



I DIG MARGAM

notes towards the development of
an accessible and sustainable future
for Capel Mair, its holy well and
surroundings

*“a noble thought
if ever executed”*

T M Talbot (1747-1813)

PHIL COPE

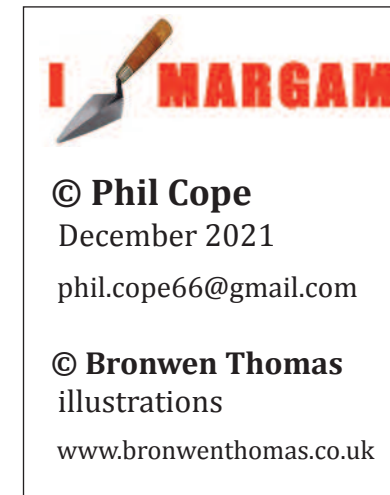
for the Friends of Margam Park

December 2021



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background

In my initial 19 August 2021 Proposal to the Friends of Margam Park (FofMP) – in response to their request for ideas to develop Ffynnon Mair / Mary’s Well – I wrote that *“it had been my strong, often-expressed belief since the recent re-discovery, disinterring and post-dig re-covering of the well beside Capel Mair that Margam (and Wales) was missing a huge trick for the development of a range of unique community, creative, spiritual, archeological and educational activities, centred upon the rich histories and heritage of Ffynnon Mair”*.

Based upon what has already been achieved in locating, exposing and recording the site, my brief was to explore and propose ways to safely and permanently reveal this important wellspring (for both visitors and students, as well as for ongoing archaeological research), albeit in close connection with the other Margam sacred spring sites, Capel Mair / Mary’s Chapel itself, and the many other attractions of the Margam Park hinterland.

In my Paper, this ‘afterthought’ was the twelfth of thirteen pieces of work proposed:

“Making an initial exploration of ideas to also develop Capel Mair alongside the well, possibly as a second phase objective, and addressing the access / security / protection of the whole site.”

Very early on in my research, however, it became clear that any proposal for the sympathetic and sustainable celebration of the well would be largely redundant if not considered within the wider context of the security of the whole site, situated on its small plateau within the steep hillside of Graig Fawron on the southern flanks of Margam Mountain, above Margam Abbey and Castle.

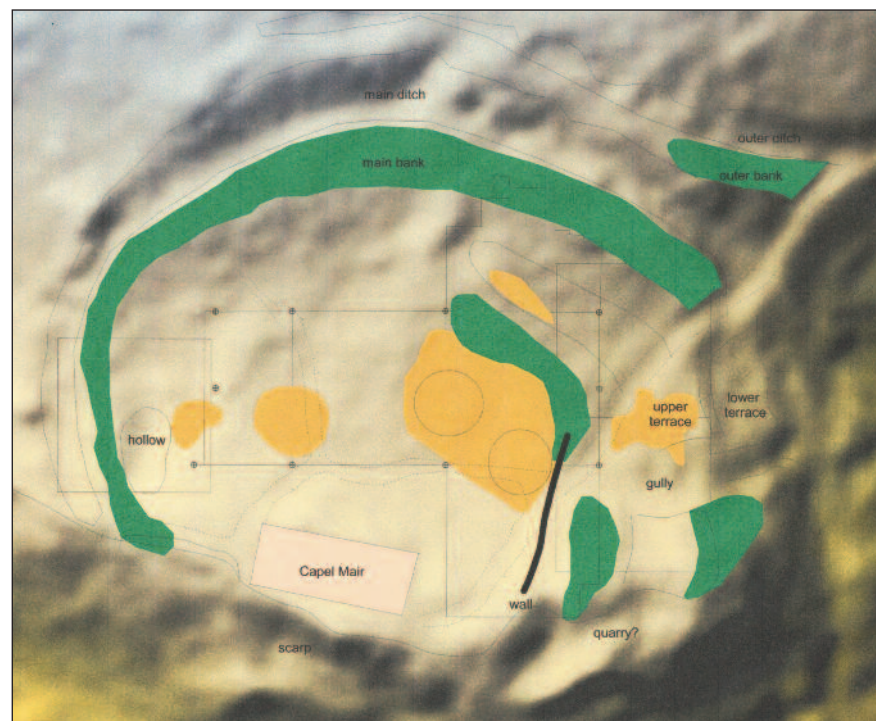
The issues were threefold: the current state of Capel Mair itself; the regular misuse of the whole site for parties and for raves, causing damage, noise disturbance to neighbours, and the mounds of litter left behind; and, most significantly, the recent geophysical evidence that demonstrated that the well and the chapel were located within an important Iron Age fort, offering a much richer range of possibilities for tourism, education and archaeological exploration than first envisaged.

This paper, then, represents the beginnings of an argument for an ambitious new approach to what could be achieved within the whole Capel Mair site, and beyond. Given the scale of the aspirations, this Report cannot be, at this time, a set of watertight proposals. Those – given approval of the efficacy of the approach – will be for the next stage. What **I DIG MARGAM** offers is the powerful outline of a vision for a range of alternative ways to respond to our hidden, built and animated heritage.

In 2015 and 2016, the Friends of Margam Park commissioned Dr Tim Young of *GeoArch* to conduct geophysical research at the Capel Mair site (*Geophysical survey at Capel Mair, Margam, Neath Port Talbot*, 27 October 2015 + 17 March 2016). Dr Young's findings indicate that the chapel lies within an Iron Age hillfort ("although use in the Roman or early medieval periods cannot be excluded"), opening up a range of new avenues for both the understanding and the usage of the site.

The geophysical examinations showed two ramparts encircling the site to the north and west; one, or possibly two, roundhouses ("a rare discovery in upland Wales" according to Dr Young); the site's original entrance; as well as the probable location of the holy well, marked as 'hollow' on Young's survey map (and later to be confirmed through excavation).

In response, my brief became radically expanded from that originally proposed, necessitating a new range of solutions to some of these apparent problems, proposals which could, however, add very significantly to the interest in and value of the site.



Geophysical Survey Summary Interpretation, March 2016 (*GeoArch*)

green tone: banks / black outline: ditches
black squares: survey area / dashed lines: paths
gold tone: area of enhanced magnetism,
with previously-identified structures shown as black circle

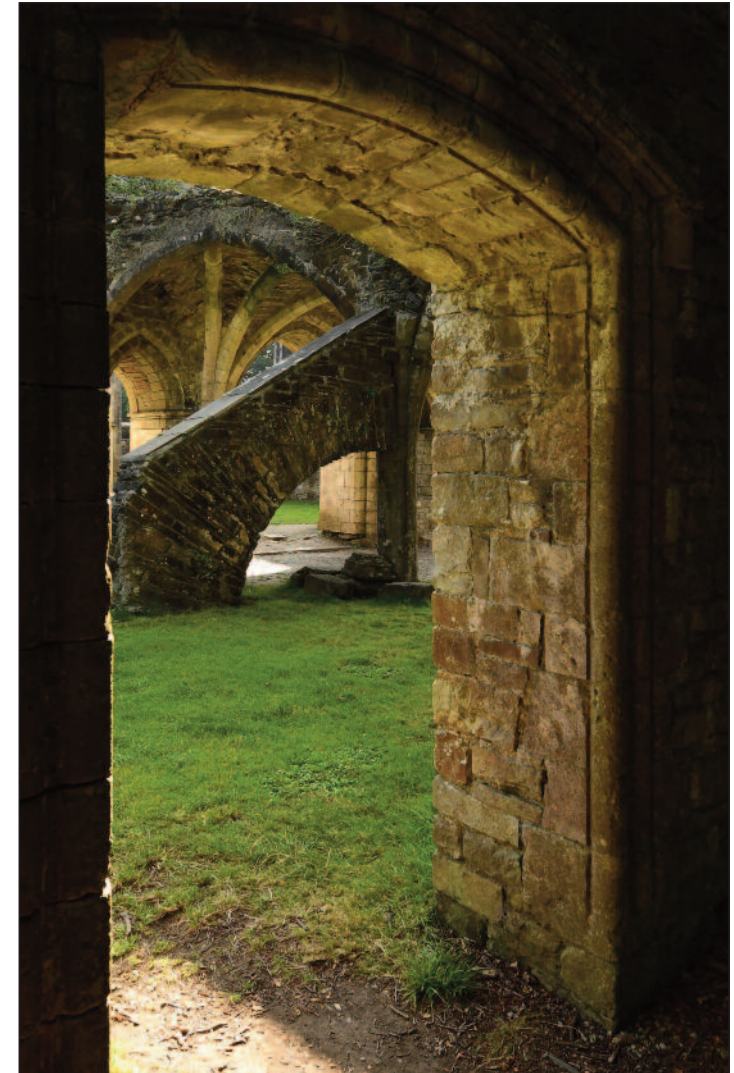
layer upon layer

Little in the whole of Margam Park is truly 'natural'; all rather reflecting an on-going dialogue between the land and human need and imagination. And in our explorations of prehistory in particular, an array of alternative interpretations are always on offer, collated from our always-incomplete knowledge of the sites from their locations and the goods and buildings left behind in and above the ground, as well as through the often-unreliable accounts of those who came to visit, conquer or convert.

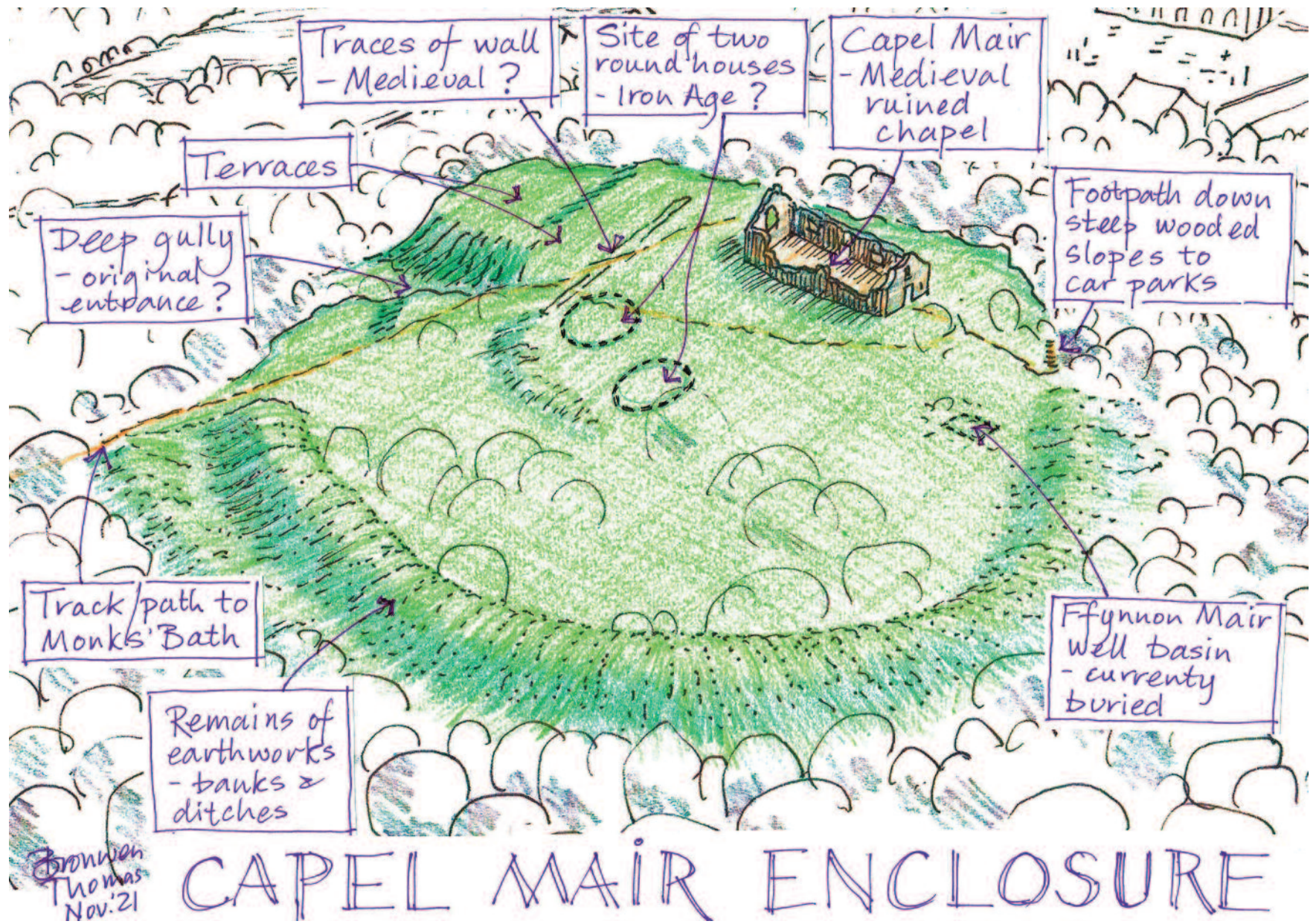
The nature and usages of most pre- and historical sites have changed regularly over time, best illustrated, perhaps, by the seemingly-constant revision of design, intention and fabric in the multiple stages of construction in the lifecycle of Stonehenge, from its first build around 2700BC to its final(?) manifestation in 1490BC.

And our understanding of the past – and in particular of the deep past – has always reflected the times and the beliefs from which it has been viewed, the standpoint, the values and the aspirations of the present moment. Stonehenge has been, at various times, the work of Merlin, a Roman temple dedicated to the sun god Apollo, a Druidic temple, a prehistoric observatory and an early computer; its construction undertaken by Egyptians, Danes, Mycenaeans, a man called Gwlyddin ... and even Martians. Today, for me anyway, Stonehenge is an overly-expensive tourist attraction, stripped through a combination of commerce and the exaggerated claims of conservation of almost all of its once-sacred attraction.

Each generation, it seems, gets the archaeology and the explanations it deserves.



Margam Abbey



(all illustrations by Bronwen Thomas CLMI, landscape architect)



This re-imagining for new purposes through new builds, alongside our constant re-defining for new ages and needs is equally apparent within the many faces of the Capel Mair site.

One way of reading this Paper, then, is as the first rough draft of Capel Mair's next incarnation.

coming late to the party

*"Of the extreme tracts of Europe towards the west
I cannot speak with any certainty."*

Herodotus, c.484-425BC

Greek writer, geographer and the so-called "father of history"

While the earth is believed to be some 4.6 billion years old and our planet's first 'human' occupation a relatively-recent 2.6 million (during the Palaeolithic or Early Stone Age), the first humans known to have walked on 'British' soil was only some 800,000 years ago ... coming extremely late to the party. (The oldest known human remains in Wales, 19 Neanderthal teeth dating back some 230,000 years were found at Pontnewydd Cave in Denbighshire; while the oldest known ceremonial burial in Western Europe was that of the so-called 'Red Lady' – who turned out to be a man – *of Paviland'*, from the Gower Peninsular in south Wales, who lived and died here some 31,000 years ago.)

'Britain' was for regular periods during prehistoric times uninhabited, as severe changes in climate wiped out, then replaced our small populations with new waves of immigrants across the land bridge which connected what we now know as Britain to what became known as Europe, until the route's final flooding from the melting of ice around 6000BC. By 4000BC, farming practices had been introduced to Britain, woodlands were being cleared, crops cultivated and animals domesticated, beginning humanity's 'control' over the land:

"... the farmers were technologists who carried in their heads an image of the way the land could be ... Instead of fitting in alongside nature, they sought to rule over it."

