

Mining Commissioner Seymour Tremenheere's account of the miners and iron workers of Bedwelty and Merthyr Tydvil in 1839

(Report to the Committee of Council for Education, Parliamentary Papers. Papers, 1840, XL, pp.208-213; in G. M. Young and W. D. Hancock, eds., English Historical Documents, XII(1), 1833-1874 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 963-68. Seymour Tremenheere was a government Mining Commissioner and Inspector. His Annual Reports of the Commissioner for Mining and Mining Populations provide a wealth of information on social conditions, including labor unrest and trades union activities. The Newport Rising of 1839 on the Welsh border was seen by contemporaries as proof that Chartism posed a revolutionary threat but historians have seen it as a largely local demonstration by frustrated workers. The excerpt below describes their lives in isolated mining valleys and argues that the despite earning reasonable wages, they bring their children into the mines at an early age and fail to provide them with any education.)

The parishes which were the focus of the insurrectionary movement, and to which I therefore confined my attention, were those of Bedwelty, Aberystwyth, Mynnyddyslwynn, and Trevethin, in the county of Monmouth; and Merthyr-Tidvil in Glamorganshire, adjoining Bedwelty on the west. The four first-named of these furnished the body of men who marched down the valleys in three divisions from three different points, to the attack of Newport, on the night of Sunday, the 3rd of November, while it is generally believed that the Merthyr men were held in reserve to act immediately on the first attack proving successful.

A glance at the physical aspect of this district, and at the manner in which its population is distributed, made it evident, that a mere inquiry into the state of education would leave untouched many subjects tending to illustrate the peculiarities most prominent in the condition of the society which had grown up in those remote valleys. These subjects I did not decline whenever they arose naturally out of the inquiry into the state of education, and seemed to connect themselves with the moral and intellectual condition of the people. At the same time I did not fail to impress upon all persons with whom I came into communication, that my instructions only directed me to investigate the state of education, and that, in seeking for information on collateral topics, I was endeavouring to satisfy my own mind on questions suggested by the educational inquiry, with the view of submitting to my Lords the Committee of Council such observations on the moral and social habits of the people in this portion of the hill district, as might seem not unworthy of their attention with reference to the main subject of the elementary education of the labouring classes. The information so obtained was committed to notes made at the time; and from these notes this report has been compiled.

The parishes to which the inquiry refers are situated in the northeastern angle of that mineral mountain range which extends across a large part of South Wales. They comprise a tract of country about 20 miles east and west, and 10 miles north and south, forming an irregular triangle, having Merthyr-Tidvil and a point a few miles west of Abergavenny for the base, and a point a little to the west of Risca for the apex. From the northern boundary-line of this district, or the base of the triangle, six parallel valleys run off in the direction of north and south. Towards the heads of these valleys most of the largest iron-works, with the population clustered around them, may be marked on the map by dark spots where the highest points of the valleys run up towards the summits of the central ridge. The valleys have there attained a high elevation; are susceptible of but scanty culture; and are separated from each other by tracts of cheerless moorland. The people are for the most part collected together in masses of from 4,000 to 10,000.

Their houses are ranged round the works in rows, sometimes two to five deep, sometimes three stories high. They rarely contain less than from one to six lodgers in addition to the members of the family, and afford most scanty accommodation for so many inmates. It is not unusual to find that 10 individuals of various age and sex occupy three beds in two small rooms. Far worse instances might be given. The surface of the soil around is frequently blackened with coal, or covered with high mounds of refuse from the mines and the furnaces. The road between the rows is so imperfectly made as to be often, in wet weather, ankle deep in black mud. Flat pavement is rarely seen, except in some new works now erecting. Volumes of smoke from the furnaces, the rolling-mills, and the coke- hearths, are driven past, according to the direction of the wind. Gardens are few, and almost entirely neglected. Due attention to sewerage is also overlooked. The house of the master or resident director stands conspicuous amidst a small group of stunted and blackened trees. About a dozen other houses of decent exterior may be seen, inhabited by the surgeon, the agents, and other officers belonging to the works. These 10 or 20 superior members of the establishment, a few small shopkeepers, and many thousand people depending on daily labour, constitute for -the most part the respective divisions of society among these colonies in the desert. The population congregated in the lower part of the parish of Bedwelty, and in Mynnyddyslwynn, towards the apex of this triangular district, forming a small proportion of the whole, is differently distributed. About two-thirds are engaged in numerous small collieries, employing from 50 to 150 men each, and are scattered in detached cottages among an agricultural population. The valleys have there expanded, the hills declined in height, and become susceptible of cultivation, and are covered with neat farms and cottages, each with its garden. There is, however, the same marked deficiency in the number of every other class except that which is dependent on daily labour.

