REMINISCENCES OF THE OLD CLYDACH IRON WORKS

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I came across in an early twentieth century edition of the *Abergavenny Chronicle* articles entitled: *Reminiscences of the Old Clydach Iron Works and Neighbourhood* by T. Jordan, of Govilon[4]. The articles are essentially oral history rendered in print. They are notable to the contemporary reader by their description of: - the locality and the ironworks; of the different social groups - the iron workers and miners; allusion to the *Scotch Cattle,* of how people built their own homesteads, and of the degree of co-operative self- help etc. What follows is an abridged and lightly edited version of the two 1910 articles by T. Jordan:[5]

Contemporary Ruins of Clydach Iron Works[6]

[4] Abergavenny Chronicle, March 11, 1910 and March 18th available to view at http://newspapers.library.wales/view/4120246/4120251/64/Clydach%20iron%20works%20jordan and http://newspapers.library.wales/view/4120255/4120260/58/Clydach%20iron%20works%20jordan

[5] Abergavenny Chronicle, March 11, 1910

[6] https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/299525

“The great industry of iron making in South Wales and Monmouthshire is now [1910] almost a thing of the past and the famous Iron Kings of the last century, whose names were household words throughout the Principality-the Crawshays of Cyfarthfa, the Guests of Dowlais, and the Baileys of Nantyglo, have long since passed away. But it is still within the memory of many when the hills and valleys in West and North Monmouthshire were at night time illuminated to-day by the great fires of the blast furnaces, rolling mills, and coke yards and when the heavy thud of the monster Nasmyth steam hammer which, it was said, could flatten a ball of iron with ease, or crack a hazelnut without crushing the kernel, resounded on all sides. The cessation of those familiar sights and sounds was looked upon as a great calamity by thousands of working people and so it was, for when the steel-rail trade superseded that of iron, many changes took place, and several important firms declined to go to the enormous expense of changing their plant for the costly one required for the manufacturing of steel rails. Consequently, the discovery of the Bessemer and Siemen's processes doomed the old style of blast and puddling furnaces, and many large works were stopped, never to be re-started, and people traversing these valleys to-day [ie.in 1910] frequently pass huge blackened ruins, the relics of many a bygone industry.

The Clydach ironworks were situated in the parish of Llanelly, in Breconshire, and cosily nestled in a picturesque corner of the valley, under the shadow of the Gilwern Mountain, about five miles from Abergavenny and four miles from Crickhowell. There were four blast furnaces, and the date on one of them, I recollect, was 1797. There had been an older one lower down the valley, at a place called the Sale Yard, which, it was said, was blown by a hand bellows. Part of the ruins were to be seen in my time. And a little lower down again was the old charcoal forge. This was said to have been built in 1680 by Captain John Hanbury, one of the Hanbury-Leigh family, of Pontypool, who already had two

blast furnaces at Pontypool. Messrs. Frere and Cook, the then proprietors of Clydach works, leased this forge in 1800, and in the course of time Messrs. Powell, solicitors, of Brecon, became partners in the works, and Mr. Frere retired from the concern altogether in 1832. The works were then carried on by the Messrs. Powell until they were closed in 1862. Clydach House, in close proximity to the old forge, is still in existence, and tenanted. It is a fine old mansion, of the Tudor style of architecture, and was the home of the Freres during their connection with the works, and was also the birth-place of Sir Bartle Frere, afterwards Governor of Cape Colony. On a square tablet over the main entrance at the front of the house is the date 1603, which, I presume, would be the date of its erection. Through the courtesy of the Rector of Llanelly, I was permitted to see the following register, *"Henry Bartle Frere was baptized at the parish church on March 29th, 1815 and died 29th May 1884 and buried at St. Paul's Cathedral."* After the retirement of the Freres, Mr. Lancelot Powell, one of the owners, and manager of the works, took up his residence at Clydach House, and resided there as long as the works continued. To the best of my knowledge, the Powell's were the sole proprietors of the works, and the family consisted of four brothers, namely, John, Walter, Charles, and Lancelot, and one sister, who married Dr. Prestwood Lucas, a physician of Brecon and a brother of the late well known and popular Dr. Lucas of Crickhowell to whose memory is erected a public fountain in the middle of the town.

