

Heritage, Communities & Co-Creating Place in Neath Port Talbot, South Wales

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CIP Case Study





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Creative Communities is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (Grant Agreement No AH/X001555/1) and hosted at Northumbria University, Newcastle.



Summary

In my role as a Community Innovation Practitioner (CIP) I collaborated with cross sector stakeholders in the Welsh borough of Neath Port Talbot to examine what an effective co-created heritage eco-system might look like, and to explore how the cultural value of community heritage can better inform statutory frameworks for heritage conservation in more equitable forms of place-making.

My research centred on a deep-dive case study of a co-created project in a Victorian colliery smithy as part of the community-run [Craig Gwladus Country Park](#). As a result of the research, a community of heritage practice emerged comprised of public, private and third-sector partners and a cohort of FE college students motivated the process of stabilising the historic ruin as part of the community's place-making ambitions for the park.

The project has identified the range of expertise and knowledge required to mobilise and deliver community-led heritage participation. The potential for where R&D could inform gaps in provision from a statutory perspective has been highlighted, along with the impacts felt by a shortfall in training opportunities for young people in post-industrial areas experiencing long-term social and economic deprivation.

Further research is required into co-creating community heritage interventions and funding should be committed to developing a one-stop-shop community heritage service aimed at collaborative management so that the sector is better equipped to deliver on the seven goals of the [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act, 2015](#).

The proposed CIP framework of heritage practice has the potential to inform early-stage intervention with communities in advance of 'underpinning' research so that end-point impacts are better indexed to wider societal needs.



Introduction

In 2019 the [Research Wales Innovation Fund](#) (RWIF) awarded Swansea University funds to conduct a three-year project exploring the role of public heritage in community regeneration. It built on long-standing community engagement in the Lower Swansea Valley funded through [AHRC Connected Communities](#) and the [National Lottery Heritage Fund](#) (NLHF). A [UKRI-funded engagement project](#) with community groups, schools and charities demonstrated a clear need for more meaningful engagement in wider place-making ambitions in areas of deprivation in South Wales. Out of this work emerged the [Centre for Heritage Research and Training](#) (CHART), an initiative designed to foreground the important role heritage and cultural perspectives can play in delivering public benefit.

Contemporaneous developments in the borough of Neath Port Talbot (NPTC) saw more being made of its rich heritage to [stimulate tourism](#), review its culture strategy, and think about how a sustainable approach could be adopted towards managing and maintaining its heritage assets. The RWIF project resourced engagement with NPTC and allowed us to begin conversations with a range of stakeholders across the local authority to identify priorities, challenges and opportunities. It also supported the delivery of pilot projects aimed at exploring the role communities could play in heritage assets and co-produced narratives in support of wider place-making ambitions.



As Swansea University's RWIF project came to an end, [the Community Innovation Practitioner](#) role (CIP), delivered through [AHRC's Creative Communities](#) programme, was identified as a way of scaling up CHART's activities in this area. It was a chance to formalise what we were doing, to share practice with other similar projects across the UK, and to learn how augmented co-creation could deliver better outcomes. The CIP role facilitated a critical examination of what heritage services focussing on engaging with community value might look like whilst at the same time keeping one eye on the need for adaption in universities so that co-created practice can be embedded in research frameworks.

Research Context

In Wales, 'heritage' is a devolved matter and, as such, a major contribution made towards the conservation and celebration of heritage comes from the Welsh Government. Consequently, a range of institutions and organisations charged with this remit were either developed or came into being after 1999. [Cadw](#), the Welsh government's historic environment service has as its mission the care, protection and maintenance of historic places. It cites 'helping people to cherish and enjoy our historic environment' as a key aim in its desire to achieve its goals for an accessible and well-protected historic environment but much of its revenue and capital income goes towards repairs and maintenance.

Supporting Cadw in its statutory duty is the [Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments for Wales](#) (RCAHMW) that develops and promotes understanding of the archaeological, built and maritime heritage of Wales.

Uniquely in the UK, a separate body was established for the management and protection of the historic environment, comprising four Welsh Archaeological Trusts (WATs). The effective running of these services has been the subject of repeated scrutiny over the past fifteen years with various proposals for structural change designed to mitigate overlapping roles and the duplication of work. To date, this has resulted in a merger of the four

Welsh Archaeological Trusts. Alongside the historic environment services are the government funded [National Library of Wales](#) and [Amgueddfa Cymru, the National Museums of Wales](#), both of which receive proportionately higher funding than Cadw.

