

## **Democratizing heritage**

*Jason Wood, Heritage Consultancy Services*

The focus of Jason Wood's keynote address was how to bring academics, local historians and heritage professionals together as a persuasive force for economic, social and cultural regeneration. He explored this theme through two ongoing case studies, one in Lancaster and one in Bradford. In both cases the projects from their inception put local people first – community engagement is not something that should be treated as an add-on. Both in their different ways reach out to local people and involve them truly in interesting and innovative ways. Both seek to increase awareness of the significance of people's locality but also to challenge more traditional notions of heritage. And both have local history and heritage dimensions, examined through archaeology and digital media, and in the second case also art.

### **Beyond the Castle**

The Beyond the Castle project seeks to unlock the archaeology of Lancaster's Castle Hill, a site previously occupied by a series of large Roman forts. Limited excavations between the 1920s and 1970s have revealed only tantalising glimpses of the site's archaeology. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that the area has seen no archaeological investigation in the last 40 years. Exploring the area between the Castle and St George's Quay, the project has enabled a comprehensive archaeological survey of Castle Hill, making use of new digital technologies to survey and analyse the remains.

The project brought together professional archaeologists and the public and shared data in real time. Results of the archaeological surveys were quickly made accessible at regular meetings and events attended by an enthusiastic group of local residents with an interest in the heritage of Lancaster. Having formally constituted themselves, this group now wish to practise their excavation techniques by undertaking a community archaeology project.

The Beyond the Castle project marks the beginning of an exciting journey of discovery about the origins of Lancaster. There is a huge opportunity for sustainable engagement not only with local people but also with visitors. Lancaster is one of Visit England's ten newly designated Heritage Cities. Telling the story of Castle Hill, therefore, will be an essential ingredient in the city's tourism strategy and in making Lancaster a key heritage destination.

### **Breaking Ground**

Park Avenue football ground, home to Bradford Park Avenue AFC since 1907, hosted its last league game 44 years ago. Voted out of the league in 1970 the club abandoned its ground to nature. A canopy of trees now stand on the terraces where crowds in excess of 30,000 regularly stood to watch top flight football.

In November 2013, Park Avenue football ground, a long forgotten time capsule of Bradford's social history, began to be unearthed when the first ever archaeological excavation of a football goalmouth and goalpost was conducted. This small intervention was remarkable in terms of the

demonstrable enthusiasm shown by a variety of people, their passion for the former ground, and willingness to see it investigated and utilized to better effect. The ultimate intention is to develop a project pairing several artists working in different media with community groups, social historians and archaeologists to reveal and promote the significance of the place.

Park Avenue has the potential to engage hard-to-reach audiences who feel excluded from traditional arts or heritage activities. The Asian community are an especially disenfranchised community in this respect, along with older men, younger children and teenagers. The pilot work in November 2013 successfully reached this target audience and confirmed that football and archaeology was a winning combination for artistic engagement.

### **Lessons learnt so far**

Although geographically some distance from Hastings, both these case studies provide useful pointers to others seeking to democratize heritage. In Hastings, the contribution heritage and local history has made to economic and social 'regeneration' has been notable; it has brought together a variety of groups to improve tourism and community engagement, thereby creating a sense of pride in local history and the town itself. There is clearly scope for further academic work and deeper, creative community engagement as the new Forum and the mission statement for the new Centre for Sport, Tourism and Leisure Studies envisage.

But there will be tensions.... Academics and heritage professionals may be experts in the past, but not always experts in social interaction. In some universities and heritage institutions there has been a reluctance to engage with public representations of the past, and when they do, it is too often transient rather than sustained.

We need to find ways to harness interests and channel enthusiasms by bringing together practical and professional experience and local knowledge; by promoting the use of social media and digital technologies as key means of communication and intellectual access; and by encouraging unique and exciting responses, sometimes in unusual places, but always for public benefit.