

Sensing History

An interview with Hans-Ole Hansen, founding father of the Lejre Research Centre (DK), historical workshops and inspirer to many

"In 1954, a 15 year old boy went to a cinema in Oslo. He saw a film about the Stone Age people of Norway. A couple of Children were living as Stone Age hunters on a lakeshore. They built a hut on their site and made a dugout canoe from a tree trunk. They made fish-hooks out of bone and stone arrowheads.

Since that film the boy dreamed of trying the same thing. (...) One day he began to experiment with a piece of bone, a branch in an angular shape and a flint stone. He chipped the stone until he produced some sharp edges that could cut and scrape.

Finally, his hunting weapon bore some resemblance to the type of axe used by the oldest reindeer hunters in our country for killing game.

Since he made the axe with the sharp flint edges without using modern tools, the boy knew how you can talk with your ancestors, learn from them and, with their help, understand what happens in the strange world we now live in." (Hansen 1977c)

What was the strength behind your initiatives because of which you received support of the establishment?

During 1956 – 1963 (Hansen was aged 17 – 24, ed.) I gradually demonstrated to a number of influential people – some of them friends of my parents – that the public really was interested in the concept of experimental archaeology and thereby created new and strong educational possibilities.

Professor Axel Steensberg (I studied ethnology under him) became very positive, being himself a farmers son. He let his first team of students participate in house-reconstructions.

P.V. Glob, the National Antiquarian ("rigsantikvar"), the Viscount Knud Holstein-Ledreborg, owner of a great many acres of land, and the Minister of Education, Jørgen Jørgensen, supported me, having lost first my father when I was 16 (1955), then my mother 3 years later.

In this blending of personal relations, an idea, born at the right time, the right place and in the right way became the decisive and supporting factors, probably never to occur again.

Could you sketch a picture of the cultural landscape in which you begun your activities? Was there any support or anything similar abroad on the course of your activities?

The cultural landscape was at that time completely rural with many prehistoric and historic monuments, fast running brooks, plenty of woodland and a magic of its own kind, especially land, belonging to the Manor of Ledreborg, owned by the Viscount. He offered to rent to me for 100 years the land I would point out as the best for my needs. A most generous offer, never to happen again...



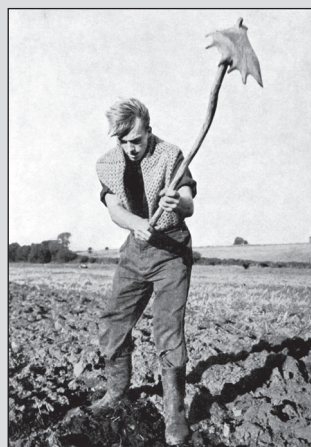
■ **Fig. 3** Not an escaped monkey! But one of the gang making the last bark tie to complete the skeleton of the house. Picture taken from: Hansen 1959: "I built a Stone Age House".

The only other place for reconstructions at that time in Denmark was that of the Hjerl Hede Museum in Jutland. But I was the first to unify science, education and historical technology into one organisation.

"The goal in Lejre was to execute comparable experiments within ethnology and experimental archaeology.

I define experimental archaeology – the dogmatic replicative process – as a tool to set up a historic recreation. The experimental archaeologist can never stand alone and be a measure to him or her, just like no single science can be set apart from its service to society. The wishes of society – the recreating of history – poses heavy demands on experimental archaeology. Traces which can be studied and analysed besides of the archaeological traces are much

more numerous than archaeological research can produce by now." (Hansen 1987)



■ **Fig. 4** Hans-Ole Hansen demonstrating working with the oldest agricultural instrument, the mattock, made of elkhorns. Picture taken from: Hansen 1959: "I built a Stone Age House".



■ **Fig. 1** Stone Age axe and pot. Drawing by Hans-Ole Hansen, (Hansen 1962: "Lerhusene i Lejre", the Danish version of the book "I built a Stone Age House").

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"Requirements for an experimental centre are:

1. Accessibility: whatever we learn about the past should belong to all people of the present and the future.
2. Education: children in particular should be able to experience and understand the past, preferably by using all their senses and a great imagination. Children should be able to trust what we communicate to them.
3. Environment: technological, chemical and biological inventions have meant increased losses



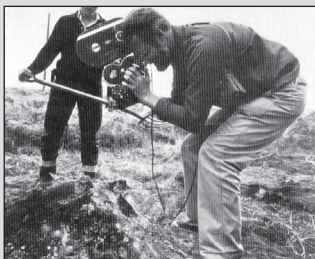
■ **Fig. 5** Tatching a roof with a group of likewise young people. Picture taken from Hansen 1964: "Mand og hus", a picture book about how to build an iron age house in modern days.



