

# Not by bread alone

'Left behind' is a familiar emotional refrain heard throughout the valleys of south Wales; so much has been brutally removed. But worse than that there has for a long time been a glaring black hole in its former capital, Merthyr Tydfil. **Geraint Talfan Davies**, chair of The Cyfarthfa Foundation, argues that it's time for another 'Rising', this time, to give it back its cultural heart.

One of the dangers of decades of economic retrenchment is the spread of pessimism with its stultifying effect on the imagination. So overwhelming do our core problems seem – health, education, the high incidence and myriad effects of poverty – that everything else is made to seem a luxury, not least cultural investment. That is something that is felt all the more keenly in Wales, where the Welsh Government's overall budget is so much more constrained than that enjoyed by the governments of Scotland and Northern Ireland, let alone England.

But, even in periods of pervading gloom, a coincidence of events can create opportunities that are too substantial to be ignored. This is the case at Merthyr Tydfil where the completion of

the dualling of the Heads of the Valleys Road and the arrival of the new Metro rail service have underlined twice over the scale of opportunity that lies at their crossroads: specifically, at Cyfarthfa Castle – a crucible of the industrial revolution – and just at the moment when it has finished celebrating the bicentenary of its construction in 1825 by William Crawshay II.

## An instrument to build a future

Following the creation of the iron industry at Merthyr in the late 18th century, by 1800 the town had become the greatest centre of iron production in the world and remained so until 1860. Today, it is where the cultural, economic and environmental legacies of two centuries and more cry out for reinterpretation in a part of



Thomas Prytherch



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Wales that cannot afford to ignore such a potent opportunity for recasting its image in the public mind. In the words, of the town's best-known historian, Gwyn A Williams:

‘The Welsh have repeatedly employed history to make a usable past, and to turn that past into an instrument with which a present can build a future.’

Nevertheless, at this point it is not difficult to imagine a chorus of scepticism. Is the country not in deep crisis? Is there not a panoply of social need crying out for funding? Is the Welsh Government not cash strapped? What prior claim on scarce resources can possibly be accorded to an ironmaster's castle and its museum and gallery? Get real.

Some answers to these questions are contained in a recently published study undertaken jointly by Cardiff University's School of Geography and Planning and Nottingham Business School – *Economic Possibilities across*

*England and Wales: the NICE Index of Localities and Regions*. This assessed 330 local areas across four measures: Networks, Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship. At the top of the list, of course, was the City of London. And at the bottom, at 330? You've guessed it. Merthyr Tydfil. Marginally above it – Blaenau Gwent at 328 and Anglesey at 325.

No fewer than 13 of the 22 Welsh local authorities were in the bottom quintile. Five were in the south Wales valleys: Rhondda Cynon Taf, Neath Port Talbot, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil. Out of the bottom 10 areas in the report's entrepreneurship index, nine were in Wales.

The report commented:

‘These places often suffer from low institutional density, weak network connectivity ... and limited access to cultural and creative infrastructure. [They] exemplify the compounding effects of economic peripherality, institutional fragility, and limited connectivity.’

It argued that post-industrial and rural areas have developed ‘self-limiting mindsets rooted in narratives of decline *that must be actively countered through behavioural interventions, choice architecture redesign, and forward-looking narrative building that highlights local successes and possibilities rather than historic failures*’ (my italics).

Arguably, in the case of Merthyr Tydfil, the last of the listed defects – ‘limited connectivity’ – has been addressed by the aforementioned completion of the Heads of the Valleys Road and the new Metro rail link. That leaves all the other assessment categories, not least of which is the cultural and creative infrastructure. And in that last field it would be hard to think of a more central proposition than the proposal to develop Cyfarthfa Castle and park into a cultural institution of both local and national significance, with all its implied beneficial economic and psychological effects, (See also *Touchstone* 2021 pp. 6–11).

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- 1 Dowlais artist Thomas Prytherch's late-19th-century evocation of the Cyfarthfa Ironworks at Merthyr. There is a grandeur to the scene that still persists in the original 10 metre-high masonry furnaces built in 1765 by Anthony Bacon. They remain the most powerful relic in the Cyfarthfa heritage area. Can a new cultural strategy breathe life into this vital relic?
- 2 The Pont-y-cafnau bridge over the Taff at Cyfarthfa, Merthyr – reputedly the oldest iron bridge in the world. Built in 1793, a symbol of ambitious industrial innovation. Being restored after severe damage by Storm Dennis in February 2020, it is surely a prompt to a much-needed cultural ambition for Merthyr in the 21st century.

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- 3 The elements have played havoc with four-fifths of the Cyfarthfa Castle building, which has lain empty for 12 years. Alarming, this room is right above one of the open galleries. All these spaces have the potential to become a major new gallery, filling a huge cultural gap in the south Wales valleys
- 4 Having just celebrated the bicentenary of its construction in 1825, Cyfarthfa Castle, set in a 160-acre park and designed in 1824 for William Crawshay II by the architect Robert Lugar, surely has to be the vehicle for an ambitious Merthyr cultural rising.



