

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Christopher Currie

Committee Clerk
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
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INQUIRY INTO THE WELSH GOVERNMENT'S HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT POLICY relating to archaeology and historic buildings, ad-hoc short-term responses to the consultation needs of CADW, local authorities, and other bodies, and long-term systematic survey and publication of the monuments of Wales. This last research role underpins the others and is essential to them.

In England, the merger of the Monuments Commission with English Heritage has **destroyed**, through repeated cuts, the long-term research role, particularly with respect to historic buildings, and lost the institutional expertise of the staff and their skills in training new investigators. Nationally, multidisciplinary studies have been less frequent; research now depends, as in the 1890s, on ageing retirees and amateurs; and all the evidence is that English building archaeology **will continue to decline in quality and usefulness**.

By contrast, in France, continued government support, through long-established institutions, for systematic research has resulted in integrated investigations and the discovery and application of new techniques, and a spate of publication, now bearing fruit in large-scale surveys across wide regions. That in turn has led to marked improvements in the standard of conservation, preservation, and interpretation for relating to archaeology and historic buildings, ad-hoc short-term responses to the consultation needs of CADW, local authorities, and other bodies, and long-term systematic survey and publication of the monuments of Wales. This last research role underpins the others and is essential to them.

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for systematic research has resulted in integrated investigations and the discovery and application of new techniques, and a spate of publication, now bearing fruit in large-scale surveys across wide regions. That in turn has led to marked improvements in the standard of conservation, preservation, and interpretation for visitors, with well-recognised economic benefits. As a result, the relative prominence of England and France in this field have been dramatically reversed since the early 1990s.

More closely comparable with Wales is Wallonia, a region that like Wales suffers from the effects of long-term decline of heavy industry and mining. Again, the Walloon government's support for systematic research independently of preservation agencies in the last twenty years has resulted in great improvements in knowledge, and a great deal of well-regarded scholarly publication of both regional and individual building studies, which the preservation agencies feed back into their conservation policy. The historic environment is regarded there as an essential means of economic regeneration.

Wales also has been fortunate in that the Commission's survey work has continued, reflected for example not only in *The Welsh Cottage* but in *Radnorshire 1400-1800*. The structures investigated form the majority of all the monuments in that area. Without it we would not have known that these were not post-medieval or Victorian stone houses but a corpus of late-medieval timber houses unique in Europe. That work, I understand, is already having an effect in enabling government and local authorities to reverse the scandalous neglect and loss of so many of these farmhouses; the reversal is **essential for regenerating** the communities of which they formed part.

The merger of the two bodies in England did not benefit the archive-custodial role either. The new NMR building and the digital archive date from the last years of independence, and all that has happened since has been the loss of the London repository. In a time of short funds, the administrative costs of a merger should be eschewed.

Finally, the Commission's consultancy role obviously requires independence if it is to be performed honestly and effectively.

In short, there are no obvious advantages in the proposed merger, and disastrous disadvantages.

Yours sincerely,

Christopher Currie
(General Editor of the Victoria History of the Counties of England, 1994-2000)