

**Harold Mytum**

## **History, Politics and Culture: Archaeology and Interpretation in British National Parks**

When national parks were established in England and Wales, their roles were defined as “preserving and enhancing the natural beauty of such areas and promoting their enjoyment by the public” (National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949). In this regard, the assumptions behind the setting up of national parks were similar to that in North America. National parks in Britain are unusual in a world context, however, because the areas within their responsibility are not publicly owned. This has clearly restricted their ability to carry through policy, but has perhaps made them more sensitive to local as well as national public opinion. It is significant that the preserving and enhancing of natural beauty was placed alongside promoting enjoyment by the public.

The brief of national parks was to protect largely upland and agriculturally marginal areas. The basic assumption that these were largely untouched, and represented areas with limited human impact, was quickly challenged, but it took some time before the archaeological as well as the historic built environment was incorporated within policies. During the same period, the greater availability of private transport, increase in leisure time, and the widening range of outdoor activities carried out in the parks led to a redefinition by the National Parks Review Panel in which the roles should be “to protect, maintain and enhance scenic beauty, natural systems and land forms, and the

wildlife and cultural heritage of the area,” but also “to promote the quiet enjoyment and understanding of the area insofar as it is not in conflict with the primary purpose of conservation” (Edwards 1991). The role of conservation had become dominant in British national parks, linked to their planning role.

National parks now operate under rather different conditions from those prevailing at their founding, and have a range of planning responsibilities which dominate much of their budgets and attention, and which have been recently extended with the latest bout of local government reorganisation. Nevertheless, the twin themes of conservation and interpretation play a part, particularly as all

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

the parks are heavily tourist based. With the apparently inexorable decrease in upland agricultural incomes, tourism is becoming the major factor in the economy of some national parks, and in all the need to encourage but yet control and manage visitor numbers is a critical responsibility. It is within this context that provision of and interest in archaeology needs to be considered.

Archaeology is a recognised issue in all national parks, and all but one employ an archaeologist to cover the subject within the authority (and that one exception has several archaeologically trained employees on its staff). The role of archaeology has some common threads over all national parks, but as one moves away from the most central and statutory requirements, then developments relate to interests and opportunities seized by individuals, and links to other organisations and individuals.

Education has increased in importance within national parks, as this has been seen as a service needed and acknowledged by the community. Planning controversies can often lead to the parks appearing bureaucratic, uncaring, and against the individual and local community, but education helps to give the parks a positive image. Archaeological material figures in many programmes, but is often subsumed within other subjects which are specifically targeted within the national curricula.

**Planning**

The statutory requirements within the planning process absorb a great deal of the attention of the English national park staff, including that of their archaeologists. In Wales, the situation is slightly different, with the local archaeological units being responsible for planning control, with the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, for example, providing the service within Snowdonia National Park, Cambrian Archaeology (formerly the Dyfed Archaeological Trust) giving such a service to the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, and the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust advising the Brecon Beacons National Park. It is worth noting that within all these the parks various educational initiatives have proved possible, whilst they have been achieved in a more limited extent in most English authorities.

Many upland areas have been long recognised as repositories of great archaeological riches, but few large-scale academic landscape studies have been undertaken in recent years. The most notable exceptions are those by Fleming on Dartmoor and in Swaledale in the Yorkshire Dales (Fleming 1988; 1998). The Royal Commissions have already covered some key areas (Taylor 1991) but modern methods of aerial, surface, and geophysical survey now allow far more sites to be identified, accurately

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

located, and non-destructively investigated.

In order to be able to carry out the planning control, particularly for extensive threats such as forestry, national park archaeologists in both England and Wales have often commissioned surveys of the archaeological resource to augment that already known. This has often involved funding from English Heritage and Cadw respectively, and has been carried out by the Royal Commission staffs, contracted archaeologists, or employees of the National Parks. In every case, large numbers of additional features have been found, ranging from Mesolithic flint scatters to World War II relics. These are then incorporated within management plans as well as local Sites and Monuments Records and the National Monuments Record. Whilst these may have a research and educational role, they are primarily used for landscape management and planning guidance. An example of survey increasing the number and range of known sites can be indicated by the work on the Brecon Beacons. The common of Mynydd Illtyd covers 625 acres, and systematic field walking increased the number of known sites (Dorling 1991).

