

Govilon Wharf,
Monmouthshire and Brecon
Canal, near Abergavenny

Taking a trip up to *Abergavenny*

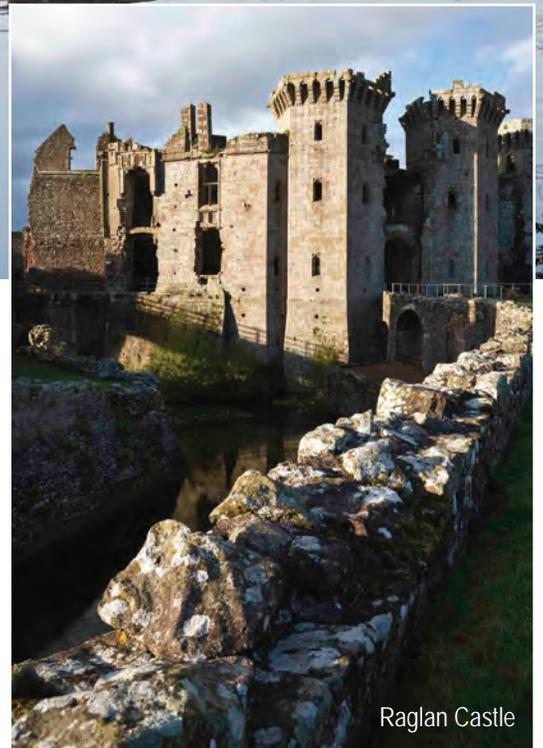
Dreamy valleys, romantic towers, movie sets – and mines. Helen Werin can't resist a visit to this photogenic corner of South Wales, as featured in the latest Michael Sheen movie.

Pictures by Robin Weaver

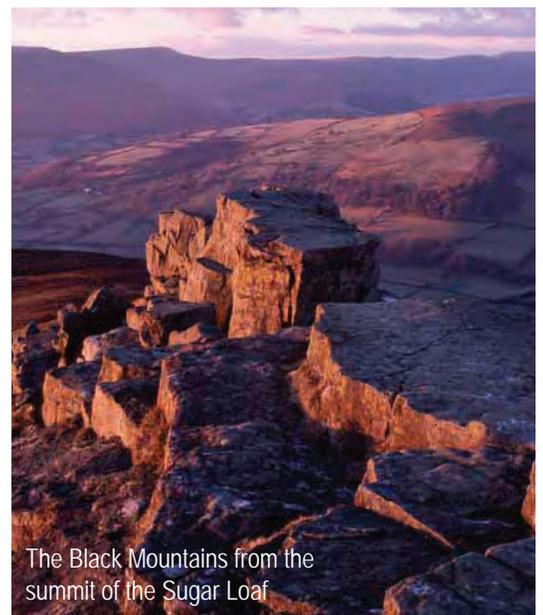
The sign on the oldest pub in Wales, The Skirrid Mountain Inn, depicts the mountain opposite being rent apart by lightning. It doesn't look the sort of place for the faint-hearted, especially when I learn of its reputation as the region's 'Hanging Pub'. More than 180 people were hanged here between the 12th and 17th centuries, so local legend claims.

Our accommodation in the medieval village of Llanvihangel Crucorney, in the Brecon Beacons National Park, should be easy to spot as it's an Elizabethan tower.

With the onslaught of driving rain and darkness it isn't. The castellated rooftop of the octagonal Twr Mihangel suddenly and dramatically appears in a shaft of moonlight. The heavy door creaks open (of course!) The knife-edge silence is cut with a 'wow'. Our home for the weekend is historic, luxurious, romantic, quirky and very cosy. The bedroom at the top of the tower looks like something out of a Merchant Ivory film; the king-sized bed a magnificently carved four-poster. The sitting room has a log fire, oak beams and candle sconces on the walls. I have



