

# HOW THE IRONMASTERS TRANSFORMED FARMING IN THE BLAENAU

by Dr. Colin Morgan

In the Blaenau, the heads of the valleys from Blaenafon to Merthyr, the industrial revolution began in the second half of the eighteenth century with the establishment of iron works. Although there had been some small scale making of iron implements using charcoal over the centuries and the taking of coal where it outcropped, the growth of iron making and coal extraction on an industrial scale began with the establishment of iron furnaces from the 1750s. In the Heads of these south-eastern valleys there were the pre-requisites of iron-ore, coal, and limestone all of which were easily accessible and plentiful in the surface geology. What though was the economy of the Blaenau prior to industrialisation?

A view still held by many is that 'there was not much there at all' and if there was: "*It should be borne in mind the original landscape was bleak and occupied by small farmhouses in what could be termed pastoral land. The occupants of the farms owned a few sheep, pigs and poultry*" (1). This description, and there are others in similar vein (2), was written in the twentieth century. It conveys an inaccurate and inadequate judgement about the pre-industry farming landscape of the Blaenau. The purpose of this article is to both evidence what farming really was like in the Blaenau and describe how it was transformed by the requirements of the iron masters.

If we draw on the earlier eighteenth and nineteenth century written accounts of Blaenau farming economy made by inhabitants of the area itself, as well as from the archive collections of estate maps, farm leases, and surveys held in the National Library and County Record Offices, a very different picture from the 'poor pastoral one emerges. Tredegar historian Evan Powell (3) describes some of the pre-iron farms of the area thus:- "*Tŷ Trist an extensive farm producing corn and hay*"; *Nantyburch Farm a large portion of the land was arable, and furrows are clearly perceptible at the present time; produce hay and corn; Twyn y Darren Felen...This ancient farm house at one time was very fertile, corn being grown and a pretty orchard adjacent to the house*". There were two large farms covering much of the area where Tredegar town now stands: Cwm Rhôs and Pen Rhôs, and Powell has this to say about them: "*Cwm Rhôs Farm. prior to the commencement of the works it was surrounded by fertile fields; produce corn and hay; Pen Rhôs - this was a very ancient farm growing corn and hay in abundance, several teams of oxen ploughing the land at the same time*". Similar examples for Ebbw Vale come from, Charles Parry (4). For example for Cwrt-y-Gollen farm: "*This place is situated between Drysiog Isaf and the River Ebbw. The old farm is now converted into offices. This land was at one time very fertile and many excellent crops of wheat*

were raised on it, but the land which was once waving with yellow corn is now covered with worthless ashes and rubbish tips.[4] “In former ages the summit of the mountains were cultivated. This is evident from the old ridges that are to be seen on the summit of Domen Fawr”.

The farming landscape was therefore more varied than were it a poor pastoral one. Thomas Watkins (5) of Llanfoist summed it up in one of his Abergavenny prize winning Eisteddfod essays: “The majority of people had some sort of smallholding where they raised barley, wheat, rye, and oats for their own use and the needs of their wider family. Every family kept bees for honey and the making of their ancient beer Cwrw Meddyglyn. They kept large flocks of sheep and every family of eminence would keep a shepherd to look after them. They kept many goats which they nurtured along the edges of the crags and hillsides, Every family kept a pig and geese and one or two hounds, and frequently these would be assembled to hunt and destroy foxes. They ploughed their fields by the power of oxen and it was not a general practice to keep large horses prior to the building of the works.”

