funtime news

A guide to good times in Rhyl and Prestatyn

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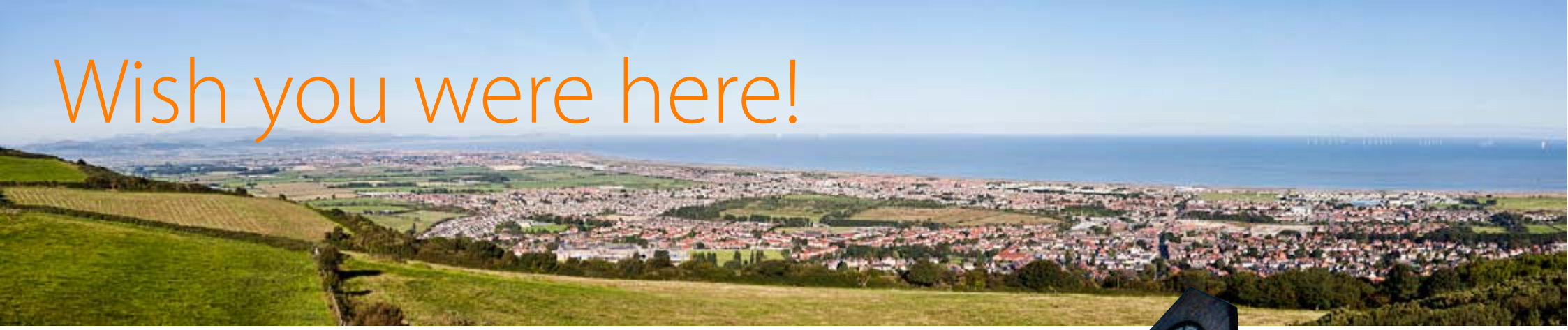
Wish you were here!



High above Prestatyn there is a tiny car-park which offers one of the most breathtaking views of the North Wales coastline.

In all weathers and at all times of day the vista never fails to impress, and with only a few notable exceptions it has remained virtually unchanged for generations.

The twin resorts of Rhyl and Prestatyn, lying at the foot of the hill, have long been a magnet for visitors and in the 21st century they retain their attraction, standing up well to the challenges and demands of the modern "staycationer".

That view from the hilltop underlines the area's outstanding feature – a six-mile stretch of glorious sand which continues to be a crowd-puller.

But closer examination of both Rhyl and Prestatyn soon shows that the resorts have far more amenities, some less obvious and less heralded than others.

Rhyl is truly a family resort, with major leisure and recreational facilities. The ever-popular Sun Centre (www.rhylsuncentre.co.uk) celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, the adjoining Pavilion Theatre (www.pavilion-theatre-rhyl.co.uk) has a year-round programme of varied entertainment and the Sky Tower offers an unbeatable bird's eye view of the town and coastline.

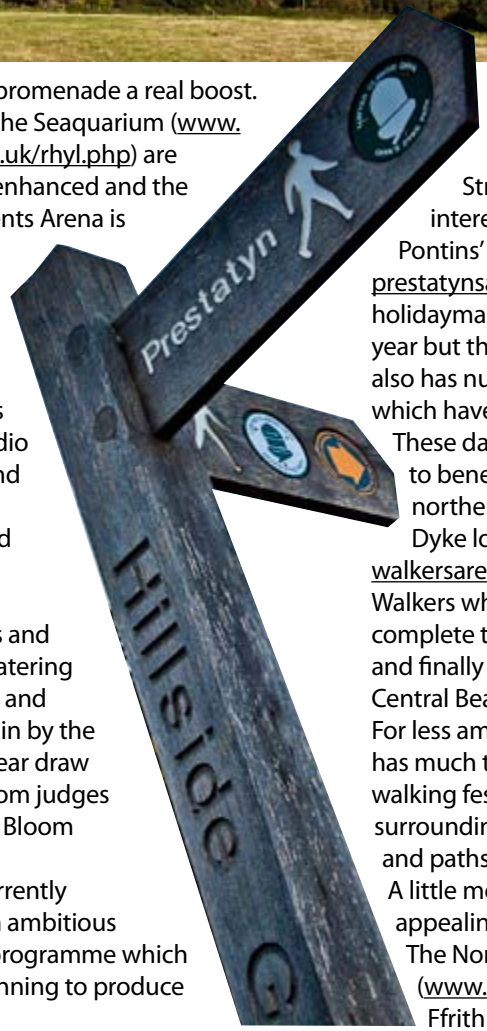
At the opposite end of the promenade Marine Lake, with its historic miniaturesteamtrains (www.rhylminiaturerailway.co.uk), is as popular as ever, and closer to the centre the award-winning Drift Park has given that

section of the promenade a real boost.

