

THE OPEN AIR MUSEUM: IDEA AND REALITY

by J. R. Armstrong

THE general idea of what constitutes an Open Air Museum will be familiar to most of us even though it is only in the last few years that the name has been applied to anything in this country. The preference has been to use terms such as "Folk Museum", or "Museum of Rural Life". Those who are familiar with the most important Open Air Museums on the Continent, where the term has been generally accepted as a descriptive title, will know that, although the essential element is the erection or restoration of buildings, and the attempt to make a complete three-dimensional setting of a way of living or working, there are many differences of approach; and that no two museums are exactly alike in their aims.

The national Open Air Museum at Oslo stemmed from the removal from central Norway of a twelfth-century Stav church and its re-erection on a peninsula in Oslo Fjord a few miles from the capital in 1885. It is now a national museum with nearly a hundred buildings representing the main regional forms of traditional building and furnishing from Lapland to the totally different south of Norway. The emphasis is on building. The second, in the date of its inception, and in some ways the most important Norwegian Open Air Museum, lies north of Oslo, at Lillehammer. It was founded by Dr. Sanders, who had for decades been collecting thousands of peasant craft objects, and who had come to realize that these were largely meaningless unless given the context of the buildings and surroundings for which they were designed—whether they were furnishings, farm equipment, clothes, or simple art objects. This museum now has some seventy to eighty buildings and is also national in its coverage. In Sweden, the universally-known museum at Skansen started as a complementary museum to the national collection of objects illustrating traditional Scandinavian art and life. It was to include not merely varying regional forms of vernacular building, but typical wild life of the country. The zoo, which now has little relation to indigenous wild life, together with folk dancing, youth festivals, and other organized events, attracts far more people than the buildings for which the museum was originally planned—a major tourist attraction, but hardly what its first promoters intended.

In Norway and Sweden today there are nearly fifty open air museums, ranging from small groups of half a dozen buildings representing the traditions of a particular valley, to large collections of fifty or more buildings, which in some cases relate to a

defined region, or a particular industry such as fishing, but very often over-lap one another without any clear sense of meeting a unique need, or of providing something which cannot be got equally well elsewhere.

In the past forty years museums have been established in Denmark, Holland, Germany and Belgium and have all benefited by what they have learned from Norway and Sweden; while England, which is one of the last countries in north-west Europe to enter this field should have much to learn, not only from the Scandinavian experience, but also from that of these other countries.

The first Open Air Museum in the British Isles to be open to the public was that of St. Fagan's, near Cardiff. It forms part of the National Museum of Wales, has the status of a national museum, and is concerned with vernacular building and the Welsh way of life. This excellent museum now has nearly twenty buildings, and has been open for nearly twenty years. England has followed tardily, although the need has been present in the minds of a great many of us since the early thirties, but nothing serious was achieved until within the past ten years. During the past four years, museums within this category have been started, and first opened to the public, at Stoke Prior in Worcestershire, at Stowmarket in Suffolk, at Beamish Hall in Durham, at Hutton le Hole in Yorkshire, at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire, at Morwellham in Cornwall, at Stoke Bruerne near Northampton, and at Singleton in Sussex. At least six others are projected or already under consideration in other parts of the country. All these ventures are differently oriented, and some have, to a certain extent, changed their objectives in the course of their initial development. The only feature that unites them is that they are all concerned with groups of buildings, whether restored in situ or moved to within a landscape area capable of accommodating them with a reasonable measure of reality. There is a big difference between a venture such as Morwellham in Cornwall, where the aim is restoration in situ, preserving the relation of the buildings to a particular industry and an industrial network and, say, Stowmarket, which aims at reconstructing the vernacular buildings and the rural scene representative of three or four regions of East Anglia. To take another example, there is a big difference between the two or three acres of Hutton le Hole, limiting itself virtually to one valley of the Cleveland Hills, and Beamish Hall, aiming to represent three industrial counties, with an emphasis on heavy industry and on a site of over two hundred acres. Aims may also be altered during the initial development. At Stoke Prior the emphasis at the beginning was essentially on buildings and architecture and the name "Museum of Buildings" defined this aim and, within this general framework of intent, buildings as different in size and status as the Guesten Hall roof and a medieval hall from Bromsgrove could be accommodated; nor was there any exact limit to

