

A Peep at the Past

Melyncrythan is not by any stretch of the imagination an imposing looking place. However, of the Neath districts, it has probably the most interesting and indeed colourful past. In 1695 Sir Humphrey Mackworth Resident Squire at Gnoll house erected a copper works at Danygraig in the Meltn. Crythan brook the happy play area of generations of Melyn people provided the all important source of power needed to turn the great water wheel, which in turn powered the bellows, stampers and hammers used in the crushing and smelting of copper and lead at the works. Silver, refined from the lead smelting operations, was conveyed by stage coach to the Tower of London for mining. The Tower in those days being the royal mint. The embellishments on the seal and maces presented to Neath Corporation in 1705 are of silver produced at Melyncrythan. Things did not always run smoothly for Mackworth, shortage of labour in 1700 forced him to enter into an arrangement whereby condemned pirates, who had been pardoned by the King on condition they served five years employment at Melyncrythan works, were transported to Neath. In September of that year ten arrived. It is of interest to speculate whether any of today's Melyn residents had a forebear among those brigands. Mackworth also owned coal mines locally, and ran a thriving coal exporting warf. His all round success was the cause of envy among other coal masters in the area. Sir Edward Mansell of Margam, together with his son Thomas, and his nephew Thomas Mansell of Briton Ferry, who were also coal masters, never missed an opportunity of throwing a spanner in the works, (no pun intended). Being justices of the peace at Neath, they were instrumental in the arrival of the press gangs in the town in May 1705. When twelve of Mackworth's workmen were pressed into military service, the rest of his workmen sought refuge among the surrounding hills. In June of the same year the Neath justices passed an order expelling from Neath any person not native to the parish. Sir Humphrey had in his employ skilled smelters and refiners from Derbyshire, Shropshire and Flintshire, and the obvious aim of this act of devious legality was disruption at the works. This sort of malicious opposition together with certain economic factors forced Mackworth's bankruptcy in 1709. Three years later however he restarted operations at the Melyn and the works continued to operate mainly under the control of the Mackworth family until 1810. Evidence of its existence may still be seen at the rear of Crythan Road and Lower Danygraig Road, in the form of copper slag deposits. I would like to end by making a comparison. In 1703 the chief smelters wage was between 16^s and £1^{1s}6^d per week, smelters and refiners 9^s to 12^s. I am forty-seven years old, and started work at a weekly wage of £1⁰2^d, not a very significant advance in wages over 250 years, even after taking into account my "boys" wage.

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