MUSEUM REPORT - In the light of one of your visits, examine the arguments for and against removing monuments / artifacts OR buildings from their sites in the landscape to the safekeeping of the museum - Gwenllian Anthony (1404702)

When thinking of a museum, it is natural to imagine a glass case building with pages upon pages of information - too much to take in for a single visit. They can be seen as places for academics and the intelligent, and not accessible for the average person. But, recent trends within the museum sphere are starting to change this view on heritage sites. Modern museums are stepping away from the 'temple of culture' image that many historical collections were built upon, and now it is possible to turn almost anything into a museum. They are found on boats, coal mines, farms, warehouses, prisons and castles (Hooper-Greenhill, E. 1992). The St Fagans National History Museum of Wales is one of these sites that emphasises the importance of accessibility and the importance of active learning. The founder and first director of the museum, Iorwerth Peate, believed that an open air museum should consist of two parts. These are: a building, where there is a systematic display of the materials of life and culture and the open air that presents national life in its environment (Kostarigka, E. 2009). Although many scholars believe that a hands-on and immersive approach to learning can be very beneficial, there is an argument to be had around the issues that arise when removing historical monuments from their original sites. This report will be drawing on observations from visiting St Fagans National History Museum, and will be discussing the issues of preservation, accessibility and context when removing monuments across Wales to house on site.

The Vulcan Hotel at St Fagans - Credit to Amgueddfa Cymru

The museum houses over 40 historic buildings from across Wales, that have been re-erected in the land surrounding St Fagans Castle. The buildings range from Bronze Age roundhouses to a Medieval Court to a 18th century urinal. There are also multiple educational exhibition spaces that include Welsh art, Welsh music, and national archaeological finds. Many of the buildings have been re-erected due to a threat of demolition or collapse due to natural decay. One of the main historical buildings at St

Fagans is St Teilo's church, which is a late 12th century or early 13th century church from Llandeilo Tal-y-bont near Pontarddulais. It is also believed to have been built on the site of an earlier Celtic church for which there are little remains (St Teilo's Church. N.D). It was made a scheduled ancient monument by Cadw in the 1980's and was offered to the museum in 1984, after it had been abandoned and was reaching a state of disrepair (A medieval church moves to the museum, 2007). The museum decided to re-erect the church as it could have looked around 1510-30, with all the elements that are associated with a late medieval Catholic Church such as a rood screen, loft, altars and colourful paintings (St Teilo's Church. N.D).

St Teilo's Church, in situ in 1984 - credit to Amgueddfa Cymru

One of the newest additions is the Vulcan Hotel and pub which was originally situated in Newtown or "Little Ireland". The area was built to house the growing workforce needed to build and service Cardiff docks in the 1850's, with the Vulcan registering as an 'ale house' in 1853. The building was threatened with closure and demolition in 2009 and was offered to Amgueddfa Cymru in 2012. Due to the access to architectural plans from the 1910's as well as interviews with the daughter of the landlord from this period, Amgueddfa Cymru decided this was the era that was most suitable to rebuild into (The Vulcan Hotel, N.D).

What are the issues that arise when removing historical monuments from their original site? On an archaeological level, it is important to understand that excavating in itself is damaging. Therefore, when an archaeological excavation is taking place on a site and monuments are taken away, it is understood that any future understanding of the site will be no more than our current understanding. If evidence is destroyed and only parts of the excavation that is considered important is noted, it is virtually impossible to gain back any lost information (Renfrew, C and Bahn, P. 1993). Context is of utmost importance when it comes to archaeological finds and to be able to reconstruct the human past, it is imperative to understand the archaeological context of any artefacts, buildings and organic remains. To be able to build a wider and fuller reconstruction of the association between artefacts and ecofacts, context is key as it allows archaeologists to form more reliable theories (Renfrew, C and Bahn, P. 1993). An example of this is the sealed deposits of stone tools that Jacques Boucher de Perthes found in 1838. He found these stone tools in sealed deposits alongside bones of extinct animals, which confirmed that humanity was much older than had traditionally been believed. If these had been removed from their

context and found in a private collection, he wouldn't have been able to prove his important theories (Renfrew, C. And Bahn, P. 1993). Therefore it is entirely possible that the removal of historic monuments to St Fagans halts any further understanding of the building and its history, as well as the possibility of halting understanding of other nearby monuments.

