

## Archaeological parks: what are they?

**Paulette M. McManus**

*Most in-situ conservation and presentation of archaeological sites focuses more on the monuments and other artefacts themselves than on them and the landscapes of which they are a part. The concept of an archaeological park can overcome this limitation. In this personal view of what constitutes an archaeological park, the intellectual roots and contemporary meaning of this relatively new concept are explored.*

Sometime in the early 1990s I found myself using the expression “archaeological park” in discussions about communicating with visitors at archaeological sites. No-one challenged me or asked for a definition, so I kept on using the term. By 1993 I was using it in my visitor studies. Nowadays, I frequently hear other people referring to “archaeological parks” and only really take note on the rare occasions when I think “I wouldn’t exactly call that an archaeological park”. I suspect that it is used as a portmanteau term to cover a useful but essentially subjective concept. It is particularly useful because it can be used confidently in multidisciplinary groups of professionals, some of whom, like me, may have had no formal archaeological training. In this article I endeavour to unpack my personal concept of the generic archaeological park by delving into some of the associations that I attach to the expression, and in so doing hope to stimulate others to consider its meaning and use.

### Park evocations

Municipal parks were once the glory of Britain. Looking at them now it is hard to realize that the urban-park movement began in Victorian England, from where it spread round the world. Municipal parks

provided large, open, well tended spaces with bandstands, cafés, places for games, walks, shrubberies and horticultural displays, and they had resident keepers to look after them. A dimension of municipal parks that I incorporate into my concept of archaeological parks is that they were for the pleasure and leisure of ordinary people. They were created as a benevolent public good, as were the museums that were established up and down the country at the same time. Like the old municipal parks and museums, archaeological parks, are an expression of cultural non-commercial values. Although I do not expect an archaeological park to have flower beds, I would never be surprised to see something of the kind; Mediterranean archaeological sites often have horticultural elements. Borrowing from the pleasure-and-leisure aspect of municipal parks, in an archaeological park I would expect the site to look well cared for and perhaps show evidence of landscaping, including well designed paths for visitors. I would also hope for a pleasant café and clean toilets.

Large private Victorian gardens often have highly visible mock ruins placed at strategic points along garden paths. This thought suggests images of temples, arches and bridges punctuating views in English enclosed parks of the eighteenth century.

Such structures usually have an easily identified profile raised against either the sky or a rising piece of ground. An archaeological park is very likely to have in it a monument with an easily recognized distinct profile. In England, I think of Stonehenge, the Ironbridge, the Avebury Ring. Unlike the garden features, these monuments are authentic: there is nothing fake, reconstructed, translocated or unreal about them. It is the distinctiveness, the iconic image left on the mind, that causes the public to remember and value the authentic monument, wonder about it and want to visit it. The archaeological remains have to be worth looking at (and photographing) by the untrained eye (Fig. 1). By their very nature, World Heritage Sites are, likely to be archaeological parks, although a distinctive monument in itself does not constitute an archaeological park.

I remember standing on the garden terrace of Harewood House, Yorkshire, looking across the Capability Brown landscape and trying to imagine what it would have been like before he worked on it, and how that could be interpreted to visitors. I was working on a presentation plan and had been all over the estate, planning possible visitor experiences. Such an exercise is very likely to lead to interpretive zoning of a large bounded area so that visitors can, if they wish, focus on differing aspects of the interpretation and pay several visits before building up a comprehensive picture of a stately house and its setting, rather as they might visit individual galleries in a large museum. Archaeological parks share strong similarities with stately houses that retain their original settings. Both have definite boundaries, usually a single entry point for visitors, lots of landscape, and difficulty finding places for car parks that do not impinge too much on the landscape. They also have a pressing need to disperse visitors across the site in order to relieve concentrated pressure on the main focus of the location, be it a house or a monument. They need to be promoted, and visitors and tourism encouraged, in order to support the infrastructure required to run them.