Neil Oliver, from *A History of Ancient Britain*, 2011

During the Bronze Age (2500-800BC) – the first to offer any really significant finds within the Margam area – 'Beaker People' introduced metal working to Britain (as well as their distinctive pottery, and their large cairns and barrows left within the landscape, still) ... and changed everything.

Arriving around 2500BC, the Beaker People (like much else in pre-historical studies, a contested nomenclature) flourished here until c.1700BC, first teaching the technologies of copper, then of the much more durable bronze (90% copper, 10% tin), making stronger tools and weapons generally available, and inspiring superb works of art, including the solid gold Mold Pectoral (breast plate / cape) found in a north Wales barrow in 1833.



the Mold pectoral or cape, 1900-1600BC (British Museum, London)

Of most significance to Margam, however, were the Iron Age (800BC-AD43) people who around 600BC (or maybe, according to recent research, much earlier) began to build hillforts, several hundred of which survive in Wales, in response perhaps to an increase in tribal aggression arising from pressure on the land and an increase in population (by the end of the Iron Age the population of Britain was to reach one million).

There is a healthy ongoing debate around where and when the Iron Age 'Celts' and their language originated, and I don't intend to step very deep into its complexity within this Paper. The word 'Celt', it seems, comes from *Keltoi*, what the Ancient Greeks called this loose collection of tribes (possibly from a Greek version of the Celtic word *Galos*, meaning 'brave warrior'), then *Celtae* by the Romans, describing what they both saw as a troublesome assortment of 'barbarians' from Central and Western Europe. The word's usage, however, is challenged by some 'Celtosceptics' as merely a modern construct, popularised in the seventeenth century for a ragbag assortment of largely-unconnected tribes.

The traditional view simply saw the 'Celts' as spreading in all directions from their homelands in Central Europe (Hallstatt in Austria and La Tène in Switzerland), and on into what was to become Britain and Wales, carrying with them their material culture and their language. Modern research, however, is suggesting that the Indo-European Celtic language may have had its origins on the Atlantic fringe well before the Iron Age, and possibly as far back as the Neolithic or New Stone Age (4500BC) – firstly, perhaps, in south-west Iberia, then spreading up through France and Belgium, and across to Britain and Ireland – and that Celtic culture might have originated in different places at different times. This new thinking questions the belief in a succession of invading hordes attacking and replacing their predecessors for one based upon cultural evolution through two-way networks of communication facilitated by trade ... the movement of materials and ideas rather than of masses of people. These theories see Celtic beliefs, designs and identities evolving naturally (while also retaining their local characteristics) through well-established communities of exchange, linked by widespread trade over land and sea, and cemented most firmly of all by a common language.

"In our new story of Celtic origins, those languages that persist out on the western edge of Europe were also born here ..."

Alice Robert, *The Celts: search for a civilization*, 2015

But despite all the controversy, I will be using the word Celtic, herein, both in recognition of these new understandings, as well as for simplification.

According to tradition, the Celts had a reputation for poetry and for song, for hospitality alongside aggression, for hotheadedness, drunkenness and loyalty. Roman reports of Celtic 'raids' (what the native people might themselves have called 'resistance') described savage and bloody fanatics, sometimes also painted and naked but for the *torcs* around their necks, stereotypes that would have justified invasion in the minds of the invader, and the ruthless elimination of the 'uncivilized barbarian'.

This is the Roman historian and politician, Tacitus, writing in his *Annals* (c. AD109) about Gaius Suetonius Paulinus' savage attack on the Druidic centre on Anglesey: *"The enemy lined the shore in a dense armed mass. Among them were black-robed women with disheveled hair like Furies, brandishing torches. Close by stood Druids, raising their hands to heaven and screaming dreadful curses ... it was their religion to drench their altars in the blood of their prisoners and consult their gods by means of human entrails."*

Epic narratives of a wild warrior aristocracy displaying the dual 'attributes' of military ferocity (while usually outnumbered) alongside an abandonment of all organizational principles, are paralleled today, perhaps, on the occasions when our tiny modern nation of Wales – through, it sometimes seems, passion alone – occasionally triumphs over vastly larger-populated and -resourced English rugby teams, particularly when the invaders cross the Severn and march onto our Millennium Stadium sacred turf!

A Celtic poet (known as a ‘bard’) had to study for twelve years, learning more than 350 poems by heart. And their Druids (a word probably once meaning ‘knowledge of the oak’) undertook twenty years of training for their jobs as lawmakers, judges and advisors to their kings. Possibly both men and women, their roles may have originated, many now believe, within Britain itself. They advised when to plant crops, sacrifice animals (and probably humans, too), and, if you believe the hype, had the powers to predict the future, travel through time, change the weather and even their shapes.

It is important to remember that much of what we ‘know’ about the Celts was written by Roman invaders, or those that heard and passed on their tales, or, much later, by the monks of the Middle Ages, all of whom had imperial or ideological axes to grind so cannot be fully relied upon for a perfectly accurate account. In Haiti, they have a saying: *If you want to shoot a dog, say it’s mad*, the strategy of accusing people you want to oppress of being less than civilized or even inhuman, employed by all invaders, including those to Ireland, Wales, North America, Vietnam, Tibet, as well as Haiti throughout world history to this day. Intent, in their words, on ridding our island of its superstitious beliefs, the Roman attacks were really predicated upon the acquisition of precious metals and of slaves ... as well as the substitution of an alternative set of their own superstitions and beliefs.

The Celtic Iron Age *Siluri* tribe (their name meaning ‘kindred’, ‘stock’ or ‘seed’ in the native tongue) occupied much of south-east Wales, building roundhouses and hillforts, often protected by ditches and banks. Unlike in particular their Late Stone Age (Neolithic) ancestors who looked mostly to the symbolism of the skies for answers to the unanswerable questions, the Celts had, we believe, a range of chthonic deities located much closer to the earth, in rocks, trees, rivers, springs and lakes – reflecting perhaps the renewed importance of the agrarian and the pastoral, the organisation of the land and the productivity of its crops and herds. And they also believed, it seems, in a life after death.

“... the Romans represented the arrival of the modern world ... bureaucrats, administrators, accountants, keepers of books ... tiresome empire builders with their pen-pushers and their armies of uniformed, identikit soldiers that marched in time, like marionettes ... It’s because of the Romans that we can’t see the Celts.”

Neil Oliver, writing in the foreword to
Alice Robert’s *The Celts: search for a civilization*

Gaius Julius Caesar’s first attempted invasion of Britain in 55BC was rebuffed by a combination of an angry welcoming party and his ships being damaged by English Channel waves. Then, a year later, with a larger force and growing dis-unity within the local Celtic tribes (some even siding with the Romans), he was able, in the south-east at least, to plant the seeds of Romanization, installing before he left two Gallic aristocrats as ‘kings’, in readiness for when, a century later, Rome would return with a vengeance.

Emperor Claudius and his general Aulus Plautius arrived in Britain (with their elephants) in AD43, alarmed by their defeats in Germania and battles in the Middle East, and by reports of similar uprising and unrest amongst the tribes of Britain. The Celts were skilled in guerrilla tactics, assisted often in Wales by our mountainous terrain. Tales are still told of warriors like Vercingetorix of the *Arveni* tribe (his name translating as ‘great leader of a hundred battles’); of the Briton Caratacus, captured by Ostorius Scapula in AD51; of Calgacus, the first named Scot, defeated at *Mons Graupius* in AD84; and of the *Iceni* tribe’s Queen Boudica and her famous revolt of AD60/61, which coincided in time with Rome’s savage act of cultural genocide at the centre of Druidic power on Anglesey.

“Romans ... Brigands of the world ... the wealth of an enemy excites their greed, his poverty their lust for power ... Robbery, butchery, rapine ... they create a devastation and call it peace.”

words attributed to Calgacus by the Roman writer, Tacitus



*The Bard by Thomas Jones, 1774,
based perhaps upon the Roman attack on the druidic sanctuary on Anglesey*

The Roman military conquest of Wales was ‘completed’ by AD210, and Wales became, for the next almost 300 years, sometimes-willing though often-resistant subjects of the Roman Empire. Then, with the fall of the Western Empire in AD410, Roman occupation of Britain ceased (although by 383, most of their troops had already been withdrawn).

In Wales, as in the south-west and the north of England, and the whole of Scotland (as well as in Ireland), post-Rome, life for most of the Celtic people remained largely unchanged, as “... *the Siluran highland may have had only the thinnest veneer of romanitas*” (Miranda Adhouse-Green & Ray Howell, from *Celtic Wales*, 2017). As long as the Romans were paid their taxes, and grain was planted, and gold, silver, lead, copper and tin dug out, a continuation of the Celt’s commitment to older rites and practices was tolerated. And in some cases, Celtic and Roman gods were even ‘married’, combining elements of both to create a new deity worshipped by invader and subject alike.

In Bath, the local healing and insight goddess, Sulis was coupled with the Roman Minerva, the deity of medicine, wisdom and magic to create a new goddess Sulis-Minerva; in the Roman complex dedicated to Nodens at Lydney Park in the Forest of Dean, another Roman god of healing met ‘Nodens the Catcher’, an early Irish Celtic deity who survived in Wales as Llund Llaw Ereint, the original King Lear; while *Balinae Silures*, the extensive bath house complex at the Roman fort of Castell Collen near Llandrindod Wells in Powys, and *Viroconium Cornoviorum* (said to have been the fourth largest city in Roman Britain, at present-day Wroxeter, near Shrewsbury) were both clearly named in recognition of local Celtic tribes.

The culture of the Celts, its language and its day-to-day practices left us, alongside a reputation for wildness in war, some of the greatest achievements in the visual arts – as counterintuitive as that may seem if we rely on Roman stereotypes – particularly in their highly-distinctive bronze, iron, gold and silver artworks, swirling shapes and shifting symbols like the innermost mechanisms of our dreams.

It was, according to Paul Jacobsthal (*Early Celtic Art*, 1921) “*the first great contribution by the barbarians to European arts*”.



*Iron Age Celtic plaques from Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey
and Tal-y-Llyn, Gwynedd
(National Museum, Cardiff)*

And while, throughout Britain in later days, we suffered wave after wave of invading Angles and Saxons (from AD449), Vikings (whose first attack on Lindisfarne Monastery came in 793), and in particular the Normans (from 1066) – the latter fundamentally changing the politics and the economy of Wales, introducing monasticism and linking us to wider European scholarship and learning – the rich oral tradition of the Welsh language survived, added to in the tales of new resistance leaders like Tewdrig, Arglwydd Rhys, Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, Hywel Dda, Rhodri ap Merfyn, Owain Glyndŵr, Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (as well as Alun Wyn Jones), rising in opposition to new aggressions, and remembered in tales which are still being told and histories which are still being celebrated.



Edinburgh Beltane Festival, 30 April 2014

And the Early Medieval Period, sometimes inappropriately termed ‘The Dark Ages’, saw no descent into cultural decay for the Welsh. It was a time of transition when our language and politics developed and matured, and our mythic literature revealed its *“rich palimpsest of material wherein an amalgam of Christianity and paganism ... broadly Christian ethics ... [was] ... punctuated by supranatural, pagan images”*. (Miranda Adhouse-Green & Ray Howell, *Celtic Wales*)

margam abbey and capel mair

Margam Abbey was founded in 1147 by Robert Consul, Earl of Gloucester, to be run by the Cistercian monks of Clairvaux Abbey who adhered to the Rule of Benedict. Believed to sit on the site of a much older place of worship, this was probably a major centre of Celtic Christianity, that deep root of the new faith which combined much of the Celts’ pantheistic regard for nature with the radical teachings of the new faith.



view through the vestibule ruins to the Margam Abbey Chapter House

Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, writing in their 1980 book, *The Origins of Britain*, give many examples of the traditions which have persisted from prehistoric religious sites through conversion to Christianity, and on to today:

“At Yspytty Cynfyn in Cardiganshire a church stands within a circular yard, a common enough devise in Celtic times ... Yet no ordinary vallum encloses the churchyard: the stone wall follows the bank of a prehistoric circle, and incorporates into it three of the original megalithic standing stones.”

And *“at Llanfairpwllgwyngell a standing stone lay beneath the pulpit of the church, while in north Wales at Gwytherin a line of four prehistoric standing stones can still be seen in the churchyard, one of them converted to use as a tombstone in the fifth century.”*

When looking back into the dense mists of prehistoric (or even relatively recent) time, it's important to realise that there was never one day or month or year or even century when one 'Age' moved smoothly onto the next ... like the 9am on 23 October 4,004BC when, according to the complex calculations of Dr John Lightfoot and his followers, God breathed life into the first man.

There was no one time when stone tools were abandoned for copper, copper for bronze, then bronze for iron, when Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) hunters became Neolithic (Upper Stone Age) farmers, when Celts became Romans, when pagans became Christians. History offers us, rather, an intriguing picture of the gradual merging of tendencies, priorities, beliefs, activities and cultures over vast periods of time. And archaeologists, pre-historians and historians have continued to refine their dates and their conclusions, as new finds are unearthed and new propositions explored.

And even when our best tales and our most dramatic poems and paintings portray the wiping out of the Celts by blood-thirsty Roman invaders, in reality each absorbed elements of the other, even Christianity inheriting, often wholesale, many of the pagan festivals and customs of their Celtic hosts within the calendar of their new church. The 'power of three' (or 'triplism') was adopted by Christianity as the Holy Trinity; many pagan Celtic deities, like Bride, the goddess of fertility, became Christian saints (St Brigit); and the many fine crosses and monuments found in Margam's vicinity (collected, now, within the Cadw-managed Stones Museum) are testament to this on-going syncretic relationship.

It is certain that the rich depths of the Capel Mair site went through a similar series of domestic and spiritual transmutations, and sits quietly today anticipating its next wave of interpretation.

charity & resistance

"of all the houses belonging to the Cistercian order in Wales this was by far the most renowned for alms and charity"

medieval cleric Gerald of Wales (c.1146-c.1223)
writing about Margam Abbey

During the twelfth century, Margam became the largest and wealthiest abbey in Wales, with a reputation for hospitality, scholarship and labour. Much later (around 1470) Capel Mair (also known as Hen Eglwys / the Old Church, Cryke Chapel and, even, 'Capel Papishod') was built to serve the local peasantry and yeomen who were not allowed to worship in the main church. Perched on its dominating hillside position, easily visible to travellers and pilgrims, with today its fine views of the Abbey, the Castle and the whole Park below, the chapel is now a roofless ruin.



Capel Mair from Mynydd-y-Castell Iron Age hillfort

The Abbey suffered almost complete destruction following Henry VIII's Act of 1536, as part of the so-called 'Dissolution of the Monasteries'. Four years of wilful and targeted desecration left cathedrals, monasteries, abbeys and churches in ruins, their precious possessions either destroyed or confiscated. (It has been estimated that more than 14,000 monks, nuns and friars were dispossessed, with hundreds more executed, with less than 5% of the period's religious art surviving.)

