

Recovering the Popular Past: the Beamish Open-Air Museum in its British Context

This paper may seem somewhat paradoxical in the context of the symposium, because it deals with a museum project that deliberately marginalized and finally sold off its ‘great house’, while retaining and presenting to the public the two farmhouses that were on the site, and incorporating an array of other domestic and industrial buildings (including a cluster of coal miners’ cottages and the surface buildings and machinery of an actual coal mine) into a complex site which has grown during more than thirty years to occupy over three hundred acres. The text of the paper as presented here is an adaptation, with some shared text, of Chapter 6 of The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century, a book that I co-authored with Gary Cross in 2005; but the research on the North of England Open Air Museum at Beamish, in County Durham, and its interpretation in the British context, is my own.¹

The later years of the twentieth century saw the rise of the open-air museum of industrial and social history in Britain. Its range of artefacts and reconstructions from a documented past laid claim to scholarly accuracy and historical authenticity in ways that commercial theme-parks did not choose to emulate. A significant British pioneer in this field was the open-air museum at Beamish in County Durham, in the old industrial north-east of England. Seeking to represent a relatively recent industrial past, much of which was still within living memory, Beamish rode the wave of interest in industrial archaeology that grew out the work of L.T.C. Rolt and Charles Hadfield in the 1950s and 1960s and its later connections with social history.²

The Beamish museum is devoted to displaying working relics of the industrial, agricultural and urban past of north-eastern England over the last two centuries, with emphasis on what made this region distinctive and in some respects unique. It was established by a consortium of local government bodies within the region, and it is still a public service rather than a commercial organization, ultimately answerable to local taxpayers despite the increasing reliance on other kinds of funding. It is dedicated to showing how things worked in the past to an audience that is increasingly losing direct

experiential touch with the ‘industrial civilization’ of the period between the late eighteenth century and the post-World War 2 generation. Beamish tries to promote a kind of popular, accessible “living history” that is firmly grounded in scholarship and research, not least in the museum's own collections, but also articulates, stimulates and encourages local pride, interactive enjoyment, curiosity, wonderment, and the sharing of experiences between the generations. Its founder, the entrepreneurial museum curator Frank Atkinson, was a very effective publicist and challenger of assumptions and obstructions.

Beamish opened to the public in 1971, after a prolonged gestation period during which, as explained below, administrative and political obstacles were overcome and a site was acquired. The Beamish Park estate included Beamish Hall, a country house with alleged seventeenth-century origins (although Pevsner could find nothing earlier than ‘a stately stone villa of c. 1813’ with subsequent extensions, and rainwater heads dated 1737 on the extension of 1897) and, it was claimed, at least one resident ghost. It had been occupied by gentry families, the Edens and the Shaftos, until the general crisis of the landowning class at the end of the Second World War, when it became a regional headquarters for the nationalized coal industry.³ By the time the estate passed into the Museum’s hands the interior decoration of the house had been greatly changed and there was little to render the house either competitively attractive as a place to visit, or relevant to Atkinson’s project, despite the romantic associations of the Shafto family with a traditional regional song. It was useful as an administrative centre, a place to store the growing collections of documents and small artefacts, and, in the early days, an exhibition centre; but it was never part of the populist, regional, industrial Beamish vision. Indeed, at the end of the twentieth century it became so marginal that it was sold off to become a luxury hotel. On the other hand the two farmhouses on the estate, Home Farm and Pockerley Manor, were integral to the enterprise: they were used to illustrate farming, domestic economy and gardening practices in North-East England at the two key dates which came to be used for illustrative purposes, 1913 and 1825 respectively, and they slotted convincingly into the vision of a regional ‘working museum’ featuring the animals, plants and practices that were characteristic of the area. But the dominant attractions were urban and industrial,

expressing everything that was distinctive about this region of coal, iron and shipbuilding, mining villages and industrial towns, the birthplace of the steam railway and the nursery of what became a mature regional industrial society whose heyday, which Beamish was to celebrate, lasted from the early nineteenth century to the generation that followed the Second World War, when new commercial and international popular cultures and consumer goods, together with the decline of the old industries and their ways of life, gave the Beamish project its *raison d'être*.⁴

What we have here, then, is a case-study of a museum which actually rejected the emergent norm at the time, the 'historic house' as 'stately home', to develop an altogether different agenda; and what follows is a discussion of how this came about, and the nature of the issues it raised. The antecedents for British open-air museums were Scandinavian. Atkinson's inspiration for Beamish, a version of which he had been pursuing in various posts and guises since the 1950s, came from Skansen in Sweden, and especially its Norwegian counterpart at Lillehammer.⁵ In his autobiography Atkinson describes a moment in 1952 when, 'leaning on the handrail of a little wooden bridge at Lillehammer museum', he decided that 'we must have such a museum in England: otherwise so much would be lost along with the equally important chance to tell everyone about their own past'.⁶

His eager advocacy propelled Beamish into the forefront of debate about the proper function and content of the museum and the relationship between the educational and the commercial. He became the focal point of tensions between 'heritage', nostalgia, and the faithful representation of history, between the 'romantic' and the 'collective' gaze in the contemplation of representations of the past, and between the ideas of the museum as theme park and the theme park as museum.⁷ Atkinson was a key figure, indeed in many senses an inspiration, to those museum curators and promoters who sought to lay claim to distinctiveness, commercial advantage and authenticity by appealing to one or more aspects of the 'power of the real', as delineated by Kevin Moore: real things, real places, real people.⁸

In the British context, Beamish grew up alongside museums that rejected the fantasy and thrill rides of amusement parks like Alton Towers, and the transatlantic fantasies of Disney, to promote historical authenticity, while also accepting commercial practices to gather crowds. Here we find, for example, the 'stately homes' and preserved railways of (especially) the post World War Two generation. Along with Alton Towers, Warwick Castle was the only aristocratic site that catered to popular tourism as early as the nineteenth century. The commercial adaptability of the British aristocracy had generally stopped short at charging for admission to its own domestic quarters; but from the early 1870s the 4th and 5th Earls of Warwick made money selling tickets for entrance into their principal seat, and attracted attention with well-publicized historical pageants in 1893 and 1906.⁹ It was not until after World War II, when the financial crisis of the landed aristocracy combined with the rapid expansion of popular motoring and a rapid expansion in demand for rural pleasures, that the "stately home" industry really gathered momentum. The National Trust, a charity with well-connected support which had been founded in 1895 to preserve unspoiled scenery and historic buildings, extending its agenda to the country houses of a declining aristocracy in the 1930s, expanded its activity and visibility in this latter sphere, as its membership doubled from 100,000 in 1960 to 200,000 a decade later. Aristocrats themselves cashed in on the new opportunities, often adding additional attractions by turning their landscaped grounds into leisure parks, with exotic animals, motor museums and indeed fairgrounds, while the National Trust itself was not above adopting the new country house decorative styles associated with the firm of Colefax and Fowler and the magazine *Home and Garden*. After 1970 these trends accelerated, as National Trust membership grew explosively to pass one million by 1980 and two million by 1990. Here was a very conservative, (self)-disciplined crowd, at leisure rather than play. They followed the direction signs, prevented their children from transgressing boundaries as they filed through the homes and gardens of the British aristocracy, and picked up tips for enhancing the surroundings of their own homes and gardens, as well as buying the National Trust's carefully-crafted souvenirs, sold in herbal-scented converted stable blocks and linked to television dramas or series celebrating country house lives and artefacts.¹⁰ From the 1970s onward the servants, who numbered among the ancestors of many of the expanding visiting public, were increasingly

celebrated alongside the landed families. Visitors to Erddig, in North Wales, entered through the servants' hall, and their attention was directed to the portraits of the servants that were on display, while the National Trust began to acquire humbler properties such as Miss Toward's Glasgow tenement house. This was part of a wider democratization of the agenda of such representations of the past, aiming at visitors who were increasingly seen as being in search of empathy with people they thought they could recognize across the chasm of time.¹¹

Following the boom in stately homes by about a decade was the interest in preserved steam railways, which fed off nostalgia for stability, eccentricity, craftsmanship, tradition and even Empire, together with widespread interest in and enthusiasm for steam locomotives themselves, as train watching, collecting engine numbers and railway photography became popular pastimes among the post-war generation of boys and young men, building on the interest displayed by many of their elders. The origins of steam railway preservation in Britain can be dated from as early as 1922, when the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway was rebuilt and reopened as a miniature line for tourists after its closure as a mineral railway. Its position on the edge of the English Lake District was helpful here, as were the Welsh mountain locations of the narrow-gauge railways that were the first focus of the nascent preservation movement of (again) the years immediately following World War 2.¹²

