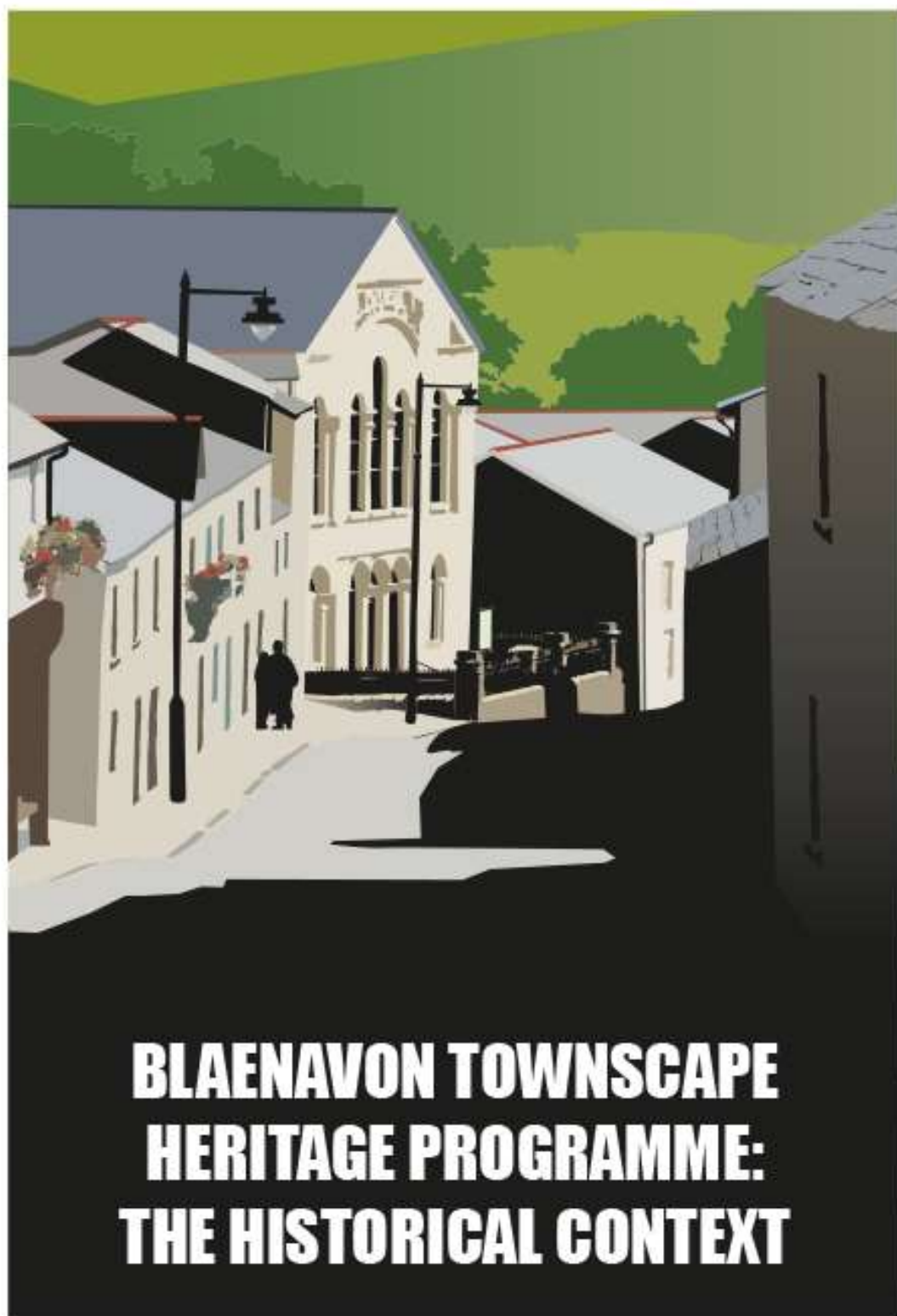


BLAENAVON



WORLD HERITAGE SITE



**BLAENAVON TOWNSCAPE  
HERITAGE PROGRAMME:  
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

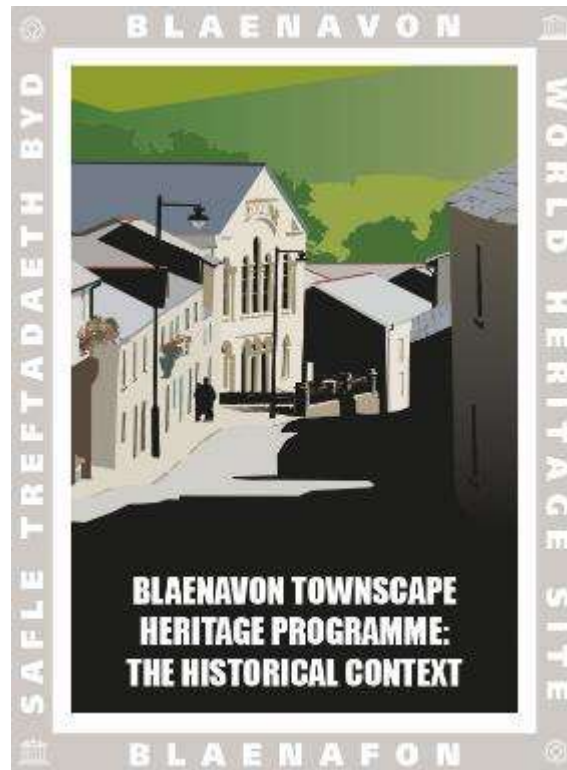


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BLAENAFON





# Blaenavon Townscape Heritage Programme: The Historical Context





## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	Page 3
Blaenavon Townscape Timeline	Page 4
Blaenavon Population	Page 7
Executive Summary	Page 8
Commercial Development	Page 13
The People	Page 41
Civic Life	Page 45
Religious Nonconformity	Page 72
Culture, Recreation and Leisure	Page 96
Epilogue	Page 116
Appendix A: Specific Properties in the Townscape Heritage Area	Page 119
Appendix B: Biographies of Sitters in Blaenavon Workmen's Hall Portrait Collection	Page 122
Appendix C: Summary of Resources	Page 129
Bibliography and Further Reading	Page 139



# Acknowledgements

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Dr Nathan Alexander Matthews asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of the text.

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# Blaenavon Townscape: Timeline

Year	Event
1787	Ironmasters Thomas Hill, Thomas Hopkins and Benjamin Pratt lease 12,000 acres of land, commonly known as 'Lord Abergavenny's Hills'
1789	Blaenavon Ironworks starts producing iron
c.1790	Baptists of Llanwenarth and Penygarn begin holding services in Blaenavon at Ton Mawr, the home of Francis James
1798	Blaenavon Ironworks employs approximately 350 people. About one thousand people are living in the area
1799	Services are being held by the Calvinistic Methodists at Capel y Graig
1804-1805	Thomas Hill and Samuel Hopkins build St. Peter's Church
1807	Horeb Baptist Chapel opens in what later becomes James Street. It remains under the control of Llanwenarth and Penygarn Baptist Chapels
1816	The Blaenavon National School on Church Road is built and endowed by Sarah Hopkins in memory of her brother, the ironmaster Samuel Hopkins Riots take place through the industrial towns of Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire, including Blaenavon
1819	Penuel Calvinistic Methodist Chapel opened in King Street, replacing Capel y Graig
1820	The original Bethlehem Independent Chapel is formed near Avon Road
1822	Riots take place in Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire
1823	Horeb Baptist Chapel becomes a church in its own right
1825	Ebenezer Welsh Baptist Chapel is formed following a split within Horeb
1831	Merthyr Riots result in the town being taken over for six days until the military restore order. The 'Truck System' is one of the grievances of the rioters. The Truck Act is introduced to end the practice of employers paying workers in tokens instead of coin of the realm.
1832	Cholera epidemic in Wales Great Reform Act increases the electorate from 11% to 18% of adult males.
1836	Blaenavon Iron and Coal Company Ltd. is established
1839	Chartists attack Newport
1840	Bethlehem Independent Chapel is built in what later becomes Broad Street John Griffith Williams opens a covered market in what later becomes Market Street
1840s	New commercial street begins to develop in the 'market field' and alongside the Nant Llechan.
1841	Blaenavon Iron and Coal Company employs 2,000 people



1844	English Baptists form a congregation and meet in Hill Street
1847	English Baptist Chapel is built in what later becomes Broad Street Three-month strike at Blaenavon
1849	Cholera epidemic kills upwards of 4,500 people in Wales
1849	Blaenavon Infants' School opens on Church Road
1854	Cholera epidemic kills upwards of 1,000 people in Wales
1858-1859	Religious revival takes place in Wales
1859	Waterworks in the process of being established. A large reservoir is erected at Coed Cae Caradoc farm
1860s	Growth of the Forge Side (or New Side) Ironworks and village
1860	Blaenavon Local Board is established with a remit to administer public health
1860	New Blaenavon Boys' Endowed School opens on Church Road
1860	Blaenavon streets are named, including Broad Street, the main shopping street
1861	Blaenavon Co-operative Society is formed
1862	New Horeb Chapel is built in High Street
1866	Cholera epidemic in Wales
1867	Second Reform Act extends male suffrage
1868	General Election Riots in Blaenavon following the defeat of the Liberal candidate. The Red Lion Hotel bears the brunt of the attack. The Riot Act is read and the military is called to restore order to the town.
1871	Wesleyan Day Schools open in Park Street British and Foreign Society School opens in Park Street
1872	Ballot Act introduces secret voting at elections
1874	Zion English Baptist Church is built at Forge Side Gas Street lighting introduced in Broad Street by the Local Board
1878	English Baptists start worshipping at Bethel Chapel, King Street
1881	Sunday Closing (Wales) Act is passed, banning public houses from opening on Sundays (except Monmouthshire)
1883	Blaenavon Workmen's Institute is formed in Lion Street
1883	Blaenavon Workmen's Hospital is opened in the Park
1884	Third Reform Act gives the vote to many working class men
1885	Park Street Wesleyan Methodist Church is built
1889	New Co-operative Society is formed
1893	Industrial and Provident Society Stores opened in Ivor Street on the site of Ivor House Foundation stone of the new Blaenavon Workmen's Hall is laid
1894	Blaenavon Urban District Council is formed Police Court built on Church Road
1895	Blaenavon Workmen's Hall and Institute opened



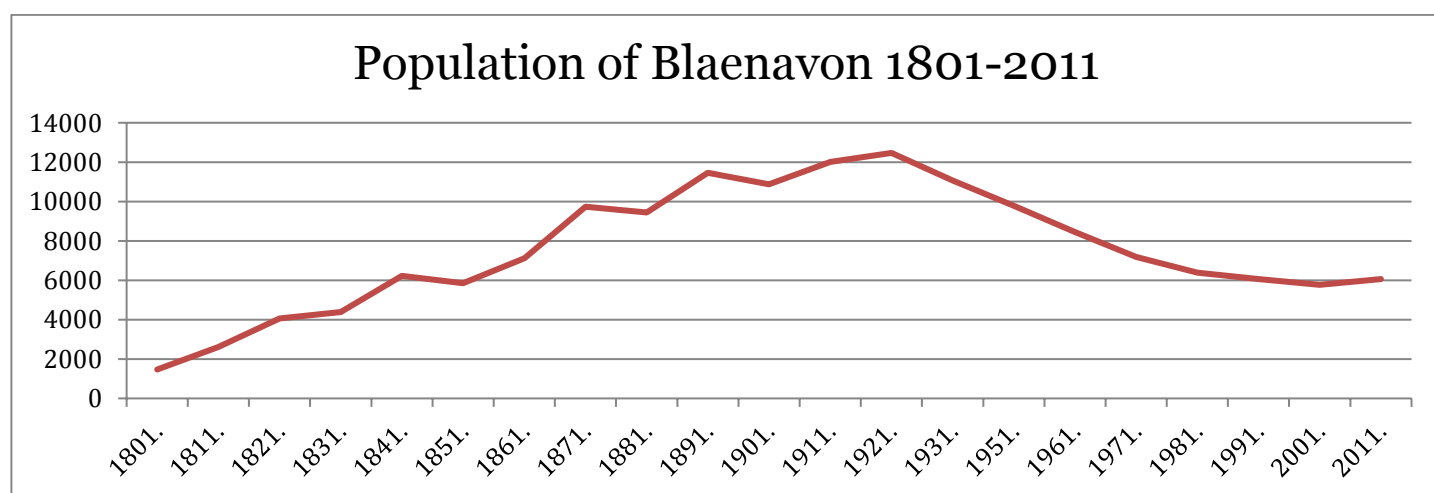
## The Historical Context

1900-1901	73-week strike. Hundreds of people leave Blaenavon.
1904-1905	The last great religious revival in Wales (the Evan Roberts revival)
1911	Dressed stone from the furnaces in North Street are used to create the new St. James's Church at Cae White, which is completed in 1913
1914-1918	The First World War
1918	Representation of the People Act (Fourth Reform Act) gives the vote to all men over the age of 21 years, and women over the age of 30



# Population of Blaenavon 1801-2011

<b>1801</b>	1469
<b>1811</b>	2619
<b>1821</b>	4066
<b>1831</b>	4382
<b>1841</b>	6223
<b>1851</b>	5855
<b>1861</b>	7114
<b>1871</b>	9736
<b>1881</b>	9449
<b>1891</b>	11452
<b>1901</b>	10869
<b>1911</b>	12010
<b>1921</b>	12469
<b>1931</b>	11076
<b>1941</b>	No census held due to the Second World War
<b>1951</b>	9779
<b>1961</b>	8451
<b>1971</b>	7189
<b>1981</b>	6386
<b>1991</b>	6066
<b>2001</b>	5763
<b>2011</b>	6055







## Executive Summary

The settlement of Blaenavon emerged as a direct consequence of the establishment of the ironworks in 1789. The population of the district grew accordingly and, by 1841, over six thousand people were living here. When the ironworks commenced production, there was little infrastructure in the area and the workers and their families largely depended on the ironmasters to cater for their needs. A company 'truck' shop was opened and was an invaluable resource, providing groceries and clothing for the local inhabitants. The truck system, however, was open to abuse and was used by the masters to keep prices artificially high and to control workers by keeping them in debt. As such, the truck system became very unpopular in south Wales and was among the causes of popular protest experienced in the region during the early nineteenth century. Over time, new laws were passed to remove the truck system and its injustices.

The commercial centre of Blaenavon emerged during the early 1840s, largely through the efforts of businessman John Griffith Williams (1809-1884), who set up the town's first covered market in 1840. Over the next few decades, a diverse array of shops and businesses were built along the new road which connected the ironworks to the market place. This new road was named 'Broad Street' in June 1860. Just as the ironworks attracted immigration in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, so too did the opportunity to sell goods and services to the local population of ironworkers and miners. Shopkeepers from far afield (including from overseas) came to set up businesses in Blaenavon and provided employment opportunities for local people, including women. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the town supported well over 150 businesses, providing virtually everything that the residents required.

Generations of shopkeepers became prominent community leaders, serving on public bodies, such as the Blaenavon Local Board, the Blaenavon Urban District Council and the Blaenavon Chamber of Trade. Many were Liberal in their political beliefs. Some of the local shopkeepers were also



## The Historical Context

involved in Welsh nonconformity, serving as deacons or trustees of local chapels. The town's businessmen were also the driving force behind the setting up of important civic amenities such as the waterworks, the gasworks and the fire service. They also took an active role in the administration of justice, with several of the town's leading tradesmen serving as magistrates in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras.

Co-operation was also popular in Blaenavon, with the town's first co-operative store being established in 1861. Whilst there were some initial challenges, by the early twentieth century, co-operation was flourishing, and various branches of the co-operative society operated around the town, providing its members with affordable groceries, furniture, insurance, funeral expenses and even housing opportunities. The success of the scheme provides evidence of the important role of self-help and co-operation between the workers, which were demonstrated in so many aspects of life in industrial south Wales.

As well as being a commercial space, the town centre became a place in which cultural and religious identity could be expressed. The main nonconformist religious denominations had been active in Blaenavon from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Throughout the Victorian era, however, there was much chapel-building and religious activity in the town. Several chapels and Sunday Schools were built in the town centre and contributed to the architectural character of the streetscape. Within the walls of these democratic places of worship, people expressed their intensely held Christian beliefs but also engaged in a whole host of cultural, social and educational activities. Religious fervour could also spill out into the streets, as revivalist preachers and evangelists would preach to crowds in the open air. Notably, the town centre would be the stage for the impressive Sunday School anniversary marches where thousands of children, Sunday School teachers and members of the congregation would wear their finest clothes and parade through the main street before retiring to nearby fields for tea and games.



Another important part of Blaenavon's culture could be found in the town's many public houses. By the early twentieth century, the town had some 57 licensed premises and a large number could be found along the principal streets of the town, including prominent, three-storey establishments such as the Red Lion, the Market Tavern and the Castle, built on the street corners. Whilst some public houses were associated with the 'rough' culture of hard-drinking, gambling and violence, many were home to more respectable pursuits. Assembly rooms such as those at the White Horse Inn or the King's Arms welcomed a wide variety of musical and dramatic entertainments and eisteddfodau, with performances both by local people and by entertainers who came from far and wide. Public houses would also benefit on agricultural fair days, which were held in the town centre twice a year. Publicans would also sponsor outdoor entertainments in the adjoining fields, including circuses or acrobatic shows.

Public houses were also home to the town's various friendly societies. These benefit clubs provided a degree of social security to their members if they fell on hard times, particularly through sickness or the death of a main wage earner. By the 1870s, over 2,000 Blaenavon people were members of a friendly society lodge. Like the chapels, each friendly society would hold its annual anniversary march in the town centre. Members, dressed in full regalia, would parade through the town, often headed by a band, before having a religious service in a local chapel and then a dinner in a public house, where speeches and other entertainments would take place.

Some of the public houses, such as the White Horse, the Forge Hammer and the Castle, were also venues of political activity, where trade union meetings would take place, as workers fought for improved working conditions and social and political reform. Some of these meetings could become quite heated affairs but were an important part in the development of the political consciousness of the Welsh working class.



Of course, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the success of the town, both as a commercial and cultural centre, was largely dependent on the fortune of the local economy. Strikes and lock-outs, such as those in the 1870s, and in 1900-01, were particularly damaging for trade. Conversely, when wages were good, people had money to spend in the shops. The decline of the Welsh coal and steel industries in the twentieth century, and the depopulation which accompanied it, had a negative effect on Blaenavon. Economic hardship, combined with social and cultural change, and improved mobility, meant that Blaenavon suffered, with many shops, businesses, public houses and chapels closing. By the end of the twentieth century, some of the town's historic buildings had been demolished and redeveloped, with a large proportion of the retail units in the town centre boarded up.

The inscription of the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in December 2000 recognised the global significance of the landscape around Blaenavon but also the social infrastructure within the town. The built heritage that survives in Blaenavon today, provides evidence, in material form, of the intangible cultural heritage of south Wales during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This document, commissioned by Torfaen County Borough Council, as part of the Development Phase of a Townscape Heritage Project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, provides an exploration of the social history and intangible cultural heritage associated with the Blaenavon townscape, with specific reference to buildings within the Blaenavon Town Centre Conservation Area.

Key themes, which are explored within this document, include, the commercial development of Blaenavon, the people associated with the townscape, the significance of Welsh religious nonconformity, leisure and culture, and the civic life of the town. Details are also provided in the appendices to specific properties that are being focused on as part of the Townscape Heritage Project, and brief biographies of selected individuals.



This document, the compilation of which has been supported by the volunteers of the Blaenavon Local History Group and the Blaenavon Community Museum, is intended to inform future interpretation work and activities that will take place during the life of the project. The richness of the town's heritage means that further research can be conducted into many of the areas and themes included in this study. To this end, a summary of resources, available online and offline, is included, also providing a detailed overview of relevant collections that can be seen within the Blaenavon Community Museum.



# Commercial Development

## **The Birth of Blaenavon**

If one were to travel back in time to Blaenavon before the ironworks was established in 1787-89, one would find it a very different place to the town we know today. It was a very small community of sheep farmers and part-time miners, scattered across the Coity and Bloreng Mountain. There was some small-scale industrial activity but virtually no infrastructure, with just a few basic roads and no streets or terraces.

The town of Blaenavon owes its existence to the ironworks, which commenced production in 1789. Founded by the ironmasters Thomas Hill, Thomas Hopkins and Benjamin Pratt, the works attracted hundreds of people from rural Wales and the west of England, who came in search of employment and a better life. Archdeacon William Coxe, during his historic tour of Monmouthshire, visited Blaenavon in 1798 and observed that:

*At some distance, the works have the appearance of a small town, surrounded with heaps of ore, coal and limestone, and enlivened with all the bustle and activity of an opulent and increasing establishment... although these works were only finished in 1789, three hundred and fifty men are employed, and the population of the district exceeds a thousand souls.<sup>1</sup>*

A similarly impressive picture was painted by Sir Samuel Shepherd, the Solicitor General, in a court case of 1816, in which he described Blaenavon as 'a city' that stood as 'a monument of the commercial grandeur and industry of the British nation'.<sup>2</sup> However, Shepherd's description did not quite match the reality. Blaenavon remained somewhat underdeveloped for years following the

<sup>1</sup> William Coxe, *An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire illustrated with views by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, a new map of the county, and other engravings*, (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1801), pp.227-228

<sup>2</sup> *Morning Post*, 19 August 1816



## The Historical Context

commencement of industry. For several decades, the community still lacked sufficient housing, quality roads and a commercial centre.

The growing population, of course, had needs. The most basic of these were the needs for food, water, clothing and shelter. In the early years of the Blaenavon enterprise, it fell upon the ironmasters to provide the local populace with these bare necessities. They provided housing for their workers and ensured that their employees and their families had access to food and essential supplies.



Above: Blaenavon Ironworks August 1798 – the engraving by W. Byrne was made from a watercolour by Sir Richard Colt Hoare and featured in William Coxe's, 'An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire', (1801)



## The Historical Context

### **The Company Shop**

For many years, the people of Blaenavon depended on buying goods at the company 'truck' shop. The original company shop was located within Middle Row, behind Engine Row, near the ironworks. It was extended into Engine Row by 1814.<sup>3</sup> Yet, with a growing population, bigger premises were required, and the shop relocated to North Street (the present site of Caddick's workshop) in 1844-45. It was an extensive establishment and sold everything to cover the needs of the workers and their families, including bread, meat, butter, cheese, footwear, clothing and general groceries.<sup>4</sup>



Above: part of the Blaenavon Company Shop in North Street (photograph N.A. Matthews)

<sup>3</sup> Peter Wakelin, *Blaenavon Ironworks and World Heritage Landscape*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cardiff: Cadw, 2011), pp.26-28

<sup>4</sup> Wakelin (2011), p.28





The company shop faced a huge demand. A former assistant in the North Street shop claimed that large crowds of women would descend upon the shop, fighting each other to get served. He claimed that, in some cases, women would be forced to queue for up to nine hours. Those waiting the longest time, were also likely to be disappointed as they often could not obtain the items they wanted.<sup>5</sup>

The company shop was an essential resource in these frontier industrial communities, where there was no alternative provision for the supply of such goods. The system, however, could be exploited by the masters and prices could be kept artificially high. Prices were often between 20%-30% higher than those found in independent shops. The shops were also an effective way for iron companies to make a profit. In Blaenavon, during the 1830s, the shop provided one tenth of the company's income.<sup>6</sup>

In some areas, tokens were issued instead of coin of the realm. This system does not appear to have been used in Blaenavon, with tokens only being issued for change. Nevertheless, the company employed the so-called 'long-pay' system. Under this system, workers were paid every four to six weeks, during which time they would have accrued debts at the company shop. When pay day finally arrived, these debts would be deducted from the pay, leaving the worker with little or no money. Debts could even be carried over to the next pay packet. This lack of cash meant that some people did not have the option to spend their wages anywhere other than the company shop. It was also a form of social control, making it very difficult for an indebted worker, without cash, to leave the area to seek work elsewhere. The truck system became a major source of discontent in south Wales, with notable disturbances such as the Merthyr Riots of 1831 being triggered by its injustices. There was attempt at reform with the Truck Act of 1831, but loopholes remained.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 8 October 1870

<sup>6</sup> Wakelin (2011), p.28

<sup>7</sup> Wakelin (2011), p.28



Whilst, by the mid-nineteenth century, the workers were under no compulsion to use the company shop, the Blaenavon Company was still able to exert pressure on people to do so. In 1870, Edwin Jones, David Jones and Thomas Parry of Blaenavon, gave evidence to the Parliamentary Commission into the Truck System. Edwin Jones, a furnaceman of 1 Engine Row, claimed that when he decided to use private shops in Blaenavon instead of the company shop, he was reported to John Lloyd, his manager. Jones noted that debts were still being accrued by customers at the company shop between pay days. He also claimed that the independent traders in the town, on the whole, sold better quality goods at a lower price than the company shop.<sup>8</sup> Over time, new laws were passed to remove the truck system and its wrongs.

### **Independent Shops and Businesses**

The main commercial centre of Blaenavon did not develop until the early years of Queen Victoria's reign. Lewis Browning, who was born in Blaenavon in 1828, said of his youth 'I can remember only five shops in Blaenavon [including the Company Shop], but all the shop-keepers kept everything their customers were likely to require, such as grocery, drapery, footwear etc'.<sup>9</sup>

Of the independent businesses, one was run by a Charles Smith. Browning recalls:

*Mr Smith, when a young man, was a collier, and even as a boy is said to have been thrifty. My parents informed me that by his effort and energy his business so increased that when the truck system ended he opened a new shop where the Lodging House now is, near the Great Western Railway Station. He was a good man, and he was a local preacher with the Wesleyans.<sup>10</sup>*

Another shop, also near the railway station, was run by David Lewis (b.1814). Lewis's business was a success and he relocated to Ivor House, larger premises, on the site of the present-day Church

<sup>8</sup> Cardiff Times, 8 Oct 1870; Edward John Davies, *The Blaenavon Story* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), (Pontypool: Torfaen Borough Council, 1975), pp.74-75

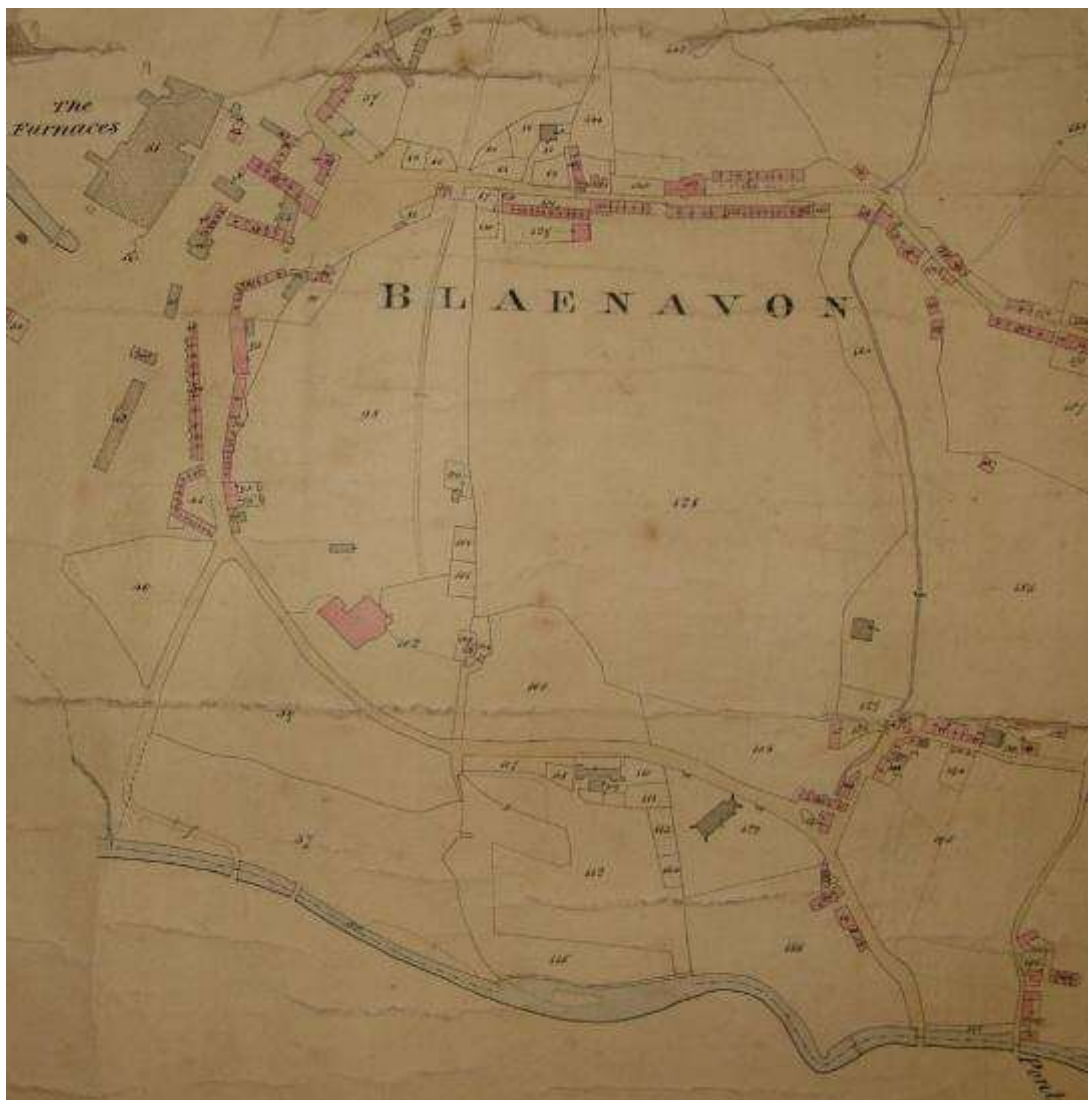
<sup>9</sup> Lewis Browning, *Blaenavon, Monmouthshire: A Brief Historical Sketch*, (Abergavenny: Minerva Press, 1906), p.33

<sup>10</sup> Browning (1906), pp.33-34



## The Historical Context

View (Co-operative) building in Ivor Street.<sup>11</sup> At the top of Blaenavon, along Heol Gwas Distewi (King Street/Queen Street), were two more shops – one was in Queen Street, run by a Rees Prosser, the other was in King Street, opposite Bethel Chapel. It was owned by William George, a Roman Catholic, known for his energy and generosity.<sup>12</sup>



The 1843-44 tithe map indicates that the early development of Blaenavon town centre was focused near the Prince Street area, at the bottom of the present-day town, and at the top, in the King Street and Queen Street area.<sup>13</sup> This is reflected in the locations of these early shops.

