

## Case Study : Critical Analysis of Dinefwr

Dinefwr Park is situated in the Tywi valley and is part of the Llandeilo Conservation area which is considered to be one of Wales's national heritage assets<sup>1</sup>. The estate is recognised as a site of Special Scientific Interest and the buildings are listed. These designations impose tight conservation restrictions on the management of the estate<sup>2</sup>. Management is currently shared by three charities: The National Trust, The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, and Cadw<sup>3</sup>. The W.T.S.W.W. manage part of the SSI woodland and nature reserve and Cadw manage and curate Dinefwr Castle. The National Trust manage Newton House and Park.

Alison Helms, (using research from a 2001 Department for Culture, Media and Sport report<sup>4</sup>) mentions that 'the historic environment is all around us - people value places not just individual sites and buildings'<sup>5</sup>. Helms suggests that the challenge which is being successfully demonstrated by the National Trust and its partners at Dinefwr, is to make the wider heritage landscape meaningful and explicable to the public<sup>6</sup>. Working in partnership, the charities present the site as a cohesive heritagescape, which Mary Catherine Garden argues has emerged out of a changing understanding of the past<sup>7</sup>. Providing visitors with a seamless experience of Dinefwr, enables them to understand not only the historical sequence of the site's buildings, but how human intervention has shaped and is continuing to shape this heritagescape and increase its biodiversity.

This case study focuses on the National Trust's property, specifically Newton House. The house was in a poor state of repair, and the contents had been sold, when the National Trust became responsible for its care in 1990<sup>8</sup>. This is significant as it enabled the National Trust to allow the house to speak for itself. Furnishings were carefully selected from as many Welsh sources as possible. Examples include a selection of antique Nantgarw china and a dining table.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Insall Associates, *Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Management Plan: Llandeilo Conservation Area*, N.D., <<https://www.carmarthenshire.gov.wales/media/1229141/llandeilo-ca-appraisal.pdf>> [Accessed 25 March 2025].

<sup>2</sup> For Sites of Special Scientific Interest see *Cyfoeth Naturiol Wales*, <<https://naturalresources.wales/guidance-and-advice/environmental-topics/wildlife-and-biodiversity/protected-areas-of-land-and-seas/sites-of-special-scientific-interest-responsibilities-of-owners-and-occupiers/?lang=en>> For the register of listed buildings in Wales see CADW/ICOMOS *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in Wales*, <<https://coflein.gov.uk/media/18/995/cpg131.pdf>>. [Accessed 30 March 2025].

<sup>3</sup> Peter Humphries, 'Heritage Interpretation and CADW', in *Heritage Interpretation* ed. by Alison Helms and Marion Blockley, (London: Routledge, 2006) pp. 71-83, (p.71).

<sup>4</sup> Alison Helms, 'Introduction: Beyond The Graveyard- Extending Audiences Enhancing Understanding', in *Heritage Interpretation*, ed. by Alison Helms and Marion Blockley, (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-7, (p.1). See also Department of Culture, Media and Sport, *The Historic Environment: a Force for our Future*, 2001, <<https://www.thenbs.com/PublicationIndex/Documents/Details?Pub=DCMS&DocId=259859>> [Accessed 31 March 2025].

<sup>5</sup> Alison Helms, Introduction: Beyond the Graveyard-Extending Audiences, Enhancing Understanding, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Alison Helms, Introduction: Beyond the Graveyard- Extending Audiences, Enhancing Understanding p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Mary-Catherine E. Garden, 'The Heritagescape: Looking at Landscapes of the Past', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12 (5), pp. 394-411 (p.1). <<https://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/13527250600821621#d1e158>> [Accessed 20 March 2025].

<sup>8</sup> The National Trust, *History of Dinefwr*, 2025, <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/wales/dinefwr/history-of-dinefwr>> [Accessed 18 March 2025].

