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Rethinking Folk Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain

Abstract

Research on folk culture in twentieth-century Britain has focused on elite and transgressive political episodes, but these were not its mainstream manifestations. This article re-evaluates the place of folk culture in twentieth-century Britain in the context of museums. It argues that in the modern heritage landscape folk culture was in an active dialogue with the modern democracy. This story begins with the vexed, and ultimately failed, campaign for a national English folk museum and is traced through the concurrent successes of local, regional, and Celtic ‘first wave’ folk museums across Britain from the 1920s to the 1960s. The educational activities of these museums are explored as emblematic of a ‘conservative modernity’, which gave opportunities to women but also restricted their capacity to do intellectual work. By the 1970s, a ‘second wave’ folk museology is identified, revealing how forms of folk culture successfully accommodated the rapid social change of the later twentieth century, particularly in deindustrializing regions. From this new, museums’ perspective, folk culture appears far less marginal to twentieth-century British society. In museums folk culture interacted with mainstream concerns about education, regionalism, and commercialization.

Introduction

In November 1968 the Welsh curator John Geraint Jenkins described the purpose of a folk museum:

...to illustrate the life and culture of a nation, a region or even a village or locality in miniature. It is the duty of those engaged in folk life to search for the key to the world of ordinary people: to throw light on their ill-documented day to day life and to study material

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that to many other scholars seems commonplace, too obvious and too near at hand to be important.¹

By the late 1960s, the British folk museum conundrum was apparently solved. In Jenkins's native country, the National Museum of Wales at St Fagan's had opened in 1948 and was thriving. The Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie was on sure footing, managed by a watchful committee of the four major Scottish universities, and a Folk Museum for Ulster had been established by the government of Northern Ireland in an Act of Parliament in 1958.² In England, attempts to establish a national folk museum had failed. But from the mid-1960s a flowering of regional sentiment had produced several successful 'open air' museums such as the Beamish in the North East and the Weald and Downland in West Sussex. From this perspective, the history of folk museums in twentieth-century Britain appears straightforward: subordinated nations on the periphery asserting cultural nationalism, whilst 'Englishness', at the centre, proved too tricky to codify.³ Yet Jenkins's definition implies that the scale of the unit mattered less than the task of revealing everyday life, that national identities were not as important as personal ones.

Much research on folk culture has focused on politically transgressive episodes. Topics of enquiry have included Cecil Sharp's romantic English folk music and dance movement on the right, and on the left, Leslie Paul's scouting offshoot, the Woodcraft Folk.⁴ Both were performances of society reformed according to the visions of the avant-garde. Prominent Marxist readings of these folk revivals have criticized elites for wresting proletarian cultural products from their makers, and appropriating them to reinforce traditional hierarchies. But these aspects of folk culture were not its mainstream manifestations and have led to an overestimation of folk culture's radical potential.⁵ This article instead turns to Jenkins's world of museums, using the general term 'folk culture' to refer to the material objects and documentary and

¹ John Geraint Jenkins, 'Folk Museums: Some Aims and Purposes', *Museums Journal*, 69 (1969), 17–9, 18.

² Iowerth C. Peate, 'Some Thoughts on the Study of Folk Life', in C. O. Danachair, ed., *Folk and Farm* (Dublin, 1976), 229–34; G. Thompson, 'The Social Significance of Folk Museums', in *Museums are for the People* (Edinburgh, 1985), 26–39.

³ Cf. Peter Burke, 'Popular Culture in Norway and Sweden', *History Workshop Journal* (1977), 143–7, 145.

⁴ Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester, 1993); Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, eds, *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester, 1989); W. Bruce Leslie, 'Creating a Socialist Scout Movement: The Woodcraft Folk, 1924–42', *History of Education*, 13 (1984), 299–311.

⁵ For a discussion and critique of this historiography, see Christopher J. Bearman, 'Who were the Folk? The Demography of Cecil Sharp's Somerset Folk Singers', *The Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), 751–75.

oral sources collected and displayed in these institutions. It demonstrates that in museums folk culture was, for the first time, in an active dialogue with the needs of the modern democracy.

Folk museums in twentieth-century Britain have been addressed in two different bodies of literature. Museologists have used a professionalization model to understand British folk museology. They are primarily interested in how early museum methods contributed to professional practices of curating that developed from the 1970s.⁶ Gaynor Kavanagh finds many of the early English folk museums wanting in this regard, arguing that the persistence of haphazard antiquarian collecting hampered the realization of the modern professional social history museum.⁷ Secondly, anthropological scholars have stretched the focus back to the final third of the nineteenth century, when domestic ethnographic collecting had to accommodate a narrative of white imperial 'civilization'. In this imperial mode, English folk objects and customs were explained as 'survivals' of earlier, less civilized cultures, a model advanced by the Victorian cultural anthropologist E. B. Tylor.⁸ Chris Wingfield has argued that as the confidence of Empire fell away, and as anthropology professionalized, folk museums became an expression of an insular national mood that relied on the 'salvage paradigm' to shelter itself from modernity.⁹ Both of these interpretations treat English folk museology as amateur and reactionary because it never amounted to a highly professionalized, nation-building project. Crucially, they do not register its connection to mainstream education and leisure in mid-twentieth-century Britain.

This article will reveal this connection, arguing that folk museums were modern, democratic institutions that fostered the relationship between local identities and citizenship. The first two-thirds of the article analyse the project of 'first wave' folk museology after 1918, which thrived in the absence of a coherent national history narrative. The final section explores how these museums were eclipsed by the rise of a 'second wave' folk museology from the 1960s, a project tied to regional social change and the new academic social history. This shift

⁶ Catherine Ross, 'Collections and Collecting', in Gaynor Kavanagh and Elizabeth Frostick, eds, *Making City Histories in Museums* (Leicester, 1998), 114–32. Cf. David Fleming, 'Projecting Social History in Museums', *Social History Curators Group Journal*, 13 (1986), 1–3.

⁷ Gaynor Kavanagh, *History Curatorship* (Leicester, 1990).

⁸ Chris Wingfield and Chris Gosden, 'An Imperialist Folklore? Establishing the Folklore Society in London', in Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin, eds, *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, 2012), 255–74; Oliver A. Douglas, 'Folklore, Survivals, and the Neo-Archaic', *Museum History Journal*, 4 (2011), 223–44.

⁹ Chris Wingfield, 'From Greater Britain to Little England', *Museum History Journal*, 4 (2011), 245–66.

enabled museums to meet the new physic and emotional needs of their communities, but it also significantly recoded how social–historical knowledge was gendered in post-war Britain.

National Failures

Calls for a national folk museum came from across the political spectrum, but primarily from intellectuals and elites who were invested in the idea of museums as vehicles for social change through education.¹⁰ The earliest vocal agitation for a national folk museum came in 1912 when a committee of folklorists and anthropologists publicly lobbied for the Crystal Palace and grounds to be utilized for a museum ‘illustrating in a comprehensive and educational manner the culture-history, and the modes of life in times past, of the English peoples’.¹¹ This campaign lost momentum when the First World War broke out in 1914. But the choice of the Crystal Palace was also problematic. It linked the project to a highly metropolitan, Victorian approach to heritage incompatible with the local and regional demands which were to carry folk museums into the twentieth century.¹² Mass education was to become the primary justification for modern heritage.

In 1928 a comprehensive survey of local and regional museums, funded by the Carnegie Trust, was published. It concluded that these institutions needed to adapt to the educational needs of their constituents. The report advocated a more even spread of museum provision across the country, with collections bearing a clear relation to their localities.¹³ It also highlighted the absence of a national folk museum, spawning a joint advisory committee between the Office of Works and the Board of Education. The committee met several times in the early 1930s.¹⁴ They devised a scheme for a small, reconstructed village made up of architecturally consistent English buildings from the early Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. Foreshadowing Jenkins’s cross-class language, the museum was described as providing ‘a sort of key to the social history of peasant and middle-class England’.¹⁵

¹⁰ See J. A. Green et al., ‘Museums in Relation to Education—Final Report of Committee, *Report of the Eighty-Eighth Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, August 24–28 1920, Cardiff* (London, 1920), 267–81.

¹¹ *The Times*, 3 January 1912, 6.

¹² See Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven; London, 1999).

¹³ H. H. Miers, *A Report on the Public Museums of the British Isles, Other than the National Museums, to the Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees* (Edinburgh, 1928).

¹⁴ *The Times*, 3 February 1931, 17.

¹⁵ The National Archives: Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter TNA:PRO), WORK 17/322, ‘“An English Folk Museum: Its Scope and Cost” by M. Wheeler’, 17 November 1930, 5, 4.

