

# Blaengarw

Time Centre



Time to create the future



## Where the Past meet the Present

A quiet revolution is flowering in a small valley town and it has nothing to do with those hippie-hi-ho idiots from the 60's. All around the UK more and more people are joining together to fight a common enemy.....alienation, social recession, isolation and the creeping power of commercialising human experience.

## One such place is Blaengarw

This is not a government initiative thought up in some wine bar at the House of Commons but is inspired by the ideas and work of Edgar Cahn an American civil rights activist. It is about people reconnecting, reaffirming their distinct humanity, creating a space of belonging, about developing a new old way of doing things based on principles of mutual exchange. One such place is Blaengarw in South Wales. It is where the past meets the present, echoing Idris Davies' 1938 poem

### The Bells of Rhymney

“Oh what will you give me?  
Say the sad bells of Rhymney.  
Is there hope for the future?  
Cry the brown bells of Merthyr”

Blaengarw Carnival 2008

## Humanism in currency Form

The Blaengarw Workingmen's Hall is an imposing monolith a testament to the time when ordinary men and women worked together for the common good of the community and not everything and everyone had an economic price tag placed upon their value. When the Hall was threatened with closure in 1999 the Creation Development Trust offered to take on the management responsibility from the Bridgend County Borough Council. This was duly agreed. At the point of handover it was costing the Council £120K to run the Hall with declining attendance figures. By 2001 things were starting to change. With an annual service agreement of £60K paid to the Trust (half the figure it cost the Council to run the Hall) the Hall was beginning to re-establish itself as the centre of the community playing host to early years development groups, youth arts collectives, learning classes, senior citizen groups and a variety of other organisations intent on 'bringing culture back home'.

In itself there is nothing new in a local building being used by local groups however, the Trust took things a little further as they began to see the talent, expertise and knowledge that existed, albeit hidden in the community. This is where our American ally came in - Edgar Cahn had developed a new way of building social capital founded on the community value of time. So, for every hour that people give to their community they receive one time credit in return. One time credit gives a person access to one hour at a social, educational or cultural event. So if a film is 2 hours long the admission fee is 2 time credits. If the Welsh National Opera sing for 3hours the admission fee is 3 time credits. Simple.





## Community mind set

Crucial to the time banking philosophy is that everyone's time (whether a brain surgeon or a babysitter) is equal in value. Without people who give time to their communities, the young father's who coach the local kids' football team and other active citizens, the quality of life would be reduced solely to commercial experiences. So, for a moment, take a leap of imagination, switch off your 'commercial mindset'. Ask yourself the question, when outside of the family and/or circle of close friends did you have your last non-commercial experience? When was the last time that you connected with your 'community mind set'?

At first glance these questions do not seem that revolutionary but if you look deeper into the core of any community you'll see how those few hours of giving have remarkable and far reaching consequences. For example, a young mother that helps out at her child care group begins to feel part of something, is sharing her own unique knowledge of child rearing, is meeting new people thus expanding her social ties, is making things happen not merely being a passive receiver of another social service. She builds her existing skills, becomes part of a social network, receives time credits to exchange at other community based activities - to see a film, to watch a play, to attend another class with the not so obvious economic benefit of better mental health, avoiding their young mums seroxat syndrome.

"Learning for All" is a motto of the Trust akin to the "Knowledge is Power" that used to adorn libraries in the South Wales valleys years ago. Classes are regularly held in Child Care, Welsh, First Aid, Sign Language and other subjects. Time credits can be used to access the courses and are also acquired by applying learning for the common good of the community thus creating an active learning environment. The classes are relevant, requested by the members, taught mostly by local people and have retention rates of over 95% - figures that any College would snap your arm off for. It is a learning circle of humanity with individuals creating their own choices, building on these choices and playing an important part in their local community.

