

# The Blaenavon World Heritage Site

## Putting principles into practice



Entrance to the Blaenavon Ironworks

Blaenavon's competitive advantage over other towns and regions in South Wales does not lie in its outstanding industrial landscape, of which there is an abundance in South Wales, but in the fact that Blaenavon has received an internationally recognised 'seal of approval' through its designation as a World Heritage Site. It is crucial to maximise this newly bestowed status by developing cultural tourism for the purposes of community regeneration in Blaenavon and the surrounding area.

Heritage managers have a range of responsibilities for managing and communicating their heritage assets, in order to achieve this.

### Core responsibilities for heritage managers

Managers of heritage destinations have two key responsibilities:

- **Conservation:** caring for and conserving the cultural and/or natural heritage assets which go to make up the destination, and
- **Access:** making heritage assets i.e. sites and/or collections 'accessible' to public audiences in physical, cultural, intellectual and experiential terms.

Heritage conservation is not 'an end in itself'. It is 'a means towards an end' and that end is to make the heritage more accessible to public audiences while ensuring its conservation and sustainability for the long term. (For recent work on issues of access and audiences, see the Heritage Lottery Fund's report on *Developing New Audiences for the Heritage*, April 2001.)

Today, heritage managers in Europe are operating within complex and changing political, economic, social and technological

Blaenavon Industrial Landscape is the UK's most recent World Heritage Site (see Jess Harris' piece, on pages 40-42, on The World Heritage List for the full UK listing). As John Rodger reports in his article on pages 49-51, the Blaenavon Partnership, the organisation responsible for the Site's development and management, is committed to maximising World Heritage Site status in the development of cultural tourism for the purposes of community regeneration in Blaenavon and the surrounding area. But how do you promote and present an area's 'landscape' as a comprehensible visitor experience? **Tim Ambrose** and **Seán Young**, Directors of Locum Destination Consulting, report on how their work with the Blaenavon Partnership is putting the principles of sound heritage management into practice, underpinning the connection of the World Heritage Site to the village and enabling economic benefits to be passed on to the local community.

environments. Understanding how these environments impact on their work and balancing the twin responsibilities of conservation and access is critical for success in management and marketing terms. World Heritage Site status recognises these as essential requirements.

Heritage managers have had to become increasingly sophisticated and skilful within these complex environments to ensure that their heritage destinations gain the resources that they need to meet their responsibilities for their heritage assets and to attract the market interest and support that they need to sustain their operations.

At the same time, the 'consumers' of the cultural and natural heritage, who represent the market for heritage, are themselves becoming more and more sophisticated. Locum Destination Consulting argues that consumers today are concerned first and foremost with *individual* experience. Recognising the significance of what can be called the experience economy, in which heritage destinations of all types and sizes operate, is essential for heritage managers who need to gain competitive edge in an increasingly crowded destination market place.

### Heritage conservation and interpretation

There are a number of issues relating to the conservation and interpretation of heritage destinations that deserve mention and which provide a context for the work underway at Blaenavon.

- Conservation planning is critical.
- Management planning leads on from conservation planning.
- Interpretation strategies focus on the consumer.

- Communications strategies build the relationship between the site and brand, stakeholders and the market.

All of these processes are interdependent and the following sections explore them in more detail.

## Conservation planning

In the UK, a great deal of emphasis has been placed in recent years on the development of conservation plans for heritage sites and monuments and historic buildings. (See in particular the work of English Heritage and Kate Clark, *Conservation Plans In Action*, pub. English Heritage, 1999.) A conservation plan defines why and how a place or a site has cultural significance and value, and together with a management plan, encompasses a strategy for retaining that significance. A conservation plan is important for a number of reasons.

- It brings together information and expertise from a number of sources - historical, architectural, archaeological and conservational - so that the site can be fully understood and its cultural significance and cultural value defined.
- It recognises that all heritage sites are undergoing dynamic processes; sites are not static and unchanging.
- It provides a multidisciplinary understanding of the site and influences the processes of change and development by developing a set of policies about the site.
- It serves as a tool for partnership activity with other organisations and helps to show professional understanding to stakeholders.
- It should have a scholarly basis, but also recognise the commercial and market context in which a site is operating.
- It is not appropriate for all sites, but is particularly important for multi-period, complex sites, such as Blaenavon.
- It does not mean that everything has to be preserved, but provides an objective basis for decision-making.

A conservation plan is thus not an end in itself, but a dynamic tool to enhance and preserve sites.

## Management planning

A management plan should be linked to a conservation plan. It ensures that the significance of a site is not adversely affected by the management approaches to that site, and indeed can be enhanced by appropriate management approaches. A management plan is important for a number of reasons.

- It helps to establish a vision, mission and objectives for the site and its management which is compatible with its conservation needs.
- It helps heritage managers manage their sites on a proactive rather than a reactive basis.
- It helps to deploy resources against priorities for heritage conservation that have been identified within a conservation plan.
- It ensures that management decisions take into account the requirements of the conservation plan and the policies that have been established from it.
- Like conservation plans, a management plan helps in negotiating the transfer of the past to the future.
- Management plans together with interpretation plans provide the basis for presenting and interpreting the site to public audiences.
- A management plan provides the context within which financial and business planning can take place.

Both conservation plans and management plans need to be monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis to ensure that they take account of change within the political, environmental, social and technological contexts around them.

## An interpretation plan

An interpretation plan provides a mechanism to help people engage with the heritage asset, appreciate its significance and understand more of the way in which it is being managed and conserved. It builds on market research, which identifies the target market segments that management wishes to reach. An interpretation plan provides a range of benefits.