While The Reformation was a pan-European movement, the story in Britain was, of course, all about Henry VIII who (for various reasons, not just to do with his wives) broke links with Rome, banned Catholicism, and made himself the sole leader of the church.



view through to the Margam Chapter House

Margam Abbey was stripped of all of its valuables, tumbled and left to pillage and decay. Today, the ruins of its twelve-sided Chapter House are one of the few elements of the original design which bear testament to its magnificence, with the present Parish Church built upon part of the Abbey nave, though extensively remodelled in the nineteenth century.

Post-Reformation, Catholic masses and other ceremonies had to be conducted in secret with many priests being sheltered by recusant families, while a number of magistrates and sheriffs turned a blind eye to services being carried out in private houses, inns, and at places like (what was left of) Capel Mair. It was at this time that it got the nickname of 'Capel Papishod' ... the Papist Chapel.

The fates of two Welsh-speaking Jesuit priests illustrate the brutal and often-repressive nature of the times. Philip Evans and John Lloyd are known as 'joint martyrs' after being held together in Cardiff prison, then both hanged, drawn and quartered on the same day in 1679 ... then beautified together in 1929, and canonised on 25 October 1970. It is thought that St Philip preached at Capel Mair, though he was arrested at Sker House on the coast. He was a skilled musician, a harp player, and it is said that a sympathetic gaoler lent him an instrument in his last days. It is likely that the valley, Cwm Philip, that lies between Capel Mair and Mynydd-y-Castell is named after him. (A short time ago, two skulls and a cluster of other bones thought to be those of the two saints were re-discovered in the attic of a house in Holywell in north-east Wales. The bones were first found in 1858, but it wasn't until recent days that they were identified. They now form part of the Stonyhurst Collections' Assembly of Catholic Martyrs' Relics at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire.)



a stained glass window commemorating St Philip Evans, Stonyhurst College, Lancashire

After the 400-year tenancy of the monks at Margam, the building was sold to Sir Rice Mansel, one of Glamorgan's richest land-owning families. He turned the park and its ruins into one of the greatest landed estates in the country. Later, through marriage, the Talbot family of Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire took over Margam's ownership, significantly adding to the estate (with the building of the Orangery between 1786 and 1790) as well as subtracting from it (with the demolition of the Mansel's Margam House). Construction of a new Gothic-style house – known today as Margam Castle – was begun in the 1830s by Christopher Rice Mansel Talbot.

In 1941, in harder times, the contents of the Castle were auctioned, and a year later, the estate was sold to Sir David Evans-Bevan of the Vale of Neath Brewery, after which the mansion and the Orangery housed British and American troops for the remainder of the war years (and much of the forest cover was cut down to supply national needs), as is always the case, new ages and new ideas of beauty and utility continuing to make changes to Margam's buildings and landscapes.

In 1973, the Park and its many historic, though now mainly-ruined buildings (including Capel Mair) were purchased by West Glamorgan County Council (now Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council [NPT]) and are now run as a modern Country Park with amenities including its fine gardens, trees and historic buildings (inc. the newly-renovated turbine house), walking, orienteering, horse riding and cycling routes, coarse fishing, deer and other wildlife, boating lake, sculpture trails, children's Fairytale Land and adventure playground, farm trails, land train, and a fine location for film and TV recordings, weddings, conferences and special events (like *Luminate Wales*, food festivals, theatre performances, etc.).

Though currently much less well-known, the nascent levels of attraction of the Capel Mair site offer a rich variety of new potential benefits, though today an occasional venue for raves and parties, regularly littered, and with the vista to the sea for the modern-day pilgrim dominated by the fiery industrial footprint of Tata Steel.



*Capel Mair and Tata Steel
from Mynydd-y-Castell Iron Age hillfort*

water/sources: an afterthought

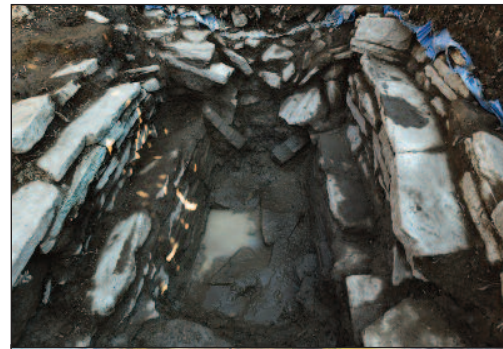
“The hypotheses we generate are themselves stories, or parts of stories.”

Alice Roberts, from *The Celts: search for a civilization*

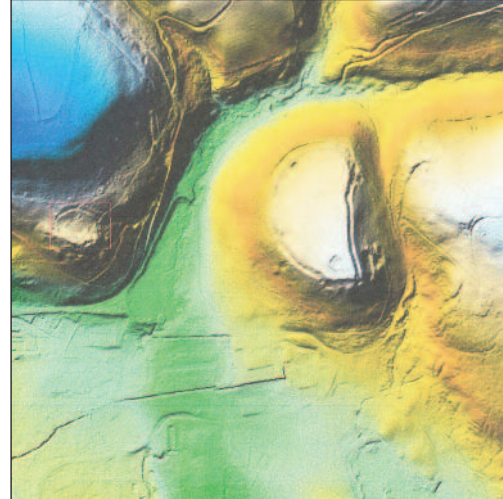
Although no one is fully confident (as yet) of the exact journey the Capel Mair (and wider Park) site has travelled from its Early Bronze Age (or earlier) origins to where and how we find it today, this is a tale all elements of which are ripe for exploration and celebration.

Perhaps the presence of a source of pure clean water readily available up at the Capel Mair site was the principal determinant of the hillfort’s original location. And given that Capel Mair sits just 350m west of the much larger and more populated Mynydd-y-Castell hillfort, perhaps it once served as the ritual centre for the main estate across the valley.

And then, with the conversion of the Celtic people to Christianity, it would have made perfect sense to construct a chapel (well before the current build) upon the foundations of the previous local people’s beliefs – still not yet faded from folk memory – and then, around 1470, to build the current Capel Mair, on top of that ...?



the excavated Ffynnon Mair, April 2019



LiDAR basemap showing both the Capel Mair (red box) and Mynydd-y-Castell hillforts, March 2016



Mynydd-y-Castell



Capel Mair



*a view of Capel Mair
and Tata Steel
from Mynydd-y-Castell*

the development of the capel mair site

The following is an incomplete list – for consideration and discussion – of some of the ideas that could be developed around our growing understanding of the significance of the Capel Mair site, under the headings of education (inc. archaeology, the arts, photography, performance, water studies and ecology, pollution and consumerism); arguments for more research at the site (inc. new surveys and excavations); Ffynnon Mair (inc. ideas towards its permanent and safe revealing); the creation of a new Walking Trail based upon Margam’s wellspring legacy; an examination of church and other usages of the ruins; the potential safeguarding of the whole site and the encouraging of new permanent wardens and keepers; followed by some initial thoughts on a budget and funding strategy; all concluded with a few final observations and concerns.



i. education

“Capel Mair is a well-known local landmark, although until now little has been known of its history. The work carried out by the Friends of Margam Park has already enhanced our knowledge of the site and the discovery of the ancient well that seems to predate the existing church building is especially interesting. The proposal by the Friends of Margam will be of particular interest to students of local and Welsh history. Their plans to involve schools in the project is particularly welcome. Many schools currently put on educational visits to Margam Country Park and the proposals for Capel Mair can only enhance the educational value of their visit. “

Andrew Thomas
NPT Director of Education, Leisure
and Lifelong Learning

Education isn’t just about facts and knowledge. Especially if connected to our local and national places of importance and the stories they can still tell, it’s also about belonging, about feeling part of where we live and work and study, particularly within the atomised, consumer-driven world in which we often currently find ourselves. And although I am aware that some people are committed to frustrating access to this wider, more democratic kind of understanding (for this and for many other projects), this Paper is all about throwing wide open these portals to what and where we have been. It’s about participation, and fully sharing in the ownership of our pasts.

“Archaeology is like a jigsaw puzzle, except that you can’t cheat and look at the box, and not all of the pieces are there.”

Stephen Dean, senior archaeologist, *Environment Agency*

Central to the proposals explored in this Report is an introduction to archaeology, especially for young people. The establishment of a National Centre for Young People’s Archaeology at Margam is, I believe, an original idea for Wales, and something that would add greatly to what the Park has to offer.

I DIG MARGAM

the wales (inter?) national centre
for young people’s archaeology

I’m already working with local schools to introduce the idea and gauge pupil and teacher interest. So far, each class has participated in a programme of three half-day sessions. The first offered an introduction to prehistory, plus to the coming of the Romans, with an outline of the work of the archaeologist (including Stone, Bronze and Iron Age items – excavated and in reproduction – for the young people to handle), followed by an introduction to the Medieval history of Capel Mair and of Margam Abbey, and the later stories in the life of the wider Park. The second session was a visit to the Capel Mair site, with individual copies of aerial photographs and of Dr Young’s geophysical plans for each participant to help locate the sites of the well, the round house(s) and the ramparts; with a third creative workshop session back in the classroom, responding to what had been discovered, and both beginning the process of imaging what the site might have looked like through its many manifestations, as well as what it could become for new generations into the future.

*I DIG MARGAM workshop photographs
with Year 6 Coed Hirwaun Primary School
and Years 7+8 Ysgol Cwm Brombil*



These sessions were monitored via individual questionnaires, filled in by every one of the participating pupils plus all members of staff:

"The Workshops couldn't be better." (pupil)

"The only thing we disliked was how it went so fast." (teacher)

"... overall it could not be better." (teacher)

*"I would love to do the **I DIG MARGAM**."* (pupil)

"Thank you for your time spent with Year 6."

The children have been inspired by your knowledge and are eager to take parents and family to visit Capel Mair." (teacher)

"I hope we do this until the year ends ..." (pupil)

(See Appendix a: **I DIG MARGAM Schools' Workshops' Evaluation Report**, for the full assessment, alongside examples of the young people's work.)

It has already been suggested (partly because of the very positive responses revealed within the workshop questionnaires) that these sessions should be rolled-out throughout all of the schools and colleges in NPT, plus for its youth service members. In addition, I have conducted a similar workshop session for local adults. I'm also proposing visits for stakeholders of all ages in the New Year to places that have both succeeded and failed to solve the issues of making their wellsprings and other historical sites attractive, safe and accessible, to explore both what is possible as well as some of the mistakes to avoid.

A major boost to these proposals will come from the plans to establish, from February 2022, a new Young Archaeologist's Club (YAC) in Neath Port Talbot, affiliated to the Council for British Archaeology. Led by NPT's Heritage Education Officer, Harriet Eaton, it will meet on a Saturday afternoon once a month at Neath Library to *"provide young people with fun and exciting opportunities to get a more hands on experience of archaeology and history, giving them the opportunity to get their hands dirty on real archaeological digs, learn recording and surveying skills, visit historical sites, handle artefacts, study maps and discover more about the area's history through fun activities"*.

This is a perfectly-timed complement for our **I DIG MARGAM** plans.



(Bronwen Thomas)

Any developments at the Capel Mair site will, inevitably, if and when permitted, take time to progress. An interesting idea, supported by Harriet Eaton and others, is the construction of a replica Iron Age Celtic hillfort within the Park grounds in which workshops on prehistory and in experimental archaeology could be conducted. These could include rampart and roundhouse building, tool and jewelry making, grinding grain into flour with a rotary quern and making bread, re-creating an Iron Age chariot, spinning, weaving and making clothes, reading and writing *ogham*, creating dyes from flowers and vegetables, Celtic design work and storytelling, participating in ritual re-enactments and seasonal festivals ... amongst other things.

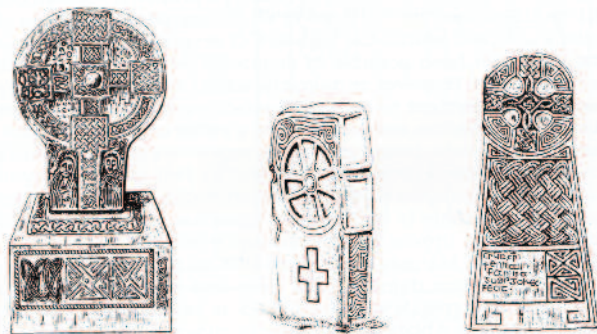
'New' Iron Age hillforts have been constructed in Wales at St Fagan's National Museum of History, nr. Cardiff, and at Castell Henllys in Pembrokeshire (as well as, in Ireland, at the highly-recommended Craggaunowen Heritage Park in Co. Clare, Ireland). We can learn much from these places' efforts, and should visit.

next page: 'modern' Iron Age hillfort and roundhouses:
Craggaunowen Heritage Park, Co. Clare;
Castell Henllys Iron Age Hill Fort, Pembrokeshire;
St Fagans National Museum of History, nr. Cardiff



In addition, we have Joyce Hunt, a Primary School Science and Outdoor Learning Coordinator for 35 years, and a member now of the FofMP. Her skills are many: *“I made a life-size Celtic roundhouse at Coryton Primary School, Cardiff with Year 6 pupils, having had previous hands on knowledge of the Celts by taking my class annually to St Fagans and making a wattles and daub wall and drop spindle with Caradog at the Celtic village. During my time as a teacher I also learnt how to make a living willow tepee and other structures at the National Botanical Gardens of Wales. I have been an active member of Friends of Margam Park for 5 years and former Horticulture Trustee. I have nearly completed making a life size willow war horse at the Turbine House for the Castle terrace.”*

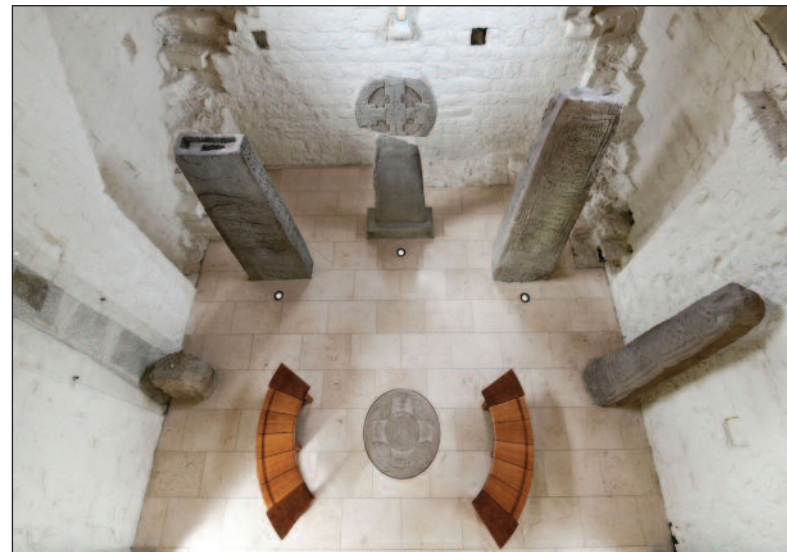
With her experience and others’ knowledge and help, we could make a ‘life-size’ Celtic roundhouse at Margam Park as one of the main focuses of our **I DIG MARGAM** initiative.



One of the questions I posed during my initial schools’ workshop programme was *“What can stones tell us?”*, what can be learned from seemingly-inanimate rocks, carved stones and ruins. One of the disappointments, therefore, is the current closure of the CADW-managed Margam Stones Museum, opposite the Abbot’s Kitchen, always an inspiring collection ... when open.

