

MSRG Spring Conference (Falmouth 2013, 25–26 April): How did people in medieval Cornwall perceive their environment?

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The 2013 Spring conference was held in Cornwall, the first time we had visited the South West (or indeed anywhere further south-west than Oxford) for ten years, since the ‘*Settlement and agriculture in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset*’ conference of 2003. Then the meeting was organised with the Department of Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter (Creighton 2003), and we turned to Exeter University again for help with the 2013 conference. Specifically, thanks to the enthusiasm and support of Dr Nicola Whyte, our conference was held at the new interdisciplinary Centre for Environmental Arts and Humanities, located at the University’s Cornwall Campus, at Tremough, Penryn, near Falmouth.

Our topic was not precisely medieval settlement, but medieval landscape more broadly. Nor did we take landscape in any of its simple, singular senses – not only, for example, the ‘landscaping’ perspectives of designed landscapes, not only the landscape of the ever-growing discipline of landscape archaeology, and not only the ‘made landscape’ in the sense that Hoskins and his legions of followers popularised it. (As an aside, even as we were holding our meeting, *The Making* was re-published yet again, this time with an Introduction by the novelist William Boyd; perhaps symptomatic of a public blindness to history, Dorset-based Little Toller Books have included it in their reprint series called ‘Nature Classics’). We sought to touch on all these, and other, approaches, but we were also trying to creep up on other less tangible, less traditional ways of using landscape to study and understand the medieval period (and thus of course all later periods, including today’s.)

Nor was this only an MSRG conference. It was jointly organised with a new partner, the Landscape Research Group (<http://www.landscape-research.org/>), on whose committee we also sit. The LRG, founded in 1967, also sponsors events each year to promote discussion and debate around its interests; in LRG’s case it is concerned with all types and aspects of landscape, from wilderness and cultural landscapes to the built environment, and strives to stimulate research, transfer knowledge, encourage the exchange of ideas and promote practices which engage with landscape and environment. MSRG and LRG thus share many concerns. On the other hand, we almost lost count while organising the meeting of the number of times that a member of one of the Groups admitted to not having heard of the other. At one level it is perhaps unsurprising, because one group works with present day landscape and the other with medieval settlement; LRG was founded mainly by cultural geographers (e.g. David Lowenthal and Jay Appleton) and includes ecologists, artists, art

historians, as well as historians, geographers, planners and landscape architects, whilst MSRG of course was founded by archaeologists and historians. But both groups have been around for many years, both publish journals (*Landscape Research* and the present journal), and both have ambitions towards interdisciplinarity and towards influencing (for want of a better term) heritage management. Most strikingly, although the two Groups on occasions employ quite different perspectives, and perhaps do not always use the same assumptions, aims or approaches, they apply their different lenses to many of the same things, the same patches of ground, and they address the same questions about people’s relationship with their environments. Our joint conference was designed to capitalise on this similarity of interests. At a personal level, a joint meeting became almost inevitable once one of us (GF) was tasked with taking his turn to organise an MSRG event and the other (PH) was asked to organise an LRG one; work shared, as common-field medieval peasants may have discovered, is work halved and enjoyed much more sociably.

The conference set out to initiate a conversation between the two perspectives. It was framed as an exploration of the relationships between the MSRG’s particular strand of historically-informed, archaeological and local ways of understanding landscape through settlement(s) and the LRG’s ways of thinking about and appreciating landscapes, which are very wide-ranging, but not always historically-focussed. ‘Settlement’ after all should be taken not to mean simply the site of some houses (the word has always had an inherent ambiguity – ‘an’ anglo-saxon settlement, ‘the’ Anglo-Saxon settlements, for example), but all aspects of the ways in which people lived in and on the land, in other words how they embodied landscapes in and through their lives, which is very much LRG’s interest.

