

BIG PIT: A BRIEF HISTORY

Early History

Big Pit, now the National Coal Museum of Wales, was just one of a number of collieries to be operated in the Blaenavon area during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The mine, however, was the most important colliery in the town for over one hundred years and has an interesting history.

The shaft at Big Pit, originally known as Kearsley's Pit, was sunk to the depth of 200ft by the Blaenavon Company in 1860. It was deepened in 1880 to its present depth of 300ft and became known as 'Big Pit' because of its unusually large elliptical shaft. Parts of Big Pit, however, date to the early nineteenth century. Big Pit was an amalgamation of several mines, namely Coity Pits, Dodd's Slope, Coity Level, Blaenavon New Mine, Elled Drift, Forge Pit, Forge Slope and Forge Level, the earliest part of the mine, which was sunk in 1812.

Many mines in the Blaenavon area, including Forge Level, were initially used for the gathering of ironstone rather than coal, in order to support the local ironworks. Coal was also mined at Blaenavon to meet a local demand but it was not until the late nineteenth century that the reign of 'King Coal' came to south Wales. By the late nineteenth century the significance of Welsh steel and iron-making was on the wane but a growing demand existed for Welsh coal to fuel locomotives, steam ships, factories and houses. Many Welsh towns, including Blaenavon, specialised on the production of coal in order to take advantage of the high demand.

King Coal

The South Wales Coalfield was at the height of production between the 1880s and 1913. In 1913 Wales recorded its highest ever output; 57,000,000 tons of coal was produced by nearly a quarter of a million Welsh miners. Big Pit was a massive employer in Blaenavon, some 1,300 men worked at the mine during the early 1920s. Blaenavon coal was shipped around the world, to as far a field as South America. It was also used by the Great Western Railway to fuel trains and engines.

Camaraderie

A long held stereotype exists of the solidarity, friendship and loyalty that were exhibited by coal miners to their fellow workmen. This was displayed numerous times throughout the history of Welsh coalmining. At Big Pit, for example, in April 1913 a serious fire broke out underground. Everybody was evacuated but three officials, Messrs Tucker, Jenkins and Bond, went underground to investigate the cause of the fire and were sadly killed by the fumes. There was no shortage of volunteers for the rescue party and Mr. Jenkins' son even had to be restrained from going underground to try and save his father. It was necessary for men to look out for each other due to the harsh and dangerous working conditions.

Accidents

Big Pit, like all coalmines, experienced a large number of accidents, some of which proved fatal. The parish records of Blaenavon contain the names of many local men, women and children who were killed

in industrial accidents. Blaenavon's worst industrial accident, however, did not take place at Big Pit. In November 1838 the Cinder Pits at Blaenavon were flooded and fifteen miners, including five children, drowned. Also, a significant explosion at Milfraen Colliery in 1929 resulted in the death of nine miners. The worst disaster in the Eastern Valley took place in Llanerch Colliery, near Pontypool, in February 1890 in which 176 miners were killed in an underground explosion but the worst mining disaster in British history was experienced at the Universal Colliery in Senghenydd in 1913, where 439 men and boys were killed. Such incidents had terrible impacts on families both financially and emotionally.

Pithead Baths

During the mid-twentieth century a number of improvements were made to Big Pit. Most significantly was the building of the pithead baths in 1939. The baths, designed by the architect A.J. Saise, opened on 28th January 1939 and had a huge impact on people's lives. Before their introduction men would have to walk home wet and dirty after a long day's toil, risking pneumonia and illness. Women would have to carry heavy jugs of boiling water to fill the tin baths for their sons and husbands, causing some women to have miscarriages. Also, it was not uncommon for young children to be scalded by the hot water. The introduction of the baths was therefore very beneficial for coalmining families across the country and the Miners' Welfare Committee worked hard for communities across Britain to have the facilities installed.

Decline of the Coal Industry

From the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s the British coal industry went into terminal decline. The reduced demand for Welsh coal and the increased competition from abroad placed enormous strain on the industry. A series of pit closures in the 1970s and 1980s had a damaging effect on communities that had, for many generations, relied on mining. Big Pit, Blaenavon's last coalmine, closed in February 1980. At the time of its closure it employed 250 people and was therefore still a relatively important employer in the town.

The closure of the pit accelerated Blaenavon's decline. By the end of the 1980s Blaenavon was merely a dormitory town with boarded up shops lining the once prosperous streets. From 1975, however, plans had been made to convert Big Pit into a museum to bring national attention to coalmining heritage of Wales. There was no delay in converting the mine to a new use and Big Pit reopened as a museum in April 1983, under the auspices of a charitable trust.

Big Pit Museum

Big Pit Mining Museum was instantly popular, providing visitors with the unique experience of exploring underground passages with former miners but financial difficulties meant that the museum often faced an uncertain future.

The management of the site was assumed by the National Museums and Galleries of Wales in 1999 and since Blaenavon received World Heritage Status in 2000, the museum has gone from strength to strength and visitor numbers have soared. An extensive revamp of the site was completed in 2004 courtesy of grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh

Tourist Board. The new surface displays, exhibitions and interpretation features were instrumental in Big Pit receiving the prestigious Gulbenkian Prize for museum of the year in 2005.

Since 1983 over three million people have been welcomed to the site and, with its enduring popularity, Big Pit will continue to bring global attention to the coalmining heritage of Wales for many years to come.