

SCHEDULING MONUMENTS - A PRESENTER'S VIEW OF TV ARCHAEOLOGY

by Tony Pollard

Archaeology is the new cooking; Archaeology is the new gardening; Archaeology is the new DIY – we've all read claims like these by reviewers and critics in response to the apparent proliferation of archaeology programmes in our television schedules. The point they are making is that there are now as many archaeology programmes as there are cookery, gardening or DIY 'lifestyle' programmes. As an archaeologist who co-presents one of these strange hybrids (*Two Men In A Trench*) I was invited to offer a few thoughts on television archaeology. My greatest qualification though is undoubtedly my fondness for watching archaeology on the 'box', especially those programmes which have been painted with the 'lifestyle' brush - do the police find a similar satisfaction in seeing their own profession portrayed in *The Bill* or doctors and nurses from tuning in to *Casualty* or *ER*?

Of course, there is nothing new about archaeology on television – Mortimer Wheeler attracted respectable viewing figures long before most people had televisions in their homes, while Kenneth Clarke's *Civilisation* and Jacob Bronowski's *Ascent of Man* are still regarded as yard sticks against which history and archaeology programmes are measured. These early, long running

series were fronted by charismatic academics and paved the way for one-off documentaries under the *Chronicle* and *Horizon* umbrellas on the BBC, and more recently *Secrets of the Dead* on Channel 4. Although this latter type of programme included archaeologists, often filmed while carrying out their work, their role was generally limited to that of a talking head, providing an interspersed insight into their own work and ideas, while the narrative thread was maintained by a disembodied voice-over.

Time Team, which has been running for over ten years, marked a turning point in the way archaeology was presented on television. Here, for the first time, we had archaeologists not only doing the work of archaeology, but also presenting the programme (albeit with the foil provided by a comedy actor) within a signature format. Now the archaeologists, their craft, labour and science took centre stage. It is here that archaeology really separated itself from television history. Historians work in libraries and archives but in their programmes they talk about history as they climb up hills or stand in front of castles and churches. The 'doing' of archaeology, on the other hand, is by its very nature more interesting to look at than the book-work of the historian and has always had the advantage of being able to play on the drama of discovery: it's more obviously about revelation than reiteration.

Without *Time Team*, which really proved that the practice of archaeology made good television, there would be no *Meet The Ancestors*, *Time Flyers*, or indeed *Two Men In A Trench*. There were also experiments in presenting archaeology to a wider audience that didn't quite last the course – remember Scottish Television's *The Dirt Detective*? But is there too much archaeology on television? The answer, given a public hunger for programmes about the past, which is almost as old as the cathode tube itself, and an ever increasing number of channels (including the *History Channel* and the *Discovery Channel*), is a definite 'no'. Archaeology programming will continue to find new ways of presenting its subject matter and I like to think that *Two Men In A Trench* has played its own part here. Please forgive me for blowing my own trumpet for a second, but I am proud that we have brought to public attention the relatively new field of battlefield archaeology. In making the series, we have also embarked on the biggest archaeological investigation ever to be carried out on British battlefields (something that certainly wouldn't have been possible without the financial support of a television company). Nor can it be denied that making the programmes has been great fun – a pleasurable learning process shared by archaeologists and production team alike.

The most recent criticism of factual television is 'dumbing down'. The term has become something of a clarion call for those who prefer their programmes to be heavily didactic and to the point, with as much detail as possible included and without extraneous chit chat or humour to detract from the transfer of raw information – with something that looks and sounds a bit like a 1950s public information film probably being their ideal. Well I, for one, like

my pill sugared. Just as I enjoy museums but get bored of reading the labels, so I like to see presenters make fools of themselves while they teach me something. There is such a thing as 'dumb' television archaeology and this is usually where the 'cringe' factor is cranked up a little too high, as lampooned in the excellent *We are History*. Fortunately the good far outweighs the bad, and anyway the bad is usually pretty entertaining. But what of the future of the past on TV? It's safe to say we'll be seeing more female presenters - especially in the wake of Bettany Hughes' Channel 4 series *The Spartans*, which gave Michael Wood-style ancient history a new set of legs. Computer-generated images, which have gained a degree of ubiquity over the last few years, will also continue to be popular, with the BBC about to launch *Walking with Cavemen*, which will presumably be similar in style to the hugely popular *Walking with Dinosaurs*. But on a more human note, there will undoubtedly be an increase in the use of less obvious archaeology and history presenters. Jeremy Bowen, one time BBC Middle East correspondent, but more recently presenter of *Jesus and Moses*, is a good example of the marriage between the non-specialist but familiar presenter and high-tech special effects. But also expect more comedians - yes, it's that humour thing again. Even particular types of archaeology will see an increase in output and I hear that *Two Men In A Trench* has itself spawned a new mini-genre, with Channel 5 commissioning its own series on battlefield archaeology.

Tony Pollard co-presents *Two Men In A Trench* with Neil Oliver. The second series will be shown on BBC 2 in Autumn 2003. Tony is based at GUARD, Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow and was a member of LAHS in his teens. The text of the article above is taken from Issue 41, Spring 2003, of *Scottish Archaeological News* published by the Council for Scottish Archaeology.