

Why does Heritage Matter?

Heritage is not history although both disciplines seek to understand the past by throwing new light onto old narratives. Defining heritage is challenging as its wide ranging categories include tangible and intangible, natural and man-made. The value placed on heritage cannot be measured as it is viewed and managed in different ways by different international and national heritage bodies, and private citizens. Most of these groups agree that heritage matters and should be protected for future generations. However, heritage professionals and local communities continue to debate the issues of how heritage should be protected, what form that protection should take and whether heritage should be allowed to evolve and create new meanings.

Rodney Harrison argues that 'heritage is primarily not about the past but about our relationship with the present and the future'¹. That rings true when I reflect on the abandoned brickworks I pass on my walks along the cycle path from Horeb to Llanelli. The buildings add to my cultural wellbeing, offering new meanings to the landscape and provide tangible evidence of Horeb's industrial past. The cycle track was part of the historic Llanelly and Mynydd Mawr railway line. Built to serve the mines further up the valley and authorised by an Act of Parliament, it later served the brickworks and was the first operational public railway in Britain². Its change of use in the twentieth century facilitates leisure pursuits and reinforces Horeb's strong community identity.

However, the brickworks are decaying and part of the kiln has collapsed allowing nature to reclaim it. New narratives are emerging from the decaying buildings, stories that are important to local people, creating new intangible heritage links. I met a photographer who valued the romantic atmosphere the buildings created, and two gentlemen who shared some of their memories of working in the brickworks. As Serge Schmitz and Lauriano Pepe suggest 'tangible things help to construct personal place and community identity'³. The buildings acted as a trigger point for the gentlemen's recollections. Research reveals that 'the extant building includes the remains of a 16-chamber Hoffman brick kiln', now listed (see NPN275711)⁴. According to Coflein, the Hoffman brick kilns is thought to be unique, the only surviving one used for bricks in Wales. Checking this revealed the kiln may not be unique as there is a visitable Hoffman lime kiln near Wrexham⁵. Perhaps the function of the kilns is irrelevant as they both share similar designs.

The local community hold mixed views on the topic of whether or not to preserve the buildings. The question is should they be preserved and if so where and how? Accessing the kiln is challenging and it requires considerable expensive maintenance work to ensure it is safe for the public to visit. It may not fit the criteria for removal to St Fagans. If the buildings are removed and rebuilt they will lose context and future local intangible links by becoming part of a museum group of rural and industrial buildings, an imagined community⁶. Imagined because the museum sources its buildings from the whole of Wales with the purpose of showcasing Welsh built heritage

¹ Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2013) p.14. <<https://research-ebSCO-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/c/ovpsy/search/details/52zyqrpfkz?db=nlebk>> [Accessed 9th February 2025].

² Please note Llanelly is an old spelling of Llanelli. *Five Roads Heritage Society*, 'Our Living Heritage: A History of Five Roads, Horeb and Cynheidre' (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2013) p.93.

³ Serge Schmitz and Lauriano Pepe, 'Does Local Rural Heritage Still Matter in a Global Urban World?' *Geographical Review*, 112 (3) (2022), 353-70 (p. 353) <<https://research-ebSCO-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/c/ovpsy/viewer/pdf/rut5cfdxmb?route=details>> [Accessed 20 February 2025].

⁴ *Coflein*, Site record Eclipse Brickworks, Horeb, Available at: <https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/545072/> [Accessed 12 February 2025].

⁵ *Coflein*, Site record Hoffman Limekiln, Minerva, Available at <https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/275798/> [Accessed 20 February 2025].

⁶ For discussions on imagined communities see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* 2nd edition (London: Verso, 2016).

through the centuries. Caitlin DeSilvey argues that ‘we live in a world dense with things left behind by those who came before us, but we only single out some of them for our attention and care’⁷. In a world faced with climate change are the brickworks worthy of special treatment? Perhaps, it would be more sustainable to leave them in situ, allowing nature to take over. As Caitlin DeSilvey suggests ‘the nature of heritage is changing all the time’⁸. If this is the case, perhaps the buildings should be preserved through cultural memory and digital methods.

