

Session - Walking the archaeological walk: walking and thinking in archaeology

Don't walk that way! Why heritage sites need psychogeography

This way! Follow the arrows. Stop here and read this panel. Look at this. Don't touch that. This area is roped off for your safety. This area is not open to the public. This area is closed for conservation purposes. Don't walk that way!

As a curious visitor, managed heritage sites can feel like no-go areas.

These historic buildings and spaces, subject to the frailties of funding, time and weather, are at constant risk. It's no wonder that sightseers – bustling, knocking into things and nudging over fragile edges – require management, and I don't blame curators and conservators for trying to shepherd me around as an exercise in damage limitation.

But does it always have to be like this?

I am a writer, and that makes me nosy. I am intrigued by the past, and the narrative and poetic possibilities of place. I'm also a psychogeographer, which means that (like many people) I don't like being told what to do, where to walk and what to look at.

If there is a fence I want to see over it. If there is a closed door, I want to open it. Who wouldn't? What is kept from us is what sparks our curiosity. We begin to imagine what is beyond that fence, behind that door. We create scenarios. We interpret signs and clues, and construct narratives.

This desire to make sense of things and build stories around fragments is a practice that writers, historians, archaeologists and genuinely switched-on visitors all share. The will to peer, ruminate and interrogate is something that any good visitor experience should provoke. So how can we embrace these tendencies, and foster them, within the constraints of managed heritage sites? How

can we offer those rucksack-carrying tourists and sticky-fingered children something really worthwhile, without breaking the very thing they have come to see?

One answer is to encourage a particular kind of walking: attentive walking, informed by psychogeographical practices.

As I pointed out, walking around a heritage site can be a frustrating experience. But the freedoms of walking – and the attendant pleasures of pausing, imagining and narrating – are vital to the public experience of these sites.

Walking, given a basic level of fitness and comfort, can be a liberating act. The process of walking – the physical movement of it - removes us literally and metaphorically from the clutter of the everyday. As a visitor, when I'm walking across a field to view an abandoned watermill, or climbing a hill to reach a ruined tower, I am not concerned with the demands of home or work. Unless I'm plugged into a device, I am not checking my email on the hoof, or receiving calls. Instead, I am removing myself from potential interruptions and entering a different mental space - a receptive state of mind that enables me to switch on my senses and be fully present in my surroundings. Added to this is the anticipation of a 'find', of coming upon something fascinating, unique, unexpected: of tapping into the past through an object in the landscape or a remnant of material culture.

Frederic Gros speaks of this state of mind as the 'silence' of walking in his book, *A Philosophy of Walking* (2011). 'This is', he says:

in the first place, the abolishment of chatter, of that permanent noise that blanks and fogs everything, invading the vast prairies of our consciousness like couch-grass (61).

Walking, my ears are open and my brain is ready for input.

Do I want the free audio tour? No thanks.

Let us return to the idea of attentive walking. What does this mean? I see it as a way of walking that embraces the spirit of the *dérive* or drift, a psychogeographical practice described by Guy Debord as ‘a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances’ (Debord 62). Psychogeography is concerned with responding to, and challenging the prescriptions of, place. Inform me that I need to follow the interpretation panels in a set order and I will find an excuse to go through the exhibition backwards. The psychogeographer does not follow the path, but walks against the crowd, because creative engagement is only possible by disrupting the flow, switching from passive reception to active perception.

I won’t go into a history of Psychogeography here. Instead I would like to glance briefly at a sideshoot of this movement that is particularly appropriate to heritage sites: counter-tourism.

Latourex, the laboratory of experimental tourism, was established by Joël Henry in 1990 with a view to finding ‘new ways of seeing other places’ (Henry and Anthony 25). Experimental tourism is not critical or snobbish about sightseeing: rather, it is profoundly democratic and celebratory. For the Latourex tourist, all experiences of travel and tourism, good and bad, absurd and impractical, are equally worthwhile. To disseminate this practice, Henry created *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel*, in which he and his collaborator Rachael Anthony set out various games and approaches from the laboratory. In this book, the practice of counter-tourism is explained as follows:

Hypothesis: Do the opposite of what you think a traveller should do.

Method: Varies, but could include travelling to a famous landmark and taking a photograph with your back to the sight; alternatively, photograph some tourists practising classical tourism...

...take the opposite approach to instruction. If your guidebook advises you to avoid something, deliberately seek it out (100).

Also established in the 1990s, the artistic company Wrights & Sites began to create site-specific performances and interventions with psychogeographical, counter-tourist roots. Their practice

evolved into the creation of Mis-Guides, performance walks and accompanying literature intended to transform participants' experiences of familiar places by exploring them in unexpected ways. Their *A mis-Guide to Anywhere*, published in 2006, is a series of instructions for creating self-led Mis-Guides, including walking by following your own shadow, visiting roadworks as if they are archaeological excavations, or looking for hidden wormholes to other places. This Mis-Guide also contains approaches for heritage sites and monuments, including my favourite, for visiting memorials:

A city marks its history in stone, from the simple plaque to the statue, to the clock tower, to the war memorial. Once the names have been carved it is rare to hear those words spoken aloud. Go with a friend to any marker in the city that may constitute a memorial, and read aloud to each other these silent words and names.

(Persighetti et al)

This 'sounding out' of the forgotten past has a reverence to it that reflects how respectful counter-tourism can be - and it is this combination of playfulness and appreciation that I recommend incorporating into walking heritage sites.

