

Saturday 27th October 2012
London to Blaenavon
Blaenavon World Heritage Site

The day dawned late because this was the last day of daylight saving in Britain and it was about 7.00 am before daylight. When it did arrive it was crisp and very cold and we were pleased to at last see a clear sky four days after arriving in London. The clear sky was to last all day and stretch into Blaenavon.

Jennifer (Su's daughter) and her husband Andy were joining us to make a foursome for our exploration of Wales. We took a pre-ordered Kenwood hire car to Waterloo station to catch the train to Bristol that rocketed over the 120 miles with only three stops in about 100 minutes. We took a cab from the Temple Meads train terminus to the Avis depot in central Bristol only a couple of blocks from the St Nicholas markets. So before moving the car, a comfortable manual MG we walked up to the markets where we had a look around and a Moorish lunch in a market with more variety of cuisines than Mindl Beach in Darwin.

I had been initially disappointed with English architecture after having been blown away by the elaborate and ornate exteriors of the cities and villages we had seen in Central Europe but in the old Exchange area of the markets we did see some very ornate buildings with some excellent sculptures. We got away from Bristol at about 1.30 and made our way via the M4 to the grand and wide bridge over the estuary of the Severn that took us into Wales (paying a \$Au10 toll on the way).

With the assistance of a couple of wonderful navigators we found our way through Pontypool to Blaenavon where our first call was to the World Heritage Visitor Centre. It was in an old church and provided splendid interpretation of the Outstanding Universal Values that justified the inclusion of Blaenavon on the World Heritage list in 2000. I was impressed by the logo that Blaenavon that was adapted with variations in the same style to show the particular values of this site e.g. the Big Pit, Steel Works, Rail, Canal etc.

It seems as though this was at the centre of development and innovation in the evolution of steel making in the Industrial Revolution. Here they mined coal and iron ore pellets underground, raised them to the surface, turned them into steel and then shipped the finished product down the Brecon – Monmouth Canal to the Severn to be shipped out to the world.

I was most impressed by two programs that I hope we can get applied on Fraser Island. One was a Junior Ranger program and the other was a program for Volunteer Rangers where the work and training covered a variety of tasks including dry stone-walling, footpath management, reed-bed planting, wildlife monitoring

and guiding visitors. They called for "Volunteer Rangers" for the "Forgotten Landscapes Partnership". This is something FINIA might pursue.

After leaving the most informative and most helpful Information centre we found our way to the Big Pit, the largest colliery in Blaenavon that was the last to cease mining. It has been preserved as a functioning museum and we were able to descend 90 metres the shaft after being stripped of everything with batteries in including watches and cameras and even car keys and then equipped with helmets (very essential for me) and lights. It was a great experience to see what conditions were like for the miners, young children and pit ponies that worked in the mine. The guide was a 59 year old miner (who looked like a 70 year old) who told the story with passion and authority. It was an unforgettable experience. His grandchildren called him "Spud" because he grew up underground.

Back on top we headed off to our accommodation at Ty Shon Jacob Farm, that Jennifer had found on the net. It was a beautiful and interesting drive through a lovely avenue of trees in the richest autumn tones. The farm B&B sits atop a hill overlooking Blaenavon and Pontypool where we went to have an interesting dinner at Harvester (a British version of Sizzler). We could see the Severn Estuary (widening out to the Bristol Channel) in the distance

Sunday 28th October 2012
Blaenavon to Swansea
Brecon Beacons National Park

Daylight saving ended last night and we had nominally an extra hour of night. When the day dawned, it was as scheduled grey, cold and very windy. It was great to be warm inside our B&B and nobody was enthusiastic about doing an early morning walk before breakfast as had been suggested.

As we acclimatized to the day the wind dropped and after the most indulgent B&B hot breakfast we set out without rain to explore some more of Blaenavon and the Brecon Beacons National Park.

Unfortunately the Blaenavon Ironworks weren't open as we arrived so we took a few photos and pressed on through some splendid Welsh rural landscapes despite some mistiness. We passed through some classic Welsh villages and many with names replicated in Australia including Ebbw Vale, Merthyr and Swansea,

Our first stop was in Brecon where we went to an Information Centre. We paused by the Monmouth-Brecon Canal and then made our way on to the Brecon Beacons National Park Visitor Centre where we had lunch.