The folk museum was to be the physical expression of the modern connection between heritage and education. It was hoped that the scheme would be administered by the Board of Education, since Britain's rising enthusiasm for preservationism needed to be supplemented with 'a definite educational policy'.¹⁶ The maintenance budget estimated an annual cost of £16,500, modest compared to the British Museum at £450,000 per year, though still a little more than the National Portrait Gallery's humble £14,000 outlay.¹⁷ Nonetheless, in March 1930 the Treasury categorically refused to back the scheme. In a time of national financial turmoil, burdening the taxpayer with such a novel liability was unthinkable.¹⁸ An internal Treasury memo mocked the scheme, calling it 'more suited to a Museum Director's utopia than to a world of financial stringency'.¹⁹ Thus the main obstruction to an English national folk museum was financial: successive governments preferred to leave such a large intervention in public education to the voluntary or private sectors. There was little political will to augment the portfolio of public London museums that were only administered by central government for historic reasons.

In the summer of 1948 the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) established a committee tasked with revisiting the question of an English folk museum. The committee published a scheme in 1949 and later a system of classification for English folklife material (see Figure 1).²⁰ This time it was stressed from the outset that any claims made upon public money would be slight. Local museum curators would act as honorary curators assuming responsibility for material from their region.²¹ But it still proved impossible to secure long-term funding for such an elaborate project from charitable sources, again during a period of national austerity.²² Moreover, by the early 1950s the

¹⁶ 'An English Folk Museum: Its Scope and Cost', 4.

¹⁷ TNA:PRO, ED 24/1399, 'National Folk Museum: Maintenance Budget', *n.d.*

¹⁸ TNA:PRO, T 162/265/1, Sir Charles Trevelyan and Mr Lansbury to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 13 March 1930; TNA:PRO, ED 24/1399, The Chancellor of the Exchequer to Sir Charles Trevelyan, 3 June 1930.

¹⁹ TNA:PRO, T 162/265/1, 'Internal Memo', 29 May 1930.

²⁰ 'A Scheme for the Development of a Museum of English Life and Traditions', *Man: A Monthly Record of Anthropological Science*, XLIX (1949), 41–3; Royal Anthropological Institute Archives, Fitzrovia, London (hereafter RAI), British Ethnography Committee papers (hereafter BEC) A59/6/35/d, 'A Simplified Scheme for the Establishment of an English Museum', 1951; RAI, BEC A59/16/7, 'Suggestions Concerning Classification, Storage, and Labelling of Objects Illustrating English Life and Traditions', *n.d.* This scheme is discussed in detail in Peter Rivière, 'Success and Failure: The Tale of Two Museums', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 22 (2010), 141–51.

²¹ RAI, BEC A59/1/26/1, 'Plan for a Museum with Dispersed Storage for Folk Material', 1948.

²² RAI, BEC A59/7/4, T. W. Bagshawe to F. Stallman, 1 March 1952. The RAI scheme was mainly involved with funding applications to the Pilgrim Trust.

Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) had been established at Reading University and appeared to fulfil the aims of a national folk museum enough to satisfy those holding the purse strings.²³ Meanwhile, in Wales, a flourishing national institution had grown out of the Department of Folklife set up at the University of Cardiff in 1936. The founder of the National Museum of Wales, Iowerth C. Peate, observed that Wales's advantage was that it was 'a singularly appropriate and compact topographical unit'.²⁴

This issue of scale was reoccurring. Behind the scenes, the RAI committee's consultations revealed a persistent tension between the overall schemes and desires to keep folk museum projects locally grounded. The Director of Bristol City Museum wrote to the committee chair: 'The average Englishman is in general more in favour of regionalisation than centralisation'.²⁵ Another correspondent noted that if these kinds of museums were to attract 'working people' and 'ordinary folk', they needed to appeal to them directly by displaying the evolution of their own particular trades from their region.²⁶ This implied active identification and participation. The idea of a national folk museum was finding itself out of sync with the kind of narratives that would speak to mid-twentieth-century audiences. As I have argued elsewhere, populist social history needed to be about intimate and individual everyday lives.²⁷ Despite their efforts, the various national schemes proposed could not encapsulate this within such a large-scale institution. Successful local folk museums exhibited common impulses across all four nations, especially in rural locations. They were part of a grass-roots educational project concerned with the articulation of personal identities.²⁸ In the local context there was space for the romantic imagination, for myth and superstition, a far cry from the Whiggish teleology of an 'official' Protestant national patriotism.²⁹

²³ Rivière, 'Success and Failure', 146.

²⁴ Iowerth C. Peate, 'A Folk Museum for Wales', *Museums Journal*, 34 (1934), 229–30.

²⁵ RAI, BEC A59/2/134, F. S. Wallis to T. W. Bagshawe, 12 September 1949.

²⁶ RAI, BEC A59/2/23, R. A. Salaman to T. W. Bagshawe, 19 February 1949.

²⁷ Laura Carter, 'The Quennells and the "History of Everyday Life" in England, c. 1918–69', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), 106–34.

²⁸ Cf. Bridget Elizabeth Yates, 'Volunteer-Run Museums in English Market Towns and Villages', PhD thesis, University of Gloucestershire, Gloucestershire, 2010.

²⁹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London, 1992). For a particularly stark example of the co-mingling of folk museology, religion, and romanticism, see Geoffrey Ginn, 'An Ark for England: Esoteric Heritage at J.S.M. Ward's Abbey Folk Park, 1934–1940', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 22 (2010), 129–40.

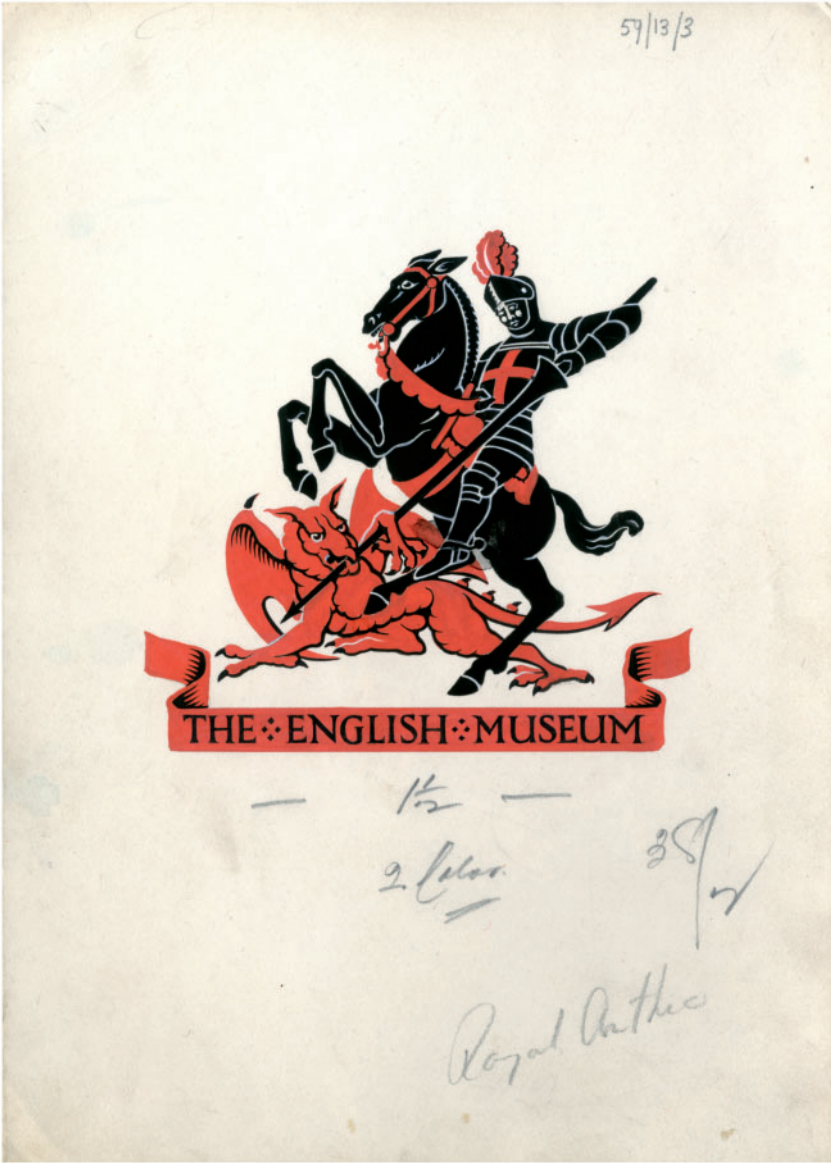


Figure 1
Device for the English Museum, 1949' RAIA BEC A59/13/3 (image reproduced by permission of the Royal Anthropological Institute).

