



Assignment feedback form

(to be completed by marker)

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PORTFOLIO - CRITICAL REPORT - PART 1

Student number:

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For completion by marker:

Comments:

Marker's signature:

Date:

Provisional mark:

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.

Critical Review - Cardigan Castle.

This review is of Cardigan Castle as a whole. It is the historic heart of Cardigan and has only come back into the hands of the community (via a charitable trust) very recently, after having become derelict thanks to the previous (private) owner. After a massive injection of grant funding, and a lot of hard work, the castle was officially opened to the public in 2015. Its role is to share its history and the history of Cardigan with the world, and to become the heart of the town again.



Cardigan Castle.

The History and the Site

The site is beside the Teifi River in Cardigan. The first stone castle was built there in 1110 and was later captured and rebuilt by Lord Rhys, who held the first ever eisteddfod there in 1176. The current site, which is a scheduled ancient monument, consists of the remains of the 12th century castle, an intact Georgian mansion, which has had some changes over the centuries and also incorporates part of the castle. There are also various outbuildings in the grounds, including servants' quarters, a coach house, stables, and a WW2 pillbox, as well as the gardens, both produce and scenic, which have also been revived and are thriving (Johnson 2015). There is also a new, slate and glass restaurant, which is a 21st century addition to the site. Its construction was not universally popular, but the whole site is a living example of change - of function, purpose and character over time, so this new building is simply carrying on that tradition of change. However, the most important change is

that the site is now open to the entire community and to visitors (for a small entrance fee), rather than being a place for historic battles or elite living quarters. And, with that understanding, the community has embraced the restaurant wholeheartedly - using it not just as a place to eat, but to celebrate private and public events.



1176 Restaurant - street view.

The Site as Museum - practical issues

The entire site is a museum in and of itself and it was decided at restoration not to make it a snapshot of one moment in time. Instead it reflects many changes, external and internal, all highlighted within the interpretation and information. The inside of the Georgian mansion (Castle Green House) has been restored and reconstituted to reflect various aspects of the history of that building, right up to and including the most recent owner - there being one room left almost as it was before the restoration (after being emptied of rubbish and cleaned), showing some of the destruction to the fabric of the building. The outbuildings have been restored beautifully and now have been fitted out as holiday lets instead of servants' accommodation, stables and coach house.

As with many site-based museums, it is imperative that the castle bring in revenue in order to stay open. However, unlike the National Trust or English Heritage, the Castle does not have a fee-paying membership base, so the management must do what they can to keep the cash flowing and the doors open. This includes the holiday lets (which are 5-star serviced apartments, not short term rentals like the National Trust), and also conference hosting, weddings, castle-related history events, shared entertainment events (theatrical and musical) in partnership with Theatr Mwldan and Small World Theatre (both located in Cardigan), entrance fees and, of course, gift shop sales. It means that the site is becoming part of the community rather than an elite establishment from which people feel separated. Membership of the National Trust, for instance, is beyond the budget for the majority of people and their entrance fees are often quite substantial as well. Whereas Cardigan Castle is very keen to avoid this kind of thing happening and offers a £5/year entrance fee to locals and low entrance fees generally.

The Site as Museum - exhibitions and events

As for display, there is a permanent display relating to the Eisteddfod. This is in one room, with a video display and glass cases carrying descriptions and narrative, both of the history and to accompany the contents and, whenever they can borrow one, the castle staff have a locally sourced bardic chair on display as well. There is also a specially-made large sized bardic chair in the gardens, which is to honour and remember Lord Rhys.

The display cases in Castle Green House are of museum quality but a little large for the size of the rooms - however they are a result of decisions made by CADW during the original set-up and changing them for something more appropriate is on the 'to do when there's funding' list.



1. Castle Green House.
2. Before.
3. After
4. Video history
6. Medieval Day

Every effort has been made, within the constraints of finance and staffing, to make the castle and its history as approachable and interesting as possible - to the widest number of people. There are regular events for families and children, as well as history enthusiasts, which involve dressing up in period costume, re-enactments, stories, art and craft projects for children, lectures for adults as well as the theatre and musical performances in the grounds. And Castle Green House, plus the facilities, gardens and restaurant are also disabled accessible, the house having had an accessible lift installed during the refurbishment and the garden path and restaurant top entrance put in place with wheelchairs in mind (www.cardigancastle.com).

The National Eisteddfod is a permanent theme, but the content varies and contains castle-owned items, along with borrowed items on display. There is also a rolling video on show at the entrance that tells the story of the castle from its earliest beginnings up to the present time, another similar in the house about the story of Cardigan itself, and one on the most recent private owner, Barbara Wood. There are interpretation panels on past residents and local contemporary history, including the Army during the last war, Miss Wood - and the restoration itself. Along with all that, the castle has a very keen and knowledgeable historian/archaeologist, who has written the guide book for the castle, provided historical information for the user-friendly website, delivers lectures and talks and also trained a cohort of local volunteers, all of whom act as tour guides.

The restrictions they have are mostly due to limited funds and space, both rooms and display space, as well as content. I believe they've made the best use they can of what they have access to, bearing in mind also that people go through the house and grounds unattended and everything needs to be both safe and secure. They also can't make the entire place and its remaining buried history available for further historical investigation or public inspection, for a number of reasons: there are protected bats roosting in the medieval cellar, the re-building work covered up some medieval ruins discovered directly under the central hall of the house, one wing of the house and some of the outbuildings being used as holiday lets, and they can't dig in the garden for more archaeology because it's listed. From the angle of the castle's history I think they are doing the best they can with what they have available to them. Certainly the extensively researched knowledge base is second to none and every opportunity is taken to share the knowledge. They even take small groups to see the bats and, at the same time, share the history of the tower - whenever the natural history folks give permission to go down into the cellar.



