

Has community heritage played a part in transforming the Blaenavon Big Pit into the National Coal Museum of Wales?

The purpose of this paper is to review existing research into community heritage and highlight the significance of incorporating the narratives and knowledge of communities in heritage sites. The Big Pit National Coal Mine in Blaenavon will be used as an example to illustrate the significance of the role communities play in the British Heritage sector. By examining the implications of intangible and tangible authenticity in relation to the heritage of The Big Pit, both positive and negative attributes will be identified for future engagements in industrialisation projects to consider.

Definition of “heritage community”

“A heritage community” consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations (Zagato, 2015).

Community engagement within heritage is a fluid entity that alters its purpose of involvement according to different concepts, contexts, and situations, and thus the relationship that evolves between community and heritage may vary according to the cultures within societies and the demands of political policies (Deacon & Smeets, 2013:131). Heritage visitor sites and museums are acutely aware ‘they can no longer ignore the voices of the peoples whose pasts they are displaying’ (Dicks, 2003:30), should the past still be represented by the present. As heritage is often formed out of the story’s communities tell, it is reliant on the community as its focus. The ‘building blocks of heritage’ (Crooke, 2010:17) are created by the customs and buildings that define and represent communities and when integrated with the heritage sector the understanding is that ‘community is defined and justified because of its heritage, and that heritage is fostered and

sustained by the creation of community’ (ibid:17). Present consideration that heritage can be better understood with the inclusion of local communities is a shift from past generations yet might not be the connection that is considered ‘so natural an affinity that it hardly needs justification or explanation’ (Crooke, 2010:17). Sitting within the modern framework of cultural heritage and approached emphatically and holistically, the aims of community heritage are to represent and validate ‘national, community, family and individual identity’ (Ripp, 2018:4), dismissing the purely object centred emphasis that has been the focus of generations before our present times.

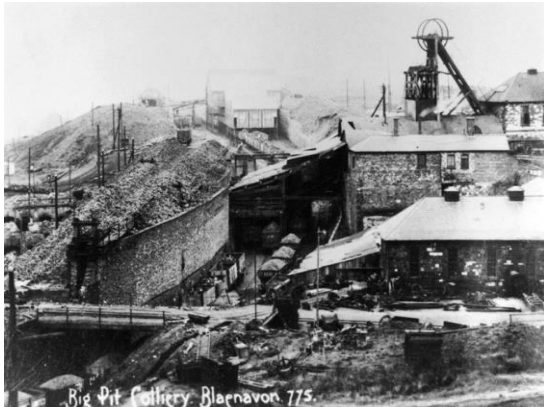
Heritage is always around us, an ever-present entity, whether in the form of a building, location, object, or community, both as a tangible and intangible presence. The UK has recognised that community heritage must be studied and represented by utilising the skills of both academic professionals and communities, in order that a deeper understanding of local heritage can be reflected. British community heritage generally relies on the discourse used within localities which depends on the interests and ties that bind people together, rather than focusing solely on a geographical area (Berger, Dicks, Fontaine, 2020:337) yet by blending community and location the past can be seen as unauthentically idyllic, with superior values and viewed as ‘containers of special ways of life’ (ibid) that no longer exist. From the 1980’s, the UK’s approach to heritage using the narratives and lives of ‘ordinary people’ was in contrast to the conservative approaches that come before, when the images and histories produced focused on that which has been perceived as ‘nationalistic and elitist’ (Berger, et al. 2020:337). Encouragement for communal activity has been implemented in nationwide incentives such as the Research for Community Heritage projects, initiatives have been taken to explore areas and develop histories. With assistance from the Heritage Lottery Fund, a broad range of themes were applied to help to develop and interpret ‘the changing nature of

communities in their historical and cultural contexts and the role of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life' (Arts & Humanities Council, 2013:3) (ibid:4). A summary of the project concluded 'community engagement projects can develop skills for all participants, improve historic databases on local, regional, and national levels, and strengthen links between the heritage sector and health and well-being agenda's (Hale, 2011:6). Further positive impacts have been identified as: increased social capital; shared sense of place; increase civic pride; greater social interaction; empowerment of communities (Evan, 2014:9-10).