'First wave' Folk Museology

In 1928 there were 530 provincial museums and art galleries in Britain, by 1938 there were 800, and in 1963 still only 876.³⁰ The inter-war years were therefore a period of growth. In a 1938 survey of local museums, forty 'period' museums were identified, including those labelled as 'folk'. But many of the other 400 'general' local museums that the report covered could be considered folk museums because they were preserving and displaying everyday life, work, and customs.³¹ This was the main goal of Luton Public Museum, Cambridge Folk Museum, and the Highland Folk Museum (*Am Fàsghadh*), which will be discussed in the following section. The Castle Museum at York and other smaller institutions will also be considered, together forming a mid-century cohort of 'first wave' folk museums. These museums have been chosen because of their significant impact on communities and schools from their opening as noted in contemporary surveys and local newspapers, and because they represent a spread of the different types of folk museums that emerged in this period in relation to location, origin, and size.

The story of Luton Public Museum revolves around a man named Thomas Wyatt Bagshawe.³² Bagshawe used his position in the family engineering firm to open a local museum for Dunstable in 1925, which began in the Town Hall but was eventually exhibited in Bagshawe's own house. From 1927 he was in talks with Luton Council about establishing a similar collection for Luton, the neighbouring town.³³ This plan bore fruit, and Luton's Public Museum opened in February 1928 with Bagshawe as the honorary curator.³⁴ Luton gradually became Bagshawe's main concern, and by September 1938, Dunstable Museum was defunct.³⁵ In 1931 Luton Public Museum moved from its original premises in the local library to a nineteenth-century manor house named Wardown House.³⁶ The museum thrived at Wardown throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and into the post-war period. The average monthly summer attendance in the late 1920s had been 620 visitors.³⁷ By 1931, this had risen to 5,970 in July and 7,418 in August, and across 1937 and 1938 monthly attendance figures remained consistent at over 5,000 guests.³⁸ Luton's population was growing rapidly

³⁰ Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, *Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries* (London, 1963), 3.

³¹ S. F. Markham, *A Report on the Museums and Art Galleries of the British Isles (Other than the National Museums)* (Edinburgh, 1938), 45–6.

³² For a detailed biographical introduction to Bagshawe, see Peter Rivière, 'An English Theme Park', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 23 (2010), 155–8.

³³ *Luton News*, 19 May 1927.

³⁴ *Beds and Herts Saturday Telegraph*, 4 February 1928.

³⁵ *Dunstable Gazette*, 24 February 1939.

³⁶ *Luton Pictorial*, 7 July 1931.

³⁷ Wardown Park Museum Archives, Luton (hereafter WPMA), Museums Subcommittee Minute Book, 2 September 1930.

³⁸ *Luton News*, 19 September 1931; *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 15 October 1938.

over the same period, from approximately 50,000 in 1914 to over 130,000 by the early 1960s.³⁹

In the later 1940s Thomas Bagshawe also chaired the national folk museum project at the RAI, described above. One of Bagshawe's lesser-observed roles during this period was as honorary curator of the folk museum for Cambridgeshire.⁴⁰ A committee of local elites had opened the Cambridge and County Folk Museum in 1936 in the rooms of an abandoned pub to 'collect and preserve for the benefit of the general public and for the purposes of education, objects of local interest and of common use'.⁴¹ Although many founding members were connected to the ancient university in Cambridge, part of the museum's civic identity was a remit to preserve local things that the research-driven University museums overlooked.⁴² At Cambridge Bagshawe mentored Enid Porter, a 38-year-old former schoolteacher with ancestral roots in the county who had been hired as a museum assistant in 1947 (see Figure 2).⁴³ In 1950 Enid Porter was appointed as full curator.⁴⁴ She spent the rest of her life collecting personal objects, street names, and anecdotes from private conversations with the local people of Cambridgeshire. From the early 1960s she lived in a purpose-built cottage adjacent to the museum, and although her health often failed, she was writing and publishing on local history until after her retirement in 1976.⁴⁵ Cambridge Folk Museum attracted fewer visitors than Luton, although the town's local, permanent population was smaller because of the growing University, and the museum had more restricted opening hours.⁴⁶ In the decade between 1937 and 1947, the average annual attendance was just over 4,100 guests.⁴⁷

³⁹ James Dyer, *The Story of Luton* (Luton, 1964).

⁴⁰ WPMA, Museums Sub-Committee Minute Book, 14 May 1940.

⁴¹ Cambridge and County Folk Museum Archives, Cambridge (hereafter CCFMA), Cambridge and County Folk Museum (hereafter CCFM) 1st Annual Report, 31 December 1936. Cf. *Cambridge Daily News*, 28 October 1935.

⁴² On the background of the founders and their intentions, see Rebecca Proctor, "'From Papua to Pampisford': The Origins of Cambridge & County Folk Museum", MA thesis, University College London, London, 2010, 7–8.

⁴³ The original curator from 1936 was Miss Catherine Parsons, *Cambridge Daily News*, 28 February 1939.

⁴⁴ CCFMA, CCFM 15th Annual Report, 31 December 1950.

⁴⁵ See the preface to Enid Porter, *Cambridgeshire Customs and Folklore* (London, 1969). Cf. *Cambridge Daily News*, 26 August 1968. For a biographical essay on Porter, see Carmen Blacker, 'Enid Porter 1909–1984', in Carmen Blacker and H. R. Ellis Davidson, eds, *Women and Tradition: A Neglected Group of Folklorists* (Durham, NC, 2000), 233–44. A full bibliography of Porter's published works has also recently been assembled, see J. D. Pickles, 'The Publications of Enid Porter', *Review of the Cambridgeshire Association for Local History*, 16 (2007).

⁴⁶ J. P. C. Roach, *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 3, the City and University of Cambridge* (London, 1959), 15–29.

⁴⁷ CCFMA, CCFM 12th Annual Report, 31 December 1947.



Figure 2

Enid Porter (1909–84), no date (image supplied by the Museum of Cambridge and reproduced by permission of Cambridge News and Media).

The founder of the Highland Folk Museum, Isabel Grant, shared many of Porter's objectives, and the two women swapped notes on their methods.⁴⁸ Grant, like Bagshawe, had already lectured at

⁴⁸ Isabel F. Grant, *The Making of Am Fasgadh: An Account of the Origins of the Highland Folk Museum by its Founder* (Edinburgh, 2007), 60.

Cambridge Folk Museum in 1938, prior to Porter's arrival.⁴⁹ Grant was a Scottish woman of aristocratic descent who first became interested in Highland customs when she deciphered the account book of an eighteenth-century Highland ancestor.⁵⁰ She had previously worked as a research assistant to John Maynard Keynes in London, who encouraged her to pursue social and economic history.⁵¹ Grant's museum first opened in a church on Iona in 1935, but it was an arduous struggle for her to establish long-term funding for her project. During its first two summers on public display in 1936 and 1937, Grant reported 800 and 900 visitors to her collection, respectively. By 1951, summer attendance reached 6,000 guests.⁵²

What were the disciplinary and conceptual parameters of mid-twentieth-century folk culture collected and disseminated by Bagshawe, Porter, and Grant? In 1890 G. L. Gomme, a pre-eminent Victorian folklorist, described the products of folklore as 'relics of an unrecorded past', distinguishable from anthropology in dealing with 'observable phenomena in man's mental and social history'.⁵³ These traditions were associated with an unscholarly romanticism. Comparing various European folklore cultures in the late nineteenth century, Chris Manias has stressed the 'contested' and 'ambiguous' nature of British folklore.⁵⁴ Other northern European states, such as across Scandinavia and in Germany, used romantic vernacular cultures to shore up their collective nationalisms in this period. But scholars have highlighted the potentially global reach of Britain's Folklore Society (FLS), established in 1878 at the high noon of Britain's Empire. Anthropology and folklore in Britain therefore became uncoupled amidst an imperial discourse struggling with the distinction between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' cultures.⁵⁵ By the 1920s British folklore objects were regarded as indigenous anomalies in anthropological museums.⁵⁶

As Jonathan Roper has pointed out, locating a consistent English domestic folklore tradition in the nineteenth century involves moving

⁴⁹ CCFMA, CCFM 3rd Annual Report, 31 December 1938.

⁵⁰ Grant, *Am Fasgadh*, 14–5. This research was eventually published as Isabel F. Grant, *Every-day Life on an Old Highland Farm, 1769–1782* (London, 1924).

⁵¹ Hugh Cheape, 'Dr I. F. Grant (1887–1983): the Highland Folk Museum and a Bibliography of Her Written Works', *Review of Scottish Culture*, 2 (1986), 113–25. Keynes also published some of Grant's articles in *The Economic Journal*.

