

From the Museum Perspective: *promoting and safeguarding expressions of ‘spirit of place’ in North East England*

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Abstract: At the very heart of any ‘spirit of place’ are the varied and shared meanings and values amongst individuals and groups in relation to a particular location and its heritage. With respect to promoting and safeguarding ‘spirit of place’, little attention has been given to the contributions museums can and are currently making. Traditionally, museums have been involved with collecting aspects of heritage *from* communities, thereby, creating a separation between heritage, community and place. Although such activities tend to ignore the interconnectedness of these three entities, there are museums that engage, however small the scale, with these relationships and contribute to their promotion and safeguarding. Based on an examination of the projects and activities of three museums within the North East of England, it is argued that a potential role can exist through close cooperation with local communities, the true owners of ‘spirit of place’.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to suggest that museums can play a role in the promotion and safeguarding of a certain, communal ‘spirit of place’ through active engagement with its local communities. Specifically, this paper seeks to provide insight into an array of museological practices regarding the promotion and safeguarding of certain expressions of ‘spirit of place’ in the North East of England. This has been achieved through an examination of the efforts of three museums based on document analysis, observation and in-depth interviews with the museum curators, who can also be considered head managers in these three instances. All three museums engage in a variety of promotional and educational programmes, as well as projects that aim to sustain integral links to their local communities. Although most of these efforts are on a small scale, it is through them that certain ‘spirits of places’ have been promoted and safeguarded because of a close cooperation with local community members. Interestingly, little attention has been placed on the potential role museums can play and, most importantly, what roles they are currently fulfilling that contribute to the promotion and safeguarding of particular ‘spirits of place.’ In essence, the insight this paper provides brings new possibilities to the debate surrounding the museological role in promoting and safeguarding ‘spirit of place’.

This first section, the introduction, seeks to bridge the notions of ‘spirit of place’ and that of museum function regarding the connections between heritage, community and place. The second section will examine three museums in the North East of England and their promotional, educational and safeguarding efforts as mentioned above. A

concluding discussion, section three, will suggest that a potential does exist for museums to be involved with the promotion and safeguarding of ‘spirit of place’ based on the examination of the museum efforts previously presented.

1.1 ‘SPIRIT OF PLACE’ AND THE MUSEUM CONTEXT

Davis (1999) has stressed the fact that the promotion and safeguarding of senses and spirits of place cannot be achieved through traditional museum efforts. This is to say that museums have generally been involved with detaching particular items of a communal heritage from their natural contexts by bringing them into the museum. This activity severs, for example, senses of belonging, pride and place – and truly the significance, meanings and values embedded within – that are held within the heritage by its communities, those people who live outside the museum context (Stefano and Corsane, 2008:348). Davis (1999:21) phrases this succinctly by saying, “the essence of place lies beyond the museum, in the environment itself, and is defined by the individuals and communities who live there”. Rodman (2003:212) also asserts that the idea of place is both ‘multilocal’ and ‘multivocal’. Meaning, a place may have shared values amongst a group of people, however these values vary for each inhabitant and place. She states:

“Finally, a single landscape can be multilocal in the sense that it shapes and expresses polysemic meanings of place for different users. This is more accurately a multivocal dimension of place, but multilocality conveys the idea that a single place may be experienced quite differently” (ibid).

Understandably, dealing with a multitude of meanings, or a plethora of expressions of place, regarding a specific locality can be problematic for the traditional museum concerned with presenting ‘expert’ interpretations of all that lies outside its walls (Davis 1999:32). Nonetheless, Rodman (2003: 208) notes that “the links in these chains of experienced places are forged of culture and history”. Crang (1998:108) also mentions that the phrase ‘spirit of place’ “suggests that people experience something beyond the physical or sensory properties of places” and that through literature or the arts, “people can express these meanings”.

