

Decolonising heritage collections

The People's Collection Wales Toolkit

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the Decolonisation Toolkit created by People's Collection Wales (PCW), a community-driven digital heritage platform. Released in 2025, the Toolkit provides structured guidance for identifying, contextualising, and addressing discriminatory and colonial language in both English and Welsh metadata. Core features include website-level and item-level content warnings, transparent audit trails, and practical workflows for reviewing legacy material and preparing new uploads. Drawing on case studies – including historic newspapers, Penrhyn Castle, minstrel show photographs, and community contributions – the article explores how the Toolkit supports inclusive description while maintaining accuracy and public trust. It situates PCW's approach within wider debates about non-MARC metadata, critical description, and community participation.

KEYWORDS decolonisation; metadata; inclusive description; community archives; digital heritage

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Introduction

People's Collection Wales (PCW) is a bilingual platform enabling individuals, local groups, and institutions to upload material and describe it with metadata. This openness enriches the national record but introduces challenges: harmful terms appear in historic collections, and contributors risk reproducing outdated language in new uploads.

To address this, PCW developed the Decolonisation Toolkit with input from the Cultural Heritage Terminology Network and a Task and Finish Group of heritage professionals. The Toolkit aligns with PCW's Charter for Decolonising the Collection ([People's Collection Wales, 2025](#)) and the Welsh Government's Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan ([Welsh Government, 2022](#)), ensuring that descriptive practice responds to ethical and cultural responsibilities.

This article will examine the key principles and practical guidance of the PCW Decolonisation Toolkit¹, using specific case studies to demonstrate how a community-driven approach can effectively address harmful metadata in a digital heritage context.

Key Principles

The Toolkit defines decolonisation as a diagnostic and dismantling process distinct from general equality and diversity agendas. It involves acknowledging colonial legacies in heritage collections, recognising that metadata choices reflect power and perspective, and shifting descriptive practices to centre historically marginalised voices ([People's Collection Wales, 2025](#)). Decolonisation is positioned as a continuous effort rather than a one-off corrective, reflecting the evolving nature of language, identity, and social awareness.

Toolkit Guidance

The Toolkit offers a comprehensive set of measures to support contributors and moderators. It begins by introducing a site-wide content warning that acknowledges the likelihood of encountering harmful language, supported by item-level warnings that alert users to offensive terms or imagery in specific records. These warnings are not designed to censor but to prepare audiences for what they may see or read, enabling informed engagement ([People's Collection Wales, 2025](#)).

Equally important is the audit trail system, which ensures that changes to metadata are fully documented. Every alteration is recorded with details of what was changed, when it happened, and why. This not only enhances transparency but also demonstrates the iterative process of learning, revising, and improving. Rather than erase outdated interpretations, PCW encourages users to preserve them within the audit trail to retain their historical value while also correcting or contextualising them for modern readers.

In practice, contributors are encouraged to examine their own items carefully. Harmful terminology can be contextualised with additional explanation or replaced with language that respects dignity and accuracy. The Toolkit points to the Inclusive Terminology Glossary² as an invaluable resource in this process (Cultural Heritage Terminology Network, 2024). New uploads are subject to the same expectations: contributors are asked to reflect on provenance, review their descriptive text, and consult relevant communities when necessary. Because PCW is bilingual, the Toolkit highlights the need for Welsh-language equivalents to ensure parity across both languages, acknowledging that linguistic nuances may affect how sensitive terms are translated or reframed.

¹ <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/sites/default/files/documents/Final%20Eng%20Decolonisation%20Toolkit%202025.pdf>

² <https://culturalheritageterminology.co.uk/>

Finally, the Toolkit reinforces the collaborative nature of PCW. Contributors and users are not passive actors but active participants in shaping an inclusive collection. They are invited to report offensive content, revisit their own contributions, and reuse items in ways that tell more inclusive and accurate stories.

Case Studies

The Toolkit sets out its approach through a series of practical examples that show how inclusive description works in practice. One early example is a 1918 newspaper clipping containing the derogatory term “Chinaman” as seen in Figure 1.

