

What is re-enactment for?

Living History groups employed by historic sites and museums should carry out careful research to ensure they are not perpetuating myths about the past.

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This article was inspired by Beverley Southgate's book *What is History For?* (2005), in which the author outlines some of the uses that history has been and should be put to. According to Southgate, history has been used to justify many things, from an unsatisfactory status quo to genocide. It can be and has been used to oppress women and minorities such as ethnic groups. However, history can also act as a force for good.

History can be used to explode myths and misconceptions about the past; it can foster empathy for the cultures of different times and, by extension, different places. Finally, it can provide historical skills of analysis and reason that can be applied in everyday life. There are also those, amongst them eminent historians, who believe that history should be done for its own sake, in an attempt to find the "truth" about the past.

The situation is similar for re-enactment. Some re-enactors do it for its own sake, enjoy-

ing the camaraderie and the immersion in a different place, almost as a form of escapism. Others do it as experimental archaeology, to test in the field theories constructed by academics. However, when Living History groups are employed by historic sites and museums to bring history to life for their visitors, these reasons are insufficient. In this age of dwindling resources for heritage it is important that the industry is seen to be contributing to society in order to secure funding.

Let us take the exploding of myths and misconceptions. A re-enactor must ensure that myths about the past are not passed on to visitors unexamined, the most common misconceptions revolve around the height and washing habits of people in the past. It is therefore important, for example, that a re-enactor knows the average height of people in the age they are representing, using more reliable evidence such as skeleton measurements rather than the height of doors. More specifically, a Tudor Living History Group in England, for instance, should be able to explain why it is no longer thought that Henry VIII died of syphilis. These points may seem unimportant on their own, but such myths are the building blocks of more serious ones.

Indeed, getting closer to the ever elusive "truth" of history and exploding such myths can foster empathy. By finding that people in the past faced problems similar to ours but saw them in a different perspective because of the culture they grew up in, can help us to understand different perspectives in the world today. It may sound pompous to claim that history has the power to end bigotry but it is important to realise that history and re-enactment can either contribute to or challenge bigoted attitudes.



■ Fig. 1 Re-enactment is now all about the visitor. (Copyright History Talking Ltd)

The best way to demonstrate the different views of the world in general is by exposing the varied interpretations of history itself. In these post-modern times it has long been acknowledged by historians that the truth about what happened in the past can never be truly known and certainly never objectively described. Not only is the record fragmentary, but every scholar of the past has put his or her own interpretation on events, coloured by their personal experiences and the assumptions present in his or her own society. Instead of trying to hide this from visitors to historic sites, it should be highlighted, having the historical skills to discern the reliability of an interpretation of the past can help people recognise the interpretations of supposed "fact" in the modern world, for example in the media.

It is important that re-enactors are aware of the ways in which they use history so as to avoid using it in dangerous ways. It should not be used to justify the status quo, this means that history should not be presented as part of a smooth progress from "primitive" to "civilised". This method is always similar to the Whig history of the nineteenth century Britain that saw the

parliamentary democracy and technological pre-eminence of Britain as the logical culmination of centuries of advancement. This, of course, is not the case and our modern western world is also not the height of civilisation. If it is lauded as such then there is always scope for its members to patronise other cultures as backwards.

It goes almost without saying that the justifying of past atrocities should be avoided. This is just as bad as pretending they didn't happen, such as ignoring the slave trade when talking about how eighteenth century English country houses were built, but condemning the perpetrators with twenty-first century eyes also does not serve history well. Is it good history to condemn Louis XIV as evil because of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and persecution of French Protestants? His actions must be surely analysed, based on the context of the late seventeenth century. Perhaps the Holocaust should be exempt from such analysis, but it can be acknowledged that anti-Semitism was widespread in Europe before the Second World War. However, the lengths to which Hitler and



■ Fig. 2 Good historic interpretation equips visitors with their own historical skills (Photograph courtesy of Buckinghamshire County Council)



■ **Figure 3:** Re-enactment isn't all about fighting, everyone can relate to clothes. (Copyright, History Talking Ltd)

his associates took their bigotry can be seen as out of place and more akin in nature to medieval witch hunts, aided by better transport and communication.

History though can also be used to oppress. By ignoring the history of certain groups, they are sidelined in modern society, although this has been addressed in recent times and there are many historians writing about women's, children's and minority groups' history. Re-enactors can also redress this balance by, ideally, including minority members in their groups or, at least, addressing their history. This does not mean, for instance, having women fighting alongside men in re-enactments societies, as this is misleading. It means acknowledging the important role that women played in battles in looking after the wounded and dead and, insalubrious as it is, providing entertainment for the troops. That fighting should be seen as the main point of many re-enactments shows how male-centric the industry is.