the region or area to be served. Since then local crafts such as nail making and chain making have been included, the buildings becoming essentially ancillary to the crafts they house. This kind of pragmatic adaptation to changing circumstances or needs is understandable and may be necessary in the early stages. This has certainly been true in the case of the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum at Singleton. This pragmatic approach does, however, raise larger issues which will be made clear by recounting some of our experience at Singleton.

It has not been easy to find phrases which define, or to invent any simple formulation of our aims. At the entrance, for example, there is a noticeboard saying, "Museum of Historic Buildings"; on our headed paper appears "The Open Air Museum, Singleton". For those already familiar with those early museums on the Continent, the second of these phrases is probably adequate to indicate very roughly the kind of things they will expect to find in the Museum. When coupled with "Weald and Downland" (its full title), there is a fairly clear indication of the region covered. But this description conveys only a generalized purpose; the other phrase "historic buildings", can, by suggesting some limitation, be misleading. One definition emphasizes the individual importance rather than the generic significance of the buildings exhibited, the other implies a preoccupation with buildings as something apart from their furnishings, as well as the exclusion of traditional crafts, with some of which the museum is definitely concerned. Even the attempt to define exactly the geographical area which the museum covers by the phrase "Weald and Downland" could be considered a little misleading. When a title for the original promotion committee was first discussed six years ago, the name adopted was "The Wealden Open Air Museum"; and it was in the central Weald that a site for the museum was first sought. The title was extended to include the "Downland" only when negotiations for a possible site near Brighton were later under consideration. In the end the magnificent site finally acquired, through the generosity of the Edward James Foundation, lay right at the western edge of the Weald and Downland area. It therefore became logical to include the eastern fringe of Hampshire within the area to be served. Already four buildings from this area—a treadwheel from Horndean, a base-cruck cottage from near Fareham, a market hall with open arcade from Titchfield, and an early granary from near Winchester, have been acquired. The treadwheel has been repaired and re-erected, the market hall is under construction, and the other two are waiting until the necessary funds are available for their repair. This shift to the west means that the eastern Weald is a very long way from the museum, and it may well be that another museum, concentrating on the slightly different traditions of Kent, might some day be established within that area. This is a possibility which we should already take into account in our planning. Considerations of this kind raise very

important issues which need clarification at a time when the response of the public, and the general interest which increasing numbers seem to be showing in museums of this type, may lead to their proliferation during the next decade.

If we may return to the question of policy and, for the moment, set aside the question of catchment areas, for all those Open Air Museums where the objective is the removal and re-erection of buildings (rather than the restoration and preservation of an existing complex *in situ* as in the case of Coalbrookdale and other museums concerned with the preservation of a unified industrial site, or the group, for example, of abandoned crofters' cottages at Auchindrain in the Highlands, or the Waterways Museum at Stoke Bruerne) there is a very real need for a simple, clear and easily understood statement of intent. At the time of writing, the following brief formulation is being considered for Singleton. "Our purpose is to create a museum of representative traditional buildings which it is impossible to preserve *in situ*, rebuilt with associated crafts and furnishings for enjoyment, research and instruction." This is the kind of brief statement which can be printed even on the back of an entrance ticket or membership card, and it expresses fairly well the priorities as seen by every one of the founding members; but the emphasis, even among those who are in general agreement, can prove to be quite different when it comes to actual detailed policy decisions. Every one of the key words in this apparently clear and simple statement can be differently interpreted, or the emphasis shifted—words such as "traditional", "furnishings", "crafts", "research", "enjoyment" can all be understood in subtly different ways.

