

THE BRYNMAWR EXPERIMENT

BRYNMAWR FURNITURE

During the late 1920's, a number of crafts and industries were established at Brynmawr in what was then south Brecknockshire. They became known later as the Brynmawr and Clydach Valley Industries and included boot-making, weaving, stocking-knitting, quilting and agricultural ventures for the benefit of the local people.

By far the most successful venture was the establishment of a furniture workshop that produced thousands of distinctive pieces of furniture during the period 1930-40. Brynmawr furniture became popular throughout Britain and is still held in high esteem when considering the social and artistic history of Wales.

The social context led a group of Quakers to settle in this area and attempt to assist the local people by providing work and practical help to alleviate the problems caused by the 1920's depression.

In 1928, Peter Scott, the Secretary of the Home Service Committee of the Society of Friends visited Brynmawr and the neighbouring valleys with a group of young Quakers. The Friends had already established a handful of small businesses and industries in depressed areas in an effort to alleviate the serious problems caused by unemployment and the resulting poverty witnessed in South Wales. It was Scott and his colleagues, however, who were to establish new ventures in the Brynmawr district, having encountered the effects of poverty on the people of the area. The first practical help came in the form of financial aid, food and clothes from the Friends' Relief Fund. This was seen as the initial step to gain the confidence of the local people to co-operate in a venture that would help restore hope and self-respect to the community.

These initial overtures met with a mixed reception. Despite the poverty and need, the majority of the local people were reluctant to co-operate fully with the well-meaning strangers in the early years. The Quakers' benevolent motives were often questioned; some believed that the authority of local people was under threat: unfamiliar ideas were presented to a close Welsh community by members of the English middle class. The Quakers worked hard to reassure the people on all these points with limited success. Many, however, did agree to co-operate, and several joint committees were established with the aid of the local authorities. These committees were formed to examine and report on seven main topics to the local Community Council. The topics were:

- Commerce
- Education
- Health
- Housing
- Industry
- Local Services
- Population
- Transport

Each Committee of appointees produced lengthy reports and recommended solutions for the good of the local population. It must be stressed, however, that the local Labour Party, the Trade Unions, a good number of the local elected members and members of the local radical organisations formed no part of these committees. They were invited to participate but objected to the appointment rather than the election of people to the various panels. They also saw in the Quakers' efforts to encourage voluntary labour, a tendency to undermine their attempts to gain fair wages and conditions for workers. These tensions remained throughout the thirties, and even after the establishment of crafts and industries from 1930, full co-operation between the two camps was never achieved.

A public meeting was called in December 1929, with the support of both the local Council and the local elected Member of Parliament, to promote the idea of the establishment of crafts and industries that would produce work for local people aided by volunteers. Many locals were impressed by the ideas and, despite the opposition of the local radicals, it was decided to form an executive committee to facilitate the various proposed ventures. In 1929 a number of volunteers had attended a summer camp at Brynmawr to assist with the voluntary work instigated by the Quakers in that year. Volunteers were to appear regularly in Brynmawr during the next few years, assisting local people with tip clearance, the formation of gardens, the clearance of slag heaps, and the building of a nursery school, playgrounds for children and adults, and a local swimming pool. These projects provided the local unemployed people with work and food but not a regular wage. Nevertheless, a good number participated in the schemes to improve the local environment. Social and cultural clubs for men and women were established as well as a network of youth clubs for local boys and those of the surrounding valleys. These provided the means for hundreds of boys to participate in sport and other youth projects for a decade. A number of other cultural and practical enterprises were launched under the aegis of the Quakers who administered the activities from their headquarters in Alma Street. Many local people participated in these ventures but much opposition was encountered from officers and members of local churches, chapels and societies that had flourished in Brynmawr before the Quakers appeared on the scene. Distrust in some quarters, however, evaporated and was replaced by the desire to work together.

THE FURNITURE WORKSHOPS

Background: It was the furniture workshops and their products that were to chiefly promote Brynmawr and their fame has survived to the present day. This was undoubtedly the most successful enterprise.

Founder: There was no notable tradition of furniture-making in the area. The people of Brynmawr had relied on the cabinet-makers and joiners of the surrounding countryside for their woodwork and wares during the previous two centuries, although a number of carpenters worked in the town during the first decades of the twentieth century. These, however, were not directly involved in the new venture established by the Quakers in 1930. Paul Matt, the son of a German cabinet maker who had been apprenticed to his father for

three years, and who came to Brynmawr as leader of the local unemployed persons clubs, was the instigator. A trained designer and a man of vision and energy, he saw an opportunity of combining one of his ideas with the creation of new products.

