

THE 156TH ANNUAL SUMMER MEETING

The South Wales Valleys, 2009

The South Wales Valleys meeting took place between 10th and 15th August, 2009. We were fortunate that in a very rainy season the weather was fine every day except the last. We were based on the Premier Inn in Ebbw Vale. Forty-nine members participated for some or all of the meeting. Originally the meeting was to have been based on a hotel near Cardiff which unfortunately went down in the Recession. However, the move proved in some ways beneficial as there was a considerable gain in travelling time. The new hotel had no function room, so the after-dinner lectures and the AGM took place in The Miners' Institute in Llanhilleth, about five miles down the valley. This building of c. 1900 has recently been restored for use by the local community and has a very fine large function room. Members used their cars and gave each other lifts.

The theme of the Meeting was the archaeology of the region. While this meant a great deal of industrial archaeology, the aim was to include prehistoric and mediaeval monuments too.

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MONDAY 10TH AUGUST

The first visit was in the afternoon to Pontypool Museum where Cambrians were welcomed by Deborah Wildgust, the curator. The Museum is housed in the Georgian stable block of Pontypool Park. Among many exhibits from the history, archaeology and geology of the Torfaen Valley the Museum has an outstanding display of Pontypool and Usk Japanware, which was made there from the middle of the eighteenth century and exported throughout the world.

The party was then taken to Goytre Wharf on the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal. Here there are substantial remains of the lime works where lime was produced for agricultural use, and also the manager's house and other buildings from the early nineteenth century. The canal was also an important corridor for coal and iron brought to the canal by a network of tramways and railways to the wharves at Gofilon and Llanfoist further north. Later in the week Cambrians were to see many industrial monuments associated with this production and with this crucial transport network.

After dinner members heard an illustrated lecture given by Frank Olding, who is a member of the Association and the Heritage Officer for Blaenau Gwent Council. He surveyed the archaeology of the region from the Palaeolithic up to the industrial revolution.

The night was enlivened by a fire alarm at the hotel at 1.30 a.m. However, it was a false alarm. Cambrians were again in luck, standing outside in warm and dry weather!

TUESDAY 11TH AUGUST

Tuesday morning was devoted to the ironworks and associated sites at Cyfarthfa, Merthyr Tydfil. The coach put us down at the remains of a bank of furnaces surviving in an empty area of demolition. Richard Keen described the history of the works from its founding in 1765. In 1783 it came under the control of the Crawshay family, the name most strongly associated with Cyfarthfa. He took us along a passage

behind the furnaces and into a working chamber between furnaces. The scale of the construction was impressive. Picturesque artists might have described it as 'sublime'. Richard then took us to see the first cast iron railway bridge in Wales, Pontycafnau, which not only carried across the River Taf a tramway for limestone from the Gurnos quarries, but also supported two troughs, one above and one below the tramroad, carrying water to the ironworks. We followed the line of the tramroad to a point in Cefn Coed y Cymmer where we stood under two later bridges from the 18th and 20th centuries, our walk having presented a microcosm of bridge construction from the late 18th to early 20th centuries.

The party then walked up the hill to Cyfarthfa Castle Museum past the ornamental lake which also supplied water to the ironworks. The Castle, an imposing structure of 1825, built by the Crawshays, now owned by Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council, houses both a school and the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum. The exhibits relate to the town and the locality and also comprise a collection of paintings, prints and drawings. Cambrians enjoyed a buffet in the room known as The Wedding Room, or, alternatively, 'Mr Crawshay's Office'. Using this room we also saw the interesting collection of modern Welsh art that it contains. In an adjacent passage there was an admirable collection of pencil drawings by Sydney Curnow Vosper.

After lunch Cambrians went by coach to the Brecon Mountain Railway, three miles to the north, where the party split. Party A took a trip on the railway, which runs through splendid scenery into the Brecon Beacons. This is a modern narrow-gauge railway opened in 1979. It runs for part of the way along the route of the former Brecon and Merthyr Railway that ultimately connected Brecon with Newport docks.

