

Understanding Treherbert, Cwmafan and Treharris: The past, present and the future

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January 2021



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Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the Three Towns project which is looking at the pre-conditions for growing the foundational economy in Treharris in Merthyr Tydfil, Treherbert in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Cwmafan in Neath Port Talbot. It is funded by the Welsh Government's Foundational Economy Challenge Fund.



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January 2021

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Registered charity no 1104191

Company registered in Wales no 4175018

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Summary

Many places in Wales have developed as a result of past industrial activity which has since disappeared. This report looks at the three communities in the south Wales valleys - Treherbert, Cwmafan and Treharris.

In each, the development of industry over a hundred years ago fundamentally shaped their growth as their populations grew and as businesses sprang up to serve their growing needs. The subsequent decline of their main industrial activities has had a profound social and economic effect. There is a feeling each has been overlooked in terms of economic development in recent years by both Welsh Government and local authorities

Each community has some shared characteristics that could help shape their future development. These include a core of locally-owned small businesses, a strong sense of community, and natural resources of various kinds. All three communities have key services such as health services, some transport connections, schools and community facilities that are vital for making them places people want to continue to live in. However the last hundred years have also seen each community develop unique characteristics that hint at how they could develop into the future and continue as thriving prosperous places.

Of the three places, Treherbert is more geographically isolated than Cwmafan or Treharris being located at the top of the Rhondda Fawr. This has fostered a sense of resilience and 'do it yourself' attitude. The re-creation of the Treherbert chamber of trade to help local businesses thrive is a good example of this. The social enterprise Welcome to Our Woods plans to turn Treherbert into Wales' first 'Forest Town' could significantly boost the economy and jobs, create a unique identity and boost health and wellbeing for the population. There are emerging opportunities with nearby developments including the opening of Zip World and the Rhondda Tunnel.

Cwmafan's location close to larger population centres gives it an opportunity to be a gateway to the nearby scenic Afan valley. This could help it to attract new residents and make full use of the tourist potential in the upper Afan valley such the Afan Forrest Park and Glynccorwg Ponds and Mountain Bike Centre. The community has a history of collaboration between local businesses, residents and stakeholders that increases its potential as a place where problems are shared and solved locally and opportunities can be seized.

Treharris' location at the confluence of the Taff and Taff Bargoed valleys could help to re-establish it as a local destination for people from the surrounding areas to visit and spend money and make a new home for themselves. Its links to larger population centres like Caerphilly and Merthyr Tydfil are also a strong basis on which to attract people to live and establish businesses. There is potential to build on the nascent green energy/self-sustaining projects to generate wealth locally. The potential for tourism is strong with Treharris having Parc Taf Bargoed and the Summit Centre (Rock UK) on its doorstep and being relatively near to Bike Park Wales and excellent cycle routes. These can also help to improve local health and wellbeing.

1. Introduction

Places across the south Wales valleys have experienced significant changes over the last century. Industrialisation – particularly the opening of pits, ironworks, copperworks and steelworks - triggered rapid growth in places that were once small settlements. People moved in for work and the increased population created the market for consumer and business services and infrastructure to serve local needs. With the societal and industrial shifts, these places have continued to witness change as older industries close or reduce in size and alternative paths and identities emerge.

The foundational economy is said to offer good prospects for places like the south Wales valleys that have been subject to such dramatic changes. The foundational economy provides everyday essentials such as utilities, education, health care and food. By meeting essential needs wherever people are, there is argued to be an opportunity to create jobs and grow businesses. However, no two places are the same. Developing the foundational economy will depend on an understanding of the dynamics and potential of different places: what has made it what it is, where it is going next and what the barriers and opportunities are.

With an eye to the future, this paper examines the development of three communities in the south Wales valleys over the last hundred years. It seeks to understand how the past and present can inform understandings of opportunities ahead and how they can be grasped. The three places are Treherbert in Rhondda Cynon Taf, Cwmafan in Neath Port Talbot and Treharris in Merthyr Tydfil. It outlines what local shops and services exist, what has been lost and gained, and what are the emerging opportunities. It is based on a combination of interviews and conversations with residents and stakeholders and through desk research.

The analysis focuses on three themes: industry and retail, local services and community infrastructure (e.g. green spaces, community clubs and amenities such as libraries). It explores what could come next for each place and where the opportunities and capacity to bring about change may lie.

This report is not an exhaustive history of each place and any omissions are not an indication of importance. We hope that in setting out a possible future for these places, people and organisations will be inspired to take action.

2. Treherbert

Treherbert is located at the top of the Rhondda Fawr valley within the county borough of Rhondda Cynon Taf. The administrative ward of Treherbert consists of the communities of Penyreglyn, Treherbert, Tynewydd, Blaencwm and Blaenrhondda. As of 2011 the population is 5,440. All five communities within the ward are interconnected in an almost continuous flow along the main road running through the valley, with the exception of Blaencwm which is slightly – half a mile - to the west of the main road. The majority of commercial premises and amenities are located on or around the high street through Tynewydd and Treherbert.



Map from www.openstreetmap.org under open licence

2.1 Industry and Retail

Around a hundred and fifty years ago Treherbert was remote and rural, with a few scattered farms, until a test coal pit was sunk in 1851 on land owned by the Bute family (where its name originates – Tre or village of Herbert). The test pit indicated that the area was viable for extraction and it began operating as Bute Merthyr colliery in 1855. This was quickly followed by a number of other collieries such Lady Margaret in 1853, Ynysfeio in Pen-y-englyn in 1859, Fernhill in Blaenrhondda in 1869 and Hendrewen (Glen Rhondda)

in Blaencwm in 1899. By 1900, every village had a pit that was each employing large numbers of people. Shops, services and amenities such as chapels were opened to serve the fast-growing communities.

Although Bute Merthyr closed in 1926, there was still a strong industrial as well as manufacturing base in Treherbert throughout the twentieth century that provided jobs and security. Glen Rhondda closed in 1966 and the final colliery to close in the area was Fernhill in 1978. As part of wider government economic strategy¹ in the 1920s and 1930s factories like Polikoff opened in Treorchy – a little further down the valley from Treherbert. Polikoff later became Burberry and remained in operation until 2007. Other factories included EMI and Rollo Hardies. The latter made, amongst other things, parts for nuclear submarines.

Manufacturing is still a feature of modern Treherbert but on nowhere near the scale it once was. Everest Windows began making window parts in 1972 and remains a local employer. It employs around 400 people but only recently avoided administration after finding a last-minute buyer. However 188 jobs could not be saved due to falling sales resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown.² The furniture manufacturer Thomas Lloyd is another major producer that is still operating in the area.