Whilst British legislation emphasises sites in the preservation process, and many archaeological remains are scheduled ancient monuments within national parks,

there is less protection for landscapes. Some areas including archaeological remains have gained some protection, however, as environmentally sensitive areas or sites of special scientific interest (White 1991). Management agreements with farmers, often with payments attached, have also provided a solution.

**Conservation and Interpretation**

Archaeologists have been closely involved in the conservation of major monuments within the national parks. These projects may have also included substantial elements of detailed survey, buildings recording, or excavation, or may have involved less primary study and only an input into the design and management of schemes.

At the Roman military camps at Cawthorne, North Yorkshire, attempts at interpretation are constrained by concerns over conservation and visitor management. This is a site purchased and cleared of regenerated woodland by the North York Moors National Park to ensure the most effective protection for the excellently preserved but fragile earthworks. A car park for only 20 cars some distance away minimises visitor impact, and for part of the visitor trail, Terram, a permeable membrane, has been used to minimise wear (Cartwright 1991). The site is regularly monitored and

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

measures taken to minimise degradation by both animals and people, and vegetation control is by both sheep-grazing and hand-spraying of chemicals (Lee 1994). A wide range of erosion prevention strategies have been employed in the Yorkshire Dales on sites of various periods and character (White 1994).

Industrial archaeology, particularly for quarrying and mining, abounds in the upland areas of Britain. It is therefore not surprising that some of the most extensive, and expensive, conservation and interpretation projects by national parks have been in this field. It is with the industrial heritage that it has been most easy to obtain interest and resources to combine archaeological conservation, research, and interpretation. Industrial monuments can be stabilised and displayed in a resilient state and can withstand at least small numbers of visitors. Moreover, many are located in locations that can combine other experiences expected from a national park: spectacular scenery, (at least apparent) isolation, and a confrontation with nature and the elements. Some such sites have been taken into guardianship by organisations such as English Heritage and the National Trust, but others are managed by the national parks themselves.

In Snowdonia National Park, excavation and consolidation have taken place on sites as different in date

as Iron Age iron smelting structures and water-powered pumping and winding engines, and the Clydach ironworks in the Brecon Beacons was a relatively early example of consolidation on some scale (Wilson 1988). The charcoal-fired iron smelting furnaces with bellows powered by a water wheel at Duddon have been excavated, conserved, and displayed. Here, Lake District National Park obtained the site on a 50-year lease, and has sensitively carried out work but does not wish to encourage mass tourism (Lowe 1991). Management agreements have been negotiated with land-owners in the case of three lead smelting complexes, including the Old Gang and Surrender mills in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, and English Heritage has grant-aided consolidation (White 1989).

With stretched staff and financial resources, and an archaeological record both diverse and often fragile, the presumption is for preservation and no interpretation. Only key sites such as those discussed above, can be accorded sufficient attention to be resilient to attrition caused by visitors. So, recent research by Kingston (1997) has shown why Lake District National Park considers that no element of interpretation should be given to indicate the location, nature, and extent of the famous Neolithic stone axe quarries and working areas at Great Langdale. The quarry faces,

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

and the huge screens of debris, including rough-outs and waste flakes, are under threat from walkers and others unaware of the significance of the site, but it was felt that any on-site or nearby notices would only attract more visitors and potential collectors. Interpretations that identify places of past human activity within the wider cultural and natural landscape are rare in national parks because of the density of visitors, and the fact that these sites often lie on private land where farmers are attempting to run viable businesses. The problems of erosion of archaeological deposits on open moorland are widespread in the parks (Griffiths 1994).

