

Understanding Treharris: 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 Jason Jones of Treharris

Author – Lloyd Jones

Bevan Foundation
145a High Street
Merthyr Tydfil, CF47 8DP
January 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. Treharris	4
2.1 Industry and retail.....	4
2.2 Local services.....	7
2.3 Community infrastructure.....	8
2.4 Where next for Treharris?.....	10
3. Conclusion	13
4. Endnotes.....	15

Summary

Many places in Wales have developed as a result of past industrial activity which has since disappeared. This report looks at the community of Treharris in the Taf Bargoed valley in south Wales.

In Treharris, the development of industry over a hundred years ago fundamentally shaped its growth as the populations grew and as businesses sprang up to serve their growing needs. The subsequent decline of Treharris' main industrial activities has had a profound social and economic effect. It is hard not to feel the community 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 Treharris develop unique characteristics that hint at how the community could develop into the future and continue as a thriving prosperous place.

Treharris' location at the confluence of the Taff and Taff Bargoed valleys and industrial activity saw it become a thriving destination for people to come and spend money. While this has declined in the decades since heavy industry left, there is potential to re-establish it as a place to pull in visitors from surrounding areas. Its links to larger population centres like Caerphilly and Merthyr Tydfil are a strong basis on which to attract people to live and establish businesses. There are also a good strong core of small independent businesses that can act as a foundation for this growth as well as providing jobs and sustaining wealth locally.

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.

There are key services such as a modern health centre, two retirement homes, two primary schools and community facilities – including Wales' oldest boys and girls club. There is also a strong sense of community that has been especially apparent during the pandemic. These are all vital for making Treharris 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 Treharris 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.

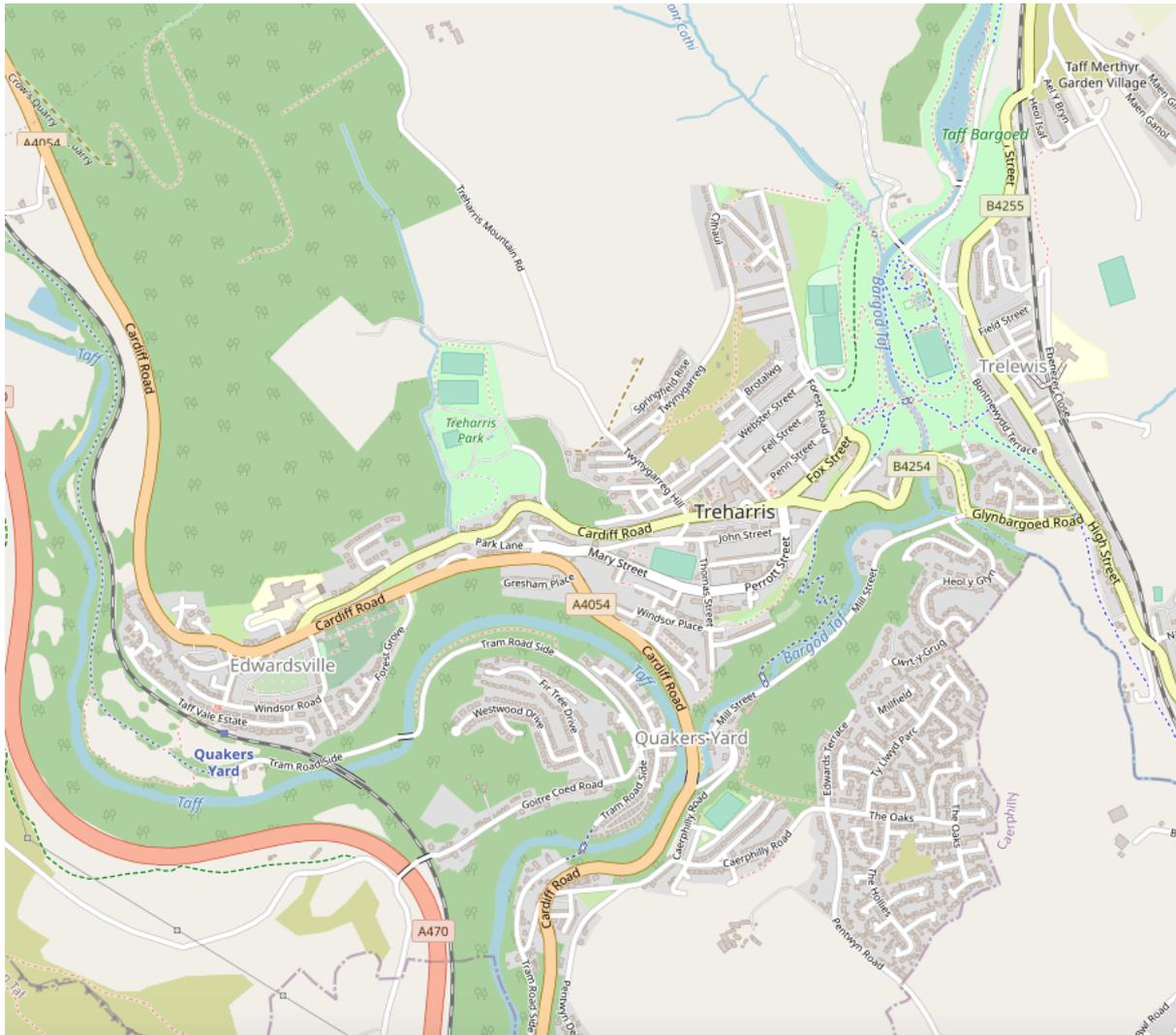
With an eye to the future, this paper examines the development of Treharris over the last hundred years. It seeks to understand how the past and present can inform understandings of opportunities ahead and how they can be grasped. It outlines what local shops and services exist, what has been lost and 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 Treharris and any omissions are not an indication of importance. We hope that in setting out a possible future, people and organisations will be inspired to take action.

