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## HERITAGE-LED REGENERATION AND THE SANITISATION OF MEMORY IN THE LOWER SWANSEA VALLEY

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### Introduction

When the Copper industry in Swansea came crumbling to a close in the 1960s, the Lower Swansea Valley was one of the most contaminated landscapes in the world: Slag heaps, ruined buildings, a hundred years of intense air pollution, the water table full of heavy metals. The urban population which had been built on the strength of the industry had few opportunities for employment. The families which ran the companies withdrew and took their capital with them. The city, its government, citizens, remaining industries, and universities were left to recreate a healthy landscape – a long process of decontamination.

While decontamination typically involves the dilution, containment, or removal of toxic materials, it is also a process of managing relations between the past and the future, as such it is a heritage practice (Wollentz et al. 2020). Throughout this period of decontamination, cultural heritage has played different roles in establishing a liveable city. As the process is ongoing, we can expect cultural heritage to continue to take on different roles. In this chapter, I will use academic, policy and public-facing discourse to define four phases of decontamination and the different types of heritage narratives associated with them. I will then consider how these narratives contribute to the ongoing decontamination and political processes at play and how they are expressed in the contemporary landscape.

### Chronology of post-industrial Swansea

The toxic impacts of metal processing in the Lower Swansea Valley were recognised even in the heyday of the industry:

By the 1820s, the sulphurous smoke from the Lower Swansea Valley copperworks choked the town and surrounding area. A number of court cases were brought against the copper companies by local farmers and residents. They contained vivid testimonies of the effect of the smoke on cattle, horses and the growth of crops. John Henry Vivian took a personal interest in the issue of copper smoke, and funded extensive research into alleviating it, enlisting the help of other scientists such as Michael Faraday.

(Goskar 2011, 17)

In the late 1950s, Swansea was struggling with the legacy of nearly two centuries of intensive industrial exploitation, notably copper production, fuelled by the ready availability of coal (Evans and Miskell 2020). In the 1960s the ‘Lower Swansea Valley Project’ (LSVP) was established to tackle the immense challenge of air, land and water contamination. Since there was no UK legislation surrounding the disposal or management of toxic waste until 1972 (Salvo 1989) Swansea Council, the local government body, was on its own in how to manage this process and it was framed as research with the University. In 1979 just before the last rolling mill closed, the project came to a close as well with a conference which concluded the ‘foundations of reclamation have been laid and the challenge lies in the successful planning and development of the valley’ (Bromley and Humphrys 1979) (Figure 5.1).



**FIGURE 5.1** The contemporary landscape of the copperworks shows little trace of dereliction. The two remaining chimneys are managed as heritage. Attribution: ©Sarah May, 2022.

The LSVP did not frame the problem as contamination, it talked of dereliction. This term is interesting because it draws attention to abandonment, rather than contamination, and because it carries a secondary meaning of a failure to fulfil obligations. The problem was framed as a loss of care and control, the breakdown of a functioning system, rather than the consequences of that system. The primary concern was with how the valley was perceived by residents, visitors and potential investors. The early research on 'human ecology' had a very strong emphasis on the visual, how the 'ruins' and waste were seen and how they formed part of daily life. The LSVP report on Human Ecology even comments 'If the house is turned so that the bad bits can't be seen all the time, it can be more easily forgotten' (Stacey 1962, 122).

The dumps of slag and other industrial waste, known as tips, were definitely an asset as well as waste and using them as an asset – for hardcore more than anything more sophisticated – was important. The main focus of the research on their management related to controlling dust and the visual impact of 'nibbling' – small-scale, ad hoc excavation for reuse of the material (Holt 1966). The response of the LSVP was to use the tips to level the valley and construct embankments on the floodplain. Till deposits from elsewhere were then spread over these areas to 'act as an impermeable seal to the contaminants and as a growing medium for plants and trees' (Waters et al. 2005).

Nonetheless, 20 years after the completion of the LSVP strongly acid soils (pH 4.5) and very high metal amounts, which had been originally recorded in the 1960s (Davies 1966) were still a concern (Bridges and Morgan 1999). A further research project to monitor the problem concluded that the soil contamination in the Swansea region penetrates deeper than usual for metal contamination, this could be because of the acidity of the soil, 'Alternatively, substantial mixing of waste materials with the soils may have occurred' (Waters et al. 2005).

