

# Aberdulais Falls: A case study in Welsh heritage



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# Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Aberdulais Falls	6
1.1 Background	6
1.2 Aberdulais Falls and the National Trust	6
1.3 Stages of development	7
1.4 The economics of maintaining a heritage site	8
1.5 Water power	8
1.6 Visitor numbers	8
1.7 Evaluation	9
1.8 Conflict and tension	9
1.9 Aberdulais Falls and the local community	10
1.10 Other considerations	10
1.11 Facilities and the visitor experience	10
1.12 Conclusion	11
Keep on learning	11
Acknowledgements	12

# Introduction

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This case study looks at Aberdulais Falls near Neath, South Wales. This is a place of great natural beauty, but also an important industrial heritage site. The course considers the key issues affecting the decision-making of the bodies which are responsible for looking after our heritage. For example, who decides what should be preserved from the past as our heritage, who is this heritage for, and how should it be presented and explained? In this case study, we examine the heritage debates around what to do with places, buildings, things and the memories attached to them in the context of a specific Welsh heritage site.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand some of the issues surrounding natural heritage
- understand some of the issues surrounding industrial heritage
- demonstrate an awareness of why tensions often arise between conservation and the demands of modern tourism.



# 1 Aberdulais Falls

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## 1.1 Background

Aberdulais Falls is under the control of the National Trust. It is set in an area of outstanding natural beauty that has attracted artists for centuries (Turner visited the ten-metre high waterfall in 1796). Aberdulais Falls also has a four-hundred-year history of industrial use, due to the opportunities it provides for water power. The industrial history of Aberdulais Falls goes back to 1584, when the availability of water power and fuel led to copper ore from Cornwall being smelted there. Copper smelting was superseded by a fulling mill (used in the manufacture of cloth), and later by a corn mill. Corn ceased to be milled there in 1820.

The combination of good canal and road links and water power led to the construction of a tinplate works on the site in 1830. This remained in operation until 1897, after which the works fell into decay, with only a few buildings remaining occupied and maintained. One was Danygraig House; the others were a stable and the former school for tinplate workers' children.

In time, even Danygraig House became derelict, and in 1981 the whole site was taken over by the National Trust.

## 1.2 Aberdulais Falls and the National Trust

When the National Trust took over the Aberdulais Falls and the associated buildings, the site was derelict, overgrown and dangerous. Prior to the Trust's ownership, public access to the Falls over the land surrounding it had been denied. Important decisions had to be taken regarding the future of the site.

The A465 slices through the site and the suburbs of Neath have encroached on the river bed on both sides.



Figure 1: Aberdulais Falls, Skewen, Neath

Photo: RGB Aerial Photography. © GeoPerspectives COWI A/S

Photo: RGB Aerial Photography. © GeoPerspectives COWI A/S

[View an interactive version of Aberdulais Falls.](#)

Informed by its stated aims and objectives, the National Trust's decision-making process swung into action. This was, of necessity, complex and time-consuming. It was determined by the interaction of a range of professionals and senior members of the Trust. In addition, any developments to the site had to be agreed by Cadw – the Welsh equivalent of English Heritage.

## 1.3 Stages of development

As a result of the consultation and decision-making process, it was decided, as a primary objective, to undertake a systematic survey of the site in order to uncover and understand the industrial archaeology of Aberdulais Falls. This involved removing tons of rubbish, infill and vegetation, and examining in detail the archaeological remains discovered.

During this process, no evidence from the sixteenth-century copper smelting works was uncovered, and it is assumed that this lies beneath the archaeology of the later tinplate works.

The next stage was to make the derelict buildings safe, by consolidating the masonry, and to open the site to the public. This occurred in 1984, and initially Aberdulais Falls received about 2000–3000 visitors per year. The site was attractively landscaped and artists could again make use of the site in an aesthetically pleasing environment. However, it would have given little impression of the noise, smell and physically demanding labour of a tinplate works.

