.K., legal protection is achieved through controls such as the listing of buildings and scheduling of ancient monuments, the establishment of conservation areas, and by the outstanding international importance of the site being taken into account as a key consideration by local planning authorities. A management plan enables all the agencies involved with the World Heritage Site to co-ordinate their activities and helps ensure that the site is managed to the highest possible standards.

The Need for a Management Plan

The Ironbridge Gorge today is a scenic cultural landscape, but its former industrial character has been concealed by the natural regeneration of the landscape. The tenure of the land is complex: the Gorge has an existing residential community of over 3,500, and receives 800,000 visitors annually. The management plan is intended to guide the long- and short-term management of this complex landscape. It will be a working document that will complement the existing programmes of the responsible agencies, and foster partnership work by establishing for

the first time a unified framework for management of this unique asset.

A management plan is also needed to satisfy the U.K.'s obligations under the World Heritage Convention. UNESCO, through its subsidiary bodies, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), has produced a set of management guidelines for cultural World Heritage Sites. These guidelines stress the importance of long- and short-term management plans to resolve conflicts and protect the cultural value of each site. The organisation of the Ironbridge Gorge management plan reflects the guidelines published by UNESCO.

It is intended that the management plan will provide an overall framework of objectives and actions for the site, but it is not in itself a statutory document. It does not confer any new powers; it can only advise, inform, and promote. Each individual agency has its own set of aims and priorities, but it is intended that the plan will help to foster effective partnerships (Table 1) to make best use of scarce resources. The management plan can only operate with the direct support and co-operation of all the agencies, and of the many individual residents and users of the site.

**Archaeology and the National Park Idea:
Challenges for Management and Interpretation**

Table 1. Key partners in the development of the Ironbridge Gorge management plan

Telford & Wrekin Council Shropshire County Council Bridgnorth District Council	Local planning authorities
English Heritage	Advisor to the government on heritage policy
Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust	Established 1968; manages most of the key industrial monuments
Severn Gorge Countryside Trust	Established 1991; owns and manages most of the countryside throughout the World Heritage Site
Ironbridge Institute	University of Birmingham
Environment Agency	
Department of Culture, Media and Sport	
ICOMOS UK	

The aim of the management plan is to:

- Express the special significance of the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site;
- Encourage public discussion and commitment;
- Balance the many and varied interests and pressures in the Gorge;
- Establish a clear and sustainable framework for the future management of the World Heritage Site;
- Coordinate existing policies for the conservation and management of the World Heritage Site, and review and widen their scope as necessary;

- Encourage the integration of different agencies' management and maintenance programmes set clear objectives and high standards of management for future action in the World Heritage Site; and
- Establish a context for research, funding, and bidding.

To fulfil this brief, a number of task groups were set up to look at themes and areas of work identified by the inter-agency group as important to developing a management strategy for the Gorge. Officers from different agencies worked together and produced a series of short reports. These working papers provided a framework within which the

Archaeology and the National Park Idea: Challenges for Management and Interpretation

core team could develop ideas and strategies. There has been a large amount of source material for the core team to draw on in the preparation of the plan. The material covers a broad range of subjects, including archaeology and historical development, planning and transport policy, woodland and countryside management, and ecology, and reports on tourism and land instability.

In June 1997, a consultation document was published. Based on key issues that reflected the areas where damage to the special qualities of the World Heritage Site could occur, the Ironbridge Gorge Initiative also highlighted the commitment to partnership working between the agencies. A copy was circulated to every home in the Gorge, to all the Friends of the Museum, and was publicised widely. Three hundred pre-paid responses were received; 89% of respondents fully supported the stated aims and actions.