At the time of writing in 2024, the heritage sector in Wales can be considered under pressure from one of the most extreme budget reductions in funding announced in December 2023 which, despite revision upwards, have placed national collections and statutory heritage services at risk.

The £3m cut to grant aid for Amgueddfa Cymru cast doubt on [the viability of operating seven sites](#), and the proposed 22% cut to Cadw and RCAHMW, since reduced to 10.5%, was seen not only to impact the viability of delivering statutory services, but to undermine the [sustainability of small heritage organisations](#) across the regions. These cuts follow repeated curtailments in devolved government spending that between 2014 and 2018 [are calculated](#) to have amounted to reductions of over 30%.

The picture is slightly less bleak for Neath Port Talbot's heritage provision and services. A considerable tranche of its Shared Prosperity Funds have been assigned towards 'Building Pride and Place'

through a dedicated [Heritage, Culture and Tourism Fund](#). In particular, the [Vale of Neath Heritage Corridor Masterplan](#) has benefitted from Levelling Up Funds and NLHF's recent announcement that NPTC would be designated a '[Heritage Place](#)' gives much confidence for future structural and audience development.

These successes reflect both a need in the authority to address culture and heritage, but also a keenness at the heart of the authority's elected and non-elected representatives to find '[new ways to celebrate our amazing place of Neath Port Talbot](#)' and to use the theme of heritage to do so through a commitment to a [Heritage Strategy](#).

The innovative primary legislation that governs the broader policy framework in Wales, the [Wellbeing of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act \(2015\)](#) is important to the work of CHART in the field of heritage. The act legally binds public services to deliver, amongst other things, a Wales of cohesive communities and vibrant culture. Indexed directly to this is the recent [Place-making charter for Wales](#), designed to bring about inclusive, socially connected, and vibrant communities throughout Wales. However, heritage in the public sector often sits between various agencies, from arts and culture, to planning and tourism, and in so doing broadly mirrors discussions in the critical literature of the diverse definitions of 'heritage'.

Of specific relevance to this case study are [discourses on how heritage should not be considered a static and fixed physical entity](#) to be 'conserved', but rather something that is 'made' and 'reproduced' by people, actively, on a day-to-day basis. The criteria for value assessments of heritage amongst professional, statutory and government bodies are therefore often at odds with those of local heritage communities. Yet, authorised definitions, resulting in a dominant discourse, can be seen as a product of funding into the heritage services sector being allocated largely towards conservation and management of fixed assets in a structure ill-equipped to accommodate the social, cultural and political work that heritage can do for wider public benefit. Added to this are the issues prevalent in the sector with [the appropriation of the term 'community'](#) itself. The reverence within which it is held can often prove unhelpful in applications that are frequently non-consensually imposed on sociographically-defined marginal groups. A critical awareness is therefore required of the political philosophies that underlie mantras to be more 'local' and more 'community' focused.

Taken together, these are the devolved policy, local authority, and critical contexts within which the CIP research into co-creation with partners and communities on the theme of heritage is set. It offers real-term opportunities for rethinking the role that heritage can play in delivering a forward-looking, healthy and equitable Wales with community participation at its heart.



CIP Activities

CHART was keen to learn from its involvement in the [Enhancing Place-based Partnerships in Public Engagement programme](#) and to ensure that its co-created cultural activities with communities were sustained on institutional rather than interpersonal connections. One of the central concerns communities had about Higher Education public engagement was that when an academic member of staff moves on, the connections, collaborations and funding streams can fail. The CIP research therefore scaled-up existing work in collaboration with partners to gain research insights from practice, rather than acting as a standalone project with isolated activities. With my experience derived from over seven years' working as a field archaeologist, fifteen years in broadcast media, and over a decade in Higher Education, I had a background spanning practice and conventions, with an awareness of the statutory framework, along with skills in interpretation, storytelling, public engagement, and research-led critical enquiry. I am also passionate about engagements with the past being mediated through [tangible, tacit and physical connection](#).

