

## Context

Having recently completed my master's research, which showed that the new Curriculum for Wales had influenced socially engaged practice in museums and galleries through their learning provisions, it got me thinking about what else heritage education could influence. One of my main interests was how heritage education could influence young people's sense of identity and 'Welshness'. What does it mean to young people to be Welsh? How do they view long-standing traditional identity? Does this represent them, or are they finding new identities? Or are they just simply being given the space to express their identity?

There are many heritage education theories that show that there is potential for heritage education to influence identity creation, while also equipping learners with the skills to draw their own conclusions. There are eight factors that should influence heritage learning. One of these is 'choice and control', meaning learners have a choice over what they learn in a particular setting.<sup>1</sup> Another is the need for 'facilitated mediation' – either by heritage educators themselves or other groups or individuals involved in the process.<sup>2</sup> These ideas create a space where identity can be created as the learner is given autonomy over their learning, but through a mediated environment, they can be encouraged to question biases and further develop their ideologies.

Moreover, 'learning is a social experience'.<sup>3</sup> These social experiences, facilitated at heritage sites, can enable '...students spaces to respond to social issues experientially, kinaesthetically, and intellectually, and to uphold their rights as learners, creative beings, and concerned citizens of the world'.<sup>4</sup> Surely, these motions would have a profound impact on the identity that a young person may create. This becomes even more so if the heritage site includes socially engaged art, as it goes beyond creating 'pleasing art objects' but creates symbiotic relationships between conversations, processes and equality.<sup>5</sup>

However, while these theories show there is scope to influence identity on young people in Wales through heritage education, there is also a unique political dimension in Wales which will also play a part in identity creation. Wales, while being a part of the UK has its own identity due to it being a devolved nation. Toszek has argued that it was Welsh devolution that 'was essential for awakening the Welsh identity sense in the political dimension'.<sup>6</sup> Added to political ideologies being a part of the Welsh identity is the growing discontent in Wales towards conservatism, due to coal mine closures in the 80s,<sup>7</sup> as well as the economic difference from the rest of the UK caused by the rapid loss of industry.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums : Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers INC,2000), pp. 119-122.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 119-122.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Briggs Kemeza, 'Embracing Individualism and Encouraging Personal Style in Gallery Teaching', *Journal of Museums Education*, 44 (2), p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> Ross H. Schlemmer, B. Stephen Carpenter II & Erika Hitchcock, 'Socially Engaged Art Education: Practices, Processes, and Possibilities', *Art Education*, 70:4, 2017, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Bartłomiej H. Toszek, 'Political Dimension of Welsh Identity after Devolution: Fact or Fiction?', *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, vol. 45, 2016, p. 365.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 361.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 365.

Therefore, our heritage sites in Wales, which were built on the rise and fall of industrialisation, will inevitably include these notions and further shape identity in young Welsh people. But how are the young people reacting to these ideas? Are they wanting to pull away from these traditional ideas or holding them with pride, or possibly reframing them?

## **Aims**

The research would aim to explore the role of heritage education in shaping young people's sense of identity and their perceptions of 'Welshness'. It would also investigate how heritage learning environments and practices (including contemporary art) influence identity formation among young people in Wales. Alongside this, it would examine the relationship between traditional Welsh identity, emerging identities, and the autonomy provided by heritage education.

## **Objectives:**

The main research objectives would be to analyse how heritage education theories are applied in Welsh heritage sites and their impact on identity creation. As well as assessing young people's responses to traditional Welsh identity narratives and exploring if they adopt, reject or reframe these ideas through heritage learning experiences. Additionally, identify the extent to which political, historical and socio-economic contexts embedded in Welsh heritage sites contribute to shaping young people's identities.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of the research would combine desk-based research, analysing theories already established, alongside a mixed-methods approach to data collection. Some of the methods of data collection would be through semi-structured interviews with young people (either secondary school or college students) who have participated in heritage education programmes or sessions. Identifying these people could be through engaging with long-established programmes at local museums or heritage sites. Conducting these interviews would allow for a space to explore personal views on Welsh identity and find out their experiences in heritage settings.

Further added to this, I would like to conduct focus groups with the same group of people to further look at the social dynamics of collective discussions around identity and Welshness. This will be useful in understanding if identity is captured differently in peer settings. This also leads to participant observations at heritage sites during education activities, to again observe organic discussions and the autonomy the young people have.

Moreover, it will be essential to analyse the learning materials, interpretations, any learning policies, etc, from the heritage sites – to see how these in themselves are portraying ideas of 'Welshness'. It will set an understanding of what narratives are being presented to young people.

