CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

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## DANGER! HISTORY AT WORK: A CRITICAL CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO IRONBRIDGE GORGE MUSEUM(1)

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# DANGER! HISTORY AT WORK:
# A CRITICAL CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO THE IRONBRIDGE GORGE MUSEUM[1]

by

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# C O N T E N T S

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## Introduction

In the Autumn of 1982 we finally took possession of a late nineteenth century end terrace house in Madeley, Shropshire, a small township designated as part of Telford New Town - 'The Birth Place of Industry'. For the past decade the Ironbridge Gorge ('where in 1709 the world's industrial revolution began'), has been a regular haunt of ours for family outings from the West Midlands. In a sense our interest in the area exactly reflects the most recent phase of the increasing lure of historical tourism in general, and the gradual ascendancy and expansion of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust (hereafter the Trust) in particular. Indeed, our new house stands opposite one of the Trust's most popular sites - The Blists Hill Open Air Museum - from which noise and smoke, both rumoured to be authentic artifacts of nineteenth century industrialism, pervade the valley. Moreover, the adjacent local pub - the All Nations - famed among CAMRA members for a decade or more, is the haunt of strange anachronisms and fossils from over the road. Here at lunch-time at the bar one finds young men in sub-Victorian garb; heavy hobnail boots, plain serge trousers or mock Halifax corduroy gathered at the waist with binder-twine, hauled up with wide braces, pulled to at the ankle with gaiters. Old jackets, dull, nondescript but suggestively 'old', open to reveal grubby collarless workingmen's shirts, or the occasional plain waistcoat perhaps with the stylish flourish of a watch fob and chain. Needless to say, these phantoms of the past-present quaff real ale, 'brewed traditionally', itself a sort of liquid history bearing silent witness against the present. Tending old machines at the museum is a thirsty business.

The first time I stumbled upon this scene I had thoughts of an entrenched local conservatism, or of a place visited by Dr. Who's Tardis, or even of a sinister youth sub-culture inspired by Thatcher's trenchant 'Victorian values'. On all counts I was not equally wrong, of course, because after all, what I had happened upon was simply history at work! But if being nonplussed by these spectres was my response, precipitate careful research into past editions of History Workshop Journal might have forewarned me of their imminence. Barrie Trinder, the Trust's 'honorary historian', set the stage so artfully in an ebullient and enthusiastic article on the Musuem. He said: 'In Ironbridge it is possible still to drink in some of the pubs where those who heaved into place the ribs of the Iron Bridge must have refreshed themselves'. (Trinder, 1976, p.175). Many years have passed since this cautious

fantasy was aired, years through which the historical imagination has taken its toll of young men and women just around the corner from the famous Iron Bridge. Yet I am not just referring to those who contract to 'dress up' to add a benign face to a particularly ruthless epoch, but to the countless coach loads of school-children, and pleasure seeking families as well, who are daily 'educated' into this very partial imagined community of 'the past'.

This article is an attempt to come to terms with some of these issues, by way of an analysis of the development of the Trust and through a critical account of the kind of history on offer within its museum. My argument begins with what I call the political economy of the Museum Trust; the way in which it was founded, then funded and run. In this section I discuss the Trust in terms of the development of historical tourism, arguing that it is deeply involved in the history-making business. I am concerned at this point to examine the ways in which the Museum develops its image and the process through which it legitimates its view of the past, and its own sense of self-importance as educator and historian. Indeed, this section concludes with a discussion of the Trust's philosophy of museum-making, and the kinds of interpretive assumptions it makes about history.

Part Two of this article appears in the form of a history trail - if you trust me I will be your guide to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum. In this capacity I will attempt to deconstruct these sites, as a highly critical consumer, examining the Museum for its biases and absences. I hope to show the ways in which industrial archaeology cleans up history providing a fiction that I call 'the past'. This is an illusion, but at times more a romance, that hides class struggle, and the oppression of women, preferring a technicist framework with nationalist and masculinist values tied to the assumptions of the dominant classes. My tour around Ironbridge will give a brief description of most of the Museum sites but concentrate on two in particular, the Severn Warehouse Visitor Centre and the Blists Hill Open Air Museum. Throughout Part Two I will be concerned to show some of the ways in which ideas of 'the past' are articulated across the whole field of public representations of history. Overall, but especially in my two extended descriptive sections, I will concentrate on analysing some of the different forms of museum practice that represent 'the past' as idyll and utopia. This will include a discussion of the different forms of memory, some aspects of the relationship between the public and the private, and how these relate to

popular pleasure. My theme, the purpose of writing this piece, is to try and capture some of the complexity involved in the relationship between history and politics.

PART ONE: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

In the early months of 1967 what was to become the Telford Development Corporation appointed a Working Party on Industrial Archaeology. This all-male working party was called upon to assess the historical value of the Coalbrookdale, Ironbridge and Blists Hill areas of East Shropshire. Infused with a sense of reverence for the past and an exaggerated sense of importance for the locality, the members set about their own self-consciously historic mission. Reading the Final Report of the Working Party gives one an insight into the structure of feeling of this group,[2] which developed its ideas at the interface of a tension between a sense of a vanishing 'great' industrial past and a contemporary desire to conserve old buildings and machines from the 'ravishings' of time; this is the stuff of which the 'National Heritage' is made. The threat of loss is felt to be more manifest and the act of recovery more urgent if the artifacts under consideration are given world-historical significance. The Working Party had just such a taken-for-granted attitude about the importance of the area - 'one of the classic industrial regions of the world' - and of the role of local, individual human agents - 'without the achievements of the Quaker, Abraham Darby I, the industrial revolution would have been impossible' (Final Report of the Working Party, p.2 & p.4). With these assumptions in place the necessity to conserve was paramount and obvious.

Apart from recognising the central importance of the iron bridge itself, the aims of the Working Party concentrated on two main ideas. In the first instance, they were concerned that the whole area could be used 'in telling the history of British industry in a manner not attempted elsewhere in the country' (p.3). This meant making Coalbrookdale what they called a 'living museum', an aim best achieved in their view by requesting the County Council to designate part of the town a conservation area. Central to this part of the scheme was the proposed transfer of Darby's old furnace and its associated museum of iron from Allied Iron Founders Ltd., who presently owned it and agreed to the proposal. The overall scheme also meant developing Blists Hill as a 'public park' - 'demonstrating an industrial story of unique interest in an almost ideal setting' - on a long lease at a nominal rent from the Telford Development Corporation (p.8).

The second aim of the Working Party was to propose a way of administering such a proposal, and they suggested a public company, registered under the Companies Act, 1848, but limited by guarantee. This organisation,

to be named the Ironbridge Gordge Museum Trust Limited, would be non-profit making and would attempt to register as a charity. Its main aims, apart from the desire for 'public participation', would be as follows:

> To secure the preservation, restoration, improvement, enhancement and maintenance of features and objects of historical, domestic and industrial interest in the area of Dawley New Town (now Telford) and the surrounding districts of East Shropshire, including the provision of museums and the organisation of meetings, exhibitions, lectures, publications and other forms of instruction relevant to the historical, domestic and industrial development of East Shropshire. (p.13)

The Working Party estimated that this ambitious programme required an equally ambitious capital sum of £500,000 and an estimated annual revenue expenditure of £15,000 after the initial period of growth. Both sums would soon be superseded. The first problem of the nascent Trust was to find a way to raise such money while still remaining an 'independent museum'. Like many organisations before and since, the Trust prepared applications for the 'big charities' like the Ford Foundation and the Gulbenkien Trust. However, given the Trust's emphasis upon industrial archaeology, letters were written to the chairmen of the largest British companies, and an Appeals Brochure was produced in 1969 to court industry 'for support in recording their own industrial heritage'. At this initial stage the British Steel Corporation made the largest donation, but over the years the Trust has received help on a broad front from local companies like the ironcasting firm of Glynwed Ltd., or the brewers Mitchells and Butlers; nationalised industries like the Coal Board and British Rail; and local companies with huge national and international interests like Tarmac Ltd. (the silo building contractors at Greenham Common Air Base). It is the intimacy between the Trust and the management structure of organisations like these - and the assumptions they share - that renders the Trust's idea of 'independence' a very relative one. What they all have in common is a professional-managerial view of the significance of historical artifacts, and the Museum faithfully reproduces this view in relics radically separated from their social relations.

The Trust could not survive on money from industry alone, nor could it simply rely on the wits of its trustees to raise funds. The task of fund-raising was given over to a separate body, the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Development Trust, that would attempt to recruit financial support

throughout the country. Charitable status, money from charities, benefactors and Trust Presidents with big pockets, and independent fund-raising feasibility studies all helped cash flow for the acquisition of new sites throughout the 1970s. Yet another tier of support came from local and national government. All the local urban district councils have at one time contributed funds to the Trust, but by far the most important regional source of support comes from the Telford Development Corporation which has carried out a number of projects to facilitate the general aims of the Museum. These works have mostly been landscaping the immediate vicinity of museum sites, which adds to the general impression that the Trust is expanding its physical control of the area ever outwards. National government has been generous too, with the Department of the Environment giving large lump sums and latterly funding the Museum through the National Heritage Memorial Fund, set up under the National Heritage Act (1980). Again, this level of commitment represents a set of shared assumptions specifically around constructing a particular version of 'the past' that rests on an idea of 'English culture', now conveniently expanded to include 'industrial heritage' as part of 'the nation' officially sanctioned for cultural consumption.

The great irony of all this is that while the Trustees were making friends in high places and influencing the right people, the brunt of the field-work necessary to make the museum a reality, was done by volunteers or those for whom consent was not an issue. The 'Friends of Ironbridge Gorge Museum' was formed in 1969, and their labour, not to mention their annual subscription fee, has helped support the Museum ever since. In the early days it was a case of volunteering to help to clear sites and renovate old machinery, but more recently the 'Friends', especially at weekends, take on the role of 'interpretive guides' or fully costumed 'exhibit demonstrators'. It has been argued that this is an educational experience in itself.

> Everyone who becomes involved with a restoration project enters a learning situation, whether he is a skilled engineer re-assembling a steam engine, or one of a group of schoolboys digging mud out of a canal. Everyone who volunteers to guide visitors on a site, places himself in a situation where he has a great incentive to learn and to ask questions about history.
>
> (Trinder, 1976, p.175)

Reading this description one could be excused for thinking that the restoration and interpretive work was only carried out by boys and men.