⁵² The National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh (hereafter NRS), Records of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust (hereafter CUKT), GD 281/37/147, I. F. Grant to Dr Russell, 17 October 1937; 'The Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie, Inverness-shire', 1952.

⁵³ George Laurence Gomme, *The Handbook of Folklore* (London, 1890), 2, 3.

⁵⁴ Chris Manias, *Race, Science, and the Nation: Reconstructing the Ancient Past in Britain, France and Germany* (London, 2013), 221–6.

⁵⁵ Wingfield and Gosden, 'An Imperialist Folklore?'

⁵⁶ Tabitha Cadbury, 'Home and Away: What Was "Folklore" at Cambridge?', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 22 (2009), 102–19.

away from the 'official' activities of the FLS and looking at local parish activities.⁵⁷ In the twentieth century, folklore was still being studied haphazardly at a local level, and often by women.⁵⁸ 'First wave' folk museologists rarely used the nineteenth-century 'popular antiquities' tradition to frame their activities. They instead cited a modern (and foreign) forebear: Artur Hazelius in Sweden. Hazelius founded the Nordic Museum, the world's first significant folklife museum, in central Stockholm in 1873. But it was his pioneering open-air museum, Skansen (opened in 1891), that became a source of inspiration and place of pilgrimage for advocates of modern folk museology.⁵⁹ Hazelius essentially provided local museum folklorists in Britain with coherent methodologies for the display and categorization of everyday life to a general public, and an association with his project helped these practitioners mark themselves out as popularizers, rather than antiquarians or academics.⁶⁰ They only reluctantly defined what they did as 'folklore'. They saw their inquiries as broad and interdisciplinary, part of a nascent museological profession that separated them from academics. For example, Enid Porter thought 'folk' was an awful word adopted in lieu of anything better: 'it's everything to do with the way of life of the people, the clothes they wore, the things they believed in'.⁶¹ Likewise, Isabel Grant was uneasy about the 'peasant' connotations of 'folk', but as her biographer noted, 'It was of course difficult to find the right term for a museum of wide-ranging social history; it required a name which people could understand'.⁶²

Local folk museums could connect their endeavours to the channels of inter-war citizen-making because their collections were explicitly related to local knowledge.⁶³ Location was a constant sticking point in debates about establishing a national folk museum in England, Wales, and Scotland. Proponents wanted the national museums to be situated as near as possible to a dense urban centre, to maximize the opportunities for

⁵⁷ Jonathan Roper, 'England—the Land without Folklore?', in Baycroft and Hopkin, eds, *Folklore and Nationalism*, 227–53.

⁵⁸ Recent work has sought to correct the 'dead white men' tradition that dominates the history of British folklore, see Juliette Wood, 'British Women Folklorists before the Second World War', *Folklore* (2013, virtual issue). Cf. George W. Stocking, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888–1951* (London, 1995).

⁵⁹ Sten Rentzhog, *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea* (Stockholm, 2007). Cf. Edward A. Chappell, 'Open-Air Museums: Architectural History for the Masses', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 58 (1999), 334–41.

⁶⁰ See Charles E. Freeman, 'Museums Methods in Norway and Sweden', *Supplement to Museums Journal*, 47 (1938).

⁶¹ CCFMA, 'Folk Museums by Enid Porter', unpublished lecture notes, *n.d.*

⁶² Cheape, 'Dr I. F. Grant', 114.

⁶³ Cf. Tom Hulme, "'A Nation of Town Criers': Civic Publicity and Historical Pageantry in Inter-War Britain', *Urban History* (advance access) (2016), 1–23.

school groups to visit.⁶⁴ However, the central conceit of these institutions was the personal appeal of their rich vernacular collections, inevitably grounded in a strong sense of place. Marrying these two objectives proved to be challenging, and lead to the composite village approach that invariably felt inauthentic. In contrast, local folk museums tapped into genuine appetites to document waning industries and customs during the 1920s.⁶⁵ For example, Hereford Museum's 'Old Country Life' section contained old-fashioned smocks and dairy utensils. At Northampton Central Museum, there was a reconstruction of a cobbler's shop, showing how shoes were made in cottage industry.⁶⁶ From the beginning of his tenure at Luton, deputy curator Charles Freeman contributed a regular column to the local newspaper describing the museum's latest accessions of 'bygones', always relating them to the rapid industrial and social progress of the town in the present.⁶⁷ The coverage of these museums in local newspapers, linking past and present, was an essential part of their entrenchment in everyday, community life.

Whilst the anthropological 'survivals' approach to folk objects emphasized universality, in local folk museums objects were endowed with significance via the memories and voices of the community. Porter acknowledged this practice of contextualization as her key debt to Bagshawe. He had impressed upon her the importance of gathering the transient local knowledge surrounding material objects. Porter became notorious for her habit of sitting by the museum entrance and soliciting stories from local visitors and passers-by.⁶⁸ Grant heeded Bagshawe's advice even more literally. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, she travelled far and wide around the islands to augment her collection.⁶⁹ When collecting these objects from within people's homes, Grant was also collecting the emotional and sensual aspects of history. She described this as a 'psychological atmosphere', arguing that it was absent from materialist-economic accounts of social history.⁷⁰ Predictably, Isabel Grant does not feature in Hugh Trevor-Roper's classic essay on the 'invention' of the Highland tradition of Scotland. Although operating in the same ideological tradition of Highland chauvinism, her efforts added

⁶⁴ TNA:PRO, ED 24/1399, 'Memorandum II: National Folk Museum: The Question of Site', n.d.

⁶⁵ Kate Hill, 'Manufactures, Archaeology and Bygones: Making a Sense of Place in Civic Museums, 1850-1914', *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8 (2013), 54-74.

⁶⁶ *Museums Journal*, 33 (1933), 65-6; *Museums Journal*, 29 (1929), 129.

⁶⁷ For example, 'Chicksands Priory Mangle', *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 24 August 1937; 'Giving Man Back A Pride In His Job', *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 7 February 1939; 'Gifts That Help Make A Picture of the Past', *Beds and Herts Saturday Telegraph*, 24 June 1944.

⁶⁸ Porter, *Cambridgeshire Customs*, xiv.

⁶⁹ Grant, *Am Fasgadh*, 67-73.

⁷⁰ Grant, *Every-day Life*, 4-24.

a feminized, privatized, and tactile dimension to the episodes of public spectacle and antiquarian documentation that he describes. But she was, as Trevor-Roper put it, contributing to the creation of a 'whole imaginary Highland civilisation'.⁷¹ The *Glasgow Herald* declared in 1948, 'One woman's hobby has become a national asset'.⁷² Establishing larger outdoor exhibits for *Am Fasgadh* (on the Skansen model) required the re-enactment of practical skills, too, and Grant identified men who 'still have the ancient skill' to rebuild traditional Highland cottages in the museum grounds.⁷³

In local folk museums, useable social knowledge was extracted from hands and hearts, rather than from books. This set them apart from earlier folklore practices, and situated them within local, rather than national or imperial, traditions. This local emphasis was ideologically conservative and gendered feminine, in stark contrast to the new academic social history of the 1960s. The following section will explore why social knowledge was cast as feminine and conservative in these museums from the 1920s to the 1960s, revealing its utility for mid-century educational purposes.

'Conservative Modernity' in Local Folk Museums

Alison Light has argued that after the First World War, the nation was more attuned to a 'history from inside', and she explores this introspection through women's writing as an expression of 'conservative modernity'.⁷⁴ This idea of a progressive modernity still tethered to established social and gender norms is useful in explaining the enduring purchase of folk museums on communities in mid-twentieth-century Britain.⁷⁵ A traditional aspect of 'volkish' conservatism has been the utilization of folk culture as a manifesto for racial 'purity' in the present. It is possible to draw a line from the origins of British folklore studies in the mid-nineteenth century and the surrounding Victorian racial discourse, to inter-war eugenicist thinking through figures such as Marie Stopes and Rolf Gardiner.⁷⁶ National folk museum projects were

⁷¹ Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Highland Tradition of Scotland', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1992), 15–41, 37.

⁷² *Glasgow Herald*, 2 July 1948.

⁷³ NRS, CUKT GD 281/37/147, I. F. Grant to H. Hetherington, 30 March 1944.

⁷⁴ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991), 5.

⁷⁵ Cf. Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain* (Oxford, 2004), 95–110; Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism c. 1918–45* (Manchester, 2011), 202–3.

