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BI-ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

2026 | SUMMER EDITION



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INTRODUCTION

A Warm Welcome to the Third Edition of the Op Heritage Cymru Newsletter

The first half of 2026 has seen continued collaboration between policing and partner agencies across Wales in addressing a range of heritage crime challenges as they have emerged. This sustained, joint approach remains fundamental to reducing opportunities for heritage crime and mitigating its impact on our historic environment where offences do occur.

Our Overarching Objectives:

- Develop and deliver training programmes for Police Officers and cadets to enhance the prevention, identification, and investigation of heritage crime
- Strengthen partnerships and improve coordination between policing, Cadw, and partner organisations
- Increase public awareness of heritage preservation through effective community engagement and targeted educational initiatives

By working collaboratively, we can better safeguard Wales rich and diverse heritage for future generations.



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NIGHTHAWKING ACTIVITY ACROSS WALES

The year began with continued reports of nighthawking activity across Wales, including incidents affecting a number of significant heritage sites.

Several reports have involved well-known landmark locations. In one case within the Dyfed-Powys Police area, a total of 59 holes were discovered at Aberystwyth Castle, with six located within the legally protected scheduled monument area.

Gwent Police have also received reports of suspected nighthawking at Caerphilly Castle. On multiple occasions in recent months, staff have identified groups of freshly dug holes within the castle grounds, believed to be the result of illegal metal detecting.

Nighthawking continues to pose a significant threat to Wales' historic environment, causing irreversible damage to archaeological features and the loss of important heritage assets.

Under Section 60 of the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2023, the unauthorised use of metal detecting equipment on a scheduled monument is a criminal offence.



Some of the holes discovered at Caerphilly Castle.



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COMMUNITY EVENT SPOTLIGHT

In May, a small community woodland in the Tredegar area, hosted a highly successful Viking re-enactment event.

The weekend offered an immersive Viking Age experience, featuring full-contact combat displays and an authentic encampment at its centre.

Visitors had the opportunity to explore living history, engaging with reenactors and gaining a vivid insight into life during the Viking period.

From traders and crafts to children's activities and traditional music, there was plenty to keep visitors entertained.



Reenactors engaged in a combat display.



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Recognising the excellent engagement opportunity that *Scandinavian early medieval combat and living history re-enactments* present, representatives for Op Heritage Cymru were naturally in attendance!



Gwent Police officers and heritage crime volunteer representing Op Heritage Cymru.

Engagement at this type of event is particularly effective, as it brings together individuals with a strong interest in the historic environment, including landowners, volunteers, and local historians.

This supports the development of trusted relationships and encourages community-led intelligence sharing, which remains vital in identifying and preventing offences in rural and remote locations.



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OFF-ROAD VEHICLES AND THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

The impact of illegal off-road vehicle use, including 4x4s and off-road bikes, on the historic environment has long been recognised as a significant concern.

Such activity can cause considerable and often irreversible damage to sensitive archaeological sites and landscapes. The effects are not only immediate but can permanently degrade the historical record through erosion, ground disturbance and the displacement of archaeological material.



Historic landscape erosion caused by off-road bikes.

Illegal off-roading has been shown to cause deep rutting, erosion and the breakdown of historic earthworks, in some cases reducing archaeological features to their underlying core and permanently altering the landscape.

Enforcement in remote and open upland areas presents particular challenges, often requiring specialist resources and coordinated approaches. In response, Welsh forces have increasingly utilised aerial support, including police helicopters and drones, which have often proven effective in detecting and disrupting this illegal activity.



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Rural crime and NPAS helicopter on an operation.



Drone deployment.



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DYFED-POWYS POLICE: PROTECTING PLACES OF WORSHIP

Dyfed-Powys Police (DPP) Heritage Crime Officer, Gary Gwilt, advises that **four offences involving churches** have been recorded so far this year across the force area. These consist of:

- Two incidents of theft
- Two incidents of criminal damage

Incidents of this nature are closely monitored by the DPP Rural Crime Team, who take a proactive approach in identifying patterns, supporting investigations, and working with partners to prevent further offences.