Party B went in the coach to a point at the foot of the disused quarries on the west side of Morlais Castle. The climb up to the castle, with Frank Olding as our guide, was rewarded with magnificent views from the summit in the fine, clear weather. The remains of the castle were full of interest though not much masonry remains above ground. Entering the undercroft of the circular south-east tower was an astonishing experience! The castle dates from the early 1290s, built by Gilbert de Clare in defiance of both Welsh and marcher lords. We then descended to where the coach was waiting to take us back to the railway and rejoin Party A.

After dinner the retiring President, Professor Tony Carr, installed Richard Keen as President of the Association for 2009-10. Mr Keen then delivered his Presidential Address on *The Heads of the Valleys: 250 Years of Landscape Change* (printed in this volume).

WEDNESDAY 12TH AUGUST

This day was devoted to the World Heritage Site at Blaenafon. To quote from Richard Keen's article in the Programme Booklet, 'It was only at and around Blaenafon that a happy combination of events resulted in the survival of a landscape upon which evidence of the history of industrialisation along the Heads of the Valleys remained in profusion. It is the completeness of the landscape that was, and is, so important. Within a relatively small area there are a number of monuments and sites that can claim national and international significance.'

The Rev. Dr. Jason Bray was kind enough to open St Peter's Church for us. Here Jeremy Knight, who had been Cadw Inspector for the area at the time of the World Heritage bid, spoke about the history of iron making and coal mining in Blaenafon and of the establishment of the World Heritage Site. The Church itself, built in 1804, contains cast iron features, including the font; in the churchyard are four tomb chests with cast iron tops. The church is next door to the Visitor Centre, the former St Peter's School dating from 1816, where there is a comprehensive exhibition on the Heritage Site. Cambrians next went by coach to the Big Pit Mining Museum on the other side of the valley. Here most of the party went on the guided tour underground which occupied most of their time. But others saw the surface exhibits: the winding house, the blacksmiths' shop, the pithead baths etc. Some particularly enjoyed the 'Mining Galleries', which involved walking through simulated modern underground workings with full sound effects.

After lunch in the Canteen, the President described the landscape that was spread out before us from the terrace. This included the town of Blaenafon with its ironworks.

Under the guidance of Richard Keen and Jeremy Knight the party visited the ironworks which is in the care of Cadw, looking especially closely at the remaining casting house, the balance tower and the workers' accommodation. Research is still going on at the site. Work was in progress on the Calcining Kilns where conservation work had just revealed the very last load of limestone in its storage bin prior to being broken up and carted into the furnaces and the last 'make' of iron ore and coke in their kilns, again ready for the furnaces.

This World Heritage Site is very extensive. 'The Blaenafon Industrial Landscape' states the Cadw guidebook, 'is a microcosm of the Industrial Revolution.' Cambrians were able to see some of the outlying features of this landscape high up in the area beyond Keepers Pond. Here we saw the site of the Garnddyrys Forge, where the cast iron was transformed into wrought iron in the puddling furnaces, and the route of Hill's tramroad, built in 1817-18 to link the ironworks to the canal at Llanfoist. The contrast between the present serene and sunlit scenery and the intense activity of the ironmaking era was striking.

After dinner the Cambrians went again to Llanhilleth Miners' Institute for the public lecture given by Peter Wakelin on *Records, Research and Relevance: the Royal Commission 100 years on*.

THURSDAY 14TH AUGUST

On this day Cambrians set out in two parties in separate coaches. The larger party, Party A, went first to St Sannan's Church at Bedwellty, where Madeleine Gray spoke. Though there was a church here from early times, the oldest part of the present church dates from the 13th century. Its prize possession is a late medieval chest carved with the Five Wounds of Christ and the Instruments of the Passion.

From Bedwellty they went to the Siloh Presbyterian Chapel in Gelligroes, a well preserved early chapel in which the doorways give access under the side galleries and the pulpit backs against the middle of the façade. They were warmly greeted by the Chapel Elders, who entertained them with refreshments.

