**Closing the economic gap between Wales and the SE of the UK**

Railway electrification is one way to reduce the differences between the ‘core’ growth area of the UK around London and the poorer ‘periphery’ areas on the edges, like South Wales.

Last year, this faster and more efficient rail improvement was planned to finish at Cardiff but this July an announcement from the Department of Transport has extended the planned improvements to Swansea. This will also help all areas along the lines further west as well, like Carmarthan and Fishguard. Electric trains can be one carriage longer because they are lighter and more efficient, so it is another way to reduce overcrowding.

The journey from Paddington to Swansea will be cut by 20 minutes. Such a high proportion of the Welsh population lives in **S**outh Wales that once the whole project, including the ‘Valleys upgrade’, is finished, two-thirds of people in Wales will be able to catch a fast clean electrified train service from their local station.

**Welsh shoppers now care more for the environment due to the plastic bag charge**

The number of carrier bags used by shoppers now is fewer than just 5% of the number that were routinely used and dumped by food and clothes shoppers across Wales before the setting of a plastic bag charge in 2011.

70% of Welsh shoppers support the bag charge. Only 17% still object to the charge!

Where shoppers have paid for plastic bags, some shops are passing on the money for environmental projects and local good causes. For example the Keep Wales Tidy charity has received more than £105,000 worth of retailer donations as a direct result of the bag charge and they use this money for local projects to educate people and improve the environment.

**The changing fortunes of Welsh hill farmers!**

10 years ago, the sheep farmers of Wales were facing a terrible future. Prices were so low that farmers made no money on each animal and many were leaving farming. Sometimes animals were sold for less that £20.00 each after all the care and effort taken to raise them.

In 2010, prices began to rise for Welsh lamb. There was less lamb on the market and higher demand for it from a larger population in the UK and also in Europe . This year prices have continued to rise as demand has increased and supply has been limited.

Last year, a multi-million pound project to boost the sales of Welsh lamb in Europe was unveiled at the Royal Welsh Show with the announcement of a £3.5 million promotional campaign. The Welsh based red meat promotion agency, Hybu Cig Cymru, will continue to spend the money in Europe over the next two years to promote the unique qualities which led to Welsh lamb being granted Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status. This is a type of award which should make Welsh lamb more recognised, attractive and valuable in the world market . Hybu Cig Cymru/Meat Promotions Wales (HCC) said that last year's export figure for lamb and beef stood at a record £200m - £53m higher than 2010.

**Even more windfarms!**

Geography in the News has reported on new windfarms so often in the past that it seems that there is a new one planned every issue. Well here we go again!

In July a huge new plan was published to build between 147 and 440 turbines over 9 miles out into the Irish Sea between Anglesey and the Isle of Man. This is a long way out from the coast and will be hardly visible, so there are unlikely to be objections on the basis of landscape damage. Shipping could be affected however, including ferries to the Isle of Man. Plans are at a very early stage for this 2.2 gigawatt powerstation. Given the windy weather we have had this year, it might make quite a lot of the planned energy, because if the wind does not blow, it’s not going to generate any power or profit!

## Ecotourism in the Brecon Beacon National Park

## National Parks are the obvious place to showcase conservation activities, environmentally sustainable technologies and ecotourism.

## In a previous issue we presented the report of a hydro-electric power station at the Dan yr-Ogof show cave complex in the Brecon Beacons National Park. Now tourists to the Brecon Beacons are being offered a fun option of hiring one of a fleet of electric cars to explore its natural attractions.

The vehicles are two-person quadricycles, called Twizys, which are powered by electricity that is increasingly gathered from sun, rain and wind. They have a top speed of 50mph. Multiple charging stations will be available around the area.

The new eco-friendly transport scheme is partly funded by the Welsh Assembly via the National Park and the Eco Travel Network (ETN).

**Flooding in Wales has been all too frequent this year.**

The most recently affected areas were in mid and north Wales in June when 2 days of continuous rain flooded villages. *Tal-y-bont in Ceredigion, suffered as the small Afon Leri that flows through the centre of the village* turned into a destructive brown torrent.

It is clear that property owners are becoming much more aware of the possibility of flooding in locations that were previously considered safe from the hazard.

One indicator of this is the number of Welsh people who are signing up to the Environmental Agency’s free flood warning service. It has more than doubled in two years from 47,000 in 2010 to 101,000 in 2012. The agency said a further 100 properties signed up for the service during last month's floods.

The alert system is designed to give people time to take action to protect their homes and businesses from floodwater, like the 1,000 people, and 150 people rescued and 75 properties damaged last month.

Flooding is of course created by heavy rainfall, but the level of damage is also influenced by where people and property are and by how much they have prepared for the possibility of a flood happening. We cannot stop it raining, but by prediction and preparation, the impacts of flooding can be reduced.