

**BRITON FERRY WHARF, BRITON FERRY, NEATH PORT TALBOT –
PROPOSED RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRE
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT ON THE CHARACTER AND SETTING OF
ADJACENT HISTORIC ASSETS**



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This report is not for general publication

1. Background

1.1 This report supports a planning application for a composite research and development centre and offices at Briton Ferry Wharf

1.2 In their response to the pre-planning application, Cadw identified a number of scheduled ancient monuments where setting is a potential concern. Of these, the only one deemed to be of potential concern to them is Scheduled Ancient Monument GM445 - Briton Ferry Dock Entrance. To be comprehensive, this reports also addresses the impact on the setting on a number of nearby listed buildings, including:-

- North jetty of outer tidal basin at Briton Ferry Docks – ref 23311. Listed Grade II
- Dock walls and gate between inner dock and outer basin at Briton Ferry Docks – ref 23299. Listed Grade II*
- Hydraulic accumulator tower at Briton Ferry Docks – ref 23298. Listed Grade II*
- Briton Ferry Ironworks Engine House - ref 23300. Listed Grade II.

The first three buildings are associated with the scheduled Briton Ferry Dock Entrance, all part of major improvements to the dock infrastructure designed by Brunel and completed after his death (in 1859) by Robert Pearson Brereton in 1861.

The descriptions of the historic assets may be found on Cadw's CofCymru website - <https://cadw.gov.wales/advice-support/cof-cymru>.

1.3 The report concludes that the impact – as defined by the criteria within Technical Advice Note 24 (The Historic Environment) 2017 including relevant annexes *Historic Impact Assessment in Wales*, *Managing Change to Listed Buildings in Wales*, *Setting of Historic Assets in Wales* and *Managing Change to Registered Historic Parks and Gardens in Wales* – is **neutral** in terms of the scheduled Briton Ferry Dock Entrance.

1.4 In terms of the impact on the listed buildings, the impact on their setting is considered **neutral** except for the Briton Ferry Ironworks Engine House, where the impact on setting is considered **moderate**.

1.5 A number of archaeological and historical sites and features are noted on the Archwilio website <https://archwilio.org.uk/wp> maintained by the regional Archaeological trusts.



Figure 1 - extract from Archwilio website showing recorded sites (copyright)

- 1.6 The site is located immediately south of the M4 Briton Ferry Bridge on a former industrial plain sited between the River Neath and the Briton Ferry Dock. It fronts the River Neath, where scant remains of a stone-faced wharf comprise the main reminder of the site's industrial past. Otherwise the flat site is characterised by hard surfacing, some concrete revetments (associated with later ballast storage) and modern fencing. The designated historic assets all lie outside of the development site.
- 1.7 There are close views of the site from the north and south. From the north-west are elevated views from the M4 Bridge (fleeting, there being no pedestrian access) and from the west via the A483 (where access is similarly restricted)

2 Historical Significance and Context

- 2.1** Briton Ferry has an important industrial past. Nearby Neath had a long and significant tradition of both iron and copper working through the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Until the early C19, the River Neath was bordered by the inter-tidal mudflats of Baglan Bay. The Neath Canal – started in 1795 – extended gradually towards Briton Ferry with the opening of the Jersey Canal in 1822. The potential of the river was being realised, wharfage created by tipping copper slag onto the mudflats. By the 1820s, the whole of the mouth of Baglan Bay was reclaimed in this way, altering the course of the river. To the north of the development site, around Warren Hill, an industrial settlement was growing, based on the shipping place of the Neath Abbey Coal Company, where the canal had been extended closer to the river in 1842.
- 2.2** The development site lies to the south of the early industrial core of Briton Ferry (and the old river ferry itself), comprising the rapid expansion of the industrial plain during the mid-later C19. Immediately to the north of the development site, the Briton Ferry Ironworks was set up in 1846, its first blast furnace built 1854. Reconstructed in 1890 (as the core of newly established concerns including the nearby Villiers Tinsplate Works and the Albion Steelworks), the works were expanded in 1907-10. Of this period, only the engine house survived closure and clearance after 1958.
- 2.3** Of key importance to developments south of the ironworks was the passing of the Briton Ferry Dock Act in 1859. With the construction of Brunel's Vale of Neath Railway in 1851, improved dock and wharf facilities were needed for the handling of coal and other goods. The dock consists of an inner floating dock of some 5.3 hectares in area (now silted up) and an outer tidal basin of around 4.2 hectares, enclosed by masonry revetments. The dock was completed in 1861, its entry controlled by a hydraulic iron gate. The facilities included coal-tipping machinery, three loading cranes and a ballast crane (designed by William Armstrong, whose eponymous accumulator was housed in the surviving masonry tower to provide hydraulic power for the machinery).
- 2.4** The new dock allowed for further expansion of industry south of the Ironworks. This included the Briton Ferry Steelworks, the Villiers Victoria Tinsplate Works and the Gwalia Tinsplate Works, all established 1888-9. The sites of both tinsplate works are partly included within the development site as is that of the Cambrian Coke Works to their south. The last was built on the site of a short-lived brick and pipe works established c. 1870 by Captain Formby. To the west of the Coke Works was the Navigation Patent Fuel Works, set up in 1896. By the end of the C19, the site was a hive of heavy industry.



