

THE RISE AND FALL OF DUNLOP SEMTEX

1. In 1928 the Society of Friends under the leadership of Peter Scott set up the Brynmawr Experiment.
 2. They revived the bootmaking industry in the unused Gwalia Factory in Factory Road Brynmawr and set up a furniture making factory in part of the same building and produced furniture of unique design.
 3. A Swimming Pool was constructed with the help of students from eight other countries as well as Britain. The Pool was completed in 1932.
 4. Government policy at this time was for young unemployed to move to more prosperous areas of the country.
- Ramsay MacDonald's National Government of 1932 commissioned a series of surveys of areas suffering economic depression. The survey of South Wales concluded that new industries were needed to replace the failing coal and steel industries.
6. In 1934 the Government brought in the Special Areas Act and appointed Commissioners- one for England, one for Scotland and one for Wales.
 7. The Commissioners were given power to spend public money to help invigorate the economy. This led to the setting up of the Treforest Trading Estate.
 8. In 1936, Sir Malcolm Stewart, the English Commissioner suggested that the Government should not merely increase aid to industries which moved to Special Areas but they should implement an embargo on new factories (with certain exceptions) in the London Area.
 9. In 1937 a Royal Commission on the Geographical Distribution of the Industrial Population was set up under the Chairmanship of Sir Anderson Montague-Barlow. The main finding was that the industrial well being of the nation could not be left to market forces alone but some government intervention was necessary, in other words, there should be direction of industry.
 10. On 15th June 1945 Parliament passed the Distribution of Industry Act and instead of the sprawl of industries in the South East of England, industries could, through Economic Planning, be directed to areas such as South Wales.
 11. The Government Department responsible for legislation was the Board of Trade and regions where industries could be directed were designated "Development Areas".

12. Industries which wished to invest in Development Areas could either rent one of the buildings provided by an estate company or have a building specifically designed and built by an estate company or have a building specifically designed and built by an estate architect and then rented at a sum related to the cost of construction.

13. Going back to 1931, a young Oxford University student by the name of Jim Forester (Lord Forester) got to hear of the Brynmawr Experiment and contacted Peter Scott. As a result Jim Forester visited Brynmawr and immediately took an active interest in the town and its people. He became especially interested in the Brynmawr Furniture and Brynmawr Bootmakers

14. In 1934, Jim Forester was made Chairman of Brynmawr Bootmakers and no doubt his title "Lord Forester" gave prestige to the undertaking.

15. On the closure of Brynmawr Furniture in 1940, Jim Forester promised the workers that when the war was over he would bring them a factory.

16. On 28th May 1945, Lord Forester who was now managing director of Enfield Cables Ltd. of Middlesex approached the Board of Trade in Cardiff and stated that he wished to set up a factory in Brynmawr and requested that South Wales and Monmouthshire Trading Estates erect a factory for his company.

17. By June 13th 1945 application was made for a factory of 100,000 sq feet to house the Brimstone Rubber Company, at Brynmawr. Estimated cost was £125,000 and employment would be given to 600 people.

18. In August 1945 the Directors of Enfield Cables (owners of Brimstone) met planning officers and officers of South Wales and Monmouthshire Trading Estates to choose a site and the field bordering the Waen Pond was decided upon.

19. All parties agreed that the main factory would be built on the Waen Field and a coal fired boiler house would be built on the opposite side of the Brynmawr-Blaina Road with easy access to Brynmawr Railway Sidings.

20. On 1st February 1946, Enfield Cables informed the Board of Trade that they had obtained a bank loan and would therefore fund the project themselves.

21. Enfield Cables later informed the Board of Trade and South Wales and Mon. Estates that the bank had withdrawn their financial support.

22. Once more the South Wales and Mon. Estates received a fresh application from Enfield Cables for financial backing.

23. The new plans submitted were much more detailed and more ambitious than any previous factory design, also the original estimate had increased to £455,000.

24. The Board of Trade were invited by Lord Forester to visit Enfield where he would be able to describe the proposed operation for Brynmawr and would show more clearly every feature of the new factory which he and his company had been working on for the past year.

25. South Wales and Mon. Estates were not in favour of the proposals but the Board of Trade was more enthusiastic.

26. Enfield Cables had been so confident of success that they had purchased the Cwmavon Brewery near Blaenavon as a pilot plant to train workers for the Brynmawr Factory and was already employing 100 workers. The property had originally belonged to Peter Scott's Subsistence Scheme.

27. In 1940 Lord Forester had engaged two young architects of a practice known as the Architects Co-operative Partnership. They were the remnants of a group of eleven young architects who had got together prior to the war. They were the bright young boys of the architectural world who were to break down many of the traditional ideas in designs and methods of construction.

