

**Ambition, Influence and Status in a Small Borough:  
Local Government in Aberavon 1830 – 1921**

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## Summary

This thesis examines the urban and municipal development of the small coastal town and incorporated borough of Aberavon between 1830 and 1921. Aberavon's importance to the study of urban history lies in its transition from ancient to incorporated borough in 1861 and subsequent sublimation into a new Borough of Port Talbot in 1921. The research assesses how local and national factors affected outcomes in Aberavon and culminated in submission of a borough extension which surrendered the ancient name. Contributions and characteristics of individuals and groups are assessed throughout, particularly those of the corporation members, councillors, salaried officials, landowners and industrialists whose decisions impacted upon the future status of the borough. Industrialisation and urban development provide important historical context throughout the thesis and in the later years of the study period it is apparent that the ambitions of the local Labour party played a significant role in encouraging moves towards amalgamation. An extensive historiography offers examples of municipal development which compare and contrast with that of Aberavon but Welsh studies are limited. The broader historiography reveals that a weakening of local identity due to inward migration influenced attitudes to both incorporation and amalgamation, a phenomenon which was also evident in Aberavon. The impact of central government reforms and interventions from 1835 to 1919 is shown to be a motivating factor in expanding local government ambitions and boundaries, bringing into question the value of incorporation as either an ultimate objective or an enduring status. Contemporary sources including correspondence, Acts of Parliament, newspapers, census material and minute books are employed to examine how industrialisation and urban growth influenced municipal ambitions in and around Aberavon. The thesis contributes to studies of municipal history by providing a new Welsh perspective which gives wider relevance to urban history research in this period.

## DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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## STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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## List of Abbreviations

CUHB	Cambridge Urban History of Britain (Vol. III)
ECC	The Governor and Company of Copper Miners in England ("The English Copper Company")
GCC	Glamorgan County Council
GWR	Great Western Railway
ILP	Independent Labour Party
JP	Justice of the Peace
LGA	Local Government Act
LGB	Local Government Board
LRC	Labour Representation Committee
MCA	Municipal Corporations Act
MFA	Municipal Franchise Act
MP	Member of Parliament
MUDC	Margam Urban District Council
NAS	Neath Antiquarian Society
NLS	National Library of Scotland
NLW	National Library of Wales
OS	Ordnance Survey
PHA	Public Health Act
PTC	Port Talbot Company
PTR&DC	Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company
PWLB	Public Works Loan Board
PWLC	Public Works Loan Commissioners
R&SBR	Rhondda and Swansea Bay Railway
SWCC	South Wales Coalfield Collection
SWR	South Wales Railway
TNA	The National Archives
WGAS	West Glamorgan Archive Service
WNO	Welsh Newspapers Online

## Introduction

### Research Aims and Significance

This thesis originated in a desire to unravel the circumstances which led to an incorporated borough losing its name and status. In 1861 the small Welsh borough of Aberavon made the transition from ancient to municipal borough following the granting of a new charter and in 1920 submitted a successful application for a borough extension. Crucially, however, the name of the new extended borough was not Aberavon, but Port Talbot, a name which had been devised in 1836 when the harbour at Aberavon had been renamed for local landowner and M.P. for Glamorgan, C.R.M. Talbot; the thesis period begins in the year in which Talbot was first elected. For almost a century after 1836 the settlement around the docks was also known locally as Port Talbot but it had no formal or official recognition other than for postal purposes.<sup>1</sup> Initial research using local history publications suggested that the subsequent changing of the borough name could be explained by the scale of wealth, industry and influence on the eastern side of the River Afan at Port Talbot and that Aberavon's loss of borough status had been a natural consequence of Port Talbot's undeniable dominance. Further research, however, revealed that creation of the Borough of Port Talbot was actively promoted and supported by the council in Aberavon as well as a number of the town's inhabitants.

Aberavon's extension was a remarkable event in that it involved the voluntary surrender of a centuries-old borough name and the transfer of its status to a new borough. 178 boroughs were reformed as a result of the Municipal Corporations Act (MCA) 1835 but in later years, the names of only six were lost following local government reorganisation in the late twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Of the more than a hundred remaining unreformed boroughs only eight received new charters between 1835 and 1881.<sup>3</sup> Aberavon therefore provides the only example of a reformed borough that subsequently relinquished its name voluntarily. The municipal history of Aberavon also shows that the commercial interests and influence of local groups and individuals could lead to a situation in which newly-created communities might equal or even surpass the status of more established neighbouring towns which had little or no industrial

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<sup>1</sup> *Herald of Wales*, 13 June 1914.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Municipal\\_Corporations\\_Act\\_1835](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Municipal_Corporations_Act_1835) (checked against individual municipal histories).

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unreformed\\_boroughs\\_in\\_England\\_and\\_Wales\\_1835%E2%80%931886](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unreformed_boroughs_in_England_and_Wales_1835%E2%80%931886) (checked against individual municipal histories).

presence.<sup>4</sup> Both West Hartlepool and Devonport illustrate this point and will be examined in more detail below.

Elected members, local governments and private individuals could therefore be significant factors in contributing to the composition of civic entities: their actions, reactions and even inaction were of crucial importance to the progress of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century small towns. Municipal histories such as those by Hennock, Garrard and Lowell also provide examples of ways in which some salaried officials were able to not only exert influence but also become indispensable components of a council.<sup>5</sup> The thesis does not replicate any specific studies undertaken previously, but it has been influenced by work on incorporation and local government conducted by Hennock, Garrard and Doyle.<sup>6</sup> These studies, however, relate to larger towns and cities than Aberavon, where a small, close-knit community existed.

Small towns provide ideal research material for urban historians, and it is understandable that studies such as those by Clark, Pritchard, and Borsay *et al* have concluded that Wales is an under-researched area of urban Britain which requires further investigation.<sup>7</sup> Clark's identification of differences in the quality of urban government at this time provides an important structuring theme for the thesis by acknowledging that there was no 'single type of small town'.<sup>8</sup> Pritchard's investigation of the councillors of Denbigh noted that 'studies of Wales are difficult to find' although Light later undertook an examination of politics and power in Bridgend, Penarth and Pontypool.<sup>9</sup> Borsay *et al* also acknowledged that studies of Welsh towns are conspicuous by their absence,<sup>10</sup> and despite Aberavon's intriguing history neither its municipal incorporation nor the borough extension of 1921 have been the subject of previous

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<sup>4</sup> For examples see R. Trainor, *Black Country Elites: The Exercise of Authority in an Industrialized Area 1830-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) and D. Cannadine, (ed.), *Patricians, power and politics in nineteenth-century towns*, (Leicester: University Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> E.P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Urban Government* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973); J. Garrard, *Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns 1830-80*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); A.L. Lowell, *The Government of England, Vol. II*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1924), (Googlebook).

<sup>6</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973); J. Garrard (1983); and B.M. Doyle, 'The Changing Functions of Urban Government: Councillors, Officials and Pressure Groups', in *Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Vol. III, 1840-1950*, ed. by M.J. Daunton, first paperback edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 287-313.

<sup>7</sup> P. Clark, 'Small towns 1700-1840', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume II, 1540-1840*, ed. by P. Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.733-73; J.W. Pritchard, 'Fit and Proper Persons: Councillors of Denbigh, their Status and Position, 1835-94', *Welsh History Review*, 17 (1994), 186-204; P. Borsay, L. Miskell and O. Roberts, 'Introduction: Wales, a new agenda for urban history', *Urban History*, 32. 1, (2005), 5-16, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> P. Clark (2000), p.734.

<sup>9</sup> J.W. Pritchard, (1994); (J. Light, '...mere seekers of fame?': personalities, power and politics in the small town: Pontypool and Bridgend, c. 1860-95, *Urban History*, 32.1 (2005), 88-99.

<sup>10</sup> Borsay *et al*, (2005), p.10.

academic study. This thesis attempts to address that deficit by providing a new case study of a Welsh coastal town during the nineteenth century and following its distinctive passage into the twentieth century as an extended borough with a new name.

The thesis argues, therefore, that transition from small town to incorporated borough status was not a foregone conclusion based on criteria such as population or housing density. No routine, linear progression occurred towards higher municipal status over time, and each town developed in its own unique way. The MCA of 1835 did not result in the complete conversion of all hereditary corporations to elected municipalities. In many towns, including Aberavon, the absence of suitable structures and personnel militated against immediate incorporation. Furthermore, as the thesis will demonstrate, in subsequent years many corporations either failed to achieve the required standard for self-government or resisted incorporation and actively opposed attempts at reform.

In towns where individuals with landed or business interests were already involved in improvement commissions, parish vestries or even corporations themselves, the prospect of incorporation could be seen as an opportunity to gain additional influence, but these same powerful interests were just as likely to oppose a new charter in favour of the *status quo*.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the thesis also argues that a town's inhabitants, regardless of occupation or social status, were key factors in influencing the processes and structures of local government. Williams and England both recognised the extent to which numerous ironmasters were able to prevent the incorporation of Merthyr Tydfil, despite its commercial importance.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, a majority of seemingly obscure ratepayers in small towns could thwart attempts at incorporation simply by submitting petitions of opposition.<sup>13</sup>

The changing status of Aberavon demonstrates that attainment of municipal status was no guarantee of its perpetuity. The first attempts to extend the borough boundaries and include the area known as Port Talbot began just twenty years after incorporation. Furthermore, in legislating for the creation of additional levels of local government throughout the period,

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<sup>11</sup> See R. Trainor, (1993), pp.234 (Dudley), pp.373-374 (Dudley, Wolverhampton and Bilston), and p.272 (West Bromwich).

<sup>12</sup> G.A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1979); J. England, Merthyr Tydfil: The Road to Incorporation 1833-1905, *Llafur*, 9.4 (2007), 10-25.

<sup>13</sup> For examples see TNA PC 1/1505, Petition against Charter, from Inhabitant Householders of Wakefield, Yorkshire (1847); PC 1/1524-6, Petition against Charter, from Inhabitant Householders of West Hartlepool, (1873); PC 1/1224, Petition against Charter, from Inhabitant Householders of Reigate, Surrey, (1862); PC 1/749 Petition against Charter, from Inhabitant Householders of Bolton, (1838); and PC 1/485, Petition against Charter, from Inhabitant Householders of Devonport, Devon, (1836).

central government's attempts to apply mechanisms of oversight provided ambitious councils and councillors with the means to extend their powers and increase the scope of their jurisdictions. This became particularly evident in the Aberavon and Port Talbot area after 1914, when the local Labour party made amalgamation the 'chief plank' in its local policy platform.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Local Geography**

Situated on the coast at the southern rim of the South Wales Coalfield, Aberavon's significance in 1830 was as an ancient borough and historic port. The mouth of the River Afan, which gave the borough its name, opens into Swansea Bay and had offered local manufacturers access to the lucrative Bristol Channel trade since the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The port served the larger industrial settlements of Cwmavon, situated in a separate parish two miles to the north, and Taibach, just over a mile to the east of the borough in the parish of Margam. In Cwmavon, after 1838 '[t]he local government of the district was entirely in the hands of the [English Copper] Company [the ECC], who owned practically the whole of the houses, and monopolized industry in the valley'.<sup>16</sup> Taibach had been industrialised since the 1770s when the ECC established its first works on land leased from the Talbot family; a designated wharf at the widest section of the river mouth gave convenient access to the sea and to the copper ores of Cornwall. After 1838 the site and lease were acquired by the Vivian family, who owned the nearby Morfa Colliery as well as further copper works in Swansea, which by 1820 was at the centre of an industrial area which was producing 90% of Britain's copper and a large proportion of its zinc, lead and silver.<sup>17</sup> Housing for the Vivians' workforce in Taibach was provided by the company, also on land leased from C.R.M. Talbot.<sup>18</sup>

Taibach and the copper works are shown on Map A in Margam Parish on either side of the main road between Cardiff and Neath. Cwmavon, in the parish of Michaelston Lower, is to the north. Aberavon can be seen as a ribbon development alongside the River Afan, which shapes the lines of both the borough and parish boundaries. As the map indicates, despite its close proximity to the sea there were no industries in Aberavon at the start of the period. Its 1831

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<sup>14</sup> *Herald of Wales*, 20 June 1914.

<sup>15</sup> See P. Jenkins, 'Wales', in P. Clark (2000), pp. 133-49, p.136; G.E. Jones, *Modern Wales: A Concise History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.162; R.S. Craig, 'The Ports and Shipping, 1750 – 1914', in *Glamorgan County History Volume V, Industrial Glamorgan from 1700 to 1970*, ed. by A.H. John and G. Williams, (Cardiff: Glamorgan County History Trust Limited, 1980), pp.465-518, p.466.

<sup>16</sup> M. Phillips, *The Copper Industry in the Port Talbot District*, (Neath: The Guardian Press, 1935), p.54.

<sup>17</sup> J. Davies, *A History of Wales*, (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p.342.

<sup>18</sup> I.G. Jones, *Mid-Victorian Wales: The Observers and the Observed*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1992), p.99.

population was a mere 572 and it was the smallest of the three communities in the area.<sup>19</sup> An extract from *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales* in 1833 pointed out that, ‘from its proximity to a marsh, it is much exposed to damp, and the inhabitants are consequently subject to ague and other complaints: it is neither paved nor lighted, and consists almost entirely of mean and illbuilt houses, affording but little accommodation to the inhabitants, and fewer attractions to strangers’.<sup>20</sup>

Having been classified as a ‘town’ in the fourteenth century by virtue of the fact that it dominated a valley as it opened out onto a routeway of a line of towns in south Wales, two hundred years later it had ‘lost any semblance of urban status’.<sup>21</sup> By 1834, the castle that had initially helped contribute to the town’s status had been reduced to ‘scant ruins’.<sup>22</sup> Physically divided over time by railways and a major road, Aberavon lacked what Evans termed a ‘recognisable core’<sup>23</sup> and faced significant challenges in maintaining its identity as a discrete town. Consequently, the borough was not one of the 178 chartered boroughs to attain incorporation immediately following the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 (MCA). As a result of the expansion of nearby industries, however, by the time of its incorporation in 1861 the borough’s population had increased to almost 3,000 and as Table A shows, continued to grow throughout the period of study.<sup>24</sup> Individual chapters will consider the implications of this population growth during specific time periods and assess its impact on the decisions and responsibilities of contemporary local government structures.

**Table A: Populations of Margam and Aberavon 1831-1921**

Parish	1831	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921
Margam	2902	3526	4747	5528	5205	5708	6274	9014	14713	17774
Aberavon	573	1290	2380	2916	3396	4859	6300	7553	10505	15370

Source: Census of England and Wales, 1831-1911 and [www.visionofbritain](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk) 1921 data accessed 20 November 2020 and 30 November 2020

<sup>19</sup> I.G. Jones (1992), p.285.

<sup>20</sup> S. Lewis, ‘Aberavon’ – Extract from *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales*, 1833 <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/GLA/Aberavon/Lewis1833>, [accessed 16 July 2017].

<sup>21</sup> H. Carter, *The Towns of Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1965), pp.20-21.

<sup>22</sup> T. Roscoe, *Wanderings and Excursions in South Wales: With the Scenery of the River Wye*, (London: Longman, Simpkin, Bogue and Orr, 1844), p.227 (Googlebook); see also J. Davies, (2007), pp.111-112 and p.167.

<sup>23</sup> N. Evans, 'Rethinking Urban Wales', *Urban History*, 32.1, (2005), 114-130, p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> I.G. Jones (1992), p.285; Census of England and Wales, 1831-1911 and [www.visionofbritain](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk) for 1921 data [accessed 20 November 2020 and 30 November 2020].

Expansion of the residential and commercial area on the eastern side of the river as shown in Map B eroded distinctions between the borough and the new community to the extent that many Aberavon inhabitants self-identified as living in either ‘Port Talbot’ or ‘Aberavon, Port Talbot’.<sup>25</sup> Examination of contemporary maps shows that the placement of ‘Port Talbot’ was inconsistent. The name originally applied to the harbour only, although industrial buildings bearing the name ‘Port Talbot . . .’ could be seen situated inside the municipal boundary of Aberavon (see Maps 3.1 and 4.1).<sup>26</sup> Conversely, an Ordnance Survey boundary map of 1900 places Port Talbot inland and north of the docks.<sup>27</sup> A 1917 Boundary Commission map of Glamorgan, however, does not use the name at all.<sup>28</sup>

Geographical and physical boundaries are therefore a critical factor in the study of Aberavon’s history. Access from the sea to the inner harbour at the start of the study period was convoluted and contributed not only to a blurring of boundaries between Aberavon and Margam but also, as industrial production in the area increased, lessee dissatisfaction with the historic yet increasingly inadequate port. The sale of corporation land around the docks led to the name of the port changing from Aberavon to Port Talbot in 1836, and in diverting the course of the River Afan the new Port Talbot Harbour Company was able to initiate a series of events that impacted significantly on Aberavon.<sup>29</sup>

Care has been taken throughout the thesis to ensure that place names are not used interchangeably. The relatively distant position of Cwmavon from the coast allows it to be treated as a separate settlement. However, clarification is required regarding Aberavon and the place names on the eastern side of the river. As Map A shows, at the start of the period the industrial settlement of Taibach was separated from Aberavon by open fields. By 1914, distinctions were far less pronounced and the previously open space had been filled with a combination of properties as well as public buildings and amenities (see Map B). No longer confined to the area immediately around the docks, the name Port Talbot can be clearly seen to the north-east of the built-up area on Map B. At a local level, the name referred to the physical space between two rivers, the Afan and the Ffrwdwyllt, which marked Taibach’s

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<sup>25</sup> 1911 Census of England and Wales.

<sup>26</sup> See also Ordnance Survey maps Glamorgan XXV 1876 and Glamorgan XXXIII 1876.

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps/sheet/os\\_maps\\_1900/Glamorganshire\\_1900](https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps/sheet/os_maps_1900/Glamorganshire_1900) [retrieved 10 December 2021]; boundary map surveyed 1867-78 and revised 1896-9.

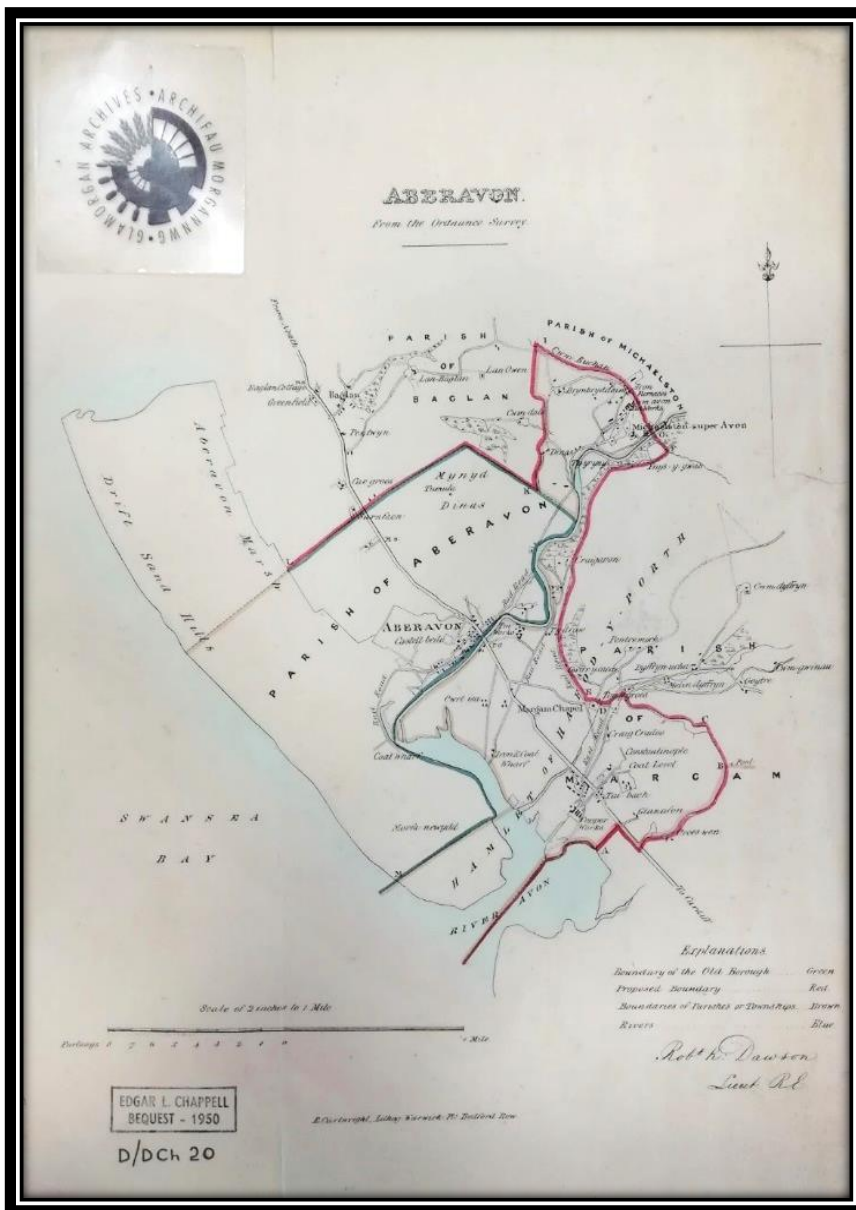
<sup>28</sup> [https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps/sheet/bc\\_reports\\_1917/Glamorgan\\_1917](https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps/sheet/bc_reports_1917/Glamorgan_1917) [retrieved 10 December 2021].

<sup>29</sup> The National Archives, PRO RAIL, 573/1-3, Minute Books of the Port Talbot Company.



western and eastern boundaries. Map A uses the anglicised form of ‘Avon’ for the river, but throughout this thesis the Welsh spelling ‘Afan’ will be used for the river.<sup>30</sup> Both Aberavon and Cwmavon will retain the anglicised spelling. References to Margam in the thesis in the years prior to 1884 relate to the civil parish area and after that time to the administrative district governed by Margam Local Board or its successor body Margam Urban District Council (MUDC) from ten years later. In 1921, the ward boundaries created by those bodies became a central element of borough extension negotiations.

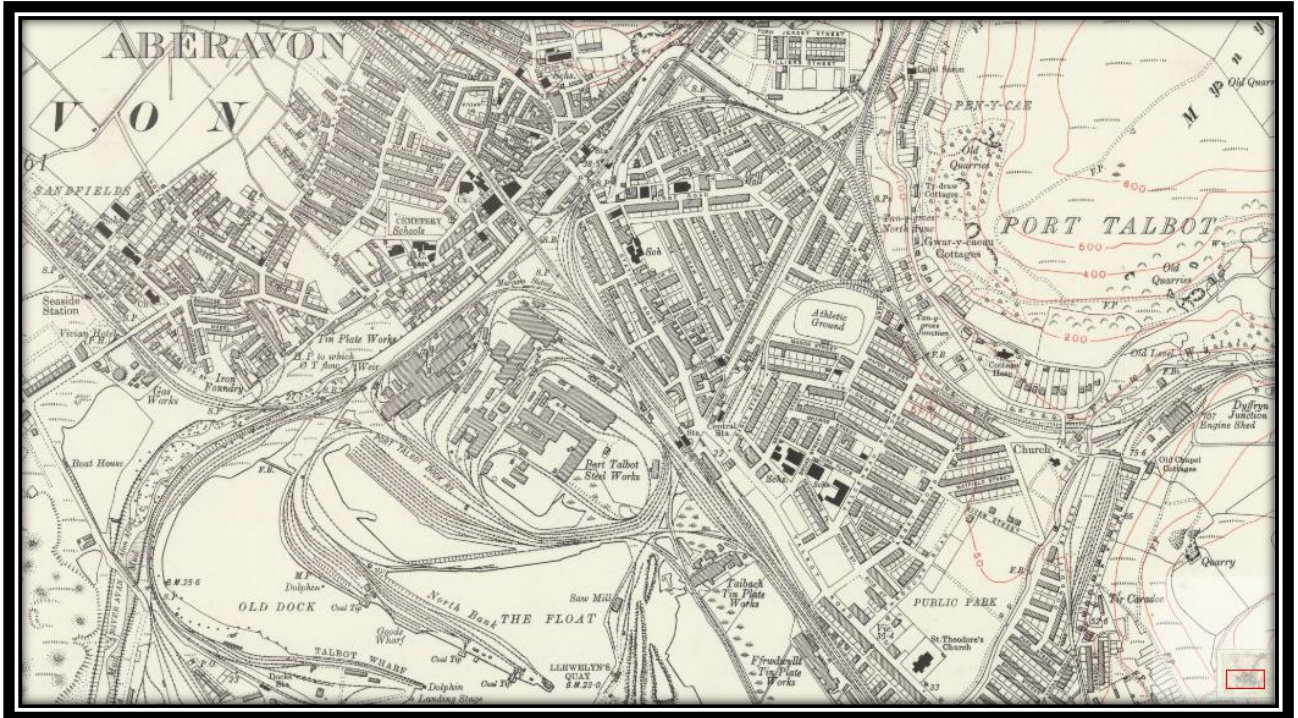
**Map A: Aberavon and surrounding settlements c.1831**



Source: Glamorgan Archives, D/D Ch 20, Robert K. Dawson’s plan of Aberavon

<sup>30</sup> Although anglicised in its spelling the river name is pronounced “Avvan” unlike the River Avon near Bristol.

## Map B: Aberavon and Port Talbot, surveyed 1914



Source: OS Map Glamorgan XXV. SW published 1921. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

### Historiography

Peter Clark has written that, 'Small town government showed itself to be ineffectual against mounting social and environmental problems' and after 1840 'there was an increasing gap in terms of the quality of urban government between Britain's many small towns and their larger urban counterparts'.<sup>31</sup> This notion could certainly be applied to Aberavon, which in 1830 was being governed in much the same way as it had been for five hundred years: by a corporation comprised of a portreeve, two aldermen and a small number of burgesses. These hereditary officials derived their authority and privileges from an ancient charter of 1304 in which they retained personal rights to tolls, fees and land use.<sup>32</sup> Men of some status, the portreeve and aldermen of Aberavon were regarded by many as 'the town's elite, a special pew being reserved for them in the parish church of St. Mary's'.<sup>33</sup> However, the corporation of Aberavon had no philanthropic interest in addressing issues of public good in the town as it began to grow, neither was it compelled to do so by statutory obligation. The thesis therefore concentrates on two key factors in the municipal process: the absence of linear progression and the presence of influential individuals who were able to cultivate or thwart local government ambitions in their

<sup>31</sup> P. Clark (2000), p.772.

<sup>32</sup> WGAS, B/A 1, Aberavon Charter c. 1307 (1304).

<sup>33</sup> A.L. Evans, *Mayors and Portreeves of Aberavon and Port Talbot*, (Port Talbot: D.W. Jones, 1987).

areas. Consequently, throughout the study period it is apparent that rates of transition were dependent on prevailing will.

Lowell, in acknowledging the crucial contribution of statutory salaried officials to local government after 1835, maintained that the 'excellence of municipal government was very roughly proportional to the influence of the permanent officials'.<sup>34</sup> However, due to the 'absence of any systematic study', it has only been possible to gauge an 'impression' of the impact of these officials.<sup>35</sup> Lowell offered a general perspective on permanent officials in 1924 and MacDonagh's analysis of the Victorian civil service added to the scholarship, but the historiography has tended to concentrate on elected members rather than paid officials.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on that historiography and testing the concepts against events in Aberavon it was possible to form a fundamental framework for the local government aspects of this research which involved an analysis of both councillors and officials. The thesis therefore provides a starting point from which new studies of influence in local government can begin.

Publications by local historians have tended to focus more on the history of the eastern side of the river and the areas of Margam, Taibach and Port Talbot.<sup>37</sup> Aberavon, in comparison, has been largely neglected. Margam has undoubted historic importance as the location of an ancient abbey church which, along with its estate lands, was acquired by Sir Rice Mansel in 1540. By 1830, Mansel's descendant Christopher Rice Mansel Talbot had followed the family tradition and become Member of Parliament for Glamorgan; renovation of what was to become his Margam mansion began shortly afterwards. Talbot wealth and influence are therefore long-standing features of the history of Margam that have informed a great deal of the local

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<sup>34</sup> A.L. Lowell (1908), cited in E.P. Hennock (1973), p.7.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), pp. 171-180; O. MacDonagh, *Early Victorian Government 1830-1870*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977).

<sup>37</sup> For examples see A.L. Evans, *The Story of Taibach and District*, (Port Talbot: Talbot Printing Company Ltd., 1963); and *Bygones of Old Aberavon and Kenfig*, (Port Talbot: Andreas Haaf, 1995); J.I. Hanson, *Profile of a Welsh Town*, (Swansea: C.E. Watkins Ltd., 1969); and *Outline of a Welsh Town*, (Port Talbot: Talbot Printing Company, 1971); J. V. Hughes, *The Wealthiest Commoner: C.R.M. Talbot 1803-1890*, (Port Talbot: Talbot Printing Company, 1977); and *Aberavon Beach: Aspects of its History*, (Reprinted from *Port Talbot Historian*, 2005); J. O'Brien, *Old Afan and Margam*, (Aberavon: J. O'Brien, 1926); S.R. Jones, *The History of Port Talbot*, (Port Talbot: John Penry Press, 1991); G. James, *A Brief History of the Parish of Llanfihangel Ynys Avon (Michaelstone Super Afan)*, (no publication or date details printed); and L. Rees, *Real Port Talbot*, (Glasgow: Seren Books/Bell & Bain, 2013).

literature. Previous academic work has also concentrated on these areas as the locations of major industrial concerns such as steel works and docks.<sup>38</sup>

The existing Welsh historiography includes studies of the larger towns of south Wales as they, too, negotiated the uncertainties of industrialisation and urbanisation. Books, articles and academic theses have been produced which examined aspects of the histories of these towns, some of which included references to municipal change.<sup>39</sup> Many of the towns studied were situated at the edge of the Glamorgan coalfield on the south Wales coast, and as such their municipal, social and industrial histories are important in building an understanding of the growth of Welsh port towns during the nineteenth century. In analysing the development of dock facilities in south Wales, Craig has asserted not only that circumstances ‘differed widely from place to place and time to time’ but also that the ‘dynamic force for port improvements’ could be an individual or a corporate enterprise.<sup>40</sup> Craig’s assessment explains the variation in the circumstances of the ports in the study period and also underlines the way in which local decisions could be dependent on the inclinations of particular individuals or groups.

In Swansea, municipal history was closely linked to the town’s position at the centre of the area’s copper smelting industries.<sup>41</sup> Miskell identified the presence of an obstructive corporation in the late eighteenth century, and this, coupled with the influence of local landowning interests, blocked necessary improvements to the crucial dock facilities.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> For examples see B. Penny, ‘Class, Work and Community: Port Talbot’s Steelworkers, 1951-1988’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Swansea University, 2016); R.E. Takel, ‘Industrial Port Development and South Wales’, (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology, 1971); S. Parry, ‘History of the Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area 1900-1988’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2011); and P.W. Jackson, ‘The Interaction of Industry and Organised Religion in a changing industrial culture pattern’, (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1957).

<sup>39</sup> For examples see L. Miskell, *Intelligent Town: An Urban History of Swansea, 1780-1855*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006); T. Boyns, D. Thomas and C. Baber, ‘The Iron, Steel and Tinsplate Industries, 1750-1914, in *Glamorgan County History Volume V* (1980), pp.97-154; R.S. Craig, (1980); G. Eaton, *From Castle to Civic Centre: A History of Local Government in Neath, c.1100-1972* (Neath: Eaton, 1975); D.W. Howell and C. Baber, ‘Wales’, in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950: Vol. I, Regions and Communities*, ed. by F.M.L. Thompson (Cambridge: 1993), pp.281-355; P. Jenkins, (2000), pp.133-49; P. O’Leary, *Claiming the Streets: Processions and Urban Culture in South Wales, c.1830-1880*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012); M. Phillips, (1935); R.G. Simmonds, *A History of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company and the South Wales Mineral Railway Company: Vol. 1: 1853-1907* (Lydney: Black Dwarf Lightmoor Publications Ltd., 2012); N. Evans, ‘Urbanisation, Elite Attitudes and Philanthropy: Cardiff 1850 - 1915’ *International Review of Social History*, 27 (1982), 290-323; E. Newell, ‘Copperopolis: the rise and fall of the copper industry in the Swansea district, 1826-1921’, *Business History*, 32 (1990), 75-97; D. Hopkin, ‘The Rise of Labour in Wales 1890-1914, *Llafur*, 6.3 (1994), 120-141; T. Ridd, ‘The Development of Municipal Government in Swansea in the Nineteenth Century’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Wales, Swansea, 1955); and G.A. Williams (1979).

<sup>40</sup> R.S. Craig (1980), p.467.

<sup>41</sup> L. Miskell (2006), p.89.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.20-28.

Subsequently, without the involvement of gentry interests, Swansea established a harbour trust which included representatives from the corporation as well as local industries.<sup>43</sup> Aberavon's corporation, however, had never been involved in its port operations. At Port Talbot, links between the docks and the local council were formalised by the fact that after 1894 many elected members were also involved in the private company which ran the port and its associated new rail network. At the end of the nineteenth century Port Talbot's dominance had brought about a significant downturn in trade at Swansea.<sup>44</sup> Despite the harbour trust, Swansea's personnel were unable to overcome problems of demand and delay at the port.<sup>45</sup>

Ridd's study of Swansea's municipal history identified two points which contrast with Aberavon: inheritance of a valuable corporate estate after incorporation under the MCA, and the relative disappearance of old corporation representatives on the new council.<sup>46</sup> The study addressed the many public health issues which faced the new council after incorporation and considered the options available as a means of funding improvements.<sup>47</sup> Public health dominated the agendas of new corporations in the urbanising industrial towns of south Wales, and improvements provided a yardstick by which the elected bodies could be measured. Ridd acknowledged the importance of permanent officials in bringing continuity to the administration but also noted that 'the growing importance of the officials did not go unchallenged'.<sup>48</sup>

The historiography of the port town of Cardiff for this study period is dominated by the influence of the Bute family and its associates.<sup>49</sup> The second marquess was motivated by political power and as such maintained control over Cardiff's old corporation.<sup>50</sup> Bute's ability to manipulate local government outcomes was weakened, however, after royal commissioners declared that Cardiff's governing body lacked identity with its inhabitants and was 'subordinated to political purposes'; incorporation under the MCA was therefore recommended.<sup>51</sup> Bute's docks contributed to major growth in Cardiff, but as would be seen in other towns, including Aberavon, growth of population due to inward migration and the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.36.

<sup>44</sup> For examples see *South Wales Daily News*, 8 May 1899.

<sup>45</sup> L. Miskell (2006), pp.144-5.

<sup>46</sup> T. Ridd (1955), pp.318-9 and p.97. By 1899 annual income from corporation property was almost £13,0000.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.427.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.425.

<sup>49</sup> J. Davies, *Cardiff and the Marquesses of Bute* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.106.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.110 and p.127.

presence of a new and assertive middle class led to a decline in influence for established rulers. When Cardiff became a city in 1905 it was small businessmen and property owners who dominated the new council, not commercial elites.<sup>52</sup>

Cardiff's experience provides an example of successful transition from authoritarian rule to autonomous self-government. In Merthyr, however, that transition was a much longer process, indicating that both supporters and opponents of incorporation were resilient and determined. Studies of Merthyr are numerous and encompass one or more of the social, political, municipal and industrial factors which constitute its extraordinary history.<sup>53</sup> For Evans, defining Wales within the context of social history is problematic.<sup>54</sup> The concepts of identity and nationality which Evans analysed have often been distilled by historians to produce a class-based narrative which placed local choice, power, and control within the framework of industrial and landowning interests.<sup>55</sup> The influence of the Talbot family forms part of this narrative but this thesis also considers the capacity for self-determination which developed in Aberavon and the competing influences which sought to conserve or confront the *status quo*. Analysis of both Aberavon and Port Talbot demonstrates that ambitions, whether individual or collective, were contingent on the motivations and preferences of influential individuals and groups.

### **The Merits of Incorporation**

From the inception of the Municipal Corporations Act (MCA) in 1835, central government appeared to be setting the standards to which all local bodies should aspire. Consequently, within the context of industrialisation and modernisation the benefits of elected self-government via incorporation were perceived by many as rational ambitions. As Chandler has observed, the Act also marked the start of an evolving relationship between central and local government which was rooted in principles of subsidiarity.<sup>56</sup> Almost a century later, not only as a result of a raft of national social welfare policies but also as a reaction against the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp.143-4.

<sup>53</sup> For examples see H. Carter and S. Wheatley, *Merthyr Tydfil in 1851: A Study of the Spatial Structure of a Welsh Industrial Town* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982); A. Croll, *Civilizing the Urban: Popular culture and public space in Merthyr, c.1870-1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); B. Trinder, 'Industrialising towns 1700-1840', in Clark, (2000), pp.805-29; D.W. Howell and C. Baber (1993); G.A. Williams (1979 and 1988); J. England, 'Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists: The Middle Class in Victorian Merthyr', *Welsh History Review*, 23 (2007), 35-58; and J. England, *Llafur*, (2007).

<sup>54</sup> N. Evans, 'Writing the Social History of Modern Wales', *Social History* 17 (1992), 479-92.

<sup>55</sup> For examples see G.A. Williams (1979 and 1988); J. England, *Llafur*, (2007).

<sup>56</sup> J.A. Chandler, *Explaining Local Government: Local Government in Britain since 1800*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. xi, 135, 153, 307 and 312.

perceived threat posed by growing numbers of socialist councillors, local authorities found themselves far less able to pursue their own agendas.<sup>57</sup> Central government was therefore a crucial factor in influencing the scope of local government ambitions. For Chandler, the Act enhanced industrial and commercial interests by providing for elected representation that until 1832 had eluded them in Parliament.<sup>58</sup>

Funding the new municipalities through the rating system placed a significant burden on local landowners, many of whom were Whig and Tory members of Parliament with a distaste for centralisation but a desire to protect their interests.<sup>59</sup> As a consequence, *ad hoc* agencies were created, prompting Doyle to characterise the MCA as ‘largely symbolic’ due to the number of single-purpose authorities already in existence, the overlapping functions, authority and boundaries of which could all, in theory, address the challenges of urbanisation.<sup>60</sup> Historians have noted differences in towns’ responses to the MCA as well as subsequent approaches to the prospect of amalgamation. In many cases, these responses were influenced by the characteristics of local individuals and groups. In addressing these points in the thesis in relation to Aberavon two essential elements emerge: the influence of industrial neighbours in determining the scope of municipal change, and the impact of immigration on local identity. These factors are evident throughout the period being examined and form a background to the activities of its local government members and officials. Aberavon’s importance to studies of municipal history became particularly evident in 1915, when during discussions of an amalgamation proposal from MUDC it was noted that there was no precedence of a district council taking over a corporate body. Whilst Aberavon’s application for a borough extension did not set such a precedent, the fact that Margam Urban District was larger in both size and population was important. Surrender of the name Aberavon in favour of the port name was also significant to the study of municipal history. The research therefore raises questions regarding the inherent value of incorporation, whether as an indicator of status or a guarantee of enduring influence.

An early general trend towards incorporation after 1835 demonstrated not only the ambition of some local governments to modernise but also the commissioners’ predisposition to

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p.154.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.308.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. and p.23.

<sup>60</sup> B.M. Doyle, (2018), p.288; and J. Garrard (1983).

recommend new charters as a means of reforming ineffective hereditary corporations.<sup>61</sup> For the Webbs, the complaint was 'not so much that the Corporations performed the Municipal functions badly, as they did not . . . perform them at all'.<sup>62</sup> Incorporation, therefore, could be perceived as opportunity rather than accomplishment and was both a validation of an existing capacity for self-government and a mechanism for its achievement. Attitudes to incorporation varied, however. In Merthyr, described by Croll as once being the premier urban centre in south Wales, incorporation was resisted by wealthy landowners and industrialists throughout the nineteenth century, contributing to what England described as an ideological conflict between private interests and public needs.<sup>63</sup> In 1874, a lecture on incorporation in Merthyr cited the small town of Aberavon's success in comparison to "the metropolis of the iron trade" that had become an "object of ridicule" when compared with its neighbours.<sup>64</sup> Similar points were made at Merthyr's charter inquiry of 1876, in particular that the town lacked public buildings and facilities because businessmen made money and moved elsewhere.<sup>65</sup> Conversely, the immigrant businessmen of Aberavon were significant due to the fact that they not only stimulated the local economy prior to incorporation in 1861 but also put down roots and helped build a sense of community. Many council colleagues were also members of the local Freemasons' lodge.<sup>66</sup>

In small towns like Aberavon it was shopkeepers who were the main beneficiaries at election time but their presence in local government challenged a perceived nineteenth-century wisdom that ideal councillors should be drawn from the ranks of wealthy and successful businessmen.<sup>67</sup> It was perceptions such as this which informed the intentions of the 1869

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<sup>61</sup> R. Sweet, *The English Town, 1680-1840: Government, society and culture*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 1999), p.154.

<sup>62</sup> S. and B. Webb, *The Development of English Local Government 1689-1835*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.141.

<sup>63</sup> A. Croll (2000), p.3; England, (2007), p.10.

<sup>64</sup> *The Merthyr Telegraph*, 23 October 1874.

<sup>65</sup> *The Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales*, 15 December 1876: incorporation inquiry evidence of Walter Smyth, chemist and druggist; see also A. Croll (2000), p.41; T. Vigne and A. Howkins, 'The Small Shopkeeper in Industrial and Market Towns' in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, ed. by G. Crossick, (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 184-207; J. K. Walton, 'Towns and Consumerism' in M.J. Daunton (2018), pp.715-744; B. M. Doyle, 'Rehabilitating the Retailer: Shopkeepers in Urban Government, 1900-1950' in *In Control of the City: Local Elites and the Dynamics of Urban Politics, 1800-1960*, edited by S. Couperas, C. Smit and D.J. Wolframm, (Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007), pp.41-52; C. Hall, 'The Shop and Family in the Industrial Revolution' in *The Victorian City: A Reader in British Urban History 1820-1914*, ed. by R.J. Morris and R. Rodger, (Harlow: Longman Group, 1993), pp.307-321.

<sup>66</sup> The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, *England, United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 1751-1921*, available on [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

<sup>67</sup> For examples see J. Garrard (1983), p.57; J.W. Pritchard (1994); E.P. Hennock (1973); J. Light (2005); and B.M. Doyle (2018 and 2007).



Municipal Franchise Act and which permitted property holders living outside a municipal boundary to stand for election.<sup>68</sup> In Aberavon, that Act had only minimal impact on outside representation: whilst it encouraged businessmen candidates from outside the borough they were often soundly rejected at the ballot box.

### **Ambitions for Expansion**

New municipal corporations were not static entities, neither were they immune to amalgamation challenges from less established neighbours. Consequently, Croll's assertion that Merthyr's eventual incorporation in 1905 did not represent an 'ending' can be attributed to the dynamic nature of civic identities.<sup>69</sup> The 1888 Local Government Act and creation of county and county borough councils provided scope for local authorities to extend their ambitions and boundaries beyond the MCA. Where population numbers could meet the required criteria of 50,000, the establishment of county borough councils marked a turning point in the history of ambition within municipal government. Until 1888, the sole route to representative self-government remained incorporation as a municipal borough. In MUDC, ambitions for county borough status were evident from 1913 and in 1915 the amalgamation of Plymouth was held up by one MUDC councillor as a successful model for the District Council to follow in securing county borough status.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, central government's predisposition towards amalgamation after 1919 was influenced by the new Ministry of Health's perception of local authorities as 'jealous fiefdoms' constantly engaged in an 'unedifying scrummage' for the extension of their boundaries.<sup>71</sup>

The trend towards amalgamation and borough extension that became evident in the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century illustrated central government's inclination towards local government reorganisation as well as the dynamic and ambitious nature of many elected representatives at that time.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, smaller towns and boroughs often found themselves vulnerable to unwanted absorption into larger neighbouring authorities.<sup>73</sup> Borough extension, as indicated by its name, involved a formal

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<sup>68</sup> B. Weinstein, 'Local Government' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800-2000*, ed. by D. Brown, R. Crowcroft and G. Pentland, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.8; and 32 & 33 Vict., Municipal Corporation Elections Act 1869, c. 55.

<sup>69</sup> A. Croll (2000), p.135.

<sup>70</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 17 July 1915.

<sup>71</sup> J. Davis, 'Central Government and the Towns', in M.J. Daunton (2018), pp.261-286, p.278.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.277; for examples see *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 1921; *Western Mail*, 24 June 1921; and *Hansard*, 4 May 1921.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* Rotherham, Penarth and Briton Ferry were opposed to the extension Bills of Sheffield, Cardiff and Aberavon, respectively.

application by a borough to extend its boundaries. Amalgamation, often used as a general term to describe the combination of a number of local authorities under one name, including municipal boroughs, could also be applied to the mergers of disparate urban districts. Eventual extension of the Borough of Aberavon in 1921 created a new municipal district with boundaries similar to those that had first been considered in 1831 as a prelude to the Reform Act of 1832 (see Map A). These boundaries were the subject of a series of Aberavon proposals and Margam rejections throughout the study period.

Studies of Aberavon, Hanley, and Devonport show that neither municipal nor county borough status acted as a barrier to further boundary extension or amalgamation. Plymouth's municipal history was as an ancient then incorporated borough that in 1914 had merged with Devonport (previously known as Plymouth Dock) and East Stonehouse by means of a borough extension.<sup>74</sup> Devonport, like the community that had become known as Port Talbot, had been a tiny settlement that had grown to become larger than its older, more established neighbour. However, unlike Port Talbot its expansion led to it becoming a municipal borough in 1837 and it achieved county borough status in 1891, indicating that its 1914-15 population would have been well in excess of 50,000. In contrast, the total population of Margam Urban District was in the region of 18,000.<sup>75</sup> Plymouth's successful extension proposal had also included retention of the ancient borough's name and identity. Conversely, as Stobart has noted, in the towns of The Potteries, federation of a county borough (Hanley), three municipal boroughs (Stoke-upon-Trent, Longton and Burslem) and two urban districts (Fenton and Tunstall) led to the creation of the new county borough of Stoke-on-Trent, not Hanley, in March 1910.<sup>76</sup>

Variations in the municipal development of small towns highlight the importance of an acknowledgement of unique circumstances and influences. Aberavon experienced high levels of inward migration and it will be shown that a positive correlation existed between immigration and support for amalgamation. Equally, older and established residents were more likely to oppose amalgamation. Emotional attachment to place was therefore dependent on length of residency and the construction of local identity. Research by both Jones and Evans

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<sup>74</sup> Three Towns Centenary Panel at <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/visitorsandtourism/museumsandheritage/boundarystones/threetownsamalgamationcentenarystone> (accessed 9/11/2020).

<sup>75</sup> 1921 Census of England and Wales; the population of Margam Urban District was 17,774 and of Aberavon municipal borough 15,370.

<sup>76</sup> J. Stobart, 'Identity, competition and place promotion in the Five Towns', *Urban History*, 30.2 (2003), 163-182.

has identified a reluctance to accept English immigrants in urbanising industrial towns in Wales, and in writing about the Aberavon and Margam area Jones goes so far as to assert that a ‘deep antipathy’ existed towards ‘[English] strangers’.<sup>77</sup> Research conducted for this thesis, however, has uncovered very little evidence of anti-English sentiment and a high level of integration. Although inward migration was blamed for dwindling support for hereditary corporation candidates in 1874, English representation on Aberavon council was consistently strong, suggesting that voter priorities extended beyond attachment to place.<sup>78</sup>

Cultural differences linked to language are also evident in the research, but no detailed assessment of the cultural assimilation of incomers to the area exists. Extensive work has been carried out on immigration into the Glamorgan Coalfield, but a focus on ‘labour’ has excluded those who provided the necessary administrative and service support.<sup>79</sup> Use of Welsh was common in Aberavon throughout the study period, and examples can be found in the 1911 Census of Welsh-speaking children whose parents had been born in England.<sup>80</sup> Although reports exist of a number of councillors choosing to use their native Welsh language in ratepayer meetings, no reactions of colleagues or clerks who were non-Welsh speakers were included.<sup>81</sup> No evidence of non-Welsh salaried officials speaking or learning Welsh has been uncovered either, although Swansea Grammar School advertised evening classes in 1897.<sup>82</sup> In Aberavon, Essex-born outfitter Councillor H.J. Stokes, like many retailers of the time, employed a Welsh-speaking assistant in his shop, and in 1865 the Vicar of Aberavon, a Welsh speaker himself, advertised the immediate need for a Welsh-speaking curate.<sup>83</sup> Language differences, therefore, could be accommodated in ways that not only differed greatly from the pre-1861 period but also contributed to a relaxation of fixed notions of local identity.

### **Sources and Methodology**

This study of Aberavon includes consideration of potential gaps in research as well as accessible material. Principal primary sources for the thesis are local government records, original manuscripts and contemporary newspaper articles, but in many cases the availability

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<sup>77</sup> See I.G. Jones, (1992), p.101 and N. Evans, (2005), p.127.

<sup>78</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 21 November 1874. See also chapters three, four and five.

<sup>79</sup> B. Thomas, ‘The Migration of Labour into the Glamorganshire Coalfield (1861-1911)’, *Economica*, 30 (1930), 275-294.

<sup>80</sup> For examples see [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), 1911 Census of England and Wales, Aberavon, Enumeration District 1 pp. 571 and 605, and E.D.2, p.26 and 57.

<sup>81</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 May 1877; *South Wales Daily News*, 16 February 1878.

<sup>82</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 18 September 1897.

<sup>83</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 2 November 1898, *The Cambrian*, 6 October 1865 and Census of England and Wales 1891 “Language Spoken”.

of records is inconsistent. Written reports of corporation activities for the period prior to incorporation are especially scarce; a single volume of Aberavon corporation minutes has survived for the period 1847-60, but it is incomplete.<sup>84</sup> No evidence has been found to suggest that further records were kept but have not survived, but a number of documents and newspaper articles refer to the corporation keeping scarcely any accounts.<sup>85</sup> Alternative sources of information regarding the corporation such as leases, conveyances, records of court cases and third-party correspondence were therefore examined to obtain evidence of the corporation's dealings and priorities.<sup>86</sup> Vestry records were also used to identify individuals associated with either the old corporation or the growing movement for reform.<sup>87</sup> This record was invaluable not only in revealing that many newcomers to the town preceded civic office with vestry involvement but also in confirming that meetings from 1859 had indeed become what a correspondent in *The Cambrian* described as 'the medium of a trial of strength between burgesses and municipalians'.<sup>88</sup> A similar politicisation of the vestry was identified by Elliott in his study of the incorporation of Bradford.<sup>89</sup> Central to this study of Aberavon were the council and committee minute books as well as Burgess Rolls, copy Acts of Parliament, maps and plans, photographs, and original documents relating to incorporation. Minute books were used extensively for the period after 1861, but volumes covering the important period from 1914 to 1921 are missing from the collection of deposited council records of both Aberavon and Margam. Other than an accounts ledger which covers the period 1914-17, no records of Aberavon's full council or committees were available for this period, and contemporary newspaper accounts have been used to obtain details of council decisions and activities.

Census enumerators' books were also used extensively to piece together the demographic shifts taking place in Aberavon and its neighbouring settlements. Notes in census abstracts account for incidences of rapid growth which were 'attributed partly to an extension of the coal, copper, iron and tin works in the neighbourhood; and since 1831 partly to the formation of a floating harbour'.<sup>90</sup> The 1911 Census abstract also acknowledged a large increase in

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<sup>84</sup> WGAS, D/D LE B/A 1, Aberavon Corporation minutes 1847-1860.

<sup>85</sup> For examples see J. Booth, *Reports from the Commissioners on Municipal Corporations in England and Wales, Aberavon (Glamorganshire), 1833*; WGAS, RISW/GGF 20/50, Report of boundary commissioner W. Wylde, 1831; NAS B/A 2/3, Copy Injunction by Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain, case between Henry Grant and the Portreeve, Aldermen and Burgesses of Aberavon; *The Cambrian*, 11 November 1843.

<sup>86</sup> For examples see WGAS, D/D BF 927, letter to the Earl of Jersey from his agent, Charles Tennant and *The Cambrian*, 3 December 1842 and 15 July 1843.

<sup>87</sup> WGAS P/68/CW3/1, Aberavon Vestry Minute Book 1855-77.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, and *The Cambrian*, 26 August 1859.

<sup>89</sup> A. Elliott, 'The Incorporation of Bradford', *Northern History*, 15.1, (1979), 156-175, pp.161-163.

<sup>90</sup> Census of England and Wales, 1851: 'Abstract of Answers and Returns', Note, p.584.

population since 1901 and attributed that growth to the development of iron, steel and tinplate works as well as to colliery development.<sup>91</sup> Each census from 1841 to 1911 was searched online by county, civil parish and enumeration district using the Ancestry website.<sup>92</sup> This facility enabled searches of particular streets to be made as a means of identifying the growth of suburban areas on the fringe of Aberavon at Pentyla. The website was also used to collate birthplace data.

Trade directories were examined to assess the changing patterns of wealth and economic activity throughout the study period. The directories list the growing presence of clergy and gentry and also provide evidence of official establishments and public facilities including banks, building societies, insurance agents, schools, places of worship, clubs and societies, and public halls. It should be noted, however, that the purpose of trade directories was to promote locations and attract visitors, so the publications were of necessity positive in tone; from the last quarter of the eighteenth-century trade directories ‘were becoming standard in all places with urban pretensions’.<sup>93</sup> Compilers of the directories often repeated descriptions of areas from previous editions, therefore some printed information was out of date. Elections for MUDC were held in the spring but Aberavon’s Borough Council elections took place in November, and as a consequence the names of elected representatives for a particular year could be incorrect. Later directories, however, included the year each members’ term came to an end, a feature which assisted in the compilation of councillors’ names, occupations and residences for each chapter. Used in conjunction with the relevant census pages, council minute books, Freemason registers and newspaper articles the trade directories were a valuable primary source in the construction of personal profiles for the individuals being studied. Additionally, this combination of sources helped to distinguish between councillors with identical or very similar names.

Incorporation inquiry evidence and the subsequent royal commissioner reports provided background to conditions in the town, the influence of neighbouring industries and the operations of the corporation. Use of these materials helped provide insight into the motivations of both promoters and opponents of incorporation. After July 1861, the formal nature of Aberavon’s new council, its officials and its committees resulted in organised administration

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<sup>91</sup> Census of England and Wales 1911, County of Glamorgan: Area, Families or Separate Occupiers and Population, extracted tables published 1914.

<sup>92</sup> [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

<sup>93</sup> P. J. Corfield, ‘Business leaders and town gentry in early industrial Britain: specialist occupations and shared urbanism’, *Urban History*, 39.1, (2012), 20-50.

processes which produced an abundance of records that are now curated by West Glamorgan Archive Service (WGAS) in Swansea. Adoption of public health legislation imposed statutory duties on councils which led to further documentation, overseen by qualified salaried officials. Examination of corporation and council minute books in conjunction with newspaper reports of meetings allowed assessment to be made of members' effectiveness as well as their willingness to take a proactive stance to council business. MUDC letter books covering the period are also available and cover the thesis period from 1893 to 1921, but in the crucial years prior to amalgamation the books are either incomplete or restricted to the business of the Inspector of Nuisances and therefore give no formal indication of the Council's decision-making processes regarding Aberavon.<sup>94</sup> Subsequent documents produced following the Aberavon Provisional Order at the local inquiry and the House of Commons Select Committee were therefore examined and these were found to include a number of explanatory factors which accounted for MUDC's objections to the Aberavon proposal.<sup>95</sup>

No documents have survived which record meetings of MUDC's predecessor body, Margam Local Board, although brief reports of agenda items at these meetings were produced in newspapers. Election candidates and results were also published and it was apparent that the first Board members were elected unopposed.<sup>96</sup> In the absence of personal papers, the motivations of many individual councillors could be interpreted by means of their proposals in council and their support or rejection of others' motions.<sup>97</sup> Written records relating to local landowners such as C.R.M. Talbot, his heiress Miss Emily Charlotte Talbot and the earls of Jersey are plentiful. Estate records deposited at WGAS were examined in order to assess the involvement of these individuals in the development of Aberavon and the surrounding area.<sup>98</sup> Acquisitions by local historians are also held at WGAS.<sup>99</sup> Notes, leases and correspondence from these sources were a particularly useful means of confirming corporation land ownership and transfer, as were deposited documents bearing annotations by C.R.M. Talbot which provide an indication of his attitudes to lessees and the docks.

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<sup>94</sup> WGAS UD/Ma/30-44, 1893-1922.

<sup>95</sup> DC/N L 1/62 and DC/N L 1/76.

<sup>96</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 August 1884.

<sup>97</sup> WGAS PTL UD/Ma/1/1-6, 1897-1915 and PTL B/PT 1/1, 1915-1921.

<sup>98</sup> WGAS D/D Ma (Margam Estate) and D/D BF (Briton Ferry Estate).

<sup>99</sup> For examples see WGAS D/D JVH (John Vivian Hughes collection), D/D LE (A.L. Evans collection) and D/D Z 25 (John Adams collection).

Maps are used throughout the thesis to enable a visualisation of the study area and to differentiate between the Borough of Aberavon and the urban area of Margam which was under the jurisdiction of the district council. Comparisons between earlier and later maps are used to demonstrate not only a general increase in residential and commercial properties but also a distinct narrowing of the distance between the communities on each side of the River Afan as seen in Maps A and B above. The map produced by the commissioners and included as Map A above provides a clear indication of the lack of development in the area in this early part of the period. Plans produced following harbour improvement Acts in 1834 and 1836 form part of Chapter One and demonstrate how the sale of corporation land at the docks and the subsequent creation of a new entrance channel within the Aberavon boundary helped contribute to the conflation of the two settlements.<sup>100</sup> The Margam Estate Survey of 1814 and the Aberavon Tithe Map of 1841 provide details of land ownership in the area at those times and Ordnance Survey maps published in 1884, 1900 and 1921 illustrate a sequence of urban development as well as a distinct municipal boundary line which cuts directly through the docks.<sup>101</sup>

Differences within and between the settlements after 1888 are emphasised by the inclusion of a number of photographs.<sup>102</sup> These were especially appropriate for comparative purposes during the period of rapid development on the eastern side of the river between 1889 and 1909 which is assessed in Chapter Four. Contemporary postcard photographs often acted as promotional material but lack of clarity regarding the boundary contributed to a number of inscriptions on the photographs being attributed to Port Talbot rather than Aberavon and *vice versa*. Familiarity with Aberavon was, therefore, an important factor in the use of the images but the captioning demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the study area.

A substantial amount of information has been obtained from local newspapers. From 1861, these sources were essential in identifying candidates, elected members and salaried officials and providing evidence of any political, religious or Masonic affiliation. Newspaper reports of council decisions and ratepayer meetings have been used extensively, as have letters to editors

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<sup>100</sup> Glamorgan Archives, Q/D/P/47 and Q/D/P/62.

<sup>101</sup> WGAS, D/D Ma E 1/1-2, Survey of the Margam Estate, by R.W. Hall, 1814, Map A and Apportionment; P/68 1-2, Tithe Map of Aberavon, 1841.

<sup>102</sup> Port Talbot Historical Society collection and WGAS, D/D DRPT 1/4, photograph album containing postcards of Port Talbot and Aberavon.

in comparison with official reports or official correspondence.<sup>103</sup> Advertising also reflected local economic circumstances such as the sale of surplus coal at the docks in 1832 or the presence of new villa-style properties in Aberavon in 1866.<sup>104</sup> The range and availability of news sources varied throughout the period being researched and can be separated into four main categories: digitised editions of Welsh newspapers available online and covering the period 1804-1919 using Welsh Newspapers Online (WNO); an online index to articles in *The Cambrian* for the period 1804-1881; *The Cambrian* on microfilm at WGAS in Swansea; and the British Newspaper Archive via the genealogy website Find My Past.<sup>105</sup> Newspaper articles frequently offered what appeared to be *verbatim* accounts of meetings and events but consideration was given to what might have been omitted from the commentaries. Correspondents often decided for themselves which items on Aberavon's agenda were worth reporting and accounts of meetings were frequently concluded with the declaration, 'There was no other business of public interest'.<sup>106</sup> Reports of council meetings were also dependent on the press being allowed access, and although Aberavon's committee meetings were opened to journalists from March 1889, full council meetings at MUDC were still being held *in camera* in August 1904.<sup>107</sup>

*The Cambrian* was the first weekly newspaper to be published in Wales and proved fundamental to this study of Aberavon. This Liberal-leaning newspaper was originally designed to promote commercial enterprise in Swansea. Circulation was extensive and covered 'the principal towns of South Wales, the West of England' and 'America, India and the British Colonies'.<sup>108</sup> *The Cambrian* regularly featured reports of council elections and meetings, local court cases, letters to the editor and accounts of government inquiries. With no English-language newspaper published in Aberavon itself, *The Cambrian* was an important source of local news as well as a declared supporter of incorporation.<sup>109</sup> The first daily newspaper published in Wales was *The Western Mail*, a Conservative publication which began circulating

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<sup>103</sup> For examples see J. Booth, (1833); G.D. Warburton, *Report by Captain Warburton on Petition of Inhabitants of Aberavon for a Municipal Charter*, House of Commons Copy dated 11 July 1854; J.F.D. Donnelly, *Reports on a Petition from the Borough of Aberavon for a Municipal Charter*, 1861; Letter from W. Ranger to Sir George Grey at the General Board of Health, 28 May 1863; and A.H. Williams, *Public Health in Mid-Victorian Wales: Correspondence from the Principality to the General Board of Health and the Local Government Office, 1848-1871*, (University of Wales, Board of Celtic Studies, 1983).

<sup>104</sup> *The Cambrian*, 7 April 1832, 19 February 1866 and 12 October 1866.

<sup>105</sup> The Cambrian Index Online, 1804-1881, <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/cambrian>; Welsh Newspapers Online, 1804-1919, <https://newspapers.library.wales/>; [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) (all accessed continually 2017-2021).

<sup>106</sup> For examples see *Weekly Mail*, 13 January 1883 and *South Wales Daily News*, 11 May 1878.

<sup>107</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 March 1889; *The Cambrian*, 12 August 1904.

<sup>108</sup> *The Cambrian* in Welsh Newspapers Online, National Library of Wales.

<sup>109</sup> For examples see editions on 23 November 1849, 8 July 1859 and 30 March 1860.



across Wales and the border counties in 1869; it was founded by John Crichton-Stuart, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marquess of Bute.<sup>110</sup> Both *The Cambrian* and *The Western Mail* included Welsh, British and international news stories. A weekly Welsh language newspaper called *Y Celt* (The Celt) was published in High Street, Aberavon for a short time between 1878 and 1902.<sup>111</sup> Politically radical and also produced in Bala, Llanelli, Caernarfon and other Welsh towns its main content was religious news and discussion.<sup>112</sup> Despite its local credentials, however, references to ‘Aberafan’ were rare in the publication period and none proved relevant to the thesis subject.<sup>113</sup> In contrast, the overt partiality of socialist newspapers established after 1911 such as *The Pioneer* and *Llais Llafur* (Labour Voice) contributed a great deal to the research by revealing the motivating forces which steered the Labour councillors of MUDC and Aberavon towards amalgamation. Newspaper content was also an important factor in the push towards amalgamation, and a series of extensive articles was presented by a special correspondent in June 1914.<sup>114</sup> Assessment of both the borough extension process and the inclination of former Aberavon councillors to demonstrate a continued commitment to Aberavon by contesting seats in the new Borough of Port Talbot were significant factors in this period of research. Reports of both nominations and results were missing from online sources but were discovered by searching the *South Wales Daily Post* on microfilm.

Nonconformity, usually a significant feature in case studies of Wales, does not form part of the research for this thesis. The topic was considered for inclusion but ultimately rejected as a singular component. Distinctions between some Liberal nonconformist and Conservative Anglican councillors were identified in newspaper reports of candidate nominations or locations of mayoral civic Sundays after 1861, which indicates how important such affiliations were to voters at the time. However, the research provided neither exhaustive nor conclusive evidence of how religious persuasion influenced ambitions within local government in Aberavon throughout the whole of the study period. Whilst Jackson’s 1957 thesis provides details of the growth in numbers of churches and nonconformist chapels in the area, direct links to elected members and their denominations are not specified until 1921.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> *The Western Mail* in Welsh Newspapers Online, National Library of Wales.

<sup>111</sup> *Kelly’s Directory (1895)* and Welsh Newspapers Online.

<sup>112</sup> Welsh Newspapers Online, National Library of Wales.

<sup>113</sup> Only 15 results were found for Aberafan using Welsh Newspapers Online for the period 1878-1902.

<sup>114</sup> *Herald of Wales*, 13 and 20 June 1914.

<sup>115</sup> P.W. Jackson, (1957), Table IX, p.195.

## Thesis Structure

The thesis is divided on a chronological basis into five chapters. Each chapter addresses pivotal points in the changing status of Aberavon between 1830 and 1921. In Chapter One, the actions of external agents with interests in land ownership and industry are identified as key factors in influencing the future of the borough. The chapter begins in 1830, the year C.R.M. Talbot, owner of the substantial Margam Estate and leaseholder to the primary local industries, was first elected to Westminster.<sup>116</sup> Original documents, contemporary reports and newspaper articles were employed to evaluate the hereditary corporation's lack of response to the consequences of local industrialisation.<sup>117</sup> As early as 1820 the area between Aberavon and Llanelli was producing 90% of Britain's copper,<sup>118</sup> but by mid-century the corporation's failure to adapt prompted the creation of a power vacuum which was filled by landowners and industrialists from outside Aberavon. Central to the premise of this chapter, therefore, were the private individuals and companies whose livelihoods were dependent on effective operations at the docks.<sup>119</sup> Decisions taken by Aberavon's corporation at this time were not only instrumental in extending private ownership of land at the docks but also contributed to the name of the port of Aberavon being surrendered in favour of 'Port Talbot'.<sup>120</sup> The chapter ends in 1848, significant as the year in which the Bank of England took over the running of the substantial English Copper Company works in Cwmavon and Aberavon's corporation secured a Market Act.<sup>121</sup> The following year, the concept of representative self-government was becoming popular in the borough as an indicator of modernisation and the first moves towards incorporation were made.

Chapter Two develops the theme of modernisation in Aberavon in the period 1849-1861 and begins at the time when public meetings to promote incorporation were first held in the town. The chapter demonstrates not only the individual contributions to incorporation campaigns made by immigrant inhabitants but also the extent of non-resident landowner and

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<sup>116</sup> WGAS D/D Ma E 1/1-2.

<sup>117</sup> For examples see J. Booth (1833), p.167; WGAS, RISW/GGF 20/50, W. Wylde (1831), pp.1-3; *Pigot's Directory* (1835), p.732; *Hunt & Co. Directory of South Wales* (1848); *The Cambrian*, 30 January 1836; WGAS, RISW/GGF 20/27, letter to the Board of Health from Margam Parish calling for the establishment of a local Board for Margam and Aberavon as a means of managing cholera outbreaks; NAS B/A 2/3; *The Cambrian*, 3 December 1842, court case in which two corporation members were described as persons in a low situation of life.

<sup>118</sup> J. Davies, (2007), p.342; *Pigot's Directory of South Wales*, (1835), p.732; see also R. Simmonds, (2012).

<sup>119</sup> 4 Gulielmi IV, *Cap. Xliiii*, (Aberavon Harbour Act), 1834; 6 Gulielmi IV, *Cap. Xcviii*, II, (Port Talbot Company created and port name changed to Port Talbot), 1836.

<sup>120</sup> TNA: PRO RAIL 573/1.

<sup>121</sup> 11 & 12 *Victoria Regina*, *Cap. Cxxxviii* (Aberavon Market Act).

industrialist influence on outcomes. Opposition by the hereditary corporation and its followers was significant. The chapter ends in July 1861, when a combination of qualified inhabitants, potential for wealth distribution as a result of trade at the docks and the predisposition of commissioners to recommend incorporation led to the granting of a charter of incorporation to Aberavon at its second formal attempt.<sup>122</sup>

The third chapter considers the formative years of Aberavon's new corporation from its inception in 1861. The works of historians such as Hennock, Garrard, Pritchard, Trainor and Doyle form the basis of this chapter, where it will be demonstrated that effective government was not dependent on councillors' occupations but on their individual characteristics as they negotiated the realities of elected office in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>123</sup> The likelihood of the new council achieving its ambitions in this period was influenced by three main factors: the characteristics and competencies of councillors; the influence of salaried officials; and the priorities and pressures of local government. Despite having to overcome numerous obstacles, including the continued challenges of the old corporation and its supporters, the more progressive members of Aberavon's council were keen to implement change and were often successful. The chapter also assesses efforts made by the new council to differentiate itself from its unelected predecessors by a commitment to improved public health and the deployment of visible expressions of power such as civic regalia.<sup>124</sup> Croll's interpretation of newspapers as 'civic boosters' and shaming mechanisms can be seen in reports of activities outside the council chamber of Aberavon.<sup>125</sup> Civic processions, for example, were reported extensively in local newspapers and contributed to a sense of identity and community. The chapter concludes with the creation of Glamorgan County Council under the Local Government Act of 1888, a measure which established a new tier of local government with responsibilities for oversight which central government was reluctant to enact directly.

Chapter Four examines the years 1889 to 1909 which formed a pivotal period in Aberavon's history due to a period of rapid industrial development at and around Port Talbot docks following the death of C.R.M. Talbot in 1890.<sup>126</sup> Despite incorporation, Aberavon's status in

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<sup>122</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861).

<sup>123</sup> E.P.Hennock (1973), p.332-3; J. Garrard (1983); J.W. Pritchard (1994); R. Trainor (1993 and 2000); and B.M. Doyle (2018).

<sup>124</sup> See P. O'Leary (2012).

<sup>125</sup> A. Croll (2000), p.11 and p.60.

<sup>126</sup> C. Baber, 'The Subsidiary Industries of Glamorgan' in *Glamorgan County History Volume V* (1980), pp.211-275; T. Boyns, D. Thomas and C. Baber (1980), pp.97-154; W.E. Minchinton, (ed.), *Industrial South Wales 1750-1914: Essays in Welsh Economic History*, (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1969); W.E.

relation to its neighbour on the other side of the river had become precarious and this situation was reflected in public anxieties for many of its long-standing councillors.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, news outlets began constructing particular functional identities for the two settlements.<sup>128</sup> In an effort to consolidate its position, amalgamation proposals by borough extension began to be raised again by Aberavon in this period but despite a strong pro-amalgamation Labour presence on MUDC the overtures were consistently rejected.<sup>129</sup> The chapter concludes at a point where Aberavon's identity and sense of place were becoming increasingly obscure but the primacy of industrialists as elected representatives in the urban district was under threat from a growing number of councillors drawn from the workforce.

The final chapter examines the critical factors which from 1910-1921 influenced Aberavon's decision to relinquish its historic name and extend the borough boundaries to incorporate the urban areas of Margam and Cwmavon. It will be demonstrated that in this period local authorities, including those of Aberavon and Port Talbot, utilised what Stobart called 'cultural capital' as a means of promoting their communities in anticipation of potential amalgamation.<sup>130</sup> The chapter also considers how local identities were influenced by inward migration at this time and assesses how these factors shaped attitudes to amalgamation. The emergence of a distinct Labour party and its success at local government level will be examined in relation to economic circumstances associated with the First World War and its aftermath. Of particular significance in this period was the power vacuum created in Margam after the 1918 death of the owner of Margam Estate which coincided with Aberavon councillors' decision to co-opt a non-resident local industrialist as mayor. The chapter reveals the complex nature of amalgamation negotiations at this time and culminates with the formation of the Borough of Port Talbot on 9 November 1921.

The thesis highlights a number of important implications for the understanding of local government and changing borough status in Britain in this period. Ambitions and influences were not fixed and could change over time, as did central government's trust in the abilities of local governments: by 1921 permissive legislation and the principles of *laissez-faire* had been

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Minchinton, *The British Tinplate Industry: A History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); R. Lawrence, *The Collieries of the Afan Valley and the Port Talbot Areas*, (Blackwood: Ray Lawrence, 2008); R.S. Craig, (1980); and R. Simmonds (2012).

<sup>127</sup> *The South Wales Daily Post*, 21 March 1898; *The Cambrian*, 18 May 1900.

<sup>128</sup> *The Cambrian*, 16 June 1899 and 1 June 1900.

<sup>129</sup> *The Cambrian*, 13 December 1901; *Evening Express*, 23 February 1899; *Cardiff Times*, 17 January 1903; and *The Cambrian*, 17 May 1901.