In terms of what sites will be sampled, I will be picking ones that are actively engaging with young people aged 11-18 and have an education programme or already established partnership with young people in the age bracket. It will also be essential to engage with

teachers and heritage learning practitioners to understand their viewpoint. Due to the age group targeted, informed consent from participants or guardians will be essential, as well as all information being anonymous and confidential.

## Discussion

Building on the established background, aims, objectives, and methodology, it is essential to discuss practical examples and initiatives that illustrate how heritage education may influence the preservation or evolution of identity among young people in Wales and show the need for this research area. For example, there was a press release in December announcing the new permanent display of the 'Manod Slate Tablet', which is a piece of contemporary art conceived by Jeremy Deller and designed and carved by John Neilson.<sup>9</sup> The work is in both the English and Welsh Languages and says 'Daw'r llechen hon o chwarel Manod yng Ngogledd Cymru lle cafodd paentiadau'r Oriel Genedlaethol eu diogelu yn ystod yr Ail Ryfel Byd' (This slate is from Manod quarry in North Wales where the National Gallery's paintings were protected during World War II).<sup>10</sup> The work was commissioned by Mostyn (an art gallery in Llandudno) and was supported by CELF, the national contemporary art gallery of Wales.<sup>11</sup> Here, the identity and heritage of Welsh people is conceptualised through the traditional craft – using carved slate – as well as the Welsh language being preserved and represented in an English institution. This will have a significant impact on not just the importance of the historic event it commemorates, but also the intangible aspects of creating the piece of work, as well as the use of the Welsh Language. How can this not have an impact on the identity of young people in Wales? Can you not feel a sense of pride that our language, after being told for decades that it is 'dying', is now standing proud in an English venue, not just as a nod to the past but as a piece of contemporary work, showing that our language is very much alive and kicking!

Moreover, Narberth Museum used both tangible and intangible heritage to retell the stories from the Mabinogion and combined this with contemporary issues of identity, masculine vs feminine, self-awareness, as well as tolerance.<sup>12</sup> This short project saw Peter Stevenson (storyteller) work with school children as well as adults.<sup>13</sup> The participants got to listen to the stories as well as the opportunity to tell their own and create artwork to go alongside this.<sup>14</sup> This project brought together the historic importance of Welsh identity and heritage, combining it with modern-day ideas. The session not only provided a perspective from the storyteller but also gave the children the space to create their own understanding, which I believe is essential for identity building. If projects like this exist in Wales, then it is an interesting notion to follow in how young people perceive their identity and the link to 'Welshness' – there are museums and heritage sites that are actively giving young people

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<sup>9</sup> The National Gallery, 'New National Gallery artwork - a slate from the Welsh quarry that housed the nation's paintings during the war', *The National Gallery*, December 2025, <New National Gallery artwork - a slate from the Welsh quarry that housed the nation's paintings during the war | Press releases | National Gallery, London> [accessed 3 December 2025].

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Narberth Museum, 'Stories of the Mabinogion and their contemporary relevance', *YMag*, July 2025, <YMag July 2025 - Museums Federation Cymru> [accessed 3 December 2025].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

the space to do this through heritage, so surely there must be an influence on young people's perceptions? Is this a negative or positive idea?

Further added to this, in 2023, Cadw launched its Young Custodians programme at Neath Abbey, working with Dŵr Y Felin Comprehensive School.<sup>15</sup> The programme has run for several years, but this is the first in South Wales.<sup>16</sup> The project enables pupils to gain ownership of the site through creative workshops, research projects and site visits.<sup>17</sup> The project has already reported fostering pride in the young people.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, a few years on, it would be interesting to see how this has shaped their identity and understanding of what it means to be Welsh. The site has been a focal point of the Neath community for generations, whether that was linked to religion or industry – now a new generation will have a connection to this site – how is this different? What shaped it? Was it their involvement with the site or changing political spheres?