Advice for Churches and Community Groups:

- Ensure locks, gates, and access points are regularly checked and maintained
- Consider basic security measures such as motion lighting, alarms, or CCTV where appropriate
- Keep valuable or historic items securely stored and, where possible, recorded or photographed
- Encourage local communities to remain vigilant and report any suspicious activity promptly

Early reporting and strong community awareness continue to play a key role in protecting these important sites.



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HERITAGE WATCH – CRIME PREVENTION INITIATIVE SUPPORTING RURAL CHURCHES

In January, the Gwent Rural Crime Team were pleased to support some more local churches through the Heritage Watch initiative, supplying 20 tailored crime prevention packs.

The packs were provided following a request from the Church of Wales and were sufficient to cover an entire rural ministry area.

Each pack was carefully assembled to help safeguard these valued community spaces and included Smart Water forensic marking products, visible deterrent stickers, Heritage Watch signage, along with practical advice to reduce the risk of crime.



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LOCAL COMMUNITIES PLAY A CRITICAL FRONTLINE ROLE IN REPORTING HERITAGE CRIME



In Wales many sites are remote and challenging to monitor.

KEY ROLES OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

1. Early Detection and Reporting

Community members such as farmers, landowners, walkers and volunteers are often the first to notice:

- Suspicious activity (e.g. vehicles near remote sites at night)
- Signs of illegal metal detecting or excavation
- Damage to monuments, churches, or historic buildings

Because police and heritage bodies cannot maintain constant physical presence, community vigilance effectively acts as an early warning system.

2. Intelligence Sharing

Local knowledge is invaluable. Communities can provide:

- Information on suspicious individuals or activity
- Details about access routes, terrain, and site vulnerabilities
- Context about what is “normal” vs suspicious behaviour

This enhances intelligence-led policing and helps build stronger evidential cases.



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3. Participation in Watch Schemes

Initiatives such as Heritage Watch schemes rely on community participation. These schemes:

- Encourage structured reporting
- Facilitate communication between residents and police
- Disseminate alerts and prevention advice

In Wales, these often integrate with wider rural crime initiatives, strengthening overall coverage.

4. Supporting Prevention

Communities contribute to prevention by:

- Increasing visible presence at heritage sites
- Promoting responsible access and awareness
- Working with Cadw and local authorities on site stewardship

This reduces opportunities for offenders and reinforces community ownership.



Historic Blaenavon Ironworks.



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NEW TECHNOLOGY INVESTMENT HELPING TACKLE HERITAGE CRIME

In March, officers from Gwent Police Rural Crime Team were issued with head-worn night-vision technology, marking a significant boost to their operational capabilities.

This latest investment enhances the team's already advanced toolkit, working alongside thermal imaging and other specialist equipment to tackle challenging offences such as nighthawking.

The new kit provides a powerful tactical advantage, enabling officers to move across complex terrain in complete darkness without the need for visible light, remaining unseen while maintaining full situational awareness. Crucially, it also allows for evidential recording in low-light conditions, strengthening the team's ability to detect, disrupt, and prosecute offenders.



New night vision equipment being setup on a deployment.

A Rural Crime Team spokesperson commented:

“This technology is another new development for us. Being able to operate effectively in complete darkness gives a clear advantage, particularly in remote rural areas. It not only improves our safety, but also significantly increases our ability to gather evidence and bring offenders to justice.”



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CADW INVESTING IN DRONE TECHNOLOGY TO PROTECT WALES' HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

Cadw are investing in drone technology, marking a significant step forward in how Wales protects, monitors, and manages the historic environment. As heritage assets face growing pressures from natural erosion to criminal activity, this investment reflects a broader shift toward smarter, more efficient methods of safeguarding nationally important sites.