Raglan Castle



The Black Mountains from the
summit of the Sugar Loaf

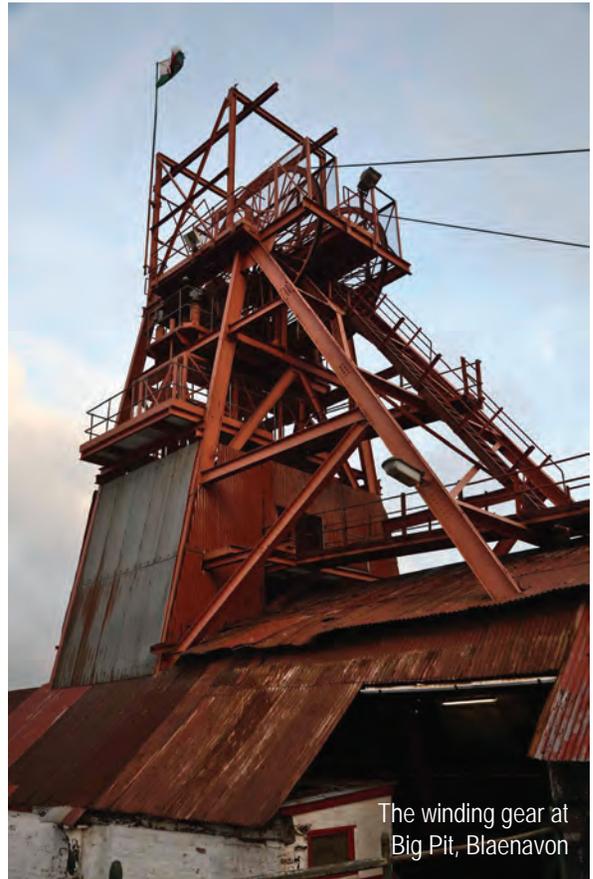
to pinch myself that we're in Monmouthshire and not on a Hollywood film set.

The owners excitedly tell me of Twr Mihangel's connection to the film *Resistance*, which is set in and around this corner of south east Wales. Apparently, the previous occupant of Twr Mihangel was the local co-ordinator of a covert group of men, like those featured in the film. In the event of a German invasion, these men would have planned a counter-resistance attack, sabotaging the Germans' advance through Britain.

Next morning, the fairytale-like quality continues with the discovery of the Twr's walled gardens. There are gazebos and ponds, 'secret' paths and pretty sitting areas. We venture up the dreamy Vale of Ewyas, the easternmost valley of the Black Mountains. It's remote, surrounded by lofty mountains. It's also very narrow. We pray that we do not meet any oncoming vehicles. We're going to see the church of St Martin of Tours at Cwmyoy, set in the valley's steep side at the foot of a landslip. When we arrive we shake our heads, not quite believing

what we're seeing. The tiny church is tilted and twisted. Its tower leans more than the famously wonky one in Pisa. No part of it is square or at right angles with any other part. Inside it's almost like entering one of those crooked houses that you find in old-fashioned fairgrounds.

Further up the valley is an even smaller medieval chapel at Capel-y-ffin. It's charming and almost other-worldly in its isolation. We've passed the beautiful ruins of 12th century Llanthony Priory to get here, standing beneath Hatterall Hill. Along the ridge above runs the Offa's Dyke path. I'm anticipating another 'wow' moment just ahead when we reach the Gospel Pass, with the stunning valley of the Wye spread before us. It's a view I've seen many times before, but which never fails to



The winding gear at Big Pit, Blaenavon



The four poster bed at Twr Mihangel

Photo courtesy Twr Mihangel



Cwmyoy church and its leaning tower

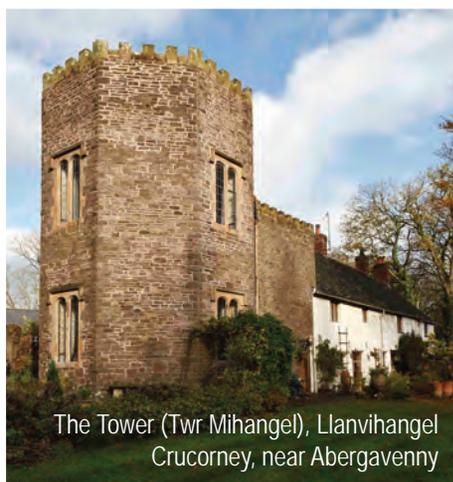
impress. On a clear day like today, it's certainly unforgettable.

That night we dine memorably at The Angel in Abergavenny on cawl (Welsh broth), scallops and pheasant, washed down with a crisp white from the vineyards on the Sugar Loaf mountain above the town. The Georgian coaching inn is where Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor once dined on steak and kidney pie and a bottle of claret. Hollywood megastars aside, it's also where Benjamin Pratt, one of the founders of the nearby Blaenavon Ironworks, suddenly rose from his dining chair and said "I am going to die. But I die an honest man" and, so it was reported, "instantly expired".