Interestingly, history, culture, literature and the arts, as expressions of place, share a common ground with what most museums regularly seek to preserve (ICOM 2001: article 2). Moreover, Smith (2006: 56) argues that whether the heritage at hand is tangible or intangible, “we are actually engaging with a set of values and meanings, including such elements as emotion, memory and cultural knowledge and experiences”. On the whole, what is needed within museums is a shift from the ‘expert’ interpretation of heritages and their places to an inclusion of the meanings, values and significance attributed to them by the local communities. Davis (1999:21), again, phrases this well by stating:

“In effect, a new philosophy is needed that leads to the empowerment of local communities, providing them not only with a mechanism for rescuing an artefact, a habitat or a way of life from loss or destruction but also a means of expressing a deep conviction to preserve and deepen a sense of place”.

Although Davis is referring to the ecomuseum philosophy of rendering full authority over heritage management efforts to local populations, museums do have the potential for working more closely with local communities in order to promote and safeguard the more immaterial aspects of heritage, such as ‘spirit of place’ (see for instance Corsane 2006a, 2006b for the ecomuseum ideal; Corsane et al 2008 for ecomuseology and ‘spirit of place’). The Ecomuseum ideal can provide a way forward for promoting and safeguarding ‘spirit of place’, however there are museums making valuable contributions that resonate with this philosophy. This is especially true of museums that are heavily dependent on the local community for survival – be it through employment, educational programmes and more general input on content, as examples. As studied in the following section, museums can invite local communities to express their ‘spirits of place’ within the museum setting. They can also celebrate the history and culture of a specific locality outside of the museum with the participation of local community members. Moreover, museums can rely on local citizens through employment or voluntary services, especially if this was always the case, as encountered at the Heatherslaw Corn Mill discussed in the next section.

2. The Promotional and Safeguarding Efforts of Three Museums in the North East

The following sections will examine the safeguarding efforts of three museums, The Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum, Heatherslaw Corn Mill, and the Borough Museum and Art Gallery, in North East England. These three were chosen from a preliminary survey of six museums which involved a series of visits and in-depth interviews with curators or managers, depending on the museum. The museums outlined below were selected due to the fulfilment of at least one of the following criteria, although the studied projects consisted of varying combinations of all three:

1. Ongoing promotional efforts related to a certain ‘spirit of place’.
2. Ongoing educational efforts related to a certain ‘spirit of place’.
3. Efforts to sustain a certain ‘spirit of place’ in the local community.

It is important to note that all six museums are engaged with educational and promotional efforts regarding a certain communal heritage of their corresponding areas. However, the museums chosen for this paper were found to be most clearly engaged with what can be referred to as a firm ‘spirit of place’. This was, again, revealed from analysis of mission statements and forward plans, as well as visits and in-depth interviews with those in charge. The in-depth interviewing method was chosen due to the exploratory character of this study. Questions were of an open-ended nature in order to capture both facts and underlying attitudes about the importance of promoting and safeguarding intangible aspects of heritage, such as expressions of ‘spirit of place’.

In general, it was found that the Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum is involved with an array of promotional efforts that safeguard the ‘spirit of place’ that is associated with the Northumbrian bagpipes living traditions, as discussed in the following section. Educational efforts through theatrical performances and shows were seen as also safeguarding a ‘spirit of place’ in the region of Berwick upon Tweed (Northern

Northumberland County) at the Borough Museum and Art Gallery. Heatherslaw Corn Mill, a museum with a working mill, employs the local citizenry in an effort to maintain a 'spirit of place' that has always been integral to the operation, life and social history of the area within which the mill has been located for, at least, 700 years. In addition, educational activities concerned with the lives of the people of the mill and local estate throughout history seek to further enhance an experience of this particular place, especially with young visitors. The following sections will examine these practices in further detail.

2.1 MORPETH CHANTRY BAGPIPE MUSEUM, MORPETH

Dedicated to the bagpipe instrument and its many forms from Scotland, Ireland and Europe, the Bagpipe Museum, as it is more commonly called, strongly focuses on the Northumbrian Smallpipe and the Border pipe, two instruments that are particular to the North East of England. The museum was established in 1971 when W.A. Cocks bequeathed his collection of instruments, manuscripts, letters and memorabilia to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In 1987, the collection was transferred to the Chantry building, a thirteenth century church, in the town of Morpeth in Northumberland County. Located on the first floor of the church building, there are two exhibition areas displaying both bagpipes and text panels with information ranging from medieval times to the more recent story of the Cocks Collection.