The prime difference in the pre-industrial landscape of the Blaenau to that which followed as conveyed in the several citations above, was the presence of arable – the growing of corn. Pre-industrial estate maps such as those of the Morgan Tredegar Estate often designated the particular usage of their farm fields’ and the following table relating to four Bedwellty farms in the 1760s is taken from them. It shows just how significant arable was for the larger farm holdings:

Arable Land on 4 Bedwellty Farms in the 1760’s (6)

Farm	Total Acres	Arable Acres	% Arable
Cefn y Rhychdir	177	63	35.6
Abertyswg	151	87	57.6
Argoed Ganol & Argoed Fach	120	38	31.66
Waun-y-Borfa	113	44	38.9
Totals	562	232	41.2

Regarding the distribution of pre-industrial farms in the Heads of the Valleys, the written accounts which list the location of farm holdings show that though the total pre-industrial population was small (about 600 in Bedwellty parish in 1801) compared with what was to come, the distribution of farms in these upland parishes extended from the valley bottoms to the mountain tops. For example: for that part of the Ebbw Fawr Valley which would become the Ebbw Vale Urban District, Tudgay (7) has named 46 farms and they extended from

river's banks to the mountain top. This rural landscape of mixed farming also featured corn mills in each of the Blaenau valleys (8) The mills in addition to grinding the grain also served as important social meeting places. In what became Tredegar: *"The Mill was a place of deep interest; when the farmers met with their corn to grind or receive the meal, all the occurrences of the district for miles around were related and received with avidity; the jingle of rhyme was heard, and tales of the fairy elves were related as epilogue with the utmost pathos of expression. The Mill was also an extensive fertile farm"*(Powell op.cit .p12) Prior to the industrial revolution then, we have a picture of a settled and stable mixed farming economy so how did it change to be almost entirely pastoral and to the extent that some later writers mistakenly concluded this was how the Blaenau always were?

In short, the answer is that the Iron Masters bought-up farms in order to site their furnaces, erect buildings, and to ensure the supplies needed for their works and growing communities of workers. They imposed leases on their tenants which tied farming to the needs of iron making. Even those farms which stayed independently owned also sought the economic benefits of supplying what the Iron Masters and worker needed. These needs were: large numbers of horses for haulage, and for livestock - sheep and cows for meat and milk to feed their workers. It is these needs which explain the absence of arable in today's landscape. In the integration of farming with the iron industry pastoral land was therefore in prime demand. Detailed evidence of these changes is to be found in the leases and sub-leases the iron companies made their farm tenants accept, and are to be found in county archives, though they are yet to be fully researched and written-up.

This author cannot find any published paper which discusses the relationship of the Blaenau iron masters with the farms and the tenants they acquired. There is, however, an undated typescript document in Ebbw Vale Works Museum Papers by F. J. Ball entitled: *The Farms and the Industrial Revolution* (9). This gives striking evidences of how the Ebbw Vale Works Iron Masters controlled the tenants of the farms they acquired; and what follows here draws on what Ball wrote.

The Ebbw Vale Works owners – the Harfords insisted in the sub-leases of their farms that their tenants must assist in the transport of supplies to the works and to maintain sufficient horses for that purpose. For example Dyffryn Farm, *'at a rent of twenty five guineas a year, a lease of Dyffryn farm was granted in 1797 to Edmund Edmunds on condition that he agreed to haul pig iron, limestone, or any other goods to and from the furnace at any time also to offer to the Company all his straw, oats, wheat and barley at a fair price'*. The land of Dyffryn extended from high on the mountain to its foot opposite the site of where Victoria blast furnaces were built. It had also bordered an ancient farm Tynyllwyn which had also been acquired by the Iron Company but demolished to build stables for horses, a

slaughter house, and some dwelling houses. The terms of such leases imposed on farm tenants by the iron company were specific regarding haulage and horses. In 1810 Thomas Watkins became a tenant at Gwaun Helyg Llwynau farm and among a range of requirements his lease stated that: *'he must haul for the Company and sell to the Company any crops he might grow...[and] keep eight good halling [sic] horses for the employ of the Ebbw Vale Company in the summer and four in the winter'*.

