

DOWH RESEARCH REPORT May 2022

1 WHERE WE ARE NOW.

In the last research report to trustees (December 2019) it was stated that DOWH was ‘in a period of consolidation and review’. In this respect there has been some very significant progress.

1.1 The **houses database** is now complete and final arrangements are being developed to make it secure and accessible to all those with a ‘need to know’ – it’s a management tool rather than a research database and allows us to see precisely which houses have been visited, when and by whom, and alerts us to any assessments made on those visits that give us a solid basis for deciding whether or not to follow-up with further calls and action (such as the scope for house histories, recording and tree-ring dating). There are currently around one thousand buildings on the list. The data has been inputted and finessed by Jane Parry-Evans based on information furnished largely by Margaret Dunn. John Townsend and Peter Masters have been heavily involved in design and development and the whole project made possible by a generous grant from the Marc Fitch Fund.

1.2 The **parishes project** has made headway, faster in some areas than others, and several databases of houses that were in existence in c.1700 have been created. Some parishes have mustered totals of one or two hundred, so pruning these down to those that survive in something like their early form and then visiting on a selective basis, is a challenge for the new post-Covid world where, hopefully, doors will be opened to us again. John Townsend developed the recording template and will be organising a workshop (or workshops) with volunteers who wish to take it further. Topical issues include how the parishes project information can be fed into the houses database (so that is an active rather than an historical archive), what the final product might look like (house histories, geographic surveys or thematic studies, for instance) and where some external funding might help (for tree-ring dating, architectural recording, outreach and publishing costs etc.).

1.3 The **new website**, completely refreshed by Peter Masters with input from a small users’ group has created a valuable and easy-to-use portal for accessing all the Group’s reports. Access has been streamlined both for users perusing the site and for those who are searching for individual houses via a search engine like Google. However the reports are reached, users will be made aware of the Group’s mission and authorship (and copyright) will be clearly attributed. This is a major step forward for researchers both within and beyond the Group and an important part of our charitable purposes.

1.4 The **Newsletters** (all but the current one accessible to all via the website) in themselves form a useful resource, but under Terry Williams’s editorship it now includes an increasing number of short thematic and research papers that give some flavour of the range of members’ active interests – from beds and bed-making to bats, as well as book reviews, news and calls for help. The programme of Zoom lectures continues to cover varied ground and attracts 40-50 with Q&As to follow. All this reflects an active and interested membership.

2 INTO THE FUTURE.

2.1 What do members want?

Over the next months we must decide how best to support the energy and expertise of our volunteer members in expanding our research yet further as we return with some degree of comfort and confidence to the field, library and local archives. While research is intrinsically useful and rewarding, it does have other very important spin-offs. Parish project and individual house research is likely to identify not only interesting houses but owners who are happy to host visits – a pool that has almost disappeared over the last two years – and this should lead to greater engagement on the part of our members.