According to its mission statement, the museum "exists to promote an awareness and appreciation of the bagpipe, its music and its history, with specific reference to its Northumbrian heritage" (Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum 2006). This 'Northumbrian heritage' refers to the centuries of bagpipe making, playing and composing of music that has taken place within the modern-day counties of Durham, Tyne and Wear and Northumberland. The earliest record of a Northumbrian-style Smallpipe is from 1695 and the names of prominent pipers of the region started to emerge in the eighteenth century (Say 2003). Nonetheless, this strong connection between heritage and place – the homeland of these bagpipe traditions – is not one that has lived only in the past. Currently, pipers can be found at regional festivals, workshops and amongst informal pub gatherings. The painstaking handcrafting of the pipes also continues due to a rather steady demand. Music is still being composed in a style which compliments the tunes of the past and, yet, resonates with more contemporary influences. Through these living traditions, a certain 'spirit of place' continues to develop and thrive.

From an ongoing study presented elsewhere (see Corsane et al 2008), a particular 'spirit of place' is expressed through an involvement in the living traditions of the Northumbrian Smallpipe and folk music circuit of the region. It must be stated that all consulted bagpipers consider themselves part of the more general folk music traditions of the region since they can play regional tunes on a variety of instruments ranging from the flute to the fiddle. Additionally, the informal playing sessions throughout the region consist of musicians playing together on all different instruments. In any case, based on a preliminary stage of interviews with twenty musicians about their motivations for participation, significant senses of belonging and pride have been articulated. In general, multi-layered relationships between the heritages of the traditions, the region and the community itself have emerged as sources for both these feelings of attachment, belonging and pride. It has been argued that these senses of belonging and pride can be

seen as the roots for a communal expression of ‘spirit of place’ amongst these musicians (Corsane et al 2008). The next two subsections will present two ways in which the Bagpipe Museum currently promotes and safeguards this particular ‘spirit of place’. This is based on document analysis, observation and an interview with the only paid member of staff, the curator.

The key methods for safeguarding the ‘spirit of place’ that is associated with the Northumbrian Smallpipes living tradition are through the museum’s promotional efforts. This purpose is specifically addressed in a statement about the role of the museum, which is as follows:

“The purpose of Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum is to collect, document, preserve, exhibit and interpret the bagpipe and its development in the British Isles and Europe from the earliest times to the present day, with particular emphasis on Northumberland, Tyneside and the Borders. It sets out to display this in a form that is attractive and accessible to all, and to promote it within the region and beyond” (Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum 2006).

This section focuses on two ways in which the museum promotes the “bagpipe and its development” within the North East region, the place to which the aforementioned ‘spirit of place’ corresponds. In general, these promotional efforts can be divided into two museum activities, discussed in the next two subsections. The first subsection will examine the museum as an ‘access point’ for information regarding both the bagpipes and the traditions that continue to live outside the museum walls. The second discussion will centre on the museum as a venue for bringing the communities of these living traditions into the actual exhibition spaces.

2.1.1 Museum as ‘Access Point’

The Bagpipe Museum has a wealth of information for those seeking to learn more about the Northumbrian Smallpipes and folk music traditions of the region. For instance, the gift shop has a large assortment of compact discs of contemporary (and deceased) well-known pipers, as well as centuries-old tune books and educational materials for players at all levels. In addition to viewing bagpipes on display, selections of the shop music can be heard on the overhead sound system, which is played throughout the museum. For those who would like to learn to play the Northumbrian Smallpipes (or Border pipes), information on local teachers, piping societies, festivals and informal gatherings is available from the volunteers who can be found at the reception desk. Nonetheless, the most important role the museum plays as an access point is through holding the meetings of the Northumbrian Pipers’ Society (NPS) twice a month. Although this role may overlap with the following discussion on the museum as a venue, having NPS meetings in the museum also increases visitor access to these living traditions. The museum curator feels that these meetings have educational benefits since the society members usually play the instruments and are on-hand to answer any questions. Moreover, this partnership between the NPS and the museum has helped increase society membership and overall popularity of these living piping traditions. In the words of the curator:

