



SAMPLE

Doorway to a Vanished World

by

Peter Morgan Jones



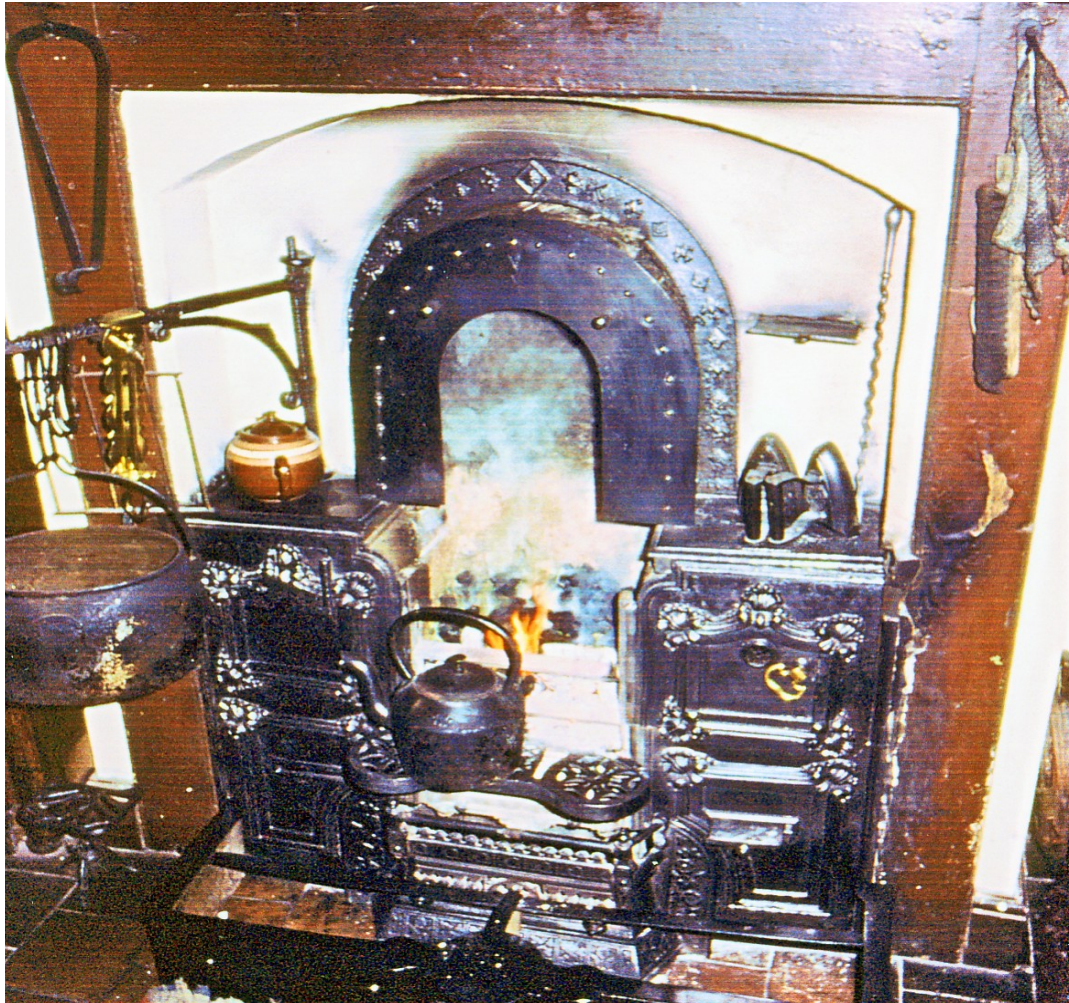
Doorway to a Vanished World

It is claimed one picture is worth a thousand words, but there is no doubt that words can also enhance photographs. Even though several photographic collections concerning the local area have been published, this new archive material concentrates upon the social record, examining detail that might otherwise pass unnoticed and unrecorded.

Produced for Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum, acknowledgements are made to Philip Prosser, (PP) Eifion Lloyd Davies (ELD), Norman Griffiths (NG) and Rex Herbert (RH) for their archive contributions, together with Jeff Darkins who helped check the text.

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Cover photograph of a Beaufort lady provided by Rex Herbert



A Black-Leaded Grate.

