Lecture Summaries 1998–9

Scotland's historic towns: a future for their past

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Edinburgh, 11 January 1999

This is the title of the paper as I suggested it some nine months ago, when asked to give this talk. I was clearly feeling a little more bullish then than now: a more correct title would remain the same, but with a question mark at the end.

Scotland's historic towns, their past and their future. What do these words mean? This is the very question raised by the Society in 1972. In a timely and crucially important report, the Medieval Urban Archaeology Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland warned that Scotland was in danger of destroying one of its significant heritages — its historic towns. They argued that the repository of evidence consisted not merely of documentary sources, but was also our archaeological inheritance; while the former were in relatively safe hands, the archaeology of towns was under serious threat: acceleration in the development of towns and the enhancement and upgrading of the townscape, essential though they might have been, were literally wiping out centuries of Scotland's past. The report concluded 'we have a duty to hand on a heritage to the future. If Scotland's interest in her history is more than superficial, the rescue of our towns should command the support of every thinking Scot.'

This paper addresses three issues. Firstly, what exactly is meant by 'Scotland's historic towns'? How do we recognize, or mentally recreate them, so that we can gain a meaningful understanding of our urban heritage? Secondly, how far have we come since 1972? Have we handed on a heritage? Have we 'rescued' our towns? And, thirdly, in the light of the answers to these first two issues, where do we go from here?

How do we recognize, or mentally recreate, the historic town, so that we can gain a holistic understanding of our urban heritage? For without this understanding of the intrinsic importance of a town's past, how can we meaningfully plan for its future? To understand, or recreate, the historic town, we have a wealth of source materials — some very familiar, others more obscure. The ideal resource is obviously the visual, standing evidence; but virtually intact towns, such as Culross, are not the norm, and neither have medieval and early modern buildings survived prolifically. Remnants of the townscape may remain, however, in a less obvious guise; and on a first field trip to a town, we should bear in mind that the morphological development of the historic town can best be understood within its geographical and geological context. A further source material, occasionally somewhat shunned, but readily available on any visit to a town, is oral tradition. Placed within an informed historical context, important pieces of information may emerge, which add to the overall, detailed picture of an individual town. Perhaps apparently less significant, but in fact often telling, can be place or street names. They may not be the sole clue to an extinct feature, but can often help to pinpoint a particular site or structure.

There are other methodologies, of course, for assessing the intrinsic character of the historic town while not on site. The most crucial source, for me, is documentary evidence. But vital as this evidence is, it can, at times, have inherent limitations and fail to reveal the full scope of town life. The historian must, therefore, turn to other disciplines. Archaeology is an absolutely essential tool, when used either in conjunction with historical evidence or, at the very least, within an informed historical perspective. An important further research aid is cartographic evidence — be it the earliest set of maps available, those of Timothy Pont, either in manuscript or adapted as Blaeu's *Atlas of Scotland* (Amsterdam, 1654), or town plans, such as those of John Wood drawn in the early 1800s, or 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps; all can be an invaluable source, indicating the layout of towns before major 20th-century developments destroyed earlier remnants. There are, however, inherent limitations. A degree of stability in the urban form has to be assumed and this may be confirmed only by other source material — documentary or archaeological. Given this caveat, town plans can shed considerable light, as long as it is borne in mind that a map shows what is present at the time of illustration, and takes no account of what may once have existed and later disappeared from the townscape.

This highlights the necessity for a wide-ranging interdisciplinary approach. There are, for example, a number of visual resources available to the historian. Early engravings and paintings, in spite of artistic licence, can offer insights into past land use. Photographs dating from the 19th century and even, on occasion, from the early 20th century can also tell much about the urban form prior to major industrialization and modern redevelopment schemes. And in some cases photography may supply the only visual clues. In the case of totally extinct settlements, aerial survey can be an invaluable resource. Nothing of the important medieval town of Roxburgh, abandoned in 1400, remains standing. Aerial survey is at present the sole reinforcement to the documentary evidence available for this significant Border town. I suggest that archaeological investigation is essential — a point made by the Society's committee in 1972.

We have available to us, then, abundant resources with which to interpret and understand the intrinsic value of our historic towns. But are we interpreting and understanding? This leads to the second question. How far, in fact, have we come since 1972?

