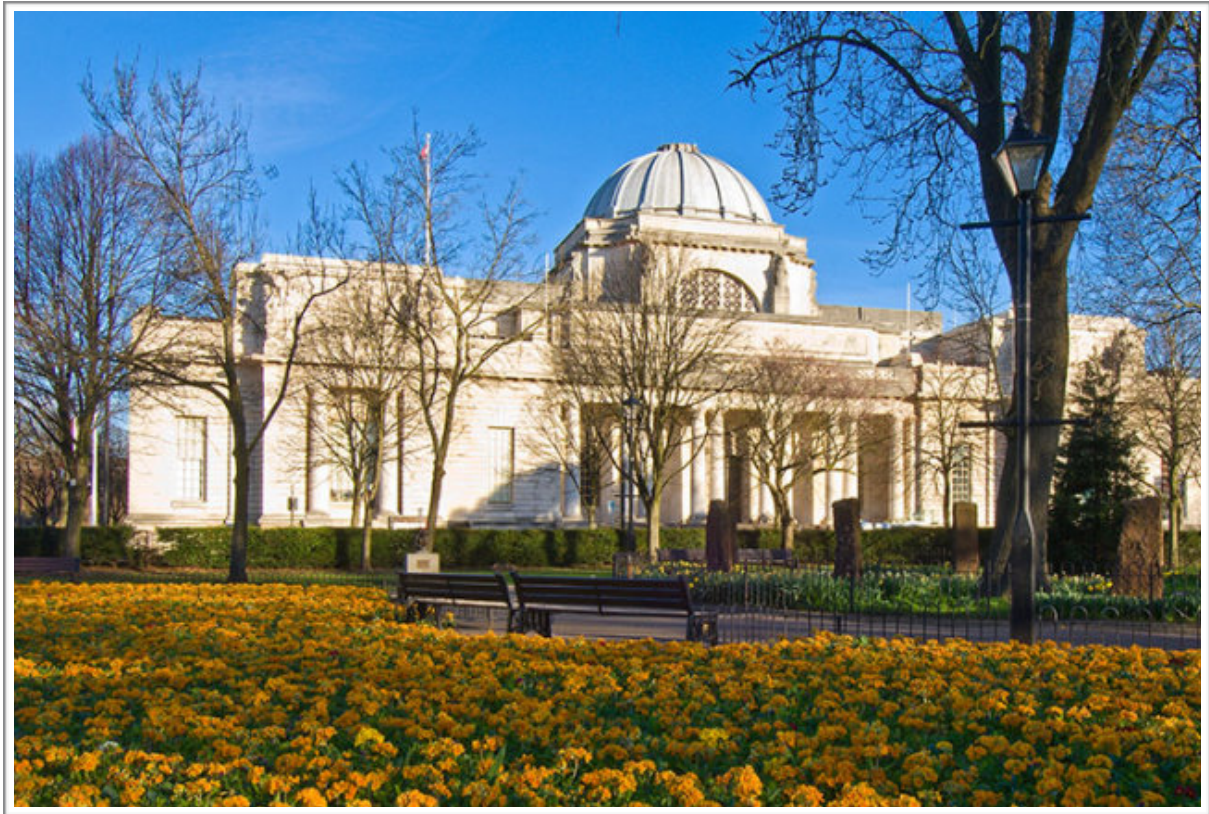


Based on your visit to the National Museum Wales,
consider how the museum promotes public understanding
of the archaeological record



<http://www.cityofcardiff.com/museum.html>

Museum, Heritage & Representation

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National Museum Wales

Report on Museum of Welsh Life at St. Fagans & National Museum Cardiff

Introduction

Archaeology is a discipline ‘which respects the humanity of past and present’, thus making meaningful contributions to the present (Shanks & Tilley, 1992: 2). As archaeology continued to evolve as a discipline, so did its perception on the archaeological record. Initially, it was thought that the archaeological record simply consisted of just the material things left behind by the past societies. However, it is now clear that the abstract and the intangible contexts are considered to be a part of the archaeological record (Shott, 2013: 1). As a result, museums started changing their traditional practices. Fleming (2005), in his keynote speech about *Managing Change in Museums*, identified ‘total inclusion’ as the most significant change that took place. In its attitude towards audiences, museums now aimed to include all of the public, and not just the elite minor sectors.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2007) defines museums as non-profit institutions open to the public that ‘acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of community in its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.’ Merriman (2010: 280) observes how the museums have indeed transformed from ‘inward looking institutions’ led solely by the needs of scholarship, to institutions that have started accommodating to a variety of different publics. For instance, national museums started off as being institutions that exhibited a nation’s historic heritage (Lewis, 2004). However, as countries become more multi-cultural, the national museums are forced to rethink their concepts and invest in more contemporary ideas in order to be connected to a wider world, and therefore a wider public.

