Don't start from the good old things,
but the bad new ones.
— Bertolt Brecht

saving the bad new things

EXHIBITIONS |
CONSERVATION
BY
JOSHUA CRAZE

unless noted, all images Joshua Craze

I

The excavator made short work of the sheds. Its power shovel easily broke through their corrugated iron walls, rusted by a century of sea spray, to reveal piles of old fishing tackle and the remnants of half-built boats. Amid the destruction, debris from the sheds fell onto the smooth stones of the beach. The sky had the same green-grey hue as the pebbles, as if God had run out of colours in Anglesey and painted this Welsh island with the murky remnants of his palette.

Further along the beach, a woman is walking her dogs. They sniff at the water's edge, eagerly searching for a gift offered up by the sea: a small crab perhaps, or else Mr Jones' unwanted office lunch, tossed out of his car window as he drove along the winding seaside road and now returned to dry land by the tide.

The woman is searching, too. Her head is bowed down, as if in prayer, and her eyes scan the water's wake. She bends down, picks something up, and cradles it in her hand. It's a shard of porcelain, with fine black ink work depicting a castle, hidden under a hazy glaze of blue, yellow and red. It could be a page from a children's colouring book, hardened by the sea. 'Children,' Walter Benjamin wrote, 'learn from bright colours, because the fantastic play of colour is the home of memory without yearning, and it can be free of yearning because it is unalloyed.'

She looks towards the sheds.

from the top: The grey-green sea
Caernarvon Castle egg cup shard
Looking for gifts

II

Beaumaris sits on the eastern edge of the island of Anglesey, and looks across the tidal waterways of the Menai Strait at the Welsh mainland. Like many British towns, it lives off its past.

History in Beaumaris is a guided tour. You can tour the castle, the stately old homes and the streets. I got so used to going on tours that at dinner I half-expected the waiter to offer me a tour of the food: 'here is a dish that was eaten by King Edward I in 1300.' Tours offer little sustenance.

The town was in service to an image of its past. Walking its streets, there were so many small panels, announcing that this house was lived in by x, on y date, that the town began to feel like a ghost – the unwelcome inhabitant of a dwelling whose true owners would return one day. The panels were IOUs: the past's contract with the future.

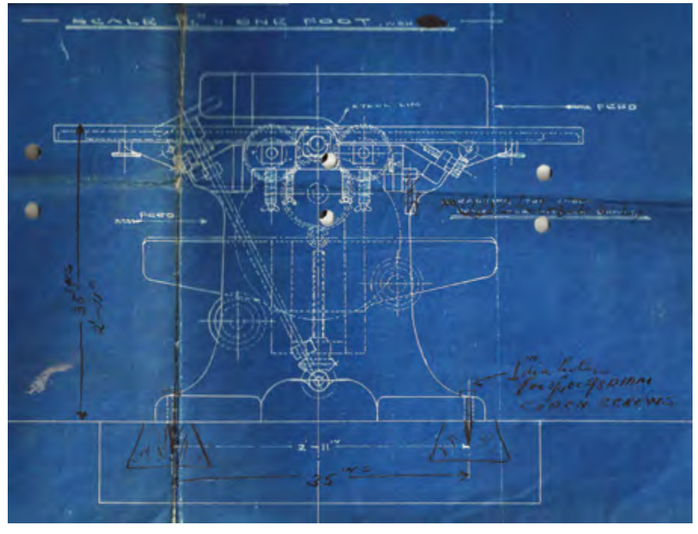
Looming over the town stands the castle, which is, or so one of the panels told me, Britain's 'most perfect example of symmetrical concentric planning.' Edward I built it here to control the Menai Strait, and counter Welsh uprisings against English colonial rule. In 1807, Thomas Bulkeley bought the castle from the English crown. And if it is the castle's towers that dominate the city spatially, then it is the Bulkeley family that does so economically. They have run the town since the fifteenth century. Up until the nineteenth, the town turned around this lineage of English aristocrats; it was a feudal economy of hunters, farmers and domestic servants, all serving at the behest of Lord Bulkeley.

III

In the nineteenth century, industrialisation and increasing artisanal production in Beaumaris was accompanied by the decline of Bulkeley power. The process reached its high point during the First World War, when shipbuilding became Beaumaris's major industry and the Bulkeleys lost many of their male heirs in combat. Baron Hill Estate, the grand mansion above Beaumaris in which they lived, fell into disrepair.