Today, around one in five people in Treherbert are employed in manufacturing which is almost twice the Welsh average. However, the near closure of Everest and closure of Burberry in 2007 with the loss of 300 jobs³ show that times in the sector are tough. No industry has yet been able to replace the number of jobs once available in Treherbert. This underscores the importance of new sources of more diverse, enduring and sustainable employment.

At its height, Treherbert had a wide selection of shops. In Treherbert and Tynewydd residents fondly remember such a wide variety of shops like Harvard's shoe shop, George the chemist, Wyndham Rees ironmonger, Mrs Perkins baby shop and James Electrical shop. Some simply were stalls in the front room of a terraced house. However, changing habits and trends such as increased car ownership, online shopping and the centralisation of some retail into supermarkets mean there are far fewer today. An example of the abundance of services available in each village can be seen in a survey completed for a new housing development in Blaenrhondda at the base of Pen Pych in the 1960s. The survey showed that there was a sweet shop, post office, three general stores, two fish shops, a barber, ironmonger, hotel, cobbler and baker. Of these only the post office in Blaenrhondda remains today. Few places have a cobbler any longer and there is a fish shop, hairdresser and general store in Treherbert. The post office continues to provide essential services such as basic banking services.

Today the main retail areas are along the high street encompassing Treherbert and Tynewydd. There are a number of general stores, a butcher, florist, hardware store, gift store, pet store, post office and funeral home. Unlike some other places, there are few 'national' chains present, something that could act as a catalyst for regeneration and is said to have been a factor in neighbouring Treorchy's success in winning the title of 'Britain's Best High Street' in 2020. The nearest supermarket is two miles away.

Work by the *New Economics Foundation* shows wealth that is retained locally can generate up to five times more for local economies than money that 'leaks out' to national headquartered stores or services.⁴ Our work exploring household spending patterns in Treherbert found that around ninety per cent of people we spoke to spent £25 a week or more on food and non-alcoholic drink locally. Many residents commented that they had increased their local spend while in lockdown.

Treherbert's chamber of trade recently re-started. It did work in Christmas 2020 to help in instal lights and decorations to improve the look of the high street - a sign of a pro-active approach to growing the identity and sense of pride in the area. It also ran a competition for shoppers over the Christmas period to encourage engagement with local business and to celebrate the festive period in such challenging circumstances

2.2 Local services

Approximately seventy-four per cent of Treherbert's housing stock is terraced. This is far higher than the Welsh average of twenty-seven per cent but typical of many places in the valleys.⁵ There are only a few post-war housing developments, the biggest being an estate in Penyrenghlyn built in the 1950s and one in Blaenrhondda in the 1960s. Levels of home ownership and rental levels are roughly in line with the Welsh average. The biggest two registered social landlords, Rhondda Housing and Trivalis, both actively engage in the community and have strong links with local groups, organisations and initiatives. Rhondda Housing works with local firms when maintaining their properties. It has used the same local contractor for electrical work for over 40 years. Trivalis run community programmes from Blaencwm Chapel teaching gardening and food production.

The geography of the valley and Treherbert's position within it makes it fairly isolated at least on three sides, and less well connected compared to some other parts of the valleys. It is at the top of the Rhondda Fawr with steep valley sides. Both roads in and out of Treherbert are single carriageway. The nearest dual carriageway is eight miles away. Many locals told us of challenges getting around, such as to Treorchy where the nearest dentist is. Some business struggle with operating in relative isolation, meaning that their local markets are small.

Public transport is therefore crucial. Around a third of households do not have access to a car.⁶ The road north over the Rhigos mountain was built as a work scheme programme in the 1930s and can be impassable in inclement weather. Treherbert has a rail link to Pontypridd and Cardiff, which takes 66 minutes when operating normally. Before COVID-19 it ran two trains an hour on weekdays, one an hour weekday evenings and a train every two hours on a Sunday. There are plans for the South Wales Metro to increase the frequency to four trains per hour on weekdays and two an hour on Sundays. Bus services are generally poor in the evenings which hinders the development of a night-time economy. The overall poor transport links and location of Treherbert appears to have created a 'do it ourselves' attitude amongst some businesses and organisations. The recent re-formation of the chamber of trade is illustrative of this.

There are no national cycle ways in this part of the Rhondda Fawr. There are plans, led by The Rhondda Tunnel Society, to re-open the old railway tunnel that connected the

Rhondda and Afan valleys. The tunnel was opened by the Rhondda and Swansea Bay Railway Company in 1890 to transport coal from the Rhondda Valleys to the docks at Swansea. If it re-opens the tunnel will reconnect the valleys at Blaencwm at the Rhondda end and Blaengwynfi in the Afan Forest Park. If successful the tunnel would become the longest cycle tunnel in Europe and the second longest in the world. It would also give the Fawr valley its first Sustrans national cycle path.

With the history of heavy industry in Treherbert, its population suffers from higher than average levels of health problems and almost half of those of working age are classed as economically inactive.⁷ Therefore health and social care as well as well-being services are vital. Ty Newydd Surgery and has two GPs and there is another surgery just one mile away in Ynyswen that was built in 2007. The nearest hospitals are the Royal Glamorgan in Llantrisant and Prince Charles hospital in Merthyr Tydfil. The nearest dentists are in Treorchy, two miles away. There is a privately owned care home Ty Ross and a home run by Rhondda Cynon Taf Council for vulnerable young adults.



A view of Blaencwm – Photo by Richard Bradford/Alamy Stock Photo

2.3 Community infrastructure

Treherbert has experienced the loss of some amenities, while others have been re-purposed. The library closed in 2014 but has since taken on a new lease of life as the hub for the activities of Welcome to Our Woods, a group that is spearheading community stewardship of local forestry. There is no longer a youth club although there is a Boys and Girls club next to the railway station. As with many community organisations, it operates on a 'hand to mouth' basis. There was once an opera house that put on plays and operas as well as a miners' lending library that also ran classes in science and history. There was also a swimming pool in Treherbert Park that was built as an open-air pool in 1936. It was converted to an indoor pool in 1992 but closed in 2009. Despite an attempt to transfer

ownership from the local authority to a community group, the pool remained closed and was demolished in 2012 to much anger and sadness.⁸ Like other assets, it was a casualty of budgetary cuts during the last economic downturn.

There are a number of organisations that are active in Treherbert. Valleys Kids offer training and activities for young people. During the coronavirus pandemic they have been an important source of support, providing hot meals and activity packs to some residents. Blaencwm Chapel has a 'pay as you feel' café with food that would otherwise be thrown out provided by the Fair Share programme. It also has a small allotment and garden which grows small amounts of food for the café and acts as a place of sanctuary for those who need it.