The vicinity of Clydach House is very wooded and picturesque, with the brook with its quaint old bridge just below and nearby the place known as the Sale Yard. Probably few people now know why it is so called. It is a wide open space, where, at one time, coal was sold to purchasers from the country. I myself have seen the old weighing-machine which had been used for that purpose, as well as for weighing country produce brought in for the use of the works, such as hay, pit wood, &c.

Clydach House in 2017

There are still traces of a cluster of old sheds and stables, and at one time the Abergavenny and Merthyr mail coach changed horses there, and there too, stood the little log hut where Molly Dobbs, the Company's post-woman, used to shelter while waiting with the letter-bags for the mail coach as it passed. Methinks I see the sturdy little woman now, as I often saw her, in scarlet cloak and bowler hat, as she handed her charge to the guard when he jumped down from the coach to receive it. This was before the days of Sir Rowland Hill's penny-postage system, and letters then were seldom sent or received by the working people of Clydach. The Company's bags were opened at the offices every morning, and when letters for other people chanced to be among them they were sent to the Company's shop, where they remained until called for, and many days would frequently elapse before those to whom they were addressed would get them or even know that they were there. And sometimes it was difficult to know for whom a letter was intended, there being so many persons of the same name, and so few known by their right names. The majority of the

people on the hills were then best known by nicknames, which were usually selected after a place where they or their forefathers had lived, or worked, or some circumstance connected with their previous history, and prefaced by Twm, Dai or Shoni, Bettws, Shan, or Peggy, and so on.

There were two separate and distinct divisions of' the population, the ironworkers in the valley, and the miners on the “Hill." There was nothing in common between them. They almost looked upon each other as belonging to a different race of people, and not infrequently when they came into contact breaches of the peace were committed which would form the subject of enquiry by the magistrates at Crickhowell, but there were seldom cases of a more serious nature than could be disposed of by a fine of a few shillings; and the late Mr. George Davies, of Court-y- Gollen, who was for many years chairman of the Crickhowell Magistrates, would, when the money was not immediately paid, impatiently shout, "Fork-em-out, fork-em-out," and by that appellation he was often jocularly spoken of by the people.

Mr. Lancelot Powell was a stern man, a true type of the ironmasters of the old school, and one who brooked but little opposition to his will. It was his regular custom every morning to ride up on his well-groomed bay horse to the works and his first halting place would generally be at the offices, whence he would cross to the furnaces, and from there round by the coke yard to the rolling mills, peering keenly into every place as he went along, and any of the workmen who might not be busily employed when he approached knew whether it were best to avoid him or not by the way in which he carried his walking stick whether across his shoulder or twirling it round in his hand. The officials under him were all old servants of the company, well tried and trusted. Most of them had been born and brought up in the place. Mr. Thomas, of Maes-y-Gwartha, for many years the confidential clerk and book-keeper and Mr. Wm. Morgan, the cashier, whose father had been cashier before him, and two of his brothers, John

and Thomas, had been furnace-manager at the works in succession. Mr. Robert Ellis from roll-turner became mill manager, and he was succeeded at the roll turning by his son William. Mr. Wm. Davies managed the Old Forge for many years, and Mr. John Reynallt and his brother Charles were at the head of the pattern-makers and carpenters. The former, who had spent all his life at the works, was quite a genius, knowing all the intricacies of the works and the peculiarities of the old-fashioned machinery by which the Inclines were worked. The Griffiths family, too, were old inhabitants, and had been the smiths and boiler-makers of the works from father to son, even to the third and fourth generation. Then again, there was Mr. Robert Smith the mining engineer, though not a native of the place, he served the Company faithfully for many years. He was a native of Northumberland, and had been recommended to the Company, and engaged by them in 1825.

The inhabitants of Clydach, at that time, were greatly prejudiced against strangers, especially English, and Mr. Smith's reception amongst them was by no means of a friendly nature. They called him the “B____y Scotchman," and gave him a good deal of trouble in the discharge of his duties. There were no policemen in those days only a parish constable here and there, generally old men, and much lawlessness prevailed.