Despite the perception that the toxicity was remediated by the LSVP by the 1970s, soil chemists still monitor conditions and a 2021 study indicates soils in the valley 'contain elevated level of metals, enough to cause direct or indirect effects on human health' (Schilling et al. 2021).

The driver of the LSVP was, of course, the loss of industry and the need for economic recovery. Beyond the physical and chemical aspects of the valley, deindustrialisation was associated with high rates of unemployment, low educational attainment, low average wages and low house prices, as well as poor transport connections, isolation and limited social mobility (Beatty, Fothergill, and Powell 2007; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012). The social focus of LSVP was planning for how government policy could support economic development. This was the importance and the focus of the 1979 conference which drew the project to a close (Bromley and Humphrys 1979). 1979 also saw the end of the Labour government led by James Callaghan. The Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, which replaced it, turned its back on the kinds of economic planning envisioned by the LSVP.

By 1981 the Lower Swansea Valley had been designated the UK's first Enterprise Zone (Evans 1981). These areas where wider planning and taxation policy was in abeyance were 'arguably the neoliberal city's purest policy expression' (Wetherell 2016). By 1983 fifteen Enterprise Zones had been announced and the policy had been adopted by the Reagan administration. The combination of Swansea Council and University College Swansea (as Swansea University was then known) monitoring the Enterprise Zone meant that the economic impact of the Zone was understood in better detail and for longer. So that while the national scheme was declared a success by 1984, the Swansea Enterprise Zone was shown to have been only functioning because of significant government interventions (Bromley and Thomas 1988).

This approach to 'stimulating growth' through deregulation is back in favour at the time of writing in the UK, but by the early 1990s, the 10-year life span of the policy had ended. The Conservative government of John Major moved back towards planning and regeneration based on diversification and the service economy. When Tony Blair led Labour back into government in 1997 Swansea was still looking for a model of post-industrial economic development. Devolution and the creation of the National Assembly of Wales in 1998 established both greater autonomy and greater responsibility for economic development in Wales, and tourism was central to the plans of the new millennium with both policy and funding to drive this new model (Dicks 2019, Price 2021). Heritage became a key component in this economic model, often referred to as heritage-led regeneration (Jones and Munday 2001).

While economic development and heritage had complementary goals, they had contrasting needs in the development of the former industrial landscape. Flynn discusses the process in the Lower Swansea Valley where tourism and recreation are seen as the innovative industries that heritage can support (Flynn 2016). While the Enterprise Zone needed only unregulated space for its economic model, tourism and recreation require pleasant vistas. As Price points out, 'To generate demand, sites must translate the meaning of industrial sites and processes in an entertaining way' (Price 2021, 437). In practice, this translates to interpretation plans which make no reference to the harms of industry only the narratives of innovation and 'entrepreneurial flair' (Cadw 2011 quoted in Price 2021, 446). Similar processes of economic development have been described in Michigan's Mesabi Range in the US where:

the process of reclamation and remediation involved cleaning up the extensive environmental legacies left over from a century of mining, including the widespread removal of abandoned or derelict mine buildings, the revegetation of mine waste piles, and the stocking of abandoned and flooded mine pits with fish favored by anglers.

(Baeten 2020, 90)

A primary aspect of the use of heritage to drive tourism as an industry is the idea of distinctiveness – the past as something which creates a unique brand. Although industrial heritage is seen as an antidote to 'outdated' visions of Wales associated

with ‘castles, costumers, and coracles’ (WTB 2000 p. 81 (Quoted in Price 2021), the details of that past can be less important than the branding. This is evident in the place branding of the Penderyn Distillery, which uses the heritage of Wales as part of a distinctive offering for their relatively new whisky which is developing a position in the international market (Morrish et al. 2011). The Distillery was originally based in the village of Penderyn but they have agreed to develop a visitor centre, with a distillery tour, in Swansea at the Hafod-Morfa copperworks, the site of the few remaining standing buildings associated with the industry.

The work has been made possible thanks to a £3.75m grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund in Wales, which Swansea Council bid with partners Swansea University and Penderyn Whisky. Construction began in summer 2020 and is part of the council’s £1bn regeneration programme the authority hopes will lead the way out of pandemic.

(Williams 2022)

It is yet to be seen whether the heritage of copper will be toxic for the Penderyn brand, or whether the heritage will be reclaimed through association with a successful tourism and luxury industry (Figure 5.2).

