

## Powell's History of Tredegar

Reprinted by Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum, 2008 £10

Evan Powell wrote the History of Tredegar for the Tredegar “Chair Eisteddfod” held February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1884. Copies of the book, which provides a narrative local history from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to 1883, were unavailable by 1901. The Tredegar Cymmrodorion Society gave permission for Evan Powell's son, who was also called Evan, together with the Tredegar Workmen's Library, to reprint the history on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1902. The original history was to be continued from 1884 to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the complete history was to be in one volume. The second part of Tredegar's story was written by David Powell, the brother of Evan, together with Evan Powell junior. The work was the winning entry of a competition organised by the Tredegar Workmen's Library in 1901. The intention was to revise and rearrange all the material but this was not possible. The second part of the History of Tredegar adopts a thematic approach with chapters, for example, on the development of industry, the growth of the town, education, religion, general culture and morality. The complete History of Tredegar, which has now been reprinted by the Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum, provides a valuable source for anyone wishing to know more about one of the important industrial towns that developed in the Industrial Revolution. There is much detail and comment to satisfy the general reader as well.

The History of Tredegar provides a comprehensive account of the development of the ironworks and coal mining from the earliest days in 1738 to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also there is an interesting chapter on the farms and their produce before the Industrial Revolution. Evan Powell senior speculates on the origin of various Welsh place names such as Llyswedog and Tŷ Trist. The author also notes the great number of English industrialists who helped to develop the local industries. There was Kettle from Shropshire in 1738 and then Atkins and Barrow from Westmoreland in 1776. The money and expertise of Monkhouse, another new arrival from Westmoreland, together with Fothergill from the Forest of Dean were vital to the development and prosperity of the town before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

There are descriptions of the industrial protests of the 19<sup>th</sup> century like the Scotch cattle and the Chartists. The rapid growth of chapels is also given attention, together with the horrors of the cholera outbreaks, so common to the rapidly developing industrial towns like Tredegar. Space is devoted to the entertainment enjoyed by the locals like “Wombwell's Entire Menagerie” which arrived in 1844 to

thrill and delight with its “great wild beast show”. Disasters are recorded, like the deluge that swept away a block of houses at Nantybwlch and poor Ann Hopkin who was found drowned in her bed. Comment is given to the attempt to send a large lump of coal to the Great Exhibition 1851. The attempt failed but what remains of the 15 ton piece of coal is still on show today in the town’s Bedwellty Park.

A number of important individuals connected with Tredegar are included in Powell’s History. Sir Daniel Gooch, the man responsible for laying the communication cables across the Atlantic Ocean, spent his early years in the Tredegar ironworks. He acquired vital skills while working in the pattern shop, and spoke kindly about the townspeople. The anger aroused by the government report into the education and morality of the Welsh, known as the Blue Books, was voiced by one local man. The inaccuracies in the report were challenged by the Rev. Evan Jones (Ieuan Gwynedd) when he wrote to the government of the day.

Evan Powell’s History has a chronological description of the events and changes of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The language is clear and precise, although there are occasions when the author uses elaborate phrases. For example the death of a popular manager, J.Bevan was such a great shock to the town that the people ‘imagined the sun of Tredegar’s glory and greatness had set.’. Nevertheless, the story of Tredegar is well told with plenty of factual detail and enjoyable digressions into popular events and gossip. The complementary history, 1884-1900 written by the brother David and the son Evan, is given a thematic structure. This relies heavily on data presented as tables, such as chapel attendance, or the programme of events for the Literary and Scientific Society for the whole period. There are good accounts of the changes in the iron and steel industries, with attention being given to the effect of new techniques. The gift of Bedwellty Park to the town by the Morgan family in 1900 is very interesting, because the park has continued to be an important part of Tredegar’s social history. A recent award of lottery funding will do much to restore the park and the original ironmaster’s house so that people can continue to enjoy the facilities given to the town.

Although the second part of the history relies too much on compilations of facts and figures, there are insights into life at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A thorough account of elementary education in this period reveals that the Bedwellty School Board had 20 schools for 9,554 pupils, although there were problems with attendance and lateness. The cost per pupil was much lower than the average cost for the whole country, yet the achievement in Reading, Writing and Arithmetic was much better than

the average. What is remarkable was the range of cultural activities. There was a variety of lectures organised by the Literary and Scientific society, a Debating and Mutual Improvement society as well as the musical groups and eisteddfodau held in the town.

The last chapter is devoted to 'Temperance' and the evils of drink. Two possible causes are discussed: higher wages and the issue of grocers' licences, it is argued, contributed to a binge culture in the town. Despite the evidence of drunkenness and trade disputes that were all too common in industrial towns, overall it appears that Tredegar was a good place to live and work at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However a note of caution should be sounded when it is discovered that a bye law was passed to stop "furious cycling."

The Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum should be congratulated for reprinting Powell's History of Tredegar. The book cover is very striking with its use of one of Michael Blackmore's pen and ink drawings of the St David steam engine at work in the ironworks. The artist has also generously allowed the use of other illustrations in the book. The reprinting has been done in larger and clearer print than the original book and good quality white paper has been used. Two weaknesses of Powell's History of Tredegar were the lack of any maps and an index. Both have been tackled successfully: John Hilling, architect, has produced two specially drawn maps of Tredegar in 1800 and 1840 which show the development of the town; Rodger Burchell has produced an exhaustive index which will enable readers to use the book effectively. The original old fashioned summaries for each chapter have been retained in this lengthy book of nearly 300 pages. This book is the first effort by Forum at reprinting local histories and it is hoping to do the same for Hilda Jennings' History of Brynmawr in the near future. The book is a fine achievement and it has been produced at a reasonable price. The support of the local councils together with a generous grant from the Community First funds have made this possible.

Copies are available from the Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum, c/o Tredegar Library, Tredegar, Gwent

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