Figure 2 - aerial view of 1921 looking towards site from south-east. Briton Ferry Dock in the foreground.



Figure 3 - aerial view from south of 1935 showing Cambrian Cokeworks, Gwalia and Victoria Tinplate Works and Briton Ferry Steelworks



Figure 4 - aerial view of c. 1935 showing Briton Ferry Ironworks to left and Gwalia and Victoria Tinplate Works in front



Figure 5 - aerial view, 1950 shortly prior to cessation of operations



Figure 6 - aerial view of c.1950, the Coke Works demolished

- 2.5** The early 1950s saw the closure of most of the iron, steel and tinsplate works across Wales. Port Talbot became the local centre of steel manufacture, planned in 1947 and operational by 1953. Satellite tinsplate works were built at Felindre and Trostre. The factories at Briton Ferry became derelict and were largely cleared in the 1970s, when Albion Steelworks finally closed. The dock became disused in the 1950s and closed in 1959, the basin left to silt up. The landscape was transformed in 1955 with the opening of the first Briton Ferry road bridge, the present M4 bridge completed in 1994. A significant component of the dock complex – the accumulator tower – was refurbished 2003-07.

Bibliography

- G. Roberts – Neath Estuary Improvement Scheme – Briton Ferry SPS Cultural Heritage Archaeological Assessment, 1998 (GGAT Report 98/037)
- P. Adams – A Most Industrious Town – Briton Ferry and its People 1814-2014.

3 THE DEVELOPMENT SITE

- 3.1** The site is level, bounded to the west by the River Neath, the landward boundaries with recently constructed steel post-and-mesh fences; matching gates to the main entrance to the east, off the existing public road. The ground partly comprises poured concrete slabs associated with the later use of the site for storing aggregates – of which period the reinforced concrete retaining walls to the south-west, east and north of the site remain. Nothing above ground survives of the tinplate, coking and (part) ironworks buildings erected in the later C19 (the listed ironworks engine house lies beyond the north boundary of the site, the listed north jetty beyond to the south).
- 3.2** The river boundary largely comprises timber-piled revetments back-filled with concrete, these in poor condition. Towards the south end of the site, the embankment is steel/concrete piled and towards the north end, there is a section of good dressed stone revetment, the detail very similar to Brunel's Dock. This was either constructed for Briton Ferry Ironworks or formed part of Brunel's improvements (this will not be affected by the development)
- 3.3** As well as site fencing, recent works have included the construction of an earth bund to the south-eastern boundary, providing privacy for the caravan site adjacent. This will be planted as part of the proposed scheme.