### Politics of heritage projects

As Dicks has argued, industrial heritage has been central to the national heritage narrative of Wales though this has not always been an easy heroic narrative because inter-regional competition pulled against national narratives. Discussing the debates in Welsh history writing traditions about the relationship between rural and urban nationalisms she observes ‘Practices of industrial heritage-making in Wales developed in dialogue with these debates, and, by erecting material forms of the past, helped to concretise them’ (Dicks 2019, 73). These politics led to the creation of the Waterfront Museum – a national museum of industrial heritage in Swansea, which is not focussed on the industrial heritage of Swansea, but on the national and even global narrative of innovation. Of course, this framing also draws attention away from the local consequences of industrialisation and the toxic legacies it leaves behind. The museum has a very strong community engagement programme, but this is rarely focussed on local industrial legacies.

Throughout the process of redeveloping post-industrial Swansea, the idea and value of ‘the past’ has shifted, and those changes are revealing the politics of heritage. In the 1960s and 1970s for LSVP, the past was something to be rid of. When discussing clearance in the valley, some residents were concerned that clearance would include their houses, but only one person expressed concern for the historic buildings (Stacey 1962, 154). When discussing the value of the project and local acceptance of it, the Territorial Army ‘knocking over ruins’ was listed as one of the things that had improved public relations (Stacey 1966 185). This demolition



**FIGURE 5.2** The artist’s impression of the new distillery visitor centre imagines a clean and fresh future, supported by a range of funders. ©Sarah May, 2022.

prepared both the literal and the metaphorical ground for the Enterprise Zone, in the plans for which the earlier use of the land was not mentioned at all.

With the new millennium, however, heritage-led regeneration required ‘material forms of the past’ which would support the economy. The construction of these

material forms of the past required projects in heritage research, management and interpretation. In the 1990s to 2000s ‘entrepreneurial governance’ emphasised partnership and regions bidding for central cultural funds in a similar fashion to other economic supports. In the late 1990s, EU structural funds were introduced including ‘Objective 1’ funding for disadvantaged areas. So the negative consequences of deindustrialisation were recognised in heritage funding, if not in the narratives it produced.

These funds encouraged bidding partnerships. By 2013, a new partnership between the Swansea Council and the University envisioned a ‘long-term plan ... to create a vibrant, multi-purpose place for work, education, leisure, and commercial activity in and around this hugely important industrial heritage site and ensure that the site plays a central role in Swansea’s future as it has in the city’s past’ (Welsh Copper n.d.).

These bidding partnerships also connected groups with diverse relationships with the site: the University of Swansea, local and national government bodies, ‘Friends’ groups and volunteers. The politics of partnership can blur the responsibilities between groups. Despite the large figures mentioned in the story of Penderyn Whisky described above, most of this work has been done by a series of small to medium projects with funds well under £250,000. These projects combine historical research, community engagement (especially focussed on schoolchildren), archaeological investigation and artistic practice (e.g. CHART n.d.). The nature of the funding produces projects which do more to share the existing narratives than to produce new ones.

Heritage engagement with Swansea copper has been almost entirely focussed on the time of the functioning industry. Although the interpretation has included information about the toxicity of the industry – its reclamation and ongoing legacy are barely a footnote. Writing in 2011, Goskar says ‘More than 20 years of tip clearance, demolition and tree-planting has resulted in the return of a tranquil valley and clean River Tawe. The last Swansea works shut in 1981, and now only vestiges of the area’s global copper heritage are left’. (Goskar, 2011, 17). Other authors have described the post-industrial period as abandonment and erasure. Writing in 2013 heritage professionals working on the Hafod Morfa copperworks in the heart of the valley declared that it had been ‘completely abandoned and left exposed to vandals and the elements for over 30 years’ (Betsworth et al. 2014). They saw their work as recovering a lost past for community benefit. Rhodri Morgan described the closure of the Welsh Industrial and Mining Museum as an erasure ‘It extinguishes the memory of what made Wales such a powerful force in the industrialisation of the world ... not only have railways, mines and iron works been closed in Wales, but we have now closed the museum that commemorates them’ (*Independent* 1 June 1998 quoted in Dicks 2019) The heritagisation of the site, in valorising the industrial past through the now well-established tropes of pride and community may erase even the memory of the toxic legacy (Figure 5.3).



