

Recreating pride in Cardigan



Gary Cooper and Dafydd Ladd show how conservation and sustainable economic development can go hand in hand



▲ Above left and above before and after – Sgidie Teifi (Ceredigion CC)

CARDIGAN IS A small west Wales port, whose isolation and economic decline were accompanied by poor maintenance of its fabric, despite the age and quality of the properties in the historic centre. Prospects for the town are now on the up. The architectural and heritage potential of the town is being realised through the Townscape Heritage Initiative. The neglected castle site, within which lies a significant Georgian mansion, looks likely to be conserved at last. The presence of Theatr Mwldan, as a regional arts and cultural centre, and the prospective revival of the Teifi waterfront have also boosted confidence.

There is little doubt that the Cardigan's renewal has been crucially assisted by the THI – which has catalysed investment in physical fabric and thus contributed to the revitalisation

of local businesses. This has received strong community backing, itself a good sign of sustainability; at the same time the scheme's contribution to employment and the local skills base should insure that the scheme has a long-term physical and social impact.

The Cardigan Townscape Heritage Initiative had its origins in an initial allocation of Town Improvement Grant by the Welsh Development Agency in April 2001, initially for three years, and subsequently renewed annually. This remains a useful source of regeneration funding as it enables public works and buildings to be aided that are outside the area of the THI itself. Phase 1 of the THI lasted from November 2002 until March 2005, with a budget of £800,000.

Following the achievements of this initial Cardigan Town-

scape Heritage Initiative programme, Ceredigion County Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund, Cadw, the Welsh European Funding Office (under Objective 1), the Welsh Assembly Government, the Cardigan and South Ceredigion Regeneration Plan and Menter Aberteifi, have joined forces to roll out the programme to other properties in Cardigan.

The aim of the initiative is to continue with the successful Phase 1, which regenerated buildings within the Cardigan conservation area. In addition, the initiative will contribute to the improvement of public buildings and the revitalisation of gap sites. This second phase will run from September 2004 until August 2007 with a

budget of £2.8M. The THI has been reinforced by parallel initiatives that have enabled a concentration of funding on the town and which have allowed flexibility in tailoring packages of support to specific projects. The WDA is funding an Area Renewal scheme at £900,000 a year over ten years; £100,000 has been put into the development of a project to conserve Cardigan Castle – where a mansion and formal gardens have been hidden for years behind overgrowth and the ruined curtain walls; and the Afon Teifi development is worth £2.5M.

In the first phase of the THI twelve properties were renovated. This started the ball rolling and convinced other property owners of the benefits of the scheme. Multiple sources of grant support have meant that some projects have been passed to Area Renewal that were not eligible for THI grant. On the other hand, sometimes this plethora of funding sources has led to complications – not least the resources that have been drawn down from the European Union.

We have had seven funding partners, operating different grant criteria; we have had to work to three different financial years; and each partner has required very high outputs that have been the focus of intense negotiation. We are pleased that the successful evaluation of phase 1 of the project in a report commissioned by the WDA has become a catalyst for further investment. Property owners who had been supported said that improvement works made their properties more viable economically and had encouraged further investment. Two-thirds said that, without grant, they would not have tackled improvements to their properties. The overwhelming

majority – 83 per cent – said they were satisfied with the help and support they had been given.

The project has clearly benefited Cardigan in physical terms – through the conservation of its fabric and the viability of local businesses – but it has had additional benefits. Craftspeople in the local work force have learned traditional building methods. Local architects now have a better understanding of conservation issues. The town looks better – and this has improved economic confidence. Generally, people in and around Cardigan have become more aware of conservation and heritage issues.

The present position is that projects worth £1.2M have been approved under phase 2; projects valued at £700,000 are already in the pipeline for next year. However, for all that has been achieved, there remains a need to further develop the economic argument for investment in conservation, especially from the property owner's point of view.

