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## **The Genius of the Place: Managing a “Mini-National Park” at Bede’s World**

**B**ede’s World could well become part of a World Heritage Site early in the twenty-first century, but it is not a national park, nor does it aspire to be one. It nevertheless shares much of the basic philosophy of national parks regarding purpose, objectives, and management, and finds inspiration in their existence and their doings.

Bede’s World is both a place and a project, not unambiguous as a project though a very small place compared with national parks: about 80 acres (32 ha) all together. It is founded on the life and works of one man, the Venerable Bede, the genius of this place in what is now a markedly post-industrial landscape in northeast England. His was the name above all associated with the fame of Jarrow in the decades either side of AD 700. Then the monastery which he served, founded by a royal grant of land in the Anglian Kingdom of Northumbria, lay at the heart of the remarkable intellectual and artistic flowering conveniently known as “the Golden Age of Northumbria” (Blair 1970, 1976; Bonner et al. 1989; Hawkes 1996; Higham 1993). Subsequently, Bede’s reputation as scholar, saint, and commentator on the Scriptures grew, and the place

where he spent the whole of his life after early childhood became one of sanctity and pilgrimage.

The small area of land encapsulated by the name “Bede’s World” may look far removed from the characteristics of a national park, but it is nevertheless precious to many—scholars, local communities, and distant pilgrims, for example. The vision for its development and management as a public place of education and recreation is infused by thinking similar to that of those involved in National Parks. We also believe that a few green acres tucked into a visually scarred and socially deprived post-industrial landscape in the middle of tens of thousands of people’s homes may in its own way be as important a social asset as the protected, rural spaces in rural backpack country, by definition distant from the urban milieu.

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We appreciate, of course, that we cannot re-create the spiritual or intellectual worlds known to Bede, but believe we can justifiably attempt to effect, however impressionistically, aspects of a more tangible Bede's world: his physical environment and some of its workings (Chippindale 1994, 7; Fowler 1999). That belief is in a way as much a matter of faith as was the Abbot's, Benedict Biscop, when he founded a monastery at Jarrow in AD 681.

#### The Site

Bede's World encompasses a complex of buildings, land uses, tenures, and expectations. At its core, physically and conceptually, is the church of St. Paul where, marvelously, the long tradition of Christian worship on this site continues.

The nave is largely nineteenth century, but it stands above the monastery's original basilican church (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 338-49). Here the famous Jarrow lectures occur each May, continuing Bede's tradition of scholarship (Sherley-Price 1955). The north aisle contains an exhibition of sculpture from the Early Christian monastery. The chancel was originally a free-standing chapel or small monastic church, dated AD 681 by its extant original foundation stone. Plausibly, it is the actual building in which Bede worshipped. Few late-seventh-century buildings stand in Western Europe. There are even fewer which are still

active places of worship rather than mere ancient monuments. Another one of them is the church of St. Peter, just 16 km (10 miles) to the south. Thirteen hundred years ago, then overlooking the estuary of the River Wear, it was the focal point of the original monastic foundation of a two-part monastery. The second part was built a few years later at Jarrow, *Gywre*, on a low-lying site overlooking extensive mud-flats where the River Don met the Tyne.

A new Benedictine monastery was built at Jarrow in the twelfth century, and it is the ruins of that, overlying the outlines of the archaeologically excavated Early Christian one (Cramp 1969), that are the obviously "old" part of Bede's World. The ruins lie beside St. Paul's, a church to which they were physically and functionally joined until the mid-sixteenth century, when the monastery was dissolved.

In addition to history and religiosity, a strong "green" element runs through the Bede's World concept and its implementation. The River Don itself has been cleaned up and landscaped. Along it, we are trying to recreate some of the former mud-flat habitat attractive to wader birds. The extensive tidal mud-flats which Bede would have looked out on are now filled in. Our efforts may be environmental gesturism, but they have helped recall the monastery's riverine connection from its harbour to the sea, and the estuarine setting in

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which Bede worshipped and worked (Figure 1).

The secular focal point lies 400 yards slightly uphill at Jarrow Hall, a late-eighteenth-century family house (Figure 1). This held the museum until 1998, essentially to present results from the monastic excavations. Significantly, its achievement came about through co-operation—from the Church, local community, academia, outside funding, and financial and other support from the Local Authority. Essentially, those components remain in place for the twenty-first century.

