

Caring for Post-Military Futures: alternative development futures for former military sites in the UK

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The research project

This research, funded by a Care for the Future programme exploratory award, examined the development futures for former military sites in the UK. Specifically, the intention was to study alternative ideas about these sites' present and future, beyond those of statutory conservation, heritage and land-use management authorities. The key question was how these might be apparent in the present uses of sites, and in the development and other imaginaries articulated around these places. The focus was originally on former military sites in the UK which had evaded celebration and scrutiny by either state-promoted conservation and heritage management regimes, or by non-state public organisations and institutions with a remit for the care of historic sites and buildings. The research asked about the questions and challenges which relatively obscure, un-celebrated or un-acknowledged military remains pose in the present and suggest for the future, in terms of their potential for future development and use, and in terms of the narratives about armed conflicts which they promote. The research considered sites in the UK, but also included a cross-national comparative element, looking at the Netherlands and specifically the New Dutch Waterline (Hollandse Waterlinie) as a contrasting example of heritage management which included understanding of the place of non-intervention within management regimes. The intention of the project was to focus exclusively on 20th century military remains in the landscape.

The funding enabled two activities. First, following a literature search to establish a bibliography of published sources on the theme of defence heritage management and non-management, a survey was undertaken of existing on-line databases and archives. The primary purpose was to use existing knowledge to create a typology for the purposes of the project, of management and non-management practices for sites. Second, fieldwork and interviews in two case study areas was conducted, with the intention to focus on sites not managed for heritage consumption. The two case study areas chosen were Plymouth and Falmouth in the south-west of England, and Lincolnshire in eastern England. Funding was used to employ a project Research Associate (Dr Justin Sikora) for several months to conduct the fieldwork and assist with the literature review and survey of on-line sources. The research was motivated by a desire to explore issues pertaining to sites which had not to date received investment and intervention through heritage management and/or commercialisation, to ask what issues such sites raise for future social and economic development in different types of localities, for public narratives about past armed conflicts in the UK, and for an on-going debate about the potential for and limits to current practices of listing and scheduling for these sites.

The funded period ran from February to October 2013. In July 2014 further fieldwork was undertaken in Lincolnshire using Newcastle University funding, due to the large number of sites evident during fieldwork there in July 2013, and the range of issues which the original fieldwork had raised. This report summarises key findings from the project. The research findings will contribute in due course to a book (provisionally entitled *Military Landscapes of Contemporary Britain*).



Coastal defences, Plymouth, June 2013.

Key findings

The challenges of defining landscapes

The project conceptualised a central problematic (alternative development futures for post-military sites) guided by the idea that it would be straightforward to identify individual sites within a locality for consideration and inclusion in the study (and thus others for exclusion) on the basis of an individual site's visual appearance, or listing on record, as being under management or otherwise. 'Management' was defined broadly, to include any active intervention in the preservation, conservation or active re-use of a site. The original application talked of localities for study, and specific sites within those localities. This approach was unproblematic, but what has prompted considerable thought following the end of the project is whether studies of this kind need to think more incisively about how a 'location' can be defined. The terminology works for the process of

indicating in general terms a geographical area for study, but in the most basic terms. Yet there were two specific features of the sites that this project examined, which raised more abstract questions around the natures of these sites. The first is that they do not exist in isolation from each other; military installations work in networks across space, and there is no real logic to trying to understand them in their post-military states as isolated and individual because when encountered in person, the remnants of those former networks still speak. For the purposes of this project, the term 'military landscapes' was used to try and capture this idea of connectivity across space, even in localities and contexts where these connections and thus indications of past use were hard to imagine because of subsequent development. The second set of ideas which this prompted followed from this, and concerned the question of whether, in identifying a military landscape, this required engagement with the idea of parameters, boundaries and limits to extent. In one sense, this is arguably a very abstract and rather obtuse question. But it raises an interesting point about the limits to the concept of the military landscape. As a descriptive term, 'military landscapes' works well, but it is useful to consider whether some of the insights of spatial theorising around 'fuzzy regions' could perhaps be deployed to give the term greater conceptual weight.

