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Industrial Heritage and Economic Development: The Blaenavon Case.

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The Blaenavon Industrial Landscape was successful in gaining the status of UN World Heritage Site in November 2000. The success formed part of local plans to conserve and develop the old industry landscape, and to redevelop the town and its surroundings (see Blaenavon Partnership, 2000). This article stresses some of the practicalities involved in industrial heritage led redevelopment processes, and goes on to assess whether this type of redevelopment could lead to a strengthening of the local economy in the Blaenavon case. This has ramifications for several other areas of the Welsh economy that are seeking to promote industrial heritage as an element of the local development process.

Local Development and the Attraction of Tourists to Old Industrial Sites

Enhancing local economic opportunities through general tourism has been highlighted as a development option in many rural and post-industrial areas of Wales. Rather less attention has been given to the role of industrial heritage in promoting tourism visits and economic development. Whilst the educational and hobby value of industrial heritage has never been in doubt, the general promotion of industrial heritage as a tourism product can be problematic for the following reasons:

- Old industry sites can be extensive, requiring large amounts of scarce funds for restoration, and needing a high direct labour component for health and safety reasons, and because industry artefacts often need careful human interpretation to add value.
- Industrial heritage sites may be far from new areas of economic activity, and feature extensive environmental damage and degradation. Degradation and

'economic distance' then create problems in attracting new activities. Consequently economic success of redeveloped heritage sites can become highly dependent on sustainable visitor numbers to landmark sites.

- Industrial heritage sites may be distant from existing tourism circuits. Economic decline can quickly link through to diminishing transport (and social) infrastructures and resulting access problems. As a result of the above factors, tourism led initiatives at industrial heritage sites may effectively represent a last chance where alternative initiatives have failed, and where there are already economic and social problems, and extensive out-migration.
- 'On-site' community decline can result in the loss of cultural assets critical to interpretation of the site. For example, in many Welsh cases, the industry artefacts have stood for centuries, however, the sociofacts (aspects of social and institutional organisation, family

ties) and mentefacts (attitudinal characteristics and value systems including religion and language) connected to the old industries can quickly vanish. One route to successful development around old industrial sites is an efficient combination of physical artefacts, mentefacts, and sociofacts.

- Finally, and linked to the above, 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. The success or otherwise of such initiatives results from success or failure 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.

The Blaenavon Case

The mines and ironworks of Industrial South Wales had a global significance

Table 1 Selected Conservation and Construction Spend 2001-4 - Blaenavon Industrial Landscape

Project	Spend (£m)	Project	Spend (£m)
Big Pit Improvements and Infrastructure	6.35	Lower Broad St. townscape	0.03
Forgeside community woodland	0.48	Gilchrist Thomas starter units	1.76
Townhall and car park improvements	0.69	St Peter's School development as visitor information centre.	1.67
Blaenavon Ironworks conservation	0.78	St Peter's car park	0.11
St. Peter's Church repairs and conservation	0.26	Ironworks Car Park	0.30
15-19 Broad St (Listed Buildings) repairs	0.22	Blaenavon access	0.65
Market St improvements	0.12	Renewal Area Grants	6.00*
TOTAL EXPENDITURE			19.42

*Assuming £1.5m pa to 2004; Source: Blaenavon Partnership (2000).

for almost two centuries. Few authentic examples of the landscape and industry facilities remain - many being swallowed up in redevelopment programmes to 'green' the valleys. Blaenavon retains important relic sites, notably the Ironworks, and the Big Pit coal mine. Added to the landmark sites is a landscape encompassing period buildings, the scars of mineral mining, and allied transport (steam railway and canal) and manufacturing activity. The area also retains the relics of an urban network of chapels, schools, workmen's institutes, and well-preserved workers' housing.

The heritage landscape in Blaenavon is set against a depressing economic and social backdrop. The geography of Blaenavon, coupled with its image (assisted ironically by its unique industrial relics) as an 'old industry' area has done little to attract inward investors or indigenous investment. A large proportion of local employment (Blaenavon and Torfaen generally) is in sectors that are growing slowly at a national level. A lack of economic opportunity has resulted in economic out-migration, and ultimately to population out-migration. Under these circumstances a series of projects linked to the conservation and development industrial heritage, and designed to increase visitor numbers to Blaenavon, is potentially one means of local economic diversification.

Table 1 lists key development projects comprising 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).

Central to new developments are improvements at Big Pit, to increase visitor capacity, and to house a large proportion of the industrial collection of the National Museums and Galleries for Wales (NMGW) at the site. Entry fees reduced to £1, combined with other projects outlined in Table 1, sets the scene for an expected large increase in visitors to the Blaenavon area.

WERU (2001) examined the direct and indirect consequences of the programme of conservation and industrial heritage development for the Blaenavon economy. The research 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 infrastructure work could provide 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 full operational phase (after 2005) revealed that the range of development projects, including Big Pit, and 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 the locality. A proportion of the indirect employment associated with the tourism development could also accrue locally, particularly in support sectors such as retail and wholesale and restaurants, hotels and bars - although this was expected to require significant new SME activity in the locality.

Is Industrial Heritage Development a Way Ahead? Some Issues

Capturing visitor spend is critical in the model of development outlined above, with new tourism and allied spending potentially giving rise to a more diversified local economy which, through the provision of higher quality retail and other services locally may be considered a social benefit. Moreover, the provision of a high quality visitor experience at landmark sites, in an improved town centre environment and through a wide range of services and retail, could both extend the duration of stay in the locality and serve to lever a higher proportion of overall expenditure. The identification and pursuit of economic objectives spurred by UN World Heritage Site status appears reasonable, given the enduring economic and social deprivation and lack of access to quality services in the immediate locality of Blaenavon. However, exploiting visitor expenditure in this way raises a number of linked issues in this unusual context:

- To be successful, such policies need to address a series of supply side and demand side issues in

Blaenavon; the former, for example, through support for appropriate business start-ups, and the latter through refined marketing of the industrial heritage product.

- Movement away from a post-industrial to service-driven culture focusing on external visitation and economic benefits, suggests a development path which could conflict with the establishment and protection of a culturally important and environmentally sensitive site.
- Visitation increases could affect the remnants of the social and cultural fabric of the town. Documents connected to industrial heritage development in Blaenavon report a desire to involve the community, for example, through establishment of a local community heritage group; a Community Heritage Enterprise to interpret town history; and with a Community Strategy Coordinator 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. Then 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.
- There is an expectation that additional demand generated by visitors may improve local provision of retail and other services. In Blaenavon the current retail and entertainment offer is of a low quality, such that any renewal or development is welcome. Yet 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 would be welcomed, no matter what the expenditure benefits.

Conclusions

The above issues should be borne in mind as Blaenavon moves tentatively along the industrial heritage development path. Successful development of the site 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 heritage-led regeneration, one must consider this relative to the alternatives: alternatives that Blaenavon has so far found hard to capture.

There is significant value in tracking the progress of events in Blaenavon. Even at this early stage 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 value; 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 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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