The hard-won success of this dedicated band of enthusiasts owed much to British literary celebrations and whimsical mockery of the ancient country branch line, with its eccentric Victorian rolling stock, quaint station names, and idyllic countryside. The parodies of patched-up and distorted locomotives, displayed in the cartoons of Heath Robinson and Rowland Emmet and represented improbably in the Emmet railway at London's Festival of Britain exhibition in 1951 (otherwise a celebration of functional post-war modernity), helped to define this frame of mind. All this created affection for idiosyncratic, old-fashioned, inefficient railways among a wider public.¹³ The Rev. Wilber Awdry's Thomas the Tank Engine children's books, first produced in 1945 and featuring cute little engines on an imaginary island railroad system, took matters in a Disney direction. In the

late twentieth century, spin-off merchandising for Thomas the Tank Engine was adapted for the American market; but there was no Thomas the Tank Engine theme park, as such.¹⁴ Instead, these impulses of quaintness and engineering nostalgia were focused on the steam locomotives themselves, and the associated paraphernalia of the railway. The popular obsession with ‘trainspotting’ and the accumulation of locomotive numbers masked a wider appreciation of the workings and even the aesthetics of the steam railway.¹⁵

As the nationalized British Railways embraced a version of modernity that had no room for the steam locomotive, and began a sustained programme of closing rural branch lines, the stage was set for the emergence of the preserved steam railway that tried to re-create the sights, sounds and smells of a recently-vanished and evocative past. Depending on voluntary labour, and beginning with the evocatively named Bluebell Railway in 1958, the railway preservation movement rescued hundreds of locomotives and other rolling stock from scrap yards and put them to work on branch lines. By the end of the twentieth century there were 63 such standard-gauge lines in Britain and 65 narrow-gauge or miniature ones, each attracting visitors with meticulous attention to period detail alongside a willingness to accept necessary anachronism and to use the ‘Thomas the Tank Engine’ week-end as a valuable marketing ploy.¹⁶ The combination of hobbyist enthusiasm, scholarly precision, the pursuit of authenticity, and the acceptance of the need to relax it in pursuit of enjoyment and commercial viability, makes many connections with the Beamish ethos. Particularly interesting is the self-help, amateur historian, *bricolage* element in much of this activity.¹⁷ The crowd here, as at the stately home, has to discipline itself according to formal constraints, not least in the interests of safety; and it has to re-learn long-forgotten rules about rail travel, including keeping to timetables and using platforms. This is another hybrid experience, closer to the museum than the theme park.¹⁸

Alongside these very widespread developments, other hybrids between the museum and the theme park began to appear in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. They ranged from displays of historic sites (either at their original locations or through artefacts brought to a

convenient and appealing site) to re-enactments of important and exciting events in British history. The most spectacular example, Littlecote, has been described as '*bricolage* at its most extreme'. It offered a Roman villa, medieval combat, waxworks depicting the British Civil War, a 'Red Indian' siege of a British colonial fort, and a steam railway. It was 'little more than a series of representations of sets' from science fiction time-travelling TV programs; but it blazed across the British tourist firmament like a meteor, winning the British Tourist Authority prize for best commercial attraction in 1987 but closing three years later to make way for alternative activities with higher profits.¹⁹ This was the kind of outcome that was satirized by Julian Barnes in his novel *England, England*, which imagined the Isle of Wight turned into a huge theme park.²⁰ Most serious attempts to recreate the past focused on Britain's industrial history, now in precipitate decline, provoking the wrath of the John Ruskin scholar and cultural historian Robert Hewison, who in an influential polemic attacked the rise of what he called the 'heritage industry'.²¹

Hewison identified the rise of the industrial museum (damned by association with the theme-park) with the decline of traditional mining and manufacturing industry, which was sharply accelerated under Margaret Thatcher. He saw it as sentimentalizing an industrial past which had never been fully embraced by English high culture, while purporting to replace 'real' jobs in productive industries by poorly-paid, often part-time work in tourism. This critique was directed particularly at open-air museums of the Beamish type; but the most obvious targets were the museums sponsored by manufacturing companies to romanticize their own history. Cadbury World, for example, which opened in Birmingham, England in 1990, provided 'an idealised image of the Cadbury chocolate factory and Bournville "model village" village in bygone days', with great emphasis on the Quaker paternalism of the firm's founders and their benevolence in setting up a model settlement for the factory workers. The displays present the history of chocolate and Cadbury, demonstrate chocolate making in the 1930s, show nostalgic TV commercials for the firm's products, and finally lead visitors into a gift shop. Michael Rawlinson comments that, 'The management of Cadbury World has never sought the advice of academic historians. The core themes for Cadbury World were first set out by a

team of leisure consultants.’ According to the company the site is designed for ‘chocoholics’ rather than ‘historical culture vultures’, and nearly half of its visitors are under sixteen, many of them presumably on educational outings. This is a purely commercial venture, with no public money or charitable status, and it attracted over 5 million visitors in its first ten years. This practice of inventing and representing an idealized, easily-digested version of the past, which conveniently ignores such issues as the use of slave labour on cocoa plantations, may well be a legitimate target for critics of the ‘heritage industry’. It is hardly fair, however, to tar the open-air museums in the public sector with the same brush.²²

Beamish’s resolution of the tension between the goals of authenticity and commercialized fun that are highlighted by these debates followed a distinctive combination of education and entertainment. It became the standard-bearer of the industrial open-air museum movement in Britain, attracting a great deal more critical attention in the academic literature than its near-contemporaries at (for example) Ironbridge Gorge in Shropshire and Dudley in Worcestershire.²³ Cultural critics drawn from various shades of opinion have treated it harshly. The relevant debates are also present in the United States, but they seem more virulent in Britain, where they are enmeshed in a long-running wider argument about the “Wiener thesis,” to the effect that the dominant British (and above all English) culture has always been hostile to industry and enterprise, and has preferred to take refuge in bucolic nostalgia for an imagined rural past founded in a hierarchical, traditional vision of landed society, as expressed especially through the cult of the country house.²⁴ Critics of the open-air industrial museum have embraced this perception, arguing that Beamish and similar sites likewise provide a sanitized view of the past that blends industry into countryside and privileges continuity over sudden change, social tranquillity over conflict, and the masculine over the feminine. Beamish and its emulators were alleged to minimize past hardships and injustices and justify the social order of the past, inducing a tranquilizing nostalgia in their visitors.²⁵

Beyond this, there are also important debates on how best to communicate an understanding of the past, especially in relation to the role of the museum’s educational

and demonstration staff, the quality and depth of the understanding they should seek to share, and the extent to which they should be, and stay, 'in character' through wearing contemporary costume and adopting contemporary accents, modes of speech, and even awareness of historical changes since the period they represent.²⁶ Here, Beamish has been at the centre of British debates on best practice. Finally, the vexed question of the relationship between (real) things, (real) places and (real) people in generating a sense of authenticity has led to Beamish being attacked for being an artificial site that groups together artefacts and buildings from all over the region, when they would be better left at the places where they were actually used and lived in.²⁷

Some of Beamish's critics have seen little difference between it and placeless theme parks such as Littlecote.²⁸ Although Ironbridge Gorge at least had its industrial ruins on their original site, Hewison complains that Beamish "has [an] ironic relationship to the region whose life it memorialises" because until 1970 the site's only connection with industry was its National Coal Board ownership (although he admits that there was actually a small coal mine there). Hewison objected to the importation of buildings from elsewhere to a green field site, and to the costumed attendants, and the peroration of his polemic ran, "The paradox of Beamish is not that it is false, the exhibits are as genuine as they could possibly be, but that it is more real than the reality it seeks to recall. The town street evokes an indistinct period of between the two wars, at just that distance in time where memory softens and sweetens. But there is no need for personal nostalgia. Here, the buildings do it for you."²⁹

Kevin Walsh, writing five years after Hewison, finds Beamish guilty both directly and by association. His hostility may be coloured by his erroneous – and indefensible – belief that Beamish was a 'private heritage attraction' rather than a 'public museum'. Hewison at least got this right.³⁰ He begins by conflating Disneyland with open-air museums as places producing 'representations of life-styles that are devoid of conflict and anti-social behaviour, and exist within a calming rural landscape.' There is insufficient representation of squalor, adversity, danger, industrial conflict, unemployment, poverty or sudden change, and the visitors, unaided, have insufficient cultural capital to

‘understand or appreciate’ the site in the ways Walsh would prefer, although no attempt is made to test this assumption. They are unable to transcend a kind of passive nostalgia that Walsh represents as a disease communicable from generation to generation, so that ‘before long, a generation will exist whose heritage lies with the heritage industry’. Beamish thus becomes damned as a ‘fantasy island’, only ‘perhaps’ less disconcerting even than Littlecote.³¹ Walsh's position deprives Beamish's visitors of agency, of the ability to take their own messages and construct their own version of the past from what they see and how they talk about it, and fails to see how they might experience Beamish differently than a theme park.

