

Scheduled for demolition, the former engine house of the old Llynfi Iron Works – one of the last to survive in South Wales - was rescued by the efforts of the local community and their Council.

The Maesteg Engine House

It isn't often that local historians are disposed to give our Councillors a pat on the back for as often as not they tend to be sanctioning the destruction of buildings of local significance and historical value that we consider worthy of preservation. Credit therefore where credit is due to the former Ogwr Borough Council (predecessors to Bridgend CBC) for their imaginative reconstruction of the former blast engine house of the old Llynfi Iron Works at Maesteg.



The Engine House – photo by Cyril James

These buildings were essential elements of the iron works that sprang up across South Wales in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to house the Cornish beam engines that blew air into the blast furnaces. Huge and ponderous machines that these were, the buildings which housed them were likewise massively constructed to withstand the vibration they caused when in operation. The one at Maesteg is built of great carved stone blocks some of which were riveted together with rivets of molten lead, and not only is it an important monument to the foundation of the town, it is believed to be one of the last remaining such structures in Wales.

It dates to a time in the early 19th century when the Llynfi Valley was a quiet and heavily wooded valley in which the forest was dotted with clearings marking the location of farms that had existed here for centuries. The only urban settlement as such was the tiny hill-top village of Llangynwyd huddled about its church, and change when it came happened in just a few short decades. This was an area rich in both iron and coal and by the end of the 18th century, with the Industrial Revolution gathering pace throughout Britain, it was only a matter of time before it too became caught up with industrial development.

Work on the first ironworks began in the early 1820s on the land of Maesteg Farm which lay on the eastern bank of the Llynfi River, and was in production by 1828. Ten years later on the opposite side of the valley and a little further upstream there followed the Llynfi Works of which the blast engine house was an essential element. At its height this works operated four blast furnaces and employed in the region of 1,500 men and women,

In a very short space of time the iron works, mines and quarries drew people in their thousands to the quiet valley seeking employment, and the town of Maesteg with its satellite communities sprang up virtually out of nothing to house them.

Almost as suddenly as it had started, however, the booming iron industry plummeted into decline with the introduction of the Bessemer steel-making process. Despite a merger with the rival Maesteg Iron Works the Llynfi works finally ceased production in 1878 and when an attempted revival failed in 1886 its equipment and machinery were removed and sold off.



Remains of one of the former blast furnaces – photo by Cyril James

For a long time the former engine house did duty as a corn-store for the pit ponies of the North Navigation Company and is still often called “the Corn-stores” today. Solid and well-constructed building though it was, time gradually took its toll. The roof collapsed and the demolition of the old building seemed imminent. Local people and conservationists nevertheless banded together to successfully campaign for it to be listed as a building of historic significance, and with the support of Ogmore Borough Council an imaginative scheme was drawn up to turn it into the foyer of a new Sports Centre.

So this massive and truly impressive building from Maesteg’s past has survived, and when I last visited it about eighteen months ago I was impressed with the obvious pride taken in it by the members of staff I spoke with. There was even a free pamphlet setting out something of the building’s history upon which I have drawn for some of the information above. A piece of “old Maesteg” serving the needs of the present generation whilst still preserving a reminder of their past – I rather like that!

Further Reading

The Maesteg Sports Centre is open to the public and the staff there always ready and willing to provide information on the history of the former engine house. Further information on the Llynfi Iron Works and the history of iron making at Maesteg may also be found in the following publications.

‘History of the Llynfi Valley’ by Brinley Richards, published 1982 by D. Brown & Sons in association with the Llynfi Valley Historical Society.

‘History of Llangynwyd Parish’ by T C Evans (“Cadrawd”) originally published 1887 and reprinted 1992 by Mid Glamorgan County Libraries.

‘Tir Iarll’ by Frederick Evans, originally published 1912, reprinted 1993 by Mid Glamorgan County Libraries.

‘Ty’r Llwyni, Some Historical Notes of the Town of Maesteg’ by David Davies, published privately, 1961.