Prior to the pandemic, the Friends of the Abbey set the alarms, and held the key, made available to visitors on request. Whatever the current issue (Covid, security, finance?), it is essential in my view – whether these **I DIG MARGAM** plans are followed or not – that this world class collection of pre-Norman cross slabs and grave markers is made accessible once again, helping to tell, as it does, the wider story of the Park’s and Wales’ journey.

Sarah Ricket’s November 2021 consultancy Report, *Shaping a New Future for Margam Abbey*, makes an interesting comparison between the current display of the stones in Margam’s Museum – *“very poorly presented and does not showcase the story of these artefacts sufficiently well or movingly”* – with that of those at St Illtud’s Church in Llantwit Major, even suggesting that some of the stones be moved into the Abbey itself, as part of her proposals.



*part of the stones display,
St Illtud’s Church, Llantwit Major*

I DIG MARGAM will also require indoor classroom and performance areas, and the current plans for the wholesale re-development of Margam Castle's interior should include these, plus attractively-designed rooms for the display of artifacts and the creative interpretations of the Park's wider history from the Stone Age through to today ... open to all. These could be added to on a regular basis by school and community responses, as well as other specially-curated and touring exhibitions, keeping the spaces fresh and, most importantly, encouraging regular repeat visits.

The volunteer staff at the Abbey, led by Beverley Gulley (sometimes with the support of Cwm Brombil Ladies WI), already have a long record of curating displays on their building's history from foundation to Dissolution, as well as on other themes including 'Women in WWI', 'The Parish of Margam in WWII' (including a section on Americans at the Castle), 'The Men on our [War] Memorial', 'Armistice Day', etc.

A healthy creative dialogue should be developed between these displays, **I DIG MARGAM** and the proposed new Castle exhibition areas.

In addition, FofMP recently had an overwhelming response when they asked the people of NPT for items of historical importance, especially those from the Castle itself. Items donated included a complete Spode dessert service that was purchased in the 1942 sale; photographs and memoirs of a gentleman who worked on the estate as a butler for the Evans Bevans family in Twyn yr Hydd; as well as a collection of papers and artifacts from a Port Talbot man who regularly met with the likes of Emily Pankhurst at his home, and was responsible for setting up the Welsh Independent Labour Party with Kier Hardie. This project has the makings of a fine Castle / Margam / Port Talbot museum collection, ideally to be housed within the Castle.

These new spaces and facilities would, I'm sure, attract many other exhibitions based upon the area's rich past. Dr Jonathan Berry FSA MCIfA, Cadw's Senior Inspector of Ancient Monuments and Archaeology, for example, has been studying the WWII presence at Margam Park: *"used by British forces, and then from 1943 by the US Army who used part of the grounds to establish two embarkation camps. Here, soldiers water-proofed their vehicles and received their final instructions, before taking their loaded vehicles to the docks for embarkation and then finally joining the vessels themselves a few days later. These soldiers were part of the 2nd US Build-Up force and followed their colleagues who had landed on D-Day.*

... there is a good probability that archaeological evidence of these camps and the soldiers' presence survives in the grounds of the Park today. This might include hut bases, rubbish middens, lost artefacts such as uniform buttons and inscriptions carved into mature beech trees in the grounds, some perhaps within the Capel Mair area."

Dr Berry's idea is to work with the public to survey the evidence of this time left within the landscape, and to work through the US unit war diaries and archives to identify photos of the camps and embarkation vessels. He also, intriguingly, mentioned this photo of US General Eisenhower addressing the troops ... with Margam Castle in the background!



The potential for new North American (and other) interest in Margam through such initiatives is obvious.

*People will forget what you said; they will forget what you did.
But they will never forget how you made them feel.*

Maya Angelou (1928-2014),
American writer and civil rights activist

Educational workshops based upon our already-outlined pre-historical and historical themes will be explored through creative writing and storytelling, photography and film-making, drawing and painting, music, dance and theatre, such are the rich levels of potential creative inspiration of the site, its location and its many windows onto our past, present and future.

The arts are the richest tools we have developed for the exploration and communication of our deepest feelings. They are fundamental to human existence, for making sense of our brief time on planet Earth. I have already explored in this Paper the on-going debates around the establishment of an identity for the Celts; participation in the arts, as an audience member or, better still, an active participant can help us all to find out who we are, of particular benefit to young people often-confused by the vast array of contradictory pressurising forces suggesting alternative often-unachievable identities. A creative exploration of where we are within both the long history of the world – and of our human journey upon it – can help free the spirit from the inconsequentiality of much of everyday life.

What follows, then, is an outline of just a few of the very many creative areas worthy of further study that will be of interest to people of all ages (while prioritising young people), based upon the rich histories of the Capel Mair site in particular, and Margam Park in general:

looking backwards

Our Project should begin, looking backwards, with the exploration of the wide range of arts that have already been inspired by this place, then use this rich foundation to inspire new works for the future.

loving poetry

The Margam Park ‘Love Poetry’ Day organised by NPT Community Arts Team and children’s author and entertainer Mike Church on 14 February 2013 was following in the footsteps of many others who have found poetic inspiration here, including local Welsh bard Twm Ieuan ap Rhys, Dafydd Edwards (c.1600-1678?), and living poet Robert Minhinnick. At its height, the Abbey was famous for its support for Welsh literature, and perhaps it could be once again.

*Finger Maze
by Phillip Chatfield,
Margam Park*



sculpture in the park

Organised by the Welsh Sculpture Trust in collaboration with West Glamorgan County Council, a major exhibition of more than sixty pieces of contemporary sculpture by some of the Britain’s leading artists (Barbara Hepworth, Dame Elizabeth Frink, Philip King, etc.) found a home from early June 1983 in the grounds of Margam Castle, a fitting setting given the collection of early sculptures found in the locality and displayed in the Stones Museum. Some of the ‘new’ works have remained in situ, with others being added over the years.

Making responses to the many levels of meaning to be found at Margam, and at the Capel Mair hillfort in particular through shaping clay or wood or stone or any other medium could add significantly to the visual glories of the Park, creating perhaps an avenue of works in response to Capel Mair and its many inhabitants and users alongside the path and steps leading up to the site in an inspiring and challenging complement to our usual interpretative displays.

photographing wales

The family of photographic pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot owned the Margam Estate, and the Castle was the subject of many of his earliest experiments, as well as the location for what is thought to have been Wales' earliest known photograph, a daguerreotype of the Castle taken on 9 March 1841 by the Reverend Calvert Richard Jones.



Rev. Calvert Richard Jones' view of Margam Castle, 9 March 1841

This is another element of the Margam story that is under-celebrated. Wales in general, and Margam in particular, clearly played a major role in the development of photography. This neglected history offers an obvious opportunity for work with people of all ages in both studying these images from the birth of photograph, as well as creating new ones of our own. Part of the Castle should be set aside for a display on Wales' role in the early days of the science and art of photography, complete, perhaps with both a functioning old-style 'wet' darkroom as well as spaces for new computer image creation, printing and display.

telling tales

We cannot be sure what kinds of 'performances' once took place at the Iron Age hillforts above Margam, although Roman invaders regularly reported on wild and bloody ceremonies full of gyrating bodies moving to demonic sounds, and much later, in the Middle Ages, monks first recorded long-remembered myths full of the wild tales of warriors and battles, feasts and magical transformations, in our earliest Welsh manuscripts, the fourteenth century *White Book of Rhydderch* and the *Red Book of Hergest* (containing, amongst others, the stories of *The Mabinogion*).

We do know, however, that there was a tradition of performance at the Abbey, the focus of community activity at special times of the year, going back centuries. And, in 1936, a sumptuous, costumed 'Pageant of Margam Abbey' was presented (in aid of Margam and Kenfig District Nursing Association) with a distinguished cast of the local great and good tracing the history of the Abbey from foundation to Dissolution.

As part of his project to create an exuberant Scottish history from scraps of a scarcely-remembered past, Robert Burns once wrote: "*There is nothing easier to invent than a tradition*", and Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams) 're-imagined' many of the foundation elements of a Welsh Celtic tradition, uniting Neolithic stone circles with Iron Age bards although they were separated in history by millennia. In the case of Margam, however, there is no need for any invention: the rich levels of history here already offer layer upon layer of inspiring times and tales.

Given the importance of the Celts to this area, a focus upon their rich ancient and continuing art and music cultures could inspire a number of possible Celtic Festivals or Events throughout the year, each following the main ancient Celtic gatherings which marked the principal agricultural events of the year: *Lughnasa*, the beginning of the harvest at the start of August; *Samhain*, the end of harvest at the close of October (our Halloween); *Imbolc*, the beginning of Spring, at the start of February; and *Beltane*, the Gaelic May Day festival. Perhaps these ways to divide the year could make sense of the whole of Margam Park's annual programme, developing a new/old common language of identity through celebration.

One of my initial suggestions for the site was going to be the establishment of a performing company which could tell these tales as part of the educational programme and, more widely, for the benefit of the general visitor to the Park. This group would provide the dramatic focus for celebrations of the main dates in the wider Margam calendar: the arrival of the Celts, the ceremonies at Capel Mair and Mynydd-y-Castell, bardic poetry festivals, the arrival of the Romans, the Silurian wars, the destruction of the Druids, the construction of Margam Abbey and its heydays and holidays, its Dissolution, the 'joint martyrs' Philip Evans and John Lloyd, the arrival of the Mansels and the Talbots, the creation of the first Welsh photograph, Margam at war, the coming of the steel works to Port Talbot, the birth of the new Country Park, etc., etc., as well as the new moments to commemorate and/or celebrate which are to come.

I was, therefore, initially thrilled to learn that Margam Abbey had what I was told was its own 're-enactment group' that had already devised a number of workshops and costumed promenade performances, one of which I later attended and photographed after correspondence with its leader. In addition, on 21 October 2021, I met with Sara Rickett who had been tasked with producing a report on ideas for the future of the Abbey who expressed her pleasure on hearing of this possible avenue of cooperation and partnership between the two Friends' groups (The Abbey and The Park), something we both felt would benefit both parties.

I recently emailed my contact in the group (just out of politeness, really: my photographs were taken in a public place and with permission) to say that my Report was nearing completion and that I would be using some of the images within it, and suggesting again that we might try to develop some ideas for working together in the future. These might have involved, I assumed, joint projects, us paying the group/the Abbey for shows devised and performed, etc.

The response, however, informed me that, "*the Abbey has its own educational programme and promotes its own schools and public outreach*", concluding: "*I am unable to give permission for use of the photographs for the purposes outlined.*" (While, as I have already said, I do not actually need permission to use my photographs, I have respected this wish in my Paper.)

This was hugely disappointing, of course, particularly after the meeting with Sarah Rickett at which we all agreed that a combined approach, supportive of each other's plans was the best way forward. Given the strong historical connections between the Capel and the Abbey, as well as the site's (now hidden) holy well, I believed working in collaboration with each other was essential, particularly after the challenging year we have been through. It's also – within the highly competitive funding environment we find ourselves – the only way that we might all get somewhere near to achieving what we each have planned.

I have since been informed, however, that the Players are not part of the Abbey and that the Abbey has received no financial benefit from them (one of the initial objectives), and that (according to the Abbey's Treasurer) "*they do not represent the Abbey's views in working as a partnership with yourself or other organisations*", adding "*I hope this issue won't change your approach towards the Abbey, and we will look forward to working with you in the future (God willing).*"

In addition, the 'working together' approach has received the full support of Fr Jonathon Durley, the Kenfig Hill vicar and community outreach worker, currently responsible for Margam Parish Church.

One of my backgrounds is in theatre and my first plan (before hearing about the Abbey re-enactment group) was, as I said above, to suggest the establishment of a performing group as part of the **I DIG MARGAM** initiative, so I am now proposing that FofMP revert to my 'Plan A' ... an exploration of the feasibility of the development of a new theatrical group, working in close co-operation with the Abbey.

Rivers, bogs, lakes and springs were places – particularly during the late Bronze and the Iron Ages – where valuable metal and other items, often deliberately bent or broken, were thrown or deposited for the renewal, perhaps, of allegiances to their spirits, in annual or seasonal acts, or at times of particular need or distress. Conducted at the portals to the other worlds in which they believed their gods resided, these ritual votive deposits can still give us feint glimpses into both their adherents’ beliefs as well as the pressures on their lives.



Iron Age cauldron from Llyn Fawr in south Wales, part of the hoard discovered in the lake between 1909 and 1912

Capel Mair and its wider hinterland boast a number of important sacred spring and holy well sites. (I have currently found four, though I am confidently informed – by people and by maps – that there are at least seven.) Later in this Paper, I will be proposing a Margam Wellsprings Walk (see **4. walking on water**, p.35) which would become the focus for the work with young people on the many themes of water (as well, of course, as a pleasant and informative stroll for the general public). This aspect of the proposed **I DIG MARGAM** educational programme, however, specifically concerns water and ecology.

While the sacred springs and holy wells of Wales, and of Margam, offer a rich diversity of structures and meanings, what is unchanging and certain is the fact that, in our privileged part of the world, we often take water for granted.

We complain bitterly on the very rare occasions when there is not enough to feed our lawns or wash our cars. It nearly always flows easily at the turn of a tap for us, while nearly a billion people worldwide lack a regular and safe supply and two and a half billion – a staggering two fifths of the world’s population – don’t have access to adequate sanitation. According to the charity *WaterAid*, 800 children will die today – and every day – because they are forced to drink dirty water.

This desperate necessity, alongside water’s growing scarcity, is becoming an ever-greater attraction for big business, seeking to make big profits from people’s thirst, both in this country as well as throughout the world. Each year in Britain more than half a billion pounds is spent on bottled water and some seven million just on its advertising ... while, in the so-called ‘developing’ world, water privatisation is being imposed by the affluent West as a condition of its debt relief, through World Bank and IMF loans. This new/old struggle for water rights – set beside the pressing issues of catastrophic climate change – will in the very near future, in the view of many commentators, eclipse our wars for oil, as a pure water source becomes the new global battleground. Dozens of nations are already suffering from severe water shortages, and in the near future, many cities that have existed for centuries will simply dry up. This is Peter Swanson writing in 2001: *“Six billion people now inhabit Earth [more like seven, now]. By the year 2050, that figure may double. Yet, the planet’s available water supply will remain the same.”*

Children love to explore the fascinating worlds of water, from the stories of its origins and life cycle, its human use and abuse over the centuries, through to its essential role in our existence, and the threats to our survival when it is rationed or removed. Cross-generational interviews can be profitably conducted with older locals as well as those from other countries now making their homes here who will all have very different relationships with and memories of water. The wellsprings of Margam offer the Park a perfect focus for the exploration of all of these things, especially with young people whose passion for our planet is crystal clear (and often shaming of their elders).



*Coed Hirwaun Primary School
at Ffynnon Gyffyr / the Monk's Bath / Medieval Bathhouse,
Margam Park (as part of the **I DIG MARGAM** NPT workshop programme)*

Wellspring sites and stories also offer great stimuli for creative writing, visual art, design, photography, film, music, theatre and dance, as well as the studies of geography, geology, history and biology, amongst others ... as well as ecology.

At the *2008 Pererinion Penrhys / Penrhys Pilgrims Festival* based around Penrhys' own Ffynnon Fair, children from the local primary school wrote and designed a book, made a film, and helped create a touring exhibition about their well, as well as taking part in a community play.