Tony Bennett's less strident critique comes from a similar perspective. He argues that the introductory tape-slide show he saw on his brief visit to Beamish privileged an authoritative middle-class voice above that of the ‘miner’ who narrated the regional industrial history, and that the museum systematically excludes or marginalizes labour movements or women's suffrage campaigns, failing to explain the ideals of the British Co-operative movement. He is equally critical of how Beamish puts together an artificial hodgepodge of buildings from a wide area with only an imagined shared regional identity, and privileges an imaginary rural ‘folk’ tradition into which industry was assimilated. Beamish does celebrate the collective genius of a region's people, but, for Bennett, it does so through creating a vision of a timeless, unchanging past that turns history into (and here he quotes Michel Foucault) ‘a place of rest, certainty, reconciliation, a place of tranquillised sleep.’³²

None of these critics asked anyone involved in the running of Beamish what they were trying to achieve or how they justified the museum's approach. Another more sympathetic critic, Kevin Moore, emphasizes the strength and depth of the regional collections that back up Beamish's presentations, and praises it as a place he has enjoyed particularly, alongside a range of other experiences that include Plimoth Plantation and, strikingly, the 'Luxor' re-creation of Tutankhamen's tomb in Las Vegas. ‘What they share is a sense of “real things in a real place”, but through artifices, through devices of

reconstruction in their interpretation. They successfully *recreate* a sense of real things in a real place, if they do not sufficiently possess this in the first place.’³³

As a museum professional, Moore may have more of a practical sense of what it is possible for museums to achieve than Hewison, Walsh or Bennett. It is, as he points out, almost impossible to find "real things, real place, real person" all together on one site; but this does not mean that there is no difference between an open-air or "living" museum and a theme park. The problems involved in meeting the critics' criteria can be illustrated from an example of an open-air museum on an authentic site, the Luostarinmaki Handicrafts Museum in Turku, Finland.³⁴ The Museum is a small, planned, artisan housing estate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century which, under public auspices, became the Handicrafts Museum in 1940. The houses were gradually repopulated with craft workshops, under the guidance of retired craft workers, many of whom 'continued to work in the museum for as long as they lived'. But historical authenticity was still an elusive goal. While most of the houses have been carefully restored to their early nineteenth-century condition, most of the crafts were not practised in the houses where they are now located. Only in a couple of cases are allusions made to the political struggles of the past. The rooms are probably cleaner and tidier than when they were in everyday use, and there is certainly no authentic squalor. Most of the museum is frozen at a particular point in time, but that was necessary to convey a meaningful and intelligible experience. Would even this effort satisfy Hewison, Walsh and Bennett? If not, what would?

Pursuing this example in this way helps us to get a more appropriate perspective on places like Beamish. We need also to understand how such places come to be. Inevitably, what is offered to and expected of the visiting crowd is the product of the museum's own history. The critics of Beamish have never seen any need to understand this fact. Even at Beamish, with a strong curator and a clear vision, the need to satisfy a shifting group of local authorities, whose political complexion might – and did – change from election to election, proved particularly problematic. What follows is an explanation of the growth of Beamish, the development of the philosophy that lies behind it, and the impact of this on

the Beamish variant of the playful crowd. It is interesting that at no point do Frank Atkinson's autobiography, or the museum's literature, or any of the museum staff in conversation, show any awareness of the adverse comments directed at them by the critics mentioned above.

Beamish was the brainchild of Frank Atkinson. As he wrote in his autobiography, 'There is little point in being unduly coy or modest about it: I made Beamish happen and kept on making it get better, until I retired in 1987.' This statement draws a veil over aspects of Atkinson's approach to the practicalities of management, especially on the financial side, and over the importance of overriding aspects of his original vision by remaking Beamish as a museum of social history rather than the history of technology, at a crucial moment in its history; but it also draws positive attention to the expanding and evolving nature of Atkinson's vision, as he responded to threats and opportunities and took continuing account of the competition, including Disney, and how he could both learn from it and distance Beamish from those aspects that he and his colleagues rejected. Atkinson was a Yorkshireman with a scientific and industrial background, who moved into provincial museum work with Halifax Corporation at their Shibden Hall museum in the industrial West Riding of that proud county. In 1958 he became curator of the Bowes Museum, an extraordinary set of collections, housed in a decaying Victorian French chateau in County Durham.³⁵ Immediately after his appointment he won support of and land from the relevant County Council committee for setting up a museum 'about the everyday recent past way of life of the County itself'. Here was the germ of what was to become Beamish; but it was not until 1965, when he began to encounter serious obstacles in Durham, that Atkinson raised his sights to pursue the dream of a regional as opposed to a county museum. As initially conceived, the museum was not intended as a tourist attraction. Atkinson's purpose was '...to rescue a representative collection of objects illustrating a way of life in the region which was rapidly disappearing; to present this in an exciting and relatively novel way which would enthuse visitors; and therefore to help encourage the people of the North-East to appreciate that the history of their forbears and their past way of life were worth remembering and something to be proud of.' This early awareness of the significance of the passing of a way of life in face of industrial

transformation and decline marked Atkinson out as an early defender of the local against the global; but he also showed a willingness to preserve the playful in the crowds he wished to enlighten.³⁶

Atkinson was no isolated idealist: he was a political animal, and appreciated the importance of chatting with councillors on his visits to Durham. He soon needed these allies. His first major step towards the foundation of Beamish was in confronting (in 1965) the county's withdrawal of support in the face of one of the periodic financial crises that beset British local government. By this time he had already amassed extensive collections, using the local press to publicize his activities and touring women's institutes and village halls in search of donations. But the financial crisis enabled Atkinson's leading opponent, the Deputy Director of Education, to win political support for the abandonment of the open-air industrial museum and dispersal of the collections. In this adversary, Atkinson faced an attitude that dogged the foundation of Beamish. According to Atkinson, this opponent 'particularly despised my concern for the industrial past of the county, believing that the "old black image" should be destroyed...' This desire to abandon a dark industrial past for a clean, modern, rational version of post-war modernity was a commonplace of the time, and Atkinson's project had to overcome these rooted, and understandable, prejudices.³⁷ These perceptions were a strong influence on strands of opinion within the Labour Party, which wanted to move on from a past they saw as bound up with exploitation and degradation and saw the new housing estates, clean light industries and the planned environment of Durham's Peterlee New Town as, if not the New Jerusalem, then at least as a desirable future which could leave the discredited past behind.³⁸

Atkinson's response was to mobilize support for his project on a wider scale. A barrage of letters went out to local allies from the Labour Party, but they also included aristocrats with local interests such as Sir Humphrey Noble of Humshaugh, Viscount Gort of Hamsterley Hall, and the Earl of Rosse, a member of the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries. This was an effort to get the decision against the Durham project reversed by public pressure. But in these letters Atkinson also aired the possibility of

going beyond Durham and setting up a joint committee to establish the industrial museum on a new site. Here were the direct origins of the Beamish project, revealing Atkinson's capacity for mobilizing support across what would normally be seen as social and political boundaries.³⁹

This was the prelude to a period of sustained struggle within the County Council, as Atkinson obtained the support of key members of the local media and preserved threatened potential exhibits like the Seaham Harbour coal drop, the last North Eastern Railway J-21 class steam locomotive, and the region's last hand-charged blast furnace through the period of uncertainty at the turn of the year.⁴⁰ By the spring of 1966 Atkinson had won his battle for the acceptance, in principle, of a regional industrial open-air museum. Atkinson's notes for the founding meeting of Beamish's managing committee tell us where he was heading: 'Museums tend to be concerned with "things", but an Open Air Museum is about PEOPLE. It tries to show in a life-like way how people have lived and worked. It is an ideal way to get an idea of one's past, practically by stepping back in history.' After emphasizing its value to teachers as well as adult visitors, he continued on a new tack and drew on a new trend: 'It would build up well as a tourist attraction, for although we may feel that we have had enough of our old industries, this region was one of the birthplaces of the Industrial Revolution. People are now becoming interested in this, and already books are being written on the subject of "Industrial Archaeology."⁴¹ Six months later he produced a more fully articulated credo: 'An open air museum serves to illustrate vividly, the way of life, the institutions, customs and material equipment of the ordinary people. It is an attempt to make the history of a region live, by showing typical features of that history as accurately as possible. If it is to be valid history these examples must be carefully chosen and as carefully presented, so as not to distort the truth. Happy and unhappy aspects of the history of the region should be shown in their proper proportion...'⁴²

The struggles of 1965-6 had not yet brought a definitive victory. A crisis followed the Conservative Party victories in local municipal elections of June 1967, as Tynemouth, Gateshead and Newcastle withdrew from the museum consortium. Soon support seemed

on the verge of collapse elsewhere. However, Atkinson enlisted the support of the local press and lobbied Newcastle's Conservative "boss", Arthur Gray, to bring that important city government back into the fold, and with it most of the region, in 1967.⁴³

Meanwhile Atkinson had been gathering evidence on the museum's potential as a tourist attraction. He learned from E.A.P. Plumridge, a doctoral student working on tourism in the region, that its most popular tourist attraction was Durham Cathedral, with 240,000 visitors per year, far ahead of all rivals. Plumridge expected demand for visits to museums and open-air attractions to double within a decade, and insisted that "publicity, access... a good site with water, and finally the other facilities such as parking, eating, accommodation etc.. . . should attract 2-300,000 visitors from the North-East and a further 150-200,000 from outside the region."⁴⁴ These estimates were to prove optimistic, but not outrageously so; and they provided valuable ammunition which Atkinson did not hesitate to use.

