

An Evaluation of the Collection Rationale of the St Fagans National Museum of History Website

Introduction

St Fagans National Museum of History, located near Cardiff, is one of the most popular heritage attractions in Wales and forms part of the wider network of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales. The museum is an open-air site comprising over fifty historic buildings relocated from across Wales, alongside permanent and temporary galleries housed within a purpose-built main building. It operates as a working museum, incorporating demonstrations of traditional crafts and activities as part of the visitor experience. The museum positions itself as a national institution dedicated to telling the story of Welsh life and culture.¹

A collection rationale refers to the principles that guide a museum's decisions about what it collects, how those collections are interpreted, and how they are presented to the public.² This essay evaluates how effectively St Fagans communicates its collection rationale through its public-facing website.

The essay begins by outlining Amgueddfa Cymru's collection development and digital strategies, then provides an overview of the St Fagans website, examining its structure, purpose, and intended audience. The main body of the essay examines the digital representation of the historic buildings and the gallery-based collections, before concluding with an assessment of the website's overall effectiveness in communicating the museum's collection rationale.

St Fagans Collection Development Strategy

The collection policy of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales establishes a framework for developing collections that represent the history and lived experience of Wales for public benefit. The policy emphasises ethical and inclusive collecting, long-term stewardship, and a focus on social history and everyday life.³

Digital access is identified as a key strategic priority within this framework. According to the organisation's Digital, Data and Technology Strategy,⁴ digital platforms, including

¹ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'About Us', <https://museum.wales/about/> [Accessed 15 January 2026]; Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Strategy 2030' <https://museum.wales/media/54765/Amgueddfa-Cymru-Strategy-2030.pdf> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

² Heather Lomas, *A Guide to Selecting a Review Methodology for Collections Rationalisation* (London: Collections Trust, 2014), p. 3.

³ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Collection Development Strategy', <https://museum.wales/about/policy/collection-development-strategy-2023-2028/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

⁴ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) Strategy', <https://museum.wales/about/Digital-Data-and-Technology-Strategy/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

museum websites, are intended to function as public-facing access points to collections and knowledge. The strategy commits to improving accessibility, usability, and public engagement, while also acknowledging that existing digital provision is incomplete and that substantial development is required, specifically to improve “user experience and journey, through inspirational digital spaces.”⁵

Website Overview and Purpose

The St Fagans website is integrated within the wider Amgueddfa Cymru web platform rather than existing as a standalone site. The homepage foregrounds the historic buildings through prominent imagery in the hero banner, alongside content relating to exhibitions, events, visiting information, and donation appeals.⁶

The structure and content of the website suggest that its primary purpose is to support visit planning and promote on-site engagement. While this approach is consistent with common museum practice, it raises questions about how effectively the website communicates the museum’s collection rationale to users who engage with the institution primarily through digital means.

Representation of the Historic Buildings

The historic buildings form the core of St Fagans’ collection and are central to its identity as a museum of Welsh life. On the physical site, visitors encounter the buildings through a carefully structured spatial journey. Buildings are grouped by period or type, such as early twentieth-century streetscapes or domestic housing across different historical moments. Movement through the landscape, combined with live interpretation from staff or actors, creates a layered and immersive experience that situates the buildings within broader social and cultural narratives, as observed during an on-site visit to St Fagans.

In contrast, the website’s historic buildings page presents an alphabetised gallery of exterior images accompanied by building titles.⁷ A map displaying the original locations of the buildings appears at the top of the page, but without explanatory text clarifying its purpose or significance. There is no introductory narrative explaining how the buildings were selected, relocated, or interpreted as a collection. As a result, the buildings are presented as singular entries rather than as components of a coherent, curated narrative reflecting Welsh social history.

⁵ Amgueddfa Cymru, ‘Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) Strategy’, p. 3.

⁶ Amgueddfa Cymru, ‘St Fagans National Museum of History’, <https://museum.wales/stfagans/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

⁷ Amgueddfa Cymru, ‘Historic Buildings’, <https://museum.wales/collections/historic-buildings/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

The lack of categorisation by period, region, or theme further weakens the communication of the collection rationale. From a design perspective, inconsistencies in image aspect ratios and layout also undermine the sense of cohesion and curatorial intent.