PMJ

With a coal fire blazing, fire-places, or 'grates' such as this were the heart of every household. Made of cast-iron, they heated water in an integral side-tank, cooked and baked food, and warmed the entire home. Baking or roasting took place in side ovens, boiling over the fire itself either by means of the 'sway' that could be moved to and from the flames, or on small 'hobs' at the front. The iron kettle would have been constantly simmering, two 'flat' or 'sad' irons wait ready to be heated on the coals to smooth clothes, while a variety of 'jacks', with which metal cooking plates or containers were suspended over the heat, can be seen. In front is a 'fender' to catch any live coals that fell, and provided a hob to keep food warm. Like the grate, polished with 'black-lead' until it shone, the out-of-sight mantelpiece array of brass candle-sticks, and essential fire-irons with their shining handles, had to be similarly burnished with 'brasso', as wives were judged on such matters.



Haymaking - Tredegar – Late 19th Century?

PP

Although a similar scene could have been photographed in any rural district, this picture was, in fact, taken not far from Tredegar's works and populous town, somewhere between Trefil and Nantybwlch. Links often existed between industrial workers and local farms, it being recorded that colliers helped-out, especially at harvest time. This appears to have been a relatively-prosperous local farm with its pair of horses pulling what was then an expensive mower, contrasting with the long-bladed scythe held by a pipe-smoking worker wearing what might be an ex-army cap and whose trousers are tied-up with 'yorks'. The essential stoneware 'jack' of beer or cider to quench thirsts awaited nearby. One horse –probably a Welsh Cob, well-fed and cared-for, is wearing 'blinkers' suggesting that industrial traffic such as that on the nearby Trefil or Brinore Tramroads, could startle it into bolting.



Brynmawr Market Hall and Square – Early 1900s

PMJ/ELD

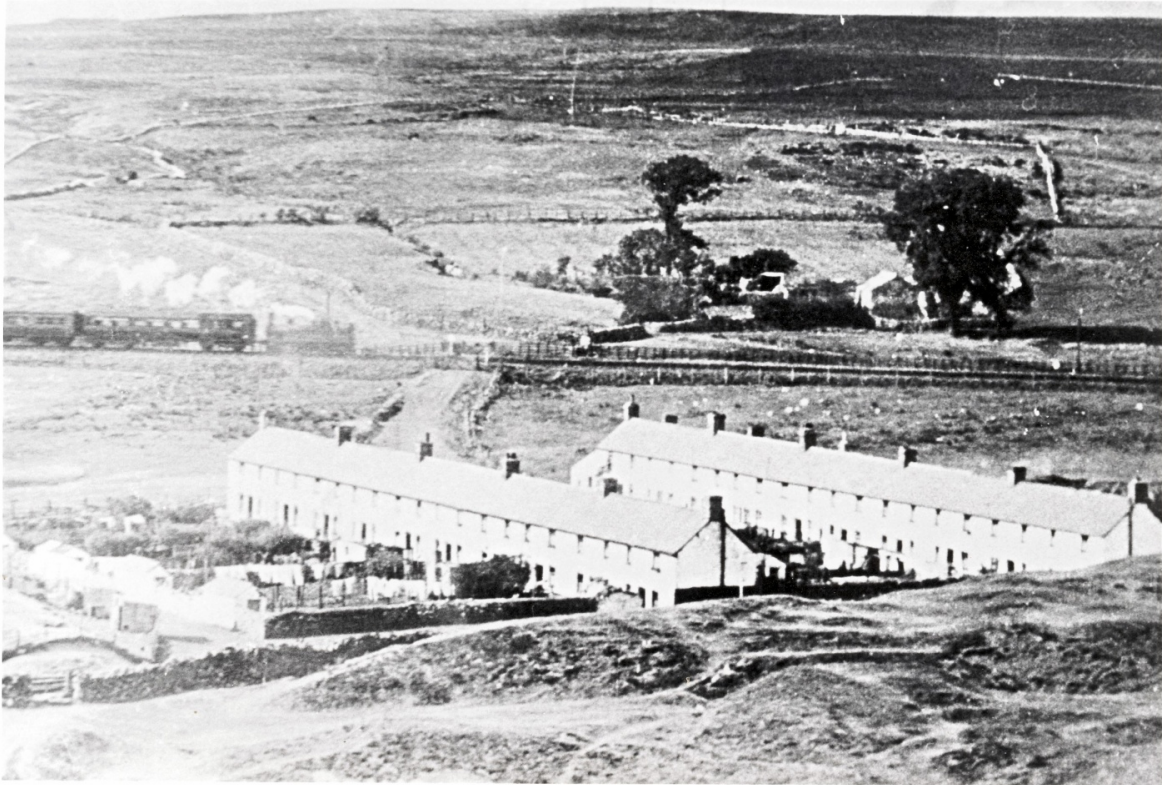
Originally in Breconshire (now Powys) Brynmawr became part of Gwent in the 1974 re-organisation. Its market hall and square clearly indicate how important the sale of farm produce brought here every week by country people was. The town was celebrated for fun-fairs operated by the local Deakins family. Their famous steam traction-engines providing haulage and electrical power were an attraction in themselves. One of these superb machines is now on display at Lord Montagu's Beaulieu Motor Museum. At such times stalls and side shows would stretch up Beaufort Street and down towards Nant-y-Glo, often featuring animal menageries. It is said that, on one occasion a bear escaped and killed a man before being shot. The memoirs of John Bainton, born in 1875, mention that local housewives hung their washing across the square to catch the wind that seemed to be constantly blowing. Crawshay Bailey's tram road linking Nantyglo Ironworks and Llangattock quarries formerly crossed through here. The trams at first drawn by horses and later by early steam-locomotives such as the famous "Cymro". The present market hall was built alongside this route in 1894 and, by the early-20th century moving pictures were being shown here, establishing a tradition that continues in what is probably the only council-run cinema in Britain.



