

Cultural Heritage Interpretation and Sustainable Tourism

CHIST 3: Iceland

18 – 25 May 2014



by Derek Alexander, Susan Bain, Neil Buchan, Alan Comrie, Andrew Gallacher and David Sneddon

Fornverkaskólinn and ARCH

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INTRODUCTION

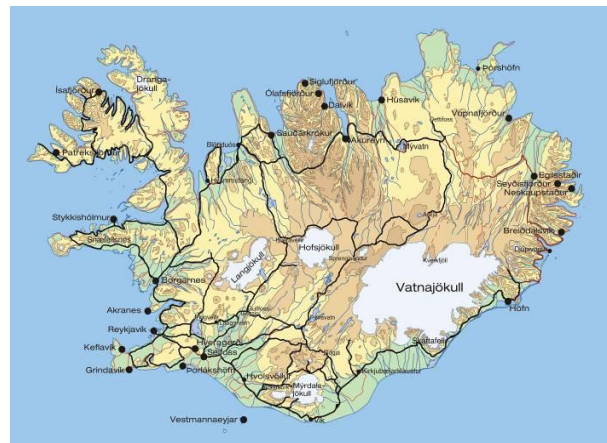
Cultural Heritage Interpretation and Sustainable Tourism (CHIST) aims to give those who work in the field of Scottish Heritage Interpretation and Tourism an idea of what is being undertaken in their field outwith the UK, and the inspiration to apply new methods at home. CHIST is funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme of the European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture, which is concerned first and foremost with vocational training. In Leonardo's words, the exchanges aim to provide *'opportunities for those involved in the design, delivery or implementation of training or careers guidance to undertake visits to partner organisations to exchange experience and best practice.'*

In 2014 there will be programmes to Cyprus, Iceland, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Estonia.

The CHIST Iceland programme 2014, reported on here, was promoted by ARCH and hosted by Fornverkaskólinn Heritage Craft School.

Arch Network is a Scottish Non Government Organisation promoting learning and development in natural and cultural heritage between Scotland and other European countries. Fornverkaskólinn Heritage Craft School is a partnership project between the Carpentry Department of the Northwest Iceland Comprehensive College, Skagafjorður Heritage Museum and the Tourism Department at Holar University College. The School supports and promotes historic building skills as well as recording and preserving the vernacular names and terminology associated with traditional Icelandic building methods, which are all in danger of being lost. The purpose of the school is also to build a network of cultural institutions, professionals and companies in the industry and promote research and exchange of cultural sciences.

The CHIST Iceland programme 2014 was based at Skagafjorður in northern Iceland and focused on traditional Icelandic turf buildings. The team from Scotland comprised Derek Alexander (National Trust for Scotland), Susan Bain (National Trust for Scotland), Neil Buchan (Castletown Heritage Society), Alan Comrie (Historic Scotland), Andrew Gallacher (Northlight Heritage) and David Sneddon (Northlight Heritage).



DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACEMENT

Monday 19th May



After driving from Keflavik on Sunday evening we had a long lie in on the Monday morning before meeting our host for the day, Helgi Sigurdsson. However the light nights and anticipation meant we were all up and ready to go in the morning. After picking up our bright orange waterproofs (which some have commented gave us a certain

convict appearance) and a splendid packed lunch from Hotel Varmahlið we travelled the short distance to the flood plain of the Skagafjorður valley. We were met there by Helgi, a local builder specialising in traditional building who works closely with the Skagafjorður Regional Museum to restore their collection of historic buildings. The grassland on the flood plain was, of course, very wet and is used as grazing for the local Icelandic horses. Helgi introduced us to one of the specialist tools for turf cutting, the 'lau' which is a short section of scythe blade mounted on a double handle.



This tool is used for cutting long thin turfs called strengur and torfur. He then demonstrated the technique, swiftly cutting a piece around 1m in length and passing the tool for us all to try. Like all craftsmen he made the job look easy and we all agreed later that it was lucky he had only brought one tool to share as we all need a breather in-between. Helgi very kindly praised our efforts but thank goodness, in true Blue Peter style, he had some he'd prepared earlier.

We then set off on the drive to Tyrfingsstaðir, a farm further up the glen, where we were going to work. Bryndis, showed us around the farmhouse itself, which dates from the late 19th /early 20th century and was inhabited until the 1960s. The farm complex is the focus of conservation/restoration work by the Skagafjorður Regional Museum, through their Fornverkaskólinn (Heritage Craft School).



There we discussed conservation issues, including the use of non traditional materials in repair and also at what period to present; the original build, the last phase or a combination?

The building we were to work on lay a little downhill from the main farm buildings and was to be used as a hay barn by the current farmer, who had been born and raised in the old turf farmhouse, but now lived close by in a new bungalow. But first, more turf cutting! This time from an area close to the building and using a spade to cut klombruhnaus or klambra – large wedge shaped turves to use as building blocks. We focused on the southeast end of the building and our aim was to build the wall to roof height by the end of day 2. As we would not be working on a roof Helgi demonstrated the technique using a couple of pallets as a model and overlapping torfur to show how it would be done.