The next goal was to decide upon a site, itself a political question, as it had to be acceptable to all the local authorities that subscribed to the project. Beamish had been on Atkinson's agenda since he became aware of its availability in the summer of 1966. The site did indeed have Beamish Hall, a potential 'stately home';⁴⁵ but, as we saw, it was not an outstanding building, and what attracted Atkinson was the site's relative ease of automobile access from all parts of the region, though he admitted subsequently that the lack of a rail connection was a drawback.⁴⁶ Above all, he prized the self-contained nature of the site, in a bowl surrounded by wooded hills, with no hint of the contemporary world to damage the museum illusion. In this concern to control his surroundings he was, of course, at one with Disney; and the museum management subsequently protected this visual seclusion by securing the purchase of additional land on the higher ground, to protect the trees and make sure that Gateshead's new high-rise flats remained hidden from view.⁴⁷ The choice of site had nothing to do with the promotion of a rural idyll or an old hierarchical society, as the critics suggested, although it may of course have fulfilled that role in unintended ways. Sites that would have met that imagined need much more

convincingly were rejected as too far from population centres or unsuitable on other grounds.⁴⁸

A point in Beamish's favour, in fact, was that its site was pleasant but not stunningly attractive, so that the local opposition to museum development made less of an impact than it might have done had a more isolated or spectacular location been chosen. By early 1969, as the project gathered momentum and the promoters sought planning permission from local and then national government, a vocal opposition movement developed within Beamish village and the surrounding area. The Beamish Park Preservation Society objected to the despoliation, as they saw it, of attractive countryside by ugly industrial eyesores, the loss of farmland and agricultural jobs, the potential burden on local taxation and, of course, the drop in property values. They argued further that this was not the right place for it, and that such a museum should occupy the site of one of the Durham villages that had lost their economic viability when their coal mines closed, to be slated for demolition with relocation of the inhabitants. In February the objectors wrote a letter of protest direct to the Prime Minister and gained a sympathetic hearing from the London Guardian and the Daily Mail, unusual bedfellows on the Left and Right of British politics, whose reports referred to the museum as an 'industrial Disneyland', a lazy confusion that was to be repeated.⁴⁹ But local garage proprietor Eric Hall spoke out in favour of the museum in April, and denounced the opposition as 'social climbers' and comparative newcomers to the district. When the proposals went up to the Minister of Housing for final approval in April 1969, only about twenty local objectors came forward, and the museum was approved without fuss.⁵⁰ The key issue here in the light of subsequent criticisms of Beamish is that the museum's contemporary opponents saw it as damaging a rural idyll rather than enshrining one.

As preparations began in late 1969 for opening in the following year, a steady groundswell of criticism continued from opponents to left and right; and the detachment of any individual local authority from financial support for the project continually threatened to derail it. Sunderland's Conservative municipal majority refused its financial support during 1969 on cost grounds. One member of the Labour Party group in July

1969 wanted to spend the money on alleviating local unemployment, and commented, 'It is about the past, but I don't like looking back. I like looking forward.' Alderman R.B. Spain attacked the educational argument on the grounds that children should be concentrating on the '3 Rs' rather than 'experiments and fads'. There were justified complaints about the difficulty in reaching Beamish by public transport. Finally, a bitter, if isolated, attack from the Left came from W. Walker of Ryton, objecting to plans to 'help in the desecration of Beamish Park, or to spoil the beauty spots of the North-East with tawdry commercialism for the enrichment of vested travel interests'.⁵¹ The price of continuing the museum's development was eternal political vigilance across all the local authorities of the region, especially in a period of sharp economic fluctuations with frequent squeezes on national and local government spending.

Here Atkinson's skill at harnessing enthusiasm, generating good publicity and manipulating the media remained essential. He publicly predicted an attendance of more than a million people per year.⁵² The regional press was almost always supportive, emphasizing the museum's contribution to a sense of regional identity and its potential to attract international tourists. The Northern Echo anticipated George Ritzer's anti-globalization agenda: 'In a world of all-consuming sameness in everything Beamish will stand as a living reminder of the way it used to be, a place where the visitor can stop the world, step back and savour an earlier moment in time and draw his own conclusions.'⁵³

At the same time, outsiders continued to read into Beamish their own prejudices and misunderstandings. The Morning Advertiser, the newspaper of the alcoholic refreshment trade, could report on the proposed re-creation of a 'traditional' English working-class pub in this way: 'A quaint carouse is in store for drinkers in Durham who like museums. A pub-of-the-past is to be rebuilt, and staffed on special occasions by barmaids in period costume. The life-like Tussauds with a liquor licence is planned at Beamish Park, an open-air museum being built in County Durham... Beamish Park is to be a Disneyland of yesterday's things, as I understand it.'⁵⁴ By contrast, in March 1969 the traditionalist Conservative Michael Wharton, "Peter Simple" of the London Daily Telegraph, showed a

much more empathetic understanding of the problems surrounding Beamish's aspirations to 'authenticity'.⁵⁵

(Beamish is) excellent, as far as it goes. But there should also be shawled women, miners with their whippets squatting on their heels by the wall, public houses crammed with shouting drunkards, their carbuncular faces lit by flares, watching in wonder as men compete in swallowing pies and hard-boiled eggs or biting rats' heads off. There should be illicit trade unionists, too, meeting at night in defiance of the combination laws, converging on the mill where the hated mill-owner has barricaded himself in with shot-gun and ferocious dogs; and close to hand, a company of yeomanry to make sure that Mr Atkinson's paraphernalia are never completely demolished.

Wharton has his history wrong, imagining the early nineteenth century rather than the early twentieth and West Yorkshire rather than the North-East, but he points to the need for, but implicitly the impossibility of, depicting the historical realities of disreputable behaviour and social and political conflict.⁵⁶ We shall return to some of these issues.

Beamish was able to attract support from cultural conservatives like Wharton, who put tradition before economy and preferred quaint, archaic inefficiency to calculative rationality. The Evening Chronicle gave strong support for Beamish and the preservation of the Victorian past, partly as an antidote to the present 'diet of pop and permissiveness', while the Bishop of Durham was very supportive, urging church-goers to become Friends of the Northern Regional Open-Air Museum.⁵⁷ This organization, founded in January 1968 and chaired by Professor G.H.J. Daysh, a regional geographer and planner at Newcastle University, included a large number of people with expertise in engineering and practical restoration.⁵⁸ Without this harnessed enthusiasm, necessary activities in assembling the collection and moving it to Beamish would have been much more costly.⁵⁹ Above all, though, it was their collecting activities that provided good copy for the local press and stimulated enthusiasm among a regional public that enjoyed reading about the dismantling and re-erecting of traditional chemists' shops or miners' cottages, and responded enthusiastically to requests to provide a new life for discarded items from their lofts, cellars or garages. The museum's collections of old everyday objects became overwhelmingly extensive, and washing mangles became particularly numerous because Atkinson once incautiously mentioned in an interview that the Museum was looking for

them.⁶⁰ The Friends tended to work on more complex, technical projects, similar to the work done by volunteers in steam railway preservation.⁶¹

As the project moved towards realisation, a 'Museum in the Making' display at Beamish in 1971 attracted about 50,000 visitors in a few amateurish summer weekends.⁶² After full opening in 1972, admissions grew steeply for most of the decade to reach around 200,000, which strained the facilities to breaking point but still fell significantly short of the original projections. This modest success owed more to the attractiveness of the concept, the level of free publicity and the cheap admission prices than to the professionalism of the presentation.⁶³ Despite entrance fees of only 20 pence per adult and 5 pence for children, only 4718 tickets were sold on the Spring Bank Holiday Monday in 1973. The car park was still a grass field, there were no public toilets on site, the Tea Room only held 45 people and there were long queues for the exhibitions. A confidential report complained that, 'This new museum began with too small a staff and too limited a revenue and capital programme.' At this point, in fact, the chair of the Friends suggested bringing in industrial investment and running the museum on a commercial basis.⁶⁴