Welcome to Our Woods is a community partnership that delivers projects to make local natural resources more useful and relevant to the area and the wider region. It is at the helm of a partnership project to take on the management of 1.5km of land surrounding Treherbert⁹. The land is owned by the Welsh Government and managed on its behalf by National Resources Wales. The new management of the land will create jobs through timber felling and forestry. This is part of a wider ambition to make Treherbert Wales' first Forest Town.¹⁰

Separately, there is currently pilot scheme to grow food through hydroponics on the site of Tappers garage. Plans are also in progress by Rhondda Housing to build housing using locally-sourced timber. There is also some feasibility work taking place for an electric car club that would offer residents the chance to hire an electric vehicle. These developments have potential to be linked to nearby opportunities, such as Zip World - a roller coaster and zip line - opening on the former Tower Colliery site. At the time of writing Zip world is scheduled to open in March 2021¹¹ although there is the real possibility it could be delayed due to the pandemic. The interest that the innovations in land management will generate are also likely to draw new and different visitors to the area.

An impact of the pandemic across Wales is that many residents have spent more time in the community, either because they have worked from home, been furloughed, have shielded or because schools have closed. Some Treherbert residents spoke of being able to do simple things like go for a walk or spend their lunch break in their garden which has given them a renewed appreciation of the landscape around them. The area is rich in natural beauty, with local beauty spots including Pen Pych and Cwm Saebren woods. While this is certainly a positive for some and working closer to home has benefits for wellbeing – not everyone has been able to benefit. In fact, our research during the first "wave" of coronavirus indicated that Treherbert may have had the highest number of people still in work out of the three communities. So while there may be an opportunity for some to re-connect with nature and place, not everyone did or can.

There is a significant sporting and cultural life in Treherbert which gives the town a sense of continuity, heritage and place. Treherbert Band has links back to the collieries and are supported by Penycymoedd Wind Farm through their community grant scheme. Clubs like Blaenrhondda FC make use of the local park to practice, highlighting the importance of green space. Blaenrhondda Bowls Club is described by one community activist as a 'jewel in the crown' of the area. They told us of one member who attends who lives with

dementia, whose condition has improved so much through participating at the club that they were able to travel on holiday with their partner. This illustrates the value of sports clubs that cannot be measured in simple economic terms but has tangible social value.

2.4 Where next for Treherbert?

Treherbert is more geographically isolated than many places in the valleys. While this brings its challenges, it has a good core of small businesses and self-employed people – many of which are centrally located around Treherbert high street - that can act as a catalyst for strengthening the local economy. These businesses provide jobs closer to home and allow for a more robust local economy.

The sense of isolation has created a 'do it yourself' attitude amongst some residents. There is scope to make Treherbert a place people where want to spend more time in and spend their money. The recreation of the Treherbert chamber of trade could help contribute to a collaborative and co-operative business community able to tackle the ongoing challenges facing high streets and small communities in Wales. Neighbouring Treorchy's success indicates the possibilities for Treherbert. However, there is also some concern that Treorchy's success draws trade away from Treherbert. The successes of places that have built a strong sense of identity, local loyalty, and even a 'brand identity' through collaborative and innovative approaches to local businesses and assets show what could be possible in Treherbert.

The plans by Welcome to Our Woods, Rhondda Housing and Skyline to see Treherbert become Wales' first 'Forest Town' have real potential to stimulate the economy but also bring health and wellbeing benefits. The ability to use the land to re-connect with nature will build on the health benefits some have seen during lockdown. Training and employing local people to manage the land will create decent jobs closer to home. West Kilbride in Scotland became Scotland's first 'Craft Town' which created a new identity for the town, acting as a catalyst for further development. Treherbert as a forest town could enjoy a similar trajectory. It must be remembered though that the developments of West Kilbride have taken place over decades, however Treherbert seems to have a firm foundation for taking the concept forward.

The opening of Zip World has potential to draw in visitors, as does the re-opening of the Rhondda Tunnels and visitors interested in innovative approaches to land management. Treherbert already has some locally-owned hotels and accommodation providers – more than Cwmafan and Treharris – that could take advantage of the opportunity of increasing tourism. Improvements to transport links (both public and private) and support to businesses to make the most of increased footfall would really help maximise the opportunity these developments present. Ensuring that these are also locally-owned and rooted can help to stop money leaking out of Treherbert's economy and could stimulate other business services in turn.

The lockdown from the pandemic has meant some residents have been able to work from home, has encouraged more local expenditure and has highlighted the importance of local services in a pandemic. This needs to continue as a way of strengthening the self-sufficiency of the economy. However, a relatively large outward commuting rate serves

as a warning about assumptions that “local” behaviours and attitudes can or will be automatically sustained into the future. The ability to enjoy the goods, services and assets in Treherbert depends in part on local, well paid jobs needs being available to more residents.

3. Cwmafan

Cwmafan is located at the mouth of the Afan valley and two miles north of Port Talbot and the M4 motorway. The electoral and administrative ward of Cwmafan consists of three communities – the village of Cwmafan itself -also known by the anglicised Cwmavon - which subsumed the smaller communities of Pantdu, Pwllglaw and Ynysyguas - Bryn and Pontrhydyfen (also known locally as Oakwood). Pontrhydyfen is situated half a mile to the north of Cwmafan along the B486, with small post-war housing developments linking the two. Bryn is a mile to the east of Cwmafan along the B4282. The total population of the ward as of 2011 is 5,336.



Map from www.openstreetmap.org under open licence

3.1 Industry and retail

There has been heavy industry in Cwmafan since the beginning of the nineteenth century which has shaped the current layout of the community. Major copper and tin production in the valley brought rapid development before a decline in the mid-twentieth century in favour of the large steelworks at Port Talbot. Interestingly there was a small steel furnace in Cwmafan 50 years before Port Talbot but it was not economically successful.¹² Cwmafan itself had large copper and tin works as well as many supporting ancillary industries such as tool shops, forges and blast furnaces. However, all had closed by the

time the last vestige of hyperlocal heavy industry – the local brickworks - ceased production in 1968. Bryn expanded around a number of small collieries, the largest, Bryn Navigation, still employed around six hundred people in 1945 but closed in 1964.¹³ Similarly Pontrhydyfen expanded around the Oakwood iron works but major industrial activity here had ceased by the 1920s.

Cwmafan's business community developed in conjunction with the heavy industry to serve a growing population. In an age before mass transport the businesses were located right next to the works alongside rows of terraced housing. The area that became the high street was close to the tin works and had an indoor market that functioned as the centre of the village. Little remains of the high street itself although there are still a number of small independent stores which, as in Treherbert, can act as a springboard for generating wealth locally. Some residents suggest that Cwmafan would benefit from more of a central hub to act as a focal point and draw people in. A typical example of the evolution of the retail 'core' is the area known to locals as 'The Waun', close to where the copper works once stood. There was a church, All Saints, and at one time a fish shop, butchers, cobblers, Co-op, a chemist and a surgery.