National parks have tended to avoid ownership of archaeological monuments, with all the management and interpretation responsibilities that this entails. Apart from some of the industrial sites described above, the most notable exceptions are both in Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. Here, the medieval and Tudor stone castle at Carew, and the Iron Age fort with adjacent Roman native farmstead at Castell Henllys (Figure 1), are both crucial parts of the park's publicity and identity (Pembrokeshire Coast National Park 1999). Both also play important roles in educational provision, and are discussed further under that heading below. Moreover, they are also interpreted for the general public,

with facilities to cope with many thousands of visitors each year.

At Carew Castle, a range of standing remains are available for inspection, together with a famous early-medieval cross and a post-medieval tide mill. Archaeological excavations were carried out during the 1980s to discover the early history of the site and as a planning condition prior to the construction of tourist facilities, including toilets (Gerrard 1991). These have now been completely covered over, however, and so their contribution to the understanding of the site has not been as great as they might have been. Despite being a multi-period site, the castle interpretation is primarily concentrated on the early Tudor period; having a Welsh origin, this dynasty of British monarchs links local, Welsh, and British interests, and thus appeals to a wide range of visitors (Davis 1987).

Castell Henllys Iron Age fort had already been operating as a tourist attraction, in conjunction with archaeological research and training excavations, prior to its acquisition by the national park. The style of interpretation has changed radically, and has resulted in greater investment in high-quality display panels along well-managed routes, though at the loss of flexibility and personal engagement between owner and visitor (Mytum 1999a). Excavations have continued (Mytum 1999b), with

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



**Figure 1. Castell Henllys is an Iron Age inland promontory fort with substantial defences, well-preserved evidence of internal occupation and buildings, and a monumental gateway of stone.**

the result that they play an important part of the summer period attractions, when most tourists (as opposed to schools) visit the site. Here, the linking of a project run by the University of York and the national park has allowed a large-scale project to have the continuity of planning in terms of facilities, access, and resources. This has involved the park in relatively little expense, as the research institution and principal investigator obtain most of the resources and undertake the administration of the project. The archaeological expertise has also

been vital in the interpretation of the site and reconstruction of buildings on the site, continuing the work of the previous owner. As a result of this collaboration, the richness of the information, and the diversity of experiences gained by all sorts of visitors, Castell Henllys won the Heritage in Britain award at the 1996 British Archaeology awards (Figures 2, 3, and 4).

As part of the conservation ethic, research excavation is not generally encouraged within national parks, a policy also supported by English Heritage and Cadw. There have,

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



**Figure 2. Archaeological excavations at Castell Henllys.**

nevertheless, been several notable excavations within national parks which have often involved associations with the organisations, and these have had valuable benefits for interpretation. Projects which have not involved substantial direct national park input have been excluded here.

The first notable research excavations which incorporated and then led to even greater interpretation were at Royston Grange in Peak

National Park, where a long-term investigation of a particular farm was undertaken over many years by the Sheffield University, and resulted in a detailed understanding of this element of the landscape (Hodges 1991). This resulted in the Peak Park taking into ownership some of the land, and the selling off of other parts with legal conditions on its management to ensure preservation of the identified archaeological resource and access for education

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



Figure 3. The Iron Age chevaux-de-frise (arrangement of small standing stones) defences, preserved under a later defensive earthwork at Castell Henllys, is the only excavated example in Europe and is now on display to the public.



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



**Figure 4. Reconstructed structure at Castell Henllys.**

and research (Smith 1991). The archaeological research highlighted the significance and potential of the site, and led to its incorporation within direct national park management. The use of a small number of low-level interpretation panels, and some building plans recovered from excavation visible on the surface, are results of this collaboration.

The Royston Grange research project has ended, but Sheffield University has begun another collaborative project with Peak National Park at Gardom's Edge. Here again, interpretation is an important element. In this case, access can be most easily gained via the Web site on the excavation

(Sheffield University 1999).

Archaeological interpretation at a more general level is present in the literature for many of the parks, but is often merely the noting of sites of interest on suggested walks, such as lime kilns and promontory forts on Pembrokeshire Coast National Park's footpath guides, or within the context of general tourist literature. Most national park archaeologists have neither the time nor the specific training to interpret for the public. As the only professional archaeologists in isolated regions, however, they are often asked to identify or comment on finds made by local people of artefacts and structures, and many are involved in the support of local amateur groups.

