

# Life and work in merthyr tydfil in the nineteenth century

[Business](#), [Work](#)



The growth of industry in Merthyr was the main reason for the huge increase in population over a hundred years from 1750 to 1851. The population was estimated at four hundred people for the year 1750, this was just an estimate so we do not know how reliable this is as it is just an estimate and was not an official system. However by 1801 the first census was introduced and this produced an official figure for the population in Merthyr at the time, which was seven thousand people. This shows a massive increase in population in just over fifty years. The population continued to rise up until 1851 where it reached forty six thousand people.

Transport played a major part in the growth of Merthyr as an industrial town. In 1790 plans were put forward to construct a canal, which would go from Merthyr to Cardiff.

It cost 103, 600 and took four years to build. On its completion in February 1794 the canal measured 24 1/2 miles. The canal allowed raw materials to be transported at a much faster rate than previously, it could also transport a larger amount of goods at a time, compared to the old method of a horse and cart. Source A5(ii) shows how in ten years the use of the canal went from 83, 729 tons of coal a year to 211, 214 tons of coal a year.

The levels of discontent in Merthyr started to rise at the start of the nineteenth century. There were many factors that contributed to this; one of them was truck tokens that were issued to workers as payment. This caused discontent because the tokens could only be spent in the shops, which were owned by the truck companies. The goods were highly priced and poor in quality, this along with a number of other issues including the state of the

government at the time eventually led to the start of the riots in Merthyr at the start of the nineteenth century.

Source B2 explains how the riot in Merthyr had reached such a point that it would be impossible to stop without the assistance of the military. It also explains what the rioters were doing during the riot, how they had demolished truck shops, the main one being the Morgan Lewis shop. It goes on to say that he thought there were in excess of two thousand people 'doing all the mischief they can.' G. Lyndon produced the source in a letter to Samuel Homfray on the 22nd September 1800. It would have been reliable because the letter was taken from the time of the riot, also source B3 is shows a painting of troops arriving in Merthyr which backs up what is said in the letter. The painting is a contemporary painting by Penry Williams.

Even though it is a contemporary painting it may not be an entirely reliable source as the artist may have exaggerated the scene, it would have been more reliable if it had been a photo instead of a painting. This would affect the usefulness of the source to an historian studying the events in Merthyr. The usefulness of the letter is that it would have been able to tell historians exactly what was going on in Merthyr at the time and how serious the riots actually were.

At the start of the nineteenth radical ideas started to become more popular in Merthyr. They believed that wide scale reforms were needed in Merthyr at the time. These views are put across in source B4, which is part of an anonymous paper, found near Penydarren on 27th January 1817. It talks

about the misery of the people of Merthyr and how if changes are not made soon the workers will take the law into their own hands.

Source A1 shows the growth in population in Merthyr over a hundred years from 1750 to 1831. Source C1 shows the census of 1851 in detail. The reliability of this source is put into question as it says that the total population in Merthyr in the year 1851 is six thousand, five hundred and twenty eight. If this is compared to source A1, where it states that the population in Merthyr was actually thirty thousand people. Therefore there is a difference of nearly twenty five thousand between each source. This also casts doubt over the reliability of source A1, however in my opinion source C1 is more reliable than source A1 because source A1 supports the fact that Merthyr was booming due to the increasing size of the ironworks at the time.