But the male-centredness of this description belies the fact that the 'Friends' has a large female membership although its actual deployment, like its discursive absence here, often occurs within a wholly male framework of 'women's work'. But more of this later.

The attractiveness of free labour makes the early Annual Reports of the Trust read like the opening salvo of a military tattoo. Once the Trustees had recognised that clearing scrub and debris could be called a 'training exercise', the military could hardly be expected to resist the opportunity. Consequently the Royal Engineers and the Territorial and Army Volunteer Reserve could help prepare the ground for this cultural struggle over hearts and minds, while at the same time practicing for more bloody manoeuvres. Other sources of labour were more obviously coercive. In 1972 the Trustees assisted in a conference on 'Manpower and Museums', at which the Home Office, local authorities and the Museum's Association were invited to discuss the use of prison labour in museum work. The Trust had already been using boys from the Stoke Heath Borstal Institute, and in 1973 it was offered a pilot scheme known as the Ironbridge Community Service Project, under the Community Service Provision of the 1972 Criminal Justice Act. (Annual Reports, 1971-72, and 1972-73). 'Community Service' is a nice idea if only it weren't so coercive and the courts so treacherous, but the Trustees have a strong sense of their own benign interest in 'the community' so they tend not to notice these issues.

This has become increasingly obvious with the inception of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), and the unique opportunity it offers employers to appear to be benevolent to the unemployed on the one hand, while actually benefiting from exploiting their cheap labour on the other. I know that the MSC has funded all sorts of politically innovative and popular projects, like the Bradford Oral History programme and the South Wales Miners' Library, but the fact remains that this is part of a deeply insidious process. One which systematically institutes <u>low</u> wages as a <u>norm</u>, and is rightly regarded with deep suspicion, especially by unemployed youngsters, who are so often prevailed upon to take up employment on MSC schemes. In the year 1976-1977 when the Trust announced that £1 million had been raised on its behalf, it successfully applied for eight projects under the MSC Job Creation Scheme. Initially these jobs consisted of library cataloguing, book binding, painting and decorating, and general estate maintenance. As the MSC expanded its <u>own</u> sphere of influence with the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) and the Special Temporary Employment Programme (STEP), so the Trust continued to develop its own interest in these schemes. With MSC money the Trust was able to set up

the Jackfield Tile Workshop and Training Centre for the renovation of old tiles and the manufacuring of 'modern' tiles from old moulds. But when MSC scrapped STEP the Trust was less than pleased, probably because this meant losing low waged adult workers already socialised into work discipline, only to be replaced by unsocialised, unskilled 16 - 19 year olds on project-based work experience schemes (Annual Report, 1979-80). However, the Trust has done well out of the MSC; it had had access to £743,000 by 1980 and currently relies on an annual subsidised labour force of 200-250. In short, the Museum has reaped the benefits and contributed towards the policing of the crisis of youth unemployment, and all this is a very long way from the blighted vision of 'public participation' set out in the Final Report of the Working Party.

Yet the topic of the political economy of museum making is not reducible to the deployment of donated capital and the mobilisation of free or cheap labour, firstly, because the Museum could not function without the continuity provided by full-time staff. This was recognised early on in 1970 with the employment of two full-time employees and, as the Museum has grown, with the exception of the mid '70s crisis, the number of part-and full-time staff has increased to the current level of 76 (Annual Report, 1982). Thus, there is considerable complexity in the employment structure of the Museum. The workforce is deeply stratified and sometimes at odds with one another. This is inevitable in the different terms of employment and the hierarchies of the wage form, not forgetting the voluntary sector as well. MSC scheme employees and their supervisors often see themselves inhabiting the lower ranks, the labouring classes. There is a definite class antagonism between them and the Friends of the Museum. This is most obvious at weekends when the Scheme workers are displaced by the Friends who have priority over them, and hence can choose which exhibits they wish to demonstrate to the public. At another level, some of the full-time site demonstrators, show a tremendous antipathy towards management, being prepared to speak angrily to strangers about the apparently opulent 'wining and dining' that takes place to secure publicity, finance and historical artifacts. Then there are the 'professional' employees and the academic advisors, not to mention the white collar, clerical and secretarial staff. Presumably they too have their critical opinions about how the museum is run, although of course, that is more difficult to canvas as a casual visitor.

The success or failure of the Museum depended upon the Trust's ability to negotiate, and to some extent develop, the terrain of historical

tourism. Therefore it is not by coincidence that a recent job description for a senior research fellow, funded by Leverhulme, talks of the Museum Trust as a 'brand leader'. It is clear that however else the Museum views itself, as educator and recoverer of 'the past', it is always acutely aware of the market place and the packaging and selling of history. In the very early years the Trust had 'open days', when visitors could examine the progress being made, especially at Blists Hill. The first of these in 1969 attracted 600 people and saw the earliest attempt to begin marketing the area, something that has been enhanced by the parallel advertising of Telford New Town. Visitors could buy souvenirs like 'Brosely clay pipes, tea towels, prints of the iron bridge, pottery mugs and ashtrays' (Annual Report, 1969-70). These attempts at selling were amateurish compared with what was to follow, as the Trust became increasingly self-conscious about how to encourage and anticipate the 'visitor business' (Annual Report, 1981). Having begun on the basis of casual opening hours, by 1974, with the first year of full scale operations behind them, the Museum now had 100,000 visitors. Ironically this coincided with the beginnings of the fuel crisis and the threat of petrol shortages, but this only increased the Trust's interest in the structure of the visitor market; surveys of 'visitor origins' and 'visitor responses' were the outward signs of a financial inquisitiveness about the leisure and travelling habits of the public (Annual Reports, 1973-74 and 1974-75). And while the gate receipts improved, running costs escalated, and entrance ticket prices climbed steadily to mark the influence of inflation and changes in VAT assessments. The full price combined ticket for all the sites currently stands at £3.50p (as at December, 1985) with reductions for pensioners, students and school parties.

The Trust's running costs were not just paid off with the money taken through gate receipts, but through the careful nurturing of the lucrative potential of a wide range of sourvenirs. In 1973, 45,000 museum guides were sold and by 1983 the Museum produced its own Publications List containing over 150 items available in its shops and through mail order. Beyond the full range of museum guides, information sheets, teaching aids, etc., there are postcards, transparencies, posters, prints and books. Indeed this side of the operation became so significant that in February 1978 the Trust established the Ironbridge Gorge Trading Company Ltd., which is held in covenant to transfer all its profits to the Museum Trust every year. Clearly the Trustees see no conflict of interest between offering up 'the past' as a museum piece and selling 'the past' as a commodity. We could hardly expect there to be anything but this most

intimate of relationships between history-making and commodity production, but I have a sneaking suspicion that to some extent what is identified as representative of 'the past', has been chosen on the basis that it primarily lends itself to the production or display of tempting souvenirs. Thus, increasingly the commodity side of this museum business, really does set the terms of how 'the past' is made available to us. Hence each museum site now has either a 'sales point' or a fully blown shop, like those at the Coalbrookdale Museum of Iron and the Coalport China Museum. Yet even with all these lucrative outlets the Trust has still had lean years of running on an overdraft (Annual Report, 1979-80).

The process of marketing and the desire to control the visitor's experience has had two other consequences. You may recall that the initial aim of the Working Party for Blists Hill was for an unusual 'public park' containing industrial artifacts. Well, this rather amorphous idea for public access was quickly superseded although never openly discussed as such, and by the early 1970s the Trust was pleased to accept the gift of some 'unclimbable fencing' for the site. This would stop 'unauthorised entry' and the area would be 'protected from trespass', thus 'enabling visitor entry to be regulated and an entrance fee charged'. It also necessitated an 'opening ceremony' (Annual Reports 1971-72 and 1972-73). In effect this was the moment of making public space private. The public would be actively encouraged to attend as if it were public space, but 'bourgeois public space', where the terms of reference like the organisation of the space itself, would be inscribed, more or less, by the moral, political, economic - hegemonic - values of the bourgeois classes (Bommes & Wright, 1982, pp.255-264).

The second consequence of wanting to define the visitor experience had more reflexive effects. We might call this effect image control, that well known desire amongst those who seek to organise our pleasure to fashion the spectacle in a uniform sort of way. The Trust began to develop this in 1972 with an 'integrated design image to be extended.... to embrace all interpretive facilities, publications, signposting, staff uniforms and all visual aspects of the Museum's work' (Annual Report, 1973-74). What emerged were tasteful signs with white lettering on blue-black backgrounds, and the proliferation of a stylised Ironbridge logo that appeared on the backs of postcards, the fronts of books and even on all the local district road and motorway signs in the area. At regular intervals the signs go through a change of image. Now it's red on white, a bit more insistent, but still managing to convey an idea of good taste.

It's a kind of aesthetic morality, for surely it's no 'mere' promise of proletarian pleasure, nothing gaudy you understand, but a solid invitation to a 'respectable' day out that is also an historical education. In one sense this is evidently a self-image for the Museum's policy-makers, but it's obviously important to produce a pleasing aesthetic, in the highly competitive image-conscious world of advertising.

To succeed this identifiable image had to become known and not just locally. The Trust reckoned that the Museum had become established, and had 'acquired a national reputation' as early as 1973 largely due to the national press, BBC TV. and the Open University (Annual Report, 1972-73). Furthermore, the Museum has become integrated into a number of networks that guarantee it access to the public gaze, like the English Tourist Board, the Heart of England Tourist Board and, latterly, through the television marketing of the Wrekin District Council. Most recently the Trust has become involved in an aggressive local venture, a marketing consortium known as the Wrekin Heritage Association. This represents the interests of a number of local tourist attractions besides the Trust, like the Severn Valley Railway, Cosford Aerospace Museum and the Midland Motor Museum at Bridgnorth. The Wrekin Heritage Association organises advertising exhibitions in major centres of population, and has already put on 'road shows' in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield (Annual Report, 1981).

