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Cymru'n Cofio – Wales Remembers

Commemorating and Researching the First World War
at National Museum Wales

Abstract Between 2014 and 2019 Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales (ACNMW) was a lead partner in the Welsh Government's Cymru'n Cofio – Wales Remembers project. This project brought together a variety of partners including the Armed Forces, local history groups, archives, museums and cultural organisations from across Wales. The main focus of the programme was on the impact of the First World War on Welsh society and its legacy. *The First World War Remembered* programme developed by ACNMW included exhibitions, creative projects, events and learning activities, all underpinned by a thorough collections research and digitisation project. Working with communities and creative partners was a key element of the programme, and this article explores the range of interdisciplinary and engagement projects developed across ACNMW sites and departments.

Keywords Wales remembers, remembrance, community, engagement, re-living

Project background

For the Centenary of the First World War Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales (ACNMW) delivered a five-year programme of exhibitions, events and engagement activities, underpinned by thorough research and digitisation of all First World War-related collections held by ACNMW.

Planning for the Centenary started in 2011 when a cross-departmental steering group was set up to develop the framework for the *First World War Remembered* programme. ACNMW's ambition was to deliver exhibitions and events across all its public sites, and to work with partner organisations and community groups across Wales and internationally.

ACNMW has seven public sites across Wales, all of which were involved in the programme: National Museum Cardiff, St Fagans National Museum of History, National Waterfront Museum Swansea, Big Pit National Coal Museum, National Slate Museum, National Roman Legion Museum, National Wool Museum.

The steering group identified three main aims for the programme:

Our aim is to tell the stories of the people of Wales during and after the First World War, to explore the unique areas of impact on Wales and on Welsh life and to better understand key events and the legacy today through Amgueddfa Cymru's collections.

The Call to War: how and why the people of Wales responded to the call to war; **Living through War:** the impact for people at home and those fighting and working in the arenas of war, loss and remembrance, and **Transformation through war:** the changing skills, attitudes and beliefs during and immediately post-war.

Through these themes we will draw out key stories that illuminate the Welsh experience and perspective of the First World War and the universal elements of war.

A set of values was agreed to guide the delivery of the programme:

- » **Personal:** Concentrating on the common experiences of how the First World War touched the lives of ordinary men and women as individuals and in communities
- » **Welsh Identity:** The specific meaning of the First World War to the people of Wales in questioning and shaping their own identity in relation to other home nations and internationally

- » Realism: An honest account of the horrors of war on the battlefield and the home front
- » Courage: The many aspects of bravery shown by those fighting in the war, civilians, survivors and returning soldiers including acts of dissent against the authorities
- » Contribute: Telling the stories yet to be uncovered through living memories and re-living experiences
- » Contemporary: Telling stories about the relevance of the WWI today

Project partners and funding

During the Centenary period ACNMW worked with a wide range of partners from across Wales, the UK and internationally to develop exhibitions, events, learning and outreach activities. The main project partners were the Welsh Government, National Library of Wales and the IWM Centenary Partnership.

The Welsh Government brought together museums, galleries, archives, libraries and other organisations under the Cymru'n Cofio/Wales Remembers umbrella to support, encourage and promote a wide range of First World War-related projects and activities across Wales.¹

ACNMW received three major grants to support the Centenary activities: a grant from Cymru'n Cofio over five years to deliver cross site exhibitions, events and engagement programmes; a grant from the Welsh Government to develop First World War learning resources in partnership with National Library of Wales; and a grant from the Armed Forces Covenant which specifically supported St Fagans National Museum of History's First World War programme.

Collections research at ACNMW

In preparation for the Centenary period curatorial staff worked with digital media, conservation, photography and translation to develop a database of all First World War-related objects from across ACNMW's collections. All objects were digitised and conserved, and object descriptions were enhanced to a consistent level and translated into Welsh.

1 Available at: <https://walesremembers.org> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

The database was launched in 2014 and over the next years grew to hold over 1100 objects. In addition to the database ACNMW staff and volunteers wrote a series of blogs and articles exploring the personal stories behind objects, conservation projects and engagement activities.

