

◀ **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

these into account.

People who have arthritis, or have suffered a stroke, may have various mobility impairments – for instance to the upper limbs. Then there are those with poor sight; by no means all the registered blind have no sight at all, rather blind people can experience a variety of visual difficulties. Then there are the profoundly deaf and the hard of hearing and people with cognitive problems – doesn't making things simpler and easier benefit everyone?

The solution lies in inclusive design.

Good design results in environments that are safe, convenient and enjoyable to use by people regardless of disability, age or gender.

Everyone can benefit from clear and easy signage, the choice of steps or ramps, wide doors and corridors, graspable handles and good lighting. In fact, not every historic building is capable of accommodating a ramp without inappropriate alteration to its fabric. There are flights of historic steps it would be wrong to mess around with. But that shouldn't stop one looking at other ways of making life easier for people – and especially the 97 per cent of the disabled who are not wheelchair bound.

To stick with the theme of steps... a ramp may be inappropriate, but we can help people with improvements such as highlit nosing (contrasting materials/colours rather than high visibility marking that would be out of place in an historic building) or (unless we are creating a trip hazard) upstands to the rear and side of treads.

Then there are contexts in which handrails would be a reasonable provision. Ideally these should go on both sides of a flight of steps and be centrally mounted on wide staircases. They should be graspable – that means a diameter of 50mm of a round or oval staircases. Wood is warm and non-slip and

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may therefore be a material to choose. Not all of this may be practical, depending on context, but any help is better than none. In castles, for instance, the option might be 20mm iron rails. And ensure that rails in themselves don't present a hazard – consider level and projection.

Doors represent another feature that deserves some thought. How visible is a doorway? Does the handle contrast with the door face? Are there push or pull signs? How much force is needed to make the door open? This is where one needs to consider the technical aspects of springs and latches, knobs and handles, the provision of vision panels and safety zones.

The visually impaired can be helped by careful thought about lighting. Can one use transition lighting to reduce the impact of movement from a bright daylight environment to places that will always be in shadow? How can one reduce glare and confusing reflections? Think about the use of blister or corduroy paving to indicate hazards.

For those who have difficulty hearing, installing induction loops – usually not intrusive and potentially portable; considering how lighting can aid lip-reading; and using effective signage – which benefits everyone of us. And can you make sure that alarms are both audible and that they are visible and flashing.

Disabled people also find it helpful if they know in advance what to expect from their visit. Will direction signs be effective in indicating accessible routes? Be positive. Never say that there are “no facilities” for the disabled; rather, explain – if this is the case – that all entrances are up steps. Likewise, don't say that a site is unsuitable for wheelchairs; instead explain the nature of the problem that may be encountered – rough ground, or steep slopes, for example.

When designing signs, bear in mind some simple graphical rules that can help the visually impaired or the weak reader. Sans-serif text (think London Transport) is easier to read on a display than serif lettering, though the latter is often better in the body copy of a leaflet. Text that is all uppercase is confusing. Don't capitalise unnecessarily.

Finally, do not second guess the needs of those with disabilities. Use BS8300 wherever possible and be aware that you need to have good reason to deviate from the standards laid down. Preservation of the historic character of a building may be just this reason. Having said this, the message must be inclusive design wherever reasonable, remembering that the disabled are a large and diverse group.

Often, small, well-designed improvements to make their lives easier will be better than big and clumsy ones – such as ugly ramps that are too steep. Little things may easily be put right – removing clutter, protecting overhangs, unlocking one leaf, changing handles, redecorating to increase contrast. You may not be able to provide for wheelchairs, but there's much that can be done to make places safer, and more accessible – by addressing the problems faced by the visually, hearing or cognitively impaired.

The message must also be that disabled persons are ordinary visitors; they are no different to you and me. They don't want the world, still less historic buildings, to resemble a nursing home. But there is no excuse for doing nothing.