

Supplementary answers by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales

23 July 2011

We note from the transcript that we did not fully answer four questions asked by members on 11 July. We have prepared this additional information as a courtesy. (Paragraph numbers refer to the transcript.)

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***Peter Black:** I will class myself as a younger person who is interested in heritage. We all accept that investigation and research are crucial in promoting the historic environment; however, the Minister's priorities, which he published in January, make no mention of them. Can you expand on your concerns in that respect?*

Investigation and research form the foundation on which the appreciation and enjoyment of the historic environment rests. They are fundamental and interrelated parts of the process of continually enhancing knowledge about the Welsh historic environment, without which proper decisions cannot be taken. The cycle of benefits includes protection, conservation, presentation and wider appreciation and enjoyment. At times of tight resources, investigation should be seen as a core service to be consolidated, and we would be concerned if its role were not properly recognised and catered for.

The Commission has long been recognised for its major contribution to research and investigation in Wales, working alongside partner bodies and individuals. Without the Commission's authoritative research, for example, it would not have been possible to obtain World Heritage recognition for Blaenavon Industrial Landscape or Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. Tens of thousands of copies of archaeological maps the Commission has produced with the Ordnance Survey have been sold, inspiring generations of students and visitors. The Commission's landmark study of Welsh vernacular architecture, *Houses of the Welsh Countryside*, was published in 1975 but still influences the management of the historic environment. It inspired owners to save numerous houses, it informed the listing of some 800 buildings, it is still used on a daily basis by conservation officers, architects and historians, and in 2011 it was the foundation for a 6-hour S4C television series.

The main source of information about the historic environment is not written on paper but rather in earth, wood and stone, and so research depends on skilled examination of physical evidence and the subsequent creation of definitive records. Some of the Commission's investigation work is reactive, as when a local authority conservation officer asks for help in understanding the importance of a threatened building or when a local group needs help interpreting a site it looks after, but much is designed to aid strategic programmes of understanding. New investigative and analytical techniques mean more efficient activity as well as new understanding and interpretation, though the complexity of the data results in specialist requirements for digital archiving.

We interpret and present the castles of Wales differently now from a generation ago. Few once bothered about industrial archaeology or Victorian architecture, let alone the Welsh cottage, yet these were are now widely regarded as highlights of Welsh Heritage. Without innovative investigation by the Commission working in a creative and expert environment this process would not have happened so rapidly nor been underpinned by evidence. Such activity is crucial at a time of diminishing national resources, for threats to the historic record continue unabated as important buildings such as chapels, farm buildings and miners' institutes become increasingly rare.

To influence opinions, ideas and understanding as we go forward, evidence has to be available in a secure, living record and communicated through excellent publications and public engagement, however that is achieved.

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Mike Hedges: *First, I congratulate you on the publication of Copperopolis, which is an excellent publication. What are you doing in the lower Swansea valley to engage the communities there? I speak as someone who lives in the lower Swansea valley.*

Peter Wakelin answered the question based on the strategy for the organisation as a national body that provides toolkits and resources for local community engagement. As former Inspector with Cadw and Head of Regeneration in the Communities Directorate of the Welsh Government, he focused on the use that had been made of the Commission's extensive work from the 1960s onwards to underpin the identification of sites for protection and regeneration. However, more and more Commission research focuses on community and partnership projects involving training and support of others. The Commission has taken a number of specific actions to support community groups and the local authority in the lower Swansea Valley. Examples over many years include:

- Working with the South West Wales Industrial Archaeology Society to investigate local sites since the 1970s and produce *A Guide to the Industrial Archaeology of the Swansea Region*, 4,000 copies of which have been sold.
- Making recommendations for the protection of the Hafod & Morfa, Whiterock and Upper Bank copperworks, and prompting the creation of the White Rock Industrial Archaeology Park.
- Undertaking additional recording at the Hafod / Trevivian to support Cadw's current urban characterisation for the communities.
- Working intensively since 2000 with the Swansea Valley Heritage Society on the heritage of the Swansea Canal, its horse-worked railways, works and mines. Results are available online at www.coflein.gov.uk and in the People's Collection, and a book is forthcoming.
- Giving hugely popular tours and talks at Swansea Copper Day on 5 March 2011, in association with the Economic and Social Research Council-funded partnership *The Global and Local World of Welsh Copper*, contributing to online resources at www.welshcopper.org.uk and leading the project to create an interpretive animation of Hafod copperworks displayed at the National Waterfront Museum and on YouTube : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpNgDYLQW7A> .
- Participating since 2011 in the Cu@Swansea Partnership with the local authority, Swansea University and the National Waterfront Museum, which has raised some £650,000 to regenerate the Hafod copperworks through a digital hub and community engagement. Posts created include a community worker for the Lower Swansea Valley.
- Developing community outreach work through the Commission's Britain from Above partnership project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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Janet Finch-Saunders: *What types of future delivery options would the Royal Commission most object to? Can you outline why such options would be detrimental to the future of the historic environment in Wales?*

Of greatest concern to us is the danger that key services in investigation, archiving and public engagement will disappear. All of these services support the understanding, sustainable management and public enjoyment of the historic environment. This danger could arise under all options owing to the pressure on resources, but we believe it would be greatest in the case of direct merger with Cadw. This is because the scope for making savings through merger is at best very small and at worst

negative. Merger could put information services in competition for resources alongside tourism development and statutory casework without a Royal Warrant to define them or the benefit of an independent board to oversee the balance of the organisation. The concern might be alleviated by measures such as giving the services a statutory basis in the Heritage Bill and developing an equivalent to the scrutiny provided by the publicly appointed Commissioners of English Heritage.

Another major concern is that services could be split between different organisations so that they would no longer be dynamically integrated. Carrying out recording, investigation, archiving, advice services and public engagement in one organisation means that there is a constant beneficial relationship between them and strong coordination with conservation officers, archaeologists and researchers outside. This ensures that the archive is a living, developing resource and that it is widely used to enhance knowledge, understanding and management of the heritage. We were pleased that the working group ruled out the option of merging the archive functions with the National Library and the other staff with Cadw, but we see some danger that difficulties of managing the archive within government for reasons of its specialist accommodation needs and charity status could lead to a highly damaging compromise position.

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Julie James: On the theme of which option you like best, I was struck in your paper by the conversation around the difficulties that being inside the Government's IT systems might cause. I am keen on the digital aspect of the commission. Can you expand on that?

Further to Catherine Hardman's verbal answer, of great concern to us is the risk of significantly increased costs of the SWISH service (the specialist partnership system delivering the Commission's archive and services and available for public use as www.Coflein.gov.uk). As described in the paper provided to the Committee, the Commission benefits from low ICT costs as a result of shared services through the University of Aberystwyth and the shared service partnership established in 2003 with the Scottish Commission to deliver SWISH. The architecture of SWISH provides site records, the catalogue of the National Monuments Record and an extensive and growing digital archive. Providing on-line access to a live system is relatively unusual in Government systems but provides the core needs of the Commission's public service. The security measures in place are extensive, but may not be compliant with GIS requirements without additional expenditure and increased ongoing costs. The working group set up by the Minister has agreed that SWISH should continue and has asked the current Assembly ICT service provider, Atos, to ascertain possible costs of continuing the service in the Government secure environment.