We learn about Pratt and his fellow ironmasters next day at Blaenavon Ironworks. They built terraced cottages for their workers and it's those in Stack Square which we can explore. It's amazing to see how close families lived to the raging furnaces and deafening forges of what is now the most complete ironworks to survive in the UK from the industrial revolution. We see

the furnaces, cast houses and the water balance lift, but it's the social history that intrigues. There's the company shop, reconstructed in the end cottage, to which many workers were permanently in debt. The system of paying workers in overpriced goods was called truck. Some bitterly joked that truck provided a 'man with his cradle and his coffin and half starved him in between'. Unfortunately the workers didn't have a choice. In the ironworks' heyday the company shop was the only place in Blaenavon where you could buy anything

Blaenavon is a World Heritage Site and across the valley is Big Pit, the National Coal Museum. The scenery is bleak, but inside the 200-year-old mine we get the warmest of welcomes. And it's all free. Coal eventually overtook iron making as the major industry in South Wales. That's how I come to be descending 300ft (90m) in a cage in to a big black hole, to learn from one of the guides, all former miners, what life was really like at the coal face. We've got emergency respirators around our waists and



The Tower (Twr Mihangel), Llanvihangel Crucorney, near Abergavenny

lamps on our heads. The youngsters on the tour don't dare complain about the weight of their battery packs. They're stunned in to silence, having being told that if they'd been around in the early 20th century, they would have been sitting in the darkness down here for up to 12 hours, operating the doors or looking after the pit ponies.

Our guide shows us where the pit ponies were kept. There are huge sighs of pity when he tells how the ponies would go blind from always being in the dark and never going above the surface. These animals actually worked shorter hours than the children.

The dangers of being deep underground, particularly from gas, hit home when our guide tells us

a very personal story. His emergency respirator, the same as the ones strapped to our hips, saved his life 20 years ago.

We return to the surface to collect our phones and battery-operated watches of which we've been divested. A vital safety measure? You bet! The tiniest spark from one of these devices could trigger a potentially lethal explosion.

Abergavenny is known as the gateway to the Brecon Beacons National Park and is almost encircled by three of the Black Mountains. Our route to Blaenavon has brought us over the most domineering of them, the mighty Blorenge. It marks the end of the coalfields as it's formed from millstone grit, which the miners called 'farewell' rock. Before we head home, we walk to the edge of the mountain. Abergavenny is laid out before us. Skirrid

What else to see and do in the area

* Climb the Skirrid and the Sugar Loaf; the Skirrid is also known as Holy Mountain because of a jagged edge on its Western flank, the result of a massive landslip said to have been caused by the mountain being 'rent apart' when Christ was crucified. It's very steep at one point and just when you think you may be at the top, there's

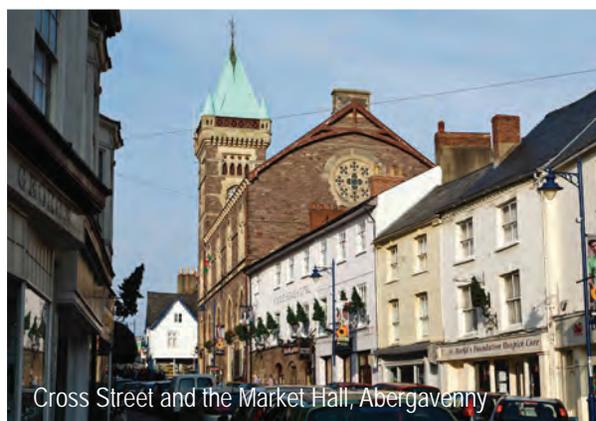
another peak beyond (two hour walk). There are a variety of easy walks around and up the Sugar Loaf. Reach it from the A40 Brecon road out of Abergavenny, taking the first turning on the right after Nevill Hall Hospital.

* The ruined Norman Abergavenny Castle, with its restored 19th century keep, is one of the best examples of a motte and bailey castle in Britain. As the seat of the medieval lords of Abergavenny, the castle was the focus for over three centuries of border warfare. Free entry. Castle Street Abergavenny NP7 5EE. 01873 854282.

* The greatest treasure in St Mary's Priory Centre is a unique 15th century representation of King David's father Jesse, carved from one solid piece of oak. There are fine altar tombs and exquisite examples of the Renaissance English school of alabaster carving. Monk Street, Abergavenny. NP7 7AY. 01873 858787. www.stmarys-priory.org

* Raglan Castle: This wonder of late medieval architecture with its landmark 'Yellow Tower of Gwent' and great multi-angular towers is one of Wales' most appealing castles. Beautiful views from the top. Castle Road, Raglan. NP15 2BT. 01291 690228 www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

Fawr, the 'Holy Mountain', and the prominent peak of the Sugar Loaf provide the backdrop in a spectacular finale.



Cross Street and the Market Hall, Abergavenny

Where to stay

* The Tower, Twr Mihangel, Llanvihangel Crucorney NP7 8DH sleeps two. Self-catering; kitchen has fridge/ freezer, dishwasher, combi-oven and microwave. Bed linen, towels, robes and slippers provided. Central heating and log fire. Sky TV, DVD. www.breconcottages.com/cottage-details/TOWER

INFORMATION

- * www.breconcottages.com
- * www.breconbeacons.org
- * www.breconbeaconstourism.co.uk
- * www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/bigpit/
- * www.world-heritage-blaenavon.org.uk/