

Big Pitt National Coal Museum



HERITAGE: INTERPRETATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS.

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Introduction.

The focus of this research report will be the world heritage site known as the Big Pit museum which is located in Blaenavon, a town in the South Wales valleys. The report will look closely at the history, formation, representation and interpretation of this heritage site. Within the South Wales valleys, its industrial past has and will continue to shape Welsh national identity, local culture, the economy and the geographical landscape of which it has become a permanent part of. This report will analyze closely the representations and interpretations of this world heritage site, along with highlighting the advantages and limitations the site has to its socio-economic position within the local community context of Blaenavon. Centralizing on heritage literature and ethnographic studies of the mine, the author will also use participant observation within the heritage site, to present a firsthand account of the experience itself along with being able to give up to date observations of organization of materials and interactive features of the Big Pit museum.

The heritage site is known to most who live within the South Wales valleys. With many of the younger generations all sharing the experience of attending a school trip to the mine, as part of the Welsh school curriculum. Raphael Samul asserts that the study of the past should inform our understanding of the present, giving individuals a collective sense of their own 'historiety' (Samuel, 2008). Samuel's assertion reflects the present definition of what is understood by the central notion of heritage, as a present reconceptualization of the past, as a process of formulating a national identity through its shared understanding and realization of its history. Welsh nationalist ideologies and image building has been at the forefront of many of Wales' development plans, with the Big Pit being one of these projects. In the hope of creating a shared collective identity, one that is characterized by its industrial past.

As Wright (1985) argues heritage to be a means of promoting or presenting a sense of national identity. The historical trajectory of the Big pit museum has been one of ambiguity and has caused much debate both locally and nationally. This is due to the community of Blaenavon being one that has suffered economically and culturally, because of deindustrialization. Similar effects have been felt in many other parts of Wales, where mines have been closed due to deindustrialization within the United Kingdom. This particular area of the South Wales valleys, has been left almost completely untouched by modernization, making this heritage site particularly unique.

Tracing the historical trajectory of the Big Pit.

The Big Pit museum was conceived in 1979, this was shortly before the mine was due to be closed, following Margaret Thatcher's larger de-industrialization plans for the country. The site was proposed as a means to ensure that once the mine had closed, there would be alternative employment available to the miners that had previously worked in the coal mine. At its busiest the coal mine employed 1,300 men which produced around 250,000 tons of coal per annum. Following the closure of the mine in 1980. The development project that set out to re-open the pit as a working mine, would act as a heritage site that would allow visitors to come and experience firsthand what it is like to work in a mine. It has been argued that this plan was an unspoken act of humanity, in order to help the local community, adjust to a lower standard of living. When the site re-opened to the public in April 1983 many ex-miners were re-employed within the mine to act as tour guides to the public. It is worth noting however that not all ex-miners were given this opportunity as the regenerated heritage site only initially employed 36 staff members, this is in contrast to the 250 employees at the time of closure. Most of these museum jobs are part-time. According to Johnston and Thomas (1990), employment opportunities such as these, should be viewed in quality and longevity. During the first year of operations as a heritage site, attracted 90,573 visitors (Wanhill, 2000). This however, was below the expectations set out upon conceiving the plan for development. It has now become evident that a more realistic visitor expectation is 150,000 upon developing on the surface attractions.

What this research had found unique regarding the heritage site is that within Britain heritage often reflects elitist ideals rather than a working class historiography. The Big Pit reflects real life experiences of the rural post-industrial community of Blaenavon. Made up of a working-class community with lower levels of literacy and material means. By introducing such a heritage site into the community, introduces a sense of collective pride for their past. And this in turn helps to create a collective identity, that is characterized by their involvement in the coal mining industry. In many rural areas today, tourism is a valuable diversification mechanism (Bristow, 2000). Through this conceptualization the big pit can be seen to represent what can be coined as 'tourism development'. With a community's economic, material and social means resting on the potential of such a project there is a lot at stake. This paper will look closely at the aims that were first set out in 1983 and the way in which these aims have been achieved or limited over thirty years on. Along with highlighting the representation of industrial heritage and the interpretation of this material. The rich industrial landscape of Blaenavon is set against a bleak economic and social background, one which has been shaped by the loss of industry, thus these findings will be presented whilst reflecting on the impact it has on the wider community.