<sup>130</sup> J. Stobart (2003).

abandoned and the municipalities had become the delivery arm of central government. In many ways, MUDC became the delivery arm of both central government and landed interests and it is hardly surprising that in the years during and after the First World War the Labour members of the council were impatient for change. No automatic, linear progression to incorporation existed, as the history of Merthyr Tydfil shows, neither was the quality of councillors determined by their occupations. Similarly, as the period of stagnation at Port Talbot docks up to 1890 will show, possession of great wealth and resources did not guarantee investment and improvement.

Urban growth as a result of inward migration had the capacity to fracture local identities, but the circumstances also existed for historical rivalries to bolster attachments to particular localities. In Aberavon, the inability to establish and maintain a distinct identity in the face of growing competition from Port Talbot after 1890 contributed to the loss of the borough name, but this outcome was aided and abetted by influential individuals and groups from both within and outside the boundaries of Aberavon. Transition to municipal borough in Aberavon had not been initiated by an existing corporation eager to modernise in tandem with its industrial neighbours. Resistant to change, corporation members joined with ratepayers in opposing schemes for incorporation and in doing so opened the way for reformers. In this sense, Aberavon was typical of ancient boroughs which gained incorporated status and where new councils were populated by reformist businessmen who were often non-native to the area.<sup>131</sup> Conversely, in Swansea, Bristol and Southampton little difference was evident between pre- and post-incorporation governments.<sup>132</sup>

At the start of the study period, a power vacuum was created by a corporation in Aberavon that was indifferent to both the needs of its inhabitants and the enormous social changes that were taking place as a result of industrialisation. That vacuum was filled initially by industrialists before inhabitant reformers helped create the conditions required for elected self-government. By the end of the study period the old corporation's 1836 decision to sell land around the port and thereby allow its name to be changed had impacted Aberavon's identity and status. Furthermore, fluctuations in central government's relationship with local authorities presented both threats and opportunities at a local level. The ways in which elected members and local elites managed those changes were important indicators of future success. Individuals

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<sup>131</sup> See G. Eaton (1975).

<sup>132</sup> J. Prest (1990), cited in Miskell p.133.

and groups were far more than the delivery arm of central government. This thesis therefore contributes to studies of urbanisation in a small Welsh town by presenting an examination of how local government was challenged, influenced and modified during periods of rapid industrialisation and social change.

## Chapter One

### Industrialisation and Economic Influence: Aberavon 1830-1848

This opening chapter examines the period in which the ancient borough of Aberavon and its port first experienced substantial change as a response to increased industrialisation in neighbouring settlements to the north and east. Drivers of change at this time were external agents: industrialists based outside the town whose business interests centred around the port, where much of the land was owned and leased by C.R.M. Talbot, M.P. for Glamorgan. The borough corporation, as the key agency within the town with the potential to influence or mitigate the effects of others' economic and industrial ambitions, was ill-equipped to deal with the demands of early-nineteenth century government and consequently it was the will of the outside agencies which prevailed.

Corporation motivation in Aberavon was based firmly on hereditary rights and privileges, a system which led to the sale of corporation land at the docks and paved the way for the passing of a key Act of Parliament in 1836 which changed the name of the port from Aberavon to Port Talbot. The chapter's key aim, therefore, is to assess the extent to which Aberavon's hereditary corporation was responsible for initiating the growth of Port Talbot and its surrounding settlement, thereby laying the foundations for Aberavon's decline almost a century before the new Borough of Port Talbot was created. Research has revealed that corporation involvement in port activities varied according to location. In Neath, for example, the portreeve retained substantial tolls and port dues.<sup>1</sup> Swansea's corporation had established a new harbour trust in 1791 which included representation from corporation members as well as local industrialists and manufacturers.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Aberavon's historic harbour had no connections to the corporation and in 1834 began to be operated solely by a private company called the 'Aberavon Harbour Company'. By 1836, the sale of corporation land around the harbour meant that the dock's new name of 'Port Talbot' had begun to gain traction and local industrialists became the prime drivers and agents of change. The sale opened the way for the name of the dock's operating company to be changed by Act to the 'Port Talbot Company'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Booth (1833), p.334

<sup>2</sup> L. Miskell, (2006), p.36

<sup>3</sup> 6 Gulielmi IV, *Cap.* Xcviii, II. "An Act to alter and amend an Act of His present Majesty for improving the Port and Harbour of *Aberavon* in the County of *Glamorgan*, to further improve the said Harbour, and to change its Name" (4 July 1836).

The chapter is divided into three sections: industrial expansion; the revised transport infrastructure; and the impact of industrialisation on the town of Aberavon. The first section will examine the growth of numerous industrial works in settlements adjacent to Aberavon and assess the burden this placed on the small, ill-equipped port where the industries' raw materials and finished products were shipped. Section two develops the theme of growth by considering the impact of local railway development. The railways stimulated population growth in both Aberavon and the surrounding areas and also created new job opportunities. Focus on transportation of freight by water shifted towards rail networks and transportation on dry land, and as a consequence financial interests in ports were often supplemented by involvement in railways.<sup>4</sup> Under the chairmanship of C.R.M. Talbot the route of the new South Wales Railway was devised but was projected to run directly through the burgeoning town of Aberavon, dividing the site of a proposed new market into two. Highlighting the influence of Talbot and the industrialists, the new railway station was to be sited further east, on Talbot's land and with convenient access to the docks. The third section, therefore, examines how the consequences of industrialisation impacted on the small town of Aberavon and how its inhabitants, including the corporation, reacted to the changes in their midst. Developments at the port resulted in population increases for Aberavon and heightened demand for goods and services. Furthermore, the absence of public buildings in Aberavon and a reluctance by the governing body to properly fund their construction demonstrate that the ambitions of industrialists far exceeded those of the corporation. In selling its lands to both the Port Talbot Company and the South Wales Railway, the corporation was complicit in diminishing the scope and status of the ancient borough.

### **Industrial Expansion**

The significance of Aberavon at the start of this period lay in its coastal position and the fact that it gave its name to the small but ancient harbour which offered access to and from the Bristol Channel. Larger vessels were unable to negotiate the narrow River Afan, but the neighbouring Customs port of Swansea acted as a hub through which both raw materials and the products of the nearby tin, copper, iron and zinc works could be transported to and from Aberavon in smaller ships. The industrial centres were concentrated in two distinct locations: Cwmavon, about two miles to the north of Aberavon, and Taibach, situated about one-and-a-half miles to the east of Aberavon in the Parish of Margam (see Map A).<sup>5</sup> The start of this

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<sup>4</sup> R.S. Craig, (1980), p.486.

<sup>5</sup> Distances taken from *Slater's Directory of South Wales, (1868)*.



period, therefore, coincides with the recognition by both industrialists and landowners that increased trade and profit were dependent on them making major improvements to Aberavon's harbour. Coal, tinsplate and copper works had become important features of the south Wales economy a hundred years earlier, operated originally by Welsh landowners and then by English capitalists eager to profit from the production of munitions for foreign wars.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, reciprocal arrangements developed between works in Cornwall and the Aberavon area whereby Cornish copper ores were imported and Welsh coal exported, allowing works located on both sides of the Bristol Channel to flourish. By 1820, ninety per cent of Britain's copper was being produced in the Aberavon and Swansea area and the harbour at Aberavon came under increasing pressure to accommodate more and larger vessels.<sup>7</sup> Described in 1835 as 'a haven for small vessels' the port had become unfit for purpose and could not deal adequately with the products of works which had grown to 'a scale of great magnitude'.<sup>8</sup> This section, therefore, identifies the agents whose ambitions were instrumental in the drive to develop the harbour, and evaluates their actions in the context of their influence and interests.

Historically, the natural course of the River Afan made access to the inner wharves of the harbour extremely difficult (see Map 1.1). Incoming vessels for works at Cwmavon were required to negotiate a sandbar at the entrance to the harbour then follow the river along a shallow inlet.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, vessels which operated for the English Copper Company (ECC) at Taibach were relatively better placed due to the works and wharf being situated at the widest section of the river mouth. The ECC had been established by Act of Parliament in 1691 and owned copper mines in Cornwall as well as a copper works at Redbrook, Monmouthshire.<sup>10</sup> In 1742 they bought the Melincrythan Copper Works at Neath from Herbert Mackworth, then in 1770 the company responded to increased demand for copper by leasing land from C.R.M. Talbot's father to build the 'larger and more modern works' alongside a new quay at Taibach.<sup>11</sup> As that demand continued and new coal levels were opened, the small settlement of Taibach began to be transformed. Previously 'a few thatched cottages' where the occupation of the 'few inhabitants was mainly pastoral', the settlement became a thriving industrial community.<sup>12</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> A.H. John, *The Industrial Development of South Wales 1750-1850: An Essay*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1950), pp.24-26.

<sup>7</sup> J. Davies, (2007), p.342.

<sup>8</sup> *Pigot's Directory of South Wales*, (1835).

<sup>9</sup> D. Northcott, *Sea Trade in the Aberavon Area*, (Port Talbot: Andreas Haas & Son, 2009) p.14.

<sup>10</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p.11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14; also WGAS D/D LE/X 3, copy counterpart lease for 31 years from 25 March 1818 dated 19 June 1823.

<sup>12</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p.14.

the early years of the nineteenth century, following the expansion of the works and the building of workmen's cottages by the company, the population had increased to over a thousand, far surpassing that of the 'insignificant village' of Aberavon, where the population was just over 300.<sup>13</sup>

As early as 1811, the 32 furnaces at Taibach works were said to have used 70 tons of coal a day, with the coal and shipping trade being stimulated to such an extent that 50 tons of Cornish ore were regularly brought in by ships which then returned to Cornwall with cargoes of coal.<sup>14</sup> Naturalist Edward Donovan had visited Taibach in 1804 where he was impressed with the copper works but struck by the 'dirty appearance of the place and its inhabitants' and the fact that he was unable to find accommodation at the only inn due to 'captains of vessels and their mates'.<sup>15</sup> Donovan's comments underline the extent to which industry and shipping had already started to shape Taibach. Establishment of a charity school in 1829 and a works school by the ECC in 1830 demonstrated a commitment to the future workforce in Taibach.<sup>16</sup> New tinplate mills at Cwmavon had also begun producing blackplate for export.<sup>17</sup> Copper smelting's long-established presence in Taibach stimulated a competitive desire for profit in Cwmavon, where access to the sea depended on a system of tramways and railroads between the works and their wharves at Aberavon. The construction and operation of both the works and tramways were dependent on the acquisition of agreeable leases from shrewd local landowners. In Aberavon, Taibach and Cwmavon land ownership at the start of the period was divided between four main parties: the burgesses of Aberavon; Margam Estate; Briton Ferry Estate and the Gnoll Estate (see Map 1.1).<sup>18</sup> Land to the south and west of the harbour was in the possession of Aberavon Corporation.

Transportation arrangements between individual works and their wharves at Aberavon harbour made the experiences of industrialists in Cwmavon very different from those of the ECC, which was conveniently located at the quayside in Taibach. As a result, it was challenges as well as opportunities which influenced involvement in the dock improvements. The small settlement of Cwmavon consisted originally of mainly scattered farms and cottages and land

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.20 and p.10.

<sup>14</sup> Carlisle's Topographical Dictionary, quoted in Phillips, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p. 20.

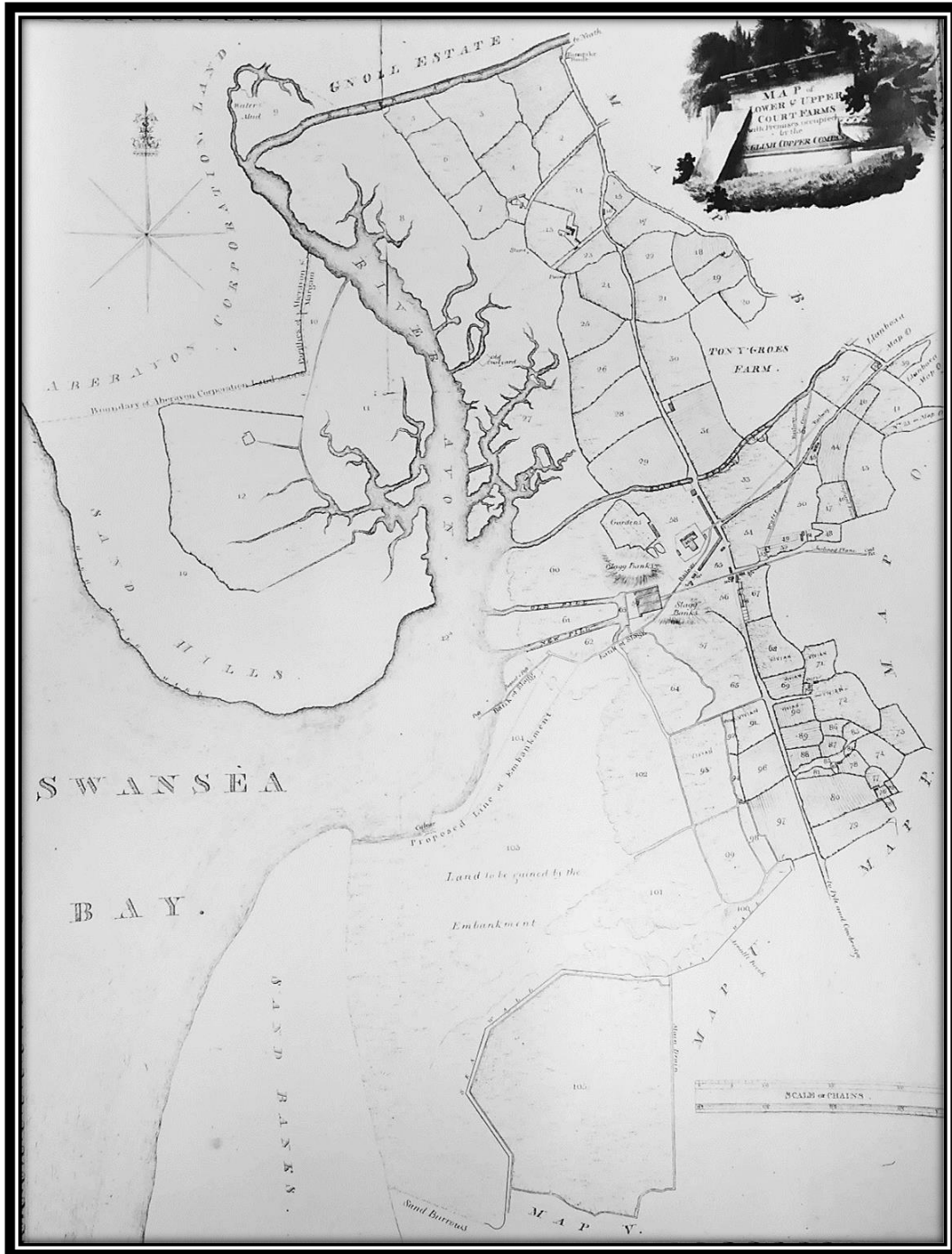
<sup>16</sup> Port Talbot Historical Society, Timeline of the History of Aberavon and Port Talbot.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> West Glamorgan Archive Service (WGAS) D/D Ma E 1/1-2, Survey of the Margam Estate, by R.W. Hall, 1814, Map A and Apportionment.

ownership was divided between the Margam, Gnoll and Briton Ferry estates. Potential dock tramway routes were, therefore, the subject of negotiation between the relevant Cwmavon

**Map 1.1: Margam Estate Survey 1814 showing Aberavon Corporation Land**



Source: WGAS, D/D Ma E 1/1-2, Map A

landowner(s) and Aberavon Corporation. In negotiating terms for Londoner Samuel Fothergill Lettsom to construct a tramway between the docks and his new iron works in Cwmavon in 1818 the status-conscious corporation included a requirement for Lettsom to provide them with

a town hall.<sup>19</sup> However, Lettsom was unable to sustain the finance needed to complete the iron works project and by the summer of 1820 he was declared bankrupt.<sup>20</sup> The bankruptcy thwarted construction of a town hall and the strength of feeling in the corporation can be illustrated by the fact that in April 1824 Aberavon's Overseers of the Highway were instructed to 'forbid' Lettsom's successors at the works to lay a tramroad.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, iron production continued in Cwmavon after Lettsom, firstly under the ownership of Messrs. Vigurs and Smith and later under Vigurs as sole proprietor then from 1835 in association with another two Cornishmen, Batten and James. Vigurs was not only ambitious but also aware of the potential for profit and expansion in Cwmavon. A background in Cornish tin and copper industries contributed to confidence in his ability to run successful operations in Cwmavon. An existing tinplate works was transferred to Cwmavon from the Vale of Neath and in 1824 he had overcome Aberavon's objections sufficiently to have successfully established a 'horse-drawn tramway which ran the three miles from his works to a wharf he had built on the west bank of the River Afan' – the only wharf situated on land owned by the Portreeve, Aldermen and Burgesses of Aberavon rather than the Margam Estate.<sup>22</sup> Vigurs' desire to compete with the ECC was clear and by 1832 he had begun negotiations with the Corporation to lease land at Aberavon Burrows on which he planned to build a copper works.<sup>23</sup> However, the Corporation intended to sell the land to the harbour company and Vigurs' Burrows plan was abandoned in 1835 in favour of further expansion at Cwmavon with new partners. As new tin, copper and iron works developed in Cwmavon so new coal mines were opened up to provide fuel for the furnaces. Labour-intensive iron production had attracted workers to Cwmavon for the past fifteen years and the population had increased dramatically. The 1821 Census reported just 207 inhabitants but by 1831 the figure had risen to 793; ten years later it was more than two thousand and almost double that of Aberavon.<sup>24</sup>

Just north of Cwmavon a new and extensive ironworks had been built at Oakwood by John Reynolds. Reynolds was an enterprising engineer who had completed some of the work left

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<sup>19</sup> See WGAS D/D Je 59, Case for the opinion of Mr Shadwell, on behalf of the Corporation of Aberavon, reciting a Lease for 99 years for £3 annual rent dated 7 Dec. 1818, between the Portreeve, Aldermen and Burgesses of the Borough of Avon to Samuel Fothergill Lettsom. Note: Shadwell was Sir Lancelot Shadwell, barrister at Lincoln's Inn and M.P. for Ripon from 1826 to 1827, when he became Vice-Chancellor of England.

<sup>20</sup> *The Cambrian*, 10 June 1820.

<sup>21</sup> J. O'Brien, (1926), p.96. Note: a full quote from the Parish Accounts of 19 April 1824 is provided which is worthy of further research but no source has been quoted.

<sup>22</sup> D. Northcott (2009), p.14.

<sup>23</sup> WGAS D/D LE/X 105, Draft Counterpart Lease dated 31<sup>st</sup> December 1832.

<sup>24</sup> Population of Margam and District 1801-1891, cited in I.G. Jones (1992), p. 285.

undone by Lettsom in his 1818 agreement and had built an aqueduct to carry water from the river to his blast furnaces.<sup>25</sup> In 1831, the company of Reynolds Bros., made up of John and his brother Thomas, was advertising surplus coal from the works for sale at its wharf at 'Taibach, Aberavon'.<sup>26</sup> This third wharf was situated on Talbot's land in the parish of Margam but rail access between the works and the sea would have passed over Corporation land. The construction and operation of a third wharf illustrates the point that even though works owners invested in facilities at the docks, no co-ordinated approach was being taken: each works operated its own tramway, each was governed by the terms of its own leases and each had its own wharf. The Reynolds brothers had no leases over coal close to their works and were in the unenviable position of having to purchase all their coal from the ECC.<sup>27</sup> The virtuous circle which had begun to be formed by increased production and increased employment was therefore hampered by two factors: the limitations at the small harbour and the failure of the principal industrial and landowning actors to develop an integrated, mutually beneficial transport infrastructure. These factors contributed to the ECC's 1833 decision to become party to a four-way agreement with Talbot, John Vigurs, and Thomas Reynolds of the Oakwood works which was designed to increase profit and efficiency by substantially improving dock facilities at Aberavon.

By 1833, then, it had become apparent that improvement work on the harbour was essential but much was dependent on the goodwill of landowner C.R.M. Talbot. Talbot had inherited the substantial Margam and Penrice estates from his father, Thomas Mansel Talbot, and his enormous wealth in land and property despite the lack of a title had earned him the epithet 'the wealthiest commoner'.<sup>28</sup> Talbot was academic, scientific (a Fellow of the Royal Society) and had earned a first-class honours degree in Mathematics at Oxford. However, his willingness to fund large projects, such as the harbour improvement and the building of his new Margam residence, was balanced by a distinct sense of thrift. Having rejected a minor harbour improvement plan in 1830 on the grounds of its £34,000 estimated costs, Talbot appears to have been determined to ensure that spending was kept to a minimum.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See WGAS D/D Je 59.

<sup>26</sup> *The Cambrian*, 10 September 1831.

<sup>27</sup> Compilation publication entitled *Reports, Valuation, and Estimates Relative to the Oakwood Coal and Iron Company, Port Talbot, Glamorganshire*, (1839: A.H. Bailey Ltd.), p.11, held at the Special Collections Library, Cardiff University.

<sup>28</sup> *The Cambrian*, 29 July 1881 (unattributed); *Western Mail*, 18 January 1890 (obituary); and J.V. Hughes, (1977).

<sup>29</sup> R. Simmonds (2012), p.59.

Civil engineer Henry H. Price, who had designed plans for the improvement of Swansea harbour in 1831, was commissioned to draw up plans for the new Aberavon harbour which included diverting, deepening and straightening the problematic entrance channel to the docks; the convoluted route to the inner wharves, however, remained unchanged (see Map 1.2).<sup>30</sup> Price had previously been involved in plans for harbour and river improvements in Ireland as well as the north of England, where he was employed by the Tees Navigation Company; he was also ‘engaged extensively in iron works and collieries in south Wales’.<sup>31</sup> The planned new channel to the dock offered ‘greater depth than at either Neath or Swansea’ and provided not only increased potential profit for its investors but also improved status for the area in the highly competitive sea trade sector of the time.<sup>32</sup>

The eventual improvement Act was passed on 16 June 1834 and created a new body called ‘The Aberavon Harbour Company’. No mention was made of the Corporation in the 38-page Act, despite its status as landowner, which suggests that either no interest was expressed or that the members were excluded by the industrialists.<sup>33</sup> A petition of opposition was submitted from the Corporation of Bristol, however, against ‘certain parts’ of the Bill which could have placed Bristol at a disadvantage regarding trade in the Channel.<sup>34</sup> In January 1835, Bristol Chamber of Commerce discussed ‘preventing advantage being taken of the port of Bristol’ following Bills put forward by Aberavon, Newport and the Bute Ship Canal.<sup>35</sup> Palmer has asserted that Bristol had been declining as a port from the late eighteenth century due to loss of trade to Liverpool; difficult river access at Bristol compounded the problem.<sup>36</sup> Unlike at Bristol, where port dues had increased nine-fold between 1770 and 1823, harbour charges at Aberavon and the docks which in 1836 would become known as Port Talbot remained consistently low and in later years would be stated as being ‘lower at this port than at any other in the channel’(see below).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, 26 October 1833; Glamorgan Archives, reference Q/D/P/47 dated November 1833; Miskell (2006), p.145.

<sup>31</sup> *Durham Chronicle*, 15 August, 1829; see also *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, 21 March 1835 and 28 March 1835 for the dissolution of Price’s partnerships in iron and coal interests near Swansea.

<sup>32</sup> R. Simmonds (2012), p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> 4 Gulielmi IV, *Cap.* Xliii.

<sup>34</sup> *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, 19 April 1834. Bristol’s precise objections cannot be ascertained as their original petition was destroyed by a fire at the Palace of Westminster in October 1834.

<sup>35</sup> *Bristol Mirror*, 31 January 1835.

<sup>36</sup> S. Palmer, ‘Ports’ in M.J. Daunton, (2018), pp.133-150, p.141.

<sup>37</sup> *Webster’s Trade Directory (1865)* and *Worrall’s Directory, (1875)*; see also G. Bush, *Bristol and Its Municipal Government 1820-1851*, (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1976).

In keeping with the clauses of the Act, funds already promised were raised by public subscription, but 'not exceeding . . . the Sum of Twelve thousand Pounds' by way of 'Shares of One hundred Pounds each'; shareholders were also deemed to be proprietors.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the company was empowered to borrow up to 'Nine thousand Pounds' in mortgages.<sup>39</sup> By May 1834 the ECC had purchased shares to the value of £5,800, making them the majority shareholders; John Vigurs took £1,000, Thomas Reynolds £200, and C.R.M. Talbot £5,000.<sup>40</sup> Public perceptions of Talbot's involvement in the dock improvements contributed to a distinct notion of proprietary rights. Talbot was a keen yachtsman, and in October 1834 it was reported that when his 'magnificent schooner' *Galatea* was brought in for the winter it was towed into 'Mr. Talbot's own Port, (Aberavon)' and was greeted by a 21-gun salute and cheers from the many Aberavon inhabitants who had waited at the dock to view the arrival.<sup>41</sup> Despite these perceptions, Talbot's role in the 1834 improvements had been that of facilitator. Local industrialists had taken an active interest in the docks and had invested time and money so that the works and the livelihoods of employees were protected. Talbot's interest was far less direct and centred on the prospect of dividends from shares. The importance of his influence, however, should not be underestimated. The second stage of development at the docks, whether calculated or not, would have far-reaching consequences for the stability and status of the ancient borough of Aberavon by altering the course of the River Afan and changing the name of the docks to Port Talbot.

Price's plan to deepen the existing channel proved ineffective and was of little benefit to the Cwmavon companies (see Map 1.2). A more radical solution was put forward and incorporated into a new Bill which included plans to raise and borrow much-needed capital. Civil engineer Henry Robinson Palmer's designs included the cutting of a new entrance channel, construction of a floating dock accessed via a lock 45-feet wide, and the fabrication of a half-mile-long pier made of copper slag which would maintain the integrity of the channel (the new cut is shown on Map 1.3).<sup>42</sup> The River Afan would therefore be diverted to flow into the sea through this direct channel, and the old harbour entrance near the ECC wharf would be blocked up; a new weir would maintain the water levels.<sup>43</sup> Having agreed the sale of land,

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<sup>38</sup> 4 Gulielmi IV, *Cap.* Xliiii, XXXV and XL.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, XLI.

<sup>40</sup> The National Archives, (TNA) PRO RAIL, 573/1-3, Minute Books of the Port Talbot Company.

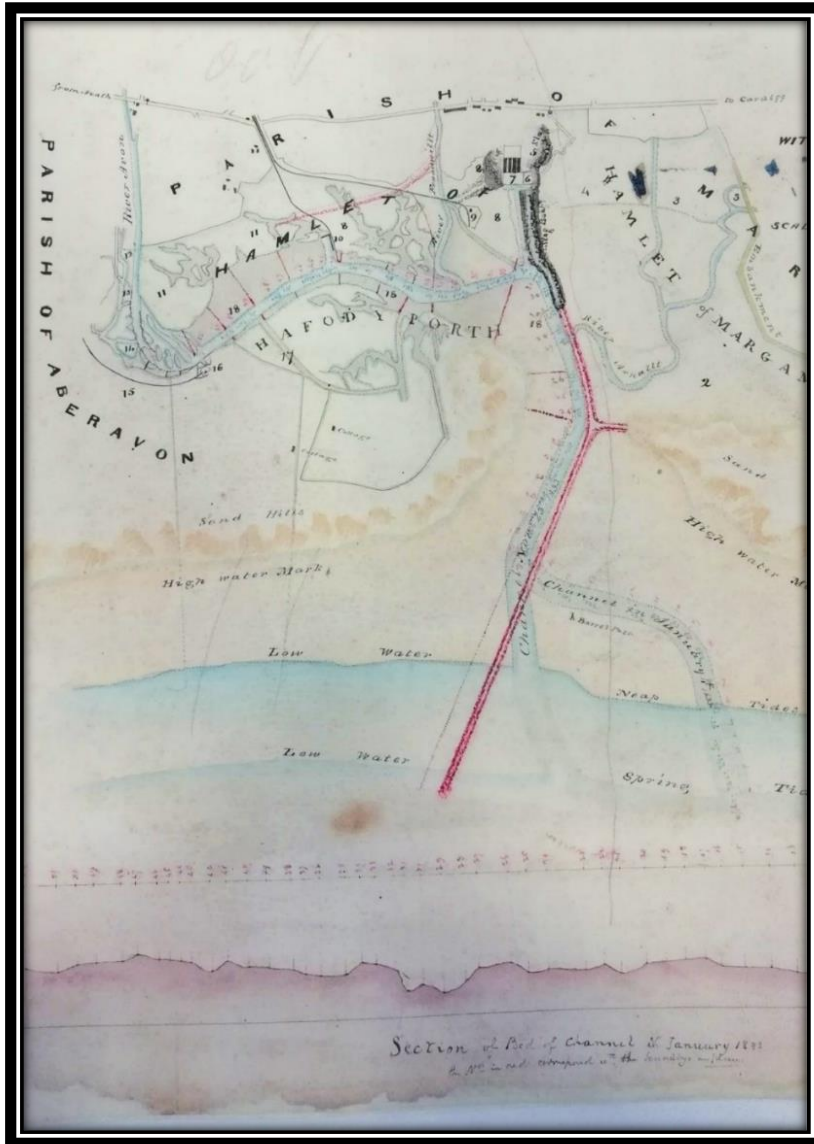
<sup>41</sup> *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, 4 October 1834.

<sup>42</sup> Glamorgan Archives Q/D/P/58 (1835) and Q/D/P/62 (1836).

<sup>43</sup> R. Simmonds (2012), p. 60.

Aberavon Corporation appears to have taken no further part in any recorded discussions regarding the harbour.

**Map 1.2: November 1833 Plan of Aberavon Harbour with improvements proposed by Henry. H. Price, C.E.**



Source: Glamorgan Archives, Q/D/P/47

Henry Palmer had been a founding member of the Institute of Civil Engineers and had worked with Thomas Telford. In the mid-1830s he moved to Westminster where he became a consultant involved in proposals for railways, docks and harbours and it is likely that this is where he and C.R.M. Talbot met.<sup>44</sup> In February 1836, at the same time as he presented an improvement Bill on behalf of trustees of the harbour at Swansea, copper smelter John Henry

<sup>44</sup> *The Cambrian*, 5 April 1845 (obituary).



Vivian, M.P. for the Swansea District which included Aberavon, introduced a Bill for the further improvement of the port and harbour of Aberavon.<sup>45</sup> The new Act enabled the company to raise a 'further Capital Sum of Eighteen thousand Pounds . . . 'divided into Shares of One hundred Pounds each' and to borrow money 'not exceeding the Sum of Twenty-five thousand Pounds, by Mortgage'.<sup>46</sup> Physical improvements in the Bill were extensive and matched similar harbour developments taking place in other coastal towns in south Wales: floating docks were either in place or under construction in Newport, Pembrey, Llanelli and Cardiff in the 1830s.<sup>47</sup>

### Map 1.3 'Plan for the improvement of Aberavon Harbour' 1836



Source: Glamorgan Archives Q/D/P/62

<sup>45</sup> *The Cambrian*, 28 November 1835 and 27 February 1836.

<sup>46</sup> 6 Gulielmi IV, Cap. Xcviii, XV & XVII.

<sup>47</sup> For examples see *The Cambrian*, 19 July 1834 (Llanelli); *The Welshman*, 9 January 1835 (Cardiff); *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 20 June 1835 (Newport); and *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, 9 January 1836 (Pembrey).

To minimise costs for the 'few private individuals' undertaking the scheme, rather than use manual labour Palmer accepted the proposal of John Vigurs to cut the new channel, by necessity one mile long and 100 feet wide, using the regular heavy land flood which flowed off the mountain.<sup>48</sup> This natural scouring process eroded the land between the sea and the proposed new dock and was completed in May 1837 after a period of five weeks.<sup>49</sup> Initial work on the cut had required the employment of more than two hundred men and Vigurs had invested heavily in his works and the docks.<sup>50</sup> The revised share allocation for the total £30,000 under the 1836 Act showed that Vigurs' holding had increased from 10 to 50 shares of £100 each. Talbot held 49 shares, Thomas Reynolds maintained just two shares, but the disadvantaged ECC had cut its shareholding from 58 to just 9, allowing seven additional shareholders to take up the remaining 190. The original four parties to the 1834 Act were no longer in the majority, but Vigurs had become a driving force at the docks. It has been documented that despite the financial parameters of the 1834 and 1836 Acts, the cost of the floating dock was close to £100,000 and said to be 'mainly financed' by Vigurs.<sup>51</sup>

Despite denials by the corporation in their later charter opposition petitions, the combined impact of industrial expansion and major improvements at the docks led to exponential growth in the Aberavon population, which experienced a more than four-fold increase between 1831 and 1851, when it reached 2,380.<sup>52</sup> Census abstracts recorded that the increase was 'attributed partly to an extension of the coal, copper, iron and tin works in the neighbourhood; and since 1831 partly to the formation of a floating harbour'.<sup>53</sup> Aberavon Corporation had itself made the cutting of the new entrance channel possible by negotiating the sale of land near the docks to the new Port Talbot Harbour Company.

Origins of the name Port Talbot appear to be self-evident: Talbot's land ownership in and around the docks confirmed his proprietorial status and he appears to have had no qualms in giving the port his name under the 1836 Act. No records have yet been located which clearly show the use of 'Port Talbot' to describe any area in Margam or Aberavon prior to 1836,

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<sup>48</sup> H.R. Palmer, 'Description of the Harbour of Port Talbot (Glamorganshire)', *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers*, 2.1842 (1842), 188-189.

<sup>49</sup> *The Times*, 17 May 1837, cited in R. Simmonds, (2012), p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, 22 October 1836.

<sup>51</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> TNA PC1/1509, 1849, Corporation Petition of Opposition to Incorporation; Census of England and Wales, 1851.

<sup>53</sup> Census of England and Wales, 1851: 'Abstract of Answers and Returns', Note: p.584.

although two documents are believed to contain that reference.<sup>54</sup> It has also been suggested that ECC directors named the new port after Talbot in recognition of his cooperation, but no evidence has been found to substantiate this claim.<sup>55</sup> A precedent had been set in Swansea, when following the 1824 construction of his eponymous canal which joined the Neath Canal Basin to Swansea Bay and provided a connection between the tinsplate works and the docks, George Tennant had been honoured by local traders who gave the name 'Port Tennant' to the dockside area where the canal met the sea.<sup>56</sup> As his work was privately funded Tennant required no Act of Parliament to sanction either the canal building or the naming of the port. Tennant's son, Charles, was M.P. for St. Albans between 1830 and 1833; both he and C.R.M. Talbot had been elected for the first time in 1830, and although their ages differed by seven years (Tennant being the elder of the two) they had both attended Harrow School.<sup>57</sup> How influenced Talbot was by George Tennant's actions is unclear, but the crucial aspect of the 1836 Act was that despite the proposed entrance channel to the new dock being situated in the Parish of Aberavon and within the municipal boundary, the second paragraph of the Act was the crucial clause which changed the name of Aberavon Harbour to 'Port Talbot'.<sup>58</sup>

After the passing of the Act the Company's first meeting was held on 26 July 1836 at the Walnut Tree Inn, Aberavon.<sup>59</sup> Resolutions were passed regarding share allocation; a request for the ECC's approval in writing of Palmer's plans; and the acceptance of a valuation of £525 (five hundred guineas) for 'land belonging to the Corporation of Aberavon'.<sup>60</sup> The purchase had been agreed with the Portreeve at a previous meeting chaired by John Vigurs and was subsequently included in the 1836 Act; no Corporation representatives were present at the 26 July meeting.<sup>61</sup> The land concerned was vital to the new company's designs but, as will be shown below, the corporation's claim to ownership may well have been spurious.<sup>62</sup> Having

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<sup>54</sup> See F. Jux, 'South Wales Snippets, Part 32: More Notes on Cwmavon', *The Industrial Locomotive*, 12/4 (2007), p. 101, cited in R. Simmonds, (2012), p.5. The article itself cites 1850 sale details of the Cwmavon Works in *Mining Journal* and refers to an 1818 lease said to include the words 'Port Talbot'. WGAS D/D Je 59 of 1823 recites details of that lease but 'Port Talbot' is not named, neither is it mentioned in the transcript of the 1818 lease held by the Bank of England under reference F12/28. See also National Library of Wales, P/M 3839, a parcel of drawings and designs for improvements to the Talbot home in Margam dated 1794, with memoranda relating to them where a handwritten reference is made to either 'Port Talbot' or 'Fort Talbot'.

<sup>55</sup> A.L. Evans, *Margam Abbey*, 2nd edn., (Port Talbot: Port Talbot Historical Society, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> *The Cambrian*, 17 July 1824, p.3.

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/> accessed 16 November 2018 and 14 April 2021.

<sup>58</sup> 6 Gulielmi IV, *Cap.* Xcviii, II.

<sup>59</sup> TNA: PRO RAIL 573/1, Minute Book A4, 26 July 1836.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, and 6 Gulielmi IV, *Cap.* Xcviii, X.

<sup>62</sup> WGAS, D/D BF 927: Correspondence (copy) between Chas. Tennant and Lord Jersey regarding the burgesses of Aberavon and Aberavon Sandhills (not dated, c. October 1840).

relinquished the land, the corporation also renounced any responsibility for the development of the harbour, which, despite its geographical location passed completely into the hands of the new Port Talbot Harbour Company.

This period represented one of optimism and aspiration: industrialists were eager to invest in the area and lease-holder landowners accommodated their lessees' plans as a means of capitalising on investments. In a position of some strength, had Aberavon Corporation negotiated robustly for benefits for the borough rather than its individual members the future of Aberavon might have been very different. The 1836 Act had to a great extent been made possible by the concessions of the corporation and as a result the commercial advantages gained by industrialists had excluded Aberavon, which was becoming something of a dormitory town for immigrant workers. The Act also contributed to unexpected difficulties for some of the parties involved. John Vigurs, having been involved in the simultaneous construction of a copper works along with a floating dock to accommodate larger vessels, retired to Cornwall in 1838 where he died 'in poor circumstances' ten years later.<sup>63</sup> His partners and son carried on operations at the Cwmavon works, enjoying preferential access for ships at the docks and a re-routed tramroad which crossed the diverted River Afan and terminated at the company's already-established wharf.

For the ECC, the relatively straightforward access to the sea they had enjoyed since 1770 had been eliminated by the diversion of the river and following the reduction in investment in the Port Talbot Company their future at Taibach appeared uncertain.<sup>64</sup> Commitment to protective clauses had been reflected at Company meetings, but in 1838 the ECC ceased its operations in Taibach.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, coal leases for the Cwmavon area were surrendered to C.R.M. Talbot, who promptly transferred them to the new Oakwood and Argoed Coal and Iron Company following the failure of the Reynolds brothers on the same site.<sup>66</sup> The brothers were said to have spent £100,000 on the Oakwood works up to 1838 but Talbot's refusal to grant a new lease on the Reynolds' terms discouraged any further investment and the works were sold.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p. 45.

<sup>64</sup> 6 Gulielmi IV, *Cap.* Xcviii, III, VIII & IX.

<sup>65</sup> TNA RAIL 573/1, 1836-1843, 9 April 1836.

<sup>66</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p. 25.

<sup>67</sup> Reports, Valuation . . . (1839), p.3.

Talbot appeared to be attempting to take more of a managerial role at this stage. In 1830 he had baulked at the proposition of spending £34,000 on dock improvements, but the three Acts up to 1840 saw company share capital increase from £12,000 to £70,000 and potential borrowing increase from £9,000 to £25,000.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, although the ECC's 1823 leasing agreement had been granted by his father's trustees (Talbot did not reach his majority until 1824), when ownership reverted to C.R.M. Talbot in 1838 it included responsibility with regard to control, management, and powers of approval or disapproval. Talbot therefore maintained a watchful eye on his own economic interests as the fortunes of local works fluctuated. Any business agreements were therefore instigated independently by the industrialists themselves and in the case of shared use of transportation systems were dependent on the locations of both the works and the wharves. Talbot's inflexible approach to his lessees was therefore a source of frustration and commercial rivalry as works owners sought the best possible sites and transport links.

The manufacturing gap left by the ECC works was quickly filled by Messrs. Vivian and Sons of Swansea. Originally from Truro, Cornwall the Vivians had been in south Wales since about 1800 and had developed copper works in the Swansea area at Hafod and Penclawdd. In June 1839, production restarted at what had become the Margam Copper Works.<sup>69</sup> Management of the works was undertaken by Robert Lindsay, brother-in-law of J.H. Vivian, M.P. for the Swansea Boroughs who had introduced the two Aberavon Harbour Bills to Parliament. Vivian, frustrated at the slow pace of improvement at Swansea docks, was no doubt eager to establish additional smelting facilities at what appeared to be a more dynamic port.<sup>70</sup> Work at the docks was unfinished, however, and it quickly became clear that more needed to be done if the Vivians were to overcome the obstacles faced by the previous tenants. In January 1840, a third Bill was proposed which gave the Port Talbot Company powers to raise up to £40,000 in additional shares to complete the work; it also provided for up to £25,000 to be borrowed as mortgages.<sup>71</sup> This Act, passed on 19 June 1840, contained no direct reference to Messrs. Vivian, but passed the rights and powers previously granted to the ECC to C.R.M. Talbot as leaseholder.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> R. Simmonds, (2012), p. 59.

<sup>69</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p.25.

<sup>70</sup> L. Miskell, (2006), pp.144-8.

<sup>71</sup> *The Cambrian*, 18 January 1840.

<sup>72</sup> 3 Victoria, Cap. Lxxi.

In 1841 the ECC underwent a complex restructuring of their organisation and took over the Vigurs works at Cwmavon as well as the Oakwood works. Their new company, which produced iron, tinplate and copper, had been formed with 'a capital of £1,000,000' and the transfer of Vigurs' shares in the Port Talbot Company to the ECC as new owners was expected to bring in an additional £4,000 annual profit.<sup>73</sup> The company prospectus of 1842 was positive, and stated that by then it 'possesse[d] four-fifths of the Shares in the Port Talbot Company'; was producing '65 tons of copper a week' along with '600 boxes of tin plates a week'; at the colliery, 2,000 tons of coal were being mined each week.<sup>74</sup> At a General Court Meeting on 8 April 1842 the Governor, Abel Lewes Gower, reported that coal trade at Port Talbot 'continue[d] to increase steadily' and that '[t]he number of vessels which entered the Harbour during the last eight months has been upwards of 1000'.<sup>75</sup>

Trade at the docks had increased after 1836, and in 1846 it was reported that Port Talbot was not only thriving but had proved capable of accommodating the *Emma Searle*, said to be the largest vessel ever recorded at Swansea Custom House.<sup>76</sup> In an effort to attract more vessels to the new docks the tolls levied remained low; in April 1841 the PTC applied a rate of 3*d.* per ton registered burthen for every laden ship or vessel entering the port, and 2*d.* for those entering to take coal or cargo.<sup>77</sup> According to both the 1836 Act and the ECC prospectus of 1842 the PTC could have levied up to 1*s* per ton per vessel, four times the amount being charged, but inter-port competition encouraged the proprietors to keep tolls low.<sup>78</sup>

Despite increased trade, arrangements between the shareholder parties at the docks began to deteriorate soon after the passing of the 1840 Act. From November 1842, the manager of the ECC in Cwmavon, William Gilbertson, had been writing to William Llewellyn, Clerk to the Port Talbot Company, asking for clarification regarding shares, bonds, non-payment of interest and the proper completion of the transfer of Vigurs' property to the ECC.<sup>79</sup> In March 1843 the Port Talbot Company faced further financial difficulties: all payments required company resolutions, both dividends on shares and interest on mortgages were withheld, and the company's accounts faced investigation.<sup>80</sup> The acrimonious relationship continued throughout

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

<sup>74</sup> NLW, P/M 9261, Prospectus of the Governor and Company of Copper Miners in England (ECC).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *The Cambrian*, 17 July 1846; H. Palmer (1842), p.189.

<sup>77</sup> *The Cambrian*, 3 April 1841.

<sup>78</sup> 6 Gulielmi IV, *Cap. Xcviii*, XIX; NLW, P/M 9261; see also Craig (1980).

<sup>79</sup> NLW, P/M 9265, Bundle of letters to Wm. Llewellyn, mainly from ECC, 1843-5.

<sup>80</sup> R. Simmonds, (2012), p.61.

the period, culminating in 1848 when the Bank of England, who were owed about £270,000, served a bankruptcy notice on the ECC.<sup>81</sup>

Both the ECC and the Port Talbot Company had been experiencing financial pressures and in February 1848 the ECC had given its workers notice that wages would be cut by one-third (about 6s. 8d. in the pound).<sup>82</sup> The company had invested heavily in the area: in seven years it had provided new schools, a market, gas works, mechanics' institute and reading room as well as about 500 houses for its workers.<sup>83</sup> Talbot, however, was said to have been owed £20,000 in rents and royalties and in June 1848, while the Bank of England made the extraordinary decision to attempt to run the works as a going concern until it was sold, Talbot took steps to prevent the 'irregular and unusual manner' being adopted and shut down the collieries on his land.<sup>84</sup> A second source has suggested that Talbot 'also threatened to lift the company's railway lying on his property' if the works continued without his £20,000 being repaid.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, the Bank of England settled Talbot's payments in a matter of days and the collieries and furnaces were reopened.<sup>86</sup>

Under the Vivians, Margam Copper Works had flourished and nearby Morfa Colliery had been established in 1847 to provide easily-accessible coal. The copper works was already operating on a global scale by minting coins for Malaysia and exporting them to Singapore.<sup>87</sup> Other local industrialists were bracing themselves for the potentially detrimental effect of American tinsplate tariffs of 4s. per box coming into force, as two-thirds of tinsplate exported from Port Talbot was destined for America.<sup>88</sup> Copper, tin and iron production had depended to a large extent on external resources and markets, but a vast expanse of minerals in the hills and valleys of south Wales remained unexploited due to poor accessibility. By the late 1830s the works owners and landowners around Aberavon were revising their transport schemes and embracing the idea of railway networks. Although the town was situated close to the developing docks it was not considered as a starting point for future investment. On the contrary, Aberavon was merely a place to be traversed.

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<sup>81</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p.55.

<sup>82</sup> *The Welshman*, 18 February 1848.

<sup>83</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p.53.

<sup>84</sup> *The Welshman*, 2 June 1848.

<sup>85</sup> F. Jux, p.104 (no citation). For a detailed account of these events see R.O. Roberts, 'The Bank of England, the Company of Copper Miners, and the Cwmavon Works, 1847-52, *Welsh History Review*, 4.3 (1969), 219-234.

<sup>86</sup> *The Principality*, 16 June 1848, p.6; also Roberts, pp.229-30.

<sup>87</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p.28.

<sup>88</sup> *The Welshman*, 25 September 1846.

## **The Revised Transport Infrastructure**

Access to the mineral-rich interior north of Aberavon provided enormous opportunities for local capitalists. Not only could existing companies obtain fuel for their works, but they could also set up their own mines and sell surplus coal. Furthermore, by opening up new mines and thereby increasing competition, existing coal suppliers would be compelled to lower their prices. As has already been noted, however, Aberavon had no industrial links neither was there a resident landowner who could take advantage of new transport arrangements to contribute to the benefit of the town. The passive corporation had only a pecuniary interest in the town; as a result the voice of Aberavon was unheard and development of a railway system in the Aberavon area occurred in much the same way as that of the harbour. Collaborative working achieved the aims of the railway speculators, but the involvement of town representatives was minimal due to the fact that compulsory purchase clauses within railway bills prevented meaningful consultation. Financial compensation would benefit the corporation as individuals, although the new lines not only offered little advantage to Aberavon's inhabitants but also proved detrimental to the framework of the town.

Led by landowners and industrialists whose main objective was the efficient and inexpensive transportation of goods, the revised transport infrastructure was a necessary improvement. It was also a potential source of profit, as evidenced by the fact that the family of C.R.M. Talbot's land agent were the owners of a substantial amount of mineral property in the Rhondda and were very keen to see rail links being established there.<sup>89</sup> In the early part of the 1830s each set of industrial works in the area operated its own transport facilities based on the lease or leases that had been agreed with the landowner(s). Wayleave agreements provided landowners with payments per ton for the materials being carried and following increased trade capacity at the newly built dock at Port Talbot, landowners such as C.R.M. Talbot were keen to recognise the advantages and potential of rail transportation. Investment in trade by both rail and sea offered alternative methods of freight and therefore minimised the risk of losses due to inter-port competition. As a result, two types of railway emerged in south Wales in this period: the large trunk railroads of the South Wales Railway (SWR) which were operated with locomotives, and smaller 'branch' railways, which either followed the routes of existing tramways or evolved as a consequence of new or expanding works and collieries.<sup>90</sup> It was not

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<sup>89</sup> J. Davies and G. Mingay, 'Agriculture in an Industrial Environment', in *Glamorgan County History, Vol. V*, (1980), pp.277-310, p.289.

<sup>90</sup> Although the Great Western Railway (GWR) had been running trains in England since 1838 it did not connect with Wales until 1852, therefore its progress and impact will be considered in subsequent chapters.



until 1845 that locomotives began operating on the smaller lines, one of the first being the ‘Redruth’ which carried coal and iron between the Cwmavon Works and Port Talbot.<sup>91</sup> Prior to this time the term ‘railway’ or ‘rail road’ signified parallel tracks which carried horse-drawn trams (see Map A).

Initial plans for new railways in the area began in 1838 and coincided with the start of the Welsh railway ‘boom’, which has been viewed as marking the ‘transition point between the first period of rapid expansion, based on iron, and the second coal-fuelled era’.<sup>92</sup> Notice of a pending Bill which proposed the creation of a new railway which would link Port Talbot to the coal-rich area of Glyncoerrwg, about twelve miles to the north, was published in March, 1838.<sup>93</sup> The Bill proposed construction of a new line from the mineral-rich valley to the docks at Port Talbot, and a number of branch railways which would make more of the area open for industrial development. A crucial element of this Bill and of similar railway bills at this time was the inclusion of clauses which granted powers to purchase or take land and buildings within the ‘parishes and townships’ over which the new railway would pass as well as to divert or alter any roads which stood in the way.<sup>94</sup> The existing railroads owned by the Cwmavon and Oakwood works were also to be purchased.<sup>95</sup> Included in the list of places where land would be procured was Aberavon, and a plan of the proposed route of a ‘Port Talbot Railway’ showed that its route from Cwmavon to the docks would follow the line of the parish road directly through the town and to the docks.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, the Bill was not submitted by the 1 April deadline and the scheme was shelved, eventually being superseded in 1839 by the Glyncoerrwg Mineral Railway, but the potential impact on Aberavon was clear.

The decision not to proceed with the Bill appears to have prompted a period of collaboration between C.R.M. Talbot and local works owners in an effort to achieve the ambition of securing a new railway at least partially. Whether or not the Bill was rejected in favour of this new plan is not recorded, but in May 1838 Talbot, John Vigurs & Co., and Robert Smith & Co., (who owned Margam Tin Works, situated near to the town of Aberavon but on the opposite side of the river) entered into mutually beneficial agreements that enabled the construction of a new

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<sup>91</sup> Port Talbot Historical Society Timeline; *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 27 March 1847 and 24 June 1848.

<sup>92</sup> P. Jenkins in P. Clark, (2000), p.149.

<sup>93</sup> *The Cambrian*, 3 March 1838.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> See R. Simmonds, (2012), pp. 6-7; also P. Reynolds, ‘The First Port Talbot Railway (1838)’, *Railways & Canal Historical Society Tramroad Group Occasional Paper*, 30 (1985).

railway from the docks at Port Talbot to connect with the original tramroad.<sup>97</sup> This new railway was to be built across the river from the parish road. The 1838 agreements indicate that Vigurs and Smith at least were prepared to work together to achieve their aims. In addition to the new joint railway project, with Vigurs' sanction Smith also constructed a separate railway from his collieries that joined with the Cwmavon line. Included in the latter agreement was a reciprocity arrangement which gave Vigurs and Smith rights over each other's lines.<sup>98</sup>

Collaborative working between landowners and industrialists, as well as between the industrialists themselves appears to have been an important feature of local rail construction in at this time and it was common for new railway company boards to be made up of the principal landowner(s) and industrialists.<sup>99</sup> Not only did this ensure that ownership and proprietary rights remained within a small group of individuals or companies, but it also contributed to the exclusion of outside interests. Control of a dock such as Port Talbot therefore increased the status and importance of the owners: as the period progressed the railways carried food, goods and people as well as mail and manufacturing freight. The establishment of a system of railways or branches of railways which terminated at a single port was a distinctive feature of industrial expansion in this period and competition between British ports often included the provision of associated railways.

In Middlesbrough, for example, extension of the Stockton and Darlington Railway by 1830 had led to rapid development of the town and planned construction of a new coal port which was originally to be called Port Darlington. The architects of the railway and port development were Quaker businessmen Edward Pease and his son, Joseph.<sup>100</sup> The area around the new port grew to surpass that of the market town Pease had envisaged and a new railway line of 1877 further separated the old town from the new.<sup>101</sup> Middlesbrough was incorporated in 1853 and its local government was keen to invest in 'utilities, capital projects and social amenities'; municipal trading became the source of its revenue.<sup>102</sup> Middlesbrough's experience raises

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<sup>97</sup> R. Simmonds, (2012), p.10.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> For examples see H. Pollins, 'The Development of Transport 1750-1914' in *Glamorgan County History, Vol. V*, (1980), pp.421-464, pp.451-6.

<sup>100</sup> <https://englandsnortheast.co.uk/middlesbrough/> [accessed 12 May 2022].

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.; see also B.M. Doyle, review of 'The rise of a Victorian ironopolis: Middlesborough and regional industrialization', by Minoru Yasumoto, *Economic History Review*, 65, 2 (2012), 800-801.

<sup>102</sup> B.M. Doyle, in M.J. Daunton (2007), p. 294-5.

questions regarding C.R.M. Talbot and the early outcome for Port Talbot had he demonstrated the commitment of the Peases.

In historic Hartlepool, until the nineteenth century the centre of the small town had been the old fishing port on the headland but by 1823 the port was in decline.<sup>103</sup> As in Middlesbrough, it was new railways and links to nearby coalfields which stimulated growth, and once again the development took place away from the original town.<sup>104</sup> Private finance by Ralph Ward Jackson provided a new railway network and dock development just outside the town in 1848 and led to the formation of a new, much larger settlement of West Hartlepool which became a municipal borough in 1887.<sup>105</sup> Whilst old Hartlepool retained its separate identity at this time, civic ambitions led to West Hartlepool, with its imposing town hall, becoming a county borough in 1902, but very little was spent on housing or health care for inhabitants in this period.<sup>106</sup> It was not until 1967 that the two port settlements finally amalgamated - under the old name of Hartlepool.<sup>107</sup>

In south Wales, the Taff Vale Railway, engineered by Isambard Kingdom Brunel in 1836 to transport industrial materials between Merthyr and the Bute Docks in Cardiff, might also have motivated plans for the 1838 railway Bill for Port Talbot. Intensity of competition between ports in this period militated against the idea of rail networks which connected to more than one port. Systems of local railways, often with smaller branch lines to local works, became the standard practice as more mineral-rich areas in the south Wales valleys were opened up to industry and products were transported to and from the local port. These emerging railways often lacked overall co-ordination, so any network development was haphazard, particularly after the introduction of model clauses Acts which reduced the number of pages in a railway Bill from around a hundred to only ten.<sup>108</sup> Landowners could submit proposals in the form of a Bill, but it was not uncommon for new lines to interfere with or cross existing routes when collaboration had been lacking or ineffective.

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<sup>103</sup> <https://englandsnortheast.co.uk/hartlepool/> [accessed 12 May 2022].

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. By 1881 Old Hartlepool's population had grown from 993 at the start of the century to 12,361, but the population of the new West Hartlepool had become 28,000.

<sup>106</sup> B.M. Doyle in M.J. Daunton, (2007), p.294.

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.hhtandn.org/venues/1333/west-hartlepool> [accessed 12 May 2022].

<sup>108</sup> J. Prest, *Liberty, and Locality: Parliament, Permissive Legislation, and Ratepayers' Democracies in the Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.24; see also G.E. Jones, (1997), p.180.

Small lines often ran from the coalfields to the ports, but the larger trunk railroads were said to have generally 'reinforced the pattern of communication from east to west, with London as the focal point'.<sup>109</sup> This notion of London as a focal point was underlined in 1844 when the first meetings took place to construct the South Wales Railway (SWR). The railway, to be constructed by Brunel at a potential cost of £2.5 million, was intended to be the first trunk railroad in Wales and a Bill for its establishment was presented to Parliament in 1845. C.R.M. Talbot's landowning and parliamentary credentials contributed to his election as chairman of the company and he spoke in favour of the Bill at its Committee Stage in the House of Lords.<sup>110</sup> The SWR was originally planned to connect with the Great Western Railway at Gloucester and cross south Wales to Fishguard, from where ferry traffic would eventually open trade to Ireland and across the Atlantic. As a means of canvassing support for the railway in south Wales, Talbot's negotiator Armstrong visited selected major landowners on the proposed route to assess their opinions of the merits of the plans.<sup>111</sup> Visits were limited 'to those landowners whose lands involved large payments and whose influence was likely to be favourable exerted with others'.<sup>112</sup>

Railway links between works, ports and growing towns had become essential to economic growth and it appeared to make financial sense to foster connectivity. Talbot ensured that the docks were able to easily connect with the SWR and Port Talbot station was constructed in 1849 on the eastern side of the river, in readiness for the opening of the line in 1850.<sup>113</sup> Aberavon, as a growing town with close connections to the docks, seemed to be in an ideal position to benefit from the siting of a station on the new SWR. However, in 1849 when notices were issued inviting tenders for the building of stations on the line, the name Aberavon was used, despite the fact that the eventual station, situated outside the borough and a quarter of a mile outside the town, would be given the same name as the docks, Port Talbot.<sup>114</sup> No documents appear to exist to confirm or contradict any involvement by the corporation to lobby for a station in the borough itself as compensation, but it seems unlikely that any discussions took place. What is clear, however, is that printed notices dated 1 December 1844 were sent to

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<sup>109</sup> G.E. Jones (1997), p.180

<sup>110</sup> *The Pembrokeshire Herald and General Advertiser*, 1 August 1845; Talbot spoke only once in the Chamber throughout his 60-year Parliamentary career but was more active in his committee role.

<sup>111</sup> NLW, P/M 9422, Report of N. Armstrong, Secretary of the South Wales Railway, regarding negotiations with landowners (1848).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>113</sup> A station named 'Port Talbot (Aberavon)' was opened on the Rhondda & Swansea Bay Railway line in the 1880s but this was also located in Margam, not the Borough of Aberavon.

<sup>114</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 13 October 1849.

landowners on behalf of the SWR.<sup>115</sup> These notices listed owners of property affected by the route of the line, including the Portreeve, Aldermen and Burgesses of Aberavon, who were paid £456-12s-6d for the compulsory purchase of their lands in Aberavon and Baglan parishes to the SWR.<sup>116</sup>

### **The Impact of Industrialisation**

Loss of the Aberavon land to the SWR contributed to a further physical division of the town. In 1848 the toll road between Cardiff and Neath already divided Aberavon near High Street and the route of the South Wales Railway from Port Talbot station caused a second east-west split. The new line passed close to St. Mary's Church, dissected Church Street, and divided the site of the proposed Marketplace in Water Street, thereby physically separating half of the market from the town hall.<sup>117</sup> The River Afan ran north to south along the eastern edge of what had become a ribbon development divided into three unequal sections between the sea and the steep mountainside (see Map 3.1 in Chapter Three).

Developments at the port had also created a number of difficulties. As more and bigger vessels began using the harbour so the pressures on the town to provide services and amenities for the mariners increased. As the port had grown, economic migrants had become attracted to Aberavon as well as the surrounding industrial areas but a lack of precise birthplace data in the 1841 Census prevents a thorough examination of the origins of inhabitants at that time.<sup>118</sup> Feldman has noted that unprecedented urban growth occurred in Britain from 1840 as families and individuals moved from agricultural areas to industrialising towns and neighbourhoods.<sup>119</sup> Whilst many migrants were responding to the pushes and pulls of the labour market, the principle of primogeniture was also a contributory factor as the non-inheriting sons and daughters of farmers left the countryside in favour of growing towns.<sup>120</sup> Many copper workers migrated from Cornwall and found employment at the Vivians' works in Taibach.<sup>121</sup>

By 1841 the overwhelming majority of employed male inhabitants of Aberavon were labourers, colliers and metal workers, but the town was also the home of a small number of

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<sup>115</sup> NLW, P/M 9272, Notices to landowners regarding the route of the South Wales Railway.

<sup>116</sup> NAS XI 4/1; undated and possibly unfinished draft document with note in margin 'Provision as to certain sums due to the undertaker'.

<sup>117</sup> WGAS, D/D Z 25/166, plan of parts of Port Talbot and Aberavon; undated, but c.1850.

<sup>118</sup> 1841 Census of England and Wales: places of birth are recorded as in or outside the county of enumeration if England and Wales; Scotland or Ireland; and Foreign Parts.

<sup>119</sup> D. Feldman, 'Migration' in M.J. Daunton (2018), pp.185-206, p.189.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192.

<sup>121</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p.33.

professional men: four engineers, two clergymen, three accountants and two agents.<sup>122</sup> At this stage, however, no solicitors or medical professionals were present. Publicans, shoemakers, butchers, bakers, drapers, druggists and a watchmaker indicate a developing retail and service sector in the town. Many workmen who came to the parish had previously been employed in constructing the floating dock at Newport but who resented the truck system in place there and had moved to work on the new dock in Aberavon instead.<sup>123</sup> In addition, 42 servants (41 of them female) were employed in the town, and of the 245 households in Aberavon in 1841, 37 (15 per cent) employed a servant.<sup>124</sup> Workers in manual occupations who had young children kept servants, as did households headed by publicans or clergymen with no children. Whilst census data up to and including 1841 does not record all female occupations, it is worth noting that in the years 1801, 1811 and 1821 the number of females in Aberavon outnumbered that of males, suggesting not only that women were also taking advantage of employment opportunities but also that their life expectancy was greater than their male counterparts.<sup>125</sup>

The census of 1841 recorded that the population of Aberavon had increased by 125 per cent in the previous ten years and had grown from 573 to 1290; 245 houses were inhabited, twelve were under construction and the average household size was about five.<sup>126</sup> Speculative, unregulated house building resulted in newly-built houses being advertised as 'to let' in 'the thriving borough town of Aberavon' and often included the inducement of a 'front room well adapted for a shop'.<sup>127</sup> In 1843 an advertisement appeared for a house and shop to let, this time citing the 'increasing trade of the neighbouring port, Port Talbot' as well as the 'trade generally of Aberavon and its neighbourhood' as reasons why the property was 'desirable'.<sup>128</sup>

The use of homes for small shops was a common feature of Victorian life and in many cases women would run the shop while their husbands worked.<sup>129</sup> This practice of combining domestic and retail activity tends to obscure the differences between numbers (and owners) of shops in this period, making a detailed assessment of economic activity difficult. Eight shopkeepers and traders are listed in an 1835 trade directory for Aberavon and neighbourhood, but these included nail-makers and maltsters; just two establishments are listed which provided

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<sup>122</sup> 1841 Census of England and Wales.

<sup>123</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 January 1836.

<sup>124</sup> 1841 Census of England and Wales, Aberavon.

<sup>125</sup> Abstract of Answers and Returns, 1851.

<sup>126</sup> 1841 Census of England and Wales cited in I.G. Jones, p.285.

<sup>127</sup> *The Cambrian*, 3 April 1841.

<sup>128</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 March 1843.

<sup>129</sup> T. Vigne and A. Howkins in G. Crossick (1977), p. 187.

combined drapery and grocery services, although eight public houses were already in existence.<sup>130</sup> By 1848, however, the number of outlets providing groceries and sundries in Aberavon itself had risen to fifteen, with bakers and confectioners, booksellers and stationers operating in the town, as well as a chemist, five tailors, a spirit dealer, a milliner and a hairdresser.<sup>131</sup>

The governing corporation, rooted in ancient hereditary rights and privileges, appeared unable to adapt to industrialisation and the demands of an urban growth of 125 per cent in ten years.<sup>132</sup> An outbreak of cholera in August 1832 led to 15 fatalities out of 45 cases by October that year, and in 1846 the town remained susceptible to further exposure due to its 'bad sewerage, a bad supply of water, a bad supply of scavengers; and a consequent accumulation of filth . . . which one's nose detects'.<sup>133</sup> Public health would not be a responsibility of local government until 1848 at the earliest, but central boards of health had been set up in 1805-6 and again in 1831-32 to address the threat of a cholera epidemic; associated local boards were also established on a temporary basis.<sup>134</sup>

Initiative was taken by Margam Parish, who wrote to the Board of Health calling for the establishment of a local Board for both Margam and Aberavon in order to better manage the cholera.<sup>135</sup> The letter, dated 23 August 18[32] was signed by four 'principal inhabitants' of the two parishes, including the Portreeve of Aberavon, Thomas Williams. Fifteen names were suggested for the Board, including the familiar John Vigurs, (who left the area in 1838), C.R.M. Talbot, John Reynolds and Griffith Llewellyn; three of the four signatories were residents of Margam.<sup>136</sup> Although this letter could be viewed as an early example of an attempt at joint working, it is more likely that Margam inhabitants were not confident in Aberavon corporation's capacity to manage outbreaks of contagious disease. Despite the situation and concerns, the call for a new local Board was rejected on the basis that it was 'more convenient in practice to establish a separate Board for each Parish'.<sup>137</sup> Ultimately, incorporation in 1861

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<sup>130</sup> *Pigot's Directory (1835)*, p.732.

<sup>131</sup> *Hunt & Co. Directory of South Wales (1848)*.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *The Cambrian*, 13 October 1832; letter from 'Observer' in *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 26 September 1846.

<sup>134</sup> TNA Research Guide 'Public Health and Social Policy in the Nineteenth Century'.

<sup>135</sup> WGAS, RISW/GGF 20/27, Paper regarding the setting up of a Board of Health in Margam and Aberavon.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, reverse of document.

would lead to the formation of a Board of Health for Aberavon, but it would not be until 1884 that Margam was able to do the same.<sup>138</sup>

Poor harvests and indiscriminate turnpike charges also impacted on the town and borough in the early 1840s, resulting in letters of grievance being addressed to the turnpike trustees, one of whom was C.R.M. Talbot.<sup>139</sup> Tollgate charges at times of hardship had triggered the ‘Rebecca Riots’ in south and west Wales, and since 1839 many gates had been destroyed by mobs of farmers dressed as women.<sup>140</sup> Up to 1843 the number of tollgates in the Bridgend area had increased, and two tollgates in Aberavon were just 300 yards apart but charges were applied at both gates on outward as well as return journeys. A letter of 1841 to the Earl of Jersey from his agent, Charles Tennant, also talks of ‘distress and ruin in general’ following the failure of the harvest.<sup>141</sup> The letter, written at the height of the Rebecca Riots, expresses Tennant’s fears for ‘the protection of Life and Property’ and his concern that ‘Messrs. Robt. Smith & Co. [Margam Tin Works] cannot stand many days longer’.<sup>142</sup> No rioters attacked gates in Aberavon, but in April 1843 the tinsplate works was, indeed, offered for sale.<sup>143</sup>

Challenges such as these had little to do with the corporation. Industrialisation and urban growth were significant in the area but corporations were legitimately viewed as bodies with a primary concern of managing corporate property.<sup>144</sup> No statutory obligations existed for ancient corporations to deal with local conditions: the poor were the responsibility of the Guardians; the roads were overseen by the Parish Vestry and the turnpike trusts; and corn prices were a matter for Westminster. Mechanisms were available that could give small towns the ability to carry out urban development and improvement. Improvement commissions could be established, a Parliamentary Bill could be submitted, and ratepayers could choose to adopt particular legislation, such as the Public Health Act of 1848. In Aberavon, countering these options were two obstacles: costs and a lack of interest. Donnelly noted that despite corporation powers no action had been taken for six or seven years to punish offenders under the Nuisances

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<sup>138</sup> See Chapter Three.

<sup>139</sup> *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, 11 November 1843.

<sup>140</sup> The rioters took their name from Genesis 24.60, ‘And they blessed Rebekah, and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them’.

<sup>141</sup> WGAS, BF/E 868, Bundle of letters including Charles Tennant to the Earl of Jersey.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 April 1843.

<sup>144</sup> F.W. Maitland, cited in R. Sweet (1999), p.35.



Removal Act.<sup>145</sup> The presence of corporation men on the vestry further limited the likelihood of change.

Despite the absence of any formal responsibility for the town's condition there was no impediment to the corporation choosing to become involved in business at the port or in managing the impact of urban growth. Aberavon's corporation was representative of the unaccountability of hereditary corporations that had been identified by the Liberal Westminster government and which had led to the electoral reform Acts of the 1830s. However, although the system was clearly in need of reform it must be noted that some borough corporations were more active than others. Since 1802, the nearby borough of Neath had operated under a copy charter said to date to the time of James II.<sup>146</sup> As in Aberavon, members of the governing corporation usually received no official salaries but were entitled to retain the proceeds of fees and tolls for their own use: the Portreeve, for example, received tolls and port dues which produced an average annual income of a hundred pounds.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, no accounts were published although corporation property had been sold in 1801 and 1825 which had funded the construction and furnishing of a town hall.<sup>148</sup>

Neath town was reported as being in a flourishing condition, being both lighted and paved, but the corporation's lack of 'general utility' was said to be an obstacle to immediate incorporation.<sup>149</sup> However, the commissioner's suggestion of a small borough extension was agreed, and Neath, with ample numbers of qualified men available to take public office, was incorporated in 1835.<sup>150</sup> In Aberavon, the port had been the 'ancient nucleus' around which the town expanded.<sup>151</sup> Booth found that the corporation members could expect regular and guaranteed personal income from tolls, fees and fines, but expenditure on the public good (about £17-0-0) was almost matched by expenses and entertainment costs for the burgesses (£13-0-0).<sup>152</sup> Booth's assessment of the future prospects for Aberavon noted the importance of industrial works in the neighbourhood and their potential benefit to the borough.<sup>153</sup> Future improvements at the port and the introduction of a railway connecting to the interior were both

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<sup>145</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.6

<sup>146</sup> J. Booth (1833), p.333.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p.334.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p.338.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> I.G. Jones (1992), p.97.

<sup>152</sup> J. Booth (1833), p.167.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p.168.

mentioned specifically, but these were not enough to convince the commissioner that Aberavon's corporation was sufficiently developed to cope with the demands of elected self-government.

Booth also appeared to have been perplexed by the fact that members conducted conversations in their familiar language of Welsh, as his report stated that, 'The officers of the borough are farmers and labouring men, almost entirely ignorant of the English language; and it was with considerable difficulty that any information could be collected from them'.<sup>154</sup> A similar situation had occurred in 1831, when a commissioner had been sent to the area to assess potential boundary changes prior to what would become the Great Reform Act of 1832. The commissioner, Mr. W. Wylde, had described the officers of the Corporation as 'Mechanics and Publicans, who can hardly read or write . . . [and] I had very great difficulty in obtaining any information as to the Boundary'.<sup>155</sup> Wylde's observations identified a corporation 'suspicious of any questions that are asked concerning the boundary', and the corporation appeared to evade all efforts at accountability.<sup>156</sup> Records of meetings between the corporation burgesses and other English-speaking individuals such as Charles Tennant, the Earl of Jersey's agent, however, suggest that the officers exaggerated their lack of understanding in an effort to sabotage potential incorporation.

Booth's critical report, coupled with the very small number of borough inhabitants who would be eligible to stand for election to a new corporation, militated against Aberavon's inclusion in the initial tranche of offers of reform under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Comments by Booth and Wylde could be said to reflect a commonplace assumption of the time which conflated use of the Welsh language and a lack of intelligence; the 'Blue Books' controversy of 1847 provided a further example of this attitude to Welsh. However, it can also be argued that members of the corporation were evidently capable of negotiating sales of land with English-speaking landowners or their agents, as well as speaking up for themselves in English in the courts.<sup>157</sup>

As noted above, in industrial Cwmavon it was the ECC which took on the paternalistic role of a local governing body.<sup>158</sup> In doing so, the company far exceeded any obligations placed on

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>155</sup> WGAS, RISW/GGF 20/50, W. Wylde on Aberavon (1831), pp.1-3.

<sup>156</sup> W. Wylde (1831), p.3.

<sup>157</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 July 1843.