Above: Llanover Tithe Map 1843-1844 (copy courtesy of Gwent Archives)

<sup>11</sup> Browning (1906), p.34

<sup>12</sup> Browning (1906), p.34. Mr. George held Catholic services in his home before St. Felix's Church was opened in Ellick Street in 1868

<sup>13</sup> John A.H. Evans, 'The Evolution of Blaenavon Town', *Gwent Local History*, No. 94, (Spring 2003), p.42



Pigot's Directory 1848 provides a list of the traders in Blaenavon in the mid-nineteenth century. The following list excludes public houses and beer retailers.

<b>BREWERS</b>
WILLIAMS, John Griffith
<b>CHEMISTS AND DRUGGISTS</b>
DEAKIN, George
<b>GROCCERS AND DEALERS IN SUNDRIES</b>
BEDDOE, Joseph
DAVIES, David
GEORGE, William Henry
LEWIS, David
LEWIS, Mary
PROSSER, Rees
SHORT, William
SMITH, Charles
WILLIAMS, John
<b>IRONMONGERS</b>
UNDERWOOD, William
<b>TAILORS</b>
DAVIES, John
<b>TALLOW CHANDLERS</b>
WILLIAMS, John Griffith
<b>PAINTERS, PLUMBERS AND GLAZIERS</b>
BURFIELD, William



### ***The Establishment of the Market***

It was the determination and enterprise of one man, however, that really provided the impetus for the development of a commercial centre within Blaenavon. John Griffith Williams, the son of Griffith Williams (a watchmaker), was born in Breconshire in about 1809. He moved to Blaenavon in about 1830 and traded as a draper and general shopkeeper. In 1862, he reflected that, on his arrival, he was dismayed that there were “no roads fit for any vehicle... only five chapels, four shops, five public houses and very few cottages [south-east] of the [iron] works”.<sup>14</sup>

Williams was committed to improve things and was responsible for the establishment of Blaenavon’s first regular covered market in May 1840, which was situated in what later became known as Market Street.<sup>15</sup> This replaced Blaenavon’s first market place, which was located near the ironworks, opposite Engine Row and was held in the open air. Of the original market, Lewis Browning recalled:

*It was a large market; green goods in abundance, butter and cheese, shoes, flannels, sometimes sheep and pigs, meat of all kinds, brought in by farmers and others, and should they fail to sell out, each had his friends who would take to the spare goods and dispose of them in the best way.*<sup>16</sup>

I.G. Gwyn Thomas, in a lecture in 1926, suggested that the old market, which was held on a Saturday, boasted about twenty stalls, with produce being sold from the various agricultural communities nearby, particularly in Abergavenny and Llanover. He notes that when the new market opened there was ‘much friction and trouble’ as people did not wish to leave the old site. However, the benefits of a covered market, providing shelter for the traders and their customers, was soon recognised.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Evans (2003), p.43

<sup>15</sup> *Hereford Times*, 30 May 1840

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Browning, *Blaenavon, Monmouthshire: A Brief Historical Sketch*, (Abergavenny: Minerva Press, 1906), p.39

<sup>17</sup> Iltud G. Gwyn Thomas, ‘The History of Blaenavon’, transcript of lecture delivered at Blaenavon Girls’ School Room before the Blaenavon Cymmrodorion Society (1926)



The *Hereford Times* records that the new market was 'substantial and commodious' and that the stalls were 'fitted up in a tasteful manner'. It was recorded that the market was 'well supplied with excellent meat, vegetables, shoes, earthenware, nearly the whole of the former being cleared off at an early hour'. The newspaper commented that 'it is earnestly hoped that Blaenavon Market will become an object of attraction to the surrounding neighbourhood and meet with the support which the outlay and enterprise that Mr Williams, the principal proprietor of the market place, is justified in expecting'. The opening of the new market resulted in great festivities in Blaenavon. An 'excellent dinner' was enjoyed by local dignitaries at the Cambrian<sup>18</sup>, a barrel of beer was given to the men and an old man was carried around the market place in a chair, with gunshots being fired in celebration.<sup>19</sup>

Around this time, Williams convinced the Llanover Parochial Highways Committee to approve the creation of Broad Street (following the old track known as Heol y Nant - Stream Street) in order to link the ironworks with the new market, via King Street.<sup>20</sup> Browning said of this old track '...it used to be a narrow lane with a house here and there, and a low wall about two feet high, or a shabby thorn hedge between it and the brook'.<sup>21</sup>

During the 1840s and 1850s this new street was known as 'New Road' or the Market Field. The street was formally named 'Broad Street' by the Blaenavon Local Board on 28 June 1860. The

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<sup>18</sup> This Cambrian Inn appears to be associated with Williams's brewery and not the Cambrian Inn on the junction between Hill Street and Llanover Road.

<sup>19</sup> *Hereford Times*, 30 May 1840

<sup>20</sup> Evans (2003), p.43

<sup>21</sup> Browning (1906), p.40



Ordnance Survey Map of 1879-1880 illustrates the extent to which the town centre grew in the mid-nineteenth century.



Above: Ordnance Survey County Series (6 inches to the mile) 1886 (surveyed 1880-79), Blaenavon Urban District Council copy (Blaenavon Community Museum)



## The Historical Context

### **Shopping in the Victorian Era**

By the mid-Victorian era, a retail core had developed around Broad Street and in the surrounding streets such as Ivor Street, King Street and Albert Street. Over 80 businesses (excluding public houses and beer retailers) were operating in the town centre by the time of the 1871 census. By the time of Queen Victoria's death in 1901, the town boasted well over 150 businesses.<sup>22</sup> The town bustled with activity. Vivid descriptions can be found in the local newspapers, observing the town in the run-up to Christmas, one of the busiest times of the year. In 1871, for instance, the *Monmouthshire Merlin* reported that:

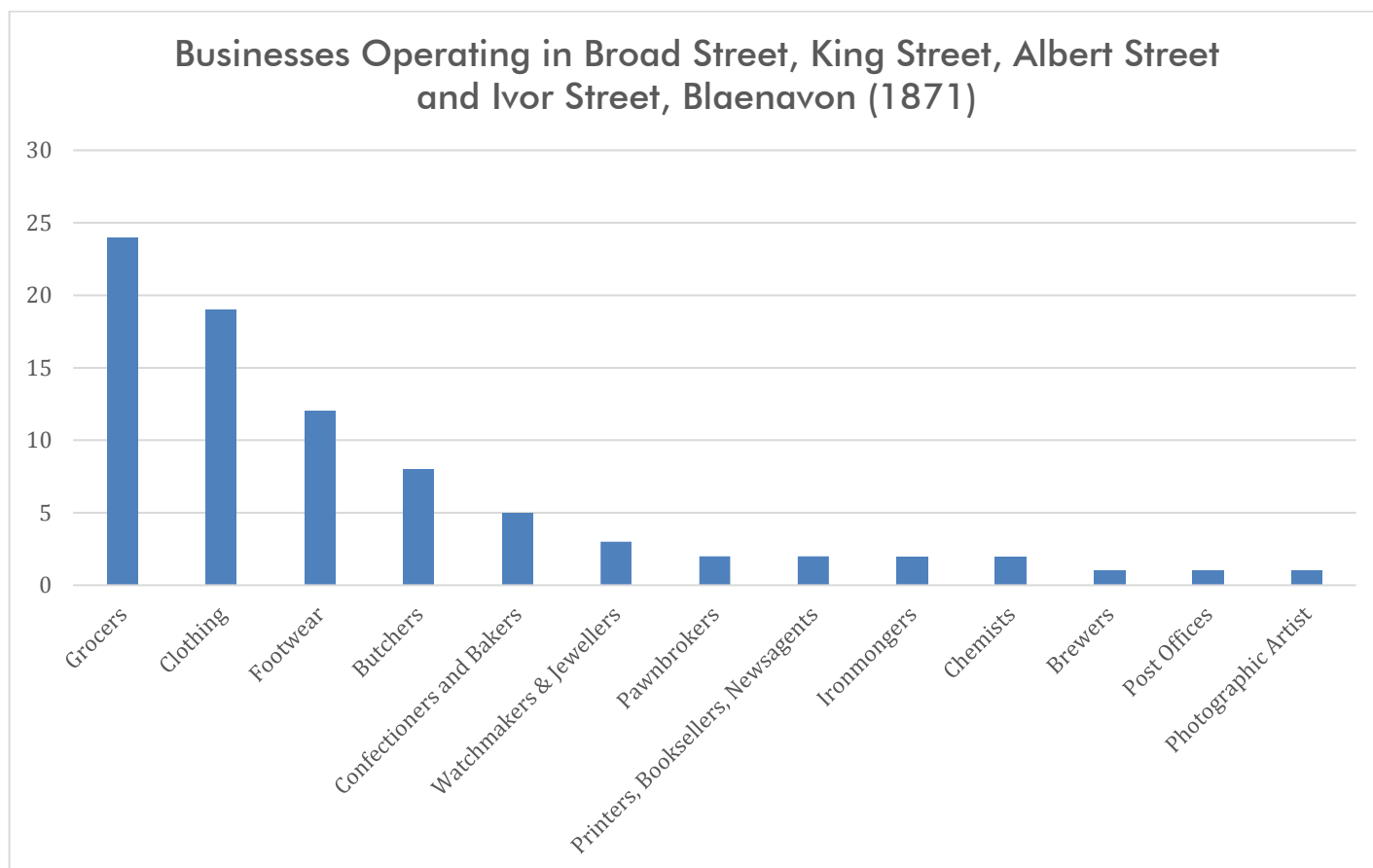
*...unmistakeable evidence of the approaching Christmas was visible everywhere during the latter part of the week. The grocers, drapers, butchers and stationers seemed to have exerted their utmost skill in their endeavours to show the best advantage of the good things of the season.*<sup>23</sup>



<sup>22</sup> Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire (1901)

<sup>23</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 29 Dec 1871





### **Grocers and General Stores**

The census indicates that the most common shops were those that provided for the bare necessities such as food and clothing. There were well over twenty grocery businesses operating in the town centre. These would have provided general foodstuff, including cheese, flour, milk, fruit and vegetables (in the case of greengrocers) and tea, as well as general household consumables such as soap or candles. With nearly ten thousand mouths to feed each day, these grocers, along with the Company Shop in North Street, would likely have been busy places. These were the days before effective storage of food or refrigeration. Therefore, people would have done their food shopping on a very regular basis to ensure that fresh items were available to for the dinner table. Likewise, grocers would have faced the daily challenge of stocking fresh goods and selling the produce before it turned bad.



With so many grocers in the town centre, it is likely that there would have been variations in size, price and quality. The businesses would have attempted to find a competitive advantage over each other. Whereas some businesses would have offered normal quality goods at a fair or reasonable price, others may have targeted the custom of the lower income families and offered inferior goods at a low price, perhaps engaging in unethical business practices in the process. Indeed, many Victorian grocers acquired a negative reputation due to immoral activities such as food adulteration and cheating customers. In extreme cases, some grocers were found putting white lead in flour, red lead in coffee and even broken glass in the sugar.

Food and trading standards evolved during the nineteenth century, to clamp down on dishonest business practices. New laws were introduced to protect consumers from the dangerous and unscrupulous activities of shopkeepers, including the Food and Drugs Act 1860, the Adulteration of Food and Drugs Act 1872 and the Sale of Food and Drugs Act 1875. Further advancements were made in the twentieth century. Relatively few cases involving Blaenavon grocers were recorded in the newspapers. Some cases, however, did reach the courts, although not all were successfully prosecuted. Of the successful cases, in 1885, Elizabeth Pritchard and Sarah Ann Jenkins were fined 21s 6d each for selling adulterated milk in Blaenavon, which contained 13% water.<sup>24</sup> In 1900, Alexander John Price was fined £5 at the Blaenavon Police Court for failing to properly label margarine as such. He had three previous convictions for similar offences, including for selling adulterated butter in 1898.<sup>25</sup>

Other cases involved the weights used on weighing scales. In 1899, for instance, Samuel Davies, grocer, was fined 15s for having 'unjust' scales, certified to be 3oz in favour of the buyer.<sup>26</sup> As this case benefited the customer, it may seem unfair that it came to court. It could, of course, have been

<sup>24</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 10 Oct 1885

<sup>25</sup> *Free Press*, 25 May 1900; *South Wales Daily News*, 23 May 1900

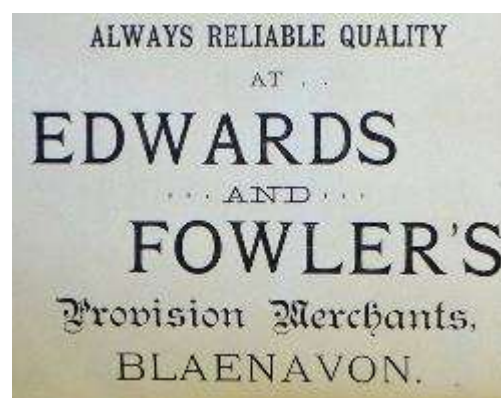
<sup>26</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 8 Mar 1899



an honest mistake but alternatively it may have been a ploy by the grocer to appear more generous in portions than his competitors.

In some cases, however, the suppliers were seemingly at fault. Jane Davies, grocer, was fined £10 at the Blaenavon Police Court in June 1898 for selling condensed milk without the proper quantity of cream. Her supplier agreed to pay the fine.<sup>27</sup> In 1900, Edwin Padfield, grocer, was fined 40s for selling adulterated zinc ointment. The supplier apologised to Mr Padfield for getting him into trouble.<sup>28</sup>

To retain custom in a competitive marketplace, shopkeepers needed to build up rapport and confidence with customers. There was choice for shoppers, a person could easily choose to take their trade elsewhere. Customers tended to show loyalty to the shops and shopkeepers who they trusted but if a shopkeeper betrayed that trust, they could lose customers and suffer the consequences of a bad reputation. Amongst the most prominent Blaenavon grocers and general provision merchants in Blaenavon during the late Victorian era were those of Ruther, Pegler, and Edwards and Fowler. These well-established businesses aspired to be known for the quality of their service and produce. For example, the firm of Edwards and Fowler, which traded at 99 Broad Street for many years, frequently submitted advertisements to local publications, including the parish magazine, during the 1890s and 1900s. These emphasised the business's trustworthiness to Blaenavon's 'respectable' population.



<sup>27</sup> *Evening Express*, 15 Jun 1898

<sup>28</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 19 Dec 1900



The number of grocers and general dealers in Blaenavon continued to increase throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Kelly's Directory reveals that there were approximately sixty businesses of this nature operating in Blaenavon. By this point, certain businesses differentiated themselves from their competitors by specialising in the sale of particular items. Thomas William Ruther, for example, served as the town's only advertised fresh fish dealer.

There were some specialist 'chain stores' that set up in the town, including the India and China Tea Company which established a Blaenavon branch at 13 Broad Street before 1914.<sup>29</sup> Others such as the Maypole Dairy Company, which traded at 35 Broad Street, focused on dairy products, such as the sale of margarine and butter, as well as tea. The number of businesses was also inflated by the number of small businesses that were established in and around the town centre. Amongst residential housing in the town, it was not uncommon for women to run small shops from their front rooms to supplement their household income whilst their husbands or sons worked in the local industries.

### **Butchers**

Meat was a staple part of people's diets and the town quickly attracted the services of several butchers. There were about eight butchers trading in the town centre in the 1870s but, as the population of the town increased, demand was such that some fifteen butchers were operating in Blaenavon by the late Edwardian era. Customers could buy joints of meat, sausages, black pudding, poultry, bones (used for flavouring), fat and suet.

The shops were quite distinctive. Shop windows often boasted the heads or carcasses of beasts to impress passers-by. Once enticed to enter, the shopper would likely see hooks, suspending the

<sup>29</sup> Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire (1914)



sides of animals from which the butcher would make his cuts. The floor would probably be covered in sawdust, which would absorb any blood that might be spilled. Butchers tended to be hygienic establishments and the floor would be frequently swept and the sawdust replaced. The butchery equipment and the counters would be washed regularly. Butchers also traded at the weekly market, held in Market Street. Tradesmen from the surrounding area would also arrive in Blaenavon and man stalls on a Saturday morning. Many of the businesses were run by independent butchers but, similarly to the grocers, a chain store, run by the English and Colonial Meats Company Ltd., emerged during the early twentieth century, trading at number 32 Broad Street.

### ***Bakers and Confectioners***

During the nineteenth century, baking tended to be carried out in the home by the womenfolk. According to Lewis Browning, the first question a man would ask of a prospective wife was, 'can you bake?'.<sup>30</sup> However, within the town were a small number of bakers, who sold bread and other items to the local population. Some of these bakeries were run by husbands and wives. Whilst the husband may have dealt with the bread, his wife may have turned her hand to the production of cakes and treats. Most of the bakers therefore traded as confectioners as well. The Millard family, for example, ran such a business and traded in Hill Street and John Street for many years.

Within the town were also businesses that focused on selling, rather than producing, confectionary. These sweetshops would sell the most popular brands of the day. The tradespeople would be keen to display their wares through their shop windows and advertise what they had to offer. The Broom family in King Street ran a confectionary shop in 81-82 King Street during the 1920s. A photograph of their shop window provides some indication of some of the items available to their customers.

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<sup>30</sup> Browning (1906), p.38



Broom's Shop 81-82 King Street, Blaenavon. Image courtesy of Mrs Pat Morgan

Some of brands on sale here include Zebra Grate Polish, Cadburys Cocoa, Cadburys Chocolate, Robin Starch, Colman's Mustard, Wills's Cigarettes, Brasso, Lipton's Tea, Sunlight Soap, Puritan Soap and Ringer's Shag – 'the old Welsh favourite'. Inside can be seen jars and trays of sweets as well as chocolate dolls, which would, no doubt, have attracted and tempted local children as they passed. Even the walls surrounding the window were used as advertising space, with the names of some big companies featuring prominently. It also indicates the eclectic nature of many of the town's shops. Whilst being described in the trade directory as a confectioner, the shop clearly served as a tobacconist and a provider of household supplies.



## The Historical Context

### **Textiles, Shoes and Clothing**

Blaenavon also had a fair number of shops that dealt with clothing and drapery. John Griffith Williams's first business in Blaenavon was a drapery. A draper sold cloth, which could be used to make clothing. As such, drapery businesses would have sold materials to local tailors and dressmakers. Indeed, there were scores of dressmakers in the town, mainly women working from home, hoping to supplement their income. The town also had tailors, who would produce or repair men's clothing. Milliners also operated in the town, making and selling hats to the women of the town. There was also a large demand for footwear in the town, with several bootmakers and shoemakers operating in the town. In 1871, there was also one clog-maker, but it seems that demand for this wooden type of shoe fell out of fashion by the end of the century.

### **Watchmakers, Clockmakers and Jewellers**

There were relatively few businesses in Blaenavon which provided 'luxury' goods. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century there were only a small number of businesses that sold items such as watches or jewellery. Probably the most common item of jewellery that would have been demanded in Blaenavon would be wedding rings. One of the longest-running jewellers, clockmakers and watchmakers in Blaenavon was run by Leopold Winterhalter, a German immigrant, at Broad Street. He offered a private room for customers interested in buying wedding rings. Other jewellers included Thomas Sambrook and H.C. Graham.





### ***Pawnbrokers***

The town also had a couple of pawnbrokers, which would have been used by people who had fallen on hard times. The system involved a person taking an item, such as a piece of jewellery, to the pawnbroker who would then lend that person some money and provide them with a ticket. The item would be held by the pawnbroker for a set period of time and, if the person had not paid back the loan, with interest, the pawnbroker would take ownership of the item and could then put it up for sale in the shop.

Traditionally, three balls were hung outside the pawnbroker's shop. These were a reference to St. Nicholas, who, according to legend, loaned three young women with bags of gold, saving them from poverty. Pawnbrokers were often owned by Jews. Jewish people had long been discriminated against and were heavily restricted in terms of holding public office or entering professions. Therefore, Jews became involved in activities that Christians were uncomfortable with, such as money-lending. Christians believed that this was usury. Blaenavon's pawnbrokers included Jewish families including the Robinsons of Lion Street and the Blooms of Broad Street.

### ***Ironmongers***

Throughout the Victorian era, the number of ironmongers operating in Blaenavon increased. In 1871 there were two but this increased to eight by the end of Victoria's reign. Ironmongers dealt in hardware, tools and equipment. A wide variety of items could be purchased from such shops, including items such as locks, nails, hinges, handles, cutlery, furniture etc.

One of Blaenavon's longest surviving businesses was that of 'Dean and Jones', which was established at 6 Lion Street in 1871. Thomas Jones, one of the partners, was born in Woolhope, Herefordshire, in 1851, the son of a local publican. He moved to Abergavenny during his teenage years, where he found work with Margaret Dean, a widowed ironmonger, at 2 Cross Street. Thomas Jones and the Dean family later saw an opportunity in Blaenavon and set up shop in Lion Street,





which was run by young Mr Jones. Margaret Dean retired from the business in 1887 and the partnership was dissolved.<sup>31</sup> Another ironmongery business was operated at 57 Broad Street by Thomas Jones's older brother Robert during the 1880s and 1890s.



Above: T. Jones Ironmonger Blaenavon pre-1908. Image courtesy of Blaenavon Community Museum

Advertisements reveal the extent of the products and services offered by Jones's ironmongers during the early Edwardian era.

<sup>31</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 27 Jul 1887



T. Jones

Furnishing and General Ironmonger

Cutler, Locksmith, Bell Hanger

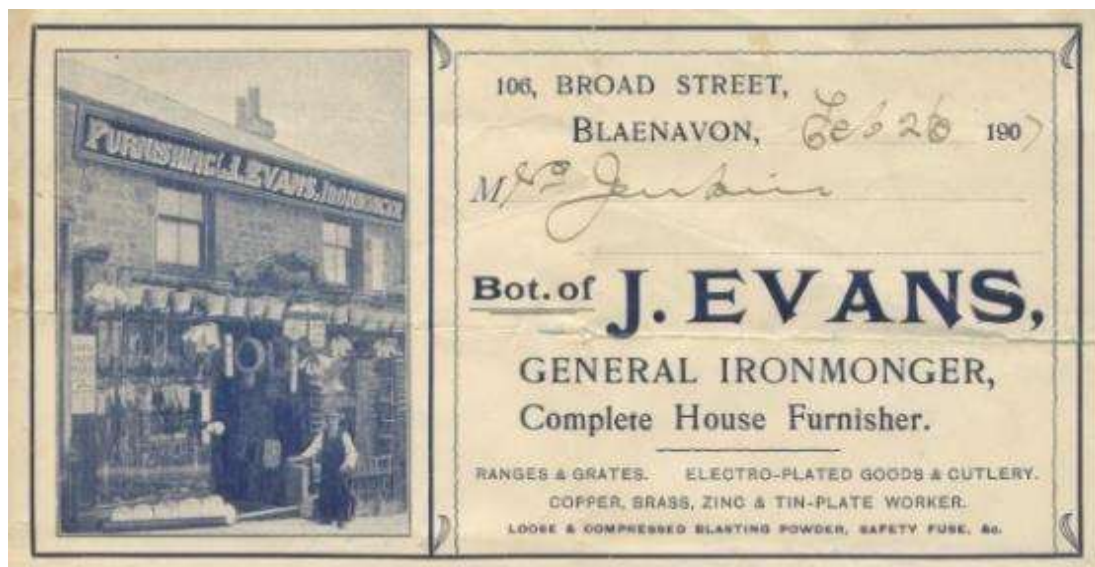
Iron and Tin Plate Worker

Cement, Oil, Paint, Colour, Iron and Steel Merchant

The shop sold stoves and marble chimney pieces, fire proof safes, kitchen ranges, iron bedsteads, mattresses etc., and guns, pistols and all kinds of sporting ammunition. In addition, the business provided for 'all kinds of iron, tin, plumbing and hot water work'.



One of the principal rivals of the Jones family was Jacob Evans, who traded at 106 Broad Street. Jacob Evans became the sole proprietor of the business in 1896, when his partnership with John Thomas was dissolved. The business offered house furnishing services and, as the advertisement shows, it was possible to buy mattresses, bedsteads and bedding from the shop. Cutlery, including electro-plated goods, were also obtainable from the shop.



Receipt from J. Evans Ironmonger 1907. Image courtesy of Blaenavon Community Museum



### **Chemists and Druggists**

Chemists and druggists served the community by providing a wide variety of drugs, medication and toiletries for the local population. The earliest chemist to set up business in Blaenavon was George Deakin, who set up shop at number 19 Broad Street. Along with a Mr Hughes, he became a manufacturing chemist and was well-known for his 'miraculous chest, cough, and lung healer'. Deakin and Hughes claimed theirs was the 'most healing and precious lung and chest protector the world can produce, paramount for all ages and generations.' It could be purchased from the shop or from leading chemists and stores across the country. The advertising included testimonials from local people, including a young man from Blaenavon named Thomas Needham, who noted the benefits the medicine had brought to his Asthma and Bronchitis. The Baptist minister Owen Tidman of King Street Chapel also gave his endorsement to the product:

*I beg to add my testimony to your invaluable preparation... it possesses marvellous properties and gives instant relief to Coughs, Cold, Hoarseness, Difficulty of Breathing etc. etc. It is very beneficial and has proved for many years a blessing to the working and all classes.*



In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, another prominent chemist and druggist was Henry Morgan Davies, who traded at 70 Broad Street. Mr Davies also served as the town's dentist. He was involved in many aspects of the town's political and cultural activities. Mr Davies was succeeded in the business by his daughter, Mildred Clara Davies.