A range of CIP interventions and activities were carried out across the period of the project. These included networking with stakeholders through interviews and meetings, to bottoming out the structure of the heritage ecosystem in Neath Port Talbot and undertaking visits to community groups to better understand the sites and the ambitions of their advocates. A survey of volunteers self-charged with the support and stewardship of historic monuments and/or archives (NPTC's 'Heritage Network') was commissioned, and workshops attended to explore concerns, capacities, and motivations. Engagement between members of the local authority 'heritage' team and CHART has been a key characteristic of the past year's activity and the CIP provided sustained consultation on the development of the authority's [Heritage Strategy](#). A series of meetings were also held

with officers at Cadw to discuss issues relating to monument conservation but also the importance of using its properties in care ([Neath Abbey](#)) as a source for community-led regeneration. A central question in all these engagements was how a diverse range of expertise, passions and interests can co-create around the theme of heritage to make the case for culture in delivering public benefit.

Putting theory into practice, I was engaged in a sustained co-creation project with a broad community of practice at Craig Gwladus Country Park. The AHRC CIP award allowed for my continued engagement in the scaling up of an earlier pilot project, delivered in tandem with NLHF funding, and to specifically address the character of cultural co-creation, in a relatively deprived part of the UK. This structure, bringing research council funding and NLHF resources independently together, could serve as a model for research-complemented community heritage but, most importantly, it kept the driving momentum of Craig Gwladus Country Park community's heritage ambitions squarely in the hands of its community.

The community of practice at Craig Gwladus Country Park was comprised of a broad range of public, private and third-sector participation. Leading activity in the park was Lisa Kirman, part-time park manager, in a role sustained through central authority and grant funding. Diane Davies, a retired schoolteacher, was chair of the [Friends of Craig Gwladus Park](#) who, along with a band of regular volunteers helped maintain access through the park and enhanced its biodiversity through tree-planting and other vegetation management (i.e. invasive species). [Gower Training and Wildlife](#) had been brought in to support the Friends in this ambition, to offer training and guidance on managing vegetation and habitat restoration. [Coed Lleol](#), Richard Manning, and [Anna Strickland](#) (amongst others) worked in partnership with Lisa to develop and deliver a program of well-being activities based on managing the woodland environments and participation in traditional green-wood crafts.



The environmental health of the park, the access to nature and the development of a community greenspace could be seen to be in good condition, but after two successful small-scale community archaeology excavations supported by [Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust](#) there was a sense that more could be made of the heritage assets. Craig Gwladus Country Park is situated on the site of a late nineteenth-century drift colliery and remnants of the industry survived in the form of an engine house, tramroad, incline railway, various abutments and the ruins of a blacksmith's building. The tramroad and incline railway had been resurfaced and served as excellent broad paths capable of providing highly accessible greenspace engagement. However, the ruinous buildings of the colliery were in a state of accelerated decay, had no statutory protection and, in the case of the engine house, were an emerging health and safety concern.

The creative community of the park, of which I was a member, came together to co-create a project designed to address a number of issues. Firstly, in accordance with NLHF's remit, the heritage needed to be better understood, and people needed to be engaged in that process. Secondly, there was a broader consensus across the authority that an investment in skills, particularly in young people, was something that needed to be addressed. This was a view expressed by another member of the creative community, Cllr Jeremy Hurley, cabinet member for climate change & economic growth, who observed how many historic buildings in the region were slipping on to the 'At Risk' register and that the repair of these buildings was something that should be carried out by local contractors with the appropriate skills.

The essential project at the park was not simply to 'conserve' the monuments but, by improving their health, we could also improve the health of the park community, enhance the visitor experience, address the needs for a wider skills shortage, and lay the foundations for better-supporting historic building conservation within the authority.

Whilst the engine house served as the most prominent of the industrial heritage monuments within the park, it was felt that the smithy building was a more manageable project. The collective plan was to uncover the ruins, explore them archaeologically, articulate the wall outlines, stabilise the fabric of the building, design a walking route through the monument, and offer basic interpretation on the building's history and function.

