

Huntly is a small town with a big mining history. Its story is about to be told in the WARO National Coal Museum.



Image courtesy of Waikato Coalfields Museum

# Mining the tourism dollar

By Rachel Macdonald

FOR many, Huntly is little more than a blip on State Highway 1 between Auckland and Hamilton, badged by the tall chimneys of its power station.

But chances are it may shortly be home to New Zealand's first large-scale coal-mining tourist attraction.

The development, called WARO, The National Coal Museum, is also likely to be New Zealand's first industrial tourism initiative.

These initiatives are a huge phenomenon in the UK, US and Europe and proponents in New Zealand believe there is no reason why the concept can't work as effectively here.

Essentially, these industrial tourism initiatives are about living the history of a place, not through academic treatises and dusty displays, but by being there.

Industrial tourism is based on the idea of edutainment – educational entertainment. It recognises the fact the \$1 in every \$8 of the global discretionary spend is invested in travelling to see things and enjoy new experiences. It acknowledges a growing demand for the appreciation of the past.

The concept was conceived in Ironbridge in England, the birthplace of the industrial revolution.

In the 1980s, an initiative was floated to attract visitors to inspect the village's magnificent iron bridge – and exchange their pounds for old-fashioned shillings and pence to spend in local shops stocking wares typical of the 19th century. This sleepy corner of Shropshire rapidly became one of the top 10 tourism destinations in the UK, producing extremely tangible flow-on benefits for the local community.

On the back of Ironbridge, a number of English towns and cities took a close look at their own industrial heritages in a bid to capture the same success. Key among those now hot favourites on the tourism trail are Wigan Pier and



Image courtesy of Solid Energy



Image courtesy of Solid Energy

the Liverpool Docks; one, until recently, a sad, silted up stretch of canal, and the other - a filthy, bomb-ruined no-man's land. Both are now enormously successful, highly profitable tourism destinations.

The secret behind industrial tourism is the fact that it uses total interaction to unlock experiences that are an inherent part of a society. It's people, not object-focussed, says Anthony Flannery, director of design firm Chow:Hill and a member of the urban design team that suggested the concept for Huntly.

"It started when Chow:Hill was engaged to undertake an urban design assessment of a proposed modification of State Highway 1 around Huntly and the impact it might have on the township. "We were discussing the possibilities and a number of parallels were drawn between Huntly and Wigan - both towns with overlooked action-filled pasts," says Flannery. "We started sharing stories about how you could turn Huntly around economically



Image courtesy of Solid Energy

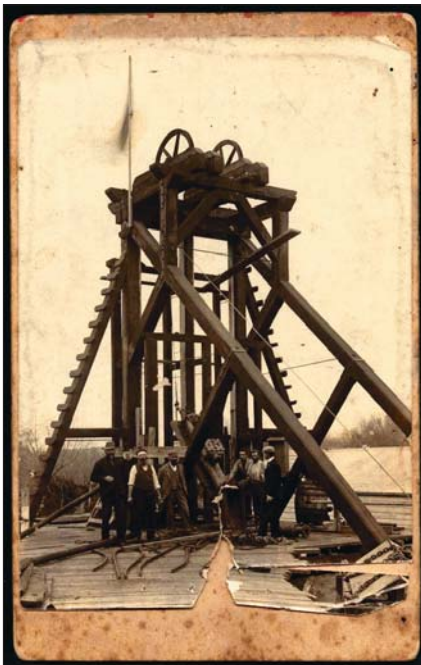


Image courtesy of Waikato Coalfields Museum



Image courtesy of Solid Energy

with more than 17,000 vehicles passing through daily on the Thermal Explorer Highway. It's also within easy reach of the nation's largest pool of school groups – around 800 establishments – and Auckland's population of 1.36 million, including all those families that need something to do on a rainy day.

"We discussed the idea with the CEO of the Waikato District Council and he referred us on to the mayor of Huntly," says Flannery. "There was already a vision to redevelop Huntly's existing Waikato Coal Museum, and the mayor introduced us to the new museum director. She was from the UK and knew exactly what we were on about. She had a sense that you could create the dynamic through the museum and we've got the experience and skills to do that. WARO – the Maori word for coal – grew from there."

if you could mirror the dynamics that had happened – and are still happening – in similar places elsewhere."

In Huntly's favour, there are 88,000 potential visitors living in the region itself, and the Waikato is the second most popular locality in New Zealand for day trips.

The township is on a major tourism route just south of Auckland,

Short term, it is envisaged that WARO will incorporate static exhibitions, audio-visual displays, and cinematic and theatrical shows, all describing the genesis of coal and the history of mining in Huntly.

Longer term, the intention is to expand the experience beyond the museum itself, offering deep mine excursions and tours of the



power station and, like Ironbridge, extending the day out into the heart of Huntly itself.

The initial discussions regarding WARO started two years ago, and since then the concept has been through the feasibility study stage, investigating business planning and the costs of fundraising. Workshops have been staged with the museum directors and advisors, and with strategic partners from the local authority, central and local government, and entities such as Solid Energy. Extensive community consultation has also been undertaken.

“It’s a case of setting ground rules and seeing what the buy-in is going to be,” says Flannery.

“Typically, these projects need the support of local authorities, and are often part-funded by them, so if they don’t believe in its potential success, the whole idea goes nowhere. It’s also important the local community believes in the concept, because it’s their story that’s the drawcard. This is far more organic than designing a building – to make it work all the dynamics have to be tapped into.”

The business case has now been assembled, the strategy has been confirmed and Chow:Hill has been awarded the commission to settle the concept design, with view to getting the first stage started in next 12 months. Overall, the WARO initiative will be developed in stages.

“The vision, as with any of the UK industrial tourism concepts, is that this will evolve progressively. If successful, it is envisaged

that the museum will grow from a local and regional asset into a national one worth in excess of \$20 million,” says Flannery.

“More importantly, however, international experience has shown that the social and economic benefits to the local community can far exceed the money invested in the actual museum project.”


• *Rachel Macdonald of Articulate works on contract for Chow:Hill* 



Image courtesy of Waikato Coalfields Museum