

Potted History

The preservation and packaging of the past as 'heritage' is big business these days. But we should be careful to distinguish between the different meanings of heritage on offer, suggests **Gill Davies**

It sometimes seems that the past is all that Britain has left at the end of the 20th century. With the nation apparently in the grip of a collective obsession with its own past, 'heritage' has become a hotly-debated issue and several recent books (including Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry* and Robert Lumley's more recent *The Museum Time Machine*) have identified the popularity and marketing of heritage as evidence of a decadent and damaging trend in contemporary society. Just what is heritage and how is its popular appeal to be understood?

One explanation (roughly Hewison's argument) is that the heritage industry represents the death-wish of a culture that no longer produces anything, whether contemporary art or manufactured goods, and that it is conjured with by right wing ideologists and capital. Wiener's analysis in *English Culture And The Decline Of The Industrial Spirit* traces Britain's present crisis to the victory of a conservative, anti-industrial movement around the middle of the 19th century. On this view, the obsession with our national, non-industrial past is evidence of a deep-rooted and uniquely British ideology. A third account (Donald Horne in *The Great Museum*), proposes that the museum consciousness is expressive of all late-capitalist societies.

A tempting scenario can be composed from elements in all these accounts: if living in the present means living in Thatcher's Britain, and the future holds little promise, then the desire to escape into heritage fantasies is understandable. But these fantasies are often, and typically, constructions of pasts which reinforce the political agenda of the 1980s – the 'enter-

prise' of the early industrial revolution, the country houses of a hierarchical society, the racist values of empire and the home and family orientation of women in the country kitchen. This cultural necrophilia, paradoxically, goes hand in hand with the rhetoric of 'modernisation' – the 'share-owning democracy' and 'sunrise' technology – to produce an ideology of popular capitalism which can espouse Victorian values while simultaneously proclaiming a brave new future which can have no place for the old-fashioned pieties of welfarism, trade unionism and heavy manufacturing.

In this context, it is useful to examine the different heritages on offer, and the different meanings the past can contain. The view that nostalgia is a powerful force, colouring most forms of leisure activity and consumption, seems borne out by the profusion of heritage centres, country diaries, Laura Ashley shops and the revival of traditional kinds of food and drink. Collectively, we can see a diverse range of products and activities nourishing a spuriously unifying myth of national greatness.

There are some important contradictions here. The (post-modern) eclecticism which invites people to dress or decorate their homes in styles ranging from a mock-innocent 1950s America to the high summer of Edwardian England, is a dream only the well-off can afford. It's all a game – a costume ball for the metropolitan upwardly-mobile. A recent issue of *The Observer* predicted 'Forties Glam' as the fashion of 1988: a coat for £449, a hat for £92 – presumably so that we can all pull together, backs to the wall, in a period of post-crash trepidation.

We need to distinguish between such cynical appropriations of the past and other manifestations of heritage, over which struggles for meaning continue. For example, Hewison and other commentators have linked some of the new social history and industrial museums (such as Wigan Pier and Beamish) with the broader climate of nostalgia and historical pastiche. But the heritage to which they refer, and the audiences to which they are addressed, are not identical with either the retro-style or the British taste for visiting stately homes.

The exhibition currently at the Wigan Pier museum is called 'The Way We Were' – a slogan we might view with suspicion in the light of tv dramas and docklands gentrification. But the 'we' is, in fact, quite specific – it describes the predominantly working-class people of Wigan and its surroundings, and the world it reconstructs has at least the potential for radical re-reading. Such a museum owes as much to new developments in history as it does to heritage: people's history, local, regional and oral history, women's history and industrial history. One might wish for a more political inflection, but the popularisation of the serious study of people's work and leisure can generate real understanding, and should not be crudely dismissed as a kind of heritage theme park. It draws upon and can stimulate community and personal memory, and though their shops and display counters may invite visitors to 'consume the past', it is *their* past, not *Brideshead Revisited*.

