

CULTURE AND RECREATION IN BLAENAVON

Blaenavon, like many Valleys towns in the nineteenth century, developed a unique and distinct cultural identity. The processes of industrialisation and urbanisation had brought together a large group of people who, through their work and lifestyles, shared a common experience. Throughout the nineteenth century this working class identity was expressed in numerous ways, whether through religious nonconformity, trade unionism or through cultural and leisure activities. This article explores the ways in which Blaenavon people pursued recreation during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Blaenavon Workmen's Institute

The most significant and visible example of Blaenavon's cultural identity was expressed through the creation of the Blaenavon Workmen's Hall and Institute. The history of the organisation dates to the 1880s when meetings were held to canvass support for a Workmen's Institute, where workmen could meet to socialise and discuss the issues of the day, read and play games. Various self-improvement groups had existed in Blaenavon throughout the nineteenth century including the Reading and Mutual Improvement Society, which had a membership of 110 in 1860. Such groups, however, often struggled to hold financial support and quickly closed. Nonetheless, it was agreed that there was sufficient demand for an institute and, to ensure success, the Blaenavon Company, the town's main employer, pledged to take a subscription of a halfpenny out of each man's weekly wage to support the new venture.

From July 1883 the Blaenavon Workmen's Institute met at a small building in Lion Street. At its opening the institute had a billiards table and a collection of books valued at £150. The facility was very popular and enjoyed much support. Within a few years it was apparent that a better building was required to accommodate the impressive membership. In 1891, the institute purchased a parcel of land on Waun Field from the Blaenavon Company for the sum of £600. The Blaenavon Company,

however, was so impressed with the workers' aims of self-improvement that it donated some £800 to the cause. Plans for a new, imposing building were drawn up by the Newport architect, E.A. Lansdowne, and between 1893 and 1894 the magnificent building was erected at a cost of £9,000. Some of the members even mortgaged their own homes to fund the building.

The work on the new Blaenavon Workmen's Hall was completed in late 1894. It was officially opened in front of a huge crowd of proud Blaenavon people on Monday the 7th of January 1895 by Cllr. Robert William Kennard, the son of the chairman of the Blaenavon Company. Architecturally, the building was arguably one of the finest of its type in south Wales. 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 a fine auditorium. A cinema was added during the early twentieth century, showing the first 'talkies' by the 1930s. The historian, Lewis Browning, commented in 1906 that 'this hall has been a great acquisition to the town, and is largely used for concerts, eisteddfods, tea parties, bazaars, political gatherings and other purposes'. It was the hub of Blaenavon's community for many years.

Sport

Blaenavon has a very proud sporting history, with a number of Blaenavon people enjoying distinguished careers on the field. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the town supported a large number of sports teams, many of which were organised by churches and chapels. There were about thirty rugby and football teams in Blaenavon during the 1870s. The town also had a number of cricket teams and hockey teams; a golf course, athletics and gymnastics clubs, a Snooker and Billiards team, a weightlifting club, dance troupes and table tennis teams.

The cause of sporting activities in Blaenavon was greatly enhanced when the committee of the Blaenavon Workmen's Institute funded the Recreation Grounds and gardens at Middle Coed Cae. The grounds were opened on the 17th of September 1921 and catered for a variety of sports and activities, including football, rugby and bowls. An outdoor swimming pool, financially supported by the takings of the Workmen's Hall cinema, was constructed in 1923.



Case Studies: The Sportsmen of Blaenavon

Three of Blaenavon's most famous sportsmen made their names in the Welsh national game of Rugby during the twentieth century.

Kenneth J. Jones O.B.E. (1921-2006) was one of Wales' most respected athletes. He served as captain of the Welsh rugby team for two seasons, winning 44 caps between 1947 and 1957. At Cardiff Arms Park, in 1953, Jones scored the decisive try against the All Blacks, in what remains the last occasion that Wales has beaten the New Zealand team. Jones was also a noted sprinter, winning a silver medal for the relay during the 1948 Olympic Games in London. He later served as captain of the Great Britain track and field team during the 1954 European Championships and in the same year he presented the Duke of Edinburgh with the baton during the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games at Cardiff Arms Park.