It was raining lightly as we set off in slightly drizzling rain through some very scenic county to find some

waterfalls in the southern part of the National Park in the Vale of Neath. It was a 35-minute walk up to the falls but the autumn colours around us from the foliage more than compensated for the grey and drizzling sky. The waterfall itself wasn't extraordinary but it was a great setting.

We then continued following the Vale of Neath downstream on a secondary road, the A470 that had four lanes and was of a better standard than the Bruce Highway between Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast. We arrived in Swansea and were able to find our hotel near the waterfront with no difficulty although by now the rain was heavier and more consistent.

Our first assignment in Swansea was to make our appointment to be at the Morrision Male Choir rehearsals but a reference posted on the internet said that rehearsals were cancelled for the nights of 24th and 28th October. Just our luck and we can find no alternatives within reach of anywhere we are staying for the rest of our Welsh tour. We hadn't anticipated clashing with school vacation week and we had hoped to experience the rich cultural contribution that Welsh male choirs have given the world. (Eisteddfods originated in Wales)

We decided to go for a walk into Downtown Swansea for a taste of Thai for dinner. It was a brave mood but the showers were abating. We walked past the Dylan Thomas Centre a reminder of the bard's roots in Swansea. Alas though Thai was closed and we settled for Pizza instead.

Monday 29th October 2012

Swansea to St David's Southern Wales Coast

The light showers continued through the night with ever-longer gaps between showers although this didn't worry us in our dry air-conditioned hotel adjacent to the Swansea waterfront

We decided to set off early and headed off for the up-market Swansea seaside suburb of the Mumbles for a light showery visit. Work was under way to resurrect the entertainment pier at the headland. We saw a little of the coastline and through the mists and rain we could see smoke belching out across the Bristol Channel on the north coast of Devon engaged in the manufacture of products unknown.

After a look around some very pleasant and affluent looking suburbs as we weaved our way through lovely Swansea, we fuelled up and headed off to explore as much of the coastline of South Wales as feasible. This meant that we stuck mainly to the lanes and by-ways that were less travelled and offered more scenic sights. There were a number of times when the autumn tones and sheer loveliness of the landscapes drew audible gasps of delight. We paused for morning tea as we

passed through Llanddowror where we indulged in in an 11.00 am "smoko" break for coffee at the Castle Gatehouse café.

We pressed on then through some stunning Welsh rural scenery before arriving in Tenby that seemed like a very busy tourist town and justifiably so although its beach and drained artificial harbour shouldn't be compare with Australian coastal or seaside resort towns. On a headland there had been fortifications as well as a castle on a semi-island. The town though was interesting and had character.

After lunch of fish and chips we made a deviation outside Pembroke attempting to see some of the much-lauded coastal scenery on a peninsula but while the road scene was attractive we couldn't see the sea anywhere. It was a pleasant drive

We raced on through Milford Haven where we saw what seemed to be four different oil refineries in the vicinity. It seemed to be an industrial hub. Then as the light was fading we made haste through the small village of Marloes to Wooltack Point where there was a fabulous lookout across to a number of adjoining islands. It was cold and blowy but the seascape surrounding us on this headland was absolutely stunning. It would have been a stunning place to watch the sunset but the chill wind and the heavy cloud dismissed the thought while we were there

It then it seemed a long drive in fading light to St David's named for the Patron Saint of the Welsh skirting the city of Haverford West which is the Pembroke shire County seat.

Tuesday 30th October 2012

St David's to Llanberis Coast of Western Wales

The weather this morning defied the forecast. In fact it defied the forecast all day and turned out to be surprisingly dry and sometimes sunny for the longest day of driving on this itinerary — 200 miles (or 320 kilometres). We found our average speed was about 40 mph which made it a long day and by 4.30 pm there was little light left to observe the landscape. Nonetheless it was a fascinating landscape with some moments of exhilaration especially when we first entered Snowdonia National Park.

The day began at St David's with a visit to the Cathedral. We had established that St David was a Sixth Century Bishop who lived and preached and did good works in this area and was buried here before becoming a Saint and the Patron Saint of the Welsh. He is honoured and recognized by the Anglican, Catholic and other religions. He is honoured by subsequent generations of bishops who have built a vast and elaborate Cathedral here and other structures such as a Bishop's Palace that has fallen into disrepair.