However, at the very heart of the collaboration lay the ethos developed by Lisa Kirman in close partnership with the Friends group. This was expressed through the metaphor of 'just getting the bus started and into first gear' rather than having a pre-determined destination from the beginning. It was essential, wherever possible, to let the 'passengers' decide on the route and the nature of the journey and, as such, we wanted to let our partners inform the outcome of the collaboration through *active participation*.

My previous engagements on [place-making projects in the Lower Swansea Valley](#) had demonstrated the efficacy of pre-apprenticeship engagement with young people on NVQ and Diploma-level Construction provision and an invitation was therefore extended to [Neath Port Talbot Group of Colleges](#) students and staff working in this area. Jamie Piper (course leader) and Ieuan Humphreys (tutor) played an integral role in resourcing and delivering engagement from the college and communicating the needs of the students, and how best to manage their expectations. Two cohorts of students (circa. 15 in each) from the Maesteg College campus were engaged across academic years 22/23 and 23/24 resulting in between 6 and 8 individuals on site at any one time. Working days were Wednesdays and Thursdays for the team throughout the academic terms.

Before any conservation work could take place, the monument needed to be ‘known’ in heritage science terms. I took the lead in providing a brief for archaeological investigation and [Archaeology Wales](#) were procured to watch clearance activities with each group and to conduct archaeological evaluation of the more sensitive deposits. It was clear that the building had been systematically robbed of its stone at some point in the early 20th century, but there were enough discarded local Blue sandstones and hand-made bricks to be stacked in preparation for reuse.

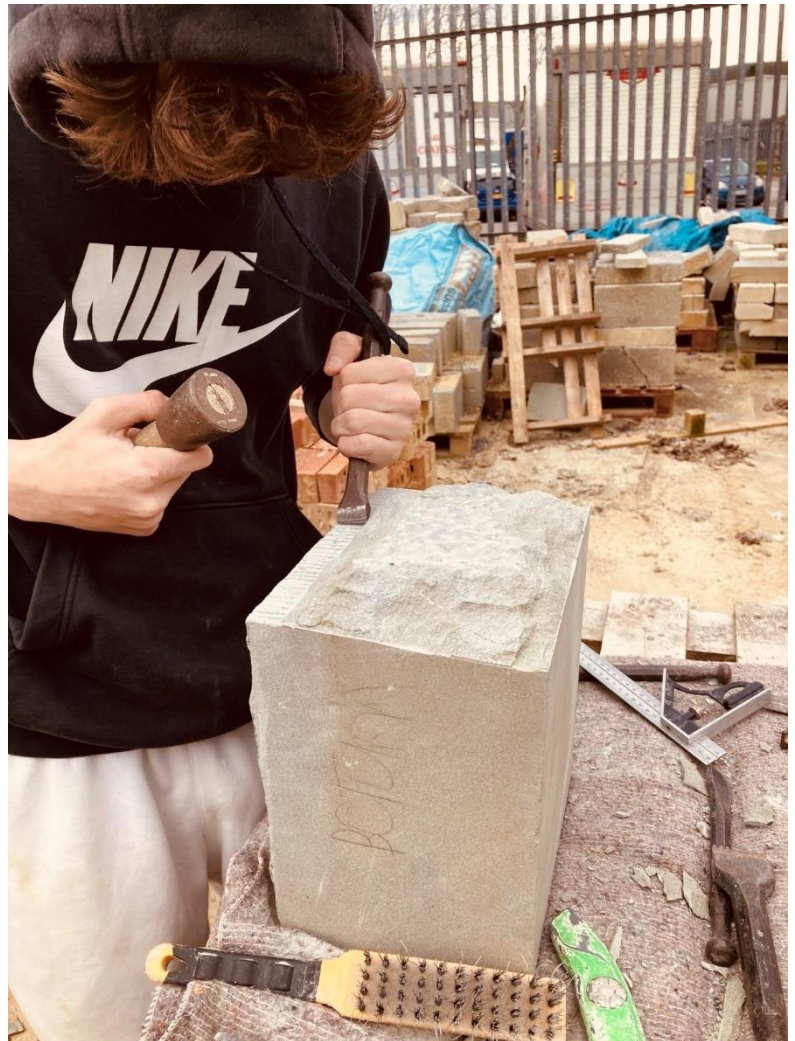


Students engaged in site clearance © Alex Langlands

The students were engaged in vegetation management, site clearance, preparation work and conservation construction techniques to stabilise the ruin, the latter of which was delivered under the supervision of Thom Kinghorn-Evans at [Cardigan Bay Architectural Conservation](#).

