

The rise – and fall – of an industry

The end of deep mining saw widespread unemployment and hardship in an area build on coal

The AAT community lies in a former coal mining area at the top of the Swansea and Amman Valleys towards the Mynydd y Gwrhyd, on the north crop of the South Wales coalfield. Before 1700, it is probable that local farmers worked coal outcrops on certain hillsides. Written records date back to 1610, when court records stated that stone coal found on or below ground was the property of the tenant and not the Lord. According to legend, the Romans smelted iron in Cwm Twrch.

Commercial mining began in the 1750s. The growth of the coal industry followed the use of coal in the copper industry and the development of the blast furnaces, which used anthracite coal to smelt iron. The rail network was completed in the 1860s, when the area was connected by rail to Swansea and Llanelli. The next major development was a series of tinplate works in the 1870s. In the 1880s, the population grew rapidly as people flooded in to take jobs in the metal and coal industries.

With the influx, the area changed from one of agriculture with small farms to a thriving industrial complex. As industry grew, jobs were filled by relatively local people, mainly farmers from West Wales. Some skilled labour came from other mining valleys, but – unlike some of the other industrial valleys in South Wales – few people came from outside Wales. That is probably the main reason why the Welsh language is still alive in the area.

Drastic changes came in the wake of the year-long miners' strike of 1984. The bitter industrial dispute under the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher, which pitted the miners led by Arthur Scargill against the National Coal Board led by Sir Ian MacGregor, heralded the end of deep mining as an industry and was followed by widespread unemployment. AAT is working to rejuvenate the local economy and bring jobs, training and regeneration to the area as well as clean energy and a low carbon lifestyle.

From the Romans to rock stars

The locality lies at the western end of the Brecon Beacons National Park and is rich in history, culture and people. There are Bronze Age monuments, including a stone circle on the Gwrhyd Mountain and the remains of an Iron Age fortress on the Black Mountain. The Romans built a number of roads in the area. The Amman and Cwm Twrch valleys are mentioned in the Mabinogion, the collection of Welsh legends from the Dark Ages. Several places claim a connection with King Arthur.

The area has produced world famous opera and rock stars, boxing and weight lifting champions, bards and poets, scores of rugby players, actors and actresses, and even a founder of a Bible college (need to name these). Historical figures who have visited the area include the great Puritan Oliver Cromwell, who ended the thrall of Monarchy, and the infamous hanging judge, Judge Jeffries.