Above: Miss M.C. Davies (image courtesy of Pat Morgan)



### **Printers, Stationers and Newsagents**

The Ward family of Blaenavon, from their shop at the bottom of Broad Street, provided stationery for the Blaenavon community for decades. The business carried out much of the town's printing needs, printing posters, leaflets and programmes for events, as well as advertisements. The business also sold postcards, depicting scenes of Blaenavon, in addition to musical equipment. The town's newsagent, for many years, was Ishmael Morgan of King Street, who supplied the townspeople with newspapers. In days when literacy was not widespread, those who could not read would depend on others to inform them of local, national and international stories.

### **Brewers**

John Griffith Williams established the town's first brewery, known as the Cambrian, near James Street in about 1840. A rival brewery was later established by William Burgoyne at the Ivor Castle. Following the death of J.G. Williams in 1884, his brewery was sold to Charles Francis Westlake. Westlake acquired eighteen pubs in Blaenavon by 1907, including the Red Lion. The brewery moved from Blaenavon to a newly erected building in Cwmavon in 1900.<sup>32</sup> There were also merchants selling ales, mineral water and porter. Lewis Richards, who traded at 69/70 High Street and Cross Street was one of the most well-known of these.

### **Post Offices**

A post office was run in Broad Street for many years by the Rev. J. Rees and afterwards by his widow and family. In 1880, it was taken over by David Lewis of Ivor House and was conducted by his son-in-law Mr Griffiths. A new pillar post box was built in the upper part of the town.<sup>33</sup> The post office later returned to Broad Street and, by 1901, was being managed by Mr Rees Jones. At the start of the Edwardian era, the post was delivered to Blaenavon residents three times a day – at 7am, 8:30am and 4pm.

<sup>32</sup> Jeremy Knight, *Blaenavon: From Iron Town to World Heritage Site*, (Logaston Press, 2016), p.87

<sup>33</sup> *Free Press*, 27 Nov 1880



## The Historical Context



Outgoing mail was collected from Blaenavon at 8:35am, 11am, 4:10pm, 6:10pm, 7pm and 7:50pm. Post boxes, by this time, were installed in walls around the town at Broad Street, Bryn Terrace, Forge Side, Garn yr Erw, Glantorfaen Terrace, Phillips Street and the Lodge.

The postal service helped residents and local businesses communicate and do business with the wider world.<sup>34</sup> A new post office was built in Prince Street and was opened in November 1937.

Left: Blaenavon Post Office in Broad Street (image courtesy of Blaenavon Community Museum)

### Co-operation

The idea of co-operation in the United Kingdom was pioneered by Robert Owen (1771-1858), a Welsh businessman and philanthropist, well-known for his benevolent treatment of his workers at New Lanark. The movement, however, was developed further at Rochdale where, in October 1844,

<sup>34</sup> John's Directory (1901), p.95



the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers was established by seven flannel weavers. The 'Rochdale Pioneers', hoping to overcome the injustices of poverty, unemployment and adulterated or poor-quality food, set up their first co-operative store. The Rochdale Principles formed the basis of co-operation and included open membership; democratic control by members; the promotion of education; the distribution of surplus in proportion to trade; payment of limited interest on capital; and cash trading (no credit). During the 1850s, co-operatives were forming all over the country. The first to be established in Wales was at Cwmbach, Aberdare, in 1859.

By the early 1860s, the principles of co-operation had captured the imagination of some Blaenavon workmen. They became minded to establish a co-operative society and, to that end, invited Joseph Barker of London to give a lecture at the King's Arms Assembly Room in King Street on 12 July 1861. At the evening meeting, chaired by Stephen Davies, Mr Barker addressed a 'large and attentive' audience of Blaenavon workmen (who had paid a 6d entrance fee) and gave advice on how to set up a co-operative society.<sup>35</sup> He referred to how independent traders engaged in fraudulent activities, adulterating food and employing 'tricks of the trade' to deprive 'workmen of their fair value for their money'. Barker argued that a co-operative society, if properly governed, would enable its members to 'obtain good wholesome food, and clothing of a more lasting quality, at cheaper rates than they did at present'.<sup>36</sup>

Co-operation, however, was not just concerned with the provision of affordable food and clothing. Barker, in his lecture, noted the potential for co-operation to encompass a whole range of functions in society. The principles of co-operation, he argued, could be used to set up libraries, reading rooms, sport grounds, housing schemes and bathhouses. He noted that the scheme could teach people about self-government, encourage provident habits and foster honesty and virtue. Through

<sup>35</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 20 Jul 1861

<sup>36</sup> *Usk Observer*, 20 Jul 1861



co-operation, he believed the working man could be raised 'from dependence to independence and prosperity'.<sup>37</sup>

Barker told the Blaenavon men that, with good management, there was no reason why a co-operative society could not succeed in Blaenavon, as they had in various other parts of the country, most notably at Rochdale. Buoyed by Barker's lecture, the Blaenavon workmen were determined to form their first co-operative society.<sup>38</sup>

Blaenavon's first venture in co-operation commenced later in 1861. It was managed on the Rochdale Principles (1844), which included voluntary membership, democratic control, dividend on purchases and the promotion of education. This and a subsequent co-operative society both failed due to debt but a new Blaenavon Industrial and Provident Society was established on 28 May 1889 following discussions among the working men in 1888. It had 455 members and had a store in King Street before moving to the Ivor Street building in 1893.

George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), the well-known co-operator, secularist and newspaper editor, writing in the *Co-operative News and Journal of Associated Industry* in May 1890, refers to the two failed attempts at co-operation in Blaenavon but states that the revival of the Blaenavon Co-operative in 1889 gladdened his heart because in England, he claimed, 'one failure kills co-operation in the place where it occurs for a generation'... 'but failure cannot kill the courage of contiguous or indigenous Welshmen'.

<sup>37</sup> *Usk Observer*, 20 Jul 1861

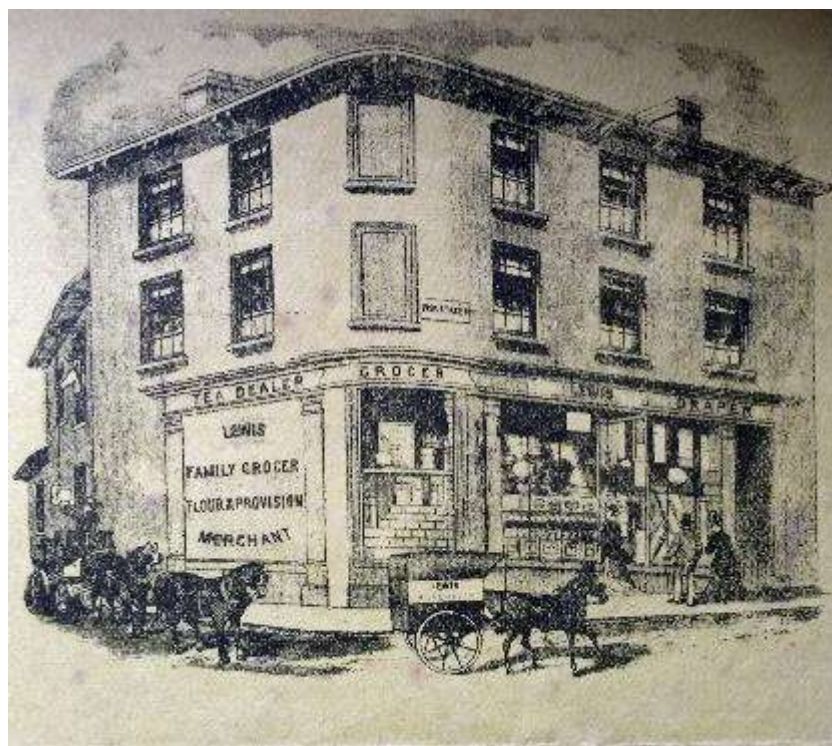
<sup>38</sup> *Usk Observer*, 20 Jul 1861



## The Historical Context

*After two failures in Blaenavon, the gallant Blaenavon men have set co-operation up again, and are as plucky as Tom Sayers, after [John C.] Heenan had broken his arm.<sup>39</sup> In America, when a store is burnt down, the storekeeper goes round with a basket early in the morning, and picks up all the nails which are not melted; and by breakfast time he has driven them into the planks of a new floor, and commences business again the same night. This is the way with the energetic and invincible Blaenavon men and women, who are buying at the new store with more enthusiasm than ever.<sup>40</sup>*

The failure of the first two societies came about because of credit and local buying instead of 'buying of the honest wholesale'. The 1889 society followed the 'safe foundation' of no credit and purchased 90% of goods through wholesale or co-operative sources. A warning was given on the



– 'If you are in debt somebody owns you. Credit leads to discredit. Previous stores failed'. Holyoake had much faith in William Bryant, the young secretary of the news society. Other leading members included Isaac Davies, the president, and James Magness, a collier and self-educated man.

The Co-operative Society took over Ivor House (pictured left), the former grocery business of David Lewis, one of Blaenavon's earliest shopkeepers.

Image courtesy of Blaenavon Community Museum.

<sup>39</sup> This is a reference to the first international boxing championship fight, an illegal, bare-knuckle, outdoor event held in Hampshire in 1860 and fought between J.C. Heenan (USA) and Tom Sayers (UK). Sayers' right arm was badly hurt early in the fight but he carried on fighting one-handed for the rest of the two hour plus, brutal affair, which resulted in a draw.

<sup>40</sup> Co-operative News and Journal of Associated Industry, Vol. 21, No. 20, 17 May 1890





## The Historical Context

The new society was not without its difficulties. Its stores in Ivor Street burned down in December 1899 and had to be rebuilt. The new store was also engulfed in fire in August 1918 but, owing to the economic difficulties in the 1920s, it was not rebuilt until 1928. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the new Co-operative Society enjoyed greater success than its predecessors. It was run by the people of Blaenavon and provided the townspeople with affordable groceries, furniture, insurance, funeral expenses and even housing for its members. Further branches were opened in and around the town.



Left: the rebuilt Blaenavon Co-operative Stores, Blaenavon (c.1902).

Image courtesy of Blaenavon Community Museum



Left: the fire of 1918 necessitated another rebuild. The new stores were opened in 1928.

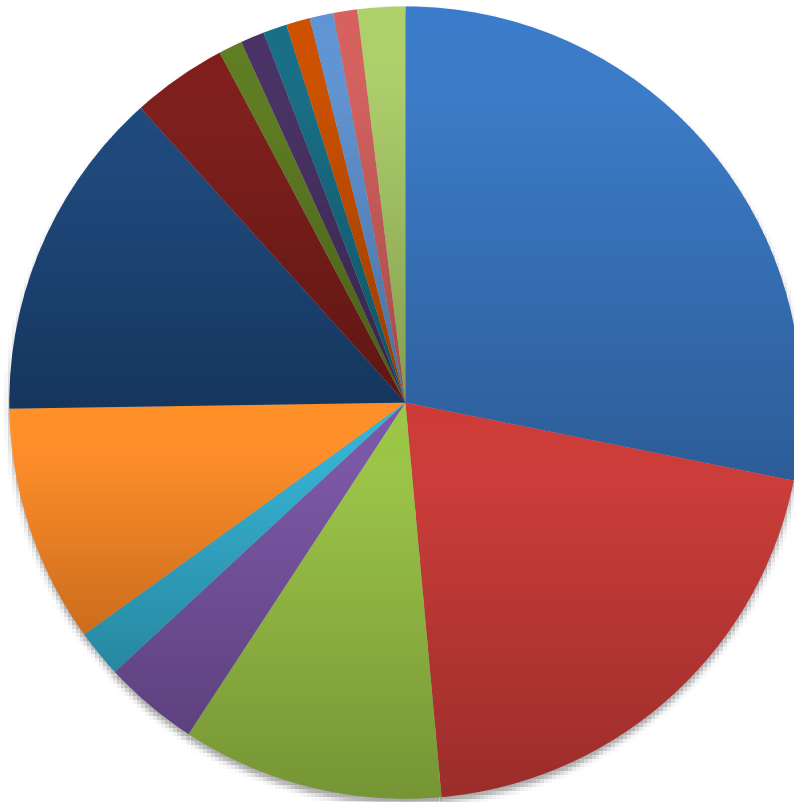
Image courtesy of Mrs Pat Morgan



# The People

Following the commencement of the ironworks in 1789, people flocked to the area to find work. Migrant workers from Wales and the west of England came to the area and set up home. Half a century passed between the opening of the ironworks to the development of a commercial centre in Blaenavon. Just as the ironworks attracted migrants a generation earlier so did the prospect of selling goods and services to a growing community of industrial workers.

Birthplace of 'Broad Street' Residents (1851)



- Local
- Monmouthshire (other)
- Breconshire
- Carmarthenshire
- Merionethshire
- Herefordshire
- Gloucestershire
- Somersetshire
- Ireland
- Sweden
- Staffordshire
- Middlesex
- Warwickshire
- Lancashire
- Glamorganshire



The first generation of Broad Street traders tended not to have been born in Blaenavon. Indeed, due to the economic structure of Blaenavon in the early nineteenth century, it is unlikely that there would have been many people within the community who had experience in business or trade. A study of the 1851 census for 'New Road' and 'Market Field' shows that, within a decade, the new commercial area in Blaenavon had attracted a diversity of tradespeople from mid and south Wales and the English counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Somersetshire. According to the 1851 census, 103 of the people living within the new shopping street were employed in the retail and service sectors. Of these 103 people, 33 were born outside Wales (31 in England, one in Ireland and one in Sweden<sup>41</sup>). Fifty were born in Monmouthshire, with 29 born in Blaenavon or its constituent parishes.

Of the twenty-nine born in the Blaenavon area, nineteen were female and, with the exception of a couple of dressmakers, all were all working in supportive roles as shop assistants, rather than playing an active role in running the businesses. The ten local males employed in the new town centre largely included young men, including apprentices living with their master. It appears therefore that shopkeepers and tradespeople from outside the Blaenavon area, including those in the traditional market towns in the counties, saw the market potential of investing in the emerging town. Gradually, Blaenavon people, especially women, were able to find employment with these businesses. Indeed, women's employment opportunities in the local industries were increasingly limited during the Victorian era so these new ventures provided a means for the women of Blaenavon to earn some money.

Children were also employed in Blaenavon's shops and sometimes worked long hours. In 1891, for example, Benjamin Cooke and Joseph Phillips, drapers, were fined for breach of the Factory Acts.

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<sup>41</sup> Ann Elizabeth Budding, aged 18 years, described as a 'shop woman', was born in Sweden but was a British Subject



Young people were found working at the business after ten o'clock at night. The drapers claimed that the business was under pressure and hence needed to employ the labour.<sup>42</sup>

During the nineteenth century, the town centre not only attracted migrants from other towns in England and Wales, it also became home to migrants from overseas. The Winterhalter family, who served as watchmakers and jewellers, came to Wales from Germany. The Blaenavon business was run by Leopold Winterhalter (1855-1921) but a branch of the family, headed by Maximilian Winterhalter, had been active in Pontypool since the 1860s. The Winterhalter family were Roman Catholic and the Blaenavon family worshipped at the Church of the Sacred Heart, St. Felix, in Ellick Street, which had been established by German and Italian Franciscan monks. The church's Benediction Monstrance was dedicated to the memory of Leopold Winterhalter, following his death in 1921. A polished oak high altar was dedicated to his wife Ann, following her death in 1939.<sup>43</sup>

Another notable family from continental Europe, who came to trade in Blaenavon, was the Robinson family. The Robinson family came from Germany (although some local historians suggest it was Lithuania). Jacob Robinson left the country of his birth when he was fifteen years of age. He travelled across Europe as a peddler before moving to Great Britain and ultimately Blaenavon. For a short period, he lived in the United States with his brother, but, following his brother's death, he returned to Blaenavon in 1887 and established a furniture business and became a pawnbroker. He married Bertha Jacobson, who was also German, in 1885 and had ten children (nine surviving to adulthood). The family were Jewish and worshipped in the neighbouring town of Brynmawr, which had a large Jewish population and synagogue. Generations of the Robinson family became important and influential figures in the Blaenavon community, serving as chemists, dentists and doctors.<sup>44</sup> The

<sup>42</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 26 Oct 1891

<sup>43</sup> St. Felix Church History (undated manuscript), held at Blaenavon Community Museum

<sup>44</sup> Blaenavon Local History Group, *From Funeral to Festival: A History of Blaenavon 1901-1951*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 2011), pp.242-243



family initially lived 'above the shop' but, in the 1910s, built 'Valhalla', a comfortable villa at Ton Mawr Avenue.

As with many Welsh towns, Blaenavon welcomed Italian immigrants. By 1911, over 20,000 Italians were living in Britain. There had been a significant increase in immigration from Italy by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and approximately 1,000 Italians were living in Wales by the end of the Victorian era. Large numbers of the Welsh Italians came from the town of Bardi, including famous families such as the Sidolis, who became famous producers of ice cream. Indeed, whilst Italians carried out a diverse range of jobs, many used their cookery skills and set up cafes or restaurants. Italian cafes and ice cream parlours opened across the industrial communities of Monmouthshire and Glamorganshire from the 1890s onwards.<sup>45</sup>

There were several Italian families in Blaenavon, including the Belli family, the Fecchi family, the Fulgoni family, the Obertelli family and the Vacara family<sup>46</sup>. Between them, the families ran cafes, ice-cream parlours, temperance bars, and fish and chip shops.<sup>47</sup> Welsh Italian cafes were well-known for their friendly atmosphere and provided places for people to take a break from the hardships of the world around them and enjoy socialising and refreshment. Indeed, Belli's cafes in Broad Street continued to operate well into the twentieth century and many residents of Blaenavon have fond memories of the hospitality offered in these establishments.

<sup>45</sup> Phil Carradice, 'The Italians in Wales', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/fdcff8e1-66dc-34e2-b279-a6e7280958cc>. BBC Wales. (Weblog 22 Oct 2012)

<sup>46</sup> Henry Vacara ran a fish and chip shop in Ivor Street and lived at 7 Ton Mawr Road. He and his father had been born in the UK but his grandfather Andrew Vacara was a musician born in Genoa, Italy.

<sup>47</sup> Blaenavon Local History Group (2011), pp.60-61



## Civic Life

### ***Blaenavon Local Government Board***

The Public Health Act of 1848 allowed for the formation of Local Boards of Health to administer public health in a locality. The formation of such a Board required a petition by ratepayers, an inquiry by the General Board of Health, a report, an Order in Council and ultimately the election of members to the Local Board of Health. A Local Board of Health was required to appoint a surveyor, an inspector of nuisances, a clerk and a treasurer to carry out the functions of the Board. The Boards were afforded powers to deal with sanitary issues such as sewerage, drainage, the removal of nuisances, the cleansing of streets, the regulation of slaughterhouses and the sanitation of lodging houses and cellar dwellings.

The Local Government Act 1858, which superseded the 1848 Act, afforded greater powers to the Local Boards and made the process of forming a Board easier. Under the Act, any place not having a known or defined boundary, was afforded the right to petition a Principal Secretary of State to settle its boundary for the purposes of the said Act. At a meeting of the Board of Roads, held at the King's Arms Inn, King Street, in 1859, it was resolved that it was desirable that the provisions of the Local Government Act 1858 should be adopted for the more effective management of Blaenavon's highways, paving and other local affairs. It was further agreed that a petition should be forwarded to the Home Secretary requesting that a District be formed of portions of the parishes of Llanover, Llanfoist, Llanwenarth and Trevethin.

On 11 January 1860, Sir George Cornwall Lewis, the Home Secretary, issued an Order in Council in which the boundary of the Blaenavon District was confirmed and defined. Under the Order, Mr Israel Morgan, a grocer and churchwarden, was appointed as Summoning Officer to take all such steps as may be necessary for deciding as to the adoption of the boundaries of the local government district of Blaenavon. He gave notice that a meeting would be held for property owners and



## The Historical Context

ratepayers within the district, at the King's Arms Inn, on 22 February 1860. At that meeting, it was resolved unanimously 'that the Local Government Act 1858 be adopted in and for the District of Blaenavon' and 'that fifteen be the number of members to be elected to constitute the Local Board of the District.'

At the April 1860 election, the first to be conducted in conformity with the provisions of the Public Health Act 1848 and the Local Government Act 1858, the following persons were elected:

<b>NAME</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>
DODD, Benjamin	Mineral Agent
GEORGE, William Henry	Grocer
HARRIS, John	Grocer
HEMMING, Thomas	Mill Manager
JONES, the Reverend John	Incumbent
LEWIS, John	Furnace Manager
LEWIS, David	Grocer
MORGAN, Israel	Grocer
PLUM, Thomas William	Manager of Blaenavon Works
PRUTTON, Robert	Victualler
STEEL, Dr Richard	Works Surgeon
THOMAS, Thomas	Engineer
WHEELER, John	Grocer
WILLIAMS, John E.	Grocer
WILLIAMS, John Griffith	Brewer etc.

Of the fifteen members elected, eight were traders or businessmen. Six held senior positions within the Blaenavon Company whereas the other member was the incumbent of the local Anglican church. This illustrates the increased influence of tradesmen in the growing town. Just a generation earlier, the community was dominated by the ironmasters and their senior employees. Whilst the industrialists still retained significant power, they were no longer Blaenavon's only decision-makers. In spite of this, at the inaugural meeting of the Local Board, held at the King's Arms Inn on 26 April 1860, the honour of becoming the Board's first chairman was afforded to Thomas William Plum,



the General Manager of the Blaenavon Company. He was proposed by Dr Richard Steel, Chief Surgeon of the Works, a proposal seconded by the Reverend John Jones, the long-serving curate-in-charge of St. Peter's Church and a close ally of the Blaenavon Company. None of the tradesmen presented any opposition and the proposal was passed unanimously.<sup>48</sup>

Mr Plum welcomed the town's adoption of the provisions of the Local Government Act and was pleased to have been presented the opportunity to 'improve the moral as well as the physical condition of the working classes'. He noted the potential to improve the sanitary conditions of the rapidly growing district and called on members of the Board to support 'every possible improvement, without, at the same time, incurring expenses that would be likely to emburden the ratepayers.' Mr Plum acknowledged the 'great responsibility' that he and the Board had undertaken but was confident that 'in so good a cause' their efforts would be 'crowned with success'.<sup>49</sup>

Several officer roles were also decided upon at the Board's first meeting and provide an indication of the work of the new civic institution. Henry Batchelor, the headmaster of the Blaenavon Boys' Endowed School, was appointed as secretary. Francis Prosser was unanimously appointed as the collector of the Board.<sup>50</sup> It was further resolved that Mr Prosser also be appointed to the important roles of surveyor and inspector of nuisances. It was agreed that Mr Prosser would receive a total salary of £25 per annum.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the history of the Blaenavon Local Board, all the chairmen of the Board were closely associated with the Blaenavon Company. In its 34-year existence, not a single tradesman held the office.

<sup>48</sup> Blaenavon Local Board, *Minutes*, 26 April 1860, GwRO A.410

<sup>49</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 28 Apr 1860

<sup>50</sup> Francis Prosser was the son of Rees Prosser, one of the early independent traders, and was proposed by David Lewis and seconded by J.G. Williams. William George, another of the early traders, proposed that Prosser be appointed to the roles of Surveyor and Inspector of Nuisances.

<sup>51</sup> Blaenavon Local Board, *Minutes*, 26 April 1860, GwRO. A.410.





<b>NAME</b>	<b>PERIOD OF OFFICE</b>
PLUM, Thomas William	1860-1863
STEEL, Dr Richard James Pye	1863 (February-June)
JONES, the Reverend John	1863-1868
HEMMINGS, Thomas	1868-1878
MARTIN, Edward Pritchard	1878-1883
WORTON, John	1883-1884
KENNARD, Robert William	1884-1890
WORTON, John	1890-1892
STEEL, Henry Charles	1892-1894

### **The Naming of the Streets**

One of the first tasks of the Local Board was to provide names for Blaenavon's principal streets. At its meeting of 31 May 1860, the Local Board appointed a sub-committee to provide recommendations for the names of streets. The committee, consisting of the Reverend John Jones, John Griffith Williams and John Wheeler, reported back their recommendations at the meeting of 28 June 1860, which were adopted, with some alterations.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>BRIDGE STREET</b>	commencing at the railway crossing of the Pontypool road running eastward, about 100 yards to the cross road
<b>HILL STREET</b>	continuation of Bridge Street, running eastward and as far as the Cross Keys in Queen Street
<b>ALBERT STREET</b>	from the top of Bridge Street running northwards as far as Broad Street
<b>PRINCE STREET</b>	commences at the old bridge over the Avon Llwyd running northward as far as the Prince of Wales Inn
<b>BROAD STREET</b>	from the corner of Albert Street running north-eastwards nearly in a straight line, about half a mile to the point where King Street and Queen Street commence
<b>MARY STREET</b>	first street from the south corner of Broad Street leading out of Broad Street on the right hand into Hill Street
<b>WILLIAM STREET</b>	second street leading out of Broad Street into Hill Street eastwards and westwards from Broad Street as far as Ivor Street
<b>JAMES STREET</b>	third street leading out of Broad Street and crossing Hill Street
<b>BAKER STREET</b>	between William Street and James Street and parallel with Broad Street
<b>IVOR STREET</b>	from the Prince of Wales to the White Hart Inn



<b>CHURCH ROAD</b>	from the end of the churchyard wall opposite the Prince of Wales Inn to the Shepherd's Square
<b>MARKET STREET</b>	fourth street leading out of Broad Street into Hill Street
<b>GEORGE STREET</b>	fifth street leading out of Broad Street into John Street
<b>ANNE STREET</b>	sixth street leading out of Broad Street into John Street
<b>DUKE STREET</b>	seventh street leading out of Broad Street, into John Street
<b>JOHN STREET</b>	Between Market Street and Duke Street nearly parallel with Hill Street
<b>CROSS STREET</b>	from the market house to the Duke Inn taking an angular direction eastward
<b>QUEEN STREET</b>	from the eastern corner, top of Broad Street, to Hill Street
<b>KING STREET</b>	from the western corner, top of Broad Street, to the Abergavenny Road
<b>NORTH STREET</b>	from Shepherd's Square to the upper Park Gate
<b>ENGINE ROW</b>	leading out of North Street into and near the top of King Street
<b>LLANOVER ROAD</b>	continuation of Queen Street from corner of Hill Street at the Cross Keys
<b>AVON ROAD</b>	continuation of Albert Street by the side of the river Avon Llwyd

It is noteworthy that the new street names represent the increased anglicisation of Blaenavon by the mid-nineteenth century. The three members of the sub-committee were all Welshmen. The Reverend John Jones (Ioan Chwefrawr), for instance, was an eloquent Welsh-speaker, born in Penbryn, Cardiganshire, well-known for the sermons he delivered in his native tongue.<sup>52</sup> Yet the names selected for the streets were, for the most part, devoid of any element of Welshness. With the exception of Llanover Road and Avon Road, the street names were similar to any that could be found in an English town or village. The English language was undoubtedly in the ascendancy in south Wales. English was the language of Empire and progress whereas Welsh was becoming less relevant. The new street names in-fact replaced older Welsh names for streets. King Street and Queen Street had been known as Heol Gwas Distewi, Broad Street was known as Heol y Nant and Hill Street was known as Heol y Garegog.

<sup>52</sup> Nathan Matthews, 'An Anglican Minister in a Nonconformist Town', *Blaenavon's Heritage: Reflections on Our Globally Significant Local Heritage* [Weblog], (21 Mar 2015), <https://blaenavon.wordpress.com/2015/03/21/an-anglican-minister-in-a-nonconformist-town/>



1860 was, quite understandably, considered a great year for the town of Blaenavon. The *Pontypool Free Press* records:

*the population is rapidly increasing, and is already about 7,500; it promises to be soon a large, prosperous and well-conducted town. To have in one year, a new parish, a local government act district, a new forge and mill, a new furnace, a new blast engine, a new national school, street lamps and volunteer rifles, is proof of no mean energy and enterprise. The streets are named, buildings are springing up everywhere, trade is flourishing, and gas and water-works have been erected.*<sup>53</sup>

The houses and buildings in the town's streets were numbered as of December 1866.