Having seen the beautiful Basilica in Prague and other European churches at first I was inclined to under-rate the quality of the Cathedral that looked relatively drab by comparison with some we had seen but despite its drab external appearance and the impression of dullness as we entered, I must say I became more impressed as we examined it more closely although it doesn't enthuse immediately.

St David's is Britain's smallest city (because of the cathedral) and the only British city to be contained within a National Park.

We left St David's after 10 and headed north. We caught glimpse of the coast but the narrow road doesn't allow for any stopping to admire the views when they are seen and that wasn't so often because unlike Victoria's Great Ocean Road the road wasn't so close to the coast. I was particularly interested in the Coastal Walk that looked so interesting on the web site. The walking track though was a fairly crude single file path and only offer walkers a rare view of the coast and mainly wandered through farm fields further from the coast. I thought what a contrasting experience it offered compared with what we could offer with the George Haddock Track on Fraser Island.

We wondered what the hills in the distance were. It was tantalizing in places to look out across the Irish Sea and realize that we could see parts of Ireland.

We made another attempt to capture some of the imagery of the coastal environment at the fishing port of Fishguard. Alas, I don't think that my photos do justice. However wherever we have seen the coastal shores in the last few days I have been surprised by the fact that the tide is always out — and always a long way out. It was out at Swansea and the Mumbles at 9.00 am and everywhere else we have observed it. It was still a long way "out" at 3.00 pm this afternoon which reminded of the tides of Torres Strait. It was more curious because last night was the night of the Full Moon and it should have been the highest tide of the year.

We were pressed for time so after this revealing insightful deviation we decided to make express haste to Tenby where we found a pleasant café that offered the most splendid lunch. The lamb and mint pie particularly impressed me. It was an exquisite taste but if anything it was topped for intriguing flavour by the Spanish Hot Chocolate I had ordered as an alternative to coffee.

Tenby is a delightful seaside town and like most others we had seen seemed to be crawling with people enjoying the week-long Mid-term break for schools. However as we passed through the famous Welsh University town of Aberystwyth we noted lots of students who apparently were not taking the school mid-term break. We also passed through many towns

with unpronounceable names for we foreigners and with such narrow and contorted streets that it is amazing that the traffic could move at all when large vehicles tried squeezing through.

Some town names were familiar with the most familiar being Cardigan and Newport. Some, like Harlech, are immortalized in song and that was our most urgent destination as the skies darkened (but not raining). I wanted to see this World Heritage Castle built by King Edward I over 800 years ago that had now been inscribed on the World Heritage list. It was a little anti-climactic because the Castle is now just a shell of stones, a skin without a body inside. I then wondered about the World Heritage standards for Cultural sites compared with Natural sites. I later learned that Harlech Castle once successfully held out under siege for seven years, the longest siege in British history. At that stage the sea came right to the base of the cliff enabling it to be resupplied by sea. I developed a new appreciation for the significance of Harlech Castle and the great Welsh song relating an episode in the siege.

With the light almost gone we then travelled express to Llanberis by the most direct route arriving about 5.30 and finding the delightful cottage accommodation chosen by Jennifer conveniently in the centre of this delightful village. Then stocked up from the local supermarket we began a very relaxing stay where we do our own self-catering.

Wednesday 31st October 2012

Llanberis

Snowdonia National Park

This morning looks to be offering very auspicious and gloomy weather to mark Halloween. The rain we avoided yesterday has now arrived and most formidably.

As a nasty Halloween trick we were urged to be at the Mountain Railway station an hour before the scheduled 9.00 am departure and despite the foul weather walked there (10 minutes away) in the wind and rain only to discover that nothing opened before 8.30 am (even the toilets) and we waited in the wind and rain with virtually no shelter. Eventually though at about 9.50 am they made a concession to let us sit in the train that offered less leg-room than a Jetstar flight and no overhead locker space. So I put my backpack under the seat only later to realize that the floor was awash from the heavy rain.

With winds gusting at 72 mph (over 100 kph) we weren't surprised to learn that the train wouldn't go all the way and we were happy to settle for the part of the way and a partial refund. What we wanted was the experience of using a train in a National Park, especially such an historic train that has operated here since 1897.