Attractions at the Seaquarium (www.seaquarium.co.uk/rhyl.php) are forever being enhanced and the nearby the Events Arena is a marvellous venue for open-air functions, having hosted massive events such as the Radio 1 Roadshow and Air Show.

East Parade and the West Ward of Rhyl boast a range of hotels and guesthouses catering for most tastes and the efforts put in by the owners each year draw warm praise from judges of the Wales in Bloom competition.

The town is currently undergoing an ambitious regeneration programme which is already beginning to produce results.



Prestatyn has always been proud of its reputation as a homely, welcoming resort with its High Street offering a wide range of interesting independent shops.

Pontins' Holiday Village (www.pontins-prestatynsands.com)draws thousands of holidaymakers to the area throughout the year but the town and neighbouring villages also has numerous small hotels and B & Bs which have been upgraded in recent years.

These days Prestatyn is really beginning to benefit from its location at the northern end of the 167-mile Offa's Dyke long-distance footpath (www.walkersarewelcome.org.uk).

Walkers who set out from Chepstow complete the hike by going down High Street and finally cooling their feet in the sea at Central Beach.

For less ambitious walkers, too, Prestatyn has much to offer, not only during its annual walking festival. The seafront, hillside and surrounding countryside abounds with trails and paths.

A little more research reveals a host of appealing features in and about the town.

The North Wales Indoor Bowls Centre (www.clwydleisure.co.uk/bowls) near the Ffrith Festival Gardens is a unique facility

Wish you were here!

enjoyed by enthusiasts from across the region and as far as Cheshire and Potteries.

In the Scala Arts Centre (www.scalaprestatyn.co.uk) in High Street, Prestatyn has a complex which is the envy of many much larger towns. Its digital equipment is the finest available, meaning that the Scala is the only North Wales cinema able to screen live performances from the National Theatre, Royal Opera House and New York Met. Over the next few months several such performances are scheduled and regular customers will vouch for the fact that they are equal to, if not better than, being present at the venues themselves.

Sports enthusiasts are extremely well catered for in the area, with four excellent and yet different golf courses in Prestatyn, Rhyl, Meliden and Rhuddlan (www.golf-northwales.co.uk).

