

BLAENAVON IRONWORKS: A BRIEF HISTORY

Lord Abergavenny's Hills

During the 1780s the leases to an area of land known as 'Lord Abergavenny's Hill' began to expire. The area was rich in minerals and natural resources and was clearly a region, where profits could be sought. Three experienced industrialists from the West Midlands, Thomas Hill of Dennis, Thomas Hopkins of Rugeley and Benjamin Pratt of Great Witley, came to the small, peaceful community and entered into negotiations with Henry Nevill, the Earl of Abergavenny. The negotiations were successful and on the 30th of November 1789 a lease of land was granted allowing Hill and Company 'the royalties, mines, minerals, coal and limestone, with power to work the same, and to erect furnaces thereon, in, under and over 12,000 acres, commonly called 'Lord Abergavenny's Hills''. Work was soon completed on the Blaenavon Ironworks, the most important site in the history of the town.

The Establishment of the Blaenavon Ironworks

The Blaenavon Ironworks opened in the year 1789, it was a very expensive, ambitious and somewhat risky venture initially costing a considerable £40,000. When it opened, the ironworks had three blast furnaces and employed about three hundred men, many of whom were iron-making experts who travelled with their employers from Staffordshire to help construct the works.

The success of the iron industry directly accounts for the growth of Blaenavon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Visiting Blaenavon at the end of the eighteenth century, Archdeacon William Coxe noted 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."

Demand and Productivity

The south Wales iron industry developed at a time of increased demand for iron goods. During the eighteenth century Great Britain was involved in overseas wars such as the American War of Independence (1775-1783) and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars with France (1792-1815). Therefore for Britain to realise her global ambitions, a supply of armaments was required and iron was in great demand for the making of cannon balls and other weapons. The demand for iron rails was also increasing during the nineteenth century and a new forge was created at Garnddyrys to diversify the company's output.

In the early years of the Blaenavon business several thousand tons of pig iron were produced by the works each year. Production levels, however, fluctuated for a variety of reasons such as changing levels of demand or advances in technology. In 1796 there was an output of 4,318 tons but due to rising demand for iron coupled with technological improvements, such as the installation of a Boulton and Watt engine in 1800 and the creation of a new blast furnace in 1805, annual production rose to over 14,000 tons by 1812. Blaenavon was a great industrial success, producing more iron than many of its competitors in Wales.

By the end of the eighteenth century and during the early years of the nineteenth century, the industrialists, Hill, Hopkins and Pratt had sown the seeds for the future development of the town of Blaenavon. Despite the fluctuating production rates, it cannot be denied that the Blaenavon venture had been a success. The population was rising, the town was growing and the industry was generally prospering.

James Ashwell

The Blaenavon Company was reorganised as a joint stock company in 1836, headed by a Mr. William Unwin Sims. Sims committed suicide in 1839 and Robert William Kennard, a Scottish industrialist, assumed control during the 1840s. His family came to dominate the Blaenavon Company for many decades.

The first managing director of the new era was James Ashwell (1799-1881). Ashwell came from Nottinghamshire and had been a pupil of the great engineer, Bryan Donkin. He had considerable experience directing ironworks in Derbyshire and Scotland. During his incumbency Ashwell was responsible for an extensive programme of improvements to the company's housing, furnaces, forges and transport systems. The company's shareholders, however, were disgruntled about the excessive spending and lack of profit made during Ashwell's tenure as manager. Ashwell therefore resigned on New Year's Day 1841 and the Forgeside ironworks were abandoned and not completed until the 1860s.

The most impressive monument to Ashwell's work at Blaenavon Ironworks is the water balance tower at its northern end, which was built in 1839. This form of lift technology using water to counter-balance loads was used in the mine shafts of south east Wales and at several ironworks. Blaenavon water balance tower is the best preserved example. The lift tower was linked to high ground behind by a wooden bridge, which was quickly replaced by the stone bridge that still remains. Its winding gear consisted of a cast iron frame with Classical detailing, on which was mounted a pulley wheel over which a chain linked a pair of lift cages, each incorporating a wrought iron water tank. By piping water in or out of the tank, wagons could be lifted or lowered as required. The stonework of the tower is of high quality, and it is topped by the remnants of the cast iron frame, which has the appearance of a ruined Classical temple.

Later Years

Gradually, the original Blaenavon Ironworks began to lose its significance. The new steelworks at Forgeside was completed during the 1860s and the old site received little investment or improvement. Production at the North Street ironworks ceased completely during the early 1900s and the site became used as a maintenance yard for the Blaenavon Company's collieries and steelworks. The site was earmarked for demolition in 1970 but fortunately the site was taken into state care in 1974 and was saved for the nation.

Conservation

From 1974 a programme of excavation, consolidation and repair was carried out according to best conservation practice. Photogrammetry and drawn survey was undertaken of all features of the site

before, during and after conservation work. Work was carried out in a way to emphasise its authenticity as a consolidated ruin, preserving its surviving features. No reconstruction took place except where necessary for structural purposes and, wherever possible, all conservation measures were devised to be reversible. Excavations were limited to features which can be immediately consolidated and materials and methods appropriate to the character of the monument were used throughout.

Stack Square and Engine Row

Also contained within the Ironworks complex, and the setting of the BBC Coal House series, are Stack Square and Engine Row. The houses are a small group of solidly constructed stone cottages, incorporating patterns of building, notably door and window heads, characteristic of the West Midlands in England, alongside more local building practices. The houses were probably erected during the 1780s for the first skilled workers who operated the furnaces from the time they were built. Amongst the early inhabitants was Joseph Hampton, from the Stourbridge area of Worcestershire, who was superintendent of the Ironworks for nearly 30 years before his death in 1832. The houses form a square into which a 50 metre high chimney stack for a new engine house was placed in 1860, the base of which can still be seen. The central range of the square was originally the Company office, shop and manager's house in 1788, and was converted to dwellings in the 1860s, which were of a much smaller size than the skilled workers' homes which surrounded them. The whole square is a Scheduled Ancient Monument in the care of the state and has been carefully conserved.

Since 2008 the Blaenavon Ironworks and the cottages at Stack Square have been under the direct management of Cadw, the historic environment service of the Welsh Assembly Government.