## 1.4 The economics of maintaining a heritage site

The National Trust operates within a complex web of funding. This comes from annual membership fees and from visitor receipts at individual sites. Each National Trust property is responsible for raising the income necessary to fund its own conservation activities and further development (although a large minority of sites cannot cover their costs). Properties raise this income through visitors charges and from catering, shop sales, etc. Failure to raise sufficient income can lead to job losses and the inability to improve facilities or undertake conservation work.

It is therefore important for National Trust properties to increase the volume of visitors, and to maximise the spend-per-head of the visitors they attract.

In the first phase of development at Aberdulais Falls, the emphasis was on the industrial archaeology of the site and on providing visitor access to the area. In the 1990s, the emphasis changed to expanding the amenities and attractions offered by the site.

## 1.5 Water power

This second phase was achieved by focusing on the water-power potential of the site. Water power had been the catalyst for the original industrial development, and it seemed apt to capitalise on that. It was decided to install a new waterwheel where the original one had been. This provided an important visitor attraction, and also presented the opportunity to use the waterwheel to generate electricity for the site, thus providing significant cost savings. Furthermore, as part of that building work, a water turbine was installed, allowing the Trust to earn additional income from the sale of electricity to the National Grid. The water-power project cost £850,000 and was completed in 1993.

As part of an overall strategy of nature conservation on the site, and as an added visitor attraction, while the water-power systems were being installed a fish pass was incorporated to enable salmon to return to their spawning grounds.

During this extensive phase of building work, the interpretation of the site for visitors was largely completed.

A conscious decision was taken not to attempt to reconstruct the archaeological features of the tinplate works. Rebuilding was only undertaken for structural reasons or to facilitate visitor understanding. Consequently, visitors to the site see only the consolidated lower walls of the original industrial buildings. Interpretation is achieved by the use of external text panels with artists' impressions of the way the tinplate works would have appeared in its heyday.

A fuller interpretation of the site is displayed in an exhibition in the original stable building. This covers the whole history of the site, and describes the experience of working in the tinplate works through the eyes of a number of individual workers – including children.

## 1.6 Visitor numbers

The National Trust has actively sought to encourage visitors with a wide range of interests to the site, and to broaden the appeal of the site as much as possible:

- displays include interpretation panels devoted to the geology, flora and fauna of the site



- computer interactive displays have been used to expand the information base
- guided tours are run, and information sheets and visitor packs have been produced
- special days for artists are held.

These various initiatives, with the addition of a new visitor centre, full disabled access and better parking facilities, have led to visitor numbers now averaging 24,000 per year.

## 1.7 Evaluation

The preceding description of the history and development of this particular heritage site possibly gives the impression of some inevitability of development, and of a smooth, conflict-free transition from a derelict industrial site to a successful visitor attraction.

However, alternative approaches could have been undertaken. Some that strike me include the following:

- 1 The site could have simply been surveyed, made safe and provided with one or two robust, external interpretation panels. Access could have been made available without the need to employ staff or provide facilities. It could be argued that such facilities are alien both to the industrial site and to the beauty of the waterfalls.
- 2 An attempt could have been made to restore the site, as far as possible, to how the tinplate works would have appeared in the nineteenth century. Such an approach has been undertaken successfully in many open-air museums across Britain.
- 3 All trace of the industrial past could have been removed in order to focus solely on the impressive natural beauty of the area. This could have allowed more interpretation of the role Aberdulais Falls has played over the centuries in inspiring poets and artists such as Turner.

You can probably think of others.

## 1.8 Conflict and tension

The management of a site such as Aberdulais Falls by its very nature highlights conflicting interests and tensions. Some relate to problems caused by the decision-making process itself, which can be slow and has to accommodate a range of interests of the various client bodies.