Figure 7 - site looking south



Figure 8 - site looking north towards listed Engine House and M4 Bridge



Figure 9 - recently constructed earth bund to south-east boundary



Figure 10 - Victorian revetment to north-west corner of site

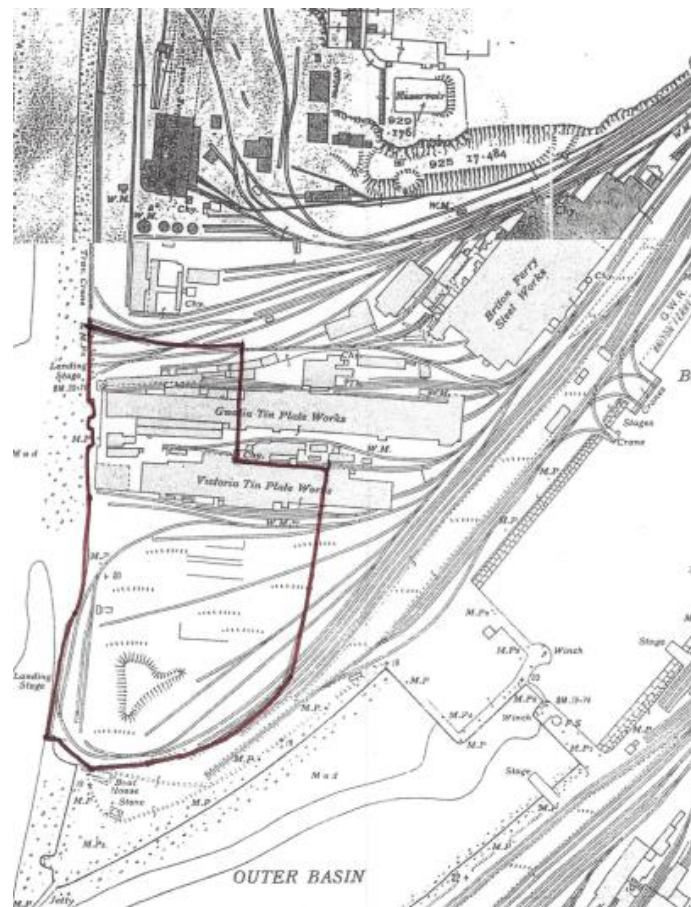


Figure 11 - extract from 1918 25-inch OS with approximate site boundary superimposed

4. THE PROPOSAL

4.1 The proposal (see drawings 03 and 04) comprises:-

- Construction of a factory building (for making GRP storage tanks) orientated north-south some 84 metres by 25 metres, 12 metres to the eaves. The main portion is to be steel-framed and clad in dark-coloured profiled metal sheeting, paired full-height doorways to each end. On the west (river) side is an additional lower lean-to (6 metres in width) running the full length of the factory. This will provide offices to two storeys, the external walls of fair-faced concrete block-work
- Construction of a 3-metre high concrete sound barrier wall to the east of the building.
- Construction of internal tarmac road and parking. Internal road to run from existing site access southwards on the river side of the building with parking bays between and HGV turning circle at its southern termination. Northern part of site (between access and north boundary) to be used for parking and plant during construction phase.
- Planting to bunded area along south-east boundary

4.2 The proposal is a commercial venture associated with the rejuvenation of Briton Ferry as a port as part of the Celtic free port initiative.

4.3 The existing infrastructure is otherwise unchanged, including the small section of historic wharf at the north-west corner of the site. A planning condition is anticipated requiring an archaeological desk-based assessment of the site, as per comments received from Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust.

5. Conservation principles

5.1 Cadw's *Conservation Principles for the sustainable management of the historic environment in Wales* (2012) are set out as follows:-

Principle 1 – Historic Assets will be managed to sustain their values

Principle 2 – Understanding the significance of historic assets is vital

Principle 3 – The historic environment is a shared resource

Principle 4 – Everyone will be able to participate in sustaining the historic environment

Principle 5 – Decisions about change must be reasonable, transparent and consistent

Principle 6 – Documenting and learning from decisions is essential

The Principles establish values which should be attached to heritage assets, namely evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal

5.2 Evidential Value. The site has a relatively short history, arising from early C19 reclamation of the mud-flats and the establishment of the ironworks to the north in the 1840s and the tinplate/coking works to the south in the 1880s and 90s. The heavily industrialised site is well-shown on early-mid C20 aerial views (see Section 3). By the 1950s, the various enterprises were redundant and the site eventually cleared in the 1970s. The area now comprises a mixture of industrial/commercial use, including a concrete plant, scrapyard, as well as a traveller's site and sewage treatment works. This industrial past is barely evident within the development site itself, apart from the short section of stone-revetted wharf to the north-west. Otherwise, the concrete hard-standings and retaining walls belong to the modern history of the site when it was used to store aggregates. The overall evidential value of the development site itself is therefore **LOW** but the surrounding protected historic assets provide the overall context of Briton Ferry both in terms of Brunel's new dock and the remains of the ironworks – thus of **HIGH** value.

