

The development and decline of the rhondda coalfield

[Technology](#), [Development](#)



On the 19th September 2005 I went on a trip to the Rhondda Heritage Park in South Wales, followed by a brief visit to the Big Pit. My task was to assess the various types of information we were provided with from our visit to the Rhondda Heritage Park so we could compare this information with other sources, such as the Big Pit and St. Fagans, and other primary and secondary ones. This was to help me answer the question set for my second History GCSE coursework assignment - "To what extent does the Rhondda Heritage Park provide an accurate picture of working and community life in the Welsh mining community in the 20th Century?"

"December 1990 saw the last pit in Rhondda, Maerdy, finally closed. After six generations of coal mining in the Rhondda valleys, this was a site that a crowd of nearly 100 people watched in silence, as the last dram of coal inscribed "The last dram of coal raised in Rhondda 30. 6. 86," was lifted from the surface (A1). This dram is on display at the park. This reaction was not unexpected considering the role coal mining had played on the economy in the Rhondda valleys. During its time, the Rhondda valleys had played a major part in the coal mining industry, producing 9.

6 million tons of coal a year, an impressive one-sixth of the output of the whole of South Wales (A1), providing many jobs for men all over Wales. A huge 41, 000 men in total were employed (A1). This wasn't even during the Rhondda valley's finest times for coal mining either, as its main boom took place during the 20 years between 1869 and 1889, when coal output went up from 1. 2 to 5. 8 million tons a year, an increase of 371 per cent (A1). The

Rhondda also produced the high-grade coal, which the British Navy relied on for the boilers during World War 1.

During this time there were 66 collieries producing nearly 10 million tons of coal a year (A1). However, this was all too good to be true and the end of the steamship era and the fall-off in the export markets meant that coal production in the Rhondda declined steadily, resulting in all coal mines closing by the end of 1990. The fact that oil and even coal was available more cheaply from abroad had an input in to many coal mines closing. South Wales' difficult geological conditions underground also contributed to the closures.

One of the most important mining concerns in Britain was the Lewis Merthyr Collieries Company Ltd. It was eight years after the closure of Lewis Merthyr, in 1983, when the Rhondda Heritage Park reopened. The Rhondda Heritage Park caters for the public, consisting of many different exhibitions and presentation aiming to educate people on the working and community life in the Welsh mining community. Its attractions include a feeble attempt at recreating a small part of a Welsh butchers shop(a more historically accurate insight into this would be the gwaalia stores in St.

Fagans)and also consists of an underground tour - A Shift In Time, " where visitors can see, hear and even smell the experience of a colliery at work" (A5), the Black Gold presentation which " relates the unique character andcultureof the Rhondda through the eyes of three generations of one localfamily, through innovation and lively multimedia exhibits" (A5) and the

Trefor and Bertie Energy Zone, " an action-packed children's play area based on the energy cycle, including hands-on exhibits and educational information, but most of all, offers younger visitors to the park the chance to have lots of fun!

" (A5) It is designed more for tourist purposes than historical ones, It is not historically accurate, but does give a good idea of what life was like at this period in time in the Rhondda. Upon entrance to the park, before you see any displays or films, you will notice the pit head buildings. There is a huge chimney, 300ft roughly, and also a lamp room and a winding room. In Big pit there is just an equipment room where you receive your light and helmet (and also an oxygen pack that is just for show). Section B - The Miner's Work During my visits to the Rhondda Heritage Park and Big Pit, I gathered a lot of information on the miner's work.

My main sources for this information were the Black Gold presentation in the Trefor and Bertie Winding Houses, the Underground tour and from the Ex-miner guides at both mine sites.. The Black Gold presentation follows the development of the Rhondda Valley from about 1830, to the nationalisation of the coal in 1946. Some things covered in the multimedia presentation were strikes, particularly before World War 1 and the inter war years, the dangers of mining, especially the 1877 Tynnewydd explosion, the life of the coal owners and how their lives contrasted with that of the miners.

The presentation in the Trefor Winding House showed life in the Lewis Merthyr colliery - the 1950s and the occupations in the mines during this

time. The Black Gold presentation had a lot of strength. There were a lot of sources used, such as photographs, pictures and documentary sources. Some were even similar to the course booklet and the school textbook Coal Society by David Egan. The Black Gold presentation had also been made more exciting by the use of moving models and sound effects, i. e. the 1890s steam engine in the Trefor Winding House.

Another positive point on the Black Gold presentation was that Dai Smith, an expert in mining history, wrote the commentary for these videos. This likely to be making the information and sources used in the presentation fairly reliable. However some weaknesses of the presentation was the amount of information we were provided with. I found that from video to video some of the information over lapped and also the content was too much. Another criticism I would like to make is on the Bertie Winding Houses video. For the first minute or so of this presentation the commentary was spoken in Welsh, with no translation.