It is fair to say that over these last 27 years there has emerged a greater awareness, in townscape management, of the need for conservation alongside a recognition of the inevitability of change; and, importantly, of the desirability of the management of change rather than the prevention of change. Central and local government bodies have committed funding, not only to protect the archaeological heritage, but also to monitor urban development and raise public awareness of the value of irreplaceable facets of historic burghs. Simultaneously, there has been a shift of emphasis in the academic approach to urban studies. The traditional, constitutional and legalistic, assessment of burghal institutions has, to some extent, been replaced by a methodology that sees burghs and towns more simply — as places where people lived, worked and communicated. This changing attitude is, moreover, reflected in other professional areas: planners, conservationists, architects and even many developers are increasingly aware of the necessity to set the historic town within its proper context — not as pastiche, but with a recognition of a historic setting that is constantly and inevitably changing. Towns, by their very nature, are mutable and there needs, therefore, to be a considered balance between conservation and change.

Legislation also reflects this changing attitude. Historic Scotland is the agent of the Scottish Executive and the successor to the Historic Buildings and Monuments (HBM) division of the former Scottish Development Department. It was HBM which initiated the Burgh Survey project as one immediate response to the Society's warnings. Historic Scotland has continued this early

policy of raising awareness of urban issues by introducing a number of initiatives which reinforce the legislation. These are aimed at helping planning authorities responsible for historic towns to recognize when there might be archaeological implications to a development proposal. One of these is the new Burgh Survey programme. The series resumed in 1994, in such a manner that the surveys, and the information in them, are more readily accessible to both planners and the general public than was previously the case: all of the new Burgh Survey reports are published.

Such measures as this offer one means of access to information by the local authorities. Many local authorities, however, for financial reasons, are unable to employ conservation and archaeological officers, which means that the quality of specialist advice available to planning authorities is variable. One of the recommendations of this Society's committee in 1972 was that 'the major authorities should appoint archaeological officers so that interests in archaeology, especially in towns, are effectively represented within planning processes.'

Archaeological research, and, indeed, historical research into our historic towns cannot, I would argue, make full impact if it is not adequately recorded. The role of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, including the National Monuments Record of Scotland, is crucial here. And there has been a determined effort on the part of Historic Scotland to catch up on its backlog of unpublished excavation reports, including reports on some important urban sites. Despite this, we have, in the last quarter of a century, in very many towns throughout the country, lost much; and not always with adequate recording.

So how do we answer the second question? How far, in fact, have we have come since 1972? Have we handed on an urban heritage? Have we 'rescued' our towns as the Society recommended? Regrettably, the answer is probably both 'yes' and 'no'.

Where do we go from here? What is the future for the past of our historic towns? The answer to this will depend very much on funding; and, funding apart, it is of course the very nature of urban sites that prescribes rescue archaeology. A prime site in a town centre is a development opportunity; and there has, inevitably, to be a balance between heritage and commercialism. Many of our historic towns have witnessed continuity of occupation over many centuries. As a result, they comprise complex archaeological sites and will remain so. It is unlikely that the approach to urban archaeology will change radically: we will continue to have archaeological units moving in to assess random, rescue sites, often on short-term contracts, with little opportunity to specialize, or gain an informed overview in specific areas of urban archaeology throughout the country.

In the future, we have to address a further issue. What is the correct balance between conservation and change in our historic towns? Of course, there has to be change, but it should be managed and thoughtful change, with full recording of that which is to be lost. Examples such as the redevelopment of Edinburgh's George Square or Linlithgow's High Street, both arguably vandalized in the name of progress, should not be allowed to happen again. We do not have the right to be so cavalier with our own and our children's heritage.

This brings me to my final point. Whose heritage is it anyway? How do we decide which parts of towns are to be conserved and which may be destroyed or redeveloped? In Britain almost nothing of local vernacular tradition, for example, has survived in industrial cities. In these cities, much of the urban landscape is a product of the slum clearance policies of the post-1945 years, which in themselves may be considered a virtue but which, in the act, swept away much of our heritage. The big question for urban conservationists is what times do we value? Are surviving elements of late medieval and early modern townscapes most valued because they are the oldest to survive in modern towns? Or are medieval elements 'best' because they make for good 'heritage' marketing? Are the Middle Ages so distant that they have become almost romantic?