<sup>158</sup> M. Phillips (1935), p.54.

established corporations at that time. A sense of co-dependency seems to have existed between workers and employers, but despite the Cwmavon of 1846 being described by a London journal writer as ‘Utopian’, the works and housing were in close proximity to each other.<sup>159</sup> Although the ECC had invested heavily in the social and cultural aspects of their workers’ lives, sanitary conditions were poor, and a lack of fresh water coupled with an inadequate sewerage system contributed to sickness and death; cholera was a frequent problem.<sup>160</sup> The 1849 cholera outbreak would be so severe in Cwmavon that the church burial ground had to be extended.<sup>161</sup>

Construction of public buildings in both Neath and Cwmavon suggests that the presence of these structures was important to growing towns. Culturally, they were indicators of progress and modernity, and socially, they underlined local commitment to inclusivity. As markers of status, public buildings could also demonstrate evidence of mature, solid governance. Aberavon corporation’s civic imperatives can be tested by examining their attempts to provide two specific public establishments: a town hall and a market. Many nearby towns of similar size had already established town halls by this period.<sup>162</sup> Additionally, historic charters conferred rights on a settlement to hold regular markets, a feature which distinguished towns from other settlements and also provided for the collection of tolls.<sup>163</sup>

Early newspaper references to the construction of a town hall in Aberavon first appeared in 1826, when it was reported that a foundation stone had been laid; corporation business at that time was being carried out at the home of the Common Attorney.<sup>164</sup> Following the laying of the foundation stone in 1826, work had begun on the new hall at the top of Green Park Street. After seven years, however, more than £300 had been spent on the building yet it was still unfinished due to a lack of funds.<sup>165</sup> The Aberavon Tithe Map of 1841 included reference to a ‘Townhall & Premises’ in the ownership and occupation of the burgesses, but the building was clearly still incomplete in March 1843 when the Marquis of Bute and his brother, Lord James Stuart responded to letters from the Portreeve by donating £25 and £20 respectively to the

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., (no citation).

<sup>160</sup> G. James (2000), pp.40-4.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>162</sup> WGAS, RISW/GGF 20/24, poster dated 3 September 1839 advertising voter revision list courts for the Glamorgan Boroughs. Half of the ten courts listed were held at town halls.

<sup>163</sup> D. Hey, (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Family and Local History*, (Second Edition), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.482.

<sup>164</sup> *The Cambrian*, 12 August 1826.

<sup>165</sup> Lewis (1833).

project.<sup>166</sup> C.R.M. Talbot had subscribed £25 towards the building of a new town hall in nearby Cowbridge in 1824, but an absence of documentation makes it difficult to ascertain whether or not Talbot also contributed towards Aberavon's town hall.

In November 1843 it was reported that although the hall had been partially repaired, no records had been kept of the names of subscribers, how much they had contributed or how their money was spent.<sup>167</sup> The portreeve at the time, Thomas Jones, insisted that he was 'totally ignorant' of the means by which the hall had been repaired so far and in a futile gesture he also asked past subscribers to send him their names and how much they had donated.<sup>168</sup> The first recorded meeting at the new town hall took place in 1845, when a public meeting was held to discuss petitioning both Houses of Parliament to ensure that any judge sitting at a local court in Wales should be able to conduct the proceedings in Welsh.<sup>169</sup> Three years later the regular voter revision list courts appear to have been held in the new Aberavon Town Hall for the first time.<sup>170</sup> From the initial attempts of 1818 it had taken the corporation almost thirty years to establish the first civic building in the town.

The corporation was also slow to provide a market in Aberavon. Plans for a market were first proposed in 1838, when the then portreeve, Samuel Jones, called for tenders.<sup>171</sup> Having recently gained five hundred guineas from the Port Talbot Company the corporation appeared to be in a position where the market could be funded from the corporation chest rather than public subscription. It was also in the portreeve's personal interest to establish a market as it would increase his income in tolls, yet no market had been built by 1846. A letter in the *Monmouthshire Merlin* in July of that year pointed out that not only did the people of Aberavon have to travel six miles to Neath for a market they also had to travel six miles or more to a magistrates' court. Voter revision every few years would have applied to only a small section of the population, and the corporation meetings occurred once a month; the new town hall, therefore, appeared to many of the inhabitants to have no real purpose. It stood 'forlorn and neglected . . . an object of derision and contempt'.<sup>172</sup> Markets had been established in Taibach

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<sup>166</sup> WGAS, P/68/2; *The Cambrian*, 11 March 1843; Glamorgan Archives DA/26-45, correspondence from Lord Bute regarding Aberavon town hall.

<sup>167</sup> *The Cambrian*, 11 November 1843.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *The Welshman*, 24 January 1845.

<sup>170</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan and Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 9 September 1848.

<sup>171</sup> *The Cambrian*, 16 June 1838.

<sup>172</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 4 July 1846.

in 1840 and Cwmavon in 1841 under the auspices of the industrialists, but the ancient borough was perceived by the letter's author as 'neglected, ill-used, and shabbily treated'.<sup>173</sup>

The nearby town of Bridgend had submitted a market Bill in 1835, but Aberavon was clearly not keeping up with developments elsewhere. The corporation responded by once again proposing that a market place be built. It is clear from the text of the motion that the proposal was based on issues raised in the July letter, but it stresses two new points: a sense of duty to the town on the part of the corporation and an acknowledgement that there was enough capital available to fund the whole project.<sup>174</sup> A Bill for establishing a market and fair in Aberavon was put before the Commons in February 1848 but by April the corporation appears to have become impatient, perhaps anxious, that no building had been secured in readiness for the passing of the Act. A public meeting was called, with the portreeve in the Chair, where it was resolved unanimously that a temporary market place be built 'until a more commodious and permanent building shall be provided'.<sup>175</sup> It was clear that capital was no longer available for the project, meaning that the expense of the temporary building would have to be met from public subscription, not corporation funds.

The location of the new market was Water Street, Aberavon. The outline and location of the site on a plan of the town from around 1850 mirror those of the parcel of land gifted by the Earl of Jersey to the Portreeve, Aldermen and Burgesses of Aberavon as a gesture of goodwill in 1840.<sup>176</sup> The same area is also shown in the occupation of the burgesses in the Aberavon Tithe Map of 1841, confirming no expense on purchase of a site.<sup>177</sup> A long delay ensued before building commenced and the market finally opened, but the market site was split into two when the South Wales Railway line was constructed. In the meantime, the corporation members received substantial funds from the sale of corporation land for the railway and also continued to collect their market tolls as set out in the Act. However, their unaccountability and lack of

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> *The Welshman*, 23 October 1846.

<sup>175</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 22 April 1848.

<sup>176</sup> WGAS, D/D Z 166, undated 'Plan E' of Aberavon; WGAS, D/D BF 4-5, Deed of Gift of land for promenade (1902) and D/D BF 919-922, gift of lands by George, Earl of Jersey to the burgesses of Aberavon (1840); see also NAS BF 1/7/5 Articles of Agreement settling boundaries between i) Portreeve, aldermen and burgesses of Avon and ii) Rt. Hon. George, Earl of Jersey (1840).

<sup>177</sup> WGAS, P/68/2.

interest in the public good had become detrimental to the town, which had developed despite, rather than because of, its local government.<sup>178</sup>

Corporation predisposition to maintaining a distinctly ‘hands off’ approach to town business and the critical comments of Booth and Wylde suggest a measure of incompetence. However, the members’ preference for formal legal redress suggests there is an argument to be made for them being shrewd operators. Land agent Charles Tennant described them as ‘cunning’ and ‘almost ruined by Law Expenses’ in an 1840 letter to the Earl of Jersey in which he accused them of selling not their own land to the Port Talbot Company but land belonging to the Earl.<sup>179</sup> Indeed, Booth’s report of 1833 tends to support Tennant’s assertion when it is stated that, ‘The Corporation is also entitled, or claims to be entitled, to an uninclosed tract of land, lying between the inclosure and the sea, and Aberavon River and Neath River, called Aberavon Burrows’.<sup>180</sup> The transactions appear to have been contested, however, as an undated and unattributed draft legal document shows that the funds paid to the corporation by both the Port Talbot Company and the South Wales Railway were held for a time by the Bank of England in the name of the ‘Accountant General of the Court of Chancery’.<sup>181</sup> The document declared that the funds should be released to the corporation.<sup>182</sup>

Samuel Lewis had noted in his *Gazeteer* of 1833 that, ‘Twenty-five of the senior burgesses still enjoy each the exclusive right of three acres of enclosed land, and the rental of the remaining borough property is about £50 per annum’.<sup>183</sup> Table 1.1 shows that of the eight leading landowners in Aberavon at that time, the burgesses held the most pieces of land, the greatest acreage, and enjoyed the highest total rental value.<sup>184</sup> It is worth noting that at least six of the other landowners lived outside the borough boundary. The low position of the Burgesses in the Average Rental Value column is in all likelihood due to the ‘peppercorn’ rents of just 1d. on most of its properties as well as the fact that a total of 999 acres on the coastal Moors and Burrows were rented for just £1-2s-6d and 2s-6d, respectively. Despite this substantial income, as the descriptions above suggest, the growing town still lacked many of the amenities available

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<sup>178</sup> WGAS, B/PT 305, ‘An Act for establishing a Market and Fair in the Borough of Avon, otherwise Aberavon, in the County of Glamorgan’, *Victoria Regina*, Cap. 138, Schedule II, dated 14<sup>th</sup> August 1848; see also WGAS, D/D LE B/A 22, Notice of 1848 showing market tolls.

<sup>179</sup> WGAS, D/D BF 927, 1840.

<sup>180</sup> J. Booth (1833), p.167.

<sup>181</sup> WGAS, NAS XI 4/1.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> S. Lewis (1833).

<sup>184</sup> WGAS P/68/2, Aberavon Tithe Map and Apportionment.

in the industrial settlements nearby. In these neighbouring communities the provision of local facilities and a good standard of housing was in the works owners' interests. In Aberavon, the self-interested corporation had no such incentive.

**Table 1.1: Land Ownership in Aberavon, 1841**

Owner	Pieces	Acreage	Rental Value	Average Rental Value
Corporation Burgesses	66 (1)	c. 1300 (1)	c. £17-0-0 (1)	£0-5-0 (4)
H.J. Grant	32 (2)	c. 31 (6)	c. £2-6-0 (6)	£0-1-3 (8)
C.R.M. Talbot	27 (3)	c. 40 (5)	c. £4-16-0 (4)	£0-3-6 (6)
Reverend Henry Key Knight	21 (4)	c. 52 (=3)	c. £6-0-0 (3)	£0-5-8 (=2)
Earl of Jersey	20 (5)	c. 52 (=3)	c. £7-0-0 (2)	£0-7-0 (1)
John David	14 (6)	c. 25 (7)	c. £4-00 (5)	£0-5-8 (=2)
Port Talbot Company	8 (7)	c. 330 (2)	c. £1-5-0 (7)	£0-3-0 (7)
Griffith Llewellyn	6 (8)	c. 12 (8)	c. £1-4-0 (8)	£0-4-0 (5)

Source: Aberavon Tithe Map and Apportionment 1841

By 1839, the situation in Aberavon was perceived by some to be improving. Newspaper reports of the opening of the Bute Ship Canal included an overview of improvements at ports across south Wales, and Aberavon was described as 'five years ago a struggling hamlet [now] struggling to become a respectable seaport'.<sup>185</sup> This view, however, is more complex than it first appears. The entrance channel to Port Talbot docks was situated within the Municipal Borough of Aberavon, but the busy port was no longer named after the borough in which much of it was located, and its ownership and operation were firmly and legally in the hands of the new Port Talbot Company. In the residential areas of the town, the River Afan served as a visible boundary, but at the docks area the distinction was far less clear; the new channel had created the illusion that land to the east of the cut was no longer part of Aberavon. As the administrative capability of the docks increased, construction of service and residential property began very gradually on the land close to the new channel on the eastern side of the river. Enumerated as part of the Parish of Aberavon in censuses from 1841, even from these early years this area around the docks was known and recorded as 'Port Talbot'.<sup>186</sup>

<sup>185</sup> *The Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian*, 19 October 1839.

<sup>186</sup> 1841 Census of England and Wales, Aberavon.

## Conclusion

In this period of industrial expansion in the Aberavon area there were significant opportunities but also many challenges. Wholly successful outcomes could not be guaranteed, but the likelihood of industrialists and landowners achieving their ambitions was boosted by the corporation's concentration on personal gain at the expense of public good. The crucial difference between the external agencies and the borough corporation was the way in which they perceived change. For the former, change was positive: it offered opportunities and triggered innovation, even though risks could be high, and this encouraged a forward-looking, proactive attitude. For the latter, change was unwelcomed: the imperatives of the corporation were rooted in ancient rights, privileges and status.

Consequently, as has been shown, the primary factor in this period was the change at the docks which had been enabled by the sale of corporation land to the new Port Talbot Company. For the growing town, change in this period was dependent on outside influences and agencies but Aberavon appeared to serve no purpose other than providing access to and from the sea. As a result, inhabitants of Aberavon did not share fully in any benefits being experienced by neighbouring settlements and the town's development was dependent on *ad hoc* reactions to population increases, housing demand and retail pressures. Lack of interest by the corporation and the absence of a resident landowner created a power vacuum which was easily filled by ambitious and non-resident industrialists. By the end of this early period, therefore, a number of Aberavon inhabitants and their neighbours in Taibach and Cwmavon were giving serious consideration to the removal of the existing corporation and its replacement with an elected body under the terms of the Municipal Corporations Act 1835.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> *The Cambrian*, 23 November 1849.



## Chapter Two

### Ambitions for Representative Government: Aberavon 1849-1861

This chapter assesses the incorporation of Aberavon under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 (the MCA) and places that experience within the context of the broader historiography of the development of municipal government in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Aberavon was one of only eight unreformed boroughs to successfully petition for a new charter between 1835 and 1881, and as such its incorporation offers insight into the expectations of promoters, supporters, opposition and the commissioners whose recommendations informed the eventual decision.<sup>2</sup> Shopkeepers and retailers feature strongly in the wider historiography, and it will be seen that in Aberavon a similar group of propertied men, under the leadership of a London-born grocer, utilised the parish vestry and later the Freemasons' lodge to support and achieve their aim of incorporation.

The key aim of the chapter, therefore, is to consider the factors which led to Aberavon's successful incorporation in 1861. The structuring theme for the chapter focuses on the capacity of Aberavon, as well as other small towns, to capitalise on the benefits of urban growth. Industrial and commercial development in such towns stimulated inward migration and portrayed hereditary corporations as increasingly anachronistic. Elected self-government became an aspiration for forward-looking inhabitants seeking autonomy from both landowners and members of closed corporations. It will be shown that the tenacity and ambition of local reformers combined with the predisposition of inquiry commissioners to see new charters being recommended. As Chapter One has shown, in the early part of the study period Aberavon was in no position to meet the terms of the MCA and gain a new charter. The Act stipulated that only the votes of inhabitant householders in a borough could count towards a charter decision. Therefore, despite the wealth of local industrialists and landowners their influence was irrelevant unless they lived within the borough boundary. In larger towns the likelihood of industrialists and landowners not only living locally but also meeting the standards for elected representation was greater than in small, undeveloped places like Aberavon. As a result, non-resident industrialists could provide the infrastructure which might eventually lead to incorporation, but as non-residents their influence was indirect.

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<sup>1</sup> For examples see E.P. Hennock, (1973); J. Garrard (1983); B.M. Doyle, (2018); A. Elliott, (1979); J. Smith, 'Urban elites c.1830-1930 and urban history', *Urban History* 27.2 (2000), 255-275; G. Bush, (1976); J. England, (2007); and B. Weinstein (2018).

<sup>2</sup> The other seven boroughs were Honiton, Hartlepool, Hedon, Yeovil, Reigate, Dunstable and Lewes.

It will therefore be argued that the main drivers of incorporation in Aberavon in this period were its committed inhabitant businessmen, many of whom had only recently migrated to the town. Whilst many industrialists and local landowners supported Aberavon's ambitions for reform throughout all three charter campaigns, their role in securing incorporation was limited and the crucial elements of the Act related only to individuals within the borough itself. Incorporation under the MCA offered boroughs the benefits of elected self-government and increased status. The Act not only provided for the reform of existing corporations but also gave growing, unincorporated towns the opportunity to petition for a charter.<sup>3</sup> Accountability and transparency were key factors influencing this reform and new councils were required by law to produce annual accounts of income and expenditure. Under the Act, the new, unpaid borough councillors and aldermen became subject to regular election by the borough's qualified voters. Administrative support in the new bodies was provided initially by a Town Clerk and a Treasurer who were salaried, statutory officials. Incorporation was therefore perceived as an indicator of modern, mature and autonomous local government.

After the initial tranche of charters had been granted, incorporation involved the submission of a petition of inhabitant householders to the Privy Council. Royal Commissioners then conducted lengthy inquiries within the boroughs in question and made recommendations based on evidence heard. Central government's predisposition towards the reform of ancient boroughs, however, could result in charters being granted on the basis of the removal of an incompetent corporation rather than on robust evidence of effective future governance. In Aberavon's case, the favourable recommendation made in 1860 not only relied on the wealth of the neighbouring industrial settlements spreading to Aberavon but also on the inclusion of the whole parliamentary borough, a decision which was opposed vehemently by the non-residents of the existing Borough of Aberavon, including landowner, leaseholder and M.P. for Glamorgan, C.R.M. Talbot.

The chapter is divided into three sections which separately analyse local ambitions to gain incorporation in 1849, 1853 and finally in 1859 when a series of inquiries began which resulted in the granting of a new charter in 1861. Section one highlights the advantages to be gained from incorporation and includes an assessment of the conditions in Aberavon which prompted supporters of reform to take their initial action. Although the first attempt failed to gain traction,

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<sup>3</sup> 5 & 6 Gulielmi IV, *Cap. LXXVI, An Act to provide for the Regulation of Municipal Corporations in England and Wales* (9<sup>th</sup> September 1835).

the 1853 efforts progressed through the petition and inquiry stages before falling at the final hurdle when inhabitant householders voted against the proposal; this attempt is examined in section two. The third section considers the charter submission of 1859 and assesses the changes in and around the town which contributed to the petitioners' eventual success in gaining municipal status for the Borough of Aberavon in 1861.

### **The First Charter Attempt: Aberavon in 1849**

Case studies of towns and regions in England and Wales have shown that the explanatory factors which shaped incorporation were dependent on both local considerations and national trends, therefore outcomes differed between towns and varied over time.<sup>4</sup> The history of Merthyr Tydfil, for example, illustrates the fact that transition to incorporation was never a natural, linear progression following a town's development to any specific criteria, neither was representative government a foregone conclusion after the 1835 Act became law.<sup>5</sup> Manufacturing towns in the north-west of England were among the first to reform, with Leeds gaining its new charter in 1835, then newly-incorporated Manchester and Bolton in 1838.<sup>6</sup> In the Midlands, Birmingham's ambitions for reform were realised in 1838 following the formation of an incorporation committee which was eventually elected unopposed as the new council, a pattern which was repeated in Aberavon in 1861.<sup>7</sup> Unlike in Birmingham, where the new council was never intended to supersede other bodies such as the Street Commissioners, in Aberavon the removal of the existing corporation was a priority from the outset.<sup>8</sup>

In Wales, twenty-one Welsh towns with historic charters had successfully made an automatic transition to representative government as a result of the initial investigation in 1833.<sup>9</sup> Larger towns such as Swansea, Cardiff and Newport had incorporated and held their first elections in 1835, as had Neath, a small town six miles from Aberavon which was

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<sup>4</sup> For examples see E.P. Hennock (1973); J. Garrard (1983); A. Elliott (1979); and G. Bush (1976).

<sup>5</sup> See J. England (2007) and G.A. Williams (1988).

<sup>6</sup> See E.P. Hennock (1973); and J. Garrard (1983).

<sup>7</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>9</sup> 178 of the 246 incorporated towns investigated were subsequently granted new charters of incorporation; the Welsh towns were Aberystwyth, Beaumaris, Brecknock, Caernarvon, Cardiff, Cardigan, Carmarthen, Denbigh, Flint, Haverfordwest, Llandovery, Llanidloes, Monmouth, Neath, Newport, Pembroke, Pwllheli, Ruthin, Swansea, Tenby, and Welshpool; see <https://www.parliament.uk/about/livingheritage/transformingsociety/laworder/policeprisons/overview/metropolitanpolice/> (accessed 23/7/2019). Of the 178 new boroughs, all but six (Andover, Lymington, Macclesfield, Newport Isle of Wight, Pontefract and Rochester) remained represented in the name of the modern governing body after local government reorganisation in 1972.

connected to the docks at Swansea Bay by both river and canal.<sup>10</sup> Despite relative similarities to Aberavon in terms of population, style of governance, and access to coastal trade, Neath appears to have been much better placed to implement and maintain a system of representative government at this early stage.<sup>11</sup> Neath's portreeve retained tolls for his own use, but surplus funds were said to have accumulated and Neath had been lighted and paved at no expense to the inhabitants. The investigating commissioner nevertheless concluded that the corporation of 1833 'exist[ed] for no purpose of general utility' and any extension of its jurisdiction would be 'inexpedient' unless the boundaries were changed.<sup>12</sup> Neath was granted early incorporation, but only with the inclusion of several surrounding hamlets.<sup>13</sup>

Neath was also the place of residence of Henry J. Grant, J.P., Lord of the Manor of Avon, and Neath's choice for its first mayor in 1836. Prior to his nomination as an alderman in Neath's new council in 1836, Grant had been an alderman under the old regime and his close family had also been involved as corporation officers.<sup>14</sup> By 1849, however, Grant seemed converted to reform and despite his Conservative politics and manorial role at the annual selection of the Portreeve and Constable of the Castle at the Court Leet he had become a named supporter of incorporation for Aberavon.<sup>15</sup> Evidence given at the 1853 inquiry would record that in 1849 Grant had said he would rather waive his right as Lord of the Manor than be an obstacle to reform.<sup>16</sup>

Aberavon's ineffective ancient corporation created a power vacuum which was filled initially by influential 'out-dwellers' from the large industrial settlements of nearby Taibach and Cwmavon.<sup>17</sup> Although the term out-dwellers appears self-explanatory, in this case it was used pejoratively by opponents of reform in Aberavon to refer to the non-residents who were 'try[ing] their utmost to get the Municipal Act'.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the term was used to highlight the support being given to incorporation by the industrialists and landowners living outside the borough. These men were pressing for improvements in the town that reflected the ambitious

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<sup>10</sup> Election results in *The Cambrian*, 2 January 1836.

<sup>11</sup> J. Booth (1833), p.335.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.338.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *The Cambrian*, 12 October 1833.

<sup>15</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 November 1849.

<sup>16</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 November 1853; evidence of Thomas Jones, Ironmonger.

<sup>17</sup> *The Cambrian*, 27 May 1853, letter from a non-burgess; 'outdweller' in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] using <https://www.lexico.com/definition/outdweller> [accessed 28 August 2021] is a Late-Middle English term which refers to 'a person who lives outside or away from a certain place'.

<sup>18</sup> *The Cambrian*, *ibid.*

plans at the docks. The hereditary corporation, however, was under no obligation whatsoever to act. Doyle has noted that, 'Prior to corporation reform, local government itself was the result of pressure group activity [...]'.<sup>19</sup> In Aberavon, the combination of external industrial forces, population increases and an escalation in the number of resident propertied men had indeed fostered the formation of a significant pro-reform pressure group. This group helped contribute to a rise in the relative wealth of Aberavon and was eager to participate in the improvement of the borough. A crucial factor in assessing the trend towards representative government, therefore, is not the Municipal Corporations Act itself, which was silent on matters of public health and sanitation, but the way in which individuals and groups responded to its potential to induce change.

Political allegiances were powerful influences in shaping reaction to the Act. The 'Great Reform Act' of 1832 had abolished so-called rotten boroughs, re-distributed seats by cutting 31 constituencies to just one M.P. and created 67 new constituencies.<sup>20</sup> In the boroughs, which included Aberavon as part of Swansea, the franchise was standardised to include £10 householders. The Act also conferred an additional County seat on Glamorgan and C.R.M. Talbot was subsequently joined by Lewis Weston Dillwyn. Tories had initially opposed reform, especially when they had been in government, but the extension of the franchise to £10 householders represented an opportunity to secure additional votes from the emerging middle classes. In contrast, incorporation under the MCA threatened the Tory-dominated local order, particularly in rural areas where land ownership and paternalistic Tory control were familiar and long-standing features. The historiography demonstrates clearly that in many urbanising towns and boroughs the pursuit of representative government was a straightforward struggle between Liberal reformists and a Tory-Anglican élite.<sup>21</sup>

At the local level, newspaper editors with differing political views could use their publications as mechanisms of influence in the quest for reform. Garrard has noted how shopkeepers and professionals could 'get in on the act' through these newspaper reports, which reinforced images of the benevolence of urban political élites.<sup>22</sup> As the principal source of

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<sup>19</sup> B.M. Doyle in M.J. Daunton (2000), p.307.

<sup>20</sup> The Representation of the People Act 1832, 2 & 3 Will. IV c. 45.

<sup>21</sup> See A. Elliott (1979) for Bradford; J. Garrard (1983), pp. 160 and 188 for Bolton; D. Fraser, 'Areas of Urban Politics: Leeds 1830-1880' in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, Vol. 2, ed. by H. J. Dyos and M. Wolff, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp.763-788, p.764 for Leeds; and J. Garrard (1983), p.110 for Rochdale.

<sup>22</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.30.

printed news in Aberavon, *The Cambrian* acted as a ‘civic booster’ for incorporation not by concentrating on the borough’s positive aspects but by highlighting the negatives in order to influence support for change.<sup>23</sup> *The Cambrian* was a Swansea-based Liberal newspaper which supported incorporation for Aberavon from 1849 and was not averse to open criticism of the existing corporation. *The Welshman*, which was Liberal leaning, also endorsed a new charter. The self-styled ‘only Conservative journal published in the Counties of Glamorgan and Brecon’ at this time was *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, which promoted itself as such as a means of attracting advertisers.<sup>24</sup> Readers then, as now, would choose newspapers which confirmed rather than challenged their beliefs. Whilst reports of Aberavon’s charter campaigns could cover almost whole pages of *The Cambrian*, on more than one occasion *The Guardian* report was a mere few lines. In July 1860, when early indication was given that a charter for the whole parliamentary borough was likely to be granted, *The Guardian* placed the item in the ‘General News’ section on page seven.<sup>25</sup>

In Aberavon, whilst calls for incorporation came from men with Liberal leanings, there appears to be no evidence to suggest that the corporation and their supporters were Conservatives or that local opposition to incorporation was based on party allegiances. In fact, the corporation appeared to be broadly a-political. Said to have contributed £200 towards the construction of a town hall for Aberavon, the manager of Dowlais Ironworks and future Liberal M.P. for Merthyr Tydfil, J.J. Guest, had been created a burgess of Aberavon in 1824.<sup>26</sup> John Vigurs had also become a burgess during his time as proprietor of the Cwmavon Works, and Evan Jones, former portreeve of Aberavon was a stated Liberal supporter.<sup>27</sup> Whilst many of the drivers of change who petitioned for a new charter in Aberavon were founders of a local Municipal Reform Party, no formal links have been identified between the ancient corporation and either local Conservatives or the Anglican church. Despite a special pew being reserved for the corporation at St. Mary’s Parish Church, there are few reports of their attendance there; a subscription of £50 to the church’s rebuilding costs between 1847 and 1859 appears unpaid.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For civic boosterism in Merthyr see A. Croll (2000), p.11 and p.60.

<sup>24</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 20 September 1851.

<sup>25</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 28 July 1860.

<sup>26</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 3 July 1915 (opening of new town hall and arcade); *The Cambrian*, 2 October 1824; and evidence of Alderman Thomas Williams at the 1853 inquiry reported in *The Cambrian*, 11 November 1853.

<sup>27</sup> *The Cambrian*, 2 May 1835 listed supporters of J.H. Vivian, the Liberal Parliamentary candidate for the Swansea Boroughs.

<sup>28</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 29 May 1847, p.2 lists subscribers; *The Cambrian*, 6 January 1860, evidence of Dr. H.L. Prichard.

Corporation neglect and industrial investment were the principal topics when the first moves towards incorporation were made at a public meeting held on Monday, 12 November 1849 in the Long Room of the Globe Inn, Aberavon.<sup>29</sup> A further meeting took place the following Monday to conclude business.<sup>30</sup> The meeting had been organised by Aberavon inhabitants who were not burgesses or freemen and who were in favour of petitioning for a municipal borough. Central to discussions were the two contrasting factors: visible improvement at the docks and visible decay in the town. Blame for the latter was placed firmly on the corporation's lack of interest and involvement. By 1849 the town's population had almost doubled from its 1841 Census figure of 1,290 but the corporation had not adopted the Public Health Act of 1848 which would have introduced basic bye-laws requiring all new houses to be provided with a WC or ashpit.<sup>31</sup> Over a hundred new houses had been built in the town since 1841 but the absence of a body with responsibility for building control and regulation meant that speculative builders had taken advantage. Neither the corporation, the Vestry nor the inhabitants themselves had funded a Bill for improvements, so the town had not been drained, and no system was in place to remove sewage and waste. The public meeting was the first step towards rectifying the situation and resulted in the creation of a municipal committee. Members of the committee formed a deputation which visited prominent landowners and industrialists such as H.J. Grant, J.H. Vivian and C.R.M. Talbot to garner support.<sup>32</sup>

The Aberavon contingent at the first public meeting on 12 November 1849 consisted of seven tradesmen, two of whom were churchwardens, and Evan Bevan, a mineral surveyor born in the Swansea area who had previously lived in Cwmavon.<sup>33</sup> Support came from a variety of sources both within and outside the municipal borough (see Table 2.1). The correspondent for *The Cambrian* who reported on the meeting agreed that the 'interests, wants and future prosperity' of the 'little rising town' could be remedied by the MCA in the 'Borough of Aberavon' but Evan Bevan, the elected Chair at the first meeting, concentrated not on the borough itself but on the geographical position of the town and the 'great natural resources of the neighbourhood', including the 'excellent floating harbour'.<sup>34</sup> This remark, coupled with the

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<sup>29</sup> *The Cambrian*, 23 November 1849.

<sup>30</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 November 1849.

<sup>31</sup> A.J. Ley, *A History of Building Control in England and Wales 1840-1990*, (2000: Google Book), p.38.

<sup>32</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 November 1849.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

presence and promised support at the meeting of so many non-inhabitant householders, implies that incorporation of the Parliamentary Borough of Aberavon was the main aim at that time.

**Table 2.1: Individuals involved in Aberavon charter campaigns of 1849-53**

NAME	ROLE
<b>C.R.M. Talbot</b> J.P., M.P. for Glamorgan; Lord Lieutenant of Glamorgan	UNCOMMITTED
<b>Daniel Smith</b> Ironmonger & Grocer; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER
<b>David Davies</b> Printer & Stationer	FOR CHARTER
<b>David Longdon</b> Merchant; brewer and maltster	FOR CHARTER
<b>Edward Jones</b> Grocer; Future Councillor & first Mayor	FOR CHARTER
<b>Evan Bevan (d.1855)</b> Mineral Surveyor	FOR CHARTER
<b>Griffith Llewellyn</b> J.P., High Sheriff of Glamorgan	FOR CHARTER
<b>Henry J. Grant</b> J.P., Lord of the Manor of Avon	FOR CHARTER
<b>Hopkin Llewellyn Prichard (Doctor)</b> Poor Law Surgeon	FOR CHARTER
<b>Howel Gwyn</b> J.P., Conservative M.P. for Penryn and Falmouth 1847-58; Neath councillor to 1857; Mayor of Neath 1842 and 1844	FOR CHARTER
<b>J.H. Vivian, M.P. (d.1855)</b> Liberal M.P. for Swansea Boroughs; owner of Margam Copper Works	FOR CHARTER: Gave verbal support 1849
<b>John Biddulph</b> Manager of the ECC works at Cwmavon after 1848	FOR CHARTER
<b>Llewellyn Llewellyn</b> Co-owner of Margam Tin Works	FOR CHARTER
Police Sergeant <b>Peter Wright</b>	FOR CHARTER
<b>Rees Morgan</b> Neath town councillor and owner of property in Aberavon	FOR CHARTER
<b>Robert Lindsay</b> Manager of Margam Copper Works; son-in-law of J.H. Vivian, M.P.	FOR CHARTER
<b>Thomas Jones</b> Ironmonger and Churchwarden	FOR CHARTER
<b>Thomas Jones</b> Maltster and Innkeeper, Bear Hotel	FOR CHARTER
<b>Thomas Lewis (Captain)</b> Harbour Master	FOR CHARTER
<b>Thomas Williams</b> Alderman of corporation	AGAINST CHARTER
<b>William Gilbertson</b> Manager of ECC following restructuring in 1850	FOR CHARTER
<b>William Llewellyn</b> Co-owner of Margam Tin Works	FOR CHARTER
<b>William Loveluck</b> H.M. Customs Officer	FOR CHARTER



The town's ancient status and identity would have been considerably diluted by such a move as the population sizes of the neighbouring settlements were each larger than Aberavon (see Chapter One). Whilst the population of Aberavon in 1861 and 1871 was 2,916 and 3,396 respectively, the population living within the parliamentary limits of the contributory borough was 7,754.<sup>35</sup> The parliamentary boundary extended two miles to the north to incorporate the intensely industrial community of Cwmavon in the parish of Michaelston Lower and more than a mile to the east to include Taibach, the location of the Vivian's copper works.<sup>36</sup> The boundary also extended slightly west of the municipal area of Aberavon to include a negligible number of properties in the hamlet of Baglan Lower.<sup>37</sup> However, the space between Aberavon and the industrial areas to the east and north was made up entirely of open countryside, thereby impeding the practical operation of a truly representative 'town' council.

Incorporation of the Parliamentary Borough would have created a larger borough with an extended pool of qualified potential representatives but it was by no means certain that these men had the time or the inclination to participate in local government. If they chose not to stand for office, they were certainly reluctant to be governed by the likes of the existing corporation members. Having already funded improvements in their own areas the industrialists were also disinclined to agree any local rate increases to fund improvements in Aberavon, where the 'apathy and indifference of the Corporation in all matters relating to the interests, wants and future prosperity of the town' had become all too apparent.<sup>38</sup> The small yet growing population of Aberavon had proved unable to mitigate either the impact of urban growth or the corporation's neglect of the town and this provided further justification for intervention by the out-dwellers. However, whilst the local industrialists endorsed the promotion of a charter, they were ambivalent about how that might be achieved. Incorporation of the existing borough meant that the weight of opinion of propertied out-dwellers was of little consequence apart from the possible potential to sway the votes of deferential inhabitant householders. If incorporation extended to the Parliamentary borough, however, then industrialists and landowners would have considerable influence over their workers and tenants.

Whilst C.R.M. Talbot was prepared to lend his name as patron in the funding of the restoration of St. Mary's church in Aberavon he rarely visited the town.<sup>39</sup> As early as 1830 he

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<sup>35</sup> *Harrod's Directory (1866)*, p.340

<sup>36</sup> *Butcher's Directory (1875-6)*, pp.314-315.

<sup>37</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 10/1, Borough of Aberavon Burgess Roll 1861-82.

<sup>38</sup> *The Cambrian*, 23 November 1849; 'a correspondent' commenting on the public meeting.

<sup>39</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 25 June 1859.

had been emphasising ‘the difficulties involved in representing the divergent interests of agriculture, manufacturing, shipping and commerce’,<sup>40</sup> and the presence of all four in Port Talbot and Aberavon appeared to increase his reluctance to fully engage with his constituents and their interests. Absence of a resident benefactor to fund or initiate improvements at Aberavon also contributed to its neglect. In contrast, influential and non-resident owners and users of the docks were prepared to invest heavily in projects in their own areas which furthered their interests. Consequently, urban and civic development in Aberavon remained subject to the aspirations of inhabitants. This tends to support the view suggested by some urban historians that the influence of the middle classes as well as the gentry was instrumental in shaping urban politics and expression in the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

Trainor, for example, noted how the continued involvement of successive earls of Dudley in civic projects was a welcome boost, but it ‘probably discouraged innovation in the rest of the élite’, a ‘large and complacent’ middle class.<sup>42</sup> Research by Morris found that whereas the commercial and professional middle class[es] generally predominated in large urban centres, in medium-sized towns and small industrial centres manufacturers played a greater part in public life.<sup>43</sup> A form of governance in the neighbouring industrial settlements of Taibach and Cwmavon bears witness to Morris’s theory, and the support of industrialists in the districts surrounding Aberavon was a major factor accompanying the drive towards incorporation. However, reform under the MCA could only be achieved by a majority petition of the inhabitant householders of a borough, and the non-inhabitant householders appear to have overestimated their capacity to influence the final outcome.

The chapter’s focus on incorporation offers insight into the motivations of inhabitants of small towns, industrialists and landowners as they sought to expand or protect their interests at a time of enormous change. Both hereditary corporations and aristocratic landowners were often intent on maintaining centuries-old traditions. In contrast, industrialists and immigrant businessmen were, in general, modernisers. For Cannadine, the period heralded a slow transition from landowners as a governing elite to a new era where councils were populated by

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Escott, <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/constituencies/glamorgan>, [accessed 31 May 2022].

<sup>41</sup> See R. Trainor, (1993); R.J. Morris, 'The Middle Class and British Towns and Cities of the Industrial Revolution 1780-1870' in Fraser and Sutcliffe (1983) p.286; see also J. Smith (2000), pp.273-4 and R. Sweet (1999), p.192 for a rebuttal of the case for the continued influence of urban élites.

<sup>42</sup> R. Trainor, (1993) pp. 372-3.

<sup>43</sup> J. Smith (2000), p.260.

confident middle-class elites.<sup>44</sup> Daunton's emphasis on clauses in landowners' leases as a means of maintaining the value of their property,<sup>45</sup> however, highlights the potential for clashes between groups and raises questions regarding the impact on small town inhabitants. It will be seen below that those of Aberavon were consistently affected after 1890, when the Talbot heir took control of the extensive Margam Estate.

Additionally, Sweet has noted that as the century progressed corporations began to be perceived as public rather than private bodies.<sup>46</sup> However, this shift in perception was dependent on a number of local factors such as ratepayer resistance to incorporation, support for hereditary members from future burgesses or the gradual splintering of small, close communities as a result of inward migration and the passage of time. In Aberavon, evidence for a shift in perception began to emerge in the 1840s, when inhabitants became more acutely aware of their town being, 'neglected, ill-used, and shabbily treated'.<sup>47</sup> Developments in neighbouring towns had prompted calls for a town market, a well-appointed town hall and representative self-government.

Under the terms of the MCA all candidates for office had to be on the Burgess Roll and were therefore 'occupiers of rateable property in the borough who lived within seven miles of it and who had paid rates for the previous two-and-a-half years'; they also, in a small borough, had to 'own real or personal property worth £500 or else occupy property with a rateable value of £15'.<sup>48</sup> Candidacy, therefore, excluded men who had very recently settled in Aberavon, despite their standing or ability, and was also affected by the rateable value of the new and existing properties in the town. As a result, plans for incorporation were eventually abandoned due to a failure to agree boundaries and the possible recognition that candidates for elected office were simply too few.<sup>49</sup>

Whilst the votes of non-inhabitant householders could not directly affect a charter outcome, landowner influence in the decision not to proceed with a petition of incorporation cannot be discounted. Newspapers did not report any announcements or outcomes after December 1849, when a list of prominent out-dwellers prepared to promise support was published.<sup>50</sup> C.R.M.

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<sup>44</sup> D. Cannadine, (1982), pp.2-10.

<sup>45</sup> M.J. Daunton (2018), p.7.

<sup>46</sup> R. Sweet (1999), p.34.

<sup>47</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 4 July 1846.

<sup>48</sup> E.P. Hennock, (1973), p.10; in larger boroughs the property qualifications were £1,000 and £30 respectively.

<sup>49</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 November 1853.

<sup>50</sup> *The Cambrian*, 7 December 1849.

Talbot was one of those named, but in testimony to the 1853 inquiry Thomas Jones would confirm that Talbot had ‘not given a definite answer on the subject up to that day’ even though other ‘influential gentlemen of the neighbourhood’ were favourable.<sup>51</sup> As will be seen below, whilst Talbot was said to have given verbal support to Aberavon’s municipal ambitions he did not sign the promoters’ 1853 petition and opted to contest incorporation of the parliamentary borough in 1860 by submitting a counter petition of his own.<sup>52</sup>

Aberavon was not unique in terms of the town’s conditions, but issues of choice, political will, and decision-making were important determinants of local outcomes.<sup>53</sup> Towns and their governing bodies in England and Wales continually faced unprecedented issues, but the presence of a variety of local bodies such as the Parish Vestry or Improvement Commissioners, often with overlapping responsibilities to the local population, impeded the formation of single, coherent, local strategies. In Aberavon, this lack of clear direction provided justification for both the corporation’s inertia and the reformers’ interventions. A possible explanation for this position has been offered in the work of Rosemary Sweet, who cites F.W. Maitland’s assertion that corporations’ primary concerns were the management of corporation property.<sup>54</sup> Sweet further states that, ‘The older the charter, the less specific the terms of powers tended to be’.<sup>55</sup> Aberavon’s charters dated back to the fourteenth century but they had been so selectively implemented over the centuries that by the nineteenth century Aberavon was a borough by prescription only. The corporation, steeped in history and intent on retaining its privileges, maintained that it was fulfilling its obligations as it saw them by simply managing corporation property and collecting fines and fees; no new or additional level of government was required.

Improvements elsewhere, however, highlighted the problems in Aberavon, not least of which was the lack of leadership, and it was no exaggeration to say that Aberavon was slipping behind its neighbours. Despite an 1848 Market Act there was still no marketplace and the only public building was the town hall which, like that of Merthyr Tydfil, had taken decades to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> TNA PC1/1508 and TNA PC1/1521, Petition against inclusion of Parliamentary Borough: Owners and Occupiers.

<sup>53</sup> For examples see B.M. Doyle (2018); H.J. Dyos, *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe, eds., *The Pursuit of Urban History*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1983); J. Garrard (1983); E.P. Hennock (1973); L. Miskell, (2006); R. Trainor, (1993); J. Smith (2000); and D.W. Howell & C. Baber, (1993).

<sup>54</sup> R. Sweet (1999), p.35.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

complete.<sup>56</sup> As Sweet has noted, by the nineteenth century structural improvement was evident in almost all towns and only in the ‘most decayed’ market town had no kind of investment in the urban fabric been made.<sup>57</sup> Buildings, particularly civic buildings, ‘were proof of the success of the town’s economy and the good taste of its inhabitants’ as well as confirmation of ‘urban pride and identity’.<sup>58</sup> Substantial financial investment had been made at the docks, but the insanitary conditions and apathetic corporation across the river in Aberavon represented a significant impediment to the area’s future prosperity and status.

The historiography has highlighted how ‘great benefactors’ could influence the development of towns, and Trainor’s account of Bilston, where ‘civic innovation was difficult’ until late in the nineteenth century due to the absence of prosperous individuals, partially reflects experiences in Aberavon.<sup>59</sup> In Aberavon, eighteen years after the MCA had become law, the situation was summed up in evidence given by Dr. Prichard, who even as Poor Law Surgeon had been unable to enforce the removal of nuisances in Aberavon, saying, ‘Here there is no mayor, no magistrate, no esquire, no large proprietor, no leading person to direct public interest. No head, no governing body, no authority to act for the public good. In fact, it is impossible that Aberavon can be in a worse position than it is at present’.<sup>60</sup> Prichard’s words echoed those of T.W. Rammell, who had described unincorporated Merthyr Tydfil in similar terms following an inquiry into sanitary conditions there in 1849, concluding that the town was ‘almost entirely destitute of drainage’, had ‘a very large number of cases of epidemic, endemic and contagious diseases’, lacked effective cleansing and proper provision of water, and was without ‘any governing body connected with the place having authority for such purposes’.<sup>61</sup>

Prichard and Rammell both suggest that the presence of wealth and authority in an area was a guarantee of improvement. However, there was no shortage of wealthy industrialists in the new settlements at Merthyr, and the ironmasters and their agents were active within Merthyr’s select vestry from the 1820s.<sup>62</sup> The masters consistently opposed attempts at incorporation even

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<sup>56</sup> England, p.21. Merthyr’s town hall was completed in 1896 although the first discussions had taken place in 1833. In Aberavon, the first records relating to construction of a town hall date to 1818 (WGAS, D/D Je 59 of 1823 recites the details) although the completion date was not until about 1848. See also Chapter One.

<sup>57</sup> R. Sweet (1999), p.254.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.263; see also R.J. Morris and R. Rodger (1993), p.8.

<sup>59</sup> Trainor, (1993), p.373.

<sup>60</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 November 1853.

<sup>61</sup> T.W. Rammell, *Report to the General Board of Health on a Preliminary Inquiry into the Sewerage, Drainage, and Supply of Water, and the Sanitary Condition of the Town of Merthyr Tydfil*, (London, 1850) cited in England, p.12.

<sup>62</sup> G.A. Williams (1988), Table 2.2, p.62.

though Merthyr of the 1830s was considered ‘Wales’s premier town’ in view of its ‘wealth, population and commercial importance’.<sup>63</sup> Rammell had recommended the provision of clean water, but despite this, and 1,430 cholera-related deaths in the summer of 1849, the ironmasters refused to allow the waters of the Taff Fechan to be used for the public good.<sup>64</sup> Reformers called for adoption of the Public Health Act, but they were ‘few in number and had no firm power base’.<sup>65</sup> Opponents of reform cited raised rates and rents as the reasons for their objection, and it was not until 1897, when shopkeepers allied themselves with the local Chamber of Trade, that a more organised attempt to remove squalor, obtain civic power and improve trade could emerge.<sup>66</sup> Local interests and decision making were, therefore, crucial and influential factors in the success or failure of campaigns for incorporation.

For those relocating to Aberavon, the adjustment from rural settlement to urbanising and industrial town had proved to be problematic. As Dyos has noted, the English and ‘still more markedly the Welsh’ were ‘reluctant city dwellers, accepting their lot with a devious determination to bring as many rustic features as possible onto the urban scene’.<sup>67</sup> Whilst Aberavon was by no means a city, the rustic features identified by Dyos were certainly in evidence in the growing town and its neighbourhood, where animals were kept and slaughtered in close proximity to residences.<sup>68</sup> Pigsties at the backs of houses were a constant nuisance and many households kept smaller animals and poultry indoors. In 1854, concerned with the threat of a cholera outbreak in Cwmavon, the English Copper Company (the ECC) had attempted to take preventative measures and issued a notice to its workers which stated that ‘no rabbits or poultry may be kept within doors’.<sup>69</sup> The company had been operating in the area for almost a century and following its relocation to Cwmavon after 1838 had in many ways become a mechanism of local authority. Suggested precautionary measures against cholera for its many employees included tract distribution and the use of ‘Two large Baths, well supplied with almost constantly flowing tepid water . . . at the charge of  $\frac{1}{2}d.$  and  $1d.$  (according to circumstances) for each bather’.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> J. England (2007), p.15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>67</sup> H.J. Dyos, (1982), p.60.

<sup>68</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 November 1853; evidence of Benjamin Morgan Davies.

<sup>69</sup> NLW, P/M 9324, Parcel of letters 1852-55. The ‘English Copper Company’ was the shortened name given to ‘The Governor and Company of Copper Miners in England’ which had been founded in 1691, begun working in Wales in 1742 and operated a copper works at Taibach from 1770 (see Chapter One).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, printed notice to workmen and inhabitants of ‘Cwm-Avon, Port Talbot’ dated 8 November 1854.

Fear of cholera and concerns with public health generally had also influenced national government decisions. The MCA, which was permissive and enabling, had proscribed the administrative processes of election and stipulated the legal responsibilities of new councils regarding lighting, paving and policing a borough. As a regulatory Act for the establishment of elected local government, however, it was silent on how new councils should manage the health and welfare of their growing populations. Local bodies were autonomous, but whereas individuals were allowed freedom of action within the law, the reverse was true for corporations, which were prevented from carrying out any action that was not 'specifically permitted by statute'.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, authorities were required to submit local Bills to Parliament if they wished to expand their minimum responsibilities. In the 1830s, the average cost of an unopposed town improvement Bill was £1,627, and additional fees for barristers meant that 'opposed Bills were always expensive'.<sup>72</sup> As a result, although from 1835 central government had facilitated autonomous self-government, the means of implementation were heavily dependent on both the political will of corporations and the local availability of funding.

To the reformers, an elected body comprised of active, enthusiastic individuals would present Aberavon with the capacity to carry out the necessary improvements in the growing town. The Public Health Act of 1848 (the PHA) offered both reformed and unreformed boroughs the means to address the more pernicious aspects of urban growth, but its expensive and permissive nature, coupled with a population and corporation consisting of mainly labouring men, had so far inhibited adoption in Aberavon.<sup>73</sup> Unless the mortality rate exceeded 23 per 1,000, when a Local Board of Health would become mandatory, it was unlikely that the Act would be voluntarily sought and implemented. By 1854 more than '300 towns had petitioned to adopt the [PHA], and it had been applied in 182', with 'over a million pounds' being granted in loans for improvements.<sup>74</sup> In Bradford, the failure of local government to deal with public health crises had given local Liberals justification to push for incorporation and had even won the support of Tory shopkeepers who were keen to see the town improved.<sup>75</sup> In

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<sup>71</sup> J. Prest (1990), p.4.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>73</sup> 1841 Census of England and Wales; J. Booth (1833), p.165.

<sup>74</sup> Report from the General Board of Health on the Administration of the Public Health Act and the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Acts from 1848 to 1854, with appendix; *Parliamentary Papers* 1854, XXXV, Paper 1, [1768]; see also R.J.B. Morris, 'Local Government, Local Legislation: Municipal Initiative in Parliament from 1858 to 1872', (doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2014 ), p.51, [accessed in .pdf form 17 October 2018], published (Oxford: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> A. Elliott (1979), pp.158 and 174.

Aberavon, however, no consensus had been reached on the necessity to address public health and an incorporation petition to the Privy Council, the body with responsibility for health as well as the administration of charter requests at that time, appeared to be the sole remedy, despite the MCA's silence on the public good.

Insanitary conditions in Aberavon had not deterred migrant workers with a variety of skills from coming to the town to support themselves and the local economy. By 1851, most residential streets contained a broad range of occupations from tin workers to dressmakers, with grocers, labourers and non-conformist ministers all living close to each other.<sup>76</sup> High Street, the route of the daily mail coach, was slightly more commercial than others but also included farmers (one of 100 acres and another of 60 acres), as well as retailers from England, Scotland and other counties of Wales. Irish immigrants had come to south Wales in the mid-1840s to escape the potato famine, and many Aberavon streets contained a number of workers from Ireland. Overcrowded lodging houses were commonplace, particularly in Cwmavon Road and Mountain Road, Aberavon where a single property housed between twenty and twenty-five Irish inhabitants.<sup>77</sup> Many of these immigrants worked as labourers, in agriculture or on the railways, others were listed as sand carriers or cockle sellers.<sup>78</sup> According to the 1851 Census, Aberavon's 2,380 inhabitants lived in 389 houses, giving an average household size of just over six, but this figure was clearly skewed by the presence of common lodging houses.

The population had increased fourfold since the 1831 figure of 573, and in 1835, the year the MCA received Royal Assent, the town's facilities had been limited. The seven taverns or public houses were supplemented by one retailer of beer, and two premises were run by combined drapers and grocers; a blacksmith and a nail maker completed the town's contribution to trade.<sup>79</sup> By 1848 the town boasted a variety of services and facilities such as grocers (15), drapers (6), plumbers and glaziers (2), shoemakers (7), a solicitor, and a chemist.<sup>80</sup> In addition, there were booksellers (2), tailors (5), a hairdresser, a confectioner and a dealer in china and glass.<sup>81</sup> The number of public houses had increased to nine, but the greatest increase was in the number of beer retailers which had risen to nineteen, possibly as a result of the relaxation of licensing laws contained in the Beerhouse Act of 1830 which allowed ratepayers

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<sup>76</sup> 1851 Census of England and Wales, Aberavon.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Pigot's Directory of South Wales, (1835).*

<sup>80</sup> *Hunt & Co. Directory, (1848).*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*



to brew and sell their own beer after purchasing a licence for two guineas.<sup>82</sup> Public houses served as meeting places as well as drinking establishments, and it is worth noting that their high number also presupposes an ample supply of paying customers to sustain the businesses.

### **The 1853 Campaign**

Self-interest and self-preservation appear to have been the motivating forces of the corporation in Aberavon, which, like that of Bristol, refused to accept that rights and privileges were accompanied by responsibilities and obligations.<sup>83</sup> Unlike its counterparts at Swansea, Neath, Liverpool and Bristol, where corporations had established links with the port operations, in Aberavon the corporation had no interest or involvement in the docks and was therefore unable to benefit financially from tolls.<sup>84</sup> Sweet has written that wealthier corporations could be found in ‘port towns where they had property rights over the harbour and could benefit from the upswing in trade by levying tolls’, but Aberavon’s corporation had no such links and any potential benefits had been lost.<sup>85</sup> The corporation attended parades and were a significant presence at the 500-seat banquet to welcome the ECC back to the area in 1852 following its four-year period away from the area after bankruptcy, but corporation persistence in refusing to spend any income on the town itself had, to many, become untenable.<sup>86</sup> Letters began appearing in *The Cambrian* in early 1852 which criticised the ancient borough’s ‘sapient local rulers’ and encouraged tradesmen to support those who had promoted the MCA in 1849.<sup>87</sup> The municipal committee had continued, and in November 1852 a ‘numerously and respectably signed’ requisition urged its members to forge ahead with a formal submission for incorporation.<sup>88</sup>

Tradesmen played a significant part in the reform campaigns and the influence of incomers was an important aspect of Aberavon’s development. A powerful shopkeeper element has been a common thread throughout studies of incorporation and the historiography has revealed that poor conditions in towns stimulated action by the tradesmen whose businesses were being affected by poorly maintained streets that were an impediment to trade and deterred visitors.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> 11 Geo 4. and 1 Will 4. c. 64; see S.L. Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, culture and society in nineteenth century Britain*, 2nd edn., (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), p.149.

<sup>83</sup> G. Bush (1976), p.71.

<sup>84</sup> For examples see L. Miskell (2006); R. Sweet (1999); and G. Bush (1976).

<sup>85</sup> R. Sweet (1999), p.105.

<sup>86</sup> *The Cambrian*, 14 May 1852.

<sup>87</sup> *The Cambrian*, 2 January 1852.

<sup>88</sup> *The Cambrian*, 12 November 1852.

<sup>89</sup> Sweet (1999), p.76.

Retail provision in Aberavon had continued to expand since 1848 and by 1852 bakers (4), clothes dealers (2), ironmongers (2), straw hat makers (2) and watchmakers (2) had joined the existing range of traders in the town.<sup>90</sup> Numbers of tailors, chemists, drapers and plumbers had also increased.<sup>91</sup> William Young and William Whitelaw had both migrated to Aberavon from Scotland and set up family businesses as bakers and confectioners; both became involved in municipal reform and both would become elected councillors and mayors after incorporation. Jones has suggested that immigrants from England were unwelcome in Wales, and that there was a 'deep antipathy' towards English incomers who were perceived by cultivated Welshmen as 'morally inferior'.<sup>92</sup> There is no evidence to support this assertion in Aberavon, however, as English incomers appear to have been popular members of civic society. Men like grocer Edward Jones and future town clerk Marmaduke Tennant made substantial contributions to the social and municipal development of the town.

It is significant that the main drivers of change within the town in this period were relatively young and ambitious businessmen who had not only moved to Aberavon but who, despite the poor conditions, had also taken the conscious decision to stay. One explanation for this situation was the relative lack of organised opposition and oversight in Aberavon at that time. In Merthyr, powerful industrial interests controlled not only the works but also the town's vestry and much of the housing.<sup>93</sup> In Dudley, a strong aristocratic presence contributed to the town's improvements but at the same time inhibited civic innovation.<sup>94</sup> In Aberavon however, the absence of these resident interests and the presence of a disorganised ancient corporation created a situation in which opportunities to cultivate ambitions were relatively unrestricted. Furthermore, local industrialists appeared keen to support incorporation for Aberavon. For Aberavon's reformers, the insanitary conditions and their removal represented the means to an end, and unlike their retail counterparts in Merthyr, who were said to have rarely put down roots but made what money they could and then moved on, the retailers of Aberavon appear to have been persistent and determined.<sup>95</sup> As I.G. Jones has written, Aberavon 'grew in

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<sup>90</sup> *Scammell & Co. Directory of Bristol and the South West, (1852).*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> I.G. Jones, (1992), p.10. Note: of the 13 identified committee members elected to take forward the petition for incorporation in 1859, two were English, one Scottish, one Irish, five were born in neighbouring parishes and four born in other Welsh counties: none were born in Aberavon.

<sup>93</sup> J. England (2007), p.12 and G.A. Williams (1988), pp.21, 42, 53, 61-62.

<sup>94</sup> R. Trainor (1993), p.372-3.

<sup>95</sup> *Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales*, 15 December 1876, incorporation inquiry evidence of Walter Smyth, chemist and druggist at Merthyr for 26 years; A. Croll (2000), p.41.

consciousness as it expanded in size and its image of itself as a town became more pronounced'.<sup>96</sup>

As Table 2.1 has shown, support for incorporation came from a wide range of sources. Necessity for reform would have been more obvious to those living within the borough and would have been felt more keenly by them, but it is clear that the majority of local landowners, industrialists and individuals associated with the docks could also appreciate the potential benefits. By April 1853 enough support had been gathered to two petitions had been submitted to the Privy Council calling for a charter of incorporation for Aberavon. The first petition, of Inhabitant Householders, was signed by 187 petitioners who represented a substantial rating assessment of £1,267-15s-0d.<sup>97</sup> The second petition, that of the Owners and Occupiers, was signed by just 37 men whose total rateable assessment was £1855-4s-0d.<sup>98</sup>

At the top of the first document was Benjamin Morgan Davies, spirit merchant and local businessman, who had been a principal speaker at the first meetings in November of 1849. He was followed by the aforementioned Thomas Jones, ironmonger, a newcomer to Aberavon in 1826 at the age of twelve but a churchwarden from 1846 until his death in 1858. Signatures of future councillors involved in retail are evident throughout the document, listed alongside those of labourers, colliers, the Vicar of Aberavon, the Parish Clerk, and the local county police officer, Sergeant Wright.<sup>99</sup> Supporters on the second list included the Lord of the Manor, Henry J. Grant (first to sign); William Gilbertson of the ECC; William Llewellyn of Margam Tin Plate Works; Robert Lindsay of the Margam Copper Works; Howel Gwyn, M.P.; Dr. H.L. Prichard; and William Loveluck, Customs Officer.<sup>100</sup>

Despite promised support at the start of the 1849 campaign, the signature of C.R.M. Talbot M.P., the wealthiest landowner in Glamorgan and director of the Port Talbot Company which had been named for him, was conspicuous by its absence from the petition of Owners and Occupiers. Incorporation was a means of improving conditions in Aberavon but the benefits would also impact on the docks. The charter petitions were therefore drafted to justify incorporation by not only emphasising the need for reformed local government but also the

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<sup>96</sup> I.G. Jones (1992), p.98.

<sup>97</sup> TNA, PC1/1507, 1853 Petition for Charter, from Inhabitant Householders.

<sup>98</sup> TNA, PC1/1508, 1853 Petition for Charter, from Owners and Occupiers of land.

<sup>99</sup> TNA, PC1/1507.

<sup>100</sup> TNA, PC1/1508.

importance of the docks and surrounding industries. Lessees of Talbot's vast property empire were keen to assist the promoters, but Talbot himself appeared reluctant to commit.

Port Talbot docks, however, were a fundamental factor in the charter campaign. The identical text of the promoters' two charter petitions referred to Aberavon, the docks, and the neighbouring industrial works. The documents stated that 'there is not a sufficiently responsible or effective local Government within the said Borough adequate to its requirements' and prayed for incorporation under the MCA of 1835.<sup>101</sup> Crucially, justification for incorporation relied on three main points, two of which referred to Aberavon's well-suited position for 'Shipping and Mercantile purposes' and the construction of 'Docks of great size and depth' by a company formerly known as the Aberavon Harbour Company but later amended to the Port Talbot Company.<sup>102</sup> The third point referred to 'very extensive Copper Iron Tin and Chemical Works and Collieries' that were 'within Two miles' of the town, which was said to be 'still increasing in prosperity'.<sup>103</sup> The virtues, if any, of the town itself were not specifically mentioned and it is worth noting that despite the charter's positive points regarding the docks the actual situation in the early 1850s was not as favourable as the promoters maintained: the port's steamer 'Don' had become unreliable and the ribs of the lock gates needed immediate repair, prompting a number of letters of concern from the ECC to Talbot's agent.<sup>104</sup>

The corporation dismissed the importance of the docks due to them being 'principally situate beyond the limits of the said Borough' and 'principally connected with the neighbouring Town of Taibach'.<sup>105</sup> The extensive works in Cwmavon and Taibach were described as 'not of the importance to the said Borough which is implied in the said Petition and a very small proportion of the persons employed therein are resident in the said Borough'.<sup>106</sup> Whilst the last point contained an element of truth, it is unlikely that Aberavon would have increased in population and prosperity if not for the new docks and the neighbouring works. Garrard has noted in his analysis of Salford in the 1840s that, 'though much more than a suburb, she was heavily dependent on her neighbour'.<sup>107</sup> Whilst Aberavon was certainly not a suburb at this

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> TNA, PC1/1508, 1853 Petition for Charter, from Owners and Occupiers of land, etc.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> NLW P/M 9267, letters to William Llewellyn, 1848-52 and John Biddulph, 14 April 1850; see also NLW, P/M 9324, Parcel of ECC letters 1852-55, William Gilbertson to William Llewellyn, 7 January 1853.

<sup>105</sup> TNA, PC1/1509.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.86.

time, a co-dependency existed between the docks, the industrialised areas to the north and west, and the developing town.

The corporation's petition also challenged the population figures (which were correct according to the 1831 and 1851 censuses), and emphasised the potential for expense, animosity and party feeling under MCA government; it also absolved itself of any allegations of mismanagement.<sup>108</sup> Effective representative government in Aberavon had the potential to foster reciprocal arrangements between the port and the town and contribute to the prosperity of both, but the corporation appeared insistent on maintaining its perceived exclusivity. Aside from the corporation, many of those who opposed incorporation had been influenced by concerns that the burgesses and their close families would lose their ancient hereditary rights and privileges under a new charter. Additionally, the prospect of paying for improvements under a new corporation raised issues of higher rates and a commensurate increase in rents.

Divergence between the texts of the promoters' petitions and that of their opponents highlighted the complexity of the situation. Geographically, Aberavon, Taibach and Cwmavon were separate settlements, and Port Talbot was the name for the new dock, much of which was in the Parish of Margam but the main entrance to which was within the municipal boundary of Aberavon. To the promoters, recognition of the surrounding wealth and prosperity reinforced the validity of the petition and evidenced integrated commercial activity which was being impeded by regressive local government. The Common Seal of the corporation was affixed to its petition of opposition on 30 June 1853 and petitions of opposition from both Inhabitant Householders and Owners and Occupiers were also submitted.<sup>109</sup> The charter petitions were considered by a committee of the Privy Council on 16 July 1853, a week after counter-petitions had been submitted by Inhabitant Householders, Owners and Occupiers, and the Corporation of Aberavon. Following deliberations, the Privy Council ordered that a public inquiry should be held, and Captain George Drought Warburton, R.A. was dispatched to Aberavon to consider the evidence. Warburton had recently married and his wife accompanied him to south Wales although the couple chose not to stay at an Aberavon hotel but at Pyle Inn, in the village of Pyle, about seven miles to the east of the inquiry venue.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> TNA, PC1/1509.

<sup>109</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 July 1853, p.5; TNA, PC1/1509, Portreeve, Aldermen and Burgesses Petition Against Charter, 1853; TNA PC1/1510, Petition of Inhabitant Householders Against Charter; and TNA PC1/1511 Petition of Owners and Occupiers Against Charter.

<sup>110</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 5 November 1853.

Witnesses at Aberavon's 1853 inquiry, including the Polish Roman Catholic priest of Aberavon, referred to the filthy state of the town and the absence of drains but preferred things to remain the same rather than be highly taxed by rate increases to cover improvements and salaried posts under the MCA.<sup>111</sup> These residents' concerns, coupled with the notion that newcomers and out-dwellers appeared to be threatening a way of life that had existed for centuries, had encouraged many signatures of opposition, including nineteen who signed both petitions after having been persuaded by the burgesses to change their minds.<sup>112</sup> At submission in 1853, the petition of Inhabitant Householders against a charter was signed by 236 persons, who together represented a rateable assessment of £787-15s-0d.<sup>113</sup>

Incorporation was an important and contentious subject in Aberavon as it was elsewhere. Reformers in other towns in Wales and their opponents would have been interested in the proceedings and the outcome. Newspaper accounts of the first inquiry in 1853 reflect that view and those in favour were extremely comprehensive. Evidence from many witnesses was produced in detail, although that of others was grouped or summarised where it agreed with prior testimonies. The inquiry at 'this notorious little borough' was attended by 'all the principal shopkeepers of the town', which went some way towards confirming status on the latter.<sup>114</sup> Evidence of the filthy state of the town, the neglect and incompetence of the corporation, and the necessity for reform was consistent, with Dr. Prichard, the Poor Law Surgeon, emphasising his 'utter despair' at the lack of a responsible body to help him deal with the impact of population increase, overcrowding and disease.<sup>115</sup> Police Sergeant Peter Wright was prepared to state that the corporation was 'uneducated and ignorant' and that many could not write their names; portreeves had been fined for drunken and indecent conduct, and one had even been tried on a felony charge.<sup>116</sup>

Bush has cautioned against using hindsight to assess the situations in nineteenth-century towns, and acknowledged that rate-paying residents opting to endure insanitary conditions rather than risk funding improvements can seem perplexing to modern readers.<sup>117</sup> Whilst the poorest conditions would have been experienced by those who were excluded from the

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<sup>111</sup> *The Cambrian*, 11 November 1853.

<sup>112</sup> G. Warburton, *Report...* (1854), p.2.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 5 November 1853.

<sup>115</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 November 1853.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> G. Bush (1976), p.15.

franchise, the integration of residential and retail premises at that time did not insulate the better-off inhabitants from the sights and smells of the town, and those whose businesses depended on trade would have been keen to remove any deterrents.<sup>118</sup> The lived experiences of many inhabitants show that these competing ideals were important factors both before and after incorporation.

*The Cambrian* reported the five-day inquiry at great length (and often *verbatim*) in four of its weekly issues between 4 November and 25 November 1853. The evidence against the corporation appeared extensive and damning: they had acted in an *ultra vires* capacity by indiscriminately granting licences to beer-house keepers and neglected to drain the corporation lands so that neighbours' fields became flooded and worthless (David Longdon, brewer and maltster).<sup>119</sup> They had cancelled the town's street market, forcing traders, including ships' captains looking for stores, to the market provided by the ECC at Cwmavon, and had not provided a new market after 1848; they had not provided a slaughter-house, so the slaughter of 150 animals in Aberavon every week was carried out in small rooms attached to butchers' homes, and the excrements, which were 'put or thrown into the streets', remained there sometimes for weeks (Thomas Lewis, Harbour Master and Benjamin Morgan Davies, spirit merchant).<sup>120</sup> A bridge, built by the Port Talbot Company under the terms of the Port Talbot Harbour Act, connected the town with the port but had been in disrepair for eleven years and the corporation had neglected to restore it; no public buildings had been provided (the town hall had eventually been built by public subscription) so the tradesmen of the town had combined to petition for the Municipal Act (Thomas Jones, ironmonger and churchwarden).<sup>121</sup>

The relationship between the town and the docks was underlined in the inquiry by Port Talbot's Harbour Master, Captain Thomas Lewis, who believed that a properly governed Aberavon could double or treble business. Lewis had received numerous complaints from ships' captains confirming the fact that supplies were unavailable in the town, and he believed that potential traders were deterred from Aberavon due to the absence of a market.<sup>122</sup> Crucially, with tonnage entering Port Talbot on 1,320 vessels amounting to 80,014 for the year ending May 1853, Lewis's view was that good local government would not only improve the town of

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<sup>118</sup> For examples see J. Garrard (1983) on Bolton, p.188; J. England on Merthyr Tydfil, p.20; and R. Trainor on Wolverhampton, p.272.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

Aberavon but also increase the trade of the port.<sup>123</sup> The evidence of a former portreeve of Aberavon, Thomas Williams, confirmed that the corporation ‘had nothing to do with the making of the harbour’ and that the bridge that was in disrepair ‘was erected in the first instance for the benefit of the port’.<sup>124</sup> The broken bridge, which was legally the responsibility of the Port Talbot Company, was indicative of the uneasy relationship that existed, and would continue to exist, between Aberavon and its neighbouring community.<sup>125</sup>

Although the signatures of the Owners and Occupiers in Aberavon were irrelevant in terms of influencing the outcome of the inquiry, Warburton was at pains to point out in his report that ‘a very great preponderance of wealth, and . . . of respectability and intelligence’ was in favour of the charter.<sup>126</sup> Garrard has noted a general assumption that the value of a man’s political opinion at this time was directly linked to the value of his rateable property, and as a result the wealth present in the neighbouring industrialised areas was an important factor in determining Aberavon’s future.<sup>127</sup> The promoters had used this premise to frame the text of their petitions and for the commissioners, the surrounding industrial districts were important and influential factors in Aberavon’s campaign for incorporation.

In Aberavon, an opposition majority of just four inhabitant householders prevented a new charter being granted. However, the wealthier inhabitants, although fewer in number, had supported incorporation and Warburton’s report noted that although the outcome was 96 in favour but 100 against, the total value of rate assessment in favour was £410-0-0 greater than that against.<sup>128</sup> The result contrasted with that of Birmingham in 1838, where the rateable value of charter opponents had exceeded that of those in favour, but a majority of signatories in favour of incorporation meant the petition was successful.<sup>129</sup> Notwithstanding the ‘lamentable sanitary condition’ of Aberavon town, the ‘evils of the existing system’ and the proposals by the promoters to apply a more robust system of financial management to the corporation funds, the outcome was inevitable. Both the number of burgesses (under 300) and the number of those

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> *The Cambrian*, 11 November 1853.

<sup>125</sup> 6. Gulielmi IV. *Cap.xcviii*, Clause III, ‘to make and construct...roads...to cross the said River near the Weir...and also to erect and maintain the necessary Bridges...over the said River Avon...’.

<sup>126</sup> G. Warburton, *Report...* (1854), p.2.

<sup>127</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.24-25.

<sup>128</sup> G. Warburton, *Report...* (1854), p.2 (£1,197.15s against £787.15s); adjustments were made to remove the invalid signatures of females and non-rated inhabitant householders.

<sup>129</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.18.



qualified to stand as councillors (39 out of a population of about 2,500) were seen as limitations to reform.<sup>130</sup>

Warburton stopped short of a definitive recommendation, but his predispositions were underlined by a stated belief that the ‘late rapid increase of wealth and population’ could counterbalance objections to incorporation.<sup>131</sup> Despite his positive comments the petition was ultimately dismissed by the Privy Council, having failed to gain a majority of inhabitant householders in favour of reform. As will be shown below, the outcome did not deter the reformers but yet again provided further motivation to the tradesmen of Aberavon to fight for representative government.

### **The 1859 Charter Campaign**

Explanatory factors which influenced the second, successful attempt at incorporation can be attributed to changes in the demographic and commercial composition of Aberavon. Inward migration and the emergence of a propertied class of businessman in the town contributed to a new sense of relative affluence in the town. By 1859, ten years after the first meetings were held to discuss incorporation, the population of Aberavon had increased by almost 600 and was approaching 3,000 inhabitants.<sup>132</sup> About 150 new houses had been built since 1851 and in 1856 architect-designed ‘villas’ were being advertised for sale, many situated north of the main road on the mountain side at the top of town, where better-off residents could enjoy sea views and occasional fresh air.<sup>133</sup> Trade directories had begun to list ‘Gentry and Clergy’ of Aberavon living in ‘Sea View Villas’ and ‘Wellfield Villas’, heralding the beginnings of a suburban element to the town.<sup>134</sup>

House building and ownership were assisted by two developments in this period: the establishment of local building societies, and a change in building regulations in 1858 which favoured the use of brick and tile construction rather than traditional wood and thatch. Although building regulations were permissive and had not been adopted in Aberavon, insurance companies were keen to minimise risk and were naturally predisposed towards houses less likely to catch fire. This was particularly relevant for Aberavon, as the South Wales Railway ran directly through the town and sparks from coal-fuelled trains were an ever-present danger.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-5.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>132</sup> Census of England and Wales 1851 and 1861.

