

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.

The first stone castle was built there in 1110, and was later captured by Lord Rhys, who held the first ever eisteddfod there in 1176. The current site consists of a Georgian mansion, which has had some changes over the centuries and also incorporates part of the medieval castle, along with the outbuildings (including a WW2 pillbox) and the Grade II listed gardens. And a restaurant which is a 21st century addition to the site, carrying on the tradition of growth and change.

The whole site is a museum in and of itself, while inside the mansion (Castle Green House) the reconstituted internal decoration also reflects the history of the building, right up to and including the most recent owner. As for display, there is a permanent display relating to the Eisteddfod over the centuries. This is in one room, with a video display and glass cases carrying descriptions and narrative to accompany the contents and, whenever they can borrow one, they have a locally sourced bardic chair on display as well. The display cases are museum size and quality but not quite appropriate for the size of the rooms - but 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. The building, facilities and gardens are also disabled accessible, the building having had an accessible lift installed during the refurbishment.

The National Eisteddfod is a permanent theme, but the content varies and contains castle-owned content along with many borrowed items on display. There is also a rolling video on show that tells the story of the castle from its earliest beginnings up to the present time, another similar about the story of Cardigan itself and one on the previous owner, Barbara Wood. There are also interpretation panels on past residents, including the Army during the last war. Along with all that, they have a very keen and knowledgeable historian/archaeologist, who has written a book on the castle (for sale in the gift shop), provided historical information for the very user-friendly website, delivers lectures and talks and also trained a cohort of local volunteers, all of whom act as tour guides, taking visitors around the castle and telling them all about its history. Considering that there is very little funding available for the historical interpretation, I think that they have done a great job and everyone who comes along loves it, especially the guided tours.

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 available for further historical investigation or public inspection, for a number of reasons. There are protected bats roosting in the cellar (medieval - the cellar, not the bats..), the re-building work covered up some of the medieval ruins discovered directly under the central hall of the house, one wing of the house and some of the outbuildings are used as holiday lets (otherwise they would run at a loss), 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. Certainly the knowledge base is second to none and they do their best to share it with anyone who is interested.

It is, for the most part, all about the castle, understandably, and the one criticism I would make 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, apart from when they hold major events in the grounds. It regularly connects to the community as best it can through their events, but I believe it could do more - and with a minimal budget. I want to see it being more than just about the castle's history with an overview about the town, I think it should also include the people's history - and let them help to provide the content and help curate it. I have a cunning plan...