Nantgarw china was prized by nineteenth century British aristocrats and it is conceivable that the Dynevors would have owned some<sup>9</sup>. The dining table was sourced from a Pembrokeshire country house. Rowland Matthew, taking ideas from Wilson and Mackley, argues that a country house was used by wealthy people to showcase their wealth, 'affirm their status and often to provide a stake in country affairs'<sup>10</sup>. The owners of Dinefwr were involved in both local and national affairs during the whole tenure of their ownership. They employed local people and supported local artisans - a practice that the National Trust is continuing to uphold through continued patronage of local artists and changing exhibitions. Regularly changing themed exhibitions, children's activities and events such as the upcoming Easter parade allow staff to connect with local people and ensure the collections and events remain relevant. As Ruth Taylor suggests, this allows visitors to 'take the experience that they want from the visit'<sup>11</sup>.

Newton House is presented as a relaxed country residence on the ground floor, functional servants' rooms in the basement and exhibitions on the second floor. The atmosphere of the whole house is relaxing: it is not a treasure house, although it does contain some irreplaceable artefacts. Overall, this interpretation reflects story houses and appears to be popular with a range of different visitors. Dinefwr staff appreciate that visitors wish to enjoy their visit and although they bring their prior knowledge to their visit, they hope to learn or explore something new.

Dinefwr staff respond well to this approach and seek to offer a bespoke interpretation of the house. The knowledgeable volunteers respond to visitors' needs or leave them to create their own meanings and interpretations of the rooms. Curatorial staff have clearly considered some of Tilden's principles of interpretation, by carefully selecting and displaying works of art throughout the house: pieces that provoke curiosity allowing visitors time to reflect on their meanings<sup>12</sup>. Dinefwr is very user-friendly and remains one of the few properties that permits dogs in the downstairs rooms and cafe. There are no guidebooks. Instead interpretation relies on appropriate bilingual signage, academic books and knowledgeable volunteers. Signage is informative and interesting, but it is often hard to read, due to colour choices such as green backgrounds and yellow lettering. It is an area that needs further attention to ensure that it is inclusive of and accessible to older people, and people with special needs.

One of the most effective interpretation techniques employed to showcase history and heritage in Newton House is to emphasise the significance of the whole estate. This is done by highlighting different aspects of the geology, archaeology, biodiversity and history of the site. In the Discovery Room visitors can see a pictorial black and white 'timeline that meanders across the walls'<sup>13</sup>. This technique and the regularly refreshed natural history display have the effect of:

- Bringing the outside into the house thereby prompting visitors to regard the house as part of the larger heritagescape.
- Underpinning the 2025 National Trust Strategy: People and Nature Thriving.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Nantgarw Chinaworks, *Porcelain Production, n.d.*, <<https://nantgarwchinaworksmuseum.co.uk/history/chinaworks-history/>> [Accessed 2 April 2025].

<sup>10</sup> Rowland Matthew, *An Analysis of Country House Interpretation in Wales*, p.11. (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bangor, 2023) <<https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/files/58495424/2023Rowlandphd.pdf>> [Accessed 21 March 2025].

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Taylor 'The National Trust' *Heritage Interpretation*, ed. by Alison Helms and Marion Blockley, (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 97- 109 (p.102 ).

<sup>12</sup> HDC International, *Tilden's Six Principles of Heritage Interpretation*, <<https://www.heritagedestination.com/hdc-library---tildens-tips/>> [Accessed 30 March 2025].

<sup>13</sup> The National Trust, *Exhibitions at Dinefwr, 2025*, <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/wales/dinefwr/exhibitions-at-dinefwr>> [Accessed 28 March 2025].

<sup>14</sup> The National Trust, *People and Nature Thriving, 2025*, <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/our-strategy>> [Accessed 28 March 2025].

The goals of this strategy include restoring nature everywhere and inspiring more people to care and take action. Dinefwr staff are achieving this not only through visual means but through engagement with the public inside and outside the built environment. Dinefwr has a rich history but presenting it effectively, as a Welsh property is challenging. The fortunes of the Rhys family, the former owners, fluctuated over the centuries due to the political climate of the times. Interpretation techniques have to effectively present the positive and the negative sides of Dinefwr's heritage. Positive heritage of the house is reflected in the beauty of the displayed objects and information emphasising the occupants contributions to society. Negative heritage includes: persecution and discrimination of the Rhys family by the English, rural discontent, class discrimination and the marginalisation of women.

