

Blaenavon Ironworks

The cottages and the company shop



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Stack Square

Some of the cottages in Stack Square have been furnished for the BBC Wales programme, *Coal House*, first shown in October 2007.



Engine Row

Two cottages in Engine Row have been furnished with original and replica household goods as the homes of working families. At the end of the row is the company shop, recreated as it might have looked in 1840. In this booklet the project designer, Charles Kightly, describes the decoration and furnishings. We are grateful to the Radnorshire Museum, Llandrindod Wells, and the Judge's Lodging, Presteigne, for donations of some original items.



No 1, Engine Row

is furnished as it might have appeared when almost new in 1790. It is recreated as the home of an experienced ironworker from the established ironworks at Ironbridge, Shropshire, attracted to Blaenavon by this housing, which was comparatively good for the period. He is imagined as having a wife and small baby.

He might have brought with him items like the yellow-painted replica 'Shropshire' (Clun-style) armchair, the replica 'Shropshire borders'-type bed and the replica 1781 print of the Iron Bridge.

The interior of the main room is intended to convey modest prosperity. Its walls and woodwork are coloured with 'red raddle' colourwash, made from red ochre pigment (also used until recently for marking sheep) mixed with limewash. Raddle decoration still survives in a few Welsh rural houses.

The occupants are about to sit down to a substantial meal of boiled leg of Welsh mutton (modelled on a mutton, not lamb, joint from Radnorshire), with a jug of caper sauce and a relish of samphire. This plant grows wild on salt marshes, and was popularly used as a vegetable throughout Wales and other parts of Britain: being naturally salty, it kept well and was used inland as well as by the seaside. It has been cooked on the well-equipped range (original to the site, but extensively refurbished) with its sway, pot-ratchet and bronze pans.

Eating equipment on display includes pewter plates, a jack-type jug of black leather lined with pitch, linen tablecloth and napkins, a few cheap drinking glasses, and a range of replica pottery based on bulk-produced examples from the Ewenny and Buckley potteries, used throughout Wales at this time. There is also a range of decorative pottery on the chimney piece, shelves, and the green-painted dresser.

Some of the furniture, including the fireside Clun chair and the dresser, is painted, as nearly all pine and softwood furniture was at this time. There are rush mats on the floor, and curtains and other textiles in heavy herringbone-weave wool cloth based on an original of 1780. The recreated textile is hand-woven and vegetable dyed. The house is lit by candles: yellow beeswax for best, and cheaper white tallow (mutton fat) for everyday.

The occupant's working kit is also displayed, including a snapsack for food, a pitch-lined leather water-flask, a leather costrel for beer or cider, a horn-panelled tin lantern, and a tinplate tea-can.

The bedroom includes a replica painted four-post bed, with curtains to keep out draughts slung between the posts: this is a type of late eighteenth-century bed found in the Shropshire/Montgomeryshire border region. The linen-covered mattress is supported on cords, and it has good plain linen sheets, plain linen pillowslips, decent white blankets, and a brightly coloured 'practical patchwork coverlet' made up from pieces of woollen cloth. There are

also an original cage-type rocking cradle, a horn-panelled tin lantern and a bible on the bedside chair, a blackware chamber pot, and a substantial original plain elmwood clothes chest. The owners waistcoat, breeches and Sunday shoes (with brass buckles), and his wife's shoes (with low heels) and sun bonnet are also on display. Religious prints are stuck directly to the walls.



No 2, Engine Row

reflects the decline in status in the cottages and their occupants by around 1841, when, according to the census returns, a cottage in the row (not necessarily this one) was occupied by the Macarthy family, emigrants from County Cork. The family consisted of four adults, four children and a baby. The eldest, Timothy Macarthy, worked as a filler, as did his two sons, Timothy and Thomas (allegedly aged 14 and 10 years in 1842, but probably younger).

The interior is shown as a much less prosperous and well-equipped household than No 1. It is intended to reflect overcrowding and also show a few of the cheap mass-produced items now available.

