

The Welsh approach to heritage interpretation

Wales is part of the United Kingdom, but with its own – devolved – administration, the Welsh Assembly Government. Cadw is the Welsh Assembly Government's historic environment service. 'Cadw' is the Welsh word for 'to keep' or 'to protect'.

Wales is a small country, with a population of just under 3 million covering some 2 million hectares of land. Its size is something of an advantage when seeking to establish an integrated approach – it is certainly small enough and sufficiently cohesive to make it possible to develop and implement a pan-Wales approach to heritage interpretation.

It does, however, have one very particular additional dimension, one which will strike a chord with a number of other countries' representatives here. Wales is a bilingual nation. The ancient and beautiful language of Welsh is spoken by 20% of the population and is promoted by law. Government and public information, including heritage interpretation has to be bilingual. This gives Cadw particular logistical and presentational challenges, not least finding people with the ability to originate readable but authoritative text in Welsh – translation into Welsh from English tends to be more academic and lose the vital spark of originality.

Attitudes to 'Welshness' and the Welsh language are varied as be would be any country's view of itself and although it is a small country, there are distinctive regional differences – between the Welsh-speaking heartland of north Wales; the cosmopolitan capital, Cardiff; the post-industrial south Wales Valleys; and the mainly rural west. The history of these areas is very different and so is the history and heritage which seems to matter most to its residents. Putting it simplistically, the people of south east Wales (the Valleys) seem most attuned to their mining, industrial and transport heritage; many of the people native to north west Wales (Gwynedd) still feel keenly the conquest of the semi-independent Principality of Gwynedd by King Edward I in the late 13th century. This influences residents' responses to the monuments in State care and increasingly influences how we in Cadw interpret them.

In south Wales the castles of the Edwardian conquest are perceived either as symbols of Welsh pride – or as an unavoidable inconvenience. Caerphilly Castle irritates those stuck in the one way road system it now causes, but its image is ever present in the Valleys. Most residents have a greater empathy with the sites which bear testimony to the more recent industrial past, such as the Blaenavon World Heritage Landscape – there are of course people still living who experienced life down the mine or in the blast furnace and who knew what it was like to try to bring up a family without all the conveniences of a 21st century lifestyle. That is why a recent BBC television series, Coal House, struck such a chord in south Wales. Last year, three modern families squeezed into three tiny cottages on Cadw's Blaenavon site; the men worked down the local mine and the women went back to a forgotten life of trying to get by on next to nothing. This proved to be one of the most powerful and engaging pieces of interpretation Cadw could ever undertake and the public response has been tremendous.

In Gwynedd, in north Wales, the legacy of the now almost lost slate industry is clear in the landscape, but seems to have less of a grip on the national psyche. Conversely the great castles built by Edward I to suppress the Welsh population 700 years ago can still give rise to intense feelings of nationalist passion. Cadw is regularly criticised for promoting the defeat of Wales and for failing to give sufficient attention to the castles of Welsh princes. Wales is not the only country to feel keenly the assaults of centuries past, of course, but this is a nuance that is perhaps lost on the tourist visiting the World Heritage castles of Conwy, Caernarfon, Harlech and Beaumaris.

Cadw's new approach for interpreting its sites and the wider historic environment of Wales therefore had to be sensitive to and reflect back these local, regional and national passions and also try to give the innocent traveller a sense of what emotions flowed so close to the apparently tranquil surface. It also had actively to promote the Welsh language and give it equal weight in interpretive provision.

And there were other, more obvious pressures. Cadw's approach to interpretation has generally been the provision of authoritative, academically sound information, via high quality and very detailed guide books and traditional information panels – which seem wordier than they really are because all the text is presented in two languages. This “interpretation” is greatly valued by the enthusiast but only one in thirteen of our visitors buys a guide book and even less people will read or remember – or be interested by – much of the technical or detailed information on our interpretation panels. This is a very passive experience for the visitor – there is little of the interpretation specialists' mission to ‘provoke, relate, reveal’. There is nothing to stimulate the senses and very little to engage the imagination or encourage exploration and discovery.

