

Nant y Glo and Blaina. (The story of a departed industry)

(I found this in an old copy of the Western mail dated 30th August 1878 on page 3, there's lots of interesting details in it about the old Nant y Glo iron works).

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Our scene lies in the heart of the great coal and iron mining region bordering upon Brecknock and adjoining Monmouth a district that is now, in a commercial point of view, in the extremity of decadence with but feint hopes .of ever again reaching to the glory of its culminant splendour, or grafting once more its thriving and lucrative prosperity. We have for some time been intent upon exploring the vicinity of Nantyglo and Blaina, to feast our eyes upon the locality whence have sprung colossal fortunes and, alas upon whose shores the life boats of many a lonely widow, and innumerable small capitalists, have been shattered to pieces, leaving the occupants high and dry with but small hopes of getting afloat again. We arrive at Brynmawr by an evening train and locate ourselves at the Griffin Hotel, which is owned by Mr R. Wain, who is also the proprietor of the Royal at Cardiff. It is a clean, well-appointed hostelry, under the management of Miss Jackson and for comfort and attention is not surpassed by any hotel in the hill district; the meals are excellent and well served, the bedrooms airy and well ventilated and we feel at home and in possession of all that makes a sojourn at an inn enjoyable.

After breakfast we walk down towards Nantyglo, where we meet by appointment Mr. James Phillips, who has lived as mineral agent to the Baileys and as lessee of the Nantyglo and Blaina Company (Limited) for more than 30 years, a gentleman whose large and varied experience, whose practical knowledge of mining, in all its ramifications, and whose capacious intelligence renders him par excellence a desirable and comprehensive guide to this once prosperous region of industry.

We stand upon a flat above the three old furnaces first erected upon the ground leased more than 100 years ago by the then Earl of Abergavenny. We are in the circle of a perfect amphitheatre of hills and mountain ranges; right before is the bold outline of the Milfran, supposed to be a corruption of Malfryn; to the left is the town of Brynmawr, with its unequalled and serried buildings, its uneven and angular streets lying tranquilly on the green slopes of the Breconshire highlands and resting quietly in the glare of an August morning sun.

On our right we see the narrow valley stretching along without an apparent outlet towards Blaina, while in our rear are the cloud-capped hills known far and wide as the Monmouthshire Beacons, dividing the two valleys of the Ebbw Fach and the Ebbw Fawr. Immediately at hand we see two round towers with walls eight feet thick, pierced with lance windows, and erected by Mr. C. Bailey, to defend the "big house" of Nantyglo during the

turbulent times of the Chartist demonstrations in 1839. Under the level tips on which we stand are deposited thousands of tons of "ball mine," considered by Mr. John Evans, once the mineral agent of Nantyglo, as worthless, but now known to be the most valuable sample of our native ore. Whether it will be ever be utilised will be matter for consideration for future administrators of this splendid property.

We passed over the tops of the original furnaces, all in a state of ruin; from these erections which were comprised in the original lease, nothing has been removed. The iron cone like coverings of the blast furnaces are there rusting with the effect of the atmosphere, a number of iron barrows rapidly peeling away, and the thick iron pavement crackling with oxide at every footfall. As we leave this place we are joined by an old gentleman, who says,

"I have lived here now fifty six years. I remember the first policeman established here, at the passing of the Rural Police Act in 1842. He was disliked and not much feared by the men and he had but little love for them. He was not long here it was discovered that he was too intimate with one of the women of the place. One night they left Brynmawr together, and next morning they were both found drowned in the big pond. Some said that he tried to throw her in, but from the fact of her having a tenacious hold of his collar when they were taken out, it is supposed that in the struggle she drew him in also."

We are now in the forge. We are alone, surrounded by ruin and desolation through the roofless rafters we behold the blue sky in all its ethereal beauty. We stand upon a pavement once trodden by hundreds of busy feet but the engines that snorted, and plunged and waved their tireless arms and shook the reverberating earth with the huge swing of crank and beam, are passive and still, and the solid metal composing the scientific organisation has been sold as old iron at 40s. a ton. The furnaces have ceased to roar, and the fires of the forges are dead as the Cities of the Plain (this is a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah from the Book of Genesis ^(E.L.I.D.)) after the smoke of their burning had ascended up into heaven. The ponderous hammer is absent, and the sullen gates which once rested on their hinges are nowhere to be seen. Labour has repose, but it is a repose sinister in its apathy and ominous for the changed significance of its aspect. It speaks of empty cupboards, unpaid rents, ruined homes, rags and penury. The old mill is called the Lion Mill, from its vicinage to an old thatched unlicensed house, where cwrw bach used to be frequent and to which was given the name of "The Lion." Tîr Dafydd ap Gronwg is on the side of the hill leading up to Garnfach and the quaint house where "Shon Tifedd" lived uprears itself before us. The Tifedd was well known to all the old inhabitants of Nantyglo and for miles around -a dry, wiry humourist, who lived well and made lots of money. The bump of reverence was not a very prominent organ in his phrenological developments. It is said that one evening, near to the close of his life, he wished the members of a neighbouring chapel to come to his house and hold a prayer meeting through which, peradventure, he might have a safe and easy passage through the land of night. The good people came and arrayed themselves in the

room preparatory to holding the service when a message came to the Tifedd to the intent that Mr. Bailey was coming to see him. He at once called his wife, and said "Mary, Mary, Crawshay is coming, send the devils away tonight and ask them to have a prayer here tomorrow night."

