

Interpretation for a nation?

The possibility of a national interpretation plan for heritage in Wales is becoming a reality, as Cadw's Dave Penberthy explains.

Back in 2007, Cadw, the Welsh Assembly Government's historic environment service, started a review of its interpretation provision and began considering a strategy to guide future interpretation developments across its estate. Atkins Heritage were commissioned to undertake this review and propose recommendations for action. Major weaknesses of Cadw's existing interpretation were already apparent. These were:

- an over-focus on the architectural story of the monument
- little reference to the lives of people who lived in it or were affected by it
- little reference to the wider environmental context in which a monument sits or to other relevant (including non-Cadw) sites

In short, the interpretation tended to be somewhat insular. It also tended to be didactic and quite academic in tone.

At the same time, Cadw was developing the Heritage Tourism Project ⁽¹⁾, which successfully secured EU Convergence Funding in spring 2009. The success of the Heritage Tourism Project hinges upon an integrated presentation of heritage sites and the development of meaningful and memorable storylines, making connections between sites, places, people and communities.

Both the review and the Heritage Tourism Project called for the development of a pan-Wales Heritage Interpretation Plan presenting key themes of Welsh heritage at national, regional and local levels for the benefit of local community identity and pride, lifelong learning and tourism. A 'national' interpretation plan would provide the foundation for a more coordinated and coherent approach to interpreting Wales' heritage and culture.

Cadw will shortly begin a process of consultation and discussion with other organisations that make a significant contribution to the understanding and appreciation of the Welsh historic environment. These organisations will be invited to participate in workshops to discuss the issues raised in the Atkins report and Cadw's own work so far in response; and to highlight additional perspectives and possible strands that might lead to a fully rounded plan. A draft plan will be published for wider consultation in 2010.

A review of the historic environment assets across Wales and consultation with national institutions, public sector bodies and community heritage and

tourism interests highlights a number of national chronological and/or thematic story strands:

- Origins, prehistory and Roman invasion and settlement.
- Spiritual and inspirational landscapes – religious, spiritual and cultural inspiration and architecture from prehistory to the present day.
- Castles and Princes of Medieval Wales, including the native princes, Norman and Edwardian conquest, the fight for Welsh independence.
- The rise of the Welsh merchant and gentry, 16th – 18th centuries. The growth of towns, vernacular architecture and the manor and town houses of the Welsh gentry.
- Wales the first industrial nation – from earliest times to the present day.
- Defence of the Realm, from the Napoleonic Wars to the Cold War.
- Maritime Wales.
- The rise of Wales and Welsh nationhood in the 20th and 21st centuries.

How these story strands translate into compelling national and local interpretative themes and how they interface with tourism marketing strategies will need to be explored and agreed with stakeholders.

It can be seen from above list, that the scale and the diversity of the Welsh historic environment means that interpretation needs to be developed at a number of levels, yet it should still have coherence from a set of overarching themes. These interpretative themes are yet to be developed. However, Cadw is underpinning their proposed approach with a guiding set of interpretative principles to determine which stories are told and how they are delivered.

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

and that interpretation should:

- be planned and guided by clear themes and measurable objectives.
- be inclusive and audience focused, offering different approaches to interpretation so as to broaden choice.
- aim to communicate the significance and meaning of places from different perspectives, allowing different voices to be heard.

- aim to encourage dialogue between visitors and interpreters and between themselves.
- be developed alongside formal learning and outreach as part of an overall strategy for engagement.
- be developed in partnership with others, increasing the potential for creating stronger thematic links between places, as well as strengthening branding and cross-marketing.
- be bilingual and seek to promote a sense of the heritage and spirit of Welsh heritage.
- be regularly monitored and its effectiveness measured against stated objectives.

In tandem with these consultations and discussions concerning a pan Wales interpretation plans and to progress the Heritage Tourism Project, Cadw is about to commission interpretation plans on some of the key stories of Wales.

- Princes of Gwynedd
- Princes of Deheubarth
- Owain Glyndŵr
- Edwardian Castles of north Wales
- Lords of the southern March
- Defence of the Realm, 1797-2000

The aim of these interpretation plans is to provide a more coordinated and coherent approach to interpretation as the success of the Heritage Tourism Project relies on Cadw working with a broad range of partners in its delivery.

In his recent ambition statement ⁽²⁾ Alun Ffred Jones AM, Minister for Heritage, underpinned the need to create a more accessible historic environment.

"My central priority however has to be to encourage many more people to appreciate the historic environment..."

..The first requirement is that we make visits to historic sites enjoyable. This is not simply a matter of more innovative presentation. We need to bring history to life by helping people appreciate the human stories associated with heritage sites. Historical events cannot be understood through individual sites alone so we also need to help people understand the drama of history by seeing sites much more in the context of their historical landscapes and townscapes. Helping people to see the links in this way should also encourage them to look beyond the mainstream attractions and to explore the special places which resonate with the stories of our predecessors and our own memories and responses."

(1) For information on the Heritage Tourism Project contact Howard James, Heritage Tourism Project Coordinator, Cadw. howard.james@wales.gsi.gov.uk

(2) Heritage Minister's Ambition for the Welsh Historic Environment (August 2009) Alun Ffred Jones AM, Minister for Heritage. www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

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