Beside the Hall (Figure 2) a multi-million-pound new museum building by architects Evans and Shalev (Singmaster 1995, 30) opens in May 2000, four years after Phase 1 (Figure 3) was opened in May 1995. This indoor part of the “Museum of Early Medieval Northumbria” presents not just the monastic excavations properly for the first time but also acts as a display case for an important phase of English history which at the moment does not benefit from a major presentation in a professional museum in the region. New to many will be Northumbria in its European context, focusing on the journeys of Benedict and Wilfred between England and Rome. This was their essential prelude to the foundation of Jarrow–Monkwearmouth monastery as a modern establishment up-to-date in its architecture, facilities, and liturgy. The references to the Mediter-

ranean and to Late Classical antiquity in the architecture of the new museum building knowingly renew this link (Figure 3).

#### Landscape

All such relative sophistication in Bede’s world would have been realised against the backcloth of the mundane daily life of an agrarian estate; and so is it still, for at *Gywre* in the twenty-first century as in the seventh we are trying to run an “Anglo-Saxon farm,” not as a static stage-set but as a working “model” of what might once have been (Figure 4). It is on heavily polluted land formerly serving various industrial functions, occupied into the 1980s by huge petrol storage tanks. Vast amounts of soil were removed and replaced. The specifically agrarian landscape was conceived in 1991, mechanically shaped in 1992 and 1993, and planted up in 1993 with mainly deciduous hardwoods (attested as existing before AD 700 in northern England). By ca. 2025 the landscape with its trees and artificial stream should look as if it is a farmed valley where the fields have been cleared out of woodland. Already the setting looks old and the stream entirely natural as its babbles its way through modern but historically authentic (planted) meadow flora into its “Anglo-Saxon” pond, now with uninvited but very welcome wildlife (Figure 4).

The concept was based on a familiar archaeological landscape

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**Figure 1.** Plan of Gywre, the “Anglo-Saxon farm,” showing Jarrow Hall and Phase 1 of the new museum building with, to their north, “pre-medieval” fields on an axial lay-out, standing oaks (cog-wheel symbol), a stream and pond, the sites of the four experimental buildings (a = Thirlings A, b = New Bewick *grubenhaüs*, c = Hartlepool monastic “cell,” d = Yeavinger hall), and a “Bronze Age” burial mound, all high above the mud-flats of the tidal River Don flowing northwards to the Tyne.

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**Figure 2. Careful design and landscaping has brought about a visually interesting juxtaposition between, *centre*, the “old,” Jarrow Hall, now (May 1999) a restaurant, offices, archive, and library, and, *left*, the pergola fronting the neo-classical entrance to the new museum building.**

model in incorporating ideas of palimpsest, succession, survival, rupture, and continuity. Its design also had to bear in mind that this new and contrived landscape has to “work” in the late twentieth century and beyond as an Anglo-Saxon farm, an educational resource, and a tourist attraction. The constructed Anglo-Saxon landscape therefore had features built into it from prehistoric and Roman times of the sort

demonstrably existing as relics in a Northumbrian landscape of ca. AD 700 (Figure 1; Fowler and Mills, in press). There are no problems of archaeological reference points for such landscape detail. Documentary evidence is brought into play too.

The pond and its adjacent ford, for example, lead to discussion of the topographical detail in Anglo-Saxon land charters.

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**Figure 3.** The atrium, the main feature of the entrance into the new museum building, is, in Mediterranean mode, open to the skies above its mosaic-lined pool. To some, a near-pure statement of Classicism creating a place of quiet and contemplation; to others, a waste of space and money badly needing to be “useful.”

**Buildings**

We have also constructed buildings: practical ones which we have to have as farmers, and experimental ones for scientific and tourism purposes (Figures 4, 5, and 6). With the latter, we build from primary evidence and first principles, knowing that our work will at best produce a model that may or may not “work.” We are constrained by having to op-

erate on a site which is open to the public throughout the year and which must comply with several statutory requirements concerning access, safety, and animal welfare. We also have to generate revenue. Some basics are nevertheless quite clear in our construction work. We began by relating to the concept of “authenticity.” That continues: but now “honesty” rather than just

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authenticity is the key word, that is, being able not just to quote a reference but also to explain and be frank in interpretation and open in presentation.