One way to characterise the difference between the groups – in a very oversimplified fashion, the sort of oversimplification that can sometimes move us on and kick-start new ideas – is the object / subject distinction, looking *at* or looking *through* ‘landscape’. We might suggest that MSRG’s approach objectifies landscape, treating it as an object of study. LRG on the other hand, whether through representation (in art or literature), through enactment and embodiment (the currently fashionable academic trope of constructing landscape through walking, for example), focuses on landscape as subject, and on the people who make landscape either physically through beholding, perceiving or experiencing, symbolically or through ‘real’ actions. What should emerge from bringing together those two poles of practice is recognition that past landscapes – in this case medieval landscapes, or the pattern of settlement and land-use if you wish, although with its superstructure of symbolic meanings

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– were the product of people’s perceptions as much as present day landscapes. This of course matches the opening words of the European Landscape Convention definition of landscape – ‘an area, as perceived by people’ – although it is important not to restrict the word perception to sight – all senses are involved in perception, as is thought, memory, knowledge and associative reflections (‘cognition’), as is experience and physical engagement, whether following an ox-driven plough through a medieval field or walking, interpreting and surveying the earthworks that were left behind. This is what the participants of the conference did on its second day, at Godolphin, a settled, farmed, mined and (re)designed medieval landscape. Thanks to the help of the National Trust, the current owner, and under the expert guidance of its past owner, Mr John Schofield, founder-member of the Cornwall Buildings Group, we all had an opportunity to walk the landscape, seeing the present and creating in our imagination the past, a sort of ‘beating of the bounds’. We could also think about the questions that had been raised by the first day’s lectures and discussions in the context of Godolphin’s medieval precinct and gardens, an exploration of the deer park and warren, and consideration of the medieval fields, commons and industrial workings on which the house and its amenities were imposed.

Those lectures had been selected to provide a multi-faceted exploration, in the context of Cornwall (and Devon), but we hope with much wider applicability. They looked from many different disciplinary (and personal) perspectives at how medieval (and early modern) people created ‘landscape’ through their perceptions of the world. We examined how we can excavate, uncover or recover past perceptions, how can we ‘see’ our predecessors’ landscapes as well as ‘preceding landscapes’. Our Falmouth conference therefore hoped to open windows on the study of landscape’s past not merely in terms of landscape history but in terms of the prehistory of the concept of landscape itself. Despite what the *OED* appears to claim, ‘Landscape’ was not invented by Dutch or Italian painters and their patrons, but in its particular way of affording connection to the physical environment and with other people, is probably basic to being human.

To this end, and to cement the dialogue between the two Research Groups, we heard from the current LRG chair (Paul Tabbush) and two past MSRSG chairs. Paul Everson intrigued us with examples from his own particular embodiment in landscapes at places such as Bodiam Castle and Barlings Abbey; Paul Stamper

reminded us from his position in English Heritage’s Designation Dept that understanding of past landscape must lead to action in the present day, whether preservationist or creative. Nicola Whyte (University of Exeter) in ‘Senses of place, senses of time: recovering non elite perceptions of the landscape from the archives’ took us to the manorial documents, to see how landscape was held in memory, as revealed by study of manorial court papers concerning land use disputes, common land agreements and the like. In ‘The wild in Cornwall: a bit of an outlandish landscape history’, Sam Turner (Newcastle University) took us out of the settlement itself, though its fields and into the land outside, whilst Graeme Kirkham (Cornwall Council) in “‘Reliques of an olde forte rayseed of earth, litle rounde hills wherin mens bones have bene founde’”: prehistory in the landscape in medieval and post-medieval Cornwall’ reminded us that like us, our medieval predecessors live amidst historic landscapes; their past was as present as ours is. Philip Marsden (recently Writer in Residence at Falmouth University College), in ‘From Myth to Maps – the Cornish coast and changing ideas of place at the time of the Reformation’ used two 16th century maps of Tintagel and Carrick Roads (effectively Falmouth Sound) to explore how places and landscapes are perceived, created and distorted according to contemporary need. Finally, Barbara Bender and John Torrance presented an overview of the Branscombe Project in east Devon; their presentation, ‘A medieval landscape: our view, their view’, took us to the heart of the conference’s concerns, whilst emphasising the community-focussed aspect of the project and the roles of people in constructing landscape *meanings*. And we gave talks ourselves as well – GF in introductory abstract mode (‘Not past versus present, but different ways of seeing: landscape as shared interdisciplinary commons’), PH a discussion of how we might envisage life – and therefore landscape – amongst ‘Medieval Cornish hamlets, fields and commons’. He also reminded the conference that MSRSG had journeyed down a similar road before in the 2007 POMLAS initiative: Perceptions of Medieval Landscape and Settlement (MSRSG 2007).

Reference

- Creighton, O. 2003 Medieval settlements and settlement study in the South West. Report on the MSRSG 2003 conference. *MSRSG Annual Report* 18, 5–7
 MSRSG 2007 Perceptions of medieval landscape and settlement. *MSRSG Annual Report* 22, 6–31