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The Welsh Folk Museum

When Artur Hazelius introduced the concept of a folk museum in 1891 to illustrate the living culture of a nation, this imaginative leap in technique was probably the most important ever in the history of museum development. "Knowledge and love of the past" wrote Andreas Lindblom, one of Hazelius's successors, "are an essential foundation for all kinds of new creation ... Do not ponder over the reason why the old houses at Skansen give you so much pleasure: they are comforting and stimulating because they suggest life not death." This method of transforming the museum from a curiosity shop into a home of national inspiration was not espoused for several years in many countries including those of Britain.

Of the four countries of the British Isles, Wales has led the way throughout the present century in the study of folklife. In 1936 a Department of Folk Life was created in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff and during the thirties serious attempts made to secure a site for a national Welsh folk museum in the vicinity of Cardiff, the Welsh capital city. In 1946, an admirable site for this purpose was offered to the National Museum by the Earl of Plymouth. This was St. Fagans Castle and its gardens and grounds, together with eighty additional acres of park land. The Museum Council, in accepting this generous offer, resolved to discontinue the former department in its Cardiff building and to create at St. Fagans, as a constituent unit of the National Museum, a national folk museum to be called the Welsh Folk Museum. Its chief executive officer is the Curator. Its work is divided into two main departments, the Department of Material Culture (with a Keeper and two Assistant Keepers) and the Department of Oral Traditions and Dialects (with a Keeper and three Research Assistants). In addition to the work of these two departments, there is the great task of removing significant buildings

from different parts of Wales for re-erection on the Museum site. For this purpose the Folk Museum has a Foreman with a small building team, working under the Curator's direction. There are also craftsmen at work – woodturners, basket makers and textile workers. These produce traditional wares which are sold to the general public. It is intended in time to represent all the traditional crafts of Wales in this way. A project to be developed in the near future is a folk-museum service for schools whereby, in particular, teachers will be advised and encouraged to make use of local folk-life material in their schools.

A modern block of buildings is planned as the administrative center of the Welsh Folk Museum. This will include offices, laboratories, work-rooms, library, etc., together with exhibition galleries, storage rooms and restaurant. Space is also allocated for a theatre and lecture-rooms. A Treasury grant is awaited to defray the greater part of the cost of this new block of buildings; until this is given, work on the new buildings cannot begin. In consequence, the main development of the Folk Museum, since it was opened to the public in July 1948 has been the re-erection of ancient buildings. Farmhouses, dating from the 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th centuries from Denbighshire, Glamorgan, Montgomeryshire and Radnorshire, an 18th-century cottage from Caernarvonshire, an 18th-century chapel from Carmarthenshire, a 16th-century barn from Flintshire, and an 18th-century woollen mill from Brecknockshire, have all been removed from their original sites and re-erected in the Welsh Folk Museum. Other buildings removed, but not yet re-erected, include an extensive tannery from Radnorshire, and an 18th-century turnpike toll-house from Cardiganshire. All these buildings have been gifts to the Museum from their owners and their re-erection has been made possible by generous donations, principally from Welsh County Councils and the Pilgrim Trust.

St. Fagans Castle itself, a 16th-century mansion built on the ruins of a small medieval castle, is temporarily the administrative headquarters of the Folk Museum, and a late 19th-century addition serves as a small restaurant. But the greater part of the house has been restored to its original character and furnished with period pieces. This main part of the house is open to visitors and the Castle gardens and grounds, with a series of 16th-century fishponds, a mulberry garden, a herb garden, a rose garden, ornamental and terrace gardens and a vinery and flowerhouse are a source of much pleasure to visitors. Over one hundred thousand

persons visit the Folk Museum annually, including about twenty thousand school children who come in organized and supervised parties.

The Folk Museum is also a research institution. Publications by members of the staff include works on houses and building construction, the history of agricultural implements, Welsh folk customs, agricultural transport, costume and embroidery, clocks and watches, rural crafts, furniture, and dialectology. The research work carried out by the Department of Oral Traditions and Dialects is described in detail by its Keeper elsewhere in this journal (pp. 317-325).

Members of the staff also lecture extensively throughout Wales and beyond on their special subjects and on folk-museum matters generally. Surveys conducted by them are in progress; they relate to such matters as rural crafts, the social organization of rural communities, folk traditions, and folk songs. It is hoped that in the course of the next few years a series of Welsh Folk Museum monographs on these and other subjects will be published.

The Welsh Folk Museum will become in time a microcosm of the traditional Welsh scene and a center for the study of, and research into, problems of Welsh culture and tradition. From the wealth of its collections a past can be recreated almost unknown to a rapidly changing society in the second half of the 20th century. It can be truly said that its motto as that of the National Museum of Wales itself is, *I ddysgu'r byd am Gymru, a'r Cymry hwythau am wlad eu tadau*, to teach the world about Wales, and the Welsh people about their own fatherland.

*Welsh Folk Museum
St. Fagans Castle
Cardiff, Wales*