

AHRC Strategic Research Programme: Landscape and Environment Framework Seminars.

School of History, University of East Anglia, 28 June 2005: Access and Ownership.

The seminar was well-attended, with over fifty delegates (including speakers), and was generally agreed to be a useful (and enjoyable) occasion. Apart from the discussions themselves, there was much informal contact and exchange of ideas, and important new links were forged between individuals, and subject areas.

Keynote Lecture- Dr Ben Cowell

The day began with a keynote lecture from Dr Ben Cowell, English Heritage. During his lecture entitled 'The Value of Landscape' he speculated on opportunities for new research under the AHRC's Landscape and Environment Programme. His presentation included a discussion of the different values attached to landscape by a diverse range of stakeholders, how values have changed over time, how values can be measured, and what this might imply for the management of landscape. An overview of history relating to the use and ownership of the landscape and the origins of the modern day landscape preservation movement was used to contextualise why values are important for organisations involved in heritage protection. He concluded by observing that the landscape is still under threat; to counter this he stressed the importance of finding joined-up solutions between different Government departments and agencies, and developing partnerships between these organisations, Research Councils and Universities.

The keynote lecture was followed by four sessions – two in the morning, two in the afternoon – which ran in parallel. Discussion was lively – almost everybody present contributed. The main conclusions were as follows.

Session 1: The Experience of Enclosure

One major area of agreement was that many of the more complex questions about the impact of enclosure – social, economic, or environmental – are premature, because we still do not know some of the most basic things about the process. Most academic enquiry has been directed towards the geography, chronology, and effects of parliamentary enclosure, but other forms (by formal agreement, 'informal' etc) were of equal or greater importance, not only in the 'pre-parliamentary' period (the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) but also in the period after 1700. These alternative methods often had very different underlying motivations and results, in both social and landscape terms.

Research could also be usefully directed towards the way that the pre-enclosure landscape was actually used, regarded and inhabited, and common rights exercised, in the period before enclosure. Recent research has helped present a more nuanced, less romanticised view of commons and commoners, but there was an urgent need for this issue to be examined across a wider range of environments and regions. Indeed, the question of local and regional variation in the character of the pre-enclosure landscape, and the experience of enclosure, was repeatedly raised: national and international generalisations often masked considerable local differences. New sources of data could be used, but much could be learnt by revisiting old sources and asking new questions.

Nevertheless, the English enclosure experience, many contributors felt, had been abstracted, and considered in isolation from what was going on in Britain as a whole, and should also be studied against a wider context of European landscape and land use change. The extent to which enclosure could be seen as part of a wider package of social and ideological change was also emphasised, and some participants suggested that it could be viewed as one part of a much longer process of change in the balance of public/private/community rights over land, which could be usefully tracked into the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries - with recent developments in the law concerning public access to open land representing, in a sense, an important reversal of a long-term trend. The later history of commons – especially urban commons – should also be examined: too much emphasis had been placed on the middle-class interest in preserving open spaces (Commons Preservation Society etc) in the period after c.1850, and not enough on the continuing use of commons in a practical, economic way by local populations. The two views of common land might often be in conflict.

Session 2: Privacy, Possession and Design

One major point of agreement was that interdisciplinarity should not be confined to academic institutions: the latter should identify research projects which interface with other agencies. There are huge restoration projects in landscape already underway and we must bring academic research into the public domain. We should aim to contribute to some major practical debates: for example, the question of whether existing habitats are being sufficiently protected, now that there is greater provision for public access, particularly motorised access. But in addition, we should use our expertise to assist agencies (such as the National Trust) to manage access in ways which are historically meaningful. People are no longer encouraged to walk through designed landscapes, or even to approach them, in the way that was originally intended, in order that they might be correctly 'read'. We must try and recover the details of that original experience, so that it can be replicated in the modern world.