An impressive cast list of trustees, like the Earl of Plymouth, Lady Labourchere or Sir Monty Finneston - cash flow, visitor numbers and advertising all facilitate the process of legitimization. But like a First Division football team, success is marked by the size of the trophy cabinet in the directors' office and the array of awards attached to the history of the club. Doubtless the Trust would claim First Division status and championship honours, from a run of success that began in 1973 with the British Tourist Authorities 'Come to Britain Trophy'. Then in European Architectural Heritage Year the Museum won the Special Civic Trust Medallion, but the really major accolades followed in the mid 1970s. In 1977 the Trust accepted the Museum of the Year Award, presented annually by National Heritage and sponsored by the Illustrated London News. In the following year came the greatest prize of all, the European Museum of the Year Award, a direct result of the previous years success. Taken together, the Trust saw the two awards as placing 'Ironbridge firmly and irrevocably in the forefront of the nation's consciousness', and with the resultant increase in gate receipts estimated the joint value of the awards to be about £20,000 (Annual Report, 1977-78).

Moreover the process of legitimization has other networks, to put it crudely, the establishment, and more particularly, the monarchy. When Prince Philip presented the Museum with the Special Civic Trust Medallion, he did so as a national-historical figure, located within a network of popular expectations around ceremony and pageantry. Yet the real coup in this respect came in the bicentenary year of the Iron Bridge when the Prince of Wales became the living centre-piece of the festivities. The Executive Board's Annual Report captures exactly the sense of awe, reverence and subjugation necessary to translate and retain the cultural capital of a visiting prince and heir to the throne:

> Undoubtedly the high point of the year, and indeed the Museum's development so far, was the visit to the Ironbridge Gorge on 5 July 1979 of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Coinciding almost to the day with the two hundredth anniversary of the completion of the arch of the Iron Bridge across the River Severn His Royal Highness' visit was a fitting and appropriate tribute to the great pioneers of the eighteenth century who built this outstanding symbol of the Industrial Revolution.
>
> (Annual Report, 1979-80)

This passage celebrates an ensemble of interests: the entreprenurial spirit, the majesty of a prince, the work of the Trustees - all for the most part 'great' men - located within a sense of the national past-present. After his visit to a number of Museum sites, the Prince responded in kind; he 'honoured the Trust and Development Trust by becoming their patron'. In the end, though, the success of the Museum is not reducible to any one of these contributing factors, and the situation has to be understood in all its complexity. Indeed to raise a capital sum of £2.7 million in slightly less than fifteen years is evidence enough of the ascendant status of this diverse, competitive and persuasive enterprise.

So far, then, I have concentrated upon how the political economy of the Museum Trust has worked to develop the area into a major attraction for historical tourism. In doing this I have, for the most part, purposely avoided discussing the philosophy of the Museum, both in terms of the kinds of history it provides and in terms of its role as a formal and informal educator. However, these are crucial issues, in no sense simply separated from the level of the political economy, despite the necessary organisation of my argument. In many ways the political economy, and the shared assumptions at work there, prefigure the framing of the museum

experience as I've already hinted, which also means it structures the content and form of the history on display. Of course while it closes down history, it cannot remove the possibility that visitors might frequently be resistant to particular versions of 'the past', and keen to make their own alternative readings of the exhibits and their settings. This structuring of the Museum will become more obvious in Part Two, during my guided tour of the Museum, but for the meantime let me turn to an account of the Trust as educator and historian.

A cursory look back to the aims of the Trust set out in the Final Report of the Working Party indicates the central importance accorded its role as bona fide history teacher; indeed the Museum was established as an educational Trust. The Museum produces, with the B.P. Educational Service, its own Teachers Handbook that describes all the museums; it gives teachers advice about how to organise school trips, what time will be necessary for each viewing, and which Museum publications will be most appropriate as teaching aids. It describes the area as 'a superb open air classroom', 'a unique environment', 'for nowhere is it possible to study so many imposing monuments of this most significant period of our past in such a limited area' (Ironbridge Gorge Teachers Handbook,n.d. p.3). Over the years the Trust's capacity to attract school parties has been impressive. In the early days by far the majority of visitors to the Coalbrookdale Museum of Iron were schoolchildren, and by the mid 1970s the Trust was boasting of 40,000 visitors from educational institutions. From their research it was found that the majority of these came from within a forty mile radius, although a signficant number of parties visited from Merseyside, and a smaller number from even further afield: London, Cornwall and Scotland (Annual Report, 1973-74). By the 1980s with the Museum receiving about 200,000 visitors per annum, the number of these on educational visits was approximately half.(3)

Being an educator is only half of the Museum's projected aim, as the Report of the Executive Board in 1974 makes clear:

> The primary function of any museum is to conserve - to acquire and protect for posterity material of cultural value and importance. But in doing this it is essential that sight is not lost of the people for whom that material is being kept, the scholars and schoolchildren, overseas visitors and local residents whose heritage the Museum has the responsibility and privilege to guard.
>
> (Annual Report, 1973-74)

Here the emphasis is upon the already self-evidently important significance of specific artifacts, the concommitant logic of preservation and the implicit modes of interpretation; these being constructed through a sense of uniqueness, the inalienable character of the sites suggesting an almost mystical, or religious significance attached to the notion of 'heritage'. This gives the aire of an extraordinary claim to power, for those who see themselves as the guardians of 'the past'. Yet despite the different constituencies of visitor and the potential contradictions structured into their different experiences, and therefore their different needs, the Museum doesn't appear to be overly self-analytical about its interpretive role.

Thus, while Barrie Trinder appears to signal a corrective to my argument, the promise is an empty one:

> It is equally important to consider how evidence is interpreted to the public. It is all too easy in a textbook or a conventional indoor museum to portray innovations as the achievements of individual inventors or entrepreneurs, without regard for their effect on society. The advantage of far-reaching conservation schemes like those at....Ironbridge is that it is impossible in such settings to avoid asking a whole range of questions about the impact of innovations.

Yes, impossible not to ask questions, equally impossible to find answers, although Trinder does hint at why the answers might have become so elusive:

> The case for conserving buildings, processes and communities should not be that they aid one side or other in any of these debates (about the Industrial Revolution), but that they provide new levels of understanding of the issues involved.
>
> (Trinder, 1976, p.174)

But this is a bland empiricism of the worst kind, the 'value-free' variety to which much of history-making still has a quaint attachment. It sustains the idea that it doesn't take sides, only stands as 'evidence' for the moment when 'truth' wins out in the end. Needless to say the vacuum produced in this way cleans up the past, sucking it dry of all radical political potential, putting its faith in artifacts and technical processes, ignoring the social relations of production,, and setting history on a trajectory of blind debate within the parameters of celebration and shared

illusions about an increasingly fanciful idea of 'the past'. This despite the disclaimers, is a dominant and largely conservative history in the making.

In its own terms of reference the Trust is evidently concerned to produce 'clear historical messages',[4] which are argued to be 'in response to a growing awareness of the significance of the Industrial Revolution in the history of this country and of the world'. Moreover, and this is the Trust's real claim to sophistication and competence as historian, the Museum is a symbol of,

> a growing recognition that it is through field studies in places like the Ironbridge Gorge that a fuller understanding of the period can be gained, that meanings and relationships can be revealed through the use of original objects in an original landscape.
>
> (Teachers Handbook, n.d., Foreword)

The operational assumption here is that the Museum does provide a cogent and thoroughgoing analysis of the Industrial Revolution, and not merely a celebration with analytical overtones. This is an assertion that is only made possible through the inalienable authenticity of artifacts and sites. Indeed the claim to authenticity is a crucial one for the Trust, as it represents another facet of the process of legitimization equally as important as the seal of approval given by royal patronage. Thus, to be found peddling something other than a measured and rigorous account of the past, would tip the balance between commercialism and academic credibility in the direction of money for dreams, illusions and fantasies. Yes, and in my view it is a fanciful history that the Museum Trust is in the business of selling.

## PART TWO: DOWN MEMORY LANE? A GUIDED TOUR INTO 'THE PAST'

It is almost impossible, as my introduction playfully suggested, not to begin a general description of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum empire without making some wildly grandiose claims for the area. This inference is so well established that, like a psychologist's word association test, the merest suggestion of the name Ironbridge brings forth the irresistable urge to utter superlatives of an historical variety. So I'll avoid the temptation of stating as others have done, that the Iron Bridge is the 'eighth wonder of the world'.[5] Instead I'll begin by saying that it's a rather impressive piece of innovative manufacturing and engineering skill,

that stands as a particularly impressive monument to the emergent industrial bourgeoisie of the latter half of the eighteenth century. I will also say that it represents exploited labour, a shift in work patterns, discipline and time; and that it is a symbol of manufacturing capital and commodity production. However, most of these meanings are not manifest in Ironbridge but remain latent and for the most part lost, in the technicist framework through which the bridge appears as industrial archaeology.

That the bridge represents the past as technology is undeniable, but its present appeal as a tourist attraction encourages a broader set of meanings. The bridge is a kind of promenading place, a pedestrian precinct that affords fine views of this always muddy and treacherous river, as it wends its way through the narrow wooded gorge. Tourists have been visiting this site for more than a century, they come and go like the swifts and swallows that dart above their heads; just as seasonal, just as fleeting. It's a good place to eat ice-creams and gaze absent-mindedly into the middle distance. It's somewhere, especially from its apex, where boys indulge in spitting competitions, or those with a horticultural eye, inspect the tidy gardens of the bridge's neighbours. With so many visitors about, concentrated in the summer months, the bridge acts as an impromptu grandstand for the occasional raft race, or it stands in for the village green as a suitable site for the dances of the Morris Men. These ancient fellows of yore, as 'traditional' as the real ale they slop and as 'ancient' as the most recent folk revival, add a degree of colour and male bon ami to this bustling focal point. The bridge is undoubtedly the legitimate centre-piece of this huge and daily growing history-making colony on the banks of the River Severn. Furthermore, it is one of the few Ironbridge Gorge Museum sites that is open and free, but which at times becomes lost in the array of other attractions vying for your attention where money, and not just historical imagination or memory, is the passport to 'enlightenment' and pleasure.

The Ironbridge Gorge Museum kingdom consists of a whole panorama of historical sites spread over six square miles of the Severn Gorge. Taking the bridge itself as the pivotal point, the rest of the complex spacially might be seen to represent the two sides of a horseshoe. Following the imprint round, or rather making forays in either direction, takes in more than two centuries and shouldn't be attempted in one day. Even two days at the rate of one century at a time seems to represent a rapacious appetite, and confirms the modern tendency to gorge on the past. The Trust

suggests a suitable starting point is at the Severn Warehouse Visitor Centre, just a short distance along the western arm of the horseshoe.