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

**Education**

Interpretation specifically for children is an aspect which has become increasingly important within national parks. To justify funding and to ensure sufficient demand from schools with limited time to give within a compressed curriculum, resources offered are closely linked to specified educational requirements of the national curricula for England and Wales.

Within this context, archaeology can be found within the history curriculum, but can also be relevant in other subject areas, such as local studies, which link to geography, geology, and the environment.

Some national parks have a range of facilities for all age groups, though any archaeological element is often only available at keystage 2, because of the curricula. Lake District National Park offers units, lasting a



**Figure 5. School party visits the excavations at Castell Henllys, with explanation by a national park guide.**

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



**Figure 6. Excavation of the Iron Age gateway at Castell Henllys, which the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park intends to interpret with a full-scale *in situ* reconstruction/simulation.**

half or whole day, at the primary and secondary level, and for more advanced students in further and higher education. The range of current modules can be seen on the Web, with the Discovery walks for keystage 2 including a valley such as Borrowdale, contrasting two valleys near Glenridding (including much industrial archaeology), or consid-

ering the context of Lake Windermere. All incorporate a mixture of natural and human impacts on the landscape over time (Lake District National Park 1999).

Northumberland National Park has many assets, such as Hadrian's Wall, within its area, but many of its features are well maintained and interpreted for the public and school

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

parties by English Heritage (1997). The park has concentrated on landscape issues, linking art, geography, history, and literacy in programmes for keystages 2 and 3 which contain, to varying degrees, elements which are archaeological (Northumberland National Park 1999).

Those sites owned by national parks where research excavation and interpretation have taken place have often been given particular attention with regard to education. This has been externally recognised in a number of awards, such as the Virgin Award at the British Archaeological Awards, given for Castell Henllys in 1996, and the McGregor Award for contribution to environmental education, given for the Gardom's Edge excavation in the Peak District in 1999.

At Castell Henllys, investment has been on a significant scale, with a purpose-designed education centre (Anonymous 1994) and the provision of full-time and several part-time staff to allow a wide range of schools to be taught through the medium of either English or Welsh. There is also a video and teaching pack (DCCED 1993). The main emphasis is on keystone 2, particularly the history curriculum, but also offers links to a range of other curricula (Mytum 1999a), and the experience for school parties includes elements of role play, crafts, and study of the

reconstructed buildings. The University of York training excavation for British and European Union students (from school and universities as well as some mature students) runs every summer, as does a credit-bearing field school for overseas university students which has a wider remit (University of York 1999). The Castell Henllys training excavation is the largest of its kind running in Britain at present, and that is only possible because of the support given by Pembrokeshire Coast National Park.

The Brecon Beacons archaeologist is himself running a small archaeological education project linked primarily to keystone 2. This allows children of ages 5 and 6 to participate in excavation and finds handling at an Elizabethan manor house, as well as study standing remains, the surrounding historic landscape, and documentary sources (Brecon Beacons National Park 1999). The Snowdonia National Park archaeologist has directed training excavations, largely aimed at the adult education market, which have been conducted largely on Iron Age industrial sites.

**Conclusion**

There are many exciting initiatives in national parks which involve activities beyond the core responsibilities of planning control, conservation, and encouraging

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

tourism. Interpretation of both wider cultural landscapes and individual sites has grown considerably during the 1990s, and education programmes are now beginning to include archaeological elements where appropriate for the curricula. With so many commitments, the national park archaeologists are torn in many directions. But it is possible to gain additional staff and promote activities through opportunistic applications for funding from the European Union, English or Welsh government agencies, the lottery, and

private sponsors. Even if some such projects are inevitably temporary, many have outcomes which can last considerable periods of time. The flagship projects, such as Royston Grange and Castell Henllys, offer a lead which others may follow if the commitment is there to seize opportunities as they present themselves. Despite renewed financial pressures on recurrent funding, exciting times lie ahead for archaeology within British national parks.

