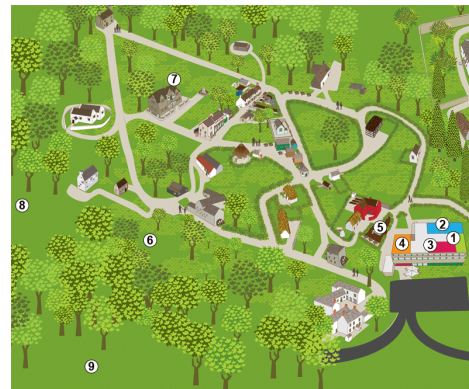


St. Fagans National Museum of History, how easy is it to gain a sense of what constitutes Welsh culture?

For this museum report, I have chosen to conduct a virtual tour at the St. Fagans National Museum of History. St. Fagans is one of Europe's foremost outdoor museums and a well-known heritage site in Wales. St. Fagans is, first and foremost, a people's museum that explores the lives of the people of Wales. The museum is constructed within the grounds of St. Fagans Castle, which is a former 16th-century manor and garden. It was bequeathed to the people of Wales in 1948 by the former owner, the Earl of Plymouth.



Amgueddfa Cymru, St Fagans National Museum of History: Highlights (2024)



Amgueddfa Cymru, Site Plan (2024)

It was opened to visitors in 1948 and set out to represent the lived experience of Welsh people through a variety of historic buildings extracted from their initial locations across Wales and reconstructed within St. Fagan's grounds. Since its opening, more than forty historic buildings from a variety of periods of history have been reconstructed in the 100-acre parkland, which includes multiple dwellings, a school and a chapel. In the fields is a working farm where livestock is still being reared; there are also daily farming demonstrations.¹ The site is a living museum with traditional crafts and pastimes, where craftsmen can be seen in their workshops demonstrating their traditional skills.

The virtual tour for St. Fagans can be found on the Amgueddfa Cymru website and has been created using Matterport 360°; although not all of the 50 buildings are included in the virtual tour, and one cannot view any of the exterior parts of the site. There are twelve links to virtual tours: a World War Two post office, a medieval court, a Victorian school,

¹ Amgueddfa Cymru, *St Fagans National Museum of History* <<https://museum.wales/stfagans/about/>> [accessed 13th March 2024]

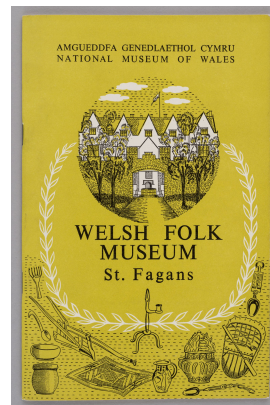
terrace mining cottages, three farmhouses, a tollhouse, Oakdale Workmen's Institute, a medieval church, and two galleries. A few of the virtual tours have various little blue hotspots that, when pressed, display a pop-up that explains the items that the link is attached to; for example, in the Blaen-Waun Post Office, the virtual tour has links to pop-ups like on the telephone the pop-up states:

'Post Office Telephone: in the early days, the post office had a telephone on the counter and was used for post office work as well as by the local community. Later, a public telephone kiosk was built outside the small building.'²

The information pop-ups are a great addition to the virtual tour as they provide a comprehensive understanding of the history of these buildings. Unfortunately, not all of the virtual tours of the buildings have these hotspots, which puts the visitor at a disadvantage in regards to gaining additional information on the buildings, such as how old the building is, who owned it, why it was built and what the items on display are.



