

# Public Archaeology Arts of Engagement

edited by

Howard Williams, Caroline Pudney & Afnan Ezzeldin



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# Public Archaeology

## Arts of Engagement

*edited by*

Howard Williams, Caroline Pudney & Afnan Ezzeldin

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# Public Archaeology at Bryn Celli Ddu: Sharing Prehistory

Sanaa Hijazi, Courtney Mainprize, Maranda Wareham, Sian Bramble,  
Ben Edwards & Seren Griffiths

*This chapter presents the results of an undergraduate project that explored public attitudes to heritage, prehistory and specifically how people relate to the Neolithic passage tomb at Bryn Celli Ddu, Anglesey, Wales. Dr Seren Griffiths (University of Central Lancashire) and Dr Ben Edwards (Manchester Metropolitan University) have been running ‘The Bryn Celli Ddu public archaeology landscape research project’ with Dr Ffion Reynolds (Cadw) since 2014. This project explores the landscape around Bryn Celli Ddu, and has at its heart public archaeology, with various programmes of public engagement. The project was initiated in response to a research question from members of the public, and the project research design has been developed over its lifetime (2014–present) with members of the public. Research for this paper was undertaken on a site open day during the 2018 season. The results we present here provide an initial impression of the people who visit the site, their motivations and concerns, and how they would like the research programme to develop.*

## Introduction

Bryn Celli Ddu (or ‘the Mound of the Dark Grove’ in English; Figure 1) is one of a group of late Neolithic passage tombs located on Anglesey. The monument has a series of phases of prehistoric activity, as well as a history of antiquarian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century exploration (Hemp 1930). Its present form is an extensively reconstructed monument, which was intended as a resource to educate members of the public (Hemp 1930). The site has a number of nationally important features, notably the way the passage was constructed so that on the summer solstice the sunrise illuminates the passage and chamber (Fig 2). Despite the importance of the site, relatively little work has been done on its landscape context. Over the last five years, the Bryn Celli Ddu public archaeology landscape project has aimed to better-understand this location, working with members of the public to survey and excavate sites in the vicinity, and with the Welsh Historic Environment Agency, Cadw, to produce a series of open days and public engagement events focusing on the summer solstice. In 2018, as Archaeology and Anthropology undergraduates we developed and undertook a research project to explore people’s motivations for visiting the site, the value in which people held the site, and the sense of relationships people had with the site.

## Archaeological background

The island of Anglesey is rich in Neolithic archaeology, with at least 30 burial chambers, plus additional rock art panels and settlement sites (Foster and Daniel 1965; Lynch 1997). Bryn Celli Ddu is a famous Neolithic passage tomb on Anglesey, the first phase of construction has been estimated to be between 3075–2950 cal. BCE (Burrow 2010: 262). The monument was partially excavated by François du Bois Lukis in 1865, and by the H.M. Office of Works and archaeologist W.J. Hemp from 1925–1929 in an attempt to conserve the monument (Hemp 1930). The site is notable for a number of aspects: a henge monument may predate the passage tomb, and may represent one of the earliest examples known of a henge (cf. Bradley 1998; Burrow 2010); a rare form of megalithic rock art (‘the pattern stone’) was recovered from the site; and the passage architecture is orientated so that the summer solstice sunrise illuminates the interior of the monument. The heavily reconstructed monument survives today as a chamber and passage covered by a low mound and bounded by a c. 25 m diameter ditch. The site is one of several late Neolithic (c. 3300–2500 cal. BC) and early Chalcolithic (c. 2500–2000 cal. BC) monuments in its immediate vicinity (Lynch 1997), which includes rock art panels, at least one other burial monument, and a Grooved Ware pit circle; these have been foci of investigation as part of the landscape project so far. Standing



stones and other burial monuments were probably robbed out in antiquity (cf. Barnwell 1869; Baynes 1912; Lynch 1997). Bryn Celli Ddu is a Cadw guardianship monument, and is currently presented to the public with two interpretation panels at the monument, and series of panels at the public carpark, putting the monument into its regional context. Visitor access to the monument is provided from the carpark along a reasonably flat public footpath.