■ **Fig. 2** "The sacrificial stone had to be moved, so the early sunlight could fall on it once more". (from: Hansen 1959: "I built a Stone Age House") (still available 2nd hand).



■ **Fig. 6** Problems with the construction of an Iron Age house are solved on the spot.



■ **Fig. 8** "But everything evaporates like dew in the sun when one sees the collected results and knows that many more people than the few who helped along can experience what we experienced."



■ **Fig. 9** "Who constructs houses? Young people of course. Numerous are the working groups who have lent a hand in building houses at Lejre over the years (...) Silent, tired people – a view that has repeated itself so often that one feels like never wanting to stop." (fig. 6, 8 and 9 from Hansen 1964: "Mand og hus")

and growing threats to our lives. We are no longer in sync with our environment as we have been over the millennia." (Hansen 1986)

You were and are not alone. Who should be mentioned? Could you say a few words about them?

No one is alone when building up new possibilities. Many, many persons should be thanked for their participation for better or worse, for example the scores of volunteers who came to my assistance. I here confirm that the later director of the Danish Agricultural Museum, Mag. Art. Svend Nielsen (deceased), who (also being a farmers son) became a most strong and valuable colleague and tutor for me in the period 1963 – 68!

Later (from 1964 - 65 and onwards) a number of fine craftsmen and good practical helpers joined in the Lejre Research Centre. I must mention Arne Bjørn (deceased) (reconstructions of pottery kilns), Ninna Rathje (deceased) (ancient textile crafts) and the biologist Tove Hatting (the biology of the Gotland sheep).

Also my late wife, Bodil Hansen and my present wife, Dorte N. Hansen, who became and are supporters in the occasionally tough fight for the survival of the Lejre Centre and later the Battlefield Centre of Dybbøl.

"In Lejre, we worked 30 years with education and experiment. There is always an exchange between education and research. (...) We tried with the teaching and tourism to create a base for research. Research itself needs a lot of resources which can't be earned by the normal centre's work.

1. Archaeological and ethnographic research cannot be executed without using experimental work with ancient technology

2. Modern teaching about the past of our society, especially

in primary school, cannot be done without activities in historical workshops which catch people's attention better than books and TV

3. Culture tourism, crossing borders in language and culture, is mainly based on demonstrations and historical reconstructions with good sources in archaeology, ethnology and history.

4. Ancient technology is an important lifeboat, if our modern society were to fall apart or if people found themselves in situations where they were dependent on natural resources." (Hansen 1987)



■ **Fig. 7** Ceramics baked in open field ovens. Artist's impression of the nightly work. (from Hansen 1964: "Mand og hus")

What are the strengths of Lejre – and what are its weaknesses?

The strength of Lejre is its young, powerful and dynamic momentum. And that the results of this - over time - became educational adopted all the way up to the Danish Ministry of Education.

Its weakness was the constant lack of proper finances, as well as publications dealing with results over the first 20 years of activity.

In the early years (1964 – 1966), we were thoroughly convinced in having experimental research as our focus. Looking back now, I think we should have started as a "Summer camp research centre" and not being open all winter. We remained open because our staff was that enthusiastic. In wintertime, there is no income but the expenses keep flowing. We should have withdrawn in that period and

gone back to a small staff which would publish the experiments of the summer before.

With being open in winter, we lost money. This, and the fact we did not get any publications out made archaeologists doubt the value of the Lejre Centre. It was a difficult starting point indeed. It was PV Glob, who told me "Hans-Ole, you are not a scientist, but a teacher". He showed that the best possibility for survival for the Centre was to change our focus from research into education. This major change from a research centre into a teaching centre happened in 1967 – 68.

The main reason for me to retire in the mid 1980s was that I was burned out. I had pioneered and run the centre for 21 years, built or restored 25 houses in that time. A tired director should go, rather than stay around and for example only run the experimental part. It was not my objective to stay director for the rest of my life! I think the centre profited from my stopping. It has developed nicely since.