There is, nevertheless, agreement that the focus should be on traditional and truly vernacular building of sub-manorial status; that the smaller houses and cottages, which rarely survive from early times, should have precedence over larger and more sophisticated buildings; and that only buildings, which cannot be preserved *in situ*, should be accepted. Logically this means that the museum must, whether directly or indirectly, be actively "preservationist", ready to give advice and help to any individual, society, or local authority concerned with preservation. Already we can say that three important medieval buildings, which otherwise would probably have disappeared without trace, have been preserved and will be restored through the influence and recommendations of the museum. This we regard as an extremely important aspect of the museum's work. But it also follows that the scope of the museum itself must be limited by what buildings may become available, and not by what it might be able to acquire, had it the means, in order to create an ideally balanced and representative collection.

This means that the future content and shape of the museum can be planned at this stage only in fairly general terms capable of adaptation. If, for example, a much more determined effort

were to be made at national, or regional level, to preserve in situ all buildings of medieval date at whatever cost, the planning of the museum would obviously require drastic reformulation. Unfortunately this is a very unlikely contingency; and, looking to the future, we anticipate that rather more than half the museum will be devoted to buildings which ante-date the sixteenth century. The position at present is that of eight major buildings, of which four have been put up and four are still in store, one is an aisled hall of possibly the thirteenth century, one a small farm house of the fourteenth, two are farmhouses from the fifteenth, one a three-storied jettied townhouse and shop from the end of the fifteenth, a market hall and a late Tudor farm house from the sixteenth, and finally an aisled barn, now being erected as an exhibition centre, from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth. This is the kind of dating spread we may anticipate for the major buildings which we hope to be able to accommodate—perhaps fifteen or sixteen altogether. The smaller buildings, which we now have, range from reconstructions of a charcoal burner's settlement, a "Saxon weaver's" workshop, and a thirteenth century rubble flint cottage, to a rebuilt sixteenth century treadwheel, an eighteenth century granary and cowshed, a small toll cottage, from the beginning of the nineteenth and a smithy from the mid nineteenth century.

There are also in store two small granaries, one from about the end of the sixteenth, and the other from the early eighteenth century. Thus, for the lesser buildings there is a far greater spread in date, and this will probably remain true of the twenty or so smaller buildings for which there should be space. There are two reasons for this. Firstly any reconstruction of early buildings based on archaeological evidence can be attempted only when they are small and relatively inexpensive, and secondly, there are far fewer farm buildings or buildings accommodating traditional crafts surviving from the medieval period than is the case with houses. Because of this uncertainty as to what size or type of buildings may need to be accommodated, the master plan has had to be conceived in terms which provide maximum flexibility. Provision for farmsteads has been made so that each farm, with or without ancillary farm buildings, can be completely isolated from one another and within its own curtilage, less than it would have enjoyed in practice, but at least sufficient to give a sense of separate identity in time and space. The thirty-five acre site will allow for seven, or perhaps eight, such farmhouses. This involves careful landscaping and anticipatory tree planting. The rest of the major buildings will be in close association in a nucleus consisting of compact village, or small town, centred on the market hall, which has already been erected. The acquisition of this market hall last year necessitated an early planning decision, fixing the exact site and form this village nucleus should take; and it is possible that much of the layout of the paved square, paths and frontages will



FARM HOUSE, "WEALDEN" TYPE

*before removal from reservoir site (1968) and in Final stages of re-erection
at the Museum (1972)*



"WINKHURST"

early 15th century small house before removal from reservoir site in S.W. Kent (1968) and as rebuilt in the Museum (1972).



EARLY 18th CENTURY GRANARY

before removal from Littlehampton for road widening (1969) and after repair and re-erection at the Museum (1970).

be carried out as soon as possible although at this stage we cannot yet know what size or shape the individual buildings will have, or how much space each building may require.