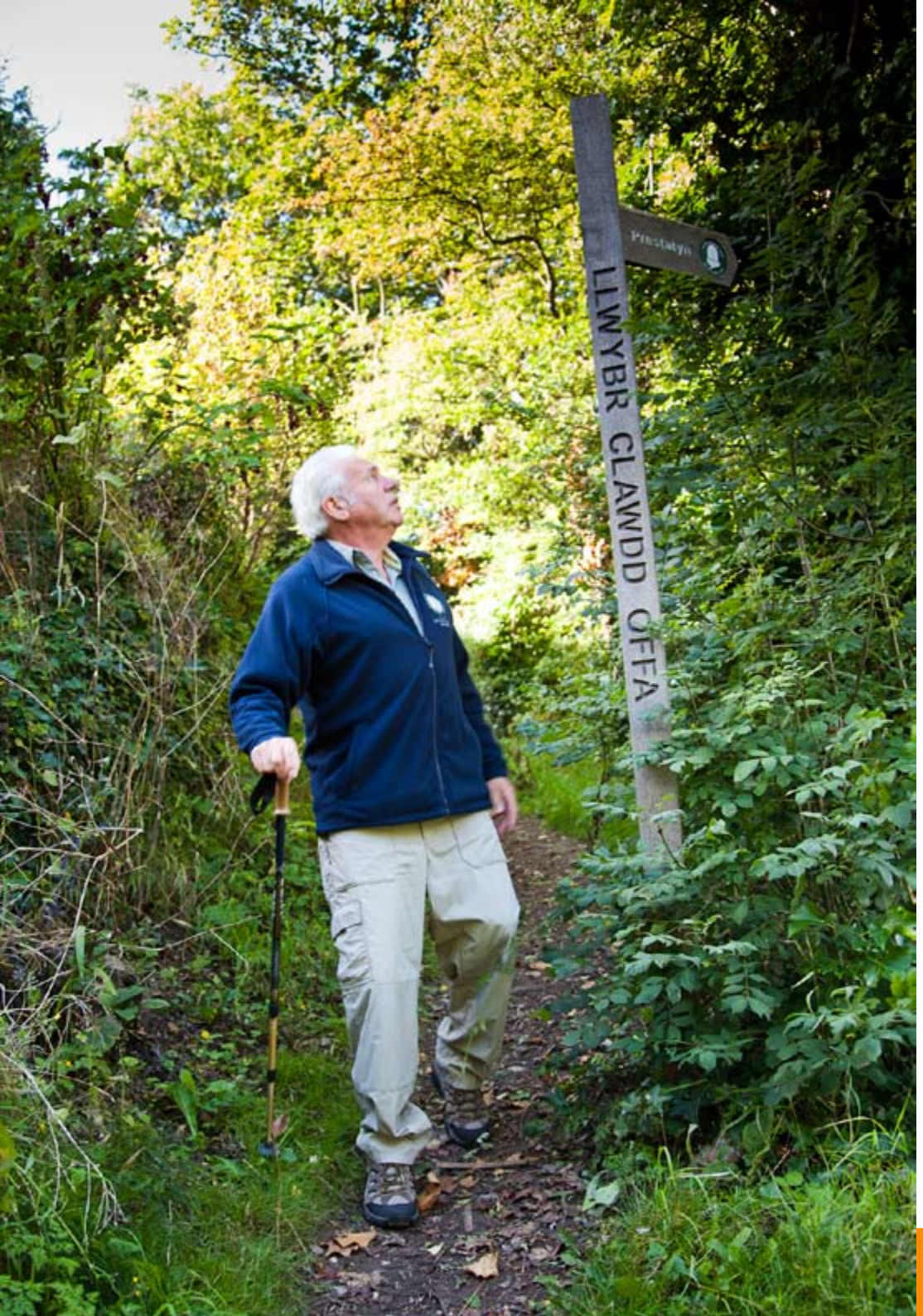
There are cycle tracks linking the towns and neighbouring villages, and in the near future Rhyl will soon have North Wales's first purpose-built cycling track at Glan y Morfa, providing a safe training environment for road and off-road riders.

For history lovers, too, there is plenty to capture one's attention, not least the well-preserved Roman baths tucked away at the bottom of a cul-de-sac off Meliden Road.

One of the major attractions of North Wales in general is that everywhere is within convenient travelling distance of some of the North West connurbations, but that is particularly true about the Rhyl – Prestatyn area.

Both resorts have mainline railway stations and are also within half-an-hour's drive of the end of the M56, as well as only 10 minutes off the A55.

For more information about the delights of Rhyl and Prestatyn go to: www.rhyl-prestatyn.co.uk



You'll never walk alone in Prestatyn

Walkers are flocking to the North Wales holiday town of Prestatyn for health, history, wildlife and scenery – not to mention good company.

Prestatyn and Meliden was the first community in Wales to be accredited with Walkers Are Welcome status in 2007 (and the third in the UK), and its successful sixth Walking Festival in May attracted about 1,300 visitors.

The 47 Walkers Are Welcome (WAW) towns and villages in the UK go out of their way to welcome walkers and show them where to walk, places of interest to visit and pointing out the cafes and pubs which will be particularly glad to see them.

Apart from being the gateway to North Wales coastal resorts, Prestatyn is the beginning (or end) of the Offa's Dyke National Trail, and also the North Wales Path and Clwydian Way.

Offa's Dyke is one of the most popular long distance walks in Wales. The 182 mile long walk follows the man-made dyke constructed by Offa, King of Mercia between 757 and 796 as a boundary between England and Wales.

But more than this Prestatyn is making a huge effort to engage the entire community in making the town a Mecca for walkers.

Until last year Malcolm Wilkinson, who lives in Prestatyn, was national chairman of WAW and is still on its executive, and involved in most things to do with walking in North Wales.

"We also have a walking your way to health scheme called 'You'll Never Walk Alone' which has been going since 2001, it's all voluntary, aided by Prestatyn Town Council and Denbighshire county council and which has been used by 15,000 people so far.

"It runs up to twice a day, all year round with walks of between 10 minutes and two hours," he said.

It's also pulling in not just local people, but visitors from neighbouring Flintshire and Conwy. The walks are part of a properly structured and insured scheme, with volunteer leaders. The scheme is also about social interaction. "After the walks we encourage people to go to a local cafe and in that way they can network with other groups.