The entire population of these five parishes, according to the lowest estimate given by persons most conversant with each, amounts to 85,000.

In some few instances, a portion of the population attached to the works within these parishes is located beyond their boundaries. Their condition differs in no respect from the rest, and the general results of the inquiry can be very slightly affected by their omission.

DAY SCHOOLS

The following Table shows the number of Common Day and Dame Schools in each of these Parishes respectively; the Number of Children frequenting them, and the proportion they bear to the whole Population.

PARISHES	Common Day Schools for the Elementary Education of the Working Classes	Dame Schools and Schools for Children of from Two to Five Years of Age	Total Children attending Day and Dame Schools	Total Population
Merthyr	15	8	1,322	34,000
Bedwelty	13	10	825	20,000
Aberystwyth	2	4	300	8,000
Trevethin	13	7	638	16,000
Mynnyddyslwynn	4	4	223	7,000
	47	33	3,308	85,000

Inquiry was made among the clergy, the ministers of dissenting congregations, the teachers of Sunday-schools, agents at the different works, secretaries of benefit clubs, schoolmasters, and other individuals whose occupations give them opportunities of forming an opinion, as to the degree of intellectual cultivation prevailing among the labouring classes of the hills. The result of the general testimony appeared to be, that of the adult working population a large proportion could neither read nor write; that very many had only acquired the art of knowing the letters and words; and that very few could read with ease to themselves, and with understanding. Wherever books were found in any cottage, the Bible was among them. It was also found in many in which the inmates confessed that they could not read it. In one part of the district in which inquiries were made, in 1,448 houses, three-fourths were found provided with Bibles, and one-fourth without. Where the inmates could read, song-books, hymn-books and religious tracts were the usual store. In about 200 cottages in different parts of the district, in which the question was asked, 10 only, exclusive of those belonging to superior engineers, were found to contain any book of general literature....

An extensive result of this deficiency of education among the working-classes of this district, and of the means of obtaining general information through the medium of the language with which they are chiefly familiar, is an insensibility to the value of instruction, and an indisposition to procure it for their children. Many other causes combine to encourage this feeling. Their occupations are such, that in general the absence of any previous mental culture is no obstacle to their obtaining good employment. Success in their calling being the result of mechanical skill, rather than, as in some other mining operations, of careful judgment and previous calculation, the higher qualities of the mind are called into play in a comparatively small degree. Even those individuals among them who are appointed to situations of responsibility, possess in general very slight attainments. It occurred recently in one of the largest works, that, out of 11 competitors for a situation of that nature, only one could write. Their employments have but a slight tendency to impress upon them the value of intellectual proficiency. The great majority, therefore, are content to remain without any instruction. In the entire district, the number of adults attending evening-schools was about 90. Of the few who have learned to read at all, a large proportion confine themselves to the restricted literature of their own language. It is perceived by them that their children are sure of being able to gain an ample livelihood at an early age, without the aid of "learning." The parents are, therefore, apt to believe that their superiors are actuated by some selfish motive in endeavouring to induce them to send their children to school. They are averse to the trouble of making their children clean every day, in cases where they are sent to schools in which cleanliness is enforced. If the children object to go to school, the parents not unfrequently abstain from insisting upon it. If they send them at all, it is seldom for many months at a time. They are taken away whenever the father has not earned as much as usual, or has spent more. They think instruction of any kind very little necessary for the girls, whose assistance at home they are unwilling to dispense with. The boys are taken into the coal or iron mine at eight or nine years old, often earlier. The value of the labour of the youngest is about 6d. a-day. Their occupation consists in opening and shutting air-doors, in throwing small pieces of coal or ironstone into the trams, or in handing implements to the men at work. A boy thus learns early to become a good miner. It is not improbable, however, that not much skill in that respect would be lost by his beginning somewhat later; and it is certain, that from the time he enters the mine, he learns nothing else. A mother stated that her husband wanted to take one of her boys, then only seven years old, into the mine. She said, "that her others had gone there young enough at eight; and after they once went