<sup>133</sup> *The Cambrian*, 16 May 1856.

<sup>134</sup> *Slater's Directory of South Wales (1858-9)*, p.113.

By 1858 three building societies had been established in the town, based at the Castle Hotel, the Victoria Hotel, and the Ivorites Hall.<sup>135</sup> In January 1856 the last of these, the Central Glamorgan Building Society, was said to have been operating profitably for its shareholders and 120 members.<sup>136</sup>

Evidence of an expanding commercial culture within the town can be found in the number of new public institutions such as banks and insurance companies, which were operated by local agents, usually from within their existing retail premises. Banks supported local industries and their presence gradually encouraged small traders and professional men to the area.<sup>137</sup> When the Glamorganshire Banking Company opened its first branch at Aberavon in 1861, its business was conducted in the front room of High Street confectioner William Whitelaw.<sup>138</sup> From the late 1850s, Norwich Union offered fire and life insurance via Evan Evans, a pharmaceutical chemist, stationer and sub-distributor of stamps, from his shop in High Street, next door to the post office. Sun Assurance cover was provided in Cwmavon Road by grocer Edward Jones, who had been born in Southwark. Having moved to Aberavon in the late 1840s, Jones had been instrumental in the first campaign for a charter and became a Poor Law Guardian in 1856. He was also a member of Aberavon's Oddfellows, one of several friendly societies that existed in the town at the time.<sup>139</sup>

Association with the Oddfellows was considerable, so much so that by February 1856 the Queen Victoria Lodge considered building a separate Oddfellows Hall to house their 160 members and to act as a public hall for the benefit of the town.<sup>140</sup> The existing town hall was said to be 'rather inconveniently situated', and although it is unclear whether this particular comment referred to the location or the condition of the hall, by the time of the 1859 incorporation inquiry it was considered unfit for use as a venue and in a 'disgraceful' state.<sup>141</sup> Plans for the new hall appear to have been abandoned, however, as later reports refer to meetings at the Castle Hotel.<sup>142</sup> A number of other friendly societies had been established in Aberavon, and membership of a new benefit club was actively promoted in 1856 by William

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.

<sup>136</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 12 January 1856.

<sup>137</sup> G.E. Jones (1997), p.164.

<sup>138</sup> A. L. Evans (1987), p.9.

<sup>139</sup> WGAS, P/68/CW 3, *Aberavon Vestry Minute Book, 1855-77*, entry 13 March 1856.

<sup>140</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 2 February 1856.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, and *The Cambrian*, 14 October 1859.

<sup>142</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 July 1870.

Gilbertson, manager of the ECC.<sup>143</sup> Under Gilbertson's plan, healthy workers under the age of 35 could pay £1-5s a year (plus 3d a year administration costs) and receive 6s. per week up to the age of 70 if they became ill; after the age of 70, workers' contributions would cease, but they would still receive 4s a week in benefits.<sup>144</sup> Management and oversight of societies such as these provided the opportunity for local businessmen to use their financial skills for the benefit of local people and at the same time become acknowledged as local leaders.

Aberavon, then, was developing as a discrete town with several support networks in place where individuals could share ideas and ambitions: the town appeared to be formulating the capacity for self-government. Dismissal of the 1853 charter petition had left the promoters with little means of redress against the filth and squalor that hindered the town's future prosperity, but failure does not appear to have deterred them from remaining active. In Merthyr, opposition to incorporation had come from ironmasters and industrialists - 'men of vast wealth determined to resist any move that threatened that wealth or challenged their power'.<sup>145</sup> These men were able to obstruct self-government for decades by maintaining control of the vestry and successfully emphasising the financial burdens which would be placed on inhabitants by anticipated increases in rates and rents. Merthyr's struggle for reform was represented as an 'ideological conflict' between the private interests of the industrialists and what were increasingly seen as public needs.<sup>146</sup> In Aberavon, however, reformers enjoyed the full support of local industrialists if not that of landowner C.R.M. Talbot.

Obstacles to reform in Aberavon remained the corporation members and their inhabitant supporters who were determined to resist challenges to hereditary domination in the borough. A broadly similar situation had existed in Bristol, where Bush has described the corporation as being 'averse to any other body being outside its influence' and which 'opposed moves to inflate any other body's status'.<sup>147</sup> Despite the obvious failures of Aberavon's corporation which had been highlighted at the 1853 inquiry, little damage had been done to its support. Many within what had previously been a small, close-knit community had chosen to retain their loyalty to the corporation members and their families to ensure the continuation of historic privileges. However, as time passed and the town and its population expanded, the idea of a governing corporation based on ancient rights and privileges became increasingly

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<sup>143</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 February 1856.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> J. England, *Llafur* (2007), p.10.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> G. Bush (1976), p.11-12.

anachronistic. Aberavon's ratepayers had narrowly rejected incorporation, mainly due to the risk of increased expense involved in removing nuisances. Others, however, were less content with the *status quo*.

Mechanisms for improvement were available to all towns, but the permissive nature of legislation at this time meant that implementation was very much a matter of choice for a town's authorities. Hennock has argued that 'municipal reform was meant primarily to change the basis of authority, and only to a very limited extent to change the functions of corporations'.<sup>148</sup> However, as the century progressed, central government's *laissez-faire* ideology of non-intervention which had influenced the introduction of permissive legislation began to be challenged. This challenge was based in the increasing realisation that modernising towns need not be centres of filth and squalor but could, with judicious government and management, become prosperous commercial, residential and municipal communities. The presence of active reformers was a crucial factor influencing the rate of change and can be illustrated using the examples of Leeds and Birmingham. The towns had incorporated within three years of each other, the former in 1835 and the latter in 1838, but whereas 'insanitary areas were cleared, and public health became a major preoccupation' for both, reform began in Leeds only after 1890 but was well under way in Birmingham in 1870.<sup>149</sup> Improvements were therefore dependent on political will and the capacity to deliver as well as collective action.

As Fraser has pointed out, men 'denied access to superior offices by their social and political status made a political battleground wherever they could pitch their tents'.<sup>150</sup> Excluded from the corporation, Aberavon's reformers took on the next available sphere of influence, the parish vestry.<sup>151</sup> The vestry was where the more 'substantial inhabitants', with the additional benefit of plural votes based on property ownership, could determine spending and elect Overseers of the Poor.<sup>152</sup> Overseers collected the poor rate and were responsible for administering poor relief but also exercised functions with political importance as they compiled the local and parliamentary electoral rolls.<sup>153</sup> Although their positions offered an element of prestige, the role was onerous, and any overseer who failed to attend the annual

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<sup>148</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.186.

<sup>149</sup> J. Smith (2000), p.257.

<sup>150</sup> D. Fraser (1973), p.772.

<sup>151</sup> For examples, see S. and B. Webb (1963); R. Sweet (1999); O. MacDonagh (1977); and J. Garrard (1983).

<sup>152</sup> R.W. Hoyle, 'Local Government' in D. Hey, (2010), pp.225-234, p.227.

<sup>153</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.117.

voter revision courts was subject to a fine of £500.<sup>154</sup> Responsibility for the collection of rates gave vestries a higher income than corporations and thereby conferred a measure of status on vestry officers; churchwardens were often nominated personally by the vicar, which could also underline an individual's standing and help further any political ambitions.<sup>155</sup>

Aberavon's open vestry was well attended by ratepayers, and the surviving minute book from 1855 to 1877 recorded the presence of familiar figures of the time, including former portreeve Pollard Jones, who signed by mark.<sup>156</sup> Concerted efforts to 'pack' vestry meetings with rate-paying opponents of the corporation are evident from January 1856.<sup>157</sup> The vestry had never established an Improvement Commission, neither had it undertaken its duties regarding the upkeep of roads despite surveyors being fined and letters of complaint being sent to the General Board of Health and the Local Government Office.<sup>158</sup> Future councillor Edward Jones was appointed Guardian at the annual election at Easter 1856 and at the next meeting a resolution was passed that the vestry should draw the attention of the Portreeve, Aldermen and Burgesses of Aberavon to the necessity of supplying the town with water.<sup>159</sup> Possibly confident that the corporation had neither the finances nor the inclination to complete the project, the new vestry members were keen to instigate ideas for improving the town whilst simultaneously putting pressure on the corporation.

Edward Jones had already led calls for a public meeting to discuss improvements in the postal service in Aberavon, and by early April 1856 he had succeeded in attracting the M.P. for Swansea Boroughs, Lewis Llewellyn Dillwyn, to Aberavon to progress the case.<sup>160</sup> Jones was supported by several of his fellow tradesmen. As Gilbert has noted, the organisational strength of groups such as this was evident in membership of social societies such as the non-conformist chapels and the Oddfellows, and after 1856 this particular group began to dominate the vestry.<sup>161</sup> Six overseers were elected at the vestry on 2 April 1859; five of those overseers,

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<sup>154</sup> WGAS, RISW/GGF 20/24, poster 3 September 1839.

<sup>155</sup> WGAS, P/68/CW 3.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> *The Welshman*, 12 June 1846; A.H. Williams, *Public Health in Mid-Victorian Wales: Correspondence from the Principality to the General Board of Health and the Local Government Office, 1848-1871*, (University of Wales, Board of Celtic Studies, 1983).

<sup>159</sup> WGAS, P/68/CW 3, 2 April 1856; *The Cambrian*, 4 April 1856.

<sup>160</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 26 January, p.6; *The Cambrian*, 4 April 1856; the Swansea District was comprised of five boroughs: Swansea, Aberavon, Loughor, Neath and Kenfig.

<sup>161</sup> D. Gilbert, 'Community and Municipalism: Collective Identity in Late-Victorian Mining Towns', *Journal of Historical Geography* 17, (1991), 259-70, p.217; WGAS, P/68/CW 3, 2 April 1859.

James Key, Thomas Rees, David James, Joseph Foley and Captain John Jones were reformers, and four would be members of the first council formed after incorporation in 1861.<sup>162</sup> Involvement in the town's businesses and societies developed into the formation of what became known as a Municipal Party in Aberavon, and it was this pro-reform party which not only planned a second attempt at incorporation but also, in the meantime, agitated for adoption of both the Public Health Act of 1848 and the Local Government Act of 1858.<sup>163</sup>

Bush has noted that Bristol's corporation also opposed Bills 'almost regardless of cost'.<sup>164</sup> Historic charters of incorporation gave towns 'identity at law' which provided the capacity to 'sue and be sued in the courts' and this was significant when 'contesting privileges', a practice routinely employed by Aberavon's corporation despite its significant costs.<sup>165</sup> Dr. Prichard's deposition at the 1853 inquiry had emphasised the consequences of there being no body or individual within the town or borough of Aberavon to provide for the public good.<sup>166</sup> As a result, it fell to the out-dwelling industrialists and inhabitant retailers, whose businesses were dependent on profitable local trade, to lead the movement for reform. It was this 'new generation' which also influenced the charter campaigns of Bradford in 1847, Dudley in 1865, and West Bromwich in 1888.<sup>167</sup>

Justification for incorporation in 1853 had been founded on the premise that improvements at the port emphasised the superior nature of the industrial areas in comparison with the borough. By the time of the 1859 campaign, however, success at the docks appeared to be stalling. Whilst the trading figure of more than 80,000 tons of imports into Port Talbot in 1853 appeared high, total export tonnage from the port had fluctuated considerably and fallen from 81,906 tons in 1856 to 56,820 in 1859; foreign exports had fallen from 11,576 tons to just 361 in the same period.<sup>168</sup> Although the slump in the iron trade and the fall in the prices of both steam and house coal had impacted on all of the south Wales ports, by 1859 the larger ports of Cardiff, Swansea and Newport had all increased their export tonnage, but three ports, Llanelli and Burry Port, Neath, and Port Talbot remained in decline.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> WGAS, P/68/CW 3, entry 2 April 1859.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> G. Bush (1976), p.11.

<sup>165</sup> R. Sweet (1999), p.34; see also Chapter One.

<sup>166</sup> *The Cambrian*, 6 January 1860, evidence of Dr. H.L. Prichard.

<sup>167</sup> R. Trainor (1993), p.234 and A. Elliott (1979), p.174.

<sup>168</sup> *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 26 May 1860; *Cardiff Times*, 16 July 1859; *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 3 July 1858.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

Tolls at Port Talbot had been kept deliberately low in order to attract trade. However, as Chapter One noted, it was apparent from the series of Bills submitted by the Port Talbot Company from 1836 that additional capital needed to be raised on a regular basis to maintain the docks as a successful operation.<sup>170</sup> By 1858 the ECC had been holding bonds in the PTC for fifteen years but had received no interest whatsoever and was owed £19,000. ECC's manager, William Gilbertson, had unsuccessfully demanded payment in February that year, so in May 1858, possibly due to the depression in trade, he took legal action for recovery at Neath Petty Sessions, where magistrates Howel Gwyn and Griffith Llewellyn presided over the appointment of a receiver of tolls for the Port Talbot Company.<sup>171</sup>

Challenges were also evident in Aberavon, where the corporation's influence and relevance were increasingly brought under scrutiny as the decade progressed. An outbreak of smallpox in the area in 1858 led to four deaths in Aberavon in late January, with the disease being so rife that at least one funeral was held with the corpse left outside the church during the service.<sup>172</sup> Drainage, paving and lighting were still absent and letters to the newspapers from corporation supporters blamed the Guardian, Edward Jones, with the result that the latter's responses became commonplace publications in *The Cambrian*.<sup>173</sup> By March 1859 the corporation was seriously in debt and, like the Port Talbot Company, had been placed into receivership.<sup>174</sup> Under the terms of the 1848 Aberavon Market Act the corporation had been permitted to borrow money, which resulted in mortgages being raised on corporation property.<sup>175</sup> Henry Daniel and George Williams had lent a total of £6,500 between them, but the corporation had been unable to meet the repayment requirements, so Alfred Cox, a Bristol solicitor with responsibility for much of the corporation's property, was appointed Receiver. Cox had given evidence at the 1853 inquiry, where it was established that '[t]he mortgages included the whole of the corporation property'.<sup>176</sup>

Confidence in the reformers' capacity to influence and accomplish change continued to grow throughout this period. A further boost occurred in June 1859 when it was confirmed that

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<sup>170</sup> The original Aberavon Harbour Act had been passed in 1834, but subsequent Acts to raise further monies were passed in 1836, 1840 and 1865. Further Acts were passed throughout the nineteenth century and again in the twentieth century.

<sup>171</sup> *The Cambrian*, 7 May 1858.

<sup>172</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 February 1858.

<sup>173</sup> For examples see *The Cambrian*, 18 December 1857, 1 January 1858, 22 January 1858.

<sup>174</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 32, Appointment of Receiver, 7 March 1859.

<sup>175</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>176</sup> *The Cambrian*, 11 November 1853; evidence of Alfred Cox.

the Postmaster General had sanctioned the improvements to Aberavon's postal arrangements which had been proposed by Edward Jones and his associates.<sup>177</sup> This confirmation signified that the reformers were capable of achieving their objectives for the town: they had organised themselves, secured the support of the local M.P., negotiated for improvement and gained a successful outcome. Within days an informal committee for incorporation had been formed and notices of a public meeting at the National Schoolroom on 27 June were distributed in both Welsh and English and announced by the Town Crier.<sup>178</sup> *The Cambrian* reported that Aberavon had become divided into two parties, 'the municipal and the non-municipal' and that the town had become a centre of hostilities between the two.<sup>179</sup> A petition from Owners and Occupiers which supported incorporation had been circulated and was already signed by the manager of the ECC, William Gilbertson; the High Sheriff of Glamorgan, Griffith Llewellyn of Baglan Hall; Dr. H.L. Prichard of Taibach; 'and the elite and most influential of the town and neighbourhood'.<sup>180</sup> Samuel Jones, a former portreeve for three consecutive years, had also decided to support the cause for reform.<sup>181</sup> C.R.M. Talbot might not have been wholly convinced of success, but on this occasion his was the first signature on the petition.<sup>182</sup>

Whilst the drivers of change were active within the town, the specific calls for incorporation at this stage were led by a non-inhabitant, Griffith Llewellyn J.P. of Baglan Hall, land agent to C.R.M. Talbot until 1840 and High Sheriff of Glamorgan in 1852. Llewellyn chaired the advertised public meeting to discuss municipal reform in June 1859 and his ambitions for Aberavon were clear: if men of capital were to be encouraged to the borough then the affairs of the town needed to be 'managed by persons more competent than the corporation', and 'the acute minds of the tradesmen of the town' could ensure better care of corporation property.<sup>183</sup> William Gilbertson, also a non-inhabitant, agreed, and proposed the first resolution, calling for a charter in order to increase the town's prosperity; his proposal was eagerly seconded by Edward Jones, who cited a 'sense of duty' as his impetus for change.<sup>184</sup> Jones was clear that attending to the sanitary condition of the borough was a nobler duty than 'clinging to the tottering fabric of an imbecile corporation'.<sup>185</sup> At the proposal of Daniel Smith, vestryman and

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<sup>177</sup> *The Cambrian*, 3 June 1859.

<sup>178</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly, *Reports on a Petition . . .* p.3.

<sup>179</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 July 1859.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, see also TNA, PC1/1515.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *The Cambrian*, 1 July 1859.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*



ironmonger, an incorporation committee was agreed, and was subsequently populated by the borough's most active reformers and energetic vestry attendees (see Table 2.2).

**Table 2.2: Individuals involved in the Aberavon charter inquiry of 1859-60**

NAME	ROLE
<b>Arthur Pendarves Vivian</b> J.P., Industrialist; son of J.H. Vivian and manager Margam Copper Works	FOR CHARTER
<b>C.R.M. Talbot</b> J.P.; M.P. for Glamorgan; Lord Lieutenant of Glamorgan	FOR CHARTER (MUNICIPAL)
<b>Daniel Smith</b> Ironmonger & Grocer; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER
<b>David James</b> Jeweller; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER
<b>David Jenkins</b> Ship Owner; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER
<b>Dr. Hopkin Llewellyn Prichard</b> Poor Law Surgeon	FOR CHARTER
<b>Edward Jones</b> Grocer; Future Councillor & first Mayor	FOR CHARTER
<b>Evan Evans</b> Chemist/Druggist; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER
<b>Griffith Llewellyn</b> J.P., High Sheriff of Glamorgan	FOR CHARTER
<b>Griffith William</b> Labourer & Common Attorney	AGAINST
<b>James Donovan</b> Inland Revenue Officer	FOR CHARTER
<b>James Key</b> Butcher & Farmer; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER
<b>John Jones</b> Innkeeper, Walnut Tree Hotel; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER
<b>John Jones</b> Ship Owner	FOR CHARTER
<b>John Thomas</b> Labourer and Portreeve	AGAINST
<b>Samuel Jones</b> Former Portreeve – three consecutive years	FOR CHARTER
<b>Police Sergeant James Cecil</b>	FOR CHARTER
<b>Thomas Rees</b> Draper	FOR CHARTER
<b>William Gething</b> Hammerman/blacksmith (retired); tin plate manufacturer 1871 & 1881	AGAINST
<b>William Gilbertson</b> Manager of ECC following restructuring in 1850	FOR CHARTER
<b>William Jones</b> Contractor/Builder; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER
<b>William Davies Jones</b> Draper; son of John Jones, Walnut Tree	FOR CHARTER
<b>William Llewellyn Powell</b> Merchant	FOR CHARTER
<b>William Loveluck</b> H.M. Customs Officer	FOR CHARTER
<b>William Whitelaw</b> Baker & Confectioner; Future Councillor	FOR CHARTER

Political divisions within the town were replicated in the vestry, and by the summer of 1859 every meeting had become ‘the medium of a trial of strength between burgesses and municipalians’.<sup>186</sup> Proposals for chairmanship of meetings began to be contested between the two opposing sides, with at least one decision being made by a poll using ‘the old-fashioned method’ of votes being recorded in chalk on the vestry floor by Griffith William, the corporation’s Common Attorney.<sup>187</sup> William had made a point of proposing Griffith Llewellyn to the chair at the June incorporation meeting despite that role having been publicised in advance; he had also seconded the vote of thanks given by Edward Jones.<sup>188</sup> William was no supporter of incorporation, however, and appeared to be inserting himself into situations where he could obtain useful information for the corporation.

Possibly in an attempt to undermine the reformers’ cause, the corporation had carried out a small amount of paving. The tradesmen of Aberavon, however, supported by reformist associates including Dr. H.L. Prichard, William Gilbertson, Griffith Llewellyn and Rev. David Evans, Vicar of Aberavon, had taken the lead in the provision of gas lighting in 1857.<sup>189</sup> A new private company, the ‘Aberavon Gas and Coke Consumers’ Company, (Limited)’, had been established in 1857 and its committee, made up of Aberavon men under the chairmanship of Edward Jones, had raised £1800 in 360 subscription shares of £5 each to cover the implementation costs of £1475.<sup>190</sup> Private provision of utilities was common in the nineteenth century, although in many instances the companies were later bought by local councils which engaged in municipal trading and retained any profits in their borough funds. Rather than support the advantages to be gained from lighting the corporation were deliberately obstructive, making a site for the gas works difficult to find, and subscribing to shares but not paying when the call became due.<sup>191</sup>

Ownership of land and property was a powerful tool in this period of municipal change. However, the transition of ancient boroughs to incorporation under the MCA was complicated by the lack of clarity in the Act regarding corporate property. Of crucial importance was the question of whether historic corporate property transferred automatically from an existing corporation to a new corporation elected under the MCA. In Aberavon, the promoters were

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<sup>186</sup> *The Cambrian*, 26 August 1859.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *The Cambrian*, 1 July 1859.

<sup>189</sup> *The Cambrian*, 10 July 1857.

<sup>190</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 19 December 1857.

<sup>191</sup> *The Cambrian*, 6 January 1860; inquiry evidence of Edward Jones.

confident of inheriting corporate property and produced handbills in October 1859 which stated, 'We are of the opinion that the Corporation Property will undoubtedly merge into the New Corporation'.<sup>192</sup> As the historiography shows, in both Leeds and Bristol a fear of losing corporate property had led to the sale of land and buildings which might have been used for public purposes after incorporation.<sup>193</sup> Aberavon's corporation took similar action, prompting correspondence between the promoters and the Privy Council, which swiftly intervened and dispatched a commissioner, instructing him that he 'should forthwith proceed to Aberavon'.<sup>194</sup>

In contrast to the previous inquiry, when Captain Donnelly opened proceedings at the National Schoolroom on 28 December 1859 there did not appear to be much local interest, and the only 'gentry and respectable people in the neighbourhood' who attended were the 'two or three' who came as witnesses.<sup>195</sup> Evidence at this inquiry was very similar to the last, and included criticism of the corporation as 'exceedingly illiterate men' who were 'totally unfit to have charge of the borough' (William Gilbertson) as well as a graphic description of the town as 'a puddled, stagnant, and festering mass' where '[w]ater was very scarce' and the river water unsafe due to pollution from the copper works (Dr. Hopkin Prichard).<sup>196</sup> The portreeve, John Thomas, a labourer who earned 15s. per week and who was probably unable to read, attempted to rebut the accusations by denying shortages of water and pointing out that the river water was 'sometimes fit for the poor people to drink'.<sup>197</sup> In fact, water had been so scarce at the beginning of September that Griffith Llewellyn had gifted the town a water pump.<sup>198</sup> Thomas also refused to show the corporation accounts, and allegations of inequity in the granting of tenders were numerous, including the contracts for the market and slaughterhouse which had been granted to the late Portreeve for £32 p.a. despite an offer from a non-burgess of £50 p.a.; a contract to construct a new roadway had been given to the Portreeve at 2s. 6d. per yard but a contractor had tendered at 4d. per yard.<sup>199</sup>

Capacity for elected self-government in Aberavon was supported by a financial statement from the promoters based on judicious management of corporation property. However, not only

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<sup>192</sup> TNA, PC1/1525, Correspondence and Related Papers, 1859-61; Handbill from Promoters.

<sup>193</sup> G. Bush (1976), p.43, and E.P. Hennock, (1983), p.187.

<sup>194</sup> TNA, PC1/1525, letter dated 5 December 1859 from William Jones to Earl Granville, President of the Privy Council; letter dated 13 December from William Bathurst at Whitehall to Captain J.F.D. Donnelly, R.E.

<sup>195</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.1.

<sup>196</sup> *The Cambrian*, 13 January 1860 and 6 January 1860.

<sup>197</sup> *The Cambrian*, 6 January 1860.

<sup>198</sup> *The Cambrian*, 9 September 1859.

<sup>199</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.5.

was the MCA unclear regarding the transfer of corporation property but also, when the commissioner sought legal advice, he was offered two conflicting interpretations. The Attorney General, Mr. Bethell, opined that new bodies had no entitlement to ‘property vested in the existing corporation’, but a Mr. Welsby disagreed, stating that the intentions of the Act were not to have two corporate bodies, ‘differently constituted and with different powers’ operating in the same borough.<sup>200</sup> Evidence from Alderman Spencer Murch Cox of the new borough of Honiton, where an old corporation had remained in existence and had continued to take tolls of about £12 a year, supported the legal opinion of the Attorney General, and it was judged that ‘this would not have been allowed if there had been any legal method of preventing it’.<sup>201</sup> However, by the time these opinions had been delivered the corporate property of Aberavon had been sold, much of it for far less than it was worth. Opportunistic Common Attorney Griffith Williams bought twelve perches (about 310 square metres) of Aberavon Mountain from the corporation for £8 on 3 September 1860 and sold them to Daniel Smith three days later for £15.<sup>202</sup> Advertisements for the sale of Aberavon property in Bristol on 12 January 1860 referred to the advantageous shipping accommodation, wharfage and floating harbour at Port Talbot, factors the corporation had chosen to dispute in both their petitions against incorporation.<sup>203</sup>

Clarity was also lacking regarding the legal position of compound householders - those who lived in premises where the rates were paid by the owners and the cost passed on to tenants in rent. This group was the largest of the signatories to the ‘Against’ petition, and as such was favoured for inclusion by the corporation’s lawyers. Following the verification of signatures (123 persons had signed or made their mark on both petitions) the result in total reflected the outcome of the previous attempt: a majority of 44 against incorporation (212 to 168).<sup>204</sup> However, if only male, ratepaying householders were included, those in favour of a charter held a majority of 20 (69 to 49) and the criteria for incorporation had been satisfied. Legal arguments ensued regarding the application of the Small Tenements Act, 13 & 14 Vict., c.99 to

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> WGAS D/D JVH 289-290.

<sup>203</sup> TNA, PC1/1525 Correspondence and Related Papers, Poster for Sale of Corporation Lands; five burgesses, William Williams, Nathaniel Williams, John David Thomas, John Evan, and Samuel Jones opposed the sale and took out newspaper advertisements alongside the corporation notices urging ‘Public Caution’ regarding the legality of the sale.

<sup>204</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.3 and TNA PC1/1514 and 1517.

the process and Donnelly concluded that the matter should be referred to the legal officers at Westminster for a decision, thereby adjourning the inquiry until later in the year.

Pressure for reform was maintained in the vestry while the decision on incorporation was pending. The election of Guardians in April 1860 had been the first contested election since the formation of the Neath Union in September 1836 and reformer Daniel Smith was elected Guardian by a large majority following the withdrawal of two burgess candidates.<sup>205</sup> Smith was also one of the first initiates into a new forum for ambitious men of the borough: Afan Lodge of Freemasons. A warrant for the new Afan Lodge had been issued on 29 September 1860 and on 1 November that year the United Grand Lodge of England was sent the required £6-12s-6d in payment.<sup>206</sup> The new lodge's eight founding members came from three existing south Wales lodges: Cambrian Lodge in Neath, Indefatigable Lodge in Swansea and Prince of Wales Lodge in Llanelli.<sup>207</sup> Afan Lodge met at the Walnut Tree Inn, home and business of reformer and founding member John Jones of Cambrian Lodge. Familiar names from the vestry, the incorporation committees and the inquiries are evident in the membership lists for 1860 and early 1861; the Lodge was led by Worshipful Master Theodore Mansel Talbot, active social reformer and only son of C.R.M. Talbot.<sup>208</sup> As Table 2.3 (below) shows, there was significant overlap between the charter promoters, the vestry and the lodge.

Membership of the Masonic lodge was an attractive proposition to those working for incorporation and as will be shown in the next chapter it was also a significant factor as a support network available to newly-elected councillors, mayors, and their salaried officials. López and Walton have identified a distinct Conservative element to the Blackpool Freemasons, but Liberal-Nonconformist leanings in Aberavon suggest a different structure within Afan Lodge just prior to and following incorporation.<sup>209</sup> Philip Jenkins acknowledged the Conservative roots of Freemasonry in eighteenth-century Wales but also recognised a shift towards a more heterogeneous, radical membership base as industrialisation progressed.<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, Joe England noted that membership of the Freemasons' Loyal Cambrian Lodge

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<sup>205</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 14 April 1860.

<sup>206</sup> P.M. Davies, (ed.), *The Reason Why: A History of the South Wales Province*, (South Wales Masonic History Group, 2012) p.128.

<sup>207</sup> Founding members were William Llewellyn Powell, David Longdon, Richard Gillett and John Jones (all Neath); George Newman and David Jenkins (Swansea); and William E. Chalindor (Llanelli).

<sup>208</sup> Freemasonry Membership Registers, 1751-1921; *Cardiff Times*, 22 February 1890.

<sup>209</sup> D.M. López and J.K. Walton, 'Freemasonry and civic identity: Municipal politics, business and the rise of Blackpool from the 1850s to the First World War', *Manchester Region History Review*, 21, (2010), 43-68.

<sup>210</sup> P. Jenkins, 'Jacobites and Freemasons in Eighteenth-Century Wales', *Welsh History Review*, 9, (1979), 391-406.

was a continuing thread for the reformist ‘shopocracy’ of Merthyr in the mid-nineteenth century, and this pattern of membership was reflected in Afan Lodge as the century and the new corporation progressed.<sup>211</sup> Freemasonry was also an important means of connecting the town of Aberavon with its surrounding districts, in particular after 1863 and the arrival of the new Town Solicitor and eventual Town Clerk, Marmaduke Tennant, whose installation as Worshipful Master of Afan Lodge and subsequent elevation to Deputy Provincial Grand Master of the Eastern Province gave him the opportunity to build extensive social networks across south Wales. There is no record of C.R.M. Talbot having been a Freemason, although his then agent, John Felton, was initiated into Afan Lodge at its first ceremony on 15 November 1860 and there can be little doubt that Talbot was kept informed of business discussed at the Lodge.<sup>212</sup>

Whereas Talbot preferred maintaining a vicarious control of his assets, his authority and self-assurance were unsettled by the published early indication that not only had the charter petition been successful but also that it would ‘be framed so as to include the whole of the parliamentary borough’.<sup>213</sup> Talbot had made it clear that his support would only be given if the charter was restricted to the municipal borough, and to underline his case he organised a petition of his own opposing the incorporation of the Parliamentary borough.<sup>214</sup> He and his lessees were not prepared to fund improvements at Aberavon, neither were they prepared to be in a position where they would be governed by its inhabitants. Talbot’s petition was signed by what Donnelly’s report stated was ‘almost the whole, if not the whole, of the [ratepaying] inhabitants of the Parliamentary borough, which is not included in the corporate borough’.<sup>215</sup> It is clear that whilst major landowners and industrialists might encourage autonomous self-government for urbanising areas outside their own locales, little appetite existed to provide anything more than vocal support to the inhabitant promoters.

Talbot and his representatives had secured the signatures of 788 inhabitants from the settlements of Margam, Cwmavon, Port Talbot and Taibach.<sup>216</sup> The signatures had been

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<sup>211</sup> J. England, *Llafur* (2007), p.18; England also cites the originator of the term ‘shopocracy’ as Richard Cobden, writing in 1838 to his publisher, W. Taitt (see John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, London 1906, pp.123-24). See also England’s account of Freemasonry in Merthyr in *Welsh History Review* 23, (2007).

<sup>212</sup> *Freemason Membership Registers, 1751-1921*, Afan Lodge 1860.

<sup>213</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 28 July 1860.

<sup>214</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.10 and TNA PC1/1521, Petition against inclusion of Parliamentary Borough: Owners and Occupiers.

<sup>215</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.10

<sup>216</sup> TNA, PC1/1525 Correspondence and Related Papers.

obtained despite the fact that works owners such as A.P. Vivian of Margam Copper Works and William Gilbertson of the ECC in Cwmavon were already declared supporters of Aberavon's incorporation and demonstrate that the petitioners' objective was incorporation of the existing borough only. It was contended that the inhabitants of Aberavon had chosen to 'tax themselves in support of a Charter' but proprietors of Cwmavon, Taibach and Margam works were thought to be *de facto* corporations themselves.<sup>217</sup> If included in the new borough then those areas, which it was said already had adequate sewerage, water, paving and lighting, would be paying rates 'for the sake of a small corporate borough which ha[d] done nothing for itself'.<sup>218</sup>

A similar situation would occur in Merthyr in 1873 when the inhabitants of Dowlais and Merthyr Vale, who 'saw themselves as in a separate town with a market, churches, chapels, and infirmary, library, reading room and Memorial Hall' petitioned against inclusion in Merthyr Tydfil's incorporation.<sup>219</sup> Similarly, opposition to Dudley's incorporation in 1865 would come from outlying districts rather than within the town itself.<sup>220</sup> Ultimately, Donnelly was persuaded by Talbot's argument and concluded that any incorporation should be restricted to the municipal borough.<sup>221</sup> He also acknowledged that following the loss of corporate property any new municipal government would be financially reliant on a borough rate alone.<sup>222</sup>

Analysis of the rateable values at each charter submission appears to support a contention that Aberavon was becoming relatively more affluent: rateable value in 1853 was about £3000 but this had increased to around £4200 by 1860.<sup>223</sup> Additionally, despite fewer signatories both for and against incorporation the total petition assessments were of comparable value in both 1854 and 1860.<sup>224</sup> Donnelly's decision to recommend incorporation had been influenced by the fact that improvements to the sanitary condition of the town were paramount and adoption of the Local Government Act would 'cost almost as much as a corporation'.<sup>225</sup> However, success at this time can be attributed to the presence of an increasing number of ambitious, propertied men, keen to remove obstacles to the prosperity of themselves and the town. A commensurate increase in the number of potential councillors had occurred, and a list of 54 names, based on

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<sup>217</sup> *The Cambrian*, 9 November 1860.

<sup>218</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), pp.10-11.

<sup>219</sup> J. England, *Llafur* (2007), p.20.

<sup>220</sup> R. Trainor (1993), p.234.

<sup>221</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.8.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>223</sup> G. Warburton (1854), p.5 and J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.12.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 1854: 96 signatures for, value £1197-15s; 1860: 69 signatures for, value £1161-2s-2d; 1854: 100 signatures against, value £787-15s; 1860: 49 signatures against; £584-2s-8d.

<sup>225</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.12.

the personal property qualification of £500 value or £15 in rates, was provided to the Privy Council by William Jones, Overseer and future Town Clerk (see Table 2.3).<sup>226</sup> Legal opinion eventually excluded the compound householders, and having met the required criteria Aberavon's status as an incorporated borough was confirmed on 2 July 1861; two days later the campaign's leader, Edward Jones, was initiated into Afan Lodge of Freemasons.

## **Conclusion**

Aberavon's charter campaigns were influenced by the desire to replace an ineffective, outdated system of government with an enthusiastic, elected body that could contribute to improvements in the town and borough. Reform of local government was an objective shared by a number of individuals both within and outside the borough, although motivating factors were dependent on place of residence. Industrialists with commercial interests at the docks believed incorporation would raise the area's status as well as the town's, but whilst they were prepared to provide moral and vocal support to the inhabitant reformers there was no desire on their part to help form a geo-political union within a new borough based on the parliamentary boundary. The old corporation's neglect of Aberavon therefore acted as a barrier to the involvement and investment of outdwellers as well as the formation of an extended Borough of Aberavon.

It has been shown that although non-inhabitant signatures on charter petitions were irrelevant to outcomes, the views of these individuals were important as a means of influencing inhabitants' decisions. The abandoned 1849 attempt, for example, appears to have been cut short due to the influence of C.R.M. Talbot, who was a consistent opponent of any expansion of the borough that was based on the parliamentary boundary. Opposition within the borough was linked to the existing corporation, but a gradual dilution of corporation authority took place between 1854 and 1861, caused in the main by the increased presence of propertied immigrant businessmen. The 1854 failure prompted renewed pressure by the growing numbers of tradesmen and their associates, whose modernising ideals were shared by local industrialists and local newspapers and led to a celebrated, albeit slender victory at the 1861 campaign.

Lack of a resident benefactor had been said at the inquiries to be a disadvantage to the borough, but it left the inhabitant reformers free to pursue their municipal ambitions. The

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<sup>226</sup> TNA, PC1/1525, list of persons at present qualified in the Borough of Aberavon to be town councillors; *The Cambrian* 9 November 1860 evidence of William Jones. R.H. Curtis, draper, had been declared insolvent in October (see *The Cardiff Times*, 13 October 1860) and Samuel Jones, butcher, had been noted as an insolvent debtor in January that year (*Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 7 January 1860).



determined tradesmen, and the existence of support networks such as the Freemasons and the vestry, provided settings where the new pressure group could work towards achieving their objectives. Correlations between vestry attendance, membership of the Afan Lodge of Freemasons and presence on incorporation committees indicate that the reformers' power base was broad and strong.

In contrast to the impact of non-inhabitant opposition, commercial success in surrounding areas was an important factor. In both campaigns which resulted in inquiries the commissioners considered the favourable circumstances in the industrial communities to the north and particularly the east of Aberavon, believing that the increasing trade and wealth there would also benefit the new borough. In 1854, however, any case for commissioner recommendation was negated by both the lack of suitable qualified men to take up council positions and a decisive vote against incorporation by inhabitant householders. Despite the best efforts of the reformers Aberavon was simply not ready for incorporation. By 1861, the combination of commissioner predisposition, expectations of increased wealth as a result of nearby industries, the urgency of removing a negligent corporation and sufficient numbers of inhabitants qualified for office led to a recommendation that a new charter be granted.

Successful campaigns for incorporation were dependent on a majority of inhabitant householder signatures but Aberavon's result in 1861 highlighted long-standing anomalies in the framing of the MCA. Legal interpretation of the Municipal Franchise Act of 1858 had been required to confirm the validity of the compound householder votes which had provided a narrow victory but clarification was not formalised until the 1867 Reform Act and consolidation in the MCA of 1882.<sup>227</sup> Differences of legal opinion on that matter and the transfer of corporation property undermined the new council's authority, impacted on its capacity to fund improvement projects and prompted the old corporation to pursue its customary route through the courts by immediately contesting the validity of the new charter.<sup>228</sup>

The research has revealed that the scale of neighbouring industrial concerns was used in different ways by both promoters and opponents of Aberavon's charter campaigns as a means

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<sup>227</sup> J.A. Chandler (2007), pp.45 and 77; The Municipal Corporations (Consolidation) Act, 1882: 45 & 46 Vict., c.50.

<sup>228</sup> WGAS D/D LE B/A 9(i) (Chancery case of Portreeve, Aldermen and Burgesses of Avon v Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of Aberavon regarding lawful ownership of corporation property); and WGAS RISW/GGF 20/50 (Queen's Bench Division regarding repeal of charter); the new corporation was successful in both cases. See also J.A. Chandler (2007), pp. 45 and 87 re minor Acts to supplement the 1835 MCA.

of supporting their petitions; promoters were positive, opponents negative. Commissioners, however, were in no doubt that industrial capital would advantage the new borough and the active involvement of the industrialists in the financial projections for the promoters appeared to underline that point. As subsequent chapters will show, however, the anticipated benefits to Aberavon failed to materialise and the new borough constructed its identity within the context of limited funding, an increasing population and a raft of measures designed to improve the borough and the lives of its inhabitants.

**Table 2.3: Selected List of Men Qualified to be Councillors in 1860**

Original Source: The National Archives, PC1/1525, Letter from William Jones, Overseer, to Earl Granville, President of the Privy Council

Name	Occupation	Vestry	Afan Lodge	Name	Occupation	Vestry	Afan Lodge
Edward Jones C	Grocer	Y	Y 1861	Thomas Ace (F)	Grocer		Y 1875
Daniel Smith C	Ironmonger	Y	Y 1860	Wm. David/ies Jones C	Draper	Y	Y 1862
John Jones C	Innkeeper, Walnut Hotel	Y	Y 1860	Evan Edwards (F)	Leather Seller		
John David	Grocer	Y		Richard Jones	Grocer & Draper	Y	
Robert Savours	Innkeeper, Globe Inn	Y		Lewis Sutton	Spirit Dealer	Y	
Thomas Jones	Innkeeper, Castle Hotel	Y		Evan Evans C	Chemist	Y	
Benjamin M. Davies	Spirit Merchant	Y		Thos. Emmanuel Jones (F)	Grocer		
John Williams	Asst. Overseer (then Borough Surveyor)	Y	Y 1874	David Davies	Stationer		
John Longdon (F)	Draper	Y		David James C	Jeweller	Y	
Thomas Rees C	Draper	Y		David Jenkins (F)	Cordwainer		
William Whitelaw C	Confectioner		Y 1863	Wm. John David (F)	Farmer		
James Key C	Farmer	Y		Richard Hitchins Courtis	Draper	Y	
William Gething (F)	Blacksmith (retired)			William Jones	Builder	Y	
David Roderick (F)	Grocer	Y		Thomas Jones	Innkeeper, Bear Hotel	Y	
James White Rogers	Tallow Chandler	Y		Wm. P. Struvé	Manager, ECC		Y 1862
David Jenkins C	Ship Owner	Y	Y 1860	David Longdon	Brewer	Y	Y 1860
Joseph Foley	Ship Owner	Y	Y 1860	Hopkin Ll. Prichard	FRCS		Y 1860
John Jones C	Ship Owner	Y		John Richards	Gentleman Farmer		

All elected unopposed in September 1861; William Jenkins, Innkeeper (Victoria Hotel, Water Street), elected in 1861 but not included in Jones's list

Members of committee formed after public meeting 1/7/1859. James Donovan, Inland Revenue Officer and William Loveluck, Customs Officer, both vestry attendees, were also members. Loveluck was also a member of Afan Lodge from 1861

Co-opted after the selection of four Aldermen following the first council meeting in September 1861 along with Josiah Mansfield (Shipbuilder), member of Afan Lodge

(F) denotes future councillors, all elected after 1861

## Chapter Three

### Incorporation, Opportunity and Urban Development: 1861-1888

Municipal incorporation represented a significant achievement for the charter promoters and campaigners of Aberavon. Although the result itself had not been clear-cut, a formal outcome had been declared. The borough's raised status and the implementation of elected self-government were indicative of a new willingness to engage with the unprecedented demands of mid-nineteenth century life. Historiographical accounts of newly incorporated councils provide a variety of explanatory and illustrative factors with which to assess the municipal experiences of British towns and boroughs.<sup>1</sup> This chapter, therefore, assesses the initial consequences of incorporation in Aberavon. The key aim in examining this period is to demonstrate how the attributes of councillors and officials were critical factors in determining outcomes and displaying evidence of positive differences between hereditary corporations the new municipal councils.

Central government's preference for permissive legislation allowed councils to choose to enact as much or as little legislation as they saw fit, with the result that 'powers came to be regarded as weapons to be used or laid aside at the pleasure of the Authority. . . rather than as powers accompanied by a duty to put them into force'.<sup>2</sup> In Aberavon, the almost immediate adoption of the Local Government Act of 1858 illustrated the council's intent, as did the acquisition of new civic regalia. Ambitious councils were therefore able to set separate objectives alongside any mandatory central directives, but these objectives were influenced by three main factors: the characteristics and competencies of councillors; the influence of salaried officials; and the priorities and pressures of local government. Each factor will be examined in a separate section.

The first section assesses the characteristics of Aberavon's elected representatives and their capacity to govern effectively. The section emphasises the popularity of retailers in local government in Aberavon and also considers arguments within the historiography regarding the significance of the calibre of councillors.<sup>3</sup> It will be shown that in the early part of the period

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<sup>1</sup> For examples see R. Trainor (1993); J. Garrard (1983); E.P. Hennock (1973); J.W. Pritchard (1994); and B.M. Doyle in M.J. Daunton (2018).

<sup>2</sup> PP 1871 XXXV, p.42, RSC2, Vol. I, Report, p.36, cited in J. Prest (1990), p.201.

<sup>3</sup> See B.M. Doyle (2007), pp.41-52; R. Trainor, 'The 'decline' of British urban governance since 1850: a reassessment', in *Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond since 1750* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), ed. by R.J. Morris and R.H. Trainor; A.L. Lowell, (1924), pp.176 and 180; E.P. Hennock (1973), pp. 332-3; and J.

contested elections were infrequent. Despite the numerous financial challenges faced by the new corporation, retailers continued to be the majority choice of the electorate and remained the largest occupational group on the council throughout the period.<sup>4</sup> A small manufacturing group emerged on the council in 1866, made up predominantly of local grocers and their associates who had taken advantage of low set-up costs to gain entry to the tinsplate trade. The small-scale nature of the Aberavon operations affected their ability to diversify when market fluctuations hit later in the century and councillors reverted to their previous careers in retail. Section two assesses the roles of the salaried officials who provided councils with administrative support. Like councillors, officials varied in their quality and effect, but as the century progressed and mandatory qualifications were introduced, they contributed to a notion of professionalism in local government. From the outset, some were able to rival councillors as men of significant public stature.<sup>5</sup> Membership of the Freemasons' Lodge was an important factor in this respect as it brought together both council groups.

Section three addresses the fact that in Aberavon, as in other newly-incorporated councils, ambitions were influenced by a need to reconcile financial limitations with visible evidence of change.<sup>6</sup> Legal costs, an absence of central government funding until 1889 and a reluctance to apply a borough rate to deliver on pledges made by reformers prior to incorporation meant that councils borrowed heavily and amassed huge debts in order to fund both projects and obligations, particularly with regard to public health legislation.<sup>7</sup> The section includes an examination of how ambitions for local improvement were influenced both positively and negatively by the competing demands of ratepayers during a period of local population expansion and municipal franchise extension. Ambition was clearly a driving force for Aberavon's council, but whilst any criteria for evaluating individual councillors remained nebulous, the extent to which the council's ambitions were realised in this period can be measured by assessing the contrasts between Aberavon at incorporation in 1861 and again in 1888 when the Local Government Act (LGA) created Glamorgan County Council and changed

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Dearlove, *The Reorganisation of British Local Government: Old Orthodoxies and a Political Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p.14.

<sup>4</sup> For further examples see R. Trainor (1993); E.P. Hennock (1973); J. Garrard (1983), p.18; or J. Light (2005).

<sup>5</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.6.

<sup>6</sup> R.W. Hoyle, in Hey (2010), p.232.

<sup>7</sup> R. Ensor, *The Oxford History of England: England 1870-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.129.

borough funding arrangements by providing subsidised funding for a medical offer of health as well as salaries for local inspectors.<sup>8</sup>

### **Councillors: Characteristics and Competencies**

The historiography of incorporation and elected representation is extensive and engrossing. Much of what has already been written has concentrated on the occupational groups of elected members. Whilst this has contributed to an understanding of the socio-economic composition of towns at particular points in their history, a general theory has emerged which perpetuated a notion that some groups in the nineteenth century were better suited than others to provide effective municipal leadership.<sup>9</sup> This value judgement was predicated on the argument that wealthy businessmen evidenced financial success. Consensus existed, therefore, that a 'flair for business' and the capacity to 'think adventurously about finance were ideally suited to local government.'<sup>10</sup> Prior to the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act (the MCA) it was 'generally agreed that ideally town councillors possessed two or possibly three crucial characteristics: [t]hey were men of station or respectability, they were men of substance or property or wealth, and they were men of intelligence or education'.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the characteristic deemed most desirable was that of the status they had been ascribed as a result of wealth.<sup>12</sup>

This 'legitimising theory' continued to influence perceptions of elected representatives throughout the nineteenth century, giving credence to the idea that the best local government was to be found where manufacturers and proprietors held sway on the council.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as late as 1892 concern was being expressed in Leeds that the presence of professional men such as architects and doctors on the council was no substitute for 'a manufacturer or a large tradesman'.<sup>14</sup> Hennock's study of the municipal history of Leeds offers insight into trends linking council membership and occupational groups, and also suggests possible explanations for the presence of particular groups at different times.<sup>15</sup> At incorporation in 1836 the council was made up of élites from manufacturing and the professions, but after 1845 craftsmen and

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<sup>8</sup> 51 & 52 Vict. c.41, the Local Government (County Councils) Act 1888 and Lowell (1924), p.189.

<sup>9</sup> For examples see E.P. Hennock (1973); J. Garrard (1983), pp.21 and 24; R. Trainor (1993) p.242; A.L. Lowell (1924), pp.176 and 180; and J. Light (2005).

<sup>10</sup> E.P. Hennock, 'The Social Compositions of Borough Councils in Two Large Cities, 1835-1914', in *The Study of Urban History* ed.by H.J. Dyos, (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), pp. 315-336, p. 318.

<sup>11</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.308.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.24.

<sup>14</sup> Alderman Edwin Gaunt (Liberal) in *The Leeds Mercury* 26 October 1892, p.7, cited in E.P. Hennock (1973), p.325.

<sup>15</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973).

retailers began to gain a hold, with shopkeeper numbers peaking in the 1850s: by the 1870s shopkeeper numbers had reached such ‘unprecedented levels’ that there were no professionals at all on the council in 1874.<sup>16</sup>

Circumstances in Leeds were not replicated exactly elsewhere, but two factors can be said to have influenced representation and effected a general trend towards the election of retailers to local councils. The first was legislation which had extended the franchise, including the Small Tenements Rating Act of 1850 and the Municipal Franchise Act (MFA) of 1858, both of which gave the vote to ‘compound householders’ whose rates were previously paid by the homeowner and passed on to the occupier in rent.<sup>17</sup> The second factor was a corresponding preference amongst the electorate for the small shopkeepers with whom ratepayers identified.<sup>18</sup> After 1869, when the franchise was extended to give single women ratepayers the right to vote in local elections, shopkeeper numbers have been shown to have increased.<sup>19</sup> As an attempt to raise the perceived low standards and social standing of local councillors the Act also included a clause which entitled property holders living outside a municipal boundary to stand for election.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to views expressed by Light in her examination of Bridgend, Pontypool and Penarth there is no evidence to suggest that contested elections in Aberavon contributed to shopkeepers and other retailers being prevalent on the council as a result of a lack of competition, particularly from wealthier and allegedly more capable individuals.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it was not uncommon for eight candidates to contest four seats (see below).

Whilst historians have emphasised a reduction in numbers of wealthy businessmen on councils after 1860 this does not justify an assumption that the group abandoned local government; in Aberavon, manufacturers often stood as candidates but it was shopkeepers who won elections.<sup>22</sup> Aberavon’s incorporation, therefore, coincided with legislation which increased the opportunity for shopkeepers and ratepayers to become more involved in self-government. Additionally, the size of the borough meant that unlike in larger towns such as West Bromwich, where qualification was based on a rateable value of £25, voters and

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<sup>16</sup> For examples see E. J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783–1870* (Harlow: Longman Group Limited, 1983), p.294; E.P. Hennock (1973), p.204; B. Weinstein (2018), p.7; and B.M. Doyle, (2018), p.300.

<sup>17</sup> B. Weinstein (2018), p.7.

<sup>18</sup> E.J. Evans (1983), p.294; Weinstein (2018), pp.7-8.

<sup>19</sup> For examples see J.W. Pritchard (1994), p.190; E.P. Hennock (1973), p.204; and B. Weinstein (2018), p.7.

<sup>20</sup> B. Weinstein (2018), p.8; 32 & 33 Vict., Municipal Corporation Elections Act 1869, c. 55.

<sup>21</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1-2 and *The Cambrian*, municipal election announcements and results October and November 1862-88; Light (2005), p.92.

<sup>22</sup> See E.J. Evans (1983), p.294; B. M. Doyle (2018), p.300; and R. Trainor (2000), p.29.

candidates in Aberavon were eligible if their property was rated at £15.<sup>23</sup> Whilst this might raise questions regarding the relative wealth of a towns' inhabitants, it also supports the argument made by Vigne and Howkins that perceptions of class could be related to the area in which shopkeepers lived and worked.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, for many of Aberavon's inhabitants the shopkeepers of Aberavon displayed the characteristics of wealth, respectability and station which were associated with the notion of the ideal councillor. An example of this conspicuous wealth was evidenced in newspaper reports of the 1870 marriage of new councillor Ewan McLean, a draper, to the daughter of Alderman William Whitelaw, a Scottish baker and confectioner who had been in Aberavon since the early 1840s and who spared no expense in entertaining the wedding guests.<sup>25</sup> Whitelaw had been mayor of Aberavon in 1866, a costly post regarded as 'an expensive luxury which few men can long afford'.<sup>26</sup>

It can be seen from Fig. 3.1a that of the seventeen different men elected and re-elected to the mayoralty in this period the retailers were predominant; it is also evident from Fig. 3.1b that Aberavon's first citizens matched the characteristics identified by Evans: they were 'disproportionately first-generation successful businessmen. . . and not infrequently immigrants from other parts of the country'.<sup>27</sup> Councillors, however, remained unpaid, and although many were prominent and successful businessmen, in Aberavon the majority of councillors elected between 1861 and 1888 could not be described as very rich men.<sup>28</sup>

Small shopkeepers of Aberavon had driven the campaigns for incorporation and following the granting of a charter in July 1861 it was twelve men, many of whom had formed the campaign committee, who were elected unopposed to the first council. The first mayor of Aberavon was Edward Jones, a 39-year-old grocer who had been born in Southwark and who had lived in Aberavon since the late 1840s. The remaining members of the council, many of whom were future mayors on more than one occasion, were also predominantly immigrants. Following the appointment of four aldermen, the full complement of sixteen representatives was achieved by the co-option of four additional members, two of whom were Aberavon

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<sup>23</sup> R. Trainor (1993), p.286; TNA PC1/1525, List of Men Qualified to be Councillors, 1860.

<sup>24</sup> T. Vigne and A. Howkins in Crossick (1977), p.184.

<sup>25</sup> *The Cambrian*, 11 November 1870; the wedding breakfast was said to be 'a first-class affair, champagne and other wines of choice vintage being *ad libitum*' as well as tables which 'groaned beneath the weight of animal food and the choicest delicacies of the confectioner's art'.

<sup>26</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), p.161.

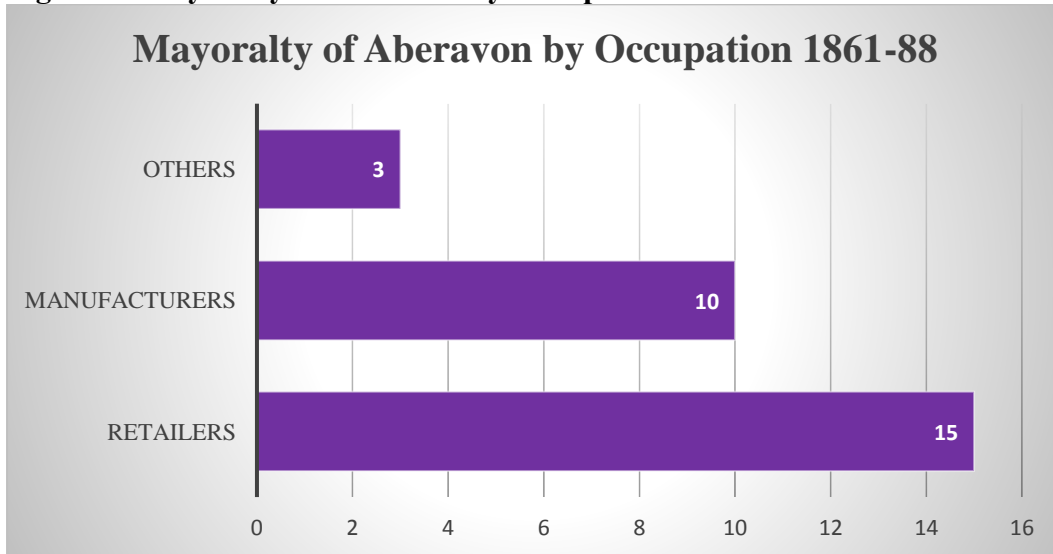
<sup>27</sup> E.J. Evans (1983), p.294.

<sup>28</sup> Councillors did not receive expenses until the 1970s and no regular allowances were paid until the 1990s.



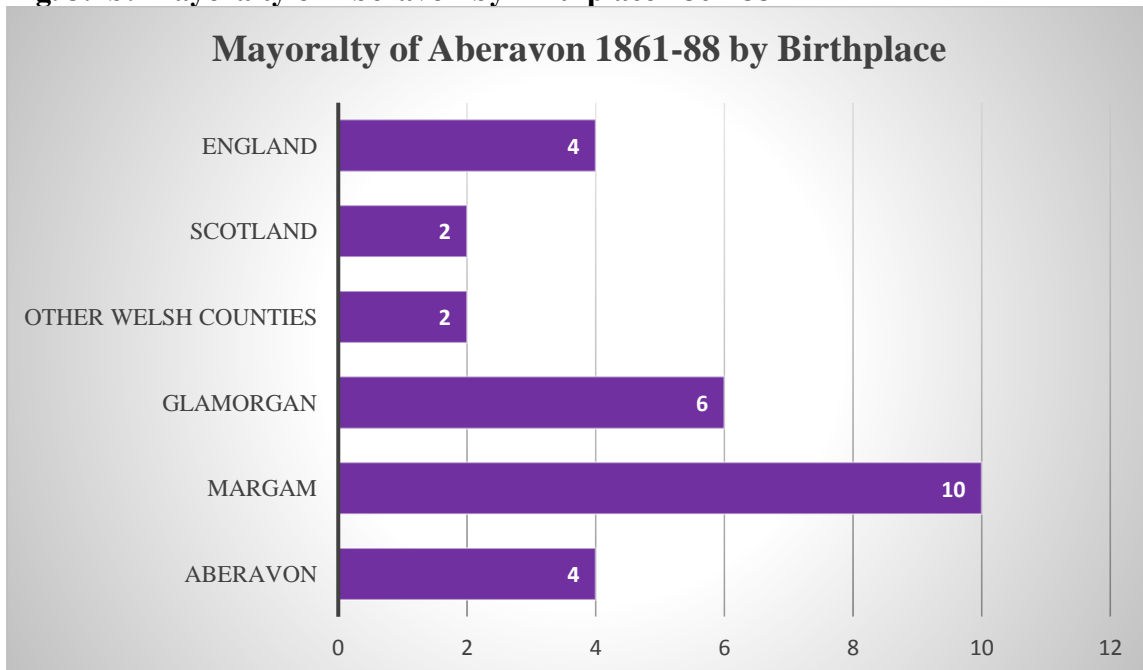
retailers and a further two who built or owned ships. In theory, this decision enabled the council and the docks interests to work together for the benefit of the future prosperity of the town.

**Fig. 3.1a: Mayoralty of Aberavon by Occupation 1861-88**



Sources: Council Minute Books, Welsh Newspapers Online, *The Cambrian*, 1861-88 and 1861 Census of England and Wales.<sup>29</sup>

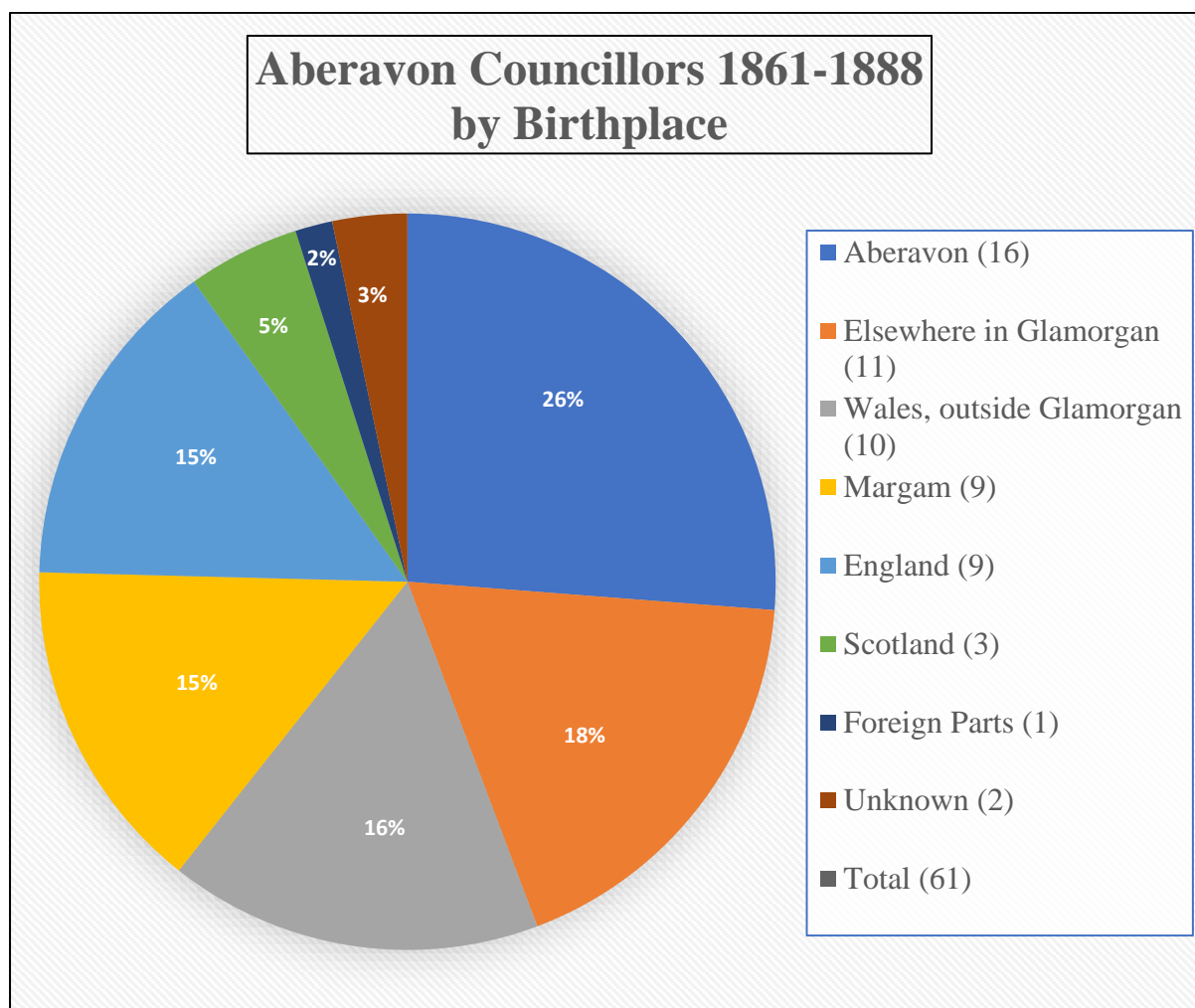
**Fig. 3.1b: Mayoralty of Aberavon by Birthplace 1861-88**



Sources: Council Minute Books, Welsh Newspapers Online, *The Cambrian*, 1861-88 and 1861 Census of England and Wales

<sup>29</sup> See also A.L. Evans, (1987); the occupations of the three 'Others' were ship broker (1863), coal and metal merchant (1884) and timber merchant (1887). Note: Seventeen different individuals occupied the mayoralty in this period.

**Fig. 3.2: Aberavon Councillors 1861-88 by Birthplace**



Source: Welsh Newspapers Online, Council Minute Books and Census of England and Wales 1861-91

As Fig. 3.2 shows, the council was cosmopolitan in its make-up and of the 61 different councillors elected in Aberavon from 1861 to 1888 only about one-quarter were natives of Aberavon. This group was the largest, but it is noticeable that representation from Margam-born men was equalled by that of English councillors, with nine incomers from a variety of counties in England successful at the polls. Table 3.1 shows birthplace data for the population of Aberavon at the censuses of 1851, 1861 and 1871.<sup>30</sup> Data for 1911 has also been provided in order to illustrate trends in population growth. In comparing the 1861 and 1871 data with Fig. 3.2 it can be seen that council membership was not representative of the population as a whole. For example, the percentage of Scottish councillors far exceeded that of the percentage

<sup>30</sup> Manual census data collection from [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

in the general population and English councillors were also over-represented. This again underlines the acceptance and integration of some immigrants.

**Table 3.1: Population of Aberavon by birthplace**

	1851 (%) <i>n</i> = 2380	1861 (%) <i>n</i> = 2916	1871 (%) <i>n</i> = 3396	1911 % <i>n</i> = 10505
Aberavon	30%	37%	41%	52%
Elsewhere in Glamorgan (inc. Margam)	29.5%	25%	28%	23.7%
Elsewhere in Wales	16%	14%	12%	7.7%
England	11%	9%	11%	13%
Scotland	0.04%	0.14%	0.35%	0.5%
Foreign Parts	0.3%	0.2%	0.44%	1.4%
Ireland	13%	15%	7%	1.7%

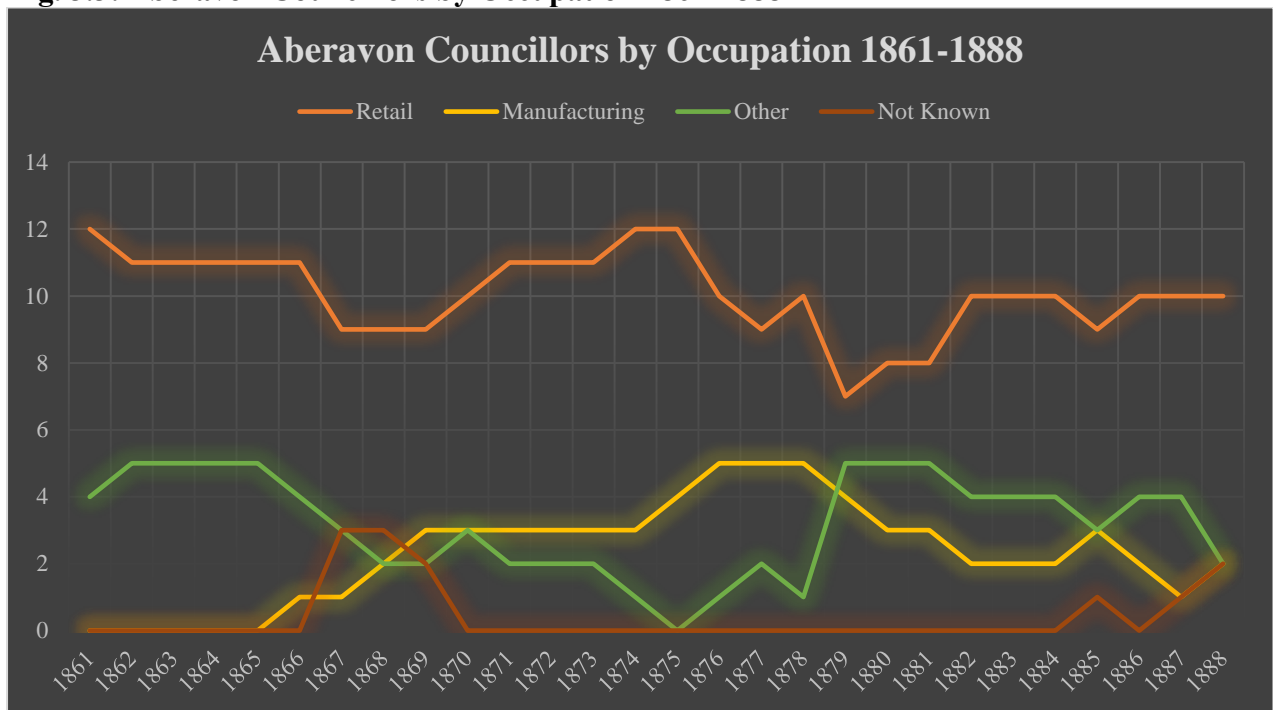
Source: Manual census data collection from [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

Irish migrants made up a substantial proportion of the population but they had no presence on the council. Unlike many Scottish and English immigrants, the Irish individuals and families in Aberavon had been forced from their homeland by famine and were in no position to set up in business and reach the property qualification required for either voting or standing for office. Natives of Aberavon also appear to have been significantly under-represented, particularly when consideration is given to the continued increase in the percentage of the population born in the borough. As can be seen in Table 3.1, the population of Aberavon in 1851, 1861 and 1871 was made up predominantly of immigrants; although those born in Aberavon were the largest single group they were still outnumbered by inhabitants born outside the borough. In the years immediately surrounding incorporation, therefore, scope existed for the influences of qualified incomers to affect local government outcomes.

Fig. 3.3 (below) shows the occupational characteristics of the elected members in this period: of the sixteen original representatives, thirteen were retailers and tradesmen, and nine of those thirteen were shopkeepers. Unlike in larger industrial towns such as Rochdale where

manufacturers were the largest occupational group until the turn of the century, there was no resident manufacturing elite in Aberavon in the first years of its incorporation.<sup>31</sup> Wealthy local landowners and industrialists such as the Earl of Jersey, Henry H. Vivian or C.R.M. Talbot held property interests in the borough of Aberavon but were non-resident and drawn not to the new municipal government but to Westminster. Representation was further restricted by the fact that although the neighbouring industrial settlements of Taibach and Cwmavon were considerably larger in terms of population, Aberavon’s ancient charter had been a key factor in contributing to its incorporation in 1861.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, of the qualified ratepayers whose names could be considered for the original council, two-thirds were involved in retail.<sup>33</sup>

**Fig. 3.3: Aberavon Councillors by Occupation 1861-1888**



**Sources:** Council Minute Books and notices of nomination and election, Welsh Newspapers Online and *The Cambrian*, 1861-1888. The designation ‘Other’ includes ship owners, cordwainers, builders & contractors, farmers, bootmakers, some designated as ‘Gentleman’, a solicitor (from 1884), a surgeon (from 1886) and a schoolmaster (from 1879).

<sup>31</sup> Garrard (1983), p.19.

<sup>32</sup> Census of England and Wales 1861: Aberavon 2,916; Margam (including Taibach) 5528; Lower Michaelstone (including Cwmavon) 5322 cited in I.G. Jones (1992) p.285.

<sup>33</sup> TNA PC1/1525, List of Men Qualified to be Councillors; 36 out of 54 were in retail trades; see also Table 2.3 in Chapter Two.

By the mid-1870s, however, small tinplate works had begun to be established in the borough and manufacturers became an alternative occupational group on the council. Access to the tinplate industry was relatively easy at this time and retailers often invested in founding their own works as a means of supplementing their incomes.<sup>34</sup> Aberavon grocers Thomas Waters Jenkins and William Gething had taken this route, and in 1876 the number of tinplate manufacturers on the council peaked at five (see Fig 3.3). Retailers remained the majority group on the council throughout this period, and their continued presence confirms the suggestion by John Wyn Pritchard that a ‘broad contact network’ was an explanatory factor in the success of retailers at municipal elections.<sup>35</sup> The election of certain groups might well have been perceived as preferable, but the assumption that superior outcomes could be guaranteed by members of a particular occupational group failed to take account of individual characteristics and also discounted the relevance of the democratic process. Hennock’s research concurs with the notion that the effective operation of local government is entirely dependent on individuals, regardless of their occupations.<sup>36</sup>

On the Aberavon side of the river, land for industrial development was limited but lent itself to the small-scale production of tinplate. Minchinton has asserted that, ‘Entrepreneurially the outstanding characteristic of this period was the dynamic response of local industrialists to the opportunities of expansion which became available in both manufacturing industry and transport.’<sup>37</sup> These opportunities were not restricted to established wealthy industrialists, however, as ‘[w]ith a modest sum it was comparatively easy to become a prominent member of local society and to enjoy a comfortable standard of living’ by gaining entry into the tinplate trade.<sup>38</sup> Works set up in Aberavon and Margam were small establishments that had been funded with a minimum of capital, the sources of which varied between one or two individuals, the subscription of a number of individuals, or an existing company with interests in the production of iron, copper or coal.

Growth of tinplate production in Aberavon was influenced by proximity to two main features: the resources of neighbouring industries and the docks. Tinplate manufacture was a subsidiary of the iron industry, and tinplate manufacture ‘grew up where iron, coal and labour

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<sup>34</sup> W.E. Minchinton, (1957), pp. 106-7.

<sup>35</sup> J.W. Pritchard (1994), p.191.

<sup>36</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.324.