5.3 Historical Value. In the light of the clearance of the historic infrastructure, the historical values of the site itself are considered **LOW**, the wider context of Brunel's major mid-C19 improvements obviously **HIGH**, the use of hydraulic power then cutting-edge technology..

5.4 Aesthetic Value. The site is a typical post-industrial open area, in itself of **LOW** value, but the wider context of the site with the remaining historic assets and the infrastructure of the small town (the sites of the railway sidings, the churches and chapels and some industrial housing for example) is of obvious visual interest.

5.5 Communal Value.

MEDIUM value. The heavy industry in and around the site will still be recalled by older residents of the area, the remains of the structures prior to clearance by younger generations. The restoration of the accumulator tower and long-term desire

to restore Brunel's dock illustrates the local interest in the industrial past of the town, but the development site itself is only of contextual interest.

6. THE HISTORIC ASSETS AND THEIR SETTING

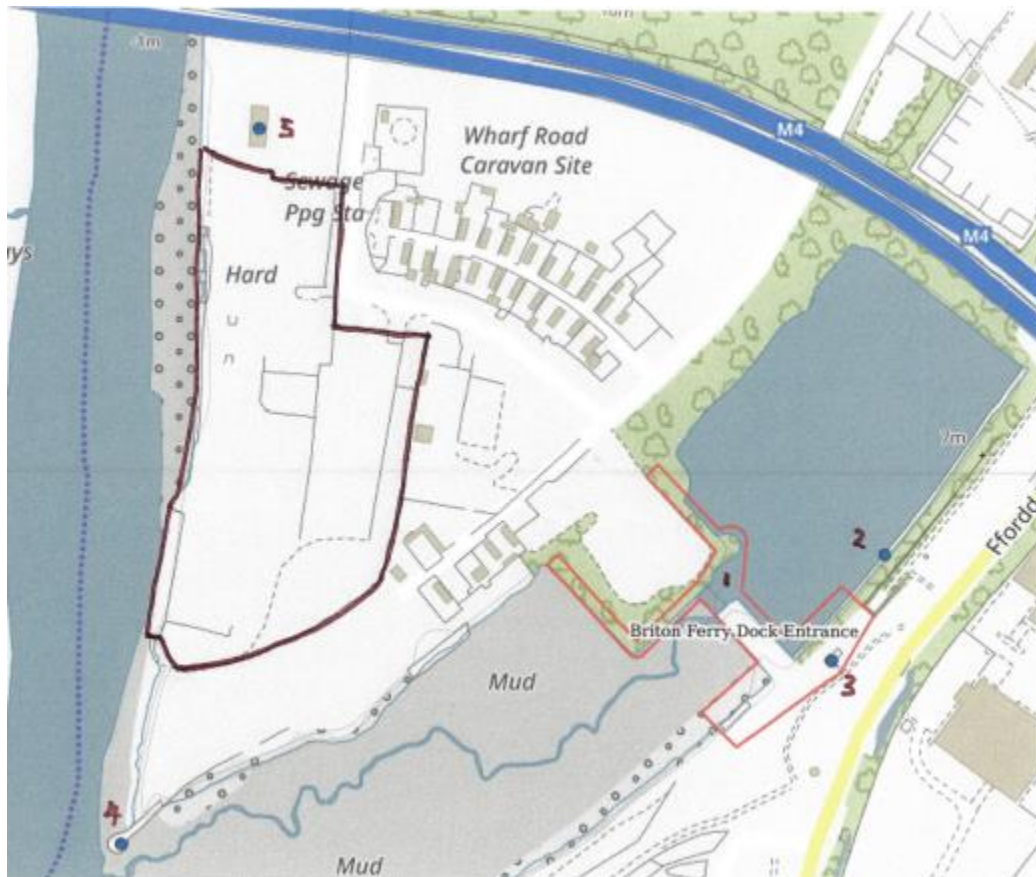


Figure 12 - extract from Cadw Cofcymru database showing approximate site boundary superimposed and historic assets numbered