⁷⁶ Matthew Jefferies and Mike Tyldesley, *Rolf Gardiner: Folk, Nature and Culture in Interwar Britain* (Farnham, 2011); Alison Bashford, *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth* (Columbia, 2014), 211–38.

much more inclined to deploy rhetoric promoting racial nationalism, for example the 1912 letter to *The Times* in support of the Crystal Palace scheme referenced 'promoting love of country and pride in race'.⁷⁷ This is particularly true in the case of Wales, where the idea of a Welsh racial exceptionalism, advocated by the anthropologist H. J. Fleure, fuelled the drive for a national institution.⁷⁸ No doubt Bagshawe, Porter, and Grant each espoused the importance of authentic, ancestral claims on their respective communities. Bagshawe, in particular, exhibited gross streaks of anti-Semitism in later life.⁷⁹ But their histories were too granular and too practical to explicitly connect with this racial discourse. What mattered most was the local distinction between objects and stories, much less easily tied to the differentials of character and mental capacity central to racial theory.⁸⁰

Nonetheless, local folk museum narratives were framed by the ideal of a conservative organic community as a basis for stable politics within which individuals knew their position, but also exercised agency and creativity. In her account of the origins of the Highland Folk Museum, Isabel Grant explained how her exhibits bound all grades of Highland society in a common aesthetic community: 'The dress, the highly stylized music, the complex meters of verse, the austerity of the epic tales were common to everyone in a many-sided society'.⁸¹ Thinkers more attuned to class tensions, from Carlyle through Ruskin and Morris to Leavis, had used the organic community to enact a radical break from the industrial present.⁸² But the local folk museum sought to physically embody a web of organic community relations that had developed unbroken over time and would continue to bind the community together in the future, through working-class memory and leisure rather than work. This proved especially potent during the Second World War. The 1941 annual report of the Cambridge Folk Museum reported: '...the exhibits tend to show that in spite of wars the continuity of ordinary life in England has been unbroken'.⁸³

These highly conservative depictions of the past could operate comfortably alongside socially progressive practices in folk museums. Considering the educational activities occurring within these museums highlights how folk culture was connected to mainstream modern, democratic concerns. During the First World War, museums up and down the country proved their social utility to the mass public for the

⁷⁷ *The Times*, 3 January 1912, 6.

⁷⁸ TNA:PRO, EB 3/11, 'Letter from L. T. Winston Davies', 2 May 1937.

⁷⁹ WPMA, T. W. Bagshawe to C. Freeman, 30 September 1962.

⁸⁰ Cf. Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven; London, 2006), 155–6.

⁸¹ Grant, *Am Fasgadh*, 27.

⁸² See E. P. Thompson, 'George Sturt', in *Persons and Polemics* (London, 1994), 256–62.

⁸³ CCFMA, CCFM 6th Annual Report, 31 December 1941.

first time. Many developed partnerships with local education authorities (LEAs) and undertook educational experiments. As the importance of serving an emerging secondary education constituency grew throughout the inter-war years, so too did funding for museums.⁸⁴ Thus, it was found in 1938 that about half of the provincial museums and art galleries in Britain received regular visits from school parties.⁸⁵ Education became the public-facing purpose of museums, often regarded as ancillary to their technical, curatorial functions. These tensions reflected a broader bifurcation of 'popular' and 'expert' knowledge occurring in mid-twentieth-century Britain.⁸⁶ In museums this split was gendered: women were most likely to gain entry to museums work in a custodial or educational capacity, which subordinated and trivialized their expertise.⁸⁷ Most 'first wave' folk museums were founded in the early twentieth century at the very moment when the gulf was widening between education and research; they became sites for the formation of 'popular' knowledge and were conceived of as public-serving institutions from the beginning. For example, one of the earliest rationales for a Welsh folk museum justified it as a form of unemployment relief in the short term (the pulling down and re-erection of a large number of buildings) and a site of social community services and a source of touristic revenue in the long term.⁸⁸ Thinking along similar lines but inflected through her gender, Grant conceptualized her museum work as an extension of the social work she had undertaken in London during the First World War.⁸⁹ Elderly visitors told her that she was 'helping people to feel their roots'.⁹⁰ This public service ethos further galvanized women's roles as communicators, mediators, and 'care-givers' when working in 'intellectual' public spaces such as museums.⁹¹

In 1932 Luton Public Museum received one of the first Carnegie Trust museum development grants of £200, matched in kind by the Luton Corporation.⁹² The Carnegie Trust endorsed museums with

⁸⁴ 'Report of a Conference Between Representatives of the Board of Education and a Committee of the Museums Association on the Proposed Transfer of Museums to the Local Education Authorities', *Museums Journal* 19 (1920), 123–9; Board of Education, *Memorandum on the Possibility of Increased Co-operation between Public Museums and Public Educational Institutions* (London, 1931).

⁸⁵ Markham, *A Report on the Museums and Art Galleries*, 114.

⁸⁶ Cf. Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010), 7–10.

⁸⁷ Kate Hill, *Women and Museums 1850–1914: Modernity and the Gendering of Knowledge* (Manchester, 2016), 38–9.

⁸⁸ 'Letter from L. T. Winston Davies'.

⁸⁹ Grant, *Am Fasgadh*, 14.

⁹⁰ NRS, CUKT GD 281/37/147, I. F. Grant to Mr Laughton, *n.d.*

⁹¹ On women and 'emotional work' cf. Claire Langhamer, 'Feelings, Women and Work in the Long 1950s', *Women's History Review* (advance access) (2016).

⁹² WPMA, Museums Sub-Committee Minute Book, 8 September 1931.

tightly focused regional collecting policies, as at Luton, because it maximized the relevance and accessibility of local museums to their communities.⁹³ With this grant Luton Public Museum built up one of the first special 'travelling' loan collections for circulation amongst schools. In 1937 the local newspaper noted, 'The modern idea is to take the Museum to the schoolchildren'.⁹⁴ These efforts continued, and during the Second World War numerous weekly lectures in the museum, with titles such as 'Everyday Life in the Middle Ages', were run for the hundreds of new working-class pupils in Luton who had been evacuated from London.⁹⁵ The museum was described as 'one big schoolroom' in the local press.⁹⁶ In 1953 Islay Doncaster, a history teacher and lecturer at a local training college, undertook a more formal educational experiment at Luton.⁹⁷ Doncaster focused her energies on running classes with secondary modern (or 'B' stream) pupils in the museum, arguing that these 'less intelligent children gain more from the visual and tactile approach to learning than the Museum'. The classes, ranging from 'History from Local Archaeology' to 'Nineteenth Century Social Life', required pupils to identify and draw objects from the galleries. They were then permitted to handle museum specimens such as primitive tools and straw splitters, which they used to make straw plait themselves.⁹⁸ This latter activity deliberately connected the pupils to Luton's historic straw-plaiting industry, which had been priced out by cheap imports from abroad in the 1860s.⁹⁹ This regional economic shift, cut through with nostalgia, forms part of a pervasive national narrative in Britain about the transition from Victorian prosperity to twentieth-century 'decline'.¹⁰⁰ But in the museum it became a significant vehicle for a locally grounded citizenship message. Education, especially with lower-ability working-class pupils, was about a social investment in the future, itself a condition of twentieth-century modernity.

At Cambridge Folk Museum the curator, Enid Porter, had trained as a schoolteacher prior to her appointment. This experience allowed her

⁹³ The history of the Carnegie Trust's museum policy is outlined in NRS, CUKT GD 281/33/13, 'Report of the Working Party on a New Policy for Museums', November 1949.

⁹⁴ *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 2 June 1937.

⁹⁵ WPMA, Museums Sub-Committee Minute Book, 14 December 1939; 15 January 1940.

⁹⁶ *Beds and Herts Evening Telegraph*, 14 September 1939.

⁹⁷ Cf. Islay Doncaster, *Finding the History Around Us* (Oxford, 1957).

⁹⁸ WPMA, Museums Sub-Committee Minute Book, 25 July 1953. Emphasis true to source.

⁹⁹ Dyer, *Story of Luton*, 115–20.

