

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy
Response from The Monmouthshire Antiquarian Association



The Monmouthshire Antiquarian Association

Founded 1847

Patron: The Rt Revd Dominic Walker, OGS, Bishop of Monmouth

Reg. Charity No: 1022927

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Committee Clerk

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

National Assembly for Wales

Cardiff Bay

CF99 1NA

27 June 2012

Dear Sir/Madam

Consultation: Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

The Monmouthshire Antiquarian Association wishes to comment on the above and following a committee meeting of the Association we have set out our response to the questions posed in your document.

Firstly we provide some background information about our organisation. The Association, as the oldest established county archaeological organization in Wales, welcomes the opportunity to comment on these proposals. We were set up in 1842 not only as an antiquarian society, but as a conservation body, being responsible for founding what is now the National Roman Legion

Museum, a branch of the National Museum of Wales, for the conservation and study of the remains of the Roman legionary fortress, which at the time were frequently found in building work and destroyed without record. With a strong membership base within the county community and links with other county organizations, we have been involved in the study and protection of the physical remains of the historic county of Monmouthshire for over 150 years. This has involved much cooperation with Cadw and its predecessors, the Royal Commission and the National Museum of Wales. At the present time we maintain a library in the National Roman Legionary Museum which provides access to the public, we arrange visits which allow access to privately held heritage not ordinarily accessible to the public and disseminate research through our journal *The Monmouthshire Antiquary* and through lectures and conferences which are open to the general public and sometimes free.

1. 'How appropriate and successful are the current systems employed by the Welsh Government for protecting and managing the historic environment in Wales?'

Cadw and the Commission are complementary bodies, but with quite distinct identities and functions. Cadw has responsibility for the statutory protection of sites and buildings by scheduling as ancient monuments or listing as historic buildings and for the conservation of monuments in state care and their presentation to the public. The latter are most frequently the ruins of medieval buildings such as Tintern Abbey and the Edwardian castles of north Wales. It is often not realized that without constant repair and conservation by Cadw's team of inspectors, architects and stone masons monuments such as Tintern Abbey would soon suffer collapses and losses of masonry, causing no doubt considerable public disquiet and criticism. It is thus essential that these skills should be preserved in any reorganization. The Royal Commission operates under royal warrant as a recording body, charged with making a definitive record, in a

variety of media, of the physical remains of the past of Wales. Their professional skills in surveying and recording all aspects of Wales's heritage are unmatched. A recent highly successful television series has shown how they carry out these tasks. The programmes received widespread critical and public acclaim. Both Cadw and the Royal Commission have a high public profile and are well respected brands of a kind which no competent businessman would willingly discard.

In the matter of the promotion of the historic environment the Unesco World Heritage site of Blaenavon, within our county, provides a case study of the present roles of the bodies concerned with Welsh heritage and how they can cooperate in a successful project. Blaenavon is a community in dire need of regeneration and with a strong pride in its own history and identity. Each official body contributed what it does best. Cadw was responsible for the task of conserving the remains of the ironworks, involving architects and engineers and for the historical research necessary for the understanding and presentation of the site. The latter needed the active involvement of members of the local community, who often had important information to impart. The Royal Commission recorded the extensive surrounding areas of industrial landscape, central to the World Heritage bid, and which, properly understood and presented, became a major resource for education, recreation and tourism. The National Museum of Wales was responsible for developing Big Pit as a museum site and major tourist attraction. Taken together, this represented a major achievement, recognised in the award of World Heritage status. However, with hindsight, some things could have been done better, perhaps with more positive results for the local community. The project would have benefited from closer coordination and planning between the bodies involved and the local authority from an early stage. Some ideas based on local initiative, such as the Blaenavon 'book town' project proved over ambitious and

unsustainable in the long run, whilst not enough thought was given to transport links between Big Pit and the town, so that the latter has not benefited the town financially in the way it should have done. Much of this has now been put right, with the visitor centre in the old school and a local authority forum involving interested parties.

2. 'How well do the Welsh Government policies promote the historic environment in Wales (for instance in terms of interpretation, accessibility, attracting new audiences and tourism)?'

Cadw can show remarkable success in developing its monuments for education and tourism and their presentation to the Welsh public. Its guidebooks are recognised as among the best in Europe, accessible and attractive and its monuments are the setting for a wide range of local events. The Royal Commission have similarly shown great skill in marketing their product in a variety of media, including not only print but also television films and publically accessible electronic media.

3. 'How well do the policies for the historic environment tie in with wider Welsh Government policy objectives (such as regeneration communities)?'

The examples of Blaenavon and Merthyr Tydfil both show the role of Cadw and the Commission in promoting the regeneration of communities. Both Blaenavon and Merthyr are former industrial communities with a strong sense of their own identity and history. The physical remains of their past are central to that identity, but these remains need to be understood and properly presented before can be used to reinforce that identity and to attract visitors and tourists to those places. The current popularity of such things as steam railways and the 'retro' television series based on former life in Stack Square Blaenavon emphasise how radically public attitudes

have changed since the time when these were seen simply as ‘the bad old days’, fit only to be swept away.

The potential role of Cadw and the Commission in promoting health issues is usually overlooked and more could be done here. Doctors are continually reminding us of the importance of exercise for health and the prevention of obesity. Walking however requires a purpose or object and the success of the Offa’s Dyke footpath shows that the field monuments of the Welsh countryside can be valuable in attracting and encouraging walkers, benefitting their own health and contributing significantly to the local economy. Cadw and the Commission could profitably identify and develop a series of walking routes and guides involving field monuments and encourage public access. Cycle routes perform the same function, though here, over use of fragile environments can cause environmental damage

4. ‘What would be the advantages and disadvantages of merging the functions of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales with the functions of Cadw?’

There would be both advantages and disadvantages in merging the functions of the two departments, so creating in effect a state antiquities service like those of most other European countries. Since it would be impractical to physically combine the two, moving Cadw to Aberystwyth or the Commission to Cardiff, if only on grounds of cost, the merger would presumably be less than total. It would be an advantage for Cadw to have easier access to the Commission’s definitive records and archive and to its electronic mapping and surveying resources, though it should be stressed that this is solely a matter of geography (which it may be possible to overcome via electronic media). The precise format of any reorganised body matters less than the need to ensure that the professional skill base and long experience of the two

organizations is not diminished, since without this they cannot function. One point which needs to be borne in mind is that many Cadw monuments have a high public profile and can lead to adverse press comment. Swift response to such allegations requires rapid consultation between Cadw and the Welsh Assembly Government.

5. 'What role do local authorities and third sector organisations play in implementing the Welsh Government's historic environment policy and what support do they receive in this respect?'

Cadw has built a heritage forum with local authorities which meet twice a year. Relations of the two bodies with the National Trust are excellent. The Trust realises that it sometimes needs specific conservation skills which Cadw possesses and for example Cadw manages several monuments on behalf of the National Trust. One shortcoming in Wales is the lack of local authority County Archaeologists, who play an important role in England. Only Denbighshire has one.

We trust the foregoing will be considered in your deliberations.

Yours faithfully

Christabel Hutchings (Hon. Sec.) on behalf of the Chairman and MAA committee