The actual length of the rack and pinion Abt rail line is 7.53 kilometres in length. . In the 8 months it operates it carries more tourists than visit Fraser Island annually. It is obviously a huge revenue generator and an attraction in its own right. It made me wonder just why the light rail on Fraser Island has been stalled for so long. I tried to acquire the DVD that we saw to show back home but it was sold out. That shows the public interest in its operation.

The average grade is 1:8 but the steepest is 1:5.5. The average speed was mph (8 kph). We went as far as Rocky Valley with an altitude of 2,230 feet (620 m). Here we waited for a while side on powerful wind gusts rocked the train and made us happier about not going to the top. The whole railway line operates in the Snowdonia National Park (the third National Park we have so far visited in Wales. It is due to cease operation from 31 October until March but today it was booked out all day.

After a long lunch in our comfortable cottage and catching up with our washing we headed off to another World Heritage site, Caernarfon Castle. This was a grander and more complete castle that was inscribed in 1997. It was where Prince Charles was installed as the Prince of Wales. We also discovered that it was one of a series of Edwardian Castles built surrounding Snowdonia to control the Welsh. It was interesting to see this part of the Edwardian Castles in much better repair than Harlech. There are more castles comprising this World Heritage site and we hope to see more before we leave Wales.

Thursday 1st November 2012 Anglesey, Conwy and Llanberis Sand and Castles

We survived Halloween with our treats intact but this morning we discovered that a trick had been played on us. The weather prophecies happily failed to deliver any more than the promised cold weather but without the rain and grey skies.

With the weather looking so good we decided to make the most of it and headed off for Anglesey, the largest island in Wales.

We crossed the Britannia Bridge one of the two bridges across Menai Strait linking Anglesey to the mainland and then followed a very attractive drive beside the Strait to see the World Heritage Beaumaris Castle, the third Castle we have seen constructed during a building frenzy by Edward I to help him keep the Welsh in order. We were later to see a fourth at Conwy that looked more imposing although not admired as much architecturally. We also discovered a well-preserved house with very low doors in High Street that was built about the same time as the Castle.

Having seen so many castles we pressed on but only after a very interesting and unplanned diversion to a nearby town. Our objective was to see the sand dunes at Aberffraw on Anglesey's West coast. It is the largest dun system in Britain and it was interesting only as a point of comparison with Fraser Island. We had smoko at the local Heritage Centre that has a Tea Room run by handicapped young people and organized by a group whose mission is "Reaching your potential".

We had seen the main items we were attracted to Anglesey for so we headed off to Conwy to see "another bloody castle" — albeit a World Heritage medieval castle with its surrounding village also contained within a huge wall. For Jennifer though the mission was to eat lunch at Dawsons Bar of the Castle Hotel. It was a fine lunch in a room with a pleasant ambience. Apparently an impressive artist with "Dawson" in his name paid for his board and lodgings at the hotel by giving them some paintings.

We then followed the A55 back to Llanberis pausing at a few stops to admire the snow on Mt Snowden that had been deposited overnight and just become visible as the cloud lifted.

We could hardly wait when we got back to Llanberis to go for a walk to see the town and features we couldn't appreciate in the rain.

Friday 2nd November 2012 Llanberis to Shrewsbury Llangollen Canal the Sky

The day again dawned clear and very crisp with the dusting of white sitting on the tops of the Snowdonia Mountains. We aimed for an early start having booked a 2½-hour barge trip on part of the Llangollen Canal that included the World Heritage Pontcysyllte Aqueduct.

It was with sadness that we left our Llanberis cottage at 8.20 but we had a wish list of things we wanted to see. I wanted to visit the Snowdonia National Park Visitor Centre and since a visit to the Bodnant Gardens wasn't practical in the time frame Su opted for a scenic drive near some lakes.

We were blown away by the sheer power of the mountain landscape as we drove south from Llanberis and stopped several times for photos that failed to capture our gasps of awe. Eventually though we arrived in the village that previously hadn't been on our radar or even in our thinking — Betws-Y-Coed. I was surprised that Llanberis didn't have a National Park Visitor or Information Centre since it was the base for exploring Mt Snowdon. However our drive down had alerted us to the fact that there was so much more to this beautiful and rugged National Park. We discovered that Llanberis was a relatively ordinary Welsh village

when compared with Betws-Y-Coed and the natural beauty surrounding it.