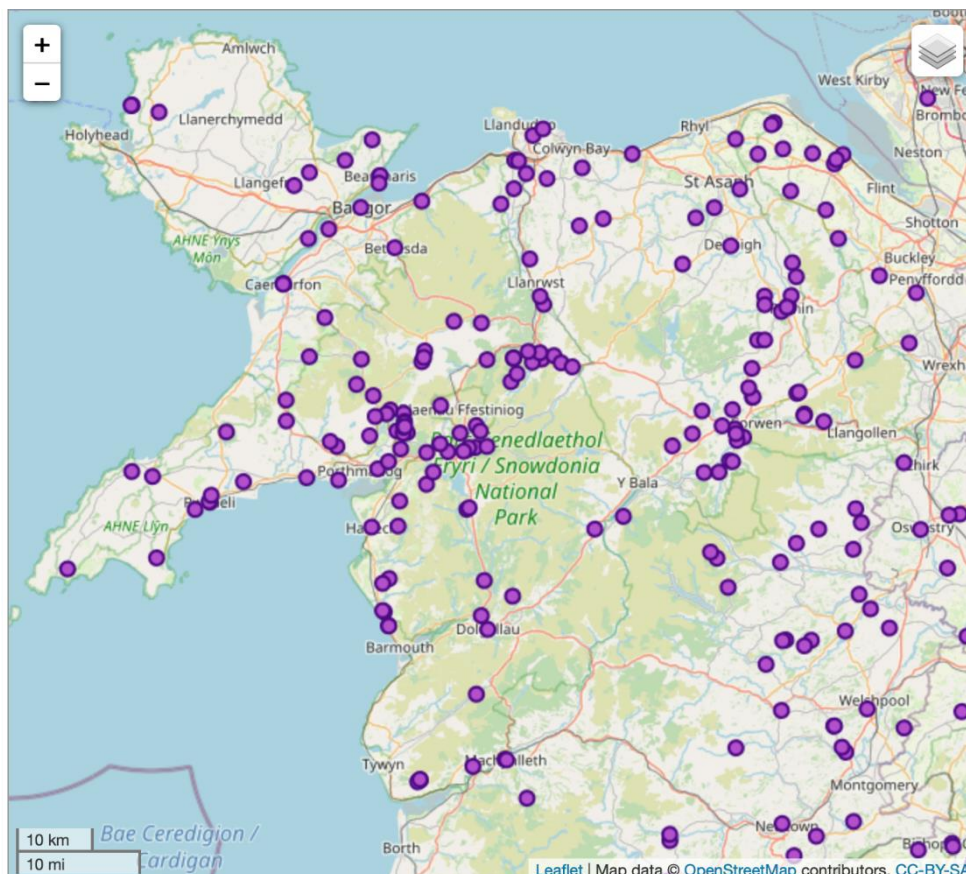
When Wally Barr produced the results of his analysis of what members wanted from DOWH (March 2019) house visits were by far the most valued activity: he observed that ‘perhaps the chance to share an interest in old houses with like-minded others is not something that arises often in our everyday lives’. While many people simply enjoy and profit from these occasions, others will be drawn in to more committed involvement. Interestingly, one of the key ‘moderately popular’ activities was attending training sessions – on library and archive research, building recording etc., along with ‘academic and professional talks’.

When thinking about possible new directions, one has to balance present levels of active member engagement against the likelihood of attracting more through house visits, training workshops and lectures (and maybe conferences and study tours). Currently, around 32 members are active, in the sense of giving large amounts of time to research, administration and outreach. Attendance at zoom lectures adds a further 25-30 people who regularly put time aside. Overall, this adds up to about 30% of our membership. Very likely, the resumption of house visits and other activities will bring an increase in these numbers, but organising these make considerable demands on a small number of people, and needs to be underpinned by sustained research (such as parishes project and house histories). A 30% base of active member compares well with other similar societies. But we do need to be realistic about what we can take on with the people who are prepared to put in the time. One other conclusion of Wally Barr’s analysis was that ‘no great enthusiasm was expressed by members for becoming more involved in the running of DOWH, either at a branch or a

group level' or actively promoting the work of DOWH in their own communities. Having said all that, it should not be seen as a counsel of despair: in the post-Covid world where the gloom is already lifting, people are likely to seek out new activities which bring them into contact with old friends and open up the possibility of making new ones.

2.2 Parishes project, house histories and research modules

North Wales is a large area and research has in practice been carried out at a more local level, hence the branch structure. Our lead publication, *Discovering the Historic Houses of Snowdonia*, grew out of such a geographically focused project, the N W Wales Dendrochronology Project, although it did spread the net wider to take in new discoveries in other parts of the region. This is reflected on the map below in the concentration of tree-ring dates secured as part of that project in the Blaenau, Beddgelert and Penmachno areas. There are comparable tree-ring dating clusters in the swathe of territory reaching from east of Bala to north of Ruthin; the lower Conwy Valley; and, though less concentrated, in north Flintshire. These tree-ring dates largely emerged from the 3-year N E Wales Dendro-Project that was, and continues to be, underpinned by active research, largely in the form of house histories but with some publications, too, by a small but productive group of researchers. Other pockets of research activity exist, too.



Distribution of tree-ring dated buildings in North Wales. © Vernacular Architecture Group

Many have been commissioned by DOWH (and its predecessors), hence the concentrations in the Blaenau/Penmachno and the Cynwyd/Corwen/Ruthin areas reflecting the Snowdonia Houses (N W Wales) and the N E Wales projects for which we were able to secure considerable external funding.