With the creation of what could be seen as a historical theme park, there is the threat of 'disneyfying' national history and culture, which is making the experience closer to a funfair than that which used to be offered by the austere (Hooper-Greenhill, E. 1992). As previously mentioned, tourism moves millions of people around the world yearly. In 2024, tourism's total contribution was 11 trillion U.S dollars, making up a 10 percent share of the total global GDP (Statista. 2025). When tourism is involved, it can become a balancing act between authenticity and what makes money. Reconstructions and reproductions of architectural heritage can often be created through the eyes of non-specialist visitors, emphasising tourism over truth and entertainment over education (Barry, K.M. 2017). Although Iorwerth Peate spoke of open-air museums presenting national life in its environment, it is important to note that this is not always the case when re-constructing buildings from across the country. A Cardiff city pub and a roundhouse from North Wales have not co-existed in the same environment until they were purposefully re-erected at St Fagans National History Museum. They have both lost their contextual environment and are now money-making products.

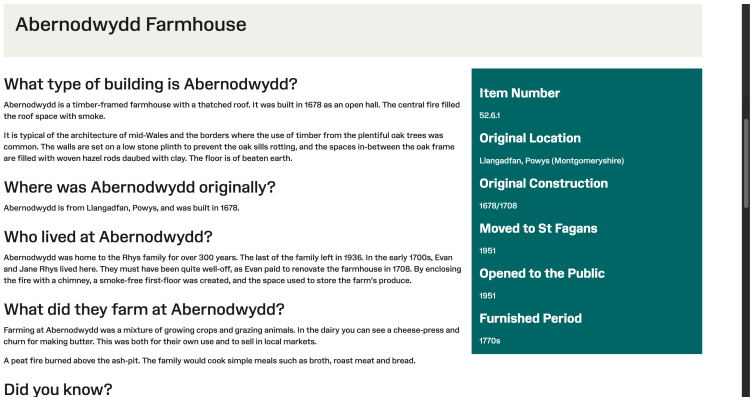
Although the history can be skewed and directed towards the non-specialist visitors, national heritage museums such as St Fagans can provide shared memory and heritage that helps strengthen group bonds and a felt connection to history (Barry, K.M. 2017). Carr (2007) writes about the importance of 'know how' rather than knowing a body of knowledge, considering activity as a means of understanding the world. For a younger audience, activity and play are both important aspects of the educational journey. For example, Piaget (1967) explores the idea of play being a mechanism of behaviour which allows a child to adapt themselves to external conditions and to 'construct' worlds, as well as understanding the world around them (Kostarigka, E. 2009). Although it may not always be historically accurate and targeted towards academics, 'disneyfied' heritage sites can allow children and non-specialist visitors to immerse themselves in national culture. It can fuel the imagination, connect visitors with their past and breed interest in local and national histories. The realisation and simplification of such histories, ultimately, makes those histories more accessible. It allows people who wouldn't or can't access books, to educate themselves on national history. This may be children, people with disabilities or learning difficulties, or people with no interest in reading. It removes the detachment that some may feel to academic and educational pursuits which can only be a positive thing.

As mentioned earlier, archaeological excavations and removal of monuments can be incredibly damaging as well as disruptive to further research. Although this is the case, there is an argument to be made about the importance of preserving historical buildings before they become too damaged to save. With deliberate and natural destruction of historical buildings, whether it is political, capitalistic or environmental, being an ever-present threat, is it in the best interest of national heritage organisations to save these monuments? To many nations across the world, material remains of the past are valued as an important component of national heritage and national and regional governments have a responsibility to avoid unnecessary destruction of that heritage (Renfrew, C and Bahn, P. 1993). With regards to St Teilo's Church and The Vulcan Hotel at St Fagans, both of these buildings were at risk of destruction from capitalist and natural reasons. Without the re-erection of these buildings at St Fagans, they would more than likely be a memory now

with little or no material trace of their existence. It can be argued that open-air museums such as St Fagans are saving historical buildings and that the rebuilding of these monuments are but another phase in its history. They allow visitors in the 21st century to immerse themselves in history and culture, as well as giving the buildings a far better chance of surviving for many more years (A medieval church moves to the museum. 2007).

Photos of Abernodwydd farmhouse being built

The immersive experience of visiting a site such as St Fagans can be a great way of inspiring and educating the public. But, can that same inspiration and education be translated to an online setting? The current online website includes a list of historical buildings which includes a brief history and bullet point information. It notes the original location and construction date, the year it was moved to St Fagans, the furnished period date along with more specific information such as who lived and worked there and the type of building. The site also includes an interactive map showing the original locations and a gallery full of 2D and 360 pictures of all the monuments. The website is useful if looking for a brief and easily accessible way of educating about national history, but it lacks real substance for those wanting to delve deeper. There is also a lack of immersive experiences such as 3D virtual tours, which could allow the international community to engage with Welsh history and culture, not just those who visit physically. There are some 3D experiences with bullet point information, but again, it lacks real substance and it is only catered towards the non-specialist visitor. Most major museums, such as The Louvre and The British Museum, offer some kind of immersive experience such as self-guided virtual room tours, VR experiences and interactive platforms for history and art. Although St Fagans have dabbled with this on their website, there are many other interactive ways that could create a more immersive and educational experience online.