This argument is also supported by projects that change or empower people to create their own identity from other countries. In Egypt, the Egypt's Dispersed Heritage project focused on prioritising community-driven co-creation where Egyptians are empowered to create their own narratives of what it means to be Egyptian, which counteract the colonialist elitist ideologies that have long been imposed on them.<sup>19</sup> They did this by creating comics in Egyptian Arabic, drawing on perceived ideas of Egyptian heritage and posting them on social media.<sup>20</sup> The article mentions that social media was used because Egypt has a very youthful population, 'with an estimated 61 per cent of the population under the age of 30'.<sup>21</sup> This shows that the project recognised the issue with colonialist ideas in Egypt and could see the best way to recontextualise this was through young people, who are the majority of the population. The project was successful in empowering young people through social media to highlight their views and concerns on Egyptian identity, such as, *'I have always felt there was something wrong with the way we present Egyptian antiquities. It's seen through the eyes of the other rather than our Egyptian eyes. We seem to convey Western point of view not ours'*.<sup>22</sup>

However, the article does not analyse whether these are newly developed ideas due to the comics, but rather it is presented in a way that people have always felt this way; they just did not have the platform to express it. Therefore, this example from Egypt adds to the discussion on whether it is the heritage education itself that creates ideas of identity in young people, or does it empower them to express themselves. This is an interesting notion, and one I believe would add to the current discourse in the Welsh perspective.

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<sup>15</sup> Neath Abbey, 'Young Custodians from Neath find out more about their local heritage', CADW, 6 October 2023, <Young Custodians from Neath find out more about their local heritage | Cadw> [accessed 3 December 2025].

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Heba Abd el-Gawad and Alice Stevenson, 'Egypt's dispersed heritage: Multi-directional storytelling through comic art', *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 21.1 (2021), pp. 126-127.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

Moreover, in comparison, China has seen an evolution of identity through governmental policies linked to heritage.<sup>23</sup> The country saw this evolution from before 1911, where identity was on a personal level, focusing on who their family was, where they lived or their language.<sup>24</sup> This began to change in the 1940s, when museums and historical sites saw interpretations of the past shaped through a communist lens.<sup>25</sup> Whereas now “China is a unified country ‘with an unbroken cultural tradition’ and the purpose of heritage conservation is to ‘strengthen national unity’”.<sup>26</sup> This change is in part attributed to the ‘patriotic education bases’ at cultural sites.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, while Wales has a different political and heritage backdrop, what is the change in young people’s identity? Does this not leave space to see if heritage education plays a part in this shift, as it has in China? Can this idea also be played out in the Western sphere?

Furthermore, in this example in China, memory has also played a part over generations. Heritage theory also supports that memory is what helps us create an identity.<sup>28</sup> However, when looking at young people, for the majority of the time, they will not have a direct memory or possibly even a family with a direct memory of the heritage they are engaging with. How does this play a factor in the identity they create of what it means to be Welsh? Especially if memory creates a sense of belonging.<sup>29</sup> Will the heritage learning not enforce an idea of what a memory is, despite it not existing beforehand, and then this inadvertently shape that young person's identity with their country?

Further added to this debate is the influence of tourism on heritage sites. Perception influences behaviour before, during, and after visits – if a tourist links the site as part of their own heritage, they stay longer, read more of the interpretation and are more likely to revisit.<sup>30</sup> This means that heritage sites are using their understanding of tourists’ perceptions to influence “marketing, pricing, and interpretation” strategies, ensuring they are tailored to diverse visitor motivations.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, if heritage sites are trying to cater to tourists to boost visitor numbers and dwell time, does the perception of Wales that they are playing out to tourists to attract them have a negative or positive effect on young people's identity? Is it making them more empathetic to varying viewpoints, or has it created a simplified view of Wales?

Therefore, many of these elements come together to show that heritage sites can shape young people's identity. In Wales, there are currently projects that are doing this and

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<sup>23</sup> Robert J. Shepherd and Larry Yu, *Heritage Management, Tourism, and Governance in China: Managing the Past to Serve the Present* (New York: Springer, 2013), p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Jan Assman, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. By Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. (Berlin, New York, 2008), pp. 109-110.

<sup>29</sup> Veysel Apaydin, ‘The Interlinkage of Cultural Memory, Heritage and Discourses of Construction, Transformation and Destruction’ in *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage Construction, Transformation and Destruction*, ed. By Veysel Apaydin. (London: UCL Press, 2020), p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Yaniv Poria, Richard Butler, and David Airey, ‘The Core of Heritage Tourism’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30.1 (2003), p. 243.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 250.

reinforcing the Welsh language and culture. Then, in comparison, both Egypt and China show the potential of heritage education to empower identity formation and reshape national narratives and show that a space is needed to examine this in Wales. In addition, memory and interpretation play a vital role in the creation of identities, even when young people do not have a lived experience of the heritage, which raises questions around how these created narratives from heritage sites shape belonging. Then, on top of these theories is the tourism-driven landscape of heritage sites, where there is potential to simplify Welsh identity for marketability. These points show that there is ground for this research to develop further, and that there is a gap in understanding exactly how heritage education shape's identity in young people in Wales.

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