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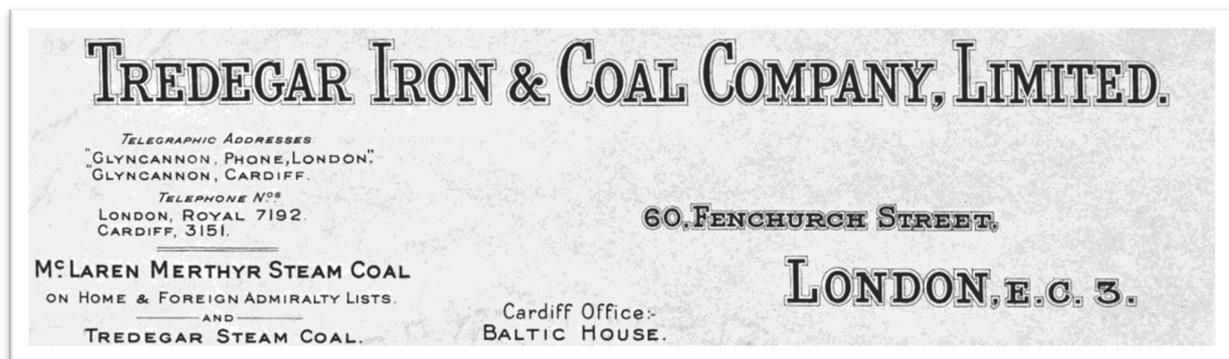
Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum

A World Away



Photographs of Tredegar - a Company Town

Peter Morgan Jones



For some one hundred and fifty years Tredegar's ironmasters, Sam Homfray father and son, together with the Tredegar Iron & Coal Co. that followed, made vast wealth from this area but, often overlooked, is that their workers also benefited from their employers' social enlightenment.

Unlike other industrial towns Tredegar was planned with wide streets, focal points and vistas, while its landowner Sir Charles Morgan M.P. campaigned against company shops as being harmful to working-people, and both Homfrays encouraged private traders as a means of limiting monopoly. Also forgotten is their early provision of education for workers' children, and reluctance to employ them underground.

Both ironmasters would become highly-respected patrons of both town and workforce, Sam Homfray junior and his family being cheered, not jeered, as Tredegar Chartists marched past Bedwellty House in 1839, with contemporary records revealing a respect bordering upon affection.

Social bitterness appeared largely after the ironmasters' departure when the company that replaced them became answerable to distant, uncaring, shareholders. Even so, this company constructed well-planned model villages for its workers, founded what became Tredegar's Medical Aid service, and

provided financial support for its Cottage Hospital. Contrary to modern opinion Tredegar was never a town of harsh and grasping masters and downtrodden, oppressed, men. Certainly there were many faults and hardships, but under ironmasters and company this small valley town inspired remarkable achievements and individuals whose impact upon British and World history was enormous.

Ironmaster, company, furnace and pit, have vanished forever and, with the whole region facing an uncertain future, this collection of photographs attempts to recall a vital period that now seems a world away.

Peter Morgan Jones

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in collaboration with Tredegar Archive Group.

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ABERYSTWITH, OR BLAENAU GWENT.
MONMOUTHSHIRE.

The upper Sirhowy Valley probably never resembled the romantic etching of neighbouring Blaenau Gwent but Mill Farm, near what became Ty Trist Colliery, provides some suggestion of how it may have been.