Abernodwydd Farmhouse

What type of building is Abernodwydd?

Abernodwydd is a timber-framed farmhouse with a thatched roof. It was built in 1678 as an open hall. The central fire filled the roof space with smoke.

It is typical of the architecture of mid-Wales and the borders where the use of timber from the plentiful oak trees was common. The walls are set on a low stone plinth to prevent the oak sills rotting, and the spaces in-between the oak frame are filled with woven hazel rods daubed with clay. The floor is of beaten earth.

Where was Abernodwydd originally?

Abernodwydd is from Llangadfan, Powys, and was built in 1678.

Who lived at Abernodwydd?

Abernodwydd was home to the Rhys family for over 300 years. The last of the family left in 1936. In the early 1700s, Evan and Jane Rhys lived here. They must have been quite well-off, as Evan paid to renovate the farmhouse in 1708. By enclosing the fire with a chimney, a smoke-free first-floor was created, and the space used to store the farm's produce.

What did they farm at Abernodwydd?

Farming at Abernodwydd was a mixture of growing crops and grazing animals. In the dairy you can see a cheese-press and churn for making butter. This was both for their own use and to sell in local markets.

A peat fire burned above the ash-pit. The family would cook simple meals such as broth, roast meat and bread.

Did you know?

Item Number

52.6.1

Original Location

Llangadfan, Powys (Montgomeryshire)

Original Construction

1678/1708

Moved to St Fagans

1951

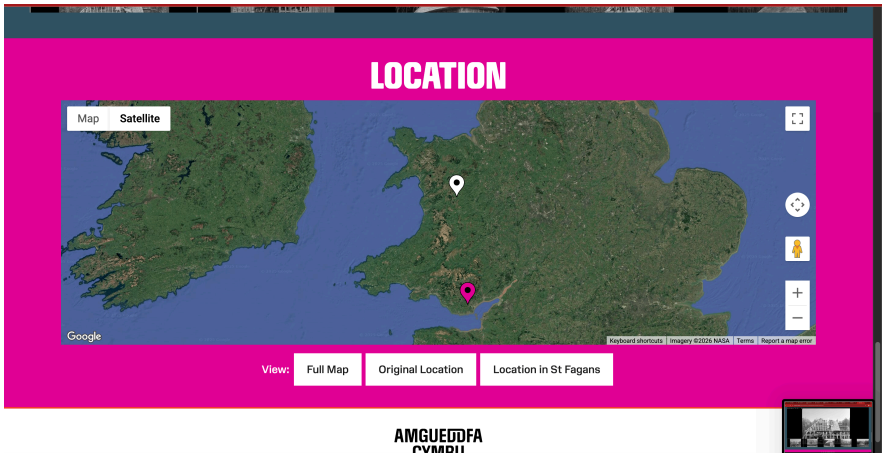
Opened to the Public

1951

Furnished Period

1770s

Brief Information on the Abernodwydd Farmhouse



Interactive Map showing the original location of Abernodwydd farmhouse

To conclude, the removal and re-erection of historical buildings will continue to be debated for years to come, due to the delicate balance of preserving monuments and destroying historical context. The damage that excavations cause can make it increasingly difficult for future archaeologists and historians to gather further information about artefacts and buildings, and can also hinder the discoveries of other finds in its locality. Although this is an issue, it's also in the hope of preserving historical buildings that are facing threat of destruction, such as St Teilo's Church or The Vulcan Hotel. In the case of The Vulcan Hotel, it was at threat of demolition as part of an area redevelopment, therefore any remains or archaeological context would have been built over regardless. The re-erection of historical buildings to a museum such as St Fagans increases the accessibility to national history and culture. It allows people who wouldn't engage with written text to have access to shared heritage and to personal history. Even though some scholars may argue that it can turn heritage sites into theme parks, ultimately it opens up the subjects of history, anthropology, archaeology, culture and art to those who wouldn't necessarily engage otherwise. This can only be seen as a positive thing for the humanities. Also, with the development of virtual experiences and the ever increasing dependency on online educational systems, it opens up the possibility of online only exhibitions. This could possibly lead to re-erecting historical buildings becoming unnecessary, allowing

archaeologists to continue researching historical sites without removing monuments from their context, and the possibility of in-depth tours and immersive experiences becoming available from the original sites of historical buildings. This may very well be what bridges the gap between accessibility, preservation and removal from context, in the future.

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