### Associations with the nineteenth-century conservation movement

Part of the background to the conservation movement of the late nineteenth century was the Eurocentric view that lands which had been neither occupied by Europeans nor used in a European manner represented untouched nature. Looking at landscape paintings made in Australia and America in the mid-nineteenth century, one is struck by the specificity with which artists depicted unfamiliar plants, mountains, rivers and wilderness scenes. Under the influence of the developing natural sciences, they worked to depict the dynamic processes of a powerful nature. For viewers, their art confirmed the growing realization of the complex, natural, organic systems of which humans were a part. This



**Figure 1** Part of the prehistoric stone circle at Avebury, Wiltshire, where the archaeological remains are “worth looking at” and where visitors like to be photographed.

line of thought would develop into the proto-science of ecology by the end of the century. However, by the 1870s, the landscape art of America and Australia had changed to reflect a poetic, atmospheric approach that depicted the spirit of place and a generalized view of a landscape seen as a subject for contemplation. This shift came about as increasing urbanization led city dwellers to look on the countryside as a place of retreat and refreshment and a destination for weekend excursions – a place for enjoying nature as a balance to the artificiality of urban life.

As wilderness frontiers everywhere retreated, man's role in nature came to be seen as potentially destructive. Towards the end of the century a conservation movement developed, aimed at protecting natural and historic places from despoliation. It was diverse in motivation, and remains so. It encompassed those who advocated the scientific management of resources, those who wanted things to remain as unspoiled as possible so that they could be studied scientifically, and aesthetic romantic contemplators. In 1872, Yellowstone was established as the first American national park. In Britain, the National Trust for the Preservation of Places of Historic and Natural Beauty was founded in 1894, and the British added to conservation concepts an emphasis on amenity value.

In preservation terms, archaeological parks are descendants of those natural and historic places protected over a hundred years ago. The motives for establishing archaeological parks today are likely to be just as diverse as those described above, but a conservation mission tends to be dominant. Depending on how closely one's point of view converges with that of the managers of archaeological parks, there may seem to be a certain fuzziness about their purpose, their methods of management and the way they make themselves intellectually accessible to the public. Archaeological parks may differ remarkably and this makes their definition difficult. This variability in open air, protected areas of cultural value, together with a prime focus on conservation, contrasts with the museums, which have as their fundamental purpose an internationally accepted, well defined and balanced mission to collect, conserve, research and interpret collections.

### Landscapes in space and time

Connections between valued natural landscapes and past human activity over time were seldom considered until fairly recently. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, natural and historical environments tended to be looked at separately and human influences were considered in terms of their destructive propensities in the here and now.

Geological and ecological factors that first caused humans to exploit or settle in

a particular place, and the manner in which human activities subsequently influenced the natural environment of that place, require a more holistic and multidisciplinary view than was required for a more exclusive examination of either artefacts or biology alone. Perhaps W. G. Hoskins' book, *The making of the English landscape*, first published in 1955, was a major influence in Britain leading to the widespread adoption of this new holistic viewpoint, which has led to the unified consideration of archaeological remains in their environmental settings. This fusion is, for me, an essential feature of the interpretation presented in an archaeological park. Just as historic houses shorn of the landscapes in which they were set can tell only a partial social history, so archaeological remains divorced from their environmental setting by urban development cannot tell visitors a story that ranges adequately over both historic time and natural space. For this reason, archaeological monuments in urban areas are, in my view, unlikely to form the nuclei of archaeological parks.

I expect an archaeological park to interpret the landscape around the monuments on it in a way that will help visitors to understand an evolving picture of the intermeshing, over time, of ecological dynamics and human activities. I look for help in reading a cultural landscape and, as a visitor, my question is "Why does what I am looking at look like this?"

Some cultural landscapes are easier to interpret, and for visitors to read, than others. I suspect that "readability" is one of the feasibility criteria for an archaeological park. For example, at Ironbridge Gorge in Shropshire, the dependence of early industry on the presence of minerals, on timber from the valley sides, and on the river that provided both power and a means of transport, is easy to understand as the visitor moves round the site. At

Empuries, in Catalonia, the choice of location for the Greek and Roman colonies that have left the highly visible remains of their coastal cities (Fig. 2) can easily be appreciated by viewing the sheltered harbour within the greater Bay of Roses, the watercourse beside the present site, and the nature of the countryside inland, and comparing all that with maps that show the nature of the coast at the time of settlement.