One of the major finds the in-depth collections research brought to light was *Dyddiadur Kate*, a Welsh language diary written by Kate Rowlands in 1915. The diary is a rich and nuanced account of life in rural Wales during the First World War. It gives us glimpses into everyday tasks, the names of fields and farms, local characters and dialects, as well chapel and farm life. The diary was first shared with the public via a Twitter project in 2015 and has since been turned into a free e-publication.²

The research and digitisation project was invaluable for the development of ACNMW's First World War exhibitions and learning resources throughout the Centenary period. ACNMW's First World War database, and related blogs and articles, are a major legacy of the programme and can be accessed via the museum's website.³

In addition to the First World War database and related research, ACNMW collaborated with National Library of Wales to create a comprehensive set of digital learning resources during the early Centenary period. This project resulted in the production of new resources for teachers and young people in Wales to learn about the First World War from a Welsh perspective. The project used the wealth of primary resources digitised by ACNMW and National Library of Wales. The learning resources are free to access on the Hwb website.⁴

Overview of the *First World War Remembered* programme

ACNMW's exhibition programme of eight touring exhibitions and 18 site-specific exhibitions focused on the impact of the First World War on people across Wales. Working with ACNMW's diverse sites, the exhibition programme explored the war often in site-specific contexts – from comparing the

2 Available at: <https://museum.wales/media/46765/Dyddiadur-Kate.pdf> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

3 Available at: <https://museum.wales/stfagans/first-world-war/digital-legacy> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

4 Due to time constraints the Hwb project was not presented at the Koblenz conference, but is included here as the resources are publicly available and one of the major legacies of ACNMW First World War research project. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

impact of war in the Roman period with that of the First World War in a series of exhibitions at the National Roman Legionary Museum, to touring exhibitions focusing on the war effort of Welsh industries – including women working in munitions, mining communities, slate quarries and woollen production – developed by Big Pit National Coal Museum, National Slate Museum, National Wool Museum and National Waterfront Museum Swansea.

National Museum Cardiff focused on exhibitions exploring ACNMW's art and natural history collections, and St Fagans National Museum of History worked extensively with the Armed Forces community in uncovering the First World War history of some of its historic buildings and objects from the social history collections. The exhibition programme was further enhanced by a wide range of over 130 events from curator talks and lectures, Remembrance Day gatherings to family workshops exploring how we remember the First World War today.

Working with creative partners, schools and universities, young people and community groups was a major element in the development of exhibitions and events across all sites, and this paper looks at creative projects from across ACNMW's sites.

Working with communities and creative partners

The *First World War Remembered* programme relied heavily on collaboration with a range of creative partners as well as community co-curation and co-production. The collaborative projects addressed the legacy of the First World War through performances, re-discovering and re-interpreting buildings and memorials, as well as exploring the stories behind objects in the ACNMW collection, from war art to personal artefacts.

National Slate Museum: From *For Freedom and Empire to Cofeb*

During the Centenary period, National Slate Museum focused on the impact the war had on Welsh slate miners. To start their Centenary programme they consulted audience through the *A Call to Remember* display to share their thoughts on how the First World War should be commemorated and the responses gathered then underpinned the development of their First World War exhibition programme.

The first exhibition that was developed focused on the reaction of the slate miners to the call to war and its impact on the industry through the touring exhibition *For Freedom and for Empire*.

The Welsh language play *I'r Gad* was commissioned by the National Slate Museum and developed by the theatre company Bara Caws. The performances were programmed to support the exhibition *For Freedom and for Empire*. The play focused on the campaign to enrol young quarrymen from north Wales into the British Army during the First World War. The play was set at various locations at National Slate Museum, and visitors were guided promenade-style between locations. The play focused on the experiences of two brothers, Gruffydd and Gwilym. Portraying the storyline from two different viewpoints provided an opportunity to convey different interpretations and a more balanced approach. The audience was encouraged to empathise with both characters leading them to a better understanding of the complexities of the situation and of the reasons behind the actions taken by both characters.

The audience was very much part of the action. An immersive experience was encouraged with the movement between locations. Visitor comments reveal the play's impact.

Felt the power of propaganda and its effect on common people. My grandfather was killed in Belgium in 1916 – and my mother was left without a father as a child of one year and 10 months. The power of the whole experience was agonisingly painful.

I was in France and Belgium visiting the graves and museums etc. in November 2012. Today has broadened my understanding.

The culmination of the Centenary programme at National Slate Museum was the community exhibition *Cofeb – Memorial* which opened in 2018. Each element of this exhibition was inspired by the Dyffryn Nantlle Pen-yr Orsedd Quarry memorial, which was commissioned to commemorate the quarry workers who died in the First World War. The unique carvings, research into the names inscribed on the memorial and the idea of commemoration itself were used to inspire local school groups and artists, as well as special interest and community groups, to contribute creatively to the exhibition. The outreach work undertaken in this project resulted in valuable new information – for example, a pupil involved in the project discovered a direct connection with a name on the memorial. The family connected to the memorial loaned

pictures and a bracelet which were shown in the exhibition, rediscovering the personal story behind one of the many names on the memorial.

National Waterfront Museum Swansea: *GRAFT*

National Waterfront Museum developed a number of First World War exhibitions such as *Munitionettes and Canary Girls*, an exhibition focusing on women working in munitions factories in Wales, and two exhibitions on the impact of the war on Welsh industry as a whole, both during the war and in its aftermath (1918: *Return to Peace and Working for Victory*). These exhibitions were enriched by personal stories of the impact of the First World War on Welsh people, uncovered by staff members researching their own family histories.

