

Chapter 3

The background to Aberdare in 1861

Aberdare is the principal town in the Cynon valley which is situated between the Merthyr and the Rhondda valleys.

The “Coal Rush” that started in the Cynon valley in 1837 with the first deep coal mine in Cwmbach, would see more than thirty collieries producing almost two million tons by 1861. The 1860s would witness the peak of Aberdare’s status as an ‘Iron Town’ with the town and surrounding villages producing vast amounts of iron from its five ironworks at Hirwaun, Abernant, Llwydcoed, Gadlys and Aberaman.

The rapid growth of industry would be accompanied by an equally dramatic growth in population. Aberdare was transforming itself from a rural backwater of just 1,446 souls in 1801 to 6,741 in 1841 and by 1861 it would be an ‘iron powerhouse’ with a population of 32,299. The attraction of relative well-paid employment at the Ironworks and ever-expanding coal mines was a magnet for thousands of young workers particularly mostly Welsh-speaking agricultural labourers from Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, Brecknockshire and Cardiganshire escaping rural poverty.¹

The town’s astonishing rate of growth was partly driven by its railway lines running to Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil and Swansea which meant that coal and iron could easily be exported to the ports on the Welsh coast. Its exponential growth was more importantly driven by early capitalism, and resulted in the working class enduring very poor, often hastily built, poor quality housing with no real sewerage or sanitary system. Three epidemics had ravaged the town in the 1840s: typhus in 1847, smallpox in 1848 and a cholera outbreak in 1849 that claimed 104 lives². A resultant investigation would see Thomas Rammell’s Report to the General Board of Health published in 1853.³ Rammell provided a damning indictment of the newly industrialised town. He described how massive industrial growth and an accompanying rapid increase in population had led to the creation of slum conditions in which disease proliferated.

This did improve very slowly because in 1858 the Aberdare Water Company was formed to provide a public supply of clean water, but cholera still continued its deadly work in 1866.⁴

Numerous poor people lived in indescribable squalor. Poverty was prevalent in Aberdare. The Merthyr Poor Law Union, of which Aberdare was a part, opened a workhouse in Merthyr Tydfil in 1853 where the poverty-stricken were housed but the conditions were extremely terrible. They were underfed, given monotonous work such as stone-breaking and oakum-picking, so that people dreaded it and tried by every means possible not to be sent to this hated institution.⁵

The end of the Crimean War resulted in a depression in the ironworks and collieries in the area and by December 1857 almost all the workers were on strike. The religious leaders of Aberdare, Rev Dr Thomas Price of Calfaria chapel and Rev David Price of Siloa chapel, stressed the futility of the strike which made them very unpopular with the workers. Therefore, Aberdare in 1858 was a divided society and the hatred shown by the workers to the coalowners and religious leaders was alarming.⁶ [or really justified Ed.]

Something had to unite them, and this came in the form of a Religious revival which came to Wales in 1859 and it came powerfully to Aberdare early in that year. Christopher Turner states that:

The valley community of Aberdare was particularly receptive to the revival of 1859.⁷

Dafydd Morgan, the evangelist came to Aberdare in the middle of the year where he stayed for two months. As a result of his and other ministers' preaching, thousands of sinners were converted, and thousands of "backsliders" came back to God.

Turner states:

'This quickening of religious life during 1859–61 led to at least 19 chapels being built or extensively enlarged to accommodate the increased membership. Even the church, (St Elvan's which was opened in 1853), was influenced by the revival, for in April over two hundred people were presented for confirmation.'⁸

Rev David Price, Siloa, was convinced that the numerous prayer meetings throughout the valley, and the religious revival, were an integrating force within this divided community.

This moderated the hatred of the working class towards their superiors [employers]. Another influence which calmed the divisions was the great boost given by the Temperance movement. It was so strong in Aberdare that in July 1858 a Temperance Hall was built there.⁹

The Revival and the associated Temperance movement encouraged the idea of a 'classless' (gwerin) Wales and provided a framework for the coal owners and Aberdare's middle class to encourage the working classes to become less militant. However, not all embraced these ideals and industrial action continued including a strike at Abernant Ironworks lasting two months ending in June 1861.¹⁰

Aberdare was often called the 'Athens of Wales' because of its cultural heart. This period was the start of Aberdare's great printing centre with the newspaper *Y Gwladgarwr* (The Patriot) which began in 1858 and *The Aberdare Times* whose printing presses started to roll in the April of 1861.

By 1861 the Revival had petered out. The desires were now for temporal things. The wish now was for a Peoples' Park where people of various classes, many of whom worked long hours, could breathe pure air, walk amongst trees and flowers, and meet their fellows and hold pleasant conversations. Many people were getting restive as no progress was being made, as it had been talked about for the previous four years.¹¹ It was eventually opened in 1869.

This was the situation when the first "National" came to town in August 1861.

Notes

¹ Thomas, Brinley 'A cauldron of rebirth': Population and the Welsh language in the 19th century IN *Welsh History Review*, 13 (1986,):418

² Cholera at Merthyr Tydfil, Return of Cases, Saturday 22, 1849. Copy in W.W.Price Collection, Aberdare Reference Library

³ Rammell, Thomas A Report to the General Board of Health on a preliminary inquiry into the Sewerage, drainage and supply of water, and the sanitary condition of the inhabitants of the Parish of Aberdare published in 1853. Reproduced in *Old Aberdare volume 1*

⁴ Thomas, Tydfil *Poor relief in Merthyr Tydfil Union in Victorian Times*, 1992 pp137-138 (A very detailed study of this subject).

⁵ Ibid p 83-92

⁶ Turner, Christopher *Religious revivalism and Welsh Society: Aberdare in 1859* IN *Llafur* 4(1), p 10

⁷ Ibid p 5

⁸ Ibid p 8, see also Jones, Alan Vernon. *Chapels of the Cynon Valley*, CVHS, 2004 pp295-298

⁹ Ibid p10

¹⁰ Aberdare Times 15th June, p3 and Cardiff Times 28th June 1861, p.8

¹¹ Aberdare Times 6th April 1861