<sup>37</sup> W.E. Minchinton (1969), p. xxix.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112.

skilled in metal working were available'.<sup>39</sup> Aberavon's close proximity to Port Talbot docks, where railway sidings and transportation were provided to local industries under wayleave agreements, created a favourable environment for these new works. Furthermore, the coal power required to operate the industrial furnaces was accessed by use of the numerous rail links which had been put in place from the beginning of the century and included both small, works-specific routes and main trunk railways.<sup>40</sup>

Aberavon's first tinplate works had been opened by Aberavon resident Richard Jenkins, a former agent in Margam Tinplate Works, and his partner, Margam-born Edward Davies, an ex-mason and building contractor. The new business was located within Aberavon borough, and occupied a site known as the Avon Vale Tinplate Works. However, despite its physical location the operating company was registered to reflect links to the docks as the Port Talbot Tinplate Company Limited, a name which continued to be used by Jenkins after the partnership was dissolved in 1879.<sup>41</sup> Both men became elected representatives in Aberavon and served together between 1875 and 1880 but following the dissolution Davies leased two acres of land in Margam to set up his own tinplate works which benefitted from sidings connecting to the Great Western Railway (GWR).<sup>42</sup> Davies also initiated political links with Margam and became a member of Margam Local Board as well as its successor body, Margam Urban District Council, where he represented the Central Ward continuously until his death in November 1908.<sup>43</sup>

The second works established in Aberavon in this period, the Burrows Works, which traded as Glamorgan Tinplate Company was also founded on the basic principles of small-scale production. Thomas Waters Jenkins and his father-in-law, former Cwmavon iron mill manager David Lewis, began operations in the mid-1860s. Jenkins was elected to Aberavon Council in 1874 and retained his seat until 1882; as one of the borough's wealthier and most renowned citizens he served as mayor on two occasions. Minchinton has estimated a capital cost of about £3,000 to build a works, with the advantage of 'long credit' of nine months or more being given to producers whereas sales were in 'spot cash'.<sup>44</sup> Limited liability legislation from 1856

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<sup>39</sup> W.E. Minchinton, (1957), pp.29-30; see also W.E. Minchinton (1969), p.xxv; C. Baber (1980); and T. Boyns, D. Thomas and C. Baber, (1980), pp.97-154.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>41</sup> *The Cambrian*, 19 December 1879.

<sup>42</sup> WGAS D/D LE/X 23, 1880 lease between Edward Davies and C.R.M. Talbot.

<sup>43</sup> *Evening Express*, 16 November 1908.

<sup>44</sup> W.E. Minchinton, (1969), p.109.

provided an additional incentive for small traders to enter the tinsplate trade and supplement their incomes. Glamorgan Tinsplate's initial years appear to have been profitable for Jenkins, and by the time of the 1881 Census he had moved from his grocery premises in Cwmavon Road to Brynhyfryd House in the prestigious Pentyla area of Aberavon where he was enumerated as a 'Tinsplate Manufacturer'.<sup>45</sup> By 1891, however, Jenkins was out of Pentyla and had returned to the grocery business, this time in Talbot Square, due to the voluntary liquidation of the Burrows Works in 1882.<sup>46</sup> Links to tinsplate remained for Lewis, however, as in 1877 his son, John Lewis, had married Mary Ann (Pollie) Jenkins, daughter of Aberavon councillor and future mayor Richard Jenkins of the Port Talbot Tinsplate Company.

Signs of pressure within Avon Vale and the industry as a whole became evident in 1887. Richard Jenkins wrote to John Felton, chief steward at the Margam Estate, asking that C.R.M. Talbot consider a decrease in the rates being charged to the Mansel Tinsplate Works as a means of them reducing their wayleave charges to Avon Vale; Jenkins expressed his concern that the charge 'presse[d] very heavily upon [the company] in the [current] depressed state of trade'.<sup>47</sup> When the Aberavon works were eventually put up for sale in 1889 after Jenkins had been elected to the new Glamorgan County Council (GCC), the business address advertised in the local press was 'The Port Talbot Tin-plate Co., Port Talbot', which suggests that use of the port name was not only an indicator of status but would also improve the likelihood of a sale.<sup>48</sup>

The relative ease with which tinsplate companies could be created had contributed to the construction of 100 new British mills in 1879, a situation which resulted in an over-production of tinsplate by three million boxes a year.<sup>49</sup> Three years later, giving evidence in support of the Rhondda and Swansea Bay Railway Bill, the importance of tinsplate to the district was emphasised by mayor of Aberavon and managing partner of Margam & Mansel Tinsplate Works, T.D. Daniel, who stated that there were then seven tinsplate works in the Aberavon area which produced 700,000 boxes of tinsplate per year, valued at £1 a box.<sup>50</sup> Similar figures are quoted by Minchinton for the boom period of 1879-80 when tinsplate was valued at 18s.11½d. per box.<sup>51</sup> Ten years later, however, the tin-fields of south-east Asia had expanded and the price

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<sup>45</sup> 1881 Census of England and Wales.

<sup>46</sup> 1891 Census of England and Wales and *The Cambrian*, 19 May 1882.

<sup>47</sup> WGAS D/D LE/X 67.

<sup>48</sup> *The Cambrian*, 29 November 1889.

<sup>49</sup> W.E. Minchinton, (1957), p.51

<sup>50</sup> *The Cambrian*, 21 July 1882 (Supplement) citing evidence given to the House of Commons Select Committee on Railway Bills on Wednesday, 12 July 1882.

<sup>51</sup> W.E. Minchinton, (1957), p.51.

of tin had fallen.<sup>52</sup> In 1893, the average cost of a box of tinplate had dropped by almost half to 'a farthing under 10s. 6d.'<sup>53</sup> Exports to the United States, Britain's largest overseas market, were further ravaged by that country's implementation of the McKinley Tariff in 1891, a decision which forced the failure of many 'small, financially weak, and inefficient' tinplate firms.<sup>54</sup>

Electors of Aberavon were not reluctant to reject tinplate manufacturers in favour of retailers, and did so in 1870, 1872, 1875 and 1876 when Edward Davies of Taibach, Thomas Waters Jenkins, William Gething and David Lewis respectively failed to gain seats on the council. Neither were voters opposed to returning 'workingman' candidates as they did in 1868 when blacksmith Jenkin Rees, an employee at Margam Works for 44 years, beat Richard Jenkins, agent at the rival Avon Vale Tinplate Works in Aberavon, in a controversial by-election following the resignations of two new councillors.<sup>55</sup> Agents at Vivians' Margam Works were said to have directed the workmen at both the copper works and the associated Morfa colliery to vote in their dinner hour for two named candidates, one of which was Jenkin Rees.<sup>56</sup> Rees, who was said to be 'illiterate', had recently resigned his paid secondary post as the council's Sergeant-at-Mace in anticipation of winning election to the council, and despite a subsequent legal challenge the result was upheld.<sup>57</sup> At the annual elections the following November, Rees was bottom of the poll of seven candidates for four vacant places, but his initial election offers evidence to at least partially counter the argument that working men in Wales were generally excluded from elected office until the last decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup>

Rees was elected at a time when the reformist councillors of the so-called Municipal Party faced significant challenges to their ambitions. Following six years of relative stability, in 1867 Edward Jones, who had been the driving force for incorporation and reform, decided not to stand for re-election. Between 1855 and 1865 Jones had been mayor three times but had lost his wife and three of their four children, the most recent being his youngest son who had died at the age of nine in April 1865. Additionally, as a consequence of their court case contesting

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.84.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.55.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.75.

<sup>55</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 16 May 1868.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 May 1868, 22 May 1868 and 19 June 1868.

<sup>58</sup> J.W. Pritchard (1994), p.203.



the validity of Aberavon's new charter the Old Burgess party were becoming resurgent. The municipal election of 1866 had resulted in the election of two Old Burgess candidates, William John David and William Gething, both of whom had been signatories to a Bond given on behalf of the old corporation in their case against the charter.<sup>59</sup> The election of painter William Vinton at a by-election in December 1868 secured a majority which was designed first and foremost to frustrate efforts by the new council to regain corporation property from private hands after its hasty sale prior to incorporation in 1860.<sup>60</sup>

Leeds had experienced a similar situation in the late 1830s, when a Conservative revival contributed to a return of members of the old corporation.<sup>61</sup> However, the changed circumstances, a reduction in their powers, and the 'hazards of contested elections' curtailed their representation.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, in Aberavon old burgess members tended to spend shorter periods on the council than their reformist counterparts. Motivated by self-interest rather than reform and the public good, the old burgesses were satisfied with short-lived and sometimes successful campaigns devised to ensure disruption and disarray in the new municipal body. Despite their populist appeal, the shift in calibre represented by the election of Jenkin Rees and his colleagues did not go unnoticed by the press, who reported prior to the 1869 election that the council had recently 'been recruited from a half-educated, and therefore shallow judging set of men', and municipal voters were urged to support 'good candidates' if they came forward.<sup>63</sup>

Contested elections were rare in the first years of Aberavon council, suggesting stability and a sense of satisfaction with the council. Four councillors out of twelve 'retired' every three years and either stood down or put themselves forward for re-election. Aldermen, appointed by the council members themselves, enjoyed terms of six years before facing re-election. However, the death or resignation of an alderman required his replacement from the ranks of the councillors, thus triggering an extraordinary election which brought new personnel to the council. Occasionally, councillors' businesses failed and they were disqualified due to bankruptcy. In later years, industrialists were not immune from such financial difficulties, as evidenced by the 'liquidation by arrangement' of former Aberavon mayor Thomas Waters

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<sup>59</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1, 13 June 1865.

<sup>60</sup> *The Cambrian*, 25 December 1868.

<sup>61</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.195.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Brecon County Times Neath Gazette and General Advertiser for the Counties of Brecon Carmarthen Radnor Monmouth Glamorgan Cardigan Montgomery Hereford*, 2 October 1869.

Jenkins in 1882.<sup>64</sup> Councillor Daniel Edwards, son of cordwainer and councillor Evan Edwards, was disqualified due to liquidation in 1878.<sup>65</sup>

Prospective new councillors, or those seeking re-election, were dependent on nomination by a proposer and seconder. Candidates in uncontested elections had usually done nothing ‘to forfeit public esteem’ and proposers were confident that their candidate had ‘a fair chance of success’.<sup>66</sup> Opponents in contested elections, however, were said to ‘only come forward if they intend to have a serious fight for a seat’.<sup>67</sup> Municipal Party representatives regained control on Aberavon council in 1871, possibly due to the impact of the Municipal Franchise Act (MFA) of 1869 which had not only allowed for the inclusion of single women on lists of burgesses for municipal elections but also reduced the municipal residence qualification from two-and-a-half years to one year.<sup>68</sup> A crucial effect of the latter was that very recent newcomers to the town who owned property and were qualified to vote could effectively dilute the power of the old burgess party. Aberavon’s old burgesses stood unsuccessfully for election a number of times after 1870, but by 1873 they were no match for the members of the Municipal Party, which barely gave them credence as opposition in that year’s election, described in *The Cardiff Times* as ‘another crushing defeat for the old burgess party’.<sup>69</sup>

Fig. 3.4 shows the total and voting populations of Aberavon from 1861 to 1881 and highlights the contrast between inhabitants and electors. In Aberavon, the Burgess Roll had contained 149 male names in 1861, but by 1866 that number had increased to 246, and due to electoral reform rose to 386 in 1867. However, extension of the franchise was restricted to parliamentary elections rather than municipal, and even after the reforms of 1869 the proportion of the population entitled to vote in general elections exceeded that for municipal elections in many towns.<sup>70</sup> By 1877 the number of male voters in Aberavon stood at 744, many of whom would have expressed their allegiance or antipathy at the now-secret ballot box.<sup>71</sup> As Weinstein has noted, however, it is worth considering how many of those registered actually

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<sup>64</sup> *The Cambrian*, 19 May 1882.

<sup>65</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 6 April 1878.

<sup>66</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), p.154.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> B. Weinstein (2018), p.5; it should be noted that prior to both the 1832 Reform Act and the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act women had been entitled to vote, but the new legislation specifically used the term ‘man’ and thereby excluded women from the franchise.

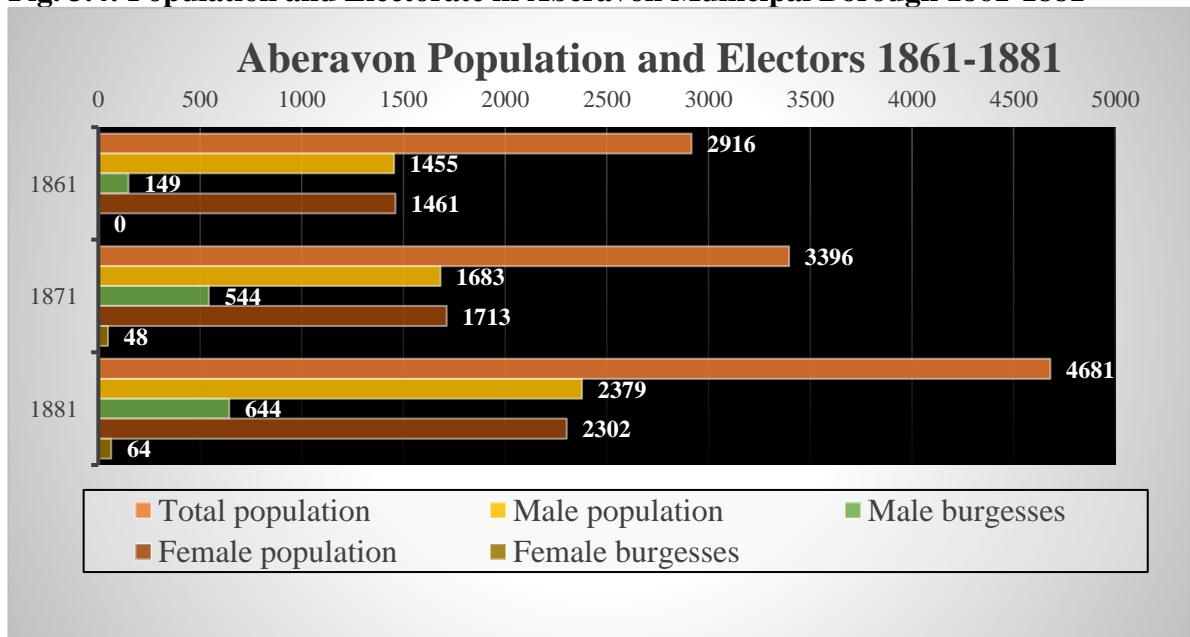
<sup>69</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 8 November 1873.

<sup>70</sup> B. Weinstein (2018), p.5.

<sup>71</sup> 35 & 36 Vict. c. 33, The Ballot Act 1872.

cast a vote at election times.<sup>72</sup> Figures for Aberavon reveal that an average of thirty per cent of the male population was eligible to vote between 1871 and 1881, but that figure represented just about fifteen per cent of the total population.<sup>73</sup> Pollbooks for Aberavon have not survived after the period 1867-70, therefore an analysis of voters and voting patterns is unavailable, but a newspaper account of the November 1876 municipal election recorded that 505 out of 667 burgesses participated in the election, casting 1,342 votes.<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting that these results were attained in a period when the practice of plural voting was still in use and the number of votes a person could cast was based on the extent of their property ownership.<sup>75</sup> Shopkeepers, therefore, could face challenges to their domination on the council from both manufacturers and a new, emerging working-class of voters but were able to maintain the close relationships with their supporters which ensured the group's continued presence on the council.

**Fig. 3.4: Population and Electorate in Aberavon Municipal Borough 1861-1881**



Sources: Census of England and Wales 1861-1881 and PTL B/A 10/1 Burgess Roll for Aberavon 1861-1882

<sup>72</sup> B. Weinstein (2018), p.5.

<sup>73</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 10/1.

<sup>74</sup> *Western Mail*, 2 November 1876.

<sup>75</sup> The Sturges-Bourne Acts of 1818-19 provided for multiple votes based on property ownership; plural voting was eventually abolished in 1894.

For towns such as Aberavon, where inward migration was a significant feature, the change in the residence qualification contributed to both an increase in the number of ratepayers eligible to vote and an expansion of the pool of candidates available to stand for election. In Aberavon, the years from 1870 to 1888 were characterised by new names on the council and an almost continuous series of contests where the number of candidates exceeded the places available. This suggests that the 1869 Act was instrumental in escalating the incidence of contested elections. Furthermore, the increase in population tended to weaken the popularity of long-established councillors, which led to unsuccessful candidate William Gething blaming the ‘large introduction of the foreign elements into the borough’ for his failure to be re-elected in November 1874.<sup>76</sup>

The contribution of qualified female voters was also a significant factor at this time. Although as Fig. 3.4 shows this group made up a very small proportion of the electorate after 1869, and in Aberavon represented just over one per cent of the total population in both 1871 and 1881, it is highly likely that the ubiquitous local shopkeepers benefitted from the votes of eligible females at election time. Doyle has written about the role of shopkeepers in the early twentieth century, but it can also be said that after 1869, for single female municipal voters at least, ‘the retailer was their key point of contact in [the] urban public world’.<sup>77</sup> In Aberavon, following the municipal election of 1869 *The Cambrian* complained that no women appeared on the Burgess Roll, but this was rectified by 1871 when the number of women on the roll was 45 out of a total of 468 burgesses and included Selina Sutton, a widow aged 73 who kept a lodging house in High Street, and Mary Ann John, also a widow, who owned and ran the Packet Hotel in Water Street.<sup>78</sup> A little over ten years later that figure had almost doubled to 84 but out of a total of 792.<sup>79</sup> Whilst the 1869 Act also allowed women to stand as Poor Law Guardians, the Aberavon vestry minutes show no evidence of women taking the opportunity to use the vestry as a vehicle for political activity.<sup>80</sup> It is apparent, however, that the vestry was not abandoned by reformers after their aim of achieving a charter had been realised. The names of many councillors, both existing and future, are evident in the minutes after 1861, as are those

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<sup>76</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 21 November 1874.

<sup>77</sup> B.M. Doyle (2007), p.46.

<sup>78</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 10/1, Borough of Aberavon Burgess Roll 1861-82.

<sup>79</sup> *The Cambrian*, 27 November 1869.

<sup>80</sup> WGAS P/68/CW3/1; the surviving records cover the period 1855-1877 only.

of their officials, which suggests that Aberavon's vestry not only worked closely with the council but also offered ambitious new ratepayers a variety of elected public offices.<sup>81</sup>

Extension of the candidacy qualification within the 1869 MFA to those outside a borough had only minimal impact in Aberavon. Edward Davies of Penrhyn House, Taibach, tinplate manufacturer and partner of Aberavon resident Councillor Richard Jenkins, stood for election in 1870, but was unsuccessful. One of eight candidates for four vacant posts, Davies finished sixth in the poll behind retiring councillor Daniel Smith, an Aberavon ironmonger who was subsequently elected mayor; returning former mayor and alderman Edward Jones; David Jenkins, a ship broker who had also been a member of the original 1861 council; and new councillor Ewan McLean, a travelling draper from Scotland.<sup>82</sup> Efforts had been made prior to the election to avoid a contest, but no candidates had been prepared to withdraw and thereby allow the two retiring councillors to retain their seats along with two others in place of the old burgess councillors who were not seeking re-election.<sup>83</sup> Davies did not stand again until a successful attempt in 1874, when once again he was one of eight candidates; he was re-elected in 1877 and served one term. In 1884 he was elected to the first Margam Local Board, where he remained throughout its transition to Margam Urban District Council (MUDC) in 1894 and then until his death in November 1908.

Occupations of elected members have featured strongly in the historiography, where much has been made of the relationship between the decision-making processes and the influence of collective occupational identities. Hennock, for example, identified conflicts on councils between big-business improvers and shopkeeper economisers which were based on a premise that shopkeepers were inherently parsimonious and self-interested.<sup>84</sup> Barry Doyle, however, disagreed and offered a 'more sophisticated' interpretation of the shopkeepers' contributions to municipal life.<sup>85</sup> Fig. 3.5 shows the make-up of the Finance Committee in Aberavon between 1861 and 1888 by occupation. Retailers constituted the largest single occupational group throughout the period, but as will be shown below, despite significant financial pressures the council maintained a commitment not only to public health obligations but also to larger, non-statutory projects.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> *Brecon County Times*, 5 November 1870.

<sup>83</sup> *The Cambrian*, 31 October 1870; Evan Thomas and Thomas Jenkins did not stand.

<sup>84</sup> For examples see E.P. Hennock (1973), p. 317; and R. Trainor (1993), p.266.

<sup>85</sup> B.M. Doyle (2007), pp.47-48.

Developments in the variety of members' named occupations led to the specifically 'retailer' group in Aberavon falling to a low of 31 per cent in 1881-2, but nevertheless their numbers on the committee remained high. Comparison with Fig. 3.3, which shows the occupations of all councillors, tends to support a view that prior to 1872, when the whole council was nominated to the Finance Committee, membership consisted of the most experienced and business-related councillors, and an element of consistency existed in the appointment of chairperson. The years 1867-8 and 1868-9, however, when the Old Burgess candidates began to outnumber the Municipal Reform Party, are significant for the absence of aldermen on the committee and the inclusion of new councillors at the expense of more senior, experienced men.<sup>86</sup> At the first council meeting following the municipal elections of 1869, Old Burgess councillor Thomas Jones publicly objected to new councillor Thomas Davies Daniel being appointed to the Finance Committee.<sup>87</sup> Daniel's financial expertise as manager of the Margam Tinplate Works and managing partner of the Mansel Tinplate Works was considerable, but the objection by Jones suggests that thorough scrutiny of financial decisions was neither desirable nor welcome. This was in stark contrast to the average retailer representation of 84 per cent on the committee between 1861-2 and 1866-7, and the period was marked by a series of regressive motions, letters of resignation and heavy-handed financial decisions.<sup>88</sup>

Concern with councillor calibre and its association with occupation does not appear to have influenced the voters of Aberavon, where a cordwainer, blacksmith and painter had all been popular electoral choices in the first decade of the council's existence. As Hennock has written, 'a councillor's occupation is no guarantee that he will make or fail to make a significant contribution to the work of the Council'.<sup>89</sup> Whilst personal wealth might provide an indication of education and experience, the informal structure of local government meant that there was no mechanism which compelled elected members to attend council meetings; active engagement by members was therefore purely voluntary. Consequently, as Sharpe has maintained, councillors' '[c]alibre cannot really be measured'.<sup>90</sup> There can be little doubt, even today, that the establishment of criteria with which to gauge the competence of an individual councillor would be extremely complex.

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<sup>86</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 14/1.

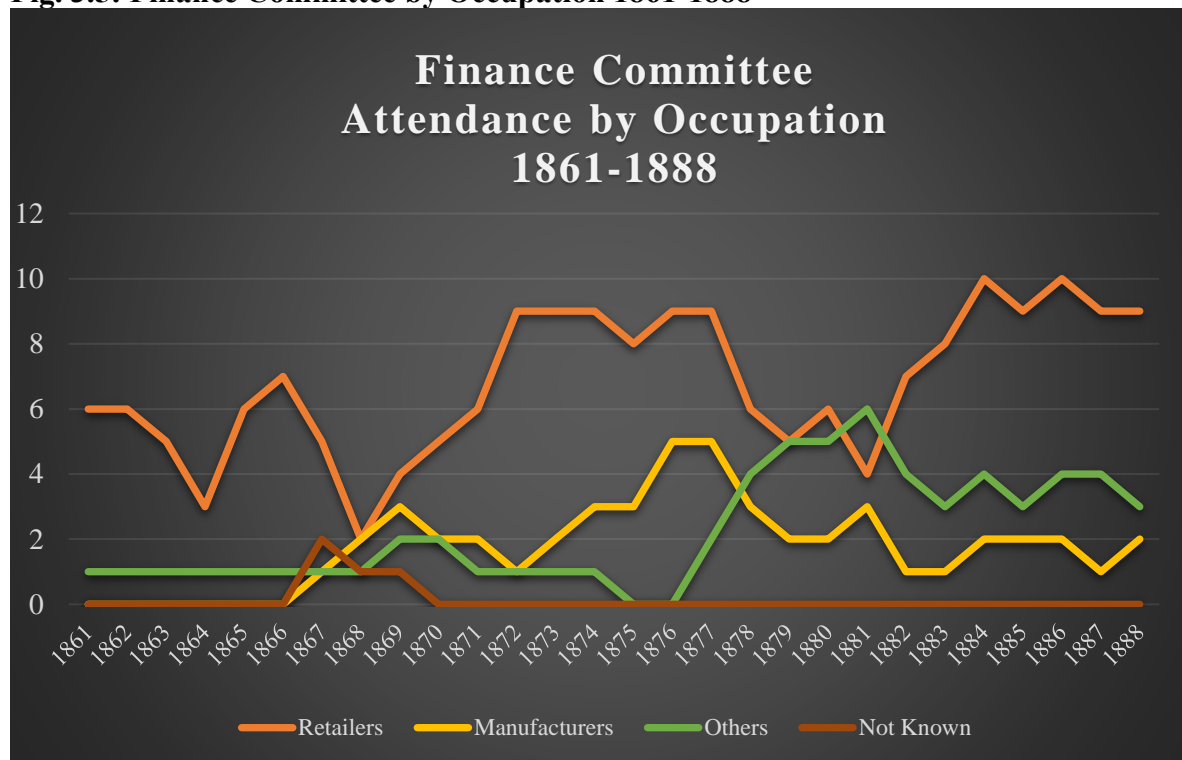
<sup>87</sup> *Brecon County Times*, 13 November 1869.

<sup>88</sup> PTL B/A 11/1, 14 January 1868 and WGAS PTL B/A 14/1 13 July 1868.

<sup>89</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.332-3.

<sup>90</sup> Sharpe, cited in J. Dearlove (1979), p.14.

**Fig. 3.5: Finance Committee by Occupation 1861-1888**



Source: Council Minute Books

Light has asserted that opportunities existed for the monitoring and assessment of a public servant’s activities and motivations, and newspapers could act as what Croll called a ‘shaming machine’ but realistically, the ballot box was the final arbiter.<sup>91</sup> The example of Councillor Richard Jenkins illustrates this point and highlights the inherent difficulties in attempting to apply value criteria to public service. Jenkins had been beaten at the May 1868 by-election by the allegedly illiterate Jenkin Rees but stood successfully at the November election, this time as founder of the new Ratepayers’ Party. Formal party-political structures were not established until the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>92</sup> It was, however, common for candidates to be nominated and supported by local groups such as the municipalians, the old burgesses or the ratepayers. Although these terms lacked official recognition they were used frequently in newspapers to inform readers of candidates’ political leanings. As the ratepayers’ representative, tinsplate manufacturer Jenkins wasted little time in proposing a motion to reduce the rates of his own tinsplate company.<sup>93</sup> Jenkins’ proposal was not seconded, however, and following the town clerk’s advice that it was not in the Council’s power to interfere with the

<sup>91</sup> J. Light (2005), p.90; and A. Croll (2000), p.90.

<sup>92</sup> K. Rix, *Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England, 1880-1910*. NED-New edition, Boydell & Brewer, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt1kgqt0h>, p.16.

<sup>93</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/1 Council Minute Book, 11 October 1870.

ratings of the assessment committee the resolution was withdrawn.<sup>94</sup> It seems clear that Jenkins saw the council as a means of protecting his interests rather than a focal point for public good. Nevertheless, following a published attendance record for the previous year of 0/51 he was returned unopposed in November 1881.<sup>95</sup> The re-election of Jenkins emphasises the point that the opportunities envisaged by Light could be rendered meaningless not only by the capricious nature of the voting public but also by the vagaries of the system. The interests of both voters and councillors were therefore constantly re-negotiated in the light of financial constraints and ratepayer expectations.

Despite imputations of low calibre, the motivating factors for a majority of councillors, particularly those whose businesses would have been enhanced by clean, well-lit premises and streets, were the public good and a desire to improve the living, working and environmental conditions of their town. Whilst this, too, suggests an element of self-interest, many of Aberavon's elected representatives evidenced the 'persistence, resilience and flexibility' identified by Trainor, and their continued presence as unpaid councillors tends to underline a strong sense of commitment.<sup>96</sup> Representative self-government at this time was an end in itself rather than a stepping-stone to higher public office and council members could 'stay there long enough to see, and be responsible for, the consequences of their actions'.<sup>97</sup> In Aberavon, councillors' duties were broad, but often unspecified. At evening meetings, held by candlelight in a room at the police station, members were called upon to take decisions on issues ranging from a new hat for the town crier to the provision of space for a new burial ground when the parish churchyard reached capacity in 1870.<sup>98</sup>

Only one man, Evan Evans, served on the council continually from 1861 to 1888. Evans enjoyed an extensive social network in his capacity as pharmaceutical chemist, stationer, bookseller, seedsman, oil & Italian warehouse keeper, sub-distributor of stamps, agent for Norwich Union Fire & Life, agent for Guardian Plate Glass, and agent for the South Wales Atlantic line of Steamers to America.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, at least seven councillors stood down after serving all or part of their three-year term, and three are known to have resigned soon after

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 5 November 1881 listed council attendance up to 31 October 1881 but published attendance figures are not available for the remaining years of this period.

<sup>96</sup> R. Trainor (2000), p.36.

<sup>97</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), pp.154 and 157.

<sup>98</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/1, 20 December 1864.

<sup>99</sup> *Post Office Directory (1871)*; *Worrall's Directory (1875)*.



their elections.<sup>100</sup> It is evident from an analysis of trade directories and other contemporary documents, however, that the majority of persistent public servants were, or had been, active in the Vestry or, like Evan Evans, provided additional public services such as insurance from their places of business.<sup>101</sup>

Underlining central government concerns regarding the calibre of individual councillors was a view that municipal government should be carried out with 'such stateliness of manner as to dignify the corporate life'.<sup>102</sup> Ambitious councillors in newly-incorporated boroughs such as Aberavon were keen to emphasise their status and raise the profile of their town. Petty Sessions for the inhabitants of Aberavon were held six miles away in Neath, and so in April 1862 a petition for a separate Commission of the Peace for Aberavon was submitted to the Secretary of State for consideration by the Queen.<sup>103</sup> Creation of a Commission at Aberavon was a significant opportunity in that it not only gave additional status to the borough but also conferred the mantle of Justice of the Peace on each elected mayor. As was customary, the opinion of the Lord Lieutenant of Glamorgan was sought prior to a decision, but the holder of that position, C.R.M. Talbot, was scathing in his response to the Secretary, writing that '[t]here are no resident gentry in the borough, and very few tradesmen who are in a position to demand that respect from their neighbours which it is desirable that a magistrate should exercise'.<sup>104</sup> Based on Talbot's comments, Aberavon's petition was refused.

Talbot's letter of explanation to the council was also straightforward, although it appeared to indicate that a Commission might be possible in the future.<sup>105</sup> However, Talbot continued to distance himself from Aberavon and refused to meet a deputation from the council to discuss potential magistrates, suggesting that his agent, Griffith Llewellyn, should be contacted instead. In contrast, L.L. Dillwyn, the Swansea Boroughs M.P., was happy to assist the council and help them in 'getting over [the] objection'.<sup>106</sup> A second petition was submitted which cited the right of mayors in a current and previous year to become borough justices.<sup>107</sup> By 1865, the separate Commission was granted following Talbot's acknowledgement that the 'administration of

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<sup>100</sup> Welsh Newspapers Online, 1861-1888.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid; Trade Directories 1861-88; WGAS P/68/CW3/1, Aberavon Vestry Minute Book; see also Chapter Two.

<sup>102</sup> J.T. Bunce, Birmingham Liberal, 1882, cited by S. Gunn in *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and authority in the English industrial city 1840-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.168.

<sup>103</sup> TNA HO 45/7333, Petition for a Separate Commission of the Peace.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., Talbot's letter of objection.

<sup>105</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 12/1 General Purposes Committee, copy letter dated 26 April 1862.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., copy letter dated 25 April 1862.

<sup>107</sup> The rights were contained in the MCA of 1835.

justice' had been 'fairly attended to by the mayor and ex-mayor of the borough' and his recommendation was that 'the bench should be strengthened'.<sup>108</sup> Four names were initially submitted to the Lord Chancellor: David Jenkins, Merchant and Alderman; Edward Jones, Merchant and Alderman; William Llewellyn Powell, Merchant; and Alfred Thomas Hughes, Clerk in Holy Orders and Vicar of Aberavon, and each November from 1865 the mayor and ex-mayor became *ex-officio* magistrates following the submission of their names to the Privy Council for confirmation.<sup>109</sup> Possibly mindful of these magisterial responsibilities the council was careful to ensure that even during the old burgess years the mayoralty was held by men of some substance and standing.

Visible evidence of this new substance and respectability could be found in civic processions, where tangible connections between the council, the streets and the inhabitants were cultivated. In small towns like Aberavon these processions promoted shared values and a sense of community; they were also reported extensively in local newspapers. For O'Leary, the public processions were visible expressions of power.<sup>110</sup> Newspaper reports of processions, therefore, were not merely neutral sources of information but a means of shaping inhabitants' views of their society.<sup>111</sup> As Simon Gunn has noted, processions were a means of giving visual and symbolic form to the power vested in the leading participants.<sup>112</sup> Eager to display evidence of differentiation from the old corporation and to avoid criticism of incorporation, Aberavon's new council procured a fur-trimmed purple robe for the mayor in 1869, and a mayoral chain of office in December 1879.<sup>113</sup> The robe was said to have been bought by private subscriptions and purchased specifically for the 'Mayor's Sunday' procession to and from St. Mary's Church.<sup>114</sup> Aberavon's representatives would also have wanted to at least match the municipal regalia of their counterparts at local civic events. Processions had not been a regular feature of old corporation governance, but municipal boroughs incorporated them into the mayor's civic service which was held annually on the Sunday following his November election. Whitsun Monday was also a celebratory occasion when churches and chapels combined with local

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<sup>108</sup> TNA HO 45/7333; Talbot's recommendation letter, 30 August 1865.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.; letter from William Jones, Town Clerk dated 27 September 1865.

<sup>110</sup> P. O'Leary (2012), p.10. Note: halberds carried by Aberavon's sergeants-at-mace are currently kept in the Mayor's Parlour at the offices of Neath-Port Talbot Council in Aberavon.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>112</sup> S. Gunn in Morris and Trainor (2007), p.226.

<sup>113</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 12 December 1879; the chain was first worn at the monthly meeting in December of that year although there is no reference to its purchase in any of the council's minute books of that time.

<sup>114</sup> *The Cambrian*, 27 November 1869; the robe had been supplied by Messrs. Cox and Son of Southampton Street, Strand, London.

dignitaries to walk in convoy through the town.<sup>115</sup> The report of the 1869 occasion does not mention spectators, but the lengthy procession joined with 250 invited guests to enjoy ‘an unlimited supply of cake and wine’ which had been provided by the new mayor, presumably out of his £20 annual allowance.<sup>116</sup> The 1867 mayoral procession had included ‘a large number of the inhabitants’ and ‘an abundant supply of wine’ was provided.<sup>117</sup>

Opportunities for civic display expanded along with the town. Events such as the opening of railways and stations, the laying of the foundation stone for a new public hall in 1872, the first Aberavon and District Horticultural and Poultry Society Exhibition in 1882, and the welcome reception at Port Talbot railway station for W.E. Gladstone as he made his way by train back to London from Swansea in 1887 all warranted formal, civic regalia before the assembled crowds. As a mark of the town’s status as the only corporate borough in the district apart from Swansea, a ‘handsomely illuminated and bound address’ was presented to Gladstone by the mayor, Richard Cook Jenkins, who added to the splendour of the occasion by wearing the customary fur-trimmed purple robe and gold mayoral chain.<sup>118</sup>

Further opportunities for visual display and positive press reporting were provided by the Freemasons, an organisation which provided its members with a robust support network. A fan Lodge in Aberavon had been issued with its warrant in 1860 and it quickly became a principal point of contact for councillors as well as their salaried officials. Membership was exclusive and by invitation only; it was also expensive, and involved joining fees, an annual subscription and the financial capacity to fund regalia, frequent dinners and charitable donations.<sup>119</sup> Six members of Aberavon’s first council became Freemasons in 1861, including Edward Jones, the town’s first mayor who was initiated just two days after the new charter had been granted.<sup>120</sup> Further analysis of the registers for this period reveals that a total of 25 of Aberavon’s councillors in this period were Freemasons, as well as at least seven officials, and this information is expressed in more detail in Fig. 3.6 and Fig. 3.7.

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<sup>115</sup> For examples see *The Cardiff Times*, 7 June 1873 and *The Western Mail*, 13 November 1876.

<sup>116</sup> *The Cambrian*, 27 November 1869.

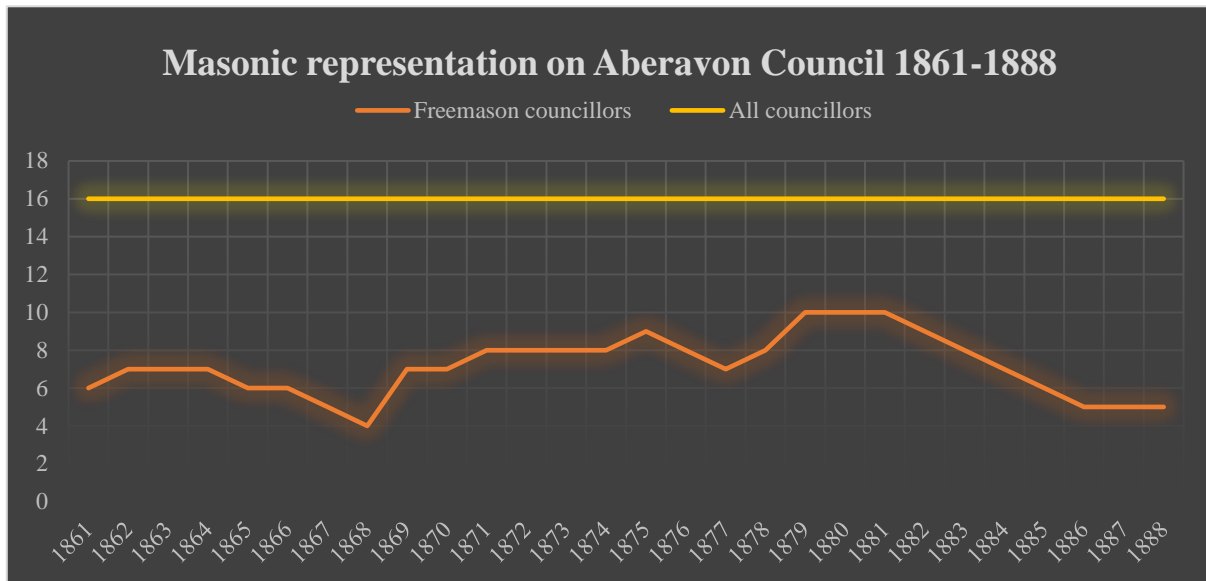
<sup>117</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 23 November 1867.

<sup>118</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 7 June 1887; the address presented in Swansea is held at the Gladstone Library in Hawarden, Flintshire but Aberavon’s address has not been located in any public depositories.

<sup>119</sup> The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, *England, United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 1751-1921* available at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

**Fig. 3.6: Masonic representation on Aberavon Council 1861-1888**



Source: The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, England, United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 1751-1921

Whilst it can be seen that the proportion of councillors who were Freemasons fluctuated between 1861 and 1888, seventeen were Freemasons prior to their elections, which suggests that the lodge operated as a means of preparing men for public office in a new, incorporated body. Research on lodge membership in Blackpool has revealed that just under one-third (32 per cent) of the town's governing body between 1876 and 1914 were Freemasons, but whether initiation preceded election or not is unclear.<sup>121</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Freemasons in Aberavon were not all drawn to the council, neither were all councillors lodge members. Initiations declined substantially during the period 1867 and 1871 when the old burgess party led the council and only two Aberavon men were admitted, one in 1867 and the other, the Vicar of Aberavon, in 1870. The next Aberavon initiations came in 1872, when seven Aberavon men became Freemasons, three of whom eventually became councillors; in 1873 they were joined by the Medical Officer of Health. It is also significant that of the seventeen different men who became mayor between 1861 and 1888, twelve were Freemasons (just over 70 per cent) although in only one case after 1861, that of tinsplate manufacturer Thomas Waters Jenkins, did membership coincide with the mayoralty.<sup>122</sup> Jenkins was initiated on 21 November 1878 having been elected mayor on 9 November that year; he had first been elected to the council in 1874.

<sup>121</sup> D.M. Lopez and J.K. Walton, 'Freemasonry and civic identity: municipal politics, business and the rise of Blackpool from the 1850s to the First World War', *Manchester Region History Review*, 21 (2010), 43-68, p.48.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

Studies of Freemasonry and municipal development have often identified distinct links between lodge membership and Conservative councillors.<sup>123</sup> In Aberavon, however, party political allegiances were less clear-cut. Early councillors were members of the Municipal Reform Party which had been established as a means of achieving incorporation, therefore most elections in Aberavon were not fought on political grounds in the traditional Conservative v Liberal sense. Contests between reformers and either the old burgesses or the Ratepayers' Party were more frequent. The Ratepayers were led by tinsmith manufacturer Richard Jenkins, a Liberal who declared himself a Conservative in 1884 but was then elected to Glamorgan County Council in 1889 as a Liberal.<sup>124</sup> Party organisation was still in its infancy at this time and it was not uncommon for allegiances to change over time. Where data are available however, it can be seen that from 1861 to 1888 Liberal councillors outnumbered Conservatives in Afan Lodge by nine to two, although the Municipal Reform Party could claim at least six members, leaving a further eight whose allegiances are not documented.<sup>125</sup> In Blackpool, a Municipal Reform Union campaigned for transparency in municipal finance but this organisation cannot be directly compared with Aberavon's Municipal Reform Party as its objectives were dissimilar.<sup>126</sup>

Lopez and Walton's research in Blackpool noted frequent Masonic involvement in public parades, including the 'spectacular occasion' which occurred for the laying of a new lodge's foundation stone and which was also evident in Aberavon in 1872 when an 'immense concourse of spectators' witnessed the Masonic procession for the laying of the new public hall's foundation stone on land leased 'on equitable terms' by C.R.M. Talbot.<sup>127</sup> The same research revealed that councillors were also involved in building speculation and this was the case in Aberavon, where the Aberavon Cottage Company (Limited) was formed in October 1881 with the purpose of providing 'improved cottages or dwellings for the working classes'.<sup>128</sup> Including solicitor and town clerk Marmaduke Tennant, the company, which held capital of

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<sup>123</sup> For examples in addition to D.M. Lopez and J.K. Walton (2010) see B.M. Doyle (2000), p.296; J. England, (*Welsh History Review*, 2007); and P. Jenkins, (1979).

<sup>124</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 2 January 1886; the article was titled, 'The Mayor of Aberavon – has he ratted?'

<sup>125</sup> Welsh Newspapers Online and *United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 1751-1921*.

<sup>126</sup> D.M. Lopez and J.K. Walton (2010), p.49.

<sup>127</sup> D.M. Lopez and J.K. Walton (2010), p.47; *South Wales Daily News*, 16 August 1872 and *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 15 June 1872.

<sup>128</sup> *The Western Mail*, 10 October 1881.

£6,000, had been subscribed by seven men; six of the seven were Freemasons and five of the seven were councillors.<sup>129</sup>

Masonic motifs on civic buildings are also offered by Lopez and Walton as evidence of how Freemasons contributed to the ‘urban fabric’ of a town, and the Masonic foundation stone for Aberavon’s new public hall as well as the Masonic crest on the outside wall of the Globe Hotel bear testament to this practice in Aberavon.<sup>130</sup> Local authority influence on the lodge is also in evidence, as the arms of the banner of Afan Lodge as well as the Past Master’s Jewel are those of the old corporation and are the reverse of those on the 15<sup>th</sup> century mace.<sup>131</sup> Despite this connection there is no record of any member of the old corporation of Aberavon becoming a Freemason, which suggests that in 1860 the founders envisaged a straightforward transition to municipal government. Links between the local authority and the Freemasons are still in evidence on the modern mayoral chain which features an enamelled gold medallion from 1915 in memory of Aberavon’s town clerk Marmaduke Tennant which bears the emblem and motto of Tennant Lodge.

Freemasonry as a means of supporting the integration of newcomers to Aberavon appears to have declined following incorporation. In fact, of the new initiates between 1860 and 1889 who have been identified as having links to the council, only four had been in the area less than four years prior to initiation. One of these was future councillor Ewan McLean, who had arrived in Aberavon towards the end of the 1860s, was elected to the council in 1870 and joined the lodge in 1872. The other three were the corporation solicitor and a succession of medical officers of health who were all new to the town and who became Freemasons within a year or two of their arrival.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, Benjamin A. Daniell, a surgeon, arrived in Aberavon in 1875/6, was initiated into Afan Lodge in 1876 and was the unsuccessful candidate for the post of Medical Officer of Health in 1877. Daniell became a councillor in 1886 having failed to be elected the previous year. Fig. 3.7 illustrates the increase in lodge membership for both officers and councillors in the 1870s, a decade when the council was re-establishing itself after a period of old burgess rule and was employing more qualified, professional men as salaried officials.

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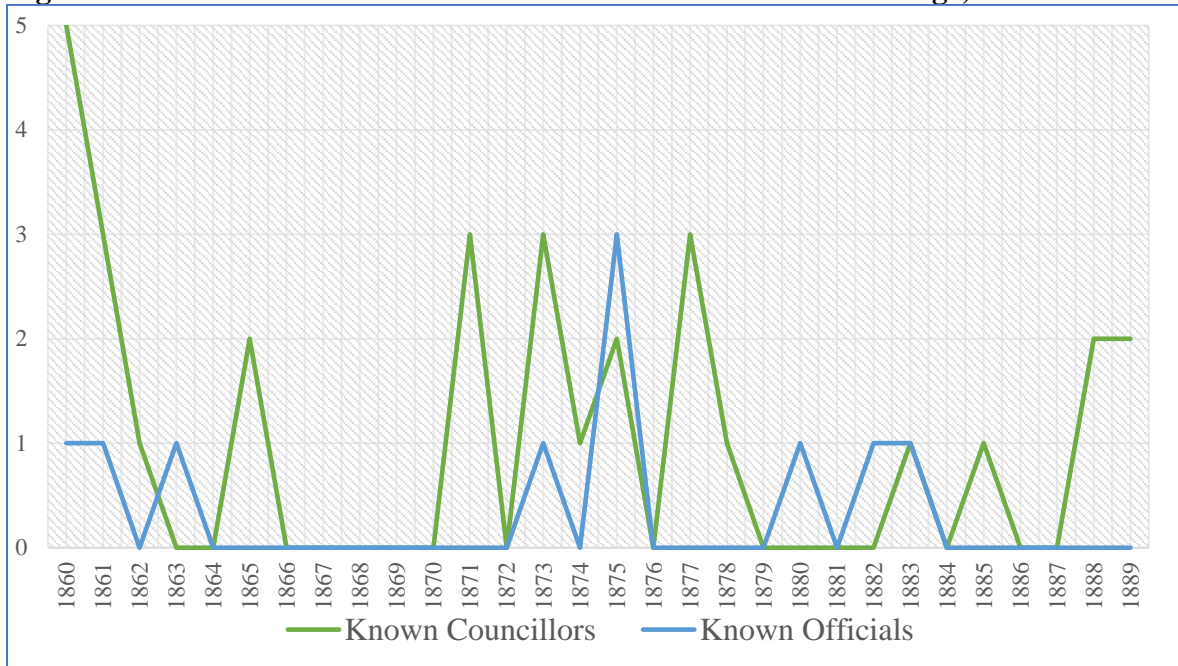
<sup>129</sup> Ibid., George Longdon was a Freemason but not a councillor, Evan Evans was a councillor but not a Freemason.

<sup>130</sup> D.M. Lopez and J.K. Walton (2010), pp. 47 and 57.

<sup>131</sup> P.M. Davies (2012), p.131; Aberavon’s original silver mace is currently kept in the Mayor’s Parlour at the offices of Neath-Port Talbot Council in Aberavon.

<sup>132</sup> *United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 1751-1921.*

**Fig. 3.7: Initiations of Known Councillors and Officials at Afan Lodge, 1860-1889**



**Source: The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, England, United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 1751-1921**

### The Influence of Salaried Officials

Hoyle has written that the history of local government is worth studying 'for what it can tell us about the concerns and aspirations of individual communities'.<sup>133</sup> In the early part of this period, communities were led by 'local government [which] was still amateur government, without a coherent policy or expert knowledge'.<sup>134</sup> As the century progressed, expert knowledge in the form of salaried officers began to alleviate the administrative issues, but as will be shown below the officials also brought problems of their own. Central government had been concerned to establish and maintain the autonomy of new local authorities, but that very autonomy could often result in situations where even the most competent of councillors found themselves challenged by the statutory processes to be negotiated.

Provision for both elected members and their paid officials had been made under the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act. Only two officer positions were mandatory under the 1835 Act, that of town clerk and borough treasurer, but councils had the option to employ additional officials if necessary and if finances allowed. Initial moves towards incorporation do not appear to have included consideration of any status differential between officials and elected members,

<sup>133</sup> R.W. Hoyle (2010), p.225.

<sup>134</sup> O. MacDonagh (1977), p.127.

and in Birmingham some men who had been interested in standing as councillors eventually changed their minds and lobbied for salaried officer posts instead.<sup>135</sup>

Adoption of the 1858 Local Government Act created new and mandatory Local Health Board posts which were filled by existing council officials.<sup>136</sup> This often doubled their salaries and provided them with enhanced expertise and influence in comparison with councillors, whose tenure could be short. Local Boards were 'required to appoint a clerk, a treasurer, a surveyor, and an Inspector of Nuisances, and were allowed, but not compelled to appoint a Medical Officer of Health'.<sup>137</sup> Additionally, Section 34 of the Act included powers to control the construction of new buildings in the borough by means of local bye-laws.<sup>138</sup> Adoption of the Act gave the new council comprehensive jurisdiction over the space, structure and sanitation of its streets.<sup>139</sup> Consequently, councillors and their officials were responsible for ensuring that new buildings were compliant with bye-laws covering sewerage, drainage, ventilation and space. As Ley has noted, specific bye-laws were advantageous to councils which 'lacked the expertise to make professional judgements on technical performance and suitability'.<sup>140</sup> Draft bye-laws were provided by the Local Government Office which assisted councils in constructing laws that were specific to their own localities.<sup>141</sup> Aberavon's commitment to the Act can be evidenced by the immediate creation of a distinct Standing Orders and Bye-Laws Committee.<sup>142</sup>

Despite financial constraints and a reluctance to apply a borough rate, Aberavon's council was keen to employ high-quality officials following incorporation. However, from the outset a series of setbacks hampered the council's ability to realise its ambitions. In November 1861 the Finance Committee resolved to appoint Mr. Philip Rowland, manager of the Glamorganshire Banking Company as their first Borough Treasurer, with the provision of a surety of £1,000 as an assurance of his commitment to the post.<sup>143</sup> In April 1862, the minute

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<sup>135</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.20.

<sup>136</sup> WGAS PTL/BA/26: Poster dated 4 October 1861 advertising meeting on 5 November 1861 to decide on Aberavon Town Council's adoption of the Local Government Act, 1858.

<sup>137</sup> J. Prest (1990), p.35.

<sup>138</sup> For further details see A.J. Ley (2000); and P. Booth, *Planning by Consent: The Origins and Nature of British Development Control*, (London: Routledge, 2003); and S.M. Gaskell, *Building Control: National Legislation and the Introduction of Local Bye-laws in Victorian England*, (British Association for Local History: Googlebooks, 1983).

<sup>139</sup> A.J. Ley (2000), p.42.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>141</sup> J. Prest (1990), p.145.

<sup>142</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 19/1, Minute Book, 1861-62.

<sup>143</sup> Example in WGAS PTL B/A 14/1, 21 November 1861.



book records that Rowland was not prepared to provide a surety and the post went to 21-year-old clerk James Loveluck, son of incorporation committee member William Loveluck, at a fee of two guineas a year and with a reduced surety of £500. Loveluck appeared to be a competent treasurer, and in March 1869, following a succession of annual rate arrears in the borough, he was appointed by the council to collect the borough rate. Although this combined arrangement suited the council's finances, Loveluck had tired of it by 1874. A ship broker and commission agent with his own business at the docks, he became one of many salaried officials, albeit on a part-time basis, who resigned their posts as the town grew and their duties became more onerous. Resigning as treasurer, Loveluck stated plainly that the pay was 'so small' that he was resigning with immediate effect, presumably forfeiting his £500 surety.<sup>144</sup>

Pay and conditions frequently influenced the retention of officials and impacted on stability in the council. Salaries in Aberavon were paid either half-yearly or annually, but cheques were only issued if funds were available and not allocated to the repayment of loans; in some instances officials were not paid for two years.<sup>145</sup> Borough surveyors were particularly badly affected, as they were expected to pay for repairs themselves and then claim a reimbursement, which tends to suggest that surveyors must have been relatively wealthy men in order to afford the initial outlay; in February 1865, Surveyor John Williams was repaid £90 for expenditure on road repairs.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, officials were not guaranteed to be repaid the full amount of their spending, as the council was not averse to deducting a guinea or more from a reimbursement claim. A charge of £47-9s-1d by the new town clerk for the council's legal work was reduced to £44-9s-1d on 13 October 1868, and his costs for defending the council against the former town clerk's demands were similarly reduced from £15-3s-4d to £14-0-0.<sup>147</sup>

Surveyor Thomas Jones had been the only applicant for the vacant surveyor's post following the resignation of John Williams in 1877; a builder, he had held the position of High Constable in 1864.<sup>148</sup> Jones was paid £12.10s a year in 1878, but by June 1879, in a growing town with drainage, sewerage and building works by this time under the authority of the council, the personal expense involved had become intolerable, and Jones submitted a letter of resignation citing the 'paltry amount' he was paid and the fact that the 'long deferred promise'

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<sup>144</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/2, letter dated 10 November 1873 copied in Council Minute Book.

<sup>145</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 14/1, 2 May 1864.

<sup>146</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1, 14 February 1865.

<sup>147</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/2, 13 October 1868.

<sup>148</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/2, 11 July 1877.

of a salary increase had not been met.<sup>149</sup> Jones, unlike James Loveluck, prudently stressed that his resignation would take effect in three months' time.<sup>150</sup> A similar situation had occurred in 1875, when the Gas Committee imposed what were believed to be 'extraordinary conditions' on the gasworks manager, who gave three months' notice of his resignation.<sup>151</sup> In contrast, there had been nine applicants for the vacant post of Inspector of Nuisances in 1875 but only one, John Bishop, was 'seconded' by a councillor and he was appointed unopposed at a salary of £12-10s a year.<sup>152</sup>

Consensus on the importance of the town clerk is evident throughout the historiography although a distinction can be discerned between the office of town clerk and the potential within that role for an individual to become a dominant figure in urban society.<sup>153</sup> Hennock's view was that '[i]t was as individuals that officials influenced policy and set standards of administration' and the absence of any regulating body combined with the latitude available to local councils in this period gave considerable importance to the personal characteristics of officials.<sup>154</sup> Capacity to reconcile superior knowledge with a relatively subordinate position within the council was therefore a crucial factor for success. Consequently, administrative power and control combined with frequent longevity in office often made the town clerk 'the most stable and permanent element in English municipal government'.<sup>155</sup>

The town clerk of Aberavon after 1867, Marmaduke Tennant, who was also the clerk to the local board of health, received an annual combined salary of £60 in 1869 as well as substantial and well-documented expenses for undertaking the council's legal work; when Tennant died in 1915 his estate was valued at over £15,000.<sup>156</sup> Consequently, the legal expertise possessed by Tennant, as well as his imposing figure and continued involvement in public affairs, made him both an asset and a rival to the town's councillors in terms of local fame and familiarity. On at least one occasion Tennant was able to speak privately to C.R.M. Talbot regarding problems with Talbot's properties in Aberavon and he secured Talbot's consent for an 'unsightly building'

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<sup>149</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/2, 11 June 1879.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 17 November 1875.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 9 June 1875.

<sup>153</sup> J. Smith, (2000), p.273.

<sup>154</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.9.

<sup>155</sup> B.M. Doyle (2000), p.297; J. Redlich and F.W. Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, 2nd edition (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1971), pp. 312-3.

<sup>156</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/1-2 and 14/1; England and Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995, Probate dated 1 June 1915.

he owned to be removed from in front of the new public hall.<sup>157</sup> In addition, Tennant's family connections with the new corporation in Hanley, Staffordshire had assisted Aberavon's charter campaign and consequently provided a network for the sharing of relevant information between the two bodies.<sup>158</sup> Finance Committee minutes record that Hanley was where the council turned in its first attempt to secure a loan against the borough rates, but this had proved unsuccessful.<sup>159</sup> In 1875, a letter from Mr. Challinor, town clerk of Hanley and the son of the previous town clerk, offered Aberavon advice regarding councils' responsibilities under the new Public Health Bill.<sup>160</sup>

In addition to civic processions mentioned above, charitable events offered further opportunities for the town clerk's exposure, and Tennant participated regularly. He attended an evening of readings organised to help clear the Reading Room debt in November 1866, hosted the annual supper for St. Mary's church choir at his new home in Pentyla in January 1868, and joined the mayor and the needy poor of Aberavon for Christmas dinner in December 1873.<sup>161</sup> Tennant also attended Aberavon's vestry meetings from April 1863 and was subsequently appointed churchwarden in 1864, a post he held for 24 years.<sup>162</sup> Unlike elected members, the town clerk was not dependent on the votes of inhabitants for his position. However, his continued presence and involvement in activities in and around the town, as well as his expert influence within the council and in a variety of additional public roles assured him of what Garrard has identified as a 'celebrity' status.<sup>163</sup> Tennant's association with the council, the Freemasons and the established Church put him firmly in the public eye and helped set him apart as a prominent individual in the town. The notion of 'celebrity' status was dependent on individual personalities, but it offered the potential for an official's influence to facilitate or frustrate the ambitions of the council, and as Hennock has noted, the relative autonomy under which officials operated was an important factor.

Lowell has asserted that 'the excellence of municipal government was very roughly proportional to the influence of the permanent officials', and it can be argued that the extent of power and influence exerted by salaried officials took place in what some believe was an

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<sup>157</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 12 July 1873.

<sup>158</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/1, 26 November 1861; see also Chapter Two.

<sup>159</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 14/1, 12 December 1861.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 April 1875.

<sup>161</sup> *The Cambrian*, 16 November 1866, 24 January 1868 and 2 January 1874.

<sup>162</sup> WGAS, P/68/CW3, 29 March 1864 and J. Radford, 'Marmaduke Tennant', *Notes & Queries, Campden and District Historical and Archaeological Society*, VII.4 (2013), 43-48.

<sup>163</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.6.

'increasingly tense relationship' between councillors and professional men.<sup>164</sup> Lowell's research, however, highlights the capacity of individual officers to reduce potential tensions. Having noted that, 'The real influence of an official sometimes depends upon his skill in avoiding the appearance of directing, and in making the councillors believe that the plans proposed are in great part their own suggestion', Lowell has offered a plausible explanation for periods of positive working between the two groups.<sup>165</sup> In Aberavon, newspaper accounts of this period evidence some public differences between councillors, but aside from a few occasions when individual councillors felt they needed to assert their authority the relationships between councillors and their salaried officials were generally constructive.<sup>166</sup> Whilst Hennock and Lowell appear to have contrasting views, Hennock's assertion that '[i]t is when skills are joined to convictions that obstacles are moved' demonstrates that the combined characteristics of councillors and their officials could be an effective means of administering local government.<sup>167</sup>

Potential conflict between councillors and officers was also ameliorated by their shared membership of local societies and organisations, in particular the Freemasons lodge.<sup>168</sup> Although both council and lodge were based on hierarchical structures, individual positions within one were not dictated by rank in the other. As such, the lodge could serve as a sphere of influence for both officials and elected members, who came from a variety of occupations and backgrounds.<sup>169</sup> Individual characteristics appear to have been the principal influence in selecting men for higher ranks in the Lodge, and occupation does not appear to have been an obstacle to progress. Aberavon's corporation solicitor and eventual town clerk, Marmaduke Tennant, had been initiated into Afan Lodge in April 1863, shortly after he moved to the town, and attained the position of Worshipful Master in 1871.<sup>170</sup> As Deputy Provincial Grand Master for the Eastern Division from 1876 his name appeared on a number of foundation stones he laid for new Masonic temples in the district. In Swansea in 1881 he presented an illuminated address to the Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, Edward, Prince of Wales, before he and his wife Sarah were guests at a Grand Ball, where they mingled with royalty,

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<sup>164</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), p.179; also cited from 1908 in E.P. Hennock (1973), p.7; and J. Garrard (1983), p.74.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p.178.

<sup>166</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/1.

<sup>167</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.334.

<sup>168</sup> D.M. Lopez and J.K. Walton (2010), p.44.

<sup>169</sup> *Freemason Membership Registers, Afan Lodge.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 April 1863 and P.M. Davies (2012), p.130.

nobility, gentry and civic dignitaries.<sup>171</sup> In the council, however, this did not dissuade elected members, Masonic or otherwise, from resolving that the town clerk be ‘directed’ or ‘instructed’ to carry out their orders.<sup>172</sup>

Internal conflict within the council was most pronounced during the period 1867-8 when the Old Burgess party gained the majority. None were Freemasons or party to the shared networks of their reformist colleagues. Consequently, the Old Burgess members reverted to the authoritarian stance of the old corporation and minute books of the time are peppered with threats of resignation from fellow councillors.<sup>173</sup> Following publication of the audited accounts in 1868 the town clerk, who had lent the council £300 (ten times his annual salary as town clerk) between 1862 and 1863 when he had first come to Aberavon from Staffordshire, found himself the subject of public criticism and offered his own resignation in January 1869.<sup>174</sup> Loss of the experienced and qualified clerk would have seriously undermined the reform agenda, but although the Old Burgess councillors accepted the clerk’s resignation he remained in the post following support from the Municipal members.<sup>175</sup>

Correlation between Freemasonry and council officials between 1861 and 1888 is shown in Fig. 3.7 above, and research has also revealed that a majority of these men shared not only Masonic but also residential links with their elected counterparts in the council.<sup>176</sup> These close working associations coupled with similar residential and social patterns support Garrard’s view that corporate officials were ‘part of the local elite rather than its rivals’.<sup>177</sup> Most notably, many shared similar villa-style residences in an emerging suburban area of the town called Pentyla. Evidence for the characterisation of Pentyla as a suburb of Aberavon can be found in two aspects of the censuses of the area at this time: the size of the properties and the occupations of the residents. From its beginnings in 1871 the Pentyla area was populated by the wealthier members of Aberavon society, many of whom employed servants and many who also had links to the council, either as elected members or as officials. By 1881, with twenty-nine properties Pentyla was home to nine past or present councillors and four council officials, all of whom kept at least one servant. Income of at least £200 per year was considered the minimum for

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<sup>171</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 22 October 1881.

<sup>172</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1-2.

<sup>173</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/1.

<sup>174</sup> *The Cambrian*, 9 October 1868, 16 October 1868 and 30 October 1868; PTL B/A 11/1, 12 January 1869.

<sup>175</sup> PTL B/A 11/1, 12 January 1869.

<sup>176</sup> Census of England and Wales, 1881.

<sup>177</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.81.

'engaging a single maid-of-all-works', which gives an indication of the financial situations of the residents.<sup>178</sup> A clerk's handbook of 1878 also forbade bank clerks to marry if they earned less than £150 a year as they would be unable to live like gentlemen.<sup>179</sup> Further evidence of suburban characterisation can be seen by the increase in residents of Pentyla such as confectioner William Young, draper Henry Davies Phillips, and draper Thomas Rees whose businesses were located in another part of town, such as High Street or Cwmavon Road.<sup>180</sup> Steinbach has found that by the end of the nineteenth century it was customary for a separation of shopkeepers' public and private spheres to have occurred and the census data for Aberavon suggests that sufficient wealth existed for some retailers at least to choose to live in prestigious Pentyla rather than above their high street shops.<sup>181</sup>

Central to development at Pentyla were the retailers and tradesmen who had led the fight for incorporation and who had been elected as councillors. Having adopted the LGA in November 1861, the council had undertaken to formulate bye-laws for the provision of roads, paving and housing; plans for new buildings were therefore brought before the council for approval.<sup>182</sup> This legislation was strengthened by the Public Health Act of 1875 and its associated Model Bye-laws which consolidated building control. Housing which had previously been speculative, *ad hoc* and often of poor quality began to be planned with particular residents in mind, and the Pentyla area began to take on the semblance of a suburb. Thompson has suggested that there was no 'clear line between town and suburb', and that social segregation could occur without the necessity for a train or omnibus ride away from a town centre.<sup>183</sup> This certainly appears to be the case at Pentyla, which was situated to the north of the town on the main highway between Neath and Cardiff and within easy walking distance of local businesses. The raised aspect of the villa properties allowed potential residents sea views as well as the added attraction of gardens, and the sale of these types of residences became a regular feature of newspaper advertising.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> T.K. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846-1886*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.35.

<sup>179</sup> R.N. Price, 'Society, Status and Jingoism: The Social Roots of Lower Middle-Class Patriotism, 1870-1914' in G. Crossick (1977), p.102.

<sup>180</sup> 1881 Census of England and Wales, Aberavon, Enumeration District ED9a compared with trade directories (*Slater's 1880* and *Kelly's 1884*).

<sup>181</sup> S.L. Steinbach (2017), p.13.

<sup>182</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 19/1 Standing Orders and Bye-laws Committee.

<sup>183</sup> F.M.L. Thompson, 'The Rise of Suburbia' in R.J. Morris and R. Rodger (1993), p.154.

<sup>184</sup> *The Cambrian*, 19 February 1866 and 12 October 1866.

Salaried officials in Aberavon were therefore not without ambition. Many resigned their posts with the aim of gaining a seat on the council and successful candidates in this period included two assessors, a serjeant-at-mace and an auditor, as well as long-time official John Williams, who had been both borough surveyor and collector of rates between 1862 and his election in 1879. Former officials on the council had the potential to add practical experience to council decisions and could also act as a balance to the power of salaried officials, which often lay in their superior professional knowledge and experience of municipal functions. Hennock has made the point that too much expert knowledge could risk dismissal, although as the century progressed, more and more council appointments required applicants to meet proscribed professional standards.<sup>185</sup> It was not until 1872 that a Medical Officer of Health was required to be medically qualified, and documents show that in 1861 Aberavon's original town crier, nail-maker David Michael, who was responsible for the distribution of printed notices for public meetings, was unable to sign his own name and signed by mark.<sup>186</sup>

In Swansea, as a means of addressing multiple public health issues, zealous Councillor W.H. Michael resigned his seat to take up an Officer of Health post when it was created in 1853 with an annual salary of £150.<sup>187</sup> Michael, a surgeon, was an industrious officer and provided justification for council interventions in a report book, but ratepayers opposed any rate increases and his appointment was not renewed the following year; a decade passed before a successor was appointed.<sup>188</sup> In Aberavon, the council had originally opted not to populate this post, but by the time of the 1872 Act the financial terms appeared attractive and following a special meeting it was agreed to proceed; the decision also prompted the council to apply to reschedule its borrowing at 3.5 per cent 'for as long as possible'.<sup>189</sup>

Prior to the council's purchase of Aberavon's gas works in 1866, the only requirements of the manager were that he understood gas fitting and was 'sober, active...[and] able to read and write'.<sup>190</sup> By 1883, however, the operation of the gas works was much more technical in nature and its management depended far more on the expertise of officials.<sup>191</sup> Technical issues such

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<sup>185</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.9.

<sup>186</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 26: reverse of 1861 poster announcing the adoption of the LGA 1858 shows 'David Michael, by mark'.

<sup>187</sup> G. Roberts, 'The Municipal Development of the Borough of Swansea to 1900', Social and Economic Survey of Swansea and District, Pamphlet No. 2 (Swansea: University of Wales Press Board, 1940), p.47.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/2, Council Minute Book 1872-84, 6 September 1872.

<sup>190</sup> *The Cambrian*, 12 June 1863.

<sup>191</sup> *The Weekly Mail*, 14 April 1883 and 12 May 1883.

as the provision of gas and water could be delegated by councillors to the expert officials, but research shows that elected members could maintain opposing, yet unsubstantiated views to their professional clerks which, as evidenced above, could result in resignations. Utilities, in particular, have been said to be ‘beyond the grasp of many councillors’ and the presence of a legal and expert town clerk became even more important.<sup>192</sup> Many town clerks were qualified solicitors whose advice was readily accepted, particularly when the council’s duties under legislation such as the Local Government Acts or various electoral reform Acts were under discussion. In Aberavon, however, when the council purchased the gas works in 1866 and began municipal trading, significant powers had been conferred on the Gas Committee which permitted them to operate independently of the full council and which entrenched the Committee members’ sense of authority in their decision making. Attempts were made to curtail the powers in 1873 and bring the committee within the scope of the full council, but its autonomy was restored following a vote in December 1874.<sup>193</sup>

Lowell’s observations on the management of councillors by their expert salaried officials offer an insight into the covert tactics which could be employed to influence outcomes. Inherent rivalries and disagreements between members and officials could be avoided in the private confines of a committee, where expert officials could dissuade members from going against their proposals without public scrutiny. Furthermore, in subjecting committee decisions to a recorded vote the officials were able to place councillors in a position of ultimate responsibility which they were sometimes reluctant to accept. As a result, officials had ‘direct influence on the committee itself’ and could also meet privately with the chairman beforehand to discuss and agree proposals.<sup>194</sup> This strategy avoided offending the sensibilities of councillors who were aware of their lack of expertise, but did not want to appear to be in the hands of their subordinates.<sup>195</sup> However, it also created the perception of a committee system removed from public observation which was said to be ‘singularly open to abuse’.<sup>196</sup> It was not until 1889 that Aberavon council passed a motion which allowed the press into its committee meetings.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> B.M. Doyle (2007), p.297.

<sup>193</sup> PTL B/A 11/2, 9 November 1874.

<sup>194</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), p.177.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p.176.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p.179.

<sup>197</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 March 1889.



### **Priorities, Pressures and Public Health**

Aberavon's incorporation in 1861 had been due in no small part to an expectation by inquiry commissioners that the wealth and importance of the surrounding industrial areas would help contribute to improved standards in the borough, including sanitary conditions.<sup>198</sup> However, it was also acknowledged that the corporation had no powers of drainage, neither had numerous other local bodies such as the Parish Vestry or a combination of inhabitants sought legislation to carry out improvements.<sup>199</sup> As historians have identified, there were overlapping functions, roles and responsibilities within and between local organisations; even after 1835 powers were shared between new councils and other bodies such as boards of guardians.<sup>200</sup> Rather than leading to instances of joint working, particularly when posts on different bodies were populated by the same people, this lack of clarity hampered improvement work. The presence of determined and enthusiastic elected representatives, however, could overcome these impediments. This was especially the case in small towns where tradesmen were well-represented on councils.<sup>201</sup> Issues of cost remained, however, and in Aberavon it became quickly apparent that no immediate benefits would be provided by neighbouring communities.

The costs of Aberavon's incorporation had been considerable, but no records appear to exist of offers of financial support, temporary or otherwise, from the out-dwelling industrialists who had supported Aberavon's charter campaign. Out-dwellers who had featured strongly in the campaigns for incorporation drew back from the new corporation after 1861 and limited their involvement to official occasions such as the swearing of oaths or attendance at ceremonial dinners.<sup>202</sup> Having invested considerable sums of money to fund improvements in the settlements surrounding their works in nearby Taibach and Cwmavon, non-resident industrialists had helped create similar opportunities for Aberavon but were content to withdraw following incorporation.

Council minutes from 1861 reveal that votes of thanks were made to named individuals from outside the borough for their support prior to incorporation, and these included William Gilbertson, manager of the copper company in Cwmavon; Lewis Llewellyn Dillwyn, M.P. for

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<sup>198</sup> G. Warburton (1854), pp. 3 and 5; and J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.6.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> For examples and further information see B.M. Doyle, (2000), p.287; S & B Webb, (1963); or M. Goldsmith and J. Garrard, 'Urban governance: some reflections' in Morris and Trainor (2000), p.17.

<sup>201</sup> R. Sweet (1999), p.76

<sup>202</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 20/1, Register of enrolment of Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors of Aberavon Borough, and oaths of allegiance of Justices of the Peace, 1861-1880.

the Swansea District which included Aberavon; and Henry Hussey Vivian, whose family owned Margam Copper Works at Taibach and who was one of the two County M.P.s for Glamorgan. The name of wealthy local landowner C.R.M. Talbot, County M.P. since 1830 and a shareholder in the Port Talbot Harbour Company, was again conspicuous by its absence.<sup>203</sup> Aberavon had achieved autonomous self-government, but the capacity to implement improvements in the town was dependent on available funding, none of which was provided by, or sought from neighbouring industrialists involved in the charter campaigns.