Mining is one of the most important industrial sectors for many, supplying raw materials to a vast number of other industries. As Csobor and Szabo (2009) have pointed out, the process involved in this form of mineral extraction is also involved in the social structuring and formation of a specific cultural and social environment. As before 1980's

coal mining typified South Wales. Leaving people within this landscape, spatially and culturally remote, thus through developing the Big Pit into a heritage site, a nostalgic view of these occupations is induced (Prentice, 1993).

By shedding new light on these once industrially rich societies that have now turned to heritage as means of development, we can trace the ideological and or political background of the period in which it was formed (Jelen and Kurera, 2017). As we look to the formation of the heritage site the Big Pit, it is key to identify the specific values and to define its accompanying characteristics (Keshner et al, 2008).

The process of developing the Big Pit museum into a well-known heritage site, that would later gain recognition as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations, came in three phases. The first phase can be characterized by the initial transition from coal mine to heritage site that would welcome visitors. The main task at hand during this phase was to make the underground areas safe for visitors, as it was going to open to the public as a working mine they would need to comply with mines and quarries safety regulations. This first phase of the development process cost £1.5 million, this was secured through a number of organizations which included; The Wales Tourist Board (£250,000), The European Regional Development Fund (£133,098), Torfaen Borough Council (£200,000), The Welsh Development Agency (£30,236) and Gwent Council (£50,000). There were also various donations made towards the project by the public and private sectors sponsors.

The second phase of the development of the Big Pit museum aimed at increasing surface attractions and improving the displays to allow further interpretation, along with an additional underground route to accommodate for more tours for visitors. This phase cost more than £500,000.

The third and most recent phase was funded in January 2000, by a substantial Heritage Lottery Fund Grant (1996) of £5,228,000. This involved a remodeling and the adding of additional features to the site to make the museum more appealing to visitors, this was accomplished by the addition of an interactive tour within the modern mine section.

Following the additions and improvements made during the last phase of development the Big Pit and the Blaenavon area was recognized by UNESCO as having 'outstanding global importance' this then resulted in the area being awarded the prestige's recognizable World Heritage Site (WHS) status in 2000. Following this the Big Pit was then incorporated into the National Museum of Wales in 2001.

The criteria present by the United Nations for gaining 'World Heritage site' status, is as follows; outstanding heritage value, stimulating significant community support and a practical and appropriate management plan (Edwards & Llurdes, 1996). According to the UNESCO World Heritage committee's website publication, they inscribed The Blaenavon Industrial Landscape as a world heritage site, due to the landscape being a almost untouched representation of the material form of the social and economic structure of the

nineteenth century. Along with the components located in the town, acting as a remarkable of an industrial landscape. As Edwards and Llurdes (1996) point out, mines and quarries have a good chance of success, on the premise that they apart of a wider range of tourist attractions within locality.

Under this premise the Big Pit is just one of twelve buildings. The world heritage site itself is made up of eight, intersecting sites areas which constitute the world heritage site status. The these include the Big Pit Museum, The Blaenavon Ironworks 1789, Blaenavon Town, The Blaenavon World Heritage Centre, The Landscape and Brecon Beacons National Park, The Canal, Keepers Pond and The Pontypool and Blaenavon Railway. All of which paint a picture of the past which is characterized by national pride for the regions involvement in the mining industry. Thus, the area has now gained a value of its own, to local and national identity formations.

Caffyn and Lutz (1999) highlight that for those areas that are undergoing heritage tourism development, there is a need to achieve a balance between economic and social goals. This they argue should be characterized by involving the community through their socially inclusive participation. However, for the case of Blaenavon many of the members of the community do not necessarily possess the skills, material and finial means to participate in the regeneration process based upon tourism (Jones and Munday, 2017). This is why there is a real need to focus not only on economic goals but also the social goals, through this there may be room to introduce program's or workshops to help develop the skills of those within the community in order to allow the community to fully participate in the heritage tourism development of the Big Pit. One way in which the Big Pit has done just that is by involving ex-miners as tour guide within the mine, taking the visitors underground, giving first-hand accounts of their experiences working in the conditions.

Representing history and heritage

According to the United Nations social and cultural organization 'heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live today, and what we pass on to future generations'. This is very true for the population of the region in which the big pit heritage site is situated, as this heritage not only represents a generations legacy, but also a lived memory for many whom have either been formerly employed in the mine or have family members who were employed there. Heritage, in this respect helps to assimilate a national identity of which is made up of past memory of the industrial sectors and the current recognition of how the process of de-industrialization has affected many communities economically and socially. As the community of Blaenavon was faced with the loss of their regional identities, the formation of this recent history as a recognized source of national pride, helps to reshape regional identities considering tourist developments. Specifically, within rural industrial landscapes. Community sustainability is a key feature of man heritage development projects. As landscapes change, industries adapt, and job opportunities become more and more scarce, heritage for many is a great opportunity for bettering ones social and economic positioning and in many areas, it is the only viable opportunity.

