

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Ian Shakeshaft

Dear Sir / Madam

With regard to the inquiry into the Welsh Government's policies, management and stewardship of the historic environment, I submit the following which serves as a case-in-point in order to illustrate several of the weaknesses inherent in heritage protection policy as currently practised.

Recent experience in attempting to avert the destruction of historic buildings in Port Talbot has revealed a number of substantial failings of Welsh Government historic environment policy and its implementation. Consequently an irreplaceable building of indisputable importance, the 1897 Custom House, emblematic of the town and its rich industrial and nautical heritage, has been lost from the landscape, along with its unique neighbour Royal Buildings.

The devastating long-term impact on the collective sense of identity and pride of the obliteration of a building of such enormous symbolism will be immeasurable, as we have learnt to our great cost from the trauma of previous indiscriminate demolition in the town.

The Custom House, home of the groundbreaking Port Talbot Railway and Dock Company, founded thanks to chief shareholder Miss Emily Charlotte Talbot by Act of Parliament, encapsulated the historical and economic development of an entire region in the Victorian era and the radical transformation of Port Talbot into a major Welsh industrial centre and port in its own right at the turn of the 20th century, yet neither its significance nor its direct association with Miss Talbot, an extraordinary figure of considerable UK-wide renown, were regarded by Cadw as sufficiently important to merit statutory listing.

Statutory listing was denied on the preposterous, arbitrary and irrelevant premise that better examples of comparative architectural vernacular existed elsewhere, such as Penarth, and that Custom House lacked overt, tangible references to Miss Talbot in its fabric. These dismissive remarks revealed a woeful inattention to recognising the importance of historic buildings in their specific context, as well as a lack of intellectual application to well-documented historical facts.

This beautiful, serviceable building offered huge scope to enable young and future generations to reconnect with their heritage, serving as a fitting and living monument to Miss Talbot, the de facto founder of the town, perhaps as a centre for education and for the development of heritage skills training. Demolition of such key structures and the financial incentives and public subsidies offered to do so thoroughly negate the heritage-led

regeneration rhetoric, and raise questions over the meaning and nature of sustainability. This disconnect must be addressed with the utmost urgency. A very large amount of public grant was guaranteed in advance to the developer in this case, inevitably making demolition the most attractive option. Councillors were understandably disinclined to object to demolition in the circumstances.

Subsequently the community was stripped of a major heritage asset with immense potential to enjoy a new lease of life and help reinvigorate the town centre, demonstrating the contradiction which occurs between heritage policies and the Welsh Government's avowed aims of regeneration of communities and the clash of priorities which can be reconciled with careful scrutiny and judicious use of financial assistance. Heritage-led regeneration necessitates a revision of this relationship to succeed in Welsh towns, where investment in built heritage is increasingly threatened by unsympathetic short-term development.

In 2012, Neath Port Talbot Council still has no inventory of locally important buildings, nor has any plans to compile any such list as recommended by Welsh Government. This failure on the part of the authority to take responsibility for local heritage in compliance with Welsh Government directives in this regard meant that measures capable of ensuring protection for Custom House did not (and still do not) exist in NPT. It is under no obligation to list locally and this is a matter of great concern. The historic environment is suffering unendurable losses under these conditions.

I would be delighted to participate in the inquiry in a fuller capacity at any time at the discretion of the committee, and I look forward to the recommendations with great interest.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Shakeshaft