So far three buildings are properly experimental, though some of the ostensibly modern buildings serve an interpretative purpose. We have carefully disguised with clap-boarding and thatch, for example, two

modern steel-framed, breeze-block buildings which, complete with electricity, are necessary to meet our statutory obligations as keeper of animals (Figure 4). Interpretation of them for visitors states that the buildings have been made to look appropriate but are neither authentic nor experimental; and people seem to appreciate such honesty.

The three experimental Anglo-



**Figure 4.** The “Anglo-Saxon landscape” in 1999 looking south from the rush-edged pond towards the first part of the new museum building and the second part, *left*, under construction, with the chimneys of Jarrow Hall beyond. The unenclosed ground to the right is arable for cereal crops. The sheds, *centre left*, both modern and non-experimental, are respectively a pig-sty and work-shop; that to the right is a byre in a post-and-pole enclosure for the Dexter cattle (see Figure 8). All the hurdling is used in genuine animal control, but the anachronistic rope barrier and sign are statutory requirements for modern humans.

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Figure 5. Gywre in summer 1999, with home-made hurdling, genuine stream-side flora originating in 1993, and statutorily necessary modern stock buildings of “Anglo-Saxon” appearance and proportions, visually dominated by a very tall pylon and power line.

Saxon buildings are based on excavated ground plans of a hall-house (Figure 6), a *grubenhaüs* (sunken-featured building), and a monastic “cell” (Figure 7). The experiment so far is limited to putting them up in controlled circumstances, and reflects the hard reality of 1:1 experiment. An enormous amount of work, material, and skill is needed to do anything “for real”; and Bede’s World simply does not command

such resources as would have been available to an Anglo-Saxon estate owner (Fowler and Mills, in press). We learnt early on that such resources would have included skills in long-term silvicultural management, for straight timbers 3 m long and 40 cm in diameter—our specifications from the archaeological evidence—don’t just grow on trees! In other words, we had some difficulty in sourcing our requirements. At



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1999 prices, our "Anglian hall" (O'Brien and Miket 1991), a not-so-simple four-bay timber building, cost about £60,000, the price-range of a small, but new, three-bedroom house in Tyneside today. In contrast, our *grubenhaüs*, based on the archaeological evidence at New Bewick (Gates and O'Brien 1988), cost about £7,000. Our experience suggests such buildings could be knocked up relatively cheaply and quickly without the need for great skill or access to specialist resources. Perhaps that is why archaeologically they are so common.



**Figure 6. Thirlings A: the completed building experimentally constructed on a ground plan of ca. AD 600 recovered from an archaeological excavation. Everything above ground level is, at best, sound inference; at worst, probably wrong. Practically every detail about the nearer gable, for example, is controversial except the spacing of the vertical oak posts. The proposed Yeavinger hall will enclose some three times the floor area of this building. The cross in the background is a modern sculpture inspired by Northumbrian crosses of Bede's world and later.**

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**Figure 7. Site signage on the Anglo-Saxon farm: clear, short, informative, up-to-date, flimsy, cheap, temporary, and easily changed at the press of a few keys on an in-house desk-top computer.**

The third building is based on one from the monastic settlement on the headland at Hartlepool (Figure 7; Daniels 1988). We now have the experience, the confidence and, remarkably, the money to proceed much quicker than expected to attempt our long-term ambition to erect a building based on the ground plan of one of the large halls at the royal site of Yeavering (Hope-Taylor 1977; Building A4). This project is in the planning stage (July 1999) with

construction scheduled to continue during 2000-2001.

**Management**

Our corporate aspirations are somewhat dryly expressed in our mission statement:

The purpose for which the Company [Jarrow 700 AD Ltd] is established is to protect, preserve and improve for the benefit of the public the Church of St. Paul's, Jarrow, Bede's World, and the monastic remains and other historical and vernacular buildings in the vicinity and to plan, develop, maintain, manage

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**Figure 8. Bede's World traction-power: three Dexter cattle resting between regular stints of training to pull farm implements. Though genetically inauthentic for Anglo-Saxon stock, they are of appropriate size and proportions as indicated by archaeologically excavated cattle bones.**

and improve the surrounding area as a centre of historical, religious, educational and cultural importance with a view to fostering public awareness, understanding and appreciation of the life, times and works of the Venerable Bede.

It is very much in the spirit of our own times that such a mission is pursued in partnership with others, and through marketing as much as through high ideals.

