



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

There's so much that makes Wales great, but to ensure it stays that way we need to be as brave, bold and forward-thinking as our forebears, argues Jules

For well over half my life I've been lucky enough to call Wales my home. During that time I've travelled thousands of miles and met hundreds of people who've shared their love of a country that's as diverse as it is proud. Many a Welshman has reminded me that Welsh slate has kept Britain dry, and that if you could iron out the hills and mountains Wales would be bigger than England. But if it were, it would not be the nation we all love and recognise as perhaps the most distinctive in the British Isles.

When I describe Wales to those who've never seen it for themselves it's hard to know where to start. My favourite spots include the sweep of Cardigan Bay, the beautiful Tolkien-esque Beacons, and of course the Cambrian Mountains where I spent much of my life.

Centuries of history have forged a landscape as shaped by nature as by man. From the rugged peaks of Snowdonia to the valleys of the industrial South, the Welsh landscape of today enshrines its past as passionately as it holds the keys to its future.

In Britain, our nation's industrial strength has relied upon our ability to make good use of a wide range of raw materials. Timber, clay, slate, coal and tin, to name but a few, have transformed the fortunes of once rural areas. Without invention and commerce, a modern map of Britain would undoubtedly look very different; but I often wonder if today we would have allowed the industrialisation of yesteryear. These days we're mindful of complex planning guidelines and the need for public consultations, but no such issues fettered those who set about exploiting huge swathes of the countryside back then.

As an archaeologist, the study of our landscape and how humans have impacted upon it has long fascinated me. The hint of earthworks where a village once stood; a crumbling engine house overlooking now-grassed-over slag heaps; or an oxbow reminding us of a river's former passage – all these things create a landscape that's seldom timeless.

I'm often asked whether we can ever really preserve a landscape, and the issue is far from simple. There are clear examples where we might seek to maintain and protect large parts of it, the wonderful Dyfi Estuary being a prime candidate, along with Snowdonia and its sister national park around Brecon. But much of the Welsh landscape is outside the protective shadow of a Parliamentary Act, so what can we do when faced with such a question and its competing demands?

Perhaps the guiding principle should be taken from the landscape itself. It's evolved and changed over thousands of years. If we were to stop the clock, to avoid further development, and even try and turn back the hands of time, what would we be left with? Would it be an area that would live and allow life as we've known it to continue?

The truth, I suspect, lies in pragmatic moderation. Farming has changed and it now needs bigger buildings. Villages are changing and need purpose and investment to surround them if life in them is to be viable. Many of us love Wales because it doesn't have the major transport links of other parts of the country, and hasn't been carved up and covered with concrete like the South East. Yet how can small- to medium-sized businesses in Wales expand if their communication costs leave them logistically at a disadvantage? How might we create a greener future based not upon heavily-subsidised renewables, but upon longer term financially viable alternatives?

The Wales I love is a vibrant place that's as proud of its past as it is excited by its future. The old heavy industries may have gone, but the opportunities for cottage industries have never been better thanks to the internet. Farming is perhaps Wales' biggest export – these days an industry whose fortunes can fluctuate – but it's also a visceral way of life for a new generation who are keen to diversify. As a country our lifestyle and leisure time is changing; today we're making more use of our green spaces for health and recreation. In an ever more uncertain world, us Britons are, I believe, exploring more of what we have on our doorstep than going abroad. Wales' great potential for the future may not be in what comes out of the ground, but rather what's on top of it, and that's a resource worth nurturing.

In short I believe we have to be as inventive, as creative and as bold as our forebears who lit the fire beneath the industrial revolution 250 years ago. The only limit to their capacity for innovation was the laws of physics and materials science. These days many of the challenges facing them have been overcome, but our perspectives are still remarkably similar. We want to power our world safely and cheaply, but now also as cleanly as possible. We also want to give people a living, in a place worth living in. And for three million of us, that's Wales. ♣

• *Black Sheep is lambing*

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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