It was also agreed that the agencies representing different interest groups on any site should be brought together to give a coherent presentation – interdisciplinarity is, once again, very important here. It might well be that the unified RHSBE could facilitate this.

The notion of conflict of interest between the researcher and the agencies/government party line was raised, but the meeting was assured that the AHRC will not be the servant of public policy.

Research should be carried out into the ways in which contemporary experimental artists could provide interpretation for archaeological excavations and – in particular – historical landscapes. The example was cited of a couple working for the deaf, who taped a stretch of the Teme at Payne Knight's Downton to record the artificial changes in note of the river created by the construction of walls and hedge barriers on the riverside walk. The aural experience of a landscape is often taken for granted, or missed completely, unless uncovered by experts.

There was general agreement on the following points:

- There is no real distinction between the vernacular and the designed landscape and research should be carried out to develop this theme throughout garden/landscape history. Beauty is always combined with utility.

- More critical research should be undertaken on the 'slipperiness' of artistic images – we cannot always take them for granted, and a database of images should be produced to augment those of Harris and Strong.
- We should examine roads as 'patterns of patronage', such as the modern A38 which connects Hestercombe with Downton and has Halswell, Cookley, The Leasowes, Foxley, Downton, Hagley and Enville on it or near it.
- More research is needed into early twentieth-century photographs of gardens by major photographers like Charles Latham and those working for Country Life – again, an accessible database of images should be created.

Session 3: Possessing the Past

There was much general discussion about why people might try to 'possess' the past through landscape; the methods by which access might be achieved; and the modes of cultural authority which might be bound up with claims on the past. All were areas which the group agreed were important areas for further research. The past can be claimed and grasped for many different ends, and we should always consider how attention to the past fits within a broader temporal narrative. Landscape history should itself be seen in terms of its historical context - a new ethos of planning in the period of post-war reconstruction. Indeed, the historiography of the discipline would now be a useful focus for academic enquiry.

Issues of geographical scale were important in understanding responses to the historic landscape - debates and conflicts over definitions of the local, the regional, the county, the national etc. The 'possession of the past' also raises important questions of ethnicity: the problem about English landscape history is that it is, almost by definition, a history of white landscapes.

Session 4: Owning Nature

There was much discussion about the general areas of environmental history which should be addressed. It was argued that historians and others need to distinguish carefully between long waves of change – such as global warming – and short-term environmental events. Both are worthy of consideration, but pose different kinds of problem and raise different kinds of issues. With regard to the latter, a 'cultural history of calamity' might make a useful focus for study. An examination of how major natural disasters (including such things as the foot and mouth epidemic) have been represented and used, and have impacted across a whole range of areas, might be a useful way into examining a wider raft of topics, including change in the physical landscape. It was also suggested that the main subject areas of landscape/environmental history should be reassessed: why, for example, had there been so much work on the rural landscape and on large designed landscapes, but so little on allotments and the urban fringe?

Most agreed that research needed to focus on the relationship between broad patterns of social/institutional change, and change in the environment: and in particular on changing geographies of scale, from local (parochial/manorial) to national (Forestry Commission, planning law, Nature Conservancy etc). Many participants also urged the importance of forging closer links with those working in the natural sciences, and noted the urgent need to have an input into the formulation of environmental policies. Environmental managers were often poorly informed on questions relating to the historic environment and cultural landscape. Historians and others could help both in providing a realistic philosophical

framework for considering 'the natural' – change is normal, and the kind of environmental stasis implied in much conservation policy is not – but also in practical terms, by showing how social and economic processes, especially past forms of land management, had shaped the present natural resource. There were clear links here – given that the majority of 'semi-natural' landscapes had once been common land – with questions raised in the 'enclosure' session, regarding the need to know more about the way the pre-enclosure landscape was actually used and managed. To understand the 'natural' environment, and to conserve it in the modern world, involves a clearer understanding of the attitudes of local communities to their immediate surrounding, both in the past and in the present.

Tom Williamson, UEA