Many of the furnishings are clearly second-hand. The Irish origin of the occupants is indicated by a few pieces of Irish-style furniture including the original corded Sogar chair from County Mayo and the original Irish dresser from County Clare, repainted in its typically bright colours. There are also Catholic religious items.

The decoration here is plain limewash, with yellow ochre paint (the cheapest colour) on the woodwork. Replica contemporary Irish newspapers are stuck on the walls as a cheap form of wallpaper, a practice recorded in a number of nineteenth-century descriptions and at least one contemporary photograph.

The main room is shown on a washday. Where clean streams were available, washing might normally have been



done outside: but there were perhaps few clean streams near Blaenavon in 1841. Washing is here shown being done by the cheap and old-fashioned cold water method. The clothes were first put into a 'buck-basket', and soaked with lye (produced by dripping water through wood ash): then the dirt was beaten out of the clothes in tubs, using washing bats on plain washboards, and a 'soap' made by mixing lye with fat from tallow, for example from old candle-ends. Finally the clothes were rinsed in another tub, and hung out to dry. Clothes shown here include a linen smock, linen shirt, and under-trousers.

The range (also a refurbished original from the site) is far less well-equipped than the range in No 1, most cooking being done by boiling in iron pots. The pantry is stocked with cheaper pottery, tinware, coopered wares (cut-down barrels) and other inexpensive items. The pantry also displays a replica garrotte-type mousetrap and a sack of replica potatoes: these are modelled on the bluish Lumpers variety, popular in Ireland before the terrible Irish famine and potato blight of the later 1840s. Eating equipment includes pot mugs and plates, tin mugs and other cheap things.

Sacks are being used as rugs: lighting is by tallow candles and rush lights. The curtains and other textiles are in 'Manchester check' cotton, the cheapest material then available. Working equipment on display includes a red-painted military-style wooden canteen with Timothy Macarthy's initials, linen snapsacks for food, a tin lantern with horn panels, and a tin tea-can.

The ground-floor bedroom is that of Timothy and his wife, Mary, and baby, Daniel. It has a plain bed (with a cheap mattress supported on boards, not the earlier-style cords) with a linen-covered mattress, a single linen sheet, and a practical coverlet made from blanket pieces and cloth scraps. Beneath the coverlet is an original black and red chequered blanket made up of two narrow-loom widths of cloth sewn together: this is a characteristically Welsh *carthen* blanket, probably from the Tregaron area. There is also an original Welsh canopied cradle; a smaller green-painted Irish cradle; a tin trunk for clothes; and an ash-bucket toilet with lid. The cottages had no sanitation, and even outdoor privies were not provided until later in the nineteenth century.



The first upstairs bedroom is that of the boys, Timothy and Thomas. There are no beds, only an old feather mattress and a woven rush pallet on the floor (a copy of a surviving 'paupers mattress' of around 1820 from the Norfolk Workhouse, Gressenhall). Bedclothes include scrappy blankets and a chequered *carthen* like the one downstairs. There are another ash-bucket toilet, an old box for clothes and possessions, a lantern, and sack mats.

The second room represents the bedroom of Jeremiah Macarthy, a labourer, aged 20 in 1841 and probably the householder's younger brother; his wife Hannah aged 19; and their two girls Mary, aged 5, and thus born when her mother was 14, and Hannah aged 3. The furniture here is very basic. The couple's bed is an original Welsh bed of about 1840, its mattress supported on sacking nailed to the frame. The girls' bed is just a boarded box, with a lattice of ropes supporting the bedclothes. The coverlets are old blanket pieces dyed and sewn together. Both girls have dolls (copied from contemporary examples).

Also displayed here are the family's working clothes, based on paintings of about 1840 of labourers at Dowlais and other ironworks. Jeremiah has a 'round hat', shirt, waistcoat, linen drawers, trousers, neckerchief and shoes. Hannah has a shift, underskirt of striped linen ticking, dress, yellow-flowered bodice-pinafore, shawl, bonnet, shoes and stockings. The girls have sun bonnets, shifts, dresses and pinafores.





