

THE BLAENAVON IRONMASTERS

The industrial revolution would never have occurred if it were not for the risks and innovation of entrepreneurs. In south Wales, during the late eighteenth century, ironmasters set up a string of new ironworks, making the region the most important iron-producing region in the world. The labouring classes undeniably played a hugely significant role in the industrialisation process but it was the capital and experience of businessmen that made the industrial revolution a success. This article examines the history of the Blaenavon ironmasters and how they used their experience and their influence to create the town of Blaenavon.

The Experience of the Blaenavon Ironmasters

The leases for the area of Blaenavon, known as 'Lord Abergavenny's Hills', were not renewed during the 1780s. The West Midlands industrialist, Thomas Hill (1736-1824), and his partners, Thomas Hopkins (d.1793) and Benjamin Pratt (1742-1794), seized the opportunity to invest in the Blaenavon site, which they knew was rich in mineral resources. The businessmen invested some £40,000 into the ironworks project and erected three blast furnaces. It was an incredibly risky venture but the three men were confident that the enterprise would be a large-scale success and that their investment would provide considerable returns. The experience that all three men had acquired in iron-making, business and banking, proved invaluable in numerous ways.

Family Background

Thomas Hill, the leading partner, came from a very wealthy industrial background. He was a successful Worcestershire banker and ran Wollaston slitting mill. Hill had also inherited a considerable fortune from his father, Waldron Hill (1706-88), and his uncle, Thomas Hill (1711-82), who were successful glassmakers at Coalbournhill, Stourbridge.

Thomas Hill's sister, Sarah Hill, married the Welsh industrialist, Thomas Hopkins, at Kingswinford in 1761. Hopkins became an ironmaster at Cannock Wood Forge, Rugeley, Staffordshire, where he gained much experience in the industry. Thomas Hill and Thomas Hopkins soon became business partners. Benjamin Pratt, an industrialist from Great Witley, also entered into this partnership and, in 1776, Hill and Company successfully obtained the lease to work Wilden Forge, Worcestershire, from Lord Thomas Foley.

Social Networks

In 1782, Francis Homfray of Wollaston Hall, Worcestershire, began to invest in south Wales. Homfray, an associate of Thomas Hill, was aware of the potential profit in creating an ironworks in the region due to the abundance of ironstone and other raw materials. Thomas Homfray, the son of Francis Homfray, continued to run the Hyde slitting mill in Staffordshire, where he would have been in contact with Thomas Hill. Information networks existed between the industrialist classes. Industrialists, despite being often in competition, would communicate with each other and share information and ideas. It is highly likely that Hill, who already had interests in the iron industry in Staffordshire and Worcestershire, was influenced by

the Homfray venture and in the 1780s Hill and Company also looked towards south Wales as a source of potential wealth.

At Blaenavon the three industrialists combined their vast experience and founded a hugely successful ironworks. Thomas Hopkins, through operating the Cannock Wood Forge in Rugeley, Staffordshire, was in contact with skilled and experienced ironworkers. He managed to persuade many of them to migrate to Blaenavon to help establish the new ironworks. It is likely that the ironmasters provided incentives to convince these workers and their families to relocate. Comfortable accommodation, for example, was provided for them at Stack Square, in the immediate vicinity of the works. It was absolutely essential that these skilled workers were brought to Blaenavon because they were required not only to help build and start the works but also to train new workers in the art of iron-making. It would have been useless to have an impressive ironworks with no-one skilled enough to make the iron.

Philanthropy and the Samuel Hopkins era

By the end of the eighteenth century the original partnership had disintegrated. Thomas Hopkins died in 1793, leaving his 25% share in the company to his only son, Samuel Hopkins (1761-1815), and Benjamin Pratt died suddenly at the Angel Hotel in Abergavenny in May 1794, bequeathing all of his capital to his friend and colleague Thomas Hill. Thomas Hill continued to run the Blaenavon enterprise with his 32 year old nephew, Samuel Hopkins, who became residential manager of the ironworks. Samuel Hopkins' era as manager of the ironworks is considered to be a golden age in the history of Blaenavon. It is a period marked by increased productivity and investment, accompanied by paternalistic social leadership.