### Resilient accessible and cohesive

This approach lies at the heart of the Cyfarthfa Foundation’s proposals, totally aligned as they are with the Welsh Government’s recently published *Priorities for Culture 2024–2030* – ‘resilient, accessible and cohesive’. They include:

- the elevation of a local museum into one that showcases the historic international significance of the story of Merthyr Tydfil and its surrounding region;
- the urgent physical rescue of Cyfarthfa Castle – a Grade 1 listed building, 80% of which has lain empty and decaying for the last 12 years;
- the enlargement of its galleries not only to tell a fuller story with all the techniques now open to a modern museum, but also to better accommodate the castle’s fine existing collection of artworks and to allow for its expansion;
- the creation of a locally based cultural institution with the necessary critical mass to become a catalytic force economically, educationally and culturally within the

community, with an emphasis on Merthyr’s especially large cohort of young people;

- the curation of its 160-acre park – with its potential enlargement to 240 acres – not only as a park to rival the best in Wales but also as a forward-looking environmental project in a place where the memory of the Aberfan disaster is still alive; and
- to take full advantage of Cyfarthfa’s strategic location, including its proximity to the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park that attracts four million visitors per annum.

### An unconscionable gap

It is also worth considering where Cyfarthfa might sit in the context of the emerging National Contemporary Art Gallery for Wales. The Welsh Government understandably puts aside the concept of a single anchor gallery – for which Cyfarthfa was one of the bidders – and this has left us with the following chain of designated galleries across Wales: four in north Wales – Bangor, Llandudno, Pwllheli and Ruthin; one in mid Wales – Newtown, but two if you also count the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth;

two in south-west Wales – Swansea and Carmarthen; one in south-east Wales – Newport, but two if you include Amgueddfa Cymru in Cardiff. But the south Wales valleys? Nil. This is an unconscionable gap that Cyfarthfa would be more than capable of filling.

So what are the obstacles? The largest and most obvious obstacle is funding. A start was made in 2025 following a very welcome commitment of £2.25 million each from the council and the Welsh Government, to be spent on the urgent tasks of making a key part of the castle building watertight and safeguarding the Pont-y-cafnau bridge, arguably the oldest iron bridge in the world – it links Crawshay’s castle estate with the 263-year-old monumental furnace structures on the west side of the Taff.

The full rescue of the castle, however, will require a combined initial investment of more than £30 million from the National Heritage Lottery Fund, the council, Welsh Government and private foundations over the next five years. A full application to the National Heritage Lottery Fund has to follow hard on the heels of the acceptance of our expression of interest in mid-2025. We have already received two major pledges from private foundations, dependent on the backing





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of the public institutions.

This may seem like a large sum, but it pales into insignificance against, for instance, the £332 million earmarked for the new Museum of London or the £266 million cost of Tate Modern’s extension. It is, however, comparable with the £50 million cost of the transformation now underway at Theatr Clwyd (see p. 63), to which the Welsh Government contributed £26.5 million. The capital cost of the Cyfarthfa project will after all be spread over a period of years. In time, the Cyfarthfa Foundation will aim to cover its annual running costs.

### A manifest truth

As Cyfarthfa celebrated, the Welsh Government was in the throes of finalising its budget for the next financial year – 2026–27. Last year the

finance minister, Mark Drakeford, warned that, given the impending Senedd elections, it would be a standstill budget with new initiatives being proposed ‘only if they can command cross-party agreement’. One of the organisations hoping and praying that it will command such agreement will be the Cyfarthfa Foundation, as we reach a crucial stage in our plans to develop the castle and its park into a major visitor attraction.

The political parties are now busy preparing their programmes for the next Senedd term. One can but hope that they will be proposing to repair the damage done to the arts and culture during Covid and its aftermath.

There will, of course, be sceptics. There are some who see culture as a concern of the privileged, tarring them with the cynicism of Marie Antionette’s ‘let them eat cake’. The

alternative is to look to a far higher authority than a French queen, to someone who reminded us that we live ‘not by bread alone’. It is this second injunction that we need to ponder urgently as culture budgets struggle to cope. The cynical condescension of Marie Antionette was, of course, abhorrent, but the thought that we live ‘not by bread alone’ is manifestly true.

Our lives require both physical and emotional or, if you like, spiritual nourishment. And that applies just as much to society as a whole as to the individual. It is why cultural investment – be it on history or art or the natural environment – should not be forced to wait at the tail end of a long queue, to be dealt with only after every other category of social need has been met. Culture is part of the solution to a wider problem. And lest we forget, the most impoverished part of Wales has its spirit too.

*Geraint Talfan Davies is the instigator of the current project to develop Cyfarthfa Castle and Park at Merthyr Tydfil and chair of the Cyfarthfa Foundation. He is a former controller of BBC Cymru Wales and a past chairman of Welsh National Opera and the Arts Council of Wales.*