So with klambra cut we loaded the trailer to transport them to site, once there we very quickly laid the first course of a double skinned wall and just as quickly realised the benefits of being constant when cutting klambra; it saves a lot of extra work if you can cut them all of a similar size and dimensions in the first place. However turf is quite a forgiving building material and can be easily reshaped and stomped into the right places. A final load of cutting klambra for the next day saw a very weary, mucky but delighted group make their way back to Bryndis

and the bus for the drive home. A swim in the local baths for some and then all to the local Hotel Varmahlið for a delicious meal.

Tuesday 20th May

On the Tuesday we returned to Tyrfingsstaðir to continue building the turf wall of the barn under the guidance and supervision of Helgi Sigurðsson. Work progressed faster than the previous day; we had learned a lot from Helgi and we all felt more comfortable working with the stengur, torfa and klambra pieces. A second course of klambra was put on top of that laid yesterday, however, the supply of klambra cut the previous day was soon exhausted so a group went to cut more.



Helgi was concerned that some of the klambra we cut yesterday had too high a clay content along with a shallow root system which could result in an unstable wall. This provided an example of how you can end up with poor or good klambra and how the correct selection of turf can influence the quality of the resultant turf building. We cut more klambra in an area that contained turves with a better root system which allowed the building of the wall to continue. The new course of klambra was not placed directly on top of the previous one. Instead a layer of stengur was laid on the inside and outside edge of the lower klambra to level and strengthen the wall while all off cuts of turf and loose soil was used to fill the wall core. A layer on torfa was then laid across the width of the wall which gives

the wall overall strength. It was on top of this that a second layer of klambra was positioned and the levelling with stengur, off cuts and soil repeated. This brought the turf walls of the building up to a consistent level which was high enough to then construct the roof.

We had to use sections of klambra cut for the inside edge of the building on the outside edge as, given the outside edge was longer, we had ran out of outside edge klambra. This was done by slightly trimming the inside edge klambra and laying them turf side down (as opposed to laying them turf to the side as is usually done. This showed how the klambra can be easily adapted to what is required.

Helgi then gave us an introduction to using the stengur and torfa as a roofing material and told us he will likely carry out the roofing of the structure we helped to build at some point this summer. The roof will be supported by a timbers located within the internal area of the building and will consist of four layers of turf, the bottom most one or two layers being completely dried before being used.



From the turf roof of the reconstructed farm, located slightly upslope from the building we were working on, Helgi pointed out the numerous elongated shallow hollows dotted across the nearby field. These represented remains of older turf buildings. We were told that, if built well and maintained, some of the

eighteenth and nineteenth century turf farmhouses may have lasted for 80-100 years it is more likely that the out buildings and poorer quality farmhouses would require substantial repair much earlier e.g. 20-30 years. Rather than carry out major repair it was often easier to start afresh and create a new building resulting in the numerous locations of former buildings seen in the field.

Helgi and Bryndis showed us round a recently rebuilt turf sheep house with a central trough and pointed out sites where turf was used to store hay. A mound of hay would be covered in strengur and torfa. This would then generally freeze allowing the hay to be removed while the turf remained standing.

The day was rounded off with much appreciated coffee and cake, kindly provided by the local farmer Sigi and Christina, in their house located nearby. Christina had made Icelandic pancakes & traditional layer cakes (vinatarta) which were wonderful.

Wednesday 21st May



On Wednesday morning we drove to the east side of Skagafjörður to Holar, seat of one Iceland's two Bishoprics and until the reformation one of the wealthiest and most important settlements in the country. A modern Norwegian timber structure serves as the Bishop's office and, while not a replica of the historically known

timber house of the Bishop, was built using similar materials and construction techniques. It also served as the location for the morning's presentations. First Gudny Zöega gave us an account of the archaeological work they have been undertaking in the region with particular focus on their work investigating early Christian cemeteries and churches. Sigríður Sigurðardóttir then gave us a brief history of the Skagafjörður Heritage Museum from the foundation of the museum in 1947 to the present day.

The key highlights of this were:

- the opening of the Glaumbaer turf building reconstruction and the rescuing of two 19th century houses for use in Glaumbaer as a café and offices;
- the growth in the museum from 12,000 visitors annually and two part-time curators in the early 90s to almost 40,000 visitors annually and 8 curators along with a historian, a geographer and two archaeologists;
- the development of local exhibitions and archaeological excavations, such as the excavation at Holar church.

After lunch we were shown around the current church, an 18th century building constructed of local stone, and had the opportunity to investigate the turf built farmhouse of Nýibær. We then travelled to the town of Saudarkrokar and visited the Heritage Museum. As Saudarkrokar only began to develop as a settlement in the late 19th century much of museum is dedicated to displaying artefacts which were in possession of the town's early inhabitants. Particularly effective were the recreations of the workshops of three local craftsmen (a watchmaker, woodworker and handyman/mechanical engineer) and the accompanying street scene their workshops were located in.

Finally the day ended with Bryndis taking us to her home where she prepared a delicious traditional Icelandic meal of smoked lamb and vegetables. Some of us were also persuaded to try some not quite so delicious pickled shark which, thankfully, we were able to wash down with some locally produced ale.

Thursday 22nd May

On Thursday morning the group left Varmahlíð for a day of excursions to focus on the effects of tourism on the sustainability of natural attractions.

We travelled 90km to the town of Akureyri where we stopped off at a fine and obviously popular bakery to pick up lunch. A further 50km east, we arrived at the wonderful Goðafoss Waterfall.



