

Branding

Post-industrial image-making in Blaenavon

John Rodger



How do you build a brand for a cultural landscape extending over 33,000 hectares with multiple industrial heritage and natural features?

John Rodger MBE outlines how he met this challenge.

The Blaenavon Industrial landscape was inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in December 2000 as a "cultural landscape" extending to 33,000 hectares in a mountain top setting. The site presents a huge challenge in marketing, which has been tackled with imagination and vigour by the Blaenavon Partnership which is responsible for management of the WHS including the area's presentation and promotion.

The WH Site has many features, historic monuments, an old Welsh iron town set in a broken landscape of early mineral workings. All bear testament to the leading role played by South Wales in the early 19th century during the formative years of the Industrial Revolution in iron and coal production.

The WHS includes several very diverse attractions which need to stand alone yet be sold as a package. Features include:

- Big Pit, The National Mining Museum of Wales and the winner of the Gulbenkian Museum of the year for 2005 with over 140,000 visitors per year.
- The Blaenavon Ironworks (circa 1787), the best preserved of their kind in the world.
- The historic iron town of Blaenavon with terraces of workers housing, churches, chapels and social buildings.
- Part of the Abergavenny to Brecon canal now a popular visitor attraction with cruising and walking on the tow paths.
- The Pontypool to Blaenavon vintage Railway.
- Beautiful walks on former mineral tramways and a community heritage museum.
- The Blaenavon World Heritage Centre in the former St. Peter's school buildings (circa 1815) which is now being developed and will act as the focus for presenting the whole WH Site (see below).

The challenge was how to produce an overarching branding style to sell all the attractions under the WHS banner bringing added value to all the individual elements while maintaining the right of each to pursue their own promotional plans and retain their own logos.

An Identity

The Blaenavon WH Site Partnership wished to have a distinctive visual identity which instantly told of the early industrial activity and the human struggle in a hostile landscape. Three design houses were invited to sit in during a discussion, or focus group meeting, in the town and submit design concepts based on what they heard. The Partnership wanted industrial heritage to be projected in a strong unapologetic way. A design house in Cardiff 6721 Limited was selected. The "man on the mountain" logo with the strapline "testament to human endeavour" was agreed and in use by April 01. In their submission 6721 Limited, also proposed ways in which the design style could be extended in presenting the varied attractions of the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape.

A Marketing Strategy

In May 2003 "Destination Blaenavon" a strategy to turn Blaenavon into "a must do tourist destination" was produced. The Blaenavon Partnership agreed to present the entire WH Site as a package of attractions. The premise being that promotion of the WH Site in total could provide "added value" to each of the individual attractions. However, a prime concern of all the partners was to try to develop the town centre as a visitor destination with cultural tourism helping to offset the all too obvious decline and decay of the main shopping street. At the turn of the last century Blaenavon was one of the most prosperous and industrious small towns in the world but by 1990 had fallen on very hard times, due to the decline in the iron, steel and coal industries and the changing patterns of retail distribution.

It was agreed that Blaenavon town could not be vigorously promoted as a visitor destination before considerable improvements were carried out, i.e. removal of the worst areas of dereliction, provision of public toilets and some appropriate shopping outlets. A vigorous programme of renewal has been undertaken over the last 5 years which has overcome nearly all the obvious decay and provided a town fit for visitors.

Very Importantly in December 2002 James Hanna, an American who assisted with the UK's first Booktown at Hay on Wye, proposed Blaenavon as another Booktown. This proposal was encouraged by the Partnership as offering the basis for thematic shopping in the town which would be consistent with the areas WHS cultural status and could also provide the catalyst for further investment by cafés and other shops.

In the context of the agreed marketing strategy, some of the partners Torfaen County Borough Council, Monmouthshire County Council, National Museums & Galleries of Wales, CADW (Welsh Historic Monuments), British Waterways and Brecon Beacons National Park agreed to contribute to a modest but ongoing budget to market the WH Site. With this money an active programme for promotion has been put in place.

Style Guide

A Style Guide was commissioned from 6721 Limited in December 2002 to develop their earlier ideas for design. This was finally completed early in 2004 and has informed the design of signage, interpretation panels, a web site, exhibition facilities and banners, as well as a series of leaflets, posters and postcards produced this year.

The Blaenavon World Heritage Centre

The focus for the presentation of the BIL WHS will be the Blaenavon World Heritage Centre in the restored St. Peter's School (Grade II*) listed, building, built in 1815 in memory of the ironmaster by his sister Sarah Hopkins.

This £2 m centre funded by the HLF the WTB, the WDA and TCBC is seen as a key attraction, the first of its kind in the UK, providing information on WH Sites, the "outstanding universal significance" of the Blaenavon Industrial landscape, the industrial history of the area and the "people's story".

The Business Plan for the new centre was prepared by Locum Consulting which included a study centre for all ages, a community resource and an exemplar piece of restoration and new build.



Balance Tower

The architect is Niall Phillips of Bristol and the exhibition designers are Hayley Sharpe of Leicester. Work is underway on site and the WH centre is planned to be opened in the summer of 2006.



Aerial view of the Big Pit

Summary

BIL WHS presented a real challenge in how to build a positive brand for diverse attractions and developing the total area as an important visitor destination. Much has been achieved since the Blaenavon Partnership came into being in 1998. The WH Site status was seen as a possible catalyst for providing a sustainable future for the area. Industrial Heritage in the UK has come a long way since Blaenavon appeared on the ICOMOS UK "tentative list" of World Heritage Sites in 1999. Much remains to be done but a vigorous and encouraging start has been made in developing the area as a major tourist destination.

Work continues to develop the individual WHS attractions and to present them jointly for mutual advantage. An events programme has also been established in embryo which will be extended and enhanced in future years to bring interest and variety to the area and encourage repeat visits.

While the progress in marketing Blaenavon has been thought through in principle its delivery depends on many people and the energy and enthusiasm of Cath Thomas the Blaenavon Project Manager and Marketing Officer has been vital in driving forward the promotion of Blaenavon.

World Heritage site status has proved to be effective in attracting funds from Europe, National Assembly of Wales, The Heritage Lottery Fund as well as the Local Authorities concerned. The result has been a changed perception both within and outside the area of this town which had suffered through no fault of its own from the vagaries of economic circumstances.

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