Community heritage engagement projects can incur potential issues and challenges, commonly noted as financial restraints, limitations in time and lack of staff (Hale, 2011:6). A fundamental concern can be 'the marketization of culture' (Dicks, 2003:34) which not only involves considering financial incentives for local public involvement but that of authentically representing local identity in a fashion that incorporates 'local structures of feeling' (Dicks, 2003:34). The valleys of South Wales during the midst of the 1980's reached a crisis point due to the depletion of coal mining, and communities were economically unstable with levels of high unemployment. Resolutions were needed to try and improve the situation and regenerate the economy, and thus began the introduction of tourism through the use of culture (Dicks, 2003:35). Instilling a humanist agenda alongside the harsh realities of mining work, museums and sites such as The Big Pit, endeavoured to respect and celebrate past histories within historic environments to strengthen and shape 'distinctive, vibrant, prosperous places' (Evan, 2014:2), where the narratives contributed by local memory and knowledge would explicate the uniqueness of community and place. However, as Dicks concedes the understanding and conceptualisation of 'community' can be suffocated by its own 'homogenising and totalling ways that do not allow for differentiation' (202:345). To fully appreciate and represent

community, heritage would do well to consider the subject through critical self-reflection, thus allowing for the imperfect nature of community to be studied as well as the feted perception. (ibid).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BLAENAVON



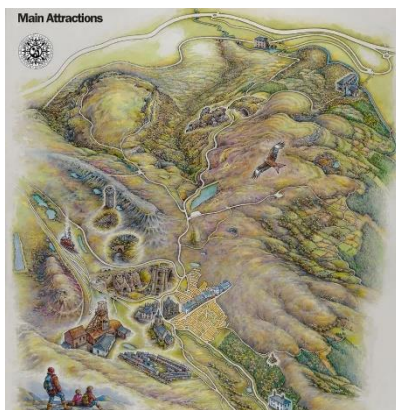
1. Big Pit Colliery, c.1910 (peoplescollection.wales, 2024)



2. Canary that was used to test the air at the 'Universal' pit disaster, 1913 (museum wales, 2024)

The Blaenavon Mine, commonly referred to as The Big Pit, is one of the ‘oldest deep-shaft mines’ in South Wales (Wanhill, 2012:60), and part of the Blaenavon Industrial World Heritage Site. Due to the discovery of vast quantities of coal in the 1850’s, Blaenavon pit became a formative player in an era that contributed to large scale industrial processing. Along with unearthing iron ore and limestone, the rural area was transformed, and supported by ‘coal serving as the backbone’ (Price & Rhodes, 2022:851), new villages with new communities came into existence, with incomes to support local business. The success of exporting the coal from Blaenavon, as well as providing for domestic use, gave employment to hundreds of workers and helped to develop not only the mining towns but also those further afield (Wanhill 2012:60). By 1980, operational losses had steeply declined, and the mine was closed. As a result of deindustrialisation, the town was damaged by ‘population decline, high unemployment, and a perceived lack of social wellbeing’ (Blaeanaevon Partnership in Walker 2011:29). Torfaen

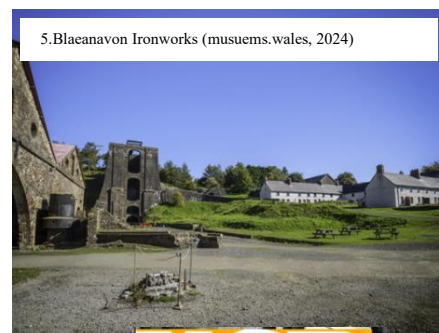
County Borough Council purchased the mine seeing the site as a potential income generator in the guise of a museum. However, due to the location of the building as a mining museum, the positive outcomes expected from the opening could not improve the towns high levels of employment or improve economical stresses (Wanhill, 2012:30). It was not until 2000, due to the Blaenavon pit and surrounding landscape, being inscribed onto the World Heritage list, that improvements in both social and economic environments were identified. Surrounding the industrial sites of both the mine and Blaenavon Ironworks, is a natural landscape in which nestles the town of Blaenavon, and buildings associated with the industry, such as the Workmen's Hall.