Each building listed on the historic buildings page links to an individual page containing an exterior image, descriptive text, a “quick facts” panel, additional images, and a map showing the building’s original location and its current position at St Fagans. The quality and depth of content on these pages varies considerably. Some pages, such as that for Abernodwydd Farmhouse, include information about former occupants and historical photographs, introducing a human dimension to the building’s story.⁸

However, many pages provide only minimal contextual information. For example, the Bryn Eyr Iron Age Roundhouses page includes limited imagery and a brief descriptive text, with no discussion of the Iron Age communities that would have inhabited the structures. There is little attempt to convey scale, daily life, or the social and environmental context of the buildings. This absence of human-centred interpretation weakens the connection between the buildings and the lived experience of past Welsh communities.⁹

In comparison, digital presentations that employ multiple media forms and interpretive perspectives can offer a more engaging and informative user experience. One example is Avalon Archaeology, which specialises in experimental archaeology and public engagement. Its digital presentation of reconstructed Iron Age roundhouses incorporates video, animation, photography, and extended explanatory text, addressing both the archaeological evidence behind the reconstructions and the lives of the people who would have occupied them.¹⁰ In contrast, the St Fagans historic building pages offer limited contextual framing, reducing opportunities for users to engage with the social and cultural dimensions central to the museum’s collection rationale.

Overall, the individual building pages give the impression that limited curatorial consideration has been applied to communicating the collection rationale digitally. The pages function as isolated entries, lacking cross-referencing or narrative links that would situate individual buildings within a broader story of Welsh life and culture.

Representation of the Gallery Collections

⁸ Amgueddfa Cymru, ‘Abernodwydd Farmhouse’, <https://museum.wales/collections/historic-buildings/1/Abernodwydd-Farmhouse/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

⁹ Amgueddfa Cymru, ‘Bryn Eyr Iron Age Roundhouses’, <https://museum.wales/collections/historic-buildings/3/Bryn-Eyr-Iron-Age-Roundhouses/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

¹⁰ Avalon Archaeology, ‘Iron Age Roundhouse’, <https://swheritage.org.uk/avalon-archaeology/our-story/iron-age-roundhouse/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

The digital representation of the gallery-based collections is similarly limited. The galleries overview page presents high-quality images and brief introductory text for the permanent galleries, such as *Wales Is* and *Life Is...*, alongside links to individual gallery pages.¹¹

However, the individual gallery pages largely repeat the same images and text found on the overview page, supplemented by short promotional videos.¹² There is little information about the specific artefacts displayed within the galleries, and no images of individual objects from the collections. This contrasts sharply with the physical galleries, where artefacts are central to interpretation and storytelling.

Temporary exhibition pages, such as those for *Women in Sport: Wales*, also prioritise promotional imagery and brief descriptions.¹³ While this is understandable in the context of encouraging physical visits, it nonetheless limits the website's ability to communicate the scope and significance of the collections themselves.

Collections and Research

The *Collections and Research* section of the Amgueddfa Cymru website provides access to a searchable database described as containing over half a million objects.¹⁴ The interface includes a central search bar, advanced search options, and filters that allow users to limit results by museum site, including St Fagans, as well as by the presence of images.

At first glance, this functionality suggests a robust digital collections resource. However, closer examination reveals significant limitations in how St Fagans' collections are represented within this system. Searches conducted using common material or thematic terms such as "bronze", "coal", and "Welsh", when filtered to show only St Fagans objects, returned no results.¹⁵ An empty search using only the St Fagans filter

¹¹ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'The Galleries', <https://museum.wales/stfagans/galleries/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

¹² Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Wales Is...', <https://museum.wales/stfagans/walesis/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

¹³ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Women and Sport:Wales', <https://museum.wales/stfagans/whatson/12817/Women-and-Sport-Wales/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

¹⁴ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Collections and Research', <https://museum.wales/collections/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