There was also an issue, it transpired, with the identification within the original grant application of a strategy of focusing entirely on 20th century military remains. They are rich, multiple, varied and fascinating. What this research showed, though, was the inadvisability of trying to separate 20th century remains from those of former historical periods of investment in military and defence infrastructure. Fieldwork for this project confirmed this; the First and Second World War remains along the Humber estuary, or around Falmouth simply made no sense without an understanding of their historical predecessors. Twentieth century military landscapes, by and large, exist where they do because immutable facts about Britain's geography. So looking around Plymouth harbour and Plymouth sound, it simply made no sense to consider management, non-management and adaptive re-use of individual features or sites without considering a far broader temporal context. In this project, then, although the focus was ostensibly on the post-military futures for 20th century remains, in fact this was broadened to include whatever other historical military infrastructure was apparent at a particular site. Whilst it makes sense for the purposes of categorisation to identify sites with particular time-periods, it suggests that military landscapes are better understood across the totality of their use.



Plymouth air-raid shelter, June 2013

Typologies of management and the significance of economic geography

The project set out to explore sites that had not been the focus of managerial intervention. A first task was the identification of a typology of types of intervention, for the purposes, first, of defining sites for inclusion or exclusion from the study, and second, in order to deconstruct the category of 'managerial intervention' by separating out motivators (economic, social, political etc.) and within these to map out the driving forces (e.g. response to legislation, existing statutory requirement, local economic development initiative, memorial function) which prompt interventions. This deconstruction and mapping exercise, in focusing on managerial intervention, would then provide a check-list of sorts, for establishing whether or not a particular site would warrant attention as part of this study. Although the process of mapping a continuum of intervention will be useful as part of the bigger writing project to which the AHRC project will contribute, for the purposes of the project itself a rigid distinction (for the purposes of site selection) between managed and unmanaged sites was, it transpired, unfeasible.

The idea that this was an appropriate way to proceed was based on previous experiences of fieldwork on military landscapes, particularly in northern England and western and northern Scotland, where the managerial status of specific sites had been clearly evident. However, in applying this approach and method to sites in more populous localities with much denser webs of economic connections and much greater concentrations of land uses, the idea of being able to select out sites which were unmanaged proved flawed. Not only are there multiple actors, gradations of intervention, changing over time and according to logics which themselves develop. What ultimately seemed most significant when in the field was being able to consider the managed and unmanaged together, and to interrogate one with regard to the other. So for example, during fieldwork in Plymouth, it became apparent that it is the interconnections and intersections between sites across the city, and the comparisons that could be drawn between sites with visible managerial protection and those with (seemingly) none, that prompted the most significant insights (in that particular case, regarding specific public sector strategies for economic regeneration, and the utility or otherwise of post-military remains in the process). Another example would be the ways in which the large number of sites in rural Lincolnshire associated with aviation in the Second World War and Cold War can be compared with regards to the management regimes in place in particular sites, ranging from those now used as visitor attractions with full tourist infrastructure, to those which have absolutely no management oversight at all, and which exist as concrete remains in a farming landscape. In thinking through alternative development futures in specific contexts (e.g. urban Plymouth, rural Lincolnshire), it was also apparent that particular modes of local economic intervention combined with successive rounds of defence investment needed to be mapped quite clearly as part of the process. The vulnerability of many of the sites to changes in the wider economy was also very clear; defence remains become very valuable in the absence of a more diverse and prosperous economic base, and they are of far less utility in times and places of economic prosperity (compare, for example, Skegness and Falmouth). This in turn indicated the utility in the future of considering defence heritage (and possibly wider themes within Care for the Future) through an approach more explicitly rooted in the conceptual insights from economic geography. For whilst defence heritage management is not a topic that can be reduced with to economic development theory, there is much in this body of work which might help explain at a more macro level the evolution of these landscapes in their post-military form.



Plymouth: adaptive re-use for economic purposes, July 2013.

The politics of preservation of post-military remains

The project generated some useful observations about the distinctions between categories of ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ in terms of engagements with post-military sites. When the project started (and as outlined in the original case for support for the grant), the availability of data on precisely *what* was in existence (or had formerly been present), and *where* these remains might be, was indicated primarily from the on-line database of the Defence of Britain project run by the council for British Archaeology and others. Using this database (and a Google maps .kmz file to pin-point location) was invaluable. But there is an observation which recurred frequently when in the field, about the partiality of some of the coverage of the records (particularly in more sparsely populated areas, possibly because of the use of volunteer input in notifying the project’s organisers about the locations of sites). What was also clear (and again, known during the preparation of the original case for support) was the mass of information available from statutory agencies, amenity groups and local authorities, about known, ‘managed’ defence heritage, which confirms the observations of others about the very high degree of professional interest in 20th century remains. What was also both invaluable and encouraging during the research was the availability and utility of amateur historians’ on-line compendia of sites, particularly unmanaged or decayed sites. This is of note here not because of its existence *per se* but because what the existence of diverse imaginaries which surround former military sites indicates for a wider politics of post-military heritage and management. The process of doing fieldwork visits to sites made this clear. Quite simply, a great many people express a great deal of passion for these sites and their histories; they are meaningful in multiple, individual, small-scale ways, and for reasons which can sometimes be readily expressed