The property was owned continuously by the Rhys family until the mid 20th century. There were periods when the family were openly persecuted and other times when they suffered covert discrimination due to their nationality and religion. Rhys ap Thomas was granted the lands and a knighthood in recognition of his support for Henry VII at the Battle of Bosworth Field. However, Henry VIII confiscated the lands. During the 16th and 17th centuries the lands were returned to the family piecemeal, aided by their conscious efforts to anglicise themselves in order to improve their life chances. Consequently, they changed the family name to Rice and married into the English nobility<sup>15</sup>. Adam Price has suggested that two of the ways England retained Wales, as a conquered nation, was to politically subjugate and culturally assimilate the Welsh people<sup>16</sup>. The Rhys family realised that to survive they needed to play the English game. They acquired a title when George Rice married the only daughter of William Talbot, the first Baron Dynevor, an English peerage spelt the English way<sup>17</sup>. The family only reverted to the Welsh spelling of their surname in 1916 when Welshness was acceptably fashionable<sup>18</sup>.

The story of the medieval Rhys family members is narrated through colourful, but dated flat wall displays in one of the exhibition rooms. They are cluttered with too much information, making them difficult to read. They emphasise the room's lack of furniture, giving it a sterile appearance. Refreshing and modernising the room would improve the storytelling and better address the needs of twenty-first century audiences. The National Trust had hoped to acquire Sir Rhys ap Thomas's bed for the room, a heritage bed that could have revitalised the room. However, the bed is preserved at St Fagans. There remains a good argument for the bed to remain in a national collection as Sir Rhys's story is not only important to Dinefwr, it is culturally important to the whole of Wales. St Fagans is free and more easily accessible than Dinefwr. However, the bed is housed in one of the newer exhibition areas and it has lost context. In order to understand the significance of the bed as a Welsh heritage artefact perhaps it would be better to house it at Dinefwr.

Until late 2024 Dinefwr was enhancing the Welshness of the house by showing the BBC series, *The Story of Wales*<sup>19</sup>, which was popular with visitors and reinforced the cultural significance of Dinefwr as a Welsh property. However, the shock that reverberated throughout the United Kingdom when the presenter, Huw Edwards was accused of possessing indecent images

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<sup>15</sup> Terry Norman, *Llandeilo History, The Dynevors*, n.d., < <https://llandeilo.org/>> [Accessed 17 March 2025].

<sup>16</sup> Adam Price, 'Wales : the First and Final Colony', *Wales Online*, 17 November 2009, <[https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/563644/mod\\_resource/content/1/Price\\_Wales\\_the\\_first\\_and\\_final\\_colony.docx](https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/563644/mod_resource/content/1/Price_Wales_the_first_and_final_colony.docx)> [Accessed 1 April 2025].

<sup>17</sup> Note that Welsh titles were no longer used after Owen Glyndour's defeat by the English crown in the fifteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> Terry Norman, *Llandeilo History, The Dynevors*.

<sup>19</sup> BBC, *The Story of Wales* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00mlrq9>> [Accessed 4 April 2025].

of children, meant that the video was promptly removed<sup>20</sup>. Difficult decisions had to be made as continuing to show the series would be considered offensive. However, its removal left the Trust with the dilemma of sourcing alternative strategies to show Dinefwr as an essential Welsh heritage jewel.

The National Trust has chosen to highlight the issue of rural discontent by commissioning a new heritage linoprint piece to illustrate the role the 4th Baron Dynevor played in policing the Rebecca riots. Memories of the Rebecca Riots live on in the Welsh psyche and remain vivid within the local farming community. Struggling to maintain their rural identity and livelihoods, the ancestors of today's farmers dressed as women and attacked the toll gates, which David Williams has suggested they regarded as 'tangible and convenient symbols of a whole social system' including tithes and the Poor Law<sup>21</sup>. The rioters took the name Rebecca from the verse in Genesis that promised that Rebecca's seed should 'possess the gates of those which hate them'<sup>22</sup>. The striking, colourful linoprint prompts visitors to engage with this dark period in Dinefwr's history when the 4th Baron, who displayed no sympathy for the rioters cause, stated that he would fire on them if necessary. This caused them to react by digging a grave for him that was visible from Newton House<sup>23</sup>. John Abell, the artist, has pictorially reflected the class system of the time by emphasising the idea of two different seeds from Rebecca's womb, one strong who would lead and the other who would serve. This contrast could be applied to both the 4th Baron and his tenants or the rich Anglo/Welsh aristocracy and the impoverished Welsh farmers. Visitors are encouraged to interpret the painting in their own way. The linoprint brings a new and different narrative to Dinefwr's cultural heritage.

