

Report on the Cambrian Archaeological Association Easter Conference April 8-9th 2006

The Future of Historical Societies in the 21st century

This two day conference was held in Pantycelyn Hall in the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, where the 31 delegates and speakers were able to sleep, eat and attend lectures under the one roof. This led to a good deal of useful informal discussion and exchange of ideas, as the organisers had hoped. Fifteen Welsh local historical/archaeological societies were represented alongside larger associations, such as the Cambrians themselves, the Society of Antiquarians of Scotland and the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. One or two other societies had written in before the event with relevant comments.

The opening address was a review of the **history and roles of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland** by their current President, **Roger Mercer**, recently retired Secretary of the Royal Commission for Ancient Monument for Scotland. This is summarised in some detail because much of it is particularly relevant to the CAA, though the SAS's scale of resources put it well above the CAA and the other groups represented!

The SAS was founded in 1780 by the 11th Earl of Buchan just as Scotland was emerging from a period when all things 'Scottish' were proscribed or suspect, a time when the promotion of Scottish history was a matter of some delicacy. It was also a period of intellectual ferment with the growth of the Edinburgh Enlightenment and the SAS was in competition with other 'philosophical' societies.

From the outset it collected antiquities, manuscripts and books and it owned premises in Edinburgh. These collections, which were the glue holding the society together in its early, rather quarrelsome years, form the basis of the National Museum of Scotland and when the 35,000 objects were given to the government in 1851 the SAS was able to negotiate a promise of free accommodation in perpetuity. *[By contrast the CAA has never had a fixed headquarters and the antiquities assembled at its summer meeting exhibitions were returned to their owners and most have disappeared].* Up to 1954 SAS continued to manage the museum.

The SAS has substantial investment income, gets some legacies and about £130,000 yearly from subscriptions (£40 from 3,500 Fellows). Having a Royal Charter entitles Fellows to put letters after their name and this is undoubtedly a draw (200-300 Americans like it!). A survey of 20% of the Fellowship suggested that they were almost equally divided between hobbyists and professionals, and historians and archaeologists and that interest was fairly evenly divided between prehistory (15%); Iron Age/Roman (19%), early historic (20%), Medieval (23%) and Post-medieval (22%). Scotland was a strong interest throughout. In age 44% were over 65, 44% between 25 and 64 and 12% between 24 and 44 (this last figure may reflect the attraction of the post-nominal letters).

Of the services offered by the SAS the annual Proceedings and the Newsletter were the most popular, followed by their occasional publications and the availability of grants for research and access to the library. Less popular were the conferences and lectures (held in Edinburgh where 150 normally come, and Aberdeen where 70-90 attend), and the excursions which came surprisingly low. On-line publications and services were not yet at all popular.

The substantial income allows the employment of 5 full-and part-time staff, a Director, Administrative Assistant, Publications Officer and Assistant Treasurer. It also supports the prestigious Rhind Lectures (6 lectures given over a week or a week-end by internationally known scholars). They are subsequently published and many have formed the basis of very well-known books.

He ended by saying that the words associated with societies such as the SAS, eg Tradition, Eclecticism, Didacticism, Intervention, Hierarchy, Teamwork, might be seen as a turn-off; all were concepts under challenge. It was up to those in charge of long-established societies to see that they maintained their essential role, while responding sufficiently to fashion to ensure that membership continued and the organisation was passed on to following generations.

David Mason (now County Archaeologist for Durham) spoke about the **Chester Archaeological Society** which he had joined as a teenager and of which he had been General Secretary for 12 years.

The society had been founded in 1849 and had had a distinguished history in the exploration and conservation of the archaeology of the city, salvaging the famous Roman tombstones and saving the amphitheatre in the 1930s.

It had no paid employees. Members came from all walks of life in the city and used their professional expertise for the society. They advertised all activities in the local press, in advance and with a post-event account; for lectures they aimed for high-profile speakers, charged for attendance and advertised them widely. This had proved a success. In publication the key was to have a good editor; income had been increased by charging developers for the publication of their results and in Chester this was feasible and acceptable.