For 2018, National Waterfront Museum Swansea received funding from 14-18 NOW to contribute to the major Swansea-based art project *Now the Hero* by artist Marc Rees.⁵

The resulting project *GRAFT: A soil based syllabus* was developed in collaboration with artist Owen Griffiths. *GRAFT* brought together groups from The Wallich and Crisis homeless charities as well as other groups and individuals from the area, and continues as a major creative learning and community resource for National Waterfront Museum Swansea. The community garden created by the volunteer team as part of *GRAFT* was inspired by the “Brangwyn panels” which were originally commissioned by the House of Lords in 1924 to commemorate the First World War. The panels eventually went on display at the Guildhall in Swansea, as the scheme developed by artist Frank Brangwyn was rejected as too colourful and lively.

A culmination of the work undertaken by *GRAFT* volunteers was the soup made from the produce they had grown, which was given to the 2500 strong audience at the five *Now the Hero* performances in Swansea in 2018.

GRAFT continues to provide a place for community learning, a long-term resource to foster engagement from a variety of local groups as well as a contemplative space in the centre of the museum.

5 Available at: <https://www.nowthehero.wales> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

National Museum Cardiff: *Come and Sing and Poppies for Remembrance*

National Museum Cardiff focused on its art and natural history collections to explore the impact of the First World War on Wales. Christopher William's painting of the battle formed the centre of a major art exhibition *War is Hell*, as well as inspiring the creative partnership project *Come and Sing*. The Battle of Mametz Wood, part of the Somme offensive, had led to the death or injury of 4000 soldiers in the 38th (Welsh) Division.

Come and Sing was a partnership project with Welsh National Opera (WNO), Arts and Humanities Research Council and Literature Wales. Young writers produced pieces of creative writing, and music students composed music and songs inspired by Christopher William's *Battle of Mametz Wood* painting. At the final event at National Museum Cardiff pieces were performed by young people and opera singers from the WNO, followed by a public singalong of trench songs.⁶

For the centenary of the Armistice in 2018, National Museum Cardiff extended a small touring exhibition *Poppies for Remembrance* into a major display. *Poppies for Remembrance* opened at National Museum Cardiff in July 2018 and explored how the poppy became the symbol for remembrance in Britain after the First World War.

The exhibition took a cross-disciplinary approach, drawing on ACNMW's natural history, art and social history collections as well as borrowing from Cardiff University Special Collections, Porthcawl Museum and private individuals. At the heart of the exhibition sat the "Well of Remembrance", offering visitors an opportunity to write on paper poppies their reflections on the impact of the First World War and subsequent wars on their families, and their thoughts on how they connect to the legacy of the war (fig. 1, p. 66).

Nearly 15,000 paper poppies were deposited in the well over the eight-month run of the exhibition. A team at National Museum Cardiff is sorting and evaluating the responses with the aim of sharing the insights on the public perception of, and reaction to, the First World War with other institutions and museums internationally engaged in similar audience surveys.

6 *Come and Sing* was not presented at the Koblenz conference due to time constraints, but is included here as an example of ACNMW's work with communities and creative partners to engage audiences with First World War events and collections. Available at: <https://youtu.be/aDQgOfjDxpQ> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

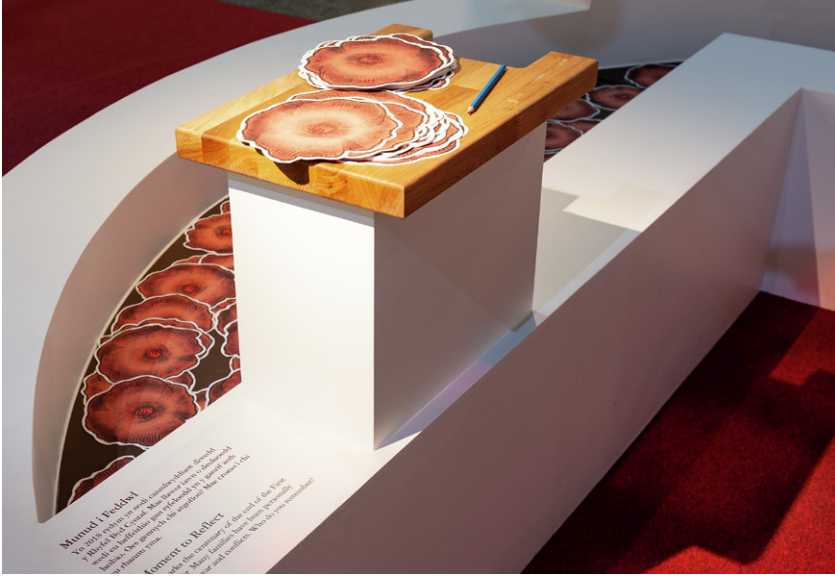


Fig. 1: Close up of the Well of Remembrance in *Poppies for Remembrance*. ©The National Museum of Wales, 2018