The past belongs to all the people, not just to the managers and public relations officers of the heritage industry. If they are offering it as a band-aid for the present, visitors can nevertheless investigate and contest the versions of the past on offer. Despite the pessimism of many current accounts of heritage, there is a potential, especially in the case of the new museums, for exposing common histories that are elsewhere concealed. ●

Breaking The Mould

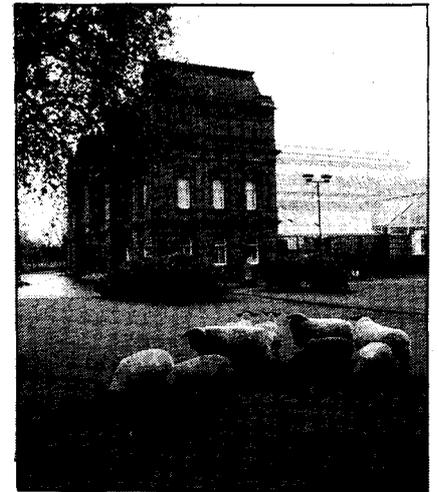
A short selection of some of Britain's new ground-breaking museums:

Beamish North of England Open Air Museum, Stanley, Co Durham. Buildings from the north of England reconstructed to show life in the north at the turn of the century. **Big Pit Mining Museum**, Blaenavon, Gwent. Experience what working underground was like. Guided by ex-miners.

Corby Industrial Heritage Museum, Corby, Northants. Early history of ironworking. **Ironbridge Gorge Museum**, Telford, Shropshire. A museum complex based on industrial monuments in the Ironbridge Gorge area.

Jorvik Viking Centre, York. Recreation of Viking York on the site of an archaeological excavation.

People's Palace Museum, Glasgow Green, Glasgow. The his-

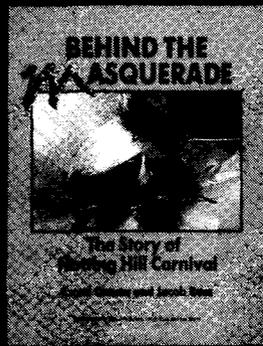


tory and development of Glasgow and its people with special emphasis on work and leisure. **National Museum of Photography, Film and Television**, Bradford, Yorks. Includes Kodak museum and the story of British tv.

Southern Industrial History Centre, Amberley Chalk Pits, Sussex. Open air museum covering the industries of the south-east.

Spitalfields Heritage Centre, 19 Princelet Street, London E1. Resource centre and museum for the study of immigrant history.

Wigan Pier Heritage Centre, Wigan, Greater Manchester. Local life and industry c1900. **Museum of Labour History**, Islington, Liverpool. Working-class life on Merseyside from 1840 to the present. ●



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BOOKS

State Enterprise

In recent years Western economists have grappled with a new concept, 'market-socialism'. Robin Murray reviews *The Challenge: Economics of Perestroika* by Soviet economist Abel Aganbegyan which presents a fresh new approach to the future of socialist economics

Aganbegyan's target in his book *The Challenge: Economics of Perestroika* (Hutchinson, £20 hbk) is the system of centralised planning which he believes became a fetter from the 1950s onwards. Setting targets and incentives in terms of quantity led to a sacrifice in quality. Poor quality and non-delivery led to hold-ups in production and an economy of shortages. Machinery – which was supplied at no cost to the enterprise on the orders of the central ministries – was often ill-adapted, of low quality and backward technologically. The centralised price system – with more than 500,000 prices being set by the central government and revisions only every seven to ten years – added to the rigidities and stimulated dual markets. Geared to the simple production economics of wartime and forced industrialisation, this system proved utterly inappropriate for a period of peace and an era of continuous innovation. What is astonishing is that this gargantuan construct – with more than 200 central economic ministries – has been able to reproduce Soviet daily life at all.

Aganbegyan believes it has only done so by being able to develop 'extensively', drawing on a growing labour force, on new lands in the east, and the country's vast oil and mineral reserves.