Ty Mawr

Samuel Hopkins was a typical ironmaster in some ways. Archdeacon William Coxe, in his Historical Tour of Monmouthshire tells us that in 1798 Hopkins was building 'a comfortable and elegant mansion' for himself. Clearly when the young Hopkins arrived in Blaenavon his first concern was to ensure that he had a fine home but at the same time some of the poorer Blaenavon residents did not even have adequate



housing. Hopkins had even ordered that the arches of a local viaduct be bricked up to provide make-shift accommodation for the surplus workforce. Hopkins's mansion, known as Ty Mawr or Blaenavon House, was an expensive and elaborate home, a visible contrast to the homes inhabited by the workers.

Religion

Despite his 'extravagance' Samuel Hopkins was a very popular man in Blaenavon, who was seen as a father-figure by many of the local people. The historian Lewis Browning claimed that Hopkins made the effort to learn the name of every worker and treated the people of Blaenavon with respect. Samuel Hopkins and his uncle, Thomas Hill, both staunch Anglicans, took religious leadership in the community and were responsible for the creation of St. Peter's Church in 1804. The gifting of the church to the parish was the earliest example of an industrialist family establishing an Anglican church in south Wales.



Health Care

The issue of health care was also a concern for Samuel Hopkins and his sister, Sarah Hopkins. Following his death in 1815, Samuel Hopkins bequeathed the sum of £100 to the Sick Club of Blaenavon. An identical sum was left to the club by his sister, following her death in 1844. Such donations would be gladly received and put to good use in an industrial town like Blaenavon, where injuries at the mines and works were commonplace. The Hopkins siblings were also patrons of other medical charities in Great Britain, including infirmaries in Bangor, Stafford and Hereford.

Education

Samuel and Sarah Hopkins, however, are best remembered for their great efforts in regard to the wellbeing of their workers' children. They established early schools in cottages at Bunker's Hill and Little Quick, where, for the weekly fee of two pence, classes were held by workers' wives. Samuel and Sarah Hopkins intended to build a purpose-built school in the town and following the death of Samuel Hopkins in 1815, Sarah Hopkins decided to 'carry into effect the benevolent intentions of her deeply lamented and most deserving brother' by erecting such a school for the children of Blaenavon.



The Blaenavon Endowed School was completed in 1816 and was built with the substantial funding and investment of Sarah Hopkins of Rugeley, who had inherited much money from her late brother. The school initially had one hundred and twenty pupils and the first headmaster was Mr. John Caldwell. The educational initiative promoted by the Hopkins siblings provides one of the earliest examples of an industrialist family taking a leading role in the education of their workers' children in Wales.

The family had a long association with education. At the time of his death in 1824, the ironmaster Thomas Hill was the benefactor of fourteen schools in the Midlands. Sarah Hopkins continued to take an active interest in the affairs of the Blaenavon school until her death in 1844. She also funded the creation of a school near her home town of Rugeley, where she was renowned for her charitable activities.

The Latter Years of the Hill-Hopkins Era

Samuel Hopkins died unmarried and childless. He left his share in the company to his cousin, Thomas Hill II (1768-1827), who became the new residential manager and ran the company with his aging father, Thomas Hill the elder. Upon arriving in Blaenavon in 1816, Thomas Hill II was immediately confronted with legal action in the case of Osborne Yeats and Harcourt Powell versus Thomas Hill and Samuel Hopkins (deceased).

Yeats & Powell v. Hill & Hopkins

The case, heard at Monmouth in August 1816, concerned the ownership of the land on which the Blaenavon ironworks and the young town had been built upon. It was a complicated case but the court eventually ruled in favour of Hill and Hopkins. The case is interesting, however, as it shows the support that the Hill family received from the local community.

