The Thirty-First International Symposium on Archaeometry was this year held in the quite unnecessarily beautiful city of Budapest, Hungary. In the course of the conference, the participants were treated to a few short excursions in and around Budapest, and to some rather hard biscuits that we were probably not supposed to eat. Those of us who had either slightly better funding or an overwhelming desire not to return to any form of reality, stayed for one of the post-conference excursions. The 'experimental archaeology' post-conference excursion was the second longest of those arranged. It took the form of a two-day spin around western Hungary in a rather eccentric-looking Ford minibus. By our return to Budapest on the evening of Sunday, May 3, the tour had taken in eight major locales spread out across the west of Hungary, reached within arrowshot of the Austrian border, and come back again.

I regret to have to admit that I went to my first foray behind the old Iron Curtain laden with all the images and misconceptions of a male, English product of the 1980s. I more than half expected to see grey, steaming, purpose-built industrial towns looming on the horizon and monuments to the virtues of the worker-hero around every bend in the road. In fact, we only saw one such town, and the monuments to communism were all collected neatly together in the appropriately -- if unimaginatively -- entitled, 'Monument Park' situated on the outskirts of Budapest. Future generations of archaeologists could have real fun with that one!

Unfortunately, for someone whose major concern is the experimental approach, rather than specific periods or geographical regions, the tour had very little to do with experimental archaeology, despite its title. The 'experimental' content was confined to the first part of the first day. The building of the new industrial town of Szazhalombatta and its attendant excavations had created a need for a small museum. This was our first
stop on Saturday, the first day of the tour. The curator of the Matrica Museum in Szazhalombatta, Magdolna Vicze, accompanied us from there on a tour around nearby Szazhalombatta Archaeological Park. The park functions as an open-air museum, educational and cultural centre, and an environmental and experimental archaeological research centre. The most striking feature of the park is the in situ reconstruction of an early Iron Age burial mound. This quite remarkable project has seen the total excavation and presentation of a spectacularly preserved wooden burial chamber within a reconstituted mound, the interior of which is viewed from a transverse suspended walkway. The rest of the park is separated from the burial mound. At present, this comprises a selection of reconstructions of Bronze Age buildings and some small cultivated plots and a bread oven. Later, we were told, would be added buildings representing the Iron Age and associated, period-specific woodland environments.

When we arrived, the park was not yet officially open for the year, so, unfortunately, there was no opportunity to observe any of the experimental work that takes place there. The chance to look around their interpretations of some of the Bronze Age buildings of that area was still very informative.

Along the way, our wonderful host, Erzsébet Jerem of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) kept us informed of the archaeological background of every area we passed through. Vegetarian sensibilities have not yet found a firm home in Hungary, so we had a lovely meal of bread and chilli sauce. (Everyone else had beef goulash in the open air -- beautifully cooked, I might add.) Afterwards we visited the small museum at Somogyfajsz. In a triumph of co-operation between industry and archaeology, an octagonal building in the form of a tenth-century AD helmet rests over the excavated remains of an iron-bloomery workshop of that period.

After we had looked around the museum, the caretakers guided us to an adjacent spot where a demonstration firing had been prepared. This was apparently the part of the day to which everyone had been looking forward, as we all leapt into the working pit like an unruly group of school children. The demonstration was based on the results of excavations beneath the museum. These indicate that small furnaces
were set into the baulk of a large pit with little or no superstructure above ground. Since very early that morning, two unfortunate fellows had been industriously heaving away on bellows trying to get enough heat into the furnace to smelt the ore. Their efforts were sadly to no avail. There is, I suspect, some research to be done before the effective operation of that type of furnace is achieved. Somogyfajsz was the last of the forays into experimental archaeology for the rest of the excursion.

The goal that day was to reach an extremely long-lived lithic source on a low volcanic hill at Vasvár before it became too late to visit the workings. Due to the variable nature of the Hungarian half hour, we did not make it on time but at least we were able to see the museum. Foremost in our minds, by this time in the evening, was vineyard country. From the museum at Vasvár, we were directed to the Hungarian rural equivalent of a pub to consume quantities of the most wonderful wine and thence -- an Hungarian half-hour later -- to the hotel, more dietary trauma, and a well needed sleep.

On Sunday, the town of Sopron near the Austrian Border, where Franz Liszt gave his first concert in 1820, was the last major stop of the excursion. A beautiful town with much of its medieval architecture intact, it forms the hub of a disaggregated archaeological park of six major sites. In the centre of Sopron, beneath a modern office building, is an excellent example of archaeologically sensitive development. A section of the forum of the Roman town of Scarbantia is well preserved as a small museum, minimally disturbed by the foundations of the building above it. From Sopron the rest of the day was spent on the motorways returning to Budapest and my hotel room, to which I was pleased to find that I still had access.

After Somogyfajsz it became clear that there were two themes underlying the excursion. The first was a demonstration of the rich and variable nature of the archaeological record in western Hungary and the important place that it occupies within their national identity. The second was that despite this, the Hungarian archaeological community does not have adequate access to the technology, resources, or skill base to do it all justice without some form of external contact. This second point was brought home vividly by archaeologist Gábor Ilon on two occasions. He showed us the site of an extensive open-area urban
excavation in the centre of one of the towns along the route. This site was still as it had been excavated some time ago, over two metres deep and in excess of 400 square metres in area. A very big hole to leave in the middle of a town just because the developers could not afford either to continue or to fill the excavation in and had therefore pulled out of the project altogether. Gábor Ilon also organised a special exhibition at the Savaria Museum, Szombathely, in honour of the conference. In it, he presented some very interesting research concentrating on the metallurgical analysis of late Bronze Age material from the site of Velem Szent Vid, Vas, Hungary. It has become very difficult to continue that work because the appropriate equipment and skills are in extremely short supply. One hopes that a postgraduate archaeometallurgist from outside Hungary might show interest in that material, or that a promising Hungarian archaeometallurgist is given the research opportunity, perhaps by a foreign university.

Throughout the tour, we were extended every courtesy and hospitality. Erzsébet Jerem who organised the excursion and guided us every step of the way with informed comment on every aspect of Hungary's archaeological heritage kept the exhausting schedule stimulating and enjoyable. Every thanks must be extended to her. We visited far too many museums and sites for me to do justice to them all in this short piece. In all, the excursion was a well organised and fitting accompaniment to an excellent conference, and I hope to get the opportunity to return, particularly to the Szazhalombatta Archaeological Park.

About the author.
Steve Townend is a student at the Institute of Archaeology at UCL. His research interest is principally in the theory and practice of what is currently referred to as 'Experimental Reconstructions' of British prehistoric architecture. He is more broadly interested in the current position and future direction of experimental archaeology. To complement this, he has recently established an Experimental Archaeology Research Group at the Institute, the broad mission of which is to examine critically the theoretical framework, practice, role, and potential of experiment in archaeology. He may be reached by email on <ycrnps@ucl.ac.uk>.