

Walter Coffin (1774 - 1867) Selwyn Davies

The traveller Benjamin Malkin (1769-1842) described the area (of what became the Rhondda) as "Hereabouts, and for some miles to come, there is a degree of luxuriance in the valley, infinitely beyond what my entrance to the district led me to expect." Thomas Roscoe described the district as "a wild and mountainous region where nature seemed to reign in stern and unbroken silence".

Then, two hundred years ago, this quiet verdant rural area, populated in the main by farmers – called GLORANS (as original inhabitants of the area were called) led a hard but busy life. The area had been called different names, the first being noted in 1203, when it was GLENROTHENI MAWR and so on variously up to 1666 when the name GLENRONTHEY was noted. It covered parts of three parishes: Llantrisant; Ystradyfodwg and Llanwonno. They had neither thoughts nor inclinations of the momentous events, which were to overtake the life of the valleys.

This is a short article about the entrepreneur Walter Coffin who was responsible for the beginning of coal mining in the Rhondda, in which there were eventually over fifty collieries working and the population expanded to 152,000 by 1911.

Walter Coffin was born in 1774, the second son of (father) Walter and his second wife Anne Morgan. He had two brothers, William and John and two sisters Mary and Sarah. The family home was in Nolton, Bridgend, where the father traded as a tanner of leather. Walter Coffin was descended from an old well-known Bridgend family connected to the Price's of Ty'r Ton into which his great grandfather, the owner of estates in Seaworthy, near Porlock Somerset, had married. Walter (senior) died in July 1812 and so the younger Walter went to live in Llandaff Court, Cardiff. It was from this address that his political influence and business interests spread. Prior to this, when Coffin (junior) was eight years old he attended Cowbridge Grammar School for eight years, and then attended a private non-conformist academy at Exeter. He hoped to be able to join the Bar, but was discriminated against because of his dissenting Unitarian beliefs.

Walter Coffin searched around apparently (so the story goes) looking for a source for the oak-tree bark necessary for use in his father's trade of tanning leather. There is no definite information about his intentions in this way. If so, he could have found the product in the many valleys lying between Bridgend and (what eventually became) the Rhondda valleys. It is said that Walter the younger was possibly influenced by the success of the Gwaun Llanharry level – a "sale" coalmine (one not connected to an iron works). A possible scenario may be that in his searches he eventually came upon a hillside farm named "Graig Ddu". {Literally translated from Welsh, it means "black rock"}. It would have become obvious that the local farmers knew of this "black rock" and the ability it had of being ignited. Furthermore, there was evidence of it appearing as a seam erupting along the hillside, making it easy to obtain (by digging into

the hillside). Yet again, on the opposite side of the valley was another farm named "Llethr Ddu" (Black slope); indicating that the names were not coincidental, but descriptive of some kind of natural environment. The Trealaw Cemetery now occupies the site of Llethr Ddu farm.

Walter Coffin (senior) invested in this new venture with his son and they purchased two farms, about 300 acres in all, Dinas Uchaf and Dinas Isaf in the northwest corner of the Parish of Llantrisant. He later purchased the mineral rights of other farms such as Gwaun Ddu (black meadow) and Gwaun Adda.

So it was in 1808 that he started mining coal from the levels in the hillside. His first level was on Dinas Uchaf land and he mined the "Graig vein" which proved to be inferior coal and the seam thin. His second level he mined was further down the hillside, to the "old vein" which was about 3 feet thick. The coal then had to be transported down the valley, originally by pack-mules to a place three miles away, where a Dr Griffiths had a rail line (at Gyfeillion), which in turn went down to Newbridge (Pontypridd) where it met the canal, and so to Cardiff. Later, a 3-mile long rail line was laid from Trehafod to Dinas and this was used to transport tubs of coal. Apparently, women shoppers, who went to the nearest market in Pontypridd on Market Days, made use of the transport. It helped by reducing the other method of transport – "Shank's pony" (walking). It was said to cost three pence to ride in the open wagons on the way home to Dinas.

In 1811 he also leased the mineral rights of Brithweunydd Uchaf, Brithweunydd Isaf and Ynysgrug farms from Mrs Ann Sanderson and Miss White. These farms were on the eastern side of the river Rhondda, opposite the Dinas Uchaf estate. In the same year Coffin appointed his first underground manager; William David of "Y Garreg Fach", Bridgend.