Goðafoss (translated as 'Waterfall Of The Gods'), on the Skjálfandafljót river, is the site where the law-speaker Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði, after decreeing that Icelanders should adopt the Christian faith, threw his statues of the pagan Norse gods into the river.



Continuing east, the group drove around 40km to a viewpoint over Lake Mývatn. The lake is a Ramsar Convention site (an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable utilisation of wetlands - recognising their economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value). After a short walk through woodland footpaths, we found several open spaces with spectacular views of the lake and surrounding countryside.



After lunch, our next stop was Námafjall mountain, beneath which is Hverir, a spectacular geothermal area with boiling mud pools and steaming fumaroles. A remarkable site, my enthusiasm for which was slightly dampened - but by no means spoiled - by "the characteristic hot spring smell" from the hydrogen sulphide gas produced along with the steam.

North of Námafjall is the 200,000 year old Krafla volcanic system where we climbed around the rim of the Viti crater. Viti (the Icelandic word for 'hell') as we were able to see from pictures on

the well laid out information boards, houses a green lake, however, at the time of our visit, this was frozen over and covered in snow. From the top we were again taken aback by the amazing views over the Mývatn region, including the Krafla Power Station.

Our final visit of the day was at a short 20km journey to Dimmuborgir (translated as 'Dark Cities'), a large area of unusually shaped lava formations, formed by a lava lake flowing in from a large eruption around 2300 years ago. The top crust of the lava lake collapsed, but the hollow pillars of solidified lava remained, forming the structures seen standing today, some of which must be 10 to 12 metres high. The striking landscape, characterised by large hollow cell or chamber like structures and some standing lava pillars, is marked out into several easy hiking routes of varying length, making Dimmuborgir one of Iceland's most popular natural tourist attractions.



The groups day ended with a fine meal of square hamburgers (not in any way like Lorne sausage) in Akureyri before returning to our cottages in Varmahlíð.

All the sites we visited today were naturally formed, popular tourist attractions and as such are susceptible to the usual erosion from the elements and the wear and tear associated with an increase in visitor numbers. The sites were all litter free and well maintained - car parks were

perhaps a little rough, but footpaths were clearly marked and information boards were clean and free from damage and graffiti. Visitor numbers are growing - at some sites increasing three fold over the past 10 years - and as such, the work and funding required to maintain the infrastructure will need to follow suit. The majority of sites we visited were quite remote and unstaffed, so increased visitor numbers will not transfer into increased funding from entrance fees. Perhaps 'Honesty Boxes' allowing visitors to leave a donation of their own choosing could be used at these sites to bring in a small amount of increased revenue? Historic Scotland have utilised these with varying degrees of success on remote sites, they do become a magnet for vandalism though.

Obviously, as is the case the world over, funding is a big issue when we talk of sustainability and the maintenance of cultural heritage sites, but I think the straight forward, simplistic and robust nature of the infrastructure of each place we visited, should limit any heavy increase in the conservation required in the meantime. However, if visitor numbers continue to increase at the current rate, then an escalation in maintenance costs is inevitable, something which is clearly evident at many Historic Scotland sites too.

Friday 23rd May

Early on Friday morning the group left Varmahlid and drove northwards past Saudakrokar and on to the former island of Hegranes which is located at the mouth of the river. We then headed south to the farm of Keldadalur where Bryndis pointed out the site of the former excavations undertaken there from 2002-2007 where construction of a new house revealed the remains of an 11th century longhouse and a circular enclosed graveyard with female burials north of the church and males to the south. We then drove about a mile to the east to another

farm where a current rescue excavation was being undertaken at the site of a proposed new garage. This was an excellent opportunity to see an excavation in progress and Gudny Zöega explained the findings.



Underneath the remains of an 18th century turf farm building were a series of earlier deposits including a range of tephra layers. Gudny pointed out the thick yellow ash deposit at the base of the section which dated to around 3000 years ago, a thin layer of dark ash belonging to 1000AD and a distinctive band of white ash of the 1104 horizon.

Following this stop, we drove north to the site of the regional “thing” or political assembly, Hegraneþing. This is a fantastically well preserved site but as with many earthwork sites it is difficult to present it to the public. A combination of frost, grass clumps and overgrazing by horses has had a major impact on the site. The aerial photograph of the site on the sign board is a good overview. Given the huge numbers of visitors that visit the “Althing” site it seems a pity that this site isn’t better known and visited?

We then headed back southwards to the turf farm at Glaumbaer. In addition to the 18th/19th century turf buildings the complex also includes two timber framed buildings that were moved to the site from local farms and are used as a cafe and a shop/office. Following an excellent lunch

of traditional Icelandic dishes, including a bowl of “skyr”, we were shown around the farm by the Museum Director Sigríður Sigurðardóttir.



This complex set of turf buildings is a warren of rooms linked by a central passageway and a number of additional farm outbuildings. The conservation requirements are clearly very complicated with ongoing treatment of issues of damp, mould and degrading wall materials. All repair work is undertaken with the help of detailed recording and original material is retained where possible.

The group then drove further South through Varmahlid to visit the small timber church of Vidmyrie, built in 1834 but on a site that dates back to the 13th century.



The last stop of the day was at the site of the battle of Haugsnes, fought in 1246, where 700 Asbirning men under Brandur Kolbeinsson were defeated by a force of 600 Sturlungs under Thordur. The site is marked by a cairn topped

with a crucifix but also by a series of natural boulders placed in two groupings by the current local farmer. This very unusual method was extremely effective and was appropriate to the setting in the landscape.