## Bring culture back home

Time banking was originally introduced into Blaengarw after Dawn Davies (Trust Director) spoke with Geoff Thomas and Becky Booth of the Wales Institute for Community Currencies which has evolved into Time Banking Wales and SPICE. Time Banking Wales is established to design, test and support different models and applications of time banking. Time banking is a new way of doing things, a better way some may argue. Take two examples. Black River Arts, a youth based arts collective organises gigs, puts on training courses, runs a monthly jam session and rock nights in local pubs- set up by young people for young people. As well as the artistic side, Black River Arts also encourage their members and audience to learn new skills in the music business such as sound recording and P.A. system management. All their activities are accessible with time currency. Then, there is the Blaengarw Performing Arts Group. They not only put on shows in the community but also pursue another valuable goal namely raising funds for Chernobyl Children's Lifeline. These funds help bring over thirty children every year to stay in Blaengarw and the surrounding villages. The children stay with local families, contribute to their new community and it is the same families that raise more money to bring the children back year after year. Started by Don Sage (a local builder) it is a truly wonderful and inspiring idea and one that is symbolic of the spirit that exists in the Valleys. It bears out an important quote from Professor Dai Smith, historian and Welsh humanist

“The valleys are needed to take forward a culture. There is nothing in this culture that denies change. There is everything in it which refuses the dehumanising of people in the name of any abstraction.”



## Calon Lan

Another project originated by the Creation Development Trust is the open access Sculpture Studio that was set up in 2007 in a derelict high street building. It provides local people the opportunity to acquire new skills with a sculptor being available 2 days week. From this, the Calon Lan Project grew. Calon Lan, a Welsh hymn, the lyrics of which were reportedly written by a group of local people when Daniel James was staying in Blaengarw, literally translates as 'pure heart'. It is a cultural signifier of a historical legacy that inspired people to practice the values of mutuality. After discussion within the community it was decided to create an epic sculpture reflecting their response to the hymn in modern times. Co-ordinated by the Trust Director Dawn Davies, originated by Stephen Hooper and created by Rebecca Buck and her team of participants at the studio. The project has proved to be a triumph with legions of local people involved in the process. The sculpture acknowledges the power of public art to place the past in focus and set a course for the future. In an age of expensive soulless outside imposed public artworks, culture off the back of a lorry, this is truly originated and owned by the people.



## A revolution indeed


A revolution indeed. Dawn Davies, Director of the Development Trust is always looking for new and vibrant ways to develop the Trust. The Trust is now the largest employer in the Upper Garw Valley. She and her team of dedicated change agents have big plans for the future. They have recently opened a high street café where customers can access food in cash and/or time credits. Future plans include a real food shop, green tourism, an art exchange and enterprise incubators.

This new time accredited way of working where people co-produce mutual outcomes using a dual currency platform provides an engine that can drive a new culture of mutualism, one that puts people together in new social networks, one that enables people to support each other and celebrate their humanity in their own community. A recent American president said 'Its' the Economy Stupid' implying that commercial relationships and rewards are all that people require for life to be worthwhile. Dream on. If we reduce all relationships and transactions to an economic commercial base there will be no family or community. We will all become happy hookers, edgy dealers proudly wearing nothing more than price tags, – the entertainers and the entertained.

So let us return to this small valley town nestling between the mountains that has seen so much pain and darkness. Something is changing. Perhaps there is a new warm wind, a reviving breeze to gently part night clouds, so people see in diamond sky the dazzling light of dreams, the universal hope that fellowship and justice will build the new tomorrow.

Maybe, just maybe, Idris' question is being answered.....70 years later





"For us empowerment meant the use of collective action to transform society and so lift all of us together"

Aneurin Bevan

Maybe, just maybe, Idris' question is being answered.....70 years later

"Is there hope for the future cry the brown bells of Merthyr?  
Must we just sink into obscurity?  
Ask the cracked bells of Rhymney  
Should we not yell proud like Glyndwr?  
Clang the green bells of Bangor  
We stood tall while they begged us to cower  
Shout the silver bells of Tower  
Let the community shine through  
Resound the bright bells of Blaengarw

Written by Patrick Jones & Geoff Thomas

References :

No More Throw Away People  
Wales : A Question for History  
Collected poems  
In Place of Fear  
When was Wales

Edgar Cahn  
Dai Smith  
Idris Davies  
Aneurin Bevan  
Gwyn A. Williams

[www.timebanks.co.uk](http://www.timebanks.co.uk)  
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