

Case Note : creative approaches to funding & then restoring an abandoned Georgian “folly” results in a very popular award-winning cliff-top visitor attraction on the Isle of Anglesey, UK



Anglesey Borough Council, who owned a continuous swathe of coastal heath a-top the 60-metre-high cliffs at South Stack, near Holyhead were persuaded to grant to RSPB a long lease of this important habitat for expert appropriate management. Separately, the long-derelect & abandoned “*Twr Ellin*”, a “Listed Building” was sold to RSPB for the token sum of £1! It was considered to have potential as a seabird spectacle viewing point, as it overlooked the formidable cliffs. The South Stack Lighthouse, built in 1805 was already popular with the visiting public, journeying here from throughout GB & from abroad. Porpoises can be seen here, close-in.

South Stack Cliffs, Ynys Môn, Wales, UK.

Introduction: For RSPB, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the largest voluntary wildlife conservation charity in the UK, the 1970s was a decade of rapid growth and expansion of educational and conservation activities. Amongst those were concerted efforts to provide further facilities to welcome visitors to its wildlife reserves, throughout the UK & also to promote their wildlife experience & to enhance educational & volunteering opportunities, for young and old. This Case Note concerns a *derelect* stone-built Georgian “folly”, “*Twr Ellin*/Ellin’s Tower” 4 Km West of Holyhead on the dramatic & remote North Western coast of *Ynys Môn*/Anglesey, Gwynedd, Pays-de-Galles/Wales. This is AONB¹, heritage coast & crossed by the 200Km “Anglesey Coastal Path”.



¹ A UK government land designation, “Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty”

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Background: Sea-bird nesting cliffs, hosting 9,000 breeding sea-birds, and maritime heathland were priority threatened habitats supporting emblematic species including puffins & choughs & peregrine falcons plus delicate invertebrates including the silver-studded blue butterfly (below) . There was also *an endemic plant* – the Spathulate fleawort. These habitats & features had been formally Notified as “SSSI”² for their special scientific interests requiring particular care.



Appraisal: *Twr Ellin, begun in 1820* had been constructed in the Regency era to house a fossil collection & provide a serious study “bolt-hole” & *summer house* for the archaeologist & mining magnate, The Hon William Owen Stanley of Penrhyn, Bangor, Liberal MP for Anglesey & also Chester. The name commemorates his wife, The Hon Ellin Stanley. They were contemporaries of artist John Constable & of Florence Nightingale. The castellated tower was used as a key strategic coastal “look-out” over the Irish Sea in both World Wars. Abandoned, in the 1950s, the locally quarried “Penrhyn” roof-slates had been salvaged & the stone-built tower left to decay. In 1977, it presented an iconic but eroding shell without roof, doors or windows. The RSPB Regional Officer’s “vision” though was clear – a restored 3-storey observation-point where trained Summer Wardens would greet, assist, guide and inform; dispensing local knowledge & imparting skills in using binoculars & identifying birds, other animals, especially marine mammals, plants and insects plus the local geology, archaeology & landform. As an experience, this would probably be unique. There would be exhibitions, inside plus telescopes & binoculars on-loan. In time, school-parties would be welcomed and guided to help to appreciate the cliff-top spectacle.

² A further government land designation, “Site of Special Scientific Interest” bringing to the attention of owners & occupiers the features, species, communities & habitats worthy of careful consideration before changes are made.

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The Project: Preparing a working-drawing was easy, especially as 2 climbers had been “press-ganged” at South Stack Cliffs to help to measure the structure! A staircase, doors and windows were needed plus a new roof and flooring. The Planning & Building Control authorities were sympathetic & supportive – the former slate roof inside the parapet walls need not be replaced like-for-like. Contractors were few in number, but tenders were invited for the renovation work. On opening those, it became clear that a traditional approach would be too costly. Even the lowest tender amounted to nearly £40K equivalent, then to the average cost of a family home! There were discretionary grants available, from the Countryside Commission & others, but even so, this project was in jeopardy unless a less costly approach was found.

The opportunity: Anglesey Borough Council, aware of the paucity of full-time jobs in the area, had recently launched a “Community Task Force” scheme, a creative measure to develop skills in young local apprentices. A project underway at a nearby Country Park was visited & negotiations opened with the Task Force Leader. Simultaneously, the most-enthusiastic Contractor was approached to manage logistics; order and supply scaffolding; site-tools and materials; co-ordinate trades and oversee quality-control. This would be a training project of considerable scale! The pieces of the puzzle were now marshalled, including the grants enabling construction-work to begin, in early Spring 1980, offering the best of the weather conditions.

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Outcomes: The whole of the works were completed on time, within budget and to a remarkably high standard. Those included a laminated timber flat roof finished in asphalt, above but forming a bright natural ceiling beneath. The whole of the outside was rendered in “pebbledash” to resist the extreme exposure. *Twr Ellin* was weathertight once more, for the first time in 30 years. As importantly, a whole team of young apprentices had a life-changing experience working together on a Listed Building & the satisfaction of contributing towards conserving a regional icon plus improving their longer-term employment opportunities.

Others appreciated what had been achieved here too, for the project was invested with *The Prince of Wales Conservation Award*. The successful combined approach to funding & construction was “borrowed”, later to enable an in-house programme to renovate some derelict buildings to provide wardening accommodation for the RSPB Reserve at Blacktoft Sands, Whitgift near Goole on the Humber estuary, also a remote & under-developed district. Much later, RSPB had the outside painted to “freshen-up” *Twr Ellin*. The effect resembles the nearby South Stack Lighthouse. That decision was an effective investment, for *Twr Ellin* looks very well-kempt, 40 years-on – whether inside...



Or outside!



a tribute to the skills of those Apprentices!



Local economic outcomes: An economist reviewed the project in 2017/2018 concluding that the 185,000 Recorded visitors to the RSPB South Stack Cliffs Reserve that year contributed £3.87 Million to the local economy. That is the equivalent of over 92 full-time jobs. In a remote region, that is outstanding!

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Twr Ellin, Ellin’s Tower restored to welcome visitors to the scarce Maritime heathland and seabird nesting cliffs at South Stack, Ynys Môn/Anglesey, Gwynedd, UK. The heath looks to be in fine condition, too!



Personal Role: Project Manager

Dramatis personae: Project site co-ordinator, Douglas Pritchard, Brynsiencyn, Anglesey/Ynys Môn.