The first vertical pit was sunk on Graig Ddu farmland about seventy yards from the bank of the river. The site of the original pit is known, but not commemorated, in the children's playground of the present Dinas Park. The seam of (bituminous) coal reached at forty yards was the "Bodringallt" or "Rhondda number 3" – first marketed as "Dynos No.3" (or Coffin's coal.) This coal was excellent for coking and smith's work. The seam was about 2 feet 10 inches in thickness and it was worked in a northerly direction until a "fault" or "syncline" was met. This "Cymmer fault" ran in almost a north/south line and coal was found eventually some 40 yards down to the west.

This setback was overcome by Coffin sinking another pit called "Dinas Middle" – about 550 yards north of the first and about twenty yards from the river bank (opposite the modern Dinas & Trealaw railway station). This was a costly adventure because over £7000 was spent by the time the coal was reached at eighty yards, because of the difficult terrain they had to dig through. Part of the shaft was bricked. Coffin had placed an advert in the Cambrian newspaper of the day. It read "Thirty good colliers would find constant work at Dinas" This suggests the exceptional circumstances of starting a new colliery in an undeveloped district. The new men who came to sink the pit came from the Llansamlet, Swansea area, where they had

experience in sinking pits as the coal seams there had been developed earlier than at Dinas.

He entered into a lease on all the coal under Graig Ddu and Gwaun Adda farms for 99 years at a rent of £40 per year, sufficient coal for the lessor's use, and all the manure made in the colliery stables. By 1830 the colliery had produced some 46,000 tons of coal, which was transported via the Glamorgan Canal to Cardiff or Newport and onward—approximately one third of it being shipped to Ireland. Coffin attempted to sink deeper to find what became "steam coal", but did not persist because working the upper seams was highly profitable.

By 1836 the Taff Vale Railway was constructed to Newbridge (Pontypridd) and Coffin was one of its chief supporters. However, when it was proposed that a branch be built into the Rhondda, he opposed it, as he saw no prospect of profit, because he felt that Dinas was the northern limit of coal of any consequence to be found in the Rhondda. But by 1841 the Taff Vale Railway had extended its line up to Dinas. In 1829 a school was opened called Dinas Works School, for the use of children of workers of the colliery. In 1832 he leased further lands and by 1846 he opened a colliery named Gellifaelog, Tonymandy in 1845 to add to his Brithweunydd and Dinas Middle collieries.

He handed his interests in coal mining over to William Ogle Hunt and retired from his businesses in 1853 to go into politics.

Walter Coffin had lived in Llandaff Court, Cardiff after his father died in 1812, along with his mother and two sisters, and it was from this base that he became a member of the Liberal Cause. He became a J.P. in the early 1830's. In 1835 he was made an Alderman of Cardiff; he later became Chairman of the Quarter Sessions, and in 1848 Mayor. In 1852 he stood as the Liberal Candidate for the Borough, winning the seat by twenty-six votes. He remained a Member until 1857 when Colonel Stuart defeated him; According to Hansard, Walter Coffin had never made a speech of any kind in the House of Commons.

Walter Coffin died aged 82 on February 15th 1867 in Princes Gate, Kensington and was buried in Bridgend Unitarian Church, Park Street, Bridgend, where he was interned in the family vault. In 1972 the Trustees of the Church removed the tomb and covered the grave with tar macadam. There was an outcry in some areas and the Bridgend Town Council investigated, but found that nothing illegal had been done.

After he died, members of the Williams Family, his cousins, inherited his estate because neither Walter nor his siblings had married/had children. Included in the Williams family were Morgan Bransby Williams, Leonard Dyson Williams, and Arthur John Williams. Their sister, Elizabeth Williams, was mentioned in Walter Coffin's will, and was also an executrix and therefore played a big part in managing the estate. This latter fact is still in existence today, because people who live in Pen y graig, who wish to purchase the Freehold of their property (on what was part of the Dinas farms estate), still have to apply to a solicitor in Swansea, who manages the freeholds for the Williams' estate. She was somewhat philanthropic and was

named "Llethr Ddu" (Black slope); indicating that the names were not coincidental, but descriptive of some kind of natural environment. The Trealaw Cemetery now occupies the site of Llethr Ddu farm.