MODERN TOOLS FOR AN HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

Wales is home to a vast and diverse historic environment, including scheduled monuments, castles, ancient landscapes and archaeological sites. Many of these assets are located in remote or difficult-to-access areas, making traditional inspection methods time-consuming and, at times, impractical.

The introduction of drone technology allows Cadw to overcome these challenges. Equipped with high-resolution cameras and mapping capabilities, drones can quickly capture detailed imagery of sites from multiple angles, providing a level of coverage that would otherwise take significant time or incur additional costs.

This approach supports Cadw's core responsibilities in:

- Monitoring the condition of heritage assets
- Identifying risks and deterioration
- Supporting conservation planning
- Enhancing public stewardship of historic sites



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STRENGTHENING THE RESPONSE TO HERITAGE CRIME

From a crime prevention and enforcement perspective, drones also offer clear advantages. Heritage crime such as illegal metal detecting, unauthorised excavations, and criminal damage often takes place in isolated areas where detection is difficult.

Drone deployment enables:

- Rapid assessment of reported incidents
- Documentation of damage for evidential purposes
- Monitoring of vulnerable or targeted sites
- Support to policing partners during investigations

By capturing accurate, time-stamped visual data, drones help build stronger evidential cases and improve the overall response to offences affecting the historic environment.

IMPROVING EFFICIENCY AND REDUCING RISK

Traditional survey methods often involve manual inspections, sometimes requiring personnel to access steep, unstable, or hazardous terrain. Drones significantly reduce these risks by allowing remote assessments without compromising safety.

In addition, they deliver clear efficiency gains:

- Faster surveys across large areas
- Reduced need for repeat site visits
- Lower operational costs over time
- Improved ability to track changes longitudinally

This allows Cadw to allocate resources more strategically, focusing on sites most at risk while maintaining oversight of the wider historic environment.

This investment not only improves operational capability but also reinforces Wales' position as a leader in innovative, collaborative heritage protection at a national level.



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ACTION TAKEN AGAINST UNAUTHORISED URBAN EXPLORER

Over recent months, concerns have been raised following a number of incidents involving unauthorised entry into disused mining tunnel networks within the Blaenavon World Heritage Site.

In some instances, access was gained by removing official mine security padlocks, with the intruder then replacing them with their own locks to maintain entry.

Some of the affected access points form part of protected scheduled monuments, giving rise to concerns around potential heritage crime and the risk of damage to historically significant sites.

Thanks to the vigilance and proactive work of organisations responsible for managing these locations, evidence identifying a potential suspect was located on social media and shared with Police.

The individual was subsequently identified, traced, and formally dealt with. In this case, a Community Resolution was issued, requiring the individual to undertake an educational input around the legal implications of their actions and donate a discovered mining artefact to a local museum as a means of reparation.



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THE SLATE LANDSCAPE OF NORTHWEST WALES

We really need to highlight some of the fantastic work taking place in North Wales!

The Slate Landscape of Northwest Wales World Heritage Site has produced a number of heritage crime-related educational resources and have been working with local schools.

[Click here to view the resources](#)