At the lowest point on the site, below the village, a lake has been partly excavated and this will act as a mill pond for a mill, which has been offered to the museum, and accepted, but which cannot be moved until sufficient funds are guaranteed to meet the heavy costs of dismantling, repair and re-erection. It is probable that this mill, which is built of local stone, will, if we exclude the small thirteenth century cottage built of flint rubble, be the only non-timber-frame building in the museum. The bias towards timber-frame is inevitable, if only on grounds of practicability, in an area where in any case ninety per cent of building up to the sixteenth century was in wood. The master-plan thus envisages some thirty-five buildings altogether—thirteen or fourteen within the village nucleus, seven farms with perhaps an equal number of farm buildings such as barns, granaries or byres, a mill, and perhaps six or seven buildings accommodating traditional crafts.

When a list of representative types of vernacular building from the earliest times to the eighteenth century including reconstructions and crafts within the region served by the museum was prepared and considered in the early stages it included nearly eighty suggestions, even after the exclusion of all secondary variations of plan or structure. If this kind of programme were to be adhered to, the site would obviously need extension. My own view is that thirty-five acres and a limit of about thirty-five buildings is desirable for a number of reasons. An enlargement of the site would, of course, be welcome to give greater elbow room, and curtilage to buildings of very different periods, status and use, as well as for the better landscape possibilities afforded, but not for any increase in the number of exhibits. The arguments for limitation are that, firstly, the experience of more than half a century on the Continent with museums such as that at Arnhem, has convinced many administrators that there is a certain size which, if exceeded, leads to frustration, fatigue or simply boredom; that it is in fact desirable to restrict museums both as to their range as well as to their size, if the public is to get most out of what is provided. Secondly, Parkinson's law begins to operate with alarming acceleration beyond a certain limit, and size also induces an element of impersonality, unavoidable in any large-scale organization, destroying those qualities of informality which we are particularly anxious to preserve at Singleton; and it leads inevitably to the need for greater restrictions. The third reason is in a different category, it is simply the need, of which planners are now much more conscious, to disperse the amenities available to the public as widely as practicable. Apart from obvious problems of car parking, traffic congestion and overpressure on public facilities, the desirability of spreading interest to include residents and static

holiday-makers as well as weekend tourists, is in itself an important consideration.

If limitation, then, is accepted as desirable, it can be achieved in two ways. The first is a reduction in the size of the catchment area, as has already been suggested, the other is the elimination of anything which can be as well done in another museum, and by close liaison with such museums. This can be illustrated by three examples within the three years since the museum was first committed to its site at Singleton. Since then, a museum, concentrating on rural life and agriculture, has been developing at Winchester, only twenty miles to the west. This museum will be able, when it is open to the public, to deal far more adequately with a great deal of agricultural history, particularly that of the last hundred and fifty years, than we should ever be able to at Singleton. To that extent, therefore, we can limit our aims. The second instance, is the establishment, only ten miles to the north-west, of a research centre for the study and reconstruction of Iron Age farm economy, including all the building associated with an Iron Age farmstead, so that again, something which had featured in our original programme, would now be quite unnecessary, since it will be far more completely realized in a venture concerned with that and that only. Lastly, during the past year, a promotion committee has been convened for the creation of an industrial museum devoted to the industrial history of the area. This may perhaps relieve us of any responsibility for the early Wealden iron and glass manufacture, and so enable us to concentrate more fully on the vernacular architecture of the region which from the beginning has been our central preoccupation.

Perhaps I may sum up by saying that I believe one of the most pressing needs at the moment is a greater liaison between the various bodies, museums, preservation and archaeological societies, etc., concerned with buildings and general social history, with a view to working out some kind of considered regional and national policy, and thus to try to avoid the unnecessary overlapping, frustrations, and sense of aims only partly realized because there has been no agreement as to where, or how, a particular aspect of preservation, reconstruction or research can best be achieved. Lack of this has bedevilled the museum world in the past, and in the particular field with which we are concerned, i.e. Buildings, their recording, preservation or restoration, the matter is so urgent that we cannot afford any waste of effort due to lack of adequate co-ordination and co-operation.