¹⁵ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Search Results: "bronze"', <https://museum.wales/collections/online/?field0=string&value0=bronze&field1=place&value1=St%20Fagans> [Accessed 15 January 2026]. Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Search Results: "coal"', <https://museum.wales/collections/online/?field0=place&value0=St%20Fagans&field1=string&value1=coal> [Accessed 15 January 2026]. Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Search Results: "Welsh"', <https://museum.wales/collections/online/?field0=place&value0=St%20Fagans&field1=string&value1=Welsh> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

similarly produced zero results.¹⁶ This suggests either that the St Fagans collections have not yet been fully digitised and uploaded to the database, or that there is a structural issue in how the site's collections are indexed within the wider system.

Although the digital integration of the museum's collection is still in development, this absence is particularly striking given St Fagans' emphasis on social history and everyday material culture. The lack of searchable object records undermines the museum's stated commitment to expanding digital access to collections, raising questions about the website's effectiveness as a public-facing interpretive resource. While the database may function effectively for other museums within the Amgueddfa Cymru network, the limited visibility of St Fagans objects weakens the communication of its collection rationale in a digital context.

Beneath the search bar on the Collections and Research page, a series of thumbnail links appear, initially suggesting collection categories. In practice, these links lead to broader informational content on research activity, disciplinary areas, and museum-wide initiatives across Amgueddfa Cymru, rather than directly to object collections associated with St Fagans. While this content is relevant to the research context of the collections, its placement directly below the search interface creates the impression that it offers access to collection material when it does not. The featured content blocks displayed further down the page attempt to curate and highlight individual areas of interest, and this curatorial intent should be acknowledged. However, the lack of a clear ordering principle or thematic structure limits their effectiveness and contributes to uncertainty about how these features relate specifically to St Fagans' collections.

In comparison, the Picture Library webpage offers a clearer, more effective model for presenting digital collections.¹⁷ Below the search bar, the gallery is organised through defined categories, each leading to pages that include brief explanatory text before presenting a masonry-style grid of images. This structure allows users to understand the nature and scope of the material before engaging with individual items, while the consistent use of categorisation supports browsing and discovery. In contrast to the featured content blocks used elsewhere on the site, this approach offers a more transparent and navigable framework for engaging with collections in a digital context.

Conclusion

This report has evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the collection rationale for St Fagans National Museum of History, as presented on its website. The analysis has

¹⁶ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Search Results: Filter:St Fagans', <https://museum.wales/collections/online/?field0=place&value0=St%20Fagans> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

¹⁷ Amgueddfa Cymru, 'Picture Library', <https://images.museumwales.ac.uk/> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

shown that, while the museum articulates clear collecting priorities at an institutional level, these priorities are not consistently communicated through the digital presentation of St Fagans' collections.

Overall, the website places greater emphasis on supporting visits and promoting events than on clearly communicating the collection rationale. The historic buildings are presented with limited contextual framing and little sense of narrative connection, and the gallery pages provide only minimal information about the objects that underpin the museum's social history collections. The *Collections and Research* section, although extensive at the wider museum level, offers very limited visibility of material specifically associated with St Fagans, making it difficult for users to gain a clear understanding of the site's collections through digital means.

These issues should be considered in the wider strategic context of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, which recognises that its digital platforms are still under development. The limitations identified in this report, therefore, reflect the challenges of implementing a coherent digital strategy across a large and diverse museum network, rather than simply shortcomings in curatorial intent.

Nonetheless, given the emphasis placed on digital access within the collection development strategy, the current website represents a missed opportunity. Greater use of varied media, alongside more explicit attention to people, stories, and social context, would allow the digital content to move beyond surface-level presentations of buildings and towards a clearer articulation of the museum's collection rationale. As it stands, the website does not fully convey the cultural and historical narratives that underpin the collections at St Fagans National Museum of History.

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Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, *Search Results: “Welsh” (filtered to St Fagans)*, <https://museum.wales/collections/online/?field0=place&value0=St%20Fagans&field1=string&value1=Welsh> [Accessed 15 January 2026].

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