When an official in the mining department became unpopular with the workmen, he was in danger of a nocturnal visit from the dreaded “Scotch cattle," as they were called, a band of men with blackened faces, who would

Clydach Gorge Cast Iron Bridge dated 1824 (www geograph.org.uk/photo/299475)

drag their victim from his bed, and after doing him grievous bodily harm, would proceed to demolish the furniture. I myself have seen many a cottage clock, with its bronzed face disfigured with scars, the work, I was told, of the notorious "Scotch Cattle," a name probably given them on account of their black appearance and the savage brutality which characterised their outrages. They were, I presume, an organization similar to the Mollie Maguires that at one time terrorised some of the mining States of America. The animosity towards Mr. Smith, however, soon passed away, and in the course of time he got to be greatly respected by the workmen. the young people looked up to him as to a father, and called him Y Meister (the master), and many a time did he ride to Crickhowell to speak a good word on behalf of the “Boys” when they had got into trouble, perhaps through a drunken brawl, for drinking bouts

frequently ended in a fight, followed by a summons to appear before the magistrates. Mr. Smith retired from the works in 1849, after 24 years' service under the company.

The general Clydach Mineral property was, originally, part of the tract leased to the Beaufort Iron Works by the Duke of Beaufort, but, with the concurrence of the Duke, the Clydach portion was subsequently sub-leased to Messrs. Frere, Cook and Kendal. I do not know what the area was, but it was not large, I think. It was a cropping-out corner of the South Wales strata, bordered on one side by the Blaenafon Company's property, and on the other by that of the Nantyglo Company's, and, with one exception - that of a shallow balance pit sunk to cut off the long underground haulage in the lower Llamarch level-was reached and worked entirely by levels, across measures, drifts, and slopes, and thereby the workings were drained without having recourse to much expensive pumping.

Originally waterwheels were used for the purpose of creating a blast for the furnaces and turning the rolls in the mills, but as the number of blast furnaces increased, the old water-wheels gave place to steam engines, which were supplied and erected by the Neath Abbey Company, who were, at that time, I believe, the only steam- engine manufacturers of importance in this part of the country, and a few of their celebrated old Cornish engines are still at work in different places. The materials (coal, ironstone and limestone) for the use of the ironworks were brought down from the hill by means of inclines, each about three hundred yards long and forming a zig-zag line down the mountain side. At the foot of each section of the incline was a level piece of ground forming a landing place, where two men were stationed to pass the trams from one section to the other. The inclines were self-acting, the weight of the full trams going down drawing the empty ones up, and were regulated in their motion by a brake on a wheel over which an endless chain worked and to which the trams were attached. When in motion there were four trams on each side travelling up and

down at equal distances apart, one landing at the top when the other reached the bottom, and the men, from continual practice, were quite experts in the work which was carried on with clock- work regularity and precision. By this means about 600 tons of material passed down the inclines each day.

According to modem ideas the system was primitive and quaint, but there was great simplicity about it, and, considering the distance and the difficult nature of the ground over which the materials had to be conveyed, it was comparatively expeditious and cheap. The mechanical contrivances of to-day for cheap haulage at collieries were either not known or not resorted to then, and the Clydach Company depended entirely upon horses both over and under-ground; consequently they possessed a large number (probably about two hundred), while for underground work a number of donkeys were employed. There were donkey- stables and it was rather an amusing spectacle to see long strings of those harnessed donkeys, with their boy drivers, going to their work in the morning and returning at night.

The dwellings provided by the Company for the housing of their work people were comparatively few, many of the houses having been built by and belonging to the workmen themselves. The work people were not only allowed but encouraged to build their own dwellings, and they were at liberty to select any waste spot they liked to build upon. The people, as a rule, were industrious and provident in their habits, and in addition to sick benefit clubs they - organised money clubs into which they paid monthly instalments of various amounts according to their means, and when the lot fell to them they generally applied the money to some useful purpose, such as buying a horse or a cow or a couple of pigs; and a common custom with them was to go to Abergavenny Cheese-fair, on the 25th of September, and buy their winter's supply of good cheese, at a saving price.

