

# Blaenavon and United Nations World Heritage Site Status: Is Conservation of Industrial Heritage a Road to Local Economic Development?

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This article examines the policy issues connected with a programme of economic redevelopment centred upon the conservation and renewal of industrial heritage. The article examines the case of Blaenavon Industrial Landscape in South Wales which has recently been successful in gaining status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Tourism-led economic development focusing on industrial heritage is shown to present some unique trade-offs between promoting the needs of visitors over local communities, and between the maintenance of cultural value and site commodification.

Industrial heritage      Economic development  
Industrial South Wales

## Introduction

Blaenavon has been identified as one of the most economically and socially disadvantaged areas of the contemporary Welsh economy. The major remaining asset of the Blaenavon area is its unique industrial landscape. This constitutes one of the few authentic examples of an area shaped by coal and iron-making development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Blaenavon Industrial Landscape was nominated for inscription on the United Nations World Heritage List in 1999, and was successful in attaining this status in November 2000. The status of World Heritage Site was an important component in local plans to conserve and develop the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape, and to promote the economic redevelopment of the town and its surroundings (see BLAENAVON PARTNERSHIP, 2000). This article examines three issues: the expected effects of the industrial heritage-led redevelopment process; how far this process might strengthen the local economy of Blaenavon; and the nature of the policy trade-offs which have to be addressed in this context.

The next section outlines some issues regarding tourism-based development in economically marginal areas, and then examines some of the specific issues relating to the developmental role of industrial heritage. The third section provides the historical context of the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape, summarizes the economic and social problems facing the area, and the main components of the redevelopment plan focusing

on industrial heritage. The fourth section examines the expected impacts of the redevelopment programme in terms of new and safeguarded employment. The fifth section examines more general policy issues resulting from this case study, particularly issues arising in the context of optimizing economic benefits in the locality. The final section contains conclusions.

## *Tourism, economic development and industrial heritage*

Tourism and visitor stimulated economic growth has been highlighted as a realistic development option in many economically marginal areas of Wales. In rural areas, tourism is seen as a valuable diversification mechanism, transferring extant commercial infrastructure from declining to growth sectors, in many cases at moderate cost (BRISTOW, 2000). In post-industrial areas it may be that a significant supply of labour is available and suitable for the necessarily flexible and part-time/seasonal needs of the tourism sector. Tourism opportunities to such areas may be enhanced by an increase in leisure time and improved personal mobility. Both of these factors enable more flexibility in tourism trips. The economic arguments for tourism-related development are particularly attractive in some Welsh areas where the number and duration of tourism trips are not comparable to those in either Scotland or Ireland, despite similarities in scope of product – this implying under-utilization (ENGLISH TOURIST BOARD, 1999). There are several other issues relating to tourism development in economically marginal areas. While tourism development might provide relatively lower skilled employment, the development of ‘customer-facing’ skills in the local workforce could be beneficial, perhaps linking to improvements in the service industry base. For communities with limited access to retail, hospitality and other commercial services, the additional demand created by the tourism sector may enable local provision of such services at a higher level. Moreover sympathetic development of the extant natural or built resource can be environmentally enhancing. Set against these benefits are concerns about the economic value of heritage tourism. For example, CAFFYN and LUTZ, 1999, in summarizing the literature, demonstrate that there is considerable doubt and scepticism regarding the benefits accompanying heritage tourism. Uppermost are questions on the quality and duration of employment created in tourism sectors and, in the Welsh context at least, how far tourism development is consistent with economic targets posited by the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Development Agency in terms of closing the GDP per capita gap with the UK average. Moreover, the indirect effects of tourism can be mitigated by leakages outside the host region, particularly where supply and service infrastructure is underdeveloped (ARCHER, 1984).

What of the specific role of industrial heritage in

promoting tourism visits and economic development? There has been increasing interest in the tourist development of industrial sites, particularly those associated with the mining, textiles and metals sector (see, for example, EDWARDS and LLURDES, 1996). Several areas of the UK currently promote trails of industry heritage. For example, the Midlands focuses particularly on metal working, there is textiles in the North West, mining in South Wales, and slate and copper in North Wales. Specific groupings within the EU promote the development of mining heritage, such as the European Mining Heritage Network, designed to assist collaboration and learning between old mining areas. At a more general level are initiatives such as the Industrial Culture Route in the Ruhr (EBERT, 1999), with some likelihood that this will be extended into a European Route of Industrial Heritage.