Today, the boatbuilding business is finished – vessels constructed of metal and plastic have replaced the wooden boats that were Beaumaris's pride. The town's economy is now almost entirely reliant on tourists, who come to see the crumbling castle and celebrate Britain's feudal past. The tourists are wistful. Something of the holiday camp pervades Beaumaris's presentation of itself: a time outside of time, where one can come to forget the present, and marvel in the splendour of so much unreality.

I thought this over in a solidly built pub on the main street, nursing a beer. Soon, I began listening to the conversation in the booth opposite me. What language were they speaking? It wasn't Arabic. Slowly, I realised it was Welsh.



above and left: The patient labour of boat-making. Ship design found in the old Gallows Point sheds
Bulkely Arms Hotel receipt
Return to sender: ship-builder's address, found amid the debris of the last shed.

from the top: The Beaumaris Regatta, mid-twentieth century
Ben Williams and his boat
The 1885 Beaumaris Regatta

photographers unknown

In Beaumaris' placards and advertisements, there are hints of a long simmering conflict. I was drinking in the George and Dragon. At the pub's entrance, there is a wooden sign: St George, his shield emblazoned with the red cross of England, is killing the dragon, the symbol of Wales. This immortal combat takes place in pubs all over town. The George and Dragon is owned by the Bulkeley family.

Five hundred years ago, the town's Welsh inhabitants might have been indentured farmers, or servants on the family estate. Today, they work in gift-shops or give guided tours around Bulkeley properties. Seen from this perspective, the nineteenth century and the promise of non-feudal relations was a temporary blip; Britain has always been a feudal society, except now we call it a service economy. In Beaumaris, it is a service economy that feeds off representations of a feudal past, and a feudal economy sustained by tours and castles.

Beaumaris's past is at once impossibly remote and strangely proximate. The mannequins and period furniture of the museums and castles suggests a distant, fantastical past, which we can luxuriate in, as if inhabiting – however briefly – an episode of Downton Abbey. Yet it is the commemoration of this past as past that allows its perpetuation in the present. The same family rules Beaumaris, except now it does so by offering up the fossilised traces of a feudal class structure as if they were not still to be found on every street.

IV

As on land, so at sea. Beaumaris contains two boat worlds. They exist together uneasily. The first is full of yachts that the rich have been sailing since the nineteenth century, though perhaps to say that they sail them is an exaggeration.

The other world is full of fishermen, boat builders and mussel farmers. Early in the nineteenth century, the Bulkeley family decided to place a new mansion along the main sea front. To do so they had to move the working boatmen elsewhere and so leased them a piece of land called Gallows Point, which became the centre of the town's ship-building industry.

The two worlds are opposing poles of activity, and people move between them. As fishing stocks fell around Anglesey and the boatbuilding business collapsed, the men of Gallows Point increasingly went into the other world and worked as sailors on the yachts of the rich. Over the last fifty years, with the collapse of artisanal labour in the town, an aristocratic service industry has returned and the boatmen have become Lord Bulkeley's skippers.

All over Beaumaris, conservation crowds out the living. In recent years, some fishermen have started to work ferrying tourists to Puffin Island, which is just off the tip of Anglesey and home to a large colony of cormorants. There are now plans afoot to make the island a human-free zone: nature immunised against man, just as, in Beaumaris' glorious castle, the past has been immunised from the present.

V

I grew up in a world not entirely dissimilar to Beaumaris. Until I was eleven, I lived in Tintern, Wales, a village that lay between the castles of Chepstow and Monmouth. Many of my childhood memories are of exploring castles, medieval jousts and nights spent reading history books.

As much as I cherish these memories, and the worlds that they created, I am sceptical. Walter Benjamin wrote that '[in] authentic history writing the destructive impulse is just as strong as the saving impulse… The way in which it [history] is valued as heritage is every bit as insidious as its disappearance could ever be.' No better way to kill something than to put it in a glass box – sanctification is a technique of depoliticisation. In Beaumaris, it is the commemoration of the past as a bygone era that allows that era's perpetuation in the present.

Why save any of this? Why not tear down all the castles and the museums? I think about the Brecht quote that gives this essay its title. Brecht instructs us not to turn away from the present, though it is ugly and bad, towards beautiful old things. Start from bad new things.

VI

In 2002, a local businessman announced to the boatmen of Gallows Point that he had purchased the land beneath their feet and he would be redeveloping the sheds: they could rent space in his identikit black and white warehouses, or they could go. After a short struggle, the boatmen accepted their loss. Over the next ten years as the businessman struggled to finance his operation, they allowed their sheds to go to ruin: why conserve what will not last? By the end, the sheds were repositories of memories and craft. Few boats were built for profit, but the boatmen went along to the sheds everyday regardless, to work on their own project or just share stories.

