

# Archaeological Open Air Museums: a possible new way forward

**The author argues that ancient dwelling should be reconstructed primarily for research and archaeological open air museums be open all year round.**

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The cultural tourist today feels it is essential to go to an archaeological open air museum if there is one in the area they visit. Whether it is a Stone Age hut or a Viking longhouse, such museums have sprung up throughout Europe in an attempt to replicate the house structures of our European ancestors. The prime objective is to educate and at the same time hopefully to learn about the daily lives of those that lived in such dwellings.

Unfortunately there are a number of such reconstructions that have for some reason taken short cuts in their efforts to build copies of ancient homes. While on an EAA excursion to Volus in Greece during the Thessaloniki conference I visited a museum on the coast. Next to the museum entrance was a small replica of a Stone Age hut on the shoreline promenade. Having a more than passing interest in such reconstructions, I went over to take a closer look at it. To my dismay I noticed that through the crumbling daub of the walls steel re-enforcement mesh had been put into the frame of the hut and there was even a layer of polyethylene sheeting under the reed roof.

Why do people feel the need to do such things? Surely clay and sticks and reeds were good enough for their ancestors to build their houses with for thousands of years, so why blatantly make a fake reconstruction instead of a genuine one? We may think that we



■ Making pots for centre shops

have improved building techniques over the centuries, but when it comes to mud brick or wattle and daub huts with thatched roofs there is really no need to try to re-invent it. It worked o.k. before!

The desire for local authorities to build such centres in their regions has in some cases seemed to have missed the whole idea behind reconstructing an ancient dwelling. It should be primarily for research to move on our knowledge of such buildings. Not to have one like everyone else has so you can tick the cultural tourism box.

Here is an example of a fundamental design fault that has been perpetuated particularly in Britain over the last 30 years and that is the way a prehistoric round house should be thatched.

Before I built my first roundhouse in 1992 I did not want to go to look at other reconstructions as I wanted to hopefully bring something new to the research. So I looked at the house urn from Kronsberg in Germany dating to 600 BC as an indication of the pitch of a roundhouse which was about 55%. Having no particular funding to build my first roundhouse other than enthusiasm and a bit of land to put it on I had to forage as it were in my home country to find enough reeds to cover my 7 metre diameter roundhouse. I knew due to the size

of the reed beds I was cutting that I would not be able to put a thick layer of thatch on in the first year. So I tied 13 cm thick bundles of reeds onto the frame until the roof was covered, thinking I would be able to put another layer on the following year with the next seasons reed crop. What I discovered however, was that it did not need another layer of reeds. The pitch of the house was so steep any rain ran off it quickly before it could seep through. However more importantly, the smoke from the central fire could filter right through it. The reeds on the inside roof of the first roundhouse I built were as golden as the day we put them up after 14 years of fires had been lit in the central hearth.

This substantiates my theory that it is a positive disadvantage to have any training in any prehistoric skill to be undertaken as one cannot help but be influenced by modern techniques.

A prime example of this was the first reconstructed roundhouse built in Britain by Peter Reynolds in the 1970's. He employed a thatcher to help and advise on the thatching of his roundhouse who preceded to thatch it with a thick layer of reeds just as he would do with a cottage. This is fine if the house is of a substantial size as there is enough space for the smoke to dissipate slowly in the roof space.

Many years after building my first roundhouse I was asked by the Peat Moors Centre in Somerset to do a Prehistoric Cooking course in one of their reconstructions. They had built roundhouses a little smaller than mine but based their thatch on the Reynolds example. After a good fire was lit, but before we could start cooking it immediately became apparent that no one could live in a roundhouse that size with a thick thatch and survive a wet winter! The smoke could only escape through the low doorway so within minutes the hut filled with smoke and it was impossible to work in there.

If one is going to build a reconstruction and replicate the daily lives of European prehistory as some of these centres are supposed to do, it has to work as a dwelling! Not just on a sunny day with no fire lit in it. People would not live for thousands of years in structures that did not work efficiently. Human nature has not changed that much.

If we look at the interiors of such structures such as the Neolithic houses at Scara Brae in Orkney, thanks to its stone furniture it gives us an indication about Stone Age furnishings in dwellings. Too many reconstructions are just too neat and tidy inside and look like a museum exhibits. They should look lived in, if we want the public to take them seriously.

When demonstrating ancient cooking techniques at Biskupin over a ten day period I found that the first three days were spent getting the workspace to work efficiently making the working areas, storage areas, etc. After the third day one tends to get a little bored and it is only human nature to make improvements to your home or workspace. After the ten days were over we would have

a plethora of shelves, seats, tables, even beds to rest on.

I think the general public get bored with visiting such centres more than once because they just do not look real they are too staged. Yes, the roof is thatched and there is probably a loom in the corner and a quern by the door and a few dried wild herbs hanging on the walls, but they do not look like real homes.

So how do we make the reconstructions look less like neat and tidy museum exhibits and more like homes that the public would be able to relate to?