A founder member of Wrights & Sites, Phil Smith, has gone on to produce further misguides, including one directly applicable to heritage sites: *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook*. In this, and its smaller companion *Counter-Tourism: A Pocketbook*, Smith reacts against the spectacle of the heritage industry, which he sees as offering a sanitised re-packaging of historic sites. This is 'Heritaj' with a J, akin to 'muzak': the bland, washed-out, digestible version of the past. Smith's handbook is subtitled 'A handbook for those who want more from heritage sites than a tea shoppe and an old thing in a glass case'. It offers a series of provocations and principles for visitors wishing to shake up 'twee heritage' and what Smith describes as 'the heritage-tourism machine' (*Handbook* 5). This includes taking a stance against health and safety signs, those restrictions and warnings that psychogeographers itch to disobey: but rather than putting oneself in physical peril, Smith suggests a more metaphorical interpretation:

Many unnecessary health and safety signs can be usefully reinterpreted. For example, the sign “Historic sites can be dangerous –please take care” erected outside English Heritage sites should be taken seriously. If the past eats your brain, your vacant smile will be taken for customer satisfaction (27).

Ways of walking feature in Smith’s guides, including prowling, walking barefoot, walking across a site ‘as if it were on a thin skin of ice’ (35), and a favourite psychogeographical chestnut, misreading the site map by holding it upside down.

Smith doesn’t want to cause trouble at heritage sites, and he is clear about not disrupting the pleasure of others. His reason for adopting these strategies is to burst the bubble of the heritage business.

... behind those simple-sounding stories in the Visitor Guide and the locked gates marked PRIVATE, there lies a multitude of wonders, absurdities and outrages that, when counter-tourism opens the doors, provide a subversive and life-twiddling experience rather than a deferential procession through the unrevealing homes of the rich and famous.

It’s not because the heritage industry is dull or bad or conservative or inaccurate (ahem!), but it just doesn’t seem to realise how odd, surreal, dreamy, horrific, elusive, ruined and apocalyptic it all is (31).

Like Smith, I want us to re-enchant and defamiliarise heritage sites and spaces, so that we can see them afresh and better appreciate their richness. And I believe we can do this by bringing together the playful tenets of counter-tourism and the enquiring practice of attentive walking.

In 2016 I worked on two projects with English Heritage sites using this approach. I was invited to visit Walmer Castle in Kent by the Senior Curator who had recently completed a major redisplay

project there. She asked me to train the site's team of newly-recruited volunteer Room Guides in using psychogeographical approaches.

In the resulting workshop I asked participants to derive around the site, following their curiosity and using psychogeographical provocations to discover spaces and objects they had not previously noticed. The purpose of the project was to look at different ways of working with material heritage in enclosed, 'hands off' spaces, as well as making the most of the extended grounds. Volunteers took part in defamiliarising exercises with objects, to encourage them to question the act of interpretation, and then worked in small groups to create their own 'misguided tours' of items and spaces in the site. They presented these tours to each other (and some curious visitors), bringing together walking, creative interpretation and storytelling. Armed with these techniques, I hoped that the volunteers felt better equipped to deal with under-stimulated visitors, especially those sticky-fingered children wanting to skip under the red ropes.

Following this project I worked with curatorial and interpretation staff from English Heritage at St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury. This was a very different kind of site: open air, ruined walls, and very little tangible heritage. The brief was to improve visitor experiences to the site, especially those of families. Attentive walking and imaginative responses were key to this.

Working with a family forum, drawn from local English Heritage members, we created a series of indoor and outdoor activities to help younger visitors engage with the spaces and their stories. The most tangible meeting of walking and counter-tourism in the resulting interpretation items is the selection of monk's habits available for visitors to wear. Inside each habit is stitched the inevitable trail of the site, but with a series of games and provocations - including a spotting list for playing heritage bingo, storytelling through mime in the refectory, and reading an imaginary manuscript in the cloister.

I live in the medieval cinque port of Sandwich in Kent, a place that I long felt needed an injection of counter-tourism. In the summer of last year I ran a project to achieve just this. *Walking Heritage* (Overall 2016) was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and supported by my institute. The project comprised working with local community and history groups, town archives, English Heritage and

the Royal Geographical Society, to create alternative guided walks in the town. For example, an animal-spotting safari encouraged families to look again at the architecture they passed every day, and a tour of 'ghost pubs' visited sites that were once public bars.

I produced accompanying literature for the project, including a misguide, 'Walking Sideways in Sandwich', which Phil Smith agreed to collaborate on, and the 'Not the Blue Plaque Tour of Sandwich' (Overall 2016) a self-led walking tour of town tales, undocumented histories and local legends.

My most recent project in this vein explores sites in Canterbury through the lens of literature. *O what we ben!* was funded by the Being Human festival of the humanities this year. My colleague Mike Bintley and I worked on a text each and collaborated on the project, which launched in November. It comprises an imaginative mapping of our chosen texts, *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban ([1980] 2011), and the Old English poem *Andreas* (North and Bintley 2016), onto the cityscape, using a trail that connects resonant sites. These included Canterbury cathedral and buttermarket, the ancient town walls, the Westgate tower and the Dane John mound.

Mike and I offered joint misguided walks of the trail during the festival, reading from the texts and connecting them to the fabric of the ancient city, as well as encouraging walkers to seek further parallels in the busy streets and back lanes. Printed and downloadable maps of the trail are available, as is a virtual online tour on the project website. The project covered an area of heritage sites, exploring the symbiotic relationship of text and place, and offering a process of creative interpretation through walking.

I hope that I have made a case for employing attentive walking and counter-tourism to sites of historic interest. If we cannot climb those fences or open those doors, we can find imaginative ways of leaping over and walking through them, uncovering and reading our own stories of the past.

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