I was a little disappointed with the Visitor Centre that offered no visual or audio-visual interpretation off the park. I looked for a booklet describing the park and was interested to learn that they once had a good interpretation book that sold for five pound but that the park web site that was much lauded now carried all of that information and the booklet guide to the park had gone out of production. It was an ominous sign of the future. I did learn though that the deciduous conifers we had been observing were European larch trees. Then as we later drive over some high moors I was reminded that over here bracken fern also goes through autumn tone.

Su set us on an interesting and challenging drive well off the beaten track and took us to many places where the autumn foliage was still at the climax of its seasonal display. Then we headed to Llangollen where a totally new and different experience waited us in the journey in a barge that took us 126 feet above the landscape below.

The trip across the aqueduct was short and impressive but we started at the aqueduct end just minutes after boarding the barge instead of the Llangollen and we didn't really get a build up the significance of the World Heritage site. We didn't even learn until later that there was a World Heritage Visitor Centre just after we crossed the aqueduct. So I missed some of the background I would have liked to have received beyond just the bare statistics that were on our coffee mugs.

The building of the aqueduct turned out to be an unrewarding act of folly for the builders who took ten years from 1795 to 1805 to build it at a cost of \$47,000. This was because it never achieved its aim if being commercially viable as a carrier of minerals from Wrexham to Chester before the money ran out and it was incomplete. Something was salvaged when the canal to Llangollen was built to utilize it as an aqueduct to supply Chester's water. But even that wasn't well thought through because it was built with so many bends that it wasn't thought that it could be suitable for barges. However the barge operators rose to the challenge and now navigate their 72 feet long vessels through this winding waterway that has a regular depth of 3 feet, just sufficient to carry barges like the Thomas Telford (named after the man who designed the aqueduct with a draft of 2 foot 6 inches. The aqueduct though was deeper with a depth of five feet for its 1007 feet (300 metre) length.

We all found the 8-mile cruise along the Llangollen Canal the most pleasant experience of our Welsh travels. It was quiet relaxing and the scenery of the Dee Valley so far below us was truly stunning.

We ended the day in Shrewsbury in Western England (Shropshire) the birthplace of Charles Darwin. Originally we had thought of starting the Welsh journey from here being reminded of the Darwin connection. Since our greater awareness of Wallace gained just over a year ago and even an Email since we left Australia indicating that evolution may not be as reliant on random selection as Darwin had asserted but could be shaped by the environment, my homage to Darwin has dimmed a little.

We overnighted at Albrighton Hall, a grand Victorian mansion about three miles out of town that has now become an expensive Mercure resort

Saturday 3rd November 2012

Shrewsbury to Bath

Bath World Heritage and Guy Fawkes

We were determined to get to Bath early because Andy and Jennifer needed to catch a train back to London about 1.00 pm and were keen to see some of Bath with us especially since it is one of their favourite cities. So we left at 7.00 am driving through the almost deserted Shrewsbury Thursday Island join the great motorways of the UK that delivered us to Bath in just under 150 miles (240 kilometres) in just over three hours with a stop for Breakfast along the way.

In Bath after locating the Abbey Hotel and a car park for the day we jumped on a hop-on hop-off bus tour to see some of the sights. The Hotel is well named being almost adjacent to the most impressive Abbey that during its past history had been a cathedral, and the Roman Baths. It was also the starting point for the bus tour. We met an interesting American woman from Alabama that had been a missionary in Japan for over 30 years.

Then after a walking tour of the city centre we opted for lunch at a teahouse near the Roman Baths. I was surprised to learn that all of the inner city of Bath was inscribed on the World Heritage when I had only been aware previously that it was the Roman Baths that had been inscribed. I was more surprised as I walked around because while it is a fashionable city, there seemed to be nothing to make it of Outstanding Universal Value other than it was all built exclusively from local building material, namely limestone. There were some lovely buildings done by John Woods's (Elder and Younger). Apart from seeing nothing extraordinary, we were surprised to see so little acknowledging its World Heritage status or offering any interpretation.

