

## Moving Towards Cultural Democracy: Redeveloping St Fagans

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### *The background*

The open air museum at St Fagans is about to embark on its greatest period of change since its foundation in 1948. One of seven sites which make up Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales (AC-NMW), the Museum is undeniably loved and well-visited, receiving an average of around 600,000 visitors every year. It is Wales's most visited heritage attraction and the second most visited open-air museum in Europe.

Considering this record of success, it is fair to ask why redevelopment is considered necessary. All organizations need to evolve and change in order to survive and stay relevant. In doing so, they need to consider their core values, the essence of their original vision and ambition. The first head of St Fagans, Iorwerth Peate, set out his vision in a pamphlet in 1948, the year the new Museum was opened.<sup>1</sup> In it he declares that folk museums should link the past to the present in order to 'provide a strong foundation and a healthy environment for the future of their people'. They were to be 'living community-centres, not memorials of a dead culture [...] [each one a] fountainhead of new cultural energy'. St Fagans, according to Peate, was to be 'a picture of the past and a mirror of the present [...] an inspiration for our country's future: from it will radiate energy to vitalize Welsh life'.

As to who constituted the 'folk' or 'gwerin' that were to be St Fagans' subject, Peate in 1946 said clearly that they were to include all parts of the community – 'ffordd yr holl Gymry o fyw' ('the way of life of all Welsh people').<sup>2</sup> In reality, the Museum was never a mirror to the nation. As the new museum developed, it became obvious that Peate's view of what would 'strengthen Welsh life' was the preservation of a vision of Wales which represented his own rural background.

Despite its popularity, the visitor experience until now has been mainly passive, and the diversity of communities in Wales has not been reflected in its exhibits and displays.

We have yet to realize the untapped potential of St Fagans for learning and skill sharing. It is a unique resource combining in one place a heritage site, an open-air museum, and the national archive of oral testimony. The Wales of today is very different from the Wales in which St Fagans was first imagined. It is a Wales of greater cultural confidence on the one hand, but huge problems of social and cultural deprivation on the other. We want St Fagans to reach *all* the peoples of Wales, to be truly culturally democratic and driven by the social needs of contemporary Wales.

1 Iorwerth Cyfeiliog Peate, *Amgueddfeydd Gwerin - Folk Museums* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1948).

2 Douglas A. Bassett, 'The Making of a National Museum', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1984), 217–316.

*A participatory museum*

Our aim is to transform the way the Museum engages with the people of Wales. We want to be a place where people can create, share, and connect with each other around content; a place where people feel that the Museum is relevant to them, that they can influence what it does, and leave their mark for the future.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we aim to be a participatory museum that works with the people of Wales to create a museum that makes a difference to people's lives.

It could be argued that an ethos of participation and community engagement has always been central to the work of St Fagans. In its early days, collections grew rapidly with the involvement and donations of people across Wales. From 1958 onwards, the Museum began to build up an extensive archive of the oral testimonies of ordinary people. However, it has not been without its critics. From the 1970s onwards, left-wing historians and museum professionals increasingly criticized St Fagans as presenting a sanitized view of an idyllic rural past which did not include industrialization and deprivation.<sup>4</sup> The response saw the re-erection of miners' cottages from Rhyd-y-car and Oakdale Workmen's Institute at the Museum. The inclusion of these saw an increase in visitor numbers and a strengthened feeling of public ownership of the Museum and pride in its achievements.

However, there are still gaps in our representation of Wales, and inevitably there always will be. For a museum to be relevant, it has to find a mechanism to develop its collections in ways which meet the needs and questions of the communities it serves. Very early in the development of this project, it was decided that this mechanism would be a programme of public engagement and co-production. This would allow the museum to continually adapt and evolve, getting better as more people get involved.

*Co-producing with communities*

Rather than close the doors of the Museum for the period of redevelopment, the decision was made to remain open so that visitors and community groups could engage with the process. We have involved diverse communities in all aspects of the redevelopment. Having consulted with over two hundred external organizations during the planning phase, we are now working with eight participatory forums. The forums represent a range of organizations from the public and third sector and the diversity of communities in Wales, to guide the redevelopment and inform activity programmes and gallery content. This way of working recognizes the importance of valuing different types of expertise. Partners have helped the Museum define the gaps in terms of collections, interpretations, and staff skills. Partners have delivered learning and development opportunities for museum staff and volunteers, focusing for example on customer care for refugees, those going

3 Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010).