The Severn Warehouse Visitor Centre

The Severn Warehouse Visitor Centre stands raised upon its own wharfage on the banks of the River Severn. Built by the Coalbrookdale Company in 1840 as a warehouse and major distribution centre for the Darby's ironware, it was restored by the Trust in the years between 1974 and 1977. According to the Teachers Handbook the Trust regard the site as a key one, in as much as it is intended to contextualise the other museums and explain the significance of the locality in relation to the rise of industrialisation generally. Thus the museum's brief is an ambitious one, to bring together the local, national and international dimensions of the transformations taking place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Teachers Handbook, n.d., p.5). From the outside the building exhibits all the curiosities of a functional industrial warehouse given over to mock gothic; a profusion of buttresses, castellated battlements and arched windows all set off with two sham turrets. This is a curious blend of industrial, military and ecclesiastic styles, but, given the loving care of the renovation, obviously of even greater significance to the present.

Inside the museum, the foyer has the feeling of good contemporary interior design. The old and the new are nicely integrated in an archtectural vision, that apes a version of a private domestic form, Habitat chic. This is important because it does make you feel comfortable, but its ambiance is that of the most heavily privatised sector of 'bourgeois public space': it's clean, tidy, with a cosy temperature, an eye to detail with its clever lighting effects, and of course a 'sales point' for Museum publications, postcards, slides, a small range of books, badges and school india rubbers. The museum proper begins in the foyer opposite the 'sales point' with a set of images and accounts, deriving from those members of the leisured classes who visited the area in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Interspersed with these there is a part finished brick wall with open cast-iron window that helps break this space up, but most visitors pass rapidly through this section to the 'auditorium'; a forty seater cinema where they sit, watch and listen to an audiovisual presentation. Missing the previous section is rendered nugatory here as a twelve minute slide and tape presentation saysit all. Here the structure of feeling of the overall intended experience is presented; that set of

ideas that inscribe the aims and philosophy of the Trust itself.

Images of industrialisation and local industrial processes follow one another in quick succession, some of them are evocative and highly coloured, and some of them include scenes from the labour process but the latter go unremarked upon. The audio tape, produced with assistance from Beacon Radio the Wolverhampton based commercial station, is of a man's voice. He starts off assertively, persuasively, and his is the voice of male power/knowledge only occasionally needing to be bolstered by music, notably when talking about the Great Exhibition of 1851 ('pomp') and the scenic beauty of the locality ('pastoral'). But these are simply foils to his rash superlatives and seductive blandishments.

> Welcome to the Ironbridge Gorge. The most extraordinary district in the world. Here events took place that were to change the life of mankind - events which set in train the Industrial Revolution in Britain. During the eighteenth century this country became the world's first industrial nation; during the nineteenth, the workshop of the world. If any single place can claim to be the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution then this part of the Severn Valley in Shropshire can amply justify that claim.

This opening salvo, the founding myth we might say, is picked up elsewhere in the wide range of materials produced by, and on behalf of, the Trust. Indeed it seems to have been infectious. Neil Cossons, Director of the Trust from 1972-1982, waxed lyrical and classical when he opined that the Ironbridge Gorge stood 'with ancient Egypt, Athens or Rome as a place of outstanding significance in the evolution of man', (Teachers Handbook, n.d., Foreword), and as if to prove that nothing is new when it comes to cleaning up the past, Barrie Trinder gushed: 'The Industrial Revolution was Great Britain's greatest single contribution to world civilization' (Trinder, 1976, p.172).(6)

Hyperbole of this sort is familiar enough, it appears in countless guises throughout contemporary culture in numerous forms, sites and practices, each contributing to a sense of the national past. Of course, this has a number of effects, all of them serious and worth worrying about. Firstly, it elevates 'the nation' to a position of that of the prime mover; 'we' are all 'national' subjects, part of an 'imagined community' where unknown strangers share an image of communion and comradeship constituted through a personal stake in the 'national past' and the national destiny - 'we' become trans-historical subjects.(7) The voice of

the audio-visual show asserts this as 'our' common bond, just as surely as such imaginings shun any mention of real inequality and exploitation on the national and international stage. Secondly, I always feel that the absent centre of this structure of feeling is a racist one, that actively excludes a whole set of ethnic histories and non-white experiences. On this occasion it is specifically to do with the infallible genius of the white English/British 'race', who 'civilise' while they industrialise, but there are more and less sophisticated versions of this. My third observation concerns the specific character of English/British nationalism, and that is to point out that it is constituted through regionalism. This is the most manifest message of the text; in attempting to establish the world-historical significance of the Ironbridge Gorge it insists that local issues can effect 'the life of mankind', and this distinctive localism is what makes Britain 'Great'.

There are other elements besides, that turn a twelve minute slide show into a near perfect little cameo of conservative historiography. Underpinning the celebration of national and regional greatness are a set of assumptions about 'Man' and 'Nature'. This relationship that facilitated the eighteenth century when 'innovation after innovation poured from the Gorge', is all about technological determinism on the one hand and male romance on the other. Technological progress is encapsulated by reference to innovation, 'charcoal to coke', or through the availablility of raw materials like coal, iron ore, limestone, clay, water power, a navigable river, and that magic ingredient 'manpower'. The means of production are here in abundance but never one word for the relations between technological change, the labour process, capital investment and profit. On the other hand, the narrative of male romance is abundantly clear, the images of fire and smoke are heroic ones, and the names of Abraham Darby, William Reynolds, Richard Trevithick and Thomas Telford slip from the tongue like a roll of honour at a stag party. The emphasis here is upon patriarchal lineage, male bonding and competition between men. Industrial and class power seem to be synonymous with a wholly favourable view of a particular form of public masculinity - rugged, hardworking, gifted, innovative and so on. This 'race of giant sons' as one of the ironmasters affectionately referred to them in 1871 is lovingly reproduced here to the glorification of these male values, and ruling class values at that; liberal individualism and the entreprenurial spirit hacking out a destiny in good old 'mother nature's bosom'. The remainder of the audio-visual show is a brief account of industrial decline and eventual dereliction, counterposed against the

phoenix-like rise of the Trust. This gives me grounds to think that there is a great deal of cultural capital to be accrued by the custodians, who can claim to have recovered this moment of world-historical significance, bringing it forward to the present, there to be nurtured into a proliferation of contemporary meanings.

Leaving the 'auditorium' the next experience is of a completely different order. Indeed the formal presentation of each exhibit provides the framework for different kinds of visitor experience. After the audio-visual programme the next stage of the exhibit purports to 'show something of the impact of industrialisation elsewhere in Britain' (Teachers Handbook, n.d., p.5). In other words this is one of the Museum's rare attempts to come to terms with an account of the social consequences of industrial capitalism. After the visual pleasure of the colour slides the subsequent static black and white images taken from etchings and drawings of child labour, working-class housing, urbanism, etc., hold little or no appeal. These representations are presented in conjunction with quotations from the Report of the Children's Employment Commission 1842, passages from Engels' The Condition of the Working Classes in England (sic), some private correspondence of the eminent, and other similar sources reproduced on up-right wall-hanging panels, sometimes set at right-angles to one another. No doubt the recourse to black and white is intended to inscribe a bleak sense of documentary realism, while the quotes struggle to hold the attention of even the most knowledge-hungry scholar shuffling between right-angled corners, gazing guiltily around to see how much more there is to read, feeling, furthermore, that one should be interested in this. (The attendant passed comment on my refreshing but unusually assiduous study of these). And of course the experience makes me uncomfortable, doubly so, for on the one hand the quotations and images are purely descriptive, lacking any analytical component whatsoever, and secondly, this stark presentation of history rebuffs the visitor with its didactic tone rather like a fusty Cambridge Regius Professor delivering a lecture. In effect this kind of history threatens to deaden the mind; it puts you to sleep and prepares you for more portentous dreams inculcated elsewhere.

The form and content of this kind of pedagogic history-making smacks of a quite specific compromise within the dynamics of the past-present relation. It seems to say: the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution are important, but not intrinsically interesting or relevant to a contemporary celebration of technological progress and the entrepreneurial spirit, or rather, not relevant to the essence of these

captured in the mystical nationalism of the idea of English/British genius. In a sense social history only seems to occur here as a pre-emptive defence against the possibility of withering criticisms from visiting or itinerant social historians, sensitized to its possible absence! Probably in the same vein, the passages from Engels, divested of any of his seering distaste for capitalism, are intended as an olive branch for the more 'liberal-minded' of socialists. As yet there are no manifest concessions to the kinds of knowledge produced by the contemporary women's movement or anti-racist struggles, but given time....? Yet perhaps it's all less conscious than this. Is it history-making as catharsis, but with only a mild self-flagellation for the Museum propogandists that after all leaves the original sin unpunished? Because while this version of 'the past' sanitises history , it certainly removes gender, class and race oppressions.

This is very much a case of one facet of the 'historical apparatus' at work contributing towards a dominant memory of the past. Images and ideas of the past divested of causes, forces and relations of power can be found throughout 'the field of public representations of history'.(Popular Memory Group, 1982, pp.205-215). Furthermore, as a dominant form it deliniates the kinds of questions posed of the past for the present, and helps map out the sorts of feelings we all have about our positions within the social-historical world. Clearly if questions of English/British genius are implicitly given more importance than questions of the nature of oppression, then this has certain determining and compromising consequences for learning and thinking about international, national, local and personal histories. The ironic 'realism' of the black and white representations has to be seen in terms of the seductiveness of the colour slide show, with its sincere male voice attempting to persuade us of the 'real' significance of the epoch. That the knowledge provided in the former is stripped of all radical political meaning, is in the end as important as the fact that this form of representation makes the content infinitely forgetable. In other words, this is but a moment in the process of making the dominant memory a popular one, a process which is founded upon a continual re-working of the terrain of social amnesia.