In parallel with these and other workshops, studies and events, analyses of the natural ecology of the whole site, including the water in the well – its tree, plant, soil, insect and animal life – should be undertaken, research ideally also being conducted cross-generationally, an exercise which will link our work at Capel Mair to a wider understanding of global climate change.

**PENRHYS
PILGRIMS
PERERINION
PENRHYS**

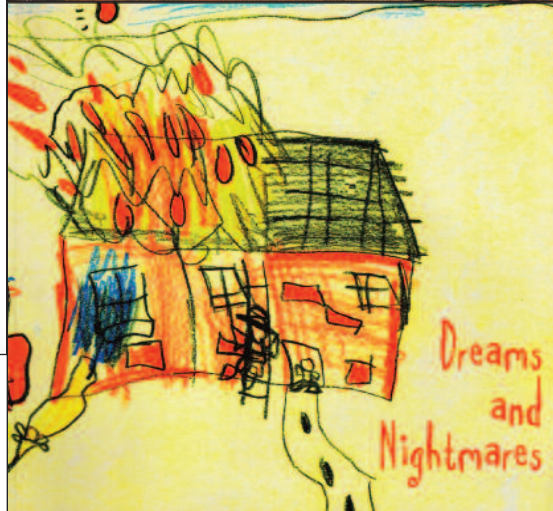
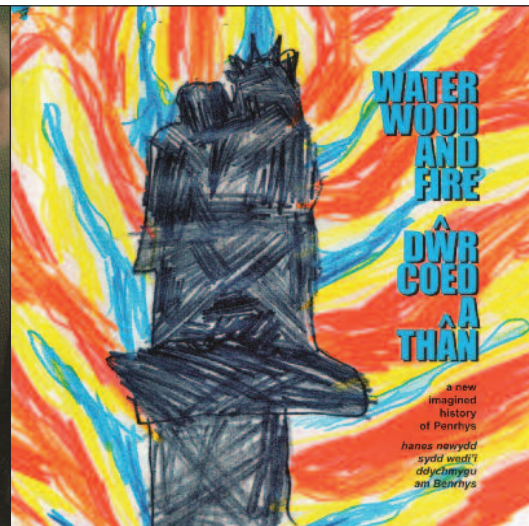
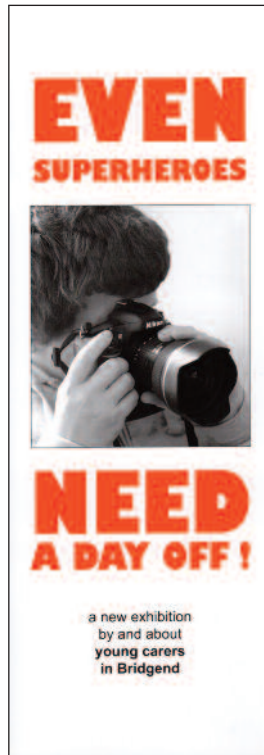
exploring our past
creating our future
archwilio'n gorffennol
creu'n dyfodol

**a new
touring
exhibition**
**Arddangosfa
Teithio
Newydd**

to mark the four
hundred
and seventy years
since the destruction of
the Penrhys Shrine
and the fortieth
anniversary of the
completion
and occupation
of the Penrhys Estate

*i ddathlu pedwar cant a
saithdeg
o flynyddoedd ers
dinstrio Allor Penrhys
ac atafaelu a*

*i dathlu pedwar deg
o flynyddoedd ers
adeiladu ystâd Penrhys*



a small selection of community and schools' publications, including 'Water Wood And Fire', one of the Penrhys Pilgrims Festival books (2008); 'The Great Swansea Sea Poem' and 'I know what writing poems feels like' (both for the Dylan Thomas Festival, 2003); and 'The Land Project' (Valley & Vale, 1991)

Much of the work of archaeologists is in uncovering what has been discarded or hidden, objects and buildings which have passed their sell-by dates or have been buried through neglect or for some special reason. What we hold and what we choose to discard tells us much about who we are and what we value. Neil Oliver, writing about Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) hunter-gatherers thought that *“They may not have influenced the land as we have done; instead they were influenced by it, so that the world was less something they lived on, more something they lived with.”* Then, following the ‘Neolithic Revolution’ of the New Stone Age from hunter-gathering to farming: *“By planting seeds instead of gathering wild harvests and by keeping animals in pens instead of hunting them in the woods, we changed everything, and every one of us as well. Instead of helplessly trusting nature – hoping the fish would come, that the fruit would ripen on the tress and bushes – we took steps to bring the world to heel.”*

And our ancestors were changing in another way, too. The simple earth-bound truths of the first hunters and the first farmers were being left behind with eyes now looking upwards ... to the sky: *“... Between 3000 and 2500BC, people were making it plain, in the form of the monuments they built, that they had become aware of their place, not just on Earth but within the cosmos. ... During the late Neolithic people first conceived of an idea ... that somewhere beyond the mountains, beyond the clouds – way out where the sun and Moon lived their lives and made their endless journeys – was Heaven.”*

Exploring these questions with young people (*What is our relationship with the earth?* and *What are we leaving behind?*) will increase our understandings of our world and of our own priorities, and the increasingly-significant realities of consumerism, packaging, pollution and the principles of conservation.



children from Llangynwyd Primary School taking part in ‘The Water Project’, at Ffynnon Gollwyn, Pyle

As well as the regularly-altering face of the Capel Mair site itself through the past three millennia or more, the view out from its elevated position will also have changed profoundly since its earliest occupation. Another focus of our schools’ work could be the exploration of these changes from its Iron Age occupation (or before) all the way through time to the Tata Steelworks of today, and on to an imagining of what will come next as new technologies replace the old, and sea levels once again rise worldwide, ultimately posing the big questions: *What kind of world do we want to live in?* and *What actions will we need to undertake to ensure it?* *Homo sapiens sapiens* is the name of the species that every human on earth originates from. The name means ‘wise man’. *I wonder how ‘wise’ we are currently being?*

Given the scale of the aspirations outlined herein, it should be clear that appropriately-equipped classroom and workshop areas will need to be provided, plus a display area for the collections of artifacts and interpretative panels illustrating the prehistory and history of the whole site (for school and the general visitor). Suggestions have already been made for areas within the ambitious plans for the large-scale renovation of the Castle to be made available for these purposes.

ii. digging deeper: the need to know

Cadw has a joint obligation – similar to that championed by me in this Paper – for the protection of our historic places as well as inspiring the interest of current and future generations in our heritage, “*working for an accessible and well-protected historic environment for Wales*”. This is always a difficult balance to achieve, of course, but one which, when realised, can provide huge benefits for both the defence and the understanding of our cultural assets.

In order to make progress at the wider Capel Mair site, we will need to know more. I am, therefore, proposing that a number of new Surveys be undertaken (in line with Cadw requirements and conducted with the help of our Archaeological Trusts and others). These should include:

- A Conservation Management Plan (including a description and history of the site and a statement of significance: much of this has been achieved within this Paper),
- A Visual Impact Assessment Report on the proposed works (once an initial design for the well covering, etc. has been agreed),
- An Archaeological Earthwork Survey,
- An Ecological / Habitat Survey,
- A Security and Access Assessment, and probably,
- A new Structural Survey of the Capel Mair building.

In addition, up to four more exploratory Excavations would ideally be required, to provide the fullest understanding of the site, with a full complementary programme of post-excavation analysis and reporting.

These should include:

- a third holy well dig,
- one at one of the potential roundhouses, and
- one at part of the site’s double ramparts (and possibly one at one of its two entrances).

The digs themselves should be led by Dyfed Archaeological Trust [DAT] and/or Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust [GGAT] (DAT has already expressed an interest) with the participation, ideally, of a Welsh university / academic institution, and be open to a wide range of participants, in particular local young people, prioritising those not normally engaged with heritage. (see **1a. I DIG MARGAM: national centre for young peoples’ archaeology**, p.19)

Currently, with the only Scheduled Monument on the Capel Mair site being the chapel ruin itself (plus a buffer of 3.5m around it), work on the other parts of the hillfort are legally allowed, with the permission of the landowner (NPT). Having said this, what has been discovered about the significance of the site from the geophysical examinations and the two holy well excavations would suggest that the whole site will one day be Scheduled. In order not to make plans which legislation later overturns, therefore, we should assume in our proposals the Scheduling of the whole area.

Any excavations of the kind proposed herein would need to be justified on the grounds of the significance of the site, and fully meet conservation principles and guidances. All excavation is, of course, disruptive and the work suggested will need to be seen as sufficiently important to be approved. While the excavation of the potential roundhouses could be seen as damaging, our work here will advance our knowledge with only a very small percentage of the fort’s interior being affected, leaving the remainder for future generations. And the cases for the excavations of the ramparts and the holy well are even more compelling.

The ramparts could offer us important new information on their structure and materials, as well as potentially revealing artifacts from the time(s) of their erection, and on completion, being substantial constructions, could be in-filled and reconstructed.



image of April 2019 excavation of Ffynnon Mair (courtesy of Luke Rosser)

The strongest case for further excavation, however, can be made for the well, which has already been dug twice (though, unhelpfully, no record, as far as I can see, has been made). This will be the opportunity to remedy the oversight, digging only being part of the excavation process. The well is a substantial stone structure, has a strong historical relationship with the fully-visible chapel (and possibly with the hillfort, too), and is significant in our growing understanding of the wellspring sites within the Park and beyond.

While burial post-excavation has always been an acceptable archaeological practise, in this case I believe it would be a huge missed opportunity, for both the public and for archaeology. Once enclosed, and made safe and secure following the well's third excavation – co-ordinated in time with the plans for its enclosure (see **3. *The Fountain on the Mountain***, next) – Ffynnon Mair will be permanently visible to all, as well as accessible for further archaeological exploration in the future, if and when required.

iii. the fountain on the mountain

“In the noble wood above the house stand the roofless walls of an ancient church with traces of a churchyard enclosure round it. In the church yard and near the large door of the church or chapel is a well by the foot of an ancient tree which might probably be used in early time for the baptismal ceremony or as holy water aspersion, called Ffynnon Mair.”

Rev William Thomas, writing about Margam in 1787

While some of the Reverend's account has been questioned by later archaeology, his words do confirm the historic importance of the holy well to the site, although he stops short of any suggestion that it might have pre-dated the chapel or, even, Christianity itself. What is certain, however, is the historical and spiritual importance of the Ffynnon Mair site.

I have already explained how the protection of the well (once fully excavated and secured) – combining safeguarding with accessibility – was the initial objective of my work, here. I've already begun exploring ways to permanently uncover and display the well within the context of the whole site, with a children's-designed art work which could tell the story of the whole site, in partnership with a local college, sculptors and a foundry ... and if there was a steel maker near to our site to supply the raw materials that would be even better!

This part of our initiative (which I have titled *'The Fountain on the Mountain'*) would be fed by and run in parallel with the recent most-welcome renewed interest in all things wellspring, with new projects regularly being established, new sites being discovered, old neglected springs being renovated (and, in some cases, being brought back into use) and even new wells being constructed, as well as books like my own being created and consumed in larger number.



*the
April 2019
dig*

water that plays the oldest music *

When fully revealed and interpreted, *'The Fountain on the Mountain'* and Margam's other wellspring sites (see **4. walking on water**, next) could also become foci for well-dressing and other celebrations and commemorations (including World Water Day on 22 March; St Peter's Day 29 June, with an event at Ffynnon Pedr / St Peter's Well, Margam; and also, perhaps, a day or days to celebrate the water deities of other faiths like the Hindu Varuna, the Chinese Mazu, the Inuit Sedna, the Vodou Agwe, the Egyptian Anuket goddess of the Nile, the Irish Boann, Danu and Li Ban, the Celtic Nodens, Balisama, Grannus, Nantosuelta and Damona, and the Welsh Dylan Eli Ton and Llŷr.).



Father Jon at Ffynnon Pedr, Margam

what's in a name?

There is also the issue of the naming of the well. Most wells have had a series of names, over time, originating (in Wales) with usually a Welsh name suggesting location or usage (medicinal, ceremonial, etc.), which later often became homogenized into the Ffynnon Mair, Mary's Well or Our Lady's Well solution given to a very large percentage of British wellspring sites ... and occasionally, later still, a modern name.

I believe a discussion around the naming of the well site would be valuable, not just in recognizing and publicizing the many levels of meaning through which 'Ffynnon Mair' might have travelled but also with a view, perhaps, to finding a new name which reflected its deeper history, or even our contemporary responses to a spring of pure, clear water emerging from the ground halfway up a mountainside, at a time of severe climate change.



Ffynnon Mair, Margam

(I have for some years been delivering illustrated talks on sacred springs, holy wells and spas throughout Britain, Ireland and the USA – examining and celebrating their locations, their stories and their usages and abuses – and would be happy to include one or more of these within the **I DIG MARGAM** plans, in order to help us better understand 'Ffynnon Mair' within the context of the wider wellspring culture of Margam Park and beyond, as well as to stimulate our discussions to find a possible new name.)

finding new guardians

Ambitious projects like **I DIG MARGAM** pop up regularly ... and often fail. Initial excitement and energy is overcome by the waning of enthusiasm, the drying-up of funds and sometimes the aging of its leaders and participants, in parallel with the growth of new weeds and brambles, the choking of water flows, and the gradual tumbling of walls.

In my research on the sacred springs and holy wells of Britain and beyond, I discovered that these once-important sites once had what were known as 'well guardians', usually women, and often with very special powers, who controlled access to the wells, arranged divination services, organised special events often on saints' or other special days, providing food and drink, and sometimes even accommodation.

We will need something similar for our **I DIG MARGAM Project** to protect what we create, to regularly visit the site(s), to support its many activities and events, all co-ordinated by the FofMP. This time, however, it can be male and female guardians who offer their services, and they will not need any 'special powers' except those of love and care, and perhaps sometimes a measure of hard graft to help preserve and develop the significance of these very special places for the future, for local people and visitors alike.

These new **I DIG MARGAM** guardians could be individuals, community groups, local organisations, businesses (like Tata Steel), and, of course, schools, all working together to ensure the fulfillment of our many plans and the longevity of the site.