**FIGURE 5.3** Heritage interpretation valorising the 19th-century heyday of the copper industry, fading now.

Tracing the post-industrial development of the valley contextualises the industrial past and its complex legacies. A contamination GIS commissioned in the 1990s mapped contamination from records of cultural activity but treated those sources as technical rather than cultural documents (Power et al. 1995, Arup 1997). The reclamation and heritage activities are not mapped – despite the source-pathway-receptor

model being used. An update to this, a Historic GIS which includes the subsequent interventions would provide an opportunity to understand these issues in greater depth – for scholars and for citizens.

### Heritage, disaster, decontamination

It has been 50 years since the last mills shut in the Swansea Valley and over 100 years since the copper industry went into decline. The landscape has not been frozen at the moment of loss, and nor has it simply been ‘recovering’. The technical cultural and heritage interventions continue to make use of that landscape for political purposes which change over time. The story of toxicity in Swansea didn’t stop when the metal processing industries collapsed. Subsequent political decisions and their expression through heritage policy and projects are part of how toxicity is managed and experienced.

The initial phase was dominated by the LSVP, led largely by bioscientists at Swansea University, this project aimed to ‘deal with dereliction’ It was focussed on the decontamination of heavy metals, clearance, stabilisation and the establishment of plant cover on abandoned industrial land. In this phase, the industrial past was framed as a problem to be dealt with. Taking down ruined buildings was a heroic act. The next phase was the Free Enterprise Zone, which decontaminated the economic legacy of the industrial past by linking the area to Thatcherite economic strategy. In this phase, the industrial past was sealed (denied, forgotten?); the focus was on building a future not dependent on that past. Following this, there came heritage-led regeneration, a strategy to revitalise the links between the city and the former industrial area by framing it as an asset, an anchor for the community. In this phase, the industrial past became an asset, the cornerstone of placemaking. Most recently heritage-led regeneration has entered a new phase more closely linked to private enterprise through a partnership with Penderyn distillery which is building a visitor centre in some of the remaining standing buildings. In this phase, the industrial past is a metaphor, a stage and an aesthetic asset.

This description of four phases could be taken to argue that heritage has played an important role in recovering from de-industrialisation and indeed that Swansea has succeeded in overcoming the disaster which it faced in the 1950s. Pasquinelli has recently explored the role of heritage in disaster recovery. Discussing recovery from earthquakes in Italy, she proposes that through heritage practice temporality is rearranged so that the past is defined in relation to the disaster and the ‘natural order’ is toward reconstruction. The disaster represents a temporal rupture and she suggests three stages to repair it, Dark Heritage, Reconstruction Heritage and Restored Heritage. ‘Restored heritage’ in which the pre-disaster past is stabilised and valorised is at the end of a linear ‘heritage management lifecycle’ – while Dark Heritage and Reconstruction heritage – which focus on the disaster precede this stable state (Pasquinelli 2016, 3). The development of heritage narratives in the Lower Swansea Valley follows this pattern. The LSVP and even the Enterprise

Zone focussed on the disaster of industrial collapse and so represent ‘Dark Heritage’ and ‘Reconstruction Heritage’. The two phases of heritage-led regeneration valorise the stable past of industrial prosperity and represent ‘Restored Heritage’.

I suggest that Pasquinelli’s stages are not naturalised positions related to the passage of time, but political positions, reflecting choices and negotiation. Through the framing of Dark Heritage, the LSVP used the ruined buildings and unmanaged tips to identify deindustrialisation as a disaster to be overcome. The firm focus on the present of the Enterprise Zone moved the disaster into the recent past through the frame of Reconstruction Heritage. Heritage-led regeneration uses Restored Heritage to draw attention away from the disaster linking the industrial past to the post-industrial present without reference to the process of deindustrialisation.

But if the disaster is contamination, not deindustrialisation, toxicity not dereliction, the politics of heritage practice are different. If the disaster is ongoing, can a stable state be reached? Toxic heritage as a frame suggests that the disaster is the contamination – and while that persists the rupture is ongoing. These positions have political consequences and engage different political actors. Heritage has allied itself to economic politics but narratives would be different if it were allied to climate or public health politics. Heritage practice can support the political processes required to face these challenges as effectively as it has engaged economic change; but only if it establishes partnerships with people working on those issues.

If the memory of the copper industry is sanitised, the legacy of contamination can be forgotten. However, the past has not been removed. Like tips used for landscaping, it has been ‘sealed’ by a cover which allows growth, but the toxic heritage persists.

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