¹⁰⁰ Martin J. Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850–1980* (Cambridge, 1981). Cf. David Edgerton, *Science, Technology and the British Industrial 'Decline', 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 1996); Jim Tomlinson, 'Thrice Denied: "Declinism" as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20 (2009), 227–51.

to see the museum as a space analogous to the classroom. As with many local folk museums, Cambridge struggled to secure long-term financial backing, and funding applications to various Trusts always relied on the educational appeal of the museum and evidence of its activities.¹⁰¹ Indeed, grants from the Education Committees of both Cambridge City and Cambridgeshire County Council were the most sustained source of income for the museum across the mid-century. Upon its opening in 1936 the Town Council agreed to make a grant of £10, in return for senior children attending Borough Elementary Schools being admitted free of charge.¹⁰² Workers' Educational Association visits were also subsidized from 1937.¹⁰³ After years of sustained informal activity under Porter's direction, the Cambridgeshire and Isle of Ely Education Authority inaugurated a Schools Museum Service in September 1967 and appointed a specialist museum teacher to run classes in the Museum and take loan exhibits to the schools.¹⁰⁴

Further north, York Castle Museum had been opened in 1938 by the York Corporation and was styled as 'the folk museum of Yorkshire life' with 'the single aim of preserving the way of life in Yorkshire during the past four hundred years'.¹⁰⁵ The nucleus of the early museum was a collection of Yorkshire bygones amassed by the collector Dr John Kirk in the early twentieth century.¹⁰⁶ York Castle Museum famously had one of the first 'living history' period streets in Britain, and, as at *Am Fasgadh*, emulating the Scandinavian folk museums on an even larger outdoor scale was an ongoing curatorial ambition.¹⁰⁷ They appointed a full-time teacher to be based in the museum in 1940 through the financial backing of the LEA. An Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools report on the provision of museum services in York in 1948 held the city up as a nation-wide example, ultimately because the LEA had recognized and invested long term in these educational projects.¹⁰⁸ From the late 1940s, the museum received visits from over 1,000 schoolchildren per month.¹⁰⁹ Parallels can be drawn with the National Museum of Wales, whose schools' service was robustly funded by a syndicate of Welsh LEAs from

¹⁰¹ CCFMA, CCFM 4th Annual Report, 31 December 1939.

¹⁰² CCFMA, CCFM 1st Annual Report, 31 December 1936.

¹⁰³ CCFMA, Cambridge and District Folk Museum Minute Book, 15 January 1937.

¹⁰⁴ CCFMA, CCFM 31st Annual Report, 1 April 1966 to 31 March 1967.

¹⁰⁵ York Library and Archives, York (hereafter YLA), Y/COU/5/2/12 BC 59.2, Corporation of York Castle Museum Committee Minute Book, 4 April 1956.

¹⁰⁶ P. C. D. Brears, 'Kirk of the Castle', *Museums Journal*, 80 (1980), 90–2.

¹⁰⁷ On 'living history' streets see Kate Hill, 'Collecting Authenticity: Domestic, Familial, and Everyday "Old Things" in English Museums, 1850–1939', *Museum History Journal*, 4 (2011), 203–22, 216–8. Plans to develop York Castle Museum into a folk park were evident by the 1960s, see YLA, Y/COU/5/2/12 BC 59.3, Corporation of York Castle Museum Committee Minute Book, 3 April 1963; 4 July 1966.

¹⁰⁸ TNA:PRO, ED 149/97, 'Museums of York and Their Use by Schools 1946–51', *n.d.*

¹⁰⁹ YLA, Y/COU/5/2/12 BC 59.1, Corporation of York Castle Museum Committee Minute Book, 5 April 1950; 7 November 1951.

1950 and had much success connecting with rural and isolated secondary schools via an exhibit loan service.¹¹⁰ The 1948 HMI report noted that York Castle Museum was the most popular museum with children in the city, contrasting it with the less popular Yorkshire Museum, established in 1830 'in a traditional style'. This local preference underscores that folk museums were not singular institutions, but part of the wider array of modern, social-historical sites for education. The report went on to explain some of the methods used at York, clearly analogous to those at Luton:

Actual specimens from the homes, workshops and farms of earlier generations are used to help in the creation of an understanding of ways of life which have ceased to be...the method has a degree of success never possible with the older and more traditional methods of teaching History.¹¹¹

These successes at York stemmed from Kirk's focus on regional collecting, to which the museum remained committed. Through this, they developed a practical education programme that emphasized the agency of individuals living and working in Yorkshire across time and into the present day.

In their efforts to concoct modern educational programmes for 'average' pupils through visual and tactile teaching methods, these various schemes map directly onto the shifting educational currents of the mid-twentieth century, and after 1944, directly onto the tripartite model of secondary education.¹¹² Ever since the publication of the Hadow Report on modern secondary education in 1926, there had been a strong, but casual, assumption in pedagogical discourse that 'average' (most often working-class) pupils learnt best through 'concrete things and situations'.¹¹³ The local folk museum was functioning as a channel for a modern historical education that consciously fragmented national histories. These pupils were fed a trajectory of social history that was intended to bolster their sense of personal identity, since these methods foregrounded the individual within an atomized story of the nation's economic development. How far these narratives were imbibed is far more difficult to ascertain. But the persistent popularity of such activities amongst schoolchildren, teachers, and museum professionals

¹¹⁰ *The Times*, 9 September 1955, 11.

¹¹¹ 'Museums of York'.

¹¹² On post-war secondary education, see Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (Sixth Series)*, 24 (2014), 5–28. On history teaching for 'average' pupils specifically, see Jenny Keating, David Cannadine, and Nicole Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England* (Basingstoke, 2011), 132–6.

¹¹³ Board of Education, *The Education of the Adolescent* (London, 1926), 108. Also known as the 'Hadow Report'.

in the late-twentieth-century heritage sector attests to the power of using active education to engender positive emotional engagement.

‘Second Wave’ Folk Museology

The incremental progress of these small-scale projects was to be superseded by an era of more successful folk museology in the years after the Second World War, aided by top-down professionalization and bottom-up social change. From the 1950s the museums sector was professionalizing, whilst within universities various strands of social history were entering the official academic discourse. The Carnegie Trust, the major funder of local and regional museums aside from LEAs, had three clear objectives for its museum policy by 1951: professional development for staff, commissioning ‘expert reports’ to help museums plan redevelopment, and a small number of grants in aid of museum development schemes (contingent upon a favourable ‘expert report’).¹¹⁴ The focus was on research, rationalization, and technical skills, rather than the vernacular or emotional expertise of individuals like Bagshawe, Porter, and Grant. Gradually, ‘first wave’ folk museology was evacuated from the community spaces it had precariously occupied in the middle decades of the century. The claims of these museums to speak to everyday life in the past and present was subject to greater scrutiny in a post-war social climate that particularly valorized ‘ordinariness’ over eccentricity.¹¹⁵ In parallel to the decline of local newspapers, this change was also a by-product of the waning voluntary civic spirit characteristic of inter-war public life, as well as the movement of women into the formal workforce after the Second World War.¹¹⁶

The shift was particularly stark and highly gendered at *Am Fasgadh*. The Carnegie Trust became heavily involved in Grant’s work from the later 1940s, warily dubbing her an ‘individualist’. In exchange for funding, a Steering Committee was put in place in 1948.¹¹⁷ The committee emphasized the importance of compiling a catalogue of the collection ‘before its provenance, usage, history etc.—all locked up in Dr Grant’s mind—pass forever’.¹¹⁸ Plans were soon afoot to acquire Grant’s collection as the nucleus for a national folk museum for

¹¹⁴ NRS, CUKT GD 281/34/4, ‘Joint Committee of the Museums Association and the Carnegie United Kingdom—Policy 195155’, 19 January 1951.

¹¹⁵ Claire Langhamer, ‘Who the Hell Are Ordinary People? Ordinariness as a Category of Historical Analysis’, *Royal Historical Society Lecture Series*, University College London, 10 February 2017.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Helen McCarthy, ‘Women, Marriage and Paid Work in Post-War Britain’, *Women’s History Review* (advance access) (2016).

¹¹⁷ NRS, CUKT GD 281/37/147, H. Hetherington to J. Wilkie, 8 April 1944.

¹¹⁸ NRS, CUKT GD 281/37/147, Dr D. A. Allan to Lord Kilmaine, 5 October 1948. Isabel Grant was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Edinburgh in July 1948.

Scotland. From 1954 an all-male Council of representatives from four Scottish universities administered the museum.¹¹⁹ The museum was to 'play a large part in educating our own people to [sic] our history and development, and in showing the Scottish way of life to the visitor from further afield'.¹²⁰ The professionalizing and masculinizing ethos was clear. In the first meeting of this new Council, it was expressed that 'the curator might in future be an archaeologist and ethnologist rather than an antiquarian', and a May 1955 report stated that 'The aim is to make it a real research institution as well as a public attraction'.¹²¹ The museum re-opened along these lines in June 1955.

In the 1950s the Museums Association rolled out its first professional diplomas, within which there was a 'Folk Life and Local History' strand. The Museums Association focused on cultivating international networks to share best practice; thus, curators and museum assistants were given grants to visit museums abroad and attend conferences with the support of the Carnegie Trust.¹²² A new generation of more professionalized curators emphasized the need for larger, regional museums. In this formulation, the National Museum of Wales and Ulster Folk Museum were regarded as regional, rather than national. They were to be matched with analogous institutions for English regions such as the North East, Yorkshire, and East Anglia. The educational impulse within these museums was to be maintained and enlarged: 'Collection is not an end in itself, but only a means of reaching the people to whom those objects had the meaning of everyday things'.¹²³ In 1963 the government's Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries published a report on provincial museums, which further advocated the regional model.¹²⁴ These endeavours were paralleled by academic developments in folklife studies, the most important being the opening of the Institute of Dialect and Folklife Studies at the University of Leeds, which operated for 20 years from 1964.¹²⁵

In the summer of 1952 Frank Atkinson, then director of Halifax Museums, conducted a tour of the folk museums of Norway and

Her laureation address was reprinted in Cheape, 'Dr I. F. Grant', 121. Cf. Grant, *Am Fasgadh*, 189.