The evening was spent hosting a Scottish meal of haggis, neeps and tatties, with a dram or two of whisky followed by a cranachan pudding!

Saturday 24 May

It was with some reluctance that we packed up and tidied our log cabins before leaving Varmahlíð for the last time. I think we would all have stayed longer in the picturesque region of Skagafjörður, given the opportunity. The range of activities and visits organised by the Fornverkaskólinn Heritage Craft School were not only informative and inspirational, every minute was a thoroughly enjoyable experience!

With Alan at the wheel we stopped briefly in Sauðárkrúkur, the region's main town to pick up Bryndis before heading west on the journey south to the capital city of Reykjavík.



One of the last sights as we left the town was the 'uniquely' decorated building housing the Minjahúsið Heritage Museum, where on Wednesday we had been given a fascinating insight into the eclectic collection of social history artefacts.

Having spent most of the week concentrating on turf and timber structures, our team stone working expert Alan was treated to a visit to the church at Þingeyrar, which derives its name from the legislative assemblies held there during the

Commonwealth period (930 - 1264).



Whilst the original church dated from 1133 the present stone church was dedicated in 1877. As no suitable raw material was available locally, the stone was dragged to the site by boat and sledge from the Vatnsnesfjall mountain range some 15km distant across the nearby lake Hóp – quite an achievement. Alan observed that the stone would probably have been difficult to build with as the material did not appear to cleave in straight lines, making each stone unique in shape. The end result however was impressive, with a handsomely proportioned main structure and a bold square entrance tower.



Inside, the simple curved ceiling was free from any structural members and was painted deep rich blue, decorated with regular gold stars. The net effect created the impression of a much larger space, redolent of an open air assembly on an autumnal star lit evening. In common with other churches visited, the fixtures and furniture were simple, elegant and beautifully decorated. Well worth the visit.

The second visit of the day was also to indulge the particular interest of one of our team. Castletown Heritage Society in the far north of Scotland is currently researching a proposal to stage a range of participative opportunities for our local community to explore and celebrate a fascinating aspect of Caithness Viking heritage – the epic ninth century journey of Auður the Deep-Minded from Caithness to Iceland, and the lives and activities of contemporary Viking society.

Bryndis had kindly paused the journey north from Reykjavík on Sunday to enable me to visit the site at Kjalarnes in the shadow of Mount Esja where Auður (or Unnur) first landed in Iceland and met up with her brother Helgi. On our journey south we completed the story by visiting the Hvammsfjorður fjord, where having failed to reach an amicable agreement with her brother regarding land at Kjalarnes, Auður permanently settled, establishing a farmstead called Hvammur at the head of the fjord.

According to the Book of Settlements Auður was Christian, baptised and devout. She established a place of worship at Krosshólar where she set up crosses on the top of a rocky outcrop overlooking Hvammsfjorður.



A large stone cross commemorating Auður stands there today and the view from the memorial was most impressive. Whilst an approaching weather front obscured the distant realms of the fjord one could get an appreciation of the extent of her domain, which stretched between the outer edge of Hvammssveldt and Skraumuhlaupsá in Hörðadular.

Auður benevolently divided her land up amongst her family and followers, most of whom lived there for a long time thereafter. With the assistance of a helpful tourist information board it was possible to locate the various farm holdings and homesteads.

Fresh from the excitement (for me anyway!) of Krosshólar we headed a short distance inland to Hvammur where a working farm and church now stand on the site of Auður's original farmstead. It was easy to appreciate why she chose that particular spot to settle, nestled as it was in the protective lee of a shallow fertile valley with an open view along the fjord.



Like Krosshólar, the entrance to the farmstead at Hvammur was marked with a multi-lingual tourist information board.



Our next port of call was at Elríksstaðir where in 2000 an interpretive replica of a turf and timber farmhouse was built on the ruined site of the original farmhouse. The general shape of the replica was based on the sub-structures revealed during archaeological excavation, and all the tools used in the construction were based on tools used in the Age of Settlement. This was another impressive example of how Icelandic

vernacular heritage has been preserved and presented in a contemporary context.

After travelling through the 6km long tunnel under the Hvalfjörður fjord we emerged into driving drizzle and rain. Sadly this did not relent as we explored Þingvalla, one of Iceland's most important historical sites. The Alþingi (parliament) was founded there in 930AD and assembled each summer until the 13th century, after which it functioned as a court of law until 1798. Many crucial events took place in Þingvalla, such as the foundation of Christianity in 1000AD and the foundation of the modern Icelandic republic in 1944.



The setting of Þingvalla was incredibly impressive, combining a natural amphitheatre with a lake, geologically riven gorges and a fast flowing river. The availability of deep, turbulent water was evidently useful during its time as a court of law, with death by drowning an accepted and regular form of punishment.

Today, visitors to the site are well served by paths and walkways supported by interpretive information boards. Investment in Þingvalla as a significant cultural heritage site was readily evident, with new access ways and visitor parking under construction. Sadly the weather discouraged us from exploring the outer reaches of the site, but the majesty and grandeur of the location was not lost on us.



On arrival at Reykjavik we located our accommodation - the boys scored here as the original allocated flat had been damaged due to flooding and our replacement apartment was positively palatial! After an excellent meal in the Eld Smiðjan restaurant (which saw David successfully meet the challenge of finishing a very LARGE pizza) we sampled the delights of various local brews in the nearby Micro Bar – to be recommended!