Bath seems to have been an indirect beneficiary of the slave trade that was centred on Bristol. While Bath technically had its hands clean, it prospered during the slave trade. It is small wonder that the leader of the campaign against slavery was Wilberforce who was a

Bath resident and who after a life-long campaign finally saw slavery abolished not long before his death.

The highlight of our Bath visit was clearly the Roman Baths. What the rest of the World Heritage site lacked in interpretation was more than adequately made up for in these archaeological treasures showing the grandeur of the Roman lifestyle when they occupied Britain. It still mystifies me that there was any advantage gained for the expatriate Romans or for the Roman Empire by repatriating all of their citizens from abroad to help them save the crumbling empire. The logistics of feeding and housing them back in Rome must have created more problems than it solved.

The story told of the baths and the Temple to Minerva that sat in the centre of Aquae Sulis (Bath) and the detail was incredibly impressive. It certainly justified its inclusion in the top cultural sites of the world.

After emerging from dinner at a nearby Thai restaurant we saw a crowd gathered on the square outside our hotel overlooking the river. We quickly assessed that the crowd was there to watch the fireworks marking Guy Fawkes Day. It still wasn't the 5th November but Guy Fawkes is a big story in England marking the plot by Catholics to blow up the Houses of Parliament and replace the Anglican King Edward with a Catholic. Fireworks are on sale everywhere but this being the last weekend of the school mid-term break the municipal authorities chose to let off the public display of fireworks on Saturday night instead of waiting until the kids were back at school. It was cold and clear waiting in the square but the grand display was worth the wait, and although I have seen other fireworks displays, this was special because it was the first Guy Fawkes fireworks I have seen since I was a teenager when the sale of fireworks was abandoned in Queensland and Guy Fawkes Day in Queensland was taken off our calendars.

Sunday 4th November 2012 Bath to London Stonehenge World Heritage Site

It was cold and wet and windy outside when we woke but after breakfast we watched the snow falling quite heavily outside our hotel window. As I slipped on the frozen snow going to retrieve the car I saw just how much snow was sitting on the car rooftops and I thought how quaint it was. However as we headed off to Stonehenge at 8.30 am. I was more than impressed.

Driving out of Bath being dusted with powder snow was a special experience. However the scene around was like a fantasy. It was audibly gasping with exhilaration at the fairyland we were driving through with the rich autumn tones now being painted against a white background and etched by the darker evergreen

conifers and the skeletons of the trees that has shed their leaves.

I was too excited to even think about taking this marvellous scenery replicated probably on countless Christmas Cards, but for me who is so unaccustomed to autumn foliage let alone snow, this was very special. My concentration on negotiating the slushy road prevented me capturing the scene but by the time we reached the Salisbury Plain the snow had ceased and when we returned through Bath just three hours later most of the fantastic fairyland effect had just melted away. Then I felt deprived.

(I noted in the "Times" next day that Bath seemed to record the most notable snowfall —3 inches).

It was still raining lightly when we arrived at Stonehenge but after we acquired our tickets it was gone, not before causing lots of local flooding in some places in surrounding counties

There isn't a lot that can be said about Stonehenge. Despite it being well out of the way of major roads it was very busy with people. There were 8 coaches in the car park. It was surprising though that the average length of stay seemed to be less than 30 minutes. The site was impressive but then we had heard and read so much about it there was not the surprise factor.

We returned the fastest way to Bristol retracing our route to Bath and then continuing on Bristol where with the help of Su's Navigation we refuelled the car and returned it to Avis before taking a cab to Temple Meads Station and boarding the 1.30 pm train to London.

Summary

In 9 days we had traversed over 1,000 miles and have been 90 metres underground and 126 feet above the ground. We had been to three Welsh National Parks and been on the Mt Snowdon Railway and the Llangollen Canal. We had a pretty comprehensive encounter with the Welsh people and their culture. We had also spent just the last two days in England and it just didn't feel the same. We had also experienced five World Heritage sites:

- **Blaenavon**
- **Four Edwardian Castles**
- **The Pontcysyllte Aqueduct**
- **Bath**
- **Stonehenge**

Most of all we had experienced all of this at a wonderful time of the year but if we do it again I would choose to do it the same time again.