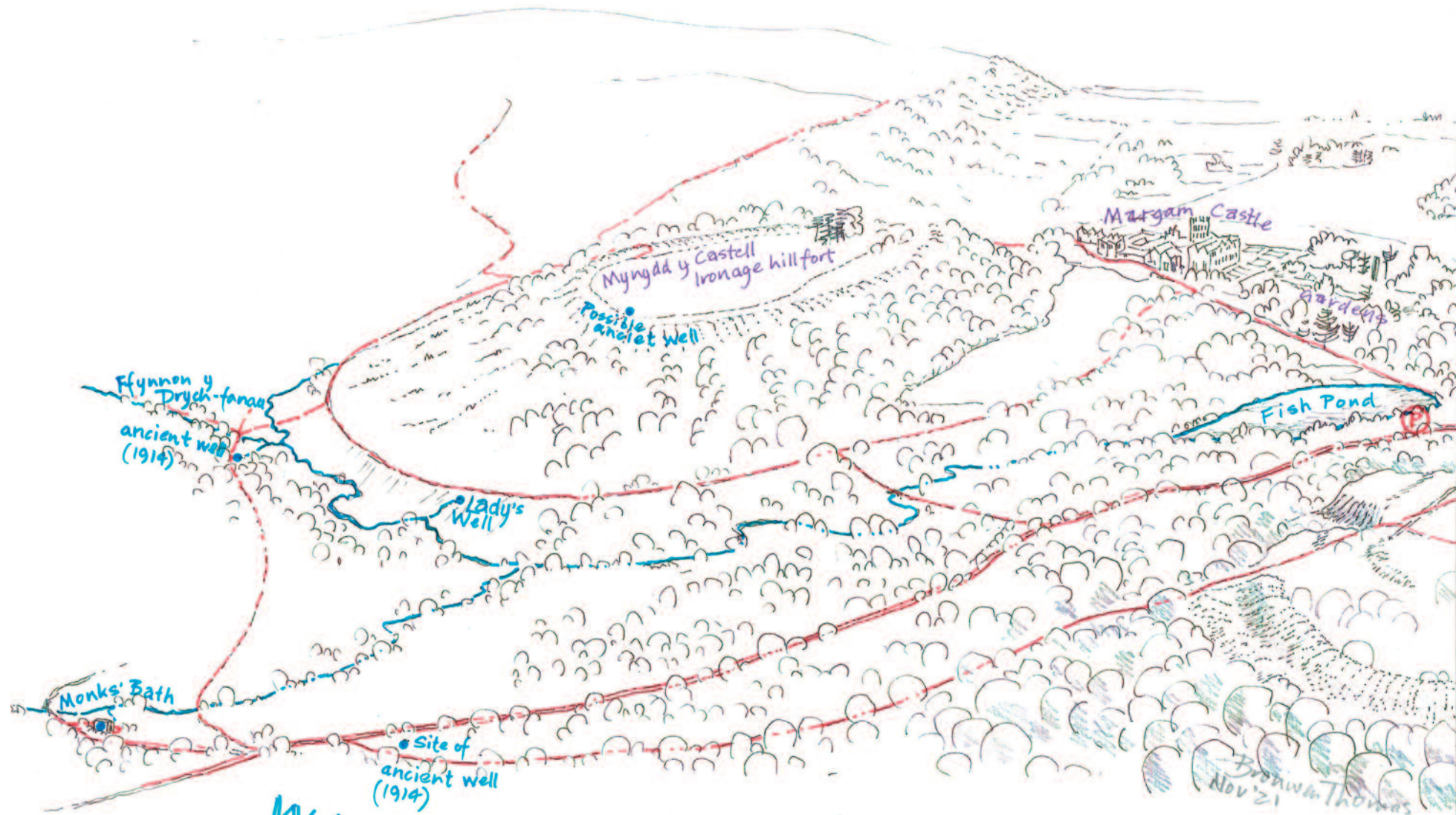
iv. walking on water

Although no significant evidence of Roman settlement has been found in our area, milestones have been unearthed and the Roman road known as '*Julia Martima*' runs through the lower end of the Park, linking Roman forts at Cardiff and Neath. In addition, the Cistercian Way, the Wales Coast Path, the Celtic Way, and the St Thomas' and St Illtyd's Ways all pass beside Capel Mair, as well as the Celtic Trail Cycle Path route 4.

Margam itself has also produced a number of fine thematic, self-guided walking routes, including the Pulpit, Monastic, Cwm Philip and Craig-y-lodge Trails. And the FofMP have recently added its gentle, guided 'Health & Wellbeing Walk'. I'm suggesting the addition of one more to celebrate Margam's often-neglected sacred spring and holy well heritage.

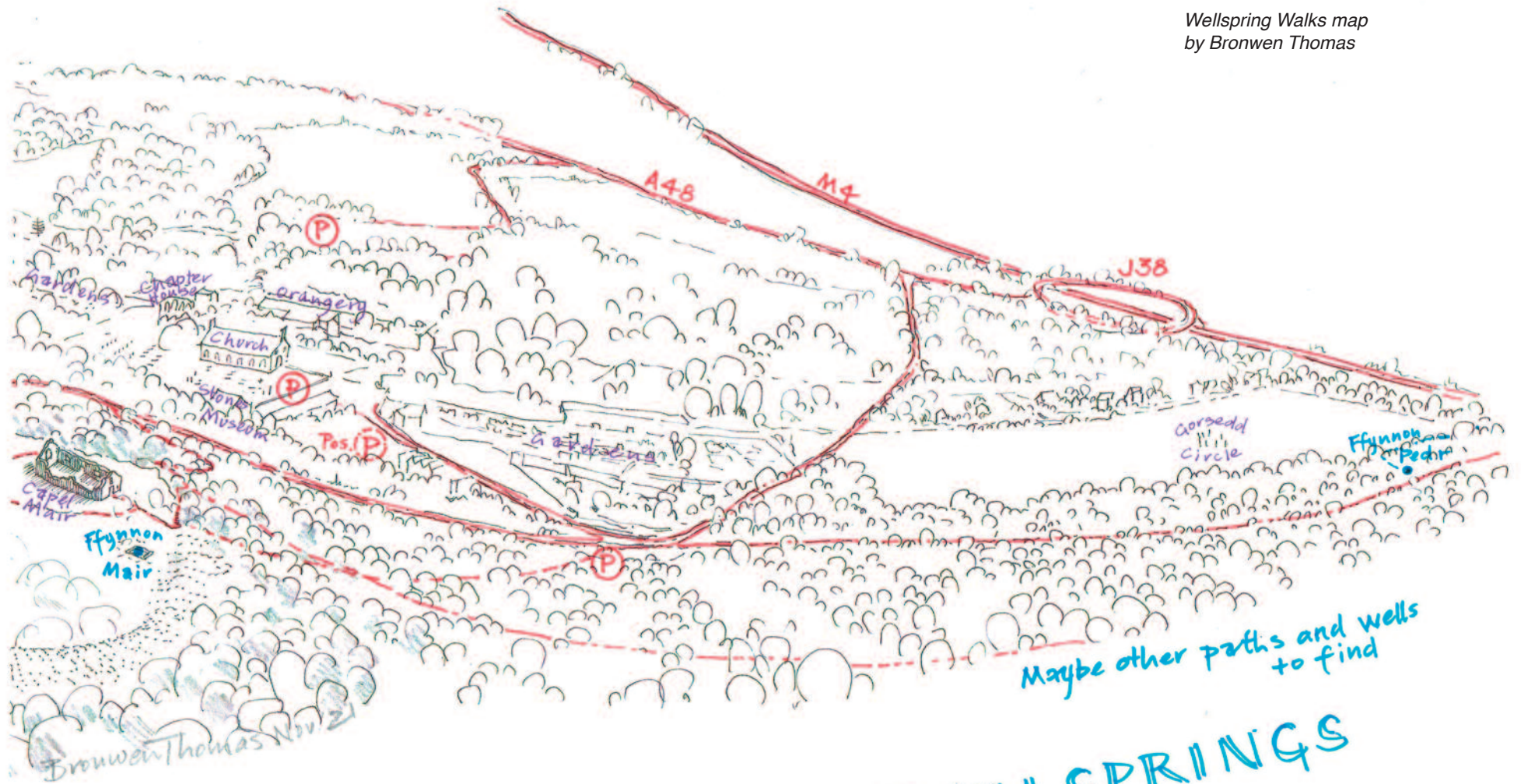
One of the most constantly-attractive appeals of my visits to holy wells throughout Britain is their ability to take us on a series of journeys. Some of these are merely geographic, leading us sometimes up dangerous dead ends or up to our knees in mud. Others still are travels through time and through belief – historical and spiritual voyages.

These begin with the pantheistic belief systems of our earliest ancestors, then take us through to the coming of Christianity to these shores; through the regular ages of attack, abuse and neglect; and, on to the time of the discovery of seemingly more rational and scientific explanations for these magical springs during the spa era; and back today, full circle it would seem, to the tentative beginnings of a more holistic, more open, hopefully more sympathetic relationship with water, with rock and with the earth.



WALKS TO MARGAM'S WELLSPRINGS LOOKING EAST

Wellspring Walks map
by Bronwen Thomas



WALKS TO MARGAM'S WELLSPRINGS LOOKING WEST

The Margam Wellsprings Walk could visit a potential of seven significant sites within the Park in a circular trail, interpreted at each site as well as through digital technology. Regular guided walks could also be arranged, some of which might be thematic (the poetry of wells / the arts of wellsprings / photographing sacred springs / singing waters / finding the holy in the well / etc., etc., all fitting perfectly with the increasingly-important wellbeing agenda).

water/park

At present, most people who visit Capel Mair park either at the lake below the path up from the south, or in the small car park beside the Abbot's Kitchen (and make use, when open, of its very fine facilities). Parking at the Kitchen, however, often causes severe problems for the Church, especially when funerals or weddings and other large services are being conducted. An increase in interest in the proposed new Margam Wellsprings Walk, plus the many other new activities proposed surrounding the Capel Mair site will certainly exacerbate this problem.

Parking at the Abbot's Kitchen for the Capel Mair climb entails an extra ten minute (each way) walk, west along Ten Acre Wood road, then back east on yourself to reach the foot of the steps. A perfect solution to both issues has been suggested by Mari Goldsworthy, the Margam Abbey treasurer. She wrote to me on 23 November 2021:

"Every day we have more and more walkers and bikers parking their cars in the Abbey and walking to the back gate at Margam Park or even to Capel Mair leaving even less spaces for people to park that visit Margam Abbey.

I have recently asked NPT council about the possibility of renting the ground to the back of the Parish Hall so that it could be used as additional car parking for the Abbey and Parish Hall. Their response is positive, and this would be beneficial for your work at Capel Mair.

However, there are costs involved to remove the vegetation from the area and put natural stone down as a base for the car park.

If you are considering developing Capel Mair as a tourist or educational facility, you will require car parking and this area might be beneficial to us both as a joint project. The Abbey and Parish Hall could also be used by you as a historical building and even a place to eat and drink. The potential to work together is beneficial to both Margam Abbey and yourselves."



entrance gates to Margam Abbey

The extra space the Abbey is requesting sits beside the upper road to the steps to Capel Mair and, with the addition of a gate to the back of the new car park, much of the extra walk would be eliminated, making the visit more accessible for more people, as well as solving the limited parking issue for the Abbey.

v. faith on the mountain

*“the faith in the well continues in a measure intact,
when the walls of the church have fallen into utter decay”*

John Rhys, *Sacred Wells in Wales*, 1893

We have records that show that Catholic Holy Masses were held in the ruins of Capel Mair at Easter in the years 1922 and 1923, led by the Rev. WN Gurney, and in the 1990s, Monsignor David Bottrill, parish priest of Our Lady of Margam Catholic Church started celebrating mass again here every July, on the anniversary of the executions of the ‘joint martyrs’, Philip Evans and John Lloyd.



This tradition continues to this today with people from the surrounding area (from Porthcawl to Swansea, and beyond) attending, the latest being held with the blessing of Archbishop George Stack on 23 July 2021, the day of the two Holy Martyrs in the catholic calendar. Fr Andrzej, the Our Lady of Margam’s current priest, has written that *“Some consider it a mini pilgrimage walking from the Abbey car park up the hill to the chapel carrying their deckchair”* and concludes that *“If weather will allow us we will have Holy Mass in Capel Mair every year”*.

vi. new acts of enclosure

One of my first observations in researching the Capel Mair site was the need to deal with the unprotected nature of the chapel itself, to ensure both the longevity of the structure itself as well as of those who see it as some sort of historical adventure playground and regularly climb upon it. I have already made what some might feel is a radical suggestion for the safeguarding of a permanently-revealed Ffynnon Mair. This part of my Report will tentatively explore the much more difficult issue of providing an equally imaginative solution for the protection of the whole of the Capel Mair hillfort site.

When is a fence not a fence ... or perhaps that should be ‘an offence’? The Celtic Iron Age hillforts on Mynydd Margam would have been surrounded, at Capel Mair on three sides at least, by stone and earthen walls, known as ‘ramparts’, plus by wooden fences, sometimes sharpened at the top, known as ‘palisades’. My proposal is to explore the construction of a non-invasive enclosure, mimicking what we have learned from other excavations and reconstructions of Iron Age hillforts in Wales, at the Capel Mair site .

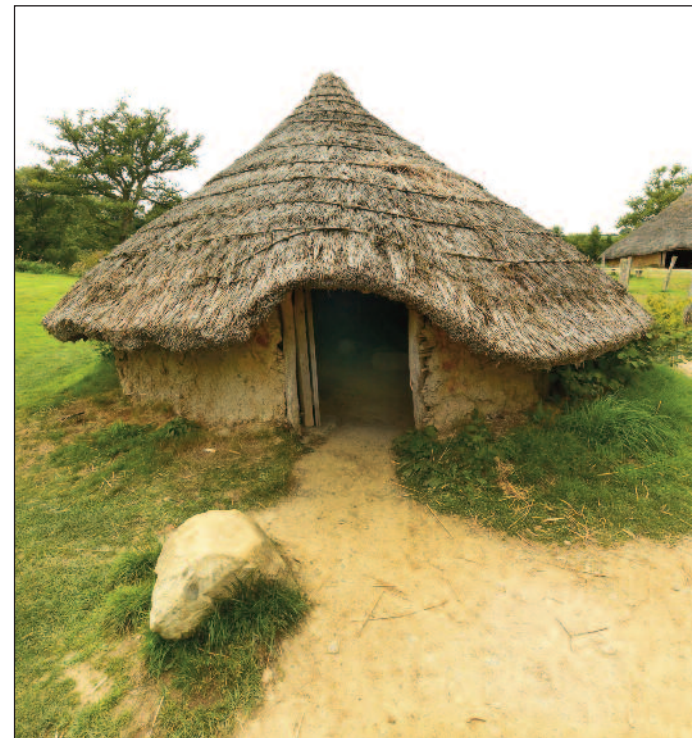
The design and fabric of our historic sites, including those of our holy wells and of our churches and chapels, have changed regularly over time, as new beliefs and new ideas suggested new ways to explain the unexplainable, to enclose and protect what we have valued, often building layer upon layer of masonry and of meaning. It is strange, then, that the current prevailing attitude towards the care of our heritage seems to be to stop history at the latest significant modification, or at another moment deemed right, a strategy in danger often of signing the death certificates for these sites as places of consequence and vitality in our lives.

Was the well at Capel Mair the original determinant of the location of the site in Iron Age times; and was this, with the coming of Christianity, considered to be a site of spiritual (pagan) importance that the new faith thought best to colonise; and was the first chapel built here because of the importance of the well? Maybe we will never know the answers to these questions but my suppositions certainly illustrate the ways in which one culture always builds upon what came before it. **And today, maybe, we need to be looking for our own contemporary responses to the Capel Mair site?**

I fully recognize that there are major issues with these ideas, particularly with regard to the understandable regulations laid down to protect our special places from harm. I also understand the archaeological imperative to retain and secure historic remains for future generations, but I want to gently question why we aren't, in most cases at least, continuing today to make our own physical, spiritual and community responses to these once-important places.