For example in Britain the 'Black History Month' attempts to redress the balance by recognising the ethnic minority presence in and contributions to British so-

ciety. It has become clear that there were many more people of different cultures living in and visiting Britain through the ages than has long been thought. It behoves every Living History group to research the presence of minority ethnic individuals or groups in the time they are representing. There should however be no need for a special month to celebrate minority ethnic history, it should be an essential part of everyday history.

People not only came to Britain and Europe from far-flung places, but also moved around within it. It is too easy to assume that no-one travelled in the past but, as has been shown, throughout history individuals and groups did move around, from the Early Bronze Age "Archer" buried at Amesbury, near Stonehenge, who had travelled there from Switzerland to the Irish immigrants in London of the nineteenth century. If this diversity in the past was highlighted it would dispel yet another myth. These are just a few examples of how re-enactment can avoid the subconscious supporting of a history of Britain that presents the past as some white, Anglo-Saxon, male, heterosexual, able-bodied paradise.

Whether or not Living History groups adapt their methods on reading this paper, they will still be affecting how the visitors to their events view the past. For those who do not take this on board, there is a danger that the history they present will reinforce myths, bigotry and oppression. They will present their version of the past as if it is an unassailable truth and will therefore not allow visitors to develop their own historical skills, which are useful in everyday life. It may seem scary to admit that others have different opinions to you, but if it is done well the visitors will feel empowered to have an opinion and new insights into may result.

If Living History groups do adapt their methods and are able to demonstrate the effect

they have on visitor's perceptions of history, modern issues, other people and even themselves, then it will strengthen their bids for funding of re-enactment events. Well thought out re-enactment can be used in social education programmes and when this happens, it would probably be more appropriate for re-enactment or Living History to be called historical interpretation. Live historical interpretation is not well developed in Britain as re-enactment groups currently only fulfil the needs of the managers at our historic sites and museums. However, the need to justify spending is becoming more urgent and managers will soon have to employ costumed staff who work with sound theoretical principles.

Ideas on the value and uses of live historical interpretation are much more developed in the USA and there is a great deal of accompanying literature that can be consulted. The founder of live interpretation (covering both cultural and environmental interpretation) was Freeman Tilden. His book, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957) outlines six main principles for interpretation. Perhaps the most important here is: "Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable." (Tilden: 1957, 9).

Therefore, though the challenges may seem difficult, there are ways, through a study of the techniques of presenting the past, not just content, that re-enactments can deliver on the potential outlined here.

Summary

Wozu dient Re-Enactment?

Wenn Gruppen, die "lebendige Geschichte" vorführen, von (Freilicht-)Museen damit beauftragt werden, dieses für die Besucher der Institutionen vor Ort zu tun, müssen sie versichern, dass dabei keine unwissenschaftlichen Mythen weitergegeben werden. Die historische Überlieferung ist

fragmentarisch und jeder, der sich mit Geschichte beschäftigt, fügt seine eigenen Vorstellungen hinzu, die durch persönliche Erfahrungen und die jeweils zeitgenössischen Geschichtsbilder beeinflusst sind. Aus diesem Grund muss jede Gruppe ihre eigenen Forschungen zu speziellen Themen (z. B. zu Fragen der Existenz von ethnischen Minderheiten oder Individuen innerhalb einer historischen Gesellschaft) durchführen, um der schwer fassbaren historischen Wahrheit möglichst nahe zu kommen; auch Mythen können dabei übrigens eine Dynamik entfalten, die Begeisterung und Einfühlungsvermögen für das Thema weckt. Die Kenntnis darüber, dass sich die Menschen in der Vergangenheit mit ähnlichen Problemen wie wir heute auseinandersetzen mussten - die jedoch aufgrund der andersartigen kulturellen Umwelt in einer unterschiedlichen Perspektive zu sehen sind -, kann uns auch dabei helfen, in der Gegenwart verschiedene Perspektiven in der Welt besser zu verstehen.

A quoi bon l'histoire vivante

Quand les musées et centres historiques engagent des groupes de l'histoire vivante pour qu'ils animent l'histoire aux visiteurs, il ne faut pas que ceux-ci confirment des contre-vérités. Les documents historiques sont fragmentaires et de ce fait, tout historien crée sa propre interprétation des événements, teintée de ses expériences personnelles et d'idées présentes dans la société. Par conséquent, il est nécessaire que chaque groupe de l'histoire vivante effectue ses propres recherches (p.ex. sur la présence des ethnies ou individus minoritaires) afin de s'approcher de la vérité inaccessible du passé. Sachant que dans le passé les gens affrontaient des problèmes proches des nôtres, qu'ils néanmoins percevaient d'une perspective différente, en raison de leur culture différente, il se peut qu'on puisse comprendre mieux diverses perspectives du monde actuel.

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