Walter Coffin (senior) invested in this new venture with his son and they purchased two farms, about 300 acres in all, Dinas Uchaf and Dinas Isaf in the northwest corner of the Parish of Llantrisant. He later purchased the mineral rights of other farms such as Gwaun Ddu (black meadow) and Gwaun Adda.

So it was in 1808 that he started mining coal from the levels in the hillside. His first level was on Dinas Uchaf land and he mined the "Graig vein" which proved to be inferior coal and the seam thin. His second level he mined was further down the hillside, to the "old vein" which was about 3 feet thick. The coal then had to be transported down the valley, originally by pack-mules to a place three miles away, where a Dr Griffiths had a rail line (at Gyfeillion) , which in turn went down to Newbridge (Pontypridd) where it met the canal, and so to Cardiff. Later, a 3-mile long rail line was laid from Trehafod to Dinas and this was used to transport tubs of coal. Apparently, women shoppers, who went to the nearest market in Pontypridd on Market Days, made use of the transport. It helped by reducing the other method of transport – "Shank's pony" (walking). It was said to cost three pence to ride in the open wagons on the way home to Dinas.

In 1811 he also leased the mineral rights of Brithweunydd Uchaf, Brithweunydd Isaf and Ynysgrug farms from Mrs Ann Sanderson and Miss White. These farms were on the eastern side of the river Rhondda, opposite the Dinas Uchaf estate. In the same year Coffin appointed his first underground manager; William David of "Y Garreg Fach", Bridgend.

The first vertical pit was sunk on Graig Ddu farmland about seventy yards from the bank of the river. The site of the original pit is known, but not commemorated, in the children's playground of the present Dinas Park. The seam of (bituminous) coal reached at forty yards was the "Bodringallt" or "Rhondda number 3" – first marketed as "Dynas No.3"(or Coffin's coal.) This coal was excellent for coking and smith's work.. The seam was about 2 feet 10 inches in thickness and it was worked in a northerly direction until a "fault" or "syncline" was met. This "Cymmer fault" ran in almost a north/south line and coal was found eventually some 40 yards down to the west.

This setback was overcome by Coffin sinking another pit called "Dinas Middle" – about 550 yards north of the first and about twenty yards from the river bank (opposite the modern Dinas & Trealaw railway station). This was a costly adventure because over £7000 was spent by the time the coal was reached at eighty yards, because of the difficult terrain they had to dig through. Part of the shaft was bricked. Coffin had placed an advert in the Cambrian newspaper of the day. It read "Thirty good colliers would find constant work at Dinas" This suggests the exceptional circumstances of starting a new colliery in an undeveloped district. The new men who came to sink the pit came from the Llansamlet, Swansea area, where they had

instrumental in donating and building Dinas library in a street, then called Belle Vue (today named Library Road), the library has been demolished. The Librarian was employed by members of the Naval Lodge (of the South Wales Miners Federation, latterly the National Union of Miners) who paid his salary out of a "penny-a-week" contribution.

Ultimately, there must be a considerable part of the (old) parish of Llantrisant, which still pays "ground rent" to the successors of the estate of Walter Coffin.

Here we are, two hundred years later. The valleys are getting greener year by year, after the two hundred years of colliery spoil being deposited on the hillsides. Trees now abound in areas that were denuded of them to make way for the coalmines, their working areas and the terraces of houses. Locals can point out the darker mounds of spoil still on the hillsides, where miners dug for coal. The seams can still be tracked along the hillsides. There are no coal mines in the valleys of the Rhondda nowadays but it is said that there is more coal left underground than all that has ever been taken out.

There are moves afloat within the Borough Council to commemorate many of these scenes of history. I wonder if this coal era will be remembered in another two hundred years.

Selwyn Davies

Bibliography: The Rhondda Valleys by E.D.Lewis Pioneers of the Welsh Coalfield by Elizabeth Philips, Glamorgan County Historian ; Cardiff Times 1867 Various articles researched in Treorchy Library