Much of the terraced housing was demolished in the 1970s and the church was demolished in the 1980s. Today the whole area is known as All Saints Place and consists of modern semi-detached housing. The area around 'The Depot' which housed small scale manufacturers and machinists was developed into housing in the 1920s (Depot Road) and had a local cinema; 'Ebleys' which was built in 1927, turned into a bingo hall in 1970 and demolished in the 1980s. The nearest cinema is now in Port Talbot.

While it is difficult to be certain, the close proximity of Cwmafan to Port Talbot appears to have a generally positive effect on the area. The availability of employment opportunities contrasts with other places that are more geographically isolated. Being so close to a larger centre of economic activity which includes a regional employer makes a difference. Some residents suggest that Cwmafan has not suffered from deindustrialisation to the same extent as other valleys communities. As Cwmafan's industry declined, Port Talbot's increased to a peak of twenty thousand employed in the steelworks in the 1960's. Today it employs around four thousand people.¹⁴

There are a larger number of people employed in manufacturing in Cwmafan compared to the Welsh average (seventeen per cent compared to eleven per cent).¹⁵ There are also a number of small manufacturing businesses on the Brunel Industrial Estate south of the old tin works such as European Plastics Ltd and numerous mechanics and garages. Employment levels are in line with the Welsh average. Over half the population commute between five and ten kilometres away and according to *Understanding Welsh Places* almost eight hundred specifically commute to Port Talbot. The opening of the M4 in 1963 and general increases in car ownership at the same time as hyper-local industry ended will have also helped local job opportunities.

3.2 Local services

Cwmafan has a relatively low stock of terraced housing – twenty six per cent compared with seventy four per cent in Treherbert.¹⁶ This is largely due to the housing

developments that now occupy brownfield industrial sites such as Cae Glas on the old tin works or Penllyn, Heol Maban and Heol Jiwbili on the copper works. Modern housing tends to have lower maintenance costs and retain heat better so reducing utility bills. A quarter of houses in Cwmafan are for social rental. Registered social landlords like Tai Tarian and Coastal Housing play an important role in the community. Both are engaged in community projects and activities and look to use local firms in their contracts where possible. They also are both real Living Wage employers who provide opportunities for local people to find employment.

The spread of the housing developments in Cwmafan has transformed it from the village it once was. The population is spread over a wide area. The larger estates like Brynbryddan, Heol Maban and Heol Jiwbili each have a core of vital services including corner shops, hairdressers and laundrettes that serve the larger population. However, the smaller estates such as Cae Glas do not. Therefore re-creating a central hub around the old high street with good public transport would be a boost for residents and local businesses with more people spending money locally and ensure all residents (such as the elderly or those with health issues) have access to local services and essentials. Many residents who spoke to us told us they considered Port Talbot as 'town', reflecting the gravitational pull of Port Talbot for shopping, leisure and access to some services. The relative affordability of housing is seen as a positive for local people (although average prices are higher than Treharris or Treherbert) but there is a perception amongst some residents that Cwmafan is attracting commuters from Port Talbot and Swansea where house prices are higher. This could bring new opportunities to the area but is contingent on residents spending locally to avoid leakage of cash out of the area.

There are three care homes in Cwmafan. Michaelstone Court is a retirement home in the centre of Cwmafan and is run by Tai Tarian. D&S Care Homes run Ty Cwmafan which provides residential homes for young adults. Clarian Hope is a residential assisted care facility for adults with learning difficulties. There is a junior school in Cwmafan and there was once another in Bryn as recently as 2015 but the class sizes had been deemed too small so the pupils were moved to Cwmafan and the school was demolished. On reaching secondary education, children travel to Port Talbot where there are three secondary schools. There is a health centre located on the Penllyn estate (part of the Heol Jiwbili estate) next to Depot road in the middle of Cwmafan. Residents only have to travel three miles to the nearest hospital – Neath Port Talbot Hospital. However the nearest A&E is Morriston near Swansea approximately ten miles away.

Transport has also shaped Cwmafan. Cwmafan's proximity to the M4 means it has easy access to a key economic artery and therefore has good connectivity with the wider region. While it enables people to work and socialise further away which also carries the risk of leakage of spending out of the area. Port Talbot is two miles away, Swansea ten and Cardiff thirty. Until the Beeching cuts of the 1960s, Cwmafan, Pontrhydyfen and Bryn were all connected to the railway network. Today the nearest railway station is Port Talbot Parkway, roughly two miles away and on the mainline network between Swansea and London.

Car ownership in Cwmafan is in line with the Welsh average. For the quarter of households without a car, access to public transport is vital. Without a railway station, bus services are the primary mode of public transport. Some residents we talked to spoke of the lack of frequency of services. Neath Port Talbot Public Service Board's Wellbeing Assessment for Port Talbot (which includes both Bryn and Cwmafan in its 'community area') states on their website that residents had "expressed concern over shortcomings in the provision of public transport, as unreliable bus services and expensive taxis made it difficult for non-care owners to commute."¹⁷



A view of Cwmafan – Photo by Julian Pottage/Alamy Stock Photo

3.3 Community Infrastructure

There are a number of active and well used sports clubs in Cwmafan. Many have roots going back over one hundred years. There is a rugby club in each of the three communities: Cwmafan RFC, Bryn RFC and Pontrhydyfen RFC. In ordinary circumstances all are active and as well as playing ordinary matches and practice, also hold social evenings and day trips. Their premises also function as community hubs for wider use. Bryn RFC regularly hosts a local history society and has guest speakers and presentations. Cwmafan RFC held a series of online quizzes during the coronavirus pandemic. Each year Cwmafan hosts Cwmfest with local bands and singers. The sport clubs act as a venue for the performances alongside local pubs and clubs. The festival is a great social event and helps generate revenue for local businesses. As with many such events, in 2020 the festival was postponed due to the pandemic. There are a number of pubs in the area that do meals, although some residents told us they would welcome more choice for staying local and eating out.

The local library opened in 1971 and as well as acting as a traditional library, it is also the hub for a number of community organisations such as the local sewing club. During the pandemic the club raised thousands of pounds for charity making masks as well as scrubs for key workers in the local health centre. The library is also where plans for Christmas are made including the annual Cwmafan tradition of creating 'memory stars'. This is where people can remember someone dear to them on a locally-made star which is then put on the communal Christmas tree. The tree is sourced from a farm in Neath, the lights are erected by a local business and all is paid for from a community fund made up of residents' donations and fundraising activities throughout the year. The library is one of the most well used in the county borough and one of the most economical. Cwmafan's community infrastructure has been especially important over the pandemic in supporting vulnerable people, co-ordinating support responses and running socially distanced activities to boost morale and maintain social contact.