Household goods

Pottery and utensils

Before the advent of plastic and cheap glass, most working people's household utensils were made of wood, tin or other metal, or, most commonly, of pottery.

Nearly all the pottery items on display (including mugs, plates, dishes, storage jars and the wide-topped round pans called *steens* or *pancheons* are replica copies of pottery from Ewenny, near Bridgend, Glamorgan, and Buckley, Flintshire. These two large-scale industrial pottery complexes supplied all Wales and parts of the English Midlands with household utensils throughout the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries. Their products were transported by cart, packhorse, coastal shipping, canal boat and (later) railway, and widely sold at fairs or by travelling potters. Much of their everyday pottery was earthenware glazed in black, buff or reddish glazes: both potteries also produced a range of decorative display ceramics including plates, vases and candlesticks, of which replicas can be seen, especially in No 1.

Other utensils include coopered tubs made like small barrels, and coopered buckets; replica tinfoil items as produced around Llanelli and Swansea; and a few pewter plates.

Lighting

The lighting shown is by candles and rushlights. Candles were of two kinds: sweet-smelling yellow beeswax with flax or hemp wicks produced the better light, but were



comparatively expensive: they are shown used 'for best' only in No 1. Tallow candles, usually made from white mutton fat by the householders themselves, were much cheaper, but were smelly, gave poorer light, and broke easily. Both types of candles were produced by repeatedly dipping the wicks into the candle material until sufficient thickness was reached. They were made and stored in pairs connected by the wick, as shown. (Modern candles are usually made of paraffin wax, not yet available in the periods represented.)

Rushlights (shown only in No 2) were cheaper still, being made of rush stems dipped in tallow. They gave a poor spluttering light, and were usually used in iron rushlight holders, having frequently to be adjusted in the grip as they burned away.

Both cottages also display tinsplate lanterns which held candles. Their lighting panels are made of thin semi-transparent horn strips rather than the then more expensive glass.

Painted furniture

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and earlier) most country furniture (especially if made of pine or other softwood) was both protected and decorated by painting. The recent fashion for stripping old pine furniture has destroyed much evidence for this once almost universal practice. Favourite colours included green, yellow ochre, red-brown and black. The wall cupboard in No 2 retains its original colour, and some replica furniture displayed has also been painted.

Irish country furniture (like the original dresser in No 2) was especially noted for its bright colours: our dresser (from County Clare) reproduces an original colour scheme. Irish dressers also differed from many Welsh and English examples by their narrowness in proportion to their height, and the use of rods rather than grooves to keep plates in place.

Textiles

The original and replicated textiles displayed are mainly of linen or wool. The replicated wool textiles (for example the curtains and bedspread in No 1) have been hand-woven and authentically dyed with vegetable dyes: modern chemical dyes only became popular after around 1850.

Original textiles include the pair of red-and-black Welsh *carthen* blankets in No 2. Like most early blankets, these have been woven on narrow handlooms approximately 3ft (1m) wide: two or more widths are sewn together to make wider blankets. They probably come from Carmarthenshire or Ceredigion.



The Company Shop

Part of the Blaenavon Company Shop has been recreated as it might have appeared in about 1840, in part of the original shop. At this time the shop seemingly took up the whole 'middle row' of Stack Square: but after 1843 the shop moved out of the ironworks onto North Street. The middle row was then converted into cottages.

The company shop was probably first established very soon after the creation of the ironworks in about 1790. Since the area was then virtually uninhabited moorland, a shop where workers could buy (according to the company) 'the common necessities of life and indeed almost every article they can desire' was absolutely essential to the new community. But since workers had no alternative to buying here, the shop also became a source of considerable profit to the ironworks owners. During the period 1837–43 its profits ranged from twelve to thirty-six per cent of the entire profits of the works.