Atkinson recognized these and other problems. At a speech in 1975 he addressed the challenges of rising expectations about presentation and interactivity, and the lower thresholds of boredom, that were associated with television and innovations in retail design, as well as the commercial competition. Museum curators had to respond or join the dinosaurs:⁶⁵

This is the point at which you have to make up your minds. Do you wish to be serious institutions with little interest in the public and its needs – collating and cataloguing and preserving your collections? Or do you wish to communicate with the untutored – but very experienced – public and interpret your collections for its greater enjoyment? I offer you the phrase, 'enrichment through enjoyment.' Not only leisure for learning and learning for leisure, but learning through pleasure! This will not be easy. There will be many terrible chasms which we shall have to cross... balanced on tightropes. On one side of our first tightrope lies Disneyland and the amusement arcade. Pleasurable for some, but hardly meriting public expenditure. On the other side of our tightrope may be said to lie more formalised instruction which may be acceptable in school or college, but is hardly so to the

average man in the street looking for a little enjoyment. We therefore have to tread this tightrope and... if we do not, others will.

In that spirit, Atkinson emphasized the need for museums to employ communicators and use interpretive centres. 'Interpretation' was 'imported from the United States' as a concept, but could still be useful. He considered the role of the 'museum shop', which entailed walking another tightrope between profit maximization and the communication of ideas and experiences. He emphasized the need to relate displays to people's lives to promote 'environmental awareness' and, heretically in some eyes, he promoted the value of using replicas to show how machinery worked, thereby prolonging the life of the original artefacts, which might be displayed elsewhere:⁶⁶

Nevertheless, replicas lack that realism which is one of the justifications for a museum. Any funfair can provide 'pretend' equipment and Disneyland is probably the most elaborate example of this. But a museum is built on the principle that only the real object can, in the end, be guaranteed accurate and correct. The philosophy of truth which lies behind our education is seen here, and it is the antithesis of Orwell's 'Newspeak' of Nineteen Eighty Four.

Truth resides in the authentic provenance of the artefact and the authentic, carefully researched context for its use. Atkinson is more concerned with this narrower and more accessible kind of 'truth' than with the 'staging' of 'authenticity'. Replicas may be acceptable for practical and pragmatic reasons, but only if they are backed up by the real article. By the same token, Atkinson resisted suggestions for a Site Manager appointment, arguing that, 'Such a post might... tend towards emphasising 'visitor-popular' activities at the risk of (sic) historically accurate presentation. One has to maintain a happy balance between 'academic aridity' on the one hand and "disneyland" on the other.' The educational emphasis remained strong: nearly 50 per cent of the visitors were children, with their parents or with school parties; and an Education Officer would be a more important appointment than a Site Manager, because Beamish was expected to provide a gateway experience for opening out new perspectives and interpretations for the rest of the region.⁶⁷

Beamish encountered its first real crisis in the depression of the early 1980s, which hit the North-East particularly hard. The museum was beginning to attract external funding that

made it less dependent on local authority support, as grants from the English Tourist Board and job creation schemes under the Manpower Services Commission helped to bridge a widening gap. One former employee has argued that the directed cheap labour provided by the MSC effectively saved the whole Beamish project, combined as it was with the turn to social history in the early 1980s. By 1979-80 potential political problems were reduced, as the local authorities' revenue contribution to Beamish had fallen to 42.3 percent, from 84.6 percent in 1971-2. But a sudden drop of 20 per cent in visitor numbers during 1980 was disturbing, and forced a reappraisal, although the decline followed a doubling of admission prices to a more realistic £1.50 (which meant that visitor income year on year had actually grown) and a rainy summer.⁶⁸

Atkinson was quick to call in a consultant from the private museum sector, Kenneth Robinson, managing director of Montagu Ventures Limited, who ran Beaulieu Motor Museum. This successful enterprise was based at a 'stately home' in Hampshire, in the south of England. Robinson emphasized the overriding need simply to increase visitor numbers, and he observed that the site had no single dominant attraction, but that visitors 'appreciate a wide range of features'. He was struck by aspects of the survey data, especially the very high average size of visiting groups, at 5.75. This may have been distorted by school parties, but it was still evident that Beamish was a 'family day out experience'. It was also dominated by locals: 'The (average) distance travelled by visitors to Beamish of 23 miles for day visitors and 25 miles for tourists is very low for a feature as significant as Beamish.' The social composition was also unusually down market: 'Sites such as Beamish normally attract a rather upmarket slice of visitors.' There was room to build up a constituency from beyond the immediate environs, especially as there was a very high proportion of repeat visitors (42 per cent) among the tourists as opposed to the local day visitors. The latter needed regular innovations to get them to return. So this was a regional attraction with considerable scope for market expansion, especially as 'far too little' was being spent on publicity. The advertising budget should be doubled, the expected catchment area for day visitors extended to a hundred-mile radius, and coach operators and hoteliers should be targeted. Atkinson responded positively to most of this, and by the time he reported to the Joint Committee in March 1981 visitor surveys,

targeted marketing and front of house improvements were already under way. He admitted that success so far had come in spite of ‘anomalies, as for example in hesitation about “commercially realistic pricing” and difficulties in reconciling the “Beamish experience” with positive marketing.’ But he still worried about the extent to which the Beamish ‘product’ should be designed for or devoted to the ‘customer’s’ interests, while expressing with unusual candour the idea that “regional heritage” and “nostalgia” is a necessity and is indeed the full justification for Beamish.’⁶⁹

Even more important than the lessons from Robinson was the change that took place in the dominant ethos of Beamish in about 1982. I can find no formal documentation to support the shift, but long-serving senior management are clear that it occurred. They locate a transition from a predominant concern with displaying the history of technology to a greater emphasis on social history and the history of popular culture; and they are sure that this above all is what revitalized the museum after the hiatus of the early 1980s and moved it on to new levels of popularity and praise. In 1982-3 it attracted 212,824 visitors; by 1987-8, the year of Atkinson’s retirement, the total had reached 373,916; and the following year visitor numbers topped the half million mark, as they did again in 1990-1. This could not be sustained, and the next decade saw a sharp and then a gentler decline before admissions stabilized at about 320,000 at the turn of the millennium, when 70 percent of visitors still came from north-eastern England and, within that, 30 per cent from three local counties.⁷⁰ The most critical external comments on Beamish, by Hewison, Walsh and Bennett, thus came at the height of its popularity, and at the point where the transition from emphasizing things at work to people in environments had recently been made. The early and highly active involvement of the Friends, with their strong bias toward industrial archaeology, may have helped to divert Atkinson’s enthusiasm away from the people’s history he espoused in public toward a less conscious emphasis on machines and their working; but both aspects of Beamish were always in evidence, as the comments of visitors and the media made clear.

So what sort of experiences did Beamish provide, as it extended its displays and assembled new attractions through the 1970s and 1980s? It was particularly rich in

exhibits connected with historic transport, coal mining, steam technology and relocated buildings, both domestic and commercial, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, although there was also material from earlier in the nineteenth century, especially in connection with railways and agriculture. From the early 1990s, particular foci of interest were defined, with first 1913 and then, additionally, 1825 being chosen as years that represented particular phases of the economic, social and cultural development of North-East England. 1913 was chosen as the high point of regional economic development and relative prosperity on the eve of the First World War, and the climax of a regional social system that was to remain in place through various vicissitudes and eventual decline for half a century thereafter; while 1825 was intended to capture the dynamism of the early Industrial Revolution at the point where the region became the birthplace of the steam railway. The choice of high points of economic activity, which were also quiet interludes between periods of industrial and political struggle on the coalfield, attracted the criticism that these latter themes were being further marginalized by the choice of unrepresentative windows through which to access the past, giving an unduly rosy, nostalgic and conflict-free picture of periods when times remained very hard for many regional residents. Why not choose, for example, 1842, the climax of the Chartist campaign for manhood suffrage and a year of economic severity, or 1926, the year of the British General Strike? This raises issues of the alleged absence or downplaying of difficult themes in Beamish's representation of popular regional history, to which we shall return.⁷¹