#### References

- Anonymous. 1994. A hand-made link to the Iron Age. *The Architects' Journal* (6 July), 29-39.
- Berry, A. Q., and I. W. Brown, eds. 1994. *Erosion on Archaeological Earthworks: Its Prevention, Control and Repair*. Mold, Wales: Clwyd Archaeology Service.
- Brecon Beacons National Park. 1999. Web site: <<http://www.breconbeacons.org/english/archaeo-tymawr01.html>>.
- Davis, P. R. 1987. *Carew Castle*. Haverfordwest, Wales: Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority.
- DCCED [Dyfed County Council Education Department]. 1993. *Pathways to the Past. The Celts at Castell Henllys*. (Video and teacher's pack.) Haverfordwest, Wales: DCCED and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority.
- Dorling, P. 1991. Recent archaeological work in the Brecon Beacons National Park. Pp. 7-10 in White and Iles 1991.
- Edwards, R. 1991. *Fit for the Future: Report of the National Parks Review Panel*. Cheltenham: Countryside Commission.
- English Heritage. 1997. *Hadrian's Wall*. (Teacher's handbook.) London: English Heritage.
- Fleming, A. 1988. *The Dartmoor Reaves: Investigating Prehistoric Land Divisions*. London: Batsford.
- . 1998. *Swaledale: Valley of the Wild River*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gerrard, S. 1991. Carew Castle, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. Pp. 47-54 in White and Iles 1991.
- Hodges, R. 1991. *Wall-to-wall History: The Story of Royston Grange*. London: Duckworth.
- Kingston, E. J. 1997. Archaeology of the Uplands: A future for our past? M.A. thesis, Department of Archaeology, University of York.
- Lake District National Park. 1999. Web site: <<http://www.lake-district.gov.uk/educate/index.htm>>.
- Lee, G. 1994. Erosion control on Cawthorn Roman Camps. Pp. 87-92 in Berry and Brown 1994.
- Lowe, A. 1991. Archaeology and the Lake District National Park. Pp. 20-24 in White and Iles 1991.
- Mytum, H. 1999a. Pembrokeshire's pasts. Natives, invaders and Welsh archaeology: The Castell Henllys experience. Pp. 181-193 in Stone and Planel 1999.
- . 1999b. Castell Henllys. *Current Archaeology* 161.
- Northumberland National Park. 1999. Web site: <<http://www.nnpa.org.uk/edvisits.html>>.
- Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. 1999. Web site:

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

- <<http://www.pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk/english/index1.htm>>.  
Sheffield University. 1999. Web site: <<http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/geap/>>.  
Smith, K. 1991. Archaeology in the Peak District National Park: A report on progress in the last decade. Pp. 39-46 in White and Iles 1991.  
Stone, P. G., and P. G. Planel, eds. 1999. *The Constructed Past: Experimental Archaeology, Education and the Public*. London: Routledge, One World Archaeology 36.  
Taylor, C. 1991. Archaeological field survey in national parks by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. Pp. 65-68 in White and Iles 1991.  
University of York. 1999. Web site: <<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/arch/staff/sites/henllys/menu.htm>>.  
White, R. F. 1989. Conservation of the remains of the lead industry in the Yorkshire Dales. *Industrial Archaeology Review* 12, 94-104.  
———. 1991. Arresting decay: Archaeology in the Yorkshire Dales. Pp. 55-64 in White and Iles 1991.  
———. 1994. Combating Erosion in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Pp. 93-101 in Berry and Brown 1994.  
White, R. F., and R. Iles, eds. 1991. *Archaeology in National Parks*. Leyburn: National Park Staff Association and Yorkshire Dales National Park.  
Wilson, A. 1988. The excavation of Clydach Ironworks. *Industrial Archaeology Review* 11, 16-36.

**Note:** Web addresses quoted above were all accessible during November 1999.

**Harold Mytum**, Department of Archaeology, University of York, The King's Manor, York YO1 2EP, United Kingdom; [hcm1@york.ac.uk](mailto:hcm1@york.ac.uk).