There are perhaps not as many amenities in Cwmafan as the other two areas, for example there has never been a swimming pool (although Treherbert and Treharris pools are now closed). The library opened much later than the other two areas. This relative lack of amenities is probably attributable to the close proximity to Port Talbot – the large Princess Royal Theatre and Civic Centre are just a mile away from Cwmafan centre. However what is in Cwmafan is well used. The community centre situated on the site of the old railway station and opposite the library is host to a range of activities. It is run as a trust and hosts a monthly market where people can sell produce, crafts and gifts as well as running a variety of education classes. The centre was previously run by Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council and was earmarked for closure in 2016 due to budgetary pressures. This triggered its transition towards a trust.

A popular annual event that brings together many in the community is the annual Richard Burton 10k race. The actor, who was born in Pontrhydyfen, acts as a strong identifier for the community. There are some murals and artworks scattered across Cwmafan in the style of graffiti artist Banksy. The arrangements for the race are sponsored by local companies and the money raised is distributed to local charities and good causes. More could be done to highlight the link to the actor and his place of birth. There are walking trails people can use but perhaps his former home could be purchased and turned into a museum for his life and work – even run acting classes for residents.

There are a good number of green spaces in Cwmafan. They offer space for residents to relax and socialise. Cwmafan is also close to parks in the Afan valley. Similarly to the other communities, some residents told us of the benefits of being able to make use of these spaces more during the pandemic and how it reinforced the importance of accessible green spaces for all to access. Parc Siencyn Powell sits on the site of the copper works, right in the centre of Cwmafan. It was named after a Jenkin Powell who drowned while trying to save four young boys from drowning in a pond on the old works. While undoubtedly a tragic event, his heroic actions are a source of pride to the community.¹⁸ Just four miles further up the Afan valley from Cwmafan is the Afan Forest Park. It has a visitors centre (Cedars Tearoom) a café and toilets, showers and a campsite. Within the park is the South Wales Miners' Museum Visitors Centre that was the first miners' museum to open in Wales in 1978.

3.4 Where next for Cwmafan?

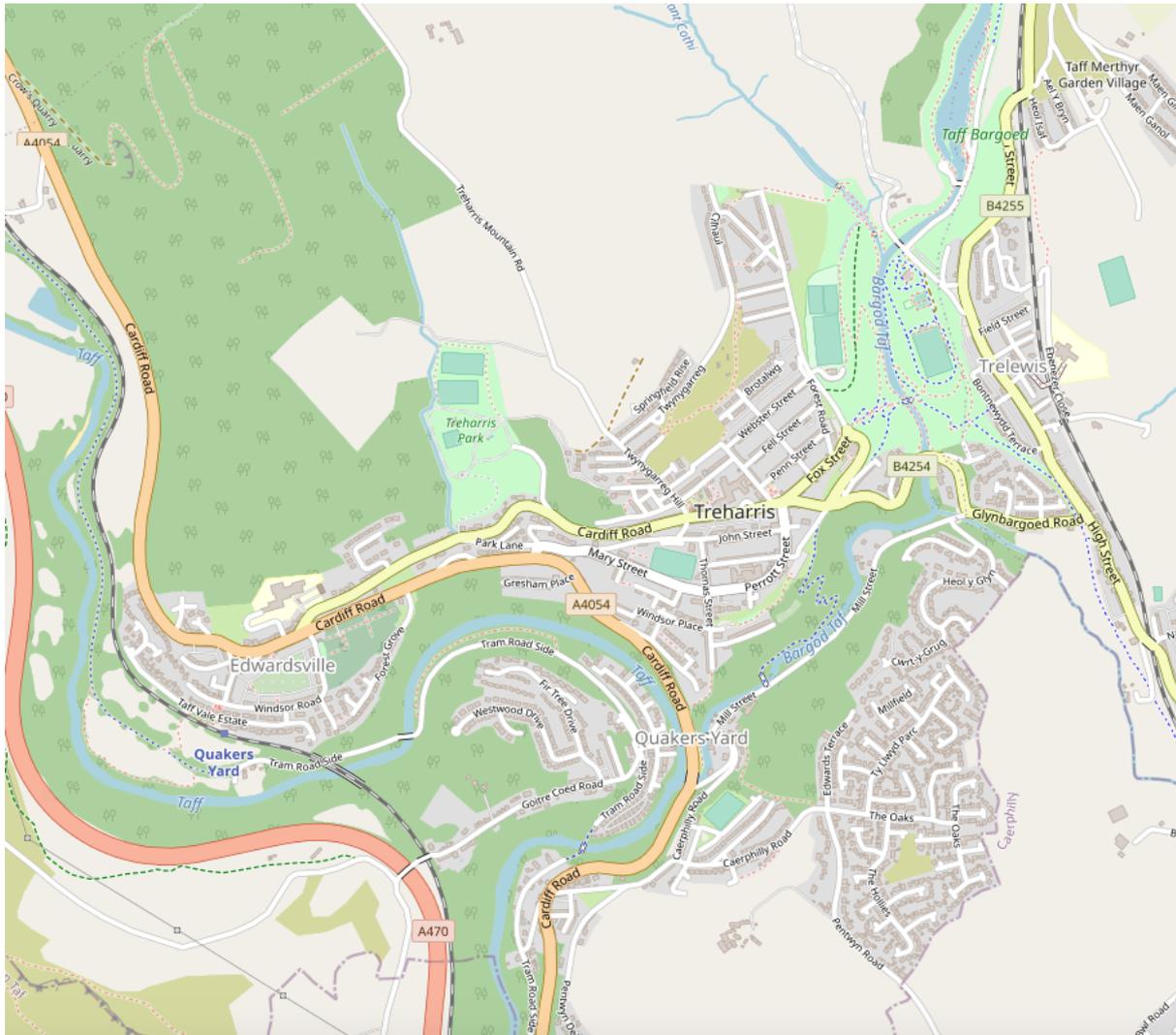
Cwmafan has a very strong sense of community spirit and cohesion and a core of small or self-employed businesses. The businesses are rooted in the community, provide jobs and contribute to the economy. There are strong relationships between community members and local businesses that can be seen in the fundraising and co-operation that takes place to support community events and activities that take place throughout the year. This coordination can provide a foundation to build further co-operation for the economic benefit of the area. The community fundraising for items for key workers or the memory stars tradition add to a sense of cohesion that makes people want to live in Cwmafan, look after each other and make it as best a place to live in as possible. The business profile of the area has a strong foundational sector, including hairdressing, food and retail, cleaning and construction – these are businesses that are likely to be needed for a long time to come. Also important is the work that registered social landlords are doing in employing local businesses for contracts and their contributions to activities that ensure Cwmafan is a place people want to live and work and thrive in.