4 John Williams-Davies and Beth Thomas, 'A Mirror to the Nation: Museums Reflecting Changing Identities', in *Museums and Meaning: Idiosyncrasy, Individuality and Identity*, ed. by G. Chamberlain (Museum-iD, 2011).

through drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and those with learning difficulties, as well as training on child protection. These methodologies are now becoming embedded and will continue beyond the reopening of the galleries in 2017.

The participatory forums are grouped according to strategic area or audience segment. These include: Diversity; Craft and Creativity; Volunteering; Primary and Special Schools; Secondary Schools; Young Ambassadors; Informal Learners; and Academics. Our partners include: Action in Caerau and Ely (ACE); Cardiff and Vale College; Cardiff University; Deafblind Cymru; Diverse Cymru; Glynderw and Michaelston College; MENCAP; Open University; NewLink Wales; NIACE Cymru; Wales Puja Committee; Urdd; the Wallich; and the Welsh Refugee Council, to name but a few.

What we have learnt from previous experiments is that there needs to be different modes of collaboration, focused on areas of greatest need. The participatory forums are communities of interests with identified domains of knowledge and expertise. It is a closed mode of collaboration, dependent on the Museum or partner organizations having the networks to contact and select them. The new galleries have adopted both closed and open modes: working with known communities on the one hand to co-produce displays, while employing other participatory elements to open up debates and information sharing to a wider world. There are clusters in each gallery where communities will respond to objects or choose their own objects and interpretation. There will also be opportunities for visitors to take part and contribute to debates, votes, and interpretations through social media platforms, activities, and comment cards. The aim is to integrate the voice of the curator with the voices of the people of Wales and the world to create a multilayered and inclusive experience.

It is early days, but the indications are that this collaborative way of working is having an impact. Participatory ways of working are helping to place community needs and aspirations at the core of our work and ensure we play an effective role in developing community benefits and dialogues across relevant sectors in Wales. We are also supporting community groups to develop their own projects – the increased confidence they gain through working with us enables them to lead on their own culture and heritage bids. Being involved with these initiatives from the start provides an opportunity for archive material or objects to be collected and deposited at the Museum, diversifying the collections and stories we hold. St Fagans has a role as a facilitator of debates about the nation and its identity, rather than as the arbiter of what is inside or outside a single national canon. In future, the buildings we re-erect and the gallery displays we produce will all serve to encourage and broaden those debates.

### *Creating new spaces*

The redevelopment of St Fagans is a £26.6 million project to refresh the main museum block and to provide additional gallery space and buildings for visitors. The archaeological collections previously on display at National Museum Cardiff are to be moved from there to St Fagans. St Fagans will tell the story of people in Wales not just for the last 500 years, but the last 250 millennia.

When it is completed in 2017, visitors will enter the museum via a covered courtyard large enough to cope with the enormous volume of people who come to see us. In that space they will be introduced to the diversity of things that St Fagans has to offer: the galleries, the castle, the re-erected buildings, archaeological constructs, and the events that bring the place to life each day.

Two new galleries will lead off from this courtyard. The first will introduce visitors to key moments from Welsh history as told through the Museum's archaeological and historical collections. This is not an attempt to produce a definitive historical narrative for Wales, but a mechanism through which the past can be used as a springboard from which visitors can learn more about the Wales of today. For example, in one display visitors will be introduced to an opulent dress made for an eighteenth-century woman at a time when most people in Wales lived in poverty – a situation with striking parallels today. In another display, the role of religion in Wales today will be explored through an effigy of the goddess Durga, commissioned by a Hindu community in Wales. The responses of visitors will be encouraged at all these displays so that subsequent visitors will see a gallery of Welsh history shaped by the people of Wales themselves. The other gallery in the main building will take advantage of the breadth of the Museum's collections to show the many different ways that people have lived and died in Wales, from early people hunting along the shoreline to tourists holidaying in caravans, and from the types of food people ate to the manner in which they were buried. There will be opportunities for visitors to respond to the displays, and we also have a programme for both galleries of co-curated displays.