Figure 1: Bryn Celli Ddu at the start of the summer open day in 2015 showing some of the stalls with public engagement activities and information. The survey was conducted on the equivalent event in 2018. (Copyright Adam Stanford)

### Background to the public archaeology work

Public archaeology is core to the Bryn Celli Ddu public archaeology landscape research project, with the project ethos seeking to be *responsive* and *creative*, and based long-term *relationships* developed with local people on Anglesey and Gwynedd (Griffiths this volume).

Since 2014, a series of events have taken place as part of the public archaeology and engagement work. In 2018, this took the form of an Archaeology Festival, with activities including:

1. local volunteer archaeologists digging on site;
2. a site open day;
3. a local Young Archaeologist Club excavation day;
4. visits from 235 children from eight local schools;
5. a star gazing event;
6. a solstice event;
7. an exhibition at the local museum Oriel Môn about the excavation's findings;



8. a series of free public lectures from leading academics working on Neolithic and Bronze Age Britain and Ireland at Oriel Môn museum;
9. a treasure trail set in the wider landscape taking in key monuments in the local historic environment;
10. a series of artists' residencies.



Figure 2: The view towards the east showing visitors to one of the summer solstice events watching the sunrise on top of the monument. (Copyright Adam Stanford)

The annual project archaeology open day takes place at Bryn Celli Ddu, on the closest Saturday to the summer solstice (21 June) in the middle of the excavation project (to coincide with a popular time for visitors to come to the site given its solar alignment). The open days have included educational stalls, craft activities, experimental archaeology activities, children's activities including story-telling and performances, artists in residence under-taking work at the site or displaying the results of their residencies. Other groups and organisations have also delivered activities at these events, including Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (the local Welsh Archaeological Trust) and the local Urdd Derwyddon Môn (the Anglesey Druid Order). Each year, the open day events have attracted hundreds of visitors, numbers vary and are highly dependent on the weather. In 2018, the events that took place as part of the Festival of Archaeology with visitor numbers given in Table 1.

### Research aims

Four authors on this paper (Hijazi, Mainprize, Wareham and Bramble), designed this as an independent undergraduate project. These authors were then in the third year of an Archaeology and Anthropology degree at the University of Central Lancashire. The project was designed to better understand the

contemporary social context in which people experience archaeology, heritage and monuments, and specifically how they respond to Bryn Celli Ddu. It was also designed as a way to co-create the future public archaeology programme, in order to reflect the interests of members of the public and wanted to understand about the wider landscape archaeology project.

Table 1: Visitors to different events associated with the public engagement programme at the site in 2018.

Event Type	Visitor Numbers
Archaeology Open Day	650
Summer Solstice Sunrise	150
Stargazing	60
Public Lectures	150
Museum Exhibition	500
Site Tours	100
Treasure Trail Take Up	500
<b>TOTAL VISITORS</b>	<b>2110</b>

We were especially interested in the range of different interests people had in the site, in the ways in which the site might have meaning to different people, and in terms of the wider significance of the historic environment in different people's senses of identity and belonging. The survey also went through University of Central Lancashire ethics approval.

The aims of the survey were:

- to identify current attitudes to prehistoric monuments and heritage among members of the public who visit Bryn Celli Ddu;
- to capture anonymous demographics about who visits prehistoric heritage sites in Wales, using Bryn Celli Ddu as a case study;
- to identify research aims that members of the public might like to develop as part of the Bryn Celli Ddu landscape project;
- to identify media for public engagement that members of the public might use in future years.

## Research methods

On the 16 June 2018 open day, we conducted our visitor survey at the site. The survey contained 20 questions (Appendix 1), which we invited visitors to the site open day to complete *after* they had completed a tour of the site. We asked people who were in groups to fill out one survey representing all of the views of people in their group; we did not want to survey every individual visiting the site, as we felt this would be invasive and might negatively impact on the experience of visitors to the open day. Participants' names were not recorded; likewise, postcodes were not collected in order to ensure that the data were anonymous. Members of the public were briefed about data collection, retention and use prior to completing the survey. Participants were given Griffiths' email as a contact for further details, as well as details of the 2019 museum exhibition and public lecture where they could follow up the results of the survey and excavation.