### ***Blaenavon Urban District Council***

The Local Government Act 1894 introduced significant reforms to local government in England and Wales. Urban or rural districts were defined and, for certain functions, became the responsibility of elected councils. In doing so, a second tier of local government was created below the county councils, which had been established under the Local Government Act 1888. The districts were based on the boundaries of the existing sanitary districts. Councillors were elected by men and women voters, and were elected for terms of three years. One-third of the council would retire in rotation each year. Candidates, who could be men or women, were required to be on the electoral register and have lived in the district for at least one year.

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<sup>53</sup> *Free Press*, 1860, as quoted in Davies (1975), pp.57-58



Above: Mr John Thomas (seated), clerk to Blaenavon UDC outside the council offices and Dr Avarne's surgery in Lion Street in the 1900s. Image courtesy of Mrs Pat Morgan.

The Blaenavon Urban District Council was formed in 1894, replacing the Blaenavon Local Board.<sup>54</sup> Its first chairman was Henry Morgan Davies, a member of the Liberal Party and a Chemist and Druggist, trading in Broad Street. The new authority took responsibility for sanitation, sewerage, cemeteries, refuse collection, the licensing of entertainments, housing and roads. The council took

<sup>54</sup> The minutes of both the Blaenavon Local Board and the Blaenavon Urban District Council are held at Gwent Archives, A.410



## The Historical Context

up offices in Lion Street (rebuilt in 1930) and several officers were employed, including a clerk, a medical officer of health, a sanitary inspector and a surveyor. Many of the members of the council during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras were shopkeepers, who were members of the Liberal Party. These included H.M. Davies, William Edwards and Thomas William Ruther. Charles White, the manager of the Gas Company, was another prominent Liberal during that period.



Cllr. H.M. Davies JP, first chairman of Blaenavon UDC

Key figures in the administration of the Blaenavon Urban District Council included John Thomas, the former headmaster of the Blaenavon Boys' Endowed School, who served as clerk to the council until his death in 1912, having previously served as clerk to the local board from 1864. He was succeeded by his 22-year-old son, Ilyd G. Gwyn Thomas, who remained in the role until his retirement in 1956. I.G. Gwyn Thomas was a dedicated public servant. He was also a churchwarden for 45 years, Secretary of the National Savings Committee and a Past Master of the Torfaen Lodge of Freemasons. He fought for the interests of the Belgian refugees in Blaenavon during the First World War and was awarded the Order of the Crown of Belgium with Silver Palms. He died in 1976, aged 85 years.

For several years, the council's surveyor was Mr John Morgan, a local builder. Mr Morgan was born in Rhymney in 1843 and, after a period living in Tonypany, he moved to Blaenavon, where he was appointed as estate overseer for the Blaenavon Company in 1882. Morgan was responsible for the designing of new engine houses for the company in 1883-84 and later served as architect for the renovation of St. Peter's Church. Following his resignation from the Blaenavon Company in 1892, Morgan set up business as a master builder. He was contracted to rebuild Ivor House into the new



co-operative stores in 1892 and, in 1893-94 was responsible for building Blaenavon Workmen's Hall. Morgan retired in 1911 but, at the age of 71 years, in 1915, was appointed surveyor to the Urban District Council following the death of Edward W. Edwards in France during the First World War. He continued to hold the position until December 1931 when he was 88 years old. Before his retirement he had designed and overseen the rebuilding of the Urban District Council's offices in Lion Street. A special 'smoker' celebration was held to mark his retirement in the Ivor Castle Hotel.<sup>55</sup> Mr Morgan wrote a poem to commemorate his extraordinary career. He passed away in 1935, aged 91 years.

### ***The Farewell***

Time was when I was young and bold,  
And swiftly could I run.  
But now not slow of foot, but old,  
And all my work is done.

To nations of the past, I am tied –  
I've lived my little day,  
And now I'd rather step aside  
Than block a youngster's way.

If only they should find,  
The thought that I was kind,  
And served them as a friend,  
For all my stretch of days,  
I'll ask no sweeter praise.

And if they'd found me true,  
Willing and glad to bear  
All I had power to do.  
Ready with all to share  
What little joy I gain,  
I shan't have lived in vain.

<sup>55</sup> *Free Press*, 11 Dec 1931; *Free Press*, 10 Feb 1928



### **Street Lighting and Utilities**

Following the establishment of the market place, John Griffith Williams set up a brewery nearby. He constructed a reservoir at Coed Cae Caradoc to provide water for his enterprise. A gasworks was also established near Bridge Street, which provided gas for the brewery. Williams soon made these gas and water utilities available to private and commercial customers in the growing town. The town hall, opened in Broad Street by Williams in 1862, also benefited from gas lighting and boasted four chandeliers, complete with some 400 gas-jets.<sup>56</sup>

In an era before electricity, gas lighting, using coal-gas, was used for both indoor and outdoor illumination. Gas lighting was introduced to some streets in London during the early 1800s, initially at Pall Mall and Westminster Bridge, but it was not until the mid-1820s that it was employed outside the capital city. John Griffith Williams was therefore keen to ensure that Blaenavon enjoyed the technological innovations of the modern age.

In 1867, the Blaenavon Gas Company Ltd. emerged as a rival to Williams's business. The company quickly established offices in Broad Street and, in February 1867, permission was granted from the Blaenavon Local Board to 'open the streets and roads for the purpose of laying down their gas pipes, whenever and wherever they may require to do so'.<sup>57</sup> In April 1867, the company invited tenders for erection of their new gas works, which was to be located near Avon Road.<sup>58</sup> The contract was awarded to Hunter and Company, who carried out the construction work and laid mains in Broad Street, King Street, Prince Street, Ivor Street and James Street. Furious at the competition, J.G. Williams ordered his men to rip up the pipes of his rival. The police had to maintain order and Williams pledged to seek an injunction to halt the work.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Evans (2003), pp.43-44

<sup>57</sup> Blaenavon Local Board Minutes, 26 Feb 1867

<sup>58</sup> *Hereford Times*, 4 May 1867

<sup>59</sup> Edward John Davies, *The Blaenavon Story*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Pontypool: Torfaen Borough Council, 1975), p.57



Notice was given to the Blaenavon Local Board in August 1867 from the British government that its resolution of 26 February 1867 permitting the Blaenavon Gas Company Ltd. to lay gas pipes was unlawful. A special meeting of the Local Board was called and held at the Girls' Endowed School on 9 August 1867 at which the members unanimously rescinded their earlier permission.

An amicable settlement was, however, eventually reached between the two parties in late 1867. It was thought that a lengthy legal battle between the two parties would have ensued but, following arbitration, the Blaenavon Gas Company Ltd. agreed to pay J.G. Williams the sum of £2,800 for the good will of the old gas and water works, to include all mains etc. connected to the water works, but in respect of the gas works, Williams was to take up his pipes and plant and agree that neither he nor his children would manufacture gas in, or near, Blaenavon.<sup>60</sup>

The Blaenavon Gas Company Ltd. agreed to supply gas and water in Blaenavon and to acquire the gasworks and the waterworks, belonging to John Griffith Williams. They agreed to maintain the existing gas works situated near Bridge Street and the waterworks situated upon the lands of David Lewis at Coed Cae Caradoc.<sup>61</sup> Notice was given in November 1867 that the Blaenavon Gas Company Ltd. would be dissolved and incorporated as a new company under an Act of Parliament.<sup>62</sup> A new Blaenavon Gas and Water Company Ltd. was empowered under the Blaenavon Gas and Water Order 1872 to 'maintain and continue gasworks for the supply of the town and district of Blaenavon.'<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *County Observer*, 21 Dec 1867

<sup>61</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 23 Nov 1867

<sup>62</sup> *Free Press*, 30 Nov 1867

<sup>63</sup> The water works were purchased by Blaenavon Urban District Council from the Blaenavon Gas and Water Company Ltd. in September 1900 for the sum of £10,801 4s 6d (*South Wales Echo*, 28 Sep 1900).





### **Directors of the Blaenavon Gas and Water Company Ltd.**

William Edwards	Grocer
David Lewis	Grocer
Joshua Evans	Surveyor
John Burgoyne	Builder
David Williams	Farmer
J Burford	Baker
Charles Smith	Grocer

John Harris, draper, served as the company's first secretary. Charles White was appointed manager in 1874.

The idea of providing street lighting to Broad Street was mooted as early as 1860 by members of the Local Board. A proposal by John E. Williams, grocer, in 1862 to introduce gas lighting to Broad Street failed and a parish poll held on the issue in January 1870 saw the proposal to light the streets rejected by 94 votes to fifteen. The *Free Press* sardonically reported that 'the powers of darkness prevailed' in Blaenavon. It was not until 1874 that the Local Board finally agreed that the streets should be illuminated with gas lighting.<sup>64</sup> Mr Stokes, gas fitter, installed the lamps along the town's main street and, on Thursday 8 October 1874, lit them for the first time in front of fascinated bystanders. The occasion did not go unmarked. The bells of St. Peter's Church were pealed in celebration and the volunteer rifle corps and Blaenavon Brass Band paraded through the town to 'lively' music. The parade was followed by a 'carnival evening' and refreshments at the White Horse Assembly Rooms in King Street.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Free Press*, 6 Jun 1874

<sup>65</sup> *Free Press*, 10 Oct 1874



In 1878, the streets of Blaenavon were plunged into darkness at night owing to a fault with the gas tank.<sup>66</sup> The Blaenavon Gas and Water Company Ltd. had to expend much money on its repair and the town was out of gas for some time. Charles White of the Blaenavon Gas and Water Company prepared a tender in 1879 to the Blaenavon Local Board for lighting the public lamps. It provides some indication of the extent of street lighting.

*I am instructed by my Directors to inform you that this Company will be pleased to light, extinguish, and clean the public lamps for three months, viz. from October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1879, to January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1880, from dusk till eleven p.m., and on Saturday night till twelve p.m. (five moonlight nights per lunar month excepted)., for the sum of 14s per lamp, or for the same period and with the same exception re moonlight nights, from dusk till dawn, at 23s per lamp.<sup>67</sup>*

A decision on the tender, however, was delayed because of an intervention by John Griffith Williams, who opposed the lighting of the street lamps due to the additional expense it would cause tradespeople and ratepayers during a time of economic depression. In October 1879, an anonymous 'traveller' to Blaenavon, wrote to the *Pontypool Free Press* to complain about the lack of street lighting.

*It is my fortune, or rather my misfortune, to have occasionally to pass through the streets of Blaenavon in common with several other neighbouring towns after the light of day has departed, and I have lately been very much struck by the apparent apathy and neglect of the Blaenavon Local Board in not having the gas lamps lighted. A letter published in your contemporary, in connection with a report of a recent meeting of the said Board, shed some light upon my mind, though certainly not sufficient to prevent my colliding with several persons as I passed through Broad Street on Monday evening last at nine o'clock, when it was so pitch dark in the main street of this*

<sup>66</sup> *Free Press*, 10 Aug 1878

<sup>67</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 10 Oct 1879



## The Historical Context

*populous town as to almost make true the old saying of not being 'able to see one's hand before one'.<sup>68</sup>*

However, John Griffith Williams, in response, argued that the expense of street lighting should not be incurred because the 'majority of tradesmen are drifting into insolvency and ruin'. He argued that, as a large ratepayer, he was justified in his remarks. A series of exchanges took place between Mr Williams and an anonymous 'old inhabitant' in the letters pages of the *Pontypool Free Press*. The old inhabitant, in his letter to the *Pontypool Free Press*, said that:

*He [John Griffith Williams] must not forget that we as tradesmen and ratepayers – large or small – are depending upon the public generally for our position as such, hence it is our duty to support such measures as will afford the greatest possible convenience and security to the entire neighbourhood.<sup>69</sup>*

He further argued that darkness made crime much more likely and he believed that if a poll was undertaken, the majority would want street lighting and protection.

J.G. Williams responded in the next edition:

*I now ask the rate payers a simple question. Is this a time to spend money when the Blaenavon Iron and Coal Works are nearly at a standstill; when the main part of the heavily-taxed publicans, shopkeepers and house-owners, are doing scarcely any business when many houses, shops and cottages are void, and those that are occupied paying little or no rent; and when general ruin and distress are staring them in the face?*

Williams, who claimed to have been advocating improvements in Blaenavon for fifty years, added:

*I have seen Blaenavon in a state of darkness before the present Gas Company erected their works, and long after then, when we were left in a state of darkness and were*

<sup>68</sup> *Free Press*, 18 Oct 1879

<sup>69</sup> *Free Press*, 18 Oct 1879



*obliged to resort to the use of oil and candles. No one complained then, neither did they rush howling into public print. If we could do without gas then, why should we not do without it now for a short time, until we can afford to pay for the luxury?<sup>70</sup>*

One wonders if J.G. Williams would have taken the same stance if he was still the proprietor of the gas works! Light, however, was eventually returned to the town.

### **The Chamber of Trade**

A Chamber of Trade was formed in Blaenavon in about 1897 to represent the interests of the tradespeople. The chemist and druggist H.M. Davies was its first chairman. This initial venture does not appear to have been successful but, in 1912, a revived Chamber of Trade was formed to allow the tradespeople of Blaenavon an opportunity to collaborate and discuss issues affecting trade and commerce in the town. The Chamber of Trade was active in the town for many years and was responsible for holding events such as eisteddfodau.

The new Chamber of Trade, under the chairmanship of Mr. J. M. Edwards, held a banquet at the Castle Hotel in February 1914, which was attended by over 100 people. There were some interesting speeches. Mr W. Lewis of the Great Western Railway proposed a toast to the 'Town and Trade of Blaenavon'. He observed that the town of Blaenavon had a reputation as one of the 'blackest spots in South Wales' but argued that this was an unfair assessment. Mr Lewis argued that Blaenavon was a progressive town. He noted that there were people still living in the town who could remember only two shops in the town. Amid much hilarity, he referred to these early shops, both located near the railway, as Blaenavon's 'Harrods' and 'Whiteley's' – references to the famous London department stores. Mr Lewis drew attention to the fact that the town could now boast 'the magnificent Workmen's Hall, the Co-operative Stores and the large number of splendid shops'. He added, to laughter, that the town had a new Police Court and 'the first man who was tried there boasted of it to that day'.

<sup>70</sup> Free Press, 25 Oct 1879



H.M. Davies, in his speech, observed that Blaenavon had not bred many 'merchant princes' but noted that it had produced tradespeople who brought great credit to the town. He reflected that Blaenavon tradesmen compared favourably with other towns when it came to the issue of commercial morality.<sup>71</sup>

### **Fires**

Fires presented a major threat to tradespeople and property owners in Blaenavon for much of the nineteenth century and efforts were made to improve fire-fighting as the century progressed. On 30 November 1871, some paraffin caught fire in the premise of Mr Morgan, ironmonger, adjoining the Lion Hotel, Broad Street. Both buildings, and others in the area, were enveloped in flames. The fire broke out at 5:30 in the afternoon but the fire engine from Abergavenny did not arrive until 7:45pm.<sup>72</sup> The ironmonger's shop was totally destroyed and considerable damage was inflicted to the Lion Hotel and premises belonging to Mr Jordan.<sup>73</sup> Just days later a fire broke out in the premises of Isaac Bloom, a pawnbroker in Broad Street. The fire took place in the early hours of the morning when Mr Bloom and his family were all asleep. They awoke to find themselves surrounded by smoke and had to escape in their nightclothes. Mr Bloom's mother-in-law, Mrs Harris, was described as an 'invalid' and had to be carried out of Mr Bloom's back. The whole family survived the fire but it was feared that the shock would kill the elderly Mrs Harris. It became apparent that Blaenavon was ill-equipped to deal with fire and the local press called on the townspeople to procure its own fire engine, a fire brigade, hydrants and fire escapes.<sup>74</sup>

Stung by the criticism, Blaenavon's first fire engine was purchased by the Local Board in early 1872. Described as being 'very fine', it was supplied by Mereweather and Sons of London and was drawn through the streets of the town in celebration. However, it could not be adequately tested because

<sup>71</sup> Abergavenny Chronicle, 27 Feb 1914

<sup>72</sup> Monmouthshire Observer, 2 Dec 1871

<sup>73</sup> Merthyr Telegraph, 15 Dec 1871

<sup>74</sup> Merthyr Telegraph, 15 Dec 1871



of the shortage of fire plugs in the town's water pipes. The Blaenavon Gas and Water Company pledged to introduce fire plugs and it was hoped that a fire brigade could be formed for the town.<sup>75</sup> Later that month, a fire broke out in King Street, at a property owned by Mr Jones, a draper. The engine was brought to the scene but it was not required. However, a proper test and demonstration was finally carried out on a Saturday in late February 1872 when Superintendent Freeman of Abergavenny connected the hose to the Afon Llwyd, near the railway station. It was a success and a 'voluminous stream', reaching heights of 40 feet was projected by the engine, amid great cheers from the many spectators who had assembled.<sup>76</sup> In May 1872, the Local Board resolved to pay for helmets and uniforms for Blaenavon's new Fire Brigade.<sup>77</sup>

An anonymous 'Blaenafon Poet' published the following poem in the *Free Press* to honour Blaenavon's newly formed fire brigade in July 1875. It should be noted that many of the town's firefighters listed in the poem are local publicans and businesspeople – for example, there are references to Mr James of the White Horse Inn; Mr Pullin of the Griffin Inn and Mr Jones of the Rising Sun.

The fire brigade for fire is made;  
They go to blazes, for that is their trade;  
They gallop to fire like going to hell;  
As faithful servants, they do work well.  
A shining cap upon each head,  
And, like the fire, their coats are red;  
Then, let the people say yes or no,  
Like demons, to blazes off they go.  
Among the foremost in the force,  
You'll see Mr James, without his "White Horse";  
Pullin, the Griffin, stout and stiff,  
On top of the engine, taking his whiff,  
In his coat of red, and his cap of brass,  
Like a jolly John Bull, he looks first class;  
Ellis, the shop, on top of the town,

<sup>75</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 23 Feb 1872

<sup>76</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 1 Mar 1872

<sup>77</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 31 May 1872



## The Historical Context

Where is such another as he to be found?  
Morgan, the saddler, Bigs and Whort,  
They work away through water and dirt.  
And Dick, the sailor, indeed, fair do's,  
Is just the boy to handle the hose;  
For cleaning the engine he is worthy of praise,  
It was so dirty, it took him two days;  
The dirt could be scraped away with a spade –  
That was the fault of the old brigade;  
He'll go through fire, climb on high,  
Fathom the deep, or traverse the sky;  
Being used to climbing the topmost sky;  
We have found a useful man at last.  
Jones, the Sun, has stood the test,  
Though he can't run, he comes in with the rest.  
No fear but these, well up and well dress'd,  
With water would doubt the devil's own nest.  
Should a fire occur, we have a brigade  
That would put all England into the shade:  
Ready for action by day or by night,  
To lead old Neptune 'gainst Vulcan to fight;  
The god of the river, the god of the seas,  
Would drown all the bugs and frighten the fleas.

In May 1877, at a meeting of the Blaenavon Local Board, it was remarked that no-one was looking after the fire engine and that a recent fire had taken place at Bunker's Hill, where the engine could not be used.<sup>78</sup> Dismay was expressed at a Blaenavon Ratepayer's meeting, held at the White Horse Inn in October 1877. It was observed that the Local Board had purchased a new fire engine and hose for the sum of £300 yet no-one had taken charge of it and it was not in use. It was felt that there was insufficient water pressure in the pipes and that it would be easier to use the fire engines from Abergavenny or Pontypool.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 1 Jun 1877

<sup>79</sup> *Free Press*, 20 Oct 1877



On the evening of 8 November 1878, a huge fire, believed to have been caused by a gas leak, broke out at premises known as the Brynmawr shop, Blaenavon. The fire ruined the shop and caused significant damage to the adjacent Forge Hammer Inn, engulfing its club room, and damaging two dwelling houses. It was beautiful moonlit night and a large number of the townspeople fought the fire, bravely climbing onto the rafters to pour water onto the flames, preventing the fire from spreading farther than the Forge Hammer's liquor vaults. An estimated £4,000 of damage was done to the affected properties, some of which were only partly insured. As a precautionary measure, other traders brought out their merchandise and furniture into the street but unfortunately some elements of the crowd took advantage of the confusion and stole items. Mr Witchell, the boot maker, had some of his boots stolen and one man was robbed of his purse.

The Blaenavon Fire Engine was deployed and Sergeant James and his men worked hard to extinguish the fire but the inadequacy of the brigade was noted by an observer. It was claimed that the fire engine took too long to arrive and that once it arrived the men were unable to operate it, being confused and disorganised. It transpired that the firemen had failed to bring the connecting pipe, rendering the fire engine useless. Fire engines were also summoned from Abersychan and Pontypool but arrived in Blaenavon too late to be of any use. The fire had to be fought with buckets of water and the hose had to be connected to a hydrant outside the Lion Hotel, an inconvenient distance from the fire. The local press was harsh in their criticism of the Blaenavon Local Board, warning them that they ought to keep their engine in better order and to ensure it had competent firemen. Apparently, there had been no proper fire brigade for two years.<sup>80</sup> In 1878, Thomas Jones [probably Thomas James] was requested to attend a meeting of the Blaenavon Local Board with a view to re-establishing a fire brigade for Blaenavon.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 16 Nov 1878; *Free Press*, 16 Nov 1878

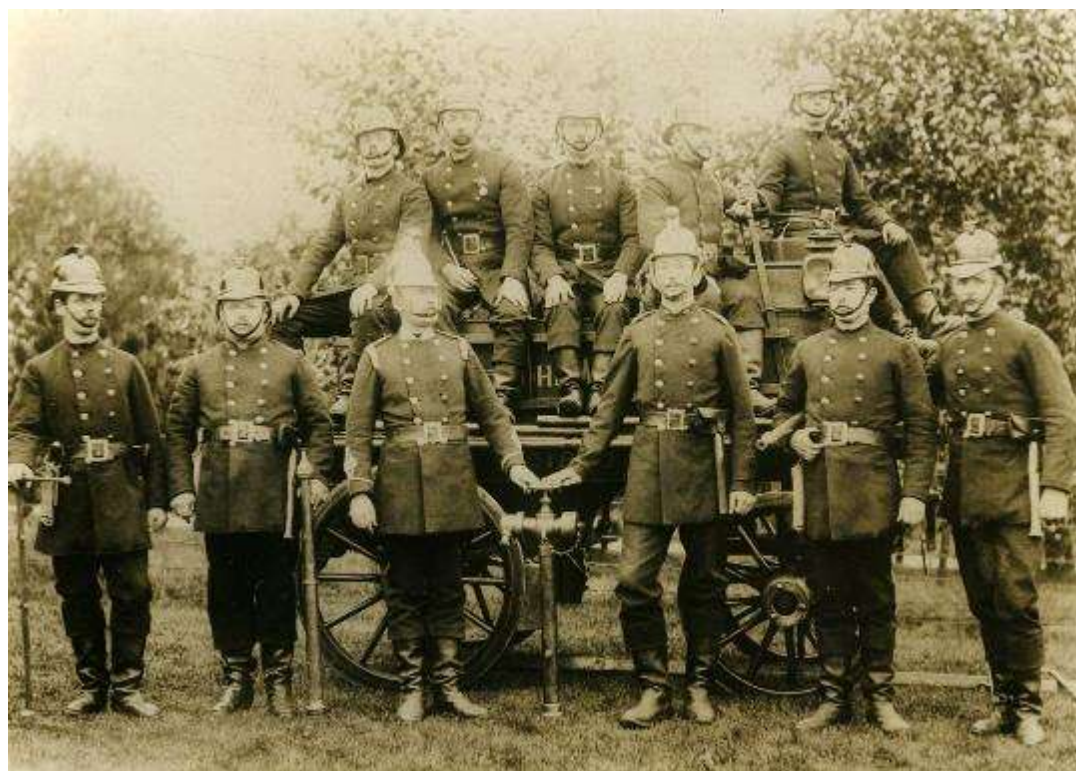
<sup>81</sup> *Free Press*, 7 Dec 1878





## The Historical Context

In 1885, Thomas James, Captain of the Fire Brigade, expressed his dissatisfaction that the fire service was being hampered due to a lack of water supply. A house fire at 1 Waun Street had necessitated that water be carried all the way from the White Horse pump in King Street. The Gas and Water Company recommended that Captain James visit Charles White at the Gas Works whenever a fire broke out to ensure an adequate supply of water was provided.<sup>82</sup> This was considered unreasonable as a house might be half burned down in the time that would take.<sup>83</sup> In 1886, the General Manager of the Blaenavon Company, John Worton, called for a new fire engine to be purchased and for the old one to be taken in part exchange.<sup>84</sup> The newly purchased fire-engine, named the 'John Worton', survives and is held in the Torfaen Museum Trust collections at Pontypool Museum.



The Blaenavon Fire Brigade with the John Worton fire engine.  
Image courtesy of Mrs Pat Morgan

<sup>82</sup> *Free Press*, 10 Jul 1885

<sup>83</sup> *Free Press*, 7 Aug 1885

<sup>84</sup> *Free Press*, 19 Mar 1886



Another disastrous fire took place in Broad Street in July 1886. Moses Solomon's pawnbroker's shop, opposite the Lion Hotel, was completely gutted and Mr Maynes' grocer's shop next door was also badly damaged. The heat was so intense that much damage was done to the front of the Lion Hotel. By the time the fire engine arrived and put the fire out, the damage had already been done.<sup>85</sup> In 1905, a lock-up shop, located between the Lion Hotel and the Rolling Mill Inn, owned by Mr James, a boot and shoemaker caught fire. The fire brigade attended but found it impossible to save the building, which was destroyed.<sup>86</sup>

The fire engine was used for civic events and even funerals. On the death of Evan Davies, undertaker and part time fireman, in March 1890, the coffin was conveyed on the fire engine from his home in New William Street to Ebenezer Cemetery, Llanover Road.<sup>87</sup> In September the same year, another fireman, Mr William Price, died aged 24 years, and his coffin was similarly taken to the grave upon the fire engine, under the superintendence of Captain White.<sup>88</sup>

### **Law and Order**

The growth of a commercial centre in Blaenavon inevitably attracted the attention of criminals. In January 1839, John Griffith Williams's shop was targeted by burglars. At about two o'clock in the morning, Mr Williams was awoken by his maid, who could hear noises in the shop below. J.G. Williams armed himself with a pistol and went downstairs to confront the two men who had broken in and were taking things from the drawers. Displaying 'courageous and manly conduct', he seized a 2lb weight and knocked one of the men down, before picking up a 4lb weight and knocking the other down. The men, Thomas Ford and William Davies, described as 'old offenders', cried out for mercy and were held at gunpoint until the arrival of Mr Hodder, the policeman, who arrested them.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>85</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 31 Jul 1886

<sup>86</sup> *Evening Express*, 13 Mar 1905

<sup>87</sup> *Free Press*, 7 Mar 1890

<sup>88</sup> *Free Press*, 19 Sep 1890

<sup>89</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 12 Jan 1839



The 'lock-up' in North Street.  
Image courtesy of Mrs Pat Morgan

Various cases concerning public disorder, theft, violence and petty crime, were heard in the courts throughout the Victorian era. The cases are too numerous to detail here. Blaenavon's original police station, known as the 'old lock-up', was located in North Street, near the ironworks. It was opened in 1838 and the first policeman was John Hodder, known locally as 'Mr Order'.<sup>90</sup> However, by the late 1860s, the need for a more modern station had been identified.

The county surveyor submitted plans in December 1869 for a second-class police station to be erected in Blaenavon for use by the Monmouthshire Constabulary. Plans were put forward at the meeting of the Blaenavon Local Board in February 1870 that the county police station be built on land near St.