Company shops had a bad reputation, partly because of the high prices and allegedly poor quality of their goods. During the 1830s, a survey of Monmouthshire company shops found that their prices were up to fifty per cent higher than in ordinary shops. Even more unpopular was the system by which they operated. Blaenavon workers were paid in cash in arrears, at monthly or even longer intervals. So they were often forced to buy food and vital necessities on credit, using tickets signed by company agents



Blaenavon token, known as 'dibs' (National Museum of Wales).

as shop 'currency'. When their pay finally arrived, payment for these shop purchases was deducted, often leaving little or no cash. Thus many people were permanently in debt to the company shop.

This system of effectively paying workers in overpriced goods was called 'truck', meaning 'exchange' or 'barter'. Some bitterly joked that 'truck shops' — as company shops were often called — provided a man with his cradle and his coffin, and half-starved him in between. This system provoked much resentment, sparking off the Merthyr Rising of 1831.

The records of the Blaenavon shop between 1837 and 1843, however, show it in a better light than truck shops elsewhere. The percentage of profits on sales was

never more than twelve per cent, sinking to six per cent in the slump years of 1841–42. In 1842 it reported considerable losses, due to dismissed workers simply leaving without paying their shop debts. Nor were Blaenavon workers paid, as elsewhere, in tokens which could only be used at the company shop. The Blaenavon shops tokens, locally called 'dibs', were seemingly payments for overtime or as bonuses. Dating from around 1870, they were exchangeable for beer in the pub attached to the North Street shop.

We do not know precisely what the Blaenavon shop sold in 1840, though it is almost certain that (like the later shop in North Street) it stocked a comprehensive range of everyday foods. It also sold boots and shoes, clothing, cloth and a range of household goods and working equipment.

The products displayed in our shop are all modern replicas closely based on originals. They include cheap tin plates, mugs, candle-lamps with horn panels and canteens as well as the more expensive pitch-lined leather *costrels* and flasks used for carrying drink while working on site. There are cheap bowls and spoons made of horn, and two kinds of candles, cheap tallow candles (which cost about 6d [3p] a pound [0.45kg] in 1840) and the much pricier beeswax candles (at 2s 6d [12.5p] a pound). There is also a very wide range of the pottery mass-produced at Ewenny and Buckley and used for almost every conceivable household purpose: jugs, storage jars,



A shop ledger from Varteg, near Blaenavon, held in Gwent Archives.

cooking pots, pans, dishes, cups and even money-boxes.

Clay pipes (still found in large numbers around the site) and tobacco are also on sale: many women as well as men smoked pipes. Foods reproduced include several kinds of bread (at about 2d [1p] a large loaf in 1840); bacon, the basic everyday meat (at reportedly 9d [4.5p] a pound in 1830s company shops, but only 6d [3p] a pound in ordinary shops); the more expensive ham; and cheese (at about the

same price as bacon, and also fifty per cent costlier in company shops). There are potatoes, smaller and lumpier than modern varieties, but a godsend to poor families at only 2d [1p] for 4 pounds [1.8kgs]: along with easily stored foods like onions, dried peas and raisins. Rather more expensive, but regarded as necessities, are tea at 5 shillings [25p] a pound, and sugar, supplied in solid cones and cut off as needed with sugar nips, at 9d [4.5p] a pound. Beer was drunk by almost everyone, a pint of the strongest sort costing 2s 6d [1.25p].

To modern eyes these prices may seem startlingly low, but they should be related to wages in south Wales in about 1840. A collier might then earn just over £1 a week, and a skilled furnace workman perhaps £1.10 shillings (£1.50), while the girls and women who worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, breaking ore at Blaenavon's furnace top terrace, earned just 6 to 7 shillings (30–35p) a week in 1865. Food and drink alone accounted for about sixty-seven per cent of a family's income in 1840, compared to around fifteen per cent in 2008.

The fittings and shelves in our shop are salvaged from nineteenth-century shops, while the weights, scales and other equipment are also mainly nineteenth-century. The grate came from an ironmaster's house near Llantrisant, and the original long-case clock was made in Ystradgynlais. The portraits are of the young Queen Victoria (reigned from 1837) and Thomas Hill I (1736–1824), founder of Blaenavon Ironworks.