6. 12th century tower - attached to the back of Castle Green House.
7. Bat in the cellar under 12th century tower
8. Medieval arch under central hall (leads to bat cellar, if it were excavated)

Evaluation and Critique.

In my view, the staff and volunteers at the castle have done an excellent job in presenting and sharing the castle and its history with visitors, both local and distant. The videos, displays, interpretation, tours and guide book are professionally planned and executed. Geraint Jenkins, former director of the National Museum of Wales, was well known to the castle historian and the trustees and his ideas around accuracy and authenticity are shared by all. Every piece of information presented is extensively researched and every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the provenance of every item and, where it is unsure or unknown, this is stated. Cardigan Castle is not an over-egged heritage museum aimed at getting tourists in, which Jenkins abhorred, it is the heart of the town and it is bringing new life to Cardigan with every year it has been open to the public (Jenkins 2009:1-7).

Everything the staff and volunteers do is aimed at increasing the knowledge base at the castle - and sharing it with both adults and children in an accessible, interesting and appropriate manner. Their events are both

engaging and fun, the talks and guided tours are not just full of names and dates, but narrative, interesting facts and funny stories from the past that stay in people's minds. Local people are justly proud of the castle and it has certainly boosted cultural pride in an area which used to be a major port and market with its own railway station and a bustling town centre and hinterland. The port and station are long gone, but the castle is back and it is definitely no moribund pile of ancient stonework. It is alive and full of people's ideas for sharing, teaching, learning and community growth, just as Alexander describes (1996:12-15) museums should be. And it also ably and deliberately demonstrates - not as an object, but as a site - that it has a 'life' and a 'career' - a 'biography', as per Kopytoff, and as described by Samuel and Alberti (2005:560-62). Not only has politics, war and society impacted it over the centuries, it is now having its own impact on society, as it revitalises Cardigan town. Its relationship to the town and the people is now totally different. No longer a centre of power and control, it is a place of fun, laughter, life and learning - for everyone.

The castle has historical objects and displays, colour coded and professional labelling and display boards, models, pictures, news items, photographs, maps, information guidebooks, looped video history vignettes, guided tours, lectures relating to the castle and the town - and events like Medieval Day, Remembrance Day, etc. For a small, local, historic site, with very few staff and a small number of mostly elderly, but enthusiastic volunteers, they work miracles every day and would certainly put a lot of CADW properties to shame. All of which demonstrates that what they do with respect to both engagement and interpretation definitely lives up to the sort of criteria listed by Ambrose and Paine as being vital to effective interpretation (2006:78-81).

In addition, the restoration of the castle and its environs has definitely begun to revitalise the local economy, both in terms of incoming visitors and in drawing local audiences to the various events, as more and more well-known acts want to come to the castle to perform. Cardigan Castle is becoming famous nationally and internationally, thanks in no small part to the Channel 4 Restoration of the Year Award it won in 2017 - and the town and local area are benefiting. It is becoming a cultural centre in its own right, as well as a top class event venue, alongside its role as guardian of Cardigan's history. Again Ambrose and Paine stress that this kind of cultural expansion is a role that museums can play in their local community (2006:10-11), to the great benefit of both, and the castle is surely doing that.



9. Glen Johnson, historian, with historic photographs, maps and newspaper clippings.

10. The restored dining room and perfect copy of old wallpaper and decoration.

11. 12. Models made by Small World Theatre depicting medieval character and servant.

13. Halloween event, held every year, where tales of the castle's ghosts are told and a little bit of ghostly re-enactment goes on in the dark.

14. The WW2 pillbox.

15. Celebrating VE Day anniversary.

I can find very little to fault with what they are doing, within the constraints already mentioned. But generally, what the castle focuses on is, for the most part, all about the castle. Which is understandable, but leads to the one criticism I would make, which is that, for locals, once you've seen it, you've seen it. There is little to draw you back again more than once or twice for the history or exhibitions. After seeing the house and grounds, people usually only come to show visitors, or when major events are held in the grounds. The shared theatrical and musical events always draw good crowds, but they are only there for the performances. The castle is just a venue at those times. And it would be fatal for the castle, and for the community, if it came to be seen more as a venue than as 'Cardigan Castle'.

The staff and volunteers regularly connect to the community as best they can through the various events they hold, which celebrate links to historical events, from the Medieval times and historical characters, like Lord Rhys and Sir William Marshall, to the Civil War and the World Wars, as well as high days and holy days like Easter and Christmas - and Halloween.. But I believe it could do more to fully engage people - as more than just visitors - and with a minimal budget. I want to see the castle relating to more than just its own history with an overview of the town: its known history, buildings and businesses, all of which is interesting but can be seen as just names and dates and princes and gentry - and all in the distant past, apart from the war.

I believe the castle could also focus on more recent history, that of the town rather than just the castle - and focus on the people's history, on their lives and experiences. And, within that initiative, they could directly engage with and encourage local people to help provide the content and to curate the resulting exhibitions and events. This would create stronger links across the community. It will give people more of a feeling of ownership of their castle - and it will engender interest and enthusiasm in the next generation, to prepare them to take over the reins when the current generation of staff and volunteers are gone. This would be REAL 'inclusive community' work, as described by Crooke (2006:170-74), empowering people to become more than spectators, to instead engage and themselves become part of the history of the castle, as well as the town. Thereby ensuring the future of the castle as the historic heart of the town and not just a money-making venue which, over time, could happen if people stop caring about community connection and each other, and just focus on revenue.



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Photographs

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