

Caring for the castles and abbeys of the Welsh princes



The twin peaks of Deganwy overlooking the mouth of the river Conwy

Gwilym Hughes — Cadw's assistant director, historic environment — outlines the achievements of the Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative

The twin peaks of Deganwy Castle overlook the mouth of the river Conwy and face the great fortress-palace built by Edward I at Conwy following his invasion in 1282–83. However, the fragmentary remains of Deganwy that are visible today scarcely hint at its crucial role in the ebb and flow of invasion and counter-invasion along the narrow belt of lowland coastline between Liverpool Bay and the mountains of Snowdonia. At least four successive castles stood on this site, but each one was systematically destroyed to prevent it from falling into the hands of opponents.

Like many other key medieval monuments, the castle is barely known to the tens of thousands of visitors who pass by on their way to the picturesque seaside resort of Llandudno. And yet these sites are hidden gems locked away in the Welsh countryside, with extraordinary stories to tell about the life and times of Wales's native princes. Deganwy is just one of eleven such sites that have benefited over the last three years from Cadw's Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative

(WCHI). The aim of this initiative has been to unlock the secrets of these iconic sites and to ensure that they are conserved for future generations to enjoy. However, the key to the success of the programme has been to negotiate full public access to the monuments, many of which are in private ownership.

Of course, Wales is home to some of the most magnificent medieval monuments in western Europe. The imposing castles built by Edward I in north Wales are rightly recognised as some of the greatest military and architectural masterpieces of the medieval period, their global importance recognised by their inscription as one of Wales's three World Heritage Sites. Almost as impressive are the castles associated with the Marcher lords, such as Pembroke, Kidwelly, Caerphilly and Chepstow.

However, some still think that Cadw has focused more on these conquerors' castles than those of native Welsh princes. In reality this is unfair. Over the last twenty years, Cadw has transformed public access and understanding at key sites associated with

Welsh nationhood. For example, Cadw has undertaken access and conservation work at Dinefwr and Dryslwyn Castles, which are associated with the princes of Deheubarth, and at Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's Dolforwyn Castle in Powys. Support has also been provided for Denbighshire County Council, which manages the hilltop castle of the princes of Powys at Dinas Brân. In addition the magnificent castles associated with the princes of Gwynedd at Dolwyddelan, Dolbadarn, Castell y Bere, Criccieth and Ewloe are in Cadw's guardianship.

The Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative has now extended this programme following the announcement in January 2009 by the Minister for Heritage that £2 million would be made available from the Welsh Assembly Government's Strategic Capital Investment Fund.

The initiative is now close to completion and has supported work on three groups of sites. Three sites linked with Owain Glyndŵr — Sycharth Castle, Glyndyfrdwy and Machynlleth Parliament House — make up the first group.



The motte at Glyndyfrdwy (left), where major works to stabilise the mound (above) have recently been completed

The second contains two monuments in south-west Wales with connections to the princes of Deheubarth: Nevern Castle and Strata Florida Abbey. The third group in north Wales includes three castles (Deganwy, Tomen y Mur and Dinas Emrys), two royal courts (Llys Rhosyr and Abergwyngregyn) and a Cistercian abbey (Cwmhir) associated with the princes of Gwynedd.

Owain Glyndŵr

Two of the Glyndŵr sites that have benefited from the initiative, Glyndyfrdwy and Sycharth Castle, were fortified homes of the Welsh hero (see David Gwyn's article in this issue). The traffic of the A5 passes barely a stone's throw from the great earthen motte or castle mound of Glyndyfrdwy, near Corwen (OS grid ref. SJ 125431). For many years this motte, has been in danger of partial collapse onto the adjacent Llangollen Railway line. Meanwhile, the earthwork motte-and-bailey castle at Sycharth lies hidden away in the countryside of northern Powys (OS grid ref. SJ 205258) but has long suffered from erosion.

The WCHI project has allowed detailed archaeological surveys and conservation at both sites. At Sycharth, a combination of geophysical survey techniques, including ground-penetrating radar, provided significant new evidence of the position and construction of the keep and the buildings within the bailey. At Glyndyfrdwy geophysical survey has revealed the complex arrangement of defensive and water management features associated with this moated residence.

Both sites have now benefited from clearance of scrub, tree management and extensive earthwork conservation and repair. At Glyndyfrdwy the stabilisation of the motte involved a very sophisticated engineering solution using a combination of rock anchors and wire meshing. New interpretation has

also been put in place at both sites and at Sycharth a much needed car-parking area has been created. The sites can now be visited as part of a Glyndŵr tour (see pp. 18–19). Another location that could be included on a Glyndŵr journey is the Machynlleth Parliament House, which has also benefited from the WCHI.

