

John Carman on cultural heritage transcript

Dr John Carman of the Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity discusses his research into cultural heritage.

Title: [John Carman on cultural heritage \(/schools/historycultures/departments/caha/research/arch-research/videos/carman-john.aspx\)](/schools/historycultures/departments/caha/research/arch-research/videos/carman-john.aspx)

Duration: 4.56 mins

I'm John Carman. I'm an archaeologist, based in the Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity at the University of Birmingham.

I specialise in two areas which are connected, but also operate quite effectively separately. One of them is in the field of cultural heritage. I'll say a bit more about that in a minute. The other one is looking at a particular aspect of cultural heritage, a particular form of cultural heritage, which is the historic battlefield.

From my own point of view, there are two aspects of cultural heritage that I'm particularly interested in.

One is the kinds of values that we give to the cultural heritage and how those values are given. Based on my early research in this field which came out in the mid 1990s, it seems to me that the general we think is not the way it actually works. Most people tend to think that things become heritage and are treated in particular ways because they are valued. My own research indicated it doesn't quite work that way. It may actually work the other way around. That things are valued because we treat them in particular kinds of ways. That's very interesting.

The other aspect of cultural heritage I'm particularly interested in is issues of ownership. If cultural heritage has tangible benefits that accrue to somebody, then it implies those rights, those benefits accrue to people on the basis of some kind of system of ownership.

One of the great lies that lies at the heart of the cultural heritage system is that cultural heritage is something that belongs to everybody. In fact, it doesn't belong to everybody. Cultural heritage and particularly those individual objects - buildings, sites, monuments and so on - that constitute cultural heritage actually belong to particular kinds of people. They belong to museums. They belong to state agencies that are responsible for managing them. They belong to individuals who manage them in particular ways and maybe make them available for public access and so on.

Ownership is a kind of silent discourse, it's one thing we don't talk about. Instead we talk about things like stewardship and custodianship and words like that which all sound very nice and fluffy but actually sort of hide the reality of what's going on.

That brings me to my second area of interest which is historic battlefields.

These are a very particular kind of cultural heritage object. They recently entered the field of archaeology. Battlefield archaeology emerged during the 1980s and has been picked up in Europe and particularly in the UK through the 1990s and into the present decade.

The way that I'm interested in looking at historic battlefields is as types of landscape. I have a project which I jointly run with Patricia Carman called Bloody Meadows which looks at historic battlefields as particular kinds of places.

We go to them with two questions in mind.

The first question is what kind of places are these? Are they high up? Are they low down? Are they near towns? Are they away from towns?

What we've discovered is that particular kinds of places seem to be preferred in historical periods. There doesn't seem to be any particularly utilitarian reason for that. We think that it's to do with cultural expectations. There are particular kinds of places where it is right to fight each other and there are particular kinds of places where it is not right to fight each other.

The other aspect is how these places are remembered if they are remembered at all. There are approximately 3000 known battlesites in the world. We've looked at about 50 so far so we have quite a way to go.

Some of them are noted. They have monuments on them. People remember them. People treat them as places of significance.

Others; they are known to military historians and people like us but the people who live on the land, the people who live in the vicinity, either have forgotten that the battle was ever fought there or never really knew and certainly are not terribly interested.

It's very interesting to try and work out what's going on. Why some battlefields are remembered and others are not.