Learning from the Past

Archaeology of canals

The impetus to write this article arose from my attending the DES/English Heritage course "Learning from the Past" at Birmingham in April 1989. The option group I joined studied 'Canals' as an educational resource in the widest possible sense but I pursued an interest in the industrial archaeological potential of our artificial inland waterways.

Over the past twenty years as a teacher of A-level Archaeology I have had cause to help many candidates in their choice of individual study (coursework) which counts 33% of the total mark. Nor are all attracted to traditional archaeology nor are students taking the course over one academic year (as more mature students in Further Education) capable of addressing the deeper issues of, for example, prehistory within the first three weeks of their course. In this context Industrial Archaeology has provided a somewhat separate area of study the rudiments of which can be appreciated and enough so to allow fieldwork of a meaningful nature to take place fairly soon in the academic year.

The introduction of a similar coursework requirement in the LAG GCSE syllabus has underlined this point and I therefore decided to undertake that I investigate the challenge that I set my own students - the locating and archaeological recording of a canal.

At their greatest extent there were about 5000 kilometres of canals in the British Isles of which just over 50% remains navigable - the best being in varying states of neglect, some, indeed, totally erased from the landscape.

My archaeological background and familiarity with the canal system in different parts of the country have convinced me that many disused canals have left valuable evidence which allows discerning landscape detectives a chance to exercise their skills and powers of observation. Furthermore, as the waterways linked centres of commerce, they are to be found in both the rural and urban environment.

The research I carried out at Dudley was individual in nature (as is appropriate to my students) but could have been followed equally by groups of children working on different lengths or themes of the waterway, eg bridges or water supply. The tale of convenience I selected part of the Dudley No 2 Canal which skirts the southern fringe of Birmingham from Selly Oak where it joined the Worcester and Birmingham Canal to Halesowen.
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The village group

The title of the course suggested that the Past has relevance to the Present. I liked that. So often the emphasis seems to be on "learning about the Past", as if it is in some way divorced from our lives today. So we sought to demonstrate, somewhat more historically than others, I chose what came to be called "The Villages of Northfield". The group was made up of teachers from all phases of education, including a lady from Canada, and numbered twelve. We had been long-term visitors to the area before the course began and almost straight away we were invited on to a site visit. Coming from rural Norfolk I was rather surprised to find that the "village areas", in fact, part of a large Birmingham suburb! After our first view we assembled together and were offered the option of direct access to the site of a building of this local organisation - wonderful! Tony and Pete would be there to assist, after short cuts, direct us to resources as we required them but the investigation was ours. I liked that too!

We were not to work alone, we worked with Rachel Shaw from Northampton as we both came from archaeological backgrounds. We took our turn to present the concept of PLACE. We both had experience of topographical survey, but wanted to widen our skills to include documentary and other historical research. We thus intended to apply a breadth of skills to the investigation of Northfield Old Village, with a view to discovering what was and why, and what to build.

The village began with a map of the village which was clearly outlined "Conservation Areas". The questionning process was underway.

Why is this a conservation area?

Our topographical instincts led us to question the shape of the conservation area and after another tour or two to question the shapes of other important features.

Why is there an open space next to the Pastoral Centre?

Why is the 'Green' the shape it is?

Has the gravel pit always been this shape?

Our walk also led us to question some of the street names.

Why Old Moat Drive? Where is the moat?

Beef Farm Close? Was there a farm here?

Pine Close? Conifer Drive? Woodland Road? Why so many wooden names in a modern urban development?

While surveying Old Moat Drive we asked a resident if she could remember what the area looked like when it was built. Her reply revealed that prior to 1965 there had been a playing field 200 feet to the south "some prettiest gardens and the tube barn".

More Questions.

The questions we had raised now gave structure to our investigations. We pursued our enquiries which might provide some answers in Newman College library, Northfield local history library and the Local Studies Department of Birmingham Central Library. The researches and of the other members of the "Village Group" were also available and a sense of camaraderie developed as we found things out which might help someone else's investigations. We discovered maps dated from 1714 to 1935, old pictures and photographs covering a 100 year time-span; and articles and reports from various newspapers and documents. The work of our colleagues into census returns and land apportionment provided other pieces to the jig-saw. Gradually our central image of the development of this place grew.

We reached the stage where we could, fairly accurately, describe what had been, when changes had occurred and what is there today. We had some insight into the attitudes to the Past of people at different times in Northfield's history, although the process of enquiring WHY, as stated in our original intentions, would require greater investigations of wider scope.

The scheme proved less than cost effective and was abandoned. In conversation with an elderly local resident I was given a first hand account of the site at the time of abandonment - indeed my informant even recalled playing his equivalent of 5-side football in the disused tanks!

Finally, I would like to observe that while canals dominated my time in Birmingham there was a great deal of other useful activity and interchange of ideas with colleagues from a wide range of educational backgrounds and the whole week was an enlightening and rewarding experience.

Sam Gorin
Network Technical College Nottinghamshire

Display of Rachel Shaw and Lynn Sustrawski (Archaeology Liaison Officers)
FULL OR BURNT TO INVESTIGATE — USE RUBBER GLOVES.

TO PLAY THE DUSTBIN GAME YOU NEED: ONE DUSTBIN

Did you know?

When you have finished your picnic or Barbecue:

- Empty out your picnic or barbecue dustbin into the dustbin you are using for the picnic.
- Wash your picnic equipment after use to prevent future problems.

How many other uses are there for this container?

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