Although the existing building in Machynlleth (OS grid ref. SH 747008) is a later fifteenth-century structure, it is believed to stand on the site of Owain Glyndŵr's first parliament, convened in 1404. The initiative has supported a local charitable trust's programme to carry out essential conservation on the building fabric and improve the interpretation of the site. This has included the restoration of the Battle of Hyddgen mural, the provision of new computers, which incorporate an interactive Owain Glyndŵr timeline, and interpretation that links in with other sites associated with Glyndŵr (see p. 19).

Princes of Deheubarth

In south-west Wales, the Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative has supported a project

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The motte at Nevern Castle and one of the recently installed interpretation panels

that has led to important discoveries at the twelfth-century castle of Nevern in northern Pembrokeshire (OS grid ref. SN 082401). Cadw worked in partnership with Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and the community council, which owns the site, on a programme of investigation, conservation and public access improvements.

Major excavations, led by Chris Caple from Durham University, have revealed evidence for wooden and stone buildings, dating to the early twelfth-century Anglo-Norman occupation of the site and to later twelfth-century activity, possibly associated with the great prince of Deheubarth, Rhys ap Gruffudd — known to his contemporaries and to history as 'the Lord Rhys'. The most dramatic find has been the base of a large round tower, constructed of slate with clay bonding, on top of the castle motte. This has now been consolidated by members of Cadwraeth Cymru, Cadw's conservation works team (see *Heritage in Wales* 48). A second tower, isolated from the rest of the complex by a steep rock-cut ditch, has also been excavated and conserved. Careful tree and vegetation management has transformed the appearance of the site, which is now fully accessible to the public. As well as new on-site interpretation, Nevern Castle also now boasts an attractive website (www.neverncastle.com).

The Lord Rhys was also a major patron of the Cistercian abbey at Strata Florida just outside Pontrhyfendigaid, Ceredigion (OS grid ref. SN 746657). The major refurbishment to the visitor centre, that was partly funded by the initiative, is described elsewhere in this issue.

Princes of Gwynedd

Gwynedd's princes governed their kingdom from a network of royal courts (*llysoedd*). Although many of the courts are known by name, few have been identified on the

ground or investigated archaeologically. The Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative has supported work at two important *llys* sites: Llys Rhosyr, near Newborough in south-west Anglesey (OS grid ref. SH 419653), and Abergwyngregyn on the north Wales coast (OS grid ref. SH 656726).

The foundations of several buildings associated with the court at Llys Rhosyr were excavated during the 1990s. However, over the last 15 years the remains have suffered from gradual deterioration. The WCHI has provided support to Menter Môn for essential conservation work, improved site drainage and complete refurbishment of the on-site interpretation, including new interpretation panels due to be installed in late summer.

Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative Sites



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Llys Rhosyr, where the WCHI has funded conservation and new on-site interpretation

At Abergwyngregyn, the initiative provided funding for Snowdonia National Park Authority and community heritage group Tirwedd Dyffryn Aber Cyf to undertake a programme of investigation and interpretation at this royal centre and in the associated historic landscape of the Aber Valley (see *Heritage in Wales* 47). Major excavations have been led by the park archaeologist, John Roberts, at two locations in the valley. The first during the summer



Cwmhir Abbey, the burial place of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd

© Gwynedd Archaeological Trust



One of the successful open days held during the Abergwyngregyn excavations in late 2010

of 2009 was of a prehistoric roundhouse and a medieval corn-drying kiln. During late 2010 the focus of investigation moved to the area adjacent to Yr Mwd, the earthwork motte at the heart of the modern village of Abergwyngregyn. The foundations of a large aisled hall thought to date to the late thirteenth century have now been excavated. Both excavations were visited by local schools and included student participation and other public outreach events. It is hoped to facilitate public access to the motte and the site of the medieval hall excavations in the near future. Meanwhile, a new interpretation facility has been established in the village (Aber Tŷ Pwmp), appropriately titled 'Life at the Royal Court'.

At Deganwy (OS grid ref. SH 782794), Cadw has also been working closely with the landowner and the tenant farmer to protect and to interpret the fragmentary and fragile remains of the castle. The early stages of the project included detailed archaeological and conservation surveys. This provided the basis for a challenging programme of masonry consolidation of the surviving walls on the twin hilltops of the castle site (see 'Conservation action' on p. 15). A new parking area has been established next to All Saints Church in Deganwy and the castle can be accessed from there by waymarked public footpaths.

Although Cwmhir Abbey is in Powys (OS grid ref. SO 055711), it has important links with the princes of Gwynedd. Llywelyn ab Iorwerth was an important patron of the house and Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was buried there after he was slain at Cilmeri, near Builth Wells, in 1282. The masonry foundations of the Cistercian monastery had already benefited from a programme of conservation supported by Cadw during the 1990s. However, thanks to the Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative, an area for car parking has been made at the farm adjacent to the site and an outbuilding converted into a small interpretation centre.