The sheds were finally pulled down in 2013. Unbeknownst to the businessman the sheds had sat atop the town's old rubbish dump, and as the foundations for the new warehouses were dug and the earth placed on the beach, all sorts of objects started to get washed out to sea.

The clay pipes and red ink bottles might have slipped away unnoticed, into the forgetfulness of the water, if it were not for that woman, combing the beach for curiosities to use in her sculptures. That woman – Clare Calder-Marshall – and her partner, Alison Englefield, decided to curate an art exhibition, 'Fragments of the Past: What You Can Find Out From Small Things,' which displayed many of their finds from the beach.

Clare Calder-Marshall

The old and the new sheds

Part of the exhibition is based in the work of two detectives, hunting through the material world for traces of past lives. Part of the reason the stories these objects tell seem so compelling is the particular nature of the pasts that they reveal. In one of my first essays for *On Site review*, I wrote about garbage collection in Juba, South Sudan. After secession from Sudan, the nascent capital's population exploded, and so did the rubbish. Burnt plastic, coke bottles, defunct computers – a litany as recognisable in London as in Juba. The rubbish dump as Gallows Point was different. In each mark on the slip-wear and in the proud proclamations of merchants found on terrine pots there were local stories.

We still have local stories today, of course, but more and more often they are expressed in a material code that an archaeologist would never be able to uncover: loves and losses are both written onto identical, mass-produced objects.

Castles, given time, acquire a singularity the coke bottle will never possess. I remember wandering around them with Clare, my mother; their atmosphere lodged inside me. I remember strolling along beaches with her when I visited and marvelling at the amount of driftwood she would acquire. Clare would save everything if she could. I was more sceptical. Why, when surrounded by a surfeit of information, save anything at all? My question made me feel like the local businessman: 'tear down the sheds, ignore the old rubbish dump. The past is past, and the future is the tourist service economy and warehouses.'

Clare and I were both more interested in the boatmen than the future. One of them, David Gallichon, asked my mother: 'They talk about conservation, but why don't they conserve people like us? We're a dying breed, aren't we? Boating all our lives, since we were children.' I wanted to know not how to conserve them, but how their energy and knowledge could live in a world of gift shops and teenagers who wished they were elsewhere.

For Clare, putting on the exhibit was partly a way of trying – as saving them was not possible – to redeem the destruction of the sheds. The sanctification of past objects, I thought, doesn't seem like an adequate path to salvation. The sheds were a community. The same men sat there, day in day out, talking about boats. They worked with love, spending hours repainting a boat before heading home for the night: it was a practice that grounded them – a relationship to material objects that is not about conservation or heritage, but the active transformation of the world they inhabited.

Clare's practice, in some ways, is analogous to the boat-builders. They were moored in the world through the lathe. After they had finished work, Clare would prowl around Gallows Point, finding objects, taking them home, turning them into sculptures.

right: The last shed to be demolished at Gallows Point
The once-social life of the sheds, Gallows Point community

Clare Calder-Marshall

photographer unknown

VII

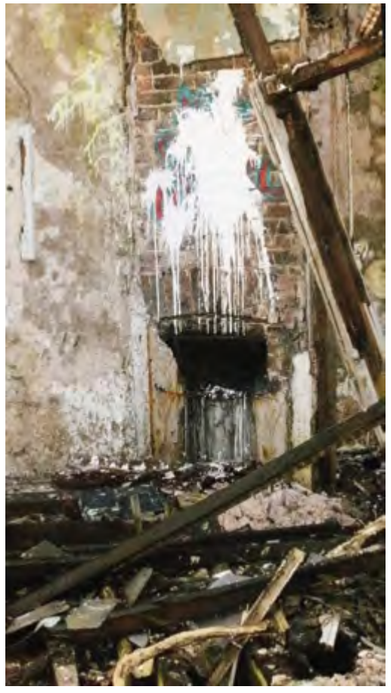
One Sunday, Clare and I visited Baron Hill Estate, then old Bulkeley mansion. Built as a family house and a guesthouse for King George IV, it fell into disuse during the First World War. By the time the Second World War broke out, only one of the Bulkeleys was still living in the vast property. It was then used to house Polish refugees before a fire gutted it. Post-war, the resurgent Bulkeley family wanted to rebuild the premises, but – sweet irony – they have been blocked; there is a protected species of bat that nests in the ruins, whose habitat would be threatened by renovations, and so it is the bat that is sovereign and the ruin that is conserved.