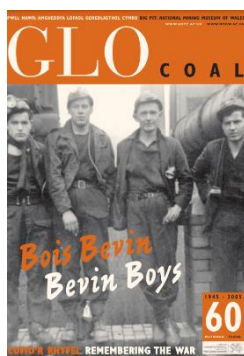
3. Visitor sites in Blaenavon (visitblaanafon.co.uk, 2024)



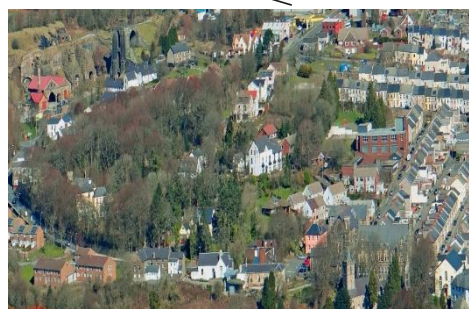
4. COAL magazine, 1947 (museums.wales, 2024)



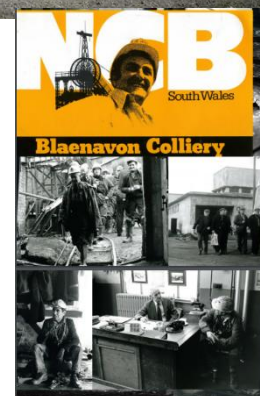
5. Blaenavon Ironworks (museums.wales, 2024)



6. GLO magazine (museums.wales, 2024)



7. The Blaenavon Townscape (visitblaanafon.co.uk, 2024)



8a. Article in GLO

Big Pit is a real coal mine and one of Britain's leading mining museums. With facilities to educate and entertain all ages, Big Pit is an exciting and informative day out. Enjoy a multi-media tour of a modern coal mine with a virtual miner in the Mining Galleries, exhibitions in the Pithead Baths and Historic colliery buildings. All this AND the world-famous **Underground Tour**. Go 300 feet underground with a real miner and see what life was like for the thousands of men who worked at the coal face.

An award-winning national museum that still retains many features of its former life as a coal mine, standing high on the heather-clad moors of Blaenavon, the tunnels and buildings that once echoed to the sound of the miners now enjoy the sound of the footsteps and chatter of visitors from all over the world.

(Excerpt from www.museum.wales.bigpit, 2024)

In preserving the Big Pit, the relict landscapes of the surrounding area, as well as settlements that supported the industry, the importance of 19th century Welsh industrialisation has been established as heretically important. It not only illustrates the technology that was essential to material output but also helps in the understanding of the distinct cultures that evolved, thus portraying both the ‘patronage and the social structure of communities.’ (UNESCO,1992). As an area now considered of vital importance in improving knowledge of the technical, social, and economic processes that are linked to 19th century industrialisation, are we able to identify the concepts of community heritage in relation to the internationally significant site of the Big Pit?

If we look to the WHC for guidance, the Big Pit, and Iron Works, are ‘within public ownership and the wider community, voluntary groups, residents and Town Council’ (unesco,1992) and should maintain close engagement with the overall management. As an objective to develop the financial prospects of mining valley culture, success has been noted in terms of population growth and employment opportunities (Blaenavon Partnership, 2010). Yet, aside from the positive aspects, and the implementation of Cultural Landscape inscription which stresses ‘local cultural values should be balanced with universal values’ (Walker, 2011:30), this has apparently not been the case with Blaenavon. The ‘current, exclusive management’ (ibid) have failed in granting local people access to collaborate in the planning and implementation of projects and that decisions have been mainly upheld by political and professional stakeholders (Walker, 2011:30). By overlooking the community engagement, management have disregarded the community’s narratives of Welsh coal mining and heritage and possibly failed to provide, and encourage, social and cultural equalities (Walker, 2011:32). This is not first case of discontentment and political prowess between local and national stakeholders in the implementation of community heritage. Dicks’s research into the Rhondda Heritage Park, South Wales highlights

innumerable practices that both dismissed and distilled local voices in preference for professional knowledge. Historical knowledge was replaced by that of authority and succeeded in rebuffing ‘the multiple voices on the ground’ (2003:41). Though the project has remained somewhat successful, it has exposed the notion that rational ideas of heritage will find the task ‘bending of social realities to an imagined spirit of free enterprise’ (Dicks, 2003:41) almost unachievable.