Cwmafan has potential to build upon its position as the gateway to the Afan valley. The Afan valley has sites of interest and appeal including the Afan Forrest Park and Glyncorrwg Ponds and Mountain Bike Centre. Visitor accommodation - bunkhouse type accommodation next to the library that is well used – demonstrates the visitor demand to the area. The plans put forward by the Rhondda Tunnel society to re-open the Rhondda Tunnel would reconnect the Afan and Rhondda Fawr valleys through Blaengwynfi in the Afan Forest Park. The tunnel itself is two miles long and Blaengwynfi is ten miles north of Cwmafan. The tunnel could easily link to the existing Sustrans cycle route four that runs through the centre of Cwmafan, starting at Aberavon Seafront to the Afan Forest Park Visitor Centre and through to a connection with the Llynfi valley. These assets could boost visitor numbers but also give Cwmafan's residents better access to the surrounding landscape to improve health and wellbeing.

There is a desire amongst some in the community to see a central hub re-created in the centre of Cwmafan. The recreation of a retail core will act as a pull for both residents and visitors to shop and socialise. Our research with residents highlights that residents would welcome more choice when spending their money in Cwmafan. Therefore a central hub would strengthen the local economy. However there would need to be a wider variety of services created that meet the needs and preferences of the community. The benefit of a central hub could also go some way to addressing the issue of some residents seeing Port Talbot as the main place they go to spend their money. It would also help attract potential new residents.

4. Treharris

Treharris is situated at the southern end of the county borough of Merthyr Tydfil in the Taff valley. The community consists of the villages of Treharris, Edwardsville and Quakers Yard. Travelling south from Merthyr Tydfil on the old Cardiff Road first is Edwardsville, followed half a mile later by Treharris. Quakers Yard skirts Treharris to the west and south over the river Taff. The population as of 2011 is 7,705. Treharris is by far the largest of the three communities and is where the majority of the businesses are located.



Map from www.openstreetmap.org under open licence

4.1 Industry and retail

Industrialisation of Treharris began in earnest after the sinking of a mineshaft by F.W Harris (hence the name Treharris or Harris' town) in 1872. This mine became Deep Navigation and was followed by Taff Merthyr in 1926 and finally Trelewis Drift in 1954. Such was the importance of the mines to the area, Deep Navigation alone had almost two thousand workers in 1920.¹⁹

There were industries other than mining such as the engineering company Celtic Batteries that first repaired then produced car batteries before re-locating to Caerphilly in 1978. The collieries closed in Treharris a lot later than in Cwmafan or Treherbert; Trelewis Drift closed in 1989, Deep Navigation in 1991 and finally Taff Merthyr in 1993. Arguably, of the three places, Treharris has had the least time to adjust to the withdrawal of the industries it was built around.

Similarly to other coalfield areas, there are more people employed in manufacturing and construction than the Welsh average. Seventy-two per cent of the working age population commute between five and thirty kilometres for work and many residents who spoke to us told us how they felt unable to support the local economy when they are working away from Treharris. The most common commute destinations are Merthyr Tydfil, Cardiff, Pontypridd, Newport and Blackwood. Earnings are below the Welsh average.²⁰

The variety of businesses in Treharris in 1920 was quite striking. Fox Street alone had four grocers, a draper, hairdresser, jeweller, saddler, stationer, tailor and ironmonger. A flavour of the retail life of the town in the 1930s through to the 1950s comes from Aldo Opel who lived in Treharris:

“Saturday nights saw a crowded Perrott Street and part of Fox Street for in those days there was a thing called Saturday night shopping where family groups would do the weekend shopping, the shops staying open till 9 p.m.”²¹

To run this night indicates a level of co-operation and collaboration between businesses at the time and could only work as an initiative if the majority of businesses were on board. People of Edwardsville remember many shops in people’s front rooms such as a sweet shop that made their own ice cream. There was a post office and bakery and what is today Troz’s Takeaway had been both an Italian café and a Chinese restaurant. Quakers Yard had the old centre around Old Mill Road where in 1920 there were five pubs, a post office and a Co-op.

All three pits were still in operation until 1989, although with declining numbers actually employed. When Deep Navigation closed in 1991 it had 300 workers; which contrasts with its peak of 2,000²².

Having even this level of employment in the centre of the community meant there was a thriving retail environment through the period until the mid-1990s, especially independent retailers. Many residents spoke to us of shops fondly remembered that had been in business for decades. There was Clees Ironmongers that residents remember being open from the 1960s and Audrey’s shoe shop that can trace its history back to the early 1900s when it opened as Navigation Boot Stores and supplied colliers with their boots. One local suggested to us that Treharris once had more shoe shops than Merthyr Tydfil and the most shops per head of population in Wales. Although we cannot find evidence of this, it highlights at least the perception of a thriving community. One resident of Quakers Yard but who was born in Aberfan told us that as a teenager in the 1970s they would visit Treharris to shop and socialise in the cafes with friends rather than going up to the larger town of Merthyr Tydfil. Audrey’s closed in 1995 and Clees had

closed by the early 2000s. The chamber of trade closed in 2011 but had apparently been redundant for a decade more. One local commented;

*"I think it's well known that when the pits closed, most of the businesses closed in and around Treharris."*²³

Today there are not the same number of independent businesses but Treharris still has an impressive number with a high street presence: hairdressers, pubs, clothes shops, cleaners, seamstresses, cake shops etc. The bulk of these are small independent businesses. Merthyr Tydfil borough council currently provide support for new businesses in Treharris through its 'Meanwhile' programme which gives businesses an opportunity to open in vacant properties. However, some residents expressed a desire for more variety. There is no grocer, butcher or café (although the pubs do offer meals). The lack of a butcher is an interesting matter. Until only a year or so ago there was a butcher on Perrott Street in Treharris that was supplied by a co-operative of five local farms. The produce was local and organic but the shop closed and is now a cake shop. The reasons for the closure are unclear. Suggestions from residents we spoke to included succession challenges upon retirement and the passing of an owner. Whatever the reason, the fact that the butcher was well established indicates that it met a demand, likely to have been from within Treharris but also from customers further afield. The co-operative that supplied it is apparently still trading.

4.2 Local services

The majority of homes are privately owned. Much of Treharris and Edwardsville retain their terraced housing, with Quakers Yard having more modern post-war developments. Approximately half of the housing stock is terraced, a quarter is semi-detached and a quarter is detached.²⁴ The Cilhaul estate is the most modern housing development in Treharris itself and was built in the 1930s. It is situated in the most deprived part of the ward, and registered social landlord Merthyr Valleys Homes is an important organisation in the area, having recently refurbished many properties on the estate using local contractors. Quakers Yard has seen the biggest change in its layout, with most of the centre demolished in the 1950s due to repeat flooding. Most of the modern community consists of the housing estates of Woodland Avenue and Fir Tree. Quakers Yard is the least deprived area in the Treharris ward. Hafod Housing Association manages properties on the Fir Tree estate and helped to fund the building of a community centre which has a café and modern space for parties and events.