Peter's Church. In July 1870, tenders were invited from builders interested in building the police station in accordance with the approved plans but delays were caused in early 1871 when the Blaenavon Iron Company had formed a new road through the Waun Field, taking a portion of the site for the proposed police station. The plans had to be altered accordingly but work was nearing completion by June 1871. The new police station was completed and occupied, albeit with some defects, in October 1871. A police court was established in Blaenavon in October 1892 and a building was erected for that purpose next to the Police Station in 1893 and opened in 1894. Until this point, court cases involving Blaenavon people were generally heard by the magistrates in

<sup>90</sup> Knight (2016), p.71



Pontypool or Abergavenny.<sup>91</sup> Many of the cases heard in the court during its first months included instances of public drunkenness.<sup>92</sup>



The Blaenavon Police Station and Court on Church Road. Image courtesy of Mrs Pat Morgan

It is noteworthy that, by the early twentieth century, several tradesmen sat on the magistrates' bench in Blaenavon. Justices of the Peace included H.M. Davies, William Edwards, Thomas William Ruther. Of course, cases from time to time involved crimes in the town centre, including those against their fellow tradesmen and magistrates. In 1910, for example, some youths were sentenced to a birching by Charles White JP and H.M. Davies JP, for stealing from the shop of Cllr T.W. Ruther JP, their fellow tradesman, Liberal councillor and magistrate.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 24 Oct 1892; Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire (1895), p.28

<sup>92</sup> *Free Press*, 6 Jan 1893

<sup>93</sup> *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 8 Jul 1910



## The Historical Context

### **The General Election Riot 1868**

The most significant outburst of lawlessness in Blaenavon's history took place in November 1868, following the announcement of the General Election Result. Pressure for electoral reform had been exerted on parliament in the years following the 1832 Reform Act, with the Chartist movement leading the calls for reform from 1838 until the 1850s. In 1867, a minority Conservative government led by Lord Derby and Benjamin Disraeli, passed the Second Reform Act, which extended the vote to some sections of the male working class. The new law, however, fell far short of awarding universal suffrage. It gave the vote to all male householders in the boroughs and to lodgers who paid an annual rent of at least £10. In the county constituencies, there was a reduction in the property threshold, enfranchising landowners and tenants with small amounts of land. However, it was mainly the men living in urban towns and cities that benefited, with the electorate of England and Wales doubling as a result of the Act.

Small towns like Blaenavon, which were located in a county constituency, rather than a borough, did not see the same increase in working class electors. The same qualifications were not introduced in the counties until the Third Reform Act of 1884, which introduced a uniform franchise across the nation. In 1868, Blaenavon, despite having a population of over 9,000 people, had an electorate of just 240 men. The men voted as follows:

<b>Candidate</b>	Morgan (Con)	Somerset (Con)	Clifford (Lib)
<b>Blaenavon Votes</b>	54	52	144
<b>Monmouthshire Totals</b>	3761	3525	2338

Despite the small Blaenavon electorate voting decisively in favour of the Liberal candidate, the Monmouthshire result, as a whole, favoured the Conservatives. This was the last election to be held before the introduction of the Ballot Act in 1872, so everyone's votes were made public. As such, it became clear, even before the polls had closed that victory in Monmouthshire would go to Benjamin



## The Historical Context

Disraeli's Conservative Party. From three o'clock on the afternoon of Tuesday 24 November 1868, crowds began to gather in the principal streets of the town as news began to spread about the election result. By dusk, many hundreds had gathered. Conservative supporting businesspeople became the targets of violence.



King Street, Blaenavon (image N.A. Matthews)

The riot started in King Street with an attack on Joseph Lewis's shoe shop and James Ellis's grocery business. The rioters proceeded to the White Horse Inn where the landlord and landlady Mr and Mrs James provided the men with free drink in the hope that they did not damage their property.<sup>94</sup> The historian Lewis Browning even claimed that the blue banners of the Conservative Party, flying outside the pub, were quickly changed for the red banners of the Liberal Party.<sup>95</sup> The White Horse was saved but the men got very drunk and marched down Broad Street where they embarked on a

<sup>94</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 26 November 1868

<sup>95</sup> Lewis Browning, *Blaenavon, Monmouthshire: A Brief Historical Sketch*, (Abergavenny: Minerva Brothers, 1906), p.43



sustained attack on the Red Lion Hotel, the property of John Griffith Williams, the local businessman and entrepreneur.



The Lion Hotel, Broad Street. Image courtesy of Mr Francis Keen

The rioters descended upon the hotel, smashed the windows and climbed in. The attack was sudden and John and Catherine Morris, the daughter and son-in-law of J.G. Williams, were clearly ill-prepared. The *Free Press* reports that 'Mr Morris, the landlord, and his family made their escape without being able to save a single thing.'<sup>96</sup> The family's furniture, books, papers, bedding and all their clothing were cast out into Broad Street and burned in a bonfire. The family's home was ransacked. £400 worth of spirits were quickly consumed by the rioters who proceeded to steal £130 cash, £13 worth of silver spoons and various other items of differing value. The *Pontypool Free Press* reports:

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<sup>96</sup> *Free Press*, 28 Nov 1868



## The Historical Context

*The liquors first attracted the attention of the rioters. Beer, wines and spirits were carried into the streets. The casks were broached, and the gutters ran with liquors. Many went down on their hands and knees to drink, and sucked away like beasts until they reeled and fell senseless.*<sup>97</sup>

The window frames throughout the building were knocked out. One rioter was killed when he rushed at an upstairs window, knocked it out and plunged head-first into Broad Street where he broke his neck. Unsuccessful attempts were also made to set fire to the property. The next day, a correspondent from the *Western Daily Press* observed that 'The Lion is now the mere skeleton of a house, nothing whatever remaining but the bare walls'.<sup>98</sup> The *Western Daily Press* records that 'hundreds of panes of glass were broken in different houses' within the town'.<sup>99</sup> Williams' drapery shop was also attacked as was his brewery in James Street. Following an attack on the Castle Hotel in Broad Street, the mob eventually got to the Prince of Wales Inn where serious damage was made.<sup>100</sup> Up to two thousand people were estimated to have filled the streets during the riot and soldiers from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers were called in from Newport to restore order to the town and made scores of arrests.<sup>101</sup>

For days after the riot it was believed that violence could re-occur. The Blaenavon Company suspended its business and it was reported that large numbers of drunken miners were wandering the streets and pubs making threats to destroy the lock-up in North Street and to attack the Blaenavon Company Shop unless their comrades were released from prison.<sup>102</sup> Constables were sworn in and soldiers were barracked in the Endowed Infants' School on Church Road until the situation had calmed down.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>97</sup> *Free Press*, 28 Nov 1868

<sup>98</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 26 Nov 1868

<sup>99</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 26 Nov 1868

<sup>100</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 2 Dec 1868

<sup>101</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 2 Dec 1868

<sup>102</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 26 November 1868

<sup>103</sup> Browning, p.44





# Religious Nonconformity

## **Nonconformity**

Across the South Wales Coalfield, during the nineteenth century, chapels allowed for the expression of the religious convictions of many individuals who lived and worked in the area. The power and influence of the chapels extended into lifelong learning, leisure and politics. Nonconformity could also be an expression of national, regional, local, or class identity. Women were also active in the chapels and were involved in sisterhood groups and Sunday Schools and, in some cases, were lay preachers. The strength of Welsh nonconformity was evident with the 1851 religious census, which showed that most Welsh worshippers were nonconformist in their religious beliefs.

Nonconformity also reflected the changing position of the Welsh language in the community. During the early nineteenth century, Welsh was the main language of Blaenavon but by 1911 just 5% of the town's population could speak the native tongue. As the nineteenth century progressed, and the Welsh language declined due to immigration, English speakers broke away from their Welsh-speaking brethren to establish their own chapels and Blaenavon had a mix of both Welsh and English chapels. Some of these still exist and remain as reminders of the relationship that existed between Welsh and English speakers during the nineteenth century.<sup>104</sup>

Chapels were built at a remarkable rate across Wales during the second half of the nineteenth century. Some chapels were constructed quickly and cheaply and later rebuilt in a grander form (for example, Broad Street English Baptist Chapel). In the late nineteenth century, there were times when chapels were being built across Wales at a rate of one new chapel, every eight days. In 1901, Blaenavon had no fewer than eighteen chapels and churches. However, due to the changing religious and cultural attitudes during the twentieth century, many of these chapels closed. Some

<sup>104</sup> Blaenavon Partnership, *Nomination of the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape for Inclusion in the World Heritage List*, (Pontypool: Torfaen County Borough Council, 1999), p.43



have now been demolished but surviving examples include the Park Street Methodist Chapel, Horeb Welsh Baptist Chapel, King Street English Baptist Chapel, Broad Street English Baptist Chapel, Zion English Baptist Chapel (Forge Side), Zion Bible Christian Chapel (no longer a chapel), the Avon Road Methodist Mission Chapel (no longer a chapel) and Bethlehem Welsh Congregationalist Chapel.

Chapels were places where people could express their important Christian beliefs and receive moral guidance in their lives. They were also important social, cultural and educational centres. Sunday schools helped many people learn how to read and write. Lectures, day trips, youth clubs and special events also provided entertainment and a sense of community among the congregation.

Chapels were run on democratic principles. The members of the congregation played an active role in the management of the chapel, with deacons taking a leading part. Debate was encouraged in both the Sunday Schools and in the chapels, which gave members of these institutions confidence to participate in the public sphere. Increasingly, nonconformists became involved in politics. With the extension of the franchise, particularly following the 1884 Reform Act, Welsh nonconformist men found themselves with a political voice. Finding their political home in the Liberal Party, Welsh nonconformists campaigned for issues such as the disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales.

Following the First World War, Welsh religious nonconformism entered decline. The horrors of the war and the uncertainties that followed made people question the old customs and beliefs. The rise of socialism and the Labour movement posed a challenge to the Liberal nonconformist traditions of south Wales. Alternative forms of culture and recreation during the twentieth century, such as the cinema, competed for people's attention. Chapels did not disappear overnight and certainly there were still strong congregations and Sunday Schools still in existence beyond the Second World War. However, the chapels did not have the social control or influence that they enjoyed in the



## The Historical Context

nineteenth century. Falling chapel membership and a declining population meant that congregations struggled to maintain the imposing chapel buildings and, across Wales, chapels closed, with many being demolished.

### **Chapel Building and Growth**

The Methodist Revivals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had a lasting impact on the religious life of Wales. Itinerant preachers would travel across the country, holding meetings in fields, barns, farmhouses or cottages in their endeavours to save souls and bring people to the Lord. Great revivalists emerged such as the energetic Howell Harris of Talgarth (1714-1773), who, it is claimed, held revival meetings at Persondy Farm, Garn yr Erw, near Blaenavon. A generation later, south Wales was being transformed by the Industrial Revolution and a new wave of revivalism, led by charismatic preachers such as Christmas Evans (1766-1838), sought to advance the cause of religious nonconformism in the new industrial communities.

The missionary work of the revivalists led to a significant rise in nonconformism. Initially, members of the various religious denominations met in humble buildings or in the homes of their leaders. For example, the Blaenavon Baptists, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, met at Ton Mawr Farm, where they listened to preachers from the Baptist Chapels of Llanwenarth and Penygarn. However, with the rise in membership, congregations sought to build chapels to accommodate their services. Across Wales, a busy programme of chapel building commenced and continued into and throughout the Victorian era. Chapels became hugely significant institutions, playing an important social, cultural and spiritual role in people's lives. Their architectural styles also helped shape the identity of the built environment in the growing towns of south Wales.

The earliest nonconformist chapel to be built in Blaenavon was Capel-y-Graig (Chapel of the Rock), a Calvinistic Methodist chapel constructed near the ironworks in the 1790s. The Baptists built their first chapel, Horeb, in what is now James Street, in 1807. A group of Welsh Congregationalists



## The Historical Context

established a chapel adjacent to the river, near what is now Avon Road, on Christmas Day 1820. They named their place of worship – Bethlehem. The Methodists held services in the same area, in a disused malthouse.

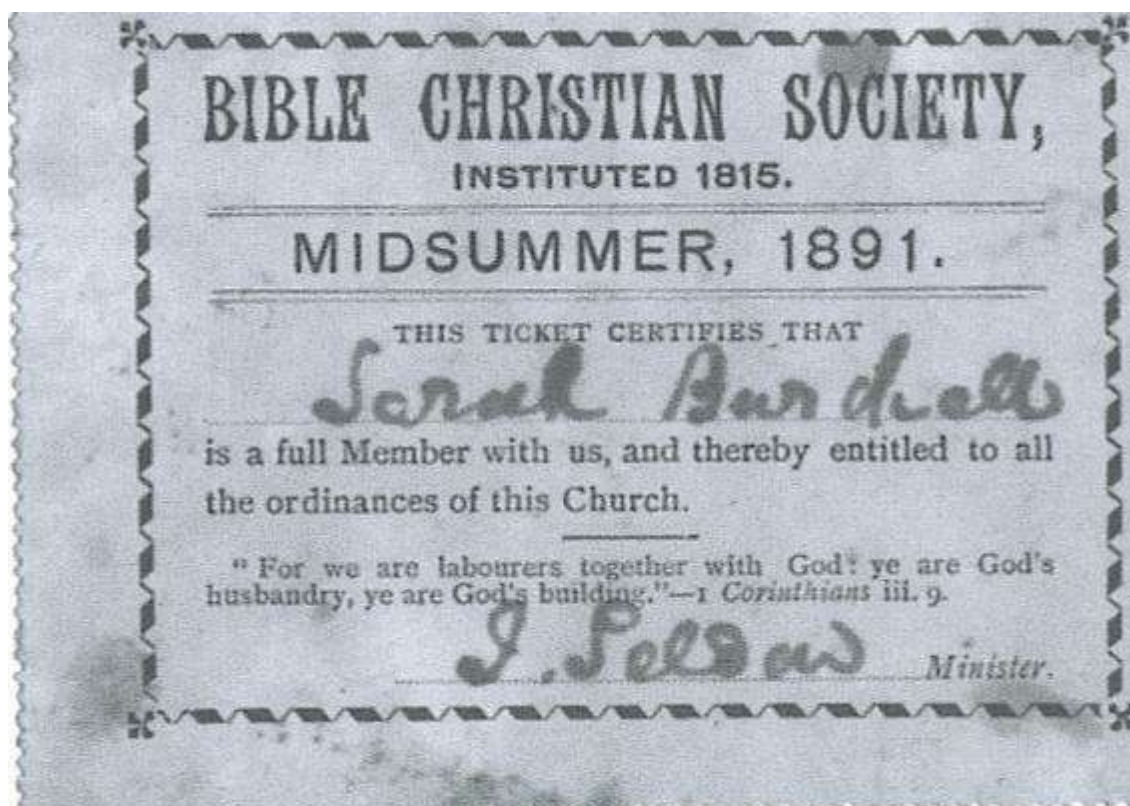
The early chapels were replaced within a generation. Capel-y-Graig was forced to close, as the land on which it stood, was needed by the ironworks. It was replaced by a new chapel, known as Penuel Chapel, was opened in 1819. Similarly, the original Bethlehem Chapel was replaced by a chapel of the same name, alongside the banks of the Nant Llechan in 1840. Chapels could also be built, especially if they had been built in haste or the growth in their congregations necessitated a larger building.



Bethlehem Welsh Independent Chapel (photograph N.A. Matthews)



The English Baptist Chapel in Broad Street, for example, was rebuilt in a grander form in 1888, featuring a far more ornate façade. Ebenezer Baptist Chapel, which had been opened in 1825, became greatly dilapidated by the 1870s and was too small for the needs of the congregation. It was rebuilt and extended in 1876, with a new schoolroom built underneath. The work was completed by the local builder John Burgoyne in March 1877. At its reopening service, eleven people were baptised after the evening service. The new chapel, which was built at a cost of £1,250, was described as 'one of the neatest and most convenient chapels in the district.'<sup>105</sup> The Bible Christian Chapel in Broad Street was extended by local builder John Burgoyne in 1861.<sup>106</sup> The chapel was re-opened for divine service in the September, when Miss Jollow of Devon preached three sermons to a large congregation, raising a fair amount of money for the chapel funds.<sup>107</sup>



Membership card of Sarah Burchell, Zion Bible Christian Chapel, 1891 (Image courtesy of N. Andriessen)

<sup>105</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 2 Apr 1877

<sup>106</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 15 Jun 1861

<sup>107</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 21 Sep 1861

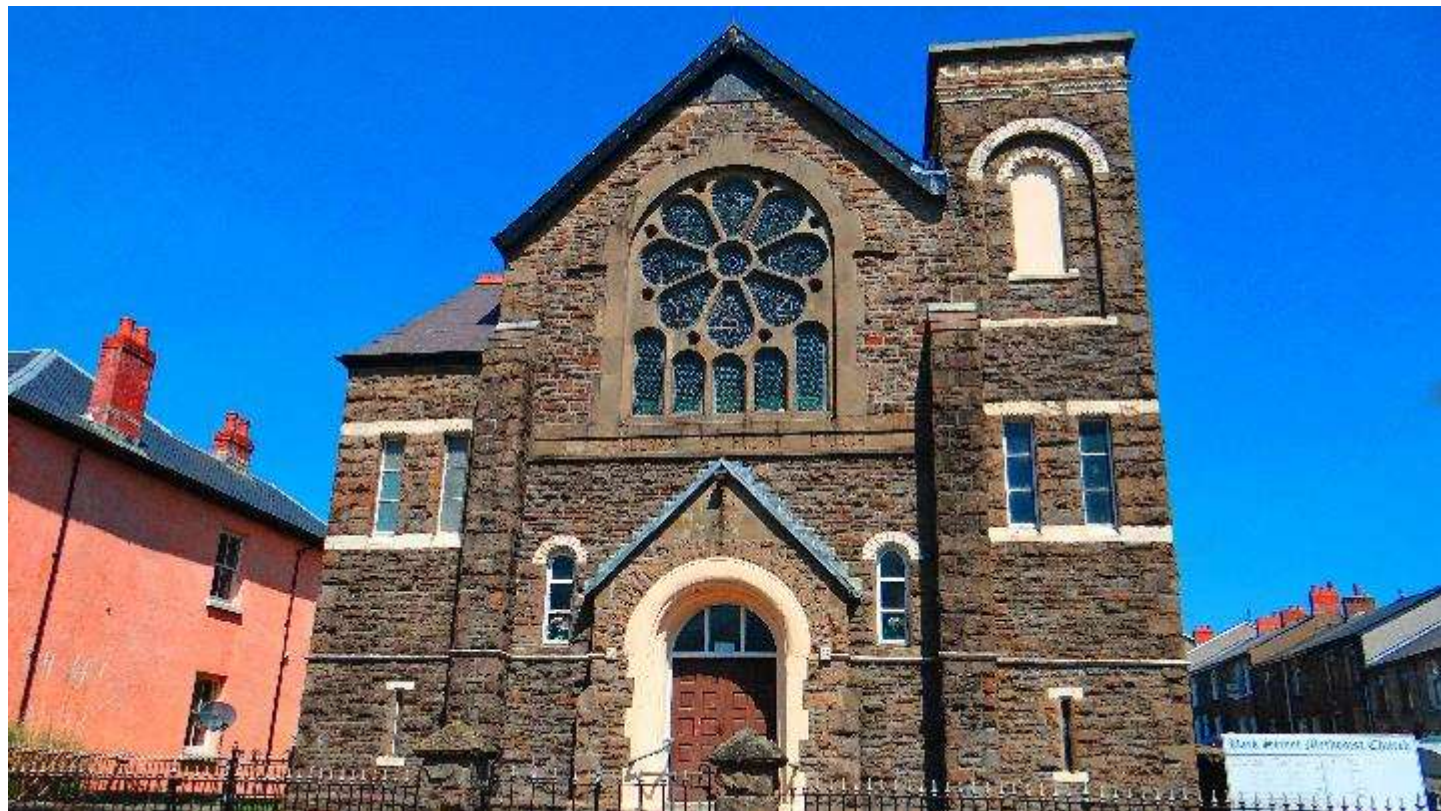


## The Historical Context

A new Horeb Chapel was built on the corner of High Street and Church Road in 1862 and opened in 1863. Park Street Chapel was built in 1885 by the Wesleyan Methodists to replace its chapel in James Street (former Horeb) and provide worship closer to the town centre, which would prove more convenient than Wesley Chapel, located in Chapel Row on the western outskirts of the town.



Horeb Welsh Baptist Chapel (photograph N.A. Matthews)



Park Street Methodist Chapel (photograph N.A. Matthews)

The building of a new chapel was a notable local event, which would often attract the interest and support of people of all denominations. In August 1877, memorial stones of the new Primitive Methodist Chapel were laid in the upper part of Broad Street. The members of the chapel marched from the old Chapel in King Street to the new site, singing 'All hail the power of Jesu's name'. A bottle was placed in a hole in the stone, containing a copy of *The Primitive Methodist* and other items. The foundation stone was laid by W.B. Lawrence, steward and trustee. Members then placed money on the stone – over £212. Several nonconformist ministers participated including William Rees (English Baptist), R. Hughes (Welsh Independent), J.E. Griffiths (English Congregational), P. Bellingham, A. Bevan and J. Harding (Primitive Methodist). When the ceremony was over, some 840-people adjourned to the White Horse Assembly Rooms in King Street, where tea was served



from 4pm to 7pm. This was followed by a jubilee meeting in King Street Chapel, attended by a large congregation.<sup>108</sup>

Chapel-building could also be instigated by disagreements and splits among congregations. These could involve a disagreement over scripture or dissatisfaction at the performance or appointment of a minister. In 1825, for example, there was a significant split within the Welsh Baptist congregation at Horeb Chapel in which 81 members decided to leave the chapel and build a new church across the road, which they named Ebenezer. A group of 46 English Baptists seceded from Broad Street Baptist Chapel in 1878 and held services in a room in Lion Street. Their numbers increased by the summer and sufficient funds were raised to purchase King Street Chapel from the Primitive Methodists.<sup>109</sup> This, and the transference of 52 members to the new Zion English Baptist Church at Forge Side in 1874-75, meant that the Broad Street Chapel lost a significant number of members and was weakened as a result.<sup>110</sup>

### **Welsh Language**

Chapels provided an important platform for the articulation of the Welsh language and its associated culture. Welsh was used in sermons, in song, in poetry and prose, and at the eisteddfodau and other activities held by the chapel. However, as the industries grew, so did the population. Increasing numbers of English migrants came to seek work in the mines and ironworks of south Wales. English speaking chapels ensured that Welsh nonconformism was able to exert influence on the lives of English speakers, even if they did not speak Welsh.

English-speaking Baptists, led by William Underwood, a local ironmonger, formed a congregation in 1844 and met initially in a house in Hill Street.<sup>111</sup> There was a degree of collaboration between

<sup>108</sup> *Free Press*, 1 Sep 1877

<sup>109</sup> *Free Press*, 31 Aug 1878

<sup>110</sup> Broad Street English Baptist Church, *A Short History of Broad Street English Baptist Church, Blaenavon*, (1944)

<sup>111</sup> Broad Street English Baptist Church (1944)





Broad Street English Baptist Church (photograph N.A. Matthews)

the Welsh and their English-speaking brethren. on 3 August 1845, the English Baptists held their first anniversary service at Horeb Baptist Chapel, which had been lent to the English speakers by the chapel's Welsh speaking congregation. Sermons were preached in both English and Welsh by the Reverend John Jones of Raglan and Thomas Price of Pontypool Baptist College.<sup>112</sup> By 1847, the congregation had grown and a purpose-built chapel was required. The English Baptist Chapel was erected opposite Bethlehem Chapel on the new road.<sup>113</sup> The congregation took advantage of their proximity to the Nant Llechan and conducted outdoor baptisms in the stream.<sup>114</sup>

The language issue affected various denominations across Wales during the second half of the nineteenth century. Congregationalists were, by 1860, keen to establish English chapels in towns and manufacturing districts where 'the English language and English habits were daily gaining ground'. A committee of Welsh and English Congregationalists was formed in Merthyr Tydfil and it was decided that English missions would be established in a variety of industrial towns in south Wales, including Blaenavon.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>112</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 9 August 1845

<sup>113</sup> There was derision in the *Monmouthshire Merlin* (19 Jun 1847) over the numerous spelling mistakes in a plan issued by a builder for the erection of Broad Street English Baptist Chapel: "Ground Plan and Elevation of New Babtize Chapel for the Englis. To be erected at Blaenavon Iron Works in the Parish of Llanover Uper and County of Monmouth. Scale 4ft to the Inch. In-side-hend.- Elevation of Pulpit. Doors and Puse."

<sup>114</sup> Broad Street English Baptist Church (1944)

<sup>115</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 30 Nov 1860



## The Historical Context

In about 1863, the Reverend Thomas Griffiths of Bethlehem Chapel suggested that it was important that an English cause be established in Blaenavon due to the gradual disuse of the Welsh language in the town. Several English-speaking members therefore left Bethlehem Chapel, with the blessing of the Welsh members, to form an English church. They met initially at the town hall, but this proved inconvenient, and, after a year, the congregation moved into the former Horeb Baptist Chapel in James Street, which had been vacated in 1863. They remained there until early 1867 when the Welsh Baptists sold the James Street Chapel to the Wesleyan Methodists.

The English Congregationalists, led by the Reverend D. Evans of Carmarthen College, returned to the town hall for services but decided that a new church would be required. An elevated spot in Lion Street was identified and, with the financial support of the Society for Promoting English Preaching in South Wales and Monmouthshire (£50) and the generosity of Mr Samuel Morley MP



(£100), the congregation were in a position to commence the new scheme.<sup>116</sup> In July 1867, Henry Overton Wills of Bristol, the famous tobacconist and congregationalist, laid the foundation stone of the new Independent Chapel. The work took just under a year to complete and the opening service of the English Congregationalist Chapel took place on 18 June 1868 when excellent sermons were preached by the Rev H.T. Robjohns of Newcastle upon Tyne and H. Oliver of Newport.<sup>117</sup>

Lion Street Congregationalist Chapel 1917 (image courtesy of Blaenavon Community Museum)

<sup>116</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 13 Jul 1867

<sup>117</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 27 Jun 1868



As the nineteenth century progressed, Welsh speakers became a minority group in Blaenavon. Even the Welsh congregations had to appeal to English speakers. For example, in August 1866, Ebenezer Welsh Baptist Chapel, at its anniversary, held its morning and evening sermons in Welsh but also offered an English language service in the afternoon.<sup>118</sup> Bethlehem Chapel, the last of Blaenavon's nonconformist chapels to abandon the native tongue, also offered bilingual services to mark its anniversary in April 1910.<sup>119</sup> The relationship could be reversed, however. Lion Street English Congregationalist Chapel, at its 1885 anniversary, held a Welsh sermon in addition to the English.<sup>120</sup> Such gestures indicate that the relationship between the Welsh and English congregations was generally good. However, there were some tensions.

Confusion arose in 1862 when the Reverend J.R. Morgan of Llanelly delivered a lecture, in Welsh, on 'Different Sorts of People' at Ebenezer Welsh Baptist Chapel. The chapel was thronged with people, every available space, including the gallery was filled. However, a large proportion of the audience were English speakers who had attended because handbills, advertising the event, said that the event would be in Welsh and English. The English speakers felt 'thoroughly duped'. It was felt by some that it had been a deliberate ruse to procure money towards the liquidation of the chapels' debts. The *Monmouthshire Merlin* stated that the method 'is not likely to commend the chapel authorities to public favour.'<sup>121</sup>

### Revivals

Religious revivals were common in Wales during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These were occasions when there was an increased interest in Christianity in the country. During these phenomena, religious fervour spread through the land and made people conscious of the 'sinfulness' in their lives. The revivals, which believers attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit, had significant impacts

<sup>118</sup> *Usk Observer*, 25 Aug 1866

<sup>119</sup> *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 29 Apr 1910

<sup>120</sup> *Free Press*, 14 Aug 1885

<sup>121</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 12 Apr 1862



on people's lives and behaviour (in the short-term, at least), with mass conversions taking place across the country. Congregations welcomed new members and adherents and, as a result, nonconformism became increasingly influential. Remarkable scenes would often be witnessed. For example, during a revival in Blaenavon, prayer meetings were held by the miners underground during their dinner hours.<sup>122</sup> No fewer than fifteen major revivals took place nationally from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to 1859. Revivals could also take place locally, with local nonconformist preachers working to build religious fervour in their communities. These often took place through the form of organised revival meetings.

