

Championing the historic environment



▲▶ Above Ruthin

Right High Street, Haverfordwest
(Matthew Griffiths)



Matthew Griffiths explains how the ideas contained in the Historic Environment Review are being progressed



THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT Group first met a year ago, with a brief to advise the government on policy matters.

The Group's existence is a key outcome of the Historic Environment Review that was initiated by Sue Essex in the days when the historic environment fell within the environment portfolio. That review was itself the response to one of those occasions when the Assembly Government works in partnership with its friends to make a great and imaginative leap forward – the conference at Cwmaman mounted by the National Trust. I believe strongly that an enduring partnership between government and those outside government concerned about the historic environment in Wales is essential as part of an open and creative discussion of policy. The integration of Cadw into the Ministry of

Culture, Welsh Language and Sport, and the appointment of a new director in Marilyn Lewis, is very much an opportunity to build on the partnership-working which has underpinned the debate about the future of the historic environment in Wales.

Origins

We are three years down the road from that conference in Cwmaman – “The historic environment: an asset for the future”. Sue Essex envisaged a joined-up approach to our understanding of the historic environment, the way it contributes to cultural and social identity, the recognition of its economic potential, and the resources we invest. She stressed social sustainability and the theme that the past is given meaning as a record of people's lives that speaks to people and communities, today and tomorrow. She emphasised the

importance of education, and spoke with understanding of the tensions that can arise from statutory controls. The Review that followed responded to the conference's endorsement of the need for a clear definition of the historic environment, and for thinking that would enable improved co-ordination, fresh thinking and alignment with the vision of a “sustainable Wales... that is environmentally and culturally rich”.

An inevitable context was the process being followed in England, where the *Power of place* report (2000) was given a government response in *Force for the future* (2001) and the first, tentative, *State of the historic environment* report (2002). This was a dialogue in which sustainability, social inclusion, lifelong learning, and community regeneration were stressed. The formal outcome was the establishment of the annual

Heritage Forum, a seminar with ministerial involvement, and the quarterly Historic Environment Review Executive Committee (HEREC), established in 2002, whose principal role is to progress an annual state of the historic environment report – *Heritage counts*.

Review and response

Many readers of this paper will have a well-thumbed copy of the report produced by Paul Loveluck, Jane Sharman and Paul Drury (March 2003). There may have been question marks about some of the detail in their observations, but most stakeholders welcomed the broad approach that the authors took.

The key elements of their report were:

- a holistic approach to the historic environment
- recognition of the potential of the historic environment as a cultural and economic asset, and the role of the heritage in regeneration
- the need for research into social and economic aspects of the historic environment
- the importance of community participation and the potential of the voluntary sector
- the need for planning instruments to consider impact on the historic environment
- the identification of problems associated with developing, integrating and accessing the information base
- to point to a lack of human and cash resources
- to indicate opportunities to be proactive with regard to education and skills

The key conclusion – associated with the benefits that could arise from clearer leadership and greater co-ordination – was to raise the possibility of a new champion for the historic environment.

Quite what this might actually be was a little opaque – the options the consultants set out included a ministerial sub-committee of the Cabinet, a

cross-cutting group of officials, or an advisory body chaired by a minister and serviced by a small official secretariat.

Following the Assembly elections in May 2003, responsibility for the historic environment lay passed to the Culture minister, Alan Pugh.

In his response to the Review (January 2004), the minister broadly endorsed both the content and philosophy of the report, not least its emphasis on community values and partnership. The Historic Environment Group was to be set up by Cadw's chief executive, as a sub-group of the Cymru'n Creu forum of cultural bodies (now superseded by the Culture Board), its role to be broadly analogous with that played by the Wales Biodiversity Group in advising government.

The Group met for the first time, at Dinefwr, in October 2004. It is chaired and serviced by Cadw. Its members are: the National Library of Wales, the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, the Countryside Council for Wales, CyMAL, the Welsh Local Government Association, the Council for British Archaeology, the Civic Trust for Wales, the National Trust, and the Architectural Heritage Fund and the Welsh archaeological trusts (one member).

The Heritage Lottery Fund joined for the second meeting; the WCVA dropped out after the first in view of the technical nature of the agenda but asked to be copied in to minutes and reports.

Its composition is therefore hybrid, combining structures within the Assembly Government with statutory bodies and voluntary organisations.

Terms of reference

The terms of reference of this group took a little time to resolve but they do give the group a remit to advise government as a whole, not just the Culture Minister, within whose department Cadw itself lies. It will

To advise the Welsh Assembly Government on action to benefit and promote the historic environment of Wales; specifically to identify strategic issues and priorities for action in relation to

- the roles of the public, private and voluntary sectors
 - the co-ordination of joint working and partnership
 - sustainability – the conservation and management of the historic environment
 - the management of and access to information about the historic environment
 - developing understanding and knowledge about the historic environment
 - public awareness of the value of the historic environment
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identify issues for research and discussion and it will consider ways in which the historic environment contributes to other key policy areas.

All this implies the cross-cutting agenda and role envisaged in the Review's discussion of a new advisory structure, if not the public status or role of an historic environment champion. How can deliver effectively on these terms of reference?