The process involved using traditional lime mortars to lay local sandstone and hand-made bricks to provide 'surrounds' for exposed doorways. Traditional stone masonry 'banker-work' techniques to dress Bath stone into quoin (corner) stones was delivered by [Oliver Coe](#). Students were also engaged in 'moss-capping' of the stabilised walls to protect their exposed upper surfaces from wind and rain erosion. Devised between [Celtic Wildflowers](#) and Lisa Kirman, this represented a truly innovative approach to the long-term conservation of stabilised ruins.

Throughout, it has been the monument, the nature of the work and the character of the student cohort that have provided the guiding energy behind how decisions were made collectively. To extend Lisa's metaphor, they have dictated the route the bus has taken at a steady and considered speed. What emerged across the year was a collaboration that aligned well with current academic discourse on the nature of [heritage as a 'process' and not a 'product'](#). There remains no clear idea of what the finished smithy will look like nor whether there will ever be a 'finished' state because the most important principle is that successive community members feel they can use the site to make and reproduce their own heritage within the setting of the monument.



Introduction to dressed 'drafted margins' on quoin stones © Oliver Coe

Results & Change

A material transformation has taken place at the Smithy site at Craig Gwladus. What was two years ago an uneven patch of ground covered in vegetation, largely unknown to the community that use and manage the park, is now a stabilised ruin with re-instated walls, original entrances articulated in brick surrounds and dressed-stone quoins.



The Victorian colliery smithy site in summer 2022 © Martin Broughton



The Victorian colliery smithy site in May 2024 showing new quoin stone in foreground corner and moss-capping left centre © Lisa Kirman



At the point of writing, plans are afoot for a local blacksmith to forge some of the non-diagnostic catalogued iron artefacts recovered from the site into an installation sculpture and a local artist is creating an impression of the building in its 1880s heyday to feature on an interpretation panel.

The restoration has been completed to a high standard, with every stone and brick laid using traditional methods by students from NPTGC. The monument can now tell part of the story of the mining heritage of the region and, as Kieran Wilson, a participating student stated, ***‘this has been here for 100 years, and now it will be here for another 100 years’.***



Every stone and brick was laid by Neath Port Talbot Group of Colleges students using traditional methods © Thom Kinghorn-Evans

But the project was never about just repairing the building: for some students heritage conservation construction has provided a meaningful and engaging experience, one that has, in the words of Jamie Piper, unlocked ‘the creative side’ of the participants. Traditional building skills, such as stone-masonry, are not mere construction techniques alone but profoundly artistic in the sense that each stone is dressed and laid with an aesthetic value in mind. Thom

Kinghorn-Evans commented how he had observed a change in the attitude of the students to their work, a pride in how they delivered it, and a care for how it looked.

For the wider park community, it has been an inspiration, and a direct result of the activity prompted the Friends of Craig Gwladus Country Park to engage another ruin, to consult me on a possible project, and to procure [Trysor Heritage](#) to carry out a community dig. For Diane Davies, the heritage aspects of the park were an exciting development, welcomed by the membership of the group, and one that provided opportunities to garner new members.

From the skills brought to bear on the project to the development of a clear co-creation framework for such engagements, the CIP project has generated a blueprint for how this kind of R&D could be delivered across devolved settings. This holistic project structure both observed and made possible by the CIP funding can help inform ongoing debates about how heritage services with an increased focus on community value are delivered by the statutory bodies in conjunction with arms-length and third sector organisations.

