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**ALL WORLD
CUP MATCHES**

**LARGE BEER
GARDEN**

Golf fans from all over the world are preparing to descend on Newport in South Wales for The Ryder Cup later this year and Helen Werin takes us on a trip around the area...

CARDIFF, the Welsh capital, likes to think that it can top the lot when it comes to tourism. But that's to grossly underestimate the appeal of what neighbouring Newport has to offer. I should know; Newport is my home town. Dull and industrial though the city (as it is now) may at first appear, my fiercely-inbred loyalty insists that I defend it.

The fact that I hadn't been back for other than a fleeting visit for nearly 30 years actually proved a huge bonus. It made me look at Newport with fresh eyes. Indeed, I visited fascinating places that had been right under my nose for 20 years but, I'm almost ashamed to say, had never actually set foot in.

More than anything, my visit made me realise that, historically, the Newport area is an absolute gem. We went from one of the most important military sites in Roman Britain at Caerleon to the medieval wonder that is Raglan Castle.

In between, we were charmed by the 'jewel in Newport's crown' that is the 17th Century Tredegar House, home to a family whose wealth soared even more with the industrial revolution, to the very heart of that revolution itself that is the World Heritage Site of Blaenavon.

Add to that a visit to the landmark Transporter Bridge, undoubtedly the finest of its kind in the world, and you can perhaps share my enthusiasm, bias or not.

I remember the striking red-brick Tredegar House during the time it was a Catholic high school, the 'rival' to my own school a little further down the road. What an incredible surprise then to step inside and be amazed at the grandeur, particularly the glamour of the gilt room.

The interior is, in parts, restored to its 17th Century origins and in others to a 1930s' style. Our engaging guide was Paul Busby, whose enthusiasm for the house is such that he has written a book about Evan Morgan, its' eccentric final resident.

Curiously there are no corridors, with the rooms noticeably grander the further you walk in. Paul explained the reason for this; guests would have had some idea of their standing with the fabulously wealthy Morgan family, as the more well-liked or respected that they were the further they were allowed inside.

Paul describes the house as a 'work in progress' with about 26 of the 90 rooms open to the public. Thankfully, during the 23 years it was a school, the nuns had such foresight as to save bits of the décor as they fell off, in particular the elaborate carvings from the oak-filled state dining room.

These were kept in a desk drawer in the Old Library. Paul told me that the drawer was filled with a "bit of nose here, a snake there, a touch of mane, etc," most of which were reattached during the restoration process.

Tredegar House aside, there is no doubt whatsoever as to what is Newport's 'symbol' – the Transporter Bridge. I may have glided over the murky Usk in its' gondola and climbed the zig-zag stairs to go 'over the top' far too many times to remember, but the novelty never wears off.

Sadly, the bridge was closed for repairs at the time of our visit, though it is expected to reopen in July 2010. Nevertheless, the thrill of standing there, under the 74m (242ft) towers hadn't dimmed.

I did get to see inside the motor house where Martin Newman, the fitter, presides over what is, undoubtedly, his 'baby', albeit one 'born' in 1906. It seems that the dear old Transporter has suffered since the building of the new city bridge upriver.

As soon as that opened in 2004 the Transporter's traffic dropped from about 500 cars a day to 60. Nevertheless, Martin keeps the bridge ticking over until it gets back on its



Newport's best known landmark is the Transporter Bridge over the River Usk. It's just been reopened following renovation. Pic: Robin Weaver

Newport is a gem with an industrial past

feet.

It was a joy, then, after my rather poignant experience at the Transporter Bridge, to go somewhere that you might think would be long buried – literally – but has enjoyed a massively successful resurgence. I'm talking about Big Pit at Blaenavon, 30 minutes from Newport.

The 200-year-old mine may have closed in 1980, but as the award-winning National Coal Museum it now attracts over 140,000 visitors a year.

The mountainside above Blaenavon is about as bleak and unwelcoming as it is comes. Once inside Big Pit though, we were kitted out with lamps and emergency respirators by the friendliest of ex-miners eager to show us what underground life was like for them and the thousands of other men who worked at the coal face.

Without doubt this was the highlight of our visit to South Wales, dramatically enhanced by the knowledge and enthusiasm of our guide, Robert Bishop.

It was exciting enough to make the 90m (300ft) descent of the mineshaft in a cage and slightly more unnerving when Robert casually informed us that only weeks before 120 tourists had had to walk the 2.4km (1.5miles) along the 'emergency' way out after a power cut halted the cage.

But the harsh realities of being deep underground really kicked in when Robert told us a very personal story about the dangers of gas. His emergency respirator, the same as the ones strapped to our hips, saved his life 20 years ago.

We all returned to the surface, in absolute awe of the miners, to collect our mobile phones and battery-operated watches of which we had been divested. A vital safety measure? You bet! The tiniest spark from one of these devices could, so Robert warned, trigger a potentially lethal explosion.

Our last stop was to take us much further back in time. In Caerleon, on the east side of Newport, the fortress of the Legion housed 5,000 soldiers in its' heyday, with an amphitheatre, temples and shops and what appears to have been a giant leisure centre.

The 'Crown Jewels' here are the dozens of gemstones found in the drainage system, loosened from Roman jewellery by the humidity in the baths.

As we entered the Roman Baths exhibition, which displays a large part of the swimming pool and the cold, tepid and sauna-like bathing areas, I

couldn't help but be amused by the sign which read: 'This is not a public swimming pool.'

It seems that so many prospective modern-day bathers were turning up with their towels and swimming costumes that the curators felt obliged to put them right.

Surely these couldn't be the tourists from Brazil, Australia and the US, who had signed the visitors' book? My guess is that they were people from not too far away at all, unaware of the fabulous treasures on their doorstep – just like me.

Where to go

Information: www.newport.gov.uk
Big Pit: National Coal Museum, Blaenavon. NP4 9XP. 01495 790311
www.nmgw.ac.uk

National Roman Legion Museum: High Street, Caerleon, NP18 1AE. 01633 423134. For Roman Baths complex, amphitheatre and barrack block call 01633 422518.

Ryder Cup information: www.rydercupwales2010.com and www.rcts.co.uk

What to see

THE landmark Raglan Castle (20 minutes from Newport) dates from the 15th Century. From the tops of the towers there are wonderful views over the beautiful Monmouthshire countryside.
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

Newport Museum and Art Gallery John Frost Square, has an archive of all the original designs for the Transporter Bridge plus photographs of its entire construction as well as a fascinating collection of weapons, broadsheets, silver and prints from the 1839 Chartist protest in Newport – 01633 656656.

Blaenavon Ironworks, founded in 1788, was one of the largest in the world. Now at the hub of Blaenavon World Heritage Site, it is one of the most important monuments to have survived from the early part of the industrial revolution.
www.world-heritage-blaenavon.org.uk 01495 792615.

Where to stay

Sarum House is a Wales Tourist Board five star B&B in the heart of Caerleon.
www.sarumhouse.co.uk – 01633 431225.

Where to Eat

The Chandlery, at 77-78 Lower Dock Street, Newport, an award-winning restaurant in a 19th Century ships chandlery. www.thechandleryrestaurant.com – 01633 256622

The Bell Inn, Bulmore Road, Caerleon. Welsh hospitality at its best www.thebellatcaerleon.co.uk – 01633 420613
Junction 28, Station Approach, Bassaleg. www.junction28.com – 01633 891891.

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