

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLAENAVON TOWN

Pre-Industrial Blaenavon

Prior to the massive disruption and upheaval caused by industrialisation in the late eighteenth century, Blaenavon was a very small settlement situated in the Lordship of Abergavenny. It was a barren and somewhat inhospitable area of Monmouthshire with just a handful of farmsteads scattered across the Blorenge and Coity mountains. The area bore little resemblance to the Blaenavon of modern times. Little had changed in Blaenavon for many centuries. The farmers, for many generations, lived a quiet and remote life in a tiny community as they struggled to survive in a rural environment with a harsh climate. The Blaenavon historian, [Lewis Browning](#), in his 1906 book, poetically described the tranquil but isolated life that these early residents faced.

“What those farmers listened to was the bubbling water as it tumbled over the mountain side into the Avon Llwyd, the rushing wind whistling between the rocks and trees, the barking of dogs, the bleating of sheep, the birds pouring forth their sweet melodious songs; and it was far better to be out of doors than to be by the fireside telling tales and fables of old witchcrafts, conjurers, spirits and little fairies.”

Many of the area's farms had been standing for centuries and this gives us some clue into how long a community had been in existence in Blaenavon. Ty Godwith Farm, for example, situated to the rear of modern day Charles Street, can be dated to the sixteenth century. A number other farms including Dan y Capel, Capel Newydd Farm, Elgam and Ty Fry were built in at least the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Farms in Blaenavon tended to be passed down from generation to generation. New Road Farm, also known as Ffermdy Wil Rhios was in the possession of the Jones family from the early seventeenth century and Coed Eithen Farm, according to local legend, had been farmed by members of the Edwards family from the twelfth century.

Early Industry

Agriculture undoubtedly dominated the economy of early Blaenavon but some people were employed in small-scale industry. There was an awareness of Blaenavon's rich resources many centuries before the industrialisation of the 1780s. In the town of Pontypool, located about six miles south of Blaenavon, there had been a forge for the production of iron from as early as 1425. In 1565 the famous Hanbury family of Pontypool leased the rights for the use of timber and minerals from the land between Pontypool and Blaenavon from Henry Nevill, the sixth Baron Bergavenny. People in Blaenavon were employed to 'scour' for iron ore between the Elgam area of Blaenavon and [Penffordgoch](#) on the Blorenge Mountain in what was an early form of open-cast mining. Woodcutters were also employed to collect timber from the forests which spread across the mountainside in Blaenavon. These resources were used to fuel the furnaces in Pontypool. Prior to the 1780s, however, metal working was only carried out on a small scale and the small population of Blaenavon essentially supported itself through sheep-farming and agriculture. Little had changed in Blaenavon for many centuries but this was to change drastically in a relatively short period of time, following the arrival of the capitalists in the 1780s.

Early Development, c.1782-c.1845

The first stage in the development of Blaenavon saw a small village growing around the new **ironworks**. By the early nineteenth century, rows of industrial housing were built in close proximity to the ironworks, including Engine Row, **Stack Square**, Bunker's Row, Staffordshire Row and Shepherd's Square. Throughout the first fifty years of the Blaenavon venture, the settlement expanded westward to the area now occupied by the **Sidney Gilchrist Thomas** Industrial Trading Estate. Rows of small cottages including Quick Buildings, Chapel Row and Victoria Row were created to provide homes for the ever-growing workforce.



During the early nineteenth century there was some degree of social segregation in the allocation of housing in Blaenavon. The workers at the ironworks lived in the streets surrounding the works, such as Stack Square, North Street and Staffordshire Row. The coal and ironstone miners lived in places such as Bunker's Hill, Quick Buildings and River Row and those who worked with horses lived in the appropriately named Stable Yard or Stable Row.



The early period of Blaenavon's development also witnessed the creation of the community's first public buildings, including the ironmaster's mansion, Ty Mawr, built in 1798-1800; **St. Peter's Church**, built in 1804, and the original Blaenavon Endowed School built in 1816. All of the buildings provided the developing area with its own unique identity.