- 6.1** *Technical Advice Note 24: The Historic Environment* (2017) provides guidance on how the planning system considers the historic environment during decision-making on planning applications. The relevant annex *Setting of Historic Assets in Wales* advises that applicants for planning permission should provide the local planning authority with sufficient, but proportionate, information to allow the likely impact of proposals for development on a historic asset and its setting. For this report, the relevant historic assets are numbered within Figure 12 and will be discussed in detail below.
- 6.2** The setting of a historic asset is the surroundings (not fixed in extent) in which it is understood, experienced and appreciated, embracing present and past relationships to the surrounding landscape. Views to, from and across a historic asset are an obvious form of evaluation, but other sensory elements may be relevant too, including wider topography, layout, use, noise, and light pollution, as well as historic, artistic, literary, cultural or scenic associations, tranquillity and remoteness.

- 6.3 SAM GM445 (Briton Ferry Dock Entrance) and Dock wall and gate between inner dock and outer basin (listed Grade II* ref 23299).** These are referenced as 1 and 2 in Figure 12. Both buildings form the dock constructed 1859-61 to Brunel's design. The well-constructed masonry walls and (blocked) gate are readily visible from the public path to the south-west, as is the inner dock which is silted up.



Figure 13 - Brunel's Briton Ferry Dock viewed from the south-west

- 6.4** In terms of views towards the site from the SAM, the existing vegetation around the north boundary of the site and that intervening provides good screening, this to be augmented with the planting of the existing bund. The roof of the proposed building may be partially visible towards its southern end. The ridge-line of the building is equal to that of the height of the listed Ironworks Engine House – the latter instructively not visible from the SAM. From the site, the SAM is not visible due to the intervening bank and vegetation.



Figure 14 - view from SAM looking west towards site (marked with arrow). The listed North Jetty is visible to the left edge of the photo



Figure 15 - looking east from the development site. SAM not visible

- 6.5** In terms of views across the site, there are elevated views from the M4 bridge. The topography means that the SAM is not visible from the north-west. Whilst the building will be prominently visible from here, the impact on the setting of the SAM is low. From the north-east are clear views of the dock from the bridge, these taking in a view of the listed Engine House. The proposed building will be readily visible within the setting of the SAM (and all of the other historic assets). How much weight is given to views from a structure that provides extremely limited opportunity for viewing and is a much later addition in terms of setting remains in question. There are also views (in a similar context and more distant) from the elevated A483 to the west.



Figure 16 - view across site looking south-east from the M4 bridge (Google Map July 2022)



Figure 17 - views looking south-west from the M4 Bridge



Figure 18 - view from site looking east towards the site from the A483 – Google Map July 2022

6.7 Overall, in terms of the visual setting, the impact is considered **NEUTRAL**

6.6 The Hydraulic Accumulator House (listed Grade II, ref 23298). This stands within the scheduled area of the dock, but at three storeys, is a local landmark. That said, the building is not visible from the site and views towards the site from the tower are limited by the vegetation between the opposite bank and the site boundary. In terms of views across, the assessment made for the dock itself applies here, the impact similarly **NEUTRAL**.



Figure 19 -view towards the (hidden) site from Accumulator Tower

6.7 The North Jetty (listed Grade II, ref 23311). This lies just to the south of the site boundary, an outlier of Brunel's dock scheme. The jetty comprises a stone-built bastion with a later piled link to the shore.



Figure 20 - the North Jetty



Figure 21 - site viewed from the south-east from Briton Ferry Dock with the North Jetty visible to the left

- 6.8** The North Jetty is visible from the site when viewed from the river bank – and from the jetty are good views northwards across the site towards the two road bridges. From the jetty, the proposed building will be prominently visible. The visible listed Engine House provides a context to the (similar) height of the building, the proposed dark cladding suitably recessive. The M4 road bridge remains dominant on the skyline (figure 22). Figure 21 shows a view across the site from the east, the building set well back to allow the jetty to remain as a prominent shoreline feature. Overall, the visual impact on the setting of the jetty is considered **MODERATE**.