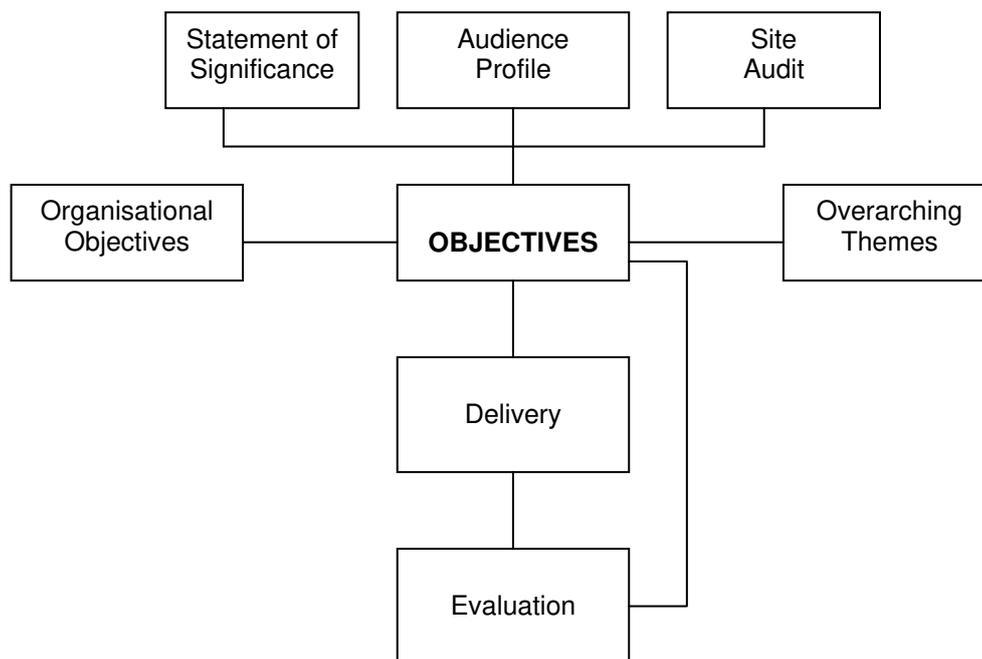
This approach, of which we are all guilty to some extent, also fails to consider that different visitors will respond to different interpretive delivery media and that the tone and the focus of the story will strike our diverse audience very differently.

In Wales, then, we are, of course, now experimenting with a range of different media, from mobile phone messaging and PDA e-trails to living history residencies and history-inspired creative performances. One new experiment for this year is the commissioning of an animated film about the prehistory of Anglesey in north Wales. The film will be produced by a multi-disciplinary creative team working with schools and community groups and will be premiered in an immersive ‘silo’ inside Beaumaris Castle this summer. Music, story-telling and creative workshops will supplement the film and, we hope, give visitors a very new perspective of the long history of the island of Anglesey.

New technology has the advantage of providing bilingual, indeed multi-lingual, interpretation without textual overload. With animation it is possible to provoke, relate and reveal without any words at all.

There is also much to be said for interpreting a site just by talking to people and sharing one's passion for the site and the story. Local guides also help visitors get a flavour of local culture, language and dialect – many visitors to Wales love to hear Welsh spoken even if they do not understand it!

Whatever the interpretive media selected it is the story that is the key. Selecting the best stories – ones which resonate with the audiences – has been the driving force of Cadw's approach to developing a pan-Wales heritage interpretation plan. We started with our own 127 sites, looking at them afresh to crystallise what makes them special. We also looked at our audience profile and the profile of the communities living near the monuments – the two are not always the same. Lastly, we evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the site in terms of current access, of welcome and presentation. This review helped us build up some tentative overarching themes, ones which also complemented Cadw's vision for a well protected and accessible historic environment. All of this helped us develop interpretive objectives and then re-test those themes.



The four key themes we have arrived at reflect our aspiration to celebrate the specialness of the place; to help visitors appreciate it by telling the stories of people who lived, worked and died there; providing encouragement and a means for exploration and discovery; and, finally, to explain to visitors that the historic environment is a fragile resource and one which we can all play a part in conserving.

- **Key theme 1: History happened here** – key archaeological or historical period or event significant to the development of the property or surrounding geographical area.
- **Key theme 2: I lived here** – the stories of people, either known individuals or those whose lives can be traced through the archaeological and/or architectural record.
- **Key theme 3: Look here** – challenging visitors to look and ask questions of the archaeological, architectural and landscape evidence.
- **Key theme 4: We care** – helping people value their heritage and the role of conservation.

We are now engaged upon testing and evaluating the themes through pilot projects and a range of media. Later this year we will be sharing our work with other heritage bodies in Wales, to see if the themes work as well for their sites and collections and to start telling stories that range across sites, landscapes and regional boundaries.

Marilyn Lewis
Director
Cadw

Marilyn.lewis@wales.gsi.gov.uk

Tel: 00 44 1443 336030

www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

Step Changes

A number of 'step changes' are therefore required. The table below sets out and summaries the current approach to interpretation found in Cadw monuments and the conceptual and material 'step changes' required to deliver a new approach to interpretation. These are considered in more depth in the successive chapters of this report.