“The museum has been open for twenty-one years this year and I am absolutely positive that because we’re here, the pipers’ society has got record

membership...I think when I first got involved, they had maybe 400 members and now they have nearly twice that...I don't think that that's a coincidence...I think that it's a general thing that people are more interested in folk traditions than perhaps they were...I mean, I know people who come here and they don't play anything, but they go away with a list of addresses".

As an access point, the museum opens doors to this particular expression of 'spirit of place' that is continuing to evolve and thrive in the surrounding region. The museum raises awareness of the networks of people playing these instruments and tunes and, in turn, centralises itself as a point of entry into this world. Interestingly, further to what is currently being done, the creation of a website with information regarding workshops, concerts, and teachers, among other useful facts, is being planned for the immediate future. This is intended to enhance access for a larger audience of internet users within the region and beyond and, therefore, fits well into the promotional purpose of the museum, as quoted above.



Figure 1. A piper practicing before a NPS competition in the main exhibition space

2.1.2 Museum as Venue

In addition to being the NPS meeting place, the museum also acts as a venue for school programmes, performances and competitions. These events occur throughout the year and provide a site at which the local communities, musicians and museum staff can interact and learn from each other. Aside from promoting awareness of the living traditions as examined in the previous subsection, acting as a venue also strengthens the cohesion between the enthusiasts of these folk music networks. Not only are new audiences coming in contact with these living traditions, but the musicians, themselves, are given valuable opportunities to come together and express their 'spirit of place'. Furthermore, the NPS has been in existence since 1928 and, as mentioned earlier, this partnership with the museum helps ensure its future survival simply by providing a place to convene. This is especially true of the competitions that are held once a year since certain standards of technique in bagpipe making, playing and musical composition are

upheld and maintained by the community. Here, the museum is seeking to both promote and preserve the playing of regional music. The curator notes, “if you look in the display cases, many of the sets of Northumbrian pipes are aesthetically pleasing in themselves, but on the other hand they no longer play music and the music is the important bit...not so much the vessels that are used to make it”. It is evident that an emphasis is placed on the music and by inviting musicians in to perform and compete, the museum setting itself becomes more alive and the living traditions are continually rejuvenated. Similarly, the ‘sense of place’ expressed by these living traditions has found both a promotional site and home for well-keeping.

2.2 HEATHERSLAW CORN MILL, HEATHERSLAW

In 1973, The Heatherslaw Corn Mill Trust was created in order to renovate and preserve a pre-existing nineteenth century mill that is part of the neighbouring Ford and Etal Estates. The earliest known records of a mill on this site date back to 702 years ago. The mill has acquired working-museum status in the years after the trust was established and continues to function today producing locally-grown flour during visiting hours. Its mission is as follows:

“The mill exists to show people the ancient methods of water milling to produce cereal products from the locally grown crops. It also demonstrates the uses of water power and gearing in its most basic forms and over the years has become of greater importance as the world has moved to computer chips and less visible forms of power. It also serves to illustrate the importance of the mill in social history of a rural community such as Ford Estate” (Heatherslaw Corn Mill Trust 2007).

In general, there is a strong emphasis placed upon the relationship, throughout time, between the local land, its inhabitants and the mill. Indeed, from talking with the Mill Manager, who also acts as the Museum Curator, this relationship is of the utmost concern to the museum. Moreover, it appears that the interconnectedness of the social history of this locality and the function of the mill are what constitute a ‘spirit of place’ in this instance. The manager states, “It’s not just about the building...this was always an integral part of the community and without it, the community couldn’t function and we’re trying to recapture that aim by showing people social history, explaining what life was like throughout the ages”. Nonetheless, local community members are employed within the museum, which brings this ‘spirit of place’ into a contemporary context. The manager has noted that the mill remains within the ‘structure of the estate’ thereby allowing the museum to work closely with the carpenters, agricultural engineers and other skilled workers of the area. Through this, the museum seeks to sustain its ‘spirit of place’, expressed by the links between the mill and the local inhabitants, well into the future. The following discussion will outline reasons for various educational activities that further support these promotional and safeguarding activities.

