

Easter Conference 2008

Recording and Conserving Welsh Buildings: a Conference in memory of Vernon Hughes

This conference, held at the Llety Parc Hotel in Aberystwyth on March 28th -30th, was organised by the President, Tom Lloyd and Frances Llewellyn and attended by 44 members and 12 speakers.

The decision to make the conference a tribute to Vernon Hughes had been made by the Trustees in the year following his death and the nature of the programme was dictated by his particular interests. Vernon Hughes had been a member of the Cambrians since 1949 and had served as meetings organiser for several years. He was an architect with a lifelong interest in historic buildings and their repair and had been much involved with the saving of damaged buildings in London after the Second World War. Subsequently he worked as a conservation architect for Monmouthshire and later for Cadw. He was one of the very first to draw attention to the qualities of Victorian buildings in Wales, all very much under threat in the decades following the War. During his time in London, he had spent many evenings in the RIBA library, scanning through *The Builder* magazine (monthly from the 1840s), making a huge, neatly ordered record of all references to Wales which has been of incalculable help to all architectural historians.

The meeting opened with tea and a ***tour of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales*** at Plas Crŷg . 2008 is the centenary year of the Commission and the Cambrian visit was part of their programme of celebratory events. The party was welcomed by the Secretary, Dr Peter Wakelin who introduced members of his staff who would demonstrate some areas of the Commission's work and the range of archives held by the National Monuments Record Wales.

David Thomas demonstrated the RCAHMW online services, notably Coflein and the databases to which it gave access. Then the party split into smaller groups to visit other rooms.

Louise Barker discussed earthwork surveys, traditional and computer animated. The recent work on the Froncysllite Aqueduct was a particularly fascinating example of the latter. Tom Pert demonstrated computer mapping techniques whereby new finds from air photography and other sources can be added to maps and checked against historic maps. The software also allowed rectification of old vertical air photographs and oblique views. Members also visited the National Monuments Record main archive store and looked at various collections, old and new. Vernon Hughes' index to the *Builder* is stored there. On the ground floor, in the Library there were exhibitions relating to vernacular architecture, seaside towns and religious buildings - all the themes of the conference, together with a series of old maps of Aberystwyth.

After dinner that evening the ***Keynote Address*** was given by Prof Bill Davies who had been a close friend of Vernon Hughes since they were boys together in Abergele. Professor Davies, who had run a very successful architectural practice in north Wales before becoming the head of the Welsh School of Architecture in Cardiff, spoke about ***The Concept of Regional Architecture in Wales***, a subject which he and Vernon had often debated. The lecture, illustrated with many of his concept sketches for his own projects and for teaching discussions, looked at the influence of climate, materials and location.

The three lectures on the following morning looked at Welsh vernacular buildings; how they are recorded, protected and used in the 21st century.

Richard Suggett of the RCAHMW spoke about the late medieval hall houses. Dendro-chronological dating has suggested that none of the surviving houses in Wales date

from earlier than the 15th century. In that century of recovery after the Glyndŵr Revolt, three groups of hall houses can be recognised, those built by high status *uchelwyr*, those belonging to lesser gentry families and those belonging to essentially peasant farmers. The central hall was common to all three but its size and decoration varied; the presence of cross wings was originally a feature of aristocratic houses, but was soon copied by the gentry. As fashions changed the rural hall houses were often demoted to other uses and fine houses could be discovered within later farm complexes.

Judith Alfrey of Cadw spoke about the Listing system as applied to cottages and minor vernacular buildings. She stressed that the criteria were strict because the decisions had to be defensible. She illustrated her discussion with a number of examples from the Lleyne and southern Ceredigion where particularly characteristic houses could be found, buildings built at the end of the 18th and in the 19th centuries at the edge of common land or wastes. These had been built with few resources but they often showed surprising architectural sophistication and finesse.

Greg Stevenson has been rescuing a number of small cottages of the type discussed by Judith Alfrey and has been demonstrating that they can have a continuing role as ecologically sound holiday homes. His company now has a large portfolio of unusual small houses and he can let them for a high proportion of the year. He illustrated his talk with pictures of the houses in various states of disrepair, work in progress and final completion. He was also able to show that the rescue of a cottage would act as an example, and other owners would repair their own, often using traditional materials and methods.