However, this produced sense of history as forgetfulness is not common to every exhibit in the Severn Warehouse. The black and white images are punctuated by a good example of one of the more progressive trends in museology, as the Teachers Handbook explains:

> The impact of industrial growth on the lives of ordinary people is illustrated by a section through a typical

> middle class home of about 1900. Many of the fittings, furniture and domestic objects demonstrate how the new techniques of factory mass-production affected each aspect of everyday life.
>
> (Teachers Handbook, n.d., p.5)

The route through the museum passes through this foreshortened and abbreviated 'house' within a warehouse, with the upper floor of the dwelling cut away to reveal a small bedroom and lavatory. The downstairs of kitchen and parlour is sufficiently stocked with artifacts to be pleasing to the gaze and prompting to the memory. Yet it is the everyday life aspect of the exhibit that is important and not the suggestion of its typicality, or that the artifacts convey how the new technology affected 'ordinary' lives. In my view, the latter is quite hidden with no reference to the relation between production and consumption, and no obvious comparisons being made to earlier domestic arrangements. Nevertheless one effect that this exhibit has on the visitor is a positive one, partly because - I'm sure without realising - it moves from a more public, official, male historical discourse into the realm of the personal; the private remembrance of family, household and domestic life. Loitering nearby I noted that this exhibit became the catalyst for brief self-examinations; it draws forth personal comparisons, narratives and anecdotes about the home, about family, grandparents, mothers and domestic labour. Significantly women visitors on the whole were more interested in this, much more vocal, and clearly about to assert some kind of control over the history-making process. Dominant memory is to some extent contested at this point, or potentially so anyway, but unfortunately in the end this potential is not made use of. Instead the trajectory of history-making slips back into the image-on-the-wall approach, and the visitor's make the final dash to the exit door, giving polite perusal to a collection of photographs outlining the restoration of the area. There is another chance to visit the 'sales point', and then decisions have to be made about which site to visit next.

On the Road to Coalbrookdale

Continuing along the western arm of the horseshoe the route meanders towards Coalbrookdale, an iron making community with a number of Museum properties. Here there are industrial locations, dwellings associated with Abraham Darby's Coalbrookdale Company, and locally important social and religious institutions. But before these are reached the visitor

passing up the valley will see the beautifully restored Rose Cottage, a seventeenth century timber-framed house that exudes all the charm of a chocolate box idyll. The next notable point on the itinerary, the Coalbrookdale Literary and Scientific Institute, is a splendid and imposing mid-nineteenth century example, not just of Darby's paternalism, but of the whole ethos of the bourgeois control and development of both knowledge and artistic expression. It seems incredible now that for several decades from the 1860s onwards, this building provided the facilities for some of the budding designers for the porcelain, tile and ornamental iron trades that would help dictate the style, and capture a sense of opulence for, public buildings and public space throughout Britain and the colonies. In 1980 the Coalbrookdale Institute was converted into the Ironbridge Gorge Youth Hostel, and with the adjacent Walker Study Centre it provides accommodation for 60, and a study centre for school parties in pursuit of the complete historical experience.

The centre-price of the western arm of the horseshoe is the Coalbrookdale Furnace and Museum of Iron. The Teachers Handbook describes the furnace with the voice of a pedagogue convinced of the merits of learning by rote.

> It was here in 1709 that the Quaker ironmaster Abraham Darby I first smelted iron using coke as a fuel instead of charcoal. This constituted a major breakthrough in the development of the iron industry. Throughout the eighteenth century the Coalbrookdale Company was in the forefront of ironmaking technology, producing in the 1720s the first iron steam engine cylinders, and in 1767 the first iron railings. In 1777 Abraham Darby III enlarged his grandfather's furnace to make the iron for the world's first iron bridge. This event is recorded on the cast-iron beams above the furnace forehearth.
>
> (Teachers Handbook, n.d., p.5)

As the description suggests this museum is at the forefront of the Trust's elaboration of history as industrial archaeology. This approach, which belies its own relative novelty and any claims to progressiveness, is redolent of the most entrenched traditionalism of much school book history; it's what put many of us off history in the first place. Conventional, conservative history is the model here, with chronology relentlessly unfolding as each date represents a punctuating moment of technological innovation activated by men of destiny. This is a public

record of 'the past' of the most unexceptional kind, already made familiar to us in the Severn Visitor Centre; the fundamental conflict between labour and capital is lost sight of, history is stripped of the dynamic of class struggle, purged of all mention of gender inequalities and the consequences of Empire. Yet this double preoccupation - the fetish for technical procedures and the celebration of male power/knowledge - is the couplet through which the narrative of 'the past' is continually deployed throughout the whole Ironbridge Gorge Museum, a fact that I can't keep returning to despite its stupifying regularity.

The Coalbrookdale Furnace itself is housed in a kind of glass fronted wig-wam, an impressive enough spectacle in its own right. Entrace is free, and once inside the atmosphere is a little disconcerting. How is one supposed to feel inside this building, a place purpose-built to house and enhance this decrepit ruin? My sense of the strangeness of this building derives from my feeling displaced by such a massive edifice, designed entirely for the purpose of observing this one relic, although conservation is also part of the plan. But what are we supposed to be looking at? Here there is an elevated iron viewing gantry that runs adjacent to three sides of the furnace, and up to its charging hole on the top. Clearly the idea is that one can inspect and photograph all the remaining features of this brick-built pile; a kind of shrine to the Masters of Iron. But to my mind it is the incidental things that make this place memorable and add to its disconcerting air of time out of joint. Presentation is everything, hence the barren ash-blackened ground beneath the gantry that resembles the raked features of a slightly forlorn zen garden, is a pleasing counterpoint to this juxtaposition of old and new. Similarly the ferns, lichens and liverworts that have a precarious existence in the remnants of the furnace's waterwheel pit. These plants provide an iridescent glow of green in a place made drab with shades of brown and cream. But don't touch! For while the visitor lulled by the calm of this place looks on, so too the video cameras perched high on their metal supports. We too it seems are part of someone else's spectacle, as increasingly in our society, public space becomes the site for routine surveillance.

Opened in 1979 by H.R.H. Prince of Wales (an affable 'action man' if not exactly a man of steel - note the shifting forms of masculinity), the adjacent Museum of Iron is housed on two floors in the Great Warehouse built by the Coalbrookdale Company in 1838. Brevity precludes a guided tour of this museum, except to say that one floor is given over entirely

to the history of ironmaking, 'from Iron Age to Bessemer', while the upper floor is about the Darby family and the Coalbrookdale Company. However, while the story-line of the exhibits extrapolates out from these entirely familiar 'common sense' historical reference points, the articulation of 'the past' is not restricted to the museum proper. For example, I felt inclined to regard the shop in the foyer here not just as a consumer would, as a site organising a set of potentially desirable products, but more than this, as a retail outlet catering for historical tourists wishing to make a further investment in this stripped down, cleaned up version of 'the past'.

Of course this is not restricted to historical tourism because this idea of 'the past' is part of the domestic present; a very public form of history is made artifactual, given an aesthetic, as well as a use-value to be explored in the private domain of the household. Given that this is a museum of iron the reproduction cast iron doorstops, fire grates, wood burning stoves, art castings and garden furniture - some of it made by the contemporary Coalbrookdale Company - is only to be expected. However, at the same time there is no obvious rationale for the heavy white pottery butter dishes, cruets, rolling pins and mugs with their solid mock nineteenth century plainness, or the terracotta ware that apes the old. Yet these objects do not seem out of place, nor do the cookery books or the pots of Crabtree and Evelyn Preserves, with their fussy delicate labels gesturing to a time when time was no obstacle. A friend of mine suggests that this is something to do with the process of making use-values sacred; where exchange values are ignored and an object's utility becomes overdetermined with a set of myths and illusions about production and consumption in this past-present.(8) This seems to go some way to explain the strange desire that one can feel for a wholly unremarkable, but extremely expensive and decorous pot of marmalade.

I find this fascinating, for what we have here is a kind of ubiquitousness of representations of 'the past' that appears through a wide range of cultural forms. Thus, on the one hand it informs the 'official' practice of museum-making, and on the other, it determines the more diffuse practice of commodity production and retailing. In the crudest sense the shop full of historicised commodities equals the effectivity of this idea of 'the past', as each visitor is offered the opportunity to become a consumer and buy into this imagined community. All cannot afford to do so, but in any case this relationship is not reducible to a moment in the capitalist circuit of commodity production. Nor is it

simply a case of individual and personal investments developing an estranged social-historical sense of self through the active pursuit of pleasure. Indeed, the situation is more insidious yet, for while the public field of representations of history is not unitary, but complex, contradictory and including oppositional accounts, the overall terrain is mythical and conservative; there to be reworked in more obviously political ways as Thatcherism effectively demonstrates. Thus, while the shop is chock full of commodities that promise a utopian life, however far fetched, it is a utopia without radicalism. So too, the vast range of forms that constitutes the public field of representations of history, where progressive accounts of the past - recoveries and critiques - are placed in opposition and subordinated to the dominant public forms, against which they are forced to struggle to find a voice or create a positive image. Historically throughout these struggles over political definitions, the Conservative right has been rather better at producing a dominant memory of the past, than its counterparts in the women's movement, or on the Left. Aided and abetted by central state institutions, and the mainstream media, notions of 'English tradition' - for that is also a conservative utopian life - provides the ample background for Thatcher's reworked allusions to the 'Victorian values' of self-help, hard work, thrift, charity, neighbourliness and love of country. In other words; the popular memory of this highly ideological sense of 'the past' is reproduced through this complex of popular cultural forms, subjectivities and more strictly political mobilisations. Furthermore, it is this insidious relationship between politics and history that leads me to ask questions about the practice of museum-making, because:

> Political domination involves historical definition. History - in particular popular memory - is a stake in the constant struggle for hegemony. The relationship between history and politics, like the relationship between past and present, is, therefore, an internal one: it is about the politics of history and the historical dimensions of politics.
>
> (Popular Memory Group, 1982, p.213)

## From Ironbridge to Blists Hill

Retracing the route down the dale and returning to the Severn Gorge, the easterly wing of the horseshoe passes the iron bridge with its attendant Tollhouse Information Centre. The town of Ironbridge is one

of those places, like Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire, that is caught in the contradiction between serving the local community with its transmuted bourgeois needs, and the transcient expectations of the visitors. Just over ten years ago the overall feel of the place was one of dereliction, but the Museum has changed all that, not entirely for the better. Post Office, greengrocers, butchers, chemists and small supermarket, all somehow still impoverished, barely hold sway against the craft shops, antique shops and the endless nick-nack emporiums that all sell the very same glitzy junk. Added to this, cafes, 'tea shoppes' and restaurants come and go like speculative butterflies puffed up on the golden rays of the summer when the visitors flit and cash registers chatter, only to spend the winter in fitful hibernation. Some die off, some return, others metamorphosise into different dreams of an 'independent living'.

