

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Richard Edwards

Dear Sir/Madam,

I understand that the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee is currently holding an enquiry into the future of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales, and that one of the options being considered is to merge the organisation with a larger government body.

As the producer of the BBC series Hidden Histories, which has been screened on BBC Wales and across the UK on BBC 4, it is my considered opinion that the Royal Commission is one of the most effective organisations I have ever worked with in terms of promoting the historic environment in Wales.

There have been three series to date, and they have achieved excellent ratings and high audience appreciation factors, creating a positive image for Welsh heritage across the UK.

This is mainly due to the organisation's understanding of the importance of the media in reaching the audiences they have targeted, the quality of their staff, and the high degree of access to staff and resources given us by the Commission.

In my opinion, the Commission displays a clearly defined and almost entrepreneurial flair in promoting not just the history of Wales, but an understanding of the way it works as an organisation. One of the qualities enjoyed by our viewers was the spirit of re-discovering the past, of re-telling stories that we thought we knew but which are constantly evolving through new findings.

The Royal Commission inhabits a boundary where science meets history, and its staff are adept at communicating not only their enthusiasm and learning, but scientific process in an historical environment. What, in other hands, could have been a dry, academic exercise was imbued with the excitement of a detective story about our collective past.

As a production team, we were constantly impressed by the calibre of the Commission staff, their ambition to communicate and their understanding of how to put across information to the public. We were privileged to have access to their brilliant computer graphics on Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, the LIDAR imaging of Bardsey and Skomer which has radically revised our understanding of the islands' past, and telling reconstructions of iron age hillforts and the Roman town above Trawsfynydd. We were also able to show for the first time on television the location of a previously undiscovered Norman church in the Conwy valley, two medieval fish traps in Fishguard Harbour and the first Roman villa ever to be discovered in mid Wales. We also dipped into their newly acquired Aerofilms footage and used a fraction of the archive in the invaluable National Monuments Record, including original plans by leading architects and designs by sculptors and artists. The Commission's work with communities is particularly impressive, as seen in projects with the settlement of international volunteers who created Brynmawr Park in the 1930's, and the history of sport in the South Wales valleys focussing on stories such as the importance of Nelson in the history of handball.

Not only do contributors like buildings expert Richard Suggett, aerial photographer Toby Driver and surveyor Louise Barker have authority, they know what makes a good story and how to tell it simply –

a rare gift with specialists. Throughout, we felt we were working with a team that brought different skills and resources to bear on each story.

As someone with long experience of making programmes about the history and culture of Wales, such as *Homeland* with Sara Edwards (BBC Wales 1995-2000), *Star Spangled Dragon*, a history of the Welsh in America with John Humphreys (BBC Wales 2003) and *The Welsh in London* with Huw Edwards (2007), it is hard to imagine working so closely with an organisation if it were to be subsumed into a government department, not least because of the difficulties of getting contributors to appear from government bodies, and the guarded nature of what they say.

The Royal Commission is a jewel, which has done more to raise the profile of the historic environment in the media in Wales and the UK than any other body. I believe its many qualities would be threatened by merger, and urge your committee to preserve its independence and distinctiveness. We have plans to make more series with the Commission and hope it will still be possible.

Yours faithfully

Richard Edwards
Executive Producer
Hidden Histories