Cambrians then visited the Gelligroes watermill, recorded since 1625, near the River Sirhowy. The owner, who showed us round, is working on its restoration. The mill operates when there is enough water, but unfortunately water is now scarce due to interference with the weirs and leats. He said that he was currently deepening the outflow channel to reduce friction on the (rebuilt) wheel and allow it to turn with less water. This is the place where, in 1912, the amateur radio enthusiast, 'Artie' Moore, picked up distress signals from the Titanic as it went down. There is a small collection of Moore and amateur radio memorabilia in the Mill.

Meanwhile Party B set off, under the guidance of Frank Olding, in a smaller coach to Gelligaer Common, a remote area of high ground south-east of Merthyr Tydfil. It can seem a desolate and dreary landscape in dull weather, but on this day it was magnificent with sunshine and distant views. This hill is remarkable for the large number of Bronze Age remains to be found, in contrast to nearby ridges. We saw two ring cairns and the summit cairn. We also saw the early Christian inscribed stone, now very much tilted from its original upright stance, with the inscription low down on the obliquely angled side. It seems that nobody has ever made much sense of the inscription, and nor did we. There was much debate between Frank Olding, Frances Lynch, Heather James, Jeremy Knight and others on its function and location. Lastly, we saw a group of house platforms, excavated by Lady Aileen Fox in 1938. Finds of pottery from these platforms date them to the 13th or 14th century.

The two parties came together at Llancaiach Fawr Manor for lunch, a tour of the House and a talk on the ongoing researches into earlier remains at the site. This house, dating from the early 16th century, is owned by Caerphilly County Borough Council. The Curator, Diane Walker, had organized for us an architectural tour of the house, explaining the restoration and alterations undertaken by the Council after it came into possession of the property in 1983. There are plans for further restoration.

Records of earthworks existing to the east of the house have recently led to further investigations in Cae Hir, the field adjacent to the car park. We were shown a collection of finds from excavations in 2008 and earlier this year. There had also been two geophysical surveys including one in 2009 which suggested further structures in the north of the field and, unexpectedly, a large number of structures in the south.

The present hypothesis is that the site in Cae Hir was a late medieval manorial complex and possibly the forerunner of the present manor. There is evidently much more to be discovered. Further excavations, probably in association with a university archaeology department are planned.

In the afternoon Cambrians went in a single coach to meet with Brian Davies, the Curator of Pontypridd Museum, on Pontypridd Common. The rocking stone on the Common, a glacial erratic, has long been an important political meeting place for the local community, and was the focus of a stone circle and 'serpent' constructed by a local druidic enthusiast in 1850. Brian and five other Cambrians stood on the front of the stone and with a concerted jump made it rock, drawing applause from the witnesses. We were also taken to a real Bronze Age circle, probably a barrow kerb, further along the Common.

Our guide went with us in the coach to Hopkinstown, west of Pontypridd, to see the Winding House of the Great Western Colliery, where the winding engine, recently restored by members of the Pontypridd Historical Society, was actually running, as demonstrated by Brian Davies. The visit was attended by the Mayor and Mayoress of Pontypridd, and the party was photographed by the press.

Unfortunately there was no time to visit the William Edwards bridge or the Museum, in the town centre, but they were pointed out as we passed by.

The Annual General Meeting of the Association was held after dinner.

FRIDAY 14TH AUGUST

The first site was the Sirhowy ironworks, near Tredegar, first established in 1778. It ceased producing iron in 1883 but continued to produce coke until finally closing in 1905. Both Frank Olding and Richard Keen spoke about the monument, which is well cared for by Blaenau Gwent Council.

The Duke's Table, near Trefil, had to be omitted through lack of time. It consists of a circular stone picnic table and earthen benches, probably created for the Duke of Beaufort's shooting parties around 1790, before the nearby quarries were opened. Instead we went directly to the brink of the Clydach Gorge at Llanelly Hill.

Clydach Gorge has a spectacular number of industrial sites and the remains of multiple lines of communication along, up and down the Gorge. All this is within what is nowadays beautiful scenery marred only by the modern Heads of the Valleys Road. Van Laun writes: 'The valley had the natural assets to invite early industrial exploitation: iron ores, woodlands to provide timber for charcoal furnaces, and fast streams to supply power for simple mechanisation' (van Laun, *The Clydach Gorge*, 1979). Production of iron continued on an increased scale as the industrial revolution developed, until it was overtaken by more up-to-date techniques with which it could not compete.