In 1879, amid industrial and economic distress, there was much revival activity in Blaenavon. Special revival services were held in Broad Street Baptist Chapel by Mr Bright, the blind evangelist.<sup>123</sup> There was a week of revival services with three very effective sermons being delivered by the visiting preacher. Described as a 'good, lively singer', Mr Bright also gave a lecture on 'The Blind'.<sup>124</sup> King Street Chapel was visited by Mr Barnham, a singing evangelist. He caused much sensation by his singing and his performance on the American organ.<sup>125</sup> The town was, however, deprived of a visit by Mr Brown 'the converted clown'. He was scheduled to preach at the Primitive Methodist Chapel but his plans were disrupted by the bad economic trade in Blaenavon.<sup>126</sup> Also in 1879, revival services were held in the newly constructed Primitive Methodist Chapel by Rev. T.T. Shields, with large attendance from people of various denominations. Each evening, the friends met at different places in the town and sang in procession towards the chapel, where large congregations assembled.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>122</sup> *Hereford Times*, 16 Mar 1861

<sup>123</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 23 Jan 1879

<sup>124</sup> *Free Press*, 25 Jan 1879

<sup>125</sup> *Free Press*, 19 Jul 1879

<sup>126</sup> *Free Press*, 20 Dec 1879

<sup>127</sup> *Free Press*, 29 Nov 1879



In the same year, the Salvation Army also made efforts to save the souls of the Blaenavon people. They marched through the streets singing, and addressing a large crowd near the post office at the bottom of Broad Street.<sup>128</sup> This would become a regular occurrence in Blaenavon later in the nineteenth century and beyond, when outdoor services and the singing of hymns would take place by the Salvation Army in Prince Street at the Hallelujah Lamppost and outside the Market Tavern in Broad Street.

Among the most notable revivalists in Blaenavon at that time were Owen Tidman (1843-1934) of Bradford on Avon and his wife Sarah Annie Goseley (1849-1932). As itinerant Baptist preachers, the couple, and their young children, had travelled to diverse areas of the country, including Edinburgh, West Bromwich, Worcester and Taunton, before arriving in Blaenavon in about 1879. The couple played a significant role in the revival that was taking place in the community. In March 1879, Sarah Tidman addressed an audience of approximately 700 people, who had crammed into King Street Baptist Chapel to listen to her sermon.<sup>129</sup> Her husband, Owen, was believed to have been blessed with 'healing hands' and was known for his energy and powerful sermons. He went into the streets of the town during the evenings and preached in the open-air to large assemblies of people, encouraging people to turn to the Lord for their salvation.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *Free Press*, 29 Nov 1879

<sup>129</sup> *Free Press*, 15 Mar 1879

<sup>130</sup> *Free Press*, 14 Aug 1885



Outdoor preaching in Blaenavon c.1920s (image courtesy of Mrs Pat Morgan)

Such was the success of the Tidman mission that, shortly afterwards, Owen Tidman was offered the pastorate of the new Baptist chapel, with the unanimous support of the King Street congregation. He duly accepted the call in April 1879.<sup>131</sup> By November 1879, it was reported that the chapel had enjoyed success through the efforts of the esteemed pastor.<sup>132</sup> He subsequently oversaw the renovation of King Street Chapel and was known for his ability to use anecdotes and illustrations in his sermons to capture the imagination of his congregation. The Tidmans managed to inspire members of the congregation to assist in their street missions and, in 1885, it was reported that an 'earnest band of helpers' from the chapel was supporting the Reverend Tidman in his work.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>131</sup> *Free Press*, 5 Apr 1879

<sup>132</sup> *Free Press*, 29 Nov 1879

<sup>133</sup> *Free Press*, 14 Aug 1885



It is noteworthy that Mrs Tidman also played such an important role in the life of the chapel and in the revivals. It was not uncommon, however, for females to take an active role in delivering sermons or addressing congregations in nonconformist chapels. For example, revival services were held in the Bible Christian Chapel in 1881 by Miss Parsons, an evangelist. Large numbers of people flocked to listen to her. A procession was formed and the congregation marched through the town singing.<sup>134</sup> In 1861, Miss Jollow, a female orator, from Devonshire preached sermons in Blaenavon at Bethlehem Chapel and the Bible Christian Chapel, at which large audiences gathered. The funds were to go towards the extension of the Bible Christian Chapel.<sup>135</sup> Also in 1861, 13-year-old Miss Evans of Tredegar, delivered lectures on teetotalism to large audiences at the Welsh Methodist Chapel and the Welsh Independent Chapel, where she was loudly applauded.<sup>136</sup>

There was a degree of co-ordination in planning a religious revival. The various ministers of the town, of differing denominations, would collaborate to organise revival activity. For example, in 1880, a combined revival movement was decided upon by the Primitive Methodist, Wesleyan Methodist, Bible Christian, English Baptist (King St) and Congregational Ministers, who arranged to hold, for a fortnight, alternate revival meetings in their respective chapels.<sup>137</sup> The success of the revivals varied and, by the end of the nineteenth century, they tended to be largely local in nature. However, an extraordinary religious revival emerged in 1904 and had an impact across the nation.

The so-called Evan Roberts Revival of 1904-1905 was the last major national religious revival to take place in Wales and was the largest to have ever taken place in the country. Roberts, a 26-year-old former miner, travelled across Wales with his followers, spreading the word. He took a non-denominational approach and held prayer meetings and singing. The revival received much attention from the press, who reported on the excitement experienced in communities across Wales.

<sup>134</sup> *Free Press*, 9 Dec 1881

<sup>135</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 6 Jul 1861

<sup>136</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 21 Sep 1861

<sup>137</sup> *Free Press*, 27 Nov 1880



The revival began in the autumn of 1904. The first signs of it reaching Blaenavon came in December, when the pastor of Horeb Chapel broke down with emotion at a prayer meeting, whilst attempting to relate his experiences at a revival meeting in Caerphilly.<sup>138</sup> Sidney Evans, a close friend and supporter of Evan Roberts, led a mission in Blaenavon in January 1905. Meetings were held with great fervour. On a Wednesday in early 1905, Evans held services in King Street Chapel in the morning and Penuel Calvinistic Chapel in the afternoon. In the latter place, the minister had to admonish his attendees for their lack of warmth. However, it was reported that the 'fire' did not take long to take hold. Remarkable scenes were witnessed – a man prayed fervently for the drunkards and gamblers of Blaenavon, which led to self-confessed gamblers and drunkards coming forward from parts of the chapel to confess their sins and surrender to Christ. Twenty-four converts were made. The last meeting of the mission was held at night in the Workmen's Hall – Sidney Evans said he 'had been told that out of Blaenavon's population of 13,000, there were only 3,000 Christians.' He asked, somewhat provocatively, 'could this be wondered when some of the churches were so cold and indifferent?'. On that evening some 93 conversions were recorded, with 300 made in total during the Blaenavon mission.<sup>139</sup>

It is worth noting that the Reverend E.V. Tidman, the son of Owen and Sarah Tidman, followed in his parents' footsteps and became an important revival preacher in 1905. He was born in Edinburgh in 1870 but moved to Blaenavon at an early age, where he attended the British School, Park Street, under the headmastership of Titus Morris Jenkins. He became a schoolteacher but, in 1892, entered Pontypool College to train for the Baptist ministry. He went to Cardiff College for four years and obtained the theological diploma of ATS. In 1897, he took a pastorate at Nazareth, Mountain Ash.<sup>140</sup> His parents had moved away from Blaenavon by the time of the 1904-05 revival.

<sup>138</sup> *Evening Express*, 10 Dec 1904

<sup>139</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 14 Jan 1905

<sup>140</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 25 Feb 1905





The renewed religiosity continued even after the missionaries had departed. On a Saturday evening in March 1905, a group of boys, aged between the ages of 14 and 16 years, held prayer meetings in the principal streets of the town. Just before 11pm, they were holding a meeting in William Street, when a drunken man went in their midst and began to sing. He asked to be taken home and have a prayer meeting there. Six boys took him home, got on their knees and prayed for the man's soul and he was duly converted.<sup>141</sup> Never again would a revival like that of 1904-05 be seen in Wales again. However, it was not the last local revival to take place. For example, in 1906, revival services were held at the Primitive Methodist Church, Blaenavon by Albert Shakesby, a former boxer, prize-fighter and author of *From Street Arab to Evangelist*.<sup>142</sup> During this local revival, some 250-300 conversions took place. Among the number were some 'well-known characters'. Midnight services were held, with hundreds flocking to the services from all parts of Monmouthshire and it was reported that the chapel was packed each night.<sup>143</sup>

### **Chapel Life**

A stereotype has developed of the Welsh nonconformist chapel as dour, conservative institutions, led by strict deacons and ministers who acted as 'killjoys', not allowing their congregations any pleasure in life. Indeed, some of the congregations were known for their austere and strict behaviour. The Calvinistic Methodists, who worshipped at Penuel, were apparently very conservative in outlook. According to Browning (1906), a visiting preacher was banned from the pulpit as the deacons disapproved of his hairstyle. In the same place, there was opposition to the use of musical instruments to accompany the hymns. It is claimed that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century a deacon had a visiting choir removed when instruments were played. He recommended that they take their instruments to a notorious public house instead.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>141</sup> *Evening Express*, 11 Mar 1905

<sup>142</sup> Janice Holmes, 'Methodists and Holiness' in Timothy Larsen and Michael Ledger-Lomas (eds.), *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions - Volume III - The Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.134

<sup>143</sup> *Evening Express*, 6 Dec 1906

<sup>144</sup> James Scourfield, 'The Chapels of Blaenavon', *Capel: The Chapels Heritage Society Newsletter*. No. 41. 2003), p.2; available at [http://www.capeli.org.uk/uploads/newsletter\\_41.pdf](http://www.capeli.org.uk/uploads/newsletter_41.pdf)



Many chapels became proponents of temperance. People were encouraged to 'sign the pledge' and become teetotallers, abstaining from alcohol. Chapels fought to keep people out of the public houses and advocated the closure of public houses on the Sabbath. The result was the Sunday Closing Act 1881, which banned pubs in Wales (except Monmouthshire) from serving alcohol on a Sunday.

However, it would be wrong to assume that chapels were dull or boring institutions. The popularity they enjoyed suggests the contrary. The chapels were keen to offer alternative forms of entertainment and culture. The chapels had very important social, cultural and educational roles, and offered something for everyone – men, women and children alike.

An important institution strongly connected with the chapels was the Sunday School. In the early years of the Industrial Revolution many young children worked in mines, ironworks or factories. Few had access to education. Humanitarians such as Robert Raikes (1736-1811) were alarmed by this and called for schools to be opened on Sundays - the day of rest. Sunday schools became popular throughout Britain during the 19th century, educating well over a million people each week by the 1830s. Sunday schools were held by the churches and chapels of Blaenavon and a number of dedicated schoolrooms were added in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of which were inappropriate extensions, of inferior quality, and detracted from the architectural style and appearance of the main chapel buildings.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>145</sup> Scourfield (2003), p.5



Sunday School extension to Broad Street Baptist Chapel (photograph N.A. Matthews)

Men, women and children attended these schools, where volunteer Sunday School teachers (male and female) taught reading, writing and Bible studies. The scholars would also discuss the important issues of the day and take part in public speaking and debates. Sunday schools gave young people knowledge and self-confidence. Many community and political leaders in Blaenavon and Wales developed their skills through the Sunday schools and chapels. State education became more widespread after 1870 as more day schools were opened. Sunday schools continued to teach Bible studies but their role changed. They also ran youth clubs, sports teams, concerts, plays, marches and day trips. Sunday schools remained popular social and cultural organisations for young people



well into the 20th century. The schoolrooms were also useful for adult education, entertainment and lectures.

The lectures delivered in Blaenavon's chapels were many and varied. They could also be a useful way of raising money for the chapel funds. For example, the Reverend H. Stowell Brown of Liverpool delivered an 'able and popular' lecture on 'Christianity and Common Sense' at Horeb Chapel on a Monday evening in August 1877. The lecturer received frequent applause from his large audience. Horeb had been lent for the occasion, and the considerable proceeds from the occasion were to be applied to the funds of Ebenezer Welsh Baptist Chapel, which had recently been rebuilt and incurred debts.<sup>146</sup>

Some of the lectures appear to have been quite secular in nature. In February 1871, between 700-800 people attended the English Baptist Chapel, Broad Street, to listen to the Reverend James Hughes of Ashton under Lyne deliver a humorous lecture on 'Quaint Sayings from Queer Folks'.<sup>147</sup> In November 1874, a crowded audience assembled in Lion Street Chapel to listen to a lecture on 'How to Get on in the World' by the Rev. Jansen Davies. The profits were to go to the chapel funds.<sup>148</sup> In February 1890, the Reverend Levi Rees of Lion Street Chapel, gave a 'spellbinding' lecture on the 'Advice of the Lamp Post' to a large audience – it was apparently full of humour and wit.<sup>149</sup>

Chapels also allowed people a glimpse of the wider world. In an event in 1880, the Reverend T.T. Shields of the Primitive Methodist Chapel exhibited magic lantern views illustrative of Stanley's

<sup>146</sup> *Free Press*, 11 Aug 1877

<sup>147</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 17 Feb 1871

<sup>148</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 7 Nov 1874

<sup>149</sup> *Free Press*, 7 February 1890





Sunday School marches were also a regular occurrence, particularly during the summer months. Two hundred Sunday school children of Broad Street Baptist Chapel marched through the principal streets of Blaenavon in June 1862 and, on returning to the chapel, were regaled with an ample supply of tea and cake.<sup>152</sup> In August 1877, Lion Street Chapel Sunday School, proceeded from the Waun Field and paraded through the streets of Blaenavon before going to the Forge Hammer Assembly Rooms for a 'good tea'. Following tea, the children returned to the field 'where different innocent games were indulged in till dark'. On the same day, the children of Zion Baptist Chapel, Forge Side, enjoyed their annual treat of tea, cakes and games.<sup>153</sup>

Three sermons were preached to a large congregation at the Broad Street Baptist Chapel in July 1874 by the Reverend T.E. Williams of Aberystwyth. On the following Monday, some 950-people enjoyed the good things provided at the annual tea. This was followed by a lecture by the Reverend T.E. Williams on 'Christmas Evans'. The collections and the proceeds from the tea and lecture considerably exceeded £100.<sup>154</sup>

The annual Sunday School treat at the Wesleyan Chapel, James Street in August 1877 consisted of a procession and singing in the town centre. A good tea was later served in the chapel and, in the evening, a musical version of 'Robinson Crusoe' was delivered. George Deakin, chemist, conducted the singing and read the explanatory parts.<sup>155</sup> Indeed, the chapels had a strong musical tradition. The Welsh choral tradition, had its origins in the chapels. Chapel choirs would compete in eisteddfodau, singing 'sacred' music. Gradually, this enthusiasm for singing resulted in the development of Male Voice Parties and choral societies that sang secular music.

<sup>152</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 21 Jun 1862

<sup>153</sup> *Free Press*, 11 Aug 1877

<sup>154</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 17 Jul 1874S

<sup>155</sup> *Free Press*, 1 Sep 1877



Sunday school buildings could be used to host musical events. For example, Broad Street English Baptist School Room was often used for entertainments, songs, solos, duets, readings, recitations etc.<sup>156</sup> However, such was the popularity of some of the events, the buildings lacked the capacity to accommodate the attendees. In 1879, shortly after its damaging split, Broad Street Baptist Chapel's Sunday School Anniversary was said to be 'decidedly the most successful Sunday school anniversary ever held in Broad Street Chapel. The building was crowded to suffocation at every service, and many were unable to gain admission.'<sup>157</sup> Not all events were well-supported, however. A 'novel entertainment' in 1862 entitled the 'Trial of Sir John Barleycorn', based on the old British folksong, was performed at the Bible Christian Chapel but only attracted a small audience.<sup>158</sup>

Nevertheless, many musical activities proved very popular and events such as concerts, cantatas or eisteddfodau, sometimes took place in public halls.<sup>159</sup> Eisteddfodau were popular events and many chapels held one annually. The opening of the Workmen's Hall in 1895 provided an opportunity for chapels to hold these events. For example, annual Christmas Eisteddfodau were held at the Workmen's Hall by Bethlehem Independent Chapel from 1907.<sup>160</sup> In 1910, a service of song was delivered in the Workmen's Hall by the Horeb Band of Hope entitled 'Poor Mike', written by the Rev. Silas Hocking, illustrated by limelight views, with performances by the Horeb Orchestral Band.<sup>161</sup>

Other events included the much-anticipated chapel outing. For example, in September 1891, the Blaenavon Bible Christians enjoyed an outing to Tintern Abbey.<sup>162</sup> Harvest festivals were also held during the autumn and the chapels would be decorated with fruit and flowers.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>156</sup> *Free Press*, 31 May 1879

<sup>157</sup> *Free Press*, 26 Apr 1879

<sup>158</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 18 Jan 1862

<sup>159</sup> *Free Press*, 31 May 1879

<sup>160</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 31 Dec 1910

<sup>161</sup> *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 29 Apr 1910

<sup>162</sup> *Free Press*, 25 Sep 1891

<sup>163</sup> *Free Press*, 25 Sep 1891



Naturally, the members of the congregations developed close relationships and bonds with each other. Chapels were keen to recognise the good deeds and achievements of their members. For example, in 1863, the congregation of Horeb Welsh Baptist Chapel, purchased a very handsome and valuable skeleton clock, mounted on a rosewood pedestal for the chapel's architect. It was inscribed as follows "Presented to Thomas Thomas, Esq., civil engineer, by Horeb Welsh Baptist Church, Blaenavon, as a mark of their gratitude to him, for his generosity as the designer and architect of their new chapel – June 8 1863."<sup>164</sup>

Presentations of gifts and testimonials took place from time to time, particularly when a minister was moving to a new pastorate or if members of the congregation were leaving the district. For example, Rowland and Frederick Luxton of Broad Street English Baptist Chapel were presented with splendidly bound copies of the revised edition of the Bible on the occasion of their leaving town for America in 1886.<sup>165</sup> Mrs Thomas, the organist of Lion Street Chapel for 10 years, was presented with a handsome tea and coffee service on the occasion of her marriage and in recognition of her services during the past ten years.<sup>166</sup> A teapot, presented to Mrs Sarah Shoplind to mark her twenty years as a Sunday School teacher at Broad Street English Baptist Chapel is held in the Blaenavon Community Museum.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>164</sup> *Illustrated Usk Observer*, 6 Jun 1863

<sup>165</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 17 Aug 1886

<sup>166</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 20 Jan 1886

<sup>167</sup> Born in Penhow, Monmouthshire, in 1846, Sarah Ann Shoplind (nee Smith) lived in Blaenavon with her husband William, a colliery labourer, from about 1870. She was active within the English Baptist Chapel from at least 1890, when the *Free Press* records that she was involved in the running of a grand bazaar and fancy fair at the British School in Park Street, to raise funds to help liquidate the debt incurred during the renovation of Broad Street Baptist Chapel in 1888. Her husband, William Shoplind, was killed underground in December 1898 in an accident at Kay's Slope. Sarah Shoplind claimed compensation and was awarded £153 from the Blaenavon Company in 1899. By 1901 Mrs Shoplind went to live with her son William Henry Shoplind, a carpenter & builder, at 33 James Street. Isaac Lloyd, an English Baptist minister, lodged with the family. Sarah Shoplind died aged 79 years in 1926 and is buried at Llanover Road Cemetery.





## Culture, Recreation & Leisure

A key aspect of the culture that developed in south Wales during the industrial revolution was the recreational behaviour of the growing population. This included the 'rough' elements who spent their spare time gambling and drinking in some of the more notorious beer houses. Prize-fighting was common in the landscape around Blaenavon and blood sports such as cockfighting were popular. Across Wales towns and villages would have many public houses and beer shops, Blaenavon was no exception had scores trading throughout the town. Drinking alcohol was often more popular (and sometimes safer) than drinking water or milk. Pubs also provided an opportunity for working men to relax and socialise after a hard day's work. Drunkenness could result, which provided opportunities for the Temperance Movement to try and curtail the practice.

As the nineteenth century progressed, more 'respectable' pursuits were engaged in. Social, educational, political and charitable functions were assumed by self-help organisations, co-operative societies, clubs, friendly societies, reading rooms and workingmen's institutes. In the early part of the period, many of these clubs and organisations could not afford their own buildings so often met in the club rooms of public houses. Eventually, these organisations matured and purposeful venues were built. Blaenavon's Workmen's Hall and Institute is the most imposing building in the town and is a tangible example of this working class culture. Designed by Edward Lansdowne of Newport and opened in January 1895, it cost £10,000 to build, which was raised largely through a halfpenny per week deduction from the wages of the Blaenavon Company employees.

The Hall provided a range of cultural opportunities. It served as a venue for social gatherings, concerts and self-betterment. It included a comprehensive library, a reading room, a billiards room, refreshments, committee rooms and an excellent auditorium where plays and concerts could be enjoyed. Historian Lewis Browning, writing in 1906, noted that the Workmen's Hall had 'been a



## The Historical Context

great acquisition to the town, and is largely used for concerts, eisteddfods, tea parties, bazaars, political gatherings and other purposes'.<sup>168</sup>



Blaenavon Workmen's Hall (photography N.A. Matthews)

Choirs, bands and sports clubs were also established in the town and reflected working class identity. This intangible heritage remains in the town's present day Male Voice Choir, Town Bands and sports teams, most of which have their origins in the nineteenth century.

<sup>168</sup> Browning (1906), p.74



### **Leisure Activities for Tradespeople**

The Early Closing Movement was popular among the Blaenavon traders during the early 1860s. From the summer of 1862, it was decided that most of the town's businesses would close at three o'clock on a Thursday afternoon during the summer months.<sup>169</sup> Regular Thursday afternoon closing introduced in 1882, to allow shopkeepers and afternoon holiday once a week in order to participate in sports. A Blaenavon football team known as the Blaenavon Thursdays was established for this purpose.

Blaenavon shop assistants had an annual holiday during Edwardian times. On a Tuesday in July 1910, all the shops in Blaenavon were closed. The shop assistants took advantage of the day off and went on day trips to Barry, Ilfracombe and Penarth. The staff of the Co-operative Society went to London for the day.<sup>170</sup> Shop assistants would also enjoy several days' holiday at Christmas following a busy period in the run-up to the festive season.<sup>171</sup>

### **Fairs**

The town centre, however, was also a location in which all sorts of people within Blaenavon enjoyed their leisure time. Throughout the Victorian era, and into the twentieth century, Blaenavon hosted agricultural fairs twice each year, generally in April and September. These events, held at the Blaenavon market place, were opportunities for local farmers to sell produce and livestock. Typically, thousands of people would turn out for these events from Blaenavon and further afield. In September 1855, it was reported that groups of people came by train from Newport, Usk and other Monmouthshire towns to enjoy the day.<sup>172</sup> The success of the fairs varied. In 1856, animal

<sup>169</sup> *Hereford Times*, 17 May 1862

<sup>170</sup> *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 8 Jul 1910

<sup>171</sup> For further information about Christmas in Blaenavon, please see Nathan Matthews, 'Christmas in Victorian Blaenavon', *Blaenavon's Heritage* [weblog], (10 Dec 2015) <https://blaenavon.wordpress.com/2015/12/10/christmas-in-victorian-blaenavon/>

<sup>172</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 22 Sep 1855



pens were rented out free of charge as an incentive to boost the number of traders and exhibitors.<sup>173</sup> In the autumn of that year, it was reported that many 'fat beasts' had been sold and 'a great number of mountain ponies were disposed of'.<sup>174</sup> In some years, however, it was noted that the choice of animals was somewhat limited. In 1863 the produce displayed at the spring fair was 'exceedingly scanty' with the livestock predominantly consisting of pigs.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, during the 1868 and 1869 spring fairs it was noted that poor weather and a lack of choice meant that little trade was carried out.<sup>176</sup>

The fairs were not just about agriculture, however. They were events in which social activities and festivities could take place. During the markets, various sideshows and entertainments would take place.<sup>177</sup> People of all ages attended, the young in particular enjoyed the events and took the chance to socialise and engage in courtship.<sup>178</sup> The newspaper reports frequently reported that the fairs were predominantly patronised by 'pleasure seekers' rather than customers who wished to purchase livestock. In 1860, for example, the *Usk Observer* noted that during the spring event 'the business transacted would appear to be confined more to pleasure-seekers, than to the horse and cattle dealers' and that people had come from all around to find the best Cwrw Dda (Good Beer).<sup>179</sup> Indeed, these days provided good trading opportunities for not just farmers but publicans and shopkeepers. It was observed in 1864 that, during the September fair, the beer retailers, innkeepers, fruit and gingerbread sellers monopolised the business.<sup>180</sup> In spring 1860, the following poem advertised the Prince of Wales Inn, Blaenavon:

<sup>173</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 12 Apr 1856

<sup>174</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 27 Sep 1856

<sup>175</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 25 Apr 1863

<sup>176</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 25 Apr 1868; *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 24 Apr 1868

<sup>177</sup> *Usk Observer*, 2 May 1857

<sup>178</sup> *County Observer and Monmouthshire Central Advertiser*, 14 June 1873

<sup>179</sup> *Usk Observer*, 28 Apr 1860

<sup>180</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 24 Sep 1864



All ye who love a social drop  
Come in and sit you down  
For here you'll find as good a tap  
As any in the Town,  
And as ye are on pleasure bent,  
And love good wholesome cheer  
Come in and see our friend Vincent  
And taste his home brewed beer<sup>181</sup>

Despite the public houses being full on the fair days, there were relatively few recorded instances of disorder during these events and the newspapers frequently complimented the police force for upholding the peace.<sup>182</sup> Nevertheless, violence and petty crime could occasionally take place. In 1857, William Roberts, a boxer, punched two of the women performers and Dr Richard Steel, during the spring fair.<sup>183</sup> In 1887, William Lambert was charged with assault after attempting to strangle Thomas Nelmes at the September fair. Nelmes, a youth of 16 years, had provoked Lambert by squirting him in the face with a water pistol.<sup>184</sup> On the whole, however, these events appear to have been good natured, well attended affairs, enjoyed by a large proportion of the population.