The educational and hobby value of industrial heritage has never been in doubt. However, the general promotion of what is often viewed as a niche market within tourism is mitigated by important practicalities. These practicalities are only slightly less serious in the case of castles, stately homes, ancient monuments and religious sites. First, industry heritage sites can be extensive, needing comparatively large amounts of funds for restoration and repair. Linked to this, such sites can need a high direct labour component for health and safety reasons and because the implicit and explicit qualities of industry artefacts need careful human interpretation to add value. Second, industrial heritage sites may feature extensive environmental damage and economic degradation – this is certainly the case in Blaenavon – such that it might be difficult to attract new activities to adjacent areas. This means that economic success of redeveloped sites may be overly dependent on sustainable visitor numbers to landmark sites. Third, industrial heritage sites may be distant from existing tourism circuits. Where such sites have experienced structural decline, then associated transport (and social) infrastructures may have diminished creating access problems. In this context, a tourism-led initiative at an industrial heritage site can represent a last solution where alternative initiatives have failed, and where there are already economic and social problems, and extensive out-migration.

Unfortunately, where communities surrounding industrial heritage sites have been in decline, as employment opportunities have disappeared, then there is a danger of losing the critical cultural assets that are central to interpretation of the site. For example, while industry artefacts can remain standing for centuries, the 'sociofacts' (aspects of social and institutional organization, family ties) and mentefacts (attitudinal characteristics and value systems including religion and language) connected to old industries can quickly vanish. More successful industrial heritage sites effectively combine original artefacts, mentefacts and sociofacts. For example, in the case of Big Pit at Blaenavon, the

value of the visit is undoubtedly enhanced with the employment of former miners as museum and underground guides (also see, for example, the employment of slate workers at Llechwedd Slate complex at Blaenau Ffestioniog in North Wales).

Each of the factors highlighted above, together with the critical problem of forecasting visitor numbers at any tourism destination, hint at the potentially high opportunity costs associated with industrial heritage-led development. Added to these problems is the potential for precedence to be given to commercial and economic objectives over core issues of conservation and underlying community sustainability (DROST, 1996; CAFFYN and LUTZ, 1999) – in particular the extent to which new development benefits insiders or outsiders. HUDSON, 1996, contrasts the ecomuseum concept, where local people create the museum and are themselves 'exhibits' within it, with schemes where visitor numbers and income generation are central objectives. Clearly, there is a problem if real authenticity is replaced with the artificial, such that a process of commodification occurs where heritage is interpreted solely for the consumer (see TEO and YEOH, 1997). Under these circumstances commodification can mean that little weight is given to potential social concerns surrounding the development process. Indeed, Teo and Yeoh argue that the conflict between communities with local concerns, and entrepreneurs and government who are more concerned with global forces, represents an important topic on the tourism development research agenda. CAFFYN and LUTZ, 1999, also demonstrate that key questions for areas going down the route towards general heritage tourism development are those of achieving balance in economic and social goals, developing tourism that is socially inclusive, and creating mechanisms for community participation (see also HAYWOOD, 1988).

The literature suggests that as well as economic benefits, a policy surrounding promotion of industrial heritage needs to balance community involvement with the development of a set of facilities more strictly for the benefit of visitors. More importantly, the success of such initiatives may be achieved in maintaining a balance between economic, social and cultural objectives. Whilst there are likely to be increasing costs associated with the involvement of residents in the interpretation of sites and the planning process, this may add considerably to the value and quality of the tourism product.

#### *Blaenavon industrial landscape*

The Blaenavon Industrial Landscape presents a large number of individual monuments of outstanding value within the context of a rich and continuous relict landscape, powerfully evocative of the industrial revolution. It is one of the prime areas of the world where the full social, economic and technological process of industrialisation

through iron and coal production can be studied and understood. (DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT (DCMS), 1999)

