

To
From
Date 30th April 2010

Trawsfynydd Nuclear Power Station

Following our visit to the site on March 3rd, and building on the work that Simon Wardle has put in to the subject of the heritage of the nuclear industry (including his attendance at Historic Scotland's seminar on Dounreay), I am now able to offer the following advice.

There is little doubt that the surviving structures at Trawsfynydd are significant, both architecturally and historically. The structures were designed by Sir Basil Spence with Dame Sylvia Crowe as landscape consultant, and built between 1959 and 1963. The vast reactor blocks were intended to 'grow straight out of the landscape', and the choice of pre-cast concrete with local aggregate, as the cladding material was an attempt to reinforce a connection to the landscape of the National Park. Historically, the significance of the nuclear industry in the second half of the twentieth century cannot really be down-played. However, in my view there are some very significant gaps between recognising the contribution of this industry to later twentieth century history, and acknowledging the architectural qualities of the structures at Trawsfynydd on the one hand, and being able to say with confidence that the structures themselves have the kind of special architectural and historic interest that should warrant protection.

Architecturally, the structures are inseparable from the functions which they were intended to house, and assessment must necessarily take the technology into account. But nuclear power was a new and developing technology, and no two power stations were the same, either technically or architecturally. This makes it virtually impossible to apply the listing criteria to select with confidence the best example of the type – to attempt selection from a limited number of structures, each of which manifests significant technological differences, each with a quite different architectural interpretation, would be to strain the guiding framework for protection beyond its intended limits.

Even if we do attempt to apply conventional approaches to the assessment of these structures, we run into considerable difficulty. On industrial sites, historic interest is derived from the facility with which surviving structures enable the process to be interpreted – the more complete the complex, the greater the level of interest; some of the original buildings at Trawsfynydd have already been lost – notably the turbine hall. Any claim the reactor blocks might have to technological interest is damaged not only by the incomplete survival of their context in the operating site as a whole, but also by changes that have already been made to their technical content. Plant associated with the reactor cores has already been removed in the first stages of decommissioning. As a result, the technological interest of what survives is limited.

There is then the issue of the architectural interest of two structures designed by a leading architect of the twentieth century. On purely formal grounds, the reactor towers are simply massive concrete framed boxes with reinforced concrete cladding – the brutalist aesthetic that informed them has been put to more amenable use elsewhere in Wales (albeit on a much smaller scale), and it is not difficult to think of more rewarding examples of the work of Sir Basil Spence (albeit not in Wales).

I think there may be another fundamental problem with any attempt at statutory protection of these structures: Because of the nature of the process on this site, protection of the structures in their original form for the long-term is not actually a realistic option. The needs of decommissioning, the safe storage of nuclear material, and the management of contamination, cannot easily be reconciled with the rationale behind listing. Arguably, the question of long-term viable use should not be introduced into the equation, since it could properly be considered as an aspect of the listed building consent process, but it seems reasonably clear to me that listing was intended to identify buildings where either continuation of original use, or adaptive reuse were realistic, viable options. Neither pertains in this instance.

If it is difficult or even impossible to establish a case for special historic or architectural interest, and to identify how listing criteria could reasonably be applied, we are left with the need to acknowledge the impact of the nuclear industry, and of Trawsfynydd in particular, on the landscape, economy and culture of the later twentieth century. A heritage strategy, including a programme of recording (and documenting existing records), working with local communities to document the way in which the power station has shaped their lives and experience, would seem to be an appropriate way of acknowledging the historical interest of the site. Colleagues in the National Museum, CyMAL and RCAHMMW may be prepared to offer advice on drawing up a strategy, and participate in its implementation (RCAHMMW, for example are keen to undertake recording at the site). There may be community interests, and perhaps academic ones (University of Bangor history department?) who could be drawn into a partnership, working with the operators and owners of the site.

I know that English Heritage would welcome the opportunity to work with us and colleagues in Historic Scotland in developing an integrated approach to the UK nuclear industry, focussing not on protection, but on a strategic approach that fully acknowledges the wider significance of these sites in the cultural and economic history of modern times.


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