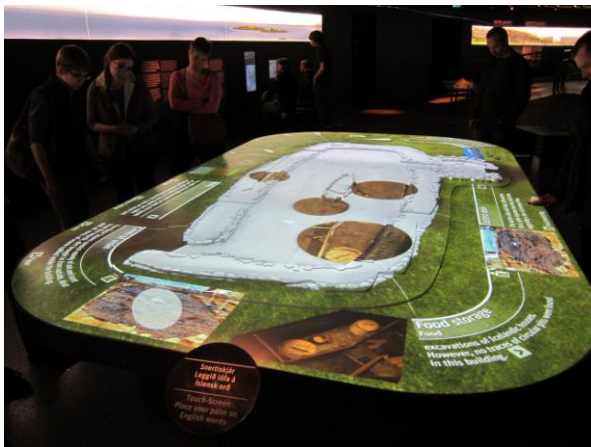
Sunday 25 May



On Sunday morning we visited the excellent 871 (+/- 2) Settlement Exhibition, where a superb array of interactive displays told the story of the early settlement and cultural development of Iceland.



A truly fascinating exhibition and an excellent example of what can be achieved in delivering a rewarding visitor experience.



After a visit to the rather more static, but never the less interesting Icelandic National Museum we were free to explore the sights of Reykjavik. The constant rain did little to dampen our enthusiasm, although it tried it's best! Sights of interest visited included the iconic Hallgrímskirkja modernist concrete church that sits on high ground overlooking the whole of Reykjavik and is visible from all over the city.



The views from the steeple over the city and surrounding land and seascapes are not to be missed.

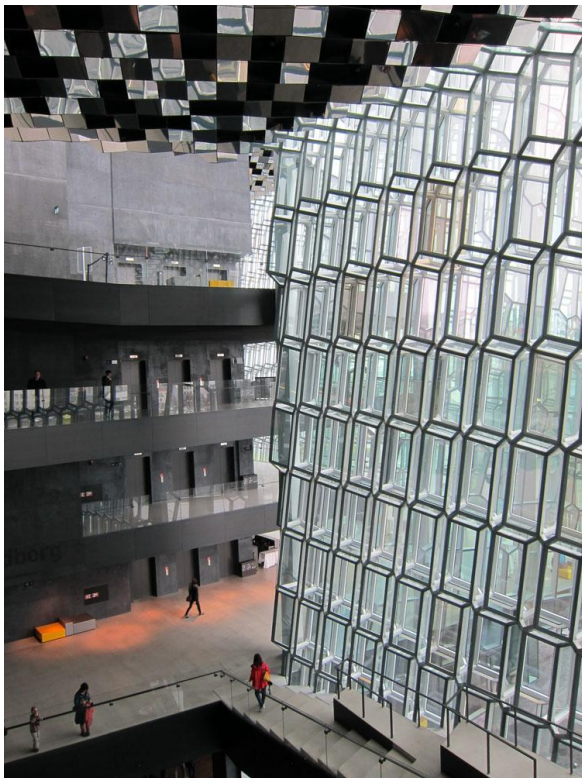


Equally spectacular was the massive 5275-pipe organ which sits over the entrance to the plain and simply decorated interior of the church. Neil noted with interest that one of the dozen or so world famous organists listed as having played the organ was Christopher Herrick – the father of a colleague he travels to work with every day!



A stroll around the harbour area led to the Harpa, Reykjavik's new concert hall and cultural venue. Construction of the quirky structure featuring glass and concrete was almost abandoned as a consequence of the Icelandic financial crash, but the bold decision to complete the building has paid off – it is now firmly established as a 'must do' location for performers and visitors alike. There were live jazz performances there during

our visit as part of the Reykjavik Arts Festival.



Continuing the artistic theme, the Einar Jónsson sculpture garden contained intriguing, if somewhat damp bronze cast examples of his intense symbolist sculptures portraying the themes of Hope, Earth, Spring and Death.

REFLECTIONS AND THOUGHTS

Derek Alexander's Thoughts



I personally found the trip to Iceland a fascinating experience which has deepened my level of understanding of a range of topics. Driving through the Icelandic landscape over the week gave a great impression of the variety of forms geologically but also how people have adapted to these over time. While at times some of the valley and coastal locations felt like being in Scotland, and familiar, the volcanic landscapes of Mytavn and the numerous lava fields were

completely new to me and unfamiliar. Given that settlement of Iceland has been dated to around 871±2 AD, the lack of a prehistoric element to the landscape was difficult to comprehend. I kept looking for traces of burial cairns, standing stones and hillforts (to no avail!). The fact that the earliest archaeological evidence in the country is accompanied by the rich documentary sources of the sagas makes it alive with traditions and stories - a fact that has clearly focused interpretation of the past very successfully and gives an impression to the visitor, at last, of quite a well understood and promoted resource. The Scottish link to the sagas was explored when we visited sites that were associated with Aud the Deep Minded who at one time had lived in Caithness and also gave land to one of her Scottish followers at Hundadalur.

