

the ENVIRONMENT means BUSINESS in today's ECONOMY

THE ENVIRONMENT has become a real business opportunity for companies from corporates to SMEs. The transnational WECAN project, hosted by Groundwork Wales on behalf of the Valleys Regional Park partnership in Wales, is helping businesses take advantage of the opportunities in the valleys created by projects, linked to the outdoors and communities, which are helping to regenerate the area once again.

Eleven businesses of all sizes have bought into the scheme already, providing in-kind or financial support for mutual benefit, and one of those is a famous old Valleys community brewery which is financing three crucial initiatives in Blaenavon and the wider south Wales valleys.



A good example is the Living Landscapes Lectures programme, which has returned for a new season after successfully bringing to life how active and diverse the area around World Heritage Site of Blaenavon and in the Valleys actually is now.

Amy Sullivan, Economy and Tourism Marketing Officer at Torfaen County Borough Council, explained what the Living Landscapes Lecture programmes are about and why they have become such a big hit with the region.

She said: "It is my role to organise and promote a series of 12 Living Landscape Lectures which will take place mainly within the Blaenavon World Heritage Site. Our aim with the lectures is to encourage local people and tourists to visit the area not only to learn about something new but to take part in it as well."

It is a real hands-on programme designed to be interactive out in the countryside and the mountains surrounding the North Gwent town but also to be educational in the lecture theatres which will take place alternately at the Blaenavon World Heritage Centre and the

Visitors Centre at Rhymney Brewery's premises in the shadow of the Big Pit National Mining Museum itself.

Amy added: **"They will hopefully gain a really useful experience and memory which will see them come back and visit the area again in the future."**

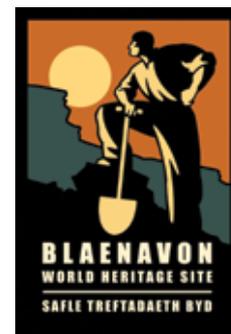
"Blaenavon lends itself well to the things we do in the lectures and the landscape is so different to anywhere else. The attractions within the area offer so many things for people to do and it is just a really good way to explore and learn something new.

"This is about using the wider landscape, the green space and the environment and it is an additional recreational resource that people may not have thought about in the past."

The Living Landscapes Lecture Programme began in July and is taking place on the third Tuesday of the month throughout this year and through the early part of 2014. The first of the events at the Brewery is on August 20th. The previous series in 2011/12 took in such diverse activities as wildlife watching, walking around the mountains and hang-gliding, all of which proved very popular.

Amy said: **"The lectures attracted in total around 550 visitors to the area, some of which were highly popular. Whilst the timing in the year and the weather can**

impact on how many people turn up, the range of topics we covered attracted people of all ages and abilities to them."



The programme will include a journey around Rhymney Brewery's site on the Gilchrist Thomas Industrial Estate and a diverse range of other activities.

Amy said:
 "Apart from Rhymney Brewery, I have been talking to a company which is looking to do a bird identification lecture so they will tell people about all the different birds that exist in the landscape and they are going to bring some examples of birds with pictures. Then people are going to be taken on a guided tour of the landscape to spot these birds and their nests themselves."

Blaenavon not only has the famous Big Pit National Mining Museum – with its 300-foot shaft which people are taken down to experience in real life how miners used to dig coal out of the ground – but also the Iron Works next door to the mine and the Alexander Cordell Museum, recognising one of Wales' most famous authors.