2.2 Research workshops

Future research must be led by volunteer members' interests and skills but, over time, these will indicate patterns that might form the basis of future research themes. Where there is demand, it is suggested that research workshops are organised where findings and future directions can be discussed, perhaps with some input from external researchers with related interests (for instance, the Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates). These workshops should run in parallel with the proposed parish histories workshops (although these, at least initially, are designed to agree a consistent standard of recording data). Whatever the mechanics, the key will be to bring together people with varied skills and interests, including, no doubt, family and house history, building recording, poetry, farming and industrial history, social history that throws light on how buildings were used, genealogy, geology and building materials. Other local groups like us that have successful building research and recording projects tend to have very mixed-skill teams that play to their members' particular interests and strengths.

2.3 Building survey training workshops

DOWH has agreed to co-host the 2022 VAG building recording workshop for the weekend of 1-2 October 2022 based in and around Ruthin. Further details to follow. We were going ahead with this for 2021 but it had to be shelved. The annual weekend training conference (two have been held so far, one in Gloucestershire in 2018, another in Wiltshire in 2019) aims at those who are new to looking at vernacular buildings. Based on visits to buildings rather than on papers, the course introduces people to examining buildings, covering basic vocabulary, some of the typical forms of vernacular buildings and how we go about investigating them.

Other training workshops held at branch level have proved moderately popular (see 2.1. above), e.g., on particular classes of document such as wills and inventories, using the resources of our local archives.

2.4 Zoom lectures, branch activities, conferences and study tours

All these activities, essentially outreach, feed into research outcomes: zoom lectures stimulate people to make connections they may not otherwise have thought about (and also provide a group-wide activity that brings larger numbers of people together than would be possible with physical meetings); house visits excite interest and can lead to deeper engagement if support and training is available; conferences – or perhaps more realistically smaller workshops – can bring a multi-disciplinary perspective to resolving local research issues; and an occasional (biennial?) study tour refreshes the palette.

2.5 Research and funding

There are two main types of funding that we have benefited from in the past:

1. Grants directed towards building community capacity where demonstrating a benefit to local people especially those who are or feel excluded is paramount.
2. Grants designed primarily to support research projects in their own right where demonstrating the contribution to knowledge or innovative methodology is the key.

Some projects are a combination of the two.

For reasons outlined above, large-scale research projects present challenges. It is more sustainable to work out from local activities and enthusiasms, providing support (training, funding) at key points, and helping bring projects to fruition. Having said this, a headline theme can raise general awareness and the Group's profile at the same time. This can be something generic like the dating of cruck-framed buildings or the chronology of modernisation (e.g., when were halls floored over and when did the first fully storeyed houses emerge). Equally however, it could be a well-planned local or regional study based on activity at branch level.

The key takeaway is: think big but act local – support and encourage work that is already underway and over time feed results into a bigger picture. At the same time, if the opportunity arises to secure funds for larger-scale projects, for instance in the event of a call for research, then it's useful to have one or two research proposals reasonably well worked out in our back pocket.

2.6 Summary of priorities for 2022-3 (moving realistically from where we are now).

Houses database and parishes project (JP-E, MD, JT, PM, MC et al)

- Agree monitoring and quality control procedures to help keep the database current and consistent (annual update)
- Analyse findings to help determine research priorities (in conjunction with tree-ring dating results).
- Convene one or more workshops to familiarise active members with the structure and scope of the houses database and explain how new data can be moved across to it from the parishes project.
- Where there is demand, convene research workshops with input from members and external experts, to help design future multi-disciplinary projects.

Training (MC, Branch convenors).

- Building recording – a VAG-organised workshop is now scheduled for 1-2 October 2022, based in and around Ruthin. Details to follow.
- Arrange other workshops on specific subjects, e.g., using different sorts of document in the archive – subject to demand and probably best organised at branch level.

Zoom presentations (MC, PM, Branch convenors).

- Continue on the present basis for 2022-3, supplemented by face-to-face meetings at Branch level.

Funding (Branch convenors, all active researchers, MC and all trustees).

- Sourcing grants for small-scale projects at Branch level (as with the Tesco schemes).
- Sourcing funds for more expensive projects (e.g., tree-ring dating, specialist building recording) as projects come on stream and research themes/questions become clearer.