The work on the turf houses was particularly of interest in relation to the turf sites that we have excavated in the Trust at Ben Lawers, Ben Lomond and at Dollar Glen where most have turned out to be medieval in date. The work proved harder than I had anticipated, especially the cutting of the thin turves using the scythe and I was relieved to get back to working with a space to cut the turf blocks. The use of quite wet turf with deep layers of clay was also a surprise. The sheer versatility of the material was a revelation and the patterns of the finished turf work very pleasing. The practical work certainly made the other turf buildings visited on the trip much easier to understand and appreciate the level of skill required in their construction and maintenance.

The use of archaeological reconstructions based on extensive investigative research seems to be quite common in Iceland. From the Viking longhouse at Eiríksstaðir to the excellent digital interpretation of the excavated site at Adalstraeti, in Reykjavik, on show in the new settlement exhibition Reykjavik 870±2 and hands on living history is a major element of the educational work.

One of the most memorable moments from the trip was visiting the archaeological dig at ? farm and having the layers of volcanic ash or tephra pointed out along with each of their dates – enough to make any archaeologist jealous!

In terms of sustainable tourism there does seem to be a certain amount of impact on the cultural heritage. There is certainly a lot of sign boards explaining many of the historic sites and while an argument could be made that they often have an impact on setting they do quickly provide markers of interest and plenty of relevant information. Increased visitor numbers were reported as a problem at Glaumbaer farm but the construction of two new reconstructed buildings and some modern toilet facilities have dispersed the concentration of visitors at any one time. There is a clear impact to some of the turf structures, most notably at the points of access, in front of doorways and along passageways. These have been mitigated slightly by the use of hessian sacking to cover passages and the proposal to extend areas of stone paving in front of the structure. The impact of visitor numbers is something we see quite regularly in Scotland too. Overall the whole trip mass a very inspiring and educational experience and there are so many crossovers with the work of the archaeology department in the National Trust for Scotland. I hope to continue to build up my knowledge both of Iceland and many of the issues raised on the trip and continue to maintain contact with the people we met.

Alan Cormie - My Reflections

This trip has been a truly wonderful experience for me and I am delighted that ARCH accepted my application for this trainer exchange, funded by the Leonardo da Vinci Programme of the European Commission. The practical element of the turf building at Tyrfingsstaðir, while physically demanding, was hugely enjoyable. Instructor Helgi Sigurðsson has the patience of a saint and

was a pleasure to work for, taking time to explain the work in layman's terms as well as provide demonstrations at each stage of the build. As a stonemasonry instructor focusing on traditional masonry skills, these types of courses have something that we must try to replicate here in Scotland - the fact that the work we produced, though not perfect, will help provide the owner of the farm at Tyrfingsstaðir with a building he will use for years to come, giving the whole group a great sense of achievement.



Much of the training we do here is carried out as a simulation, either on a 'ruinette' structure, specially constructed to accommodate each module, or as part of a workshop model which is disassembled after each course is complete - the sense of achievement is short lived.

Each excursion to the historic sites were of immeasurable interest. From battlefields to turf buildings and heritage museums we covered a great deal of Icelandic history, viewing several sites similar in many ways to what we have here in Scotland with many of the same issues - how to engage local communities, how to adapt current infrastructure to sustain the increase in visitor numbers etc.

An added bonus from the site visits was the trip to an archaeological excavation where the remains of an 18th Century farm had been found. Much of our group had an archaeological background and it was quite fascinating to listen to the discussions around how tephra layers could be used to accurately date finds.

The Reykjavík 871±2 Settlement Exhibition was definitely a great experience. To create the visitor centre around the archaeological excavation site of a 10th Century hall was an inspired decision and their use of touch screen technology to engage visitors and bring the exhibit to life, stands as a fine exemplar to all.

The landscape in Iceland was also a joy. It's quite amazing how it can appear almost 'other-worldly' with the boiling mud pools, steaming fumaroles and lava formations, but yet there were also parts of the countryside which reminded me of the hills and moors around my home town.

A huge reason for the trip being so enjoyable was the people we met. Everyone made us feel comfortable and welcome, showing us fabulous hospitality throughout our visit.

Special mention must be made of our host for the trip, Bryndis Zoëga, who spent the entire week with us, looking after us impeccably well and with good grace and charm throughout, even taking the trouble to cook us a fabulous traditional Icelandic Christmas dinner. I have nothing but deeply fond memories of my trip to Iceland - the places I visited and the people I met - and of the group I travelled with, Derek, Susan, Dave, Andrew and Neil.

Andrew Gallagher - What I got out of it

The most obvious and hugely enjoyable benefit was of course simply having the opportunity to visit such a unique, welcoming and spectacular country as Iceland.



Aside from this though perhaps the most interesting aspect was seeing a cultural heritage and tourism industry that is still in many ways in the early stages of its development. This brought to light some key questions regarding the sustainability of cultural heritage and tourism over the long term. This is perhaps best exemplified by Glaumbaer where the visitor numbers have tripled in the space of a decade. This has inevitable knock on effects in wear and tear on structures and exhibits, particularly ones as naturally ephemeral as turf built houses.

The Museum is planning a number of measures to mitigate visitor impact but there was a clear feeling that government, both local and national, were failing to understand that increasing visitor numbers requires increasing investment for maintenance and facilities. The desire of politicians to attract tourists was not matched by a desire to improve the infrastructure needed to support those tourists. Similarly at Lake Myvatn the increasing number of tourists was beginning to have deleterious impacts on parts of the Lake's ecosystem. Such examples make it clear to me that building sustainable cultural heritage and tourism requires not just exciting and informative sites to attract visitors but a concomitant

infrastructure which ensures both an enjoyable experience for the visitor and ensures the long viability of the sites.

