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Ken Whittaker

Heritage and defence: the MoD at St Athan

The military estate at St Athan in the Vale of Glamorgan dominates the local historic landscape, with a legacy that includes a nationally significant system of Second World War airfield ground defences and many archaeological sites. A proposed £12bn UK Defence Technical College will transform specialist training for the UK Armed Forces, with construction of the largest vocational training operation in the country.

Environmental Impact Assessment

Entec UK was engaged to advise on the initial PFI bid on behalf of Metrix and, working with the MoD and Welsh Assembly Government's consultancy team, to undertake a major environmental impact assessment. Gaining understanding of the nature and character of the historic environment was crucial and challenging, especially for the archaeological dimension. Research excavations by Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum of Wales at Llanmaes highlighted the potential for exceptional late prehistoric remains in this area, and sites such as Caer Mead Roman villa and St Illtud's early medieval monastery at Llantwit Major have long

demonstrated the historic and cultural importance of this lowland limestone plateau, sandwiched between the southern scarp of the upland massif of south and central Wales and the Bristol Channel.

Key archaeological discoveries during the EIA include

- cremations and associated cairns which may be part of a Middle Bronze Age ritual landscape close to the confluence of Llanmaes and Boverton Brooks. There is also a Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age midden at Llanmaes
- Late Iron Age/Romano-British settlements and fields reveal an intensively settled, mixed economy, agricultural landscape comprising medium-sized farmsteads operated by small groups, probably part of the Caer Mead villa estate. Aerial images of undated enclosures along the scarp edge of the nearby Thaw valley imply this was a landmark boundary to a major estate, which subsequently divided two of the three early medieval kingdoms of the Vale of Glamorgan and was yet later adopted as the 11/12th century boundary for the cantrefi of Gorfynydd and Penychen
- medieval remains associated with the manorial estate at Bedford Castle and medieval and post-

medieval settlement associated with St Brise Church. Whilst these relate to the established medieval settlement pattern, evidence for 12th-century activities alongside Llanmaes Brook is of particular interest, as archaeological remains associated with pottery of this period are rare in rural Wales. Further remains may provide an insight into the early feudal history of the Vale of Glamorgan.

The EIA also has to acknowledge institutional arrangements for the historic environment in Wales, implications of PFI schemes for risk management, and the significance of the historic environment to the identity of the people of Wales.

Historic environment infrastructure

The Historic Environment Group, an inter-agency forum that advises the Welsh Assembly Government is proving to be a catalyst for wider collaboration. Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust and Cadw represented regulatory interests, as advisors to the Vale of Glamorgan Council and the Welsh Assembly Government respectively, and RCAHMW and Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales provided advice and support, especially on recording and community engagement. Since devolution the Welsh Assembly Government has progressed toward an integrated historic environment infrastructure that delivers conservation, knowledge and education services through the co-ordinated action of heritage agencies. Experience at St Athan suggests multi-agency engagement with commercial historic environment activities could be an important factor in delivering national strategic objectives as set out in the *Research Framework for Wales* and the new *Strategic Direction Statement for the Historic Environment of Wales*. This engagement also provides a more secure basis for commercial investment.

Managing risk

Proper management of risk on behalf of partner interests is at the heart of the PFI process. In this case, a comprehensive, research-driven and iterative approach to historic environment baseline data established confidence that significant features could be identified and rigorously assessed. Perceived archaeological distributions were tested to reduce methodological/sampling bias or limitations, with extensive 'blank' areas trial-trenched. This approach was supported by the regulatory interests, reducing potential planning and construction risk.

Identity and place

It is apparent that some former communities of the Vale existed in a wider cultural milieu which did not necessarily relate to modern definitions of national

identity or geographic/political boundaries. Conversely insular traditions are apparent which are typical of common perceptions of the historic dimension of Welsh cultural identity.

The presence of archaeological and historic features that reflect both outlooks is characteristic of the Vale, making it culturally atypical of the rest. In contrast with adjoining areas, activities from the Neolithic through to the medieval period at times reflect connections with Wessex, the south-west peninsula, Ireland, Brittany and the Mediterranean. The Vale was also one of the Anglo-Norman 'Englishries', colonised in the 12th century under a strict feudal system.

Romantic notions

Paradoxically many of the conventional views of a pan-Welsh, celtic-derived identity that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries originated in or around the Vale. The romantic notions of personalities such as Iolo Morganwg and William Price drew on a loose interpretation of bardic traditions, to re-define a distinct sense of nationhood, reflecting a popular desire for a specifically Welsh political and cultural franchise. Claims of authenticity have not survived the passage of time, but the image of their invention, the Gorsedd, presiding at the annual National Eisteddfod demonstrates the continuing potency of heritage in defining identity. There can be no doubting it has had a massive influence on Welsh language, literature and music.

Wales now operates within a new political settlement and is eagerly setting policy that reflects ambitions for new appreciation of the historic environment. Commercial development, by initiating fresh examination of the historic environment locally, can make an important contribution to popular awareness of identity and place, thereby delivering more than simple economic investment in a successful, distinctive and culturally outward-looking Wales.

Experience at St Athan has highlighted an emerging 'Welsh-method' where the wider engagement of national and regional heritage agencies with the private sector can achieve strategic objectives and assist in the management of risk. This is proving a mutually rewarding experience for those responsible for delivering economic investment and those protecting and promoting the fragile and vulnerable heritage.

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Location plan and
EIA study area