The museum's offerings built on what was already on the site, and expanded it by bringing in buildings and artefacts from all over North-East England, most of which would have been lost or destroyed had they not been painstakingly dismantled, removed, stored and reconstructed at Beamish. Pockerley Manor, a substantial farmhouse that proved to contain medieval remains, was presented as a yeoman (substantial owner-occupier) farmhouse of 1825, with gardens and local Cleveland Bay horses, while the old drift mine on the site formed the nucleus for the re-creation of a colliery village of as at 1913, although the miners' houses that were brought in from Hetton-le-Hole were arranged internally to show change over time in living conditions, decoration and

amenities. The reconstructed colliery village included a school and a Methodist chapel. A further resource already on site was the Home Farm, which was also part of the 1913 recreation, using additional farm machinery brought in from other parts of the region and also housing rare breeds. Additions to what was originally on site included the Pockerley Waggonway, a short steam railway and engine shed, representing the earliest days of the railway in the region and the world, and using carefully-constructed replicas of early locomotives, one of which (the 'Steam Elephant') had been 'lost' in the 1840s but was reconstructed from engineers' drawings, a precedent subsequently widely followed in the steam railway preservation movement. To meet health and safety standards, stronger modern materials and techniques were used in sensitive parts of the reconstructions, but this necessary compromise was unobtrusive. Additions covering '1913' included the railway station, the main buildings of which were transferred from an abandoned station at Rowley in the Durham hills, with additions from wherever good quality material could be rescued, and the 'J-21' steam locomotive, preferred by Atkinson because of its ordinariness as the last survivor of a large class of standard freight and local passenger locomotives that had been familiar all over the region for half a century. Most attractive (and most artificial) of all, perhaps, was the market town street of 1913, with a Co-operative store painstakingly dismantled and reconstructed from nearby Annfield Plain, a candy factory (not a usual feature of such a town, but obviously marketable), an automobile and cycle works, a livery stable, a row of lower middle-class houses that doubled as working premises for (for example) a music teacher, solicitor and dentist, and of course the Sun Inn, the reconstructed pub. Here, above all, Beamish might be criticized for pulling together an adventitious and unrepresentative cluster of buildings to provide a fake urban environment, without the long featureless streets of workers' cottages that were characteristic of the region's villages and small towns; but here too, each individual building was genuine and rooted within the region. The ensemble was artificial, and perhaps (understandably) calculated to attract; but the components, as Hewison admitted, were absolutely genuine. The same applied to the vehicles of the electric tramway that took visitors round the extensive grounds, and the other archaic means of transport that were available alongside it.⁷² Backing up what visitors could see and experience were enormous collections of artefacts, including large numbers of common household objects,

and featuring a huge collection of Trade Union banners and other memorabilia of the region's working-class organizations. The research potential of this material, including oral history tapes, is now beginning to be exploited.⁷³

Beamish developed distinctive ways of presenting its material to a visiting crowd who were supposed to be educated through enjoyment, at a variety of levels from simply being exposed to something 'new' and different, to developing a systematic program of interactive learning. Building on (especially) Scandinavian practices and taking them further, it made extensive use of 'interpreters' and 'demonstrators', using staff in period costume who were given very detailed briefings about the sites and artefacts they were explaining, and were 'in character' but not playing a specific role. Each site within the museum was eventually supported by a 'Handbook for Demonstrators', following a policy that was introduced in the early 1980s. The Pockerley Manor handbook is representative of the ethos: 'The aim of this handbook is to provide information on Pockerley Manor, its furnishings and fittings, and the uses to which the various rooms were put... Pockerley has been carefully researched and a wealth of information has been built up from local records. Information, however, has been kept deliberately general, enabling you to answer most of the visitors' questions. If more specific information is needed, it will be provided in the Book of Days for Pockerley... If you do not know the answer to a question, do not invent one... If you are in doubt, refer to your Interpreter.' Accuracy was more important than staying in a role; and detailed support was provided. The plants in the gardens, for example, were supplied on the basis of the contents of the catalogues of a contemporary Gateshead (near Newcastle) nurseryman, and information was available about the subject matter of all the prints on the walls. Many of the demonstrators worked seasonally and part-time, and theirs was a demanding brief, but every effort was made to ensure the maximum of historical accuracy in their communication with visitors.⁷⁴ The staff training manual for interpreters, a step further up the hierarchy, emphasized that explanations were intended to 'provoke the visitors' awareness and understanding of the of the history and lives of the people of the region... primarily through the use of original objects or artefacts'. 'Involving the visitor is a crucial aspect of the presentation. Both interpreters and visitors benefit when visitors

participate in a presentation.’ A form of role-play was sanctioned, involving the interpreter getting into character and even inviting others to do so, but this ‘requires the ability to assume the thoughts, feelings and emotions of an historical personage, and an in-depth knowledge of history’. The implication is that most staff could not be expected to sustain this, but the training of interpreters involved the inculcation of basic teaching skills as well as the assimilation of complex historical information. It required a great deal of commitment and enthusiasm from staff whose primary motivations were likely to be interest in the content of the job rather than levels of pay or other conventional rewards. As Rosy Allan, who has worked at Beamish since its origins, has pointed out, ‘Staff who work in the interpretation department are proud to work at Beamish, and if and when they leave they normally go on to work in other museums and would probably not consider working in a theme park.’ This ‘official’ view accords with the enthusiasm and commitment shown by such staff when encountered informally on an unannounced site visit.⁷⁵

Beamish thus adopted a compromise position, short of re-enactment or placing interpreters fully in character to act the parts of specific contemporaries, but foregrounding costumed interaction with the passing crowd, assembled into manageable groups almost on a seminar model.⁷⁶ Visitors were, of course, free to choose whether to respond and listen to interpretation or to pass on and ignore it, enjoying the site in their own way; and Beamish was probably at least as attractive for picnics, shopping, gazing at perceived quaintness, indulging in soft-focus nostalgia or enjoying the reconstructed park and fairground near the 1913 town as for any historical knowledge or understanding that might be imparted.

As the museum's management are well aware, that does not mean that no messages get through. There are, of course, genuine problems surrounding what Beamish can and cannot show. There are gender issues: it would be inaccurate to show men baking bread in the miners' cottages, for example, while this is a region in which women's paid labour outside the home was very limited, and there was no equivalent of the Lancashire working-class women's suffrage movement.⁷⁷ There is evidence from elsewhere that

Atkinson himself was less sensitive than he might have been on gender issues, but in this he reflected the culture of his time and place, and a museum committed to accuracy would be wrong to misrepresent the past for ideological purposes.⁷⁸ Senior museum staff, meanwhile, are well aware of the problems raised by confronting visitors with stomach-turning renditions of 'how it really was', with tubercular miners coughing blood, peeling wallpaper and disgusting renderings of insanitary conditions. Evidence from the now defunct Wigan Pier heritage centre in Lancashire, where a role-play exhibition of death in a cottage was rejected by visitors who refused to touch the coffin as requested, is adduced to suggest that shocking visitors is counter-productive. It is also difficult to represent past conflicts, and the number of people required to stage a strike or demonstration would be impossible to assemble on an everyday basis. Even chapel services are a problem: are they to be respected as acts of worship, or divorced from their ostensible content and regarded as instructive entertainment? Where does that leave believers? Increasingly, too, the culture of Protestant Nonconformity or the traditional labour movement has passed beyond the memory or understanding of most of the visitors; and the problem is to present appropriate material without being overly or intrusively didactic. Here the tensions between education, authenticity and the cultural capital and expectations of visitors seem likely to increase; but more recent popular culture is less accessibly and demonstrably regional, and the roots to which Beamish appeals are becoming harder to reach. The role of the collections on labour movement or religious history may prove to lie in providing the raw materials for more "academic", or at least reflective and accessible, historical interpretation, leaving the museum itself to do what it does best.⁷⁹

The critics of Beamish seem not to have taken any of these issues into account; and nor have they considered the political tensions inherent in representing (for example) class conflict through a museum whose governing body has representatives from a broad and shifting spectrum of political opinions and has to take account of them all. This remains the case even as the role of the local authorities in the actual funding of the museum's activities has declined into insignificance. The relocation, reconstruction, refitting and opening of the Annfield Plain Co-operative store is a case in point. At a meeting of the Joint Committee of management in April 1976 one member described the acquisition as

‘the most absurd proposal I’ve ever heard’, and a local resident wrote in protest to the Durham County Advertiser at the ‘sheer waste of public money on such a ridiculous scheme, on a building built since 1900, which is I am sure of little interest to the community’. Atkinson and the Newcastle University geographer Professor Conzen had to defend the importance of the Co-operative store as an essential part of the fabric of every North-Eastern town of the period. All this illustrates the necessity for negotiating an obstacle course of political and ideological objections before one of the most popular items in the Beamish repertoire could be put in place.⁸⁰ The museum was a negotiated product of what was physically, politically and economically possible, and must be viewed in that light.

