

A Reflection on 'Y Gweithdy' in St Fagans, Cardiff

“Don't go to a museum with a destination. Museums are wormholes to other worlds. They are ecstasy machines. Follow your eyes to wherever they lead you... and the world should begin to change for you.”

That's what Jerry Saltz, an art critic from Illinois, once said. I am inclined to agree with him. Museums are wormholes to different eras, different countries and different cultures.

St Fagans is a great example of a wormhole museum. Set in rural Cardiff, it is an open air museum depicting Welsh life through the ages, from the Palaeolithic to modern day. It's main attractions are the 50 historical Welsh buildings that the museum have rebuilt within its walls which is accessible for visitors to explore. The buildings include Llys Llywelyn, the royal court of the Princes of Gwynedd, the Bryn Eyr Iron Age roundhouses as well as The Vulcan, a Cardiff pub and hotel that closed in 2012. I see on their website that The Vulcan was set in Newtown, or 'Little Ireland' as it was known, due to the influx of Irish people who moved there to mainly work on the docks. I start to wonder if this is where my Irish ancestors lived in Cardiff and lo and behold, I see the name of my first cousin (however many times removed...I think 4?), Jim Driscoll. Jim Driscoll was a British featherweight champion (arguably World Champion but I won't get into that) and also a relative of mine. In my quick visit to The Vulcan, I learn that they have rebuilt it to how it would have been in 1915, which is around the time that my family would have visited. It was quite an emotional moment, standing in a pile of sawdust, thinking about how important this social hub would have been to my Great-great Grandparents. I'm not sure what the sawdust was about though.



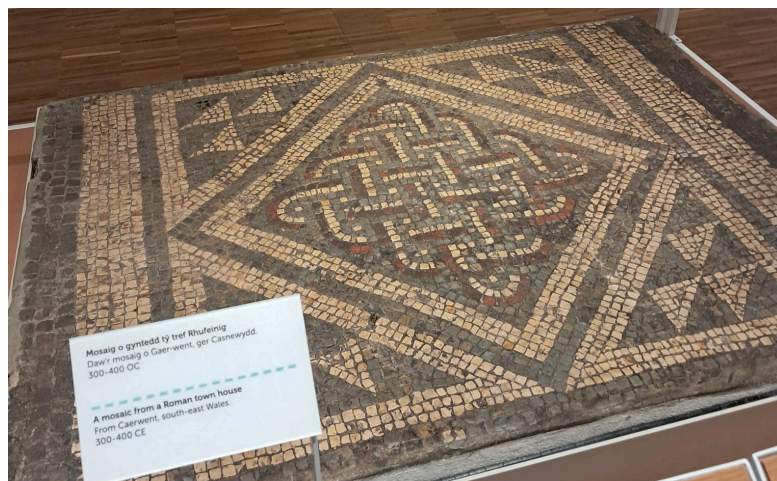
The Vulcan and the infamous Sawdust- credit to Amgueddfa Cymru

This trip down the memories of my ancestors set me up for my visit to the 'Gweithdy' or 'Workshop'. The space includes educational learning rooms as well as an exhibition on the history of crafting in Wales, from the Neolithic to the mid 20th Century. The displays contain artefacts that show the progression of working with stone, plants, wood and fabric as well as interactive activities and informational videos. As a Welsh woman with ties to this land for at least the last 300 years, this is an important presentation on the lives of my ancestors, at least in part, whether they were crafters or not. It gives me a tangible connection to the way they lived, the tools and furniture they used and the clothes they wore.



'Y Gweithdy'

I began my time at 'Y Gweithdy' at the first display which was the history of stone working. Next to the big 'Making with stone' sign was an amazingly intact Roman mosaic which was discovered in Caerwent. The display included a simplified explanation of how stones are turned into mosaics but lacked in depth information about the making and the discovery of the mosaic. As an archaeologist, I have an interest in the discovery and the excavation of artefacts and the lack of information on this is something that becomes noticeable throughout the exhibit.



Roman Mosaic found in Caerwent

The display continues with an example of a modern clay effigy of the Hindu God Ganesha and examples of Roman, Medieval and Bronze Age pottery. Some items such as a red-colour coated Roman pot had information about where it was made, which in this case was Oxfordshire, but most artefacts only had a rough location and date. I understand for a young visitor or someone who doesn't have much interest in the artefacts, a location and date is sufficient and too much information can be overwhelming. Personally, as I walked around the exhibition, I was feeling a bit underwhelmed and felt frustrated that I wasn't able to learn more about the artefacts. Although as I'm writing this, I think back to when I visited the Egyptian Museum in Torino last year and how overwhelmed I was at all the information given. Although the amount of artefacts housed there was incredible, I left feeling like I learnt nothing and I struggle to remember a lot of what I saw. The great thing about this exhibition, which might be due to multiple visits, is that I remember what artefacts are housed there.

One cabinet especially caught my eye and it was the knapping display. Inside was an array of flint tools and microliths dated from 300,000 years ago to the early Bronze Age. The display reminded me of my first ever archaeological find at Llanllyr earlier in the year. I found a piece of red-brown flint in my trench and I don't think I stopped talking about it for quite some time, to the annoyance of everyone else.



The knapping display

The exhibit had similar displays for other types of crafting and the space hosted a few interactive activities as well. There is a big basket and rope to learn how to weave, different kinds of stone to feel and many jigsaws to put together. Next to the knapping display, there were replica Roman and Iron Age tools which were made by the Blacksmith at St Fagans. I can appreciate the importance of having physical activities as someone who struggles to concentrate whilst reading or listening. Being able to feel, use and handle replica items is a great way for children and people with a short attention span, like myself, to learn about archaeological artefacts. Maybe traditional information displays work for the older generation but I find visual and physical learning much better for absorbing information. I think that's why I felt like I had learnt a lot at the dig in Llanllyr and I definitely remember finding that piece of flint.



Replicas of Roman and Iron Age tools

All in all, the exhibition is a great place to learn about the history of crafting in Wales. Although my initial thought whilst I was there was it was lacking depth in information, maybe my initial feelings were harsh. There were many ways to learn about Welsh life and to learn about how our ancestors lived, through booklets, videos, activities and even through asking staff. I was able to imagine my family using the tools, wearing the clothes, using the furniture. Some might even have used these specific items. It doesn't seem too far fetched when I know my relatively recent ancestors were regular visitors of one of the historical buildings on site. It's amazing what a museum and a little imagination can do.