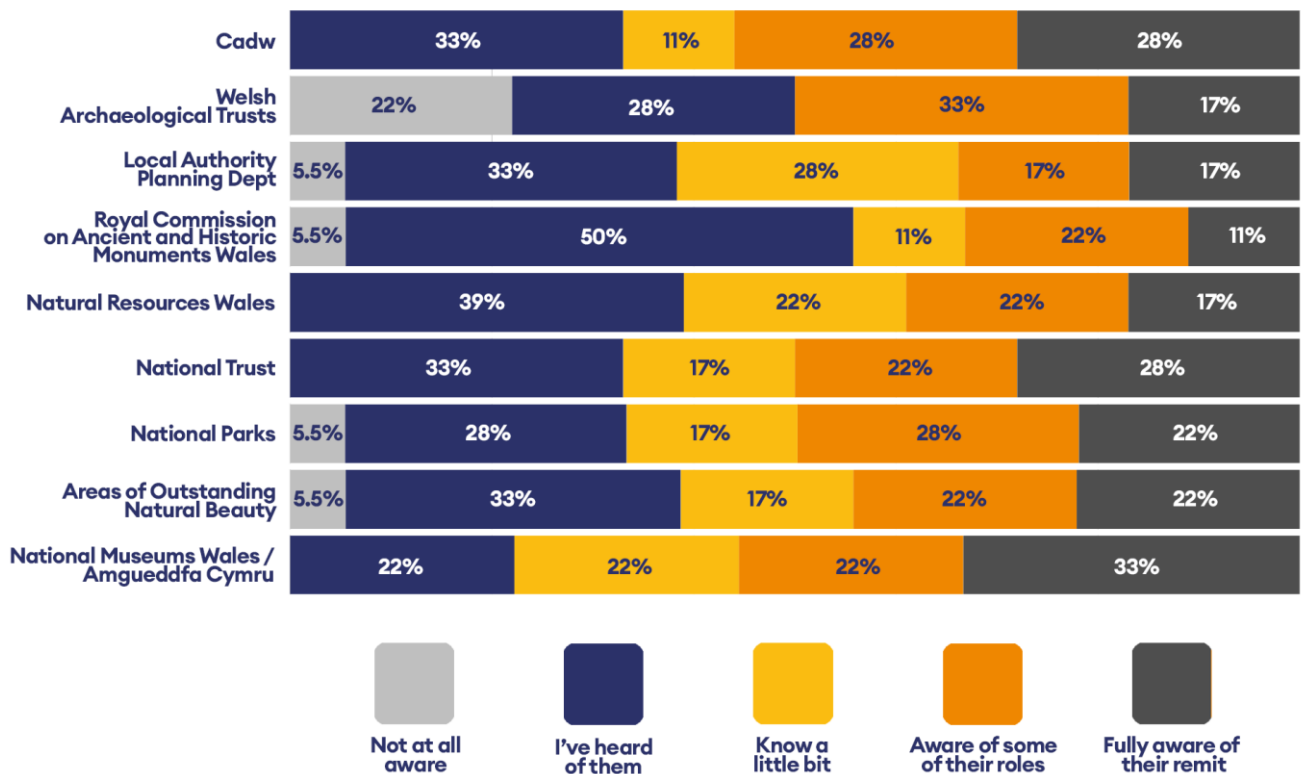


However, the Craig Gwladus smithy project has not been without its problems. At its start, [Welsh government announced cuts to funding in education](#), particularly [in the areas of FE apprenticeship provision](#), and this placed the project in jeopardy. The profile of the student cohort, from [one of the most deprived areas in the UK](#), meant that a spectrum of learning and behavioural differences needed to be accommodated on site without, at times, having sufficient levels of support on account of knock-on reductions in the staffing provision from the college. The issues that emerged out of this, and the need to build in a planned progression for participants is an area for future discussion with partners at the college. But most importantly, if we genuinely value the need to work with young people in left-behind-communities, and to transfer meaningful and rewarding skills – as the Well-being of Future Generations Act legally binds us to do – we must acknowledge a more robust commitment to appropriate staffing and growing capacity in this area.

Commercial pressures have also resulted in delays, with Archaeology Wales struggling to deliver the report of their work due to other client-focused pressures taking priority. From a

sequencing perspective, understanding the archaeological narrative of the building was key to informing design decisions along the way. From anecdotal evidence elsewhere in the region, the more lucrative work offered in the commercial sector meant that community archaeology projects were often – perhaps understandably – less of a priority for commercial delivery partners. There is also the issue at Craig Gwladus Country Park that the historic assets are not listed on the Historic Environment Record, Listed Buildings register, nor schedule of Ancient Monuments. This negated professional consultancy, allowed a more streamline and less resource-heavy approach to gaining permissions and licenses. While this is by no means exceptional, it does mean that where historic structures are designated, a higher level of professionalised advice, support and delivery time would need to be resourced.