Public works dominated the agendas of many newly-formed town councils but scope for improvement varied and was influenced by both local and national factors. A principal source of local income to fund public works for many councils was corporate property. Uncertainty regarding the fate of corporate property often encouraged corporations established under ancient charters to sell their lands prior to new charters being granted. In both Birmingham and Leeds corporation property was sold and the proceeds donated to charities.<sup>204</sup> Conversely, in Swansea the new corporation of 1835 had inherited an estate of around 800 acres which was valued at over £29,000; by 1889 it was worth around half a million pounds and provided the town with an annual income of almost £13,000.<sup>205</sup> In Aberavon, however, the threat of incorporation in 1860 had prompted the corporation to sell off all its property and retain the profits, thereby rendering the charter promoters' financial projections useless. Coupled with the absence of a resident wealthy benefactor the new council began its term facing significant financial and administrative challenges.<sup>206</sup>

Progressive councils chose to adopt new legislation, irrespective of potential costs, as a means of implementing the reforms they had highlighted during charter campaigns. In Aberavon, following adoption of the 1858 Local Government Act the new council was forced to consider raising a borough rate and obtaining loans on favourable terms. Absence of available funding undermined the council's potential to meet its obligations and risked not only criticism of incorporation but also a tangible lack of differentiation between the old corporation and the new. From its inception, then, as a means of avoiding a borough rate in Aberavon the council borrowed heavily to pay the costs of the charter, fund court cases against the old

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<sup>203</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1 26 November 1861.

<sup>204</sup> G. Bush (1976), p.43, and E.P. Hennock (1973), p.187.

<sup>205</sup> T. Ridd (1955), pp.318-9.

<sup>206</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1, Aberavon Town Council Minute Book, 6 February 1868, 17 February 1868 and 14 April 1868.

corporation and carry out promised reforms.<sup>207</sup> However, obtaining loans and making repayments was difficult, particularly as the council initially appeared unaware of its powers in relation to securing mortgages against a borough rate and was forced to seek costly legal advice from its counterpart in Neath.<sup>208</sup> Indicative of local officials' commitment to the new government was the advance of hundreds of pounds in personal loans to the council to enable day-to-day expenses to be met and scheduled loan repayments to be made. Supplementing loans from banks and other companies were £180 from Charles Old the Borough Treasurer, £40 from William Jones, town clerk and hundreds of pounds from corporation solicitor Marmaduke Tennant.<sup>209</sup>

Aberavon's Finance Committee and Full Council minutes reflect both the extent of the financial problems and the position of trust which the corporation solicitor quickly gained. Despite this trust in their attorney's wisdom, or perhaps because of it, the council was constantly engaged in expensive litigation. Compounding this situation in Aberavon was the continued presence of the 'Old Corporation'. Unlike its counterpart in Swansea which opted to 'slide into oblivion leaving the field clear for its elected successors', Aberavon's old corporation instigated numerous and protracted court cases in which each authority sought to assert or defend its rights.<sup>210</sup> Central government's reluctance to abolish or at least restrict the activities of the numerous local bodies whose responsibilities overlapped those of new corporations had led to a situation in which powers were often contested through the courts. As a result, further loans were sought, existing loans were extended and the costs of incorporation remained unpaid. Redlich and Hirst have noted that municipal government costs 'were very greatly borne out of corporate revenues' but that 'many corporations levied no rates'.<sup>211</sup> Furthermore, MacDonagh has written that the new corporations were 'able to levy a rate if existing rates were inadequate, but it was not expected that they would do so'.<sup>212</sup>

Consequently, council expenditure was funded in the main by extensive borrowing, and '[t]hirty years from the start the amount of local government debt in the United Kingdom stood

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<sup>207</sup> 40 & 41 Vict., c.69, The Municipal Corporations (New Charters) Act 1877 first permitted new councils to pass on the costs of incorporation to the rates.

<sup>208</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 14/1, 26 February 1862.

<sup>209</sup> *The Cambrian*, 9 October 1868.

<sup>210</sup> T. Ridd (1955), p.97; as late as June 1902 the old corporation was in court defending its use of the old Aberavon seal and attempted collection of market tolls due to the new council. Although defeated, the former Portreeve ignored the Chancery ruling and in December 1903 was sent to prison for contempt of court.

<sup>211</sup> J. Redlich and F.W. Hirst (1971), p.160.

<sup>212</sup> O. MacDonagh (1977), p.126.

at £600 millions'.<sup>213</sup> Encouraged by cheap loans from central government, debt became a commonplace feature of nineteenth-century local government and increased as populations grew as a result of industrialisation. In Glamorgan, inward migration contributed to a non-native population of around 35 per cent between 1861 and 1891.<sup>214</sup> Inward migration was a crucial factor in influencing the compositions and identities of nineteenth-century towns, indeed, Morris has described it as 'dominant'.<sup>215</sup> Whilst Thomas has shown that inward migration contributed to substantial population growth, his study concentrated on manual occupations within the coal industry and therefore did not include reference to occupations only indirectly associated with production.<sup>216</sup> In port towns particularly, where a thriving sea trade was ideally supported by an efficient rail infrastructure, opportunities existed for new 'white collar' employment in the form of clerks, agents, supervisors, inspectors, accountants, solicitors and so on.

As localities grew, financial demands on local authorities were increased: expenditure exceeded income in Glamorgan on twelve occasions between 1861 and 1888.<sup>217</sup> Cost-conscious councillors were satisfied that their borrowing had the sanction of the Treasury or an official Board, and ratepayers could be reassured that a borough or district rate increase was a decision of last resort. However, tensions existed between the Local Government Board, which favoured low interest rates and long periods for repayment and the Treasury which wanted stricter terms.<sup>218</sup> Resilience was therefore an important characteristic for councillors and their officials as a means of persevering with their ambitions within the constraints of nineteenth-century financial arrangements.

High turnover of both councillors and officials in Aberavon prevented effective financial planning in the council, and as the minute books show, activity was often prompted only when payments became due; long-standing debts, usually more local, were continuously deferred.<sup>219</sup> In 1867, despite a number of references in the council minute books to loans meant to specifically cover the costs of incorporation, solicitor David Randall's fees of just under £500

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<sup>213</sup> R.H. Gretton, *A Modern History of the English People*, (1912), p.29, cited in Ensor, p.129.

<sup>214</sup> B. Thomas (1930), p.294. (Original source: The Population Census of England and Wales, 1861 to 1911; the Decennial Supplements to the Annual Report of the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1875 to 1914-16).

<sup>215</sup> R.J. Morris and R. Rodger (1993), p.4.

<sup>216</sup> B. Thomas (1930).

<sup>217</sup> L.J. Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics* (Cardiff: Welsh Office, 1985), pp.182-189.

<sup>218</sup> M.J. Daunton, 'Introduction', *CUHB*, (2018), pp.1-56, p.25.

<sup>219</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1, Council Minute Book and WGAS PTL B/A 14/1, Finance Committee Minute Book.

from 1856 and 1859 were still unpaid, with the minutes noting that ‘consideration. . . was deferred. . . the Council not being in a position to entertain the question of payment’.<sup>220</sup> When Randall eventually took the council to court in 1868, against legal advice the members decided to appoint an attorney to argue the case against making full payment, a course which had been adopted on a number of occasions by the old corporation when faced with similar challenges.<sup>221</sup> This suggests that elements of the old corporation’s character re-emerged in the new and were particularly apparent in 1867 when two sergeants-at-mace were appointed at £1.10s. per year, and a new hat and coat were supplied for the town crier at a cost of over £2.<sup>222</sup> Further compounding the problem in Aberavon was the fact that in November 1868 an arrest warrant had to be issued for the former town clerk for ‘embezzling a portion of the borough rate’.<sup>223</sup> To make up for the shortfall, four mortgages totalling £1500 were obtained from the Oddfellows so that repayments due on borrowing for public works could be made on time.<sup>224</sup>

Inherited sanitary conditions on the streets of Aberavon in the early years of incorporation emphasised a need for urgent action as well as a recurring problem within the blurred boundaries of nineteenth-century local government responsibilities. Following adoption of the LGA in 1861, highways had become the responsibility of Aberavon Local Board. However, Aberavon had been granted no powers to raise a rate to make the necessary improvements and these still rested with the Neath Highways Board. By April 1863, litigation had gone on for a year and Aberavon’s Local Board, the local authority in all but name, was forced to petition for a Provisional Order to repeal the Local Act and separate Aberavon from Neath by means of a Commission of Inquiry.<sup>225</sup> An inspector was dispatched to Aberavon to assess the situation and Aberavon’s claim for separation. The subsequent report stated that in fourteen years the inspector had not seen anywhere in a ‘more wretched and deplorable state than Aberavon’; its roads were worn out, the streets unsewered, undrained, and unchanneled, and the footways unpaved.<sup>226</sup> He described ‘children and pigs together wallowing in the offal & filth deposited on the surface in fronts of & close to the doors of houses - & The place rife with disease’.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1, Council Minute Book 8 October 1867.

<sup>221</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 14/1, Finance Committee resolution 9 August 1864 to set a borough rate to defray the charter costs of £489; WGAS PTL B/A 11/1, Council Minutes 14 April 1868; *Cardiff Times* 16 May 1868.

<sup>222</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1, Council Minute Book 14 April 1868.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 November 1868.

<sup>224</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1, 14 July 1868.

<sup>225</sup> A.H. Williams, *Public Health in Mid-Victorian Wales: Correspondence from the Principality to the General Board of Health and the Local Government Office, 1848-1871* (University of Wales, Board of Celtic Studies, 1983); see Prest (1990), pp.33 and 35 for the statutory composition of local boards.

<sup>226</sup> Letter from W. Ranger to Sir George Grey at the General Board of Health, 28 May 1863.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

The appeal succeeded, but once again the costs of litigation, the petition and highway restoration proved challenging and the town clerk was instructed to procure more loans.<sup>228</sup>

Under the old corporation Aberavon had never been drained properly, neither had provision been made to deal with waste and sewage: following the 1861 incorporation inquiry the lower part of town was described as a ‘puddled, stagnant, festering mass’.<sup>229</sup> Trade directories after 1861 reflected the town’s recent transition to representative government, even going so far as to state that, ‘The ignorance and incapacity of the old corporate body has done much to retard the prosperity of the town’.<sup>230</sup> As the period progressed, efforts were made to drain the town, sewerage pipes were put in place and plans had been submitted for additional pipes to extend away from the town to serve the Sandfields area; the potential benefits of the extensive seafront had also been considered and a road to the beach was in the process of being constructed.<sup>231</sup> Furthermore, in December 1862 an application was made by the council for telegraph posts to be erected in the town by the British Electric Telegraph Company.<sup>232</sup> Councillors also exercised their authority under the PHA 1875 to ensure that new homes were connected to the main sewerage system, although councillors and ratepayers were often at odds regarding the standards of the officials tasked with delivering the council’s policy decisions.<sup>233</sup>

Population increases and extensions to the franchise were also influential factors in shaping a town’s elected government. By the end of the period being examined here the population of Aberavon had almost doubled from the 1861 figure of 2,916 to around 6,000: in 1891 it would be 6,086.<sup>234</sup> The number of houses in the town had also almost doubled: in 1861 there were 531 properties but by 1891 there would be 1,004.<sup>235</sup> As a coastal town on the rim of the Glamorganshire coalfield, Aberavon was an attractive proposition for migrants. Unlike the settlements of Taibach and Cwmavon, where industrial and residential buildings were constructed alongside each other, Aberavon’s coal mines and tin works were located on the periphery of the borough. As Cannadine has suggested, towns with similar economic structures and which could be described as “‘industrial’ or ‘seaside’ frequently had divergent social

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<sup>228</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 14/1, Finance Committee Minutes 20 June 1863 and 5 November 1863.

<sup>229</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), *Report...*, p.5; see Chapter Two.

<sup>230</sup> *Webster’s Directory (1865)*.

<sup>231</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1-2; PTL B/A 14/1; *Cardiff Times*, 16 June 1883; *South Wales Daily News*, 20 January 1887.

<sup>232</sup> *The Cambrian*, 5 December 1862 and Port Talbot Historical Society Timeline.

<sup>233</sup> For examples see *South Wales Daily News*, 11 May 1878 and *Cardiff Times*, 23 November 1878.

<sup>234</sup> Census of England and Wales 1861 and 1891.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

structures, were of varied size and political complexion, and grew at different rates'.<sup>236</sup> Aberavon was no exception.

Although Aberavon was a coastal town, the port was a mile from the town centre. Foodstuffs could be imported via both sea and rail to the docks area, but the primary function of the port was the trade in coal and metals. Borsay and Walton have noted that the presence of a 'seaside' culture was often accompanied by existing railway connections to nearby docks.<sup>237</sup> This situation was only partially evident in Aberavon, however, as the Great Western Railway (GWR) station which served the docks was some distance from the town and even further from the beach. Council involvement with a leisure economy in Aberavon was initially limited to bye-laws regarding bathing, but many elected representatives as well as resident ratepayers were keen to capitalise on the potential at Aberavon Beach. The identity of Aberavon, therefore, remained ambiguous. Its economic role in the second part of the nineteenth century was neither fully coastal and industrial nor retail and residential; small tinsplate works had emerged after the late 1860s, but Aberavon could not be said to hold a specific or specialised urban function.<sup>238</sup> As such, although the town followed Garrard's model of being 'economically, socially and politically interdependent' with its surrounding district, spatial segregation presented the town with the opportunity to develop a discrete identity for itself which was built around the provision of services.<sup>239</sup>

Map 3.1 shows the elongated configuration of the town of Aberavon at the mid-point of the period examined in this chapter.<sup>240</sup> It can be seen that areas of the town were separated from each other by the main road between Neath and Cardiff and the Great Western Railway. Villa properties are evident to the north of the town, industrial sites can be seen alongside housing in the lower part of town, and the highest concentration of properties can be found in the region of High Street and Cwmavon Road. Port Talbot was restricted to the docks area at this time. The area known as Sandfields does not feature on this edition but was situated at the far west end of Water Street, a considerable distance from the centre of town in terms of the provision of public utilities.

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<sup>236</sup> D. Cannadine, (1982), p.7.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p.2.

<sup>238</sup> P. Borsay and J.K. Walton (eds.), *Resorts and Ports: European Seaside Towns Since 1700* (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2011), p.1.

<sup>239</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.85.

<sup>240</sup> Extract from Ordnance Survey map of Glamorgan XXV (1875-77) published by West Glamorgan Archive Service, 1995.

Public health dominated nineteenth-century finance and the Public Works Loan Board (the PWLB) had been established in 1817, with the original intention of funding public infrastructure. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the Board's role 'changed materially, as it became a provider of low interest rate loans to public bodies' to the extent that 'between 1863 and 1872 the level of water and sewer investment more than doubled, and between 1873 and 1876, the PWLB were financing a third of all investment in water and sewer facilities'.<sup>241</sup> The Public Works Loans Act of 1875 created Public Works Loan Commissioners (PWLC) who loaned money to local authorities for sanitary improvements; a second Municipal Corporations Act of 1882 provided opportunities to apply for loans to fund public buildings.<sup>242</sup>

Whilst all the loans required the consent of central government departments and 'careful provisions' for repayment, it was rare for a request for borrowing to be refused.<sup>243</sup> In Aberavon, the council took advantage of the loans for public works to fund sewerage improvements and following an estimate from Cardiff civil engineer Thomas Waring, in September 1866 an application was made for a loan of £3,500.<sup>244</sup> By 1877, the council was planning another new sewer in the prestigious Pentyla area of the town which was home to a number of councillors and their officials. The cost of the new sewer was £500, to be borrowed over thirty years; existing lending under the PWLC amounting to £2,460 was also rescheduled over thirty years.

Incentives under the PHAs of 1872 and 1875 encouraged councils to commit to extensive local improvement projects. The 1872 Act created sanitary authorities and the requirement for a medical officer of health, and the 1875 Act provided councils with powers over sewers, water supplies, lodging houses and new streets and buildings, all of which required standardised implementation, regulation and inspection. Police constables and inspectors had previously been employed as inspectors of common lodging houses, but the new legislation forbade the use of the police for this purpose and new, paid Sanitary Inspector posts were created. Such legislative changes and consequent municipal responsibilities impinged on a council's ability to plan ahead and necessitated a reactive rather than pro-active approach to financial planning.

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<sup>241</sup> I. Webster, *The Public Works Loan Board 1817-76 and the financing of public infrastructure*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Sheffield Hallam University, 2015).

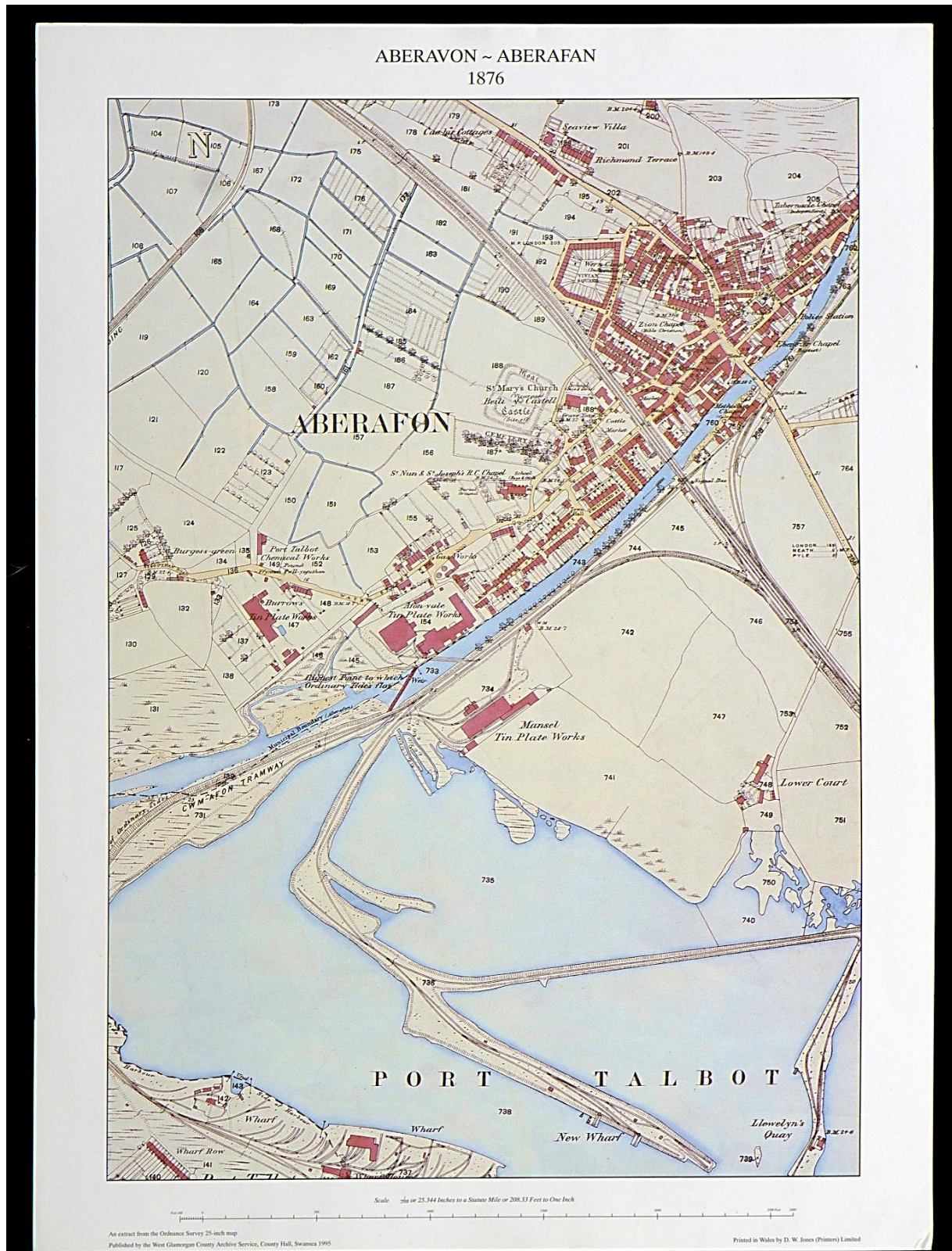
<sup>242</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), p.190; *The Municipal Corporations Act 1882*, 45 and 46 Vict., <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/45-46/50> retrieved 29 October 2019.

<sup>243</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), p.190.

<sup>244</sup> The National Archives, MH13/1, Estimate for Sewerage Works in Aberavon, 1866.



Map 3.1 Aberavon 1876



Source: Extract from the Ordnance Survey 25-inch map Glamorgan XXV 1875-77, published by West Glamorgan County Archive Service, 1995

Aberavon's municipal commitment to a safe water supply for the town was prompted initially by the council's reaction to being included within the scope of the 1875 Neath Water Supply Bill. Collaboration between neighbouring local governments was not uncommon, but councils tended to resist joint working when they were not the lead authority, a practice that would continue in the years up to amalgamation in 1921. The council therefore petitioned in opposition to the Bill and by June of 1875 was involved in correspondence with C.R.M. Talbot in order to identify a suitable site in Margam for its own reservoir; Talbot delegated discussions with the council's representatives to his son, Theodore, who would have been known to many of the councillors through Afan Lodge of Freemasons.<sup>245</sup>

Discussions, estimates and tenders lasted more than three years, often due to delays and obstruction caused by C.R.M. Talbot, including refusing permission for Aberavon's constructor to sink holes at the reservoir site.<sup>246</sup> In June 1876 Theodore Talbot died following a riding accident and the council called a special meeting to consider the implications of his loss.<sup>247</sup> Inevitably, reservoir plans were stalled and C.R.M. Talbot declined to meet with council representatives in September 1876.<sup>248</sup> A year later, a lease of £10 p.a. for four acres of Talbot's land and the sanctioning of a Local Government Board loan of £8,000 were agreed and construction began in 1878.<sup>249</sup> Legal charges for the lease, prepared by Talbot's lawyers, were over £25.<sup>250</sup> A further loan of £900 allowed the council to extend the water supply outside the town to the Sandfields area in 1880, as well as provide standpipe water to both houses and shipping at Port Talbot.<sup>251</sup> The council charged 1s.6d. per 100 gallons of water for shipping, 2s.6d. per quarter per cottage to be paid in advance, and 5s. per quarter for the Port Talbot Inn.<sup>252</sup> In the town, all houses were connected to the water mains on a compulsory basis after 1880, raising both public health standards and rateable values in the town.<sup>253</sup>

Rateable value of a borough was a crucial factor, as not only did it influence the capacity to borrow under mortgages secured against the borough rates but also offered an indication of the characteristics of a borough. An 1866 loan application had stated that the value was £5,041-

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<sup>245</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/2, 4 January 1875, 9 June 1875 and 14 July 1875.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 10 May 1876 and 13 September 1876.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 26 June 1876.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 13 September 1876.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 26 November 1877 and 10 April 1878.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 10 October 1877.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 8 September 1880; WGAS PTL B/A 16/2, Highways and General Purposes Committee, 11 September 1883.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 11 August 1880.

10s and by 1884 that had increased to £9,211.<sup>254</sup> Based on the 1866 figure a General District Rate of 8*d.* in the pound was applied, which amounted to income of £188-4*s.*-6*d.* As Weinstein has pointed out, however, from the 1870s ‘the costs of local government began to outstrip the rateable value of property’ and councils moved into municipal trading’.<sup>255</sup> In this respect, Aberavon had proved itself to be well prepared and had bought the Aberavon Gas and Coke Company in September 1866.<sup>256</sup> The gasworks was leased by tender in January 1868 for £200 a year for seven years to Evan Evans, Evan Edwards and George Jones who had together submitted the highest bid.<sup>257</sup> Evans, a chemist and druggist, had been elected to the council in 1861 and he remained there throughout this period. Edwards, a cordwainer and leather cutter, was the successful candidate in a by-election in 1862 and was a councillor until his death in the spring of 1875.<sup>258</sup> George Jones, long-standing Relieving Officer for Aberavon in the Neath Union, was also Registrar of Births and Deaths for the Margam area, which included Aberavon.<sup>259</sup> Unlike in Birmingham, where gas works interests were not represented on the council, Evan Evans had been had been a committee member when the private company had been established in 1857, but the involvement of Edwards and Jones appears to have been relatively new.<sup>260</sup> Both Evans and Edwards were members of the Gas Committee at various times throughout the period.<sup>261</sup> Conflicts of interest were inevitable, and potential municipal income from the gas works was undermined by disputes with the lessees, who were not averse to refusing to light public lamps until the council paid what was due to them.<sup>262</sup>

The persistence of Aberavon’s councillors and officials highlights the importance of individuals and their characteristics as a means of achieving ambitions. Prior to incorporation, due to the old corporation’s neglect Aberavon had been perceived as inferior in comparison with its industrial neighbours in Taibach and Cwmavon. In addressing public health issues in the borough, however, Aberavon’s elected representatives had surpassed standards in Taibach, where in 1884 open sewers and contaminated water caused regular outbreaks of typhoid.<sup>263</sup> A similar situation had existed in Swansea in the 1840s, despite provision by a private water

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<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*; *Kelly’s Directory (1884)*.

<sup>255</sup> Weinstein (2018), p.10.

<sup>256</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 March 1866 and 28 September 1866.

<sup>257</sup> *The Cambrian*, 24 January 1868.

<sup>258</sup> *The Cambrian*, 9 April 1875.

<sup>259</sup> *The Cambrian*, 24 January 1868.

<sup>260</sup> *The Cambrian*, 17 July 1857, Prospectus of the Aberavon Gas and Coke Consumers’ Company Limited; E.P. Hennock (1973), p.118.

<sup>261</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 11/1-2, 9 November 1861-88.

<sup>262</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 March 1872, ‘A Town in Darkness’.

<sup>263</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 5 January 1884.

company; Swansea's local board eventually purchased the works in 1852 at a cost of £25,250 but in the face of considerable ratepayer opposition.<sup>264</sup>

Swansea's board members were said to have been 'blissfully unaware' of conditions in the upper part of the town, and C.R.M. Talbot also tended to avoid direct exposure to the settlements to the west of his substantial estate by delegating matters to his agent whilst confining himself to his mansion in Margam and property in London.<sup>265</sup> Talbot's neglect of Aberavon is apparent from council minutes of 1864 to 1865 when the Inspector of Nuisances was directed to write a number of letters to Talbot's agent regarding his employer's 'dilapidated buildings' and 'filthy land' in the town.<sup>266</sup> Blame for lack of sanitation in Taibach was placed firmly and very publicly in the hands of Talbot, who since 1872 had been raising constant objections to the use of his land for a reservoir to supply all the houses in Taibach with safe water and whose powerful influence militated against the extension of local self-government as a potential solution in that area.<sup>267</sup> Howel Cuthbertson, local coroner and clerk to the Neath Rural Sanitary Authority wrote a letter to the *Western Mail* in which he blamed Talbot for obstructing the Authority's twelve-year efforts to provide clean water and prevent further outbreaks of typhoid.<sup>268</sup>

Talbot's delaying tactics prompted an element of conflict between landowner and sanitary authority. Neath Rural Sanitary Authority had taken independent action and applied to the Local Government Board for a £1,000 loan to supply Taibach with water in early 1883, but Talbot's response was characteristically proprietorial and reflected a general trend against perceived outside interference. A ratepayers' meeting was called to consider establishing a local board in Margam that would act independently of Neath.<sup>269</sup> Aberavon mayor T.D. Daniel also offered a potential solution to the problem with a suggestion that the incorporated borough's boundaries be extended to include the Taibach area but the idea had been vehemently opposed by Talbot.<sup>270</sup> Continued insanitary conditions at Taibach were subsequently blamed on Aberavon's proposed extension Bill and Talbot continued to insist that the only solution was a Local Board 'managing its own affairs'.<sup>271</sup> As the 'special

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<sup>264</sup> T. Ridd (1955), p.228.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p.221.

<sup>266</sup> PTL B/A 11/1, 9 May 1865 and 26 September 1865.

<sup>267</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 5 January 1884.

<sup>268</sup> *Western Mail*, 11 January 1884, letter from Howel Cuthbertson, Clerk to the Neath Rural Sanitary Authority.

<sup>269</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 19 May 1883.

<sup>270</sup> *Western Mail*, 12 October 1883.

<sup>271</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 5 January 1884.

correspondent' of the *Weekly Mail* pointed out, however, the influence of Talbot would severely limit the independence of any board: self-government could exist 'only in name'.<sup>272</sup>

In March 1884 Talbot had secured enough local support to hold a confirmatory meeting in Margam which voted to press ahead with plans for a local board.<sup>273</sup> Talbot's influence in Westminster led to a Local Government Board inquiry and the establishment of Margam Local Board. Elected to chair the Board from its inception in the summer of 1884 Talbot was able to monitor and influence the decisions being made regarding his substantial land holdings. At the Board's first meeting on 14 August, Talbot flatly refused to consider the appointment of a medical officer.<sup>274</sup> The supply of water to Taibach had been used as a bargaining tool by Talbot in the establishment of the local board.<sup>275</sup> A reservoir had been constructed and a main pipe laid to the northern end of the village; Talbot offered the board £75 to complete the extension.<sup>276</sup> A lease of 99 years for the reservoir and a nominal rent of 20s a year were also agreed.<sup>277</sup> The rental figure was a fraction of the £10 a year Talbot had eventually solicited from the council in Aberavon (see above). Pipes were linked to new taps positioned around the village in July 1885 and it was expected that more would follow.<sup>278</sup>

Taibach's predicament highlights the debate which surrounded the provision of water in the early nineteenth century, when little was known about water-borne disease and government regulation was restricted to limiting the profit levels and borrowing capacities of private water companies.<sup>279</sup> Water provision also varied in its sources, with some companies using wells and others preferring rivers or lakes due to disagreement over what constituted good water.<sup>280</sup> As the century progressed, however, an ideological shift occurred which placed the supply of clean, safe water within the remit of local authorities and water became a public good rather than a function of private enterprise. The LGA of 1858 and then the PHA of 1875 gave legislative underpinning to the change, and many municipal governments, like Aberavon, came to view a clean supply of water in their borough as a source of civic pride. It should be

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 8 March 1884.

<sup>274</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 29 August 1884.

<sup>275</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 6 June 1885.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 4 July 1885.

<sup>279</sup> R. Coopey and O. Roberts, 'Public Utility or Private Enterprise? Water and Health in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries' in A. Borsay (ed.), *Medicine in Wales c. 1800-2000: Public Service or Private Commodity?* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp.21-39.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., pp.21-23.

recognised, however, that success was often dependent on enthusiastic individuals within councils who could overcome both the obstacles presented by local landowners and the ‘bewilderment and frustration with technical and legal complexities’ as identified by Hamlin.<sup>281</sup>

Hamlin’s work of 1988 compared sanitary improvements made in Barnsley, Birmingham, Merthyr Tydfil, Cheltenham, Wakefield and Leamington between 1860 and 1885 and concentrates on the four latter towns.<sup>282</sup> His views on the ‘courageous people’ who campaigned for improved public health in the whole of Britain between 1855 and 1885 could also be applied to the determined Aberavon councillors working to provide sewerage systems and clean water to the town after 1861.<sup>283</sup> Aberavon’s retailer representatives were prepared to invest in sanitary reforms by borrowing heavily from specific central government departments, but as will be shown below it is clear that many ratepayers preferred to live in an undrained town with the constant threat of cholera than contemplate increases in rates. Nevertheless, councillors persisted in their calls for reforms, supported ably by local medical professionals. In the towns studied by Hamlin both the provision of clean water and the disposal of sewage were linked to river pollution, an issue which inevitably raised issues regarding industry, land ownership and costs.<sup>284</sup> Daunton has written that, ‘Technical solution to sewage disposal was highly politicised when rivers were used to carry away wastes, thereby polluting the next community downstream’,<sup>285</sup> and Aberavon was one of many towns which endured this fate. Landowners and industrialists were responsible for the pollution and to alleviate or eradicate the problem councillors and their officials were required to add tactics of negotiation to their already burgeoning skill sets.<sup>286</sup>

The position of public health as the driving force of municipal government in the latter half of the nineteenth century has been interpreted as a response to the neglect it endured in previous years.<sup>287</sup> Council ambitions were not always restricted to merely meeting obligations or devising innovative ways in which to raise funds but could also encompass non-statutory,

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<sup>281</sup> C.S. Hamlin, ‘Muddling in Bumbledom: on the enormity of large sanitary improvements in four British towns, 1855-85’, *Victorian Studies*, 32, 60 (1988), 55-83, p.60, cited in Coopey and Roberts, p.27.

<sup>282</sup> C.S. Hamlin (1988), p.60.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

<sup>285</sup> M.J. Daunton (2018), p.19

<sup>286</sup> See D. Cannadine, (1982), p.5.

<sup>287</sup> G. Roberts (1940), p.55.

sometimes ‘grandiose’ projects identified by Hoyle.<sup>288</sup> In January 1880, possibly in preparation for the standardisation of the United Kingdom’s time zones under Greenwich Mean Time, Aberavon’s council proposed the construction of a tower to house the town’s first public clock.<sup>289</sup> A committee of the whole council was formed which was tasked with identifying a site and receiving tenders. The preferred location was the new public hall which had been constructed between 1872 and 1873 in a prominent position in High Street (see above) but as it was owned by a private company permission had to be obtained and the council decided to look for an alternative site. A date for tenders had been set but had passed without response and despite an extension of the deadline to 18 September that year, no constructors came forward. By October 1882 the committee decided to postpone the project due to the ‘continued depression of trade’.<sup>290</sup> By 1885, when plans had been passed for a new non-sectarian school in Aberavon, the managers were invited to discuss the possibility of including the clock in the new school building.<sup>291</sup> Funding had been said to be available in the mayors’ salaries fund, but despite the council’s initial enthusiasm there is no record of the provision of a public clock in Aberavon until new municipal buildings and shopping arcade were constructed in 1915.<sup>292</sup>

It is clear that representative self-government was influenced considerably by the demands and expectations of ratepayers. As the century progressed, central government legislation had extended both the responsibilities of local governments and the number of ratepayers who could contribute to forming that government, whether as voters or candidates. Ratepayers were increasingly aware of where ‘the burden of the rates fell most heavily’ and made every effort to protect their interests at election times.<sup>293</sup> Despite continued increases in rateable values, councils maintained a reluctance to apply a borough rate to fund improvements, which suggests that the power of the rate-paying electorate was strong. Ambitious councils were therefore dependent on the support of ratepayers as a means of delivering reform and improvement. Additionally, use of the borough rate was dependent on efficient collection, a factor which frequently affected Aberavon’s ability to meet financial demands and one which served as an

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<sup>288</sup> R. W. Hoyle (2010), p.232.

<sup>289</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 16 January 1880.

<sup>290</sup> PTL B/A 11/2, 11 February 1880, 8 September 1880, 11 October 1882 and 11 August 1885; for more on the depression of trade see Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>291</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 29 August 1885 and 10 September 1885.

<sup>292</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder* and the *South Wales Weekly Post*, 3 July 1915; also D/D PTH 4/1, original *Herald* newspaper.

<sup>293</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.317.

example of officials' capacity to thwart the council's ambitions.<sup>294</sup> In 1879, the finance committee reported 'irrecoverable arrears' of over £220 in borough rates.<sup>295</sup>

Whilst the application of a borough rate could raise much-needed funds, many elected members were reluctant to risk their seats by voting for increases, whether to clear existing debts or to fund new projects. The fact that rates were separated by their purpose was also an issue for ratepayers, who could find themselves contributing to the poor rate, gas rate, highways rate, borough rate and a general district rate. Furthermore, although an alternative source of municipal income could be found in municipal trading in gas, profits were also dependent on the efficient collection of payments. In 1879, £474 in gas payments remained uncollected in Aberavon and at least £100 of this sum had been accumulating for some years and was unlikely to be recovered.<sup>296</sup>

Ratepayer involvement in elections to Aberavon's council at the start of this period was minimal. Until 1867 most elections were characterised by having only four candidates for four places; often only the four councillors whose terms had expired stood as candidates and were therefore elected unopposed. Newspaper reports confirmed a preference for uncontested elections at the time, as well as accounts of discussions between potential candidates in an attempt to 'effect a compromise and thus avoid a contest'.<sup>297</sup> Similar situations existed elsewhere, and Evans has noted that '[f]ewer than one-third of Manchester's municipal elections were contested between 1838 and 1867'.<sup>298</sup> Research by Garrard also revealed that agreements were sometimes reached beforehand under the guise of saving ratepayers the expense of an election.<sup>299</sup> Concurring with C.R.M. Talbot's public views, Aberavon ratepayers appeared to share a dislike of contested elections and complained when retiring councillors were challenged by new candidates.<sup>300</sup> In 1877, the reported 'general opinion' was that the four outgoing councillors, who were all businessmen, would be re-elected based on their past performances and there was indignation that opposition meant 'the peace of the town [would be] disturbed for no good reason'.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> See WGAS PTL/BA 14/1, Aberavon Council Finance Committee Minute Book 10 August 1863.

<sup>295</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 13 February 1879.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>297</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 October 1870.

<sup>298</sup> E.J. Evans (1983), p.294.

<sup>299</sup> J. Garrard (1983), p.45.

<sup>300</sup> *Western Mail*, 30 May 1874; see also Chapter Two.

<sup>301</sup> *Western Mail*, 25 October 1877.



Political divisions appear to have occasionally been set aside at election time, and many contests in the south Wales area were said to have not been fought on political grounds.<sup>302</sup> Factions existed, however, and in Aberavon there were frequent contests between the municipalians, the old burgesses and the ratepayer nominees. The *South Wales Daily News* noted that it was ‘difficult to say’ why ratepayers ‘turned some out and put others in their place’, despite there being no obvious links to party political allegiances; ratepayers were perceived to be merely exercising their right to effect change. The example of Richard Jenkins, above, confirms this anomaly. This did not, however, mean that personal differences were not present in the council or amongst voters at election time. Records reveal numerous examples of ideological, legal and even physical disputes. At the municipal election of November 1878 ‘party feeling ran so high . . . that the rival forces engaged in regular free fighting’ and additional police constables had to be brought in from neighbouring towns.<sup>303</sup>

Ratepayers’ capacity to influence council decisions increased in this period, and voter numbers in Aberavon rose from 616 to 822 between 1871 and 1883.<sup>304</sup> Both the LGA and the later PHAs had provided local governments with the authority to intervene in public matters which had previously been considered by a town’s inhabitants as private. In many ways, despite the opportunities presented by safer, cleaner and healthier streets, resistance to reform was based on a suspicion of interference as well as a reluctance to fund improvements. In Birmingham, the opposition members on the new corporation invoked their status as ratepayers as a means of preventing rate rises, preferring to take out multiple mortgages under the 1860 Municipal Corporation Mortgages Act.<sup>305</sup> In Aberavon, similar resistance was evident, particularly amongst those who had opposed incorporation and who by the late 1860s had organised themselves to such an extent that they were able to secure seats on the new council in order to obstruct progress.<sup>306</sup> Opponents of the Municipal Reform Party purported to prioritise the interests of ratepayers by rejecting increases in taxation. The reformist element of the council was therefore ‘squeezed’ by candidates from both the Ratepayers’ Party and the Old Burgess Party, each of which could capitalise on the council’s failures to deliver improvements but at the same time press to keep taxes low and thereby prevent implementation. Prest has observed that in a number of towns, the presence of third-party

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<sup>302</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 3 November 1882; Lowell (1924), pp. 152-3.

<sup>303</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 2 November 1878.

<sup>304</sup> WGAS, PTL B/A 10/1.

<sup>305</sup> E.P. Hennock (1973), p.31 and p.105.

<sup>306</sup> *The Cambrian*, 25 December 1868.

candidates was 'not common', but this was not the case in Aberavon, where elected members varied in both ambition and ideology.<sup>307</sup>

'Old Burgess' opposition had its limitations, however, as under the terms of the MCA the ancient freemen, described by Lowell as '[t]he most venal class of electors for Parliament', had lost the right to an unqualified municipal vote.<sup>308</sup> As a consequence, the influence of freemen was considerably diluted until or unless the relevant property qualification was attained. Notwithstanding the exclusion of many of the traditional opponents of the council, ratepayers were a powerful group, not least because of their capacity to make or break a councillor's political career. Prest has noted that many who voted in favour of the LGA of 1858 lost their seats when they were next up for election, but if this was a major factor for Aberavon's ratepayers it did not become apparent until the late 1860s.<sup>309</sup> Only one of Aberavon's sixteen councillors, David James, voted against adopting the LGA following incorporation in 1861.<sup>310</sup>

Additionally, difficulties existed in influencing ratepayers to fund improvements, and many of those councillors who voted in favour of adopting the LGA believed that implementing sanitary reforms was 'rendered impossible by the hostility of inhabitants of the poorest class'.<sup>311</sup> A ratepayer petition to Aberavon's mayor in 1867 called for the planned drainage of the town to be deferred for two years, despite a cholera outbreak in the town the previous year. The council chose to take advice from the surgeon to the Poor Law Board, Dr. Hopkin Llewellyn Prichard, whose response, which was no doubt aimed at councillors as well as ratepayers, stated that 'no persons except the most ignorant' would consider postponement. Drainage went ahead as planned in Aberavon at a cost of £3,500, but as Prest has noted, the Sanitary Commission of 1869 found evidence that 'even with weighted voting, the small ratepayers managed to outvote the 'intelligent inhabitants''.<sup>312</sup>

Neil Evans's view that 'populist values' often dominated Welsh communities was apparent in Aberavon, where public meetings were called to enable ratepayers to challenge councillors' decisions and remind elected representatives of their duties to the ratepaying electorate.<sup>313</sup> Rivalry between the settlements on each side of the River Afan was evident in February 1877,

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<sup>307</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), pp.151-2.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., p.150; see also J. Redlich and F.W. Hirst (1971), p.130.

<sup>309</sup> J. Prest (1990), p.213.

<sup>310</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 November 1861.

<sup>311</sup> J. Prest (1990), p.213.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid. and *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian, Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 22 February 1867.

<sup>313</sup> N. Evans (2005), p.127.

when Aberavon's ratepayers called on the council to 'rescind their resolution appointing Mr J.H. Davies medical officer of health for Aberavon, and [ ] appoint Mr B.A. Daniell to such office'.<sup>314</sup> The two candidates were equally qualified for the post and the council had appointed Mr. Davies, who happened to live outside the borough in nearby Taibach.<sup>315</sup> The ratepayers believed this was 'derogatory to their dignity, and adverse to the wishes of the great majority of the ratepayers'.<sup>316</sup> Despite this outburst the council remained steadfast and Mr. Davies retained his appointment. A further 'stormy' meeting in May 1877 criticised the council on a number of financial points and warned of repercussions at election time.<sup>317</sup> At the November contest that year no less than nine candidates stood for the four council seats available and two new men, a metal merchant and a shoemaker, displaced David James and William Young who, although not continuously, had been councillors since 1861 and 1862 respectively.<sup>318</sup> Ratepayer activists, therefore, were a serious challenge to a council's ambitions.

Nineteenth-century towns developed under the influence of a multitude of different political persuasions, nationalities, occupational groups and personalities. Each town was conscious of its own uniqueness but each was also aware of interdependence and a sense of rivalry with its neighbours.<sup>319</sup> Elected representatives, keenly aware of the balance to be struck between financial efficiency and civic improvement, were in the unenviable position of attempting to deliver civic projects that would meet a 'highly developed idea of what an ideal town. . . should look like, [and] the sort of facilities that it should possess', all the while under the scrutinising gaze of the ratepayers.<sup>320</sup> As a result, new civic buildings which provided visual representation of a town's ambitions and status were absent from Aberavon until 1872 when the Freemasons laid the foundation stone for new, purpose-built premises in High Street which also functioned as the town's public hall.<sup>321</sup> Aberavon's new hall was opened officially in May 1874 with a complimentary dinner to the mayor, attended by one hundred guests, including members of parliament, mayors, councillors and council officials. Both rivalry and interdependence were evident in the speeches, in which the town clerk of Aberavon, Marmaduke Tennant, described progress at Port Talbot docks as a catalyst to Aberavon becoming 'one of the principal towns

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<sup>314</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 23 February 1877.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 May 1877.

<sup>318</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 25 October 1877.

<sup>319</sup> For examples see R. Sweet (1999), pp.265-6; and A. Croll (2000), p.26.

<sup>320</sup> A. Croll (2000), p.36.

<sup>321</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 16 August 1872.

on this coast’, and C.R.M. Talbot determined to ‘make Aberavon what it ought to be, with Port Talbot – the first port in Glamorganshire’.<sup>322</sup>

Evidence of the capacity of elected members to implement improvements and increase prosperity can be found in trade directories. Whilst the intention of these publications was to attract visitors and increase trade, the inclusion of service providers and public facilities provides a useful longitudinal assessment of a town’s physical, social and civic development. Aberavon’s rateable value increased, no doubt due to the growing number of houses and inhabitants as given above.<sup>323</sup> Consequently, John John, the council’s collector of rates at this time, successfully requested a higher salary due to his increased duties and the new valuations; in 1881 his salary was raised from £35 per year to £60, which offers compelling evidence of the extent of growth in Aberavon at this time.<sup>324</sup>

Numbers of insurance companies and agents in Aberavon also increased in this period and services ranged from personal insurances to plate glass, highlighting the investments being made in retail establishments.<sup>325</sup> At incorporation in 1861 the town’s facilities were expanding but nevertheless still limited. However, as the century progressed provision widened and was influenced not only by the ambitions of councillors but also by the presence of immigrants, many of whom brought new and useful skills such as plumbing. The town’s status was enhanced by sewerage works and thorough drainage, the latter costing £4,250 and funded by loans under the LGA, as well as the ‘handsome and commodious’ public and Masonic hall, the £2,500 cost of which was met by a ‘proprietary company’.<sup>326</sup> Trade directories publicised Aberavon’s acquisition of a reservoir and underlined the investment made by the borough by citing a cost of £10,000.<sup>327</sup> Furthermore, fruiterers, fishmongers, house decorators and gardeners featured strongly in the directories from 1871, and the town’s changing character was emphasised by formation of the Aberavon & District Horticultural, Poultry & Industrial Society in February 1882; Port Talbot ‘consist[ed] merely of the harbour works and docks’<sup>328</sup>.

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<sup>322</sup> *The Western Mail*, 29 May 1874.

<sup>323</sup> *Post Office Directory*, (1871) and *Kelly’s Directory of South Wales and Monmouthshire* (1884).

<sup>324</sup> *The Cambrian*, 4 November 1881.

<sup>325</sup> For examples see *Worrall’s Directory* (1875) and *Slater’s Directory* (1880).

<sup>326</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 14/1 Finance Committee Minutes; *Slater’s Directory* (1880) and *Kelly’s Directory* (1884).

<sup>327</sup> *Slater’s Directory* (1880) and *Kelly’s Directory* (1884).

<sup>328</sup> *Post Office Directory* (1871); *Worrall’s Directory* (1875); *Slater’s* (1880); *Kelly’s Directory* (1884); WGAS D/D LE/X 105, Catalogue of the first Aberavon and District Horticultural, Poultry and Industrial Society Exhibition, 17 August 1882 and *Kelly’s Directory* (1884).

The LGA of 1888 helped authorities deliver public health improvements by subsidising half the salary of a Medical Officer of Health and associated inspectors.<sup>329</sup> However, the same Act replaced the annual grant from Parliament to the municipalities with a Treasury contribution to the county councils who passed a share of the money to the local authorities.<sup>330</sup> Inevitably, this tended to undermine the autonomy of local authorities, many of which were far from able to reach the independent county borough population threshold of 50,000. Historians tend to agree on the important role central government played in defining and deciding the physical boundaries of local governments as well as their responsibilities.<sup>331</sup> It is clear from these and other authors that incorporation had the potential to generate a significant change in the constitution of local governments, but even as boroughs grew in function and status the question of their funding led to plans for the creation of a new, intermediate tier of elected county government. Central government commitment to incorporation, however, remained and continued well into the twentieth century. Legislation in 1883 had addressed the issue of the 110 boroughs that remained unreformed: some were abolished and their assets transferred to new bodies established by the Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1894.<sup>332</sup>

## Conclusion

There is compelling evidence to support the premise that local government in this period offered scope for individual councillors and salaried officers to exert considerable influence both within and outside the theatre of the council. Although councils were restricted in their financial operations by the principle of *ultra vires*, decisions could be influenced by the views of councillors, officials or ratepayers. Matters of public health dominated the council agendas, but after 1872 it became apparent that the inclusion of financial incentives in sanitary legislation provided both carrot and stick in the statutory provision of drainage, sewerage, and water supplies as well as personnel to regulate their operation.

Implementation was often dependent on the co-operation of local landowners or private companies; council representatives therefore required personal expertise or at least access to that expertise as a means of asserting their authority and overcoming objections. Difficulties

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<sup>329</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), p.189.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> For examples see M.J. Daunton, J. Davis, B.M. Doyle and M. Dupree in M.J. Daunton, (2018); and J.A. Chandler (2007).

<sup>332</sup> 46 & 47 Vict., c.18, The Municipal Corporations Act 1883; see also B. Rothwell, 'The impact of the 1883 Municipal Corporations Act', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Winchester, 2015), available online via EThOS at the British Library <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.698199> [accessed .

arose, however, when the advice of qualified salaried officials appeared to undermine the authority of elected members. It is clear that Aberavon's councillors and officials were successful in securing improvements for the town and they, like those in many other municipalities, chose to borrow heavily to fund their reforms. By 1888 Aberavon had been thoroughly drained at a cost of £4,250 and its rateable value had increased to £10,000, almost double that of 1871.<sup>333</sup>

Aberavon's elected representatives were clearly keen to capitalise and build on the status of the borough in this period and in this respect the lack of a resident benefactor with proprietary rights over the borough proved to be an advantage. New councillors were drawn mainly from the retailer group and the research confirms that their elections were often at the expense of men in nominally higher occupational groups such as tinplate manufacturers or surgeons. This supports both Pritchard's and Doyle's views that retailers were the preferred choice of many electors.<sup>334</sup> Opponents of sitting councillors used a variety of means to challenge decisions, including calling public meetings, backing potential new councillors or standing themselves. Changes to the qualification criteria for elected office impacted on incidences of contested elections in Aberavon, where after 1869 it was not uncommon for seven, eight or nine candidates to challenge for the four seats which became available each November. Salaried officials often resigned to contest and win elected status but although at least one Swansea councillor resigned in this period to take up a salaried post, no Aberavon councillors did the same.

The Freemasons' lodge provided an important support network for both councillors and salaried officials in Aberavon. Research has revealed that initiations were at their peak in the year prior to incorporation and rose again in the years following old burgess domination. A clear correlation also existed between the initiation and employment of expert salaried officials such as Medical Officers of Health. No evidence has been found to suggest that the lodge acted as an important initial point of contact for immigrants to the borough, neither can it be contested that membership of the lodge was a precursor to elected office: not all councillors were Freemasons, and not all of those who were Freemasons were initiated prior to their elections. It is also apparent that the political constitution of Afan Lodge was not, as other historians have

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<sup>333</sup> *Post Office Directory (1871)* and *Kelly's Directory (1884)*.

<sup>334</sup> B.M. Doyle (2007), p.46; J.W. Pritchard (1994), p.191.

found, Conservative in nature but a broad mixture of Liberals, Conservatives, non-conformists and Anglicans.

Aberavon's early municipal development had been difficult and was compounded by a lack of funds and experience. Legislative changes of the late 1860s, which were intended to replace retailers in local government, only served to strengthen that representation in Aberavon. Having regained control of the council in the early 1870s, the reformist retailers and their tinplate-manufacturing colleagues were able to work constructively with expert salaried officials to deliver both public health and civic pride in Aberavon. However, as the century progressed, Port Talbot's commercial development continued, grew and began to be matched by residential expansion, causing significant anxiety for the proud councillors of Aberavon.

## Chapter Four

### ‘The Other Side’: Port Talbot, Urbanisation and Conflict, 1889-1909

Opportunities for expansion were crucial factors in determining urban development. Commercial interests and influence could lead to newly created communities equalling and even surpassing the status of more established neighbouring towns which had little or no industrial presence.<sup>1</sup> Historically, this had been the case for Aberavon, where the nearby industrial settlements of Taibach and Cwmavon had consistently outperformed the ancient borough in terms of population growth and the provision of social structures.<sup>2</sup> Municipal government had remained very much the province of Aberavon and its inhabitants, and no attempts had been made by Margam or Michaelston to subsume the smaller borough. The period covered by this chapter, however, was one in which Aberavon had reached a defining moment in its history as it battled in vain to meet the challenges from its more industrial neighbours to the east and yet maintain the dignity and status of an incorporated borough. Reaction in Aberavon was characterised by a sense of vulnerability to what councillor and former mayor Henry J. Stokes would describe as ‘strong competition on several important matters from “the other side”’.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter, therefore, examines the context in which Port Talbot’s expansion occurred and considers its significance to Aberavon as not only the other side of the river but also the other side in an increasingly competitive struggle for superiority and status. The chapter’s key aim is to assess the explanatory factors which contributed to both the success of the new settlement and the difficulties encountered by Aberavon in asserting its own identity in the face of the challenges presented by Port Talbot’s expansion. It will be argued that Port Talbot’s capacity to equal and ultimately surpass Aberavon was based on three interrelated factors: a period of intense, integrated development at the docks following the death of C.R.M. Talbot; the exclusion of Aberavon from any benefits associated with that development; and a growing recognition that Aberavon’s autonomy had become severely limited. Together, these factors fostered a cohesive, aspirational ethos in the new settlement whilst in Aberavon they contributed to frustration, weak leadership, divergent objectives and an uncertainty about the borough’s future that unsettled councillors and ratepayers alike.

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<sup>1</sup> For examples see R. Trainor (1993); and D. Cannadine (1982).

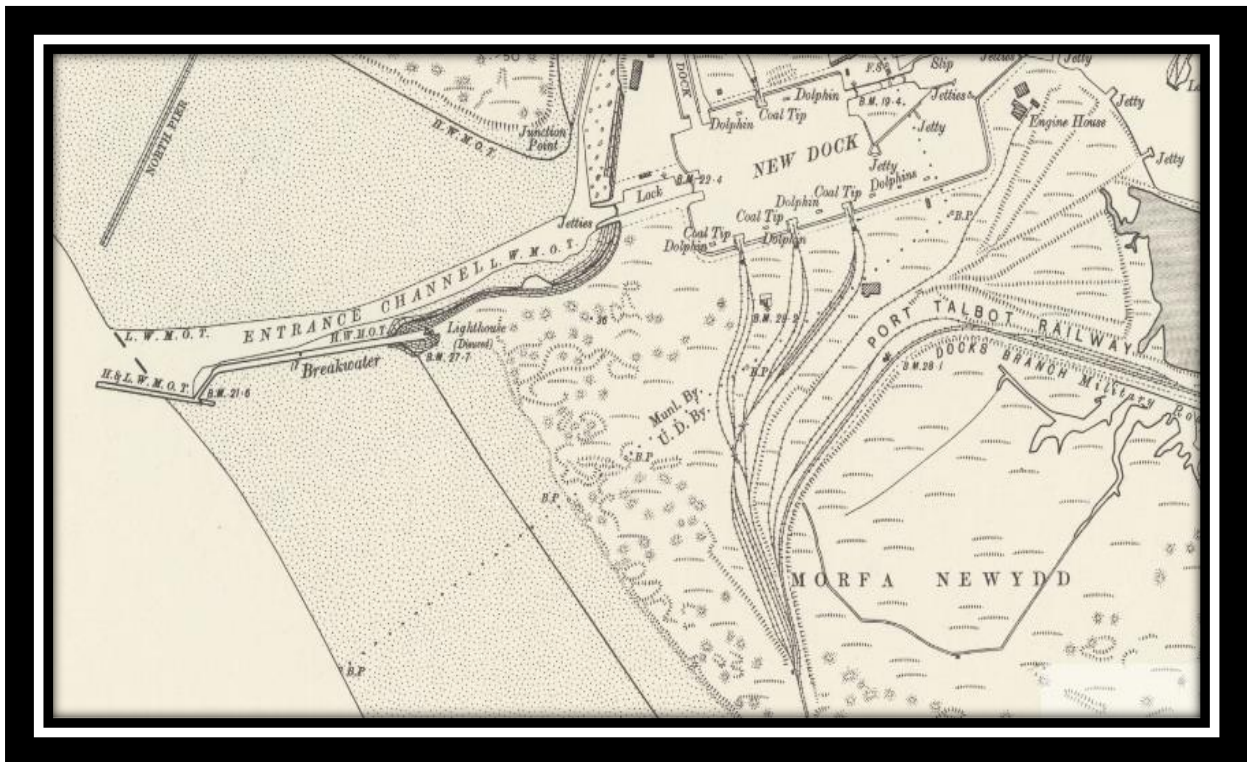
<sup>2</sup> See previous chapters.

<sup>3</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 21 March 1898.



Intense industrial, retail and residential expansion occurred in and around the docks on the opposite side of the River Afan, diminishing the spatial and psychological distance between the ancient borough of Aberavon and the new, thriving settlement in an area of Margam which had become known as Port Talbot. Contributing to the problematic nature of the situation were the location and ownership of the docks; as Map 4.1 shows, the Aberavon boundary passed directly through the area marked 'New Dock'. Lack of clarity regarding the boundary was highlighted in 1888, when a publication giving details of Britain's industrial rivers included a section titled, 'Port Talbot, or Aberavon'.<sup>4</sup> As a result of expansion at the docks, by the late 1880s the open space which had previously separated Aberavon from Taibach, an industrial conurbation situated a mile away from Aberavon on the eastern side of the river, was gradually being filled with residential and commercial properties (see Map 4.2).

**Map 4.1 Entrance Channel to New Docks and Municipal Boundary Line**



Source: Ordnance Survey Map XXXIII.A.NE & XXXIII.LNW, Revised 1896-7, Published 1900.  
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<sup>4</sup> 'Various Well-known Experts' (unnamed), *Industrial Rivers of the United Kingdom*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1888), pp.211-214.

The chapter will be separated into five sections, the first of which will consider the changing industrial landscape in the Port Talbot area which had been a location for copper production since 1770. The four 'basic industries' of coal, iron, copper and tinplate were supplemented in the area by the subsequent development of the steel industry and this period was remarkable for the beginnings of the substantial steel works which dominate the docks area to this day.<sup>5</sup> Development at Port Talbot docks and the formation by Act of Parliament of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company form the basis of the second section. At a time of intense competition between south Wales ports the new company was particularly successful in Port Talbot due to the fact that the plans included a new railway line which provided direct access to the coal-rich valleys to the north of the docks. Consequently, employment and business opportunities increased and contributed to the urban growth which is the subject of section three; as commercial enterprises grew, so did local populations and demand for housing. For councils in both Aberavon and Margam, managing these changes was challenging, particularly in matters of public health and the provision of utilities. These features were certainly not new, neither were they unique, and research studies within the historiography illustrate how population changes were managed in a number of different locations.<sup>6</sup>

Within a context of rivalry and underlying conflict, section four examines how elected representatives in each community were able to manage and influence outcomes. Formal amalgamation of the two areas had been discussed for some time, but resistance on the Margam side remained strong throughout this period and a power struggle ensued. On the one hand was the ancient, incorporated borough, on the other was the new and precocious settlement at Port Talbot; for different reasons, each perceived itself as superior. No precedent existed of a district council taking over an incorporated body, but even so the contested nature of the physical space around the docks contributed to a sense of unease in Aberavon.<sup>7</sup> The final section assesses the consequences of development on 'the other side' for the town and borough of Aberavon. In this period, salaried council officials, the Masonic

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<sup>5</sup> C. Baber, *The Subsidiary Industries...* (1980).

<sup>6</sup> For examples see D. Cannadine, (1982); G. Crossick, 'Urban Society and the Petty Bourgeoisie in Nineteenth-Century Britain' in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, ed. by D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe, (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), pp.307-326; H.J. Dyos, (1982); S.M Blumin, 'When Villages Become Towns: The Historical Contexts of Town Formation' in *The Pursuit of Urban History* (1983), pp.54-68; and D. Gilbert, 'Community and Municipalism: Collective Identity in Late-Victorian Mining Towns', *Journal of Historical Geography* 17, (1991), 259-70.

<sup>7</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 22 July 1915.

Lodge and a number of official facilities and buildings relocated from Aberavon to Port Talbot, further impacting on Aberavon's identity and signalling its possible reinvention as a seaside resort.

### **The Changing Industrial Landscape**

Substantial copper, iron and tinsplate works had been a feature of the area's industrial landscape since the late eighteenth century. Efforts had been made by owners of those works to provide employee housing as well as local amenities such as reading rooms or markets. In the late 1850s Aberavon had been described as 'mainly dependent' on iron and copper works outside the borough in the settlements of Cwmavon and Taibach, a point which was used twice by the existing corporation to argue against Aberavon's municipal charter.<sup>8</sup> The Aberavon economy had therefore relied on workers' wages being spent in the many retail facilities in the town, supplemented by growing trade from the docks due to the lack of goods and services available to ships' crews in the immediate port area.<sup>9</sup>

As the century progressed and attempts to establish tinsplate works fell victim to market downturns, Aberavon's identity became increasingly unclear. Its tinsplate industry was particularly vulnerable to market fluctuations due to being based on opportunistic and speculative retailers; by 1895 only two works remained in the borough, Glanwalia Tinsplate and the Port Talbot Tinsplate Company, which was to close that year with the loss of 400 jobs before being bought by Messrs. Byass.<sup>10</sup> By 1897, Avon Vale had also closed and was shown as 'disused' on the Ordnance Survey map.<sup>11</sup> Minchinton has calculated that about 60 workers were required to operate a mill, and recorded closures throughout the 1890s show that the tinsplate workforce in the area compared with the south Wales average.<sup>12</sup> Copper Miners' Tinsplate shut down in 1891 with a loss of about 800 employees in its twelve mills and Mansel Tinsplate closed its eight mills in the same year making about 500 unemployed; Glanwalia closed three mills in 1896 with a loss of 180 men.

Following the pattern of tinsplate manufacturing in the period, the Glanwalia works had been established as a partnership between grocer David Roderick David of Margam and his

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<sup>8</sup> *Slater's Directory (1859)*, 'Port Talbot, Aberavon, Cwm Avon, Taibach and Neighbourhoods'; TNA PC1.1509 (1853) and PC1.1516 (1859), Corporation petitions against incorporation.

<sup>9</sup> See *Harrod's Directory (1866)*; *Webster's Directory (1865)*; and *Worrall's Directory (1875)*.

<sup>10</sup> *Kelly's Directory (1895)*.

<sup>11</sup> Ordnance Survey Map of Aberavon XXV. SW, surveyed 1897, published 1900.

<sup>12</sup> W.E. Minchinton (1969), p.109.

cousin, tinsplate manufacturer Llewellyn Howell. In 1888 the business was trading under the name of Aberavon Tinsplate Company, and David was enumerated in 1881 as a tinsplate manufacturer employing 88 men, 10 women and 11 boys, and also a grocer employing one man; in 1871 he had been a grocer and in 1891 was a tinsplate manufacturer.<sup>13</sup> David and Howell were both long-serving members of Margam Urban District Council and Margam Local Board, where David was one of the original members of 1884 and Howell was elected as a representative for the Western Ward in 1893. In that year, however, when the lease on the land expired and the combination of increased rent and US tariffs proved unmanageable, the partnership was dissolved and the works closed. Llewellyn Howell diversified to pursue his interests in the production of coal and purchased Argoed Colliery in Pontrhydyfen, where his company employed 59 men to work the lucrative No.3 Rhondda seam for house coal.<sup>14</sup> Following a period of almost stagnant trade in the tinsplate industry, Glanwalia had remained idle for a six-month period in 1893.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to Aberavon, on the eastern side of the river the physical environment changed considerably as tinsplate, steel and other works joined existing copper and coal enterprises along the coastal belt. Previously undeveloped areas of land around the docks became commercially significant and an associated residential area began to emerge. By 1893, in addition to copper works and a substantial colliery, Port Talbot boasted four tinsplate works and an iron foundry, all of which were located adjacent to both the docks and the railway.<sup>16</sup> Crown Patent Fuel of Cardiff announced in early 1899 that they were building a works at Port Talbot, and reports began to circulate that a new steel works was to be built 'in the neighbourhood of Aberavon'.<sup>17</sup> Availability of land, coupled with convenient access to the docks was an obvious incentive to businesses to establish themselves in the Port Talbot area. Although Aberavon men had been keen to become involved in new manufacturing businesses, possibly by investing the savings they had built up as retailers, they faced considerable limitations within the borough with regard to physical space and shipping access.

Whilst a great deal of the blame for tinsplate closures rested with the McKinley tariffs of 1891 which shrank British output by a quarter to 450,000 tons, it must be noted that Aberavon's

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<sup>13</sup> Census of England and Wales 1871, 1881 and 1891.

<sup>14</sup> R. Lawrence, p.12.

<sup>15</sup> *Western Mail*, 15 September 1893.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Western Mail*, 13 February 1899 and *South Wales Echo*, 14 February 1899.

brief excursion into industry was not ended simply by the impact of US tariffs.<sup>18</sup> The Burrows Works had closed almost ten years before the tariffs were implemented, but many neighbouring works survived after 1891 due to their capacity to diversify. In Port Talbot, two of the Margam tinplate works situated furthest from the docks were closed, but the associated Margam and Mansel Tinplate Works was extended and began producing steel bars.<sup>19</sup> This mitigated the uncertainty and distress of local tinplate workers. Unemployment and stoppages had affected the industry for over a year, and many workers and their families had emigrated to America in the summer of 1895 and sailed on the 'Paris' from Southampton on 29 June.<sup>20</sup>

Directing the Margam and Mansel response was Sidney Hutchinson Byass, whose industrial empire was more than capable of adapting its operations to accommodate the changing industrial landscape. Byass was a knowledgeable and wealthy industrialist and J.P. whose father had founded the Margam and Mansel works. He had travelled to the United States on a fact-finding mission in the spring of 1895 to investigate the growing tinplate industry in America.<sup>21</sup> Shortly afterwards, he and his company had acquired Copper Miners' Tinplate works in Cwmavon (1896), Avon Vale (1896), Cwmavon Brickworks, Glanwalia Tinplate Works (1896), and Tewgoed Collieries (1899). Byass had been born in Reading and lived for a time in Port Talbot but had moved to the Bridgend area in the late 1890s. He was elected to Margam Local Board in 1893 and served for a number of years on the successor body, Margam Urban District Council. By 1918 Byass had moved to Llandough Castle, near Cowbridge in the Vale of Glamorgan, and in that year he became the first non-resident Mayor of Aberavon, a position he held for three years, during which time his efforts to amalgamate Aberavon with the surrounding area were realised and he became the first mayor of the new Borough of Port Talbot.<sup>22</sup>

In comparing the fate of the tinplate industry in Aberavon with the Byass operation, it becomes apparent that in this period the underlying fabric of the small tinplate industry in south Wales was fragile. In 1899, when conditions in the tin trade were gradually improving after the difficult years of the McKinley Tariffs, concern was still being expressed that the foundations of the trade were weak and that a butcher or baker could spend £5 and help establish a new

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<sup>18</sup> W.E. Minchinton (1969), p.108.

<sup>19</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 21 December 1895.

<sup>20</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 20 October 1896; *Western Mail*, 24 June 1895; *South Wales Daily Post*, 10 March 1896; and *South Wales Echo*, 25 April 1896.

<sup>21</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 10 April 1895.

<sup>22</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 2 November 1918; see also Chapter Five.

works.<sup>23</sup> The situation was reflected in newspaper reports, where one commentator described in glowing terms the industrial progressions in south Wales from failing tinsplate works to collieries and new docks.<sup>24</sup> The author describes Aberavon and Port Talbot as ‘practically one and the same town’ but emphasises that ‘Aberavon with its antiquated buildings stands for the decaying tinsplate industry . . . [whilst] Port Talbot represents . . . the docks and shipping, ironworks, collieries and patent fuel works . . . its big hotel and business buildings are fully in keeping with the style of Cardiff and Barry’s development’.<sup>25</sup> Observers could, therefore, discern differences between the two communities and apply value judgements to each.

Port Talbot’s growing dominance at this time also attracted established industries from nearby Cwmavon, a community which had relied on the smelting of iron and copper for decades. The presence of the English Copper Company in the area from 1838 had provided employment, housing and educational and social facilities for workers and their families. A substantial settlement had grown up around the works, the population of which had considerably exceeded that of Aberavon in the census years between 1841 and 1881. By the 1870s, however, the long-term future of copper was uncertain’.<sup>26</sup> The years after 1890 witnessed the ‘virtual abandonment’ of Cwmavon by industry, as businesses relocated to the coast in an effort to reduce the costs and effort of transporting both foreign and domestic iron ore, copper ores and finished products between the works and the docks.<sup>27</sup>

Industry in Cwmavon had long consisted of iron, copper and tinsplate works operating alongside each other and often under the same proprietor. Whilst this enabled combined production methods, such as the use of ‘in-house’ iron bars to be used for tinsplate, the risks of such organisation were apparent when fluctuations or changes occurred in a particular market. Consequently, in 1884 the Cwmavon works were sold and separated, with the copper works being bought by the Rio Tinto Company which employed 700 men in its 60 furnaces.<sup>28</sup> The reorganised furnaces were converted by the new Cwmavon Estates Company to a Bessemer plant which produced steel bars but business remained precarious and in 1897 the works were sold to Messrs. Wright, Butler & Company Limited.<sup>29</sup> In 1906, Rio Tinto relocated the whole

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<sup>23</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 23 January 1899.

<sup>24</sup> “The Man About Town” writing in the *South Wales Echo*, 17 August 1899.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> E. Newell (1990), p.90.

<sup>27</sup> P.W. Jackson, (1957), p.1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>29</sup> *The Cambrian*, 3 September 1897.

copper plant to a site closer to the docks, a decision which was no doubt influenced by an ‘arrangement’ between Rio Tinto and C.R.M. Talbot’s heir, his daughter Emily Charlotte Talbot. Talbot’s only son, Theodore Mansel Talbot, who had been instrumental in forming the first Masonic lodge in Aberavon in 1860, had died following a riding accident in 1876, leaving Emily, the oldest daughter, as heir. Miss Talbot, as she was known, worked in conjunction with her land agent to divert two-thirds of Rio Tinto’s traffic from Swansea to the improved docks at Port Talbot; the loss to Swansea was said to be in the region of £1,000 a year for 35,000 tons of freight.<sup>30</sup>

Messrs. Gilbertsons of Pontardawe also realised the potential business opportunities available at the docks and expectations of a new steel works were raised in the late summer of 1900.<sup>31</sup> Gilbertsons had operated a tinsplate works in Pontardawe since 1860 and William Gilbertson, the works owner, had been manager of the English Copper Company works at Cwmavon following its restructuring in 1850 (see Chapter Two). Reported as ‘Good News for Port Talbot’ the new steel works was planned to open in 1902 and said to offer employment for 3-400 men, many of whom would have been previously employed by Rio Tinto in Cwmavon, which had updated its processes at the expense of 200 jobs.<sup>32</sup> Following the formation of the Port Talbot Iron and Steel Company a new steelworks was built on a twelve-acre site at Port Talbot at a cost of about £250,000.<sup>33</sup> Gilbertson was said to have been approached by T.M. Franklen, cousin to the landowner, Miss Talbot, who was agreeable to leasing the land and providing financial support for the building of an independent steelworks; in the event of the failure of the company all property would revert to Miss Talbot.<sup>34</sup> The works was an innovative enterprise with enormous potential.<sup>35</sup>

However, despite the favourable location, the investment, the capacity for innovation and the available workforce the steelworks was forced to close the following year due to ‘commissioning difficulties’ succeeded by ‘a series of labour troubles’ which contributed to ‘cash flow problems’.<sup>36</sup> Parry has provided a comprehensive and detailed account of steel

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<sup>30</sup> *Western Mail*, 24 April 1899.

<sup>31</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 31 August 1900.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*; *The Cambrian*, 2 May 1902; *Weekly Mail*, 22 March 1902.

<sup>33</sup> T. Boyns, D. Thomas and C. Baber, p.133; S. Parry (2011), p.33.

<sup>34</sup> S. Parry (2011), pp.36-37.

<sup>35</sup> T. Boyns, D. Thomas and C. Baber p.133; S. Parry (2011), p.40; D. Brinn, *The Development of the Iron and Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area*, (British Steel Corporation publication, 1972), p.4.