there, they turned stupid and blind-like, and would not learn anything, and did not know what was right; and now they were like the rest, they went to the public-houses like men." The following statement of the wages of boys at one of the works may be taken as an average of the whole: -

		<i>Per week</i>
Boys, from 7 to 9 years of age.3s to 5s
Boys, from 9 to 16 years of age.6s to 12s

They leave their homes at an early age, if they find they can be boarded cheaper elsewhere, and they spend the surplus of their wages in smoking, drinking and gambling. Boys of 13 will not unfrequently boast that they have taken to smoking before they were 12. All parental control is soon lost. Shortly after the age of 16 they begin to earn men's wages. Early marriages are very frequent. They take their wives from the coke-hearths, the mine and coal-yards, or other employments about the works, in which they have been engaged from 16 years or earlier; having had no opportunities of acquiring any better principles or improved habits of domestic economy, and being in all other respects less instructed than their husbands.

It cannot be said that poverty is in this district the cause of the deficiency of education. The steady demand for labour, and the rates of wages, for the last seven years, have been such that the earnings of children of a very early age can rarely have been absolutely necessary to the father of a family. In order to arrive at an approximation to the proportion of persons earning the different rates, it is necessary to analyse the various grades of workmen employed by one furnace. According to information derived from several iron-masters, the number of men, women and children, to which one furnace gives employment, may be stated at 280. They may be thus divided, according to their denominations and the rates earned: -

Labourers	Parts in 100	DENOMINATIONS	Rates per Week clear of all deductions
70	25	Furnace and mill men	25 to 60s.
100	35.7	Miners and colliers	21 to 25s.
40	14.3	Artisans	18 to 24s.
35	12.5	Labourers	12 to 18s.
35	12.5	Boys, women, old men, and inferior workmen	3 to 12s.
280	100		

The above rates are formed from a comparison of various statements received from the masters; from inspection of their books in some instances; and from statements of the men themselves in various parts of the district. Each description of labourer has frequent opportunities of earning considerably more than the rates here given; and those who have begun with the lower rates have of late years been able very soon to rise permanently to the higher. Steady miners and colliers are generally able to approach the higher rate; and the abundant store of provisions, the substantial and costly furniture, generally seen in their cottages, together with the ample supply of good clothing with which themselves and their families are furnished, afford, among other circumstances, sufficient proof that the receipts of workmen of those grades are at least as high as they are here represented. Steady men, at one of the largest works, were raising, as appeared

by the books, between 70 and 80 tons of coal per month, at 2s. per ton; others were only raising between 40 and 50 tons. The manager of the works stated that there was nothing in the state of the work at the mine which prevented the last-mentioned workmen from earning as much as the former.

The clear receipts of those employed about the mills and furnaces, amounting in numbers to one-fourth of the whole, are, as appears by the table of rates, such as are obtained by few classes of labourers in this or any other country. An additional proof that inability on the part of the parents to pay the cost is not the cause of so few children being sent to school, is found in the fact, to which schoolmasters and others interested in the subject bear testimony, that the attendance of children is quite as great when wages are low as when they are high, and generally more regular. The pecuniary obstacle, if any there be, arises from a cause admitted by none more readily than by the majority of the workmen themselves; from the habit of devoting to objects of immediate and sensual enjoyment almost the-whole of their earnings not required for their actual subsistence....