The Development of the Town Centre, c.1840-c.1880

When the new **Bethlehem Independent Chapel** was built in 1840, alongside the Nant Llechan stream, it stood alone in an undeveloped area of Blaenavon. Within ten years it was surrounded by a busy commercial street, known as Broad Street. The development of the main shopping street can largely be attributed to the efforts of a local businessman named John Griffith Williams. When he arrived in Blaenavon in 1830, Williams was dismayed that there were "only five chapels, four shops, five public houses and very few cottages this side [south-east] of the works".

Williams soon became very influential in Blaenavon and in his career Williams supplied the town with its first brewery, its first hotel (The Red Lion), its first hall (The Coliseum in Lion Street now demolished), a pottery, a gas works and a reservoir. Williams persuaded the parochial highways committee to approve

the creation of **Broad Street** and he was also responsible for Blaenavon's first regular market, situated in what soon became known as Market Street. By the early 1880s Broad Street was a thriving commercial area with, among others, ten grocer shops, seven drapers, three watchmakers and two fishmongers.



The town we know and recognise today began to emerge during the mid nineteenth century. In 1860 the Urban District and Ecclesiastical Parish of Blaenavon was created and the growing town's needs were catered for by a Local Board. At the end of 1860 The Pontypool Free Press observed that '[Blaenavon] promises to be soon a large, prosperous and well conducted town'. The article noted that in the space of a year Blaenavon had seen the building of the new ironworks and forge at Forgeside, the naming and lighting of streets and a new school.

Residential Expansion, c.1875-1918

The mid to late nineteenth century also witnessed the creation of new residential areas, in the area surrounding the town's commercial centre. Streets such as High Street, Waun Street, Hill Street, Morgan Street, Queen Street sprang up to house the increasing population. The new houses built in this period were of a much higher quality than the dwellings built in the years immediately following the creation of the North Street ironworks and most of them survive today.



During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century even better quality houses and villas were created in the area between Charles Street, Cwmavon Road and Coed Eithen. The houses in those streets display a number of characteristics that indicate the prosperity of both the town and some of its workers. Many of the houses in the area tended to be larger, containing more rooms. The houses also possess a distinct architecture, with many cottages in Charles Street being constructed with dressed stone and exhibiting decorative yellow roundels around the windows. In Ton Mawr Road many of the houses feature red and yellow brick archways and ornamental keystones.



Town Planning

Despite many improvements in housing and living standards during the second half of the nineteenth century, many of the poorer people in Blaenavon still lived in poor housing. By the early twentieth century Local Government was

playing a more prominent role in the provision of housing. Unfortunately the Blaenavon Urban District Council was not fulfilling its duties and, following the publication of a

health report in 1913, the Council was criticised for not taking action to address the issue of slum housing in Blaenavon. Consequently the Blaenavon Urban District Council ordered the creation of a new housing estate near the old Elgam farm; work was completed during the early 1920s.



The population of Blaenavon reached its height in the late 1910s and early 1920s, consisting of almost 13,000 persons. From 1921 onwards the population of the town has generally been in decline and much of the development Blaenavon since that date has seen the size of the town shrink. By the 1960s it was clear that much of Blaenavon's older housing was unsuitable and an extensive urban redevelopment programme was initiated



by Blaenavon Urban District Council, which involved the creation of new roads and the demolition of slum housing. The Sidney Gilchrist Thomas Industrial Trading Estate, which opened in 1973, was created on land once occupied by early industrial housing.

Additional housing estates were built in the town during the twentieth century including Capel Newydd Avenue, Hillside Avenue, Ty Fry, Curwood and Riverside. Private housing estates and bungalows were also constructed at Llanover Road on former farm land. Most recently, building work was initiated on New Road Farm, on Varteg Road, where it is anticipated that over one hundred new houses will be built in the coming years.

Heritage Town

In 1984 Blaenavon Town Centre was designated as a conservation area, meaning that restrictions were imposed on any future development of the site. Housing Improvement Grants and the current regeneration programme have aimed to sympathetically restore old buildings to make sure that they remain 'in character' with the rest of the town. New housing, which has been built on



Brownfield land or on the outskirts of the town have tended to be built in a mock-Victorian style, including the housing development on New Road Farm.

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