<sup>36</sup> T. Boyns, D. Thomas and C. Baber p.133 cite commissioning and labour disputes; S. Parry (2011), p.18 and p.33 cites cashflow problems.

making in Port Talbot, and the history of the works, which reopened in 1906 under the auspices of the Port Talbot Steel Company is, therefore, well documented.<sup>37</sup> The new company was comprised of a partnership between the Gloucester Railway Carriage and Wagon Company and Messrs. Baldwin (Limited), which was itself an amalgamation of five companies connected with iron and steel production: E.P & W Baldwin and Alfred Baldwin & Co amalgamated with Wright, Butler & Co., the Bryn Navigation Colliery, and the Blackwall Galvanised Iron Co of London.

Adding to the anticipation of prosperity in Port Talbot was the proposed new celluloid works.<sup>38</sup> The proprietors were French and English and had chosen the Port Talbot area due to there being ‘a good supply of absolutely pure water’.<sup>39</sup> This works, which consisted of twelve separate buildings on sixteen acres of Margam Estate land, was expected to offer employment to 350 men and 50 women who would also be provided with cottages; it was completed in 1902.<sup>40</sup> Coupled with the prospective employment available at the new steel works at this time, almost 800 jobs were becoming available in Port Talbot.<sup>41</sup> The housing and welfare of these workers will be dealt with in detail below, but it is important to note here that ambitious plans for innovative projects were no guarantee of economic success: the apparent prosperity of Port Talbot which seemed evident in the growth of the docks, retail and residential buildings was not always reflected in secure, long-term employment.

The celluloid works, like the steel works, experienced stoppages and eventual closure before being purchased in 1910 by the British Non-Flammable Film and Celluloid Company which manufactured cinematographic film; the works had been idle for six years.<sup>42</sup> It was also apparent that the tendency towards vertical integration which had been evidenced by the formation of Baldwins in 1902 could also prove problematic in some cases where interests of shareholders overlapped. In the case of the English Celluloid Company, for example, overseers for Margam Urban District Council found it necessary to sue the company for unpaid rates in 1906, but ‘[i]t transpired that three out of the four magistrates were shareholders in the company, and as the remaining justice had no power to deal with it the case was adjourned’.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> S. Parry (2011), p.33; *Cardiff Times*, 8 March 1902.

<sup>38</sup> *Evening Express*, 10 March 1902.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *The Cambrian*, 28 March 1902.

<sup>42</sup> *The Cambrian*, 19 August 1910.

<sup>43</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 16 March 1906.



Fluctuations in both the copper and tinsplate industries impacted on businesses in both Aberavon and Margam in this period, but the capacity to adapt and diversify was far more viable in the latter. Aberavon's ventures into industry had been brief and ultimately unsuccessful; long-established works in Cwmavon had also experienced downturns and became attracted to premises closer to the coast, further promoting the port area as a primary location for both existing and prospective businesses. Consequently, the one commercial organisation that was consistent in the pursuit and acquisition of economic growth was the docks at Port Talbot. This operation was ideally placed to provide the prosperity that would underline the development of Port Talbot and its transformation from 'consisting merely of the harbour works and docks' in 1871 to 'rising district' in 1906.<sup>44</sup>

### **From Stagnation to Competition – Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company**

As Craig has noted, 'The physical development of port facilities was only slowly accomplished, and it needed the spur of inter-port competition and a vastly increased foreign trade to induce the transformation of the small and primitive harbours of the eighteenth century into the sophisticated dock systems of the early twentieth'.<sup>45</sup> Many local landowners and industrialists were keen to participate in the expanding sea coal trade, a factor which was evidenced by an 'almost continuous extension of dock facilities' in the period.<sup>46</sup> Between 1830 and 1914 at least £15 million were spent on dock facilities in Glamorgan.<sup>47</sup> Craig has asserted that rather than a straightforward, linear progression of dock development being experienced across the whole of the Glamorgan coast, a complex set of circumstances existed which 'differed widely from place to place and time to time'.<sup>48</sup> Craig's conclusion that 'in some places it was the individual entrepreneur who provided the dynamic force for port improvements, but in others it was corporate enterprise which initiated change', forms an appropriate basis for this section. As will be shown below, the influence of particular individuals was a major contributory factor to the expansion and success of the docks at Port Talbot.

Fluctuations and developments in the copper, iron and tinsplate trades in south Wales had emphasised the cost advantages to be gained from adapting either methods of transportation or locations of works. Furthermore, demand for steam coal after 1870 had led to the opening of collieries in the Rhondda valleys and a recognition of the superiority of relatively smokeless

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<sup>44</sup> *Post Office Directory (1871); Kelly's Directory (1906)*.

<sup>45</sup> R.S. Craig (1980), p.466.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

<sup>47</sup> R.S. Craig (1980), p.467, 'Chronology of Dock and Harbour Works' in Glamorgan.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Welsh steam coal over that from the previously dominant north-east of England.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, coal output in Glamorgan increased rapidly, and in addition to the use of coal as fuel to power local industries a separate enterprise developed which was centred around its shipment from south Wales to both domestic and overseas ports.<sup>50</sup> From the last quarter of the nineteenth century to 1914 coal output more than trebled from 11.7 million tons in 1876 to 38 million tons in 1913. In the same period, shipments of coal increased from 5.2 million tons to 29.1 million tons; over three-quarters of that coal was shipped out of the county, nearly all of it overseas.<sup>51</sup>

At Port Talbot, however, by 1891 very little had changed at the 25-acre dock site in the previous thirty years apart from a lengthening of the breakwater and an extension of the lock from 140 feet to 300 feet in length.<sup>52</sup> Prior to 1890, the Talbot interest in the docks had been more financial than administrative. C.R.M. Talbot himself had admitted in 1884 that although he had spent £180,000 on the docks it was the prospect of accommodating his mineral lessees, not the traffic at the harbour itself which was his motivation.<sup>53</sup> Talbot's lack of personal interest in the docks was revealed further by his contention that the proposed new docks and railway at Barry would be an advantage to Talbot's extensive coal district.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, he provoked laughter when in answer to the proposers' barrister he refused to prioritise his own docks, or those at Swansea, over the Barry facility.<sup>55</sup>

Talbot's death in January 1890, however, ended what Craig has described as 'a long period of stagnation'.<sup>56</sup> The importance of the individual entrepreneur was also clearly discernible after this date, when Talbot's daughter inherited the £1.4 million Margam Estate at the age of 49 and began working in conjunction with her new land agent to improve the commercial and financial success of the port area.<sup>57</sup> The Estate's new agent, Edward Knox, proved to be a

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<sup>49</sup> J. Williams, 'The Coal Industry, 1750-1914' in *Glamorgan County History Volume V* (1980), pp.155-210, p.177.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 180 and 182.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Kelly's Directory (1891)*.

<sup>53</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 17 July 1884; C.R.M. Talbot's evidence to the Committee of the House of Lords on the Barry Dock and Railways Bill.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>56</sup> R.S. Craig, p.485.

<sup>57</sup> England and Wales National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations) 1858-1995; granted 15 April 1890.

formidable force in the area over the next ten years and was instrumental in adapting the docks to the growing requirements of trade and industry.

Knox had been born in Scotland in 1861 and was great-grandson of both the Earl of Kilmorey and the Earl of Ranfurly. A Cambridge graduate, he became agent for Warne Hall Estates in Yorkshire and was a county councillor at Beverly. He was also agent to Lord Wimborne and managed his Welsh estates so kept a house in Wales. In 1890 he resigned his Yorkshire council seat and became land agent to the 33,000-acre Margam Estate where he became a driving force. Following a failed attempt to sell the docks to the R&SBR for a total of £80,000 plus royalties of one farthing for every ton of coal shipped, Knox and Miss Talbot, the sole proprietor of the docks, began to collaborate on plans for a new Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company.<sup>58</sup>

In the spring of 1891, Knox was elected to Margam Local Board, and became Chair of its successor body, Margam Urban District Council (MUDC), when it was established in 1894. As agent to Miss Talbot, Knox was one of three men who represented the Eastern Ward in which Margam Castle was located and he was regularly returned unopposed when re-election fell due. Unlike her father, Miss Talbot was keen to engage with the local community and took an active interest in the development of the area; she was also willing to take on what her father had rejected in 1884: an ambitious project to expand the docks.<sup>59</sup> The expansion was described as a ‘gigantic scheme’ with an estimated cost of £700,000, and as Miss Talbot owned all the land a Parliamentary Bill was unnecessary.<sup>60</sup> However, the dissolution and reconstitution of the existing Port Talbot Harbour Company as well as the associated railway proposals were required to be submitted to Parliament for scrutiny.<sup>61</sup>

Miss Talbot and Knox had been shrewd and successful in attracting investors with interests in freight, thereby ensuring practical co-operation in bringing traffic to the deep-water dock.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> R. Simmonds, (2012), p.66.

<sup>59</sup> *The Cambrian*, 9 September 1892; this initial attempt to sell to a syndicate was never realised.

<sup>60</sup> *Western Mail*, 21 September 1892.

<sup>61</sup> *The Cambrian*, 20 April 1894.

<sup>62</sup> *The Cambrian*, 27 January 1893; directors included the Earl of Dunraven (who lived at Dunraven Castle, Bridgend and who was Chairman); Colonel John T. North (of Avery Hill, Eltham, Chairman of North’s Navigation Collieries which operated in the valleys to the north of Port Talbot); Colonel John Roper Wright (Chairman of Messrs. Wright, Butler and Co., steel manufacturers and colliery proprietors); Sidney Hutchinson Byass (Messrs. R.B. Byass and Co., Tinplate manufacturers, Port Talbot); T.E. Watson ( of Messrs. Pyman, Watson and Co., Steamship Owners and Coal Shippers, Cardiff and Director of Ffaldau Colliery Company in the Garw Valley); and Colonel C.R. Franklen (of Bridgend, Miss Talbot’s cousin and her representative on the board). *The Cambrian* 24 May 1895 reported that Lord Wimborne (formerly Sir Ivor Guest, extensive and

It is apparent that Miss Talbot's negotiation skills were superior to those of her father, whose October 1888 discussions with Mr. Smith, a partner in the Cwmavon Works, led that industrialist to conclude that 'he had never had to negotiate with a more selfish man, who did not like to be reminded of any moral or social responsibility'.<sup>63</sup> Many of the industrialists involved with the expansion had been using the GWR line to carry freight to Porthcawl, but the circuitous route to the inadequate harbour was a completely unsuitable prospect at a time of increased demand; in contrast, Port Talbot appeared ideally located and suited to the task.<sup>64</sup> Situated 11-16 miles closer to the coalfields than either Barry or Cardiff, and 15-20 miles closer than Swansea, Port Talbot's new facilities were favourable for the transportation and shipment of coal from the hinterland and the diversion of coal traffic from both the east and west.<sup>65</sup> Plans were, however, controversial as Miss Talbot had inherited her father's interests in the GWR and was a major shareholder.<sup>66</sup>

Knox was keenly aware that a crucial element in port development at this time involved the exploitation of the coalfield by means of an associated railway network.<sup>67</sup> As John Williams has identified, a system of mutual benefit existed whereby 'the transportation system largely reflected the needs of the coal industry' and 'the development of the coal industry was dependent upon the provision of adequate and appropriate rail and dock facilities'.<sup>68</sup> At the Select Committee inquiring into the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company Bill in 1894 it was said that the district above Maesteg held an estimated 660 million tons of coal.<sup>69</sup> Pollins has also noted the capacity for alternative providers to break established monopolies in Glamorgan by offering freighters a choice of rail route.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, mining areas in the north-east of England had operated under a virtual monopoly of one railway company since the 1850s.<sup>71</sup>

Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company was incorporated on 31 July 1894 and began trading with share capital of £600,000 and Knox as its Secretary on a salary of £300 *per annum*;

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influential landowner in Glamorgan and employer of Edward Knox prior to his move to Margam) had also become a director.

<sup>63</sup> R. Simmonds (2012), p.66 and TNA PRO RAIL 1057/1551 (1884-1896).

<sup>64</sup> S. Parry (2011), p.34.

<sup>65</sup> P.W. Jackson (1957), p.29.

<sup>66</sup> R. Simmonds (2012), p.66.

<sup>67</sup> W.E. Minchinton (1969), p.xviii.

<sup>68</sup> Williams (1980), p.187.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> H. Pollins (1980), p.444.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.458.

following the death of Colonel North in 1896, Knox became a director of the company.<sup>72</sup> As expected, guarantees of traffic had been obtained from a number of collieries and this was to be supplemented by passengers and the expectation of ‘considerable import traffic in pitwood, copper ore, and general merchandise’.<sup>73</sup> The new line was planned to run seventeen miles from a new Central Station in Port Talbot to the GWR junction at Pontyrhyl, passing through the coal-rich settlement of Bryn, the new, 1,000-yard long Cwmcwrwin Tunnel and the coal town of Maesteg.<sup>74</sup> The ‘several tinsplate and copper works still in active operation at Port Talbot and Aberavon’, and ‘the important smelting works of the Rio Tinto Company, and the Iron and Steel Works of Messrs Wright, Butler, and Co. at Cwmavon’ were also expected to make use of the new railway, which offered reduced rates of between 3*d.* and 7*d.* per ton for steam and house coal producers.<sup>75</sup> The port of Swansea, however, which was set to benefit from the passing of a Bill to extend the R&SBR eastwards from Port Talbot, was concerned that it would lose the trade in coal from the Garw and Ogmore valleys.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the general depression in the tinsplate trade, the dock and railway project presented Port Talbot and Aberavon with an expectation of future prosperity. By May 1893, the prospect of Port Talbot becoming ‘a second Barry’ was being raised.<sup>77</sup> In 1881 Barry had been ‘a small village of no importance’ in which just eighteen families inhabited its seventeen houses.<sup>78</sup> By the time of the next census and the building of the new docks it had grown into an ‘important town’, with ‘well-paved streets, good shops, handsome villas and houses, a first-class hotel and a market’.<sup>79</sup> Barry’s dock prospectus of 1884 had included landowners and industrialists: Lord Windsor, who owned Barry Island where the dock was to be built; landowner and ironmaster’s son Crawshay Bailey; five colliery owners; four shipowners; and one colliery and ship owner.<sup>80</sup> Port Talbot’s prospective directors held similar interests and Margam Estate lessees with coal interests were governed by strict covenants which compelled them to ship fifty per cent of all their coal via Port Talbot.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> WGAS, D/D Xlm 164, ‘An Act to dissolve and re-incorporate and to confer further powers upon the Port Talbot Company and to authorise them to construct an additional Dock and Railway’; *South Wales Echo*, 29 January 1895; *Evening Express* 17 August 1898.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, and Glamorgan Archives D1101/4/2/3/23 (1895) copy guarantee, North’s Navigation Collieries.

<sup>74</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 4 September 1897.

<sup>75</sup> E. de la Paudiere, *Port Talbot and its Progress* (1918) cited in P.W. Jackson (1957), p.31.

<sup>76</sup> *The Cambrian*, 19 May 1893.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Kelly’s Directory* (1891), p.65.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> H. Pollins (1980), pp.455-6.

<sup>81</sup> R. Simmonds (2012), p.81.

Expectations that Aberavon would share in any prosperity at Port Talbot had been based on the long-standing conviction that success at the docks would produce corresponding benefits for Aberavon.<sup>82</sup> C.R.M. Talbot had previously spoken of his desire to ‘make Aberavon what it ought to be, with Port Talbot - the first port in Glamorganshire’, and so in 1894, to mark the passing of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Act, a complimentary banquet was thrown for Edward Knox at the public hall in Aberavon, the only venue in the area at that time which was capable of hosting such a gathering.<sup>83</sup> The guest list for the banquet comprised about 150 representatives from industrial and civic life in the district, including those from the localities with which the new railway would connect; ladies who had been invited were crowded into the gallery.<sup>84</sup> Menu cards for the event, reproduced as Images 1-4 below, highlight the celebratory nature of the event, which had been organised by an executive committee of representatives from Aberavon Council and Margam Urban District Council (MUDC).<sup>85</sup> Photographs and illustrations on the cards included portraits of Edward Knox and Miss Talbot, and landscape views of destination points for the new railway as well as of Aberavon. At that stage it appeared certain that Aberavon was to be a significant part of the new company’s plans. Ultimately, however, having secured the support and goodwill of Aberavon the new Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company chose not to involve the borough or its councillors in future discussions. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that many of those involved with PTR&DC were also elected members of MUDC and were familiar with the long-standing rivalry between the two communities.

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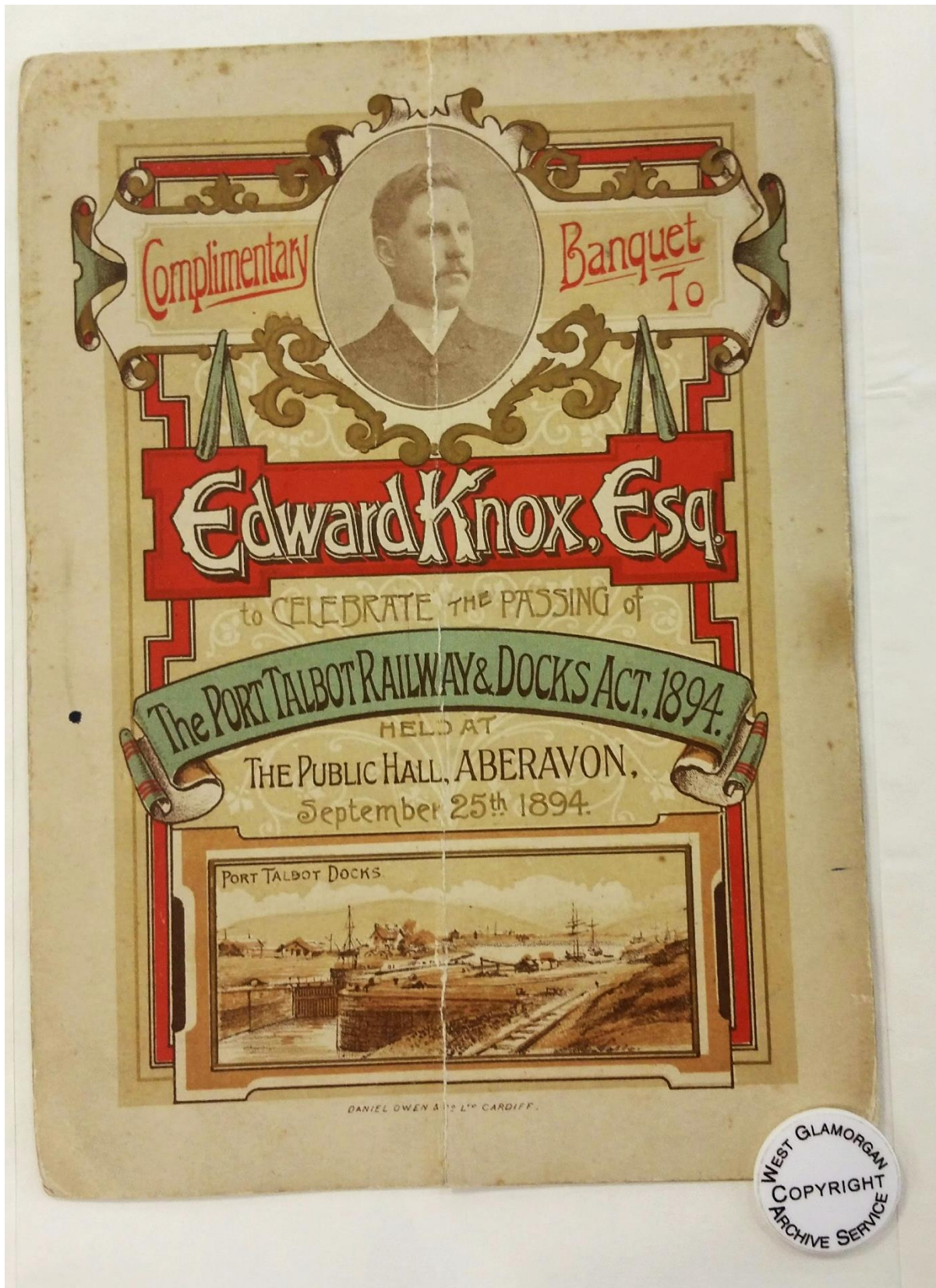
<sup>82</sup> See Chapter Three and *Western Mail*, 29 May 1874.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, and *South Wales Daily News*, 27 September 1894.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

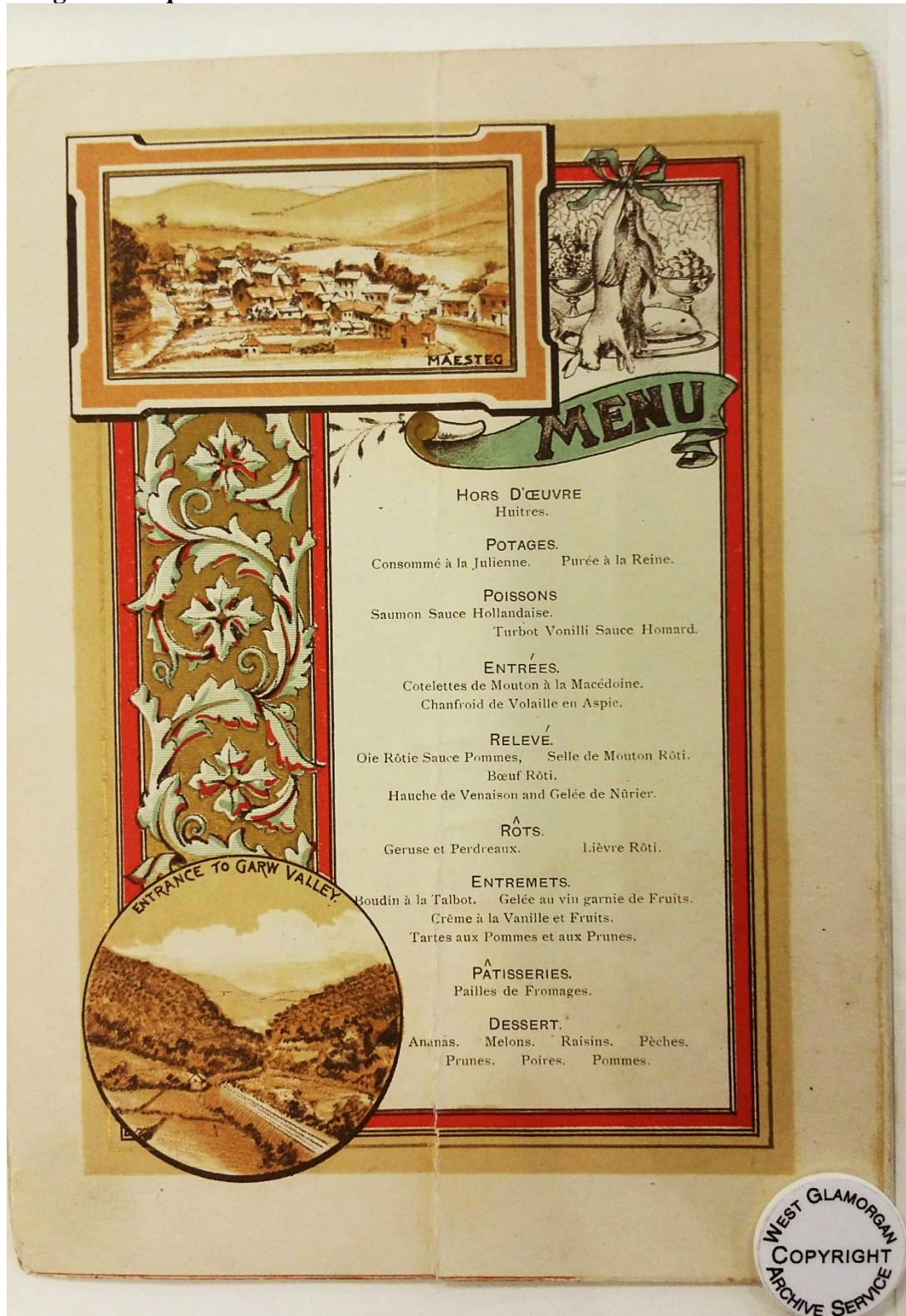
<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, and WGAS B/PT 306.

Image 1: Menu card - front



Source: WGAS B/PT 306

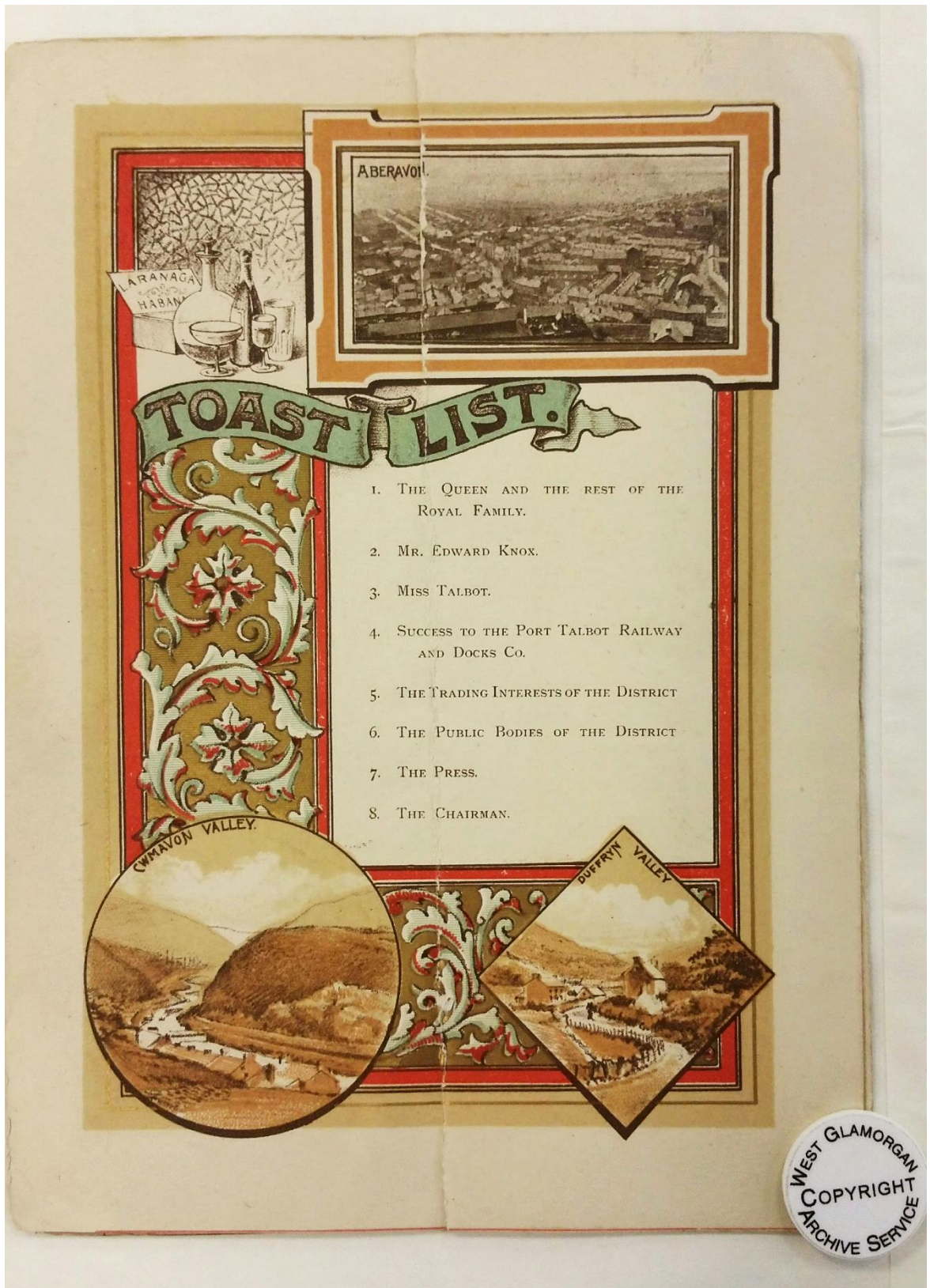
Image 2: Banquet Menu



Source: WGAS B/PT 306



Image 3: Banquet Toast List



Source: WGAS B/PT 306

Image 4: Banquet Vocalists

**MUSIC**



MARGAM ABBEY

MR HULLEY'S COUNTY BAND.

MARCH - "Hoch Habsburg" - - - *Kral*  
 OVERTURE - "Marco Spada" - - - *Anber*  
 MORCEAU DE GENRE "Margherita" *Mascheroni*  
 SELECTION "Recollections of Gounod" *Godfrey*  
 VALSE - - "Fin de Sièclè" - *Waldteufel*  
 MAZURKA RUSSE "La Czatine" - - - *L. Ganne*  
 OPERATIC SELECTION "Utopia Limited" *Sullivan*  
 OVERTURE - - "Martha" - - - *Plotow*

Conductor: - - MR. W. F. HULLEY.

**Vocalists.**

Soprano: - - - - Miss ELLEN FLYN  
 Tenor: - - - - MR. G. H. CREWS  
 Baritone - - - - MR. G. S. MILNES  
 Humorous - - - - MR. C. BELL

Accompanist: - - MR. L. H. ATKINS.



MARGAM FROM THE PARK

MISS TALBOT.



Source: WGAS B/PT 306

Prospects of shared success were still evident in November 1896, when Councillor Henry Richards, known as “the blind councillor”, accepted nomination as Mayor of Aberavon and stated that Aberavon was ‘a daily increasing borough’ which ‘in the near future it would be one of the chief seaports in South Wales’.<sup>86</sup> However, PTR&DC appeared reluctant to acknowledge Aberavon’s physical and municipal links to the docks (see Map 4.1 above). Palmer has noted that increased security at many waterfront areas in this period took on a ‘fortress character’ and Port Talbot appears to have been no exception.<sup>87</sup> In October 1898, having failed to secure access to the docks Aberavon council took the lead and issued notice of a compulsory purchase order. Part of the land required to construct a new road and bridge was said to be owned by PTR&DC.<sup>88</sup> The Company, however, challenged Aberavon’s Provisional Order in the courts, with both Edward Knox and Messrs. Byass, proprietors of the Margam & Mansel Tinplate Works located on the Margam side of the proposed bridge, opposing the application as ‘unnecessary’.<sup>89</sup> Despite support for the road from the Rhondda & Swansea Bay Railway, PTR&DC believed that its directors alone were ‘the proper persons to advocate the necessity of a road and bridge’.<sup>90</sup> The following month a Government Inquiry concluded in Aberavon’s favour, and granted compulsory purchase powers over PTR&DC lands; it was reported that ‘[t]he inhabitants of the borough received the news with the greatest satisfaction’.<sup>91</sup> Rather than accept the decision gracefully, PTR&DC continued to oppose the Order as it progressed through Parliament, submitting a petition and giving evidence at the Committee Stage in the Commons.<sup>92</sup> At each stage the Company failed to overturn the corporation’s Order but fought desperately to exclude Aberavon inhabitants from the docks, even attempting to legislate for the blocking up of a right of way that had existed for over fifty years.<sup>93</sup>

By December of 1899 *The Cambrian* was reporting that ‘forces at work’ wanted to set up Port Talbot as an independent town and the ancient borough was ‘left severely alone’ and in search of a new identity.<sup>94</sup> Port Talbot’s rapid expansion had led to a situation in which Aberavon had become almost irrelevant. An 1899 Bill submitted by PTR&DC had omitted the name of Aberavon completely, even though, as has been shown previously, a large part of the

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<sup>86</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 14 November 1896.

<sup>87</sup> S. Palmer in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.136.

<sup>88</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 October 1898 .

<sup>89</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 25 March 1899.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 29 April 1899.

<sup>92</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 5 July 1899.

<sup>93</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 5 July 1899 and *Evening Express*, 16 July 1903.

<sup>94</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 December 1899.

docks was located inside the borough.<sup>95</sup> The Bill, by its very nature, affected Aberavon and included provision for a further extension of the docks, the deviation of existing railways and the compulsory purchase of land; it also sought powers under Section 46 of the Railway Clauses Consolidation Act of 1845 to be released from any liability for the maintenance of roads and bridges which crossed PTR&DC lines.<sup>96</sup>

PTR&DC and its representatives on MUDC continued in the tradition of the pre-incorporation period and retained a parochial stance against Aberavon with regard to the docks. Trade had increased dramatically between 1897 and 1907 due to improvements to both the railway network and the docks themselves. With the support of Aberavon's mayor and town clerk Port Talbot had become a separate Customs port in January 1904 and exported its largest shipment to date, when 6,400 tons of patent fuel were transported to Vladivostock.<sup>97</sup> By June 1907, although imports were only marginally higher than the previous year, exports were up by 355,000 tons.<sup>98</sup> Just 41,000 tons of coal and coke had been exported from Port Talbot in 1897, but by 1904 the figure had grown to 945,000 tons; by 1909 the docks were exporting more than 1.6 million tons of coal and coke a year.<sup>99</sup>

Fig. 4.1 shows trade figures for Port Talbot for the period 1905 to 1909. Increased export tonnage in coal and coke products is evident throughout, but a clear rise in exports can be seen after 1905, when coal and coke exports exceeded a million tons each year. Fluctuations and developments in the iron and copper trades were also contributory factors to the figures, with the closure of local blast furnaces resulting in a reported loss of 27,000 tons of imported iron ore in the latter half of 1900.<sup>100</sup> The half-yearly company report, however, noted that the losses had been offset by 'other sources'.<sup>101</sup> Weekly reports of trade at Port Talbot were published in *The Cambrian*, and by May 1899 the port had already experienced 'record' coal and coke shipping, exporting 10,000 tons in one week.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, global demand for Welsh coal ensured that in April 1903 a contract was agreed for a fleet of 'ten of the biggest sailing ships' to transport 40,000 tons of coal to Chile for Bordes and Sons.<sup>103</sup> Welsh coal had become a

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<sup>95</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 1 February 1899; see also WGAS D/D XIm 164-171 for copies of PTR&DC Acts 1894-1914.

<sup>96</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 26 November 1898.

<sup>97</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 25 April 1903 and *The Cambrian*, 22 January 1904.

<sup>98</sup> *The Cambrian*, 18 January 1907.

<sup>99</sup> R.E. Take1 (1971), p.27a; *Weekly Mail*, 16 January 1904; and the *Welsh Coal and Shipping Handbook*, 1916.

<sup>100</sup> *The Cambrian*, 23 August 1901.

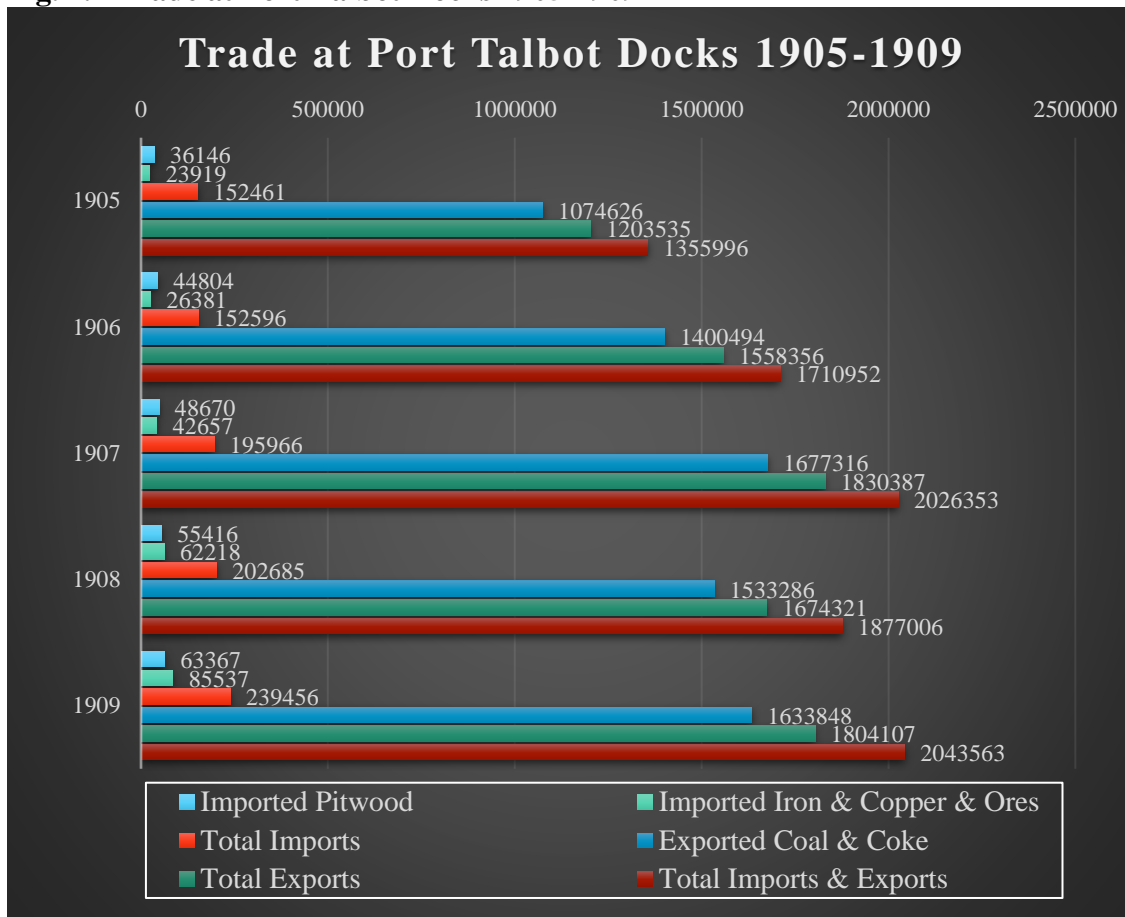
<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *The Cambrian*, 26 May 1899; weekly reports of all shipping at Port Talbot were published in *The Cambrian*.

<sup>103</sup> *Western Mail*, 11 April 1903.

highly prized commodity that had begun to replace cheaper Tyneside coal. The superior quality of Welsh coal ensured companies like Bordes a much greater profit: although Welsh coal cost 1s. more per ton than Tyneside coal it could be sold at a profit of 5s. more per ton.<sup>104</sup>

**Fig. 4.1 Trade at Port Talbot Docks 1905-1909**



Source: *The Welsh Coal and Shipping Handbook with Tide Tables for Channel Ports 1916*, (Western Mail, Ltd.), p.139

Image 5 illustrates the extent of the planned physical improvements to the docks area, which by 1895 covered 250 acres and included a mile-long floating dock which covered 90 acres.<sup>105</sup> By 1906, a further four Acts of Parliament had been passed in efforts to raise capital and extend both dock and railway provision. The planned expansion at the docks was intended to accommodate larger vessels in a deeper, wider harbour with a new lock measuring 450 ft. by 110 ft., a depth of 33 ft. and an entrance of 60ft. protected by two breakwaters, one of which had been lengthened from 400 to 1,000 ft. and another which was new and measured 2,400 ft.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> *Kelly's Directory (1895)*.

<sup>106</sup> *Kelly's Directory (1906)*.

**Image 5: Construction of the new docks in 1898**



Reproduced by permission of Damian Owen and Port Talbot Historical Society

Crucially, despite initial opposition to the competition offered by the new Port Talbot Railway, both the R&SBR and the GWR operated branch railways within the docks from Aberavon and Port Talbot stations respectively; in negotiating terms Knox had successfully obtained ‘running powers’ over these lines for the PTR&DC.<sup>107</sup> Subsequently, following the submission of additional Bills and the creation of a junction with the South Wales Mineral Railway at Tonmawr, the Company was able to access steam coal output from the numerous collieries operating in the north of the Afan Valley at Glyncorrwg and thereby divert exports to Port Talbot.<sup>108</sup>

The South Wales Mineral Railway had been in operation since 1861 and had been promoted by the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Jersey, the majority owner of Briton Ferry Docks. The railway company was originally operated by the Glyncorrwg Coal Company and following the winding up of that business the new lessees were the Glyncorrwg Colliery Company Limited. The latter company incurred debt which was funded by the GWR when it took over the line in 1908; that takeover

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<sup>107</sup> H. Pollins (1980), p.458.

<sup>108</sup> WGAS D/D Xlm 166, the 1896 Act; for details of the individual collieries see Lawrence (1957).

included parts of the Mineral Railway over which the PTR&DC had previously negotiated running powers.<sup>109</sup> Opportunities had also been taken to expand the Company's railway in a north-easterly direction to the Ogmore Valley, thereby increasing the length of the system to 37 miles.<sup>110</sup> Provision was made for passenger traffic on the lines, with reports of 1,000 passengers using the Company's trains on just one day in 1898.<sup>111</sup> Journey times on the new route had been reduced dramatically, with the travel time between Maesteg and Port Talbot dropping from two hours on the circuitous route to the east via Bridgend to just twenty minutes on the new, direct line.<sup>112</sup>

When the PTR&DC station opened in 1898 it was the fourth to be located on the eastern side of the river. The original Port Talbot station had been in place since 1850 when the South Wales Railway was established under the chairmanship of C.R.M. Talbot, but the line had been taken over by the G.W.R. in 1863. The R&SBR line station operated for passengers from 1885 and as well as a station across the river from Aberavon town an additional station at the docks was in use between 1891 and 1895. The new Port Talbot (Central) Station, built at a cost of £6,000, was located across the main street from the GWR and was designed to meet the need for a passenger station.<sup>113</sup> Despite these advances in the transport network, however, the railway developments impinged on Aberavon and its capacity to define itself. New railway lines intersected the town, where level crossings regularly held up crowds of a hundred people, but no stations were located within the borough itself until Seaside Station was built in 1898.<sup>114</sup> The lack of differentiation was exaggerated by the use and misuse of station names: Aberavon Town station on the R&SBR was in Margam, not Aberavon, and a number of name changes, including that of 'Port Talbot (Aberavon)' from the 1890s, as Image 6 shows, tended to conflate the two different communities. In 1897, when the name of the main GWR Port Talbot station was changed to 'Port Talbot and Aberavon', Aberavon councillors reacted by petitioning for a separate GWR station for the incorporated borough.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> *The Cambrian* 3 January 1908 and *Evening Express*, 27 December 1907.

<sup>110</sup> WGAS, D/D Xlm 165; *Evening Express*, 9 April 1898.

<sup>111</sup> *Evening Express*, 9 April 1898; *Cardiff Times*, 19 February 1898.

<sup>112</sup> *Evening Express*, 9 April 1898.

<sup>113</sup> See R. Simmonds, (2012), p.91.

<sup>114</sup> *The Cambrian*, 21 June 1901.

<sup>115</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 August 1902.

**Image 6: Port Talbot (Aberavon) railway station c.1909**



Reproduced by permission of Robin Simmonds

Knox's influence and confidence had helped secure a thriving docks and railway for Port Talbot. In 1893, when trade at Aberavon was almost stagnant, Glanwalia works had been idle for six months, the Mansel works was at a standstill and Margam works was on half time, Knox was not only prepared to initiate Port Talbot's challenge to the dominance of other ports on the Glamorgan coast but he had also found substantial support. Confident of potential benefits, Aberavon Town Council had acknowledged the contribution a new railway to Maesteg could make to the borough and a resolution in its favour was passed unanimously in December 1893.<sup>116</sup> Additionally, when a further Bill was proposed in 1896, the town clerk of Aberavon was unequivocal in his testimony to the House of Lords Select Committee that 'Port Talbot was within the area of Aberavon, and the difficulty which had hitherto stood in the way of the development of the borough had been the non-development of the port. The proposed extension of the docks was said to have given a great stimulus to building and other operations in the borough'.<sup>117</sup> Contrasting evidence suggests, however, that it was the 1890 opening of the Rhondda and Swansea Bay Railway, not improvements at the docks, that had prompted a

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<sup>116</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 December 1893.

<sup>117</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 May 1896.



building increase of 50 per cent in Aberavon, where there were already ‘newly built houses on every hand’ in January 1894.<sup>118</sup>

Margam Local Board was also supportive, not least because its membership was comprised of local industrialists with pecuniary interests in the docks and was presided over by Knox himself. Public confidence was also evident in the speed with which the company raised the necessary capital to proceed with the development, influence over which was credited to Edward Knox, described by *The Cambrian* as ‘not only shrewd, energetic, but also very courteous, and . . . held in high esteem throughout the district’.<sup>119</sup> However, perceptions that ‘the Port Talbot Company and the Margam Council [we]re practically one’ coloured the attitudes of Aberavon inhabitants who believed that the interests of the borough were becoming subsumed by those of Port Talbot.<sup>120</sup> The depth of rivalry and suspicion can be illustrated by the strength of feeling at a ratepayer meeting in 1898, when speakers raised their concerns that the town clerk of Aberavon, solicitor Marmaduke Tennant, shared a business office with his legal partner D.E. Jones who had been clerk to Margam Board and Urban District Council since October 1887.<sup>121</sup>

Knox’s contribution to the development of Port Talbot had been significant but in 1900 he severed his connections with the Margam Estate and resigned his elected posts, eventually moving to Bath having become agent to Lord Hylton, who owned estates in Somerset and Hampshire; he also took up an additional post as agent to Lord Zouche whose estates were in Sussex.<sup>122</sup> Whilst Knox’s reasons for leaving do not appear to be documented, his motivations may have been based in a substantial bequest to his wife, Emily, following the death of her father, timber merchant John Edward Wade who had died on 28 September 1899 in Yorkshire.<sup>123</sup> Wade’s estate was valued at £199,353-5s.-1d. and his will granted £5,000 in company shares as well as £1,900 as cash in trust to his daughter.<sup>124</sup> In his farewell speech Knox appreciated that although the docks by 1900 ‘had not obtained the success he anticipated’, the extent of the improvements had laid the foundations for Port Talbot to be recognised as an important and attractive industrial, residential and retail centre supported by a viable transport

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<sup>118</sup> *The Cambrian*, 5 January 1894; Census of England and Wales 1881, 1891 and 1901.

<sup>119</sup> *The Cambrian*, 3 September 1897.

<sup>120</sup> *Evening Express*, 7 April 1898.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, and *South Wales Daily News*, 11 October 1887.

<sup>122</sup> *Evening Express*, 31 October 1901.

<sup>123</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 16 November 1899.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, and England and Wales National Probate Calendar, (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995, John Edward Wade, 1899.

infrastructure.<sup>125</sup> A public presentation took place on 19 November, at which the chairman of the presentation committee, William Thomas, credited Knox with being ‘the creator of Port Talbot’ which had become a ‘progressive commercial and shipping centre’ which had ‘doubled its rateable value’.<sup>126</sup>

Knox and his wife were presented with an inscribed silver bowl and a brooch ‘set with brilliants and turquoise’ as well as an illuminated address; tenants of the Margam Estate, friends and colleagues had contributed towards the gifts, which were valued at £81.<sup>127</sup> Despite Knox’s contributions to developments at Port Talbot it appears that only five of fourteen Margam Urban District Council colleagues attended his presentation event and no dinner was organised, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the press.<sup>128</sup> The Mayor of Aberavon was present, as was County Councillor T.J. Hughes, but although Mrs S.H. Byass attended, her husband did not. The value of the parting gifts was just one pound more than had been spent on a silver wedding anniversary gift for Aberavon’s town clerk, Marmaduke Tennant, eleven years earlier.<sup>129</sup>

There can be no doubt that Knox was instrumental in counteracting the stagnation at the docks, but commercial success continued following Knox’s departure. His early replacement was Godfrey Lipscomb, an estate agent from Kent.<sup>130</sup> Like Knox, Lipscomb was also elected unopposed to represent the Eastern Ward and therefore the Margam Estate interests on Margam Urban District Council. He would remain at Margam until 1923, but unlike Knox his sole attempt to gain a seat on Glamorgan County Council was both opposed and unsuccessful (see Table 4.2 at the end of this chapter). Lipscomb also became a director of the PTR&DC and following Knox’s departure freight at the docks increased, supplemented by the construction of new industrial premises both at the docks and nearby. In recognition of Port Talbot having become a separate Customs port a new Custom House opened on 20 February 1905 (see Image 7).<sup>131</sup> The following year the port of Swansea found itself unable to keep pace with Port Talbot, which was said to be ‘advancing by leaps and bounds’ by offering lower costs, better facilities and prompt despatch.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 20 November 1900.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 November 1900.

<sup>129</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 18 July 1889.

<sup>130</sup> *Evening Express*, 20 November 1900.

<sup>131</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 25 February 1905.

<sup>132</sup> *The Cambrian*, 12 May 1905.

**Image 7: The New Custom House (left) and the offices of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company, c. 1905**



Photograph reproduced by permission of Damian Owen and Port Talbot Historical Society

The amount of coal which could be dropped at Port Talbot was far in excess of any dock at Swansea, leading to concerns that anthracite coal from mines near to Swansea could be shipped at a lower rate from the more distant Port Talbot: coal tips at Swansea's North and South docks could manage 150-350 tons and the Prince of Wales Dock a maximum of 600 tons whereas Port Talbot's maximum was over 2,000 tons.<sup>133</sup> Rivalry between the two ports prompted letters of criticism from works owners near Swansea, and the Harbour Trust was forced to defend itself by writing to *The Cambrian*, which considered the 'remarkable increase in the volume of freight handled at Port Talbot' as well as the increased tinsplate exports from Llanelli, major factors influencing the decline in trade at Swansea.<sup>134</sup>

By the end of the period, therefore, the expanded docks and their associated rail infrastructure had contributed to a vastly improved industrial and commercial hub. Both imports and exports at the docks had increased, but the scale of the increase in exports, particularly of coal and coke, which moved from 16,000 tons in 1890 to more than one-and-a-half million tons in 1907, was remarkable (see Fig. 4.1). Convenient facilities for shipping at

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, and Glamorgan Archives D1101/4/2/24/31 (1904-5) rate for shipping coal to Port Talbot.

<sup>134</sup> *The Cambrian*, 13 July 1905 and 28 July 1905.

Port Talbot also formed an inducement to manufacturers, who were able to take advantage of attractive terms to lease land and build works at the docks. In 1907 it had been announced that Messrs. Proud and Sons, coppersmiths, were to open workshops at the docks adjacent to the Crown works, providing ‘another tangible indication of Port Talbot’s advancement’.<sup>135</sup> The following year Crown, a Cardiff-based patent fuel company that had operated at Port Talbot since 1900, announced a planned enlargement which would double capacity and provide additional work for its employees as well as shippers.<sup>136</sup>

These employment and business opportunities provided a stimulus for the construction industry, which resulted in the creation of not only a discrete business district on the main thoroughfare which became known as Station Road, but also a completely new residential area set in the open space within the boundaries of the River Afan, the GWR and the Port Talbot Railway.<sup>137</sup> Palmer has noted that in many cases early port activity produced associated business districts but later development, closely linked to railway systems and therefore of a more transient nature, had no parallel effect.<sup>138</sup> In the Aberavon and Port Talbot area, however, the presence of local industries and the growth of both retail and residential properties at this time suggest that the additional railway network did not reflect a transient community.

It was not inevitable that Aberavon would become engulfed by the development taking place across the river. The established seaport town of Swansea, for example, had been located on the western side of the mouth of the River Tawe since 1624. A new tidal harbour had been created in 1824 on the eastern side of the river at the termination of the Tennant Canal. This new harbour, called Port Tennant, was owned by and named for canal builder George Tennant, and the surrounding settlement took the same name. Despite concerns in 1838 that high tolls at Swansea could divert traffic to Port Tennant, the established Swansea Harbour remained dominant.<sup>139</sup> In the Aberavon and Port Talbot area, however, despite geographical similarities with Swansea and Port Tennant, the distinctions were much less clear-cut. By 1903, development on the Margam side of the river had led to the elevation of Port Talbot’s status to ‘twin town’ to Aberavon.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> *Evening Express*, 9 May 1907.

<sup>136</sup> *The Cambrian*, 14 August 1908.

<sup>137</sup> O.S. Map of Aberavon XXV.SW surveyed 1897 (published 1900) and 1914 (published 1921).

<sup>138</sup> S. Palmer in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.143.

<sup>139</sup> *The Cambrian*, 21 July 1838.

<sup>140</sup> *Evening Express*, 15 December 1903.

## The Changing Urban Landscape

Whereas ‘Port Talbot’ had once referred only to the docks, its use to describe a wider area had become increasingly commonplace. In this period, the name was applied locally to the docks, the area immediately adjacent to the water and the area north of the Great Western Railway (GWR) line on the Margam side of the River Afan. Ordnance Survey maps reflected local usage by placing the name further inland as each series was published (see Map 4.2). Trade directories of the period referred to ‘Aberavon, Port Talbot’ and in many instances no clear distinction was made between the two. A more accurate interpretation of the relationship between the docks and the town of Aberavon might have been ‘Port Talbot, Aberavon’, but the major retail and residential expansion which occurred in this period was set firmly within the jurisdiction of the parish of Margam. Furthermore, the fluctuations in the copper and tin trades, which are well documented in the historiography, had contributed not only to the relocation of works from Cwmavon to sites nearer the docks at Port Talbot, but also the closure of tinsplate works in Aberavon.<sup>141</sup> As a consequence, the area had been affected by periods of high unemployment in the early 1890s but was beginning to recover by the turn of the century.

When C.R.M. Talbot died in January 1890 the population of Margam was approaching its 1891 Census figure of 6,274.<sup>142</sup> As Fig. 4.2 shows, that number represented only a slight increase in size from that of thirty years before, when 5,528 persons were enumerated.<sup>143</sup> Accounts of Talbot’s funeral had described Port Talbot as ‘still but a village, struggling into a town’ with a ‘tiny dock’ and a two-mile stretch of road between the railway station and Margam Castle considered by the writer to be ‘picturesque in the extreme’.<sup>144</sup> However, the significant changes in Margam’s population numbers between 1891 and 1911, when the decennial censuses recorded increases of forty-four percent and then a further sixty-three percent, reflect the inherent ambition within that quote. ‘Port Talbot’ was still formally the name of the docks, not any village, but its extraordinary growth around the turn of the century added weight to the concept of a new community bearing the same name. The term was used locally to describe a distinct and developing place which included houses, shops and offices as well as transport links. In addition, a new ecclesiastical parish of Port Talbot had been created in June 1901.<sup>145</sup> However, as *The Cambrian* noted, the census figures for Port Talbot could be ‘found against

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<sup>141</sup> For examples see W.E. Minchinton (1969), p.xxv; W.E. Minchinton, (1957); C. Baber (1980); T. Boyns, D. Thomas and C. Baber, (1980); and M. Phillips (1935).

<sup>142</sup> 1891 Census of England and Wales.

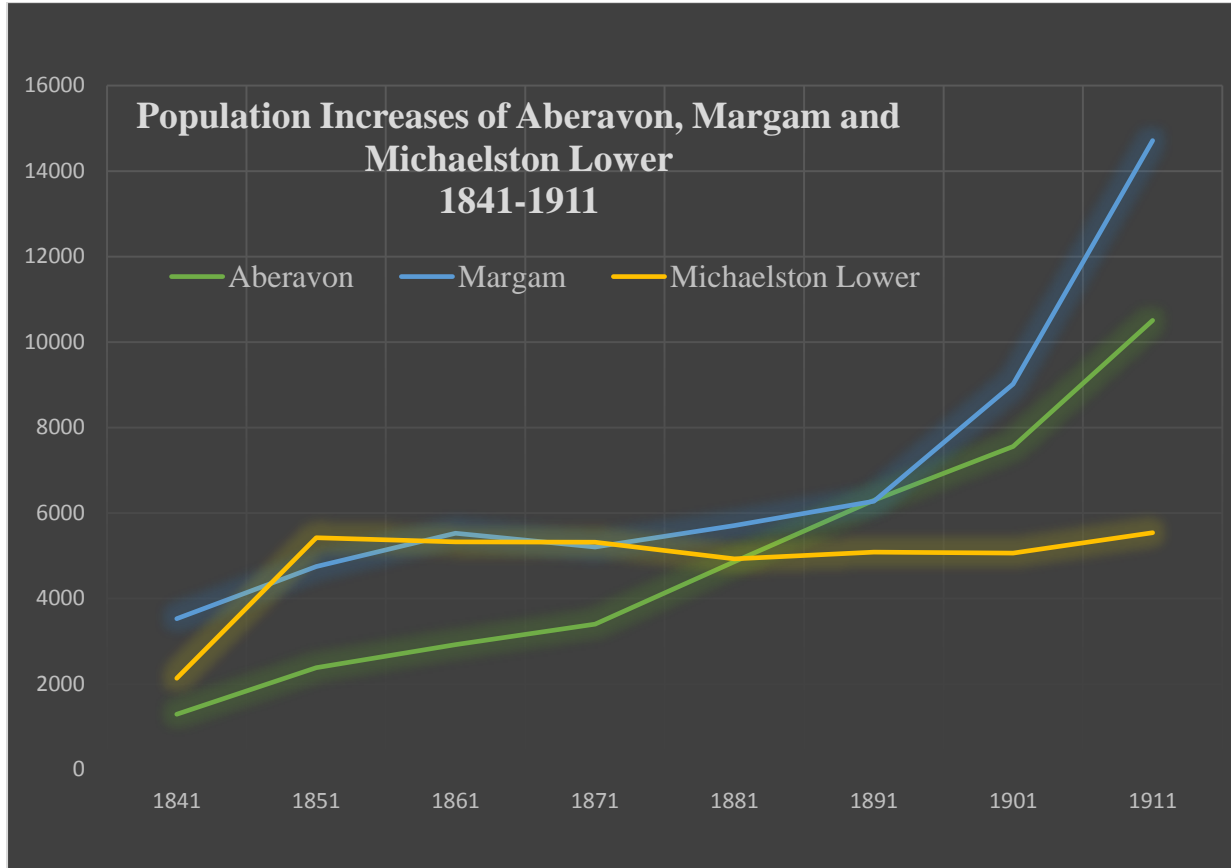
<sup>143</sup> 1861 Census of England and Wales.

<sup>144</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 23 January 1890.

<sup>145</sup> *Kelly’s Directory (1906)*; *Evening Express*, 9 August 1901.

Aberavon and Margam’, confirming the fact that the docks were located in both of those civil parishes.<sup>146</sup>

**Fig. 4.2: Rates of Population Increase in Aberavon, Margam and Michaelston Lower 1841-1911**



**Source: Census of England and Wales data 1841-1911**

The census of 1901 recorded over nine thousand residents in Margam - a population increase of 44 per cent since 1891.<sup>147</sup> Aberavon’s population also increased, but the parish of Michaelston Lower, the larger part of which was made up of the settlement of Cwmavon, experienced a slight decline in the ten years up to 1901.<sup>148</sup> Figures for both Aberavon and Margam from 1891 indicate a positive correlation between population numbers and the existence or expectation of economic expansion near the docks. However, having experienced a significant expansion in the middle of the nineteenth century, subsequent decline in the copper and iron industries had led to economic migration out of Cwmavon, often to the United States.<sup>149</sup> As Fig. 4.2 illustrates, the population increase in Margam in 1901 cannot be attributed

<sup>146</sup> *The Cambrian*, 22 August 1902, publication of census figures for Margam and Aberavon.

<sup>147</sup> 1901 Census of England and Wales.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> See also Chapter Two.

solely to inhabitants following employment opportunities by moving from Cwmavon to the docks area.

Population growth in Margam had been stimulated by these expectations of employment, which in turn triggered ‘a brisk demand for houses’.<sup>150</sup> New housing for the increased population became a priority, with ‘at least 50’ houses being let in 1893 as the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Act was making its way through Parliament.<sup>151</sup> Speculative builders were able to provide housing if landowners made sites available, but in the case of Margam, where ownership rested with Miss Talbot and the Margam Estate, control over construction extended beyond the application of building regulations and council approval. One of the first planned building projects in the area directly across the river from Aberavon was sanctioned in 1895.<sup>152</sup> Constructed under the Private Street Works Act of 1892, the plans included Tydraw Street, Tydraw Place, Courtland Place and Grove Place, all of which are evident on the O.S. map surveyed in 1897.<sup>153</sup> A Courtland Terrace had existed since at least 1895, when it consisted of ten houses, six of which were occupied by men whose names appeared as ‘Private Residents’ in a trade directory of that year, which suggests that the address carried status at that time.<sup>154</sup> These streets were directly across the river from Aberavon and as Map 4.2 suggests they would have provided visible evidence of the prosperity being enjoyed on ‘the other side’.

In Aberavon, although some building had taken place at the start of the decade, by 1895 the Medical Officer of Health reported his concern that overcrowding was still a problem due to the ‘large influx of men and families in search of work’.<sup>155</sup> This point did not go unnoticed by the press, which applauded the economic success of the improved docks and railway network but suggested that the associated building operations must ‘harrow the souls of the civic authorities’ in Aberavon.<sup>156</sup> Evidence suggests, however, that calls for increased housing capacity in Port Talbot might have been exaggerated, as fifty-six houses in the West Ward were uninhabited in 1901, including thirty-one of the seventy-five properties in newly-built Mansel

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<sup>150</sup> *The Cambrian*, 27 January 1893.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *The Glamorgan Gazette*, 8 February 1895.

<sup>153</sup> Grove Place appeared to be unfinished on the 1897 map although *Kelly's Directory* of 1895 lists one private resident at that address.

<sup>154</sup> *Kelly's Directory (1895)* for Port Talbot.

<sup>155</sup> Richard Burton Archives, SWCC: MNA/PP/118/95, Medical Officer of Health Report 1895.

<sup>156</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 19 August 1898.

Street.<sup>157</sup> By 1901 Courtland Terrace had expanded to nineteen houses and nearby Courtland Place was comprised of fourteen properties.<sup>158</sup>

The summer of 1898 had been a boom period for the building industry with the Port Talbot Development Company Limited being established with capital of £20,000 by subscribers who were not local men but shipowners from Newport and Cardiff.<sup>159</sup> The company's offices were at Mount Stuart Square, Bute Docks, Cardiff but the speculative building which resulted in the construction of 'a street of houses at Port Talbot which are anything but fully tenanted' contributed to liquidation two years later.<sup>160</sup> Local builder J.H. Owen had been contracted by the company to build 47 houses in Port Talbot but the £605 debt he incurred in the project led to his bankruptcy.<sup>161</sup>

Increased traffic at the docks had highlighted the need for companies to maintain offices in Port Talbot in order to facilitate a close point of contact with shipping. As a consequence, between 1890 and 1914 a section of the main road between the railway station and Aberavon Bridge was developed specifically to accommodate commercial interests such as banks, accountants, insurance agents and ship brokers whose offices were situated above new retail outlets. Solicitors, architects and surveyors were also located in this area, named Station Road.<sup>162</sup> North's Navigation Collieries were based in Bank Chambers, Station Road in 1906, having relocated from offices at the failing port of Porthcawl in 1898.<sup>163</sup> With the further extension of the telephone system to new businesses in Port Talbot, North's, as well as other companies in Swansea's 'rapidly growing neighbour town and port' were well-placed to use it to their advantage; the Cynon Colliery Company of Pontrhydyfen, the Dyffryn Rhondda Colliery Company of Cymmer, and the Glenavon Rhondda Collieries all kept offices in Station Road.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> 1901 Census of England and Wales, Margam, Enumeration Districts 01-04 (West Ward), ED02.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 11 July 1898.

<sup>160</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 7 June 1900 and *The Cambrian*, 17 August 1900.

<sup>161</sup> *Evening Express*, 13 October 1900.

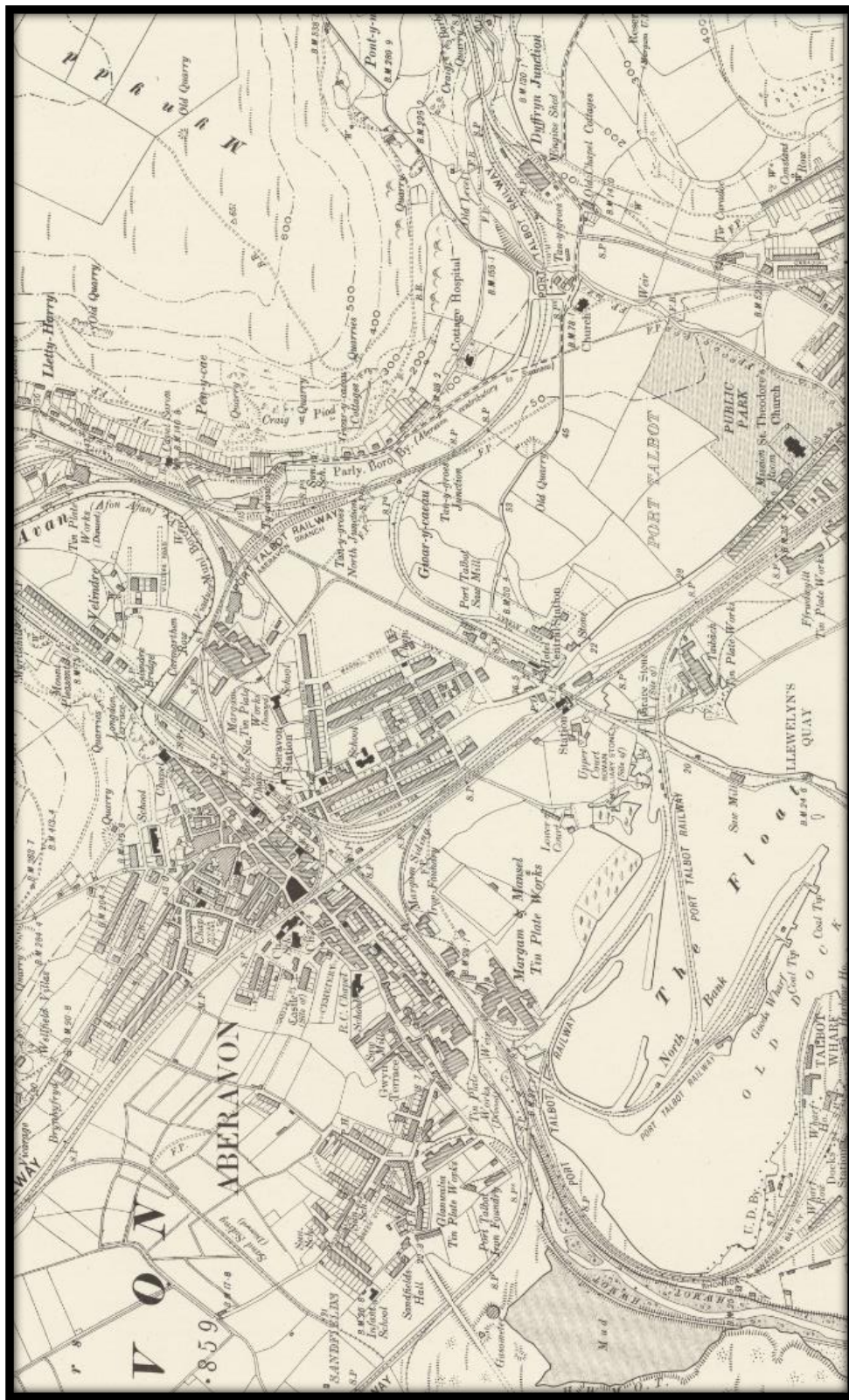
<sup>162</sup> *Kelly's Directory (1906)*.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid* and *South Wales Daily News*, 28 December 1898.

<sup>164</sup> *The Cambrian*, 5 December 1890.



Map 4.2: Aberavon 1897



Source: Glamorgan XXV SW (includes Port Talbot) - Ordnance Survey. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland

Commercial growth had stimulated employment opportunities for manual workers, but the establishment of specific areas for the administration of businesses, whether associated with the docks or otherwise, also created a range of clerical posts. An examination of occupations in the 1901 Census for the West Ward of Port Talbot, which included Station Road and the new residential development mentioned above, reveals that the majority of residents were manual workers in the coal, tin or steel industries, but that a number of shipping, telegraph and brokers' clerks were also present.<sup>165</sup> As in previous decades, some properties were a combination of both commercial and residential use, with designated floor space allocated to discrete activities. Aberavon's concerns regarding 'the other side' were not unfounded: facilities continued to be lost and the 'palatial' shops of Port Talbot threatened the ancient borough's economy by shifting the commercial hub into the new settlement.<sup>166</sup> Use of the term 'palatial' was pejorative and sarcastic; it had been used by the newspaper correspondent to criticise PTR&DC's decision to develop Station Road rather than incorporate the construction of a road and bridge between Aberavon and the docks into its original expansion plans.<sup>167</sup>

By 1906 the commercial centre of the area had shifted from High Street, Aberavon to Station Road, Port Talbot. Images 8 and 9 emphasise the differences between the narrow streets of Aberavon and the spacious commercial locations in Port Talbot. At Station Road, the shops of drapers, milliners and grocers adjoined new outlets which sold bicycles or pianos, the latter highlighting the accessibility of a household item that had once been a rare and elite object.<sup>168</sup> Between 1895 and 1906 the newsagent W.H. Smith had also relocated to Station Road from premises in the railway station at Port Talbot.<sup>169</sup> Directories for Aberavon, in contrast, record an increased number of refreshment rooms and eating-houses (see Table 4.1 and Fig. 4.3 below).<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> 1901 Census of England and Wales, Margam Parish, Enumeration District 2; see also Glamorgan Archives C/CP/102 (1921) which shows the old and new wards and boundaries of Margam.

<sup>166</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 August 1901.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Kelly's Directory (1895) and (1906)*; S.L. Steinbach (2017), pp.6-9.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

**Image 8: Aberavon High Street, c.1890**



Photograph reproduced by permission of Damian Owen and Port Talbot Historical Society

**Image 9: The 'palatial' shops of Station Road, Port Talbot c. 1905**



Photograph reproduced by permission of Damian Owen and Port Talbot Historical Society

Aberavon's potential to compete with Port Talbot in terms of economic and residential expansion had been severely restricted by two main factors: its geography and its lack of autonomy. Geographically, the town was enclosed on three sides: by the mountains to the north, the river to the east and the sea to the south. Reinforcing the north-south boundary was the Rhondda and Swansea Bay Railway, which followed the line of the eastern bank of the river and formed a visible barrier between Aberavon and the docks. Furthermore, the town itself was divided on an east-west basis by the main road between Cardiff and Neath, and the Great Western Railway (GWR) line between London and west Wales. After 1895 an extended section of the Rhondda & Swansea Bay Railway which ran from Port Talbot to Neath and Swansea formed a third east-west boundary which separated the lower section of the town from the sand dunes.

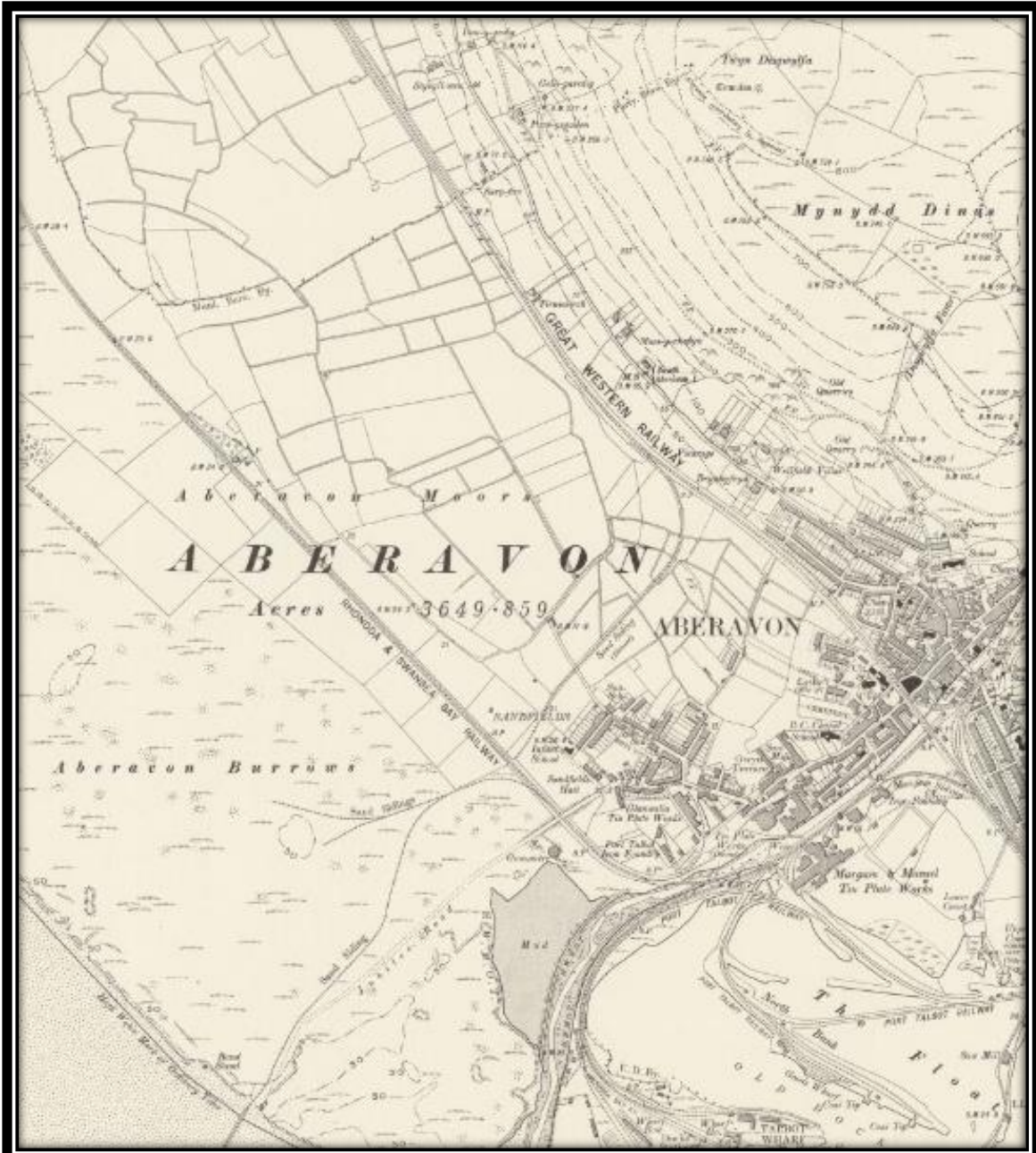
The Ordnance Survey map of Aberavon in 1897 (Map 4.3) shows how these physical features impacted on the development of Aberavon, and how options for expansion became limited to the west, away from the town, or to the south, where across the sand dunes an extensive beach, cited by the *Rhondda Leader* as 'the most beautiful beach in Wales' offered an alternative source of economic transformation.<sup>171</sup> Complicating any decisions for the future, however, were issues of land ownership which had been problematic since the incorporation inquiry of 1861.<sup>172</sup> Whilst the period examined in the previous chapter highlighted fluctuations in the willingness and ability of elected members to deliver a full range of public services to their electors, a core of councillors persisted in their efforts. In this later period, however, councillors in Aberavon found it much more difficult to work together for the public good and both inter- and intra-council relations suffered, further hampering progress for Aberavon.