"We are looking to help people who may be disadvantaged in some way, for example someone who might have lost a partner and finds them self alone and might have lost contact with the community, or people who are recovering from heart problems or a wide range of medical issues.

"It's an all-year-round scheme because to be effective the key is to walk regularly. We provide the means for people to get through the barriers. We also take people on coach trips to other places for walks, places outside the area which they might not know about or cannot get to. It's an exciting world out there and people should not be excluded.

"For many years I felt walking organisations were too fragmented and too elitist, people sticking in their own little groups."

For Malcolm, WAW is about the community

recognising the need to promote their town or village as a place which has something of interest and bringing in walkers and giving them information about where to park – or better still how to get there by public transport – and where to walk.

"We have a Roman history here which few people know about, we have the remains of a Roman bath house, but people do not know how to get to it. We have the Coed Bell ancient woodland, so we show them how to walk there.

"We engage with local businesses and cafes, rambling associations and environmental organisations, youth clubs – the whole community. We want people to come to the town, enjoy themselves and come again.

"We are helping the local economy, increasing visitor numbers, working with our local assets, sun, sea, sand and hills, our local Tern colony and a unique sand dune system – there is so much to go at!

"Our main theme is that we have something special to offer walkers. They don't have to be bobble hats and beards, walking is for the visually impaired, the handicapped, we want everyone to enjoy the fun of walking."

Although there are lots of good books on walking in the area, Malcolm feels there are many who will welcome simple diagrammatic leaflets about where to walk, rather than grapple with an Ordnance Survey map.

"The idea is to break down barriers and get people to feel more confident," he said.

"The development of the A55 was no doubt a good thing and a lot of people from Merseyside, Manchester and the Midlands head down the A55 to Snowdonia, which is a fantastic place. But if that is the only place they head for they are missing out on so much culture and history which they cannot get in Snowdonia.

"There are fantastic places if people just head off the A55. I sometimes hear people in places off the A55 complaining visitors do not come and see them. Well, if they are waiting for things to change they will have a long wait.

"You have to reach out and tell people, there is much, much more to the richness of Wales. Very often local councils are unaware of some of the things they have to offer which is why on the WAW website there are links to tell you about the villages and towns."

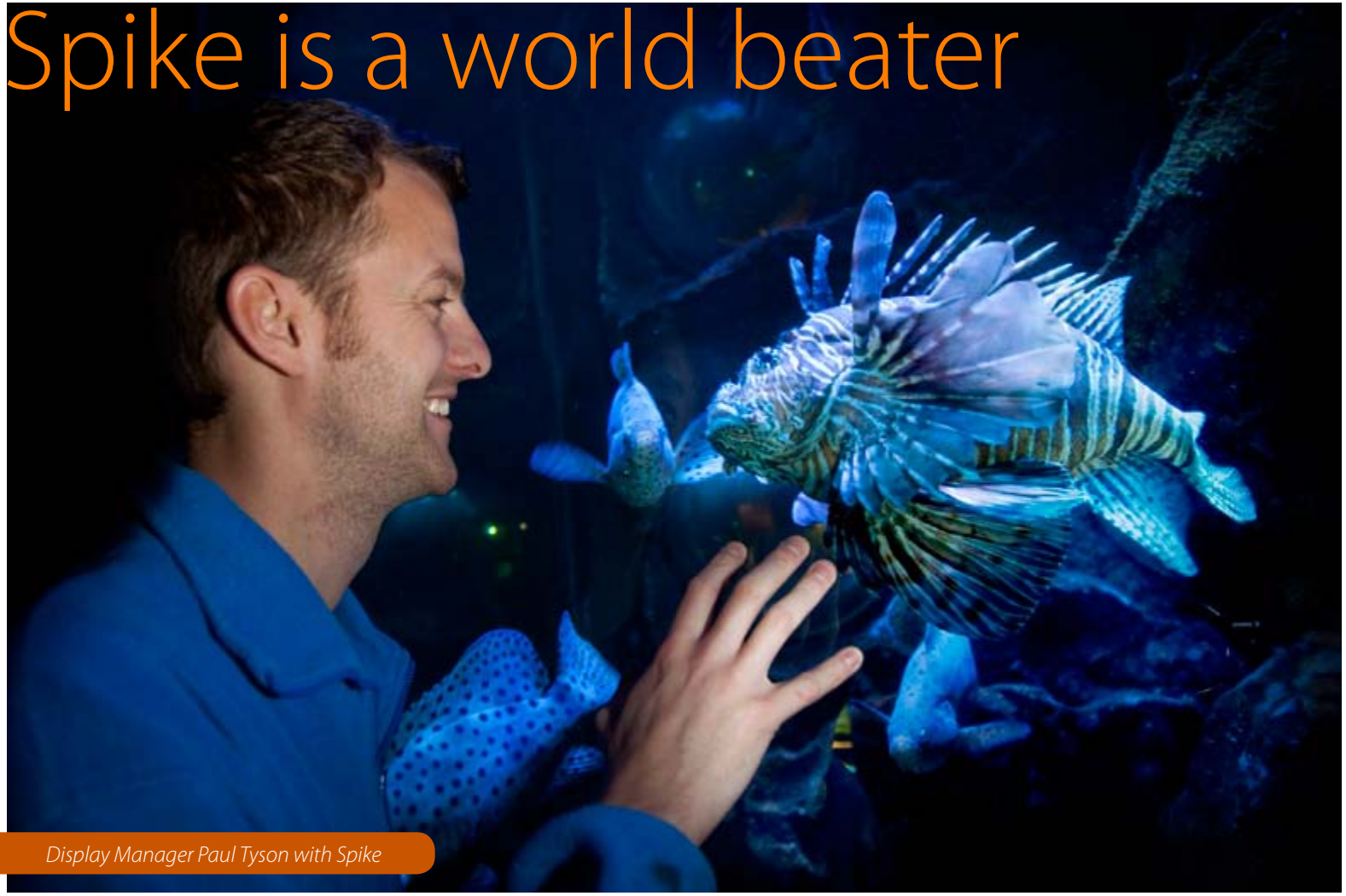
The three day Prestatyn Walking Festival each Spring offers graded, themed walks, led by trained leaders with probably the most demanding being a two-day 40 mile Offa's Dyke Challenge Walk.