This brings into sharp focus the role of the CIP and park manager whose collective range of skills enabled practitioners from ecology, archaeology, conservation, engagement, and interpretation to be brought together into a single project format. This process of co-creation – from project inception to final delivery in a place-making context – signalled a form of practice in the heritage services that currently does not reside in a single place in a community-focused framework. In theory, the charitable remit of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts should fulfil part of this function. In the survey of heritage volunteer groups undertaken as part of the CIP project, when participants were asked how aware they were of the role various agencies played in the conservation of heritage in Wales, there was least awareness of the remit of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts (WATs).

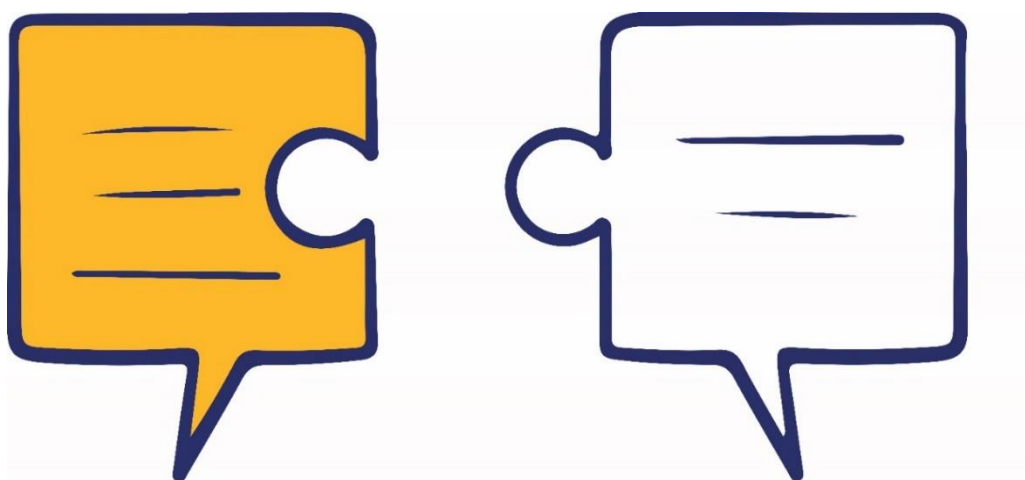


Awareness of roles of heritage agencies in Wales

The WATs do not necessarily have a remit to take projects beyond archaeological excavation, post-excavation analysis and interpretation, to delivering support for restoration, conservation and stabilisation, and factoring in meaningful skills progression, education and engagement as part of a holistic place-based engagement. They fulfil only part of the place-making functions required to facilitate meaningful participatory engagement in place-making projects.

Measured in contact time alone, the CIP participated in 50 hours of activities at the Victorian Smithy site, delivering 77 student days across 15 students. Through 4 workshops, amounting to 11 hours, 71 participants from the wider Heritage Network were engaged. 16 site, 4 online and 5 campus meetings were conducted with a total of 45 people from partner organisations. The CIP participated directly in 3 events spanning 15 hours to a collective audience of around 180 people. Added to this was the correspondence conducted through e-mail and telephone, and the lone visits the CIP made to industrial heritage sites across the local authority.

Probably the most immediate positive outcome of this immersive engagement with community groups, heritage agencies, and officers and cabinet members at the local authority is the invitation to CHART to become a lead delivery partner on Neath Port Talbot's Heritage Strategy with a special focus on skills and training. **This will almost certainly serve as a platform to infuse some of the findings from this AHRC-funded work to deliver public benefit for and with local communities in area.** In this regard, the CIP research has done much to inform co-creation and partnership working between Higher Education research institutions, communities, local authorities and heritage agencies, and the importance of physical, material and participatory interventions as a means of channelling research activity towards wider social benefit.



Recommendations

The CIP research has been invaluable for informing the development of CHART's remit. The role has been multi-faceted, delivering supervision, guidance and support for 'hands-on' engagement, co-creating activities in a place-based environment, listening to the concerns and ambitions of groups and individuals, and networking with local representatives from government and heritage agencies.