Iron and coal were the principal products of the Industrial South Wales valleys during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the region saw its primary and metal products exported across the world. Whilst the mines and ironworks of the region had international significance for almost two centuries, there are now few authentic examples of the landscape and industry facilities remaining. Many of the examples have decayed, or have been subsumed within extensive redevelopment programmes which have included land reclamation and new building in the attempt to 'green' the valleys once more. The lack of economic redevelopment is paradoxically a core part of the contemporary economic problem in Blaenavon. The area retains some important relic sites. These include the Blaenavon Ironworks, which was historically the industry leader in terms of technology and closely connected with the discovery of the basic oxygen process which revolutionized steel making after the 1870s. There is also the Big Pit coal mine which was sunk to meet the needs of the ironmakers. Currently Big Pit is part of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) and the main Blaenavon attraction, drawing around 80,000 visitors per annum. Surrounding these two main sites is a little-altered landscape encompassing period buildings, the scars of mineral mining and allied transport (steam railway and canal) and manufacturing activity. The rapid growth of the area during the nineteenth century also created a network of chapels, schools, workmen's institutes and, notably, well preserved workers' housing.

The population of Blaenavon peaked in 1921 at around 12,500. Employment and population in the area since this time has steadily declined, with steel production ceasing in 1938, and the Big Pit mine being closed for production in 1980. The comparatively rich array of industrial heritage in Blaenavon is set against a depressing economic and social backdrop. In contrast to many other areas of Industrial South Wales, Blaenavon and its wider locality have benefited little from

the surge of inward investment during the 1980s, which did much to diversify the local economies of several adjacent areas. The geographical location of Blaenavon, coupled with its image (assisted ironically by its unique industrial relics) as an 'old industry' area together with its shortage of high quality industry sites, has done little to attract inward investors. There has also been little remedy to economic and social decline in terms of indigenous investment and development. Firm formation rates in Torfaen, the unitary authority in which Blaenavon is situated, are comparatively low. In Blaenavon, the low level of demand is most clearly seen in the poor quality of retail services on offer in the town.

Table 1 summarizes the employment profile of the town. A high proportion of local employment (Blaenavon and Torfaen generally) is in industry sectors that are growing slowly at a national level. One half of Blaenavon employment in 1998 was in manufacturing and, of this, a high proportion was in sectors that are growing slowly, such as chemicals and metals. In the faster growing sectors such as transport and communications, and financial and business services, current employment opportunities in Blaenavon are poor.

GDP per capita in the Blaenavon area is estimated to be over 35% below average UK levels (see WELSH ECONOMY RESEARCH UNIT (WERU), 1997). Unfortunately GDP per capita disparities are only one symptom of the Blaenavon problem. The lack of economic opportunity results in economic out-migration, and ultimately to population out-migration. Indeed, Torfaen as a whole was one of only three unitary authority areas in South East Wales to witness a fall in population between 1991 and 1998 (of 1.3%). The more general economic and social problems of Blaenavon are highlighted in the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for Wales. The index was constructed by the University of Oxford's Department of Social Policy and Social Work for the National Assembly for Wales, and uses six 'domains' (income, employment, education and skills, housing, health, and access to services) to create the index of deprivation. The Blaenavon electoral division was characterized as scoring poorly in the employment and income domain categories, but also

Table 1. *Blaenavon: employment analysis 1998*

| Sector                                    | Blaenavon | % of employment | Forecast average annual growth in Welsh employment (%) 2000-05 | Forecast average annual growth in Welsh output (%) 2000-05 |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Manufacturing                             | 772       | 55.9            | -2.4                                                           | 1.9                                                        |
| Construction                              | 71        | 5.4             | -2.0                                                           | 1.2                                                        |
| Distribution and retail, hotels, catering | 127       | 9.6             | 0.6                                                            | 1.6                                                        |
| Transport and communications              | 53        | 4.0             | 1.7                                                            | 4.1                                                        |
| Financial/business services               | 22        | 1.7             | 2.2                                                            | 2.6                                                        |
| Government and other services             | 336       | 24.3            | 1.2                                                            | 2.7                                                        |
| Total                                     | 1,381     | 100.0           | 0.3                                                            | 2.1                                                        |

Source: NOMIS and CAMBRIDGE ECONOMETRICS, 2000.