Current approach	Step change
<p>Information</p> <p>Current interpretation is largely driven by providing information rather than engaging visitors. The 'books on walls' style predominates throughout Cadw.</p>	<p>Communication</p> <p>Effective interpretation should be a 'two-way dialogue', provoking, relating and revealing to visitors the meaning and significance of historic places. Communication – dialogue between heritage bodies and visitors, as well as between different audience groups - is the 'holy grail' of interpretation.</p>
<p>Passive</p> <p>Interpretation can be a passive experience, dependent on the visitor reading and looking at panels and exhibitions. The relationship is 'one-way', dependent on the visitor absorbing information.</p>	<p>Active</p> <p>People – particularly children - learn by doing. Games, quizzes, trails, as well as simple inter-active installations can promote active learning. Active learning also promotes communication and interaction.</p>
<p>Product</p> <p>Most interpretation is immediate, functional and soon forgotten. The emphasis is on instruction rather than learning. Whilst visitors may read panels and exhibitions, they may not necessarily remember</p>	<p>Process</p> <p>Learning shouldn't stop when visitors leave. Visitors should leave wanting to know more – and have the means to do so. Thematic interpretation across monuments, promotion of Cadw and non-Cadw</p>

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<p>what they have read.</p>	<p>monuments and the internet have a role to play in building interest.</p>
<p>Expert language</p> <p>Current interpretation is very knowledgeable and has been thoroughly researched to the highest standards. However, this often results in the use of undefined technical language and a formal style of writing that may not be accessible to all, not least children. The same ‘expert’ tone is used throughout the Cadw estate.</p>	<p>Audience focused</p> <p>An audience focused approach recognises that different people have different interests, levels of academic achievement and learning styles. It also recognises that different audiences visit different places. This means that different types of interpretation may be appropriate to different sites, depending on who comes. This does not in any way negate the value of research or expert opinion, but does mean that it needs to be made accessible to different audiences.</p>
<p>Adult focused</p> <p>Current interpretation is aimed at adults. Despite being the single largest audience group, there is very little or no interpretation or activities for children and young people in family groups.</p>	<p>Children / family groups</p> <p>Engaging interpretation for children and family groups will open up Cadw monuments for new generations. Good interpretation for this audience includes stimulating dialogue, communication, activity and fun, helping them learn without them knowing it.</p>
<p>Officialdom</p> <p>Signage at many Cadw monuments – in particular unstaffed sites – can seem officious and unwelcoming. Excessive signage can also appear cluttered.</p>	<p>Welcome</p> <p>Every visitor to a Cadw monument will be made to feel welcome. New ‘welcome’ graphics can draw together much of the signage into a single panel.</p>
<p>Bilingual policy</p> <p>All interpretation is presented in both Welsh and English, but with little or no cross-reference between them. Welsh is presented solely for</p>	<p>Opportunity to learn</p> <p>The Welsh language is central to the country’s culture and identity. Every visitor should encounter and have the opportunity to learn a</p>

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<p>Welsh speakers, and little consideration is given as how</p>	<p>Welsh phrase or pronunciation when visiting a Cadw monument</p>
<p>Specifics of history</p> <p>Current interpretation can be detailed and specific, an approach that favours fact over emotional experience. This can exclude some audiences (although is popular with others).</p>	<p>Sense of history</p> <p>A sense of history can stimulate imagination and interest, which in turn can lead people to want to learn more. Events, narratives and activities are an effective means of creating the right atmosphere for learning.</p>
<p>Fabric focused</p> <p>Current interpretation is predominantly focused on historic fabric, architecture and archaeology, with extensive use of often unexplained technical terms.</p>	<p>People focused</p> <p>Whilst architectural history and archaeology - the very fabric of Cadw monuments - should remain central to interpretation, past people need to come to the fore. Their stories and lives can be a powerful medium for explaining and exploring the use and meaning of architecture and landscape.</p>
<p>One voice, one perspective</p> <p>All too often, history is told from the perspective of the winner – usually male, rich and aristocratic. The voices and stories of the poor, of women, of children struggle to be heard.</p>	<p>Many voices, many perspectives</p> <p>Welsh history is filled with many voices – women and children, rich and poor, English and Welsh. Interpretation should reflect different perspectives and tell different stories to ‘people’ the monuments.</p>
<p>Description</p> <p>The current style of interpretation can be descriptive and linear. Furthermore, the tone (or ‘voice’) used in current interpretation is neutral and dispassionate, making it</p>	<p>Meaningful narrative</p> <p>‘People talking to people’ is the most direct form of interpretation. First person narratives and dialogue – delivered through MP3, Bluetooth and hand held devices – can</p>

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harder for visitors to connect.	communicate more in a minute and a half than 5 pages of text.
Monument specific Current interpretation is monument specific, making little or no reference to others of similar periods or even close by.	Connecting places Thematic interpretation connect places, allowing threads of the story to be picked up by visitors at different monuments. Working in partnership with other organisations can help broaden the interpretation across the wider historic environment.