These initiatives set out within the development scheme, hope to stimulate economic and social development. This desire, in which heritage is called upon to revive the past is imposed by the situation of economic decline and social crisis (Walsh,1992: 80). Although there is scope to suggest that this from of heritage is in fact dependent upon the victimization of the communities within the South Wales Valleys. As the Big Pit represents the scars of wales industrial history. This is characterized by the guided tour given by an ex-miner and the guide books that are available to purchase in the gift shop. Both recite grim stories of accidents, along with the poor working conditions that miners were subject to, along with the dreadful child labor that was once used in the mine. Both also highlight the many strikes that the miners were involved in. This paints more of a truthful, de-romanticized conceptualization of industrial past South Wales was subjected to. One, somewhat radical view, of this sort of hertiagisation and the effects of promoting this type of heritage comes from Pitchford (1995) who argues that one serious consequence, is that responsibility for the uneven development of industry in the region along with its impacts, is never placed upon the English.

The representation of heritage within the Big Pit, is one based on rather personal touch, appealing to visitors directly and on a personal level by including induvial experiences. This type of representation of the past is coupled by interactivity. Which encourages those visiting the site and also those residing in the area, to participate fully in the preservation of local rural history. What is becoming more and more common is heritage sites ability to represent the past histories of working class communities, that aid in a deeper understanding of the present contemporary issues of class-representations and economic decline.

Interpreting the past in the present.

Wanhill (2000) argues that there are three key factors in the economic success of heritage attractions. Firstly, there must be an aspect of authenticity within the interpretation this can be achieved through the creativity of the concept. Secondly, ease of access is another key to economic success. Lastly there must be a realist vision set in place in order to, enhance the visitor experience to its fullest.

When looking at these key factors the Big Pit, has gone to much effort to enhance the visitor experience through introducing a virtual tour, underground experience and museum elements. One of the downfalls they face is the ease of access. This is due to the rural location of this world heritage site, along with the lack of perception of the south wales valleys as a tourist destination. There are also some disadvantages of mining areas for industrial heritage tourism, which has been pointed out by Edwards and Llurdes (1996). As they assert, repair and upkeep can be costly of these heritage sites due to the sheer size of the mines, along with the degradation of the land in the area means that it is not the typical tourist hotspot, and lastly that the areas many of these mines are in rural locations and far from the main tourist attractions.

Wright (1985) derives heritage to be a means of presenting and promoting the past, as a tool for governments and nations to establish historically based collective identities. Thus, the Big Pit is a symbol and vehicle of national pride and historical memory of its industrial past, that is sustained through the interpretations and representations of heritage. Benedict Anderson (2007), looks at what he asserts to be 'imaginary community' in which a nations collective identity is shaped by its perception that everyone within they're community shares similar ideological values and norms as they do. We may interpret heritage to act in the same means, this act is proliferated through the expansion of mass communications and printing press. These forms of representing the industrial past, can be interpreted as the pride of a countries involvement in such a heavily demanded industry, however that sense of pride is juxtaposed with a sense of sorrow. This sorrow comes from the loss of industry and economic means, the rhetoric presented throughout the heritage site concerning the harsh and appalling conditions in which miners worked in and the nostalgia of a time with an abundance of job opportunities, for those who are not attaining a high level of education. Through interpreting some of oral histories, displays and tour it is clear that the heritage portrayed in the Big Pit, represents a working-class cultures struggle with loss, change and lack luster opportunities. It is a reminder that many areas such as this, face a troubling task of renegotiating their perceived identities and becoming a part of a national shared identity, one that is built upon communities such as Blaenavon's hardship.

Underground Tours

There is a sensory experience added with the underground tours of the Big Pit, led by an ex-miner, who provides you with a hard hat and head light. Of which once you are enclosed in a small shaft, the door shuts and the guide asks all visitors to turn their lamps off to experience what it would be like for many of the miners whilst they wait to have their lantern re-lite this is because matches are prohibited underground. The complete darkness of the mine, evokes an emotional response and appreciation towards the conditions that thousands of young men would have once been subject to working in. This giving an authentic experience of the Welsh industrial past, along with offering visitors an experience quite unlike any other.

