

How grey is my valley

by Brian J. Ford

Ask many Englishmen what they think about Wales, and the answer is stereotyped. Wales is backward, filthy and depressing; it is a land full of dereliction, bereft of soul or culture, dotted with ghetto populations of Coloureds, and with coal tips, mines and slag heaps scattered through the capital city. This is likely to be in the mind of the

outsider who thinks about the Principality. Unless he has been there, of course.

A first-time visitor to Wales is often almost shocked by the blow to the image he has held; the sight of the gleaming white buildings in the spacious lawns of the civic centre in Cardiff, the quiet splendour of the hills and the sweeping magnificence of the

beachline—it is different from what he expected. When I moved to Wales, like most who were brought up in London, my reaction was one of apprehension. But it was a year before I saw my first coal mine, and then it was one I had driven past many times before without realizing what it was.

Yet the image of Wales has its roots in reality. There are tips in profusion; there are mines and there is dereliction if you go to the right place to find them. They came there through industrial greed—and only now are we beginning to tackle the problem. One of the first tangible moves was the publication last year of a volume of data, *The Lower Swansea Valley Project*. Produced by the wholehearted effort of the University College of Swansea, this document has far-reaching implications. For this is the first attempt to integrate the best academic brains in a community into a body which can act authoritatively to diagnose the area's problems and indicate remedies.

The fact that such a document can be so unusual is itself an indication of our attitudes towards the academic. Presumably it is in University College, Swansea, that the best intellects in the region are to be found, on average, and it is only brain-power that can solve the problem of dereliction. Yet it was an unprecedented step, and it took the vigour and enthusiastic spadework of Mr. K. J. Hilton, now deputy registrar at the University College, Cardiff, to see the operation through.

But how did the area become derelict—what lay behind the need for a project in the first place? As the report points out, it all started 270 million years ago when the Tawe valley was a flourishing coal swamp. The coal subsequently formed became a valuable commodity, as trees consumed in the furnaces of developing industry became scarcer.

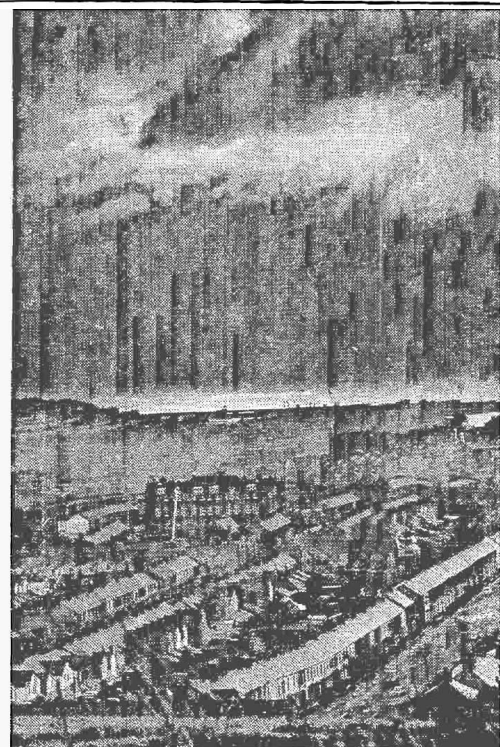
In the seventeenth century the changeover from wood to coal-fuelling took place in the salt, brewing, glass and malting industries; in the following century it extended to brassmaking and the smelting of lead and copper and at the same time Swansea became renowned for its coal.

By the beginning of this century Swansea was handling the bulk of coal exported from South Wales, although by then most of it came not from the Swansea Valley itself but farther away in the South Wales coalfield. In 1717 the first copper works was established at Landore, and 13 smelting works were established between that date and 1850. In the following years development was great, so that in the period 1780-1880 the Swansea area bore 90 per cent of Britain's entire copper smelting capacity.

But soon overseas sources of ore began to emerge as financial possibilities, and to save on transport costs much of it was partly refined at source before transshipment. In 1890, as an example, 5,200 tons of manufactured copper were imported by Britain; just 10 years later this had risen to 354,700 tons.

