

A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales Post Medieval and Modern

Panel: Stephen Briggs, Dafydd Gwyn, Stephen Hughes and Brian Malaws

After some discussion, four main themes emerged, as follows:

1. WALES AND THE WIDER WORLD

Wales was transformed from a farming economy to leading world industrial export economy mainly through coal and metal mining, metal and slate production. Each industry each left a particular imprint on the Welsh landscape, part of a distinctive cultural inheritance, the value of which has only recently been recognised. Designation of the best industrial features is helping to promote economic regeneration -. Blaenavon (World Heritage Site) and act as link-points in the European Route of industrial Heritage for Amgueddfa Lechi Llanberis and the Mynydd Parys copper mines.

Many of the structures -factories, mills, pitheads, processing floors, dams and leats - connected with this transformation long ago disappeared during the course of organic industrial change and improvement and more recently under the dictates of fashionably destroying the industrial past in the planning process. Whereas lists of important structures have been drawn up by archaeologists, few classes have been systematically surveyed and published.

There is an important world dimension to this transformation, not only because of the export trade, but owing to the development of far-flung overseas offshoots of Wales's major industries.

Recommendation: As the international dimension is integral to an understanding of domestic developments, it is important to encourage joint overseas initiatives and liaison between educationalists, researchers, museums and bodies of conservation and record to further their corporate objectives and formulate mutually rewarding research agendas.

2. TRANSPORT CORRIDORS

Concomitant with rapid industrialisation came engineered turnpike roads, canals, railways and harbour facilities which are hardly yet appreciated for their value as rich sources of archaeology and history. Some roads form the basis of today's network, like Telford's

A5, still retain their original service apparatus. The canals left a similar legacy (including for e.g. the Pont Cysyllte aqueduct).

Wales's early railways have a long pre-history. It includes abandoned well-mapped yet distinctive South Wales plateway systems like the one used by Richard Trevithick's engine in its first attested locomotive-drawn railway journey of 1804. The innovative network of distinctive narrow gauge lines in North and Mid-Wales was imitated world-wide, whilst the Welsh part of the UK network includes important individual engineering structures.

Historic harbours in Wales vary from the large-scale engineered harbours of Newport, Cardiff, Holyhead and Swansea to small rural creeks.

Recommendation: It is important that the Research Agenda helps raise the profile of this diminishing resource, particularly in view of the pressures faced from its continued use (or threats through abandonment). Greater awareness can be achieved through growing liaisons like Herian, and particularly with Assembly (and local authority) Highways and with voluntary and statutory organisations like waterways and railway restoration bodies. Future priorities for area conservation management plans should be more stringently assessed and methodologies like the A5 study should be developed and applied elsewhere. Existing work e.g. on early (pre-1840) railways in South Wales should encompass the whole of the country.

3. PUBLIC and WORSHIPPING BUILDINGS, HOUSES AND GARDENS

Probably the greatest untapped archaeological resource of post-medieval Wales lies in surviving communities, where settlements include domestic and communal buildings and outlying farms. Overall, this resource includes a remarkable variety of post-medieval housing for all classes, some still retaining gardens or ancillary buildings. Although most outwardly appear of late 18th-20th century date, many are built around earlier cores –some of medieval or 17th century origin – and virtually all present potential for profitable excavation and architectural analysis. Although classic studies already chronicle part of the story typologically or regionally, many gentry, vernacular and working-class dwellings are still under-studied. In spite of the Listing or Registration of many estate and farm buildings or their gardens, historic agricultural and horticultural change and practice are still poorly understood.

The pressure to satisfy current housing demands, and home 'improvements' has put this resource under even greater pressure, since the introduction of uniform foreign materials (plastic windows, breezeblock) and eroding local distinctiveness. Few local authorities are equipped to advise or enthuse about the use of traditional materials and designs, which are in any case often expensive or unavailable due to closure of quarries or the relevant factories.

Virtually all post-medieval Welsh communities retain places of worship. Some are improved parish churches. Literally hundreds were re-built or refurbished during the 18th-19th century. Estimates suggest that there were perhaps as many as 7000 of that most distinctive of Welsh architectural achievements, the nonconformist chapel. Churchyards, much beloved of genealogists, remain largely neglected by archaeologists and church authorities alike.

Many other public buildings or structures, like barracks, drill halls, schools, hospitals, mechanics' institutes, bridges and communal memorials have attracted a variable degree of recent public interest for conservation and study.

Recommendation: It is important that a Research Agenda should acknowledge the archaeological potential of all the standing buildings of Welsh urban and rural communities. More integrated studies of survey and analysis are needed to inform the current process of change and also to help emphasise the value of regional and local distinctiveness in landscape and buildings, improving the quality of land and townscape throughout. To this end, heritage professionals (including archaeologists and conservation officers) should be encouraged to liaise more with local groups and interested individuals, alike with local government officers and the building trade.

4. AGRICULTURE (Managing change in the rural environment)

Many aspects of post-medieval farming in Wales are imperfectly understood, so much of the landscape demands better archaeological record. Despite extensive industrialisation, most of the country remains farmland. Already subject to a variety of reclamation schemes (including afforestation) dating back to the last War, if not earlier, the future of the land is probably now more uncertain than ever before. Whatever happens is likely to impact profoundly on the archaeological resource of earlier periods, and will certainly affect the historic environment and visual amenity of Wales as a whole.

Recommendation: It is vital that historians and archaeologists should help raise awareness in the farming community and among planners about the intrinsic historical value of all farmland, and that where possible professionals be closely involved in monitoring all aspects of its archaeological resource, through any schemes involving diversification or landscape change which could affect its historical or archaeological resource or character.

Postscript: These themes are not meant to be exhaustive. They do attempt to address some of the most urgent priorities arising from development pressures on the historic environment by a fast-evolving society which, though well aware of its roots, may perhaps be less conscious of the importance of the material and landscape evidence for its development during the period which placed Wales on the world stage. The importance of promoting a much better understanding of the fragility of this recent landscape and the vulnerability of its archaeological resource are here recurrent themes needing a far higher profile at all levels of the educational and planning processes.

Paper prepared by: C Stephen Briggs (RCAHMMW)