Scottish towns are intricately varied and their meanings are part of our identity. If these meanings are not to be lost, we need to ensure that both politicians and those in the street are aware of the scale of the forces acting on our towns. If our national economy falls upon hard times our historic towns will be preserved, but they will not be maintained; if our economy flourishes, there is pressure to redevelop or replace valued buildings. The pressures of the heritage tourism industry are also double-pronged, providing money for maintenance but also demanding inappropriate levels of access to many fragile sites. We must insist on very careful tourism management and on control of traffic intrusion. We must also insist on the enhancement of the built environment by such things as shopfront initiatives, by appropriate signage and by sympathetic street lighting. Overall, we must demand that the scale of development be appropriate to the scale of place.

We do have to ask ourselves where we want to go, seeing our heritage in a new light and ensuring that the mistakes of the past are minimized. The national economy, government at both senior and local level, and pressures of industries, such as developers and tourism, quite rightly, have all a part to play in the future of our towns. But, ultimately, it is the people of Scotland who hold our heritage in trust. I think the Society has a part to play also. The Society certainly played a significant role 27 years ago. What path, I wonder, will it take now?

In conclusion, I would like to address a specific question to the Society. I began in my own mind by adding a question mark to the original title of this evening's paper. How large is that question mark in the mind of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland? In short, how precious is the future of our historic towns?

I am indebted to Terry Slater and other colleagues for useful discussions on this subject.

The ancient capital of Ulster: excavations in the Navan complex

Jim Mallory

Edinburgh, 8 March 1999

Emain Macha, the seat of the ancient kings of Ulster according to early Irish literary and historical tradition, is identified with Navan Fort, a monument that lies 3.2 km west of the town of Armagh. Navan Fort is one of a group of monuments in close proximity which archaeologists have defined as the Navan complex. Dudley Waterman's excavation at Navan Fort (1961–71) concentrated primarily on the excavation of a mound some 45 m in diameter and 5 m high (Site B). This revealed a sequence of development that began with evidence for Neolithic occupation, then accumulation of soil with subsequent evidence of ploughing, the establishment of a Bronze Age ring ditch, some 45 m in diameter, enclosing a ring of posts; and the building of a series of renewed circular structures consisting of a smaller round-house with what would appear to have been a conjoined, larger, circular enclosure (to this period, c 400–100 BC, is assigned the most exotic item to have been recovered from an Irish site, the skull of a Barbary ape); the erection of a circular structure 40 m in diameter built from concentric rings of oak posts (dated by dendrochronology to 95 BC); the encasement of the 40 m structure in limestone boulders and the firing of timbers on top of this newly constructed cairn; and, finally, the covering of the cairn and burnt timbers with sods to form an earthen mound. Navan Fort was surrounded by a hengiform

enclosure some 230 m in diameter; Dudley Waterman's untimely death prevented excavation of the bank and ditch.

Since 1986 the author has been carrying out excavations at Haughey's Fort, a neighbouring hillfort about 1 km west of Navan Fort. Haughey's Fort consists of three banks and ditches with an outer diameter of approximately 320 m. The interior of the site appears to consist of two large double-post enclosures and a number of linear palisades. Pits contained small traces of gold ornament, bronze objects (rings, a disc-headed pin, a bracelet fragment), glass beads, stone pendants and coarse ware pottery. Organic remains included carbonized barley and some animal remains. Excavations of the innermost ditch uncovered exceptional conditions of preservation. Animal bones included cattle, pig, small amounts of sheep/goat, horse and dog (the dog skulls are amongst the largest known from prehistoric Ireland or Britain). Wooden tools such as handles were preserved, as well as beetle remains (80 species), and macrobotanical material including an apple 3000 years old. A series of radiocarbon dates indicates that the three ditches and most of the interior features date to c 1100–900 BC. There were some traces of Iron Age activity associated with one or two pits.

