

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Gavin Johns

Question: what would be the advantages and disadvantages of merging the functions of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) with the functions of other organisations, including Cadw?

I understand the need for the Government in Wales to spend wisely, especially so in the current financial circumstances, but I am very concerned about proposals for the RCAHMW as I think that they are potentially shortsighted and fail to recognize the fundamental gain that Wales's heritage receives from the RCAHMW work.

Wales needs a comprehensive and soundly interpreted data set for its built heritage. There are generic building types presently at risk of the most iconic types: chapels; slate mines; farms; terraced industrial housing. All need recording. The RCAHMW has an envied track record in recording and interpreting. Absorption within Cadw will dilute this capability, and I believe, to the extent that it will not be completed in a comprehensive, timely and valuable manner. Good affordable research should be a cornerstone for work across Wales.

1. A comprehensive catalogue of the Welsh built heritage is important as it identifies:
 - a. local distinctiveness e.g the Snowdonia House type;
 - b. supports identity in communities and across areas/regions e.g heritage centers such as at Amlwch old harbour;
 - c. enables identification of relative importance by building type/by geography so that the rarity or commonality of a type can be factored into plans and therefore enables prioritisation of conservation and or spend; and
 - d. permits informed decisions on economic regeneration schemes incorporating buildings.
2. The RCAHMW has an enviable track record in recording and interpreting the rich built heritage of Wales. Their staff have acquired through continuity of activity an extensive knowledge that would be lost with such fundamental reform. Corporate knowledge cannot be given a monetary value, and I have seen directly from my experience in the privatisation of British Rail how easily it is lost and then I witnessed time after time, new initiatives starting from the beginning rather than being informed by what has proceeded, learning from past work and making progress more quickly and cost effectively as a result. Internal knowledge is the key to this.
3. The RCAHMW has led the way, by moving away from only recording (as in the early County inventories) to in-depth thematic interpretation. Witness the ground breaking publication of 'Houses in the Welsh Countryside', an extensive volume on Glamorganshire farmhouses to recent more volumes on Radnorshire and Welsh Cottages. This approach provides the base for much inspiration for others to either enjoy or to conduct further research or as outlined above to make informed choices about promoting and protecting the Welsh built heritage.

4. In times of tight financial conditions an organisation charged with maintenance of buildings and research will prioritise spend on building maintenance and reduce spend on background research. I cannot see that deterioration of Caernarfon Castle, for example, would be an acceptable political outcome. I think that combining organisations this will be at the expense of research. Exactly this approach is being taken by English Heritage (EH). The English equivalent of RCAHMW was merged with EH and now in order to meet swinging budget cuts research posts are being removed. But research forms the basis for so much other important heritage work across Wales.
5. This is not an argument against change. RCAHMW has embraced this fully with on-line services; access is good and getting better. This is an argument for retaining knowledge and experience in a skilled area that takes time to acquire, using it well to achieve a greater understanding of the built environment and not using corporate structures that would place this at risk.
6. I think the future should be for Cadw to concentrate on maintaining and interpreting state owned built heritage (custodians of the buildings) and RCAHMW should record, interpret and take on maintenance of statutory lists (custodians of data and information). Separate funding, as at present, will enable prioritisation of objectives within budgets and both organisations used as part of the means to achieve the overall objectives for Welsh heritage.
7. Wales should be immensely proud of the work of the RCAHMW and be seeking to promote and develop it. Governments should provide the seed corn research, recognising that it supports a huge range of other work and organisations and I urge you to consider your plans with this in mind.
8. I have copied this to the Chairman of the Commission.

Gavin Johns

27 June 2012

My background.

I am a private individual of Welsh descent, with a strong interest in the built heritage of Wales and a love for the country. I am a current member of the Ancient Monuments Society, Friend of Friendless Churches, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Dating Old Welsh Houses/Grŵp Dyddio Hen Dai Cymreig, and other organisations concerned with Wales and the Welsh heritage. I am Chair of the Judges for the National Railway Heritage Awards covering the railway built heritage across the United Kingdom and Ireland.