That one-roomed house you see there on the side of the hill is called Ty Cocking. It had once a weighbridge and Mr. Harrison lived there, and he could weigh the trams as they passed over the bridge while he was in bed. For many years there was no pit on the Nantyglo property and Messrs. J. and C. Bailey worked all their minerals by levels and patch work. The first colliery opened was "Sperry's." The coals were carried by mules to the canal, and taken to Brecon for sale. Mr. Crawshay Bailey prophesied that Waun Helygen (the old name for Brynmawr) would by and by be nothing but a congregation of sheep cots, as the minerals would gradually be getting more distant. He with his eagle eye and his marvellous forethought could not then see the advent of railways and the utilisation of electricity by which he since then bridged over valleys, penetrated mountains and held converse from his own office with agents hundreds of miles away.

Trosnant Farm was leased by the Henfords; (*I think it's Harfords*) eleven years of that lease is now unexpired. The rent was thirty guineas, to be paid in golden coin of that value. The freehold was subsequently purchased by the Baileys. Llanerch y Pwll Farm, containing one hundred acres of mineral property, belonged to the New British Iron Company. On the collapse of that corporation in Monmouthshire, it was sold by auction to the Baileys for £800; that sale being disputed, it was again put up to public auction and sold for £1,600. It is now worth over £30,000. We now walk down the valley, past the "Big Row," leave on our left the dismantled furnaces built on the "Tifedd" property. By the private railway of the company we reach Coalbrook Vale once the pride of the Brewers and we see a long train of coal waggons, whose owners are John Lancaster and Co. who have leased from the Nant y Glô and Blaina Co. (Limited) nearly the whole of their mineral property; and the income of the company from subletting is considerably over £10,000, and our informant says that more prosperous times might swell that income into £30,000. The limited company pays for waggon hire alone about £7,000 a year but still it is supposed that even now the income exceeds the expenditure. We pass the old company's shop, first established by Billington and James on behalf of Cruttwell, Allies, and Co. continued by Mr. Elias James for Levick and Simpson but now just a row of workmen's cottages. Mr. Elias James was the most influential man between Newport and Brynmawr, his returns in shop goods reached £70,000 a year. He was really the working man's friend, and many a strike had been averted through his timely instrumentality. With his departure Blaina came to naught and the firm collapsed. We pass through Blaina churchyard. We look regretfully on the grave which holds the remains Mr. Levick, and we remember hearing that at his sepulture his daughter played the "Dead March in Saul" on the organ in the church. From this spot we see the Henwain pit, the lowest part in the valley of the Blaina property. We turn into the Rolling Mill tavern, once kept by the celebrated harpist, Llewellyn Williams, only son of Zephaniah Williams, of

Chartist celebrity. On Garn Fâch is the public house the Royal Oak kept by him, where he drove such a trade that few houses of entertainment in the principality ever equalled. Once early in 1839 Mr. Henry Vincent came to lecture to the Nant y Glô workmen and about 2,000 had gathered by the Big Row to hear his impassionate eloquence. On leaving he was met by Mr. Crawshay Bailey, who said, "How dare you interfere with my men"

"Your men," said Mr. Vincent, "they are my men, or you ask them."

Here is Hermon Baptist Chapel, about the oldest meeting house in the locality. From its pulpit the word of Life was expounded with burning eloquence from the lips of the venerated Francis Hiley and here also Robert Pritchard, with his deep, sonorous, and lion-like voice, convinced hundreds of wavering sinners turning them from darkness into light and from the power of Satan into the sheep fold of their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

At one time the firm of J. and C. Bailey employed at Nant y Glo over 3,000 workers, and the descendants are now the exponents of what can be done by honest industry towards ennobling those who, at time, were members of the working classes. Of course there was a time and that not a hundred years ago, when commerce, trade, and the industrial arts were but as cyphers, fit adjuncts to an exchequer and requisite to a pension list, but otherwise having very little influence in the state. The soil being in the hands of the patrician few, the plebeian many were naturally their dependent.

Cast a glance round England, and look at the noble estates men like the Baileys now enjoy, who represent the ledger and the desk, who sprung from the workshop, who, machinist, inventor, railway maker, Brummagem smith, Sheffield cutler, or Manchester spinner have earned wealth enough to buy up a dukedom, and can patch up the broken fortune of an earl or a marquis

These facts touch us with a tinge of sadness when we pass and witness such sources of opulence as we now see withering at the touch of neglect, and crumbling at the inactivity of desuetude.

The Western Mail, 30th August 1878, (page 3).