Table 2. *Selected conservation and construction spend 2001–04: Blaenavon Industrial Landscape*

| Project                                             | Spend (£m)        |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Big Pit improvements and infrastructure             | 6.35              |
| Forgeside community woodland                        | 0.48              |
| Townhall and car park improvements                  | 0.69              |
| Blaenavon Ironworks conservation                    | 0.78              |
| St Peters Church repairs and conservation           | 0.26              |
| 15–19 Broad Street (listed buildings) repairs       | 0.22              |
| Market Street improvements                          | 0.12              |
| Lower Broad Street townscape                        | 0.03              |
| Gilchrist Thomas starter units                      | 1.76              |
| St Peter's School development as information centre | 1.67              |
| St Peter's car park                                 | 0.11              |
| Ironworks car park                                  | 0.30              |
| Blaenavon access                                    | 0.65              |
| Renewal area grants                                 | 6.00 <sup>1</sup> |
| Total expenditure                                   | 19.42             |

Note: 1. Assuming £1.5m p.a. to 2004.

Source: BLAENAVON PARTNERSHIP, 2000.

in education, and health domains (NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES, 2000).

Under these circumstances, a series of projects linked to the conservation and development of industrial heritage, and designed to increase visitor numbers to Blaenavon, is potentially one means of local economic diversification. Table 2 lists some of the key projects either underway or planned. Key projects comprise targeted infrastructure improvements (particularly access improvement), new construction, conservation, monitoring and repair of relict sites, together with more general improvements to the housing stock, and development of new starter units to complement tourism activity (see also BLAENAVON PARTNERSHIP, 2000, for a full description of over 60 linked projects and associated development). Central to redevelopment are improvements at Big Pit, to increase visitor capacity and to house a large proportion of the industrial collection of the NMGW at the site. Connected with this strategy, the NMGW is reducing the entrance fee to the facility to £1 (including underground tour). This, together with the wider 'matrix' of projects outlined in Table 2, opens the potential for significantly increased visitors to the locality. The reconstructed landmark sites, together with the redevelopment of the existing Big Pit Mining Museum, potentially comprises a diverse tourism offer with an undoubted stamp of 'quality approval', at least in terms of cultural significance.

#### *Industrial heritage: a summary of economic benefits*

An economic assessment undertaken by WERU, 2001, examined the direct and indirect consequences of the programme of conservation and industrial heritage development for the Blaenavon economy within the framework of Welsh input-output tables (see BRAND *et al.*, 1998). Information for the study was provided

by Torfaen County Borough, and the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, in the form of budgeted expenditure and employment at landmark sites within the World Heritage Site boundary for both developmental and operational phases. Visitor numbers were projected based on previous marketing assessments for the area (see L&R LEISURE, 1999).

The WERU study estimated that, while a large proportion of the construction activity spend (a total of around £20m in the period 2001–04) was 'once only' and time delimited, it was expected to constitute a significant demand driver for the local economy. The construction projects represent employment opportunities for local workers in construction and other sectors with activity expected to support up to 100 jobs per year. As with the development phase, the operational phase of the Blaenavon regeneration project is also expected to have significant employment effects and, in this latter case, this could comprise more sustained employment. Estimates of employment impacts of the operational phase after 2005 revealed that the range of development projects, including Big Pit, together with visitor spend could support, directly and indirectly, nearly £6m of output per annum and 150 full-time equivalent jobs in the regional economy. Of these it was estimated that four out of five could be directly employed within the confines of Blaenavon, comprising a significant employment impact for a relatively small and deprived locality. A proportion of the indirect employment associated with tourism development could also accrue locally, particularly in support sectors such as retail and wholesale services and restaurants, hotels and bars, although this was expected to require significant new small and medium sized enterprise in the locality (WERU, 2001).

#### *Discussion and policy issues*

In the case of Blaenavon, capturing visitor spend is an absolute necessity in this model of development, as this could engender a more diversified local economy which, through the provision of higher quality retail and other services locally, may be considered a social benefit. However, to be successful, such policies need to address a series of supply side and demand side issues, the former, for example, through support for appropriate business start-ups and the latter through refined marketing of the industrial heritage product. Moreover, the provision of a high quality visitor experience at landmark sites, in the town centre environment and through a wide range of services including retail, could both extend the duration of stay in the locality and serve to lever a higher proportion of overall expenditure.