Gantre Cottages, Ebbw Vale - possibly late 19th century.

RH

Situated opposite where the Leisure Centre would later stand, this block of three-storey dwellings was typical of the local early industrial period but, although well-built and desirable living accommodation, standards eventually declined through overcrowding. What appears to be an earth-closet is set into the left-hand wall – it may have been the only one in the row, although, if Merthyr is taken as an example, any local stream such as that seen here, could be used for this purpose. At Dowlais, over a century later, author Jack Jones recorded a nearby open rivulet acting as a lavatory, while at Tredegar in 1833 Daniel Gooch commented on the ‘disgusting local practice’ of men and women similarly using any open space. Practices that had been normal in scattered rural communities gave rise to major health and hygiene problems when, so many people lived closely together.



Penmark (derivation 'Penmarc' or 'Penmarch'?) Rassau – date uncertain.

PMJ

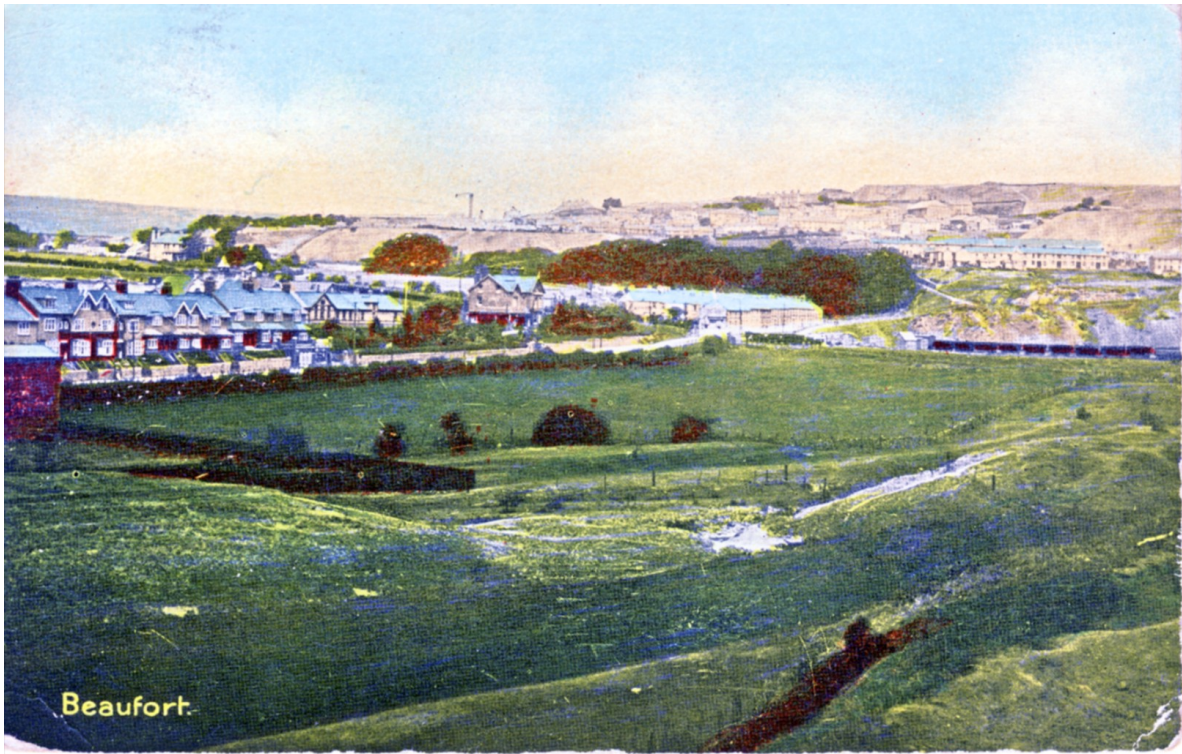
Penmark houses stood in Cwm Rassau between Nantybwlch and Rassau, the site now largely occupied by an industrial estate. One of the most industrially-despoiled areas in the locality, some of whose broken ground can be seen in the foreground, the region had been ravaged by the use of water 'races' to scour soil from underlying iron and coal seams (nearby 'Rassau' means literally 'place of many water-races'). The Rassau Tramroad from Sirhowy Iron Works ran past the houses to connect with the Trefil and Clydach rail-roads (the former faintly visible in the background) at 'Trefil Machine', i.e. modern Rassau, its route now followed approximately by the later railway line and modern A465 road. These houses were obviously well-built and of good standard, their double-frontage revealing they were for better-paid and more-skilled workers. The Webb coal-tank locomotive suggests a date before nationalization, possibly in the 1930s or 40s.