Yet the contradiction between the changing but underlying local needs and the erratic 'outside' ones, is concrete evidence of the danger of the laissez-faire effect of becoming the tertiary zone of the Trust's sphere of influence. Having once determined the seductive image of the area as a desirable place to visit and live, it begins to determine the structure of the local economy in a really unhealthy way. This is true of both the essential and non-essential sectors, although in terms of the former, the effect can be quite a bizarre one. Recently it was announced that Lloyds Bank, the last remaining bank in Ironbridge, was about to close leaving inhabitants and visitors alike with a two mile treck to the nearest alternative bank. News of this was greeted locally with some amazement, especially as Lloyds Bank have recently donated £30,000 to the Museum Trust to build an 'old' bank at Blists Hill. Meanwhile the non-essential sector flourishes and its centre-piece is The Shop in the Square, run on the Trust's behalf by the Ironbridge Gorge Trading Company. The shop exudes its own plush comfort, striking a balance between the grossly expensive Coalport China, medium priced items from the Edwardian Kitchen Company and cheap trinkets that the children can afford. When Christmas comes it's the sort of shop you scour in desperation on December 23rd for those last minute useless items, that you always feel duty bound to purchase for neglected relatives strangely impressed with your impeccable taste and support of local causes.

Perhaps one day the non-essential sector will become ascendant as it constantly threatens to do, and the local services will capitulate to the lure of tourism. I guess that not many visitors notice this as they browse their way towards the Bedlam Furnace past the old police station,

now a crafts centre where the cells house indivual crafts people and the magistrates' court an exhibition of crafts both tasteful and tacky. About 300 yards down river from the Iron Bridge, well outside the town, a part rebuilt blast furnace lies adjacent to the roadside. This is another site about which the Trust makes great claims, but the evocative possibilities of really exploiting the appropriately descriptive Bedlam Furnace are ignored in favour of more superlatives about industrial archaeology, and tedious detail about coke furnaces, pig iron and Abraham Darby III. The site, after an initial bursts of excavation and conservation, is strangely derelict. It is fronted by a car park, fenced off from the public and increasingly overgrown in late summer with Buddleia and Rosebay Willowherb. Any real insights into the history of this place are rather casually expressed in a tatty wall plque, that reproduces in sepia tint Philip James de Loutherbourg's oil painting of 1801 'Coalbrookdale by Night'. This painting which appears throughout the museums and Museum publications in full colour, makes the furnace the subject of an impressive maelstrom of fire suffusing the night sky, and ultimately it shades off into the sub-Merrie England style of semi-rustics leaving the scene with their cart and horses. Labour it seems, when not absent, is always happy! This is another contextualising theme of presenting industrial archaeology that attempts to render the Industrial Revolution idyllic; the rural setting, both real and imagined, makes hard-nosed questioning seem ill placed on a sunny day by the river. Yet this process is as old as the modern myth of the rural idyll itself, or as the voice of the audiovisual show at the Severn Visitor Centre puts it:

> The combination of industrial monuments of wider significance in an area of great scenic beauty has always attracted people to the gorge. You are the successors to five generations of visitors who have come here to view the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution.

Slightly further down stream the visitor is faced with a quandry, because for the most part the Museum's acres continue on the near bannk, except for the nascent development of the Maws Tile Works which lies to the south. At present there is only one small tile museum which will eventually be rehoused, and it is only worth a visit if, like me, you feel inextricably fascinated by the mediaevalism of Victorian encaustice or the soft relief of Art Nouveau. It's visual pleasure, nothing more, and I hope it's quite harmless because at this point I start to really enjoy

myself. However, staying with the main historical experience there are still two key sites to visit and one additional one. The additional site is known as the Tar Tunnel, a strange adit set one thousand yards into the ground, down one hundred yards of which the visitor can wander and gaze in amazement at the pools of tar accidently discovered when this place was being excavated as an underground canal. The temptation is to drift off into a mode of oooing and aaaring about the mysteries of this bizarre subterranean world of oozing pools of black bitumen. It is too easy to forget what a vile, damp, crouching, unhealthy place this must have been to work in, with the choking fumes drifting in from the boiling cauldrons of tar outside the tunnel entrance. Still, that hardly seems to matter when you're having fun, and that's a real problem when it comes to worrying about a politics of pleasure.

The Tar Tunnel is no distance from the Coalport China Museum. I could say that the pressure to abbreviate my account allows only the most cursory inspection of this site, but this would be misleading. The truth is that I find the china works to be deadly dull, partly because the rows of self-consciously aristocratic plates and jugs don't please me, but equally because the presentation is lack-lustre. This in part is much more like an old style museum, labelled artifacts and information plaques to read, but there are a set of workshps showing slip-casting, throwing, transfer printing and other processes. However, these are always unstaffed and inhospitable when I visit, giving the impression of a down tools dispute over bad working conditions. But, God forbid this cannot be? No, of course not, these exhibits are only staffed in the high season. Yet there is a serious point here because, if and when you visit, you will find that these dual themes - trades union representation, and the prevalance of industrial diseases in the pottery trades - are skated over. This museum like all the other Trust sites emplores your forgetfulness; it insists that you imagine 'the past' in this very partial way, otherwise it simply frustrates and infuriates. However, this is even more evident in our final destination, the Blists Hill Open Air Museum, that lies just to the north of Coalport at the tip of the eastern wing of the horseshoe.

Blists Hill Open Air Museum

The Blists Hill Museum occupies a forty-two acre site on which the Trust has begun the lengthy renovation of a number of *in situ* buildings and artifacts. Here there is a coal mine and headgear, blast furnaces, and

a length of the Shropshire Canal with its own impressive incline plane. These are all remnants of the days when this was a heaving, noisy and dirty industrial region. However, the majority of the buildings and machines to be found here have been imported, the Trust would say 'rescued', to go towards the construction of 'a working industrial community' (Teachers Handbook, n.d., p.10). Yet I will argue that the relationship between the authentic and the contrived is conviently blurred at this museum, where the overall spatial lay-out concocts an imagined community of 'the past' in a physical sense. At the Blists Hill Reception Centre I purchased a Museum Guide, and before embarking on my visit my attention was immediately taken by the following:

> As you go through the doors of the entrance building you pass from the late twentieth century to the late nineteenth. You will see how people lived a hundred years ago, and where they worked. You can eat what they ate, smell what they could smell and drink what they drank. You can see how their candles, their shoes, their woodwork and their printed papers were made. And you will be surrounded by the evidence of two centuries of industrial activity.
>
> (Blists Hill Open Air Museum Guide, n.d.,p.4)

As this passage suggests, an appreciation of 'the past' is currently intended to be a total bodily experience. For here at Blists Hill lies the promise of a fantasy made real; an attempt to hypnotise, to bombard the senses of sight, taste, smell, touch and hearing, even to the extent of surrounding the visitor with its all pervasive envelope of 'actual' historical space. At this site, and through all the products and publications that go with it, no effort is spared in constituting history as dream, and conferring on the visitor the whim to indulge almost every bodily pleasure. It might even be the Garden of Eden, but that was a biblical myth and this is evidently 'real' as the Teachers Handbook makes clear: 'the open wooded nature of Blists Hill has provided the Museum Trust with the opportunity to recreate an authentic industrial environment of the past' (Teachers Handbook, n.d., p.10). The dual promise of authenticity and individual pleasures is seductive indeed, but the 'logic' of these assumptions once unscrambled is more to do with the production of myth than the reconstruction of history through a set of period buildings and their concommitant trades.

Thus this complex relationship between past, present and public

pleasure is drawn into a field of equivalence at Blists Hill through the idea of utopia. The Trust's view of the past is at once rose-tinted, and eschewing even the 'muck and brass' image of urban capitalism, it ironically reconstitutes a sense of the industrial through an arcane idealisation of an organic ruralism. This is utopia number one. Locked together as a value system 'the past' and its rural setting becomes a utopia physically recreated, or utopia number two, in the architecture and space allotted for public pleasure at Blists Hill. The overall value here is one of 'the good old days' reactivated in a critical juxtaposition with a very partial sense of the present. The bad days of now, where the familiarity of economic recession and the phantom fears of trades union anarchy and break downs in law and order are pre-eminent. Consequently, the third moment in this field of equivalence appears to be utopia as hedonism: the personal pleasure and possibility of escaping the ever threatening 'outside' present. As the distant view of 'the impressive spectacle of a small East Shropshire town of the late nineteenth century' beckons from the door of the entrance building, (Blists Hill Development Proposals, n.d.,) the visitor experience (and for many the expectation) will be framed around this trinity. Certainly one cannot ignore its lure.

Wandering beneath the gas lights towards the heart of the 'community', I was struck by a sense of not wanting to be compromised by this insidious place, but at the same time strangely fascinated by the conglomeration of buildings and trades that constitute the illusion of typicality. What I discovered was not a 'community', with only two dwellings it could hardly be called that, but a 'High Street' full of retailers and small business people. Chemist's shop, butchers, printing shop, pub, sweet shop, cobbler's, plasterer's shop, and they all view for your custom. For what we have here is the complete breakdown of the separation of history-making and money-making. I don't wish to be an economic puritan, but there is a real sense in which the educative function is subordinated to the opportunism of commodity exchange. This is best exemplified in the chemist's shop, which, according to the chemist, is 'correct in every detail'. Here ancient packets of condition powder for horses, bottles of children's laxative syrup and boxes of Bromo Paper 'for the water closet', stand in glass-fronted cases at the rear of the shop, signifying the old and rather anal past. In the chemist's counter, in the foreground, Woods of Windsor have a collective of modern toiletries. The visitor can buy boxes of Wild Flower Soap, an example of the new and purer past obtaining on this occasion, quite directly, its vicarious existence

from the oldness all around it.