In order to protect the Capel Mair site (inc. the fully exposed well and the chapel, the hillfort's ramparts and entrances, and the roundhouses, alongside all of the other elements that further archaeological work will no doubt reveal), I believe the enclosing of the whole site needs to be seriously considered. But, given its Celtic credentials, this enclosure – rather than being an ugly modern fence – could be the 'reconstructed' ramparts of an Iron Age fort, adding in the process a significant asset to the Park. (Something similar, of course, has been very successfully achieved at Castell Henllys in Pembrokeshire, also built over the remains of an actual Iron Age fort.)

Or perhaps, more radically, the wall itself could be composed of three elements demonstrating the three main ages of its existence: an Iron Age wooden stockade, a medieval dry stone wall and a modern steel enclosure?



***Iron Age hillfort
reconstructions:
Castell Henllys***

next page:
*Craggaunowen Heritage
Park, Co.Clare, Ireland;
St Fagans National
Museum of History,
nr. Cardiff*



Archaeology is one (albeit essential) tool for our understanding of the past and our places within it; others (equally valuable) include the studies of mythology and folklore which can often help explain the usages of sites recorded. While the major proposals explored herein remain ambitious, the plans offer a platform for a range of additional questions regarding the overall site:

How can experimental archaeology techniques be used to help us all understand our ancestors better? What part did the site play in the life of those who used it, and what can it still mean for us, today? What tales can it still tell?



(Bronwen Thomas)

What were the sounds of the different Ages, from Bronze through Medieval ... and on to the raves of today? Can we provide an imaginative aural as well as a physical envelope for the site?

What tools would we be using, and what could our skills create? What songs would be sung? What ceremonies were conducted? What plants would have been cultivated here? Could we create a garden of herbs and vegetables on the hill top? And how would we have disposed of and remembered our dead?

notes towards a budget and funding strategy

Given the scale of the ideas explored in this Paper, as well as their sometimes radical nature, it will be difficult at this stage to calculate accurately the financial needs of the **I DIG MARGAM Project**, especially for the Delivery stage. We can, however, be more confident in what will be needed to support the various elements of its Development:

Phase I: Development

In the immediate period, there is a pressing need to keep the momentum kindled by the Project going, within both adults and young people. It is an easy thing to lose the interest generated, especially within young people, if initial contacts are not followed up and promises not kept ... almost worse in some respects than not offering anything in the first place. We need rather to be striking while the Iron (Age) is hot.

a. I DIG MARGAM: national centre for young peoples' archaeology

A programme of archaeological and historical workshops and special events needs to re-commence early in the New Year with those schools that have already had their interests kindled, plus with new schools throughout NPT (and beyond?). In addition, further sessions should be arranged for adults, as well as fact-finding visits and introductions to other similar initiatives from which we can learn.

b. research

This Paper has gone a long way in providing a detailed description and history of the site, and two revealing geophysical surveys have been completed, along with two excavations of the holy well. To determine the efficacy and desirability of our many proposals, we will need to develop a comprehensive Conservation Management Plan to include:

- an Ecological Survey / Vegetation Management Plan, with details of how the various sites will be maintained over the long term (10-20 years)
- an Archaeological Earthwork Survey
- a Visual Impact Assessment (once an initial design has been agreed)
- a Structural Survey of the standing building, and
- an examination of all security and access issues (with NPT).

c. archaeological excavations

At least three more excavations at the Capel Mair hillfort site are proposed, to include the third holy well dig, one to reveal one of the potential roundhouses, and one at part of the site's double ramparts (and also, possibly, another at one of its entrances).

d. publicity

We will need to produce at least two less-detailed, more generally-accessible versions of this Report (one for adults and one for children) for the widest of distributions throughout the area (NPT and beyond), in paper as well as in digital form, to encourage the widest possible discussion and engagement with these ideas.

We should also consider the organisation of a special event in the first year, perhaps Iron Age / Celtic-themed (perhaps theatrical and/or musical, maybe the launch of a book of paintings and/or poetry created by local people about Capel Mair, a film even) to retain and develop interest in these plans prior to their full physical implementation.

The estimated budget for all of the above is approximately **£200,000**, calculated in the following way:

Schools' and Adult Workshop and Visits Programme, including equipment, materials and travel (12 months)	15,000
Well Covering Design Workshops	9,000
Ecological / Vegetation Survey	8,000
Archaeological Earthwork Survey	5,000
Visual Impact Assessment	3,000
Capel Mair Structural Survey	1,000
Archaeological Excavations @ £25,000 x 3 (plus £25,000 reporting)	100,000
Publicity (adult + child versions)	8,500
Special Capel Mair Event / Publication	11,000
Co-ordination, Project Management and Expenses (12 months)	23,500
Contingency @ 5%	9,200
TOTAL Phase I	£193,200

Phase II: Delivery

Phase II would see the main launch of the **I DIG MARGAM Project**, the covering of the well and, hopefully, work towards the enclosure of the whole hillfort site, alongside delivery of all of the very many other ideas outlined within this Paper.

The capital costs of this stage are difficult to calculate accurately at this time, but can be estimated within the range of **£850,00 to £1.5 million** over a three year period.

In addition to the significant new levels of interest and active engagement of people, schools and other organisations in our wide-ranging programmes of activities – and by connection interest in Margam Park as a whole, and on a wider level in the status of Margam and NPT – an important additional benefit of these plans is their ability to generate significant sums from earned income. These would come from the fees charged for our educational materials, services and special events, from the sales of our publications, videos and performances, as well as from the sources of grant and trust aid which might not be available to Park / local authority applicants.


These possibilities would suggest that a separate though connected constitutional relationship between **I DIG MARGAM/FofMP** and the Park/NPT might be beneficial, something that would need to be explored more fully during the Development Phase.

On past experience, I would expect that – if securely founded in the early period and imaginatively run, **I DIG MARGAM** could be revenue self sufficient within a three to five year period.

THE GENTLE GIANT
IL GIGANTE BUONO
Y CAWR ADDFWYN

John Charles and the future of football
 John Charles e ffuturo de calcio
 John Charles a dyfodol pêl-droed

a journey through a very special life



THE GENTLE GIANT
 IL GIGANTE BUONO
 Y CAWR ADDFWYN

Hello. My name is John Charles. Have you heard of me?
 I used to play football. Some people said I wasn't bad.


Come with me on a journey through my life ...

PENRHYS
PILGRIMS


NAME:
 ENW:

a 2,000 year journey
 through a
 South Wales village
 taith 2,000
 o flynyddoedd trwy
 bentref De Cymru

The Workbook
 Y Gweithlyfr



PERERINION
PENRHYS





FOLLOWING
 THE FLAME
 Dilyn y Fflam

LLYFR GWATH
 WORKBOOK

WILK AND FOLKIN BRESIMERS
 wales and the spanish civil war
BREUDDWYDWR DOETH A FFŴL
 cymru a rhyfel cartref spaen



Cross Curriculum
 EDUCATION PACK
 PECYN ADDYSG
 Traws Gwricwlaidd

TEACHERS' NOTES
NODIADAU I ATHRAWON

PHIL COPE

*a small selection of educational workshop materials,
 the equivalents of which could be produced and sold as part of the I DIG MARGAM Project
 (Copies of the resources featured above and elsewhere within this Report are available on request.)*

avoiding bidding wars

Initially, it was assumed that a stand-alone FofMP bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and others (Art Council of Wales, Tata Steel, various trusts and funds, local celebrities, etc.) would be our way forward, with links to the very many Welsh Government (and other) initiatives concerned with the importance of faith tourism, wellbeing, heritage, education, participation, walking for physical and mental health, etc.

I, then, became aware of two other bids being prepared, at different stages of development within the Margam area, one by the Abbey and one by the Park itself. Sarah Rickett (an 'arts, church, culture, heritage consultant') has recently completed her feasibility report on the needs of Margam Abbey for the Diocese of Llandaff. *Shaping A New Future for Margam Abbey* (November 2021) argues for the Abbey to become "a name which is known, where people gather for the best in this worship tradition, which sends out mission, a place which is visited and utilised for the wider community offering learning and enrichment, provides the best hospitality and gives opportunities for others to thrive. In short, it needs to be authentic to itself, its past and its traditions, a Cistercian Abbey for the 21st century". Her Report's main concerns are with the repairs to the roof, signage and interpretation, a schools' programme, and the re-organisation of the Abbot's Kitchen.

Her Report's recommendations include the need for closer partnerships, including with the FofMP. It is clear that there is much in the histories and the objectives of the Friends of the Abbey and of the Park to suggest close collaboration (which I have learnt was not always present). These include the obvious links between the Chapel and the Abbey itself, the martyrs' story, and our joint intentions to animate our histories through exhibitions and participation and the arts, including through performance. And we also share the need for more parking spaces for access to both the Abbey and the Chapel, and the re-opening of the Abbot's Kitchen, in our case, as one of the possible bases for our activities.

The other Project is a much more ambitious one. The Park/NPT has recently received a grant of £125,000 from NLHF for an 'options appraisal' into the 're-purposing' of the Castle, including the possible provision of enterprise, commercial and community opportunities and spaces, as well as a study of its physical needs, which would aim to result in major repairs and renovations. It is anticipated that these studies might eventually attract two £25million bids to run one after the other.

It was initially suggested that our plans be incorporated within this larger Park bid. (It is certainly true that funding bodies like the NLHF would question two or three bids from the same location, and ask serious questions about what level of co-operation had been considered.) If we were to become part of NPT's NLHF set of proposals, however, it could be seen that, within the context of a potential £50million+ project, **I DIG MARGAM** would be a very small fish in a very big pond. But the truth is that we are, in fact, a very important fish, essential even, and one that can offer a great deal within these multi-million pound waters.

I DIG MARGAM could add significantly to the Castle's main bid, in particular with our emphasis upon popular engagement, and the involvement of young people, especially those who don't usually find ways to engage with heritage and history. This is currently a major priority of many funding bodies, with NLHF's current guidelines emphasising the necessity for their grants to support the immediate and wider community, including skills training, wellbeing, education and active participation. This is clearly what is at the heart of our **I DIG MARGAM Project**.

And, in addition, our priorities would open other funding doors usually closed to NPT, suggesting the potential here for the development of a perfect symmetry (from aims through finance to delivery) between the Park's and the **I DIG MARGAM** proposals.

There will, of course, be issues which consideration of a joint bid will need to address. One of biggest of these is timescales. While the Park's research process will be a long one, and the resulting application add more time before a decision to commence work is made (possibly as much as three years, followed then by a potentially-long period of renovation and construction), the **I DIG MARGAM Project** needs to build immediately upon the interests it has engendered.

All of this would suggest, therefore, that a separate FofMP bid should be developed with NLHF (and others) for at least the first three years of **I DIG MARGAM's** development, while also remaining an active stakeholder during the Castle's research period, with the aim of becoming one of its principal partners / occupants upon completion.



And in this possibly five year period, **I DIG MARGAM** will need to find alternative premises in which to base its work, prior to the Castle's re-opening, post renovation.

coming down to earth

I recognise, of course, that there will be significant issues to resolve to get anywhere near achieving what is proposed herein, and that much work still needs to be done. We should, however, have confidence in what we have to offer. Margam Park has a range of riches and experiences which are unique, certainly within Wales ... although, like Capel Mair, not always fully exposed and celebrated.

There will be planning and Cadw concerns to be met (amongst others) along the way, both at Capel Mair itself as well as with regard to its setting. We should assume that, although most of the site is currently outside of the Scheduled and Listed area, the interest we will/are already generating will probably result in the Scheduling of the whole area. And we will need to consider the maintenance of whatever changes we eventually make, ensuring its security in longevity.

I recognise that these are major proposals, but they are also very exciting ones which would greatly add value to what NPT and the Park could offer throughout south Wales and beyond, as well as providing a workable solution to the on-going misuse of the site, avoiding an almost-inevitable ugly fence.

In order to fully reveal the rich levels of meaning offered through history, belief and myth at Capel Mair (as well as at Margam's other wells and places of interest throughout the Park) it is, in my view, essential to think big, to be bold in our aims, in competition as we are with an often-distracting world of superficial and transitory pleasures. In order to be heard, our plans need to be ambitious and of a scale able to pierce the noise. While these proposals are clearly looking up to the stars, they are, in my view – assuming a lot of hard work and a fair wind – sufficiently grounded to be achievable.

whose history is it, anyway?

In the process of my research, I made contact with those individuals, groups and organisations I felt could contribute most to the renewal of the site. Most, while fully recognizing the complexities of my significantly-widened brief, at least welcomed the new lines of research, and were excited by the new possibilities. I also became aware, however, (indeed, had been warned before undertaking my work at Margam) of ‘factions’ within and between the various bodies whose interests should all have been for the betterment of the various places and people they purport to be serving, but rather often engaged in a crude jostling for power.

I first witnessed this non-cooperation – nearing animosity, albeit from a very small minority – at my (rude) introduction to the Friends of Margam Park, at their AGM on 21 August 2021.

Then, on 20 September 2021, I wrote to Port Talbot Historical Society (PTHS) introducing myself and outlining my work for the Friends “*finding ways to secure and make more accessible the area around Capel Mair*”, and inviting their contributions. The response (on 13 October) from the PTHS Chairman included the following:

“Port Talbot Historical Society does not support this project and has grave concerns over its plans, we therefore will not be providing any information to you or the Friends on this subject.”

Despite the fact that no plans had been proffered by me, only questions to be answered and areas to be explored, the Chair continued: *“I personally feel these new plans are taking things too far, as I do not think attracting people to this area will be a good idea. We have fought for years to protect the chapel from vandalism which increased when the Friends installed the steps up to the area, so if history teaches us anything then it teaches us to not increase visitor numbers to this historic site.”*

My response included the following:

“My role as a consultant is to explore the possibilities, including the views against any possible directions that may be (but have not yet been) proposed. You can be assured, however, that anything that may be proposed will take full cognizance of the need for the full safeguarding of the historic site. Your decision not to be involved with these processes merely removes your and PTHS's point of view from the final analysis.”

This correspondence reminded me of the responses to my first books on holy wells, criticized by a minority of people for including directions to the sites and six figure OS references to encourage visits. I was shocked back then to learn that some believed that these places should be reserved for an elite few, rather than be open to us all as important parts of our histories. I had thought that arguments for a more democratic attitude to our heritage had all been won.

The ex-Chairperson of the FofMP, Andrea Kennedy added to the debate: *“Hiding Capel Mair has not saved it from vandalism or indeed brought any benefits, except to the privileged few who know about the place. It's about time that privilege was given to the people of Neath Port Talbot. The only thing we are guilty of at the moment is that of educating children to their own history.”*

This episode is, it seems, reviving a very old and tired debate amongst archaeologists, museum workers and other (official and self-appointed) protectors of our physical heritage, squabbling around what I believe to be the two artificial poles of care and accessibility, both reductionist in nature ... and both unhelpful. The apparent accessibility versus safeguarding contradiction needs imaginative solutions, not closed minds. It needs the devising and designing of new kinds of protective structures; the education of people to better understand and appreciate what has made us what we are; and a fuller development of a sense of ownership by the widest numbers of people (locals and beyond).

I wonder what PTHS' current answer is for the protection of Capel Mair ... beyond placing the site (though I'm not sure how) out-of-bounds. And whatever its answer might be, the evidence shows that currently, at least, it clearly isn't working.