28. Following the war of 1939-45 Lord Forester was able to gather this group of architects together and give them the responsibility of putting his vision of a factory for Brynmawr into a reality.

29. The new factory was to be called Brynmawr Rubber and as well as a factory it was to be a social experiment.

30. Lord Forester himself sat in at the planning stage letting it be known what he wanted.

31. The design had to be such that it would cater for changes in the rubber industry and the rapid development of plastics.

32. The factory was to employ a maximum of 1000 people covering the whole age range with half the employees being males and half to be females.

33. The factory was to be planned as a complete unit and without any idea of extensions to be made to it. Any future expansion was to be on the opposite side of the Brynmawr/Blaina Road and adjacent to the proposed Boiler House.

34. The appearance of the factory was to be something to be remembered and spoken of as outstanding and different from anything ever seen before in an out of the way district. This together with amenities and conditions of work would attract labour to the district.
35. Working conditions must be considered
- a. Use and storage of safety clothes
 - b. Full clinical services - dental, ophthalmic and chiropody.
 - c. A labour manager's office near the entrance
 - d. Good toilets, cloakrooms and drying facilities.
 - e. Day and night canteen facilities.
36. Entrances to be kept to a minimum to reduce heat losses, in fact only two entrances, one for people and one for goods in and goods out.
37. All employees to use the same entrance and this was to be an architectural feature.
38. All goods would enter and leave by the same access and transport would be by road.
The coal operated boilers would receive delivery of fuel by rail via a specially constructed concrete bridge leading to Brynmawr Railway Goods Yard.
39. Design of internal features was to minimise ledges and dust traps with first class lighting by day and night.
40. The ventilation system had to be good.
41. Storage of raw materials and finished goods had to be completely indoors and volume of storage space had to take into account that during winter conditions, receipt of raw materials and delivery of orders could cause problems.
42. Services required would be steam, hot water, compressed air, cold water and drainage for waste water. A supply of A.C & D.C electricity was necessary, but gas would only be needed for the laboratories.
43. Fire hazards must be reduced to a minimum.
44. The roofs must be designed to withstand heavy snowfalls and methods of snow clearance must be considered.
45. Maintenance costs must be kept low.
46. Much of the merit of the Brynmawr Factory in design and construction was due to the close co-ordination between engineers and architects.

47. The leading engineer in the team was Danish born Ove Arup who came to Britain from Germany where he had a varied experience in German construction methods especially in the field of re-inforced concrete.

48. Shell concrete construction had been developed in Germany in the 1920's and this meant that large dome constructions using lightweight concrete could cover large spans.

49. Concrete was the chief building material in order to economise in the use of bricks.

50. By the summer of 1946 the design of the factory was so advanced that drawings could be sent to contractors on 13th Sept. Treasury financial sanction allowed South Wales and Mon Estate to sign contracts with Holland, Hannen and Cubitt Ltd.

51. The first stage was the construction of the Boiler House.

52. Stage 2, the main factory, was delayed owing to a dispute with Cubitts who wished to carry out part of the contract on a Prime Cost basis instead of Fixed Cost basis.

Cubitts withdrew and the contract was handed over to Messrs. Gee Walker and Slater.

53. The first work involved draining and deepening of the Waen Pond and grouting of the honeycomb of old coal workings.

54. Messrs Gee Walker and Slater required accommodation for their skilled workers and were allocated a vacant three storey building on the Market Square, Brynmawr to convert into a hostel with dormitories, baths, toilets and dining facilities. This building later became the Community College.

55. Side by side with the construction of the factory was the building of a model housing estate for key workers on land off Cemetery Road, Brynmawr. Architects for this estate were Messrs Yorke, Rosenberg and Mandall. One unique feature of this estate was central heating in every house operated from a single oil fired boiler situated in the basement of a block of self contained flats. This block was called "The Hendre" and incorporated a community recreation hall for the whole estate.

56. Probably the first domestic refrigerators in the area were installed in every house and they were operated by gas.

57. Production started in the factory in the Autumn of 1951.

58. By the beginning of 1952 rubber goods of various kinds were in production - floor tiles of twenty different colours,

42,000 pairs of rubber soles for shoes were produced every week, inflatable beach rings, and sponge rubber for the aircraft industry.

59. Sales reports showed that sectors already equipped were extremely busy employing 168 females and 260 males. Orders were numerous but small in volume.

60. By May 1952 the factory was struggling and shortage of work was so acute that the Board of Trade sent in its Regional Controller to investigate the problems. His report showed that the factory was working to a quarter of its capacity with only 250 people employed.