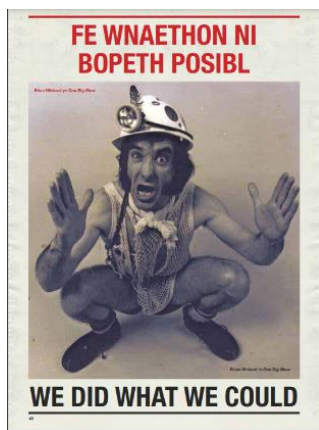
It would appear The Big Pit has eliminated and learnt from past and pivotal errors as encumbered at the Rhonda Heritage Park. Similarly, they have employed genuine ex coal miners as guides for the undergrounds tours and interpreters, which allows for personal narratives to be spoken thus providing authenticity to a visitor's experience with regard to ‘the realities of heavy industry’ (Wilks & Kelly, 2008:135). By avoiding the use of “actors” to portray the former miners, where interpretations would rely on secondary information, and along with a complete restoration of the site, the museum has avoided ‘the static presentation of time’ that can manifest in this type of setting. When the time comes that “real” miners are no longer available to provide their interpretations, and actors are introduced to play the roles, the diminished infrastructure of community engagement may deplete the authentic experience for visitors. (Wilks & Kelly, 2008:136). In relation to the inclusion of community within heritage, this authenticity can be biased towards the hierarchy of the class presenting the picture, and Pitchford (1995:46) argues that the uncomfortable stories relayed display the Welsh as being victims of the industry. Further research has demonstrated that sites such as the Big Pit, though heavily influenced by cultural and material authenticity, still rely on very composed interpretations of cultural history to provide economical gain (Coupland & Coupland, 2014:503). However, The Big Pit, set against a backdrop of tangible buildings and objects attempts to include the notions of community heritage by means of symbolic, intangible

8b.. The Big Pit (musuems.wales, 2024)

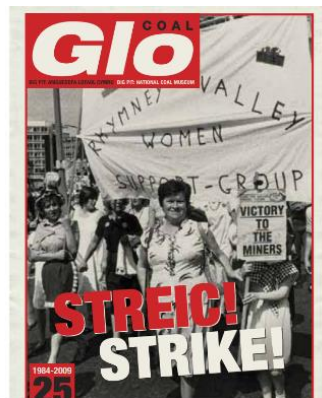


memories. Within the museum itself are numerous collections of objects and exhibitions which place emphasis on the communities of Blaenavon. Themes illustrate the homelife and health within communities, the lives of children working in mines and day to day existence as part of mining community. By using a former colliery nurse to narrate a story in the Big Pit's Medical Centre exhibition, the authenticity of community is apparent. The online Peoples Collection Wales site provides opportunity for the everyday person to contribute to an already eclectic collection of community heritage that can be submitted through storytelling, images, audio recordings and documents. Along with these personal testimonies can be found an online publication called GLO, which has been connected to the museum's current exhibition ,1984-1985 *STRIKE*, and succeeds in augmenting the heritage of Blaenavon's mining communities. Describing itself as:

‘a 'people's history' magazine; people are asked to contribute their own views, images, and experiences of a particular topic’ (musuem.wales.ac.uk)



9. Image of Brian Hibbard in GLO
(museum.wales, 2014)



10. 1984 Miners strike, Wales
(musuems.wales, 2014)



11. 1984 Miners strike, (musuems.wales,

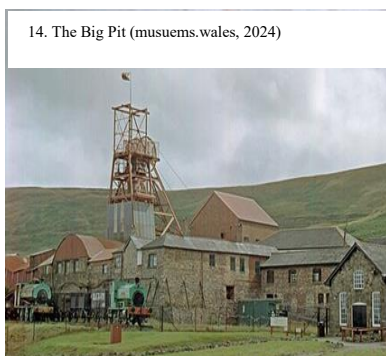


12. Working miners in lift at the Big Pit in GLO, 2014 (musuems.wales, 2024)

Within the pages of these online stories are an assortment of memories and experiences that describe the events of the year long strike resulting after the National Coal Board declared the closure of twenty mines in South Wales, resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs. By giving voices to the mining communities, who can not only express their valued opinions with regard to their own cultural heritage,

but they are also able to ‘sustain and transmit this heritage to future generations’ (Council of Europe, 2006). That they are able to engage and share