Added to this was content capture for a podcast, visiting sites to better understand the character and condition of the heritage assets, writing this case-study, and ensuring that policy recommendations are made on the strength of a rigorous review of current critical heritage studies and a sound knowledge of the heritage sector in a devolved policy context.

At the heart of community-driven co-created heritage lies a strong tradition of volunteering and while my survey of community heritage groups found that the council, in collaboration with heritage services and statutory bodies, were thought primarily responsible for the conservation of heritage assets, there was a strong sense that civic duty and community engagement had an important role to play, both in their management and in the decision-making around what to conserve and how.

Future research could be conducted in this area and as an immediate step, a parallel survey to that delivered by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action in 2014 could be commissioned to explore how and why community heritage organisations in Wales have changed in the last decade. A recent audit and analysis of Heritage Asset Adoption schemes (June 2022), commissioned by the Council for British Archaeology and funded by Cadw, may offer some up-to-date guiding principles for what balance needs to be struck between community-driven stewardship, statutory obligations and facilitation.

The average age of the volunteers who responded to my survey was 63.5 years. Diane Davies and fellow volunteer Ian Davies at Craig Gwladus Country Park commented about their age and the need to recruit newer, younger volunteers into heritage action.

A longitudinal study of volunteering in community heritage organisations may therefore prove more useful than just a 'snapshot' at local authority level and may help us to better understand how recruitment and succession planning in groups can be supported.

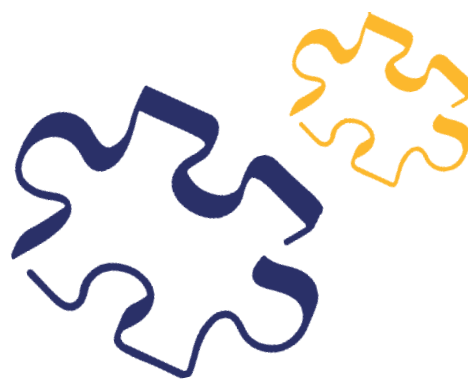
As Esta Lewis, project development officer in NPTC’s heritage, culture and tourism department, and contributor to this CIP project’s podcast articulated so clearly: “heritage evolves”. Better understanding this process of evolution will help inform cycles of engagement and identify how and where limited resources could be best directed to support co-creation with communities.

Breaking down the silos in terms of how we define communities may also prove useful in a heritage context. What emerged in the case of the Craig Gwladus smithy project was a community of practice passionate about providing opportunities for marginalised young people to express themselves. The key recommendation from this activity was the need to consider what ratios are required to sustain it. Imparting complex but rewarding and much needed craft skills can be challenging enough. But attempting to do so without the appropriate ratios of tutors to students in areas where long-term deprivation has impacted the quality of education can create a range of risks. If we are to disrupt the ‘conveyor belt of disadvantage’ in such areas and deliver on the legal requirements of the *Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*, then resources must be found to give young people the dedicated support, supervision and compassion they deserve.



Conclusion

The CIP role has enabled me to occupy a new space between critical heritage research, co-created community heritage value, and the challenges confronted by statutory heritage service provision in a devolved policy context. In so doing, it has generated new evidence on how research-driven heritage discourse can have an impact at the grass roots level and, iteratively, how the outcomes of that engagement can feed back into the research agenda. The co-creative practice at Craig Gwladus Country Park is a model that has attempted to be as equitable as possible in appreciating the knowledge of *all* participants.



There may be welcome changes to be made in this area, but the fundamental structure of research-before-impact raises ongoing questions about the nature of knowledge democracy in HE research. This is still an environment where research agendas remain the preserve of an academic elite and the wider public the passive beneficiaries of knowledge creation being done for them and about them, in a format where public engagement specialists are very often delivery ‘bolt-ons’. What the CIP role has brought to the fore is the need for co-creation and engaged activity to inform the ‘underpinning’ research in the first place, so that the pathways to impact are predicated on real rather than perceived societal need.

Research in UK Higher Education must follow global trends in recognising the requirement that excellent research must inform wider social impacts. As REF 2029 undergoes high level redesign, an area of scrutiny is the character of the research needed to ‘underpin’ impact case studies.

Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit <https://creativecommunities.uk/>

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Creative Communities is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (Grant Agreement No AH/X001555/1) and hosted at Northumbria University, Newcastle.