The coach set down more than half the party to walk down the south side of the Gorge. The remaining members were taken to Llangattock Church near Crickhowell where the Rector welcomed them. The church comprises a nave and chancel with a north aisle and chapel of equal length. It is of the 13th and 14th centuries though all the windows have been replaced. This party was then taken to The Lion Hotel at Gilwern for lunch, while the coach went to collect the walking party.

Meanwhile the walkers had split into two subgroups for walks of varying difficulty. Richard Keen led the 'easy' party down the road, explaining the monuments that could be seen both on the opposite side of the Gorge – limeworks, tramways and inclined planes - and on the near side – especially the route of the Merthyr and Abergavenny Railway, the Llanelly Quarry and the viaduct of the Bailey tramroad of 1821. Frank Olding took the others along the route of Bailey's of 1821 tramroad to the Clydach Limeworks and then down a woodland path, with a backward glance at an impressive viaduct, to the bottom of the Gorge.

After lunch the party returned to the bottom of the Clydach Gorge to view the derelict Clydach Ironworks founded in 1793-5 and expanding by 1841 to employ over 1,350 people. Richard Keen and Frank Olding again led the visit.

The last site of the day was St Mary's Priory Church in Abergavenny. We were welcomed by the Vicar, the Rev Jeremy Winston. Dr Sian Rees of Cadw described the church, which originates from a Benedictine priory founded early in the Norman advance into Wales. It became the parish church only after the Dissolution. The church contains a large number of very fine monuments from the 14th century onwards, recently most successfully cleaned. The most remarkable is the wooden figure of Jesse, which formed the base of a 15th century Jesse Tree. Across the precinct to the west of the church stands a tithe barn, recently restored, now housing an exhibition space, where the new Abergavenny Tapestry can be seen, and a café where some Cambrians had a welcome cup of tea.

SATURDAY 15TH AUGUST

The party was reduced to only twenty-six members on this last morning and we used a small service bus. The weather was wet; there was a persistent fine drizzle. This seemed appropriate for the melancholy site above Tredegar at Cefn Golau where there is one of the few remaining cholera cemeteries. These cemeteries were set away from the towns since people were terrified of burying the victims in the customary graveyards. The transmission of the disease was not understood until later. There were outbreaks of cholera at Tredegar in 1832, 1849 and 1866. This cemetery has recently been fenced in to protect it from damage by cattle and horses. Unfortunately this has also had the effect of preventing sheep from keeping it grazed.

Cambrians went next to the ironmaster Crawshay Bailey's farm above Nantyglo, which he built in 1795 together with a mansion, now disappeared except for the footing of walls. Here he constructed two Round Towers, the first in 1816, apparently to provide defence against a rebellious workforce, either for himself, or more probably for some of his workers. The farm buildings, which are in a dilapidated state, have cast and wrought iron roofing trusses and cast iron flooring supports. In the construction of the Roundhouses there was no timber at all but only stone and iron. One of the Roundhouses is fairly complete, though unsafe to enter for more than a glance from the doorway. It has a roof of interlocking cast iron plates. The other is a roofless stone shell.

Cambrians were shown over the farm by the owner, Mr G. Jones. The President was thrilled to have an opportunity of seeing the inside of the long range of farm buildings, never seen by him before and he resolved to return.

Time was running out for this year's Meeting. However, one more site had been planned and this was visited, albeit for a rather short time. St Iltyd's Church above Llanhilleth is unapproachable from the village even by a small service bus because of the steep road and tortuous bends. Our bus therefore had to take a long detour and approach from the east via the moorland of Abersychan. The church, now deconsecrated and used for local community functions, is the oldest standing building in the County Borough of Blaenau Gwent. It had become dilapidated and has been restored by the Council with help from Cadw. Close by is a motte, probably of the

11th or 12th century, and there are the remains of two buildings, probably fortified medieval buildings, behind the neighbouring cottages. Frank Olding addressed Cambrians at this site.

The bus then returned to the hotel and Cambrians dispersed after a late lunch.