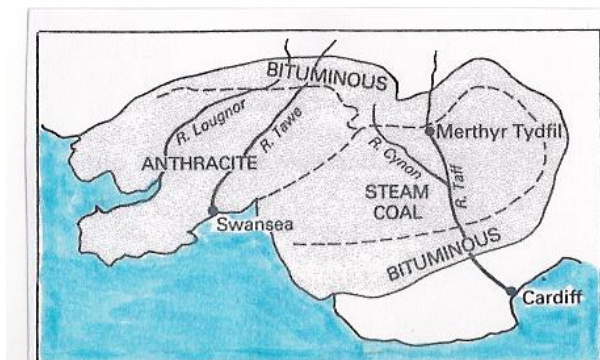


When Coal Was King

BACKGROUND

As we have already seen, coal was important in the development of the modern iron industry in Wales. This was bituminous coal and was used for domestic fires and the production of coke (for smelting iron ore). With the impending decline of the iron industry in South Wales it was fortunate that there were vast deposits of steam coal in the South Wales valleys.



Coal Deposits in the South Wales Valleys

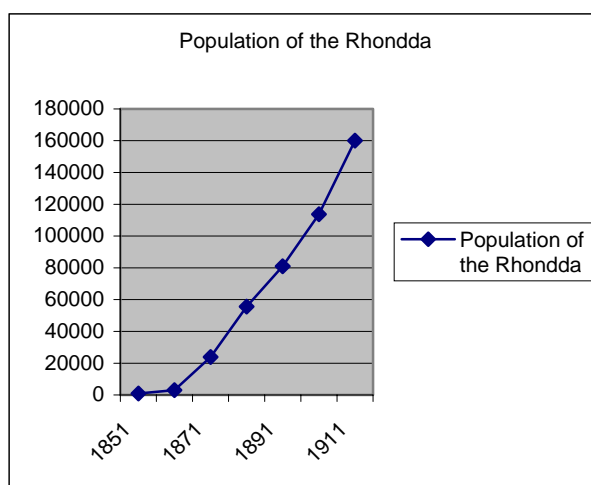
The steam coal of the Rhondda, Cynon and Rhymney valleys was very high quality and it was in great demand in the age of steam from the 1840s when it was necessary to power the newly-developed railway locomotives and steamships that were replacing sail ships.

Much of the steam coal was not easily accessible, but from the 1840s new mining techniques were introduced that allowed the sinking of far deeper pits. The newly formed railways enabled this coal to be transported to the coast at Cardiff where the Bute Dock had opened in 1839.

POPULATION GROWTH

From a rural farming area of 576 people

in 1811, Rhondda's population rose to 3,000 in 1861. It then rose more than sevenfold to 23,950 in the next decade. It doubled to 55,632 in the next ten years and then to 113,735 at the turn of the century. At the outbreak of war in 1914 it stood at 170,000.



It was not only the Rhondda that grew in population during the period as a result of the expansion of the coal industry. In the Cynon Valley coal took over from the iron industry as the largest employer. In Monmouthshire the population in 1800 stood at 45,000.

In 1900 it had increased tenfold to 450,000. The enormous population growth of towns like Cardiff and Newport (and later Barry) was due to their role as coal exporting ports, as over half the coal produced in South Wales was exported. Cardiff had grown from a town of 1,870 in 1801 to 182,259 in 1911, and by the 1880s it was the largest coal exporting port in the world (a position it held until 1913 - when it was overtaken by Barry). It was the ports that provided the commercial expertise such as shipping services and insurance. The pe-



riod 1870 to 1914 was when South Wales was important in the global economy.

ORIGINS OF THE POPULATION GROWTH

When the iron industry of South Wales 'took off' in the late eighteenth century the labour force were 'local' migrants. They were Welsh-speaking agricultural workers. This was not the case with the development of the coal industry in the South Wales valleys.

Immigrant workers flooded into the two south eastern counties of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire in search of work in the mines. They came from Ireland (after the 1845 famine), the English Midlands and from Scotland.

The flood of immigrants easily overran the native Welsh speaking inhabitants. The result was that the speaking of Welsh in much of South Wales died out before the end of the nineteenth century, and it was not until the 1960s that there began a sustained revival of the language.



If you avoided death in the pit there was always the chance of death due to the living conditions.

Many of those who lost their lives were under twenty years of age. In total 3,508 miners lost their lives in the period 1837 to 1927. The most infamous disasters were:

1856	Cymmer	113 lives
1860	Risca	146 lives
1867	Ferndale	176 lives
1878	Abercarn	268 lives
1880	Risca	119 lives
1890	Llanerch	176 lives
1894	Cilfynydd	276 lives
1905	Wattstown	119 lives
1913	Senghenydd	439 lives

In 1849 there was an outbreak of cholera in Merthyr and Aberdare which killed over 800 people. As late as 1922 Aberdare had the highest infant mortality rate in Britain.

CONDITIONS IN THE VALLEYS

By 1913 there were 323 collieries in Glamorgan - 66 in the Rhondda Valley alone. Deaths in the mines were a common occurrence. Between 1868 and 1914 a miner was killed, on average, once every five hours.

OTHER IMMIGRANTS

Despite these conditions people continued to be drawn to the area, including a long association with Italians, whose descendants remain in the valleys to this day.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Evans, David - *'Wales in Modern Times'* Edward Arnold [1979]
 Evans, D. Gareth - *'A History of Wales 1815-1906'* University of Wales Press [1989]
 Jones, Gareth Elwyn - *'Modern Wales. A concise History c.1485-1979'* University of Cambridge Press [1984]

WEB PAGES:

www.data-wales.co.uk/valley1.htm
www.crosskeys.me.uk/history/colliery.htm