We chose to undertake a survey, rather than participant observation, for two pragmatic reasons. First, participant observation presented a range of ethical considerations which we felt beyond the scope of an undergraduate project. As we wanted to gather a range of quantifiable data, we felt this was best achieved by a survey on one day, when lots of people visit the site. We also hoped that by concentrating on the open day, we might gather opinions from a range of people, not all of whom were local, including some who came from different countries to see the monument and surrounding area. Second, as none the authors who undertook the survey were Welsh language speakers, the idea of attempting participant observation without being able to communicate in the first language of some visitors felt inappropriate.

## Results

Fifty-eight surveys were completed on the day, and one was returned by emailed after the event. The surveys were completed by people who were in groups representing 241 visitors. We have therefore captured data that reveals the views of c. 37% of visitors to 2018's open day.

The vast majority of people visiting the site defined themselves as 'British', 'English', 'Welsh' or 'Cymraeg'. There were international visitors who defined as 'European', 'American' visitors, and 'Australian', however the majority of people were locals: 55% living in North Wales. Sixteen percent of visitors lived in North West England. Thirteen percent of visitors came from outside the UK. The tensions in undertaking survey work only in English, even as a project by a mixed international team of undergraduate students, were evident; several members of the public commented on our inability to speak Welsh. Issues of Welsh nationalism and national identity were also raised in several of the survey responses; the self-description of at least one participant as 'Cymraeg' may have been a statement about our inability to speak Welsh, while suggestions for future public archaeology work as part of the project included 'the rise of Welsh nationalism and the Druids'.

The majority of visitors our survey captured were adults (see discussion below), 21% of visitors were aged 47–57 years old, and 18% were aged 58–69 years old. In contrast, only 18% of our surveyed visitors were under 18 years old, 21% were 19–35 years old.

Of the local visitors, when asked '...has this monument influenced where you live?', nearly one quarter (24%) stated that the monument *had* influenced where they lived. This seems a relatively high percentage, but might reflect very strong feelings of connection, belonging and identity among local people, and of course, those coming to the open day are a self-selecting sample who we must assume have strong interests in heritage. However, the vast majority of people (73%) visiting the site on the open day stated that the monument had no personal or religious significance for them. Of those surveyed, 14% stated that the solstice did have personal, spiritual or religious meaning to them. One individual stated that they were a Druid, and as part of their beliefs Bryn Celli Ddu was associated with the summer solstice. According to this individual, the site worked within a network of Neolithic monuments in the area, each of which was used for ceremonies at key times, such as winter solstice. This individual also noted that they regarded the monument not as a burial chamber, but as a ritual complex that held its own personality and power within the landscape.

The majority of people who attended the open day were either on holiday in the region, or were locals seeking an educational day out. Of those on holiday, a sizeable percentage of people questioned (63%) stated that 'heritage was a deciding factor in [their] choice of destination'. Some of the visitors were very specific about the role of heritage in their holiday choices; one party stated '...we like to visit *Neolithic* sites on holiday' (our emphasis).





Most people (89%) who came to the site placed a strong emphasis on their personal, physical experience of the monument; digital media accessed remotely did not seem to provide a viable alternative experience. A range of suggestions were made as to how heritage presentation might be improved in Wales more generally, these included: that smaller and lesser known monuments and heritage sites should be better signed and publicised; that heritage information signs could be more detailed; and conversely, that the formal presentation of particular sites should be maintained at a low and unobtrusive level.

Surprisingly perhaps for anthropologists and archaeologists, the setting of heritage sites did not seem to be a specific concern for visitors. Only 64% of visitors agreed with the statement that ‘...changing the surrounding landscape of archaeological monuments effects how, or if, you view monuments’. Of those who recognised the importance of the setting of archaeological monuments, several answers emphasised the importance of ‘undisturbed’ landscapes, the importance of preserving landscapes, and the importance of the ‘authenticity’ of landscapes. Several respondents mentioned the importance of the landscape and the monument as understood together; with one noting that the ‘[s]urrounding landscape is *PART* of the site’ (original emphasis) and another noting ‘[e]verything is affected by [Bryn Celli Ddu’s] surroundings — that’s what’s so lush about Bryn Celli Ddu’. One person mentioned a specific archaeological case study with regards to the importance of archaeological setting, the recent planning issues surrounding Old Oswestry hillfort (<http://oldoswestryhillfort.co.uk/>). Another visitor suggested that the landscape setting of the monument was important as a means to ‘...get into the neolithic [sic] people’s head and understand them’.