and sometimes defy articulation. My thoughts on this, which will be written up in detail in *Military Landscapes*, revolve around what this amateur passion says about how and why in the present we articulate ideas of a military past. It suggests that there is a sense of nostalgia, of the (particularly Second, increasingly the Cold) Wars being places of safety in the imagination, with their clearly identifiable armed forces, state-endorsed narratives, and known outcomes. It also drives speculation about how fear in the present about uncertain futures drives interest in the past. Although there may be an alternative politics articulated around post-military sites – and in a couple of places there were traces of this in evidence for arguments proposed for site preservation in the face of proposals for change emanating from economic development agendas – post-military sites do not seem to invite these in any organised or focused way.

Alternative imaginaries appear to be personal, individual – and largely private, where they exist. What was most telling about some of the sites visited was the way in which, precisely because of their unmanaged status and thus the absence of control and oversight, they could be put to alternative uses which reflect something of their localities' economy, including its moral economy. It was reported that the lines of beach defences south of Skegness, towards Gibraltar point, had been a popular cruising ground for gay men in the past. In Plymouth, the gun emplacements at a distance from the urban centre seemed to have found a new use as a place of shelter for rough sleepers.

There are also generational issues at play. For un-managed sites post-military sites, because their period of active use is now (mostly) beyond living memory, these sites remain open in new ways for reinterpretation. A good example is what some would term graffiti art, and what others would see as vandalism, on Second World War remains in more liminal or marginal places. The presence of graffiti is particularly interesting; it signifies, if nothing else, an engagement with space in ways quite different to those responsible for its creation in the past and maintenance in the present. Graffiti is fascinating in these former military sites because it makes things visible, quite contrary to the intentions of the original designers of structures such as pillboxes and gun emplacements which were built assumptions about concealment.

The politics of preservation and use / non-use became most visible following a visit to the New Dutch Waterline in the Netherlands. Here, a linear feature reflecting several different rounds of military investment from the 1970s to the 1940s has been subject to preservation. What is distinctive is that the quantity of remains (primarily forts and other defensive structures, but also infrastructure to enable flooding on this flat land) has opened up possibilities for diverse re-uses. These include not just conservation of historic sites with regard to preservation, but also an openness to ideas about remodelling and reforming sites to suit present-day uses. These include both economic enterprises, but also non-paying leisure uses, educational and artistic responses, and environmental reclamation (many have restricted access because of canals and drainage systems surrounding them, making them easily off-limits). There appears to be a flexibility in response to these sites that is largely absent the UK, where sites appear to be visible once they have an economic function, but otherwise become obscured, anonymous.



Plymouth, coastal defences with graffiti, July 2013

Outputs:

The following conference presentations drew in part on the work conducted under the *Caring for Post-Military Landscapes* project, along with other on-going military landscapes work.

Woodward, R. (2013) *Tracing the violence of military landscapes*. Association of American Geographers' annual conference, Los Angeles, 8-12th April 2013.

Sikora, J. and Woodward, R. (2013) *Engaging with conflict and trauma in post-military landscapes*. Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers annual conference, London, 28th-30th August 2013

Woodward, R. (2013) *Military pastoral and the military sublime in British army training landscapes*. War and Peat conference on the military heritage of Britain's moors, heaths, bogs and fens. Sheffield Hallam university, 4-6th September 2013.

Woodward, R. (2013) *Considering the violence of military landscapes*. 8th Pan-European conference on international relations. Warsaw, 18th-21st September 2013.

The original intention for the project was the publication of a summary academic journal article ('Alternative futures for military pasts') for *Cultural Geographies*. Due to (unexpected) administrative duties during academic year 2013-14, this is still in draft.

The most significant output to which the research will contribute, is Rachel Woodward's book on military landscapes which (again, delayed to unexpected administrative duties) will be written in academic year 2015-16.



Plymouth gun emplacement, July 2013