We are a small organisation. Eighteen trustees form the board of directors under a chairman (Peter

Fowler). This has delegated executive responsibility to a small executive committee. Both are advised by an estate committee, which also has delegated powers within board policies, and several panels covering various specialist areas such as education, community liaison and museological and academic matters. Other ad hoc mechanisms are set up and dispersed as appropriate, e.g., to deal with the concept and design of the new museum exhibition with consultants in 1999. Apart from the

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board and executive, all the other groups include non-trustees, so our "management constituency" directly includes several dozen people bringing a wide range of expertise and interests. There is considerable interaction between these honorary managers and the 16 staff, and between both and various consultants, all guided by the single, full-time professional director (Miriam Harte).

Running a place while developing a concept like Bede's World is a major balancing act. Balancing the books is an obvious necessity, not least because we are a registered charity as well as a business and we have to earn to exist. We have not yet grown sufficiently to attain critical mass, yet are already effectively the recipient of several millions pounds sterling of capital investment. The next three years are critical financially, as returns on that investment must become apparent, not least to our many backers and the public. We are not, however, going to dwell further here on the purely financial aspects of our operation, though any reader must be as aware as we are that the bottom line really counts.

The balancing act is very much concerned with the conflicting demands, needs, requirements, objectives, priorities, and expectations of our many constituents. We know that basically there is no one single template for success, apart from constant change and self-analysis. We firmly believe that we have a strong vision

and a very sound base, but how we deliver that vision and manage the many elements to it must constantly be challenged and questioned. Bede's World is compounded of healthy tension, and must thrive on it or die.

The physical management of the diverse elements of the site, and specifically the farm, is itself challenging. We are daily (and nocturnally) concerned about the safety and security of the site and the physical well-being of staff, visitors, and animals. The site is exposed, petty crime is common in the neighbourhood, there are on-site hazards (e.g., open water; Figure 4), and staffing is thin. On the other hand, if everything was behind fences and ropes, how can we hope to give people the experience of a seventh-century landscape? Indeed, how should we interpret the site? One way is to let them simply absorb it, but will they have enough knowledge to appreciate what they are looking at? To what extent should we seek to involve people actively? Or do we use signs that again can so easily be inappropriate (cf. Figure 4) and permanent? Information points tend to result in erosion hollows. We have received considerable professional criticism for our style of on-site interpretation that is based on the principle of being non-intrusive and easily (and cheaply) replaced (Figure 7); but things change on a farm, seasonally, daily, and we wish to share these changes with our visitors.

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The best form of interpretation, perhaps especially here with a complex and intellectually quite demanding experience to hand, is undoubtedly guiding. This is, however, a very labour-intensive option, and we have neither the staff nor the appropriately trained volunteers to maintain such a facility every day. Nor have we yet been able to afford audio guides. They could be ideal over the whole site, and we are watching technical—and cost—developments carefully. We are very struck not only by the efficacy of the “wands” now provided at Stonehenge, for example, but also by their remarkable effect on visitor behaviour.

Another physical conflict on our site is how to do all the work basic to an agrarian life-style while using authentic methods—methods based on a large, local, mainly free labour force that would have been available to Anglo-Saxon estate owners. And while we try to do our best in labour-intensive activities like daub-production (Figure 6) and trying to plough clayland with a small wooden ard and two recalcitrant cattle (Figure 8), we simultaneously must ensure our employees' and volunteers' health and safety. We have to compromise, for example, by using a string-trimmer on a day when we are closed to the public. Provided a process is not part of our serious experimentation, managerially we conclude that the important thing is to demonstrate

how something would (or could) have been done as part of the interpretation, while keeping the site looking its best by developing and working as efficiently as possible with the available workers. If we were to go indiscriminately in this direction, of course, we would deservedly lose our credibility as a place of academic study, research, education, and reliable interpretation. The trick—and it has to be a trick—is to sharply define specific activities that are kept “clean” (some aspects of the crop management and timber building, for example) while we explain and are honest about the rest.

Every day, within the context of the “big dilemmas” of the sort outlined above, small incidents raise significant issues. Recently, for example, a group of visitors had been booked in and catered for, but because they spent two hours on the farm, they had no time to go to the cafe. Should we be upset by the fact that this group was so enthralled by the farm that its members did not spend any money in the cafe? As narrow-minded “business managers” the answer is probably “yes,” for we lost out financially on that visit; but in the wider context of what Bede's World is actually about, we can but be glad about our visitors' interest and hope that this might translate into a return visit.