National Museum Wales

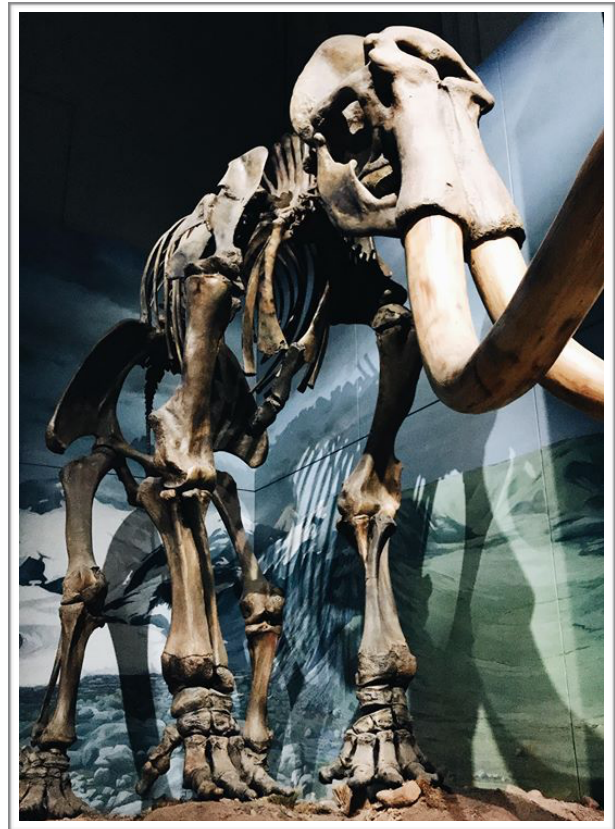
The National Museum Wales was founded in 1907, and was firmly rooted in national identity and culture. It reflected the national and civic confidence (William, 2007: 215) of Wales. Moreover, the museum was considered to be a tool of social progress for Wales as it established new sciences and interpretations of the Welsh past and nationality (Morgan, 2007: 14). It was to be a museum for the nation, rather than it necessarily representing the nation, in contrast to English national museums which aimed to show the world to Britain, rather than the nation to itself (William 2007, Mason, 2007). As Mason (2007: 23) stated, national museums help shape the public perceptions of a nation's histories, identities and cultures. The National Museum was to provide a representation of Welsh geology, minerals, zoology, botany, archaeology, art, ethnography, history and its special industries. Today, it comprises of seven different institutions, mostly centred around South Wales: National Museum Cardiff; St. Fagans National Museum of History; National Waterfront Museum; Big Pit National Coal Museum; National Slate Museum; National Roman Legion Museum; and the National Wool Museum, and together it forms the Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales network, and each one presents different components of Wales 'within a greater, national story stretching across all the sites' (Mason, 2007: 23-30).

National Museum, Cardiff

In 1927, the first branch of the Wales' national museum was opened to the public in Cathay's Park in Cardiff. It is a neo-classical building which demonstrated the traditional idea of a public museum. It was opened during the time when Cardiff was furthering its ambitions to become the capital city of Wales (Mason, 2007: 29), thus successfully establishing itself as a museum 'for the nation'.

The Evolution of Wales and Natural History galleries follow both a narrative and thematic approach where we are taken through a chronological timeline from the beginning of time illustrating how life evolved in Wales in various themes (geology, palaeontology, ecology..) The exhibition consisted of models of mammoths; replicas of dinosaur bones; and reconstruction of geological rocks.

The mammoth models were complete with a background scene of the time, sound effects and a motion sensor so that the mammoths moved, which greatly attracted the attention of children. Moreover, the bone replications of the mammoths and dinosaurs present an approximate scale, where visitors could gain insight into the size of the animals in the past, and comparing it to the size of animals in the modern day. The sound effects helped to create the atmospheric feel of the past; for instance, we hear the roars of dinosaurs, the rumbling of geological activities or general sounds of the nature.



The virtual projections gave fine visual representations, making it easier to imagine scenes and life of the past. Wildlife of animals and plants were projected on rocks in an aesthetic manner, which was different, but simultaneously adding to the feel of the gallery.