Another avenue of economic involvement is through contractor and supplier links with visitor attractions. Here the public sector carries significant weight, as public bodies are largely responsible for the physical

development and operation of landmark sites. By splitting large contracts, allowing joint bids or helping local companies reach quality standards, the public sector can enable the involvement of local businesses in high value work. Whilst some bodies may face regulatory restrictions in this area (e.g. in obtaining best value), there may exist a significant opportunity to widen the bidding process, although perhaps at some administrative cost. Again the supply side should be addressed. If the tone of correspondence and publicity is inclusive, consultation is real rather than nominal, and if the business community feel involved, the level of commercial interest, often low from local firms, may be increased. Such a process may have beneficial implications for local human capital development, particularly if new skills and experiences can be of commercial benefit in the long term.

The identification and pursuit of economic objectives spurred by UN World Heritage Site status would appear reasonable and predictable, given the enduring economic and social deprivation and lack of access to quality services in the immediate locality of Blaenavon. However, following the earlier review, the exploitation of visitor expenditure to ameliorate local conditions raises a number of questions in this unusual context. For example, a movement away from a post-industrial to service driven culture, with a focus on external visitation, suggests a development path which may not strictly be that best suited to the establishment and protection of a culturally important and environmentally sensitive site. Then any implicit or explicit policy focus on economic benefits may risk the perception of the site as, primarily, one of cultural significance.

Moreover, the strong predicted increase in visitation could affect what remains of the social and cultural fabric of the town. Much has been made in policy documents connected to industrial heritage development in Blaenavon of the need to involve the community, for example, through the establishment of a local community heritage group, a Community Heritage Enterprise to interpret town history, and with a Community Strategy Co-ordinator to strengthen the role of the community in town development (i.e. local capacity building initiatives) (see BLAENAVON PARTNERSHIP, 2000). The ways in which local communities participate in the World Heritage Site project may be problematic. The apparent lack of local entrepreneurship experience is both cause and effect of a lack of capital to promote new projects. As a result, new commercial development might largely be attributable to new inward investment and entrepreneur immigration. The involvement of established local residents only as a source of labour, and a low level of participation by the local business community, could mitigate policy aims placed in terms of community-led economic regeneration.

On a similar theme the expected additional demand generated by visitors may improve local provision of

retail and other services. This gives rise to another policy issue with respect to the impact of economic development which primarily serves visitation rather than community (see earlier review). Currently the town's retail and entertainment offer is poor, such that any renewal or development is likely to be very welcome. Yet the imposition of a 'themed' town centre development intended to capture spend may be culturally artificial, albeit objectively of architectural quality. The partial economic abandonment of the town centre by existing residents does not mean that its appropriation to serve visitors an ersatz nineteenth-century experience, or to provide a Valleys version of the mid-Wales 'shop and eat' market town, would be welcomed no matter what the expenditure benefits.

Consideration of the above factors is important in the context of industrial heritage-led development in the Blaenavon case. Whilst tourism-related development is unlikely to allow Blaenavon to fully span the GDP divide, it is likely that successful development may serve to mitigate further economic decline. Even the provision of employment which is relatively low skilled and part-time could drive up employment rates by enabling participation by those who could formerly find no suitable jobs locally and were unwilling or unable to travel for such work. Indeed, in judging the potential effectiveness of visitor-led regeneration, one must consider this relative to the alternatives – alternatives that Blaenavon has so far found hard to capture.

### *Conclusions*

The development of the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape as a tourism destination raises a number of issues for tourism-led policy. Certainly, the planned expenditure to date reveals an emphasis on increasing visitor numbers. However, the case reveals that a central problem in the Blaenavon case is an under-developed supply side. In particular, many in the local community do not currently possess the skills or financial resources to fully contribute to a regeneration process based upon tourism. Consequently, community support for development should not be taken as read.

Blaenavon is only at the beginning of this developmental path, and there is clear value in tracking the progress of this initiative. However, even in this preliminary analysis it is clear that there may need to be a balance struck between the pursuit of demand-side economic goals and the maintenance of cultural values, between providing services for visitors and enabling residents to gain full benefit from a developments. Practically, policy planning in the area has made much of the need for meaningful and high level local participation. This should include rigorous consultation and information-dissemination procedures, and the involvement of existing business in development and operation. New directions also provide opportunities to

integrate and use existing institutions and individuals to add value to the cultural offer. Underpinning policy directions should be the protection of the cultural resource during the diversification and rejuvenation processes.

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