At the foot of Haughey's Fort lies the King's Stables, an embanked enclosure that appears to have contained a Bronze Age pool which received animal and human offerings. One of the primary problems of the Navan complex is the relationship between Haughey's Fort and Navan Fort. In the absence of excavation of the Navan ditch there has been considerable speculation. One school of thought favoured a Neolithic date for the outer bank and ditch. This was suggested because the morphology of the bank and ditch resembled a late Neolithic henge, there was Neolithic occupation within the interior of the site, there were Neolithic monuments (passage tombs) in the vicinity, and because a core of the ditch sediments contained pine pollen, which disappears from Irish spectra after c 2000 BC. Others preferred the later date of 800–100 BC, contemporary with the major structural phases of the interior of Navan Fort. Indeed, a radiocarbon sample from the cored ditch sediments has indicated a date of approximately 800–400 BC.

In 1998 the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland sponsored an excavation across the ditch at Navan Fort in order to end speculation and ascertain the date of the outer enclosure. Excavations by the author revealed the ditch to be 4.7 m deep from the present ground surface and filled largely with peat. With the exception of some worked timber at a depth of about 0.5 m, there were no artefacts recovered until the very bottom of the ditch. Here were found the remains of a wooden bowl and two large oak beams. Dendro-analysis revealed that the timbers dated to c 95 BC. As they were burnt and their dates were virtually the same as the 40 m structure, it is likely that the timbers derived from that structure and that the ditch was dug at the same time. The discovery of the timbers provides new avenues for speculation on the relationship between Haughey's Fort and Navan Fort (the enclosure of the former is a thousand years earlier than that of the latter), the question of roofing the 40 m structure (the burnt beams were from a superstructure of some sort), and the time interval between erection of the 40 m structure and its subsequent, apparently ritual destruction (the beams would have been removed deliberately during the final encasement of the cairn).

Britishness — decline and fall?

Keith Robbins

Edinburgh, 10 May 1999

The 'British Question' has come to the fore in recent political debate and discussion. The current restructuring of the United Kingdom prompts further consideration of nations and states and the relationship between the two. Yet, though many scholars have written on this subject, they have been unable to reach firm conclusions or establish a typology which holds good in all circumstances. Some wonder whether the day of the state is over and has been replaced by myriad non-state actors in a globalized system. Others believe that it is time to bring the state 'back in'. Some think that, in the course of the information revolution, place means little. Theorists of nationalism also disagree on the extent to which nationalism was born in post-French Revolution Europe or whether it has a far longer pedigree.

Awareness of these debates is very pertinent to a discussion of Britishness, but there is simply no way of defining what is meant by the term. To identify its attributes as those modes of belief and behaviour which characterize the British people is circular. It presupposes the existence, or the coming into existence, of such a people. When, why and to what extent did that happen? The regal union of James VI & I constitutes one starting point, but even then in the eyes of apologists Britain already had an antiquity. Peter Roberts, John Morrill and Brendan Bradshaw are amongst other recent historians who have written on the making of Britain within the period 1533–1707. In the light of such investigations the emphasis in Linda Coley's (1992) *Britons* on the '1707 invention' seems a little strange. Placing an emphasis on Protestantism and the 'Other' [France], she rejects the notion that Great Britain could only come into being through some kind of cultural uniformity. For the 19th century, however, in my own Ford Lectures under the title 'Integration and Diversity', I have emphasized both aspects at work in different fields. By and large, 'multiple identities' exist within a single state, even if there was a pervasive Anglicanism (itself a complex term).

Over the last half-century, however, this symbiosis has proved increasingly difficult to maintain. The reasons can only be summarized. The absence of major war has removed the cement provided by a commonly acknowledged 'Other'. The British Empire is no more and even the Commonwealth has lost its British prefix. There is a global decline of Britishness in what used to be referred to as the 'Dominions'. Successive phases of European integration have placed a question mark over the nation-state as inherited from the 19th century and replaced it, or challenged it, by a plurality of national, sub-national and regional structures within Europe. Taken together, these developments have made it difficult to continue with inherited notions of a tightly drawn Britishness. Yet, if it is accepted that Britishness, over a long past, points to a 'diversity-within-unity' of the inhabitants of this island, it might yet have a utility in the new millennium.

REFERENCES

Colley, L *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837*. London.