Fig. 2: Performers in the gardens of St Fagans Castle. ©The National Museum of Wales, 2015

Many visitors reacted by providing family stories and naming relatives involved in either the First or Second World War, and in some cases more recent conflicts, thus reflecting the ongoing impact of wars since 1918. A majority of the reactions, though, express a more generalised gratitude towards the sacrifices made by past generations and pledges to remember them. Phrases such as “Lest We Forget”, “We Will Remember Them” and “RIP” were frequently evoked.

Peace and love make the world better. Remember those who lost their lives and those who continue to lose their lives as victims of war in the 21st century.

To my Great Grandfather Herbert Crowther Foxton who was injured at Villers Bretonneux in 1918 and lived until aged 90. I never met you but your memory and story shall live on in the lives of our family.

My Great Great Uncle William Hobbs aged 19 Drowned at Sea in the 1st World war. He was from Barry, S. Wales

I will forever remember the sacrifices made by all who fought the war so we can live as we do today. We will remember them.

Remembering those who lost lives in the Falklands War 1982

St Fagans National Museum of History: working with Armed Forces communities

David Anderson, Director General ACNMW:

What the *Make an Aria* project achieved was to combine different locations within and around the Castle in a way which brought hitherto hidden parts of its history to light. It wove together testimonies from different parts of our collections in ways which directly engaged our emotions. The challenge is how we build on that to engage emotionally with a greater number of people.

Make an Aria was a project in which staff at St Fagans worked with Music Theatre Wales, Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama (RWCMD) and members of the Armed Forces. Ten young music students were invited to

create new work responding to the history of St Fagans castle as a Red Cross hospital during the First World War. During the initial stages of the project, the students viewed objects from ACNMW's First World War collections alongside serving members of the Armed Forces who provided personal and contemporary perspectives on past conflict.

Following the workshop, the participants were paired up to begin the composing process. Four months later, a public masterclass was held at the RWCMD to culminate the first phase of the project, at which the newly-composed arias were performed and critiqued.⁷ The accompanying publication is available on issuu.com.⁸ The project culminated in July 2015 with a series of public performances in the grounds and interiors of St Fagans Castle (fig. 2, p. 66).⁹

Lieutenant-Colonel N. O. Crewe-Read, 3rd Battalion, The Royal Welsh: "I thought that the musical drama was outstanding and when coupled with the magical backdrop of St Fagans Castle, truly thought provoking. I felt very privileged to have been invited and proud to have been associated with the event."

The research undertaken and personal perspectives brought to the subject by members of the Armed Forces also underpinned the new *Scarred by War* display in St Fagans' *Wales Is...* gallery which links the First World War to the experiences of current conflicts through historical and contemporary objects alongside personal accounts.

One of the last major collaborative projects of the *First World War Remembered* programme was the development and performances of *Y Dychweliad – The Return* in March 2019 at the Oakdale Workmen's Institute.¹⁰ Originally erected at Oakdale, Caerphilly in 1917, the institute is now located at St Fagans National Museum of History.

Re-Live is an award-winning charity providing a dynamic, inspirational programme of Life Story Theatre work based in Cardiff. Re-Live created a performance with veterans, family members and community members which re-imagined a Victory Ball held at Oakdale Workmen's Institute

7 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnERjorVK7A&feature=youtu.be> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

8 Available at: <https://issuu.com/amgueddfacymru/docs/make-an-aria-brochure2> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

9 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7RaTaGauVs> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

10 This was not presented at the Koblenz conference as *Y Dychweliad/The Return* performances took place in March 2019.

for returning veterans in 1919, echoing Victory Balls that took place across Wales. *Y Dychweliad – The Return* also shared the experiences of 21st century service men and women returning to their communities from conflicts such as Falklands and Northern Ireland.

Y Dychweliad – The Return was an immersive live story theatre performance which merged past and contemporary experiences of conflict and its impact on both the combatants and their families. It brought a war which has now moved out of living memory into focus and investigated similarities of experiences through the voices of veterans and military families today.

Conclusion

ACNMW's *First World War Remembered* programme focused on the impact of the war on Welsh society by exploring personal stories through objects and places. The resulting exhibitions and events invited audiences to experience an imaginative and emotive involvement with a conflict that has moved out of living memory, but the effects of which still echo with families and communities today. The work undertaken by the museum has not only created a deeper understanding of the existing First World War collections and their relation to events and places, but also provided new ways of working through co-curation, creative responses and audience participation which will inform future projects.