Recently, local and social history has become more emphasized within the national curriculum of England. With this in mind, the museum feels that “the mill would provide an opportunity to unite the various groups whilst, at the same time, showing the importance of the mill within the local community throughout history”

(Heatherslaw Corn Mill Trust 2007). Already, the museum engages local school groups through story-telling activities that range from the recent past back through to medieval times. The manager mentions that although these stories are generally from an earlier period of time, it is through them that the living ‘spirit of place’ of the mill and its area is expressed. She states that:

“The stories help to perpetuate the idea that it’s a living place and not a museum itself...some people almost treat this whole area as a theme park and I’m quite sure that one or two of them think that at five o’clock at night, we shut everything down, shut the North of Northumberland and go back to the city – they forget it’s a living community still”.

An example of this took place in the past two years with a group of local high-school students studying *The Miller’s Tale* from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The students were brought into the museum to learn the techniques of milling as well as the links to local history in order to shed light on the story through actual first-hand experiences of a working mill. Moreover, a regional acting troupe was hired to perform excerpts from the tale and further enhance the students’ understanding of mill life. Examples such as this one demonstrate the importance attributed to the ‘spirit of place’ of the local area, which is, again, the connection between the operation of the mill and its local communities.

Another way in which the museum seeks to safeguard this ‘spirit of place’ is through increasing awareness of the actual tie between the wheat farms surrounding the mill and the techniques of turning the wheat into flour. The museum has recognized that there is a heightened interest in locally-produced food within England (Heatherslaw Corn Mill Trust 2007). Additionally, there is a growing concern for healthy eating, a sentiment that goes hand-in-hand with the consumption of locally-sourced foods. Aside from educating visitors on the full, local process of making the flour, a Traditional Corn Mill Guild was created in order to preserve the knowledge that is involved with its production. This guild has ties with other working mills throughout England and seeks to train those who are interested in the specific skills and techniques needed. It also seeks to ensure that the quality of mill products is maintained through advice and assistance programmes. Passing this knowledge on is an essential practice of the museum since it ensures that the machinery will be able to continue working and that its contribution to the ‘spirit of place’ can further develop. When talking about the importance of an operating mill in relation to other museum functions, the manager mentions that,

“Every single aspect that we can pass on is as important...without one, then the rest is not relevant...so, they all dove-tail into each other...without a miller being capable of actually coming in here and producing flour, you wouldn’t have people coming to see the place in this great of a number if it wasn’t moving...it’s the fact that it moves and it does make flour and people can see it...and that then leads off into all kinds of different areas that we can keep living”.

Here, it is apparent that the actual working of the mill is central to the ‘sense of place’ promoted at Heatherslaw. Overall, this is promoted through the active passage of knowledge on mill operation through the guild, and other educational projects with local

school children. Moreover, the employment of local citizens and the knowledge they provide also sustains the historical ties between the mill and its territory, its true ‘sense of place’.

2.3 THE BOROUGH MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, BERWICK UPON TWEED

The Borough Museum and Art Gallery is most concerned with the history and culture of the Borough of Berwick, a region in Northern Northumberland, near to the Scottish border. Being that Berwick was an important military post for several hundreds of years, the museum is situated in the city barracks which were built in the early eighteenth century. Most of its collection consists of historical objects from the area that are used in displays to tell various stories of Berwick throughout the ages. The museum is also known for its Burrell Collection of decorative pieces and fine art, including paintings by Degas, Maris and Boudin. Out of five main museum aims, the following three are most relevant to this study:

- Research into history and culture of Berwick Borough.
- Undertaking educational work with schools and other groups.
- Doing outreach projects throughout the Borough for the benefit for residents and visitors (Berwick upon Tweed Borough Council 2007).