Fieldwork had been a feature of the society in the past and had been revived recently with the current Heronbridge excavations. Excavation involved heavy responsibilities, but other work such as building surveys and geophysics could be less onerous but also attractive and useful. The Heronbridge excavations had had HLF funding and the project had demanded a lot of management work from volunteer members of the society. This needs to be well understood in advance. Working with volunteers is very rewarding and the society's membership had risen from 220 to 350, but it needs careful planning since abilities, needs and even numbers are uncertain. Attractive and interesting work needs to be available. Luckily Chester is normally able to provide this.

Ann Benwell spoke about the **Talwrn Group from Anglesey** which had emerged in 1994 from an extra-mural class. When the basis of extra-mural classes changed they formed their own independent group, organising lectures each week in the winter and field excursions through the summer. There are 2 parties each year and an annual exhibition of local work. They have the use of a private museum run by one of the members which makes an ideal focal venue. The group is 75 strong and 45-50 regularly attend the lectures and some 20 attend group meetings where people bring their own work or finds for general discussion. The subscription is £20 a year and membership was spread among friends by word of mouth.

In anticipation of this talk she had questioned members and made an analysis of the group's success.

Regularity of weekly meetings becomes a pattern of life and gives a sense of belonging. Lectures have a broad spectrum of topics and maintain a high standard (there are local sources of good lecturers).

Social aspects. Friendly, especially to new members; the venue is comfortable and relaxed; the summer excursions have a social aspect, teas or car-sharing; language (which can be a tricky issue in Wales) is not a problem in this group which is largely bi-lingual but carries out general business in English.

Involvement of members The 'management' is not hierarchical; there is a range of expertise among members; communication is maintained by a Newsletter and a discussion forum at the AGM. But on the other hand, there would be problems if certain key individuals were to leave.

Participation Members come to the group discussion meetings; some give the lectures and many undertake research and have contributed to a history of Talwrn published in 2000; many members introduce and thank speakers and organise excursions.

The membership was largely the 'active retired'; it might end in 10 years, having fulfilled its role for this generation.

After lunch **Mike Heyworth**, the Director of the Council for British Archaeology, spoke about the **role of the CBA in promoting participation** in history and archaeology. The CBA had recently organised, under Mike Farley, a survey of the public's view of archaeology and the opportunities for public participation and the perceived barriers to getting actively involved. The full report can be seen on the CBA website; www.britarch.ac.uk/participation

Activities by societies and others which were considered 'good practice' were: lectures, guided walks, viewing archaeological work; organising events (re-enactments, events for National Archaeology Week); archaeology used in non-historical school work such as maths and citizenship, taking children out of the classroom.

There were a number of non-excavation participation activities which might be organised by societies: land survey and landscape history studies, planning and conservation work, re-enactments and the research needed to underpin the costumes and accessories, surveys of recent historical features. The CBA's own project on the Defence of Britain, mapping WW2 defensive works had been particularly successful in using a large range of volunteers and tapping into oral history.

He then showed a presentation prepared by Eliza Gore, York Community Archaeologist about her work. She would offer advice, loan equipment and provide professional contacts to local groups, but the ideas must come from below. This could involve excavation and its publication and would make use of the non-archaeological professional skills of local people interested in their own immediate surroundings. The work of the Portable Antiquities Scheme recorders (www.finds.org.uk) was another example of how archaeologists were becoming partners in others' activities to their mutual benefit. In York community archaeology groups had increased from 6 to 11 in 3 years; those covering a small area with intensive work flourished best.

In discussion it was pointed out that such established facilitators were not available everywhere. The Brecon Beacons National Park had lost its archaeologist who had performed this role for local groups. Such changes were a matter of political will and archaeologists must lobby for support. The internet could in some circumstances act as a link spreading resources. It was thought that professional historians and archaeologists must learn to become more and more friendly.

