

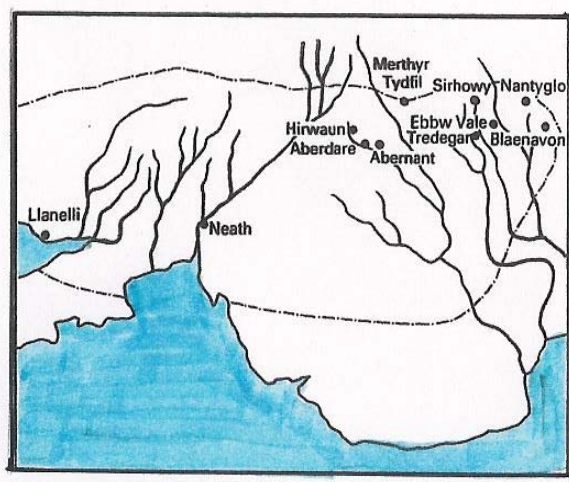


South Wales and the Iron Industry

BACKGROUND

In order to make iron, the iron ore has to be extracted from the ground and then *smelted* (heated) so that the iron turns into a liquid and can be separated from the rocks. Until the eighteenth century large amounts of timber were needed (in the form of charcoal) to smelt the iron ore, and so furnaces were sited in forests where iron ore was present in the ground. However, timber was becoming scarce, and a new method of smelting was necessary. Around 1709 Abraham Darby of Coalbrookdale in Shropshire discovered a method of smelting using coal (in the form of coke).

This meant that iron works would now be sited where there was iron ore and coal in abundance. The first place in the world to develop such large-scale ironworks was South Wales.



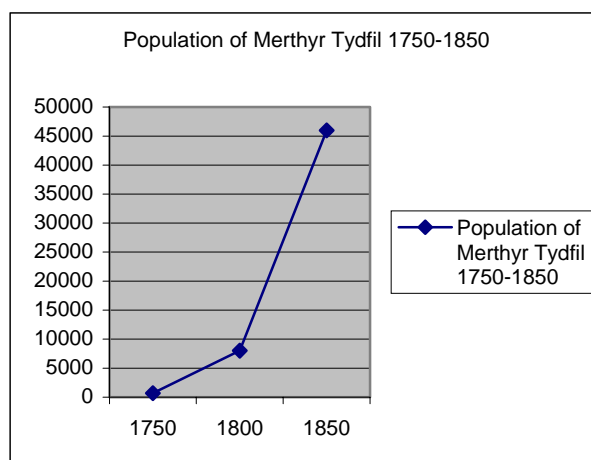
The Welsh Iron Industry before 1850

MERTHYR TYDFIL - IRON CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Coke was first used for smelting in Hirwaun in 1757, but by the end of the eighteenth century Merthyr Tydfil, with its four

great ironworks, was the most important iron-producing centre in the world.

In 1750 its population was around 700, a quiet village surrounded by green fields. By 1800 it was the largest town in Wales with a population of over 8,000 - rising to 46,000 in 1850.



On his tour through Great Britain in 1723, Daniel Defoe described the Merthyr district as:

'A most agreeable vale opening to the south, with a pleasant river running through it called the Taafe....'

In 1819, less than a hundred years later, two other visitors described a very different scene:

'About five miles [8km] from Merthyr, we saw...a faint glimmering redness...Everything was in utter darkness heightened by a thick wet fog...we could now see men moving among the blazing fires, and hear the noise of huge hammers, clanking of chains, whiz of wheels, blast of bellows, with the deep roaring of the fires'



Merthyr Tydfil in 1840

By 1823 Welsh ironworks produced 43 per cent of Britain's iron, and Merthyr was producing nearly half of this total.

Obviously the massive increase in Merthyr's population was not entirely a 'natural' increase (caused by either an increase in birth rate or decrease in death rate). It was mainly due to migration. Thousands of people moved into the area hoping to find work in the newly-established iron industry.

Most of the people who came to Merthyr to work moved fairly short distances. The vast majority came from the rural areas of Glamorgan. Others came from the agricultural areas of west Wales and fewer still from the rural parts of north Wales.

A few skilled and unskilled workers also came from England and Ireland. The 1841 Census shows that only 9 per cent of the inhabitants were born outside of Wales. This is also proved by the fact that

Welsh was the language spoken in the town in the 1820s.

MERTHYR'S RELATIVE DECLINE

Although the population of Merthyr Tydfil stood at 69,000 at the end of the nineteenth century, its days as the biggest town in Wales were over. As the local supplies of iron ore ran out, the industry became reliant on imported ore, mainly from Spain. Thus it made more sense to relocate to the coast (Merthyr is 28 miles [45km] from the sea) and the Dowlais Company set up in Cardiff in 1891.

From the 1870s the days of iron manufacture were also numbered with the development of steel - a far superior material. Merthyr did not develop as a major centre of the steel industry. As the iron industry began its decline, however, South Wales found a more than adequate replacement - coal.

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