Crowd management at Beamish has been more a matter of trying to keep queues to a minimum on busy days than of structuring the visitor experience. Early troubles with undisciplined school parties were overcome, and the main concerns have been to predict demand, manage internal transport provision, advise on how to get the best out of a visit, and entertain the queues that do develop by providing someone ‘in character’ to demonstrate crafts and related activities. Visitors are advised on the likely duration of queues where sites have limited access, as at the drift mine; but they make up their own minds about where to go and what to do within the 300 acres of the museum.⁸¹ As there are no additional charges for the various experiences, there are no pressures, and people can be left to follow their inclinations. This is, then, a family-based crowd, policed by parents or teachers, which structures itself: a respectable crowd, because of the reputation of the destination and the need to make a special effort to arrive there, and the absence of the sort of pleasures that might attract the indigestible. Beamish and the other open-air museums attract a distinctive visiting public, seeking fresh air, fun, nostalgia and entertainment in varying measures, but all within a framework of interest in education and edification alongside the entertainment, in a variety of mixes, and with agency and choice. This is a world away from Disney; and more generally there is no sense in which Beamish and related institutions can or should be lumped in with the world of the theme-park. This is an altogether different kind of experience, even though many of its members might themselves enjoy a theme-park visit on another occasion. As a constituency, it

deserves the respect with which the Beamish Museum treats it. From this perspective, Beamish's continuing successes are worthy of emphasis. In 2006 only 5 per cent of its annual running costs of £3 million came directly from the local government consortium which still officially manages it. The rest was drawn from admission charges, retail and other profits, special events and sponsorships. It forms part of the North-East Regional Museums Hub, which supports the enhancement and presentation of collections and their educational use, as part of the Renaissance North-East initiative driven from central government. Capital development projects are sustained by the European Regional Development Fund, the English Tourist Board, the Countryside Commission, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund. It still receives energetic volunteer support, and in 2007 the Friends of Beamish have promoted (among other things) a Leek, Vegetable and Flower Show at the Colliery Village, expressing in an entirely appropriate environment a living tradition of competitive practical gardening in the region's villages, and a Harvest Festival service in the village's Methodist Chapel, complete with a Methodist choir to underline the appropriateness and authenticity of this religious use of the building. In 2006 the opening of a reconstructed Freemasons' Hall in the town street attracted large crowds, including an impressive formal Masonic presence, and favourable publicity as the popular significance of an important historic organization was effectively reasserted. The Beamish of 2007 has more than 90 full-time employees, and the high season workforce reaches more than 200. Again, these numbers are augmented by enthusiastic volunteers. Its annual visitor numbers have come back up to 350,000 after a short period of decline, and 50,000 school pupils arrive on educational visits, although many of them seem to find the sweet factory and shop the highlight of their remembered experience.⁸²

The Beamish project has managed to sustain its success over more than a quarter of a century, although it will be clear that its early years were perilous and its progress has never been linear or uncomplicated. Its external visibility and capacity for income generation have been crucial to its survival and growth, together with the enthusiastic involvement of volunteers in a venture where ideals have always been more important than profit – sometimes, perhaps, dangerously so. It faces the impending problems of

catering for an audience for whom even the '1913' historical snapshot has receded beyond living memory, although many aspects of it can still strike nostalgic chords in those born before, say, 1960. It has been assisted by the persisting obsession of British school history syllabi with the classic 'Industrial Revolution' period. And, of course, although it rejected the 'stately home' model in its origins, it presents a great deal that is of relevance to those who are interested in 'historic houses', whether through the two contrasting farmhouse interiors and gardens, the tradespeople and professionals (music teacher, dentist...) whose domestic (and working) interiors are represented in the urban street, or the depiction of changing working-class material culture in the miners' cottages. It is therefore well worth extended consideration as part of this symposium.

¹ Gary Cross and John K. Walton, The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), Chapter 6.

² Christopher Harvie, 'Engineer's Holiday: L.T.C. Rolt, Industrial Heritage, and Tourism', in Hartmut Berghoff *et al.* (eds.), The Making of Modern Tourism (London: Palgrave, 2002), 203-21.

³ N. Pevsner, The Buildings of England: County Durham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), 48-9.

⁴ N. McCord, North East England (London: Batsford, 1979).

⁵ The direct influence of Scandinavian practice weighed more heavily than that of Beamish's main British precursor, the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagan's, Cardiff, founded in 1946, which itself looked to Scandinavia. Frank Atkinson, The Man who made Beamish: an Autobiography (Gateshead: Northern Books, 1999), 9, 85-6; Tony Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics (London: Routledge, 1995), 115. There was also the Ulster Folk Museum at Cultra, founded in 1958.

⁶ Atkinson, The Man Who Made Beamish, 9.

⁷ C. Williams, 'Museums: centres for learning, or Disneyland?', Labour History Review 57 (1992).

⁸ Kevin Moore, Museums and Popular Culture (London: Continuum, 2000), Chapter 7.

⁹ Peter Mandler, The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 217-21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Part IV; David Cannadine, The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 645-56.

¹¹ Merlin Waterson, The Servants' Hall (London, 1977)

¹² Christopher Harvie, "Engineer's Holiday: L.T.C. Rolt, Industrial Heritage and Tourism", in Berghoff *et al.* (eds.), The Making of Modern Tourism, 212.

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- ¹³ Ian Carter, Railways and Culture in Britain (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), Chapter 9; Becky Conekin, "Here is the Modern World Itself: The Festival of Britain's Representations of the Future", in Conekin *et al.* (eds.), Moments of Modernity (London, 1999).
- ¹⁴ Michael Freeman, Railways and the Victorian Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 244-5.
- ¹⁵ Nicholas Whittaker, Platform Souls: the Trainspotter as Twentieth-Century Hero (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995); J.K. Walton, 'Power, speed and glamour: the naming of express steam locomotives in inter-war Britain', Journal of Transport History, third series, 26 (2005), 3-7.
- ¹⁶ Freeman, Railways, 242-3.
- ¹⁷ Raphael Samuel, Theatres of Memory (London: Verso, 1994).
- ¹⁸ It also has American counterparts, although it was spread more thinly. Harvie, "Engineer's Holiday", 211-12.
- ¹⁹ Kevin Walsh, The Representation of the Past (London: Routledge, 1992), 100.
- ²⁰ Julian Barnes, England, England (London: Cape, 1998); Barbara Korte, "Julian Barnes, *England, England*", in Berghoff *et al.* (eds.), The Making of Modern Tourism, 285-303.
- ²¹ Robert Hewison, The Heritage Industry (London: Methuen, 1987); Patrick Wright, "Restoration Tragedy", Guardian Review (London), 13 Sept. 2003, 16-17; Peter Mandler, History and National Life (London: Profile Books, 2002), 126-7.
- ²² Michael Rawlinson, "Cadbury World", Labour History Review 67 (2002), 101-19.
- ²³ For an early critique of Ironbridge see B. West, "The Making of the English Working Past: a Critical View of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum", in R. Lumley (ed.), The Museum Time Machine (London: Routledge, 1988), 36-62.
- ²⁴ Martin Wiener, English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); Bennett, Birth of the Museum, 114.
- ²⁵ Bennett, Birth of the Museum, 110-14; Walsh, Representation of the Past, 97-100; Hewison, Heritage Industry, 93-5. Walsh, Representation of the Past, 95-6, points out that Artur Hazelius, the Swedish founder of the open-air museum movement, sought to "use the idea of heritage and understanding of the past as a steadying influence in the face of violent influences of modern life" (quoting E.P. Alexander, Museums in Motion (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 85). The racial dimension to such perceptions in the United States, as (for example) critics rightly pointed out that slaves, their living quarters and their culture were rendered invisible at Williamsburg, carries less immediate purchase in Britain outside old slave ports like Liverpool, Bristol and Lancaster; but the points about class and gender, and more broadly about the legacy of empire, do need to be addressed. W. Leon and M. Piatt, "Living-history museums", in Leon and Rosenzweig (eds.), History Museums. Walsh, Representation of the Past, 141-2, critiques the presentation of the slave trade at the Maritime Museum at Liverpool's Albert Dock.
- ²⁶ Leon and Piatt, "Living-history museums."
- ²⁷ Kevin Moore, Museums and Popular Culture (London: Continuum, 1997), Chapter 7; Hewison, Heritage Industry, 93-5; Walsh, Representation of the Past, 98; Bennett, Birth of the Museum, 113.
- ²⁸ Hewison, Heritage Industry, 21.