The decline of buildings in the conservation area was associated both with lack of maintenance and with alterations – for example to shop-fronts and fenestration – that was out of keeping with the character of properties. Yet a wealth of architectural detail survives to be conserved and emulated. For instance, standardised fascias, such as that at Barnado's, have been replaced by more sympathetic designs. There has been careful attention to detail – for instance of fan-lights and tiled entrances. Owners have been persuaded to adopt new signage that fits the conservation area. New signage – whether hanging signs, or painted directly onto wall-faces – is often bilingual and can be striking and innovative in design, such as the signs for George Davies and Evans, solicitors and the shoe shop Sgidie Teifi.

Property restoration has enabled craftspeople to use their skills once again; other skills have been re-learned – such as the use of the adze, or traditional mortar



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Castle Chambers before and after

and rendering techniques. In the process a pool of people with hands-on understanding of conservation techniques has been developed within the community. The Lime Company of West Wales was established by local craftspeople who recognised that the Initiative would create a demand for their abilities. This is just one aspect of the job creation impact of the THI. In terms of architectural detail, the recovery of traditional skills and techniques has enabled old colours to be discovered and applied to rendering and timber detail; the recreation of appropriate window and glazing styles for shop fronts and houses, and the repair and retention of older fabric, such as original doors and tilework. With this new skills base it has been possible, for example, to install new ironwork that matches damaged runs of railings, or to retain and pick out attractive detail such as date stones.

Case-studies exemplify this approach. For example, Corner House, which dates from around 1850, was a critical building for the THI. This charming vernacular structure, right in the heart of Cardigan, was in a very poor state of decay. Its hipped roof had been replaced by a flat roof, and its windows were wholly out of keeping with the building style. When work began, extensive dry rot was found. The building was restored using historic photographs as a guide to the authenticity of the work; the grant the owner received for the work on the exterior prompted a complete refurbishment of all four floors inside Corner House.

Castle Chambers was once a hotel. Dating from around 1790, it is sited on the main street that leads from the river to the town centre. The THI has enabled the restoration of a landmark building, whose attractive Georgian architectural features have been conserved and reinstated. Its authentic historic colour scheme has attracted much interest and admiration. The local Disability Action Group has praised the way in which a ramp and steps have been constructed to the main entrance.

The case of Seconds Ahead illustrates the deployment of

◀ **Town Improvement Grant.** This encouraged the owners to purchase an adjacent property that had been empty for over twenty-five years. A grant of £400,000 leveraged an investment by the owners of £300,000, enabling the extension to the rear of both properties. This is now the flagship store for the national chain, and building on their success, the company has bought a large, disused factory behind the store, which is to become the headquarters and distribution depot for their forty-two shops.

The THI has been central to the physical renewal of Cardigan and the growing vitality of its economy. Community support, the development of local skills, and evidence of job creation triggered by the Initiative provide a good basis for sustainability.

Online

<http://www.cardigan-heritage.co.uk>

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Not just ramps



▲ **Chepstow Castle** (Derek Lilly/Morguefile)

Alan Richards discusses an inclusive approach to access improvements for people who do not use wheelchairs



WHY SHOULD WE be concerned about access to historic – indeed any – buildings? There are multiple, rather compelling, reasons. Firstly, the law makes this compulsory, via the Disability Discrimination Acts of 1995 and 2005. Then there is the moral argument – aren't the disabled people too? And don't forget, if you're in the selling business, disabled people can certainly spend, and so can the carers that they often bring along with them. Lastly, there is an argument from self-interest – disablement could happen to you or me, on a temporary or permanent basis.

Of course, there are people who make excuses for doing nothing. The ones I've heard include the misguided ("It's a listed building, and we can't

change it"), the complacent ("We think this building is accessible as it is"), and the sad ("We've never had anyone in a wheelchair"). Other people's reasons include the nature of the business, lack of resources, and impracticability.

When people think of the disabled, and making a building accessible to someone with a disability, they frequently think primarily of the needs of wheelchair users. After all, the wheelchair is the symbol of disability, and the most visible change to buildings aiming to meet the needs of the disabled is to install ramps and lifts. Yet, while eighteen per cent of the population is disabled, only three per cent use wheelchairs. The majority of the disabled suffer from a variety of deficits – and we should surely be taking