- It helps to explain the development, significance and value of the heritage site to public audiences.
- It demonstrates how the heritage site is being managed in the context of its conservation plan and management plan.
- It encourages public engagement and participation in the process of care and conservation of the heritage assets.
- It provides for a range of appropriate interpretation approaches - on-site, for example, through exhibits and guided tours, off-site through, for instance, outreach programmes and touring exhibitions, and on-line through such media as websites and video-conferencing - to meet the needs of different market segments.

## A communications strategy

A communications strategy encompasses the role of marketing and public relations and should be thought of internally for staff and supporters as well as externally for stakeholders and the public at large. It provides managers with a proactive approach to reaching their various audiences.

- It engages stakeholders and staff in the heritage site and the conservation planning process.
- It engages the public in the heritage site and the conservation planning process.
- It targets the key market segments that heritage managers wish to reach.
- It generates interest and reasons to visit the heritage site.
- It creates reasons to return - and critically, return on a regular basis.

## Blaenavon World Heritage Site and its story

All of these points have been considered in the development of the management and marketing approach to the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape World Heritage Site.

The industrial landscape created at Blaenavon by coalmining and ironmaking, and the fundamental role it played in the development of the world's first Industrial Revolution, is very difficult to 'see' and understand for the visitor, not least because a large part of the story is underground.

For that reason, the Blaenavon Partnership is developing a World Heritage Site Centre. The concept for the Centre was driven by the identified need for a focal point that could provide a contextual understanding and appreciation of the significance of the Site and explain its history. The Centre will help Blaenavon to capitalise on its World Heritage Site designation and meet its objective of enabling regeneration through cultural tourism.

The Centre will be housed in St Peter's School in the centre of Blaenavon. This was the first school in Wales to be purpose-built by



*Blaenavon village: economic benefits to the local community will flow through greater connection to the Blaenavon World Heritage Site*

an ironmaster for the children of his workforce, and is thus of national and international significance in the historical development of education provision. The school buildings have been derelict for the last 20 years, and the WHS Centre project provides the first viable solution for their restoration and reuse. Importantly, the solution arose from the combination of a 'use looking for a building' and a 'building looking for a use', rather than just the latter.

### Forging a concept for the Centre

The mission statement for the Blaenavon World Heritage Site Centre is:

'To inspire an understanding and appreciation of the significance of the history and cultural value of the Blaenavon World Heritage Site for the benefit of the resident and visitor through the relevant and innovative management and use of the Centre's information resources.'

The Centre's core product and service offer is based on the history and heritage of the Blaenavon World Heritage Site *as a whole*. It is this interesting mix of history and heritage, supported by the identified vision and mission, that provides the foundation for the concept for the Centre.

The Centre will act as a focal point of reference for the Site, helping to orientate people both physically and intellectually. It will seek to explain the significance of the landscape on the social development of the people of Blaenavon, and the way in which the people of Blaenavon have impacted upon the landscape to the present day.

At the same time, it will allow comparisons and connections to be made between Blaenavon and other World Heritage Sites, particularly those related to industrial history and heritage.

The Centre will bring together information in digital format relating to the history and heritage of the Site, from a wide variety of sources but especially from the local community. The Centre will provide a rich variety of programmed outputs around the idea of 'story-telling', which will be designed to engage with its identified target markets, key among which are the local community, education and lifelong learning audiences. It will not be a museum, in that it will not develop collections, but it will make use of the new digital technologies to bring resources together in virtual terms to inform its programmes.

Through its presence and its programmes, the Centre and its team will act to build the destination brand for the World Heritage Site. Attractions will need to behave as strong brands in any market, with a strong sense of vision, mission and personality. The Centre will thus represent a physical expression of the World Heritage Site brand and its values.

### Programmed story-telling: the focus of the visitor experience

The role of the Centre will not simply be *to tell* the story of the Blaenavon World Heritage Site, as this can give the impression that the Centre is uni-directional ('from us to them') and that it has a monopoly of understanding. Rather, it will provide multiple opportunities and multiple choice - on-site, off-site and on-line - for people to participate in and contribute to the Centre's work in the context of the World Heritage Site. In these ways, it will help visitors to contribute to the Centre's data and to explore and engage with the resources that illustrate the history and heritage of the Site.

One of the challenges facing the Centre is to recognise that there is, in fact, not just a single story but many different ones, seen from many different perspectives. In this respect, the Centre will act as a *facilitator* rather than a teacher. The visitor or user's role is one of *explorer and discoverer*. At the same time, the Centre will inspire interest in the stories being presented in order to build and maintain audience interest.

The delivery of the core product and service offer will be through programmes of 'story-telling'. The idea of programming is a powerful one, because it puts a strong emphasis on change and renewal and this encourages repeat and regular visitation, particularly by the local community, a key market for sustainability reasons. This focus on what is described as 'story-telling' is a key element in helping the Centre establish itself as a visitor attraction and community resource centre. The approaches to story-telling will encompass a number of different activities such as:

- first person story-telling;
- temporary exhibitions;
- guided site tours;
- audio guides;
- dramatised events;
- lectures and lecture series;
- conferences and seminars;
- broadcasting;
- workshops and classes.

The challenge facing the Centre will be to deploy all of these techniques to best advantage for the different audiences that it will serve. Ultimately, the story of Blaenavon is the story of the people of Blaenavon. It is through that story that the history and heritage of the World Heritage Site will be brought alive for visitors and users.

*All images courtesy of The Blaenavon Partnership*