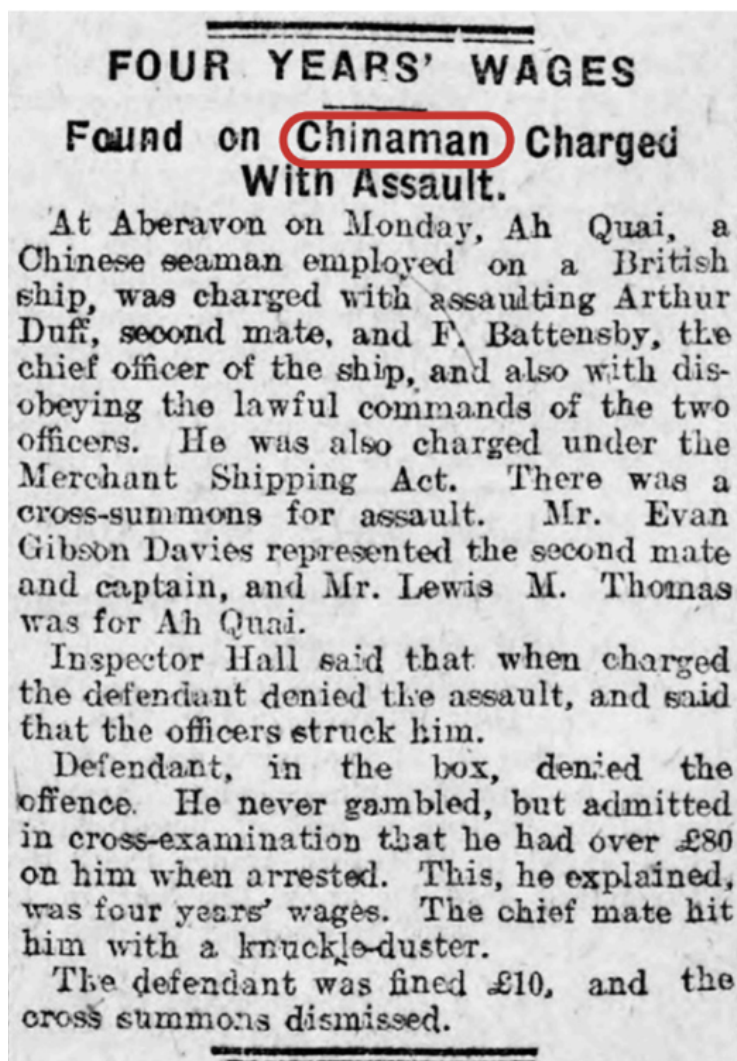


Figure 1. “Four Years’ Wages” (The Cambria Daily Leader, 1918).

Rather than remove the item, PCW retained it for accuracy but added a clear content warning and a contextual explanation from the Inclusive Terminology Glossary noting that the “term ‘Chinaman’ is an archaic 18th/19th century term for Chinese people, which is widely considered derogatory today...” ([People’s Collection Wales, 2025](#)). This ensures that the historic record remained accessible, while also preparing readers to recognise and understand the problematic language. In this case, staff flagged the item, consulted with contributors, and reviewed glossary entries before agreeing the final approach.

The decision - to retain but contextualise - was recorded in the audit trail. Researchers and users now encounter not only the historic source but also a linked explanation of racial terminology in the early twentieth century.

A second example extends this approach by showing how entire descriptions can be revised to centre lived experience. For the item relating to Penrhyn Castle, contributed by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, the original description focused on the building's architectural features. Its historical account referred only briefly to how Richard Pennant profited from the enslavement of Caribbeans:

"...Pennant himself had married into the Penrhyn family and had subsequently made his fortune through slate quarrying industries in north Wales and slavery in Jamaica" ([People's Collection Wales, 2025](#), p.21).

The use of the term *slavery* is problematic because it abstracts and dehumanises those affected. This vague phrasing was replaced with terminology that acknowledges people directly - "he enslaved" - and the description was expanded to explain Pennant's role in the transatlantic slave trade. The new entry also links to the National Trust's wider research on Penrhyn Castle³ and includes a note documenting the changes. An item-level content warning was added at the same time, preparing readers for potentially harmful terminology and signalling that the record contains sensitive material. The revised version reads:

"...Pennant himself had married into the Penrhyn family and had subsequently made his fortune through slate quarrying industries in north Wales and sugar plantations in Jamaica. He enslaved nearly 1,000 people across his four plantations. Hay-Dawkins Pennant was also an owner of enslaved people and received £14,683 from the government on abolition. (For more information on how wealth gained from the transatlantic slave trade was used to build Penrhyn Castle, visit the National Trust's website: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/wales/penrhyn-castle-andgarden/penrhyn-castle-and-slave-trade-history>.)" ([People's Collection Wales, 2025](#), p.22)

The corresponding audit trail note reads:

"This description was updated in March 2024. As per the Inclusive Terminology Glossary (1.1. African American History and the Atlantic Slave Trade: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JaJ8VchUCbtg7jPmhwizOQYsabBqKLxZ7n69urQS8VM>), the word 'slavery' was replaced by a sentence detailing how and where Pennant and his cousin enslaved people to accrue wealth, and a link to the National Trust website was

³ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/wales/penrhyn-castle-and-garden/penrhyn-castle-and-slave-trade-history>

added for further information about the Castle's colonialist history."
([People's Collection Wales, 2025](#), p.23)

This fuller treatment aligned with best practice in inclusive metadata. It shifted the focus away from abstract institutions and towards the people whose labour and freedom were taken, embedding historical accountability directly into the record. The combined use of item-level content warning and audit trail note ensured transparency while also protecting users from unexpected exposure to harmful terms.