Mike Scott Archer spoke about the genesis and work of the **Llangynidr Society** in south Breconshire, a parish now with a population of about 1000 and a varied history with remains dating from the Bronze Age to recent times.

Local history work had begun in 1982 with a WEA group which included Dorothea Watkins who ran the post office and had picked up medieval pottery on Persondy Field outside her house. This group carried out a graveyard survey, mapped local paths (deriving from the postmen's routes) and studied field changes through the fine Beaufort estate maps, as well as interviewing the old people of the village. This work resulted in the publication of *An Introduction to the History of Llangynidr*.

In 2002 and 2003 the Society excavated Persondy field under a professional archaeologist, Mike Anthony, with the approval of Cadw, finds to go to the Brecknock Museum. The team of some 50 enthusiasts (students to pensioners) identified the site of the 14th century Reeve's House for Maerdy on a raised fortified mound with surrounding bank and ditch. The other half of the site bore no evidence of the supposed mediaeval village but the foundations of a large 17th century parsonage were recorded. Summary reports are in *Shadows in a Landscape* and *Archaeology in Wales* vols 42 and 43 and the final report is now ready for printing. Seasons 2004-6 have involved work on an abandoned 16th century farmstead (not scheduled) in the upland valley of Blaen y Cwm. There is much still to do in future years on this site and others in the valley.

The finances of the Society have depended on annual donations from the village gala (now ceased), subscriptions and proceeds of publications. In 2000 the substantial book *Shadows in a Landscape* was produced. The 1000 copies have been sold at £10, either directly or commercially, yielding £6.60 each. Funding the dig each year has cost approx. £2000. Financial support from the Brecon Beacons National Park via their archaeologist ceased last year when the Park released him. The Society is now actively seeking further sources of funding so that they can continue next year – not least because it will provide an opportunity for senior pupils from local schools to participate for the 6th season running.

Rhidian Griffith of the **National Library of Wales** spoke about the library's **Outreach Programme**. When the library was built it was clearly designed to inspire awe, a beacon of learning and perhaps elitism. However the founders wanted it to be a centre of learning for the people and to cover various forms of record, not only archives but drawings and prints, photographs and films. There is now a drive to overcome the impression of remoteness and to make the building more 'user friendly' with displays and a new restaurant. The developments have led to a doubling of visitor numbers in the last 5 years. But in particular there are efforts to bring the collections to many more people through the internet and the web. A very large programme of digitising of documents has been undertaken. The Black Book of Carmarthen, the 1588 Bible, the Blue Books and collections of photographs, census returns and parish registers are all available, enabling people to build their own histories. The NLW website also aims to provide a gateway to many other sources of Welsh history and culture.

In a short addition to the programme **Mrs Nansi Mascetti** spoke about the **Royal Institution of South Wales** which was founded in Swansea in 1835 when the city was at the height of its prosperity as the centre of the copper industry. In 1838 it gained its Royal Charter for scientific work but natural history, history and literature had always been part of its interest and extensive collections were made.

The society which has a membership of over 300 has remained loyal to the founders' ideals and has been successful in maintaining the interest of young people. There is an Under 12s club on Sunday afternoons and a teenagers club is planned. It offers science prizes to schoolchildren (with laptops as prizes), a £600 prize at the Eisteddfod, organises a series of lunch-time lectures in the museum and publishes 3 newsletters and a journal *Minerva*, annually.

The following **discussion session** concentrated on the need to bridge the gap between the needs and interests of older members, particularly of the 'Learned' or County Societies, who are happy to visit, look, listen and sometimes contribute verbally; or even just subscribe (and this financial contribution is vital to survival and the continuation of journals), and those of the younger generation whose involvement is so crucial. The proceeding talks had covered both types of societies and some were certainly able to enthuse the younger generation. The typical county societies fulfill the needs of their elderly membership, often very well, but do little to further the involvement of their grandchildren, and this was a concern. It was stressed that 'archaeology' and 'history' are not synonymous with 'digging' and that worthwhile practical activities can be broader, less destructive and appeal to a variety of interests and physical abilities.