National Museums & Galleries of Wales, *Museum of Welsh Life - Visitor guide*, (Cardiff, 2001)



Amgueddfa Cymru, *A Brief History of St Fagans* (2024)

I would argue that the answer to the essay question: how easy is it to gain a sense of what constitutes Welsh culture at St. Fagans is that it is exceedingly easy. An excellent example of this is the two gallery exhibitions on display in the entrance and main building. In 2018, Amgueddfa Cymru unveiled their 'Making History' galleries at St. Fagans, split into two exhibitions: 'Life is...' and 'Wales is...', costing 30 million pounds. They stated that the aim was to make it a 'distinctly Welsh, globally significant model for museums rooted in social

² Amgueddfa Cymru, *St Fagans National Museum of History* <<https://museum.wales/learning/activity/542/Explore-St-Fagans-in-360/>> [accessed 13th March 2024]

engagement and cultural democracy.³ They combined the National Museum of Wales's history and archaeology collections for the first time. The scope of objects in the exhibitions covers a 240,000-year time span, including pieces from the collection that have never been on show before. The aim of the galleries was to display Welsh life and culture. The gallery is categorised into sections of 'Wales is...', with the sections being: Wales is... Protesting, Not Always Welcoming, Drowned Out, Llywelyn and Glyndwr, 2% Neanderthal, Sacred Places, Musical, Still Speaking Welsh, Farmers, Well-connected, Built On Faith, Welsh Costume, Coal, Scarred By War, and Independent?. The vast and thought-provoking information the museum displays in the gallery explores in-depth what Welsh culture is. Starting with 'Wales is... Not always welcoming' which displays the human remains of two people, a 25- to 35-year-old man and a 9 to 14-year-old boy buried in Anglesey around 1,100 years ago, to the drowning of Welsh-speaking village Capel Celyn in 1965 and the strong opposition to this sign of oppression from England.⁴



Amgueddfa Cymru, *The Galleries* (2024)



The virtual tour of the galleries has been thoughtfully considered by Matterport and the museum. The circular floor links, which dictate the spots you can go to, are cleverly positioned in front of the information boards so that visitors using the virtual tour can get the same experience as an in-person visit, which is hugely beneficial. There are more than necessary circular floor links which cover the entirety of the expansive galleries.

³ Jon Astbury, 'Purcell completes latest phase of St Fagans National Museum of History', *Architects Journal*, 17th August 2017. <<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/purcell-completes-latest-phase-of-st-fagans-national-museum-of-history#:~:text=The%20Making%20History%20project%20is,social%20engagement%20and%20cultural%20democracy.>> [accessed 14th March 2024]

⁴ Amgueddfa Cymru, *St Fagans National Museum of History* <<https://museum.wales/learning/activity/542/Explore-St-Fagans-in-360/>> [accessed 15th March 2024]

To gain an in-depth sense of the Welsh culture, St. Fagans conducted an extensive project in 1958, during which they travelled in a caravan around rural Wales to record local stories and memories about folk's everyday life. Today, the museum holds a vast oral testimony archive of folk stories, music, and traditions, as well as an authoritative national archive of the language of Wales and its various dialects. St. Fagans also commemorates significant events, such as the Battle of St. Fagans, which was the largest battle to take place in Wales and one of the last in the English Civil War. These events, along with other celebrations like St. David's Day on March 1st, comprise a twelve-month event programme and play an equally vital part in St. Fagan's representational work. Another way that the museum reinforces the Welsh culture is through interactive storytelling, horse and cart rides, and a photographic studio that offers visitors to have their photographs taken in traditional or vintage attire. The museum also displays Welsh culture through its craftspeople, who include a blacksmith, tanner, clog maker, tailor, and a wood turner. They provide presentations of traditional crafts, and tourists can acquire the end product.⁵



Amgueddfa Cymru, *A Brief History of St Fagans* (2024)



Amgueddfa Cymru, *A Living Museum* (2024)

There have been a number of people and groups that have criticised the museum throughout its long history. Some argue that St. Fagans is too narrow in its view and vision of the Welsh culture. St Fagan's curator, Dr J. Geraint Jenkins, contended that the museum collecting policies were guided by an idealistic and particularly discriminatory view of Wales. This criticism of the museum's inclination to emphasise on only one feature of Welsh society: that of the rural life above everything. Various Welsh scholars vocalised their criticisms beginning