Figure 2. "Churchill's Minstrels" (Conwy Archive Service, 1920s)

A third example demonstrates how visual records can be reinterpreted. As shown in Figure 2, Conwy Archive Service had contributed a photograph of Churchill's Minstrels at the Happy Valley Theatre, Llandudno, in the 1920s that was part of a 'Holidays in Llandudno' slideshow with the description:

"Happy Valley had a succession of theatres of increasing size that held huge audiences. Here we see Churchill's Minstrels in the 1920s." ([People's Collection Wales, 2025](#), p.25)

While factually correct, this description did not address its problematic content. PCW worked with the archive to revise the record so that it acknowledges both the historical popularity of minstrel shows and their reliance on racist stereotypes and blackface. The revised entry reads:

"This image is from the 1920s. It shows the Churchill's Minstrels, a minstrel group set up by Will Churchill in c.1906-07. Minstrel shows were a form of popular entertainment from the early 19th century until well into the 1970s. These shows mostly involved white male performers in blackface. While they had a distinct impact on popular music, dance and

other aspects of popular culture, they were founded on the comic enactment of racist stereotypes and are now considered to be exploitative and racially offensive.” ([People’s Collection Wales, 2025](#), p.25)

By adding historical explanation and critical framing, the new description educates readers about the wider history of minstrel shows while also signalling how perspectives have changed. The phrase “now considered to be exploitative and racially offensive” makes clear that, while these performances were accepted by white audiences of the time, they are understood very differently today. To prepare this revision, PCW staff researched best practice, consulted reference sources, and tested language choices carefully, ensuring the record reflected both historical context and ethical responsibility.

Together, these case studies show the Toolkit in action: not simply substituting words, but reshaping records to balance historical accuracy with inclusivity, transparency, and accountability.

Expanded Guidance in Practice

The Toolkit goes further by outlining detailed workflows to support this work. For item titles, where wording reflects an original title or historic language, it recommends placing harmful terms in quotation marks with replacements in brackets. This allows the original phrasing to remain searchable while clarifying its meaning for contemporary audiences. Item descriptions are expanded with contextual paragraphs that explain problematic language or imagery, often supplemented with references to external sources such as the Inclusive Terminology Glossary. By encouraging contributors to link to trusted resources, PCW promotes ongoing learning beyond the record itself. Equally, the Toolkit stresses that bilingual consistency is essential. Updates in English must also appear in Welsh, and translation should go beyond direct equivalence to reflect cultural context and nuance.

Challenges

Despite its structured framework, the Toolkit faces challenges. Some audiences view decolonisation as intrusive interpretation or even ‘censorship,’ while others have reacted negatively on social media. PCW acknowledges these criticisms but stresses that updating records is an established part of archival practice. The aim is not to erase history but to make it more accurate, transparent, and inclusive, while continuing to challenge racism and prejudice within the Collection. The need is clear: the 2018–19 National Survey for Wales found that 76% of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds did not take part in arts, culture, or heritage activities, highlighting the barriers that remain ([Welsh Government, 2022](#)).

Implications for Metadata Practice

The PCW model, which relies on Dublin Core with free-text fields, demonstrates that decolonising practices can be embedded outside MARC-based systems. The Toolkit shows the importance of participatory approaches that empower communities and contributors to influence metadata standards. It also highlights the value of inclusive glossaries, which guide terminology decisions in an area where language continues to evolve ([Cultural Heritage Terminology Network, 2024](#)). Audit trails are a further addition, providing a method to record changes while preserving interpretive history. The use of website- and item-level content warnings has increased trust among users by making the risks of harmful content explicit. Together, these practices position PCW within the broader landscape of critical metadata and community archiving.

Future Plans

Looking ahead, PCW intends to expand the training offered to contributors, volunteers, and partner institutions to ensure the Toolkit is widely understood and effectively applied. PCW also aims to publish new case studies, sharing lessons with other organisations in Wales and further afield. Finally, evaluation will become a priority: tracking search success, user engagement, and discoverability to assess how inclusive metadata affects access and use of the collection.

Conclusion

The Decolonisation Toolkit provides a structured and replicable model for community-driven decolonisation of metadata. By embedding content warnings, audit trails, glossary support, and community involvement into routine description practice, PCW shows that inclusive records can be achieved without compromising transparency or historical accuracy. The Toolkit demonstrates that addressing harmful language is not simply a technical adjustment but a cultural and ethical responsibility. In doing so, PCW contributes to a more responsible, accountable, and equitable record of Wales's heritage.

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