That evening a convivial Conference dinner was held in Pantycelyn and the conference continued the next morning with two more lectures and an extended discussion session.

Dr Martin Bell of Reading University (but previously of University of Wales, Lampeter) spoke about the **Severn Estuary Levels Research Committee** and its development into a broad-based society.

The committee was founded in 1985 as a small committee based on Cardiff University but in 1990 it opened to general membership with Martin Bell as secretary and editor. Since most of the archaeological work had been founded on the observations of Derek Upton, a local steel worker it is appropriate that 'amateur' involvement should be encouraged from the start, though the standard of work has always been professional and the subject matter often somewhat esoteric. Equal weight is given to palaeo-environmental and archaeological/historical studies. Interests extend to both sides of the estuary and across the English/Welsh border with some backing coming from both Cadw and English Heritage.

Its mission is to be an umbrella organisation, creating a climate under which research projects can flourish. Derek Upton's observations were the first stimulus; they have been put into historical perspective by John Allen's sedimentary research. Development pressures on the Levels and the example of the work on the Somerset Levels have been additional spurs. Notable successes have been the revival of interest in the Late Mesolithic, discovery of late prehistoric buildings, increased understanding of Romano-British drainage and impressive boat discoveries.

The Committee/Society has 165 member producing a subscription income (£10 individual; £20 institutional) of £2000 and £500 is made from journal sales, with grants in addition. The journal, now in its 15th year, costs £2,500-£3,500 per year. Final reports on work have been published by CBA/Cadw and amount to 1405 pages. These volumes have sold well.

SELRC provides a friendly and collaborative atmosphere for work across disciplines and over the years has produced, for about £4,000 per annum, the equivalent of a large wetland project costing many times as much, while fostering a group of informed enthusiasts who have a continuing interest in the region and a continuing monitoring role.

The final talk was by **Steve Clarke** of Monmouth Archaeology, describing how the **Monmouth Archaeological Society had developed from a society into a commercial unit**. The society had been founded in 1956 by the enthusiasm of two masters at Monmouth School, Mr A.L.Sockett (who had dug with Kathleen Kenyon) and Keith Kissock who took boys, such as the 14 year old Steve Clarke, excavating watermills in the Dixton Valley. During the 1970s, though Monmouth had been identified as an archaeologically significant town by the CBA, developments went ahead regardless.

In 1986 Keith Kissock recognised 2m of floor deposits below a Quicksave development site and a major fight with the developers and Monmouth Council ensued. MAS members bluffed their way onto the site and collected finds from skips etc and some became known as the Provisional Wing of the MAS! They picketed Quicksave stores in other towns and bought shares so they could disrupt the AGM. Though that campaign was unsuccessful on that site it raised the profile of archaeology in the town and professional and amateur diggers did get access to other sites in Monnow Street with a deep and informative stratifications S Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Norman and medieval punctuated by flood horizons.

MAS became groundwork contractors (Monmouth Archaeology) so that they could dig foundations by hand. On one site recession led to MA being in occupation for 10 years during which 1 million people visited the excavations and a great deal of money was collected. The Society won the Pitt Rivers Award and the Silver Trowel during this period.

In 1990 Planning Guidance 16 came into force whereby all planning applications must be assessed for archaeological significance and developers must pay for mitigation. MA then became a fully professional unit contracting for work in the SE of Wales. They now have two sub-units with 2 full-time workers each but the Society (MAS) members are still available as back-up, and members and especially young diggers are welcome as excavators. Even with PPG 16 many sites may be missed, but not in Monmouth where every hole in the road or service trench is checked!