We won't get anywhere, particularly within the somewhat fragile sets of relationships in evidence at Margam without openness to others' ideas, a willingness to discuss (though not necessarily agree with) alternative possibilities ... and, most importantly, the suppression of self-interest. Unlike during many periods in its past, the Capel Mair site within the whole of Margam Park now belongs to each and every one of us, not a self-selected few.

Perhaps we should be following in the archaeological footsteps of one of Wales' most noteworthy (and also often controversial) antiquarians, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, who in 1920 became Keeper of Archaeology at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, and four years later its Director. Famous for his excavations of the Roman sites of Caernarvon (the fort of *Segontium*), Lydney Park (the Temple of Nodens) and, most significantly, the amphitheatre at Caerleon (*Isca Augusta*), as well as the vast Iron Age fort of Maiden Castle, he was one of the first to reject the dusty exclusivity of his new science for a bold championing of a more popular appeal, making his discoveries known to the general public and inviting their active participation in his excavations, as well as through his television appearances.

And at Maiden Castle, *"he arranged on-site lectures ... and sold literature, postcards and slingshots from the vast cache conveniently left by the Iron Age defenders of the fort. August visitors to the site included Lawrence of Arabia, Sir Arthur Evans (the discoverer of Minoan Crete), and Augustus John the painter. Great and humble alike clamoured to scrape for a while in the prehistoric dirt."*

(from *The Origins of Britain* by Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, 1980)

We are what we imagine.

*Our very existence consists in the imagination of others.
The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.*

N Scott Momady,

Kiowa Native American novelist, essayist and poet

Thomas Mansell Talbot (1747-1813), one of the Talbots to make sweeping changes to the house, wrote of his ambitious plans for Margam in his European 'Grand Tour' notebook. He described his intentions as *"a noble thought if ever executed"* ... and I feel a little the same way about this Paper.

What is explored and tentatively proposed here is (if not 'noble') certainly ambitious. And what I have suggested may also never be 'executed'. But, if it isn't, other imaginative plans for the safeguarding and ongoing usage of Capel Mair, the revealing of its holy well, and the celebration of the much deeper layers of history unearthed on Mynydd Margam will need to be devised.

Either way, an open mind might be the best policy in order to establish whether the **I DIG MARGAM Project** can become more than paper wasted, more than just a few idle words on a lot of pages.

PHIL COPE

author of

The Price of Coal: the Tynewydd Colliery Disaster, April 1877
(Rhondda Heritage Park, 1999)

Well Kept Secrets / Ffynhonnau Cudd Cymru
new photographs of the holy wells of wales (culture & democracy, 2005+8)

Holy Wells Wales: a photographic journey (Seren, 2008)

Altarations: new photographs of vodou altars (Ffotogallery, 2000)

Let Paul Robeson Sing!
a celebration of the life of paul robeson and his relationship with wales
(Paul Robeson Cymru / V&A / Bevan Foundation / Paul Robeson Jnr, 2001)

Except on Sunday: a life on the land in haiti (The Haiti Fund, 2001)

Altaring Liverpool: a book about change (Liverpool Community Spirit, 2004)

The Gentle Giant: john charles and the future of football
(The Gentle Giant Trust, 2004)

Welsh Roots / Welsh Routes (Liverpool Community Spirit, 2006)

Wise and Foolish Dreamers: wales and the spanish civil war
(Welsh Centre for International Affairs, 2007)

*Following The Flame / Dilyn Y Fflam: a celebration of wales at the olympic
and paralympic games* (London 2012)

Holy Wells Cornwall: a photographic journey (Seren, 2010)

*The Dancing Pilgrimage of Water: writings on the rivers, lakes
and reservoirs of Wales* (Gwasg Carreg Gwelch, with Dewi Roberts, 2010)

*Borderlands: new photographs and old tales of the sacred springs,
holy wells and spas of the Wales-England borders* (Seren, 2013)

*Holy Wells Scotland: new photographs and old tales of the sacred springs,
holy wells and medicinal spas of Scotland* (Seren, 2015)

*Sacred North: walking in the footsteps of the earliest Christian missionaries
to Cumbria, Northumberland, Scotland and beyond*
(culture & democracy, with Fr John Musther, 2018)

*The Saint Who Gave His Horse To a Beggar: following in the footsteps of Aidan
of Lindisfarne, the saint who walked to heaven through Ireland, Scotland and
the north of England* (culture & democracy, with John Connell, 2020)

The Living Wells of Wales (Seren, 2019)

The Golden Valley: a visual biography of the garw (Seren, 2021)



Iron Age roundhouse inhabitant,
Craggaunowen Heritage Park,
Co. Clare, Ireland

A: October 2021 Schools' Workshops' Evaluation Report

responses to the
I DIG MARGAM
 NPT schools' workshops
 and Capel Mair visits

with Phil Cope / 6-20 October 2021



Phil Cope
 22 October 2021

PUPILS' AND TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Name of **SCHOOL**:

Name of **STUDENT / TEACHER**:

**What was your overall response to the three sessions?
 Please circle your answer. Was it**

excellent very good good ok not very good

Write your comments on the workshops below:

Tell me the 3 most important or interesting things you learnt:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Which of the three sessions did you like best and why?
 (Workshop 1: An Introduction to Prehistory and Archaeology /
 Workshop 2: A Visit to Capel Mair / Workshop 3: Life in an Iron Age Hillfort)

Were there any parts of the sessions that you didn't like?

How could the Workshops have been better for you?

Do you want to be part of the I DIG MARGAM Project in the future? YES / NO
 If yes, what are you most interested in?

Any other comments

Thank you for being part of the I DIG MARGAM Project.

This is a short evaluation of the two sets of three workshops run to test interest in the **I DIG MARGAM Project** (with Year 6 Coed Hirwaun Primary School and Years 7+8 Ysgol Cwm Brombil), based upon questionnaires filled in by every participating pupil and member of staff:

What was your overall response to the three sessions?

excellent	very good	good	ok	not very good
49%	35%	16%	0%	0%

All three members of staff (Hirwaun Year 6 classroom teacher and Brombil Head of History) circled excellent:

"It is more than an enjoyable experience ... it is humorous, fun and so much more!" (teacher)

Tell me the 3 most important or interesting things you learnt:

"The Ages are really cool" / "There is so much we have to learn about." / "... how they used the advantages of the mountain to protect themselves." / "The Iron Age fort at Capel Mair – I had no idea!" (teacher)

Most loved handling the artifacts I took in to the school (and learning about the 'Ages': Stone, Bronze and Iron [Prehistory], plus Roman, Medieval and Modern).

Popular also was the Capel well site and the hillfort ramparts; the story of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, King Henry VIII and the destruction of Margam Abbey and Capel Mair; and the Geophysical maps, *"predicting where the civilisations and wells were"*.

Many also listed the 'Monk's Bath' that we visited on our way down the hill.

Which of the three sessions did you like best?

1. 5 votes
2. 26 votes
3. 10 votes

Were there any parts of the sessions that you didn't like?

How could the Workshops have been better for you?

The vast majority replied: *"I liked all of them" / "I love all the parts" / "No, I loved everything about it" / "It was amazing." / "It was great"*, and had nothing they would add:

"The Workshops couldn't be better" / "It didn't need improving".

Someone wrote: *"I didn't like hearing that Henry VIII [sic.] destroyed the chapel"; "the part when I got attacked by a wasp";* and another said that it would have been better *"if we didn't have to climb the hill"*.

"A lot of things said were the same."

"The only thing we disliked was how it went so fast." (teacher)

"... overall it could not be better." (teacher)

Two students suggested *"information packs to keep us informed at all times" / "pictures and slide show"* (excellent ideas).

Do you want to be part of the I DIG MARGAM Project in the future?

YES: 28 / NO: 3

Only three children answered NO: *"... because I want to be a footballer when I'm old" / "because I wouldn't really know what I'd do and everything."*

If yes, what are you most interested in?

Most wanted to participate in archaeological excavations: *"digging up history" / "seeing what's underground" / "learning more about the people in the olden days, and what they did" / "... I love digging"*.

Any other comments

"Thank you for your time spent with Year 6. The children have been inspired by your knowledge and are eager to take parents and family to visit Capel Mair." (teacher)

"I just want to say it was great." / "I would love to do the I DIG MARGAM."


"I hope we do this until the year ends ..."

(Originals of all of the Pupils' Questionnaires are available to view on request.)

What follows is a very small selection of the young people's work.


One exercise placed the children in pairs with a selected Stone, Bronze or Iron Age artifact. One child was the person who lost it, the other the archaeologist who found it. Both wrote their versions of history:

Holly Smith



I am a Stone Age woman who got the First Fetter. This is my God and I have been prescribed this doll by the village doctor to help with my speech sounds from speaking God for my family. Every night my son and my family go and pray in the village church and the priest bless it. When ever anyone in the family is ill, we go to the priest and ask them how to bless the God. I can only see him in order to heal and chase away the evil spirits.


Gwen Jones




I am an archaeologist from the present day and this object may be from the Stone Age. We found it in Rose Talbot and we found it as we were trying to discover ancient buildings under the soil in a church in Swanage. We will attempt to link it to other Stone Age objects to discover what it may possibly be.

Children's toy
Religious Symbol
Something to do with Making Medicine
Archaeologist
I am an archaeologist from the present day and this object may be from the Stone Age. We found it in Rose Talbot and we found it as we were trying to discover ancient buildings under the soil in a church in Swanage. We will attempt to link it to other Stone Age objects to discover what it may possibly be.

Child's Toy
I found the object in the ground in a garden it is very small. I think it is a child's toy. I think I should do some research on it.




My sword
I was fighting with my sword. I was very strong and I was very brave. I was very strong and I was very brave. I was very strong and I was very brave.




I believe that this stone is from the Stone Age. I found it in a garden. I found it in a garden. I found it in a garden.

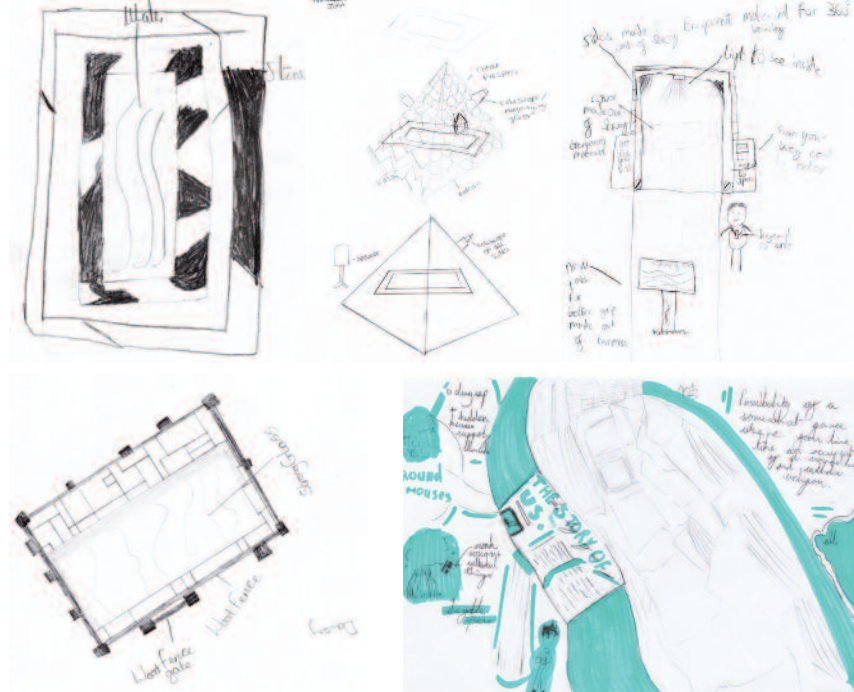
Annabel John



12th October 2021

Today I dug up what I believe to be a sword from the Celts. I think the handle of the sword is supposed to be a Celtic solder. I found it underneath a big pile of mud and weeds. At first I thought it was a sword but once I dug it up I realised it was a sword. It was really rusty and muddy when I dug it up. I think it was used as a sword when the Celts were in war. The top is copper and the bottom is Iron.

In the classroom, we also began the exploration of possible designs for the holy well covering, to ensure both the safeguarding of the site as well as its full accessibility and interpretation:



Hand-drawn diagrams and sketches for a holy well covering, including a floor plan, a cross-section, and a site plan.

B: Bibliography and Recommended Reading

Books, pamphlets, papers, reports and DVDs consulted for this Report included:

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Ronal Hutton *Pagan Britain* (Yale University Press, 2013)

Barry Cunliffe *The Ancient Celts* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

James Canton *Ancient Wonderings: journeys into Prehistoric Britain* (William Collins, 2017)

Lloyd & Jennifer Laing *The Origins of Britain: Britain before the conquest* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980)

Neil Oliver *A History of Ancient Britain: the epic story of a nation forged in ice, stone and bronze* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012)

Paul Jacobsthal *Early Celtic Art* (OUP, 1921)

Alice Roberts *The Celts: search for a civilization* (Heron Books / BBC, 2015)

Archaeology in Wales volumes, various

(Council for British Archaeology Group 2: Wales)

Miranda Aldhouse-Green & Ray Howell *Celtic Wales*

(University of Wales Press, 2017)

Ray Howell *Searching For The Silures : an iron age tribe in south-east Wales*

(The History Press, 2006)

William Golding *The Inheritors* (1955)

Walter de Gray Birch *History of Margam Abbey*

(1897 / facsimile, West Glamorgan Archive Service, 1997)

David Robinson (edit) *Cistercian Abbeys of Britain:*

far from the Concourse of Men (BT Batsford, 1998)

Glyn Coppack *The White Monks: the Cistercians in Britain 1128-1540*

(Tempus, 1998)

R H Malden *Abbeys: their rise and fall*

Madge Cusack O'Keefe *Four Martyrs of South Wales and the Marches*

(Archdiocese of Cardiff 1990)

D John Adams *Margam Abbey: the Mansel-Talbots & their tombs*
(Friends of Margam Abbey)

Leslie Evans *The Story of Margam Abbey* (British Publishing Co Ltd, Gloucester)

The Normans, Margam Abbey and Domesday Book

(West Glamorgan County Council)

The Official Guide to Margam Country Park

(West Glamorgan County Council, 1983)

Sculpture in a Country Park

(Welsh Sculpture Trust - West Glamorgan County Council, 1983)

Julian James *A Year in the Life of Margam Abbey* (DVD, 2018)

Andrew Jones *The Haunting of Margam* (DVD, 2020)

Barrie Griffiths *The First Borough of Kenfig 1147-1439* (The Kenfig Society, 2011)

Barrie Griffiths *Kenfig in Tudor and Stuart Times 1485-1699*

(The Kenfig Society, 2012)

Barrie Griffiths *The Last Years 1700-1886* (The Kenfig Society, 2013)

Mansel Jones *A History of Kenfig* (Goylake Publishing, 2014)

<http://www.cistercianway.wales>

<https://britishpilgrimage.org/portfolio/st-thomas-way-2-margam/>

Lynne Rees *Real Port Talbot* (Seren, 2013)

Managing Scheduled Monuments in Wales

(Cadw, Welsh Government, November 2018)

Heritage Partnership Agreements in Wales (Cadw, 2021)

Dr Tim Young *Geophysical survey at Capel Mair (i+ii), Margam,*

Neath Port Talbot (*GeoArch*, 27 October 2015 + 17 March 2016)