Dybbøl Banke is a History Centre in Southern Jutland on the 1864 war episode between the Danes, Austrians and Prussia. You founded this centre in 1992. In which respects is Dybbøl Banke different from Lejre?

In the Dybbøl Battlefield Centre the situation became quite new and different:

- It dealt with 1864 - a very late time period to reconstruct, a lot is known!
- A war-situation, not very popular.
- The situation as it is placed on „holy national ground“ produced many, and profound conflicts – which are now overcome.

Most countries have a specific place or two where the national identity has a focal point, a common reference for most people, maybe because of a



■ **Fig. 10** The first houses at Lejre, built in the years 1964-67. (Meldgaard & Rasmussen 1996: *Arkæologiske eksperimenter i Lejre*)

battle, maybe as a commemoration for the founding of the country. In Denmark this is the Dybbøl Hill, commemorating the fight between the Danes and the Germans during the 19th century and up to the first half of the 20th century. At that time both the Germans and the Danes used history and even prehistory in their eager efforts to prove, and to push the ancient cultural – and hence the political – border either further north or further south.

The plan for the History Centre opened 1992 on top of the former battlefield ground among the traces of 10 Danish redoubts, where a bit official and „fine“. At the cost of 50 mill. Dkr, (€ 6,1 million) it was not understandable for many visitors why the Danish people had built such an expensive centre for their greatest - defeat ! The answer: A people learn more from its defeats than from victories ...

There was no plan for a historical workshop function at the centre, but being the incoming director and participating in the initial planning of the centre, we introduced - inspired from Lejre - such a function.

This was accepted, and gradually expanded, so most of a Danish redoubt not only has been reconstructed, but also re-enactment, involving schools and visitors was introduced !

This was not without complication, since the idea of having

„fun“ at a former, bloody battlefield ground, did not please everybody. But gradually it became evident, that it was not for the sake of „fun“, the historical workshop and learning activities were carried through, but for the sake of keeping alive the whole history of that national place. A serious pedagogical travel into history meeting but small parts of the immense catastrophe that a war and its battles.

How does one achieve this? Take a group of school children. Let them follow a dramatic slide show (historic pictures only) and let them exercise as a gun crew on the ramparts of the redoubt. Then - suddenly - a grenade „smashes down among them“ (sound, smell) and some of them are „dead“, others „wounded severely“. „But - they shot at us !“ as one pupil once exclaimed....

This way of performing history teaching and history telling at a national commemoration place is - as far as we know - unique in the World.

Why the name 'Historical Workshop' → whose idea and concept behind it?

The name 'historical workshop' cannot be translated very well. In French for example, it sounds impossible.

The Council of Europe arranged some sessions in the late 1970s and onward where

The 8 criteria of a good project / attraction

In 1981, there was a large meeting with professionals from the tourist industry, in Helsingfors. Hans-Ole Hansen formulated here the following criteria.

1. Does it include thoughts about the future?

One should think of an activity for the sake of the future. Through this we should achieve something better than that which exists now.

2. Does it include popular, local / regional traditions as well as specialities?

Ensure that the traditions for cultural life and heritage and specialities of the region are incorporated as a part of the activities / the attraction.

3. Does it include piety for the environment of the location?

Take traditional or new environmental explanation or – protection as a starting point. The first aim is to conserve the environment.

4. Does it include the appropriate technical / practical skill?

That the participating persons are capable of managing practical tasks and the actual phenomenon of working, partly for the past cultures and technologies, partly for the actual management tasks.

5. Does it include expert and scientific aid?

Be sure that the activity / attraction is open to scientific, artistic or competent support and critique. Have for example contact with museums, libraries, research institutions and cultural centres. Take into consideration experience from existing or earlier projects of the same type.

6. Does it imply enough commercial competence?

The activity must be supplied with or (be guided well by) reasonable business feelings without violating the other 7 criteria. Economic management must not be overlooked.

7. Does it include enough voluntary interest?

That a convenient stream of voluntary help is ensured and that this type of support is prepared and used reasonably.

8. Does it include the proper amount of aimed PR work?

That the publicity of the activity is well judged.

That the balance between the wish of a large number of tourists and the other criteria is balanced in an appropriate and healthy way.