### Interpretation: the example of Forges du Saint Maurice

One of the strongest influences on my conception of archaeological parks was a visit I made to Forges du Saint Maurice, Trois Rivières, Quebec, in 1992, although I didn't realize it at the time. Forges du Saint Maurice was founded in 1730 to exploit the rich local deposits of iron ore. It was Canada's first industrial community and the ironworks served military and domestic needs until 1883. The heritage site is huge and very well presented (Fig. 3).

Forges du Saint Maurice is managed by Environment Canada Parks Service. During the 1970s and 1980s the Canadian Parks Service made an enormous economic and intellectual investment in developing interpretation centres. Researchers, curators, archivists, exhibition designers, architects, communicators and evaluators were trained to focus on the visitor experience. The pooled efforts of these multidisciplinary teams forged a set of dissemination strategies and a philosophy of museology that was somewhat similar to that which some British museums were working towards in the 1980s, as the educational function of museums became more professionalized. The people working in Canada spread out from the Parks Service to work and influence developments in Canadian museums. Their writings influenced museology in English- and French-speaking countries.

Forges du Saint Maurice has been a



**Figure 2** Remains of the ancient Greek city of Empuries in northeast Spain, showing cypresses remaining from an earlier garden treatment of the site, and the car park partially hidden among the pine trees at left.



**Figure 3** Forges du Saint Maurice, Quebec, the site of Canada's first ironworks: the outline of the original powerhouse is marked by the metal framework showing on the skyline; the narrow path at left has been excavated, and it formerly led workers to the mill (the reconstructed mill wheel is visible); the wide and well graded walkway, with signs beside it, is an interpretation path for visitors.

flagship project for the Parks Service. Very few outdoor sites reach such professional standards in the communication and dissemination of information on a well researched academic foundation while also allowing visitors the freedom to think for themselves about what they see. The interpretation at Forges du Saint Maurice contrasts markedly with the commonly encountered interpretations based on the emotional appeal advocated by early writers on conservation and also by guides trained by tourist agencies.

### Involving interest groups

Archaeological parks have profound sociopolitical implications because many interest groups are affected by them. As important cultural sites in areas of landscape that may also be highly regarded for their environmental, recreational and amenity value, and, therefore, be attractive to locals and tourists, archaeological parks will have many different groups of people interested in, or affected by, their establishment. They are unlikely to be satisfactorily established and supported within their local or regional context unless the pressing needs and anxieties of a range of groups can be satisfied or an acceptable framework of compromises achieved. This can take time, and it requires planning, as the protracted efforts to develop Stone-

henge as an archaeological park have shown. The many interest groups involved there range from parish councils to government ministries and include non-governmental pressure groups. It is not surprising that they have been locked in discussions and negotiations for over a decade.

The range of interest groups whose concerns may need to be balanced are likely to include: the local people who live within the boundary of the park, as at Ironbridge and Avebury, who wish for a minimal impact on their daily lives as well as financial rewards from tourism; those who farm or work nearby; parish, county and regional councils and their planning departments; development corporations; tourism organizations; heritage bodies with statutory requirements to protect and fund the site; charitable trusts with multiple interests, including wildlife and conservation; professional groups of archaeologists and ecologists; and heritage professionals who are responsible for sharing understanding of the site with the public, as well as for its management and monitoring.

### A definition

In sum, an archaeological park is:

- a not-for-profit expression of cultural value with a focus on visitors that includes communication to high museological standards

- centred on a core distinctive monument within a sizable area of cultural landscape that can be zoned for interpretive purposes
- a large area with a distinct boundary administered by the park and having a single controlled entry point for visitors
- comfortable to visit, with car parks, landscaped walks, a café and toilets
- a well marketed focus for tourism.
- likely to place conservation rather than public service at the core of its purpose.

An archaeological park should function as a vigorous, complex entity with sophisticated on-site management and support from many stakeholders.