The content of the first draft of the management plan is based on the consensus achieved by the key managing agencies in producing the Ironbridge Gorge Initiative, and reflects the priorities and issues expressed during the consultation. The consultation responses endorsed the proposal that there must be a more integrated approach to management of the World Heritage Site. Transport-related issues were high on the agenda of respondents. Local residents were particularly concerned

about the upkeep of buildings within the World Heritage Site and about the key role played by the bridges over the river in linking communities throughout the Gorge. Many people felt that to facilitate good decisions about the management of the World Heritage Site, all those who work and live in the Gorge should have access to the fullest information. A key aim of the management plan is to both inform and involve the local community. The lead agencies have signed up to:

- Conserve the industrial heritage in its distinctive semi-natural landscape;
- Interpret it as a whole for a wide public;
- Contribute actively to the economic, social, and environmental quality of a diverse community;
- Work together to achieve high standards;
- Protect the heritage while ensuring that, wherever possible, it remains accessible to all; and
- Actively engage people and agencies in the management of the Gorge for present and future generations.

Statement of Significance —World Heritage Values

The identification of the Ironbridge Gorge as a site of cultural significance forms the *raison d'être* of the management plan. To ensure that the special value of the site is not diminished, there must be an under-

Archaeology and the National Park Idea: Challenges for Management and Interpretation

standing of why the site needs careful stewardship and management through the implementation of a management plan. The Ironbridge Gorge was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1986. UNESCO measured the Gorge against six criteria that assessed the universal significance and cultural importance of the area. These were identified as compelling reasons for its designation under four of the criteria:

- The discovery of coke iron in 1709 by Abraham Darby, and the first successful large-scale structural use of cast iron in the Iron Bridge of 1779, are masterpieces of creative genius.
- The techniques embodied in these advances had worldwide application and were of considerable international influence in the growth of industrialisation.
- The physical evidence of the historical evolution of mining, manufacturing processes, transport networks, and social processes that are so much a part of the existing fabric provide a fascinating summary of the development of an industrial region in modern times.
- The dramatic topography and landscape, the river, the distinctive form and pattern of the settlements, and the presence of industrial monuments such as the Iron Bridge, combine to act as a world-renowned symbol of the

Industrial Revolution for the many thousands of visitors who are attracted to the area each year.

Re-assessing Values

Since the inscription of the Ironbridge Gorge as a World Heritage Site, appreciation of its importance has evolved. Whilst the above reasons for designation have retained their force, it is the total landscape and what it contains and represents that is now seen increasingly as its singular distinguishing feature. The Gorge is a unique landscape of sites and monuments, buildings and spaces, woodlands and open land, which together manifest the processes of industrialisation in Britain and worldwide.

Although the Gorge must be viewed as a whole, it is possible to discern three principal dimensions that underpin its significance: its industrial archaeological resource, its historic character, and its natural environment.

The industrial archaeological resource. Specific technical innovations that occurred within the Gorge relate particularly to the iron industry, but other innovations found more general application, such as the pioneering application of the steam engine. With its vital geological coincidence of high-quality coal, ironstone, and clay, the Gorge also contains important mining remains. The Iron Bridge itself stands as a power-

**Archaeology and the National Park Idea:
Challenges for Management and Interpretation**

ful symbol of the innovative spirit fostered in the area. Many of the products of the Gorge were of considerable artistic quality, whilst some, such as ceramic tiles and especially Coalport china, achieved international fame. Together, the buried remains and standing historic buildings and surviving products document the evolution of the Gorge from the sparsely populated mining area of the seventeenth century to the mixed residential, manufacturing, retail, and recreational functions of today.

The historic character. The combination of history, building materials, form and pattern of the buildings, layout of roads and tracks, and the relationship of the buildings and routes to the river and to areas of open space and woodlands gives the Gorge a special historic character. This historic fabric and the documentation of the activities in the area stand as a very significant resource in illustrating the effects of industrialisation on social behaviour, values, and structures. Continuity of use, with frequent adaptations but little wholesale renewal, is a recurring feature in the Gorge. It has resulted in the survival of a high proportion of the original building fabric, and there are currently seven scheduled ancient monuments and 406 listed buildings within the World Heritage Site. No one character dominates in the diverse built landscape of the World Heritage Site and each area

retains its own identity reflecting its specific historical experience.