Haulage and the availability of horses were crucial to the running of the iron works and farm tenants who did not comply with their agreements in this regard could be in serious trouble. In 1801 Evan Watkins was a tenant of the Company's Ty Hendre Farm situated near Pontygof and the Ebbw Fawr, and had been given notice to quit *'for failing to provide six horses for haulage'*. He did however negotiate contritely and secured renewal of his tenancy on the condition that he was *"to haul 1250 tons of limestone from Trefil Quarry to Ebbw Vale during the ensuing summer"*! Also in 1801, Phillip Watkins was given notice to quit Tŷ Melyn Farm because he had broken his contract by not keeping horses for haulage, but he too secured a renewal on condition that henceforth *'he kept two horses, placed a man in charge of his farm when ill, and paid a fine of five guineas for breech [sic] of contract.'*

The demand for draught animals grew as the iron works expanded and also the increasing number of coal mines required pit ponies, and so much so that the price of horses more than doubled between 1792 and 1815. As the above quotes from the Ebbw Vales tenancy agreements convey, to support the use of the draught animals, tenant farmers also had to supply the Company with the oats and hay they grew, but so great became the demand for oats to feed horses that substantial oat imports from Ireland via Newport to the Blaenau works became necessary hence reducing further the need for local arable. (10)

To an extent it can be argued that some Iron Works even improved aspects of local farming by the practice of covering the ground with furnace ashes, harrowing and rolling them in, which together with the application of the abundant lime gave improved pasture and good crops of turnips enabling a farmer *"to feed a numerous herd of small cattle and sheep, which are all slaughtered at home and furnish the workmen with a very good and acceptable supply of beef and mutton, of the very best and finest quality, which is always sold to them at a price below the neighbouring markets"*. (11)

However, as Ball notes, the needs of industry had primacy: *'although the Harfords were deeply concerned with the management of their farms, the accounts of which increased by 78% between 1805 to 1815, there is no doubt that their main function was to serve the needs of industry'*. In order to maintain the supply of draught animals they continued buying farms into the 1820s and 1830s. Ball

points out that the urgent need of the works for hauliers and horses also had its effect on those farms which continued to be owned independently and: *'who saw a lucrative market in the supply of draught animals. It followed, therefore from the need to keep animals that as much land as possible would be given over to grazing land'*.

In summary, the advent of Iron transformed the farming landscape of the Blaenau in three ways: many farms disappeared because their land was needed for works and housing; the land of others was wrecked by spoil tips, and for the farms which continued into the twentieth and present century their farming had become almost wholly a pastoral one of cattle and sheep.

## NOTES

- (1) Mel Warrender, The Beginning of the Iron Industry in Ebbw Vale, Gwent Local History Journal – No.107, 2010, pp5-20
- (2) Peter Morgan Jones, Hills of Fire And Iron (Abertillery, Old Bake House Publications 1992), p. 7.
- (3) Evan Powell, The History of Tredegar subject of competition at Tredegar Chair Eisteddfod 1884, Published by the Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum 2008
- (4) Charles Parry The Past And Present History of Ebbw Vale, – Prize Essay at Bethel Church Victoria Eisteddfod 1869
- (5) T. E. Watkins (Eiddil Ifor) , *Hanes Gweithiau Hiarn De Cymru* , (Abergavenny Eisteddfod, 1836). This has been published in English by the Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum as: “The History of South Wales Iron Works”. Watkins gives an extensive account of farming practices and way of life of the people of the Blaenau prior to the advent of the iron furnaces in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.
- (6) Data extracted from ‘An Exact Survey of The Freehold Estate of Tredegar belonging to the Honourable Thomas Morgan Esquire by H. S. Corrice MDCCLXIV’ , Volumes 4 & 9 at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.
- (7) A. Tudgay. The Old Farms of The Ebbw Fawr Valley, in Ebbw Vale ‘The Works’ – Supplement No.4 December 2008, Published by Ebbw Vale Works Archival Trust
- (8) Roger Burchell. 2005 ‘The Pre-industrial Mills of Upland Gwent’, dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA in Historical Landscape Studies. University of Wales.
- (9) F. J. Ball, MA. *The Farms and the Industrial Revolution*, This is an undated typescript document in Ebbw Vale Works Museum Papers,
- (10) Ball op cit.
- (11) C. Hassall, General View of the Agriculture of the County of Monmouth, London 1812. P46.