I found this pointless because even though the beginning of the video was to do with Welsh speaking none of the English speaking audience could understand the part spoken in Welsh. I feel if it had been translated over the top of the Welsh commentary in English it would have been a lot more beneficial to non-Welsh speakers. The miner guide - Dai Jones, provided me with a lot of oral information about the miner's work. He also provided me with a brief biography on himself, including his age, education and family. He told me that he was going to be 56 years old this year and that he'd lived in Rhondda all his life.

He mentioned that he went to an all boys school and started work doing a milk round at the age of thirteen. He left school with no qualifications when he was fifteen and then went in to twenty-seven years of hard, dangerous work underground. When he went into this all his transport and equipment etc was all provided and paid for. However, when collieries closed he went to college and changed jobs. He informed us that smoking was forbidden down the mines for safety reasons, as the draft could spread the smoke for miles through the mines, apart from in the designated levels where it was allowed.

He shared his experiences of accidents down the mines, where he had been buried underground in a fall, nearly drowned and saw fellow workers killed in a fire. He also told us that the only health problems he had were a few back problems now and then and impaired hearing. He convinced us that he had never been found to have any lung problems apart from them remaining blackened. He also spoke about his family. This was not important, none of his family worked down the mines, women were banned from working there in 1842, although many mine owners ignored these rules, however I found the rest of the information he provided me with very useful.

I feel he is a reliable witness and source, as he is a primary source and compared to some information written in a textbook by some author, reporting or relying on other people's accounts or sources as a secondary source, he is very useful and reliable as he has actually experienced what working down the mines was like. As had the guide in Big pit - Peter Jones. He gave us a more realistic view of the mines. He actually took us down the new mine at Big pit, whereas in Rhondda Heritage park, we were only taken

into a ventilation shaft as the real mine is in disrepair and is far too dangerous.

I feel the tours were probably the places where I learnt the most about mining. This is because I was able to visually see what the conditions down a mine would have been like, more so in Big Pit, even though I am aware the conditions were actually a lot worse during the time of coal mining, I was provided with a vague insight in to what mining would have been like by the guide in Rhondda heritage park, but given a much more in depth insight into mining at Big Pit.

To see whether it was reliable I compared my experience of the miner's work with the film 'The Miner', Big Pit and the description given by the miner guide. We started in the lamp room where we were shown a selection of miner's lamps, varying from ones not so technical, such as the oil lamps, to ones a lot more advanced in technology. We were also told about the safety precautions of the mines. In big pit we were told about safety and searched for flammable items and dry cell battery, as they could ignite whilst down the mine.

In both places we were shown a display about the amount of methane gas present, as miners would have to evacuate immediately if levels were over a certain amount(5% roughly). However, we did not carry out many of these precautions and preparations to go on the underground tour. The only preparation we made was putting on a helmet. Compared to in the film 'The Miner' and the procedures at Big Pit this preparation was not accurate, as

there was no system of checks and contraband search carried out. Also in the 1950s anyone going down the mines would have had a cap lamp, which we were not provided with.

Underground in Rhondda heritage park, everything was made to resemble the work place in the 1950s, such as, posters/safety notices e. g. on accidents with drams, variations in temperature etc. However, Heath and Safety regulations meant that some aspects of the experience were not realistic, like the shot firing and the return journey to the surface and in some cases they were simple not included, such as the temperature, a real mine would have been much colder, it wasnt cold because we were only about 10ft under ground. Big pit was in fact colder, as we were further down(90m).

According to the Rhondda Heritage Park leaflet the underground tour, 'A Shift in Time', will enable visitors to " experience for themselves the sights, sounds and smells of the Lewis Merthyr Colliery at work" (B2) and during some parts of the tour it was very authentic, such as, the lamp room, posters/safety notices, manholes and tools, but then on the other hand some parts of the tour were disappointing, like the cage, there was no control band, no real preparation and the shot firing was no where near what it would have really been like.

Also the conditions down the mines would have been a lot worse. For instance in B6 Noah Ablett, one of the miner's leaders described the temperature down the miners sometimes being " up to 90 degrees".

Although I am aware this source could be unreliable as the writer was a miner's leader, therefore the description of the conditions may have been exaggerated. Section C - Community Life During my visit to the Rhondda Heritage Park I gathered a lot of information on what life was like in a Welsh mining community. Big pit gives no information about this.

My main sources for this information were the reconstruction of the 1920s village street, the interiors of miner's cottages from the late 1890s and the Fan House video and exhibition. The reconstruction of the 1920s village street consists of a butcher's shop and a general store, containing items such as household appliances, clothes and shoes, coffee etc. In order to evaluate its effectiveness I compared it with the Gwalia stores in St. Fagans. Compared to these stores the contents of items was very poor. Also, unlike in the St.

Fagans Gwalia stores you were not able to purchase any items from the shops which had been reconstructed at the Rhondda Heritage Park. The down side to this is that the atmosphere that there is in the Gwalia stores in St. Fagans, of which it would also have been like in a Welsh mining community is not present, therefore visitors are not being shown a true insight in to what a Welsh mining community was actually like during this time. Opposite the reconstruction of the shops were some interiors of miner's cottages from the late 1890s. Again compared with the Rhyd-y-car cottages at St. Fagans they were very disappointing.