The natural environment. The nature conservation value of the World Heritage Site woods and open spaces is significant and is strengthened by their overall size and diversity. Several nationally designated sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) and numerous locally designated wildlife sites are present. Ancient semi-natural woodland and woodland on ancient sites are particularly important in the World Heritage Site. Many important non-woodland habitats are also present, including valuable grasslands and heathland. The River Severn itself continues to play a major role in the local environment—it remains a relatively “natural” river, and is a prime wildlife site throughout its length.

The ICOMOS–ICCROM guidance suggests that the significance of each World Heritage Site creates important “cultural values” for the present day which need careful stewardship and management. These values have both a historical and contemporary dimension.

Historical Continuity

Historical identity. The Gorge has a clear identity as the “Birthplace of Industry.” Its pioneering role in iron production and industrialisation is internationally recognised. The Iron Bridge itself is the supreme symbol of the Industrial Revolution.

Archaeology and the National Park Idea: Challenges for Management and Interpretation

Archaeological richness. The evidence contained within the landscape of the Gorge for the origins and development of ironworking and subsequently for wider industrialisation is unrivalled. The survival of comprehensive documentation enhances the importance of the remains by providing a source for study that is complementary to the physical resource.

Rare character. The combination of history; the form and pattern of the settlements; the dramatic topography and river landscape; the local vernacular in building forms and materials; the relationship of buildings to the river, open spaces, and woodlands; and the intricate network of paths and roads gives the Gorge a special character. It is a unique cultural landscape which has survived virtually intact and as such has a rare and irreplaceable value.

Modern Relevance

Community roots. The history, topography, and community life of the Gorge give the area a clear sense of place and a very strong identity. This identity is appreciated locally for the sense of community and belonging that it fosters, and is an important anchor in the evolving new town and the ever-changing contemporary world. The management plan will seek to underpin the vitality of this living community.

Economic potential. The heritage of the Gorge is the foremost

visitor attraction in the region, attracting over half a million visitors each year. It is estimated that the per annum direct and indirect economic impact of the visitors amounts to 1,500 full- and part-time jobs and £20 million spent within the Wrekin District alone. The identity of the Gorge as the "Birthplace of Industry" provides a significant marketing advantage, with local industry and services playing an important role in the life of the community.

Educational value. Of the 256,000 visitors to the Ironbridge Gorge Museums in 1998, 60,000 were part of formal school groups. The infrastructure provided by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum for receiving educational groups is a key aspect of the contemporary importance of the Gorge. The informal educative and learning experiences provided by visiting the area are also of immense value, with the wider ecological wealth of the area as significant as the historical associations.

Ownership

The World Heritage Site cannot be managed by one agency alone; each has certain clear ownership and management responsibilities. To date, there has been no overall integrated plan for the Ironbridge Gorge. The local planning authority development plan remains the statutory planning framework for the area. The Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust is drawing up a series of conservation

Archaeology and the National Park Idea: Challenges for Management and Interpretation

plans for the individual sites within its ownership to ensure that each monument and site is managed in a way that respects its special significance and setting. The Severn Gorge Countryside Trust owns large areas of wooded slopes and grassland. It, too, is building its own portfolio of management plans for these natural sites. There are, of course, numerous other commercial and domestic property owners who have repaired and maintained historic buildings and sites, and therefore have a contribution to make in the management of the World Heritage Site. But the scale and significance of this concentration of land owned and managed by public or charitable organisations is notable.

In an area as complex as the Gorge, there are many issues to be reconciled. One of the task groups devised key issues for the preservation of the significance of the World Heritage Site. These four issues—the preservation of character, visitor management and access, land instability, and management of the rivers and their banks—formed the backbone of the priorities listed in the Ironbridge Gorge Initiative. The content of that document was agreed by consensus amongst those organisations forming the strategy group, and endorsed by the public consultation exercise. Although the Heritage Lottery Fund and European Structural Funds present new opportunities for funding, the contin-

ued economic vitality of the area is the most realistic way of assuring the resources needed to address the four key issues. The successful regeneration of the Gorge over the past 30 years illustrates that continuing economic development can be sustainable whilst preserving and enhancing the special qualities of the World Heritage Site.