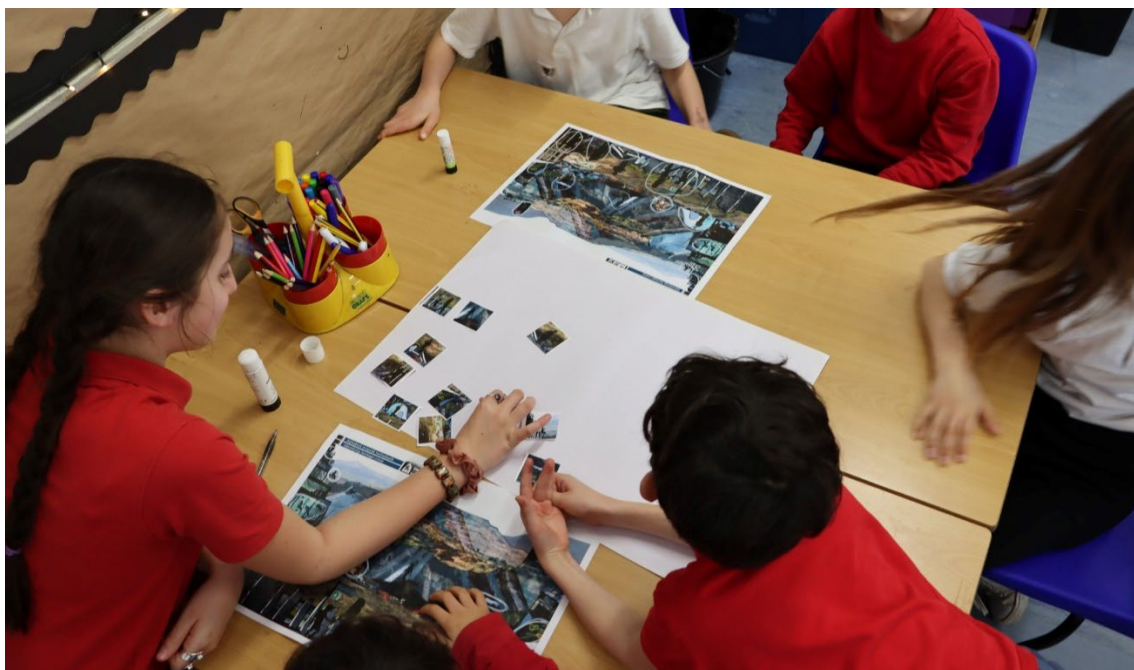


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The new resources being utilised by a local school group.

In addition to the fantastic outreach work taking place across schools and communities, a new working group has also been formed, seeking to address increased instances of heritage crime in the area. Representation includes local authority officers (Cyngor Gwynedd), Cadw, landowners and North Wales Police.

[Click here to view the World Heritage Site's heritage crime web page](#)



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‘WALKERS CAIRNS’ CLEARING DAY - CARNEDD DAFYDD

A recent day of activity on the summit of Carnedd Dafydd proved highly successful, bringing together volunteers alongside partners from the National Trust, Cadw, the Snowdonia Society and Anelu’n Uchel to remove unnecessary cairns.

The initiative focused on dismantling recently constructed cairns, which can have a negative impact on both the natural environment and walker safety. Some of these cairns had been built directly on established paths, with the potential to mislead walkers particularly in poor visibility or misty conditions.

Beyond navigation concerns, the redistribution of stones contributes to increased soil erosion and can divert footfall across sensitive summit areas. The construction of new cairns also risks damaging bryophyte habitats (mosses and liverworts), which are both fragile and slow to recover. Disturbing these environments can have lasting effects on the delicate ecosystems that characterise Wales upland landscapes.

All work was undertaken under the guidance of an archaeologist from the National Trust and Cadw, ensuring that historic or archaeological cairns were preserved and that only modern, unnecessary structures were removed.

Overall, the day marked a positive and practical step towards protecting the unique mountain environment, demonstrating the value of partnership working and coordinated action in safeguarding our natural and historic landscapes.

You can view footage of cairn removal work here:

<https://www.facebook.com/share/r/17U3g5tffA/?mibextid=wwXlfr>



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Before the work.



After the work.



Before the work.



After the work.



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FINAL THOUGHTS

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this edition — your input is what truly brings it to life and helps showcase the breadth of work taking place across Wales to tackle heritage crime.

Op Heritage Cymru continues to grow as a partnership and this newsletter remains an important way of sharing updates, highlighting good practice, and recognising the collective effort being made across organisations to protect our historic environment.

If you have something you would like to share for the next issue (**Winter 2026**), please do get in touch with PC Daniel Counsell (Gwent Police) (Daniel.Counsell@gwent.police.uk)

Contributions of all sizes are welcome and help build a clearer picture of the work being done across Wales.



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