

In 1836 Maesteg was just a village built to serve a newly constructed iron works which was the subject of a brief visit by Mrs Esther Phillip Williams.

A Visit to Maesteg 1836

The heyday of the town of Maesteg, as is immediately apparent from the prevailing architecture today, came in the late 19th and early 20th century. Its origins however lie in an industrial development that took place in 1826 some distance away from the present hub of the town.

At this time the valley was still largely rural – extensive woodland interspersed with isolated farmsteads. Here and there however the advance of industry was already apparent from the existence of several small coal mines and, at Caerau near the head of the valley, a spelter works about which next to nothing seems to be known. Industrialists were nevertheless well aware of the valley's potential for development and the formation of the Dyffryn Llynfy and Porthcawl Railroad (DLPR) in 1825, proved the catalyst which brought this about.

The DLPR was a horse-drawn tramroad that ran from Spelters (as Caerau was then known) down to a newly constructed harbour at Porthcawl which offered a ready outlet for the industrial produce of the valley. Work started in 1826, and in that same year William Jones, who operated a coal mine at Llwyny on the western side of the valley, secured a lease to Maesteg Uchaf farm on the opposite bank and formed the Maesteg Iron company.

Iron and coal were readily available from the bowels of Mynydd Pwllrywrch at the foot of which the works stood and the new tramroad offered easy access to the limestone resources to provide the third ingredient for the smelting process. In 1828 the first blast-furnace was 'blown in', followed by a second in 1831 and a third in 1844. In 1836, just eight years after production commenced, Esther Phillips Williams from Cowley near Oxford paid a visit to the works and the embryonic town of which she has left us some brief notes and in her journal.



Mynydd Pwllirwrch. The village and ironworks at Maesteg lay immediately below the new Comprehensive School buildings.

Mrs Williams was staying with relatives at Margam and arrived at Maesteg courtesy of the DLPR. With suitable accommodation at the new settlement apparently unavailable, arrangements had been made for the party to stay overnight *“at an unfurnished house called Place Newell”* which was presumably Plas Newydd, now the site of a junior school on the Maesteg to Caerau road. For this reason *“beds and a few other essentials”* had already been sent on ahead via the tramroad.

“After an early dinner we went off in the carriage for the tram-road. When we arrived at the rail-road we found a rough train waiting to convey us to Maesteg, a distance of about twelve miles. The roughness and the novelty of the vehicle afforded us plenty of amusement, and the road lay through pretty country.”

At Cwmmfelin the tramroad crossed the Maesteg to Bridgend road and beyond this its track-bed continued along the western side of the valley whilst the road crossed the river to the opposite bank. Known locally as the “Bottom Road” it is still in being, the name “Bridgend Road” applied to parts of it surviving as a reminder that it was once the main road in this direction. Later that century, when this section of the tramroad above the intersection was abandoned, its rail-bed was developed as the main highway (“Top Road”) to and from the town.



Bridge Street today

As they neared their destination the tram carrying Mrs Williams and her friends probably diverted onto a branch line along what is now Bridge Street that had been constructed to serve the ironworks. This crossed the river and main road on stone bridges. The latter was demolished in 1952, though some elements of the river bridge still remain incorporated into the present structure.

“As we approached Maesteg the view of coal in the rocks became very apparent. The mountain which supplies the works with ironstone and coal is reckoned 1,400 feet above the level of the sea, and is the highest mountain in Glamorgan¹. Maesteg is beautifully situated in a valley and its inhabitants are mostly those who are engaged in the works. Hence in the immediate village there is little to be seen but rows of white cottages, occupied by the workmen, and one or two small chapels. The latter abound throughout the villages and towns of South Wales and belong either to the Methodists or Baptists.”

This village apparently lay around and about Castle Street which was part of the main road to Bridgend, whilst the ironworks stood slightly higher up the slopes of Mynydd Pwllirwrch.

¹ Although Pwllirwrch reaches to 1,421 feet above sea level, this is not actually the case, there being many others that are considerably higher culminating in Craig y Llyn (1,969 feet).



The site of the original village and the iron works from the new Comprehensive School.

Unfortunately it was the ironworks that Mrs Williams was here to see so the remainder of her journal entry is largely devoted to these and the iron production process itself. She mentions, however, that *“no less than 400 persons, including men, women and children, are employed in the works. Each person is paid according to the quantity of work he does and thus, as their personal interest is concerned, they are generally very industrious”*. Elsewhere she notes that it was exclusively womenfolk who were employed upon the task of breaking up the limestone ready to load into the furnaces.

Prior to leaving Maesteg Mrs Williams nevertheless devote a paragraph to one feature of the new settlement which played an important role in its development during these early stages. The village was the first urban development in the valley and as such the nearest retail outlets were at Bridgend some 12 miles down the valley along a road that was little more a winding dirt-track. The company therefore operated a general store which imported all so the company provided its own general store selling goods it imported from outside the area to its employees.

“In this place there is a shop for the convenience of those who belong to the works. Here the women buy their neat woollen gowns, the peculiar manufacture of the country, and their whittles – a sort of shawl only worn by the Welsh women. All sorts of things are sold and the shop, and everybody belonging to the works may have goods at cost price.”

At this early stage in the development of the town this store would indeed have been considered a boon, but to ensure its success all or part of the workers' wages were paid in tokens that could only be spent here. As other retail outlets began to appear on the streets, this virtual monopoly in favour of the company store led to considerable friction between employers and employees before it was eventually abandoned.



Castle Street today

In 1838, just two years after the visit by Mrs Williams, construction started on what would become the Llynfi Iron Works on the opposite side of the valley. Built alongside the DPLR the settlement to house its employees spread down the valley on either side of the tramroad which became part of its main street (now Commercial Street). At one time this village was known as Bowrington but the rapid expansion of the two villages on either side of the Llynfi River led to their merger into a single community which adopted the name "Maesteg", and a new town was born.