¹¹⁹ NRS, CUKT GD 281/37/148, 'Report on "Am Fasgadh"—Highland Folk Museum, Kingussie', 4 May 1955.

¹²⁰ NRS, CUKT GD 281/37/147, 'Kingussie (Inverness-shire): Am Fasgadh (Gaelic "The Shelter")', May 1952.

¹²¹ NRS, CUKT GD 281/37/147, 'Minutes of the Meeting of the Council of Management Held at Am Fasgadh, Kingussie', 4 November 1954.

¹²² NRS, CUKT GD281/34/5, 'Travel Grants to Museum Officials Application Form', 5 January 1956.

¹²³ Jenkins, 'Folk Museums', 18.

¹²⁴ Standing Commission, *Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries*.

¹²⁵ Peate, 'Some Thoughts on the Study of Folk Life'.

Sweden on a professional grant from the Museums Association and Carnegie Trust. Atkinson cited this moment as pivotal in his journey towards founding the North of England Open Air Museum, later known as the Beamish.¹²⁶ Just like his 'first wave' predecessors, the Scandinavian museums, with their contextualized displays, provided Atkinson with a model of modern and popular museology. But by his own account, there was little precedence for what Atkinson eventually achieved, aside from perhaps the failed RAI scheme and MERL.¹²⁷ This audacious leap from Skansen to Beamish obviously papers over the stories at the heart of this article. But Atkinson provides a useful case study to illuminate how and why a 'second wave' of folk museology was possible by the later 1960s, which used the language of the 'everyday' quite differently. Atkinson spent much of the 1950s collecting and photographing the material and skills of Yorkshire craftsmen that he felt were disappearing. For example, he recorded file-cutting techniques unique to Sheffield, of which he lamented '...the more mundane, grubby and "everyday," the less would local people bother'.¹²⁸ Atkinson's formative experiences were therefore very similar to those of Bagshawe, Kirk, Porter, and Grant in the inter-war years. But opportunities to channel them into a vigorous entity were more realistic by the later 1960s. Whilst in the 1930s such schemes remained tied to elite figureheads and voluntaristic community impulses, the immediate post-war years had seen an unprecedented expansion of state infrastructure and a greater confidence in the breadth and reach of educational institutions like museums and universities, underpinned by a social-democratic consensus.¹²⁹

In 1958 Atkinson moved to County Durham to work at the Bowes Museum. From a secure professional position as curator of the Bowes, he began planning a separate public open-air museum, and he worked hard to garner the interest and support of local politicians.¹³⁰ As a Yorkshire man, he could claim to be an unsentimental outsider, and he adopted an unselective collecting policy, which encouraged the community to come to him.¹³¹ At the same time central government was cautiously backing provincial artistic renewal, but in a House of Commons debate on 'The Fine Arts' in February 1960, it was emphasized that this did not amount to any kind of financial commitment to regional museums.¹³² After

¹²⁶ Frank Atkinson, *The Man Who Made Beamish: An Autobiography* (Gateshead, 1999), 9.

¹²⁷ Atkinson, *The Man Who Made Beamish*, 85–6.

¹²⁸ Atkinson, *The Man Who Made Beamish*, 63.

¹²⁹ Glen O'Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain: The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951–1973* (Basingstoke, 2012), 153–75.

¹³⁰ Atkinson, *The Man Who Made Beamish*, 85–93; *The Times*, 24 March 1961, 7.

¹³¹ Jenny Brown, 'Frank Atkinson and the Founding of Beamish', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 22 (2009), 120–8.

¹³² *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 618, 26 February 1960, 786–7.

Harold Wilson's general election victory of 1966, Atkinson was able to capitalize upon a groundswell of local labour support for his scheme to establish a working party. This became a working committee, and in 1971 the North of England Open Air Museum opened as a small explanatory exhibition in Beamish Hall (see Figure 3).¹³³ The layers of bureaucracy that Bagshawe and Grant could not countenance were foundational to Atkinson's project, and his professional awareness of their necessity was vital to its longevity.

Most of the previous folk museum schemes, national and local, were looking to capture everyday life before or apart from industrialization. They had therefore failed to account for the experience of the staple, 'heavy' industries in Britain that had been slowly and gradually declining since the late nineteenth century. Coalmining in the North East was the archetype. Class identities in the coalfields were by no means homogenous, but they were bound up with the industrial. As Hester Barron has shown, a continuous process of myth-making bridged the experiences of a diverse community of workers across the twentieth century.¹³⁴ Central to Atkinson's mission was therefore his commitment to collecting and representing the industrial past of the North East. The Deputy Director of Education for County Durham argued that the 'old black image' of the North East should be cast off, but Atkinson fought for the retention of industrial material.¹³⁵ Realizing that the 'old black image' could be harnessed for modernity, Atkinson successfully captured and embedded his heritage project in a specific moment of social change. The triumph of the 'second wave' was therefore a matter of strategy and timing, rather than a product of the 'first wave's' failure to connect with communities.

Similarly, plans for the 'heritagization' of 'monuments of the industrial revolution' in Birmingham were afoot from the early 1960s.¹³⁶ The Cambridge Folk Museum established early links with the Cambridge Society for Industrial Archaeology, founded in 1968, which went on to establish the Cambridge Museum of Technology, opened on 'steam weekend' in 1971.¹³⁷ This absorption of the industrial was matched in the field of art and design, where studies of vernacular art began to embrace cruder, machine-made objects as part of their definition of the 'everyday'.¹³⁸ Even in the South, where local industries were more

¹³³ Atkinson, *The Man Who Made Beamish*, 93–4.

¹³⁴ Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout: Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield* (Oxford, 2010), 226–53.

¹³⁵ Atkinson, *The Man Who Made Beamish*, 92.

¹³⁶ *The Times*, 20 March 1961, 5.

¹³⁷ CCFMA, CCFM 33rd Annual Report, 31 March 1969; *Cambridge Daily News*, 17 February 1968; 19 November 1968; 7 March 1969; 14 October 1970.

¹³⁸ Barbara Jones, *The Unsophisticated Arts* (London, 1951); Margaret Lambert and Enid Marx, *English Popular Art* (London, 1951).

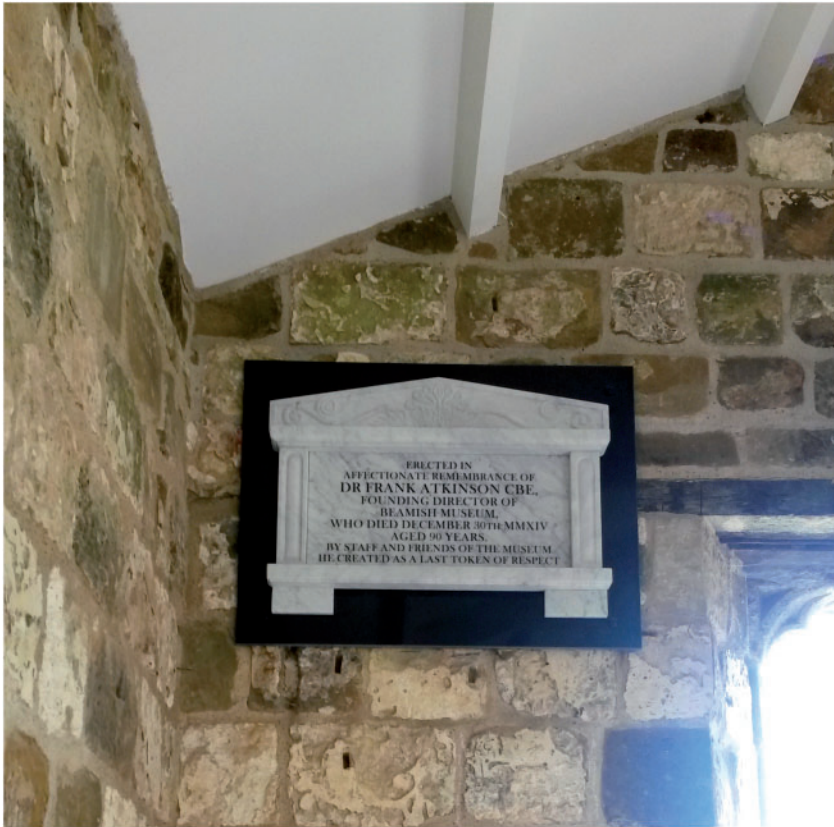


Figure 3

Plaque in memory of Frank Atkinson (1924–2014), situated inside a reconstructed Georgian church at the Beamish Living Museum of the North, 2015 (image copyright of author).

variegated, the regional industrial model became central to ambitious pitches for new open-air museums during the 1960s. In 1967 a case for an open-air museum in the Wealden area of Kent and Sussex stated: 'This is perhaps the most perfect area in England for a Regional Museum of this kind. It has a cultural and geographical unity unequalled by any other area of similar size in the country'.¹³⁹

From 1970 the government's Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries began investigating folk museums in Britain once again, in light of the rapid growth of the independent museums sector.¹⁴⁰ Their

¹³⁹ TNA:PRO, EB 3/11, J. R. Armstrong to Rt Hon Miss Jennie Lee MP, 17 May 1967.

