Uniqueness and Ubiquity: making rural places in a global era

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Assembling Newtown: Moving with the Times

https://youtu.be/xJCv3LLY-e8?t=1m31s
Placing Newtown

- The largest town in the county of Powys, population of ~11,500
- “The oldest New Town”
- One of two New Towns in Wales (the other is Cwmbran)
- Birth place of Robert Owen
- International mail order began here (the Royal Welsh Warehouse)

Robert Owen
1771-1858
Reformist, utopian, cooperative, social(ist)

Pryce Jones – Present day warehouse and past mail order advert
Place assemblage and place-making

- Places have meaning (Tuan, Relph, Cresswell),
- Places are not fixed but always-already assemblages of becoming (Thrift, Deleuze),
- Places can be anchors (Massey)

Relational place-making draws on scholarship and insights about place, politics and networks by explicitly recognising the flexible, multi-scalar and always developing meanings of place: meanings that are produced via socially, politically and economically interconnected interactions among people, institutions and systems.

(Pearce et al, 2011: 59)
Assembling a methodology

• Surveys: 48 businesses; 234 residents; 64 soft drinks outlets
• Oral histories and interviews: multi-directional approach: researchers, artist and local videographer
• Participatory engagements, focus groups and observations
Sense of place and ubiquity

“You start getting a UK brand name, like Gregg’s coming into the area and you think, oh okay this is a positive … Somebody has obviously seen our town and thought there’s potential there”.

“The big names have come in the independents have gone, and I think that’s a great loss.”
UK consumers bought 6380 million litres of fizzy soft drinks in 2014
Living in Newtown

- 81% agree Newtown is a ‘welcoming place’
- Most agree it has a ‘strong sense of community’ and a ‘good standard of living’.
- Schools, shops and leisure facilities are rated as fair, good or excellent by most.
- Residents: talk to their neighbours, are engaged in the community.

Global-Rural Newtown residents survey 2016

What is the best thing about living in Newtown/ Llanllwchaiarn?

- Countryside, green scenery & access to it
- A friendly community, neighbours
- Peace, quiet, slow paced, laid back
- Convenience, access to shops and services
- Safe, low crime
- Family connections and family friendly
- Nothing/going-gone downhill
- Familiarity, home
- Small sized town
- Transport links
- Generally nice place/good quality of life
- Location
“We travel a lot... you go to other parts of the country and you see all these things have happened, and this part of East Wales seems to be totally neglected. You go to Cardiff, once you’ve got beyond Brecon going over the top there, it seems to be money’s no object”.

Manufacturing business, 2016
Identity

Newtown is a...

Manufacturing town

Farming town

Tourism town

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neither Agree nor Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree

Global-Rural Newtown residents survey 2016
Farming town to countryside leisure?

“I somehow sense that we’re a bit peripheral... I mean, how much longer are they going take any milk from Mid Wales? The end of quotas has made such a dramatic change. The Dutch and the Irish are rapidly expanding. I think the dairy industry is in real trouble. Not as a whole but certainly I think in areas like Mid Wales I think it is....

I just don’t think it’ll be like it used to be, but other things will come. ... the rural economy here hugely benefits from shooting. I think if you totted up the gross national product of game shooting in this area and farming there wouldn’t be too much difference.”

*Interview with local politician*

*Bettws Hall, one of five firms delivering shooting experiences in the area*
There’s been a tension between food versus community, because the Town Council were very keen that it was community...but if you’re a visitor you want food, and you’re not interested in that because it’s not your community.”
Manufacturing Town

- Wool weaving, flannel production 1800 – 1930s (‘Leeds of Wales’)
- Designated a ‘Newtown’ in 1967
- Aimed to double the town’s population in a decade:
  - Building/subsidising factory units,
  - Building housing and community facilities
  - Offering business incentives.

- High manufacturing employment
- Variety of specialised, innovative global-operators with a manufacturing base in Newtown
Manufacturing success

**Contact Attachments**
- Forklift truck attachments
- Used in construction, pharmaceutical, petro-chemical, waste and agricultural sectors

**Makefast**
- Yacht and powerboat fittings
- Personal safety equipment incl. fastenings on life jackets and climbing harnesses

**CellPath**
- Medical supplies and diagnostic equipment (Cellular Pathology)
Tourism Town?

- Low tourist numbers (10,000 visitors per year)
- Lack of accommodation and town ‘brand’

“Newtown needs to make more of itself – talk up the place – promote itself and the positive things about the town”.

- A ‘hidden gem’? museums, art gallery, theatre
- Enthusiasm to develop: ‘Going Green’ Scheme, ‘Heritage hub’, Canal restoration
Newtown Bypass

“People avoid Mid Wales. They avoid Newtown”.

The Brimmon Oak

Mervyn: everybody said it to us, ‘why the tree?’ But when you see my Auntie and you see my Uncle...

Andrea: And she still loves it now.

Mervyn: ... still loves it and she used to play shop round it and she’d been on films and telling us the stories of it and she still goes up regular now and she’s 89
Translocal social action

One Brimmon Oak, 238 ancient oaks remaining in whole of Wales, thousands combined their voice to take action to protect it

Aug 6th, 2015:
- 22 initial members in local area
- One member adds over 200 people – including from London, Exeter, Bristol, Cardiff, Hereford, Isle of Wight
- Rob McBride (Tree Hunter) adds members in Belgium, Spain, and France.

Aug 7th, 2015
- Group reaches 1000 members
- 5 members added in Thailand

Today – three years later:
- 5,764 members incl. large number in USA and Australia

Mervyn: ‘With the grandson, we put it down on Facebook; ‘save the Brimmon ancient oak tree’ and within 24 hours, we had over 1000 members!’
Translocality?

• Lineage of use within globalisation and migration literatures (Appadurai, Hannerz) – geography, anthropology, development studies, sociology...

• But still an emerging and developing concept

“Translocality refers to the emergence of multidirectional and overlapping networks that facilitate the circulation of people, resources, practices and ideas”.

Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013 p375)
Conclusions

- The ‘global countryside’ - Specific place to place connections are important
- Constant change and churn
- Sense of place endures
- Local and external forces at work