61. The possibility of Brynmawr Rubber ceasing to function caused alarm bells to ring at the Board of Trade.

62. On 19th May 1952, Enfield Cables Board of Directors voted to cease giving financial aid to its struggling subsidiary in Brynmawr.

63. On 29th May 1952, the Board of Trade put the factory on a Care and Maintenance footing. The community and Jim Forester in particular were stunned by this decision.

64. In 1953, the Dunlop Rubber Company became the new tenants and changed the name to Dunlop Semtex. This was a turning point for the factory and the Dunlop development of vinyl flooring was a great success.

65. Demand for Dunlop's product came from the expanding Health Service, Higher Education Colleges and the large number of new schools, all demanded easy to clean flooring material.

66. In 1964 orders increased so greatly that Dunlop purchased the factory outright and began to extend the production and warehousing facilities. The original outside appearance was much altered with the demolition of the entrance ramp, the building of a new office block, and the construction of several large shed type buildings to the rear of the factory and adjacent to the boilerhouse. The Tuf Factory on Pond Road moved to new premises and the building was purchased for a canteen and social centre.

67. The coming of needle punched carpets caused serious competition and there were now other competitors in the vinyl flooring market.

68. Dunlop attempted diversification such as the production of cushion felt for carpet underlay and patterned self adhesive

tiles for the D.I.Y market.

69. Appointments and sackings of management was prevalent for a few years in the hope that problems would be solved by some genius, but the factory was in decline.

70. 23rd January 1981, Ninety five maintenance staff went on 24 hrs. strike over the breaking of a redundancy agreement.

71. 5th August 1981 the 750 workers started a work to rule.

72 December 1984, following seventy redundancies, a sit-in was staged by 350 production and white collar workers. This protest lasted five weeks.

73. On January 8th 1982 the management announced that the protesters had dismissed themselves and the remaining employees would be made redundant. The factory would not re-open and thus ended the Dunlop Semtex era in Brynmawr.

74. Attempts were made to sell the factory and some of the satellite buildings were let to small industries. Due to lack of finance no one was able to develop the main factory. Eventually the site was placed in the hands of receivers.

75. On 8th May 1986, Nicholas Edwards (later Lord Crickhowell) the Secretary of State for Wales declared the Dunlop Semtex Factory to be a Grade 2 listed building.

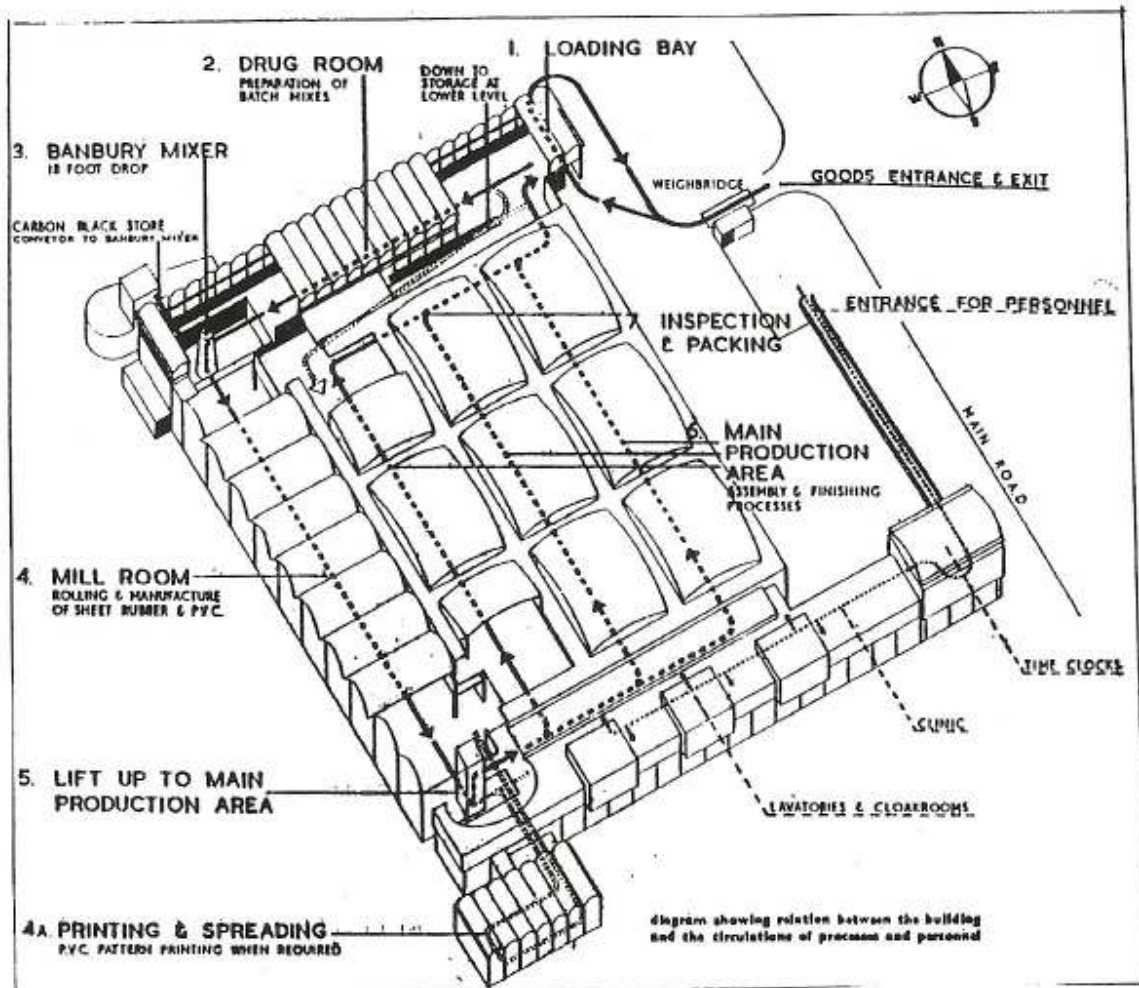
76. In October 1995, Blaenau Gwent Borough Council considered two applications for development of the Dunlop Semtex site and came up in favour of a plan submitted by J. Williams Industries/Wyndham Group P/C and Maincourse Ltd. that would mean demolition of the main factory, diversion of the Waen Pond into two smaller ponds, but retention of the Boilerhouse to be developed into a theatre. The site would be redeveloped for factory units, a retail outlet and housing.