The Reverend James Jenkins of St. Peter's Church was prepared to give evidence in support of the ironmasters. The curate even went as far as to accuse the plaintiffs and their witnesses of perjury. And it was not just the local Anglican minister who was in support of Hill and Hopkins. In a letter to Emma Theodosia Hodgetts, dated 24 August 1816, Ellen Hill (1799-1843), Thomas Hill's daughter, describes the townspeople's reaction to the court case. Written within a week of the conclusion of the case, Miss Hill writes that Blaenavon had 'been very gay and quite in a bustle the last week, with bells ringing, firing etc.' She states that when the news of Hill's victory reached Blaenavon at four o'clock on the Sunday morning, the bells of St. Peter's were pealed in celebration. She also describes an attempt by Blaenavon workers to meet Thomas Hill II on his journey back from Monmouth. If Ellen Hill's account is to be believed, Blaenavon men wished to remove Hill's horses and pull the victorious Thomas Hill and his carriage back to Blaenavon themselves, showing great levels of respect and deference. But apparently Hill 'would not suffer them to put their design into execution' and he returned to Blaenavon by the conventional means!

It seems likely that the Hill and Hopkins family of Blaenavon had gained the respect of the community, possibly as the result of their philanthropic behaviour. Arguably this could also be seen in the hard years following the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Although Blaenavon did see some disturbances in that period it did not encounter the levels of protest experienced by other industrial towns such as Merthyr Tydfil.

Thomas Hill II

The popularity enjoyed by Thomas Hill II when he first arrived in Blaenavon in 1816 was short lived. Hill did not show the same levels of paternalism as his cousin, Samuel Hopkins, and he soon found himself to be alienated from the workers of the town. Hill enjoyed an extravagant social life in Blaenavon in full view of the poor workers. He socialised with the local gentry and the upper-middle classes of the region,

enjoying parties and hunting with his pack of dogs, which he kept at his mansion, Park House. The lavishness of Hill alarmed many people in Blaenavon, who were not used to their ironmasters behaving in such a way. He was condemned by several of the religious groups in Blaenavon, who disapproved of such 'immoral' behaviour, showing that the religious and moral leadership which the Hill family once had was in decline.

Thomas Hill, the elder, died on 17th September 1824, aged eighty-seven years. In his long life Hill had achieved much, in both England and Wales. In addition to being largely responsible for creating one of the world's greatest ironworks, Hill, being a respected and successful businessman, had risen to the rank of High Sheriff of Worcestershire, a highly prestigious position. Thomas Hill divided his majority share in the company between his eldest sons, Thomas Hill II and Waldron Hill. Thomas Hill II, who had previously inherited Samuel Hopkins's share, became the main shareholder in the Blaenavon Company. The second Thomas Hill died on the 27th of November 1827 aged fifty-nine years, leaving his share to his inexperienced 29 year old son, Thomas Hill III.

The End of the Hill Era

Waldron Hill retired in the year 1830 and Robert Wheeley of Kingswinford (1796-1855), the works manager, purchased shares in the company. Wheeley, who arrived in Blaenavon during the era of the first Thomas Hill, married the daughter of the Reverend James Jenkins and adopted Blaenavon as his home, treating the workers with respect in a way similar to the paternalistic Samuel Hopkins. Hill, however, did not wish to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors. He withdrew from his family's banking business in 1833 and in the same year he put Blaenavon Ironworks and Coal Mines, 'a concern of the very first magnitude and importance', up for auction. The sale was unsuccessful but in 1836 the company was reorganised as a joint-stock company, led by a consortium of London merchants. The Blaenavon Company soon became dominated by the Kennard family.

Following the sale of the Blaenavon business, Hill III sold his ancestral home, Dennis Hall in Amblecote and much of its associated estate, to William S. Wheeley, the brother of Robert Wheeley. Thomas Hill, who never married, purchased Rudhall House near Ross, Herefordshire, where he lived in the style of a country gentleman with his sisters until his death, at the age of seventy years in 1868.

The Hill and Hopkins families dominated Blaenavon for almost fifty years. They played an important role in the creation of the community in a number of respects. They revolutionised Blaenavon's economy, built much of the early infrastructure and helped steer Blaenavon's society through the early years of the nineteenth century. The contribution of the family to the history of Blaenavon cannot be underestimated.

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