

# THE WELSH ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUSTS AND THE FUTURE OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT IN WALES

The broad-ranging review of the historic environment being undertaken in England (*Power of Place*, statutory designations, Historic Environment Records etc) is being mirrored by a similar process in Wales. In July 2002 Sue Essex, then Minister for Environment in the Welsh Assembly Government, hosted a conference on the Historic Environment at Cwmaman in the heart of the Welsh valleys. This was closely followed by two consultation documents – *Review of the Historic Environment in Wales* and *Protection of Historic Assets in Wales*. The Minister's commitment to the review was expressed in the preface to last year's IFA *Yearbook*. The opportunity for a positive follow-up is significantly enhanced by the structure of archaeology in Wales, described by Geoff Wainwright as '...an orderly and well-run place'. At the heart of this structure lie Cadw, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) and the four regional Welsh Archaeological Trusts. The trust system is unique to Wales, having now provided nearly 30 years of wide-ranging academic and professional expertise in archaeology and heritage management. The trusts, established in the 1970s as educational charities and limited companies, are each divided into two core sections, one running heritage management or curatorial services and the other contractual or field services. Through their experienced archaeological staff, based at regional centres in Swansea, Llandeilo, Bangor and Welshpool, the trusts deliver a service that is accessible and relevant to local, regional and national needs.

In general, the trusts warmly welcome the *Review of the Historic Environment in Wales* which recognises the major contribution that the historic environment makes to the cultural, economic and social well being of Wales. It specifically highlights the rich industrial heritage of urban Wales, and clearly more needs to be done to safeguard these eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century landscapes that form the backdrop to the daily lives of much of the population. The focus should not simply be on protecting the core remains of the industrial works, but also the associated infrastructure, the evidence of extractive supply and characteristic local housing. Wales has taken a lead in promoting studies in landscape characterisation in both urban and rural contexts that look



A standing stone with a very small plough margin. The intention is to increase this margin through the Tir Gofal Agri-environment scheme. Photograph Cambria Archaeology

beyond an understanding of individual sites. In partnership with Cadw and the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), the trusts are undertaking detailed characterisation work of the landscapes included in the pioneering *Register of Historic Landscapes in Wales*. Much of this characterisation work is now on the websites of the individual trusts.

At one point the review suggests that there should now be a shift in resources from rural archaeology to urban nineteenth-century landscapes. However, the trusts argue that the archaeology of rural areas faces increasing risk from traditional and new farming practices which lie outside the planning process. There is a need to preserve a proper balance between the urban, rural and maritime heritage of Wales. Agri-environment initiatives, such as the pan-Wales 'Tir Gofal' scheme run by CCW on behalf of the National Assembly addresses some of these issues. The scheme's four main objectives are sympathetic management of historic and archaeological features, care for wildlife habitats, protection of characteristic rural landscapes and public access. The trusts are funded by CCW and Cadw to advise on the historic content of farms entering the scheme. This advice is based on the information held in the trusts' regional



Gors Fawr Stone Circle in the Preseli landscape of Outstanding Historic Interest, Pembrokeshire, is one of the innumerable prehistoric sites in the Welsh countryside. Photograph Cambria Archaeology

sites and monuments records (SMRs) and, in the case of approximately 20 per cent of farms, brief 'walk-over' farm surveys. In the three years of the scheme, advice has been provided for over 2000 farms throughout Wales. However, the trusts are concerned that conservation of the historic environment is sometimes poorly represented in the resulting 'farm management plans'. There is a feeling that the historic environment is frequently viewed as a poor relation to the natural environment. In partnership with CCW the trusts and Cadw are now working hard to redress this imbalance.