Other popular events, which formed regular parts of Blaenavon's calendar, were circuses and performances by various travelling troupes and entertainers. Blaenavon's first circus took place in April 1858 to the rear of the King's Arms Inn in King Street in a field owned by Mrs Phillips. A large marquee was erected and was very well attended, especially in the evening and proved to be a very popular and profitable night for the landlord of the King's Arms.<sup>185</sup> This event was the first of many. In September 1862, Bell's Circus set up in a field at the bottom of the town near the railway station but terrible weather prevented an afternoon performance and the planned procession

<sup>181</sup> *Usk Observer*, 28 Apr 1860

<sup>182</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 26 Sep 1863

<sup>183</sup> *Usk Observer*, 2 May 1857

<sup>184</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 8 Oct 1887

<sup>185</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 1 May 1858



through the town had to be cancelled. Although the evening performance was less than was hoped, it was still well enjoyed.<sup>186</sup> Mr O'Brian's circus in September 1864 was 'exceedingly well attended'<sup>187</sup> and on, 24 May 1866, Pinder's Circus was well attended and set up a large tent in the Waun Field.<sup>188</sup> A couple of months later in July 1866 Ginnett's Circus, consisting of a troupe of equestrians, entertained the people of Blaenavon.<sup>189</sup> Another circus in 1879 was very popular and the town was particularly pleased with the acrobatic performances.<sup>190</sup> Dreadful weather resulted in a disastrous circus in 1897 when Howe and Cushing's circus' colossal tent at Llanover Road was blown down in a snowstorm prior to their performance.<sup>191</sup>

In June 1863, Stevens' Menagerie provided much interest, in which a wide collection of beasts, reptiles and birds were exhibited as a brass band gave musical entertainment.<sup>192</sup> Similarly, Mander's Menagerie visited the Waun Field in July 1865 and was well attended.<sup>193</sup> In April 1868, the celebrated Professor Ewart provided amusement and entertainment when, under the patronage of Edward Kennard and John Paton, he brought his famous ventriloquism show to the White Horse Assembly Rooms in King Street.<sup>194</sup> Also at the White Horse, in February 1869, R.W. Cousens of Swansea exhibited a pair of 'magic lanterns', with a range of dissolving views showing comic scenes, tales and 'chromatropes'. On that occasion, the room was extremely crowded and somewhat disorderly due to the excitement that was generated. Nevertheless, it was in a good cause as the proceeds of the event were donated to Zion Bible Christian Chapel in Broad Street.<sup>195</sup> The following year, a crowded audience and some 700 schoolchildren came to the White Horse to

<sup>186</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 4 Oct 1862  
<sup>187</sup> *Illustrated Usk Observer & Raglan Herald*, 10 Sep 1864  
<sup>188</sup> *Illustrated Usk Observer & Raglan Herald*, 2 Jun 1866  
<sup>189</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 21 Jul 1866  
<sup>190</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 4 Jul 1879  
<sup>191</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 1897  
<sup>192</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 13 Jun 1863  
<sup>193</sup> *Illustrated Usk Observer & Raglan Herald*, 29 Jul 1865  
<sup>194</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 11 Apr 1868  
<sup>195</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 13 Feb 1869



view Mr Buckstone's exhibition of African views.<sup>196</sup> Such events are likely to have been popular as they offered a novel, unique and tantalising glimpse of the world beyond industrial Wales. In May 1862, a Mr Le Grahn carried out an impressive magic show at the Prince of Wales Inn, consisting of card tricks, an inexhaustible bottle and bringing forth bowls containing live goldfish from a shawl. It was attended by a small crowd but the performance was enjoyed.<sup>197</sup>

### **Public Houses**

It is commonly remarked that Blaenavon had 'a chapel on every corner and a pub for each week of the year'. The public houses, for much the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were not subject to strict licensing laws and remained open for long hours. They developed an important social and cultural role.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the drinking of beer (or 'cwrw') was considered safer than drinking water, which could be contaminated. Tea was more expensive and, in any case, beer was the favoured drink. The Beer Act 1830, which aimed to dissuade people from drinking stronger beverages such as gin, made it easier and cheaper to buy beer.<sup>198</sup> The long, hard hours working underground or at the furnaces meant that men acquired a tremendous thirst. Lewis Browning recalls that 'when the furnaces were started, the craving of the firemen was for drink, drink, drink.'<sup>199</sup>

Camaraderie and relaxation after a hard day's toil could be enjoyed within the public houses. Men (and, in some cases, women) could socialise and drink together. It is worth remembering that the workers' cottages were often cramped and overcrowded and the public house gave workers space to relax in their free time. In many cases, however, the availability of beer and the drinking culture

<sup>196</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 26 Feb 1870

<sup>197</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 10 May 1862

<sup>198</sup> Jack S. Blocker, David M. Fahey, Ian R. Tyrell (eds.) *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia*, Vol 1., (Oxford: ABC CLIO, 2003), p.641

<sup>199</sup> Browning (1906), p.34



## The Historical Context

that emerged, meant that drunkenness became a social problem. Concerns were raised in the 1847 'Blue Books' that drunkenness and immorality had become significant problems. The oldest and most notorious pub was the Drum and Monkey (the Old Crown), located opposite the ironworks. Lewis Browning recalls that there was much drinking and disturbance in the pub and it caused much trouble for local constables. Violence, heavy drinking and gambling could be common features among some of Blaenavon's pubs or beer houses in the early nineteenth century.

The influence of Welsh nonconformity and the temperance movement meant that many of the customs once enjoyed in the pubs were challenged by the late nineteenth century, due to their 'sinful' nature. Locally, there were criticisms of the public houses and friendly societies. For example, John Williams, a member of Bethlehem Chapel, wrote an essay on 'The Evil of Trading in Intoxicating Drinks in Clubs and Benefit Societies'.<sup>200</sup> The strength of Liberal Nonconformism in Wales resulted in the passing of the Sunday Closing (Wales) Act 1881, which banned public houses in Wales from opening on the Sabbath. However, due to Monmouthshire's ambiguous status as a Welsh county, the Act did not apply there, meaning Blaenavon was unaffected by the new law.

As the nineteenth century progressed, licensing laws became stricter and many of Blaenavon's landlords found themselves in court for breaching the terms of their license. Offences included permitting drunkenness or serving alcohol after hours. In some cases, the pub landlord himself was accused of being drunk on their own licensed premises. James Williams, landlord of the Royal Oak Inn in Albert Street, was fined 10s such an offence in 1896.<sup>201</sup>

In 1904, a report for the Pontypool District Brewster Sessions, revealed that there were some 57 licensed houses in Blaenavon, with one licensed house to each 205 of the town's population. In the previous two years, there had been 103 prosecutions for drunkenness.<sup>202</sup> By 1908, there had been

<sup>200</sup> Browning (1906), p.62

<sup>201</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 Oct 1896

<sup>202</sup> *Evening Express*, 8 Feb 1904





little change in the number of public houses per head of the population, and prosecutions for drunkenness remained high.<sup>203</sup> In 1909, Monmouthshire County Council revoked licenses of many public houses in Blaenavon in an attempt to reduce the excessive number in the area. Compensation was awarded to the former licensees who lost their businesses. The Licensing Committee revoked the licenses of the Miners' Arms, the Albert Inn, the White Lion Inn, the Mount Pleasant Inn, the Bridgend Inn, the New Railway Inn, the Jolly Colliers, the King's Head and the Nag's Head.<sup>204</sup>

### ***Friendly Societies***

An important part of the culture of the pubs were the clubs which met within them. At the Drum and Monkey met the Old Benefit Club, which held an annual feast on Whit Saturdays. The various clubs and societies had their own banners and would hold parades around the town, typically led by a brass band. The members of Dic Shon Ffyrnig's Club, which met at the Bridgend Inn, wore hats, with red ribbons tied in a true lover's knot, as a symbol of the members' truth and loyalty to each other. The Phoenix Club, which met at the New Inn, wore similar hats, but the ribbon was yellow. As the nineteenth century progressed, a far greater diversity of friendly societies emerged, which were more systematic, organised and secretive than those early clubs.<sup>205</sup>

Friendly societies were important voluntary organisations that provided insurance and support for workers and their families in times of need. Many Blaenavon workers were members during the 19th century. The members of the lodges would meet socially, often in public houses, and enjoy dinners and entertainment together. Funds were raised through weekly subscriptions but choirs, bands and sports teams would also carry out fundraising events for the societies. Some of the

<sup>203</sup> *Evening Express*, 8 Feb 1908

<sup>204</sup> *Evening Express*, 29 Jul 1909

<sup>205</sup> Browning (1906), pp.34-36



societies were quite secretive, following certain traditions and customs. Members were sometimes required to present a password to enter lodge meetings.<sup>206</sup>

By 1871, over 2,000 Blaenavon people belonged to nineteen different lodges of various friendly societies, including the Oddfellows, the Foresters, the Loyal Alfreds and the Ivorites. Blaenavon also had a lodge of Odd Women. Together, the societies had amassed nearly £9,000 in funds which were used for the benefit of the members. The activities were encouraged by the Blaenavon Company and the works manager John Paton as it represented self-help and prevented people from having to rely on parish relief if they fell ill or came upon hard times. The following details were provided by secretaries of the lodges at the request of Mr Paton.<sup>207</sup>

<b>Lodge or Court</b>	<b>Society</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Funds</b>
Victoria and Prince Albert	Oddfellows	172	£1,607 7s 1d
St Vincent	Oddfellows	178	£660 19s 6 ½d
Prince Howell the Good	Oddfellows	37	£64 12s 0d
Strangers Home	Foresters	169	£189 1s 7d
Jacob's Wish	Foresters	225	£380 0s 0d
Foresters Pride	Foresters	58	£30s 0s 0d
Prince Howell the Good	Philanthropics	157	£1,047 13s 8d
Benediction	Philanthropics	150	£607 6s 9 ½d
Prince Llewellyn	Philanthropics	102	£319 17s 10d
Prince Ivor	Philanthropics	55	£46 1s 4d

<sup>206</sup> An example of a such a password from 1874 can be seen at the Blaenavon Community Museum

<sup>207</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 22 Sep 1871



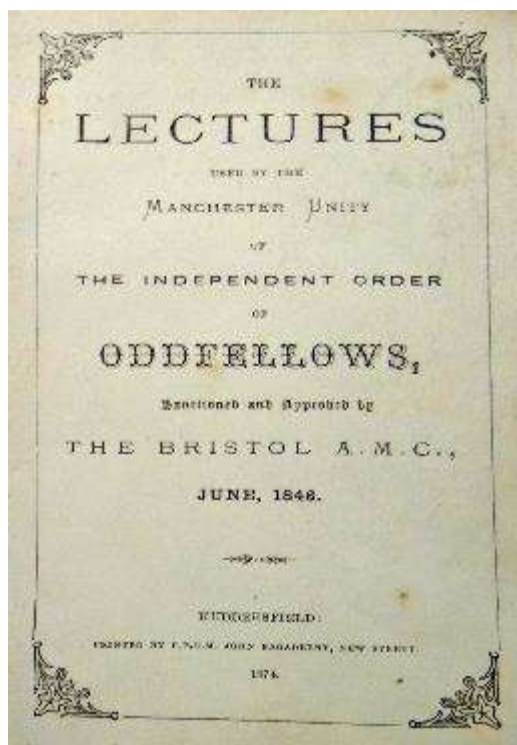
Vine Tree	Philanthropics	125	£702 18s 11½d
City on the Rock	Alfreds	135	£294 19s 10d
Rock and Fountain	Alfreds	85	£191 9s 2d
Rose of Sharon	Alfreds	33	£27 10s 0d
Howell the Good	Ivorites	210	£1,807 3s 7 ½d
Ivor Hael	Ivorites	134	£273 5s 5d
Jacob's Wish	Shepherds	76	£431 9s 8d
United Friends		31	£6 8s 6d
United Brethren		13	£36 0s 0d

The lodges of each friendly society had their own identity. They possessed colourful regalia and banners, which were displayed proudly by members during their annual march through the streets of Blaenavon. During these anniversary events, the procession, usually headed by a band, would commence from the public house in which they held their meetings. Members would often seek donations from the managers of the works and then go to one of the local chapels, where they would pay a minister to conduct a service for them. Following divine worship, the members would return to their club room, where a meal would be enjoyed. Speeches and musical entertainments would also take place.

The proceedings of these events were often recorded in the local press. In September 1852, it was reported that the third anniversary of the Vine Tree Lodge was celebrated at the Rising Sun in King Street. At midday, a hundred members formed a procession and attended service at Horeb Chapel, where a sermon was delivered by the Rev. Daniel Evans. In the evening, the social activities were very animated. The chair was ably filled by Bro. William H. George, a local shopkeeper. Toasts were given and responded to and were followed by a bilingual address by Richard Jones of Cwmavon Villa on the principles of the order. At the conclusion of the day, the health of the founder of the philanthropic institution was proposed by the Chair and responded to. A vote of thanks was passed,



thanking the 'worthy hostess' for the 'capital dinner' she provided. It was reported that the day had passed successfully, with much hilarity.<sup>208</sup>



The anniversary celebrations could be quite competitive affairs. On 8 August 1853, the Ivorites Lodge 'Prince Howell the Good' celebrated its eighth anniversary at the Prince of Wales Tavern and, on the same day, the United Friends Society held their third anniversary at the Victoria Inn, located on the opposite side of the road. About one o'clock, both processions emerged, each headed by a band of music. The Ivorites lodge entered Horeb Chapel and the United Friends Society attended the adjacent Ebenezer Chapel – a sermon being preached in Ebenezer by the Rev. J. Rees and at Horeb – in Welsh – by the Rev. D. Morgan. After divine service, the societies marched back to their lodges to dinner and lectures.<sup>209</sup>

Above: lecture book used by Blaenavon Oddfellows from 1874 (Blaenavon Community Museum)

In September 1863, the Court of Jacob's Wish (No. 3890) of the Ancient Order of Foresters celebrated its anniversary at the Market Tavern. 120 of the brethren formed a procession at noon, and, headed by horsemen, marched through the town in full regalia to the music of the Brecon Militia Brass Band. They attended divine service at Broad Street English Baptist Chapel, before returning to their club room and enjoying an excellent dinner. John Lewis, a furnace manager, took the chair, and the vice-chair was occupied by Mr Fowler, a draper. A series of toasts were given,

<sup>208</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 17 Sep 1852

<sup>209</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 26 Aug 1853



including to the 'directors and manager of the ironworks'. This was followed by interesting addresses on the principles of Forestry.<sup>210</sup>

Friendly societies were encouraged and supported by the managers of the ironworks. In 1866, Edward Kennard, the son of the Chairman of the Blaenavon Company, was made a member of the Court of Jacob's Wish at the Market Tavern. Accompanied by his brother Henry Martyn Kennard, he entered the court room, which was 'gaily decorated for the occasion'. An initiation ceremony was proceeded with, several interesting addresses were made. A band of music was in attendance and played at intervals throughout the evening.<sup>211</sup> The managers, directors and other local dignitaries also patronised the societies. For example, in 1885, the annual fete of Grand United Order of Oddfellows was held in the cricket field, under the patronage of John Allan Rolls MP (the future Lord Llangattock). The town's five lodges paraded the principal streets of the town, stopping at the residences of Mr Kennard (Blaenavon House) and Mr Worton (Park House). It was estimated that some 4,000 people in attendance, with a variety of interesting events throughout the day, including foot races, obstacle races, football matches, bicycle races and a tug-of-war.<sup>212</sup>

In August 1878, the Friend-in-Need Lodge of Ivorite Sisters held a tea party in the Forge Hammer Assembly Rooms to help raise funds for the lodge, which had fallen low due to deaths of members. 500 tickets were sold. Excellent arrangements for the amusement of the young people were made.<sup>213</sup>

The Independent Order of Rechabites was also active in Blaenavon in the second half of the nineteenth century. The order was founded in Salford, Manchester, in 1835 by a group of Methodists who feared the sinful consequences of friendly societies meeting in public houses.

<sup>210</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 26 Sep 1863

<sup>211</sup> *Usk Observer*, 25 Aug 1866

<sup>212</sup> *Free Press*, 14 Aug 1885

<sup>213</sup> *Free Press*, 31 Aug 1878



Therefore, the Rechabites advocated temperance (not drinking alcohol). Like many friendly societies, the order provided health insurance and funeral benefits to its members.

Public houses were not just home to friendly societies, they were also venues where political consciousness could emerge. The White Horse, the Castle Hotel and the Forge Hammer all hosted gatherings trade unions or meetings of workers who discussed matters concerning their working lives. The White Horse, a substantial meeting place, was also the building in which workers agreed to form a Workmen's Institute and a Medical Aid Society, both important social institutions managed by the workers.

### ***Musical and Dramatic Entertainment***

Music was very popular in the valleys, with people forming choirs, glee-clubs and bands. Concerts were often held to raise money for good causes but culture could also be competitive. Eisteddfodau were held regularly in Blaenavon and other towns across Wales. Blaenavon's musicians and bards would compete for prizes (including chairs and medals), locally and regionally, helping win personal and community pride.

By the mid-19th century, Wales had acquired a reputation as a 'land of song'. Across the country, thousands of people sang in choirs connected with chapels or churches. Blaenavon, typical of many towns in the coalfield, had a strong musical tradition with choirs, bands and musicians performing both sacred and secular music. Choirs were set up for special events, fundraising events or eisteddfodau and, throughout the 19th century, Blaenavon had various chapel choirs, choral societies, glee clubs and male voice parties.<sup>214</sup>

<sup>214</sup> For further information about choirs in Blaenavon, see Nathan Matthews, 'Save our Male Voice Choirs', *Blaenavon' Heritage* [weblog], (25 May 2015) <https://blaenavon.wordpress.com/2015/05/25/save-our-male-voice-choirs/>



## The Historical Context

Popular readings and musical entertainments were frequently provided in some public houses. One of the most notable of these was the White Horse Inn and Assembly Rooms in King Street. Here, a diverse programme of events took place, often under the patronage of the works managers or company officials who were keen to foster a respectable and responsible culture among the working class. Performances were held here by glee and madrigal societies, amateur dramatic groups and singers. Grand Eisteddfodau, balls and dances were regular occurrence.<sup>215</sup> Other well-used secular venues for musical and dramatic entertainment, included the town halls in Broad Street and later Lion Street (the Coliseum).



The White Horse Assembly Rooms, Blaenavon (photograph N.A. Matthews)

<sup>215</sup> For further information about the White Horse Inn and Assembly Rooms, please see Nathan Matthews, 'The White Horse Assembly Rooms and Respectable Working Class Culture', *Blaenavon's Heritage* [weblog] , (29 Nov 2015), <https://blaenavon.wordpress.com/2015/11/29/the-white-horse-assembly-rooms-and-respectable-working-class-culture/>



Local people were not simply passive observers, they were often active participants in these musical entertainments. The men and women from Blaenavon were happy to demonstrate their artistic skills, through singing, playing musical instruments or acting. Tradespeople often took prominent roles. George Deakin, the chemist, served as a conductor for many years, leading countless performances. His daughter Annie was an accomplished pianist. Miss Mary Ann Witchell, the daughter of a local bootmaker, could play the harmonium.<sup>216</sup> People also were keen to involve themselves in dramatic performances. The Prince of Wales public house, during the 1860s, held its own theatre. In one week in June 1863, it provided a range of dramas, comedies, farces and performances including Bulwer's *Lady of Lyons*, Jerrold's curiously titled *Black-eyed Susan*, *Betsy Baker* and *Hunting a Turtle*.<sup>217</sup>

There were many people living within the town who were accomplished in the arts. Arguably, the most famous musician to have lived and performed in Blaenavon during the nineteenth century was the Tredegar-born composer, conductor and singer William Aubrey Williams (1834-1891), who was better known as 'Gwilym Gwent'. Among his most famous works were 'Y Haf', 'We are the Young Musicians' and 'Nant y Mynydd', which were well-known around the world.<sup>218</sup> Blaenavon was also home to the multiple prize-winning poet and writer Thomas Evan Watkins (1801-1889), landlord of the Three Cranes, better known by his bardic names Eiddil Ifor and Ynyr Gwent. Also involved in the cultural life of the town were the vocalist John Thomas, known as Eos Brycheiniog and the Reverend T. Mafonwy Davies of Lion Street Congregationalist Chapel, a talented poet who won a national eisteddfod crown at Newport. Other Blaenavon poets included Samuel Davies (Asaph Aenon) and his son David Davies.<sup>219</sup>

<sup>216</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 14 Apr 1871

<sup>217</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 13 Jun 1863

<sup>218</sup> Browning (1906), p.70

<sup>219</sup> Davies (1975), pp.77-79





### ***Penny Readings, Reading Rooms and Institutes***

Literary pursuits were also popular among some sections of the Blaenavon population. The directors and managers of the works were keen to support workers willing to advance their education. To this end, they supported initiatives to promote literacy and learning. The earliest reading room was established in 1853 but failed shortly afterwards.<sup>220</sup> A similar scheme was promoted by the works manager Thomas W. Plum and the chief surgeon Dr Richard Steel in 1859 and, by 1860, its library, which was located in an office at the ironworks, boasted over two hundred books.<sup>221</sup> This library was seen as an important addition to the town, giving men the opportunity to spend their free time productively. In a letter to a local newspaper, an anonymous 'Junior Member' remarked on the benefits of the scheme:

*...for now, instead of men having recourse to the beerhouses to spend their evenings, they may go to the reading room, and instead of smoking and drinking, they may employ their time in reading and improving themselves, and then in time to come they may look back and thank in their hearts those persons who were the cause of establishing such a good thing.*<sup>222</sup>

Due to the expansion of the ironworks, the reading room had to be relocated. It was moved to a shop in Broad Street in 1861.<sup>223</sup> Unfortunately, due to financial difficulties, the scheme was suspended the following year.<sup>224</sup> The cause was revived in 1865 by Edward Kennard. Young Mr Kennard began holding 'penny readings' at the Infants' Schoolroom on Church Road, where people would pay a penny to hear people reading stories and poetry, with musical performances typically being made between the readings. These events were very popular and, from 1866, the proceeds

<sup>220</sup> Monmouthshire Merlin, 24 Jun 1853

<sup>221</sup> Monmouthshire Merlin, 17 Mar 1860

<sup>222</sup> Monmouthshire Merlin, 26 Feb 1859

<sup>223</sup> Monmouthshire Merlin, 30 Mar 1861

<sup>224</sup> Usk Observer, 29 Mar 1862



were applied to the new Blaenavon Mutual Improvement Society and Reading Room, again located at the ironworks.<sup>225</sup> Welsh language penny readings were held at Bethlehem Chapel.<sup>226</sup>



The Blaenavon Infants' School (photograph N.A. Matthews)

By the 1870s, however, it appears that mutual improvement was again on the wane in Blaenavon. The wealthier Blaenavon residents, including works managers and tradespeople, were frustrated with the failings of the earlier schemes and decided, with the support of the Blaenavon Company, to set up an institute in a building in Lion Street. The formation of this new institute in 1880 was

<sup>225</sup> Nathan Matthews, 'The Story of Blaenavon Library', *Blaenavon's Heritage* [weblog], (17 Aug 2015), <https://blaenavon.wordpress.com/2015/08/17/the-story-of-blaenavon-library/>

<sup>226</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 18 Nov 1865



instigated by George Keeling, a local tailor. The new venture was funded through voluntary subscriptions and boasted a library, reading rooms and a billiards table. The scheme was a success and relocated to purpose-built premises in New William Street in 1883. Its trustees and committee members included well-known tradesmen such as William Edwards and Edward Pegler; Charles White, the manager of the Gas and Water Company; and the Reverend William Rees of Broad Street English Baptist Chapel.<sup>227</sup>

However, in 1883, Walter Henry Hughes, a tailor, trading in Broad Street, lamented that the institute only catered for the elites in Blaenavon's society. Mr Hughes intended to provide educational and leisure facilities for the workers of the town. For this purpose, the 24-year-old, Liberal, nonconformist preacher, called representatives of the Blaenavon workmen together and secured agreement that a Workmen's Institute should be formed and paid for out of weekly deductions from the workers' wages. Mr Hughes then approached John Worton, the General Manager of the Works, with proposals for the scheme and the Blaenavon Company duly gave their support to the endeavour. The company funded the refurbishment of a shop in Lion Street to house the new Blaenavon Workmen's Institute.<sup>228</sup>

It soon became clear that the Blaenavon Workmen's Institute was a great success and plans were made to build a much larger, more imposing hall at the bottom of High Street. Enough money from the workers' subscriptions to commence construction work in 1893. However, during the building work, the committee faced financial problems and the whole project seemed at risk. Fortunately, Charles Jordan, a boot merchant, came forward to save the day. Mr Jordan, who represented the Blaenavon tradesmen on the Workmen's Institute Committee, took on great personal financial risk by holding himself responsible for a bank loan, which needed to be taken out to complete the work. Thankfully, the Workmen's Hall was completed in 1894 and opened amid much rejoicing and public

<sup>227</sup> *Free Press*, 13 Apr 1883

<sup>228</sup> *Free Press*, 24 Jul 1908



celebration in January 1895. The Workmen's Hall quickly became the most important building and facility in Blaenavon, offering recreation, education and entertainment to all elements of the town's community. Charles Jordan's selfless actions were recognised in 1904, when he was presented with an illuminated address by his fellow committee-men.<sup>229</sup>



The opening of the Workmen's Hall in 1895. Image courtesy of Mrs. Pat Morgan

<sup>229</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 21 May 1904



## Epilogue

Throughout its history, Blaenavon town centre has reflected the fortunes of the Blaenavon's wider economy. In times of strikes, lockouts and industrial unrest, the hardship experienced by the workers and their families was reflected in the town centre, as the town's shops and businesses struggled to trade. The protracted economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s was particularly damaging for Blaenavon as hundreds of families left the area for good.

After the Second World War, light industries were attracted to Blaenavon, complementing the declining coal industry, but these new factories did not provide the same number of jobs as the coal and steel industries once had. Although Blaenavon was on course to become largely a 'dormitory town', Broad Street, the town's main shopping street, remained comparatively prosperous during this period. Of course, it was not as vibrant as it had been in its heyday, but local traders and the council seemed optimistic about the future.

As late as the 1970s, there was a dynamic chamber of trade within the town and large adverts were placed in local newspapers to promote Blaenavon's many shops and services. An advert in the *Free Press* in 1975 stated 'the town's commercial centre in Broad Street continues to flourish... development schemes will ensure that this, the heart of the town, will remain strong and prosperous'.<sup>230</sup>

The state of trade in the town, however, may have been exaggerated. The County Planning Officer for Monmouthshire, stated in a 1970 report that 'there are already about a dozen empty shops in the town centre, several of which have been vacant for some years, and with a declining local population it seems unlikely that there will be a significant demand for new floor space'. He

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<sup>230</sup> *Free Press*, 26 Sept 1975



## The Historical Context

recommended that Blaenavon Council should focus the future retail development of the main street in Broad Street between its junctions at William Street and Lion Street and that a priority should be to improve the rundown appearance of the shops.<sup>231</sup>

The falling demand for retail units, coupled with the poor physical condition of many of the town's older buildings, resulted in a programme of redevelopment in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which saw the demolition of former commercial areas of the town such as Albert Street, Lion Street and parts of King Street and Broad Street. Unsafe historic buildings in the town centre, in places such as Market Street and James Street also faced the bulldozer in the early 1990s.

Many buildings in the town became obsolete or redundant, as socio-economic decline and cultural change meant that fewer buildings and services were required. The historic St. Peter's School, established in 1816, was abandoned in 1982 and fell into a poor state of repair. Similarly, the former Municipal Offices in Lion Street were abandoned in the early 1990s and the once grand public building became an eyesore. Chapels with their dwindling congregations were also closed and, in some cases, demolished. The number of public houses in the town also fell considerably. Even the splendid Workmen's Hall, once the embodiment of local working-class culture and identity, experienced closure and an uncertain future in the mid-1980s, as its voluntary committee could not afford its upkeep. The town's cultural institutions, clubs and societies struggled to survive.

Despite the hopes and efforts of the local authority and the traders, Broad Street did not flourish and many businesses closed during the 1980s and 1990s. A declining population, increased mobility, and the rise of supermarkets and large commercial precincts in nearby towns posed major challenges to local traders. By 1998, almost half of the shops in Broad Street were vacant. Despite very low rents being offered on these properties, there was little interest from investors in setting up business in Blaenavon. At the end of the century Blaenavon's increasingly aging population

<sup>231</sup> James Kegie, *Blaenavon Central Area: A Housing Study*, (Monmouthshire County Council, 1970), p.9



## The Historical Context

stood at a low of 5,763, less than half of what it was at its peak. The plight of the depressed, post-industrial town was clear, the main street was lined with boarded-up shops, which earned it the unenviable title of 'Plywood City' in a major national newspaper.

Since the mid-1970s, there had been growing recognition of the importance of Blaenavon's industrial heritage and efforts had been made to conserve the historic ironworks and the Big Pit Colliery. From the 1980s, attempts were made to boost tourism to Blaenavon in the hope that it would improve the local economy. The potential of linking the town centre with the main tourist attractions of the area was identified at an early stage. A regeneration project attempted to improve the heritage tourism potential of Broad Street, with new shop fronts and heritage interpretation being installed. Whilst these schemes gradually petered out by the early 1990s, the awarding of UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 2000 renewed the emphasis on regeneration and cultural heritage tourism in the town centre. Since inscription, there has been substantial investment in the town's main shopping street, improving its appearance and helping to make it a space where people would choose to set up business, buy goods and services, and enjoy cultural and leisure activities.