The differences between the Welsh noble owners and their servants is also highlighted in the sitting room and servants' quarters. This allows visitors to contemplate the prevalent attitudes and social structure of past centuries. Capitalising on the phenomena that Oliver Cox refers to as 'the Downton Boom'<sup>24</sup> Dinefwr acquired replica sofas made for the television series Downton Abbey. The popularity of Downton Abbey enthused visitors imaginations and increased visitor numbers at several country houses. However, Downton has also had a negative influence on country house presentation as revealed at Dinefwr by visitor reactions to these new English heritage sofas. Some visitors regard them in a positive light as they enjoy sitting on them and imagining life in a Victorian country house, whilst others think the National Trust should have sourced them from a Welsh company. Ruth Taylor has argued that interpretation is not static<sup>25</sup>: the Downton effect will fade as the television series becomes more dated and the Trust will be able to refresh the interpretation of the room. Currently, this elegant room with its stunning views of the deer park, magnificent plaster ceiling and cabinets full of china is presented in stark contrast to the servants' plain functional rooms. The family's rooms are adorned with beautifully arranged fresh flowers whilst the servants rooms have attractive but dull dried flowers: subtle but highly effective presentation techniques highlight the different narratives of the family and their staff.

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<sup>20</sup> BBC, *Huw Edwards Scandal: Shock, anger and damage limitation in the BBC*, 15 September 2024, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gegnqd4z3o>> [Accessed 1 April 2025].

<sup>21</sup> Francis H. Herrick, *Reviewed Work: The Rebecca Riots* (Review of 'The Rebecca Riots' by David Williams), *The Journal of Modern History* 29 (2) 1957 pp 143-4 <<https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/1872248?seq=1>> [Accessed 1 April 2025].

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible: Genesis 24:60*, (Collins :London, 1958) p.27.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Norman, *Llandeilo History, The Dynevors Policing Rebecca: The 4th Lord and the Rebecca Riots*, <[https://llandeilo.org/trevor\\_rice.php](https://llandeilo.org/trevor_rice.php)> [Accessed 29 March 2025].

<sup>24</sup> Oliver Cox, Review The "Downton Boom" : Country Houses, Popular Culture and Curatorial Culture (Review of 'Downton Abbey' by Julian Fellowes, Gareth Neame, Rebecca Eaton, and Alistair Bruce) *The Public Historian* 37 (2) pp. 112 - 119 (p 112) <<https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/10.1525/tp.h.2015.37.2.112?sid=primo&seq=1>> [Accessed 20 March 2025].

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Taylor 'The National Trust' p.103.

Balancing the narratives of the male and female inhabitants of a country house is challenging. The past is too often regarded as a man's world where women were marginalised to the edges of society. Dinefwr staff have tried to highlight the roles of key women, such as Baroness Cecil Dynevor, who held the title in her own right. This was, however, due to her fathers's influence at court. Not enough prominence is given to earlier aristocratic females or female servants. For example, the roles of male servants are related through life- sized wall paintings of key employees displayed in the servants' area; the roles of the key female servants such as the cook and maids are missing. This skews the narrative and lessens the significance of female servants. If, as Ruth Taylor has suggested 'there is no one objective narrative'<sup>26</sup> then the stories of the aristocratic ladies and the female servants requires more research and better presentation.

It is impossible to mention all of the effective and less effective ways that Newton House is presented as a historically and culturally significant Welsh residence. However, it is clear to visitors, who puzzle over 'the rare and intriguing set of paintings that have hung in the house since the 18th century'<sup>27</sup>, that Newton House is an important Welsh residence. It is thought that these paintings were commissioned by the Rhys family to celebrate receiving their lands back from the English crown. Using a conservation video, the National Trust, has carefully interpreted them to ensure they underline the importance of the Rhys family and their estate to the wider geopolitical heritage of Wales.

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<sup>26</sup> Ruth Taylor, *The National Trust*, p.102.

<sup>27</sup> The National Trust, *Dinefwr Treasured Land Display on the walls of Newton House*.

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