But don't spend all your money here, there are meat pies in the butchers, posters in the printers, effigies in the plasterers, candles in the candle-makers, humbugs, sugar-coated almonds and licorice in the sweet shop, and, of course, ale in the pub. I entered the New Inn in the pursuit of knowledge, to test the beer for its 'traditional qualities' and to read the Museum Guide. Interestingly, this is one of the few buildings that draws forth a description in the Guide cognisent of some aspects of class and gender relations. It gestures towards forms of popular culture, identifies the exclusion of women from the bar and their presence in the tap room, and notes the relative comfort of the smoke room used by 'white collar workers'. Yet these observations are not rooted in any structural analysis of society, and one is given no sense of the subjective consequences of these various forms of oppression. This position of safe observation is enhanced by the popular image of the pub as a place of pluralist pleasures, which, when looking backwards seeks only to democratise the inequitable - individuals are collectivised in their pleasures, provided they remain in their own allocated space. However, if anyone felt out of place it was me. Being lunch time the rest of the customers were relaxing 'exhibit demonstrators' in period costume, and with the bar staff similarly attired I was the only 'modern' to be seen. It was a bemusing experience to sit in a pub where people pass through just to have a look, not to buy a drink, but to simply remark upon the basic decor, to comment on the sawdust on the floor and feel the warmth of the fire. I felt like an interloper outside of time, a discordant figure caught in the gaze of someone in search of the promised authenticity. Did they notice me? Was I hidden from history?

I only had half a pint of mild but I stumbled outside nevertheless, only to spend the next few minutes dodging visitors bent on capturing 'the past' with cameras, aiming at photographs destined for the family snaps album. I lurked self-consciously in doorways acutely aware of my overly bright contemporary clothes, and hid from view feeling responsible for the memories of strangers. With an eye to the future, and not wishing to disrupt the narrative of their day out remembered, I took refuge in the saw mill and woodworking shop while the photographic fraternity snapped up a passing 'labourer' pulling a period handcart. In his 1976 History Workshop article, Barrie Trinder discussed the advantages to history-making of the Blists Hill project. His argument had a dual theme, that the strategy of presenting working exhibits was important, firstly, because it gave the impression of 'working conditions and of the reasons

for particular practices', and secondly, because it raised a whole set of crucial questions about work routines and the structure of the labour market (Trinder, 1976, p.174). This may once have been the overall aim of the Blists Hill scenario, but wandering through the saw mill I felt that the emphasis was heavily upon representing the antiquated labour-process as a desirable spectacle.

In the woodworking shop men were making wheelbarrows and gates, a circular saw hummed through a piece of timber, while outside a large late nineteenth century horizontal saw was prepared to cut a slice through a trunk of pine. Of course my eyes could feast upon the means of production; here was labour power, machinery and raw materials. With eyes half closed and the historical imagination hard at work I might even have been able to conjure some of the conditions of production, but how is this spectacle meant to convey any of the flavour of the social relations between labour and capital, or depict the deployment of masculinity in the workplace? I spent three of my most formative years working in small family-run saw mills in the early 1970s, and this exhibit doesn't even begin to capture the essence of that contemporary experience, which I'm sure was not wildly dissimilar to the more distant past experienced by other semi-rural labourers. How could it grasp all this; the exhibit doesn't prompt questions bar those of a technical nature, and the exhibit demonstrators are not equipped to interpret the social relations of production associated with their task. Believe me this is no saw mill, merely another space for the Blists Hill ghost town phantoms to inhabit. An actual saw mill is pervaded by the atmosphere of masculinity: risk, competition, aggressiveness and sexual innuendo are lightened by humour and male friendship. There is real danger in a saw mill, the noise is deafening and the sense of isolation acute. Accidents are common, but men struggle not to show fear, they minimise their injuries and put a brave face on crushed hands and lost fingers. Historically most saw mills have been small family businesses, with paternalistic, interfering bosses putting a kindly face on capitalism; your business is their business, and there's no place for trades unionism where wage deals are struck man to man. You go to work because you're desperate, the wage form is exploitation, you know that but what other work is there?

What angered me about the saw mill and woodworking shop was that the 'reality' it produces actively disorganises, and thus renders illegitimate, any oppositional account of what this experience of work amounts to. To some extent I felt silenced by it, and in the absence of anything more relevant, felt drawn to identify with the tools, the noise and the smell.

But this is what dominant memory always does, it provides the framework for personal experience, and if we're not constantly on guard it compromises us. However, this is not always the case because dominant memory is also continually contested - this article is intended to bear witness to that - although at the time more immediate satisfactions had to be attended to, so I bought 2 ounces of Pontefract Cakes from the sweet shop to cheer myself up.

The candlemakers is on the opposite side of the 'High Street' from the woodworkers and for once the Museum seems to have got it right. This was an ill-lighted, pokey and miserable placd, the air was heavy with the gagging vapour of quantities of melted wax that clung to clothes and made the room nauseous and claustrophic. Two young people in period costume were busy making candles, employed by the Trust through an MSC scheme on a kind of job sharing basis that gives them four days work one week and three the following week. One of them explained to me that to be dressed in 'Victorian clothes' is one of the conditions of service (another MSC scheme makes the clothes), and he was grateful for his job, clearly taking its educational-interpretive role seriously within the Museum's limited terms of reference, and fearful of the day when the scheme that employed him was wound up. Yet what struck me about all this was the deep irony of the situation. In the pursuit of authenticity the Trust had created a really hazardous and unhealthy work environment, apparently mindless of the consequences for those who work there, and, on top of this, these youngsters have to suffer the indignity of working for something in the region of £50 a week. Victorian values indeed! The saw mill with its lack of authenticity and the candlemaking factory with its seemingly genuine and certainly unhealthy atmosphere, should raise serious questions for everyone concerned about how to adequately represent the past. I felt personally confused by this particular aspect of my day out, as, on the one hand, it contradicted my criticisms of the lack of authenticity of the rest of Blists Hill, while drawing into hard relief the potentially unacceptable consequences of really reproducing a hazardous work environment. At the very least I would like to see some recognition that this was (and is), a highly dangerous place in which to work, although the young MSC employees were at pains to minimise their discomfort when I questioned them about it.

Once outside I decided on a tour of the rest of the museum, much of which lies along walks that are cut through the local woods. If the imagined community I had just left was mostly to do with artisans and

retailers, the remainder of the exhibits concentrate on mining, transport, industrial manufacture and two examples of the domestic. Blast furnaces, beam engines, winding gear, engine houses and stagnant canals don't hold any particular fascination for me. I passed them all by quite happily but could not resist the construction in progress of the new ironworks. Suddenly I realised that I had already become acclimatized to 'Victorian workers', for here at the ironworks I was surprised to see men dressed in donkey jackets, grubby flared jeans, wearing bright yellow protective helmets and wielding modern electrical tools. Should I stop and stare, was this labour process meant to be a spectacle? Then I spied it, a podium-cum-viewpoint had been erected to give the visitor the best panorama of work; one could be architect or critical critic such is the power of the gaze, and the pleasre of watching other people labour is sweet indeed as we flaunt our leisure.

All of these places of work - real and imagined, ancient or modern - have one thing in common, they represent bourgeois space, and, as often as not, the public realm of male power/knowledge. This is a complex formation but an important one. In the first instance the museum is organised for public access and public pleasure, but privatized in terms of the control of access and the lack of public participation in this modelling of history. Secondly, it is public in so much as it conjoins with 'public knowledge', producing a 'commonsense' view of the past and what constitutes its adequate representation. This is so because bourgeois public space is all pervasive with so many public forms, both physical and symbolic, that 'control perception by defining socially relevant events, practices and relations' (Bommes & Wright, 1982, p.260).[9] This is why the museum concentrates on industry and retailing, it's no conspiracy, merely the elaboration and effects of the taken-for-granted aspects of the everyday life of the dominant classes, and their men in particular. This power to define is also the power to disorganise and negate the practices and aspirations of all subordinate groups, especially the working-class, women, ethnic minorities and non-whites. Thus, the third defining feature of this construction of the public sphere is to be found in the process of inclusion and exclusion; it names who can speak, what is said and what is shown, just as surely as it administers silence and renders the private inadmissible. Furthermore, if and when the public sphere co-opts, or is forced to include, oppositional practices and silence becomes speech, there is always the danger that this inclusion is 'granted' at the expense of the transformation of subjective modes of expression into masculinist, ruling-class discourses of appropriation.[10]

This stealing of souls, as it were, is nowhere more manifest at Blists Hill than in the deployment of women staff. All their roles are defined through male needs and expectations. Thus, while the chemist's shop has a male 'expert' (a retired chemist) to contextualise the visitor experience, the sweet shop cum-refreshment counter is staffed by women shop assistants who 'simply' dispense commodities not knowledge, or rather, the knowledge they distribute is about their own, self-subordination. Similarly the pub has a 'bar maid', but I suppose the term would be a 'serving wench', while all the other costumed characters I met on my visit were craftsmen and their boy apprentices learning a 'useful trade'. I don't doubt that, on occasion, women do play the part of worker in what are assumed to be male-defined jobs, but the real lack is of any exhibit directly related to nineteenth-century female waged labour. However, even if this were remedied there is nothing to suggest that such a display would be anything other than romantic; fundamentally unable to capture the really arduous and unpleasant tenor of factory work for women, and equally oblivious to the private shop-floor culture of gossip and ribald humour that made this kind of work bearable. Although in this locality it would be more appropriate to depict the lives of the 'pit girls' who worked as surface workers in the mines, or those who took casual work in the winter and acted as itinerant agricultural labourers making an annual migration to the south for work in the summer months.(11)

The appended forms of female status find their apotheosis in one of the two domestic exhibits at Blists Hill, the squatter's cottage. It was here in this scant three-roomed hovel in the mid nineteenth century that Sarah Corbett tended to the needs of her husband, her six children and another visiting child. The Museum Guide describes her simply as a 'wife', though she must have been a woman exhausted and ruined by drudgery, and sure enough, when I entered this miserable place the MSC had provided a surrogate 'mother' to play hostess to the visitor. Yet the nature of this experience was something different despite the Trust's bland and unimaginative script, and the difference was that this domestic space invoked in the visitor a set of personal, private recollections; anecdotes poured forth, humourous, poignant and down-right sad. It wasn't that everybody that passed through had been a squatter, rather that there were sufficient objects here - cast iron bed, rag rug, blacked-up range, etc. - to act as catalyst in the process of actually remembering something personal about our own lives. In the end, though, this had the same effect as the walk-through house in Severn Wharf Visitor Centre, it

offered the possibility for subordinated memories to be aired and simultaneously gave no framework in which to make sense of them. Yet these public and private domains have a curious effect on some of the visitors, one not anticipated by the Trust. Some of those enjoying Blists Hill showed a real reticence, and I felt it myself, to enter some of the exhibits, notably the workshops and some of the domestic settings. The latter is understandable in terms of the taboos attached to the extreme privacy of the domestic - it being the realm of family life and sexuality - but having already argued that male productive work is a public form, why are visitors so reserved about entering the workshops? The answer seems to be that while commodity exchange is a public mode, thus the ease of entering retail outlets, manufacturing is the site of privatized capital which affords no public access or scrutiny. To simply reproduc this in a museum on the assumption that visitors will happily succumb to the idea of public access throughout, completely ignores the fact that these negotiations of the public and the private are deeply engrained subjective forms that we don't just leave behind.

