

Aus ICOMOS e-news INSERT 2015 July by Sue Jackson-Stepowski

In June I had the great pleasure of an ICOMOS guided tour of the world heritage listed **Blaenavon Cultural Landscape** in South Wales. It contains a number of individual components, some being the 1788-1900 iron and steel works, the former *Big Pit* coal mine, the *Pontypool & Blaenavon railway* and the village itself.

World Heritage summary for the "Blaenavon Industrial Landscape"

The area around Blaenavon is evidence of the pre-eminence of South Wales as the world's major producer of iron and coal in the 19th century. All the necessary elements can still be seen - coal and ore mines, quarries, a primitive railway system, furnaces, workers' homes, and the social infrastructure of their community. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/984> <http://www.visitblaenavon.co.uk/en/Homepage.aspx>.

My expert guide was John Rodger, a key campaigner for the World Heritage nomination, the management plan and an on-going vision for this site - not only for its wide ranging heritage values but also as a way to gain socio-economic benefits for a once impoverished community following 1980s mine closures during the British Thatcher Government era.

John's enthusiasm is contagious. Accompanying me were two Welsh friends who were amazed and much enlightened about the much wider reasonings behind the nomination, and subsequent positive flow-on and multiplier benefits for this 'valley' community. The World Heritage listing has brought about a total turn-around, changed perceptions and restored local pride. The local community chose to re-name the Blaenavon "Heritage" School.

Individual site managers' commitment was equally passionate and dynamic. Insights were gained as to how the many varied stake-holders are working together for the overall World Heritage precinct – community representatives, local government, Welsh Museums Cadw, and how Blaenavon is a major priority of the Welsh Assembly.

The iron works are seminal in leading to modern production technologies, and adopted the early industrial revolution practice of providing on-site housing. Originally for imported skilled trades, the 1790s *Engine Row* cottages were later used by blast furnace worker families. By the 1830s Wales produced 40% of British iron. The expertise gained in the Blaenavon works was 'exported' world-wide: one display showed Welsh worker communities in 19th century Russia, including Welsh inspired architecture and traditions.

Within the village, original shop fronts are conserved akin to a 'main street' program. Amongst adapted reuses are the former Miners' Institute and former school (this alone was influential in providing education for workers' children).

John was unable to attend the highly successful AI conference in Broken Hill, a step towards its national listing. The similarities with our Broken Hill not only include its industrial heritage and historic township, but also intangibles such as being catalyst for social improvements, labour legislation, and today as to how to manage the surrounding landscape.

With regards to heritage tourism (annually 25,000 visitors to the "*Big Pit*", plus another 30,000 wandering through the listed landscape, and increasing), sites management, diverse audiences and interpretation are too numerous to summarise here. One novel detail is how the *Big Pit* mine chalk board tally shows daily tourist numbers in lieu of extracted tonnage.

An interpretation challenge is how to communicate the wider cultural landscape and industrial stories. The World Heritage precinct takes in a 33 square kilometre containing varied markers e.g. the zig-zag route down to the Monmouth & Brecon Canal, and former drag line scars. Management issues echo other mine sites, from slope destabilisation caused

by trail bikes, to decisions to re-vegetation or leave-it-be in what is now a thriving, multi-user, recreation precinct.

Blaenavon is a member of the “European Routes of Industrial Heritage” – a tourism initiative to present the most important industrial heritage sites. Other British sites that incorporate worker housing are the Derwent Valley Mills and New Lanark.

Blaenavon remains a “living community” within the world heritage primary and buffer zones. Another keen person is John Harris, who leads a community group compiling Blaenavon oral histories. Two publications to date are * Funeral to Festival: Blaenavon history from 1901-1951, and * Farewell to Welfare: evolution of a local health care system.

Now the Blaenavon community seeks inputs and histories about “*Blaenavon emigres who left the town to make to a life in new countries*”. If you know of anyone please forward this item onto them and/or send their details addressed to:-

John Harris, c/- Blaenavon World Heritage Centre
emails groveplaceharris@gmail.com or blaenavon.tic@torfaen.gov.uk

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John Rodger (3rd left) explains the c1000 former Welsh coal mines listed in the Cadw 'Big Pit' Museum entrance to Sue Jackson-Stepowski (1st left) and two Welsh friends. (pic. B.Stepowski)



Being briefed about the Blaenavon World Heritage dossier preparation, current site management and wider community benefits in the former miners' cafeteria: left-to-right-Sue & [engineer] John Bevan of Bridgend Wales, Peter Walker Cadw Big Pit Mine Museum CEO, Sue Jackson-Stepowski and John Rodger (pic. B.Stepowski)



John Rodger explains to Sue Jackson-Stepowski the Blaenavon village character and setting within the wider mining 'valley' landscape, all within the World Heritage primary zone (pic. B.Stepowski)



John Rodger points out the former zig-zag route and wider Blaenavon cultural landscape issues to Sue Jackson-Stepowski (pic. B.Stepowski)



John Rodger explains to Sue Jackson-Stepowski the importance of the Blaenavon Canal initially to the iron works then to shift coal to the port; the canal now a much used pleasure waterway, cycle trail and walking route (pic. B.Stepowski)