(Hansen 1982c)



■ **Fig. 12** Part of a photo sequence taken during the most impressive of all experiments in Lejre: the burning down of a constructed Iron Age house in 1967. Picture 11, 12, 13 taken from Meldgaard & Rasmussen 1996: *Arkæologiske eksperimenter i Lejre*.

we presented the Lejre approach to environmental education through history. The goal was to professionalize the environmental education.

We were in Strasbourg, setting up our historic workshop close to the cathedral and in Marseille, where we had a lot of northern African children who thought Danish were still living like Vikings and why did we live under the circumstances they had migrated from?

In the beginning of the 1970s in Lejre we trained the first Danish teachers to set up their own 'Little Lejre' in Odense, Vejle and Esbjerg. We trained them in black smith activities, weaving, pottery and such and the building of long houses. Soon groups from Holland and Sweden came. This name "historical workshops" sounded best – it was a place for developing, history in the making.

Shortly before Peter Reynolds had to move his Butser Ancient Farm from its starting place to the present situation, I was called in as an expert from Lejre and took part in the decision, where and how Reynolds magnificent new experimental site should be created.

In the southern countries (Spain, Italy), they did not really understand what we had in mind with these workshops. Maybe because they couldn't bring the academic and craft

world together. My feeling is that nowadays in Southern Europe, due to other factors and the ecomuseums, they now accept that there can be cross-overs.

What do you think of the development in historical workshops over the years?

The development of historical workshops in and outside Denmark from the 1970s onwards was all in all positive, except for some places that were arranged as 100% tourist facilities and as entertainment.

Later - today - a growing number of rather unqualified facilities are seeing daylight, not based on archaeological / ethnological research. These may have a negative influence on the very many fine places of proper reconstructions of the past.

One very positive factor is the recent donation to the modernization of the physical frames of the Centre at Lejre. Again this centre may again lead European experimental archaeology.

How do you see the future for historical workshops?

The educational and interpretive possibilities of the historical workshops all over the World has come to stay into the Future. Apart from the clear money-making tourist centres, a most valuable method has

been found, by which future man can understand hers or his ancestors in the turbulent modern world with thousands of amusement impulses, both digital and non digital.

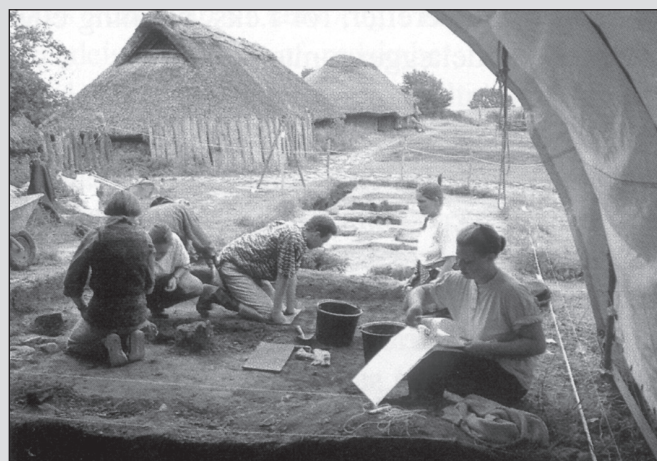
Only when all your senses are used, touching, smelling, seeing, hearing, you have been engaged to be a human being.

The historical workshops generally are orientated on techniques. We have still to see and to experience how ethics, religion, art, storytelling and psychology may be introduced, as well as more and better references to the present landscape and its heritage representing our past culture and nature (that is what my wife and I are most concerned about at the moment).

The special extra, is the historical workshops can say something about the present day environment by setting it in a cultural and time perspective. It is about time that people of today accept their responsibility to their environment. Man should learn to see the landscape as a whole, not as a collection of reserves in between man made environments.

What is the role for a national network of historical workshops?

There is an informal network in Denmark, we want to keep as a flat structure. Everybody



■ **Fig. 13** Impression of the excavation of the same house, 25 years after the fire.



■ **Fig. 11** Professor dr. Phil Axel Steensberg (left) and overinspektør dr. Phil Jørgen Troels-Smith enjoy a talk at the 25 years jubilee of the centre in 1989. Both of them have been of great importance to the Lejre Centre.

can have influence on the working group which is 'running' the network. It is important to have communication through a list of addresses, e-mail newsletters, and small meetings where we exchange craft knowledge or larger meetings where we exchange organisational knowledge.