After lunch the subject changed to religious buildings. **Alex Glanville** the property manager for the Representative Body of the Church in Wales spoke about the history of the RB, its relationship to the dioceses and to parish finances and resources. He foresaw a situation in which there would be fewer clergy; in which church buildings would have to fulfill more varied roles in the community, and in which managed redundancy would become more common. All these trends had serious implications for the conservation of historic churches.

Gruff Owen, the Manager of the Welsh Religious Buildings Trust, spoke next about the problems of preserving Non-conformist chapels. There were many hundreds of chapels; until recently their architectural worth was seldom recognised and their often splendid interiors were unknown outside their congregations. Questions of ownership and systems of central control varied between denominations. The simple shape of many chapels made conversion seem simple but, in fact, the pews, galleries and pulpits were usually more significant architecturally than the walls and, if they were to be retained, they made new uses extremely difficult to identify. The Trust was taking ownership of the best redundant chapels in order to maintain the interiors, but the process was difficult and money was short.

The party then left the hotel to visit the great parish church of Llanbadarn Fawr where **Dr Lawrence Butler** spoke about the 19th controversy about repair and restoration carried out there. The Cambrians, on their first Summer Meeting in 1847, had entered the debate about the extent of repair or change which might be countenanced at this very historic site. This debate involved critics, such as the Cambrians, the clergy and the growing Tractarian Movement, and the architects such as George Gilbert Scott and, in the case of Llanbadarn, J.P. Seddon who saw the repairs as an opportunity for 'improvement' and often imported ideas from distant areas, historically correct there, but not in Wales. Seddon failed to get all his proposals through; some of his changes may be judged successful, others, though attractive in their own right, are inappropriate to Cardiganshire. Viewing the church after the talk, members were able to renew the original debate.

On returning to the hotel (and welcome warmth) members enjoyed a presentation by **Dr John Morgan Guy and Martin Crampin** on the 'Bible in Wales' Research Project run from Lampeter University. This work focussed upon 19th and 20th century biblical art in Wales, an art under threat because of changes to the buildings in which it was housed and because of

the increasing incomprehension of its symbolism and narratives, as people become less familiar with the biblical stories. Many splendid examples of stained glass, sculpture and mural painting were shown, most of which were not generally well-known.

The following morning was devoted to seaside towns with three lectures and a tour of Aberystwyth. **Richard Haslam** spoke about the rise of sea bathing, sailing and changes in the social patterns of recreation brought about by the growth of industrial occupations and the spread of the railways. He briefly reviewed early aristocratic facilities at Plas Newydd and Penrhyn but concentrated chiefly on the growth of Llandudno and the influence of the Mostyn Estate and of certain developers/architects who established and maintained the style of the town from its beginnings. This ensured that through a long and, at times, financially insecure period of development, the town preserved a remarkable unity of appearance and scale. It could be judged to be the best planned town in Wales.

This uniformity and control was contrasted by **Robert Scourfield** with the rather more varied situation in Pembrokeshire. Many of the present holiday resorts had started life as working ports, for the coal industry, quarrying or the agricultural trade. The narrow streets and surviving defensive walls of the medieval town had prevented the building of boulevards when Tenby became a fashionable resort at the beginning of the 19th century and terraces of apartments to let had been constructed. Though the visitors were similar, the ambiance of the town differed completely from that of Llandudno. He contrasted the formal gentry terraces at Tenby with the haphazard growth of bungalows built by local shopkeepers on the dunelands above many sandy bays.

Finally **Michael Freeman** of Ceredigion Museum spoke about the development of Aberystwyth, in preparation for leading a walk around the streets and promenade in the afternoon. Aberystwyth had also been a medieval walled town with a castle dominating the river-mouth harbour. The early town had been sparsely populated and level ground allowed a more regular street plan which accommodated itself to the construction of broad streets of Georgian lodging houses and hotels in the later 18th century. Aberystwyth was blessed with a far-sighted town council at that time and development was carefully planned. Indoor sea bathing was encouraged at both Tenby and Aberystwyth by the building of bath houses in 1809-10. Which was the earlier is to be the subject of further research!

Despite unsettled weather a reasonably high proportion of the party, armed with large umbrellas, set off to **visit the town** under the direction of Michael Freeman, to view the surviving older buildings and the improvements, such as the monumental sea wall built at the beginning of the 20th century, and to ponder over the fate of the old university building on the front. Now for sale, it had been originally bought from a bankrupt hotel which in turn had absorbed the eccentric Castle House built by Nash for Uvedale Price. Difficult to use and live in, it remains an impressive structure to admire from the outside!

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