The third gallery will be built at the far end of the Museum's grounds, thereby encouraging visitors to explore a previously under-developed part of the open-air site. Its theme is one which was at the heart of Peate's initial vision for St Fagans: the skills of the hand. Peate articulated this vision by ensuring that exhibiting craftspeople populated the site and that craft objects filled the galleries. In this new gallery we take his vision a step further. On display will be examples of handmade objects, from the exquisitely crafted Maesmôr macehead made about 2500 BC to the work of the fifth generation of the family of potters still working at Ewenni. However, this gallery will not be confined to displaying and describing the skills of the makers of these objects. Visitors will be able to try their own hand at making simple artefacts, and will be encouraged to develop their skills further through booking onto courses held in a purpose-built workshop adjoining the gallery. The workshop will also provide a space for contemporary artists to respond creatively to objects in the collection.

Life-long learning is at the core of Amgueddfa Cymru's work. With over 490,000 participants a year, we are the largest provider in Wales of learning outside of the classroom, working with people of all ages and backgrounds. Our new vision, 'Inspiring people, Changing lives', encapsulates our aspirations, as a leader in the cultural sector, to break down barriers for young people and those in most need. St Fagans is at the heart of this change, with staff developing programmes of deeper, broader, and more lasting engagement that will make a real difference to the people of Wales and beyond. Learning, in its broadest sense, is central to our vision for the site and determines every element of the redevelopment, from the design of public

spaces and the content of exhibitions to partnerships with communities and the programmes we develop for the public.

The current indoor learning provision at St Fagans is limited to one small room, which is inadequate for the 69,447 family learning visitors and 72,722 school visitors, as well as other formal and informal learners who come to St Fagans each year. Building a new Centre for Learning is central to the participatory and learning ethos of the redevelopment. It will strengthen the Museum's capacity to tackle inequality and the consequences of poverty through creative learning and participation. The Centre will include three flexible activity spaces for (1) exploring the collections through creative learning and practical play, (2) skill sharing, discussing, and collaborating with others, and (3) events, celebrations, performances, festivals, and collaboration with community groups. The Centre will have a 120-seat auditorium, a collections study facility, and a reception area to receive visitors.

Another significant change is a direct response to our new mission to encompass the full span of human history in Wales. Displaying archaeology collections within the main galleries will go part way to delivering on this goal, but for many people a trip to St Fagans is integrally linked to an exploration of the historic buildings. It is important that visitors get a sense of the new time depth when they explore the open-air site. Two archaeological constructs reflect two key moments from Wales's past: the Iron Age (presented through a reconstruction of a farmstead based on one excavated at Bryn Eryr on Anglesey, and replacing the Museum's earlier 'Celtic Village'), and the medieval period (via the reconstruction of a court of the Welsh princes, based on Llys Rhosyr, also on Anglesey). The participatory approach which is central to the new St Fagans will be embodied in these new buildings. The Iron Age farmstead has been built by teams of volunteers guided by staff from the Museum's historic buildings team. The volunteers included young people from a rehabilitation centre, unemployed people, school pupils, and people recovering from substance misuse. The medieval court also offers opportunities for sharing skills. Apprenticeships have been created to work with the historical buildings unit on the construction. When completed, the hall will provide a venue which can be used for sleepovers, allowing schools based more than a day trip away from St Fagans to have overnight stays in which they experience life in medieval Wales.

### *Conclusion*

This project will provide St Fagans with a new sense of purpose and reconnect it with the reality of the lives of the people of Wales today. Museum collections have the capacity to touch people's lives in very profound ways. This project will ensure that the most iconic museum of Welsh life does not become merely a romanticized version of the past, a safe haven for the middle classes, impoverished of contemporary meaning. It will provide us with the facilities and motivation to be an inspiring space for those who do not feel that the Museum at present has anything to offer them.

Museums are, and should be, contested and political places. Conflict is often central to self-determination and identity. The participatory approach is, by its

very nature, more democratic, respecting as it does the part played by the whole population in cultural development. Museum visitors, and the diversity of cultures and communities to which they belong, are holders and contributors of culture, not just passive consumers. As such, they have the right to be involved in the recording, debating, and interpretation of that culture. They also have the right to benefit from what museums have to offer, whether it be health and well-being or increased skills and employability. To make an impact, museums have to commit to working long-term with community partners and agencies. Through our shared commitment we can develop an approach to heritage which is built on cultural democracy.