

A reflective response to the St Fagans field trip experience from the perspective of Archaeology as a discipline

St Fagans is the national museum of history for Wales and is one of the leading outdoor museums that features around 50 historic buildings featuring victorian era buildings and medieval chapels. The museum, which is situated on the grounds of a grade 1 listed building, St Fagans castle and gardens, also features exhibits within the primary building and entry way to the location. Said building stands out as unlike the rest for its more modern, brutalist architecture. The central traditional museum building holds only 2 main exhibition galleries that cover “Welsh life”.

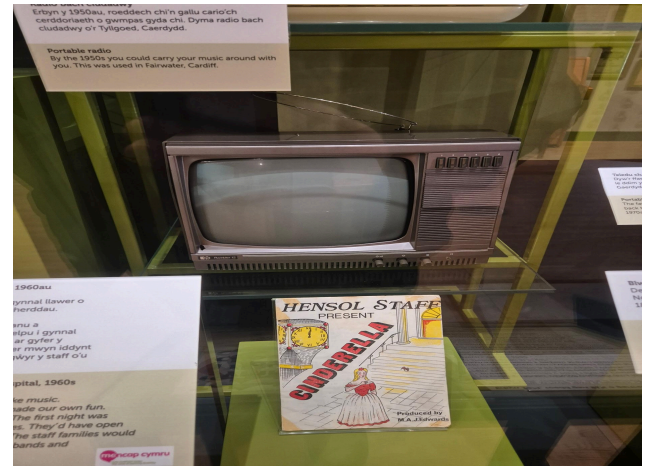
The exhibition galleries were formatted like a traditional museum with a rather linear pathway beginning with bronze cauldrons dated to around 700 BCE, roman tableware and drinking vessels from around 50 to 400 CE. The exhibition then continued with even more artefacts, including medieval travel flasks and jugs, basically the setting for a medieval table. As a person starting their journey into archaeology, from my perspective the display was quite interesting and stimulating as it intrigued me to see what items were in better kept condition than others or trying to imagine how artefacts like the travel mug, shaped to look like a barrel, could be paralleled to the modern day. It really is interesting to see what people valued back then and how it strangely aligns to current times. For instance, amidst all the brutality in the medieval period people still valued vanity items, such as a travel mug that would be shaped to look like a barrel.



-Travel mug (centre) surrounded by medieval jugs and jars. (At St Fagans Oriel Gallery)

The exhibition then pivoted to farming life as a general topic to Wales specifically. I had seen these sorts of exhibits before during a previous field trip and I wasn't particularly interested. However, without doubt I understood why the section was included as Wales is synonymous for its farming and “greenthumb” reputation. The exhibition then primarily had items from the Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian eras. Without doubt, these sets of artefacts were not interesting to me and although they definitely have a place in an exhibition about Wales. The section which included more contemporary items from the 50s to the 70s, such as a caravan and a TV set, I found most boring to me as they aren't of any specific history to Wales or of any major relevance to my discipline. They are included in the exhibit because that's what people did for entertainment during that period. People used caravans and TV sets in England, Scotland and Ireland back then. Therefore, it fails to emphasise localised Welsh culture, which I believed to be the point of the exhibit. However, the Welsh rugby section

serves to make my point of how out of context some of the exhibits are to being about Wales and not in general that period of time. Although the exhibit on rugby isn't a sport unique to Wales, it is one that has a story to tell about Welsh culture through sport.



- (Left) A pair of Welsh rugby shirts and a piece of memorabilia from the 1999 rugby world cup as the backdrop. (At St Fagans Oriel Gallery)
- (Right) A Portable TV set from the 1970s, PYE Rambler 12. (At St Fagans Oriel Gallery)

However, a definite benefit to these exhibitions in relation to the other field trips we went to was the level of detail that was included in the writings beneath the artefacts. It definitely gave needed context to stuff that would have been difficult to put into context with little historical information about the time periods on display which was in stark contrast to the Carmarthenshire museum, which featured little to no context on the items included in its display.

To conclude the experience, there is continuity within our field trips as within this same exhibit you could find the grave markers for the princes of Dehuebarth, that was rather jarringly taken from a previous site we visited at Strata Florida. This was "interesting" from the point of view of a person about to study archaeology, as this happens often and is most common in large national museums like St Fagans; It is quite prevalent within St Fagans as the primary bulk of land the museum sits upon is made up of reconstructed old buildings. This struck me as quite contradictory that architecture is deconstructed and rebuilt on a site to serve as a preservation and celebration of "heritage". From a personal perspective being from Newcastle Upon Tyne, if some of our heritage sites or buildings were moved to a museum outside of London, I would not be impressed. Even if the museum paid and was given permission from councils of the land they are removing the heritage buildings from, it still seems a bit reductive to have taken heritage from these sites to become museum exhibits to be viewed by people who are from far away or different countries entirely regardless of how much money the locations may get in return. This is also echoed in the way the museum is located outside of the capital of Wales, Cardiff, which is right on the border to England. The museum is catering for people from outside of Wales for obvious profit, which is perfectly reasonable but a little irritating as I feel they would not get the full picture of Wales from just being to Cardiff, no amount of reconstructed buildings will ever recapture and contextualize their original setting and local heritage. Overall the museum is both greatly informative (on the displays) and interactive as well but also, reductive to portraying "Welsh life". It is also disappointing from an archaeological perspective as these

sites are moved from where they were originally built. I feel the location where these sites are is just as important to understanding and properly digesting these buildings of significance, that hold localised cultural significance, as the actual building itself.



- (Left) A grave marker for a Dehuebarth prince removed from the site at Strata Florida. See picture right. (At St Fagans Oriel Gallery)
- (Right) The site of the Dehuebarth Princes supposed graves, a few gravemarkers removed and located now at St Fagans National History Museum. See picture left. (At Strata Florida Abbey/Abaty Ystrad Fflur)

Bibliography

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All pictures were taken by Sam Bennett- student of Archaeology at the University of Wales Trinity St David. With credit to St Fagans National History Museum and Strata Florida Abbey site.