For example, when a new information centre was to be built on the site, the client bodies involved in making decisions about its overall appearance, form and fabric were: the National Trust Planning Committee, the National Trust Archaeological Department, Cadw, the Historic Buildings representative, the Friends' Association (they provided funds for the new building), and the local authority, all of whom might have had different ideas about how to proceed.

Other areas of conflict are due to the economics of maintaining the site. This demands high visitor numbers, but high visitor numbers pose problems for the site in terms of damage, running repairs, wear and tear, and visitor congestion, which all have cost implications.

There are a number of ways in which visitor numbers to a site such as this could be increased without causing congestion, but these are all in their own way controversial, for example:

- increasing the space available to visitors
- extending opening hours
- restricting or rationing the time individuals or groups can remain on site.

Increasing the space available and encouraging more visitors would require more car parking, and more toilet and catering facilities. Extending the opening hours would require more staff. Both these options involve a difficult cost–benefit analysis. Rationing the time individuals or groups could remain on site would be difficult to police and would be counter to the ethos of the National Trust.

## 1.9 Aberdulais Falls and the local community

Other potential areas of conflict are with the local authority and local residents, who see the site as of value to themselves and have differing views about how it should be utilised.

The desire to accommodate, to some extent, the demands of the local community, and to engage with that community, has led to a number of initiatives. Examples of these include the use of the site's facilities for hosting lectures, meetings, keep-fit groups, etc. These initiatives can be of use to local businesses and community groups, and help raise additional revenue.

There is clear amenity value of the Falls to the local community, which was enhanced in 1994 by the acquisition of an additional 15 acres of surrounding woodlands. These are slowly being developed to provide woodland walks and nature trails.

Fishing and bird watching are also encouraged, as are field trips by local schools.

However, the Falls are in close proximity to a local housing estate (see Figure 1). At times, there have been problems between the residents of this estate and the National Trust. These have primarily involved fly tipping, vandalism and unauthorised access.

In an attempt to overcome such problems, members of the Trust have adopted a policy of meeting with the residents to discuss the problems and consider collaborative ventures and activities.

## 1.10 Other considerations

While visitors to Aberdulais Falls seem genuinely to enjoy the experience, there is a possibility that only when they arrive at the site do they realise it is primarily an industrial site, with an attractive waterfall. There is no mention in the Aberdulais Falls title of it being an industrial site. Even the National Trust Handbook and website are a little ambiguous, using the phrase 'Famous waterfalls and fascinating industrial site' in its literature. Clearly not all visitors are members of the National Trust, and some may feel disappointed that the waterfalls are not central to the visitor experience, or as accessible as some other waterfalls in the region.

## 1.11 Facilities and the visitor experience

The quality of any visitor experience is dependent on a number of variables. These include signposting to the tourist attraction, car parking, catering, toilet facilities and overall interpretation.

The lack of adequate parking, especially on public holidays, was something of a problem in the past, there being no parking on the site itself. To overcome this problem, the National Trust leased part of a nearby hotel's car park, but there were complaints that visitors to the waterfalls were monopolising the hotel car park. This problem has, to some extent, been overcome recently by the creation of a dedicated National Trust car park nearby. This has augmented the use of the hotel car park, which is still leased by the Trust.

## 1.12 Conclusion

It is clear that there are tensions in the use of the site, in that it attracts quite different audiences. There are also tensions relating to the number of visitors it is logistically possible to accommodate, and the economics of maintaining a viable revenue income. The debate goes on about how best to develop and maintain the site in line with the Trust's stated aims and objectives.

There is no definitive answer, and the site will inevitably evolve over time. It is now an attractive visitor attraction, which engages well with current interests in nature conservation, renewable energy and the national curriculum. In the future, those interests may change, and the Trust will almost certainly have to respond to those changes with a different approach. Similarly, the economic and political climate may change and further influence the way Aberdulais Falls operates as a visitor attraction.

You can find information about other industrial sites in South Wales on the Herian: Heritage in Action website.

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Figure 1 RGB Aerial Photography. © GeoPerspectives COWI A/S

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