Information about the festival and details of all its walks can be found on www.prestatynwalkingfestival.co.uk or ring the Town Council on 01745 857185.

For details of You'll Never Walk Alone walks you can visit www.healthyprestatyn.org.uk or again ring the town council on 01745 857185.

Malcolm Wilkinson, executive member of Walkers are Welcome

Spike is a world beater



Display Manager Paul Tyson with Spike

Meet Spike, a giant of the deep – the 18 inch long lionfish is believed to be a world record breaker.

He's one of two Lion Fish at the Sequarium in Rhyl and is more than half an inch longer than the largest recorded specimen ever caught.

Display Manager Paul Tyson says measuring lionfish is difficult as they have poisonous spines along their backs.

But in Spike's case it was worth the effort to discover that he is a world-beater.

Paul said: "Lionfish were originally found in the Indo-Pacific regions but they became popular in the aquarium trade and have since spread worldwide.

"They are bought when small but grow rapidly and often outgrow their tanks, leading to owners releasing them rather than killing their beloved pet.

"In the Caribbean they are now at such high numbers they are considered a pest and their capture for the table and recreational fishing in being actively encouraged.

"We've done a lot of research and as far as we know, the largest recorded Lionfish ever caught is 17 ½ inches long.

"Our zoo vet, who is consultant to virtually all public aquariums in the UK has said they are the largest lionfish she has ever seen, as have other professionals in the industry.

"We are really proud of our lionfish which are now around seven years old which is a good age as their normal lifespan is between five and seven years. They tuck into a diet of squid, sand eels and sprats.

"We are certain that Spike is a world record breakers when it comes to size and I don't think anyone could come up with a bigger specimen whether from the wild or in captivity."

Lionfish are nocturnal ambush predators. They lie motionless, hidden amongst weeds or rocks waiting to ambush their prey. They will spread their large pectoral fins wide to corral their prey and then swallow them whole with one gulp.

They have poisonous spines across the back which gives a sting equivalent to a bee sting. These are used for defence and the lionfish will raise them and point the back towards its predator.

www.seaquarium.co.uk

Opera star beamed live from Big Apple

Fans of singing superstar Bryn Terfel will be able to watch him perform live on the stage of New York's famous Metropolitan Opera - without ever leaving North Wales.

The Scala Cinema and Arts Centre, in Prestatyn, will be showing Wagner's epic opera Das Rheingold on their high definition cinema screen in a matinee performance direct from the Big Apple.