The secret is to keep it simple and most important: to keep the communication right. The people of the workshops (there are about 55 in the network from Denmark) are so much in touch, they are constantly exchanging ideas. We don't use the network to earn money or for specific centres – what about the others then? What cannot live should die.

What is the added value of Lejre and the other historical workshops to society?

Without them, there would be much less support for archaeology and interest in the past. The historical workshops make it understandable, there is no Dane younger than 50 who has never been to a historical workshop or medieval centre.

Summary

Geschichte mit allen Sinnen spüren

Das dänische Forschungszentrum Lejre wurde mit dem Ziel gegründet, Experimente zur Ethnologie und zur experimentellen Archäologie durchzuführen, um Vergleichsdaten zu gewinnen. Die Entwicklung zeigte dabei, dass ein Wechsel des Arbeitsschwerpunktes von der Forschung zur Pädagogik der beste Weg wäre, um das Zentrum dauerhaft zu etablieren. Die Geschichtswerkstätten konzentrieren sich dabei vor allem auf Fragen der Technik. Die größte Bedeutung von Lejre und anderen Geschichtswerkstätten besteht aber darin, die Geschichte der Vorfahren auf verständliche Weise zu präsentieren. Darüber hinaus sind weitere Bemühungen notwendig, um Fragen von Ethik, Religion, Kunst und erzählender Vermittlung darstellen bzw. umsetzen zu können, was auch für Bezüge zur Landschaft und ihrem historischem Erbe gilt. Geschichtswerkstätten können ebenfalls die gegenwärtige Umwelt in eine andere kulturelle

They all understand what this is about.

The workshops should use that interest more, by going beyond their limits and go into their landscape and thus introduce them to our daily work.

What have you learnt since you built your first Stone Age house?

That experienced craftsmen and academic competence is not enough, but should be paired with competitive business quality and leadership / management and receiving proper financial conditions are vital for a successful result. Loyal co-workers, staff members as well as an engaged board of directors cannot be absent.

If there would be only one single thought, you could give to people, what would that be?

Sensing history from a basis of solid knowledge as part of every man's life.

by **Roeland Paardekooper**

und zeitliche Perspektive versetzen, um einen Beitrag zur Kenntnis von Umweltproblemen zu leisten.

Sentir l'histoire par tous les sens

Le centre de Lejre a été fondé dans le but faire des recherches, exécuter des expérimentations archéologiques et ethnographiques. Or, l'évolution a mis en évidence que pour assurer son existence continue, il vaut mieux tourner de l'attention à l'éducation.

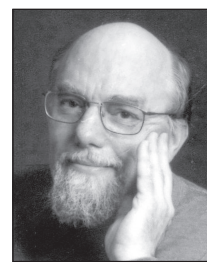
Les ateliers historiques sont voués surtout aux technologies. L'intérêt principal de Lejre et d'autres ateliers consiste en ce qu'ils permettent d'accéder à la vie de nos ancêtres. Mais, il ne faut pas s'arrêter de travailler à la manière de communiquer l'éthique, la religion, l'art ou l'art de conter, de même qu'à une meilleure façon de renvoyer au paysage culturel et ses monuments. Les ateliers sont en mesure de planter l'environnement actuel à un contexte culturel et temporel, ce qui aide à la prise de conscience de problèmes d'environnement.

Selected biography

Born on March 21st, 1939 in Fredriksberg, Copenhagen. Son of author Martin Alfred Hansen († 1955) and Vera Marie Louise Hansen, née Jensen († 1958). Married to Bodil Hansen, née Jørgensen, born January 29th 1939 († 1986). Remarried August 21st 1993 to Dorte N. Hansen, née Nielsen, born February 23rd 1954.

- 1964: with Svend Nielsen MA and professor dr. phil Axel Steensberg: founder of the Lejre Experimental Centre;
- 1966: MA in ethnology (Københavns Universitet);
- 1966-1985: director of the Lejre Experimental Centre;
- 1986 – 1988: programme consultant for the School Service;
- 1992-2004: Leader of the Historiecenter Dybbøl Banke.
- 2004-present: Project leader for the Dybbøl Banke Fund.

Counsellor at international level for archaeological open air centres and prehistoric reconstructions; Initiator of the founding of archaeological open air centres and the use of experimental archaeology and ethnologic activities in environmental education; Project consultant for the development of nature and culture information; Mediation planner



■ **Hans-Ole Hansen**
anno 1959
and
anno 2006.

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