There are good health and social care facilities in Treharris with health care a focal part of wider regeneration plans for the area by Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.²⁵ A purpose built Primary Care Centre was opened in 2008 on Fox Street that offers a surgery, pharmacy and a physiotherapist. There is also a dental clinic in Treharris. The nearest hospitals are Prince Charles Hospital in Merthyr Tydfil (ten miles away) and Royal Glamorgan in Llantrisant (twelve miles away). There are two care homes in Treharris. Ty Bargoed Newydd is run by Merthyr Tydfil Council and is a new building, opened in 2014 on the site of an older nursing home. Pantanas is a privately owned care home that is home to thirty retired people, run by Broadway Care Centre Ltd.

Treharris has fairly good transport links with a train station at Quakers Yard (although there were additional stations in Treharris, Edwardsville and Trelewis until the 1960s) and regular bus services. The A470 is only two miles away and the bus and train connects travellers to places including Merthyr Tydfil, Pontypridd or Cardiff. Treharris has a large commuter population and car ownership is higher than the Merthyr Tydfil county borough average (seventy eight per cent compared to seventy per cent).²⁶ There is an issue with suitable parking, especially on the tight terraced streets in Treharris and Edwardsville which some residents told us can prohibit them from using local shops and services. Recent work by the local authority has created additional spaces throughout the area and upgraded the bus station through re-surfacing. The south Wales metro plans would also add another two trains per hour to Quakers Yard station in the week and another one train an hour on Sundays. In the first phase of plans there were also plans to connect Treharris to Nelson, Ystrad Mynach and Caerphilly with a new bus route but the plans are currently on hold.²⁷



A view of Treharris – Photo by John Kinsey/Alamy Stock Photo

4.3 Community infrastructure

Much of the community infrastructure in Treharris has its roots in the collieries. The Boys and Girls club is located on Forest Road on the site of Deep Navigation and is the oldest such club in Wales, having opened in the 1920s. It was established through the miners' welfare fund which also funded new premises in 1966. The original building was in such disrepair that one member recalls:

*"..in the attic drifts of powdered coal dust rested like black snow."*²⁸

The club was refurbished in 2005 and is run by Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council. There is some talk of community ownership / asset transfer to make it more financially secure. It is a central part of community life, offering a wide array of classes and activities such as adult fitness, table tennis, rambling, boxing, dodgeball and many more. It also offers financial advice to young adults, a job club and promotes fitness and healthy eating with children and teenagers through the M Girls clubs. Treharris library on Perrott Street is another important community venue. It acts as a hub and drop-in centre for local people – providing a wide range of community services. That the staff do such things as help arrange for an elderly member to have their cooker fixed illustrates its role in community life in Treharris. The library also distributes food to the homeless – something Treharris has seen an increase of and provides refreshments to some local children in school holidays. It also hosts the Communities for Work programme - a Welsh Government scheme that provides employability support to people facing complex barriers to work.

The area that the three collieries occupied has been significantly redeveloped into Parc Taf Bargoed through funding from the Millennium Commission in 1999 with the Groundwork Trust. The park regularly wins green flag awards and is owned by the local authority and run by Friends of Parc Taf Bargoed. It hosts a local angling club, canoe and motorboat club and runs nature and wildlife clubs for children. The parc has a hydro-electric scheme. Once the funding for the scheme's inception has been re-paid, the ambition is for it to generate revenue to fund the parc's daily running costs, to become totally financially self-sustaining.

In 1995 a former colliery worker setup the Taf Bargoed Development Trust on the site of the former Trelewis Drift Mine. The idea for the Trust was to create new business and employment opportunities for the area. The Trust has a gym and a number of industrial units it leases to local businesses. There is a garage on site and a company that uses and re-uses timber to make furniture and gifts. The Summit Centre run by Rock UK operates on a site leased by the Trust. The Centre has an indoor climbing wall, indoor and outdoor adventure activities as well as accommodation. The Trust invests in the local rugby club. It is able to draw on £5,000 of annual revenue generated by solar panels on the site to provide grants to local groups and causes of around £500 each.

Skyline, the project partner of Welcome To Our Woods in Treherbert, is looking at feasibility studies of creating a similar land stewardship scheme in Merthyr Vale two miles north of Treharris. There is potential to develop relationships between similar initiatives to increase local wealth through sustainable means. However the Trust's director told us of the challenge of getting more young people onto the board which is predominantly made up of older people. This apparent lack of enthusiasm amongst younger local residents has been echoed by the board members of the Boys and Girls Club also. Given the community response to helping each other through the pandemic, this lack of enthusiasm is probably more down to lack of strong relationships rather than a lack of enthusiasm amongst younger members of Treharris in seeing their community thrive.

Some residents express regret at the loss of community facilities in Treharris. The swimming pool in Edwardsville is particularly missed. Created, like the open-air swimming pool in Treherbert, through the Special Areas Act grant funding in the 1930s, the pool was

converted to an indoor one in 1986. Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council closed the pool in 2008 when a new leisure centre was built at Rhydycar just south of Merthyr Tydfil town centre but approximately ten miles north of Treharris. Despite a local campaign to save the pool, it was demolished in 2010. Some residents felt it reflected less attention being paid to places outside of Merthyr Tydfil town itself. Another historic facility was the Public Hall (Miners' Workman Hall) built in 1893. Colliers raised money towards the construction and the owners offered a low ground rent. It had a grocer and a bank and became a theatre in the 1930s. It was popular with local bands, one of whom also played in the Cavern Club in Liverpool. It closed in 1980 and was later demolished. The site was recently renovated as part of a wider regeneration scheme. It is now 'Treharris Square' that can be a space for community events. Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's Physical Regeneration Team received a commendation award from the Royal Town Planning Institute for their work on Treharris Square in 2014.²⁹ One resident told us it was hoped when the regeneration work was completed that the square could host a regular market – something a number of residents and local businesses told us they wanted. It has been used for a Christmas market but not a regular market.

4.4 Where next for Treharris?

Treharris' location means that it is fairly well connected and has capacity to draw in additional population and footfall. It is close to larger settlements such as Merthyr Tydfil and Pontypridd with good transport links for residents to travel to for work or socialising. It is also connected to a number of smaller settlements like Nelson, Bedlinog, Aberfan and Merthyr Vale. There is a good core of local businesses to take advantage of this. The Saturday night shopping that once took place on a weekly basis demonstrates the co-ordination between businesses that once occurred, and could again, perhaps with the re-creation of a chamber of trade. Using Treharris Square as space for other community activities, events and perhaps as a local marketplace would help maximise the investment that has gone into its regeneration. The meanwhile approach taken by Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council to encourage business into empty properties is a step in the right direction and offers exciting possibilities for further regeneration of Fox Street – including new businesses.