The critically acclaimed bass baritone from Pant Glas will be the star of the show in the first production in a second season of operas from the New York Met shown at the Scala.

Das Rheingold will be beamed to the popular seaside resort starting at 6pm on Saturday, October 9.

The centre's general manager, Chris Bond, says the operas are proving increasingly popular.

Chris, an award-winning theatre lighting expert, said: "We have opera fans who come along dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns while others chose jeans and tee shirts, it really doesn't matter.

"There is no doubt the popularity of opera is increasing and I think this second season will be much bigger than the first.

"It's a unique chance to see the likes of Bryn Terfel performing at the Met live without having to actually go to New York.

"When we showed Carmen we could have sold every seat six times over it was so popular.

"It's a great experience and we have people coming from right across North Wales, Cheshire and Merseyside.

"We are also putting on similar live performances by the National Theatre in London which are again proving very popular."

Marilyn Henry, who runs Bryn Terfel's fan club as well being his commercial manager, thinks it's a great idea.

She says that had she known earlier she could have watched the performance live without leaving North Wales she could have saved some of her hard-earned cash.

Marilyn explained: "I have already booked flights and bought tickets to see Bryn perform the lead role of Wotan in Das Rheingold at the Met in New York.

"Had I been aware I could have watched the performance in Prestatyn I would have thought twice about going all the way across the Atlantic Ocean.

"I would encourage anyone who has never witnessed opera to grab a ticket and go along. It is an emotional roller coaster and simply a uniquely wonderful experience.

"The sound systems are so good now in modern theatres such as the Scala that you don't need to be in the opera house to benefit and with high definition screens you can actually see so much more.

"You only need to be stuck behind a large person in the opera house and you can't see everything plus, you are often so far back it's impossible to see the opera stars clearly in any case.

"Bryn is wonderful on stage and his performances are always moving and full of emotion.

"I think it's fantastic that Scala Cinema and Arts Centre is showing a series of operas live from the Met. The Met, along with Covent Garden, are both truly unique and wonderful."

American opera aficionado and retired business woman Aileen Sullivan, who lives at Oxon Hill just outside Washington DC, is a huge Bryn Terfel fan.

She said: "We have come over to Wales for the last four or five Faenol Festivals and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

"I have also become a big fan of watching opera in high definition cinemas as the camera allows such wonderful close-ups of the performers. It's amazing to be able to see their facial expressions and features so clearly.

"Bryn Terfel is such an emotive performer and to be able to see him perform such a wonderful leading role is a privilege not to be missed.

"I would encourage any UK opera fan yet to try watching a live Met performance at their local theatre to give it a go, I guarantee you will not be disappointed."

Other operas in the series include Boris Godunov by Mussorgsky on October 23, Don Pasquale by Denizetti on November 13, Don Carlo by Verdi on December 11, La Fanciullla del West by Puccini on January 8, Iphgenie en Tauride on February 25.

For tickets, and information on all The Met Opera live performances at Scala, Prestatyn visit ***www.scalaprestatyn.co.uk*** or call 01745 850 197. For information about places to stay visit ***www.rhyl-prestatyn.co.uk***

Superstar Bryn Terfel in Wagner's epic opera Das Rheingold

Show simply must go on

Lowri Hughes as Snow White and Colin McMellon as Muddles with the seven Dwarfs.

The show simply must go on for the world's longest running pantomime.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is still packing them in over 40 years after it first trod the boards back in 1967 at Salford's Victoria Theatre.

Since then the likes of Oliver star Mark Lester, Bullseye host Jim Bowen and Carry On legend Charles Hawtrey have all been in the cast.

Veteran theatre impresario Aubrey Phillips, who launched the show back in the Sixties, took it round the UK's major theatres before settling at Rhyl where it has been running for a record-breaking 40 consecutive summer seasons.

Aubrey, now in his 80's, from Bagillt, in Flintshire, has just overseen the 40th year of the show but is looking to hand the baton on to a new producer as he can't bear the thought of the show coming to an end.

He said: "A man called Stewart Suthurst and myself started the production at the old Victoria Theatre, Salford, which at the time we leased from Abraham Goldberg Ltd, and did it not as a pantomime but as a children's musical.

"This was for the Easter weeks in 1967. It was very successful but the regulars kept saying they had expected a panto version.

"We did have a terrific reputation for Christmas seasons with the runs being up to eight or nine weeks, with professional and juvenile dancers and a full pit orchestra.