Beaufort Rise, Houses and Shops – Early 20th Century.

RH

At this time having one's photograph taken was exciting, even if only to provide background detail. The sight of a photographer setting up his heavy tripod and large plate-camera in the middle of what is now a busy road would then have been a remarkable event. Here news had spread, drawing people out of shops and houses, all aware it was essential to stand still, or the image would blur. This was seemingly a prosperous district – both houses and the few shops were well-built and maintained. Possibly on a Saturday when children were not in school, boys wear their uniform's stiff 'Eton collars', boots and knee-breeches; women and girls the ubiquitous white apron to keep their dresses clean. A young girl, one stocking up, the other down, lacks an apron but carries what might be a younger sibling 'Welsh-fashion'. Strangely, at a time of horse-drawn transport, no droppings can be seen. Even though an Ebbw Vale Urban District Council litter bin stands close to hand, it is more probable any horse-manure had been rapidly collected by keen gardeners, or even removed by the photographer.



Beaufort, depicted on a hand-coloured postcard – 1920s?

PMJ

Post-cards were a cheap and popular mean of communication in days before telephones became common. For one old penny – less than half the value of today's coin – a card could often be posted and delivered the same day. The only way then of producing coloured photographs was by hand-tinting professionally-producing cards such as shown here, while even amateur photographers could enhance their black & white works using special painting kits. Beyond 'Frenchie's Field' Ebbw Vale County School is seen, with Beaufort Brick Works' stacks, and the ravaged 'patches', just visible beyond. A line of wagons suggests limestone being carried to Ebbw Vale furnaces.



Dowlais School – Early 19th Century.

PMJ

This school scene would have been typical of most towns throughout the coalfield. Two classrooms have been opened-up to form a school hall, where desks rise in tiers so children can witness events ranging from corporal punishment to school displays. On this occasion a form of ‘Swedish Drill’ seems to be taking place, girls in clean aprons to the front while the less photogenic boys have been placed to the rear out of camera-shot. Interestingly, other than the headmaster all teachers are female and therefore unmarried, a condition of their employment. The large space was normally divided into classrooms by a folding screen one of whose sockets is visible in the floor, its artificial lighting provided by naked-flame gas jets visible above. Now often criticized and denigrated, in fact this educational system instilled standards of self-discipline, learning and knowledge often absent today.

This sample is intended to give a flavour of the content and style of the booklet. Readers can continue reading it, by downloading the complete booklet of 52 pages for £2.50.