There are other fundamental issues at stake in the overall experience of Blists Hill. The effect of the fusion of past and present in this place set aside for public pleasure and education, will only really be understood when its position within the field of public representations of history is recognised for its political consequences. In this context we need to know how visitors make sense of such a place; are they blindly comprimised or do they make their own meanings? The answer, of course, is that different constituences make different meanings and find different pleasures. As all the staff reiterated, and I witnessed for myself, most parties of adults were inquisitive and interested. Young school-children, up to the age of eleven, were attentive to the point of complete absorption, while mixed parties of teenagers brought their school sub-cultures with them; the boys larked about, and the girls in huddles looked understandably bored. I know that history-making is all about the future, and politicians and educators never cease to remind us of the responsibility we ultimately hand to the young, but what are they receiving here? A sense of history is clearly important in an adequate fashioning of their future, but this mythical sense of 'the past'? I'm not sure which is the more alarming, the very young who delighted in all this, or the more critical youths who handle their rebellion by disengaging themselves altogether. Carrying the burden of these thoughts I passed through the exit gate and boldly stepped back into the twentieth century!

Conclusion

In the early months of 1984 the Trustees of the Museum decided there was a need to evaluate and thoroughly appraise the educational role of the Museum. A senior research fellow was appointed for this purpose, but the terms of reference already fixed the future of the Museum in the most conservative way possible. The Trust has reached a plateau in its fortunes, the result of which is a consolidation of its aim to bring out what it now calls the 'Ironbridge Spirit':

> examples of invention, innovation, energy and unwearied diligence on an heroic scale, and hardly to be evoked by as conventional a word as entreprenurship, could be brought out further, and without straining the evidence could be made a source of inspiration for an age badly in need of it.
>
> (Job Description for Senior Research Fellow funded by Leverhulme)

If this were not so pernicious and predictable, I could laugh at it heartily, but when seen alongside the other insidious public forms of 'the past' - inevitably mobilised by Thatcher's 'Victorian Values' - anger and opposition seem the more appropriate responses. For it is clear that what the Trust is envisaging is a continuation of the idea of 'the past' as utopia, brought up to date as a palliative for the present; a manifesto of future possibilities. Of course the entreprenurial spirit made great things, but it also produced abject poverty, strife, misery, struggle, and in speaking only of the former, the Museum stands accused of peddling fiction and not history in any formal, academic sense. In short, although heartfelt and sincere, it is basically dishonest because the fine line between education and propaganda has been fudged in favour of a set of feelings emanating from the wishes of the dominant classes and especially their men.

At the moment, however, what this leaves me to ponder is the enormous problem of how an alternative view of the nineteenth century might be produced in museum form. In the first instance it is a case of revealing the absences and making the silences speak, but the forms that this would take are not clear. Social relations - inequality, political struggle, etc. - cannot adequately be re-presented through image and text on endless wall plaques, and what is called for is some form of museum that incorporates historical drama. In producing a dramatic narrative the idea of history as fiction is necessarily taken on board, but while the

Trust does this implicitly and with the emphasis upon myth, a radical alternative would use this form to generalise actual concrete experiences, structures and historical effects. In this way the idea of utopia would not be abandoned; personal dreams just like the overall sense of the years to come, need to be thought through at the interface between past, present and utopian future. Yet this utopia could not be the mythical one of 'the past', nor the rural idyll, nor that of the nation, nor that of masculine values, nor that of Thatcherism, but the utopia that the left lost sight of. Perhaps the left never had this in an adequate form anyway, but something essential was lost when the policies began to sound like hollow rhetoric; something vanished when the political scenarios became ever more stripped of colour and ignorant of the pursuit of pleasure; important ground was given up and defensiveness was embraced in response to the criticisms coming from feminism and the anti-racist movement. The left was never more in need of its own utopia, even if only for its own solace. Yet even such small consolation, a museum of future possibilities based on a thoroughgoing but entertaining assessment of the past, seems an impossible idea in the current political climate.

NOTES

1. Claims to individual authorship always present a problem, and this is perhaps exaggerated on this occasion because the argument developed here borrows heavily from a collective project on narrative and nationalism currently being worked on by members of the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the University of Birmingham. I would like to thank all current and past members of the Popular Memory Group: Mariette Clare, Graham Dawson, Chris Glen, Richard Johnson, Pat McLernon, Laura Di Michelle, Jill Trott and Michelle Weinroth. However, none of these, either individually or collectively, shoulder the responsibility for the tone and stance of this piece, these, like any mistakes, are all my responsibility. Additionally, I would like to thank Lynne Sheridan for her valuable help in developing some of the arguments about the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, and in helping me to edit and organise this article. Finally, despite my critical position on the Trust I have received nothing but courtesy and open-handed help from the Museum staff in response to my every request.

2. The concept 'structure of feeling' is taken from the work of Raymond Williams. See, for example, Marxism and Literature, and for a useful clarification see Politics and Letters, especially the chapter on 'The Long Revolution'.

3. The present figure for the previous twelve months - up to February 1984 - is 77,238 educational visitors.

4. It uses these terms of reference to describe its practice in a recent job description for a senior research fellow funded by Leverhulme.

5. This priceless banality occurs during the audio-visual presentation at the Severn Warehouse Visitors' Centre, for an account of the rest of this programme see below, pp.16-18.

6. Exactly the same sentiments were expressed in the Final Report of the Working Party (1969), as follows: 'The Ironbridge Gorge can be described as the birthplace of the industrial revolution, for it was here that iron was first smelted successfully with coke, and so, in this area and only in this area, are to be found the prime monuments of the industrial revolution which, from its inception in the British Isles, has changed and still is changing the face of the globe. The area must be regarded, therefore, as one of the classic industrial regions of the world.'

7. See Anderson, 1983, especially pp.11-16. This notion of an 'imagined community' is also useful in terms of describing mythical conceptions of 'the past', as well as the actual practice of making open air museums that purport to reproduce history through architecture and the grouping of buildings. See for example my argument below regarding the Blists Hill Open Air Museum.

8. I would like to thank Mariette Clare for this insight.

9. See Bommes and Wright, 1982, p.260. This argument develops in rare translation, the work on the public and the private argued by Habermas, and Negt and Kluge. The real problem with the original, as with the translation, is the absence of gender, and specifically male power/knowledge as a key determining factor in the distinctions between the public and the private.

10. See Allatt, 1982 and Johnson, 1983. Both develop an account cognicent of the power relations of gender.

11. See Stanley, 1984. I am indebted to Lynne Sheridan for bringing this source to my attention.

## Bibliography

### A Museum Sources

The Final Report of the Working Party, the Appeals Brochure, Annual Reports and Accounts (beginning in 1969) are all available on request from the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust. Other items used here, like the Teachers Handbook and the Blists Hill Open Air Museum Guide (SJ693033) are available in all the Museum shops, priced accordingly. All sources can be examined at the Museum Library.

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Preface and Health Warning

Danger! History at Work was written as a result of an off-the-cuff remark by one of the Editors of History Workshop Journal, that an article critical of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum would make a 'splendid fighting Journal contribution'. This suggestion was made in response to a letter to Jerry White, in which I complained in a provocative way, about the consequences of living next door to one of Britain's most successful open air museums, Blists Hill in East Shropshire. The gist of my complaint was: here was an example of a rather fanciful view of the past being presented as a scholarly account, where the main theme - the local development of industrialisation - seemed to conceal the workings of capital, while also turning the past into a capitalist commodity. I termed this the 'history business', and went on to cite the Ironbridge Gorge Museum as the central pivot of local economic and amenity development.

Being provocative and writing a 'fighting contribution' suited my frame of mind. There was no guarantee that it would be published by History Workshop Journal, but the suggestion caught my imagination at a time when writing my Ph.D. thesis was deadening it. Danger! History at Work was meant to be controversial, it was meant to knock a hole in the benign image of museum practice. The terms provocative and fighting might carry an unacceptable masculine edge perhaps, but this is the way of the best and worst procedures of academic critique. Hence my approach is unashamedly argumentative and, unrelentingly hostile to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum. At the same time it was also meant to be personal and, in part, tongue-in-cheek, hopefully in a way that made my arguments more accessible to a non-specialist readership. The response of the Editors of History Workshop Journal was mixed. Indeed, the Collective was 'deeply divided'; some Editors were 'very enthusiastic', others had 'reservations', but one Editor in particular took real exception to the 'tone' of my article. It was seen to be 'bloody patronising about visitors and workers', and I was

cast as being like 'a thirties intellectual of the sub-Orwell mould visiting Blackpool'. Apparently for this Editor I came across as representing a kind of 'cultural ultra-leftism', and therefore my article, after considerable delay, misinformation and confustion, was rejected. It was returned to me on the grounds that its inclusion in the Journal would be divisive and detrimental to the workings of the History Workshop Journal Collective itself, not on the grounds that it shouldn't be read, although that was the immediate outcome.

Now that the dust has settled and the wounds have healed, the hyperbole has revealed its points of critical importance. Others, thankfully less silencing, have helped me to see some of the shortcomings of my argument. But while some re-writing has taken place, my stance as critical critic, embued, I hope, with a sense of humour, remains unruffled. I accept that my argument is fragmentory when it comes to discussing, firstly, the overall role of MSC in museum provision, secondly, the multiplicity of experiences available to the visitor at Ironbridge, and more generally the whole thorny issue of the politics of pleasure. My ove all intention here was much more limited than these criticisms allow. It is simply one critical consumer's guide to one museum.

Finally, I have been reminded by friends and colleagues alike, because it seems that I have forgotten to say this, that the Ironbridge Gorge Museum is 'a great day out', and 'a wonderful place to go'. However, this is not my experience; the pleasure for me is in the critique and in the fun I had examining the museum with a very wary eye. If pressed I would say that the Pleasure Beach at Blackpool or the amusements at Alton Towers are more my idea of a good day out. At least on the big dipper, having paid your money, everybody agrees that the pleasure is in being taken for a ride!