Figure 22 – site viewed from the North Jetty. The Ironworks Engine House is marked with an arrow

- 6.9 Briton Ferry Ironworks Engine House (listed Grade II, ref 23300).** An interesting reinforced concrete structure, this lies just to the north of the site, close to the M4 bridge. It was constructed in 1910 as part of major improvements to the ironworks, serving the blast furnaces (an earlier structure stood to the north, explaining the open end of the building). The tall engine house is visible from the site, the concrete revetments (for aggregate storage) precluding views from ground level into the site from it. As seen above, there are very limited views across the site from the east side of the dock, the engine house hidden by existing trees and vegetation near the shoreline (figure 21). Figure 17 shows good views of both site and engine house from the M4 Bridge. Views from the town and hillside above of both site and

historic assets are surprisingly limited due to the road bridges, trees and intervening structures. Nonetheless, due to the very close proximity of the engine house and proposed building, the impact is considered **MODERATE-HIGH**.



Figure 23 - Briton Ferry Ironworks Engine House



Figure 24 - the Engine House viewed from the site of the proposed building

- 6.10** Any visual assessment on the site and surrounding historic assets must be made in the context of the dramatically changed setting within a relatively short period. The area has changed from reclaimed shoreline (mid-C19) to an industrial plain (later C19) to dereliction (mid-later C20) and finally to clearance and the construction of the two road bridges by the later C20. The survival of the surrounding historic assets is a fascinating legacy of the town's industrial past, but the context is largely of Brunel's new dock rather than the factories which mushroomed in the later C19. The industrial scene depicted on the OS maps and later aerial photos is barely recognisable today – the dominant features now are the two road bridges, which give a wholly different character to the land below.
- 6.11** The proposed development is considered appropriate in terms of use, the building reflecting the style of modern factories in the area. The form and scale of the building are dictated by the fabrication of large GRP tanks and associated gantries and machinery, thus a more traditional 'sawtooth' roofline impossible without a major overall increase in height. Mitigation in terms of the setting of the historic assets is relatively limited, but the use of dark-coated sheeting will assist in terms of being visually recessive (and being a nod to the long metal-sheeted buildings of the tin-plate works which once stood here). The planting of the earth bund to the south-east will assist in terms of screening from the dock area (whereas otherwise, tree-planting may be regarded as alien on an industrial site). Whilst the road bridges are now the visually dominant landscape features, the Ironworks Engine House still has some presence – and care has been taken not to exceed its height in terms of the proposed factory. Beyond all this, the proposal is a visually 'honest' new

chapter for the site, providing scope for the rejuvenation of the port and in turn, opportunity for wider interest in restoring more of the surrounding historic assets (the Engine House being clearly 'at risk').

6.12 Potential buried or archaeological elements surrounding the historic assets

Several undesignated historic assets are flagged up on the *Archwilio* Wales Historic Environment website, the potential for impact on them considered **LOW** the site having been cleared of all standing structures (which were mostly of steel-framed sheeted construction) with little in the way of footings expected apart from the bases of stacks etc. A desk-top archaeological assessment is expected to be conditioned.

6.13 Historical, artistic, literary, place-name, cultural or scenic associations. No change in this context.

6.14 Parkland layout (including entrances, routes, ornamental features, planting and historic boundary features). Not applicable.

6.15 Other sensory elements – noise or smell associated with the historic asset. . Given the industrial history of the site, the impact is considered **NEUTRAL**

6.16 Tranquillity, remoteness, 'wildness'. Not applicable.

6.17 Wider Landscape setting. Not applicable

8. Conclusion

8.1 Having considered the heritage values of the site and the surrounding designated historic assets and evaluated the impact of the proposed development on their setting, it is concluded that the impact of the proposed development on the Briton Ferry Dock structures (including SAM GM445, the listed dock walls/gate, accumulator tower and north jetty) will be **NEUTRAL**. The impact on the setting of the listed Engine House will be **MODERATE** to **HIGH**.

The proposal perpetuates the industrial history of the site, is capable of a degree of mitigation and has potential to revitalise the port as part of local and national government economic objectives/policies. The venture is centred on sustainable (river) transport and will create jobs (based on a long-established business). The level of impact on the setting of the historic assets is considered acceptable and justifiable, with no harm to the character of the assets themselves.