



# Full Steam Ahead

## Bringing the industrial heritage of Wales alive

**As Deputy Director of the National Museums & Galleries of Wales (NMGW), Eurwyn Wiliam has been instrumental in the development of several destinations celebrating the country's considerable industrial heritage. Here, he explains how this 'family' of destinations is aiming to build proper recognition for Wales' role in global industrial advancement, and helping to build a new sense of Welsh nationhood.**

Wales was once one of the most heavily industrialised nations on earth. But the process of de-industrialisation has meant that not only has much of the physical testimony for Wales's immense contribution to the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the world been lost, the very history of that contribution is also little known and valued *within* Wales, and, not surprisingly, is totally unknown *outside* Wales.

Wales was the world's first industrial nation. It was in the 1840s that, for the first time in any country, more of its population became

engaged in industry than in agriculture. The pattern had been set for the rest of the western world, and this previously rural country became known across the globe for its mines, tips and steel mills.

Throughout the following two centuries, Wales dominated extractive industry to such an extent that the world price of coal was determined at Cardiff, the world price of copper at Swansea, and the world price of tin at Llanelli. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the world's largest copper and slate mines alike were to be found in north Wales, and the world's largest ironworks firstly at Cyfarthfa and then Dowlais. The world's first steam locomotive ran at Penydarren in 1804, and the first regular passenger railway at Oystermouth in 1807.

The Royal Navy's decision to rely exclusively on Welsh steam coal meant that the growth and maintenance of the British Empire depended to an extraordinary degree upon the output of Welsh miners, with Cardiff the world's foremost coal-exporting port.

In the entire history of humankind, there have been only two revolutions of lasting worldwide significance, both of which were driven by technological advancement. The Neolithic Revolution, which saw the invention of farming, resulted in the first settled

communities. And the Industrial Revolution, driven by unprecedented technological innovation across all modes of production, gave rise to change in all areas of life: settlement, transport, communications, art, culture, religion, social structure, ecology, economics and politics. Today, we are witnessing the birth of the third technological revolution, the Information Revolution, in which ideas and information are being exchanged at ever-increasing speed.

### NMGW: telling the Welsh story

The National Museums & Galleries of Wales (NMGW) believes that it has a crucial role to play in making the people of Wales not only aware but immensely proud of Wales's contribution to the Industrial Revolution and, indeed, its influence throughout the world. Equally, NMGW and its partners can educate the rest of the world about Wales's monumental achievements and innovations during and since the Industrial Revolution.

Evidently, too, there could also be major economic benefits to telling this story in a clear and integrated fashion. Currently, tourists come to Wales for scenery and a little history, but the country is not on the main UK tourism trail, and does not have the strong national identity of Scotland and Ireland. Language and culture have, as yet, had little positive influence on tourism, a fact recognised by the Wales Tourist Board's recent strategy for cultural tourism.

Ownership, and consequently interpretation, of Wales' industrial heritage is currently fragmented. CADW (Historic Welsh Monuments) has some sites in its care, particularly the flagship Blaenavon Ironworks. There are some private museums and trusts. Local authorities have a considerable number of sites in their care. But probably the single biggest player is NMGW, with a number of sites throughout Wales and a clearly defined strategy for industrial heritage. NMGW's founding Royal Charter of 1907 requires the institution's involvement, *inter alia*, in 'the complete representation' of 'the particular industries of Wales'. We have long recognised that this is best delivered *in situ*, and to that end we operate three industrial heritage centres. The first, at Llanberis, is located in the heart of the slate-quarrying district of north Wales. The second is at Dre-fach Felindre in west Wales, where a working woollen mill is being reinterpreted. And the third, in Blaenavon, is the new Big Pit Mining Museum (where visitors can experience life down a mine - see picture), which was welcomed into the NMGW 'family' in 2000 as the National Mining Museum of Wales. In addition, social aspects of Wales' industrial past have been exhibited since the late 1980s at Wales' most-visited heritage site, the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans, where a terrace of iron workers' houses, a shop and the Workmen's Institute have so far been re-erected.

### Bringing it all together

However, there has always been a need for a central, synoptic museum to bring together the story of Wales' industrial and maritime past. The first phase of NMGW's Welsh Industrial & Maritime Museum was opened in Cardiff Bay in 1977, but was never successful in attracting visitors, because of the inflexible nature of the building. The site was sold to the Cardiff Bay Development Trust in 1998. The money from the sale enabled NMGW to acquire a new Collections Centre at Nantgarw, north of Cardiff, and to have £4.5 million in hand to develop an alternative museum.

An open competition for partners resulted in NMGW agreeing to build a new national museum (with a working title of 'the

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Waterfront Museum') in Swansea. The £30 million project has attracted an in-principle offer of £11 million in grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, along with £6 million in risk contingency cover from the National Assembly. Both of these developments have been major votes of confidence in the scheme to deliver a forward-looking museum devoted as much to exploring innovation and entrepreneurship as to the rivets and slag of the past.

### Singing from the same hymnsheet

But NMGW cannot deliver a Wales-wide initiative on its own. To this end, it is a major partner in the Wales Tourist Board-led South Wales Heritage Initiative, an awareness-raising and marketing partnership designed to enhance the good work already being done at Blaenavon and elsewhere. For this to succeed, and for there to be a proper national strategy, local politicians must overcome the view that the past was all bad and should be forgotten. Likewise, amongst the outputs there must be an identifiable, unique image, and unity of product, presentation and access. New attractions should not be created unless they are of flagship standing, and we should consider carefully whether all our existing attractions are viable, or whether some actually detract from others. Attractions must work within a logical context and help to promote one another. There must be synoptic presentations at strategic locations. Just as Cardiff Bay had its 'arc of entertainment', so there should be an 'arc of history' following the northern rim of the coalfield, from Blaenavon in the east to Swansea and Llanelli in the west, including within it Merthyr and the Rhondda, Cynon and Swansea Valleys.

For all this to succeed, there must be recognition at the highest political level that we should celebrate Wales' crucial contribution to the development of the world that we live in today. Helpfully, the following words recently appeared in the first issue of a new quarterly magazine, *OneWales*:

'Has there ever been a better time to be Welsh? At the start of this new millennium we seem to have found a new confidence at last in who we are and what we can achieve. All around there are real signs of a new Wales emerging as a dynamic and distinctive country, ready to take on the world. The working people of Wales have a record of innovation and a capacity for managing change that surpasses most others in the developed world. We led the first industrial revolution and we can do it again. I am confident that we will be at the forefront, developing all sorts of world-leading technologies.'

The author was neither me nor one of my NMGW colleagues, but Rhodri Morgan, First Secretary of the National Assembly of Wales. With such optimism and focus at the highest level, the future looks bright for our industrial past.