Some 27% of respondents state that they were members of a heritage group. These included a diverse range of organisations. The most popular was the National Trust (14%), then Cadw (8%), followed by English Heritage (7%), with one or two members each of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society, Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, and Lancashire Archaeological Society. Respondents also classed the British Dowsing Society and the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids as ‘heritage groups’. Two respondents replied ‘not yet’ to this question, suggesting that visiting the site open day may have had impacts on these respondents’ interests in the historic environment, and motivated them to join heritage groups.

Overall, 83% of respondents stated that the open day tour had changed their interpretation of the site. Table 2 summaries areas in which members of the public had changed their understanding *as a result* of the 2018 open day.

When asked what people would like to learn about within the landscape project in the future, respondents highlighted some themes that already exist in the project, including archaeoastronomy, use of different geological resources, the ‘history of place’ and landscape. Some respondents said they would be simply interested in learning ‘anything new’. Others referenced specific time periods they wanted have more information on, specifically the Neolithic period in Wales. There were also a series of specific research objectives or questions that people would like to have answered.

## Discussion

The survey that we undertook was conducted with a group of very self-selecting participants, this is especially so because of the geographical position of the site, and the nature of the open day as an event conducted on the site itself. In terms of its geography, the site is relatively remote (compared, for example, with Cadw-run medieval castles and monastic sites in contemporary urban settings). Only very small conurbations are located within walking distance; members of the public have to be interested enough to attend to specifically drive to the site, or walk a significant distance. Attendance at the site on the open day therefore suggests that people present were especially interested in *received* heritage communication. In addition, the start of the 2018 open day was also exceptionally rainy, so people



visiting on this open day might be exceptionally committed heritage visitors. The data we collected shows an age-profile of more mature visitors at the open day. We were surprised by this trend, as anecdotally we had observed lots of children and younger visitors. Older people might have been more willing to undertake the survey, especially if they had more time at the site, which might be consistent with people who did not have child care to pre-occupy them. This survey therefore likely represents a very specific population. A survey conducted on a schools visit day or the Summer Solstice Sunrise event (which has significance for local druid groups) would probably produce very different results. However, this does serve as a valid sample of a group of people attending a heritage open day at the site without the biases of a specific demographic or beliefs.

Table 2: Areas of archaeological research that members of the public understood better because of the 2018 open day, and selected research aims members of the public would like to be reflected in future public archaeology events.

Research findings members of the public better-understood as a result of the open day		Research questions members of the public would like to be addressed by the research project in the future	
Themes	Example statement	Themes	Example statement
<i>The complexity of monuments in the Bryn Celli Ddu landscape.</i>	'The excavation this year [2018] does not represent neolithic remains, but probably iron age or medieval field boundaries.'	<i>Neolithic settlement and settlement choices.</i>	'The reason people who choose to settle here. What did they value about this region?'
<i>The solar alignment at the solstice.</i>	'Really interesting to learn more, especially about the solstice!'	<i>Other important late Neolithic ceremonial landscapes.</i>	'How does this site relate to other important places like Newgrange and Stonehenge?'
<i>The palaeoenvironmental context.</i>	'Love the idea that it might have been an island surrounded by wetlands back in the day, FAB site and tour.'	<i>Archaeological interpretation and competing and differences of interpretation.</i>	'I like to know more about the theories of what people living here used the site for.'
<i>The importance of the different geological materials used in several of the monuments.</i>	'Fascinating to learn about the geology and size of the site – amazing.'	<i>Prehistoric lifeways and beliefs.</i>	'People who lived here: beliefs, way of life.'
<i>The rock art panels in the landscape around Bryn Celli Ddu.</i>	'That it is an important centrepiece to a populated landscape full of monuments and archaeology!'	<i>The nature of late Neolithic ritual and ceremonial practices.</i>	'How the rituals were performed?'