Preservation of Character

Character is a combination of topography, landscape, social history and environment, with present-day uses and communities that gives a place its sense of identity. There has been a hugely successful programme of renovation and restoration of historic structures in the Gorge over the past 30 years, and the character of the Gorge today has a vitality that was lacking then. It is not only an attractive place to live, but is a place of manufacture and commerce, as well as an attractive recreational centre for local inhabitants and visitors. However, despite statutory protection, there is pressure for change through small-scale alterations and inappropriate modernisation. There are also important historic sites at the heart of the World Heritage Site that remain semi-derelict, most notably at the former tile works in Jackfield, and areas of neglected woodland and riverbanks. An over-managed or “tidying up” approach to enhancement, and “over-development,” would both change the special character of

Archaeology and the National Park Idea: Challenges for Management and Interpretation

the area and inhibit the natural regeneration process. Recording and understanding the resource will ensure that informed decisions are made and that the values of the World Heritage Site are protected.

Visitor Management and Access

The tourist business is estimated to contribute in excess of £11 million a year to the local economy in the Gorge, and has been a major factor in attracting the resources needed for regeneration and conservation work. But the environment has an intrinsic value that transcends present-day tourism needs. Tourism creates pressures for change through the need for physical access to sites and landscape, the need to explain and present the heritage for the benefit of all, and through the demands of transport, particularly parking and road improvements (Figures 3 and 4).

The Framework for Managing the World Heritage Site

UNESCO guidelines on management plans for World Heritage Sites advise that the plan should be based on a 30-year time span, with medium- and short-term objectives contained within the long-term strategy. The objectives set out here follow on from the description and identification of key issues in the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site. The objectives are linked to an action plan that sets out projects and

programmes needed to implement the management plan.

The Ironbridge Gorge Initiative document sets out the following aims: to conserve the industrial heritage in its distinctive, semi-natural landscape; to interpret it as a whole for a wide public; and to contribute to the economic and social life of a diverse community. In order to achieve these aims and address the issues that have been listed, 18 objectives have been identified (see Table 2).

Implementing the Plan

The plan is a strategic document. It will advise and influence the management of the World Heritage Site as a whole, whilst site managers are developing individual site management plans. These will show how, at a detailed level, sites can be managed within the strategic objectives of the overall management plan.

The eighteen objectives identified above deal with real needs and priorities that are necessary for long-term conservation. The implementation of these objectives will be achieved through the ongoing work of the agencies, as individual organizations and as partners, and the commitment of local people who live and work in the Gorge. Their "ownership" of the plan and an acceptance of the values that make the area special is essential to its success.

The partnership arrangement, at present an informal agreement between the agencies, can be used to

**Archaeology and the National Park Idea:
Challenges for Management and Interpretation**

Table 2. Objectives of Ironbridge Gorge Initiative

<p>To conserve the industrial heritage in its distinctive semi-natural landscape:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Protect, maintain, conserve, and, where appropriate, enhance the built and natural heritage of the World Heritage Site and its setting. 2. Establish detailed policies and programmes of action, which will be reviewed annually. 3. Keep all designations under review by the appropriate authority to ensure that the most appropriate level of statutory and planning protection is in place. 4. Complete an analysis of the special character of built and natural heritage to inform future policy- and decision-making. 5. Establish practical indicators to monitor change. 6. Agree a code of practice for environmental maintenance, and foster locally the traditional craft skills needed to implement high quality projects. 7. Expand the scope of the existing visitor management strategy, and encourage appreciation of the wider environment. 8. Review the transportation strategy, including provision for pedestrians and the increasing age of visitors, and identify priorities in the local transport plan. 9. Review residents' parking problems. 10. Devise a risk management strategy for coping with natural erosion and land instability. 11. Agree a management and interpretation strategy for the riverbanks and water courses. 12. Assess the condition and use of the existing bridges across the River Severn, and any long-term need for an additional foot or cycle crossing.
<p>To interpret it as a whole for a wide public:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Encourage the establishment of a programme of archaeological research into the historic landscape of the Gorge and its environs, and make the results widely available. 14. Develop an integrated approach to interpreting the historic landscape. 15. Make use of emerging technologies to provide access to information and knowledge for visitors and local communities alike.
<p>To contribute to the economic and social life of a diverse community:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. Promote social and economic regeneration in and around the World Heritage Site that benefits the local residential and working community and enhances the environment. 17. Celebrate the local distinctiveness of the settlements and communities in the Gorge, and recognise this in the implementation of all types of projects. 18. Further involve the community in the development and implementation of the management plan and its objectives.