Steve Clarke is concerned about the Valetta Convention introducing licensing of excavators. In S Wales, where the historical resources of Monnow Street would not have been recognised without amateur alertness, professional and amateur have worked well together, but it is essential that amateurs have the opportunity to gain excavation experience.

After the talk there was a short discussion about the fate of the finds from Monmouth, where the local Museum's storage was full. SC said that MA has its own storage and all their work is reported in brief in *Archaeology in Wales* with fuller reports deposited in the GGAT Sites and Monuments Record. For minor sites the finds are usually returned to the site owners who have legal entitlement to them. The National Museum is interested in receiving kiln material as a reference collection. It was pointed out that finds and (copies of) the excavation record need to be kept together.

After lunch there was a **plenary period of discussion** at which the speakers formed a panel and members spoke from the floor.

Peter Llewellyn made a plea for the Cambrians to re-establish an over-arching concern for Welsh history and culture. CAA, as one of the oldest pan-Wales cultural bodies, had had a high profile in Welsh heritage matters. Over the years other bodies had taken over some roles but these bodies were now themselves under threat, such as the university now fragmenting and extra-mural activities being so reduced, while taught history at all levels was contracting in

range.

He suggested that a conference or Forum should be organised by CAA every two years bringing together local groups and larger societies to discuss a theme chosen by the societies. Such an event ought to aim to become a regular Welsh cultural event for which good publicity would be needed. CAA was not good at publicity!

Some members thought that there was a need for such an umbrella event which would link north and south and the Marches, but others thought that it might duplicate the activities of organisations such as CBA Wales/Cymru or the Historical Association. Cadw had sponsored such conferences a few years ago but they had ceased, so there was now a gap.

In discussion the role of societies in general it was recognised that people had different needs and preferences and that different kinds of groups were needed to serve these. Links should be kept fluid between these groups. It was felt that on the whole the small grass-roots groups were doing better than the larger societies at present, perhaps because they were driven by the enthusiasm of their core organisers, this enthusiasm sustained and modified by their close-knit audiences. They can respond more quickly to local needs, 'doing their own thing', they may come and go. On the other hand those in charge of long-established societies had a responsibility to pass them on in good heart. But since traditional societies had survived for a long time without major alteration, perhaps the pressure for radical change should be resisted. Sid Caplan suggested that a Federation of large and small societies within a region, as in Caernarvonshire, was one way of linking the two styles of organisation.

The success of Time Team Big Dig and of the CBA's Young Archaeologists Club and its many Branches are an indication that archaeology and history are seen as exciting and are attractive to the young. The problem is to provide that kind of excitement everywhere and through local organisations. The history of the Newport Ship Society is an indication that often the stimulus is a major threat and the sustaining factors are perhaps more social than intellectual.

Tom Mort of Harlech and Charles Boase of Monmouth both felt that small societies were looking for practical advice from others, where to find speakers, how much fee should be given, exchanging information about what brought in audiences and what held them. *A letter from Llansilin Local History Society contained just this kind of comment and advice and is given as an Appendix.* Rory O'Farrell thought that the talks had shown that a regular programme/routine seems to be important, with functions allowing for some social interaction, although the social element is not the main object of the group. This is easier to achieve with small groups with a very local base, but gatherings of people from further afield can be stimulating and refreshing, bringing in new ideas.

The Monmouthshire Antiquarian Society had written to say that they were happy with their attendance and activities but were anxious to discuss publishing matters in the light of electronic publishing developments and suggested that this might be a subject of a helpful seminar. There was some discussion of publication at the Conference, especially the need to publish excavation results, yet the often impenetrable nature of such reports. It was felt that archaeology and history could always be made accessible and that editors need to be firm with jargon.

Finally it was suggested that the notes of these discussions should be posted on the web and comments and debate invited.

Since the Conference the Association has heard that at least two practical projects, in Radnorshire and in Flintshire, have been started as a result of the inspiration and encouragement received during the weekend. Please let us know of any others because this was just the thing we wanted to see happen!

4,066 words