¹⁴⁰ A data set of the 1300+ independent museums that opened during this period is currently being developed, see 'Mapping Museums', <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/art-history/>>

goal was to find out how to strengthen regional cooperation and coordination between provincial museums. The Carnegie Trust was also expressing interest in supporting 'private schemes or new experiments', over smaller and older individual museums.¹⁴¹ The need to pay attention to industrial material, the importance of education, and generating research cultures through connections with universities were all themes that emerged from these enquiries.¹⁴² The Museums Association and the Carnegie Trust set up a working party on folk museums in 1972, in which Atkinson was heavily involved and for which Beamish was held up as the model for future developments. By this point, prominent male figures were establishing social history in British universities, and Atkinson shrewdly aligned folk museology with this version of the discipline.¹⁴³ Some of the earliest social history professors were invited to participate in the working party, including William George Hoskins and Jack Simmons.¹⁴⁴ The 'new' social history of post-war Britain was gendered masculine, in contrast to the 'first wave' museums, which were coded as feminine, bearing 'relational and affective forms of knowledge'.¹⁴⁵

Atkinson explained to the Secretary of the Standing Commission: 'I think more and more one is becoming concerned with social history (or, as some would have it, local history) rather than 'folk life'. By this, I mean the whole way of life of a community or region'.¹⁴⁶ This subsumed British folk culture into a much newer and quite different set of politically charged intellectual developments, which Atkinson knew would be the best ally for museums.¹⁴⁷ Like the new academic social historians of the provincial universities, he continued to stress regionalism, what he described as 'the essence of place'.¹⁴⁸ Museums, it was observed, had a clear role in modern family life, and experiential education would be at the heart of all endeavours: 'Imagine centres

research/projects/mapping-museums-the-history-and-geography-of-the-uk-independent-sector-1960-2020> accessed 4 March 2017.

¹⁴¹ TNA:PRO, EB 3/11, B. Granger-Taylor to Lord Rosse, 7 January 1972.

¹⁴² TNA:PRO, EB 3/11, J. Geraint Jenkins to B. Granger-Taylor, 30 July 1970; 'Extract from Minutes of the Tenth Meeting of the Advisory Committee on the Allocation of Government Grant to Area Museum Councils', 8 October 1970.

¹⁴³ See Jim Obelkevich, 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', *Contemporary British History*, 14 (2000), 125–42. On the role of universities in promoting 'Regional Cultures', see *The Times*, 18 March 1957, 9.

¹⁴⁴ B. Granger-Taylor to Lord Rosse.

¹⁴⁵ Hill, *Women and Museums*, 217.

¹⁴⁶ TNA:PRO, EB 3/11, F. Atkinson to B. Granger-Taylor, 17 January 1972. Emphasis true to source.

¹⁴⁷ Guy Ortolano, 'Human Science or a Human Face? Social History and the "Two Cultures" Controversy', *Journal of British Studies*, 43 (2004), 482–505.

¹⁴⁸ On place and 'the provinces' cf. Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-up of Britain* (Leiden, 2013), 60.

where all types of education and heritage overlap'.¹⁴⁹ Following the Robbins Report of 1963, a massive expansion of Higher Education in Britain was afoot, generating a museum-going public made up of more secondary-age pupils and University-educated students. No doubt with this in mind, the interim report of the folk museums working party dismissed earlier precedents, and suggested that there was a fresh, demand-side impulse for different kinds of stories in museums:

As for their own indigenous heritage, at best there might be found a pile of 'bygones' in a corner of a local museum. It has taken this country a long time to realize that in many museums we have ignored a large part of our own social and cultural history, including the story of the Industrial Revolution itself...In interesting themselves in open air museums the public have perhaps instinctively noticed this gap.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

The pace of deindustrialization in Britain from the later 1960s gave form and focus to robust regional identities on which many new industrial folk museums were predicated. Recent work on the constellations of class and community in post-war Britain has stressed that we need a more sophisticated understanding of lived experience, as distinct from the retrospective and subjective construction of social experience inflected by memory and nostalgia.¹⁵¹ Folk museology in Britain from the later 1960s could rarely be mapped onto the realities of lived experience in the past. In the 1980s, even the gentlest of heritage critics decried the implications of museums functioning as escapist 'time machines' for the present.¹⁵² But such critiques too often missed the important distinction between lived experience and subjective reconstruction. They failed to acknowledge that folk museology, both 'first wave' and 'second wave', helped to lubricate social change by providing leisure-based spaces where subjective historical experiences could be discovered and remade, servicing the physic and emotional

¹⁴⁹ Frank Atkinson and Michael Holton, 'Open Air and Folk Museums', *Museums Journal*, 72 (1973), 140–2.

¹⁵⁰ TNA:PRO, EB 3/11, 'A Working Party on Open Air Folk Museums', December 1972.

¹⁵¹ Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid-Twentieth-Century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory* (Manchester, 2012); Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class and the Decline of Deference in England 1969–2001* (Oxford, forthcoming 2017).

¹⁵² Colin Sorensen, 'Theme Parks and Time Machines', in Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London, 1989), 60–74. The classic critique is Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987).

needs of their audiences.¹⁵³ Gradually, a new consumerism plugged these institutions into local tourism agendas. Foreshadowing the furore over admission fees that dominated the national heritage debates of the 1980s, folk museums were often the first to charge and fully embrace an 'enterprise culture' model. They argued that they could reinvest the capital, since they had always partially viewed themselves as sites of populist entertainment.¹⁵⁴

Folk culture was not an exclusively elite enclave in twentieth-century Britain. In moving beyond national and racial preoccupations, this article has demonstrated that folk culture in museums was a modern educational tool, an outlet for expressing unease and negotiating social change. Moreover, folk museums are a site where we can observe the gendering of social-historical knowledge in modern Britain. Folk culture offered an opportunity for women to play a role in public history-making, although at the same time limiting them to feminized 'amateur' narratives.¹⁵⁵ Women were also at the fore of educational practices in these museums, which combined with conservative ideologies in novel ways, for example in using ideas of 'decline' to foster positive emotional engagement. Finally, reconstructing the complete history of folk museums in Britain, national and local, is crucial to our understanding of the heritage landscape in the later part of the twentieth century. 'First wave' folk museums embodied mid-century ways of making sense of the past in Britain, especially through active education and localism. The specific professional and political shifts that engendered 'second wave' folk museology in the 1970s actually sought to erase these mid-century precedents to make itself appear more democratic and more modern. But the new museums inherited many of these impulses from the 'first wave', which were simply recast in the 1960s as Britain's educational and geographical mobility shifted upwards.

¹⁵³ For a more sophisticated treatment of heritage in this vein, see Emily Robinson, 'Inspirations and Obligations: Remembering the Industrial Past in Modern Britain', in Peter Itzen and Christian Müller, eds, *The Invention of Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Political Culture and Economic Debates in Great Britain and Germany, 1850-2010* (Augsburg, 2013), 114-31.

¹⁵⁴ This was especially important in York, where there was controversy surrounding admission fees from the late 1930s, see NRS, CUKT GD 281/37/63, 'Report on the Castle Museum, York', 6 May 1960. The National Museum of Wales charged for admission from when it opened in 1948, *The Times*, 5 November 1970, 11. In 1955 Leicester Corporation made a special application to the Minister of Education to open a folk museum and to charge admission fees, on the grounds of precedence and of the rising affluence of the population, TNA:PRO, EB 3/11, 'Report of the Minister of Education on the Leicester Corporation Bill', 14 April 1955. Atkinson noted that tourism became a priority later on for the Beamish, as it was situated in a much less affluent area, Atkinson, *The Man Who Made Beamish*, 86-7.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 9-10.