# Appendix A: Specific Properties in the Townscape Heritage Project Area

<p><b>BETHLEHEM CHAPEL, BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON</b></p>
<p>The original Bethlehem Chapel was opened near Avon Road on Christmas Day 1820. With a rising congregation, it was decided to move the chapel to larger premises in a more central location. The new Bethlehem Chapel was built alongside the Nant Llechan stream in 1840 to a classical design by architect Thomas Thomas of Landore. There were subsequent renovations in 1865 and 1902. It was the last of Blaenavon's chapels to abandon the Welsh language.</p>
<p><b>26 BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON</b></p>
<p>This was, for many years, the men's outfitting department of Fowler's stores. The shop closed in 1975 and later became a Spar and, more recently, Premier.</p>
<p><b>THE ROLLING MILL INN, 43 BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON</b></p>
<p>This two-storey public house was built in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is claimed locally that the novelist Alexander Cordell visited this public house during the 1950s to speak with colliers and local people, who helped inspire the characters and stories in his international bestselling novel <i>Rape of the Fair Country</i> (1959).</p>
<p><b>46 BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON</b></p>
<p>This shop was built in the mid to late nineteenth century. At the turn of twentieth century, it was home to the Flook family, who ran a jewellery shop. It later became a florist.</p>
<p><b>68 BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON</b></p>





## The Historical Context

This shop has had several functions in its history. In the late Victorian era, it was the business of John Bowen, a master tailor. In the twentieth century, it became a china and earthenware shop, a grocery store and a meat shop. Later in the century, it sold wool and baby clothing. It ultimately became a hairdressers'.

### **69-70 BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON**

Currently 'the Doorway' youth club, this building consists of two former shop buildings. Cllr T.W. Ruther JP ran a confectionary shop at number 69, which was subsequently a grocers', a tea dealers' and a ladies' fashion shop. Number 70 was the shop of Cllr Henry Morgan Davies JP, Chemist, Dentist and Druggist; trustee of Broad Street Baptist Chapel, committee member of the Blaenavon Workmen's Institute and was the first chairman of the Blaenavon Urban District Council. He was succeeded in the business by his daughter, Mildred Clara Davies in the 1930s. The shop later became a grocery shop and a Spar franchise.

### **71-72 BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON**

This shop was the site of J.M. Edwards' grocery business at the turn of the twentieth century. It later became a bakery and confectionary shop, before becoming a grocery business for much of the twentieth century. More recently, it has sold antiques and second-hand goods.

### **THE MARKET TAVERN, 89 BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON**

Dating to the late 1850s, the three-storey, Market [House] Tavern was one of the most imposing public houses in the town. In the 1860s, the Court of Jacob's Wish (No. 3890) of the Ancient Order of Foresters, a friendly society, held their meetings in this pub. The Salvation Army were also known to sing outside the pub.

The Market Tavern has lately incorporated number 88 Broad Street. This was a chemist during the late Victorian era and later became a branch of the India and China Tea company. In the



## The Historical Context

1960s, it was Goodwin's hardware shop. In the 1980s, it was a barber shop, before becoming an extension to the Market Tavern public house.

### **1 MARKET STREET, BLAENAVON**

Formerly a butchers' shop, this building became Morgan's corner stores by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, serving as a grocery shop.

### **THE CASTLE HOTEL, 94 BROAD STREET, BLAENAVON**

This three-storey public house was built in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Blaenavon's first co-operative society held meetings in this pub during the 1860s and 1870s. Inquests were also held at the Castle, usually in cases involving industrial accidents. Trade unionists and industrial workers would also hold meetings in the pub. A revived Chamber of Trade was formed in Blaenavon in 1912 and, in February 1914, they held a banquet for over 100 people in the Castle Hotel.



# Appendix B: Biographies of Sitters in the Blaenavon Workmen's Hall Portrait Collection

In 2016, a collection of long-forgotten portraits was discovered in the basement of Blaenavon Workmen's Hall. Following restoration work, funded by the Blaenavon Community Museum, the portraits have been redisplayed on the ground floor of the hall. Most of the portraits were donated to the Workmen's Institute in 1909 and 1918 and depict many local men, who were prominent in the community and the Workmen's Institute in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The names of many of them can be found throughout this document. What follows are brief biographies of the subjects of the portraits. The originals can be seen by visiting the Blaenavon Workmen's Hall and Blaenavon Community Museum.

### ***The Rt. Hon. Reginald McKenna (1863-1943)***

Reginald McKenna was the Liberal Member of Parliament for North Monmouthshire from 1895 to 1918. The constituency included Blaenavon. McKenna served in Herbert Henry Asquith's Liberal government alongside prominent figures such as David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. The government was notable for the introduction of a variety of social and political reforms including the Old Age Pensions Act (1908), the Labour Exchange Act (1909), the National Insurance Act (1911) and the Parliament Act (1911).

McKenna held several important offices of state, including First Lord of the Admiralty (1908-1911), Home Secretary (1911-1915) and Chancellor of the Exchequer (1915-1916). McKenna was a political rival of David Lloyd George and opposed military conscription. Following Herbert Asquith's resignation and Lloyd George's appointment as Prime Minister in 1916, McKenna left the government.



McKenna had many friends and supporters in Blaenavon. It was in Blaenavon, in 1893, that he was elected as the Liberal candidate in North Monmouthshire. McKenna stated that he regarded Blaenavon as his 'political birthplace' and was a regular visitor to the Workmen's Hall where he was received enthusiastically. On several occasions he entered Blaenavon in his motor car and was escorted to the Workmen's Hall in processions headed by the Blaenavon Town Band. His speeches attracted much interest and in 1910 some 1,500 people flocked to the Workmen's Hall to listen to him discuss the 'People's Budget' and the reform of the House of Lords. During a speech in the Workmen's Hall in 1909 he was heckled by a group of suffragettes, who called for him to support 'Votes for Women!'

The Representation of the People Act 1918 gave the vote to all men over the age of 21 years and women over the age of 30 years. The North Monmouthshire constituency was abolished and McKenna failed to win the new Pontypool seat in the 1918 General Election. The Labour Party was in the ascendency as the once proud Liberal tradition of North Monmouthshire was on the wane, never to recover.

### ***Cllr. Charles White JP (1846-1911)***

Charles White was born in Frome, Somerset, in 1846. He came to Blaenavon as a plumber, painter and house decorator but took up the opportunity to become manager of the Blaenavon Gas and Water Works in 1874. He oversaw its expansion as the town of Blaenavon grew during the late Victorian period.

A strong supporter of the Liberal Party, Charles White served on the Blaenavon Urban District Council, holding the role of chairman for six years until his resignation in 1906. He also served as a magistrate at the Blaenavon Police Court and was Blaenavon's representative on the Abergavenny Board of Guardians. He was an important local ally of Reginald McKenna, who was elected as



Member of Parliament for North Monmouthshire in 1895. A gifted public speaker, Mr White addressed many audiences at Liberal gatherings at the Workmen's Hall.

Charles White died at his home, Beechwood, Cwmavon Road, in 1911. The following poem was written by Morgan Lewis in 1911 in his honour:

Another landmark is removed  
From time's relentless shore;  
And he who gave us of his best  
We shall not see him more.  
That noble man who cheered our hearts  
No power on earth could save  
Will soon be buried from our view  
Within the dark cold grave.

Our friend was nature's gentleman  
With broad expansive mind,  
So clear in all he did or said,  
Convincing and refined.  
No cringing coward was our White  
To bend the supple knee  
To everyone in pomp and power,  
A manly man was he.

True to himself he ever was,  
He did what he thought right;  
And often made great sacrifice  
To make this dark world bright.  
His silvery voice is hushed in death,  
No more we see his smile;  
His gentle heart no longer beats,  
Which was so free from guile

Blaenavon mourns the loss of one  
Who played some varied parts,  
With such effect that deeds of love  
Are carv'd on many hearts.  
Time cannot efface the mem'ry



## The Historical Context

Of a man so true and good;  
Active in his best endeavours  
And so easy understood.

As the sun that shines upon us  
In the bright and perfect day;  
So was White, a light among us  
And a beacon on life's way.  
Nobler citizen we have not  
He was one of choicest fame;  
Honoured by the ones who knew him  
Who will yet exalt his name.

### ***Cllr. Thomas William Ruther JP (1869-1924)***

Thomas William Ruther was born in Abergavenny in 1869. He was the son of Daniel Ruther, a market gardener. T.W. Ruther moved to Blaenavon during the 1890s where he established a successful business as a fruiterer in Broad Street. Interested in the political affairs of the town, Thomas Ruther was elected to the Blaenavon Urban District Council and served as its chairman in 1909 and 1919. He was an important member of the Blaenavon Liberal Party and, in 1906, built the Blaenavon Liberal Club in Market Street, which boasted a temperance bar, billiard tables and a reading room. He was also a leading member of the Blaenavon Chamber of Trade and was involved in the cultural life of the town, presiding over Eisteddfodau in the Blaenavon Workmen's Hall. He was one of just a handful of people to be made a life member of the Blaenavon Workmen's Institute.

### ***Cllr. Henry Morgan Davies JP (1849-1934)***

Henry Morgan Davies was born in Cardigan in 1849. After a period living in Pontypool, Henry Davies moved to Blaenavon in about 1879, where he set up a business at Broad Street as a chemist and druggist. Mr Davies became an active member of the Blaenavon community, participating in



local debating classes. He joined the Blaenavon Workmen's Institute and was a member of the committee which oversaw the building of the Workmen's Hall in 1893-94.

Henry Davies, who had a strong reputation as a tenor, was a soloist at the first Christmas Eisteddfod held in the Workmen's Hall on Boxing Day 1895, when he sang 'Dear Old Wales', a popular Eisteddfod song. Davies was also instrumental in obtaining a set of Col. Bradney's History of Monmouthshire for the Workmen's Hall Library in 1919. In 1894, H.M. Davies, a leading member of the local Liberal Party, was elected as the first Chairman of the Blaenavon Urban District Council. He represented the council at the opening of the Workmen's Hall in 1895. Mr Davies held the post until 1898. He also served as a magistrate for many years and was president of the Blaenavon Chamber of Trade.

### ***Cllr William Edwards JP***

William Edwards was born in Abercarn in 1835 and moved to Blaenavon where he traded as a provision merchant as a partner with Mr R.J. Fowler in the firm of Edwards and Fowler. On his retirement in 1894 he moved to the Firs, Woodland Park, Maindee, Newport. A leading Liberal, he served as member of Monmouthshire County Council for Blaenavon East and was a magistrate.

### ***John Davies***

John Davies was born in 1869 and was the son of Thomas Davies 'The Alma' and his wife Margaret. He grew up in the Alma Inn, 41 Broad Street, Blaenavon. His father, who in addition to his duties in the pub, also worked as a miner, was killed in an accident at Dodd's Slope in 1894. John Davies served as Secretary of the Workmen's Institute from March 1898 to 1927, when he was successfully challenged by Cecil A.S. Northcote, a veteran of the First World War, at the Annual General Meeting. Davies challenged Northcote in subsequent elections but only won modest support and never regained the position.



### ***Edwin Fisher (1845-1917)***

Edwin Fisher was a colliery hewer, born in Camerton, Somerset, in 1845. He moved to Blaenavon by the 1860s and lived at Hill Street. Edwin Fisher became involved in the Blaenavon Workmen's Institute and was a member of the committee which oversaw the building of the Workmen's Hall in 1893-94. He was elected as a trustee in 1898 and was a long-serving servant of the hall. He presented Robert William Kennard with a handsome gold medal in September 1912, marking the Workmen's Hall becoming free of debt.

Edwin Fisher and his wife lived with their grandson Windsor Goodall in Hill Street. Sadly, Gunner Windsor Goodall was killed during the First World War in November 1917. Edwin Fisher died the following month, on Christmas Eve 1917.

### ***Evan Llewellyn (1851-1926)***

Evan Llewellyn, who was born in Castleton, Monmouthshire, was one of the founding members of the Workmen's Institute in 1883 and was appointed librarian in 1885. Having previously managed the library in the original institute in Lion Street, he moved into the Workmen's Hall cottage (101 High Street) with his wife, Margaret, following the completion of the Workmen's Hall in 1894.

Mr Llewellyn was known for his sense of humour. At the Institute's 'Free of Debt' celebrations of 1912, he told many amusing anecdotes about his time as librarian. He noted one occasion where a young woman requested 'Two Kisses please' to which, blushing, he informed her he was a married man. As librarian, Mr Llewellyn maintained discipline and order in the library and reading rooms, giving stern looks to any youths who dared make an inappropriate noise! He was bilingual and a stock of Welsh language books and periodicals were kept and made available in the library. Mr Llewellyn served the Workmen's Institute for over 40 years until his death in 1926, aged 75 years.





## The Historical Context

### **Arthur Morgan**

Arthur Morgan was born in Blaenavon in 1881. He lived at 11 Upper Waun Street and worked as a coalminer. He was a trustee of the Workmen's Institute and was the chairman of the recreation committee. After the First World War, it was through his leadership and direction that the Blaenavon Recreation Grounds at Coed Cae were established and opened in 1921. He became Chairman of the Workmen's Hall and Institute in 1929.

Arthur's son, Joseph Morgan, excelled educationally. He became a notable pianist and musician, who came to prominence at the National Eisteddfod in Barry in 1920. He went on to become Professor of Music at Cardiff University.



## Appendix C: Summary of Resources

The following section provides an overview of the resources utilised in the compilation of this document, as well as information about how to conduct further research into the themes covered in this project.

### **Newspapers**

Excellent online resources have been made available in recent years, which allow for the closer investigation of local history. The Welsh Newspapers Online, made available by the National Library of Wales, provides searchable access to over one million pages of Welsh newspapers published between the early nineteenth century to 1919.<sup>232</sup> Of the c.120 titles available on the website, the most relevant for Blaenavon are the *Monmouthshire Merlin* and the *Pontypool Free Press*.

Further newspaper titles are also searchable on the subscription site British Newspapers Online. This website includes access to the *Hereford Times*, which also covers Blaenavon.

Using the search feature, it is possible to refine searches to specific newspapers or between certain years. There are also options to make advanced searches. Certain methods of searching can also improve the relevance of the results. For example, compare the following search terms.

Blaenavon Market Tavern
Blaenavon AND "Market Tavern"

<sup>232</sup> <https://www.llgc.org.uk/index.php?id=4723>



## The Historical Context

The second option provides the better search, as it will return results for the exact phrase “Market Tavern” in articles, which also refers to ‘Blaenavon’. The first search simply searches for three separate, and possibly unrelated, terms. ‘Blaenavon’, ‘market’ and ‘tavern’.

### **Census**

Census returns are available on websites such as Ancestry.co.uk and Find My Past. Whilst these are subscription websites, there is generally access to versions of these resources in public libraries.

- [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)
- [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

### **Maps**

The Cynefin project digitised over a thousand Welsh tithe maps. The maps relevant to Blaenavon town centre are included under the parish of Llanover. It shows the tithe maps of the 1840s but also allows for these maps to be compared or overlaid with modern maps or historic Ordnance Survey maps. This resource is freely available and can be accessed at <http://cynefin.archiveswales.org.uk/en/>. The project was officially completed in 2017 but the data and resources will continue to be accessible on the National Library of Wales’s website – <https://places.library.wales/>

### **Trade Directories**

Trade directories provide a useful snapshot of commercial and civic development in the community at a particular time. Kelly’s Directories for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been made freely available online by the University of Leicester and others (accessed September 2017).

Kelly’s Directory of Monmouthshire and South Wales (1895):

<http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/cdm/ref/collection/p16445coll4/id/278608>



## The Historical Context

Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire (1901):

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~familyalbum/kellys.htm>

Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire (1914):

<http://leicester.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16445coll4/id/8912>

Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire and South Wales (1920):

<https://archive.org/details/kellysdirectoryo141920lond>

### **Other Relevant Websites**

<http://www.coflein.gov.uk/> - this website serves as a searchable database for the National Monuments Record of Wales (NMRW) and contains information concerning thousands of buildings, monuments and sites across Wales, gathered from surveys by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales. It also provides indexes to further collections available in the NMRW archive.<sup>233</sup>

Funded by the Welsh Government, the People's Collection Wales (<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/>) provides a searchable repository of photographs and documents relating to the history of Wales, including content relating to Blaenavon.<sup>234</sup>

### **Gwent Archives**

The principal repository for historic documents in old Monmouthshire, is Gwent Archives, located in Ebbw Vale. Within the collection are maps, local administrative records (e.g. minutes of the local board and the Blaenavon UDC A.410) and records for some local businesses. Further information about the Gwent Archives collection can be seen at <http://www.gwentarchives.gov.uk/>.

An index of archival material can be found at <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

<sup>233</sup> <http://www.coflein.gov.uk/en/about>

<sup>234</sup> <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/about-us>



### ***Blaenavon Community Museum Collections***

The Blaenavon Community Museum, located within the Blaenavon Workmen's Hall, is an accredited museum with a remit to collect artefacts relating to the social, economic, cultural, political and religious heritage of Blaenavon. The following provides an overview and assessment (by this author) of the museum's collections that relate to the tangible and intangible heritage of Blaenavon town. It should also be noted that the museum contains an extensive local studies library and includes documents such as chapel histories and historical information concerning to the town's built heritage. An extensive collection of records relating to Archer's painters', decorators' and hairdressers' was recently donated to the museum.

Further information can be sought by visiting the museum at the Workmen's Hall during the advertised opening hours, emailing [blaenavonmuseum@outlook.com](mailto:blaenavonmuseum@outlook.com) or calling 01495 790991.

### ***Collections Relating to Welsh Nonconformity***

The museum holds a significant collection relating to the Lion Street Congregationalist Chapel, with certain items on loan from Bethlehem Chapel. The congregation of Lion Street English Independent Congregationalist Chapel amicably broke away from the Welsh speaking Bethlehem Congregationalist Chapel in Broad Street in 1863. The congregation initially met in Market Street and James Street before finding its permanent home in Lion Street. The foundation stone was laid in July 1867 by Henry Overton Wills III, a member of the famous W.D & H.O. Wills tobacco company (incidentally the museum holds two Wills cigarette packets in its collections).

The chapel, due to a dwindling congregation, closed in 1982 and was subsequently demolished in 1987. The remaining congregation, along with many of the chapel's artefacts, returned to Bethlehem Independent Chapel in Broad Street. Following the closure of Bethlehem Chapel in 2009, items from both chapels were loaned to the Museum.



The collection holds a number of large Bibles from various sources. Within the collection is a Bible presented to Lion Street Congregationalist Chapel in April 1921 by Jeffrey Jones in memory of his late mother, Abigail Owen, who died in December 1919, aged 74 years. Mrs Owen had been a member of Lion Street Congregationalist Church for some 30 years. The inscription within the Bible describes her as a 'sister and worker beloved'. The artefact provides evidence of the role of women as members within nonconformist congregations and illustrates the ways in which chapels would remember their deceased members.

A communion set also forms part of the collection. With a dedication date of 5 July 1925 inscribed on the piece, it is dedicated to the memory of Mr Isaac Lodge Morgan of Fro House, Blaenavon, who died in 1923, aged 67 years. It was left to the chapel on the bequest of his late widow, Mrs Sarah Anne Morgan. Isaac L. Morgan was born in Newport in 1855. He lived at 'Fro House', number 1 New William Street (known locally as 'Coffin Corner') and traded as a builder and undertaker.

The collections also include two chapel war memorials, from Lion Street and Bethlehem Chapels, marking the men from the congregations who were killed or served during the First World War. The memorials are important not only because they name those who served or were killed but they provide a reminder of the impact that the First World War had on Welsh nonconformity. Until the war, nonconformity enjoyed a very significant social, cultural and political role in Welsh society. On the outbreak of war, ministers preached that the war was a just and holy cause and encouraged young men to enlist. The Bethlehem Chapel Roll of Honour is of particular interest as it was compiled throughout the course of the conflict, with men being added to the list as they joined up. It is likely that it was on display within the chapel and it would have implicitly exposed the men within the congregation who had not joined the forces, perhaps shaming them into enlisting. Welsh nonconformity suffered as a result of the First World War as people, having seen the horrors of the battlefield, questioned the authority of the 'fire and brimstone' preachers. Cultural change between



the wars and beyond, resulted in the declining influence of the chapels. A third war memorial is within the collection and takes the form of a font. This is again from Lion Street Chapel.

Other items within the collection, include an original photograph of Lion Street Chapel, dating from 1917. It is probably the oldest and best external photograph of the chapel in existence. Commemorative plates, cups, hymn/prayer books from chapels, including Lion Street, Penuel Calvinistic Methodist and Ebenezer Welsh Baptist Chapels are also within the collections and typically date from the twentieth century.

Additional items relating to religion, include a lectern (from St. Peter's Church) and a late twentieth century Salvation Army uniform and banner, belonging to the late Margaret Stokes who served the Blaenavon branch of the Salvation Army for many years.

Another relevant artefact is an inscribed teapot of an unknown date (probably late Victorian/Edwardian era). The pot was presented to Mrs S.A. Shoplind in recognition of her 20 year service as a Sunday School teacher at Broad Street English Baptist Church, Blaenavon. It therefore provides evidence of the role of women in educational roles within nonconformist chapels.

The museum also holds a collection of photographs and ephemera relating to Park Street Methodist Chapel, providing an indication of the cultural and social programme offered by the chapel and providing a pictorial record of most of the ministers of the chapel between the 1880s and the 1940s. A collection of photographs of Penuel Chapel (among the few known to be in existence are also in the collection and are likely to have been taken during the 1960s, shortly before the chapel's demolition.



### ***Collections Relating to Culture, Recreation and Leisure***

The museum holds a varied collection relating to the recreational culture of Blaenavon. Within the collection is a taxidermy of a champion fighting cockerel of Blaenavon, purported to date to approximately 1830. This provides evidence of the 'rough' culture participated in by certain sections of the society. Although tenuously linked with this theme, the museum holds a number of nineteenth/early twentieth century beer bottles (including some from local businesses such as Charles Westlake's brewery), which provides some material illustration of public houses and breweries etc.

The museum also holds a number of items related to the Blaenavon Workmen's Hall, including a collection of library books, which provide evidence of the educational role of the Workmen's Institute during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Within the collection is a selection of programmes relating to the entertainments, which took place at the hall during the twentieth century and a ticket reel, still containing Workmen's Hall branded tickets. The collection also contains four commemorative mugs, dating from 1912, which were presented to each schoolchild in Blaenavon, to mark the Workmen's Hall becoming free from debt.

There is also an original framed photograph of the opening ceremony of the Blaenavon Recreation Grounds – heralded as the 'daughter' of the Workmen's Institute, which opened in 1921 thanks to public subscription. Sporting memorabilia relating to the town's rugby and bowls teams are also within the collection, including photographs and sporting equipment.

The museum has bowls equipment within its collections. The sport has been played at the Bowling Grounds at Blaenavon Recreation Grounds since it opened in 1921. Also within the collection is a shield that was presented by the Blaenavon Company from 1923 as a prize for the annual relay race which was held at the Recreation Grounds. This is also an example of how the Blaenavon Company were keen to encourage respectable recreational pursuits among their employees and





how the company felt a moral duty to take a role in sponsoring certain activities that took place in the life of the community.

Eisteddfodau were an important element of Welsh society during the nineteenth century. The tradition was revived during the 1820s as people competed in choral singing, poetry and writing. Eisteddfodau became massively popular throughout Wales by the end of the nineteenth century. The National Eisteddfod was revived in 1858 and other semi-national or regional events would also take place. The growth of the railways allowed people to travel across the country to compete. These cultural events took place regularly throughout the year and were held by public houses, chapels, friendly societies and the co-operative society. Competitions would take place concerning poetry, recitation and singing, often (but not always) making use of the Welsh language. The museum holds two Eisteddfod chairs in its collections. One relates to the Co-operative Eisteddfod, held at the Co-operative Hall in Blaenavon in 1929. The second was won by the Blaenavon Male Voice Choir at the Tonyrefail Eisteddfod in 1930. Newspaper accounts from the time, indicate that hundreds of Blaenavon people would accompany their choirs to Eisteddfodau held in different parts of the country.

Male Voice Choirs formed an important part of the recreational culture of south Wales. Many Male Voice Parties were in existence in the nineteenth century and took secular and sacred forms. They were sometimes connected with the local industries or chapels. The current Blaenavon Male Voice Choir formed in c.1910. A collection of trophies relating to the Blaenavon Male Voice Choir is held by the museum on loan.

A plethora of groups and societies also developed in Blaenavon during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The museum holds items relating to some of these organisations, including a valuable silver cup from the Blaenavon Horticultural Society and shields from local branches of the



scouting movement. A shield relating to the Blaenavon Darts League is also in the collection and dates from 1987.

### ***Collections Relating to Self-Help, Friendly Societies, Sick Clubs and Co-operation***

The museum also holds a collection of regalia and memorabilia relating to the lodges of fraternal and friendly societies. The collection predominantly features a collection associated with Cllr. William Morris of Blaenavon, who was a Worshipful Master of the Kennard Lodge of Freemasons. There are several colourful masonic aprons, as well as lecture books, constitutions and material on the Oddfellows society.

Within the collection there is also a framed certificate relating to the Independent Order of Rechabites, which was a very influential temperance organisation during the nineteenth century, based in Salford, Manchester. The certificate held at the museum relates to a Brother George Palmer being admitted as a member of 'Workman's Friend', a branch in the East Glamorgan district of the Rechabites on 14 January 1899. Although its direct link to Blaenavon is unclear, it provides evidence of the temperance movement in south Wales and the work of a national friendly society. The collection also provides evidence of sick clubs in Blaenavon. A clock bearing the inscription 'Presented to Mrs D J Howells by Milfraen Sick Fund as a Token of Respect Dec 1917'. Accompanying the item are vases and a pocket watch, also believed to have been presented to the Howells family by the sick club. The Milfraen Colliery Sick and Accidental Fund met at the Forge Hammer Hotel and Assembly Room, Blaenavon. The fund, which by 1916, was worth over £400, originated 'through the inequality of raising collections for sick and injured workmen at the colliery. Every man who paid to the fund was entitled to benefit'. It was strongly supported by William Daniel, manager of the Milfraen Colliery.

This self-help culture was also seen through the co-operative movement. Blaenavon's first co-operative was established in 1861 but this, and a subsequent society, both failed within a few years



before a successful attempt was made in 1889. The society ran a variety of shops and departments throughout Blaenavon, offering dividend for its members. There is also a collection of commemorative cups and plates relating to a jubilee of the Blaenavon Industrial and Provident Society (the co-operative). Additionally, there is a collection of original documents relating to the co-operative society within the museum's archives.

### ***Collections Relating to Shops and Businesses***

Despite Blaenavon once boasting a flourishing retail centre, the museum's collection of artefacts associated with local business is somewhat limited. There are bottles associated with local breweries and ale suppliers, including Charles Westlake's brewery in James Street (and later Cwmavon) and Lewis Richards, a grocer, ale, mineral water and porter merchant, trading at 69/70 High Street and Cross Street, Blaenavon. There are also two ring boxes from Blaenavon jewellers, Leopold Winterhalter (a German immigrant, who traded in Broad Street in late 19th and early 20th centuries) and Thomas Sambrook. An empty bottle of Deakin's famous medicine is also in the collection (George Deakin, a chemist, traded at 19 Broad Street and was also a local choirmaster). The museum also holds an electro-plated spoon, sold from Jacob Evans' ironmongers.

There is also a collection of shoemaking equipment, items relating to the company shop and receipts and documents relating to local businesses, including the co-operative movement. A number of 20th century tills/cash registers (not necessarily related to local businesses) are also included within the collection.



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