There is potential also to use Treharris' geographical location to attract new residents. The advantages listed above for the purpose of spending opportunities can also apply to those looking to make a new life in Treharris. Using the good transport links, proximity to both large and small communities as well as fantastic green space are positive assets and offer a mixed appeal for potential residents. House prices are relatively affordable. Treharris today has a strong community built on generations people coming and making it their home. Attracting new families who then immerse themselves in the community can be a real benefit. There is potential for new businesses to be created, or more volunteers for community organisations or customers for established businesses.

Taf Bargoed Development Trust offers an existing platform to grow business and community opportunities. The use of the Trust's space for businesses could act as a springboard for further business growth. The potential to build relationships between groups with shared ambitions like Skyline and the land stewardship proposals for Merthyr Vale has potential to drive wealth through environmentally friendly initiatives. This

collaborative type of action is key if Treharris is to be more economically self-sufficient in the future. The strengthening of relationships will also help to improve the perception by some residents that the young people of Treharris are not as engaged with the community as they could be. There is also the possibility to scale up the use of the solar panels on site not only for sustainable energy but to be able to fund more local projects and initiatives.

Parc Taf Bargoed is a wonderful resource right on Treharris' doorstep and is well used. The Summit Centre (Rock UK) attracts visitors from all over the UK. Some residents see the potential of being near Bike Park Wales at Gethin Woodland Park near Merthyr Tydfil. However Treharris is approximately ten miles south of the Park so good transport links and a local "draw" are essential for it to benefit from this opportunity. One resident told us how they had opened a stall on the Taf Trail for passing cyclists, having spotted the opportunity of passing trade on the trail. However, it did not meet business regulations and had to close. Although an anecdote, it does highlight the opportunities that are available. The Taf Trail and appropriate links to and from it are options that merit further consideration and would also improve access and travel options for residents. Scaling up the hydro-scheme in Parc Taf Bargoed would also be a positive way of responding to the landscape created by previous industrial activity. Currently the bulk of the revenue is used to repay construction costs. Some money is used to pay for a park warden and donated to fishing and canoe clubs. It shows the potential that the generated capital can be used to fund more local projects and causes.³⁰

5. Conclusion

The development of Treherbert, Cwmafan and Treharris over the last hundred years has been inextricably linked with industry. First with its establishment and expansion and then with its decline and the knock on effects on jobs, a sense of purpose and identity. Cwmafan has perhaps weathered industrial decline better than other areas, not least because it benefits from its close proximity to Port Talbot for employment opportunities. Treherbert has suffered from both the withdrawal of industry coupled with a geographic isolation that limits its access to other opportunities. Treharris has had less time to deal with the industrial decline but the effects on the economics of the area are no different.

Looking to the future, each place has potential but there needs to a mix of developments to maximise it. The foundational economy is a vital part of each community. However it cannot or be expected to revive or sustain the whole community. It is unlikely to provide enough stable employment or income generation for all. Recognising this and taking a mixed approach to developing the local economy will be key. There are similar themes that link all three areas such as their cores of local independent businesses and strong sense of community that will stand them in good stead. Each has a unique possible future based on their historic growth. Treharris and Treherbert still have physical focal points or 'hubs' that can act as the basis for regeneration and both have a strong sense of community, as does Cwmafan, which has been especially important since the pandemic.

Treherbert, building on its 'do it ourselves' attitude, can help to grow more local businesses and make the area more economically self-resilient. The possibility of it becoming Wales' first 'Forest Town' is potentially transformative not only for the economy but for local peoples' lives, promoting a genuine sense of unique identity as an area defined by its future not its industrial past. It could also act as a demonstrator for rolling out similar initiatives in other areas of the valleys or Wales more widely.

For Cwmafan there is the potential for it to act as a gateway to the Afan valley and capitalise on the flow of people in and out of the valley for leisure, tourism and work. The collaborative culture amongst Cwmafan's key stakeholders and businesses offers potential to strengthen a sense of self-reliance and to pool resources for the betterment of all in the community.

Treharris can build on its location as a commercial hub and visitor hub in the south of the borough of Merthyr Tydfil and draw visitors as it did in its heyday. It can use these assets as a mixed appeal to new residents looking to make a new life. There needs to be more collaborative working between all residents to address concerns of a generational gap. Making the most of the landscape and natural resources through the hydro scheme and Parc Taf Bargoed could release further opportunities in Treharris.

Each community has genuine potential for future prosperity. However it is hard not to feel there is a sense they have been overlooked regarding economic development policies, by both Welsh Government and local authorities. If these smaller communities are to thrive over the next 100 years this has to change. There needs to be a recognition that smaller communities are as important as larger ones. Any consideration of wider economic development has to take their unique characteristics into account: the smaller businesses,

geographic isolation or poor public transport. Consideration of policy has to involve the community themselves, residents, businesses and stakeholders. They need to be consulted as to their needs as they are catalyst for any future positive change. This will go some way to addressing the issue of feeling forgotten about or left behind.

There is of course no way to be certain about what the next hundred years hold. Economic sustainability, a clear sense of purpose and collaborative approaches will be key for each community to thrive. The foundational economy is unlikely to replace to the same scale of jobs or even wealth that the old industries did. The "original" foundational economy that developed in these places did so in response to an eco-system of more secure employment and an assured level of consumer spending. Every area will be to some extent reliant on outside investment and people commuting for work. It remains to be seen whether changes from the pandemic around appreciating the "local" more will embed as a permanent feature of life in the three communities. Ultimately each community has unique assets that can be nurtured and maximised to ensure they are places people want to thrive in and spend their lives in.

6. Endnotes

- ¹ Such as the Special Areas Act 1934 which gave aid to areas (including south Wales) with high unemployment and the following Special Areas (Amendment) Act 1937 which encouraged businesses to locate to these areas through incentives like tax concessions. For a wider understanding of these policies see Rowlands, T, 'Something Must be Done' South Wales v Whitehall 1921-1951, (2000)
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- ⁵ InfoBase Cymru, Housing (local area), available at: <http://www.infobasecymru.net/IAS/themes/people.communitiesandequalities/housing/profile?profileid=399>
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- ¹⁴ <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s49258/EBC4-07-16%20p6%20Evidence%20from%20Unite.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Understanding Welsh Places, Cwmafan, available at: <http://www.understandingwelshplaces.wales/en/compare/W37000164/>
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²⁸ Treharris boys club: A personal history pp.4-5

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