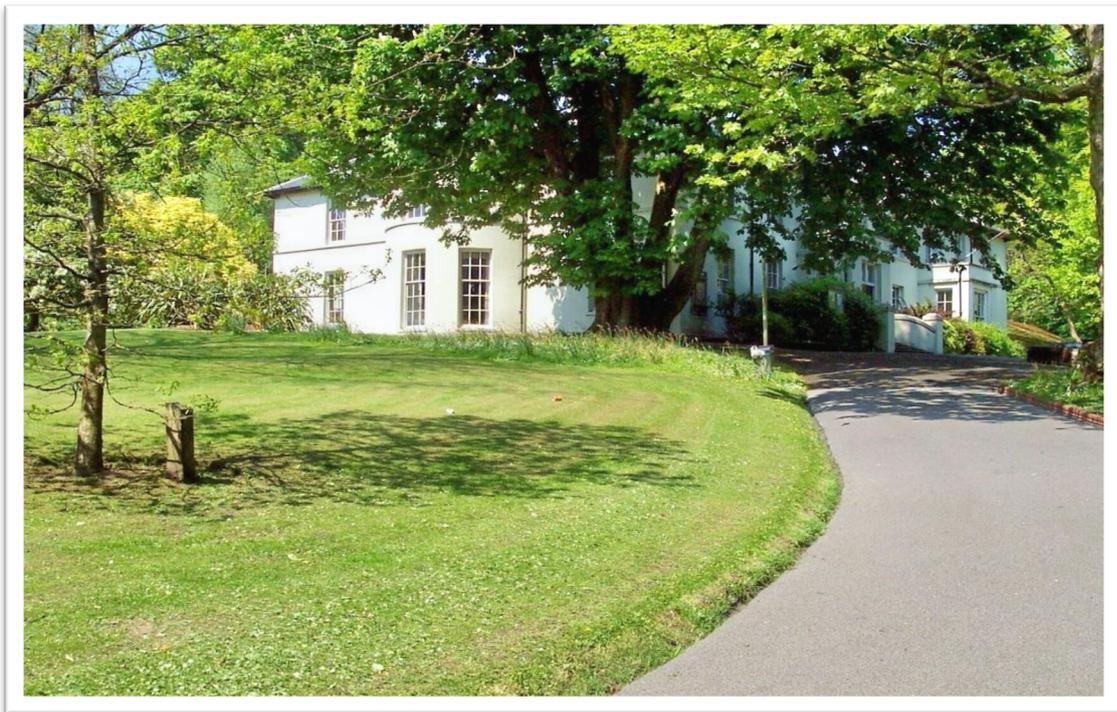


Tredegar viewed from Cefn Golau. PMJ

Lands in the upper Sirhowy Valley formed part of three different estates, i.e. the Duke of Beaufort's Brecknockshire property beginning just north of what is now the A 470 road, Burgh Estate (Cwmbran) holdings extending east of the river towards Ebbw Vale, while that to its west was held by the Morgan Family of Tredegar House, Newport, that gave its name to the later works and town.

Before the late-18th century arrival of heavy industry anyone using this ancient trackway – now Cefn Golau Hill - would have witnessed an entirely different scene. The narrow belt of land between Blaenafon and Hirwaun was then remote and undeveloped – its society probably less materially prosperous than that during the Bronze Age - but all would alter almost overnight with the exploitation of underlying rich seams of coal, iron and limestone.

Changes began in 1778 when existing small-scale mineral workings inspired the construction of Sirhowy Iron Works on Burgh and Beaufort lands. However, development of Morgan holdings did not commence until 1799 when Sirhowy Ironmasters Monkhouse and Fothergill invited Sam Homfray senior of Merthyr's Penydarren works – who had married Sir Charles Morgan's widowed daughter - to help negotiate and establish a new works. That year all four men met at Fothergill's "Glan-yrafon" House where it was agreed that new furnaces and settlement be built on Morgan land and named "Tredegar Iron Works". By 1800 the first furnaces and housing had appeared, changing the valley forever.



Bedwellty House PMJ

By 1800 Tredegar Iron Works and its associated settlement were being developed under the control of Penydarren's (Merthyr) Sam Homfray senior. When overnight stays in the new town were necessary, it is possible the ironmaster used Y Cynghordy farmhouse whose surrounding fields, protected

from industrial development, would become the site of Bedwellty House and Park. If early maps are correct, Y Cynghordy may have stood near what is now the lower park gate – well away from the present Bedwellty House where no earlier building is indicated.

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