The guided tours are ninety meters long, accompanied by a guided fifty-minute walking tour around the engine houses, stables and coal faces. The experience involves a sharing of oral histories regarding not only the history of the mine, but also their own personal experiences of working in the conditions. The tour guides also highlight that the Big Pit would have once been an extremely dangerous place to work. The miners also hope to enlighten the visitors with an authentic experience of what it was like to work in the mine, along with the hardship that the town has been left with since the loss of industry. This experience lasts an hour and is entirely free, which is great for visitors like myself, however it leaves little room for economic development. What is clear is that over the years and with modernization slowly making its way into the South Wales valleys, certain aspects of the site have changed to accommodate the changing times. With more interactive exhibitions added to the heritage site, which widens the audience even further, by appealing more to the younger generations.

In addition, upon visiting the museums website there is a whole host of interactive resources that are available free of charge. These include teaching resources, virtual tour, courses and photograph gallery's. What is most impressive is the virtual reality tour of the underground pit, which has been created to increase access to the heritage site. This is key to the success of the heritage site as it introduces a wider audience to the importance of the site in conserving national and industrial heritage. Allowing more people who may not be able to physical visit the site the opportunity to explore the site from the comfort of their own home or county. This was created in association with Google Arts and Culture, which is part of Google expeditions, and can be downloaded as an app either to a phone or tablet. This sort of resource adds to the overall marketing of the heritage site as a heritage tourist attraction. Which paints a vivid and fruitful picture of Wales' industrial past, helping to shape a nationalistic image of wales for a worldwide audience.

On the surface attractions

There is a number of visitor attractions that are on the surface of the Big Pit museum. These include colliery buildings; the winding engine house, the pithead baths, stables for pit ponies and the blacksmith shop. The souvenir shop, was formally the engineering works. The miner's canteen has now been turned into a cafeteria for visitors. As well as these on the surface attractions the heritage site also offers workshops, in which visitors can participate and learn new skills. As well as experience an interactive form of interpreting heritage.

More additions have been added to the educating aspect of the heritage site, such as, the Blacksmithing experience, where visitors of any age can purchase a workshop experience in which they can learn the skill or art of blacksmithing. There is also on display as of recent a photographic exhibition by Walter Waygood documenting the landscape, home life, society, work, religion, mining and youth in Blaenavon from the 1970's onward. This is a remarkable addition, which helps you as a visitor to create a more vivid image of the lives and histories of the community in Blaenavon, allowing visitors to put images to the stories told by the tour guides. Pitchford (1995) has studied the potential for heritage tourism in Wales, such as the Big Pit, to serve as a medium for projecting a nationalist image, he believes this image is characterized by the Welsh being both victims of injustice and bearers of a distinctive culture. Through this paper's own analysis of the historical trajectories, representation and interpretations of the Big Pit as a heritage site, Pitchford's analysis holds true. In regard to the way in which the histories of the Big Pit are told by highlighting some of the darker sides of coal mining, industrial decline and modernization. The mode of these oral histories is complemented by the eerie feeling one gets upon visiting the mine.

Conclusion

Upon experiencing the tour of the Big Pit museum and researching the interpretations and representations of this form of heritage management and display, it is clear that these play a rather important role in creating a shared, collective identity formation, centralized upon Welsh nationalism. The overall experience of the mine and the surrounding area of Blaenavon contributes to the visitors wider understanding of how industrialization has shaped the landscape, community and economic prosperity. What is apparent when walking around the surrounding area and the town, is that there is still much to be improved upon. These improvements could include, refurbishing the town to include more restaurants and attractions that would aid the region in becoming a popular tourist destination. Although there is signs of this sort of development taking place already, this has been a rather prolonged process.

With such a rich history and distinct culture, it is important to conserve and promote these types of heritage sites as vehicles for expressing 'Welshness'. One of the shortfalls facing the heritage site today, is the added competition from other regions within South And North wales who are implementing similar strategies for economic growth, through re-opening iron works, memorials, and heritage tourist attractions built under the same premise. However, what remains unique regarding the Big Pit, is its almost untouched landscape that acts as somewhat of a time machine, transporting visitors to the height of the industrial revolution. The added competition may be a serious problem in the near future, but with many new and technological initiative attractions being added to the Big Pit every year, it seems as though the heritage site is currently remaining an important part of Welsh and British heritage.

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