What is needed, says Aganbegyan, is a turn to intensive development, one that emphasises labour productivity and saving of materials, increased quality and innovation. He also wants a reorientation of the economy towards consumers.

The main way of bringing this about is to be a shift from 'administrative' to 'economic' methods of management, or from bureaucratic

to market means of regulation. Enterprises should be allowed to trade between themselves, at prices set through contractual bargaining. The cost of land and machinery should be charged to the enterprises, who would increasingly finance new investment from their own funds and bank credit. The size of their own funds – as of wage bonuses and spending on social provisions – is to depend on success in the market.

This sounds like Soviet monetarism, and a replacement of the plan by the market. Aganbegyan insists that it is not. The market, he says, is to be used as a means of implementing the plan. The plan will remain dominant. The government will still set the main 'norms of distribution'. They will control key prices, as well as the credit system. The economy will be socially owned either through the government or co-operatives. While self-employment is recognised, the private employment of wage labour is forbidden. There will be neither capital and labour markets, nor markets in land. The direction of growth will therefore be determined by the conscious plan, not by the law of value and private capital accumulation. The market is merely a medium of exchange, a means of strengthening horizontal links at the expense of the vertical, and of subjecting producers to the discipline of users. 'A socialist market is a government regulated market.' It does not imply a retreat from the state.

Like all markets, however, it does imply a new form of regulation of both management and labour. Aganbegyan recognises capitalism's capacity to discipline and restructure production. He

wants to find a way of matching this without the social costs and the tyranny involved. He is hostile to suggestions that unemployment be used as a discipline on labour. Instead he favours the carrot of performance-related incentives together with workplace democracy. Where labour needs to be shifted this should be done through natural wastage, retraining and planned job transfer.

These are all issues of central concern to socialist economists in the East and West, as will be the experience of the *perestroika* reforms in practice. If they are successfully implemented they should improve the quality and variety of goods and services available to ordinary Soviet citizens. Even in the workplace – where some commentators forecast there will be opposition to *perestroika* – the goal of ensuring 'the direct interest of working people in the final results of their labour' and the programme of extending workplace democracy offer positive ways forward for those in paid work. With planning in retreat in socialist and social democratic countries alike, the importance of *perestroika* is that it is offering a redefinition of planning within the context of a socially-owned economy.

Set against this, Aganbegyan's visions seem to belong to an earlier Fordist age. There are echoes of Henry Ford's own writings, from social salvation through high quality commodities, to the need for a healthy and abstemious workforce. There is the same confidence in technology that characterises high Fordism, with 1.5m Soviet scientists linked into production to supply the key innovations. Chernobyl, like Bhopal, is seen as the result of 'scandalous and tragic mistakes by the management and personnel of the plant' rather than raising questions about the technology itself. Aganbegyan's vision of the Soviet Union in the 21st century is one of nuclear power plants, industrialised building, efficient academics and food supplied up to the scien-

tific norms. This is the modernist economics of a central planner. It deals in the large scale. It counts in millions, and grasps the economy through the macro models and economic categories we know in the West.

There is no trace of the post-modern socialist doubts about nuclear energy, about industrialised tower blocks or the processed food industry. There is no sense that technology itself embodies social relations, and is centrally concerned with reimposing a discipline over labour; nor that modern technological advance owes as much to software and social organisa-



Abel Aganbegyan: New plans

tion as to the hardware of 'capital investment'. The perspectives of gender, of minorities, of variety and pluralism, of human-centred work and the social relations and culture of consumption are largely absent.

Yet in spite of these limitations, the Soviet *perestroika* remains a momentous project. It aims to re-engage the Soviet economy with the mainstream developments of world production, and to do so in the context of socialist aims and social control over the economy. I suspect that even the looser central reins will prove too tight, and that new forms of decentralised association will be recognised as necessary keystones to the new course. But as Aganbegyan himself hints, this is the next stage. ●