77. In April 1996 the Secretary of State William Hague announced that he would not intervene in the proposed application made to Blaenau Gwent Council, in other words the decision for the future development of the site was entirely in the hands of Blaenau Gwent County Council and this meant that the Grade 2 listed building status could be ignored and demolition could take place if necessary.

Compiled by Edwin L. Jones for Blaenau Gwent Heritage
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SOURCES: Architectural Review March 1952. Merthyr Express
1928 to 1945. South Wales Argus. Western Mail.

ELJ/PGJ



Dunlop Semtex: a decade of deadlock

May 1986: Grade Two listed building status is awarded to the Dunlop Semtex factory main building and boilerhouse.

October 1986: A public inquiry is held into a request for permission to demolish.

May 1987: Permission is refused so time can be given for an alternative use to be found.

October 1987: A working party, comprising Blaenau Gwent council chiefs and representatives from the Welsh Development Agency, CADW, the Twentieth Century Society and other interested groups, is set up to consider alternative uses.

January 1988: A Hampshire-based firm offers to buy the building from owners Tenby Limited to convert it into a trade exhibition centre. Eight other companies had expressed an interest in the building.

October 1988: A housing, industry and hotel development was put forward by a firm called Wilcon.

January 1989: A firm called Michigan Holdings proposed to refurbish the facto-

ry and seek tenants for its occupation. Cooperation between Michigan and Wilcon could not be agreed and Wilcon withdrew.

September 1989: Another firm, the Wyrndham Group, had bought the site's listed buildings and the WDA contacted it with a view to refurbishment and re-use scheme.

May 1990: Plans for permission to demolish the listed buildings and other proposals were submitted to Blaenau Gwent borough council.

September 1990: The applications were approved, but the Wyrndham Group went into receivership. The buildings were extensively marketed but no proposals were forthcoming.

January 1992: The council voiced concern over the buildings' state of repair and appearance. A study estimated refurbishment would cost £6.5 million, mothballing £1.3 million, and demolition almost £1 million – the council preferred demolition.

April 1992: Proposals to turn the factory Boilerhouse into a theatre were put forward by local people – this project is ongoing.

March 1993: A development consortium proposed demolition, site reclamation and the building of homes, light industrial units and commercial and retail units.

May 1994: The Wyrndham Group Receivers gave the consortium an option to apply for planning permission for the above scheme and if successful laid down a two-year limit for purchase of the property and site.

July 1995: A scheme to convert the existing buildings into a leisure and hotel complex were put forward by Bridgend-based South Wales Leisure Developments Limited.

October 1995: The Wyrndham Group Receivers/Mairpourse Limited scheme was given planning permission by Blaenau Gwent borough council, which refused permission for the South Wales Leisure Development Limited proposal.

April 1996: CADW decided not to ratify the demolition proposal to Welsh secretary William Hague. This means a further public inquiry will be unnecessary.