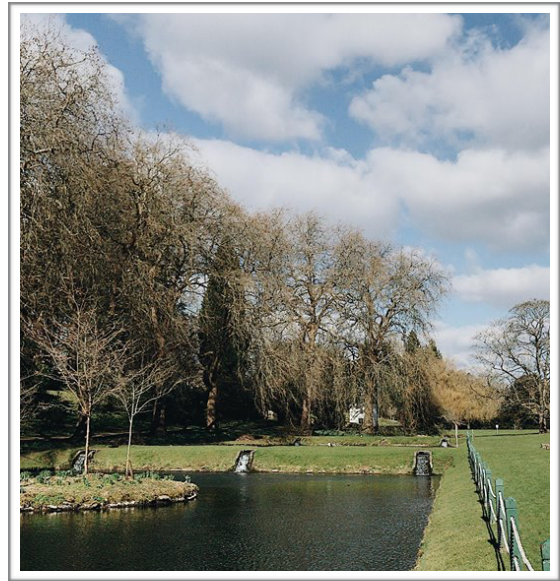
The minerals on display were illuminated and free to be touched and felt by the visitors. The effect of the lighting caused the minerals to sparkle, which showed off its best qualities. For example, the quartz on display was the most attractive mineral in the exhibition as it seemed to gain the most attention from visitors.

By the end of the walk through the Natural History gallery, the visitor would have experienced the natural evolution of Wales, giving insight into how it was formed and the nature and wildlife associated with it. It is evident that the exhibition was created with a wide audience in mind. Children, adults, tourists, students and researches all would have felt comfortable in the gallery as there was a bit of something in there for everyone. For example, whilst the mammoth models would have been of great entertainment to children, the illuminated minerals could have been of great amusement for a geology student.

The Art Galleries were significantly different to the Natural History exhibitions. The museum boasts on its website about world class art exhibitions and having 'Europe's best collections of impressionist art'. However, it comprised of limited art from European countries such as Italy, Netherlands and England of 15th to 17th century. The majority of its collection was Welsh art and highlighted the Welsh artists of the 18th century. In contrast to the Natural History gallery, the Art Galleries seemed more bare and empty; other than the paintings on the walls, there were statues and cabinet displays of vases and such. The only hands-on activity was the giant marble vase where the visitors could touch and feel the marble. The audience was different too, ranging from wandering tourists to art students, who seemed to be the only ones taking in and observing the art displays properly.

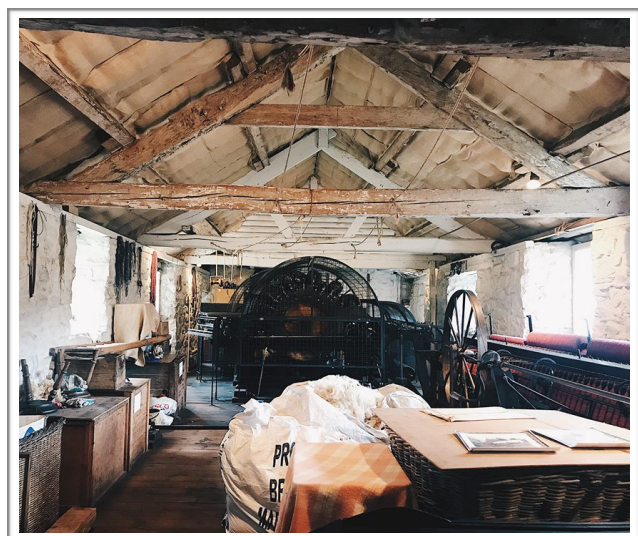
St. Fagans: National Museum of History

Opened in 1948, the National Museum of History at St. Fagans was the first national open-air museum in the UK. Initially, it was known as the Welsh Folk Museum and aimed to create a Wales in miniature. Whilst Cardiff museum was a museum 'for the nation' the museum at St. Fagans was to be 'of the nation' (Mason, 2007: 29). The idea was to capture the everyday life of Welsh people and their lives (Mason, 2004 and 2007).



As it was initially known as the Welsh Folk Museum, a lot of its focus was on the culture of rural Wales. This received criticism, however, new academic research led to the importance of industrial Wales being more emphasised (Mason, 2017: 32). Moreover, other critics suggested that the collection appeared too unified and simplified. It is evident that the museum took the criticisms into consideration. On its website, the director general, David Anderson states "We believe that St. Fagans will become one of the great museums of history, defining Wales as a contemporary, multi-cultural nation, connected to the wider world". Today, the museum boasts a more diverse collection aimed at a wider audience.

The museum consists of over 30 buildings taken from all around Wales, then reconstructed at the grounds of St. Fagans. They include: farmhouses, mills, local stores, ironworker cottages, a Celtic village, boathouse and the St. Fagans castle and gardens. It also has a visitor centre with exhibition spaces and galleries. Craftsmen were placed in their respective buildings, demonstrating traditional skills such as weaving at the woolmill, and the products were available to buy at the museum gift shop.