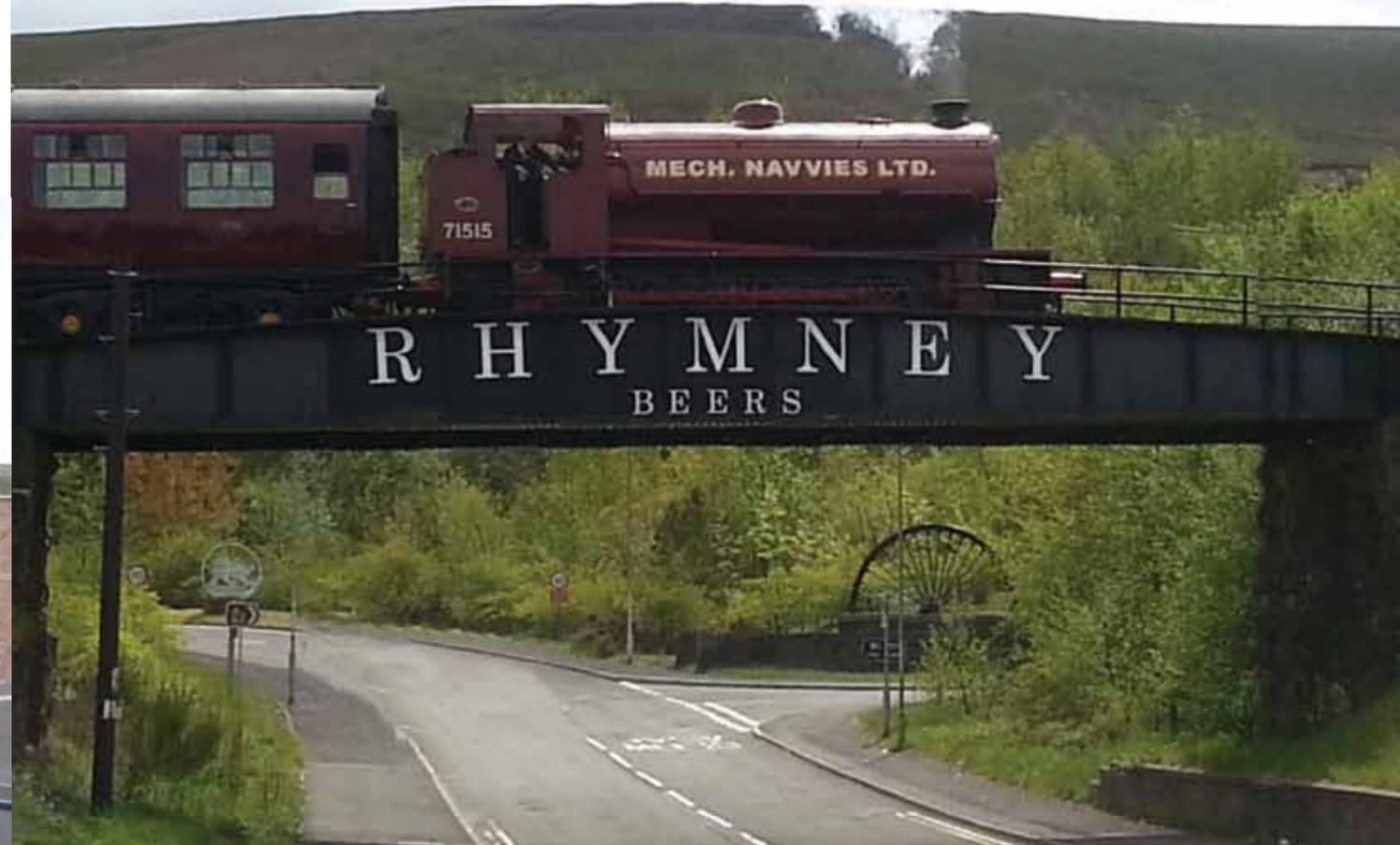
And, so that visitors know where these sites are, Torfaen Council have gone into the hi-tech world and launched a phone app which helps guide people around.

Amy said:
 "We are keen to offer a lecture on how we brought in this app and about bringing in new technology as well. People can then come up to Blaenavon, have the app on their phone and do a 'guided tour' of the town using the app. That would be a really useful, interesting, different take on the landscape."

Steve Evans, Rhymney Brewery's Managing Director, explained why he and his company has provided financial support for the Living Landscapes Lectures programme, the Community Tourism Conference that was recently held at Margam Park, and two Dark Sky Wales events (with one planned for businesses only, at the Visitor Centre, on November 15th) which is about introducing people to exploring the wonders of the night sky.



"It all fits in. It is all about history, heritage, beer, coal and steam, linked to our landscape, and we built our country on those things."



"Wild flowers have been planted, thanks to Environment Wales, on the mounds of old slag heaps, to encourage biodiversity and reduce maintenance."



RHYMNEY

For further information visit:

www.visitblaenavon.co.uk
www.rhymneybreweryltd.com

www.wefundthevalleys.com
www.thevalleys.org.uk

Mr Evans said: “We wanted to use the venue at the Visitors Centre at the Rhymney Brewery to host the Living Landscapes Lectures and basically it fits in ideally with our desire to attract more visitors to the area as well provide an alternative venue for private and business use.”