In order to keep this discussion brief, one ongoing activity, theatrical performances and shows, which integrates all three of these above aims will be examined. Again, this data has been collected through document analysis, observation and two in-depth interviews with the curator, who is also the museum manager.

Since the 1990’s, the museum has been involved with almost thirty different theatrical performances and shows that are usually in partnership with the Maltings Theatre and Arts Centre, also located in Berwick. Generally, these projects have sought to highlight a certain period of time or aspect of Berwick’s history. One example from 2000 is a show entitled *From Cheviot to the Coast: a Musical Celebration*, where the history of the borough through the centuries was celebrated in four shows of music, readings and comic performances by local amateurs. The museum places activities such as this under the term ‘outreach’ since these performances are held outside of the museum in various locations and local community members are involved (Berwick Borough Museum 2007). Nonetheless, it can be argued that through this outreach work a certain ‘spirit of place’ is expressed, promoted and thereby safeguarded. From the curator’s point of view, by bringing the historical research of the museum out into the community – to church groups, youth groups and festival events – a ‘wider audience is being engaged’. Although he admits that safeguarding a ‘spirit of place’ was not the exact intent of these projects, he does believe it is occurring mainly because of the participation of younger community members. He feels that the youth of any community is where “the vitality of one’s culture is actually at” and to involve them in museum activities is to connect to the life or, ‘spirit of place’, that exists in the surrounding area. In 2006, the youth theatre of the Maltings teamed up with the museum to re-enact the famous city myth that Berwick is still at war with Russia. This is apparently due to the fact that the city was excluded from the official 1856 peace treaty of the Crimean War.

In any case, the young actors performed a drama about the arrival of the Russian cannon, which rests on the city ramparts, during a weekend of events regarding the 150th anniversary of this continuing, yet fictitious, war.

Aside from in-house educational activities with school children, these theatrical performances and shows constitute the main method by which the museum promotes the living history and traditions of the Berwick region. This is due in part to the interests of the curator who, in addition to his museum work, is a playwright and actor. His interests have led to numerous collaborations with local theatre troupes, musicians and poets, to name a few. Nonetheless, at the heart of these projects is the active engagement of the local community both as audience and as participants. This engagement has been targeted at younger members of the area since they vibrantly express the ‘spirit of place’ of Berwick.

3. Conclusions

This paper has provided three examples of museums collaborating with local communities in efforts to promote and safeguard the connection between living heritage and locality. The playing, making and musical composition associated with the Northumbrian bagpipes, the working of a local mill, the dramatic re-enactments of local stories and the celebration of living traditions can be seen as strong contributions to the promotion and safeguarding of ‘spirits of place’. Indeed, these activities and programmes are heavily dependent on the input and overall desire of local individuals and groups – those who hold the significance, meanings and values of a particular place. The Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum acts as both a point of access for the wider world of piping outside its doors, as well as a venue for bringing these living traditions into the museum setting. This can only occur with the acceptance of the folk musicians and other individuals who see this opportunity as beneficial to the survival of their beloved living traditions and their connections to the North East region. Furthermore, the Heatherslaw Corn Mill could not function without the time, energy and enthusiasm of local farmers, carpenters, millers and museum staff. The connection between them and the operation of the mill is integral for the promotion of the spirit of this unique place. Moreover, the theatre troupe of the Borough Museum and Art Gallery and its partnerships with local youth groups also promotes an integral connection between the celebrated local heritage and its communities.

Again, the main aim of this paper is to suggest that there is a potential, contributory role for museums in promoting and safeguarding ‘spirit of place’. As presented throughout the second section, it appears that in order to promote and safeguard these intangible connections between heritage and place, museum professionals should venture out into the community. Through the forging of relationships between museums and local populations, the ‘spirits of place’ that are shared by individuals and groups can be discovered. It is then in the hands of museum staff to want to promote and safeguard these expressions of ‘spirit of place’ – to celebrate them both outside and inside the museum with, most significantly, the cooperation and enthusiasm of those who call them their own.

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