

French to study our connection

By Mike Buckingham

CARDIFF's French twin has sent a delegation to South Wales to study an engineering marvel - in the rival city of Newport.

"Cardiff always gets the kudos but we have something that is unique in Wales," said chairman of the Friends of Newport Transporter Bridge Mrs Anne Gatehouse.

"The city of Nantes, which tore down its old transporter bridge over 50 years ago, is building a brand-new one. Our French equivalents have come here to compare notes with us."

Like the existing bridges in Newport, Bilbao in Spain and Rochefort in France, the Nantes transporter was designed by local engineer Ferdinand Arnodin.

"Unfortunately our bridge was declared useless and demolished in 1958," M Yves Laine, vice president of Les Transporteurs, the association for a transporter bridge in Nantes said. "Now we are planning an entirely new transporter which will carry vehicles but which will also help with the regeneration of tourism."

"Nantes' heyday was between 1880 and 1930 when it was a very important port but it has since been overtaken by St Nazaire down-river."

"The plan is to transform what was a wasteland area into a tourist attraction of which a completely new bridge will be the centrepiece. Like Newport's



FACT-FINDING MISSION: From left, Ulla Laine, Paul Sophie, Poirer Sophie and Yves Laine, from Nantes, which is re-building its transporter bridge. Picture: CATHERINE BOOKER CB, 2008

bridge it will carry vehicles but there will be room for sightseers and also a restaurant overlooking it."

"It is quite possible that the success of Nantes' new bridge will encourage Newport," M Laine added.

Although still in working order, Newport's bridge, which is maintained as part of the city's highways, has been redundant since the opening of the new Usk bridge a few hundred yards away.

It was designed by M Arnodin at the turn of the last century and completed in 1906, much of the construction having been overseen by the then borough engineer Robert Haynes.

Plans for a tunnel founded because of the

difficult geology of the river-bed. A conventional bridge tall enough to accommodate tall-masted vessels sailing underneath would have been prohibitively expensive both in terms of construction and the land required for approach roads. A transporter using the light, strong technology of a steel framework was suggested by Mr Haynes, who then sought out M Arnodin, at that time the world's greatest designer of such structures.

In the post-war years Newport's transporter bridge, the main purpose of which was to ferry workers to and from the Orb works, fell into a decline and there was talk of dismantling the listed structure and finding an American buyer.

A new lease of life was granted after a major refurbishment in the mid-1990s but this was to be relatively short-lived.

Although the rail and truck system from which the gondola is slung is worn this is not seen as the biggest obstacle to it returning to full use. In civil engineering terms the cost of

the work would be relatively modest - in the singles of millions - but health and safety requirements are to complete scaffolding which would multiply the cost.

The Newport bridge also suffers in that unlike some cities which still have transporters as a centrepiece, it is placed some distance from the business, cultural and leisure centre.

"But the fact is that over a century after Arnodin's engineering triumph transporter bridges are still good news as major attractions," Mrs Gatehouse said.

"The French are going to the lengths of actually building a bridge to replace the one that was knocked down. There must be a message there for Newport."

There is an element of 'payback' in Nantes coming to Newport. In the 1998 film *Tiger Bay* starring Hayley Mills, Newport's transporter was 'borrowed' by Cardiff where it appeared in a dockside scene - much to the chagrin of Newportorians.

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SPAN: An artist's impression of the new bridge at Nantes