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- ²⁹ Ibid., 93-5.
- ³⁰ Walsh, The Representation of the Past, 100, 182; Hewison, Heritage Industry, 93.
- ³¹ Walsh, The Representation of the Past, 97-100.
- ³² Bennett, Birth of the Museum, 110-14, 117-20.
- ³³ Moore, Museums and Popular Culture, 137-43.
- ³⁴ Martti Puhakka and Solveig Sjoberg-Pietarinen (eds.), The Luostarinmaki Handicrafts Museum: Guide Book (Turku: Turku Provincial Museum, 2000). Translation by Christopher Grapes.
- ³⁵ For the Bowes Museum see Charles E. Hardy, John Bowes and the Bowes Museum (Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1970).
- ³⁶ Atkinson, Autobiography, 23-4, 73, 85-7 and passim; Beamish Museum Archive (BA), Box labeled "F. Atkinson's Early Correspondence, to 1966" (hereafter "1966 Box"), Atkinson to Jim Boyden, 8 Sept. 1965.
- ³⁷ Atkinson, Autobiography, 90-2. It may be significant that Beamish's emergence coincided with a general "turn against urban modernisation" in Britain in the 1970s: Peter Mandler, "New Towns for Old", in Conekin et al. (eds.), Moments of Modernity, 226.
- ³⁸ Mark Clapson, Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Jeremy Alden and Robert Morgan, Regional Planning: a Comprehensive View (Leighton Buzzard: Leonard Hill, 1974), for a view from the planners of Peterlee and nearby Newton Aycliffe.
- ³⁹ BA, 1966 Box, Atkinson to J. Boyden, M.P.; Sir Humphrey Noble; Viscount Gort; Councillor Dan Smith; and the Earl of Rosse, 8 Sept. 1965; Atkinson to Lord Fleck, 6 Sept. 1965; Atkinson, Autobiography, 92-3.
- ⁴⁰ BA, 1966 Box, Report on St Fagan's visit, 25-27 Oct. 1965; Agenda for Museums Sub-Committee, 24 Nov. 1965; Report to Museums Sub-Committee, 24 Nov. 1965; Brian Shallcross to Atkinson, 23 Nov. 1965; Atkinson to Earl of Rosse, 13 Dec. 1965.
- ⁴¹ Atkinson, Autobiography, 93-5; BA, 1966 Box, "A Regional Open Air Museum for the North East... Notes for a Conference... 5 May 1966", 2.
- ⁴² BA, North Regional Industrial Museum Working Party: Report of Clerk of Durham County Council (Meeting 4 Oct., 1966).
- ⁴³ Atkinson, Autobiography, 99-103; BA, Newspaper Cuttings, "1970" Box File (hereafter "1970 Box"), Journal, 12 July 1967.
- ⁴⁴ BA, 1966 Box, Plumridge to Atkinson, 27 Sept. 1967, 7 Oct. 1967.
- ⁴⁵ BA, 1970 Box, Stanley News, "April 1967".
- ⁴⁶ BA, North Regional Industrial Museum Working Party, 4 Oct. 1966, Site Report.
- ⁴⁷ Atkinson, Autobiography, 103-7; BA, 1966 Box, Memorandum about the availability of Beamish Hall, 8 Sept. 1966; Atkinson to Ian Swanson, 30 Aug. 1966; notes of conversation between John Walton, Rosemary Allan and John Gall, Beamish, 20 Aug. 2002.

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- ⁴⁸ BA, 1966 Box, correspondence between Atkinson and Councillor McMillan, especially 22 Nov. 1966.
- ⁴⁹ BA, 1970 Box, Northern Echo, 23 Jan., 18 Feb. 1969; Evening Chronicle, 25 Feb., 13 and 15 Mar. 1969; Guardian, 24 Mar. 1969; Daily Mail, 24 Mar. 1969; Sunderland Echo, 3 June 1969.
- ⁵⁰ BA, 1970 Box, Northern Echo, 9 April 1969; Sunderland Echo, 19 April 1969; news cuttings dealing with ministerial acceptance, 28 May 1969.
- ⁵¹ BA, 1970 Box, Evening Chronicle, 15 Mar. 1969; Sunderland Echo, 9 and 10 July 1969; Evening Despatch, 8 Aug. 1969.
- ⁵² BA, 1970 Box, Northern Echo, 16 Feb. 1971; British Library (BL) J/X0410/105, Miscellaneous Beamish Pamphlets, Living History, version 2.
- ⁵³ BA, 1970 Box, Northern Echo, 24 Aug. 1970.
- ⁵⁴ BA, 1970 Box, Morning Advertiser, 12 Dec. 1970.
- ⁵⁵ BA, 1970 Box, Daily Telegraph, 6 March 1969.
- ⁵⁶ For Wharton see M. Wharton, The Missing Will, and a Dubious Codicil: a Double Autobiography (London: Hogarth Press, 1992), and Dave Russell, Looking North (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).
- ⁵⁷ BA, 1970 Box, Northern Echo, 29 June 1968; Evening Chronicle, 19 July 1968.
- ⁵⁸ Within ten days it had recruited fifty members, but much more important was the issue of a glossy public relations and recruitment pamphlet at a press conference, and the making of a national BBC2 television programme on the museum and its philosophy, which generated further free publicity. By the second Annual General Meeting the Friends had 334 members, with two affiliated societies. By the end of 1971 there were 873 individual members and 18 affiliated societies. BL, P423/57, Friends of the Northern Regional Open-Air Museum, Newsletter One (June 1968); P421/193, Annual Reports for 1969 and 1971.
- ⁵⁹ BL P421/193, Minutes of Fourth Annual General Meeting, 17 April 1971; Annual Report for 1971.
- ⁶⁰ This story is almost a Beamish legend, but John Walton's colleague Stephen Counce, who was working at Beamish at the time, confirmed it in conversation, 25 March 2004.
- ⁶¹ Compare the enthusiasm expressed by Samuel, Theatres of Memory, for this kind of activity.
- ⁶² Atkinson, Autobiography, 133; Peter Johnson and Barry Thomas, Tourism, Museums and the Local Economy: The Economic Impact of the North of England Open Air Museum at Beamish (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1992), 20.
- ⁶³ BA, Development Strategy 2001, p. 26, Appendix 1, "Visitor Numbers;" Johnson and Thomas, Tourism, Museums and the Local Economy, 21.
- ⁸⁵ BA, 1966 Box, Beamish: 1973 and Beyond, June 1973, 8, 12; Johnson and Thomas, Museums and the Local Economy, 23-4.
- ⁶⁵ BA, 1966 Box, Typescript of Atkinson's Presidential Address to the Museums Association, Durham, 1975, 5-6.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-8; BA, 1966 Box, Discussion Paper for Joint Committee, February 1976, 8.

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- ⁶⁷ BA, 1966 Box, Joint Committee, February 1976, 8-10, 13.
- ⁶⁸ Johnson and Thomas, Museums and the Local Economy, 25-30; BA, 1966 Box, Atkinson's Report to Joint Committee on "Marketing Beamish", 6 Mar. 1981.
- ⁶⁹ BA, 1966 Box, "Marketing Beamish", and report by Kenneth Robinson, 24 Nov. 1980.
- ⁷⁰ Informal interview: John Walton, Rosy Allan and John Gall, 20 Aug. 2002; BA, Development Strategy 2001, 26, Appendix 1; <http://www.beamish.org.uk/digest.htm>, accessed 7 Aug. 2002.
- ⁷¹ Walsh, Representation of the Past, 99-100.
- ⁷² Beamish website, above, note 85.
- ⁷³ Informal interview, above, note 87, and site visit. See also Alan Doyle, Mining: the Beamish Collection (Newcastle: Centre for Northern Studies, 2001), and John Gorman, Banner Bright: an Illustrated History of the Banners of the British Trade Union Movement (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976; second edition 1985).
- ⁷⁴ BA, Handbooks for Demonstrators, Pockerley Manor, 1995.
- ⁷⁵ BA, Staff Training Manuals, Interpretation, 2002; Rosy Allan to John Walton, e-mail communication, 17 Sept. 2002; and see Atkinson, Autobiography, 211-12. .
- ⁷⁶ Compare Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums", for American practice.
- ⁷⁷ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, One Hand Tied Behind Us (London: Virago, 1978).
- ⁷⁸ Val Williamson, "Regional Identity: a Gendered Heritage", in S.A. Caunce *et al.* (eds.), Relocating Britishness (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).
- ⁷⁹ Beamish, interview notes, 20 August 2002.
- ⁸⁰ BA, 1976-7 Newspaper Cuttings Box, Durham County Advertiser, 16 April 1976, 30 Sept. 1976; Stanley News, 7 April 1977.
- ⁸¹ E-mail, Rosy Allan to John Walton, 17 Sept. 2002.
- ⁸² <http://www.beamish.org.uk> and <http://www.friendsofbeamish> both accessed 8 September 2007.