Blaenavon has produced two other Welsh rugby captains, namely Terry Cobner (b.1946) and Mark Taylor (b.1973). Cobner played for the Wales national team and the British Lions during the 1970s and captained the Welsh team against Australia in 1978. Mark Taylor, who made his national debut in 1994,

captained Wales on four occasions during the 2000s. He scored the first professional try at the Millennium Stadium during the Rugby World Cup in 1999.

Economic and Cultural Decline

Strikes, industrial disputes and economic problems posed considerable challenges for Blaenavon's cultural institutions. Between 1900 and 1901, for example, a damaging 73 week strike took place, resulting in many people leaving the town to seek work elsewhere. Due to lack of funds, both the cricket and football teams were disbanded for the season. Similar problems had to be confronted during the depression years of the 1920s and 1930s as population decline and lack of money made it difficult for clubs and societies to operate.

It was not all doom and gloom, however, as during the depression some new clubs, such as the Black Diamonds and the Blaenavon Dramatic Society, were formed to provide escapism from the harsh financial realities of the time. Some of Blaenavon's residents became well known for their talents during this era, including Joseph Morgan, a pianist, who became Professor of Music at Cardiff University and Frank Prosser and Beryl Jones, who became BBC scriptwriters.



Nonetheless, social change and the long-term economic decline of Blaenavon took its toll on the cultural life of the town. While some of Blaenavon's groups and societies such as the Male Voice Choir and the Town Band stood the test of time, some groups were not so fortunate with many closing during the twentieth century. Even the social role of the Workmen's Hall and Institute gradually diminished.

Decline of the Workmen's Hall

The rise of radio and television meant that people were less willing to regularly participate in community activities for their recreation. Cecil Northcote, the secretary of the committee, reported in 1959 that cinema audiences at the Workmen's Hall had fallen by more than a half since the early 1950s. Unable to meet the costs of operating the Recreation Grounds and the swimming pool at Coed Cae, the Workmen's Hall had to transfer the facilities to the Blaenavon Urban District Council in 1961. Similarly, the Workmen's Hall library was taken over by Monmouthshire County Council Library Service in 1954 and was moved to Park Street in the early 1980s.

By 1984 the Workmen's Hall faced numerous challenges. The cost of much needed repairs was well beyond the means of the committee. There were even concerns that the magnificent hall might have to be demolished due to serious structural problems. Fortunately the building was sold to Torfaen Borough Council, who closed the hall for several years while extensive maintenance took place.

Recent Years

The renovated **Blaenavon Workmen's Hall** reopened on the 7th of January 1995 to mark the centenary of the building's original opening. Since that time it has been operated by a voluntary committee, which has worked hard to ensure that the Workmen's Hall is once again the focal point of community activities. Although the success and popularity that the Workmen's Hall enjoyed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will never be seen again, the Hall still serves a very important social role. The cinema has been reopened, regular concerts are held in the theatre and a number of local groups and societies continue to use the on-site conference facilities. The Hall, in conjunction with Torfaen County Borough Council, also hosts a number of **events** throughout the year.

Despite the profound social and economic problems that faced coalfield society in the late twentieth century Blaenavon continues to support a diverse number of groups and societies, which form much of the town's distinct cultural identity. The town, which has long had a strong musical tradition, is well-known for its Male Voice Choir. The choir, officially formed in 1910, has over sixty members and has successfully performed to the highest standard in national competitions. The town also has two bands, the Blaenavon Town Band, formed during the 1890s, and the Blaenavon Concert Band. Both play at local, regional and national events. New groups have also been set-up in recent years including youth clubs and 'Future Blaenavon', a group which aims to improve the lives of the local community through a variety of projects.

The people of Blaenavon extend a warm welcome to all who wish to visit their special town.

Contact the **Blaenavon World Heritage Centre** for more details about Blaenavon's community groups.

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