What is to be done?

The agenda the group has followed has been largely informed by the recommendations of the Review consultants. It has met three times over the last twelve months – in October, February and June. An autumn meeting 2005 had to be postponed. The group was able to finalise its own terms of reference, extensively re-working an initial draft suggested by Cadw officials. It also chose its own name, opting for a title that was clear and descriptive, rather than metaphorical, Welsh, and alliterative (as in the case of Cymru'n Creu, for instance). Aside from these housekeeping matters, meetings have focused on three key areas.

The Group has made recommendations on the content of a Guide to Good Practice for the promotion of the historic environment through *Communi-*

ty Strategies. A version of this was subsequently the subject of a round table meeting between Sue Essex (now Assembly finance minister), Alan Pugh and local authority chief executives. The document was intended to influence those strategies still in preparation and to be relevant when adopted strategies are reviewed.

The Group has set up a sub-group that follows up the *What's in store?* report in which recommendations were made for a national Welsh strategy for the management of and access to archaeological evidence of the past.

The Group has focused on issues associated with *education and training*, reviewing each participant organisation's engagement in these issues, liaising with the Design Commission for Wales, making initial contacts with the Welsh curriculum body, ACCAC, and the National Grid for Learning, and drafting specifications for consultants to look at current practice and opportunities to develop historic environment education in schools. It has placed on the agenda a discussion of lifelong learning and continuing education.

In the future the Group intends to schedule a presentation by Wales Environment Link on sustainability and the historic environment. There is also an intention to form an *outreach* unit within Cadw that could support the Historic Environment Group in engaging with people and communities so that more can be done to help local buildings which do not have statutory protection.

Issues and opportunities

While the group has covered a lot of ground over three meetings, it is still very much feeling its way in terms of its role, its agenda, and its working methods. What follows is very much a personal set of observations linked to some questions for debate. ►

Who should be championing what, and to whom? Is it the Assembly Government, or a responsible minister, who should be identified as the champion? Or should the champion be an independent grouping, seeking to influence government's policy and spending priorities?



We should presumably prioritise the further development of effective structures and working practices – practices that make best use of the diverse membership of the group. How best can it raise awareness of the importance and opportunities represented by the historic environment? How best might it reach out to people and communities? How best can its relationship with the voluntary sector be developed? How far can the group represent that “champion” for the Historic Environment which the Review anticipated; in point of fact, *who* should be championing *what*, and to *whom*? Is it the Assembly Government, or a responsible minister, who should be identified as the champion? Or should the champion be an independent grouping, seeking to influence government's policy and spending priorities?

At the same time, how far ought stakeholders outside government, not least those in the voluntary sector, be equipping themselves more actively to be effective partners and a coherent and independent voice? In England the debate that followed *Power of place* led to the formation of Heritage Link – which has become a valued partner with government in the Heritage Forum and HEREC, alongside the key individual organisations that take part in these groups.

There are one or two further questions, the answers to which might help provide some context for the future role of the Group. If it is unclear who or what might count as a champion of the historic environment in Wales, the need certainly remains to raise awareness of the historic environment within and beyond government – not least in a way that demonstrates its potential contribution to regeneration and sustainability.

How far, for example, do Wales and the Assembly Government need a cross-cutting

Historic Environment Strategy, distinct from its Environment Strategy? Has the Group a part to play in shaping such a strategy? How far should its role be one of co-ordination? The Trust has argued that the contribution that the historic environment can make to sustainable development, economic regeneration, community distinctiveness and quality of life needs greater recognition within the Assembly Government's draft Environment Strategy.

Ideally this would have been influenced by a government endorsed historic environment strategy and informed by relevant data. In England, the Heritage Forum has become an annual seminar, focusing on the roles government and its partners play in developing distinct aspects of historic environment strategy. Might one way in which the debate excited by the Historic Environment Review can be continued lie in such an annual seminar, preferably with ministerial leadership, that could enable progress on agreed actions to be benchmarked and a shared agenda set for the year ahead? Could each group within the Historic Environment Group take on an agreed aspect of its work to develop?

One final suggestion. It is not necessarily the case that producing an annual Welsh state of the historic environment report is a role for the Group, although in England it provides a key focus for HEREC. But it *would* be a good thing to have such a report, both as a contribution to the overview that the state of the environment reports provide, and as a means of drawing attention to the effectiveness of policy instruments, the needs associated with the historic environment, and the resources required to address these needs, within the wider framework of progress towards an economically and socially sustainable Wales.

A glance at some of the data

sought and indicators developed in the most recent (2004) *Heritage counts* is interesting, although in Wales we would no doubt have our own ideas about baseline data and useful indicators. In 2004 English indicators included the extent of ancient woodland; the number of conservation areas; the percentage of grade I and II* buildings at risk; employment in heritage, museum and conservation services; and school visits to historic sites.

The Historic Environment Group might be a vehicle for the development of a Welsh analogue to *Heritage counts*; alternatively, there is no doubt that we need a process of this kind, and that it would provide a context in which to develop the quality of the Group's contribution to policy. If we are to collectively make the case for the value of the historic environment and the resources to meet its needs, such a report could provide the robust evidence such a case demands.