⁵ Rhiannon Mason, 'Representing Wales at The Museum of Welsh Life', in *National Museums: New Studies from Around the World*, ed. By Simon Knell, Peter Aronsson, Arne Amundsen (Oxford: Routledge, 2011)

in the 1960s but expanding through the 1980s. The museum has been accused of presenting a past that was too unchanging and simplified. Cultural Historian Dai Smith addressed the criticisms against the museum, stating that he:

'identifies a reluctance to countenance the display of conflict or dissension. Instead, he sees a continuing reliance on visions of wholeness, and harmony, and community, and distinctiveness and togetherness, and uniqueness'.⁶

It can be argued that St. Fagans cannot give a broad and complete sense of what constitutes Welsh culture as, from its creation, St. Fagans intended to gather mainly rural culture in preference to contemporary industrial material culture. Despite the fact that curators at St. Fagans had been actively gathering verbal testaments from the industrialised regions starting at the end of the 1960s, especially concerning home life, coal mine vocabulary, and folklore, along with details regarding the lead mines and the tinplate industry, Welsh industry culture continued to be severely underrepresented. It took until the 1980s for curators to relent to urban and industrial Wales and depict the regions where the bulk of the Welsh population had resided since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This change of mind included taking ownership of a terrace of iron miners' cottages, named Rhyd-y-car, in 1987, followed by the Gwalia Stores in 1991, then in 1995, the Oakdale Miners' Institute, and finally a post-war prefabricated bungalow in 2001.

Ironically, the iron miners' cottages are, by all accounts, the most popular attraction at the museum today, perhaps because they are part of recent history. However, I would argue that the row of houses is the most popular attraction because they present a unique experience to see the same house displayed six times in different periods of their history, specifically 1805, 1855, 1895, 1925, 1955, and 1985. The houses display the shift in living conditions of a working-class family throughout the last two centuries. The visitors get to physically see the development from a house with no running water, indoor toilets or items acquired through mass production and disposable income to a house from 38 years ago with all the amenities that houses have today, such as a microwave and television.

⁶ Bella Dicks, *Heritage, Place and Community* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p.94.



Amgueddfa Cymru, Rhyd-y-car Terrace (2024)



Amgueddfa Cymru, Rhyd-y-car Terrace (2024)



Amgueddfa Cymru, Rhyd-y-car Terrace (2024)

In 1986, a report by John Brown was published; his survey discovered that non-Welsh tourists found the museum particularly hard to obtain a sense of what constituted Welsh culture. He writes that:

'there was an expectation that the Museum would be 'Welsh' and this was sometimes followed by a feeling of disappointment that the 'Welshness' in a cultural sense did not really come through...it was generally more difficult for overseas visitors to form an impression of Welsh culture and life'.⁷

However, the museum has asserted that the site is not catered to international tourists but to the Welsh people, particularly people local to the museum.

To conclude, I would argue that St. Fagens easily provides a thorough view of specific aspects of Welsh culture; however, it is not a comprehensive and linear history of Welsh culture. This museum was the first of its kind to be constructed in Great Britain, although small folk museums had been established in Isle of Man and Scotland. It was the first national open-air museum in the United Kingdom, and museum records from that period assert that this museum's intention would be to display an absolute history of Wales and construct a 'Wales in Miniature'. It is important to keep in mind that St. Fagens is just a part of the National Museum Wales network. So, in that regard, it may be misguided and unrealisable to criticise St. Fagens for not representing all of Welsh culture in one location. The initial purpose for the establishment of the museum was to obtain a 'holistic view of the nation and be explicitly representative of Wales's vernacular national

⁷ John Brown, 'Increasing the visitor appeal of the Welsh Folk Museum: A strategy for presentation, interpretation, management and marketing, prepared for the NMW and the Welsh Tourist Board by John Brown Tourism Services'. (1986)

culture as recognised at that time'⁸ , and some would argue that it still does.

⁸ Rhiannon Mason, 'Representing Wales at The Museum of Welsh Life', in *National Museums: New Studies from Around the World*, ed. By Simon Knell, Peter Aronsson, Arne Amundsen (Oxford: Routledge, 2011)

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