In terms of the research questions visitors were interested in (Table 2), it is possible to suggest some themes in these questions. Taken together, the research question examples can be seen to emphasise the importance to members of the public of *detail* in the presentation of archaeology at the site. The research questions are very specific: '*who* choose to settle *here*, and *why*? *What* did these people believe? *How* did they express these beliefs in rituals?'. These research aims, suggested by members of the public, will be addressed in the design of the public archaeology programme in 2019.

## Conclusions

People visiting Bryn Celli Ddu open day did so for a range of reasons. For the majority of people, the motivation to visit was for an educational day out for locals and people on holiday. A minority of people attending attached spiritual or religious importance to the site or the solstice time of year.



The greatest percentage of the people who visited on the open day were from North Wales, with slightly fewer people travelling from North West England. The majority of people surveyed, or represented in the survey, were over 47, although there may be issues with the representativeness of the age profile of visitors to the open day.

A very great majority of people valued being physically present at archaeology sites and monuments, even if there is digital content online; place and landscape are themes that are repeatedly mentioned as important by visitors to the open day.

People were interested in a wide range of themes associated with the site. Archaeoastronomy, use of different geological resources, landscape and ‘ritual’ were mentioned in feedback. When asked to suggest themes for future public archaeology work as part of the project, there are two trends. First, respondents were non-committal about themes for public lectures, most often replying ‘anything’ archaeological; this might indicate that members of the public value ‘the expert voice’ or specialist knowledge (cf. Griffiths *et al.* 2015). In contrast, when asked what respondents want to know about the site itself, there is an emphasis on detail and specifics. We have selected five research suggestions from our respondents that we think are indicative of this emphasis on specifics (Table 2). It is anticipated that these co-created research themes will be explored in the public archaeology work as part of the project in 2019.

We are aware the responses we elicited are likely to represent a very specific, self-selecting group of people, which might under-represent some people with interests in Bryn Celli Ddu specifically, or prehistory generally. We are hoping to launch a modified version of this survey on line, and will be interested to see if the responses differ significantly.

The contributions by members of the public towards future public archaeology are the critical outputs of this survey; these will form the basis for the co-creation of future public archaeology work at the site, in collaboration with Cadw, the local museum Oriel Môn, local schools, future artists in residence, and on future open days. Some of the responses from this survey were surprising and we believe the best public archaeology develops over time, as a result of relationships between people and integrates these interests in specific research-orientated archaeological investigations.

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**Supplementary information: the survey questions**

- Q1 How many people are in your party?
- Q2 How would you describe your ethnicity?
- Q3 What age groups does your party include?
- Q4 Which town do you live in? Or which is your nearest town?
- Q5 If you are local, has this monument influenced where you live?
- Q6 Are the events that are occurring in June important in your consideration to come here? If not, what is the purpose of your visit?
- Q7 What is your interpretation prior to tour?
- Q8 Do your reasons for visiting include a religious or personal association with the monument? If so, would you be prepared to explain here?
- Q9 Does the solstice at this site have any personal, spiritual or religious meaning to you? If yes, please explain below.
- Q10 If you are on holiday, would you class heritage as a deciding factor for your choice of destination? If yes, is it the primary factor, a strong factor, or a minor factor? If not do you value chance discoveries?
- Q11 Are you a member of a heritage group? If so which?
- Q12 What do you think of the way heritage is presented to the public?
- Q13 What would you like to know more about?
- Q14 How would you like us to present our research differently?
- Q15 What would you like our lecture series and museum exhibition to focus on next year, in terms of a) general work, b) specific work at the site?
- Q16 If this site is available to you in an online format, would you still visit the site in person, or would being able to see it online be enough?
- Q17 Do you think digital content would affect how you feel about the site?
- Q18 Does changing the surrounding landscape of archaeological monuments effect how, or if, you view them?
- Q19 What is your interpretation of the site after your tour?
- Q20 What other comments do you have about what you think is important about this site, pre-historic archaeology or Welsh Heritage?