The very diversity of the site affects visitor management. Our ideal visitor would arrive by public trans-

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port at 10 AM, visit the church, enjoy a coffee, visit the museum, break for a bought-lunch in our excellent restaurant, then spend a couple of hours on the farm before buying some high-quality souvenirs and books in the shop, relax over tea and cake, and finally leave in late afternoon (the order indicated may be adjusted to taste!). Only a minority attain this status of ideal visitor, for few come with sufficient time allowance for the whole experience (which minimally now needs half a day and can easily absorb six hours). But all our evidence is that most people are enthusiastic once they get over the major hurdle (physically and “informationally”) of getting to Bede’s World in the first place.

We know the mantra of “Location, location, location”: our dilemma is that the area around St. Paul’s church is the only possible location for Bede’s World, yet it is almost the very last place anyone would deliberately attempt to realise the sort of project in which we are involved. The word “Jarrow” unfortunately does not immediately spring to mind when thinking of an enjoyable day out or of the great cultural icons of our age. Grand Canyon, Taj Mahal, Stonehenge, Jarrow; no, it does not quite ring true—yet. Nevertheless, Bede’s World is very consciously one item in a “cultural renaissance” being encouraged along the Tyne. Furthermore, because we are actually in the only possible location, we can

sense and promulgate the “genius” of the place, while enjoying with our neighbours a sense of locality.

All that said, our major difficulty is in attracting people to Jarrow. Once we manage to entice the visitor in (which is our key need—to attract new audiences), our objective must be to keep them as long as possible and make sure they leave with a burning desire to come back soon (bringing their friends), maybe to check progress on a pet project on the farm, or to come to a special lecture or exhibition that they saw advertised when they visited. They should also leave having signed up as a Friend, if not a volunteer! That should be our ambition for every visitor, with special emphasis on family tickets for example. We must ensure that every element of the site is making this a high-quality, enjoyable experience, whatever the needs, knowledge, and aspirations of the visitor.

The delivery of this high-quality experience is entirely dependent on the people the visitor meets at every point in his or her journey, whether they be staff or volunteers. Finding, developing, keeping and motivating high-quality staff is a major challenge for an organisation such as this, but entirely possible. We do not have many of the tools of big and rich organisations, such as good pay, long-term career development, travel, and bonuses, but what everyone can have is a sense of self-worth, respect for

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knowledge and expertise, pride in their service to their customers, and a recognition that others are relying on them. We have to try to be creative in "enhancing" jobs with things other than money, such as training opportunities and involvement on a special project, and chances to give new insights and broaden their experience.

An example of the constant questioning and re-interpretation of our vision that is needed would be our education programme. Education is at the core of Bede's World's philosophy and its activities; it has always been a key strength, we have always been good at it, knowing what we were doing (Fowler 1999). Our education service's purpose is "to support the mission of Jarrow 700 AD Ltd by promoting and developing Bede's World as an educational centre for the study and appreciation of the life, times and works of the Venerable Bede." That includes provision of educational input to museum displays, exhibitions, historic reconstructions, publications, and interactive learning developments. Now we must look to our strengths, examine needs and unmet demands, and develop programmes that will fulfil them. If we just continue to do what we have always done, we will fail. Education must be totally re-invented.

The biggest balancing act of all is how to allocate scarce resources, people, and money among all the different activities on the site. Who should take priority? We have to ask ourselves, "What would make the single biggest difference to the visitor in the long term?" We agree about the question and about the need to ask it, but we each have different answers. Bede's World, as we said, will thrive on ideas and tension.

East across the Don is a vast park for the products of a Nissan car factory. South from the church is a large commercial timber yard. Our neighbour on the northwest is a Shell petrol storage facility with large, round, above-ground tanks. On the north, between our boundary and the Tyne, is a marine works, and the whole site is straddled by electricity supply cables (Figure 5). It is difficult to ignore this environment; and we do not, for we are part of it. Were it not that this whole area is in a post-industrial phase, with high unemployment as labour-intensive work has ceased, the sort of government and European money on which Bede's World has been initiated would not have been available. The fact that Bede's World developed where it is in the 1990s is because the opportunity to do so is itself a post-industrial phenomenon.

#### **Acknowledgments**

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