Workers: Matt had been experimenting with new designs for furniture in the Gwalia Works in 1929. The following year he seized the opportunity of offering training and employment to a number of the men who attended his clubs for the unemployed, without bending national laws or treading on the toes of local leaders. A number of the practical and humanitarian aspirations of Paul Matt were realised with the establishment of the Brynmawr Furniture Makers Limited in 1931 and its registration as a component company of the Brynmawr and Clydach Valley Industries. A dozen men were initially employed to make and assemble the parts. They were given expert training and when proficient were each assisted by two youths between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Work was therefore provided for both school leavers and youths who had not worked hitherto. Up to fifty workers were employed in this way during the decade with the demand for work amongst youths great and the waiting list for vacancies long.

Capital: It proved to be a financially successful venture. An appeal for capital in 1930-31 realised £6,000 from shareholders before the business was formally opened. Orders came flooding in, including a famous initial order from the Mount School in York for four hundred chairs at a £1 each, one of the first establishments of many to swell the company's order books. It was based on a solid initial financial base and consequently flourished.

The Site: The company found a home in the old boot-makers factory at the Gwalia Works, which was closed in 1926. The new cobblers re-commenced work at these premises in 1930 to be joined by furniture makers and woodworkers in 1931. The factory was gutted by fire in 1937 but the business was re-located in other premises in Brynmawr until the Gwalia Works was rebuilt. Production remained relatively unaffected. The bootmakers were also re-installed in the old factory following its refurbishment.

Raw Materials: Following the depression of the 1920's, large quantities of oak and other timber remained unsold in Cardiff Docks. The northern European oak had been imported through this port since about 1880, and tons were acquired by Matt and his colleagues for an extremely reasonable price. It was used, with plywood and other inferior timber, to create new pieces of high quality that were to typify the standards

of the workshop for a decade. When the initial stock of timber was exhausted, other trading links with the continent were established and more oak imported. British oak was also used and walnut was added to the materials for a new range of furniture in 1936. It was emphasised in publicity material, however, that it was oak, the native timber, that was first in the field.

Pieces: A large variety of attractive, simply designed and constructed light oak pieces were produced. Matt designed a variety of pieces for the dining room, bedroom, sitting room and study and drew on his considerable experience as a designer in London during the 1920's. During that time, he had worked with followers of the Russell Brothers and he was greatly influenced by the simplicity of their designs and solidity of their pieces. Matt had no desire to

either copy or glean inspiration from traditional Welsh furniture. His pieces were contemporary and entirely in keeping with the fashion of the day. He did, however, attempt to produce a dresser based on a traditional Welsh style, but this was a rarity. The vast majority of his pieces were designed for the middle and professional classes of the 1930's, and included beds, tables, cupboards, dinner wagons, etc. Matt aimed his products at this section of society knowing that his practical and humanitarian ideals could be realised by a class of people who were eager and willing to purchase his furniture and who could afford to finance his venture.

Marketing and Customers: Initial publicity for the venture and the quality of the products was confined to Quaker fraternities and their friends. They did not have to wait long for orders. A large number of pieces were produced for institutions in England and Wales including schools and colleges, hospitals and offices and both national and local institutions. The growth of garden villages saw the complete furnishing of houses with Brynmawr furniture. Exhibitions of the products of the Brynmawr Furniture Makers were mounted frequently during the 1930's at venues in towns such as Llandrindod Wells, Birmingham, London and Manchester. Permanent premises for the display of Brynmawr furniture were acquired in Cavendish Square, London in October 1937. However, David Morgan Limited of Cardiff had been extremely supportive of the Company from its early days and generously provided exhibition space for the products, free of charge, from 1932-40, a gesture greatly appreciated by the Brynmawr fraternity.

The End of the Experiment: The Company ceased to trade in 1940, the closure of the factory brought about by the unavailability of raw materials from the continent, the disappearance of a home market and the lack of demand for quality furniture during the early war years. The last exhibition of Brynmawr Furniture was mounted between 1st and 7th February 1940 at Messrs. David Morgan Ltd., The Hayes, Cardiff.