When a man considered that he was in a position to build a cottage he would select and mark out the place, and in the summer evenings and all spare times, the male members of the family would be engaged in collecting stones, cutting the foundation, and doing what they could towards the building. Sometimes on an idle day at the works, a couple of friendly hauliers, for a small remuneration, would bring their horses and haul the stones for them. And thus many a snug cottage was built at a comparatively small outlay and they may be seen at the present time. Some of them really pretty little places with field and garden enclosed by quick or willow fences.

Looking back from our present standpoint, one would think that the lives of the miners at Clydach in those days must have been exceedingly monotonous. There were no public entertainments and no means of recreation, but such as they made for themselves. Much work and little play was the order of the day. They worked long hours, and during the short winter days very few of them saw daylight from Monday morning until Saturday afternoon. But few holidays came into their calendar, for, with the exception of Sunday, Christmas day was the only one all the year round. Easter, Whitsun, Bank-holidays, and cheap excursions to this and that place were events totally unknown to them; and yet they were contented with their lot, honest and well conducted on the whole and a scandal of any kind in the neighbourhood was very rare. This, I have no doubt, was due, in a great measure, to the influence of the ministers of the different religious denominations and the good effect of the Sunday Schools which were numerous and well attended. Day schools, however, were few and far between, for the children, boys and girls were sent to work early in life and were brought up very deficient even in elementary education.

Superstitious beliefs were fostered among the people to a marvellous degree. They believed implicitly in witchcraft, omens and ghostly apparitions, weird tales of which would frequently be told and eagerly listened to round the village

firesides in the tales of what one or the other had seen or heard, mysterious knockings and death premonitions of various kinds. There were lonely places in the neighbourhood, said to be haunted, places that people dreaded to pass at night time. A notable place was Cwm bwcca […] a place charming in the day-time with its beautiful scenery, but notorious on dark nights as the abode of the evil one. One of his satanic majesty's modes of presenting himself to the benighted wayfarer in that lonely glen was said to be in the shape of a big black dog, which would suddenly confront him with fiendish looking eyes, and then as suddenly disappear in a ball of fire. One of the legends of the place was that of the Bloody well, which is on the side of a lane called "Cae Aberduar lane," and on the stones at the bottom of which were large streaks and spots looked like blood. The story connected therewith was that once upon a time a pedlar Jew put up for the night at a roadside public-house nearby, and having imbibed too freely before going to bed awoke in the early morning parched with thirst. Not liking to disturb the inmates, he found his way to the well, and while stooping, in the act of drinking, was killed by a murderous blow on the head, dealt him by the landlord of the house where he had slept, who, having designs upon the Jew's jewel-box, had stealthily followed and murdered him, and the victim's blood upon the stones, like the blood-spots of Macbeth, could not be effaced, and remained an everlasting memorial of the long-ago tragedy enacted in that quiet country lane.

Possibly geologists might have a different opinion in regard to those spots upon the stones, but, be that as it may, I myself have seen them, and must admit that they looked very much like spots of blood. Some little while ago I paid a visit to the place where the old blast-furnaces once stood, and while gazing upon what remained of them, I became absorbed in thoughts of the past, and in imagination could hear the hissing of steam, the rolling of the wheels, and the shouting of men; could see familiar forms and faces flitting about, but returning

conscientiousness brought me back to the piles of ruins in front of me, and naught was the same as I had once known it, naught save the old iron bridge on which I stood, and the murmurings of the brook beneath, which seemed to be repeating the words of Tennyson, “Men may come, and men may go, but I go on forever.”[,,,] .

EDITORS’ NOTE: The remains of the Clydach Ironworks are a Scheduled Ancient Monument situated at the lower end of the Clydach Gorge, near Abergavenny. The site is open to the public, and access is free – Map Reference SO230133. They are signposted from the A465 at Clydach South, between Gilwern and Brynmawr.