

GOING WALKABOUT — VIRTUALLY?

Approaching the beginning of the
extant part of the Kennet avenue,
from the south-east



Archaeology walkabouts – announced last month from ADS in the UK – Archaeology Data Service and University of Leicester.

The “Virtual Walkabout” archives contain a series of still, 2-dimensional photographic images that collectively try to express the experience of walking round an archaeological site or monument. The images are presented in their Virtual order from a given point of departure, and are connected by a series of moves, forwards, backwards, pan left, pan right, step left or step right. The user of a walkabout archive can replicate walking around an archaeological landscape: walking up an avenue, around a carved stone or from one

site to another. In this way it is possible to use simple 2 dimensional images to imitate the experience of visiting an archaeological site.



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Here is a screen shot of Clive Ruggles's walk at Avebury.

Sound like a nice idea. Visit an ancient site like Avebury, on screen. But do we ever experience sites like this? In this neutral "this photograph is a record of what you would see" way? My gripe with VR of this kind is that [we don't experience places as photographs](#).

This walkabout is rooted in that phenomenological movement in archaeology – [experiencing ancient monuments](#) – that Chris Tilley made so much of in the 90s. We announced it as a program in our *ReConstructing Archaeology*. My own book *Experiencing the Past* emphasized the importance of embodied experience in our archaeological projects – archaeological habitus, to bring in Bourdieu again. But there I was absolutely against the idea that experiencing the past is ever unmediated – we have to foreground and work with the media we adopt – photography, sound, video, whatever. There is no direct representation of a visit to the past. Think less of representation; think instead of *evocation*.

So Mike Pearson and I tried to explore virtual visiting much more abstractly in a

series of *performed lectures* – not attempting to represent a place, but bringing together materials (narrative, information, imagery, sound, live performance) carefully structured in collage and montage to foreground various kinds of *relationship with the place*. We visited, for example, the ruined Welsh farm Esgair Fraith at Roda Sten Arts Center (an empty generating station) in Gothenburg in 1995.

What also bothered us was that this interest in walking ancient landscapes is an English neo-romantic experience of the countryside. It depends upon a very particular instance of the figure in the landscape implied in landscape painting, a figure that has been the target of much appropriate criticism. This is from a lecture of mine a while back –

The archaeologist, in small company, maybe alone, walks the byways neglected by Stonehenge's visitors. Their's is a mindful rambling. There are the crowds of tourists focused upon the monument. The archaeologist sees in a broad context, and their eye connects intimately with their body of knowledge. They are quietly contemplative, in contrast to the noisy mass. They take their time. In gaining familiarity, or in the painstaking processes of survey and excavation. They can relate the stones to systems of earthmoving, take note of the visibilities, intervisibilities, the framing of vista and perspective, and see in the landscape the processions, carnivals and dances of the folk of long ago.

This could be seen as a variant of an anthropological

fascination with exotic cultures, but here they are our own.

I see serious problems with the way landscape, a very particular and ideological way of making aesthetic a certain relationship with land and its inhabitants, is understood in this kind of project, phenomenological, whatever. The way landscape is framed. The exclusive character of this framing. Raymond Williams did a great job analysing this in his book *The Country and the City*.