Unlike the cottages at St. Fagans they didn't contain the detail and feel of what the miner's cottages would have actually been like in the late 1890s. They were very tidy, no dust, and smelt clean, whilst at the Rhyd-y-car cottages at St. Fagans you capture the atmosphere as soon as you walk in. The lighting is poor and dim and it smells old and musty. There was none of this at the exhibition at the Rhondda Heritage Park. However, the Rhondda Heritage Park did provide extra information on the walls of the rooms with more detail and quotes on what living situations and conditions were like.

I did find this very helpful, however for young children who couldn't read or people with not that much time this wouldn't have helped them. Some people like to just be provided with the information and detail by looking at the set-up of the exhibition, without having to read information. This information wouldn't have been much use to foreign or non-speaking English visitor of the museum as it would have been very unlikely that they could read it, therefore just wondering around the exhibition wouldn't have provided enough information for them.

It could also be argued that a much more authentic road exists outside the Rhondda Heritage Park, where many examples of a mining community can be found from miner's cottages, the Trehafod hotel etc. The other source of my information on what a welsh mining community was like was the Fan House video. This aimed to show what life was like in a Welsh mining community and in particular how people worked together in times of crisis in the 1920s and 1980s. A special focus was the life of the miner's wife and how that could be even harder than that of her husband.

The strengths of this video were the large number of primary and secondary sources consulted. Many of the sources were very similar to ones in David Egan's Coal Society. Sources 200 and 203 on page 82 of David Egan's Coal Society are the same sources shown during the Fan House video - " I used to wash the path, we had flagstones, from the back door right down to the toilet. I used to love doing it... " by R crocks, Women of the Rhondda, 1980. Like in the Black Gold presentation in the Bertie and Trefor Winding Houses, Professor Dai Smith, an expert in mining history, wrote the commentary for the Fan House video.

This likely to be making the information and sources used in the presentation fairly reliable. The section on women and leisure was well researched, such as bands and chapel life. The importance of the Sunday school treat was also empathised. However, I feel the video did not portray the importance that the miner's institute played in the Welsh mining community. A quote from Gerrallt D. Nash, Women's Hallst Institute (Cardiff 1995) expresses the importance of it - " There were places where miners could spend a great deal of leisure time away from work-reading newspapers, playing snooker etc.

Some of the buildings were huge.... " Also the video only partly covered the importance of the pub, which is described on pages 97 and 98 of David Egan's Coal Society. The Fan House video did not cover the huge changes after 1985, which is mentioned in source C6 in the Llanishen High School Resource Booklet - " The effect upon the communities of the NCB closure programme after 1985 was devastating.... " Conclusion - Assessment of the Rhondda Heritage Park In my opinion the Rhondda Heritage Park gives an

idea of the working and living conditions in a Welsh mining community during the twentieth century, but that's all, an idea.

Big pit gives an experience, it is not designed for tourists as Rhondda heritage park is, it is designed to give you a realistic insight, or as close as you will get to realistic, of a Welsh coal mine. I feel Rhondda heritage park provides more accuracy on the living conditions in a Welsh mining community, rather than on the working conditions, that are very well created in Big pit. I feel this is due to the health and safety regulations they had to obey when creating the exhibitions on the working condition, such as the underground tour, 'A Shift in Time' and also the fact that Big pit receives government funding, whereas the heritage park does not.

I feel very strongly that Big Pit provides a much better insight into the work of the miners in a Welsh mining community and I believe the sources were a lot more reliable. As Big Pit only gave me an insight into the working conditions in a Welsh mining community, and not the living conditions as well, I managed to compare the information I was provided with on the living conditions from the Rhondda Heritage Park with the Rhyd - y - car cottages and the Gwalia stores at St. Fagans. From this I can positively say that the Rhyd - y - car cottages and the Gwalia stores at St.

Fagans are definitely a better source on the living and community life of in a Welsh mining community. Source D1 in the Llanishen High School Resource Booklet quotes - " The Rhondda Heritage Park gives a romanticised mythical view of the valley for which no original has ever existed. " To be blunt, I feel

that this quote pretty much sums up the Rhondda Heritage Park. It does provide some good information, but is mainly for tourist purposes. The source D2 also quotes that - " The Rhondda Heritage Park, by contrast (to Big Pit), goes for noise and sensual assault.

" This is also true. I believe that the Rhondda Heritage Park would have been a lot better off if they had kept it simple by not including 'The Journey back to the Surface' and the cheesy sound effects because I feel this was unrealistic and they would have been better off not trying to portray the real life scares of working down the mines and instead, leaving it to peoples imaginations, because simply I feel that you can't completely experience the incidents that occur whilst working in the mines unless you have actually been there and done it.

Bibliography

David Egan - Coal Society - A History of the South Wales Mining Valleys 1840 - 1980

Llanishen High School Resource Booklet

Rhondda Heritage Park - Black Gold Booklet

Rhondda Heritage Park Leaflet

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[Rhonddaheritagepark. com](http://Rhonddaheritagepark.com)

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