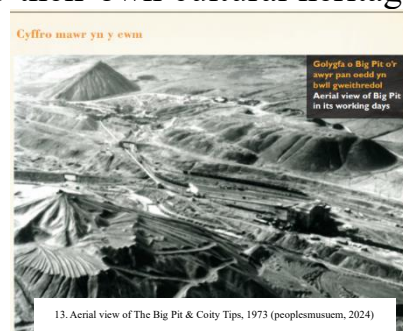
narratives of “lived lives”, of working and



14. The Big Pit (musuems.wales, 2024)

existing in an industrialised landscape, individuals are helping to shape the distinctive culture of Welsh valley communities and possibly enhance local values and that of national understanding of a hugely

important past. It can only be surmised at this particular time that the contributors who wrote for the publication, engaged in meaningful collaborations with



13. Aerial view of The Big Pit & Coity Tips, 1973 (peoplesmuseum, 2024)



15.. Article in GLO, 2014 (musuems.wales, 2024)

heritage management and that any interactions have been nurtured in a combined effort, rather than be dominated by stakeholders who have financial or political interests in the Big Pit Museum and former industrial landscapes of Blaeanvon.

The use of community engagement within heritage has been shown in this report as a complex, but contemporary process in which histories can be shaped and narrated to identify and understand that which defines a culture and how

relationships between groups develop. The Big Pit Museum in Blaenavon has attempted to negotiate the changeable and fluid demands of ‘theatres of memory’ (Samuels, 1994) and portray both the powerful tangible, and intangible heritages of authenticity. In framing a place, a past and a community, whose lives are linked to a bygone period, modern approaches to heritage have succeeded in illustrating both the positive and negative constraints of an industrialised area of Wales. Community heritage when applied to sites, can intensify the understanding of the static nature of buildings and objects that have been decommissioned as places of industrial activity. Yet this process is not always as simplistic and uneventful as portrayed in sites such as The Big Pit and needs to be recognised and illustrated for the future generations of community and heritage, in order that an understanding and appreciation can be reflected in the community heritage yet to happen.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Big Pit Colliery c.1910.

This picture shows the original wooden winding gear at Big Pit. This was replaced by a steel frame in the 1930s when production of steel was at its peak in south Wales, offering a stronger and cheaper alternative. The wagons of coal lined up in the picture were waiting to be picked up by Nora the locomotive, or one of her sisters. Nora was one of five locomotives at Big Pit, named by the mine manager after his daughters. The sixth engine 'Toto' was named after his dog. Nora can still be seen at Big Pit today. [Available at: www.peoplescollection.wales/items/24339] (accessed 25/3/24)

2. Canary that was used to test the air at the 'Universal' pit disaster, 1913. [Available at: <https://museum.wales/picture-library/item/720>] (accessed: 25/3/24)

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5. Blaenavon Ironworks [Available at: www.museums.wales] (accessed 25/3/24)

6. Front page of GLO magazine. [Available at: <https://museum.wales/media/4482/glo2.pdf>] (accessed:25/3/24)

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12. Big Pit National Coal Museum {accessed www.museum.wales}

13. Aerial view of Big Pit and Coity Tips, 1973. The Coity Tip is the former colliery spoil heap for Big Pit. Waste material brought from underground when the coal was mined was tipped onto the landscape over a long period, forming these artificial hills. After the tipping stopped, nature began to reclaim the land and many plants and

species colonised the area. The Coity Tip today is a haven of biodiversity, with a nature trail walk, popular with visitors. [Available at: <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/24343>] (accessed:25/3/24)

14. Big Pit National Coal Museum {accessed www.museum.wales}

15. Amgueddfa Cymru, (2014). Collections and Research: Article and image in GLO magazine. [Available at [www. https://museum.wales/articles/1248/Glo---peoples-history-online/](http://www.https://museum.wales/articles/1248/Glo---peoples-history-online/)] (accessed:25/3/24)

16. Amgueddfa Cymru, (2014). Collections and Research: Article and image in GLO magazine. [Available at [www. https://museum.wales/articles/1248/Glo---peoples-history-online/](http://www.https://museum.wales/articles/1248/Glo---peoples-history-online/)] (accessed:25/3/24)