

*Big Pit, Blaenavon, Gwent.*

## **BIG PIT BLAENAVON**

About a century ago South Wales was one of the major coal exporting centres of the world. Ports such as Newport, Cardiff and Barry shipped anthracite to all corners of the globe and kept supplied with the output from literally hundreds of collieries peppered throughout the valleys of the interior. As the century progressed so demand declined and the year 2008 saw the closure of the very last of our deep mines at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun. Some small drift mines still survive, and there are of course still several open cast mines gouging deep scars into the landscape, but the pits that were such a familiar feature of our past have gone. With them too went a way of life that, for better or worse, we thought would never change.



When Big Pit at Blaenavon, Gwent closed its gates for the last time in 1980 some of those who worked there came up with an imaginative scheme to preserve it as a museum. Not just a display of static features and buildings on the surface, but the actual underground workings as well so that future generations might still experience something of their way of life which was now slipping away. Over the years it has become one of the leading visitor attractions in Wales, and since it has been taken under the wing of the National Museum, entry is now absolutely free. Not surprisingly then somewhere in the region of 140,000 people visited in 2007.

My visit was made in Autumn 2007 at the invitation of my son and grandsons (aged 6 and 10), and really proved to be a day out for all the family. Six hours after we entered, our two youngest members were still reluctant to leave!



Besides the buildings and gear and displays on the surface the underground workings is really not to be missed. Everyone is kitted out with helmets and lamps, and the subject of proper safety checks before the descent is made. “Contraband” – lighters, matches, digital watches and batteries – all have to be surrendered and safely locked away pending return. As is emphasised by the guides, this is a journey into a *real* pit and the normal rules of pit safety are applied. Then it is into the pit cage to be lowered down into the bowels of the earth in the company of a guide who is normally somebody who has worked down a deep mine himself.

The tour of the underground lasts about an hour. I was fascinated! Those safety helmets were certainly not just for show! In places I was walking bent almost double and needed to be constantly on the look-out for changes in roof level. There is a story in my family that my father (like myself over six feet tall) being unable to obtain employment as a young man went to work at Oakwood colliery in the Avan Valley. A single day at the coal face convinced him that there must be better ways to earn a living, and shortly afterwards he left and joined the army. Now I know how he felt – not fear, nor claustrophobia, but I too could never have spent a lifetime working in such conditions!



Yet thousands of men did, and in the former pit-head baths there is a museum setting out their story and that of the communities in which they lived. Elsewhere on the site, imaginatively located in an underground gallery, is a cleverly constructed audio-visual display outlining the history of coal mining underground, and at the former works canteen it was possible to purchase anything from a cup of coffee to a substantial lunch.

Whether like me you find yourself re-visiting a past aspect of your life you thought you knew, or like my companions you are seeing something straight out of the history of our recent past, Big Pit is a thoroughly interesting and absorbing day out – and it doesn't break the bank to go there.

For further details, opening times, etc, .check out the Big Pit web-site at: [www.nmgw.ac.uk](http://www.nmgw.ac.uk).