The cycle track links with other paths and leads to Llanelli’s millennium coastal path. After the demise of the steel and tin industries the landscape was left as a ‘mixture of rough pasture and industrial brownfields, riddled with railway tracks, punctuated by the occasional pithead’⁹ - a former coastal heritage landscape that needed rejuvenation. Llanelli Borough Council, incentivised by economics, started to create heritage tourism in the area by working with Sir Peter Scott, the founder of the Wildlife and Wetlands Trust, to develop a Wetlands Centre for Wales¹⁰. Opening the Llanelli Wetlands Centre in 1991, Sir David Attenborough commented that ‘bringing together our people and the natural world is a precious benefit to both’. Ninety hectares of land were added to the Centre at the millennium, which according to the W.W.T. ‘effectively turned back the clock 200 years, repairing the ecological damage of years of human activity, agriculture and industry’¹¹. I volunteer with the learning team who are actively working to raise awareness of how wetlands nurture biodiversity and are an effective tool in tackling climate change.

Wetlands are located across the globe and recognised as vital cultural heritage sites by the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty, that ‘provides the framework for the conservation of wetlands and wise use of their resources’¹². They are effective in: storing carbon, helping to shield coastal areas from flooding, facilitating biodiversity, and aiding wellbeing, as well as containing archaeological remains. Adrian Oliver describes wetlands as ‘a unique component of the historic environment, under severe threat from natural and human agencies’.¹³ He argues that the archaeological resources contained in them inform us more about the past than dry land sites¹⁴. People visit wetlands to immerse themselves in nature and restore their sense of wellbeing. Unfortunately, wetlands remain under threat from human agencies who prioritise short term economic gain over the needs of this fragile heritage. Aldo Leopold argued that this was also the case with the land and the answer suggested by humans was always more education. This made Leopold question whether something was missing from the content of the education

⁷ Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated heritage: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) p. 3.
<https://www-fulcrum-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ebooks_download_interval/m613n1290?chapter_index=5&locale=en&title=1.+Postpreservation:+Looking+Past+Loss> [Accessed 16 February, 2025].

⁸ DeSilvey, *Curated Heritage: Heritage Beyond Saving*, p. 368.

⁹ Judi Loach, ‘Coast Cleared’, *Architects Journal* 8 February 2001. Available at: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/coast-cleared> [Accessed 26 February 2025].

¹⁰ Wildlife and Wetlands Centre, *Llanelli Wetlands turns 30*, 17 April 2021 <<https://www.wwt.org.uk/wetland-centres/llanelli/news/llanelli-wetland-centre-turns-30>> [Accessed 21 February 2025].

¹¹ Wildlife and Wetlands Centre, *Llanelli Wetlands turns 30*.

¹² *The Convention on Wetlands*, The Convention, Available at: <https://www.ramsar.org/> [Accessed 21 February 2025].

¹³ Adrian Oliver, ‘Great Expectations: the English Heritage Approach to the Management of the Historic Environment in England’s Wetlands’. *Journal of Wetland Archaeology* 4, (2004) 155-168 (p.156). <<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.1179/jwa.2004.4.1.155?needAccess=true>> [Accessed 10 March 2025].

¹⁴ Oliver, ‘Great Expectations’ p.156.

on offer¹⁵. Perhaps Leopold was correct but I wonder if the education on offer was not reaching the right people. It needs to reach economists and politicians. Until the world's leaders change their behaviour, learn from heritage educational initiatives and adopt sustainable attitudes towards the use of the land humans cannot effectively steward the land. Global concerns over climate change indicate to me that heritage needs to become more sustainable, co-existing harmoniously with the land. It is also imperative that we continue to persuade future generations that, in David Lowenthal's words, 'consciously informed use of heritage is essential to civilised life'¹⁶. Heritage is not history, it matters because it links the past, the present and the future in meaningful ways.

¹⁵ Aldo Leopold, *The Land Ethic: from A Sand County Almanac* (1949) <<https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil308/Leopold.pdf>> [Accessed 18 February 2025].

¹⁶ David Lowenthal, 'Why the Past Matters' *Heritage and Society*, 4 (2) (2011) 159-172 (p.167) <<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.1179/hso.2011.4.2.159?needAccess=true>> [Accessed 10 February 2025].

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