2. 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 Taf. 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

2.1 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 1920.¹

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.²

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.”³

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 2,000⁴.

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."*⁵



Treharris park autumn 2020 – Photo courtesy of Hayley Amos of Nelson

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.

2.2 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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).⁸ 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.⁹



A train travelling between Quakers Yard and Abercynon January 2021. In the foreground is the Taf Trail – Photo courtesy of Linda Jones Treharris

2.3 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." ¹⁰

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.



Looking towards Quakers Yard and Treharris from Trelewis with Parc Taf Bargoed in the foreground – Image courtesy of Lee Dare Treharris

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 2014.¹¹ 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.

2.4 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.



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

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.¹²

3. Conclusion

The development of 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. Treharris has had less time to deal with its industrial decline relative to other communities in the south Wales valleys, but the effects on the economics of the area are no different.

Looking to the future, Treharris has potential but there needs to be a mix of developments to maximise it. The foundational economy is a vital part of Treharris'. 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 is a core of local independent businesses and strong sense of community that will stand it in good stead. Each has a unique possible future based on their historic growth. Treharris still has physical focal points or 'hubs' that can act as the basis for regeneration in growing jobs and retaining wealth locally.

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 also use its location, the facilities listed in this paper and good transport links as assets to offer a mixed appeal to people and families to make their lives locally and be active members of the community. 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 in and around Treharris building on the potential of the hydro scheme and Parc Taf Bargoed could release further opportunities in Treharris. The potential for an environmentally sustainable future is something we all have to look to in the future and Treharris has a real opportunity to build on what is currently running.

There is genuine potential for future prosperity. However it is hard not to feel there is a sense that Treharris has been overlooked regarding economic development policies, by both Welsh Government and the local authority. If smaller communities like Treharris 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. Consideration of policy has to involve the community themselves: residents, businesses and stakeholders in direct consultation. They need to be consulted as to their needs as they are the 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 Treharris 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. Treharris 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 Treharris has unique assets that can be nurtured and maximised to ensure it is a place people want to thrive in and spend their lives in.

4. Endnotes

¹ Owen, John A, Merthyr Tydfil Industrial Development 1870-1918, Merthyr Historian, vol2, 1978, pp. 23-50

² Understanding Welsh Places, Treharris, available at:

<http://www.understandingwelshplaces.wales/en/compare/W38000017/>

³ Treharris District, Aldo's Story, available at: <https://www.treharrisdistrict.co.uk/aldo-opel-treharris-story/>

⁴ <http://www.alangeorge.co.uk/treharris.htm>

⁵ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/end-era-treharris-chamber-trade-1857669>

⁶ InfoBase Cymru, housing (local area), available at:

<http://www.infobasecymru.net/IAS/themes/people.communitiesandequalities/housing/profile?profileid=399>

⁷ Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, First Replacement Local Development Plan 2016-2031, available at: <https://www.merthyr.gov.uk/resident/planning-and-building-control/replacement-local-development-plan-2016-2031/first-replacement-local-development-plan-2016-2031/>

⁸ RAC Foundation, Car ownership rates per local authority in England and Wales, 2012, available at: https://www.racfoundation.org/assets/rac_foundation/content/downloadables/car%20ownership%20rates%20by%20local%20authority%20-%20december%202012.pdf

⁹ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-06/south-wales-metro-brochure.pdf>

¹⁰ Treharris boys club: A personal history pp.4-5

¹¹ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/villages-public-space-transformed-thanks-8487526>

¹² <https://www.goodenergy.co.uk/blog/2017/11/09/taff-bargoed-hydro/>