The sites we visited over the week were in the main impeccably presented and enthusiastically staffed. The work of the Skagafjordur Heritage Museum was particularly inspiring, not just at the excellent Glaumbaer and the Saudarkrokar museum but also in their efforts to retain and foster the growth of traditional skills such as building with turf. In Reykjavik the Settlement Exhibition made innovative use technologies such as touch screen displays and 3D reconstructions for their exhibits which provided much food for thought on how similar techniques could be applied in the UK.

Susan Bain – personal reflections



The whole week was a very well organised and full programme and the benefit of having a 24 hour guide in Bryndis Zoega was a fantastic opportunity , she was always helpful and very knowledgeable, answering all our queries and requests. The benefit of having a local guide meant we went places we would probably not have gone, met and talked to people (often through translation) we wouldn't have met and certainly ate things we may not have dared!

Although I have read and researched building in turf to inform the repair programme on St Kilda the experience of two days of actual work with the materials and expert tuition was invaluable. Helgi Sigurdsson patiently corrected errors and shared his knowledge, answering all our questions thoughtfully and I hope I have some key messages to take back.

Visiting sites throughout the north of Iceland was also beneficial. Tourism is now the largest industry in Iceland, outstripping fishing for the first time. However as all site managers know this can be a two-edged sword, providing much needed income for conservation and employment but also bringing problems of erosion, pollution, damage to site and loss of visitor experience. Iceland may not yet have solved this problem but they are certainly aware of it and the English language newspapers and magazines carried articles on the problems of tourism as well as articles on what to do and see. This openness to debate and sharing of issues by informing tourists is certainly a good first step to solving some of the issues.

The whole experience certainly reinvigorated me to look again at our turf roofs on St Kilda and also to understand better the tradition of building in turf in Scotland. Meeting people in Iceland as well as the other members of our group will be of long lasting benefit .

David Sneddon - Personal Reflections

On a personal level I found my experience in Iceland to be very inspiring as well as being exceptionally enjoyable. Having had time to reflect on the exchange I feel that this was primarily due to the knowledge and enthusiasm of the people we met, the interesting and varied places we visited and the understanding gained through practical work on and thought provoking visits to turf buildings, all this being set against the dramatic and striking Icelandic landscape.

The exchange exceeded my expectations on virtually all levels.



As an archaeologist in Scotland I have previously been involved in excavations where turf was a component of the buildings we were examining and I am currently co-directing the Glenshee Archaeology Project (alongside Perth & Kinross Heritage Trust) where the excavations, so far, have focused on two early medieval turf longhouses. The understanding of turf building construction in Iceland, which Helgi Sigurðsson and the Fornverkaskólinn Heritage Craft School had and conveyed to us, was invaluable to me. It was incredibly useful seeing how Helgi cut the turves, built the structures and ultimately maintained the buildings. This has drastically increased my understanding of turf buildings which is something that is directly relevant to the Glenshee Archaeology Project, where what I have learned can be passed on to all participants and visitors, but is also relevant to my wider appreciation of turf architecture as a whole.

One of the striking things I learned was the effort required to cut the strengur and torfa pieces by hand, the speed that a structure could be built (if you knew what you were doing and had the experience) and the high degree of maintenance that is required. This appreciation was definitely heightened through giving us the opportunity, over two days, to be directly involved in cutting the turves and building the wall.

Although it was clear that attempts were being made in Iceland to preserve traditional turf building skills, Helgi Sigurðsson being one with this knowledge, it was interesting to consider the situation was probably worse in Scotland with very few likely to be active in using and continuing this skill. I believe this is particularly important given turf was present in such a significant amount of Scottish buildings, from the prehistoric period through to the last century. I hope my experience on the Iceland exchange will allow some form turf building to be attempted through the Glenshee Archaeology Project and will also encourage me to seek out other people with an interest in turf architecture to promote research and encourage activities.

The practical experiences gained with Helgi were perfectly complemented by insights from the Skagafjörður Heritage Museum staff into the presentation of reconstructed turf buildings and the associated benefits and issues with tourism that arise from this. At Glaumbær Turf Farm and Museum Director Sigríður Sigurðardóttir gave us a very informative tour where issues of high tourist numbers, lack of facilities and impact on the turf buildings seemed to be prominent. This allowed me to appreciate the fragile nature of turf buildings and how this does not always fit nicely with the desire to promote these buildings to the public. I gained a huge amount personally from seeing an excavation of a turf building in progress. Gudny Zoëga of the Heritage Museum showed us around a site they were excavating in northern Skagafjörður. It was great to see the turf buildings in a context I could completely relate to.

Although primarily concerned with turf the exchange also allowed me to see how Icelandic Heritage in general was presented to the public. The settlement museum in Reykjavík demonstrated exciting ways to present archaeology and heritage while the deep felt connection the Icelanders have to the Saga's was

clear. The high degree of sign boards throughout the landscape, giving details on a particular heritage site, was to me unexpected although clearly unobtrusive and worthwhile. This promotion of Heritage, and its associated issues, will aid me in the future engaging with and promoting Heritage in Scotland.