On a smaller scale zinc, too, became an important feature of the area, only to be superseded to a large extent. In all this field of activity there were signs of growing discontent: the smelters were accused of price-fixing agreements to keep ore prices down and metal prices artificially high, and with few exceptions firms hesitated to adapt new technologies, to increase financial viability and security.

Pollution from this widespread smelting was appalling: 92,000 tons of sulphurous acid were released into the air by the copper



One image of Wales—a view over Swansea.

works alone in 1848. Crops died, cattle suffered, and vegetation withered. So it was that the area was burned and deadened by industrial development. It has stood in this state, dotted with ruins, covered with slag heaps for the past 40 years or more.

Yet of course the region is potentially valuable. The scope for development is great, apart from one great drawback—the area is ugly. It is filthy, it is displeasing to the eye, and it will clearly never develop effectively as long as it gives such an impression. Nobody in his right mind would expect workers to give of their best in such surroundings.

Fifty per cent of the region surveyed in the project is covered with tip material, slag and waste. The project team has analysed the material and suggested how it might be used for building foundations.

Over half the remaining land is barren or waterlogged, but trials have shown how vegetation could be restored. It is emphasized that this is necessary before redevelopment is aesthetically feasible.

More than this, the report has considered the whole infrastructure of redevelopment in its broadest sense—the economics, geology, sociology, even the mechanical state of the ground and the feasibility of producing open-air recreational facilities on a grand scale. Yet impressive as the effort has been, the report is simply the first step in a long and expensive process. By itself it is impotent: only practical implementation can make the effort truly worth while, and to the spectator little seems to have happened in this respect.

But behind the scenes the local authority has been busy. A spokesman in the borough engineer's department told me that, contrary to popular belief, the authority had considered a widespread development scheme immediately after the Second World War; but problems arose over the purchase of several areas of land and in 1947 negotiations broke down. However, since the introduction of the 1961 Local Employment Act and the 1966 Industrial Development Act authorities are empowered to buy land for redevelopment—"and our policy is to buy", the spokesman added. "The only way to plan, we believe, is to own; so far we have been able to purchase a considerable area of the land in the region and around it, and negotiations are

proceeding for further purchases in due course."

Asked if there was evidence of benefit from such a process, the spokesman said: "We purchased 80 acres on the north side of the A48, at the top of the project area, and have levelled and redeveloped it. We reclaimed the site of the grubbed-out workings by the use of slag from an old copper tip, and so killed two birds with one stone: we removed an eyesore and at the same time restabilized the ground surface near by. The first half of the site has been taken over by the Morganite Carbon Co. Ltd., which illustrates the attractiveness of such reclamation in purely financial terms. The authority is determined to press the project home in practical terms until the entire area has been redeveloped."

In addition, the President of the Board of Trade has just announced that the board proposes to establish an industrial estate at Landore, and will be acquiring immediately some 35 acres of land south of the Neath Road for this purpose. In co-operation with the Derelict Land Unit the remains of the Swansea Canal are due to be dealt with and the South-West Wales River Authority are considering a major improvement scheme for water courses in the area.

At the same time we must remember the additional employment in the region promised by the new offices of the Land Registry Office and the decentralization of the Ministry of Transport Licensing Office. There is much enthusiasm over this tacit legislative support for the practical implications of the project.

Clearly a scheme of this sort has commercial sense behind it, and certainly there can be no question about the viability of any step to integrate the research facilities of a university into the community it serves. Now the remaining question is one of further expansion of the project concept. Already approaches have been made—behind the scenes—to see whether such a project could be launched for the Taff Valley.

At least the way ahead is now clear. Wales, for all its tendency to ignore outside opinion, for all its legacy of introspective insularity, has a capacity for redevelopment—but only when the scars of a past age are being overcome. The Swansea Valley Project was a first step in the right direction.