Rhymney Brewery goes back to 1839 when Andrew Buchan, a Scottish engineer, came down to the Valleys to change the course of a river for the colliery in Rhymney and decided to build a brewery, initially for the miners. The company stayed as it was – with the traditional Hobby Horse brand – until 1972 when Whitbread bought it and closed the brewery down six years later.

When the British Government reduced the duty rate for small brewers, compared to those paid by the big organisations, by fifty per cent – so while the big branded brewers pay 44 pence duty for every pint, smaller companies pay 22 pence per pint – Mr Evans and his son revived the Rhymney brand.

Mr Evans said: **“It gives smaller brewers and immediate cost advantage. So by saving the duty rate, it made the chances of success more compelling, hence going from six to thirty breweries in Wales now.”**

Rhymney employ 40 employees in the brewery itself and in the real ale bars that the company run in areas like Merthyr, Pontypridd, Aberdare, Mountain Ash and a recently opened one in Cardiff.

This has now given Mr Evans and Rhymney Brewery the chance to support initiatives like the three they have with donations. He added: “The Welsh Government and HOVIP (Heads of the Valleys Innovation Programme) were very kind to enable us to create the first purpose-built brewery in South Wales since the 1970s with the first ever Visitors Centre. Without the Welsh Government and HOVIP’s help, we couldn’t have done it.

“So we would like to give something back – and we will continue to do it. It’s not just a one-off. We will find a budget for helping local enterprise and worthy projects year in and year out.”

And it was a piece of good fortune when developing the Blaenavon brewery that brought the Welsh Government’s historic environment service CADW knocking on the door with interest. Mr Evans added: “CADW came here and found a natural spring on the Ironworks site just down the road and, to their surprise, they tested this spring water and found it was pure. So they came to us and, at that time, we were the only bottling facility in Wales – I know there are about two or three now – and asked us if we would bottle the spring water so they can sell it in their 16 or 17 sites across Wales.

“So that is an on-going dialogue that we are having with them.”

The environmental aspects of the brewery stretch beyond the gates of the facility as well to the rough terrain that surrounds them, where the coal dust still peeps through the grass and reminds everyone of the industrial past that was in the area many years ago.

Wild flowers have been planted, thanks to Environment Wales, on the mounds of old slag heaps which have long been overtaken by that grass, and, said Mr Evans, it is appropriate that those flowers are of the wilder variety.

“It is important for us to maintain the history and heritage of Blaenavon. We don’t want to be planting rose bushes where none previously existed. We thought it was ideal to plant something that was in keeping with the surroundings as well as be better for the environment. There is no way we want to import top soil from Abergavenny and try and do something that is not really viable.

“It all fits in. It is all about history, heritage, beer, coal and steam, linked to our landscape, and we built our country on those things.”

Phil Burkhard, who leads on business engagement for WECAN and who formerly owned an Abercynon-based SME, said: “The WECAN project led in Wales by Valleys Regional Park is working in partnership with former coal-mining areas in Belgium and France. Its joint support for the Living Landscapes lectures helps underpin two of its major aims; namely to enthuse and encourage communities to explore and discover their natural environment, and to work with businesses to involve them in related initiatives for mutual benefit.”

“The main message is that businesses of all sizes, and not just corporates, can benefit from investing in projects linked to the natural outdoors and communities because it is increasingly becoming an essential way of doing business with real returns and not just a feel-good factor. Customers are voting with their feet and gravitating towards those businesses that are ethical and who promote sustainability (Rhymney Brewery is a zero waste business). When I listen to both SMEs and corporates, they feel more compelled to support this agenda because of the financial and people benefits and link to their values and increasingly because their competitors are taking responsible business practice more seriously.”

The private sector has a highly influential role to play, for example, Mr Burkhard added: “We have just identified an opportunity, along with the SO SAVI business, to create twenty Valleys Regional Park apprenticeships for young people aged 16-24 years old to work in the countryside and manage and promote our environmental assets across the south Wales valleys. These apprentices need to be clothed and kitted out so there is an opportunity for the right business, depending on their priorities and values, to provide these resources in return for an agreed tailored benefits package.

“There are a myriad green investment opportunities in the south Wales valleys for small businesses and corporates to provide know-how, labour, materials, facilities or finance for mutual benefit. So come and support us to further support yourselves, the environment that we can sometimes take for granted, local communities and the wider economy.”