The landscape, people and heritage of Iceland left a definitive mark on me and I hope to maintain links with the people that guided us. The exchange would not have been so productive if it were not for our knowledgeable and welcoming host Bryndis Zoëga and the team I was lucky enough to spend the time in Iceland with.

Neil Buchan - Personal reflections

My interest in participating in the mobility arose from my involvement as vice-chairman of Castletown Heritage Society (CHS), a community led voluntary organisation dedicated to the preservation of the character, history and traditions of the village of Castletown and the parish of Olig in Caithness, in the far north of Scotland. Based in Castlehill Heritage Centre, we regularly organise and deliver a programme of interpretive and collaborative events and workshops to showcase, stimulate and sustain community interest and participation in a range of craft, arts and vernacular skills, with the aim of preserving and maintaining the unique heritage and culture of the Castletown community within both local Caithness and broader Highland contexts. We also operate an archaeological research facility including field survey and excavation workshops and post finds analysis.

Our core theme relates to depicting and preserving the rich social history surrounding the Caithness flagstone industry, a key element of which was the Castlehill Flagstone Works in Castletown. Our ever-growing archive of vernacular information and artefacts is used to support research into family history and feed our

regular displays and public exhibitions. The workshops and training sessions are open to all, with a particular focus on educational support to schools and youth groups.



Like all other members of CHS I am an unpaid volunteer. Whilst I have a keen interest in cultural heritage tourism and vernacular skills preservation such activities are not in any way related to either my core profession (I am a chartered electrical engineer) or my full time employment. The CHIST programme promoted by ARCH and funded by Leonardo da Vinci therefore presented a well-focused opportunity to a) support my professional development in cultural heritage tourism and b) benchmark the activities of CHS - could we do what we do better? When I was accepted for the mobility in Iceland I was absolutely delighted!

During the week it became very evident that the aims and objectives of the Fornverkaskólinn Heritage Craft School in seeking to preserve and promote Icelandic vernacular skills and cultural heritage were remarkably consistent with those of CHS, and the programme of activities we took part in ticked every box for me. I am hopeful that it may be possible to develop some form of

continuing relationship between CHS and Fornverkaskólinn to our mutual benefit.

I am a very practical, hands-on person by nature and I thoroughly enjoyed taking part in the turf cutting and turf building restoration activities at Tyrfindingsstaðir. Whilst vernacular building construction in Caithness is principally in stone, I observed strong parallels between the general design and layout of the Icelandic turf buildings and their Caithness stone counterparts, in particular their progressive modification to meet changes in social and functional requirements and the optimisation of construction methods to take best advantage of the available raw material. The knowledge and practical experience gained will be used to communicate a new perspective during delivery of our own vernacular skills workshop activities.

The sustainable tourism theme similarly proved remarkably consistent with our operational context in the far north of Scotland. Like Iceland, Caithness is increasingly reliant on developing a strong tourism thread to the regional economy. Whilst the promotion and development of access to 'natural' heritage resources can make a strong contribution in this area, it is not without some risk.



As evidenced Glaumbaer, the marked increase in visitor numbers in recent years is having a negative material impact on the friable fabric of the buildings, increasing maintenance liability and forcing the retrospective installation of protective measures. I would observe that in marked contrast to the infrastructure at the excellent 871 Settlement Exhibition in Reykjavik which has been purpose designed to

accommodate the vagaries of tourists, the growing popularity of Glaumbaer as a tourist attraction will inevitably render it vulnerable to a proportional increase in the number of visitors who may not be entirely sympathetic to the aims of heritage preservation. Achieving a sustainable balance between the promotion of heritage tourism and the conservation of the very artefacts one seeks to increase access to is a universal dichotomy, and my observations during the week have been most thought provoking.



A particularly striking experience for me (apart from a low beam in one of the turf buildings in Glaumbaer.....) was the visit to the live archaeological rescue excavation. I have personally had no practical experience of field excavations and to be able to step into a trench and witness 3000 years of history in a single exposed face one metre high was truly fascinating. The concept of tephra layers and their benefits for dating was similarly new to me. Overall it was an experience I shall treasure and relate in detail to my archaeologically minded colleagues in CHS. I suspect they will be quite envious!



In visiting the various exhibitions and visitor attractions I noted several innovative approaches to the presentation of visitor information. The various audiovisual/ interactive

displays in the 871 Settlement Exhibition were some of the best I have seen and have inspired me to explore how the displays at Castlehill could be developed.

Overall, the wealth of information and experience gained from the CHIST 2014 programme in Iceland will be used directly by me to enrich and support the development of training activities and workshops, and the development of Castlehill Heritage Centre as a rewarding visitor interpretive experience.

From an organisational perspective the mobility ran like clockwork, both on the part of the promoters Archnetwork, and the hosting organisation the Fornverkaskólinn Heritage Craft School. Special mention should be made of our principal host Bryndis Zöega, whose level of commitment and enthusiasm was at times above and beyond the normal call of duty. I am particularly grateful to her for accommodating my interest in visiting sites relating to Auður the Deep-Minded. The information and contextual experience gained will directly contribute to the development of our proposed project next year. Thanks must also go to Gudny Zöega, Sigríður Sigurðardóttir and turfing instructor Helgi Sigurðsson for their passionate support to the programme.

This report was written by Derek Alexander, Susan Bain, Neil Buchan, Alan Comrie, Andrew Gallacher and David Sneddon, May - June 2014.