HARLECH CASTLE FOOTBRIDGE – A STRUCTURE THAT CONNECTS THE PAST WITH PRESENT

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Summary
A new pedestrian crossing opened in August 2015 to visitors of Harlech Castle providing level access to the castle from the newly opened visitor centre. The installation of the new footbridge was possibly the most ambitious construction project to take place at Harlech since the building of the castle itself.

The paper tells the story of how this new footbridge came about, its design development from a two-span simple assembly into a three-span, modern, elegant Z-shaped structure which has captured the imagination of many. The footbridge has been nicknamed the “floating bridge”.

The paper also discusses the place of the footbridge within the history of the site, the positive and negative reactions that it received and how it has become part of the much-loved landmark site, featuring on newly commissioned souvenirs.

Keywords: footbridge; structural steel; aesthetics; heritage; historical; community engagement; socio-economic impact

1. Introduction
A new three-span footbridge now links the new visitor centre at Harlech Castle directly to the castle itself, spanning over the existing car park and defence moat. Harlech Castle is one of the finest surviving 13th century military castles in Britain, if not in Europe, and forms part of the Castles and Town Walls of King Edward in Gwynedd World Heritage Site, reflecting its importance and remarkable state of preservation. The castle is also a Grade I listed building, a Scheduled Ancient Monument and a Guardianship Monument under the care of Cadw, the Welsh Government’s historic environment service. It is located within a Conservation Area and also within Snowdonia National Park.

Fig. 1. Harlech Castle and the new footbridge
Fig. 2. Footbridge links Harlech Castle to the new visitor centre - © Crown copyright (2017) Cadw, Welsh Government
Cadw had a clear vision for the footbridge. These aims were not entirely shared with other stakeholders, with a significant minority of the public being opposed to any kind of modern structure in such close proximity to the castle, favouring some kind of pastiche masonry bridge instead.

The seasonal economy of a semi-rural town such as Harlech is heavily reliant on tourism. The heritage economy in Gwynedd employed over 8000 people in 2014 – 15% of all employment in the county. This naturally meant that all local eyes were set on Cadw’s plan to redevelop the area surrounding the town’s main attraction: Harlech Castle.

Stakeholders were consulted from the very beginning of the project. During the early design process the design team met with representatives from Snowdonia National Park Authority and the Design Commission for Wales to discuss the proposals. Consultation with the North Wales Police Architectural Liaison Officer was also held to ensure the safety of visitors and local residents. A series of public consultations were held in Harlech to give residents and visitors the opportunity to comment on the design. Attendees were encouraged to provide detailed feedback on any aspect of the proposals. This feedback was collated by Cadw and distributed amongst the design team.

2. Conclusion

The aim was to provide barrier free and intuitive circulation from the edge of the site to the castle entrance. Visitors can clearly see the castle, the visitor centre entrance, and the footbridge upon arrival, immediately understanding how they will pass through the site. The footbridge is designed to minimise interference with the views on the surrounding landscape, so that visitors can understand the relationship to the mountains of Snowdonia even before they pass onto the better viewing platform provided by the bridge itself.

The project proved to be an overwhelming success. The new footbridge now provides level access to the castle’s gatehouse and inner ward which had not been available for centuries. The footbridge itself is proving to be a local attraction and visitors have commented positively on its aesthetic design. The visitor centre café itself is often filled with tourists and locals alike who frequently admire the views of Snowdonia from the café and terrace area.

Since the opening of the new facilities, there has been a significant increase in the commercial activities of the local businesses. New restaurants and shops have opened and businesses are investing in their properties. As a result of the investment in the new and redeveloped facilities at Harlech, Cadw have reported a 69% increase in income from the increase in visitors and the refurbished shop has seen a sales increase of 439%.

3. Awards

The whole project won the Institution of Civil Engineers’ 2016 George Gibby Heritage Award, was highly commended at the British Construction Industry Awards in 2016 and was a regional finalist for the 2017 Civic Trust Award in the UK. The footbridge won one of the five UK Structural Steel Design Awards in 2016 and was a finalist for the International Structural Awards 2016 in the footbridge category.