*Merthyr Tydfil is another landscape of Outstanding Historic Interest. This extractive landscape results from the supply to the Cyfarthfa Ironworks. Photograph Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust and Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments*



*The Newport Ship Open Day demonstrated huge public support for archaeology. Photograph Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust*

The provision of advice to Tir Gofal highlights the central role played by the SMRs created and maintained by the trusts. Our 130,000-plus entries underpin many of the monument-based surveys undertaken on behalf of Cadw. The SMRs are also used by all of the unitary authorities in Wales on a daily basis and in one way or another they also inform the work of the Forestry Commission, the Environment Agency and by many other public and private bodies and individuals throughout Wales. The trusts have always ensured full public access to SMRs and are actively exploring greater accessibility through the internet. SMRs have already made a significant contribution to the Extended National Database for Wales, helping to share data and to make it available through an index (CARN) on the RCAHMW website. However, they still suffer from a chronic under-funding. Funding – for less than one full-time post in each of the trusts – does not recognise the full value of the SMRs as management tools, let alone allow their full educational and outreach potential to be realised. There will need to be a significant increase in financial support if the trusts are to fulfil their ambition of achieving the benchmark criteria for fully developed Historic Environment Records.

Public concern over safeguarding archaeological remains was dramatically illustrated by the huge crowds that flocked to the open days of the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust during its excavation of a fifteenth-century ship at Newport in 2002. In practice the trusts have for many years been championing the case for community-based participation

in the protection and presentation of the historic environment. For example, Cambria Archaeology (Dyfed Archaeological Trust) has been working with a number of community development organisations throughout southwest Wales on schemes to enhance understanding and enjoyment of the historic environment. Promotion of local 'ownership' and intellectual access is a vital component of the trusts' charitable objectives. The information contained within the regional SMRs and the interpretative input of the trusts' archaeological staff provides a crucial framework for these initiatives. Furthermore, the SMRs form a repository for new information about anything of local historical importance – not just sites and monuments but also people and events. The trusts and their SMRs act as regional 'archaeological resource centres', encouraging such schemes and facilitating local community initiatives.

Unfortunately, one area of concern is virtually absent from the *Review* document – that of research and interpretation. Without better knowledge and understanding we cannot effectively manage, promote or conserve the historic environment of Wales, or capitalise on its potential as an economic and social asset. This requires resources for carefully targeted research. However, the dictation of 'research interventions', for many years now, by the location of new developments rather than by a well-considered research strategy has led to huge geographical imbalances, large areas of the Welsh coast and rural countryside becoming almost a 'research vacuum'. The trusts are working closely with IFA Wales/Cymru and others to establish a research framework for the archaeology of Wales. The results will soon be hosted on the website of Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust.

The *Welsh Review* stresses the wider definition of the historic environment and correctly focuses on the close link between the natural, cultural and historic landscape. It emphasises the value of the whole landscape, not just the statutory designated parts of it, and points out, rightly, that recognising the value of the historic heritage does not imply resistance to all change – the historic environment is itself the product of change. The trusts, with financial support from Cadw and the local planning authorities (LPAs), already advise on specific threats through the planning process. They also provide wider heritage management information and advice to the LPAs and many other national and local organisations and individuals. However, there needs to be a more proactive and integrated strategic policy, acknowledging the value of the historic environment as a significant contributor to economic regeneration. *Managed change and sustainable development* must recognise that fragile elements of the historic environment can never be replaced once they have been lost.

Following the Assembly elections in May 2003 both Sue Essex and Cadw left the Department of Environment, the former taking over the Department of Finance, the latter moving to the Department of Culture, Sport and the Welsh Language. It is to be hoped that the new ministry will show a similar level of commitment to the role of the historic environment in the economic and social fabric of Wales. The momentum of the current review must not be lost. On the contrary, the opportunity must be provided for widening the discussion, not only within the Assembly but also amongst all of the institutions, organisations, 'stakeholders' and individuals who have a concern with the historic environment of Wales. The trusts support the *Review's* proposal for an advisory body representative of the whole heritage sector in Wales, to act as a 'champion' for the historic environment.

There is clearly a need for a coherent, inclusive national strategy for managing the historic environment in its widest sense so that it can become fully recognised as a force for economic regeneration, as a creator of social cohesion and as a major contributor to the quality of life of the people of Wales.

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