The site of the mansion would make for a perfect children's play area; ruins of meaning, ready to be brought to life by active young minds. Abandoned guests from other continents hide in the garden: palm trees and jasmine flowers – foreigners to these lands – clearly brought here to be part of an arboretum, but now overrun by gorse and blackberry. The walls hold holiday dreams suspended in mid-air: fireplaces open onto nothing, and below them trees emerge out of the sides of what were once four-poster beds. At the edge of the manor lies the rusted skeleton of a greenhouse. Its curved metal ribs now jostle with tree trunks whose limbs follow the path of their metal forbearers. When should we stop the process of decay? The house was already ruined before the fire. If I had seen it in 1917, with just one ageing Bulkeley and a skeleton staff, wouldn't I have said that this is the ruin of the British upper class – little did I know – and that it should be preserved?

These questions bring me back to Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*. The anthropologist is wandering disconsolately around the concrete bungalows of the suburbs of Lahore, looking in vain for the real Lahore: the mythical place of which he dreams. It is a classically modernist trope: the past worlds are gone, and our dull concrete constructions have replaced myth with utility. He is sceptical of his own melancholy. He writes:

> 'I lose on both counts, and more seriously than may at first appear, for, while I complain of being able to glimpse no more than the shadow of the past, I may be insensitive to reality as it is taking shape at this very moment, since I have not reached the stage of development at which I would be capable of perceiving it. A few hundred years hence, in this same place, another traveller, as despairing as myself, will mourn the disappearance of what I might have seen, but failed to see.'

He is stuck in the temporal bind: unable to see the present properly, he can also not find the past and so enters a dizzying perspectivalism in which he is always out of joint with time. To find the past can be to miss the present, and to enter into the present, as our local businessman in Beaumaris does, might be to miss its significance. The ruin never stops, for it is the ruin of time.



Joshua Craze

Clare Calder-Marshall

above: The ruins of Baron Hill Estate, part of the Bulkeley family holdings
Clay pipes found after the demolition of the Gallows Point boat sheds. Part of the exhibition 'Fragments of the Past: What You Can Find Out From Small Things'

VIII

There is something redeeming, *saving* I might even say, in putting our ruins to work. Clare and Alison's exhibition rearranged the past and set it in motion. It was neither sentimental veneration of the past as past, nor its destruction in the name of the future. They sculpted it. Turned it into montages. Their art is one that preserves fragments of times that are not our own by breaking them and reassembling them in a present saturated in pasts in which we cannot recognise ourselves. The Gallows Point community turned up for the exhibition. Gruff men, not given to words, walked around the exhibition with their children, and were suddenly turned into narrators of their own stories. Peter Brimecombe, eighty years old, explained to Wilf Levett's daughter that unique boats were designed at Gallows Point. Her father had designed those boats, though he had never spoken about them. Through the exhibition, the Bad New Things of Beaumaris, who work in gift shops and tourist agencies, were given a different history to the castles and the guided tours that surround them, and it is one that promised the transformation of the material world, and not stagnation. ∾

from the top: Traces of the British empire– the finds at Gallows Point include wares from India

The paths traced by the detectives at the 'Fragments of the Past' exhibition

Exploding time, a montage of the old sheds of Gallows Point

all images this page: Clare Calder-Marshall

Single lane wooden bridge with rusted patina of steel frame spanning the Crowsnest River in Blairmore, Alberta

Eroded concrete bridge pilings of a rail bridge spanning the Crowsnest River in Blairmore, approximately 80 m east of the single lane vehicular bridge above

Michael Leeb

residual structures
inevitable ends

INFRASTRUCTURE | WEATHER AND USE
BY
MICHAEL J LEEB

With the passage of time architecture becomes a remnant shadow of its original design and built form. The very idea of permanence in architecture is itself a weak concept. These two images reveal the obsolete and weakened infrastructure of two single-lane bridges in the Crowsnest Pass through erosion, weathering, neglect and a lack of both utility and need. Despite the strength, intended solidity and permanence of concrete and steel, the unintended consequence is eventual – failure.

The permanence and the pursuit of architectural legacy closely associated with auteurship inevitably must be reconciled with its antithesis: environmental change or a state of flux that is the invariable result of entropy. ∾