"With this in mind next time we had a blank week in our attractions, about six weeks later, we advertised the production as a panto changing the format and the result was packed houses with three shows on the Saturday at 2'o'clock, 5'o'clock and 8'o'clock - I wonder how many would visit a panto today that started that late?

He added: "The following week we had a phone call from the general manager of the King's Theatre down at Southsea inviting us to play there in four weeks time and the show returned to that theatre no less than 11 times, each for a full week."

Word travels fast in showbusiness and soon Snow White was on the road on ten-week tours to somne of the UK's major theatres, household names like the Palace Theatre in Manchester, the Empire in Liverpool, the Theatre Royal in Nottingham, the Hippodromes at Birmingham and Bristol, Empire Sunderland, New Theatre Cardiff, Alhambra Theatre Bradford, the famous City Varieties in Leeds, hoime of TV's The Good Old Days, the Grand Theatre in Swansea.

"The list is endless," said Aubrey who then began taking Snow White on a run of summer seasons and Christmas performances - first taking the show to Rhyl's Gaiety and Coliseum theatres and finally

for the last 10 years at the larger Pavilion Theatre.

Snow White also played seasona at Morecambe as well as Skegness, Blackpool, New Brighton, Scarborough and even London's West End at the Victoria Palace Theatre.

It has also 'starred' in a number of television productions including an ITV documentary entitled This England.

Over its 40-year run as well as household names like Hawtrey, Lester and Bowen, Eurovision Song Contest runner up Bryan Johnson and Lancashire TV comedians Danny Ross and Ken Platt have appeared in the show.

The one constant has been Aubrey Phillips who wrote the basic storyline with Joseph Holroyd, of the Little Theatre, Rhyl, and he said: "I introduced all the extra comedy business. For the first few years we had original music, written by Alan Martin, but this has long been given up by the introduction each year of up to date music which keeps the youngsters more interested.

"The first half used to terminate in a Toyland Ballet, but with touring going from full weeks down to one and two day stands it proved too difficult to arrange dance routines with local children.

"This was then replaced with a speciality puppet act, the most frequently used being The Star International Black Theatre presented by Chris Covington. The original choreographer was the renowned Johnny Worthy."

And Aubrey says that over it record-breaking run he has seen many outstanding Snow Whites.

He said: "Over the years dozens of young ladies have played the title role. But without exception the artist who did it the longest, about 12 years, was Birmingham actress Debbie Young."

She certainly cajsed a stir when the show arrived at the Bristol Hippodrome and Abrey recalled: "None of the cast could understand why the Press were so interested in Debbie until we saw the adverts in the local papers – she had inadvertently been billed as Debbie Reynolds.

"Business was very good that week!"

Debbie Reynolds may not have made it onto the cast list but other major celebrities have, according to Aubrey.

He said: "We did have Jim Bowen of Bullseye fame who joined the production for a two week run at Coventry Theatre and the Tameside Hippodrome. He flatly refused to wear make-up as he thought it was too effeminate.

"We also had Mark Lester who had played the lead role in the film Oliver. However, he only lasted three days at the Alexandra Theatre Birmingham.

"Unfortunately he sang out of key and sadly for him the first song was Can't Sing Can't Dance, Can't Do Anything – the reviews weren't great."

They weren't enough to stop the show though and it's still going strong

Lowri Hughes as Snow White with Vivien Day who first played Snow White 40 years ago

Useful contacts

Top attractions

Clwyd Leisure - 01745 369500 - www.clwydleisure.co.uk
Rhyl Suncentre/Skytower 01745 344433 - www.rhylsuncentre.co.uk
Prestatyn Nova Centre 01745 888021 - www.prestatynnova.co.uk
Pavilion Theatre, Rhyl – 01745 330000 – www.rhylpavilion.co.uk
Seaquarium, Rhyl – 01745 344660 - www.seaquarium.co.uk/rhyl
Scala Cinema - 01745 853847 - www.scalaprestatyn.co.uk
Bodelwyddan Castle - 01745 584060 – www.bodelwyddan-castle.co.uk
Ffrith Beach and Festival Gardens - 01745 850079 - www.ffrithbeachfestivalgardens.co.uk

Tourist Information

Rhyl Tourist Information Centre – 01745 344515 - www.rhyl-prestatyn.co.uk
Denbighshire County Council – 01824 706000 - www.denbighshire.gov.uk