During the visit, we were given a tour of the new buildings under construction: a new gallery was being set up, to create a permanent exhibition space to display the material culture; a work/study space was being built where both students and researchers could work together within the museum grounds. Additionally, a new medieval hut was also under construction which was a recreation of a 1200AD site originally from Angelsey, North Wales. The archaeologist explained that once it was complete, groups will be able to stay overnight at the building. School children will have opportunities to dress up as medieval characters as a learning program. Furthermore, the website says that placements will be available under apprentice and trainee programs to work with their Historic Building units.

Whilst some buildings appeared more isolated than others, there was a guide stationed at every building who could answer any questions posed by the visitors. Some buildings like the manor had labels to communicate with the visitors, which appeared to be arranged in a haphazard manner and was written in an unusually small font.



Unless a great deal of attention was given to the labels, they did not appear to be of much use, failing to capture further interest from the audience. Some labels were aimed to interact with children as they depicted the staff or workers of the manor explaining what their job is. It is conveyed in simple language and an easy to read font.



The reconstructed buildings at St. Fagans are not organised in any specific order. It does not follow a certain pattern nor is it chronological in order. Mason (2004: 26) suggests that perhaps this highlights the ‘transhistorical continuity’ in Wales and shows how the towns and buildings displayed have ‘always existed in this kind of harmonious proximity’. The only chronological order observed was the Rhyd y Car cottages from Merthyr Tydfil. The cottages of the ironworkers demonstrated four different periods of history and is a world-wide first (William, 2007: 218).

The National Museum of History at St. Fagans has great potential to engage with modern tourism. As Stone & Planel (2004: 6) noted, ‘modern tourism now sells its products as experiences rather than simply as visits’. They suggest that the modern visitor wants to see the artefact in use rather than it being behind a locked cabinet. The craftsmen at St. Fagans museum demonstrating their skills with traditional artefacts would therefore, undoubtedly attract more visitors, than if there were traditional displays. The archaeological evidence combined with experimental archaeology and ethnography makes the constructed sites at the museum more appealing as it engages with a wider public. It gives something for everyone as the balance between science, education and presentational aims are achieved (Stone & Planel, 2004).

Discussion

The two branches of the National Museum Wales discussed have very different approaches in terms of their ethos, collections, styles and results (Mason, 2007). However, both the museums show a clear progression from where they initially started in order to become be relevant in a global context and engage with a wider audience. It is evident that the museums were making a conscious effort to link with communities and tell stories where they are best told (William, 2007: 218).

National Museum Cardiff demonstrate an interest in international audiences by displaying international collections, such as the European artworks and Chinese pottery. The interactive and hands-on approaches presented at the Natural History exhibitions suggest that the museum is engaging with a wide audience of all ages and interests.

National History Museum at St. Fagans could be highlighted as a great example of a museum which has responded to criticisms received in a positive way. A former curator at St. Fagans had observed that the initial collecting policies of the museum seemed to be driven by a highly selective view of Wales (Dicks, 2000: 19). However today, it is a museum undergoing improvements and modifications in response to the changing depends of the present public (Mason, 2004: 29). The experimental archaeology engages with the public community when the buildings get reconstructed on site.

Conclusion

Great challenges are faced by national museums today such as globalisation. Mason (2007: 33) notes how the national museum worldwide are experiencing an identity crisis in today's multi-cultural societies. As countries become more multi-cultural, national museums have to rethink the word 'nation' and how it is perceived by the public to reflect a more inclusive and civic nation. Similarly, the definition of the word museum is also updated by the ICOM 'in accordance with the realities of the global museum community'. National Museum Wales reflect the ideas of a modern museum to a great extent to engage with the multiple national identities within Wales.

Moreover, museums have moved away from the concept of just education (William, 2007: 222), and now practice inclusive learning. They are also no longer dominated by the socio-economic elite (Fleming, 2005). Museums today have changed their methods in collecting, displaying and exhibiting to present something of value to everyone. The National Museum Wales have considered the general public in promoting their archaeological record. Not everyone would be purely interested in the datas, codes and tables that come within the archaeological record in relation to the artefacts. The people are interested in the story that the archaeological record tells them, in order to identify themselves within the national story and reflect their own sense of identity, culture, history and belonging (Mason, 2007: 37).

In conclusion, National Museum Wales is evidently making a conscious effort to engage with a wider public from different backgrounds. They have considered various presentational methodologies in order to promote the public's understanding of the archaeological record and make it interesting and appealing to an audience of all ages and interests. The most notable feature of National Museum Wales could easily be the current changes taking place within the museums to adapt to the cultural and political changes in Wales. The work in progress could be seen by the public, therefore, the change could be followed as the museums take them along an exciting journey to experience the archaeological record.

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