

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Merioneth Historical and Record Society

CYMDEITHAS HANES A CHOFNODION SIR FEIRIONNYDD
MERIONETH HISTORICAL AND RECORD SOCIETY



Dear Ann Jones,

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

This submission is made on behalf of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society.

Our Society was founded in June 1939. Its object is the education of the public in the history of the former county of Merioneth, including archaeology, buildings, family history, folklore, literature. We are also alert to any threat to historic sites and buildings.

The Society produces a Journal annually which includes articles in Welsh and English. In 1957 the Society initiated an official 'County History' project which, upon completion, will provide a comprehensive and scholarly account of the history of Merioneth from prehistoric times to the twentieth century. Two volumes of the History have been published and it will complete in 2017/8.

Our bi-lingual activities include co-operating with other 'local' historical societies and County Societies in adjacent counties. We also have strong links with the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, the Snowdonia National Park Authority and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

It is unfortunate that our voluntary organisation learnt about this Inquiry through another body. It is of great concern that other interested parties, like ourselves, may not be aware of this process and be denied the opportunity of making their views known. We hope this omission is recognised by the Inquiry and that all Historical Societies are contacted directly in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Gerallt Wyn Hughes
Cadeirydd

Cadeirydd, Gerallt W. Hughes
Hon. Secretary,
Elusen Gofrestredig 110236

- 1.1 In the course of its work the Society has become acutely conscious, and appreciative, of the role of the Government-supported bodies that are together responsible for the historic environment.

- 1.2 An awareness of Cadw is fostered by its responsibility for historic buildings that form part of its estate in care, and by the publications that are associated with those buildings. Its statutory responsibilities for scheduled monuments and listed buildings are generally well known.
- 1.3 The Society is conscious of the work of the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust by virtue of its responsibility for the area of which the historic county of Merioneth forms part. Its sites and monuments record is a source of information to which members of the Society turn, and the Trust staff provide guidance and information upon request. Members of staff have contributed to our published work, including the *History of Merioneth*, ii (2001).
- 1.4 The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales has given the Society the benefit of its resources as a national institution capable of setting the historical environment of the county in a broader national context. Commission staff and Commissioners have contributed generously to our activities, including public lectures, and contributions to our publications including the *History of Merioneth*. The Commission was conspicuous in its participation in the major historical environment project, 'Adnabod Ardudwy' which involved the Society, local farmers, schools, local historical societies and members of the public. The material now available includes maps that can be 'overlaid' to show the development of the farm field system over a long period. This represents a quite significant contribution to our understanding of how we have reached the present field system and the project is a model for other communities to follow.
- 1.5 We place particular value upon the extent to which the Trust and the Commission have been able to bring the resources of a professional public service to bear upon the voluntary endeavours of the Merioneth Society. Our experience amply demonstrates the value of the support given by two bodies sponsored by the Welsh Government to an organisation in the voluntary sector. We believe that this is in full accord with the wishes of the Welsh Government itself, and we earnestly hope that this exemplar of collaboration between Government-sponsored bodies and the voluntary sector will never be impaired nor in any way endangered. We would wish to commend this earnest hope to the particular attention of the Committee.
- 2.1 This expectation prompts us to offer comment on the question posed by the Committee as to 'what would be the advantages and disadvantages of merging the functions of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales with the functions of other organisations, including Cadw'. Our ability to comment is made difficult on two counts, partly by the fact that no indication is given of the time-span within which merger will be completed. Even so, a statement made for the Government of Wales by the Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage in May 2012 conveys that he has set up a working-party to establish a process that could be used 'to join the core responsibilities of the Royal Commission with other institutions, including Cadw'. He had asked the working-party to present a report by July 2012.
- 2.2 The Minister's statement raises considerable concern in that it is proposed to proceed towards a form of merger with some haste. The Society would urge the Committee to ensure that the serious questions that arise in contemplating a merger of the heritage bodies are given due consideration, and that any hasty and potentially damaging decisions are avoided.
- 2.3 The Society is not in a position to estimate what form a merger might take. We would though, urge the Committee to impress upon Government the need to ensure two safeguards.
Firstly, it is essential that the four Archaeological Trusts (established on account of the fact that the Welsh Local Authorities did not maintain an archaeology service for each Authority) be maintained in their present form. Director and Trustees together ensure an effective value-for-money service that needs to be preserved.
Second, it is vital that the two core responsibilities of the Commission be safeguarded. These are its Survey and Investigation work and its Archive responsibility, which is the maintenance of the National

Monuments Record. These are complementary aspects of its work and the Society believes it is vitally important that they be maintained in tandem.

- 2.4 We recommend that the heritage bodies be given the opportunity to develop the procedures for collaboration that are already in hand and proving fruitful. It is clear from the Chitty Report of 2011 that significant progress is already being made in developing collaborative practices. It is in our view vital that the organisations are given the opportunity to proceed with measures to eliminate duplication and achieve the utmost cost-effectiveness.
- 2.5 This we regard as preferable to a hurried adoption of drastic measures leading to a form of merger that may have a permanently damaging effect on the provision that the Welsh Government makes for the Welsh Heritage. We have been impressed by the concept of a 'Historic Wales' umbrella, under which the existing organisations, working in close collaboration, may retain their key functions and their distinctive identity,
- 3.0 In conclusion, the Merioneth Historical and Record Society represents an historic county with a rich historical inheritance. We depend on the Welsh Government to continue to maintain its support for the sponsored organisations that support our voluntary work. We earnestly hope that Government support currently available to us through the heritage bodies will not be put at risk by a hasty pursuit of a policy that could have serious adverse consequences.

We commend our submissions to the Committee and trust that they will be found helpful in its deliberations.