Pan-Wales interpretation plan

Improving public access and understanding of these iconic monuments has been at the core of the Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative. However, the sites do not sit in isolation, but form key parts of broader stories about Welsh life, society and politics. With this in mind, Cadw has been preparing a pan-Wales interpretation plan, including thematic plans for the princes of Gwynedd, the princes of Deheubarth and Owain Glyndŵr. These plans have informed both the WCHI and Cadw's ambitious Heritage Tourism Project. Over the next four years, this complementary programme, led by Cadw and supported by the European Regional Development Fund, will see major projects at key

heritage sites in west and north Wales. It will also deliver broader packages, maximising the economic opportunities provided by heritage tourism.

The Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative and the Heritage Tourism Project will bring medieval sites and stories associated with Welsh nationhood into sharp focus. The programmes will dispel the impression that our historic environment is about the rich and powerful. Telling the story of history's ordinary people, including the underdog, will feature prominently. These stories, and the stories of the native Welsh princes, will take their rightful place alongside those associated with the great monuments of the Anglo-Norman kings and lords.

Finally, the initiative has also supported the preparation of conservation management plans at Dinas Emrys and Tomen y Mur. Dinas Emrys is a multi-period hilltop stronghold occupying the summit of a volcanic outcrop overlooking Nant Gwynant, north of Beddgelert (OS grid ref. SH 606492). The site is owned by the National Trust and has evidence for Iron Age and early medieval occupation and the remains of a

stone tower, probably built by the princes of Gwynedd. The conservation and access plan will allow the National Trust to provide better protection and public access to the monument. At Tomen y Mur near Trawsfynydd (OS grid ref. SH 705386), the conservation management plan has informed earthwork repairs of the medieval motte, which is located over the gateway of an earlier Roman fort. 

© Snowdonia National Park Authority



Earthwork repairs at Tomen y Mur

Conservation action

Deganwy is a revelation

Gwynfor Olsen and his Cadwraeth Cymru team of masons had often passed the foot of Deganwy Castle, near Llandudno, without ever realising how much of the monument remained and how important it was.

Now they have helped consolidate and restore the dramatic ruins, working above a steep precipice and braving high winds and biting cold to uncover much of what remains.

In the process, team leader Gwynfor has come to appreciate the craft of the Welsh masons who built a castle here in the mid-thirteenth century on a site that had been occupied since at least the fifth or sixth century.

Although much of the Welsh craftsmen's work was destroyed and replaced by a later English castle, some of their stonework remains and is of very high quality.

For today's team of one banker mason, three walling masons, a general craftsman and a labourer, the challenge was to uncover some of the masonry, to clear vegetation and repoint the walls using lime mortar.

When they first arrived on the steep ridge above Deganwy and the Maesdu Golf Course, there was little more than one wall and a few clumps of stones to be seen.

Now, a D-shaped tower has been cleared and conserved. The shape of the castle, including sections of wall and the base of a gatehouse, can be clearly seen.

The main wall is now clear of ivy too, to a length of about 50 feet (15m) and a height of almost 40 feet (12.5m). In other places, the masonry stands up to between 6 and 9 feet (2 to 3m) high.

Parts of a castle built by Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (Llywelyn the Great) lie under the walls constructed after the site was occupied



A helicopter delivers materials for work at Deganwy Castle

by Henry III of England in 1245. Most of the ruins date from that period.

In 1263, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (Llywelyn the Last) captured the castle and systematically destroyed Henry III's buildings. Fallen masonry near the base of the north gatehouse bears testimony to that. Some hastily rebuilt sections are credited to Edward I.

Because of the steepness of the hill, special scaffolding had to be put up and secured against the wind, whilst a helicopter shipped in the building materials and cleared the site at the end of the three-and-a-half-month programme of works — it was the cheapest option, avoiding days of carrying and path-clearing work.

'Because of the geography, this has been a new and different challenge,' says Gwynfor. 'When we were first sent here, we couldn't understand what there was to do.'

'Now we're very proud to have had a role in restoring an important part of our heritage, a castle built by the Welsh princes almost 800 years ago.'

'It was incredible to think of those early craftsmen building a castle here, without all the technology we have. When our scaffolding was put up, the medieval putlog holes were in almost exactly the same place

as the modern poles.

'There's a tremendous view; you can see most of north Wales in both directions. The Welsh knew what they were doing when they chose the site!'

The consolidation and restoration work was part of Cadw's Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative.



One of Deganwy's walls before (top) and after (bottom) conservation