coordinate projects to achieve maximum impact. Partnerships bring benefits which include access to a wider range of funding sources and increased chances of securing successful bids to the Heritage Lottery Fund and other discretionary

schemes. It will mean more initiatives can happen at once with greater impact, and it gives lobbying power for the needs of the World Heritage Site.

The plan will have the support of other organizations such as ICO-MOS and the Department of Cul-

**Archaeology and the National Park Idea:
Challenges for Management and Interpretation**



Figure 3. The Park and Ride bus scheme in the centre of Ironbridge has been only partially successful as a visitor management tool. Families with pushchairs and the less mobile find it difficult to use the buses and are reluctant to give up their cars.



Figure 4. More traditional forms of transport for carrying visitors around the Blists Hill Open Air Museum of relocated historic buildings. This museum is the main visitor attraction in the World Heritage Site.

Archaeology and the National Park Idea: Challenges for Management and Interpretation

ture, Media and Sport. If the secretary of state is happy with the plan, he will submit it to UNESCO on behalf of the British government.

The achievement of the objectives listed above will be overseen by the existing strategy group; new mechanisms to facilitate the partner arrangements and the need for a new post of coordinator to implement the plan are discussed below. The action plan that is being developed will set out a short-to-medium-term (5-10 years) programme of projects. It will indicate which agency or agencies will take the lead in implementing schemes and developing strategies.

There is a need for the Ironbridge Gorge to have a secure and sustainable economic base that is compatible with the conservation of the World Heritage Site. Securing the objectives of the plan must use the partnership approach to balance the various interests and ensure that World Heritage values are not diminished. A key part of implementing the action plan will be to achieve a standard of excellence appropriate to the World Heritage Site in all areas of work from interpretation and conservation through to everyday maintenance work. The monitoring and review of the action plan must include an assessment of quality.

The mechanisms to achieve the objectives are twofold: through the existing working arrangements, and through the appointment of a dedicated World Heritage Site officer.

The World Heritage Site strategy group will continue to oversee the implementation and delivery of the plan. At present the agencies come together in an interagency body which acts as a working group. To implement projects, closer work arrangements may be necessary. Individual projects will also require specific teams. The composition of the working group will be reviewed to ensure that all interests are represented, including the local business and residential community. These working arrangements need to be agreed to implement the action plan.

A new position of coordinator is suggested to serve the working group and coordinate the implementation of the action plan. The post will also be responsible for monitoring and evaluation, carrying out a yearly review of the action plan, and anticipating the five-year review of the management plan itself. Similar posts have been created at Avebury and Greenwich World Heritage Sites. The officer reports to the World Heritage Site working party. The post includes liaison with local owners and employers, maintenance of the GIS database, and identifying sources of funding and bidding for grants.

The achievement of objectives will be constrained by issues outside the scope of the plan—for example, national planning policy or the level of funding necessary to achieve the desired outcome. A greater under-

**Archaeology and the National Park Idea:
Challenges for Management and Interpretation**

standing of the potential impact of proposals on the World Heritage Site will be essential to justify both small and large changes. UNESCO has introduced monitoring requirements for all World Heritage Sites, and in the implementation and review of the plan there must be scope to ensure a full assessment of the site

and its management arrangements by 2004. The success or failure of this plan will not be measured by the quality of the document itself, but the process of collaborative working that is essential for its shared ownership and effective implementation. Only time will tell if this process has been successful.

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