

Understanding Cwmafan: The past, present and the future

SEFYDLIAD
bevan
FOUNDATION

February 2021



About the Bevan Foundation

The Bevan Foundation is Wales' most innovative and influential think tank. We develop lasting solutions to poverty and inequality.

Our vision is for Wales to be a nation where everyone has a decent standard of living, a healthy and fulfilled life, and a voice in the decisions that affect them.

As an independent, registered charity, the Bevan Foundation relies on the generosity of individuals and organisations for its work, as well as charitable trusts and foundations. You can find out more about how you can support us and get involved here:

<https://www.bevanfoundation.org/support-us/organisations/>

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.



Copyright Bevan Foundation
Cover image courtesy of David Slee, Cwmafan

Author – Lloyd Jones

Bevan Foundation
145a High Street
Merthyr Tydfil, CF47 8DP
February 2021

lloyd.jones@bevanfoundation.org

www.bevanfoundation.org

Registered charity no 1104191

Company registered in Wales no 4175018

Contents

Contents.....	1
Summary	2
1. Introduction.....	3
2. Cwmafan	4
2.1 Industry and retail.....	4
2.2 Local services.....	6
2.3 Community Infrastructure.....	8
2.4 Where next for Cwmafan?	10
3. Conclusion	12
4. Endnotes.....	13

Summary

Many places in Wales have developed as a result of past industrial activity which has since disappeared. This report looks Cwmafan at the mouth of the Afan valley in south Wales.

In Cwmafan, the development of industry over a hundred years ago fundamentally shaped its growth as the population grew and as businesses sprang up to serve their growing needs. The subsequent decline of Cwmafan's main industrial activities has had a profound social and economic effect. It is hard not to feel that Cwmafan has been overlooked in terms of economic development in recent years by both Welsh Government and local authorities.

However the last hundred years have also seen Cwmafan develop unique characteristics that hint at how the community could develop into the future and continue as a thriving prosperous place.

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. There is a core of small or self-employed businesses rooted in the community and a strong relationship between business and community members. This cohesion can provide a foundation to build further cooperation for economic benefit. It also helps make Cwmafan a place people want to live in.

Cwmafan's location close to larger population centres specifically Port Talbot 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 Glyncorrwg Ponds and Mountain Bike Centre.

There are key services such as Cwmafan Medical Centre, retirement and care homes, a primary school, community facilities and sports clubs that are vital for making Cwmafan a place people want to continue to live in.

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 Cwmafan that has 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 Cwmafan 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. 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 Cwmafan and any omissions are not an indication of importance. We hope that in setting out a possible future for Cwmafan, people and organisations will be inspired to take action.

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 1964.² 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.³

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).⁴ 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.



A view from Rhyslyn Park looking south towards Pontrhydyfen and Cwmafan winter 2021 – photo courtesy of Cheryl Edwards of Cwmafan

2.2 Local services

Cwmafan has a relatively low stock of terraced housing – twenty six per cent compared with seventy four per cent in Treherbert.⁵ 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.



A snowy Ynys Y Wern, winter 2020 looking north up the Afan valley, built on the site of the tin works – photo by Gareth Ayres Cwmafan

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."⁶

2.3 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.



Cwmafan library Christmas 2020 with the memory stars – photo courtesy of Suzanne Slee

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.⁷ 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.

2.4 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.



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

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.

3. Conclusion

The development of 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.

Looking to the future, Cwmafan has potential but there needs to be a mix of developments to maximise it. The foundational economy is a vital part of Cwmafan's economy. 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. Cwmafan has a core of local independent businesses and strong sense of community that will stand it in good stead. Cwmafan may need to re-create a central 'hub' that can act as the basis for regeneration and keep more wealth in the community. It does have a strong sense of community, which has been especially important since the pandemic.

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.

There is genuine potential for future prosperity. However it is hard not to feel there is a sense Cwmafan has been overlooked regarding economic development policies, by both Welsh Government and the local authority. If smaller communities like Cwmafan 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 its unique characteristics into account: the smaller businesses, geographic location straddling both dense and rural populations and poor public transport. Consideration of policy has to involve the community: residents, businesses and stakeholders in direct consultation. 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 Cwmafan 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. Cwmafan 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. Ultimately Cwmafan has unique assets that can be nurtured and maximised to ensure they are places people want to thrive in and spend their lives in.

4. Endnotes

- ¹ Stephen Parry, History of the Steel Industry in the Port Talbot area 1900-1968, 2011, p.28, available here: <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/2591/1/parrystephen.pdf>
- ² Welsh Coal Mines, available at: <http://www.welshcoalmines.co.uk/GlamWest/BrynNavigation.htm>
- ³ <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s49258/EBC4-07-16%20p6%20Evidence%20from%20Unite.pdf>
- ⁴ Understanding Welsh Places, Cwmafan, available at: <http://www.understandingwelshplaces.wales/en/compare/W37000164/>
- ⁵ InfoBase Cymru, housing (local area), available at: <http://www.infobasecymru.net/IAS/themes/people.communitiesandequalities/housing/profile?profileid=399>
- ⁶ Neath Port Talbot Public Service Board, Wellbeing Assessment, available at: <http://wellbeingsite.dns-systems.net/index.php/en/port-talbot/>
- ⁷ Wales Online, Village's memorial to true hero Jenkin Powell, 2009, available at: <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/villages-memorial-true-hero-jenkin-2115564>