Well, get people to live in them for a period of two weeks at a time at different times of the year. Small groups of students, local craftspeople or preferably families could be invited to partake in this experiment. It is amazing how children in such a situation will adapt to a different environment and make themselves games and toys out of what they find in the countryside. They would be allowed to only use the materials available during the period the house is replicating. They would have to wear the clothes especially footwear that they would have worn in prehistory too. So wearing Wellington boots as they did in an Iron Age reconstruction in Britain for a TV programme a few years ago just will not do (for information see review in Dvorakova J.K. 2003)! We need to learn how they kept their feet dry without Wellingtons.

Then by actually living in it even for short periods at a time people would find the gaps in our knowledge of what it was really like to live during those times. The dwellings would soon look lived in.

Too many reconstructions are just too neat and tidy as I have just said they need to be cluttered and sometimes down right messy because that is how most people with large families live. During these two week experiments, there could be a

body of archaeology students that were constantly available to take notes on problems and solutions as they happened rather than the participants trying to remember what they did every day weeks after the event.

Archaeological Open Air Museums need to get more of the general public to their centres throughout the year rather than relying of local government grants and school visits. The Peat Moors Centre in Somerset I mentioned before, closed in autumn 2009 because, due to the credit crunch, the local council has removed its funding. This is going to happen more and more if they cannot make such centres more self sufficient.

I feel that archaeological open air museums should be open all year round not just for this reason but to demonstrate how people lived in such dwellings in all weather conditions. Not just on a hot sunny day when most of the public look on them as summer houses rather than real homes. The research possibilities of demonstrating living in a very cold or wet climate would be boundless too.

In Europe it is well known that there were regular trade fairs and markets at certain times of the year going back into prehistoric times where craftsmen could sell or trader their wares. Would this not be a good way to inspire the public to visit such centres in the same way they might visit a shopping centre throughout the year? The four seasonal trade fairs could be before Christmas mid winter, Easter and mid summer. All times when we still celebrate the changing seasons as our forbears did. During those times there were religious festivals as there are still today too

In the new era of credit crunch and job losses would it not be an idea to run courses at local arts colleges on how to make authentic replicas of prehistoric or historic artefacts? I do not mean using electric pottery

kilns to make replicas of prehistoric pots. I mean how to use bonfire to fire them with local clay sources, how to weave using very basic equipment etc.

Not enough really good replica artefacts are sold at such centres. The majority of gifts tend to be made in China or Taiwan. Why not revive the skills of our ancestors with the young and unemployed who could sell their wares at these seasonal markets as their forbears had done before.

Archaeological festivals have always been traditionally a way of introducing such centres to the general public. Large Medieval, Roman and Prehistoric festivals go on throughout Europe in the summer months. If these were held four times a year the museum and exhibitors could then have a regular and sustainable income rather than just a summer job.

Also if the reconstructions are truly accurate and well furnished they will be just as comfortable during those seasons as in the summer months.

People in our day and age have more leisure time than they have ever had. Where do they take their families to in the winter when the weather is bad other than the shops or the cinema? If archaeological open air museums were open throughout the year not just with a skeleton staff but with re-enactors and markets too they would I am sure draw the crowds in who would be curious about how they lived in them during bad weather. We can all relate to the long dark nights of winter as we all relate to food every day. Samples menus of prehistoric or historic food could be served all year round in the cafes of such centres instead of the usual pizza or sandwiches. At a Viking museum in Norway they are already taking advantage of this idea with such a historic menu at their centre.

So I feel the future of Archaeological Open Air Muse-

ums has to be to make them all year round venues that are furnished as people would live in them rather than tidy outdoor museum exhibits to visit on a summers day.

## Bibliography

Dvořáková, J.K. 2003: "Surviving the Iron Age, FIRSTBROOK, P. (editor)". Bulletin voor Archeologische Experimenten en Educatie (BAEE), -, 15-16.

## Summary

### Les parcs archéologiques : une nouvelle solution pour avancer

Selon l'auteur, les habitations reconstituées doivent absolument retrouver leur utilisation originelle comme lieux de vie. Il devrait être possible d'y vivre une quinzaine de jours à différentes périodes de l'année, en prenant note des difficultés au moment où elles se présentent, et des solutions utilisées. Les parcs archéologiques devraient être ouverts toute l'année, afin de montrer à tous les conditions de vie en toutes saisons.

### Archäologische Parks: Neue Möglichkeiten

Die Verfasserin plädiert dafür, dass die Rekonstruktion prähistorischer Siedlungen vorrangig der Forschung dienen und unser Wissen über damalige Gebäude verbessern soll. So dass auf dieser Basis nachgebaute Häuser und der sich in Ihnen vollziehende „urgeschichtliche“ Alltag auch in der Gegenwart real funktionieren können. Menschen sollen dort eine Zeit von z. B. zwei Wochen während verschiedener Jahreszeiten leben; bei diesen Wohnexperimenten sollte jederzeit eine Person vor Ort sein, welche die auftretenden Probleme und praktischen Lösungen dokumentiert. Archäologische Freilichtmuseen sollten das ganze Jahr über geöffnet sein, um den Alltag in allen Wetterlagen darstellen zu können.

■ **Jacqui Wood** is an independent researcher and experimental archaeologist who devises unique approaches to discovering the lost techniques of our European ancestors. She works in many fields of research, however she is best known for her work in the area ancient food and cooking.