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<sup>171</sup> O.S. Map Glamorgan XXV.SW, revised 1897, published 1900; *Rhondda Leader*, 4 July 1908; *The Cambrian* 30 August 1901.

<sup>172</sup> J.F.D. Donnelly (1861), p.12.

**Map 4.3: Land availability at Aberavon**



Source: Glamorgan XXV.SW, revised 1897 published 1900. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

There was no lack of ambition in Aberavon in this period; indeed, the very frustration which had led to significant outbursts by councillors regarding ‘the other side’ was no doubt rooted in the fact that their ambitions for Aberavon were being thwarted. In March 1898, Councillor H.J. Stokes had written to the *South Wales Daily Post* to detail his concerns regarding ‘strong competition on several important matters from the “other side”’ and his ‘fear [that] not only the head post office but the county police station, public markets, a public hall, and other institutions will all be on the Port Talbot side’.<sup>173</sup> Stokes was anxious to ‘prevent Aberavon

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<sup>173</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 21 March 1898.

from being wiped out of the map'.<sup>174</sup> In May 1900 Councillor T.H. Burgess reiterated the concerns regarding 'powerful neighbours on the other side'.<sup>175</sup> To the ratepayers and representatives of Aberavon, increased construction on the other side of the narrow river provided visible evidence of wealth and prosperity but it also posed something of a threat.

Consequently, Port Talbot's increased importance as the location of choice for new businesses led to considerable decline in the status of Aberavon, an incorporated borough of around 7,000 inhabitants but which in 1899 was still fighting to obtain its own postmark.<sup>176</sup> As had been the case for decades, letters between residents of Aberavon were required to be sent via 'the suburban resort of Port Talbot'.<sup>177</sup> As 'the other side' prospered, Aberavon's capacity to function as an autonomous unit came under question. Although Aberavon could claim indirect benefits from the development of the docks after the death of C.R.M. Talbot, the capacity to influence decision making was largely absent in this period. Indeed, many of Aberavon's ambitions became dependent on the consent and support of individuals and organisations that were resident outside the borough.

As Cannadine has noted, this dependence on the largesse of local landowners was a common feature for developing towns in the late nineteenth century.<sup>178</sup> By this time, many landowners were beginning to step back from a personal involvement in local government and their roles had become more ceremonial.<sup>179</sup> Land agents, however, continued to represent owners' interests on governing bodies such as parish vestries, local boards and district councils. On the Port Talbot side of the River Afan the availability of land and funding had combined with a network of relationships between local government and the local landowner to result in mutually beneficial outcomes. In Aberavon, however, no resident benefactor existed, neither could the local authority claim to have yet developed the levels of confidence, wealth and unity which Cannadine associated with middle-class élites in growing towns.<sup>180</sup> Therefore, whilst the absence of a large landowner prevented landed dominance or interference, it also served as an obstacle to the ambitions of places like Aberavon which were keen to develop but lacked the resources to do so.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> *The Cambrian*, 18 May 1900.

<sup>176</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 December 1899.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> D. Cannadine (1982), p.4.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p.9.

The borough remained keen to develop its own amenities as best it could and an Aberavon and District Chamber of Trade had been established in 1893 with two of its members, chemist Tom Burgess, and slate merchant William Williams being supported as nominees for council seats at a by-election in 1898.<sup>181</sup> However, by 1901 the Chamber was in decline and in 1914 became Aberavon & Port Talbot Chamber of Trade. Croll identified a similar situation in Merthyr, noting that social organisations were formed but the majority failed after only a short time in operation.<sup>182</sup> A contributory factor to Merthyr's incapacity to sustain these groups was the notion of a 'floating population' which included shopkeepers, who were said to have used the town to make money before moving on, but since the 1860s Aberavon's new tradesmen had put down roots in the community and many had become elected representatives or council officials.<sup>183</sup>

In one capacity, at least, Aberavon appeared to be able to compete with Port Talbot: leisure. Already recognised as a source of entertainment due to its cheap theatre, "Palace of Varieties" and numerous public houses, on a leisure basis Aberavon compared favourably with the 'terribly dull' Port Talbot, where the temperance of the influential Miss Talbot severely limited the number of licensed premises on her estate.<sup>184</sup> Miss Talbot's dislike of alcohol consumption had ensured that there were only three licensed premises for the 'roughly 9,000 inhabitants' of the parish of Margam in 1899.<sup>185</sup> Furthermore, lessees on Talbot land were prohibited by covenant from carrying out business without Miss Talbot's licence or consent. In 1901, aerated water manufacturer James Shugg Hendra was successfully sued by Miss Talbot for breaching his covenant: by 1906 he had left Port Talbot to become proprietor of a coffee tavern in Aberavon.<sup>186</sup> In contrast, Aberavon's "Palace", owned by David Jones who was also landlord of the Red Lion, was a popular venue for both plays and entertainments of a high standard.<sup>187</sup> A portable theatre was also a feature of many towns in this period, and Ebley's Olympic Theatre had been granted a three-month licence to operate in the marketplace at Aberavon in 1894.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 6 May 1893 and *South Wales Daily Post*, 16 November 1898.

<sup>182</sup> A. Croll (2000), p.44 - a Chamber of Trade had been formed in Merthyr in 1878.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18 and 41; see also Chapter Two.

<sup>184</sup> *The Cambrian*, 3 November 1899.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *The Cambrian*, 26 July 1901 and 23 August 1901; *Kelly's Directory (1906)*.

<sup>187</sup> *The Cambrian*, 28 December 1900 and 24 November 1899.

<sup>188</sup> *The Glamorgan Gazette*, 18 May 1894.

Dyson's Diorama was also a regular feature in Aberavon, along with operettas at the public hall performed by local amateurs or visiting professionals at holiday times.<sup>189</sup>

Aberavon's transition towards the provision of leisure can be followed in Table 4.1 and Fig. 4.3 below. Earlier chapters have highlighted the high numbers of public houses and beer retailers in the town, and as the period progressed these establishments increased and were joined by coffee taverns, refreshment rooms and eating-houses. In 1895, ice cream manufacturers had set up business in the town and a fried fish shop featured in the 1906 directory. Port Talbot's amenities were very different and it is evident from the figures below that the two communities served very different purposes. In Port Talbot, manufacturing remained constant throughout the period and the number of professionals offering services as architects, solicitors and brokers not only grew but had surpassed that of Aberavon by 1906. Construction and associated trades account for the rapid rise in housing provision in Port Talbot in the latter years of the nineteenth century: numbers almost trebled there between 1891 and 1895. In contrast, construction services in Aberavon were static between 1891 and 1895 before falling slightly in 1906; other than in 1891, the number of providers was also considerably lower than in Port Talbot.

Whilst specific retailers featured strongly in Aberavon and their numbers grew in Port Talbot as the commercial area developed, the presence of unspecified retailers remained constant in Aberavon. As Pennance and Yanney noted, dwelling houses could be converted to accommodate one room as a shop, and although the premises might have operated on a part-time basis they were often open for business when other shops had closed.<sup>190</sup> Addresses in trade directories for these unspecified traders reveal a variety of locations, some in recognised retail streets such as Cwmavon Road or Water Street, but others in more residential areas which were further away from the established shops. Whereas the number of unspecified shops continued to increase gradually throughout the period in Aberavon, in Port Talbot the five such shops in 1895 had decreased to three by 1906, suggesting that the retail needs of shoppers in Port Talbot were being met by established retailers during conventional opening hours.

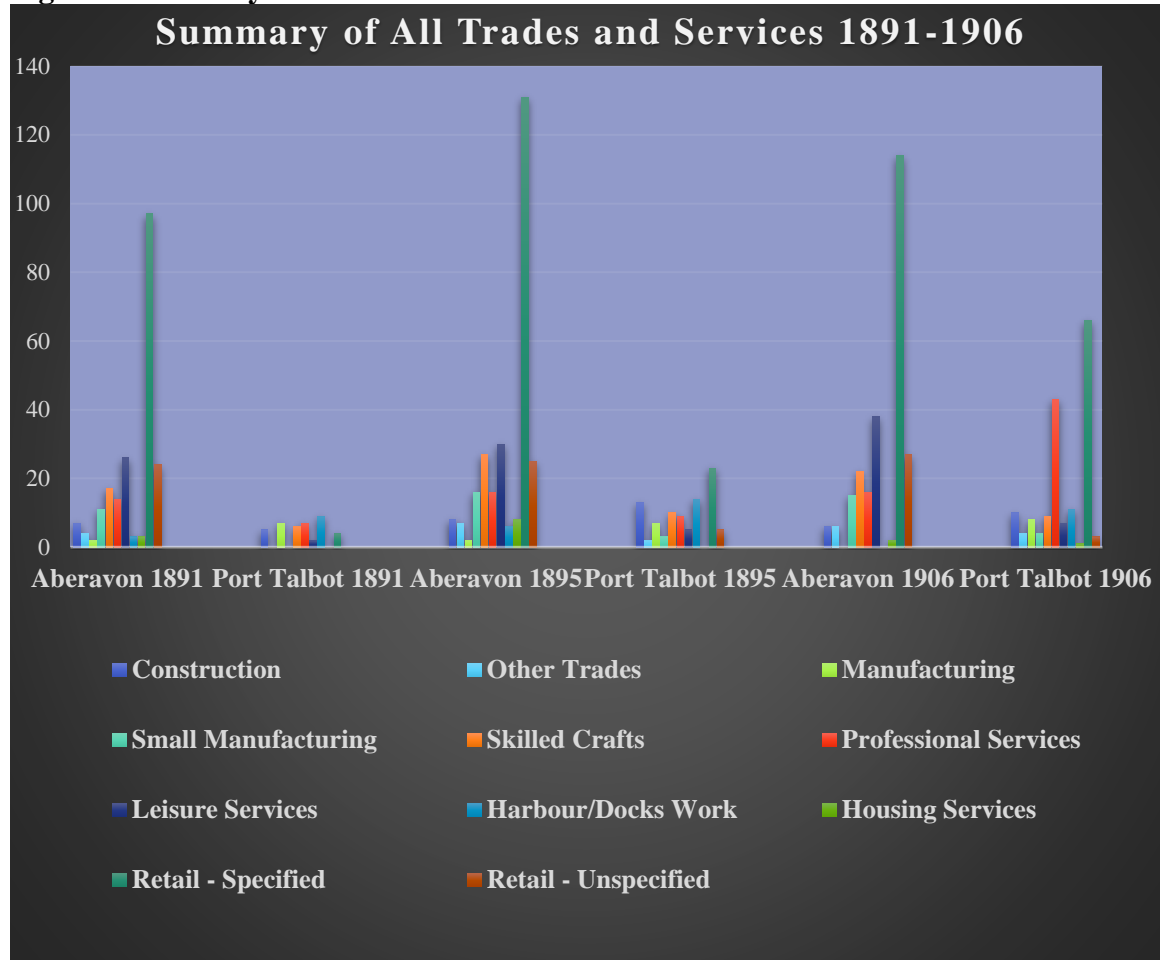
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<sup>189</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 3 February 1890; *Cardiff Times*, 2 January 1909; and *The Cambrian*, 8 April 1904.

<sup>190</sup> F.G. Pennance and B.S. Yanney, 'Competition in the Retail Grocery Trade 1850-1939', *Economica* 22, (1955), 303-317, p.312.



**Fig. 4.3: Summary of all trades and services in Aberavon and Port Talbot 1891-1906**



Source: Kelly's Directory of South Wales and Monmouthshire 1891, 1895 and 1906

Differences in the social composition of the two communities are evident in the types of premises and services which became available towards the end of the period. Whilst house moves were commonplace during the nineteenth century, many householders were unlikely to have owned a great deal of furniture. By 1906, however, the number of establishments selling furniture and household goods in both settlements had increased and Mark Surrige had set up in business as a furniture remover in Tydraw Street, Port Talbot. Twelve hairdressers kept premises in Aberavon by 1906 and a further four were available in Port Talbot. Ladies' hairdressing outside the home had become popular by this time, but although Joseph Allen of Wind Street, Swansea advertised his services there is no evidence to suggest that it was specifically ladies' hairdressing which accounted for the significant increase in Aberavon.<sup>191</sup>

<sup>191</sup> *The Cambrian*, 11 September 1891; *Glamorgan Free Press*, 22 May 1897.

In 1899, however, the presence of a ‘lady barber’ in Aberavon was said to have prompted jealousy in Port Talbot.<sup>192</sup>

Aberavon Council gave the credit for Port Talbot’s advancement to Margam’s ‘energetic land agent’, Edward Knox.<sup>193</sup> The council was keenly aware of Aberavon’s inability to develop and although its numerous landowners advertised their land to let for building purposes there was rarely a concerted effort to attract the interest of contractors, a fact which frustrated a number of councillors.<sup>194</sup> The extensive house building of the early 1890s had stalled by 1901 and barely twenty houses had been built in Aberavon in ‘the past four or five years’ but in stark contrast, MUDC was said to have passed plans for twenty-one houses at just one recent meeting.<sup>195</sup> Unlike in Aberavon, where land ownership had historically been disparate and often contested, Margam property was owned by the Talbot family and after 1890 decisions on land use could be made relatively quickly.<sup>196</sup> Miss Talbot’s considerable interest was exercised freely, contributing to the rapid development of the new settlement. Indeed, in 1910 her then land agent Godfrey Lipscomb referred to Miss Talbot as ‘the best friend any council could have’.<sup>197</sup> In 1899, tenders had been invited for the construction of twenty-five cottages at the docks for Miss Talbot, the plans for which would have been passed by MUDC.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 8 June 1899.

<sup>193</sup> *The Cambrian*, 21 June 1901.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> See Chapter Two and J.F.D. Donnelly (1861) *Reports on a Petition* . . . p.12, which blames the condition of the town on the large number of landowners.

<sup>197</sup> *Evening Express*, 19 July 1910.

<sup>198</sup> *Western Mail*, 10 March 1899.

**Table 4.1: Retail, Professional and Service Provision in Aberavon and Port Talbot**

Type	1891 Aberavon	1891 Port Talbot	1895 Aberavon	1895 Port Talbot	1906 Aberavon	1906 Port Talbot
Accountants		1				1
Architects	2		3	1		4
Auctioneers	1		2		3	2
Banks	2	1	2	1	1	3
Beer Retailers	16		17		11	
Boot & Shoe Makers	9		13	3	14	2
Builders & Contractors	2	4	6	7	5	4
Building Societies	2		3	1	2	
Butchers	10		23	2	17	4
Chemists	2		3		3	2
Clubs/Institutes	1	1	2	1	1	1
Coal Dealers	3		5	2	2	3
Colliery Offices						5
Confectioners	1		1		4	3
Dentists			1		1	1
Doctors	3		3	1	4	1
Drapers	12	3	17	2	11	9
Eating Houses	2		2		2	
Fishmongers	1		4		3	
Fried Fish Shops					1	
Furniture Removers						1
Grocers	26		28	10	22	24
Hairdressers	5		7	2	12	4
Hotels	2		4	2	3	4
Household goods	2		3	1	8	5
Ice Cream Manufacturers			1		1	
Insurance Agents	2	2		1	1	6
Ironmongers	4		4		3	2
Jewellers	3		1			1
Manufacturers/Proprietors	2	7	2	7		8
Monumental Masons		2		3		3
Music/Violin Teachers		1	2	1	2	1
Newsagents			3	3	2	4
Outfitters	3		3		5	2
Painters			1	1		3
Pawnbrokers	2		2		2	
Pianoforte Dealers						1
Plumbers		1	1	5	1	2
Public Houses	19	1	18	2	22	1
Refreshment Rooms	2		3		5	
Ship Brokers				2		13
Ship/harbour-related	3	9	6	14		11
Solicitors	3		3	1	4	5
Tailors	2	1	3	1	3	1
Unspecified Shops	24		25	5	27	3
Watchmakers			3		3	

The use of Margam Estate land as well as the availability of Talbot funding were therefore major factors in accounting for the growing disparity between Port Talbot and Aberavon. Miss Talbot was responsible for providing land and funding of £3,500 for public baths in Forge Road, Port Talbot; the ‘Grand Hotel’ in Station Road in 1902; and a new church, St. Theodore’s built in 1897 at an estimated cost of £30,000 and named in memory of Miss Talbot’s only brother, Theodore Mansel Talbot.<sup>199</sup> Talbot had been Worshipful Master of Afan Lodge of Freemasons when it was formed in Aberavon in 1860 and as Chapter Three has shown, the Lodge had been a major factor in the social lives and networks of many men in the borough. By the end of this period, however, the lodge had been relocated from Aberavon’s public hall, where it had been based since the hall opened in 1874, to new, purpose-built premises in Forge Road, Port Talbot.<sup>200</sup> Freemason Morgan Cox, aged 53, of Courtland Place won the tender for building with a proposed cost of £1,960. The land on which the hall was built had been leased from the Margam Estate, and Miss Talbot surrendered her shares in Aberavon Public Hall to donate £700 to the new building fund.<sup>201</sup> The lodge retained its name after 1909 but registration books referred to ‘Afan Lodge No. 833 Port Talbot’ rather than ‘Afan Lodge No. 833 Aberavon’.<sup>202</sup>

Further evidence of the shifting relative status of Aberavon and Port Talbot can be found in the relocation of official buildings and amenities from the former to the latter. In 1895 the county police station had been located in Talbot Square, Aberavon, but by 1901 the county police were based in new premises in Station Road, Port Talbot, built at a cost of £4,500.<sup>203</sup> Both Borough and County Sessions were held at Aberavon police station, but the small building had no accommodation for waiting witnesses.<sup>204</sup> Two public houses flanked the police station, and it was not uncommon for witnesses to be drunk in court.<sup>205</sup> The case for relocating the police station to Port Talbot was heard by a Joint Standing Committee of Glamorgan County Council and was read by their clerk, Miss Talbot’s cousin T.M. Franklen, who pointed out that ‘the population in the Port Talbot district exceeded that of Aberavon. The new police-station and court would also be situated in that part of the district which was likely to increase’.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> *The Cambrian*, 6 August 1897.

<sup>200</sup> *Evening Express*, 6 January 1909.

<sup>201</sup> *The Cambrian*, 22 October 1909; P. M. Davies (2012).

<sup>202</sup> Freemasonry Membership Registers, 1751-1921, pp.57-62.

<sup>203</sup> 1901 Census of England and Wales; *Kelly’s Directory (1906)*.

<sup>204</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 3 June 1897.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite Aberavon council protesting against the change by submitting a memorial, it was stated that land at Port Talbot had already been purchased; there was no discussion and the ‘objectionable’ police station and court were eventually replaced by a new building which was opened in July 1899.<sup>207</sup>

Aberavon’s poor postal facilities in comparison to its neighbour had been a bone of contention since the 1850s.<sup>208</sup> The siting of the main office outside the borough had led to restrictions being placed on the ‘inferior’ postmaster at Aberavon.<sup>209</sup> Aberavon Council and the Chamber of Trade petitioned the Postmaster General to have the positions reversed but received no reply, prompting outrage amongst the burgesses and the return of ‘old hate’.<sup>210</sup> After almost fifty years of efforts on the part of Aberavon, letters between Aberavon residents were still being sent to Port Talbot ‘to be ear-marked by the dignitaries at that suburban resort’.<sup>211</sup> Despite a council deputation to London in March 1898 to appeal to the Duke of Norfolk for improved facilities, the incorporated borough remained without a postmark of its own.<sup>212</sup>

Provision of public schools for the children of Port Talbot and Aberavon also highlighted the early capacity of Port Talbot to appropriate Aberavon’s ambitions. With the formation of Glamorgan County Council in 1888 the responsibility for education passed to that body as a joint education committee. On the proposal of Cllr. Llewellyn Howell, it was agreed that the joint education committee should be approached to include Aberavon within a new scheme to provide technical and intermediate education in Glamorgan.<sup>213</sup> Aberavon’s application for an intermediate school was approved in November 1890, and plans were put in place to erect buildings for ‘80 boys and 40 girls, at a cost of not less than £15 per head, equal to a minimum sum of £1,800’.<sup>214</sup> Within days Miss Talbot had agreed to provide a suitable site, but Aberavon’s town clerk had been instructed to contact the Earl of Jersey as well as Mrs. Llewellyn of Baglan Hall, both of whom owned land in the borough.<sup>215</sup> Just weeks later land had been donated by Miss Talbot on the ‘main thoroughfare’ of Station Road, Port Talbot and reports on progress of the project quickly switched from the construction of ‘Aberavon

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., and *The Cambrian*, 14 July 1899.

<sup>208</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>209</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 21 July 1893.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 December 1899.

<sup>212</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 21 March 1898.

<sup>213</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 November 1889.

<sup>214</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 13 November 1900.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

Intermediate School' to 'Port Talbot Intermediate School'; Mrs Llewellyn donated £100 but Miss Talbot's donation of land as well as £500 towards construction was clearly the better offer.<sup>216</sup>

Building projects continued throughout the period in Port Talbot, and by 1909 'hundreds of new houses' had been built in Port Talbot, Glyncothrog and the Afan Valley.<sup>217</sup> A new combined housing scheme had been proposed for Port Talbot by three parties: the proprietors of the steel works, S.H. Byass and the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company; each of the three was prepared to put up fifty houses.<sup>218</sup> In contrast, Aberavon's plans to borrow £5,600 for a 'municipal housing scheme' of twenty-four houses for workers had been met with vigorous opposition, including that of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company, the Rhondda and Swansea Bay Railway Company, Messrs. Vivian and Son, Sir Arthur Pendarves Vivian and 'a number of private individuals, in all representing an annual rateable value of £6,000'.<sup>219</sup> Objections were based on a preference for private enterprise to meet demand and a belief that 'the present supply of houses was greater than the demand'; about twenty-three houses in the borough were said to be empty, and one speaker testified that he had 'as many as twenty houses to let' that were close to the borough boundary.<sup>220</sup> Reference to the opponents' rateable value in this way suggests a return to the early nineteenth century notion that political opinion supported by substantial property ownership should be given additional weight, but the practice had been abolished as a result of reforming legislation in 1894.<sup>221</sup>

A.P. Vivian's relationship with Aberavon was complex. Although he had been instrumental in the matter of the bridge between Aberavon and the docks – and Aberavon had given him the honour of opening the bridge – he could not be described as a benefactor. In fact, in 1883, when he was M.P. for Cornwall West, he had blocked the public right of way to the beach by instructing one of his employees to place two locked gates at the entrance.<sup>222</sup> Councillors, led by the mayor, marched to the gates and successfully ordered Vivian's officer to unlock the barricade and re-establish public access.<sup>223</sup> The road crossed a substantial parcel of land in the Sandfields area which Vivian had purchased in 1860 from the old corporation at a considerably

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<sup>216</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 29 September 1892 and 1 December 1892.

<sup>217</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 January 1909.

<sup>218</sup> *The Cambrian*, 18 September 1908.

<sup>219</sup> *Evening Express*, 10 May 1905.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> 56 & 57 Vict. c.73, The Local Government Act 1894.

<sup>222</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 13 October 1883.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

reduced price. The new council later found itself having to pay him annual rent of £40 on the land when it wanted to provide water to the lower part of the town in 1897.<sup>224</sup> Vivian's stance regarding the bridge appears to be based more on establishing ownership than support for Aberavon, and the ceremonial opening on behalf of Aberavon served to underline that ownership to PTR&DC.

Responses to Aberavon's position in relation to Port Talbot varied from straightforward calls to local administrators to think in terms of a more 'modern borough' by making better streets and enhancing the town, to councillor suggestions for new municipal buildings.<sup>225</sup> The calls for a modern borough were made by Jonah Charles, a Labour councillor on MUDC, during a dinner held by the Port Talbot Dockers Sick Benefit Society at Aberavon Public Hall in February 1909; the same event was reported briefly by *The Cambrian*, which took a different tone and used the headline 'Attack on the Ancient Borough'.<sup>226</sup> Charles had been born in Aberavon but he lived and worked in Port Talbot; in 1910 he made an unsuccessful bid for the Aberavon seat on GCC (see Table 4.2). New civic buildings had, in fact, been proposed as early as 1894 by Councillor W.H. Bond but his proposal was 'deferred *sine die*'.<sup>227</sup> Margam, in contrast, borrowed £2,275 in 1906 to fund the building of new council offices on the site of Messrs. Vivian & Sons' old stables in Taibach (see Image 10).<sup>228</sup>

**Image 10: The new Margam Urban District Council Offices, built in 1906**



Photograph reproduced by permission of Damian Owen, Port Talbot Historical Society

<sup>224</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 17 December 1897.

<sup>225</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 20 February 1909 and *South Wales Daily News*, 22 March 1894.

<sup>226</sup> *The Cambrian*, 19 February 1909.

<sup>227</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 22 March 1894.

<sup>228</sup> *Evening Express*, 7 February 1906.

## Managing and Influencing Outcomes

During a period where co-operative working in the provision of utilities would have been mutually beneficial, rivalry and parochialism obstructed progress and delayed delivery in both communities. Central to the issue was the question of which of the two settlements could claim superiority, a theme which coloured both this period and the next as discussions regarding possible amalgamation began to re-emerge. The situation was exacerbated by the formation of the new county and county borough councils. Established by the Local Government Act of 1888 (the LGA) the new bodies formed a level of government between the central and the local. Although previously considered unnecessary, the councils were designed to perform oversight duties on behalf of central government.<sup>229</sup> Consequently, ambitious local councillors in Aberavon and Margam also sought seats on the county council as a means of increasing their status and bolstering local autonomy; in both Margam and Aberavon the GCC members were all connected with their respective local authorities (see Table 4.2).

Chandler has noted an assumption in central government that local authority leadership in the new bodies would reflect that of Parliament and inevitably pursue central values.<sup>230</sup> Leadership of Glamorgan County Council met this expectation, but as Table 4.2 also shows, political affiliation was often abandoned in favour of expediency. Despite the expectations of central government, overlapping personnel and potentially conflicting values impacted on the capacity of local authorities to voluntarily provide what Doyle referred to as uniform, efficient services.<sup>231</sup> The 'carrot of central subsidy and the stick of inspection' were therefore employed to compel urban authorities to provide welfare for their growing populations without direct intervention from central government.<sup>232</sup>

At the start of the period being examined here Aberavon council was comprised of sixteen men, nine of whom were retailers and two of whom were tinsmith manufacturers.<sup>233</sup> In contrast, Margam Local Board was made up of only nine members, but rivalries were intensified by a GCC resolution in 1893 to divide the district into three wards represented by fifteen members.<sup>234</sup> Three wards, Central, Western and Eastern were created, with six members

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<sup>229</sup> J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.269.

<sup>230</sup> J.A. Chandler (2007), p.110.

<sup>231</sup> B.M. Doyle, in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.313.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p.289; M.J. Daunton (2018), p.17.

<sup>233</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/3 and *The Cambrian*, November 1889 – October 1890.

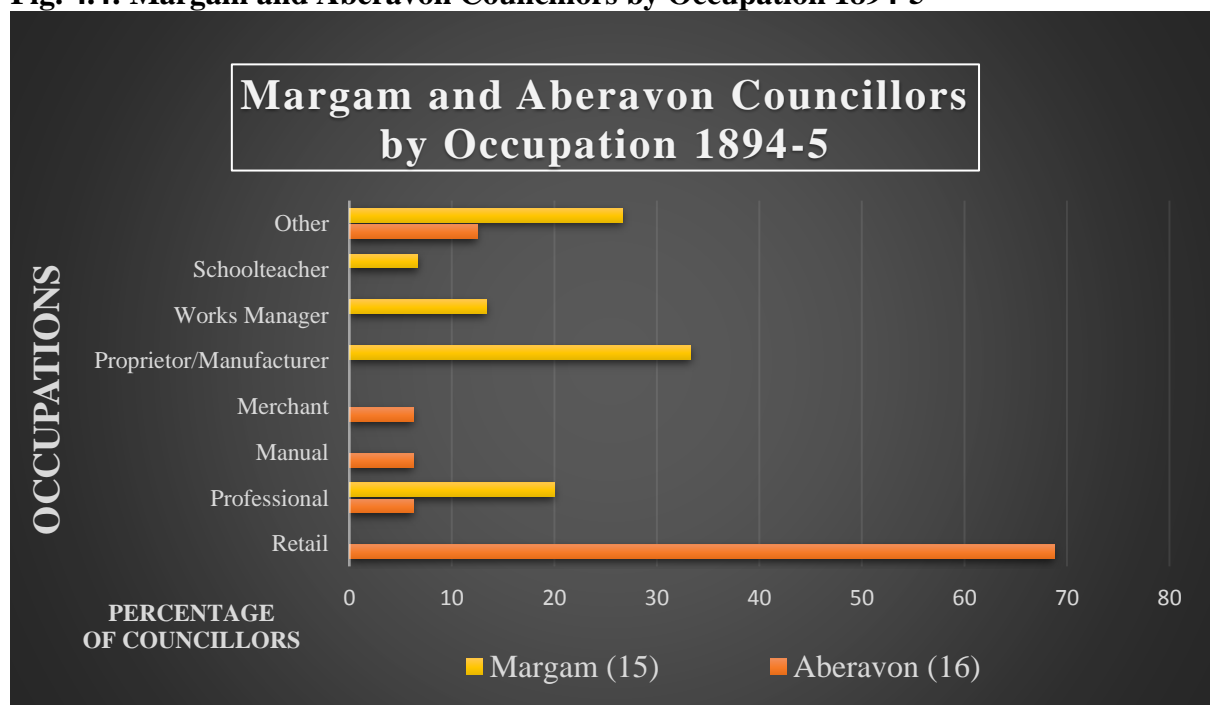
<sup>234</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 11 May 1893 and *South Wales Daily News*, 12 May 1893.



representing Central and Western, and three representing Eastern.<sup>235</sup> The numbers of qualifying voters in each ward were not reported, but the numbers of houses were 1,756, 2,793 and 150, respectively.<sup>236</sup> The following year the Local Government Act (LGA) of 1894 revised the Board's title to 'Urban District Council' and allowed for the chairman to serve as a county justice of the peace for the whole of his term of office.<sup>237</sup>

Differences in occupation between the two councils after 1894 are highlighted in Fig. 4.4, where it can be seen that the established practice of electing retailers to the council in Aberavon was still being maintained. One explanation for this is that the LGA of 1894 had included a clause which allowed married as well as single women to vote in county and borough elections, and as John Wyn Pritchard has suggested, the close, face-to-face contact between retailers and their female customers would have been instrumental in affecting outcomes at the ballot box.<sup>238</sup> In Margam, no retailers were present on the council at this time and elections remained closely

**Fig. 4.4: Margam and Aberavon Councillors by Occupation 1894-5**



Source: Welsh Newspapers Online Note: 'Other' in Margam is made up of four occupations: Estate Superintendent; Farmer; Gentleman; and Mechanic, and in Aberavon of two: Weaver and Plumber

<sup>235</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 7 September 1893.

<sup>236</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 12 May 1893.

<sup>237</sup> Local Government Act 1894; *South Wales Echo*, 3 September 1894; *South Wales Daily News*, 1 January 1895.

<sup>238</sup> J.W. Pritchard (1994), p.203.

tied to controlling interests in local land and industries, as the Margam ratepayers had noted the previous year. Council meetings took place mid-afternoon, whereas in Aberavon after 1894 both monthly and quarterly meetings were scheduled for 6.30p.m. in order to accommodate working councillors.<sup>239</sup>

Progressive attitudes had been in evidence in Aberavon at the start of the period, when the council affixed its seal to a petition to allow women the vote at parliamentary elections and also passed a motion in 1889 to allow the press into its committee meetings.<sup>240</sup> The latter decision indicates that Aberavon council contrasted with Lowell's assertion cited in Chapter Three that committee meetings were very private affairs which were therefore 'singularly open to abuse'.<sup>241</sup> In 1904, Margam Council had still not opened its doors to the press at full council meetings due to concerns that business would be disrupted by speech making.<sup>242</sup> However, in this period it became apparent in Aberavon that dissent and division were beginning to fragment the council as it struggled to cope with responsibilities to ratepayers and an increased sense of competition with Port Talbot and its governing body.

Incidences of disruptive council meetings at this time are well documented; councillors and aldermen alike would resign or walk out of meetings and it was not uncommon for insults to be hurled across the floor.<sup>243</sup> Underlying these outbursts were two connected explanatory factors: an inability to influence or direct outcomes and an absence of shared objectives. As a consequence, leadership within the council was weak and decisions could be overturned by ratepayers at so-called 'indignation meetings'.<sup>244</sup> Councillors were accused of 'betrayal' and became unsure how to proceed in managing the competing needs of ratepayers, councillors and the borough.<sup>245</sup> A new theatre was under construction in the town in 1889, but conditions in some parts were unfavourable, with pigs being kept in Charlotte Street and many houses uncertain of a regular supply of clean water.<sup>246</sup> Three years later newspapers reported that the same street was in a 'deplorable state' and that some houses were 'unfit for human habitation'.<sup>247</sup> Whilst the council had taken steps to address sanitary issues after 1861, urban

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<sup>239</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 10 November 1894.

<sup>240</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 March 1889.

<sup>241</sup> A.L. Lowell (1924), p.179.

<sup>242</sup> *The Cambrian*, 12 August 1904.

<sup>243</sup> For examples see *South Wales Daily Post*, 18 March 1896; *Cardiff Times*, 23 October 1897; *South Wales Daily Post*, 27 April 1898, 5 May 1898 and 29 June 1899.

<sup>244</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 December 1899.

<sup>245</sup> *Western Mail*, 13 July 1893.

<sup>246</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 14 November 1889.

<sup>247</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 22 October 1892.

growth and the retention of unhealthy practices by some inhabitants meant that improvements were an ongoing process.

New bye-laws regarding pigsties and nuisance had been implemented in 1894 under Section 23 of the Public Health (Amendment) Act 1890.<sup>248</sup> This clause aimed to prevent nuisance by forbidding the placement of a pigsty within 100 feet of any dwelling house. Enforcement, however, appears to have been negligible, and the practice of keeping pigs near housing continued. In 1899, when relations between PTR&DC and Aberavon Council were particularly difficult, Edward Knox wrote directly to the Local Government Board to complain about pigs in Aberavon.<sup>249</sup> In justifying his complaint Knox had asserted that Miss Talbot was a large ratepayer in the borough, a figure the council disputed and asserted was just £14.<sup>250</sup>

To administer to the sanitary health of the borough, one salaried official populated the combined post of Surveyor, Inspector of Nuisances and Water Works Manager. The holder was required to possess a Sanitary Inspector's Certificate of the Sanitary Institute of Great Britain and the post was advertised on an annual basis. Despite the onerous work involved, the council's 1893 advertisement for the post drew 44 applications from as far afield as Bath, Pudsey, Sheffield & Manchester.<sup>251</sup> Any responses where the applicant asked for a salary of 'more than £150 *per annum* [were to] be thrown out'.<sup>252</sup> The successful candidate was John Isaac Evans of Dowlais, who was appointed on a salary of £110 a year - £40 as Surveyor, £60 as Inspector of Nuisances and £10 as Water Works Manager.<sup>253</sup> Evans subsequently inspected the 'unsatisfactory' slaughterhouse and reported on the persistent overcrowding in workmen's cottages which had been brought before the council previously but ignored.<sup>254</sup> Evans was also personally responsible for the unpleasant task of disinfecting the clothing of smallpox victims by 'suspension in the fumes of burning sulphur'.<sup>255</sup>

In writing about the Black Country, Trainor has suggested that Wolverhampton became a drain on the civic talent of Bilston when elected representatives shifted their allegiances.<sup>256</sup> In Aberavon, however, any drain of talent appears to have been that of salaried officials and many

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<sup>248</sup> Richard Burton Archives, SWCC: MNA/PP/118/96, Report Book of Inspector of Nuisances, Aberavon, 1894.

<sup>249</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 31 May 1899.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 1 February 1893.

<sup>252</sup> Richard Burton Archives, SWCC: MNA/PP/118/81/1 Minutes of Highways Committee 22 February 1893.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 March 1893.

<sup>254</sup> Richard Burton Archives, SWCC: MNA/PP/118/95, Report Book of Aberavon's Medical Officer of Health.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> R. Trainor (1993), p.374.

left their Aberavon posts to take up similar positions with MUDC. David Edward Jones, Deputy Town Clerk, had become clerk to Margam Local Board in 1887; Edward T. Evans, principal clerk in Aberavon Town Clerk's office left in 1895 to practise as a solicitor in Port Talbot and by 1900 was solicitor to MUDC; James Madden had been Treasurer at Aberavon from 1883 but was with MUDC in 1895; Charles Cook, Deputy Clerk at Aberavon since 1898 left in 1908 to become MUDC's accountant; and Dr. J.H. Davies, Medical Officer of Health, moved to MUDC in 1893.

Explanations for many of these departures can be found in newspaper accounts of Aberavon councillor conduct at the time, which ranged from 'laughable' in 1893 to 'disgraceful' in April 1898 when accusations of drunkenness in the council room escalated into arguments in the street.<sup>257</sup> The town clerk remained steadfast, but newspaper reports of council meetings indicate a gradual loss of patience on his part which was evidenced by interruptions and candid remarks.<sup>258</sup> In contrast, Margam UDC appeared to be a more cohesive body and therefore a more attractive career prospect, particularly to those who believed that any future merger would prioritise Port Talbot over the ancient borough. In fact, there appears to have been no animosity against departing officials, as Charles Cook was treated to a dinner where he was presented with an illuminated address and a purse of gold.<sup>259</sup> Furthermore, Ernest Tennant, speaking on behalf of his father, the absent town clerk, 'hoped the time would soon come when Mr. Cook would again, through the amalgamation of Aberavon and Port Talbot Councils, become an official of the borough', a sentiment which was greeted with applause by the assembled councillors and officials.<sup>260</sup>

Following the receipt of 47 applications, a new gas manager had been appointed in Aberavon in the early summer of 1900.<sup>261</sup> Walter Lister, of Llanrwst in north Wales, presented the Council with his initial report on the operations of the gas works on 20 June.<sup>262</sup> The report showed that immediate repairs were required at a cost of £102, the coal stock was short by 92 tons and the treasurer's pass-book revealed that he was owed £1,000.<sup>263</sup> An angry discussion

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<sup>257</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 20 December 1893 and 27 April 1898.

<sup>258</sup> *The Glamorgan Gazette*, 17 August 1894; *South Wales Daily Post*, 1 February 1899.

<sup>259</sup> *Evening Express*, 23 October 1908.

<sup>260</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 October 1908. Cook became accountant to the new Port Talbot Borough Council but in 1926 was arrested in Salisbury and brought back to Port Talbot to face charges of larceny. See *Western Mail*, 7 January 1926 (committed for trial) and 16 February 1926 (found not guilty at Assizes).

<sup>261</sup> *The Cambrian*, 13 April 1900.

<sup>262</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 June 1900.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

ensued, not on the condition of the gas works but on the powers of the Gas Committee; the meeting ended without resolution. By December of that year the situation had been so badly managed that on one occasion the gas supply had been turned off, leading to a council meeting in which the town clerk was unable to see his papers and an alderman held two wax matches for him to read the minutes back to members.<sup>264</sup> Lister resigned his position the following July.<sup>265</sup>

Margam's reluctance to engage with Aberavon prevented gas lighting being installed in the Port Talbot area and also led to unnecessary expenses in submitting a Bill to establish a gas works in Margam that would eliminate dependence on Aberavon. *The Cambrian* maintained that Margam's reluctance was based on a simple decision to have nothing to do with Aberavon.<sup>266</sup> In addition to a gas main along High Street to Taibach, at least half a mile of gas main had been fitted by Aberavon in the Margam district, yet MUDC had opted to light the streets with oil lamps in winter and not light them at all for four or five months of the year.<sup>267</sup> Whilst the council had the right to provide gas to Port Talbot, Taibach and Cwmavon the quality of that gas was poor; divisions appeared in the council between those who favoured a new gas works and those, like Labour mayor Timothy Owen, who took a more short-term view and became known as the 'anti-new gas works party'.<sup>268</sup> It would be 1909 before Aberavon acquired a new gas works and operated it at a profit.<sup>269</sup>

Under these circumstances the potential for negotiating the pressing issue of water supply with MUDC appeared increasingly unlikely, as did the provision of an isolation hospital. Cholera and smallpox were persistent threats, with the source of the latter in 1894 being traced to a mariner at Port Talbot; the Medical Officer of Health's report of that year noted sixteen cases and one death.<sup>270</sup> In Margam, a new hospital had been provided by Miss Talbot, but in Aberavon, despite the recent smallpox outbreak brief discussions were followed by indecision and the corporation appeared to be split between improvers and economisers.<sup>271</sup> The Medical Officer of Health had stressed the need for improvements to the facilities available to contain contagious diseases, reporting in 1895 that, 'The more rapidly this town grows and the more

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<sup>264</sup> *The Cambrian*, 7 December 1900.

<sup>265</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 June 1900.

<sup>266</sup> *The Cambrian*, 23 August 1901.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> *The Cambrian*, 18 July 1902.

<sup>269</sup> *The Cambrian*, 13 August 1909 and *Cardiff Times*, 28 May 1910.

<sup>270</sup> Richard Burton Archives, SWCC: MNA/PP/118/95.

<sup>271</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 18 January 1894.

the port develops, so we shall find will infectious forms of disease be more frequently met with'.<sup>272</sup> Meetings on the subject were short, and one joint meeting to discuss proposals for a joint facility with neighbouring Briton Ferry was abandoned as no GCC representative attended.<sup>273</sup>

Margam council was well aware of Aberavon's difficulties in procuring a water supply. Eager to engage in some profit from Aberavon, a deputation from MUDC, led by Sidney H. Byass, attended the town council meeting on 1 June 1897.<sup>274</sup> Byass informed the council that MUDC was about to construct a new waterworks which could guarantee Aberavon 70,000 gallons of water a day at a minimum cost of £300 per year.<sup>275</sup> Aberavon's councillors rejected the offer unanimously, stating after the deputation had left that the terms were 'ridiculous'.<sup>276</sup> The council was determined to be self-sufficient and build its own reservoir, but its success was dependent on the largesse of Miss Talbot in leasing them land. However, Miss Talbot's subsequent refusal to let any more land for water meant that Aberavon had no alternative but to accept a supply from MUDC and in the four months up to 15 September 1905 the town consumed 11,357,000 gallons.<sup>277</sup>

As the numbers of elected 'working men' grew, so did their confidence and ambitions. In 1897, collier Rees Llewellyn was elected to MUDC's Central Ward, ousting W.S.J. Bray, manager of Margam Copper Works.<sup>278</sup> The following year Llewellyn was joined by Edward Howe, a tin worker, and then by Thomas "Tom" Jones, another collier in 1899. In April 1908, grocer James Preston, one of MUDC's very few recent retailer councillors, lost his seat to a new Labour candidate, and by 1909 Labour held seven out of the eighteen available seats.<sup>279</sup> In April 1909, as a means of increasing the representation of working men in the magistracy Tom Jones proposed an amendment that insurance agent Daniel Wellington be Chair for the ensuing year.<sup>280</sup> His amendment was lost, and Thomas Gray took the chair for the eleventh time, but it was evident that the days of elections not being fought on political lines were over and that James Preston's belief that elections were 'rapidly developing into a Capital and Labour

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<sup>272</sup> Richard Burton Archives, SWCC: MNA/PP/118/95.

<sup>273</sup> *Evening Express*, 23 April 1903.

<sup>274</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 2 June 1897.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 September 1905.

<sup>278</sup> *Evening Express*, 6 April 1897.

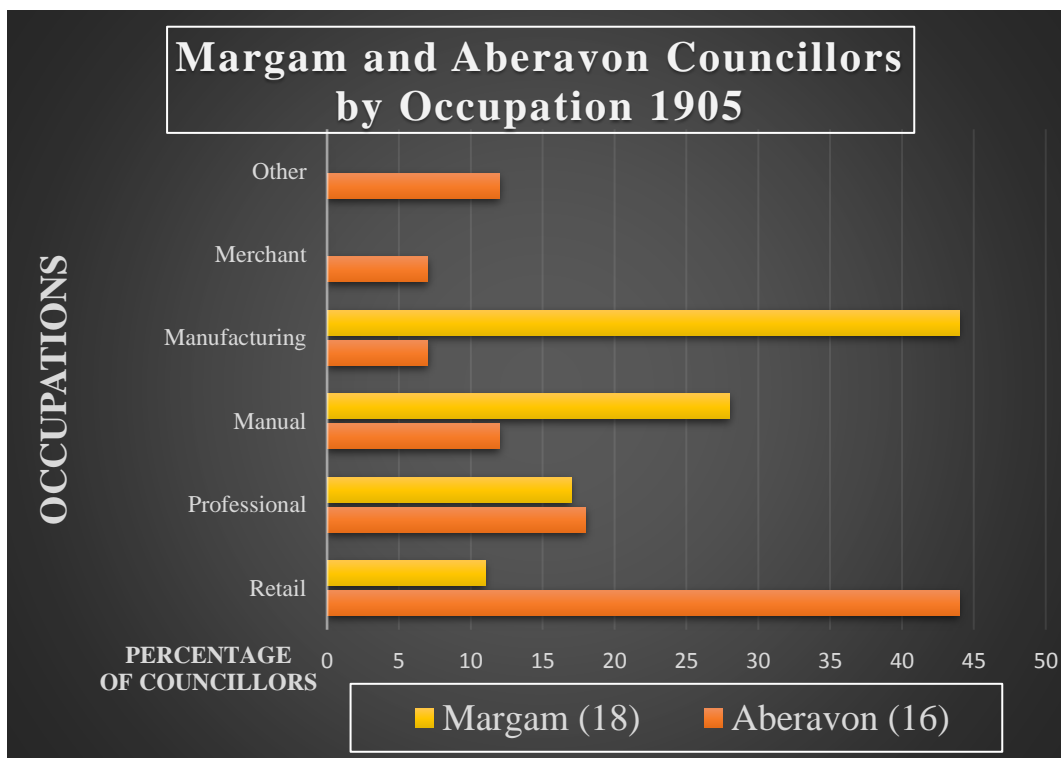
<sup>279</sup> *The Cambrian*, 9 April 1909.

<sup>280</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 23 April 1909.

question' was correct.<sup>281</sup> Relations between the two groups were uneasy, however, and in November 1909 the Chair of Finance Committee, Labour's Rees Llewellyn, resigned his position after the Surveyor referred to his comments as 'infernal impudence'.<sup>282</sup>

Fig. 4.5 illustrates the composition of MUDC and Aberavon Council in 1905. Despite a general decline in numbers of small-scale retailers in what Pennance and Yanney described as the 'passing of the grocer' in the early part of the twentieth century, retailers remained prominent as elected members in Aberavon.<sup>283</sup> However, the increase in retail provision on the

**Fig. 4.5: Margam and Aberavon Councillors by Occupation 1905**



Source: Welsh Newspapers Online

eastern side of the River Afan resulted in only a minimal increase in retailer representation in Margam; a comparison of tables 4.4 and 4.5 illustrates that the election of manual workers increased considerably in Margam up to 1905. In 1894-5 there were no manual workers, but ten years later they made up almost one-third of the council. Explanations for this rise can be linked to the heavy industry in the area and the opportunities available for working men to participate in strong trades union movements. Union men with experience and skills in

<sup>281</sup> *The Cambrian*, 10 April 1908.

<sup>282</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 13 November 1909.

<sup>283</sup> Pennance and Yanney (1955), p.311.

negotiation were drawn to local government at this time and many would later become candidates in the County elections (see Table 4.2).

Throughout the period it appears evident that the local governments on each side of the river were experiencing internal struggles; they were also reluctant to engage in co-operative working and preferred to operate autonomously. However, as the Port Talbot area drew closer to Aberavon and the interests of the two communities became increasingly connected, it became apparent that neither could function in a vacuum. Provision of services on at least an informal basis could be of mutual benefit to both. However, Margam's industrial élite had little to gain from the quarrelsome retailer councillors of Aberavon, and the ancient borough, having fought long and hard for its independence and incorporation, appeared determined to reinforce its status as Port Talbot expanded.

Aberavon councillors had been consistently keen to extend the boundaries of the municipal borough. However, there was a considerable difference between including the urban district of Margam known as Port Talbot within the boundaries of an incorporated borough and the borough itself being subsumed into the emerging new district. A paper produced by Fred. E. Clark of Aberavon town clerk's office in December 1901 argued the case for extension of Aberavon's boundaries.<sup>284</sup> Baker placed responsibility for the failure of T.D. Daniel's scheme firmly on the shoulders of C.R.M. Talbot, whose preference and influence at that time led to the creation of a new local government district for Margam, thereby preventing a boundary extension.<sup>285</sup> The paper was presented at the Constitutional Club, Station Road and following its reading and some discussion a large majority of attendees voted in favour of 'some kind of amalgamation'.<sup>286</sup>

*The Cambrian* was also advocating amalgamation as a means of reducing rates and expenses.<sup>287</sup> By January 1903, Cwmavon, which had lost the bulk of its industrial infrastructure, was looking to Aberavon for amalgamation, but acknowledged the view of MUDC that Aberavon's indebtedness was 'a big obstacle'.<sup>288</sup> In contrast to Margam, however,

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<sup>284</sup> *The Cambrian*, 13 December 1901.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> *Evening Express*, 23 February 1899 and *The Cambrian*, 17 May 1901.

<sup>288</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 17 January 1903.



at this time Aberavon held assets such as the slaughterhouse and the market, shown in Image 11, whereas MUDC, which relied principally on the private provision of services, had none.

**Image 11: Aberavon (not Port Talbot) Market, c.1900**



Photograph reproduced by permission of Damian Owen, Port Talbot Historical Society

The market was destroyed by fire in January 1907, which caused damage estimated at £8,000.<sup>289</sup> The property appears to have been either under-insured or its value over-estimated, as the company paid out only £1,900, less than a quarter of the sum expected.<sup>290</sup> The market's importance to the borough was illustrated by the laying of a foundation stone for a new building in May of 1908, an act which underlined the significance of public buildings as markers of status.<sup>291</sup>

On a practical basis, amalgamation by borough extension appeared to be a sensible option, not least as a means of avoiding the costs of duplication. In 1905 the town council of Aberavon had written formally to MUDC regarding the extension of the municipal boundary to the limits of the Parliamentary boundary.<sup>292</sup> Aberavon would remain the dominant party, but the tone of

<sup>289</sup> *The Cambrian*, 18 January 1907.

<sup>290</sup> *Evening Express*, 29 January 1907.

<sup>291</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 8 May 1908.

<sup>292</sup> WGAS PTL UD/Ma 1/4, letter dated 13 November 1905; *Evening Express*, 14 November 1905.

their letter was conciliatory, stressing the advisability of negotiation and suggesting the appointment of a committee from within MUDC which could meet with a counterpart in Aberavon to discuss details.<sup>293</sup> Inhabitants of the parish of Michaelston Lower, which included the settlement of Cwmavon, were said to be considering severing their connection with Neath Rural District Council and this offered Aberavon an opportunity to bring the urban district councils together in a new, larger borough.<sup>294</sup> MUDC, however, was not prepared to negotiate an extension and instead asked Aberavon to submit proposals in writing for consideration; the impasse continued.<sup>295</sup>

Aberavon's vulnerability in this period was also highlighted by a 1907 proposal from Briton Ferry District Council to place parts of Aberavon under its authority.<sup>296</sup> The far north-western corner of the Borough of Aberavon was adjacent to Briton Ferry and was the site of a small number of metal works.<sup>297</sup> Rates were paid to Aberavon, but separation from the town by a large expanse of open and uninhabited land meant that the works identified more with close neighbour Briton Ferry. Aberavon opposed the proposal in council in 1907 but the area would remain contested throughout the borough extension discussions.<sup>298</sup>

It had been a sense of pride in Aberavon which had provoked the original outbursts against 'the other side' by Councillor Stokes in 1898 and Councillor Burgess in 1900, but by 1908 the council was six months in arrears on the lease of the post office and had received a solicitor's letter; it is telling that council reaction was to defer the question for a month.<sup>299</sup> In the council, opinions differed on the way forward for Aberavon, but it appears clear that the expansion of Port Talbot had influenced the ancient borough's future in ways that had not been anticipated by its elected representatives. As Image 12 shows, the narrow streets of what had been a proud and growing town were comparing unfavourably with the spacious developments on the Margam side of the river.

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<sup>293</sup> WGAS PTL UD/Ma 1/4.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> *Evening Express*, 28 November 1907.

<sup>297</sup> 1917 Boundary Commission map of Glamorgan showing the municipal boundary of Aberavon: [https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps/sheet/bc\\_reports\\_1917/Glamorgan\\_1917](https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/maps/sheet/bc_reports_1917/Glamorgan_1917) [retrieved 10 December 2021]. See also Chapter Five.

<sup>298</sup> *Evening Express*, 28 November 1907 and see Chapter Five.

<sup>299</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 16 May 1908.

**Image 12: Mayor William Williams' civic procession through Aberavon in 1908**



Photograph reproduced by permission of Damian Owen, Port Talbot Historical Society

**The Consequences for Aberavon**

In this period comparisons between Aberavon and the settlement which became known as Port Talbot cannot fail to be based on anything but investment and influence. What little leverage Aberavon held in the provision of services was eroded when the new community gained the upper hand after 1890. Aberavon's borough status remained its main asset, but Images 7, 8, 9, 11 and 12 highlight the physical differences between the two communities in this period. By 1901, the corporation was said to have been 'waiting like Micawber' for 'somebody or something' and was criticised as being unable to 'take the initiative'.<sup>300</sup> Rather than being unable or unwilling to take the initiative, however, Aberavon council's progress was simply heavily dependent on the agreement or co-operation of landed interests both inside and outside the borough.

Autonomous self-government as a municipal corporation could not guarantee the delivery of ambitions in Aberavon. In fact, Aberavon's experiences in this period tend to emphasise the importance of co-operation rather than competition. Whilst "friendly rivalry" between the two communities was a feature of newspaper reporting, there can be no doubt that by 1899 those with influence in Port Talbot perceived that place as the new and natural location for numerous

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<sup>300</sup> *The Cambrian*, 19 July 1901.

commercial and official undertakings, many of which were already established in Aberavon.<sup>301</sup> Aberavon Petty Sessional Division, for example, had been founded more than thirty years earlier, yet it was suggested that it should be renamed for Port Talbot.<sup>302</sup> Additionally, in 1899 as well as losing the county police station to Port Talbot, Aberavon was faced with plans by the Post Office to relocate the telegraph office to Port Talbot.<sup>303</sup>

Croll identified two factors in Merthyr which were also significant in the development of Aberavon and Port Talbot: opposition to a district-wide consciousness and the importance of local newspapers as a source of influence.<sup>304</sup> Ieuan Gwynedd Jones described Aberavon as ‘a proud and growing town’ which ‘grew in consciousness as it expanded in size, and its image of itself as a town became more pronounced’.<sup>305</sup> Incorporation in 1861 had affirmed Aberavon’s status, and attempts to establish a competitive tinsplate industry around the town had contributed, albeit temporarily, to notions of self-sufficiency. Port Talbot’s rapid development, therefore, was perceived as a very real threat to Aberavon’s separate geographical and civic identities. Continued reluctance by Port Talbot to acknowledge Aberavon’s position as a place of consequence reinforced historic rivalries and impeded the development of a district-wide consciousness. *The Cambrian* literally blurred boundaries when it began publishing ‘Aberavon and Port Talbot’ news from 1897 and conflated the two communities into one district whilst ascribing distinct characteristics and functions to each. Other publications maintained a distinction between the two and reported Aberavon’s ‘new anxieties’ regarding the building taking place ‘just outside the Borough boundary’.<sup>306</sup>

From the late 1890s it had become apparent that newspaper columnists were beginning to carve out a new identity for Aberavon as a leisure resort.<sup>307</sup> Under the watchful eye of *The Cambrian* Aberavon’s future economic success appeared to be tied firmly to development at the beach. Regular correspondent “Rambler” noted that ‘all hope of new industries being opened up in the Borough itself seems abandoned’ and that its ‘only salvation’ was development at the beach.<sup>308</sup> Less clear was where the responsibility for that development would lie. According to Roberts, ‘in most seaside towns . . . it was the local authority which

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<sup>301</sup> *The Cambrian*, 22 September 1899.

<sup>302</sup> *The Cambrian*, 20 October 1899.

<sup>303</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 13 July 1899.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.53 and 90-102.

<sup>305</sup> I.G. Jones, (1992), pp.97 and 98.

<sup>306</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 19 August 1898.

<sup>307</sup> *The Cambrian*, 16 June 1899.

<sup>308</sup> *The Cambrian*, 19 July 1901.

assumed responsibility', but the council in Aberavon lacked the funds to be able to convert the coastal element of the incorporated borough into a resort.<sup>309</sup>

Aberavon Beach had been a popular destination for locals and day visitors since at least the 1840s but investment in the beach area had been minimal. Failure of the council to agree on the importance of the beach and work towards this common goal meant that no resort culture had emerged. Compounding the problem was the physical distance from town and the fact that the area was privately owned. Facilities at the beach were therefore provided by private investors and were overseen by the landowner, the Earl of Jersey, and his agent.<sup>310</sup> Refreshment houses contributed to the leisure economy and provided income for both the Earl and the lessees, but itinerant fruit vendors at the beach were viewed as objectionable and the council was asked by the Earl to have them removed.<sup>311</sup>

No residences had been built at the beach by this time, and consequently, unlike at other areas along the south Wales coast such as Barry, or Porthcawl, which had long been described in trade directories as both seaports and bathing places, there were no permanent hotels, shops or entertainments at the beach itself to attract long-term or winter visitors.<sup>312</sup> A bandstand had been constructed in 1891 at the expense of the corporation, with local bands often playing to visitors on weekends and holidays.<sup>313</sup> However, by 1894 the bandstand needed repairs costing £15 and a vocal minority of councillors questioned its value, believing that visitors should be encouraged to stay in the town rather than go down to the sea.<sup>314</sup> Others, though, were keen to reap any associated benefits the idea of Aberavon as a resort might bring. New byelaws were created in 1889 which provided for the use and costs of bathing machines as well as the regulation of distances to be kept between male and female bathers.<sup>315</sup> Heavy fines had been prescribed, but an absence of enforcement led to crushed and mixed bathing.<sup>316</sup>

Accessing the beach, however, was not an easy process and until the opening of Jubilee Road in 1893 had involved crossing about a mile of sandhills (see Image 13). This designated

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<sup>309</sup> R. Roberts, 'Leasehold estates and municipal enterprise: landowners, local government and the development of Bournemouth, c. 1850 to 1914', in D. Cannadine, (1982), pp.176-218, p.176.

<sup>310</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 10 August 1893.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> *Kelly's Directory (1884), (1891) and (1895).*

<sup>313</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 17 August 1894; see also L. Rees, (2013), p.110.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> Richard Burton Archives, SWCC: MNA/PP/118/98.

<sup>316</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 28 July 1900.

road to the beach had been under discussion by the council since the 1860s and had been cited in a trade directory as early as 1865; its eventual construction cost was £1,000, a substantial figure for a council that was reluctant to repair a bandstand for £15.<sup>317</sup> Despite the new road, the positions of railway stations in the town hampered direct and convenient access to the beach (see Map 4.2). The GWR brought visitors to the Port Talbot station and the R&SBR to a station further north; both were a considerable distance from the beach. Horse-drawn transport was available but it was often unreliable and charges for the mile-long ride could be prohibitive; in October 1900 it was reported that men with families opted to walk rather than pay for the carriage ride.<sup>318</sup> In 1899, a new railway station on the east-west section of the R&SBR at Aberavon had been opened. Called ‘Aberavon Seaside’, it was the first station to be situated inside the borough and was located at the top of Jubilee Road.<sup>319</sup> The convenience of the new station contributed to record visitor numbers at the beach in August that year.<sup>320</sup>

Boosted by the inherent potential in the improved infrastructure, the Earl of Jersey, whose father, the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl had been Chairman of the R&SBR in 1882, proposed to construct a sea wall and promenade at the beach, a plan which helped to underline Aberavon’s newly-ascribed status as ‘the residential quarter of the district’.<sup>321</sup> Councillors who shared in the ambitions for an evolved identity in the post-industrial borough looked to the examples of other known resort towns on the south Wales coast such as Porthcawl, Penarth and Barry where leisure culture was thriving. Optimism was high in 1900 when the Jersey Beach Hotel, the first to be built at the beach, was opened to the public and Councillor Burgess announced that he knew of interested parties with plans to build seaside villas.<sup>322</sup> The parties, however, were never named and the residences never built.

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<sup>317</sup> *Webster’s Directory (1865)*, p.307.

<sup>318</sup> *The Cambrian*, 12 October 1900 and 26 July 1901.

<sup>319</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 13 June 1899.

<sup>320</sup> *The Cambrian*, 18 August 1899.

<sup>321</sup> *The Cambrian*, 16 June 1899.

<sup>322</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 9 August 1900.

**Image 13: Jubilee Road - the road from Aberavon town to the beach**



Photograph reproduced by permission of Damian Owen and Port Talbot Historical Society

At Penarth, construction of a pier had begun after Parliamentary agreement in 1891.<sup>323</sup> The £15,000 investment proved to be culturally and financially beneficial by its capacity to function as a promenade and entertainment pavilion for visitors as well as a base for passenger steamers and operators.<sup>324</sup> In writing about Bournemouth, Richard Roberts noted how the building of a pier could enhance the standing of a resort.<sup>325</sup> Furthermore, as Borsay and Walton have noted, local fishermen could also take advantage of a resort's leisure economy by offering fishing or pleasure trips to visitors.<sup>326</sup> Aberavon naturally considered the possibility of acquiring a pier of its own and welcomed the involvement of the Earl of Jersey, although the estimated costs of £3,000 for the sea wall and promenade scheme caused the Earl to waver temporarily in his commitment.<sup>327</sup> Following what must have been a period of negotiation, however, the project

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<sup>323</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 9 November 1891.

<sup>324</sup> *Evening Express*, 13 May 1904, Penarth Pier Sunday Concerts; *Cardiff Times*, 9 April 1904, passenger steamers; *Evening Express* 27 March 1907, new pavilion erected.

<sup>325</sup> R. Roberts in D. Cannadine (1982), p.176.

<sup>326</sup> P. Borsay and J.K. Walton (2011), p.5.

<sup>327</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 9 August 1900.

was restarted as an equal, three-party effort between Aberavon Town Council, the syndicate behind the Jersey Beach Hotel and the Earl, with each paying £1,000 of the costs.<sup>328</sup> Whilst the Earl of Jersey's support for Aberavon was generous, it was also a speculative financial investment on his part. Had the beach area developed as expected then the Earl would have benefitted substantially from numerous rents and leases but by 1908 he was content to gift parcels of land to the council for recreational purposes.<sup>329</sup> A Local Government Inquiry in June 1901 revealed that the council borrowed £2,350 to fund development at the beach, a figure that included the hotel syndicate's share which was to be paid back in instalments plus interest.<sup>330</sup>

At Aberavon, the North Pier of the docks had been acquired from PTR&DC for use as a promenade and pier at a cost of £1,000.<sup>331</sup> Situated well inside the municipal boundary of Aberavon, discussions on use of the pier had been taking place since its construction in 1895. By the late summer of 1899 agreement had been reached that the pier could be used as a promenade but only on condition that it would not be used as a landing place.<sup>332</sup> As a consequence, Aberavon's leisure pier was unable to offer the boating attractions which had proved so successful at Penarth. Nevertheless, tollgate access to the pier was offered to visitors at a cost of one-and-a-half pence per person, with proceeds split equally between the Earl, the council and PTR&DC.<sup>333</sup> The opening ceremony, which the Earl attended, eventually took place on 22 May 1902.<sup>334</sup> Edward Knott, Secretary of the PTR&DC, was also present. That summer it was reported that 15,000 visitors came to Aberavon Beach for the August Bank Holiday, and additional trains were provided to carry day trippers between the beach and their homes in the valleys.<sup>335</sup>

Despite these positive outcomes, significant setbacks affected Aberavon's ability to control its own destiny in this period. Developments at the beach were often beyond the control of the corporation and although correspondent "Rambler" continued to cajole the council from the pages of *The Cambrian*, it was landowners and builders who held the key to the area's improvement. The new Seaside station had encouraged visitors after 1899, but the road to the

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<sup>328</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 8 June 1901 .

<sup>329</sup> *Evening Express*, 6 October 1908; *The Cambrian*, 4 December 1908.

<sup>330</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 8 June 1901.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>332</sup> R. Simmonds, *A History of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company and the South Wales Mineral Railway Company: Vol.2: 1894-1971*, (Lydney: Black Dwarf Lightmoor Publications Ltd., 2013), p.282.

<sup>333</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 16 October 1895 and 13 June 1899; *Weekly Mail*, 8 June 1901.

<sup>334</sup> *Evening Express*, 23 May 1902.

<sup>335</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 August 1902.



beach had been damaged when R&SBR constructed a bridge over their railway line as part of the overall works and access was described as ‘deplorable’.<sup>336</sup> Two years later the road was still in need of repair and there was general agreement that without an improved road the building of residences would be unlikely; the situation had not changed by 1902.<sup>337</sup> “Rambler” was also convinced that Aberavon beach would ‘never be patronised by the better class of visitors unless the approach [was] one worthy of its beautiful stretch of sand’.<sup>338</sup> Nevertheless, the new pier and esplanade encouraged the ambitious council to advertise Aberavon in a ‘pictorial hand-book’ of Swansea, Neath and the surrounding area at a cost ‘not to exceed £30’.<sup>339</sup> Issues of identity persisted, however, and picture postcards of the beach at that time are inscribed with both ‘The Beach, Port Talbot’ and ‘The Beach, Aberavon’.<sup>340</sup>

Aberavon’s attempts to assert itself were consistently undermined. Hampering the beach development were the financial and commercial interests relating to the docks. Difficulties arose in April 1904, when dredging by the Port Talbot Company caused the partial destruction of the recently-opened esplanade.<sup>341</sup> An 1891 agreement between the Docks Company and Wright, Butler & Co. entitled the latter to dredge without being liable for any damage caused to Port Talbot Company property, but despite the close proximity of the docks to the beach there was no similar arrangement in place to protect the sands at Aberavon.<sup>342</sup> The Earl of Jersey’s agent was clear that the council should bear the costs as the Earl had pointed out the problem to Aberavon’s surveyor ‘some months ago’.<sup>343</sup> Repairs were estimated at £1800 and were approved by the Highways and General Purposes Committee the following month, but the costs impacted on the council’s scheme to operate an electric tramway from neighbouring Briton Ferry to the beach; it was significant that there were no plans to include Margam in the transport plan.<sup>344</sup>

Local activities also proved problematic for conditions at the beach. Swansea’s refuse, which was being dumped at sea by a barge, was washing up on the sands, as was small coal which was being brushed off the decks of the increasing number of coal-carrying steamers

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<sup>336</sup> *The Cambrian*, 8 March 1901.

<sup>337</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 August 1901; *Ibid.*, 28 March 1902.

<sup>338</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 August 1901.

<sup>339</sup> *The Cambrian*, 1 August 1902; WGAS D/D Z 413/7, 1903 brochure describing Aberavon.

<sup>340</sup> WGAS, D/D DRPT 1/4; photograph album containing 168 postcards.

<sup>341</sup> *Evening Express*, 20 April 1904.

<sup>342</sup> WGAS D/D LE/X 43, bundle of papers relating to Port Talbot Harbour, 1877-96.

<sup>343</sup> *Evening Express*, 20 April 1904.

<sup>344</sup> *Evening Express*, 13 May 1904 and *Evening Express*, 28 July 1904.

leaving Port Talbot.<sup>345</sup> Furthermore, since 1893 Aberavon's Medical Officer of Health had noted that refuse and sewage from Cwmavon had led to the River Afan becoming 'practically an open sewer running through the town', and the following year it was recorded that all sewers 'emptied into tidal waters at a distance of about half a mile from the bottom of the town'.<sup>346</sup> Despite these problems, the beach remained a popular destination and advertising in the *Rhondda Leader* in 1908 drew attention to 'Aberavon-by-the-Sea' with its beautiful beach, entertainments and attractions; the new Jersey Beach Hotel also offered accommodation and could seat 400 in its dining room.<sup>347</sup> In December that year, however, the hotel was destroyed by fire.<sup>348</sup>

In many ways the corporation's actions and reactions in this period can be seen to be generally counterproductive, but some individuals remained ambitious for the future for Aberavon. The fact that numerous projects were under discussion for a number of years highlighted the difference between the prosperity and attractiveness of fast-growing Port Talbot and the obstacles being faced by the ancient borough, the identity of which had gradually become indistinct. Even Aberavon Rugby Club, which had been forced to move following the construction of the steel works in 1902, found itself relocated to the Talbot Athletic Ground in Port Talbot.<sup>349</sup>

Port Talbot's rapid growth in the direction of Aberavon contributed to questions about the status of the ancient borough, with one newspaper asking on behalf of the area's visitors, "Where is Aberavon?".<sup>350</sup> Considerations of extending the boundary had, as noted earlier, raised issues of supremacy, not least of which was the naming of any new borough.<sup>351</sup> Aberavon was perceived as being 'little known to the commercial world' whereas Port Talbot, which housed 'the greater portion of the wealth and industries of the district' had 'overshadowed' Aberavon.<sup>352</sup> Acknowledging the keen rivalry between the two settlements and the fact that Aberavon owned gas, water and remunerative market undertakings, the *Echo* was nevertheless

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<sup>345</sup> *The Cambrian*, 1 June 1906; *Evening Express*, 9 January 1907; *The Cambrian*, 29 June 1906.

<sup>346</sup> Richard Burton Archives, SWCC: MNA/PP/118/95, Reports of the Medical Officer of Health for Aberavon 1893-95 (Dr. J. Arnallt Jones); SWCC: MNA/PP/118/96, Report Book of the Inspector of Nuisances 1893-94 (John Isaac Evans).

<sup>347</sup> *Rhondda Leader*, 4 July 1908.

<sup>348</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 18 December 1908.

<sup>349</sup> *The Cambria Daily Leader* of 14 January 1919 reported that the ground was converted to allotments; see also *South Wales Daily Post*, 30 August 1900 and Rees, p.38; Aberavon RFC therefore has its home ground in Port Talbot and Port Talbot AFC has its home ground in Aberavon.

<sup>350</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 22 February 1899.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*

unambiguous in its decision that the name should be changed to Port Talbot.<sup>353</sup> However, as Map 4.1 at the beginning of this chapter has already shown, the municipal boundary line between Aberavon and Margam placed a large portion of the docks, and therefore the formally designated area at the docks called Port Talbot, firmly within the Borough of Aberavon. This point was raised in council by Alderman William Williams during a discussion on Aberavon's representation on the Pilotage Board at a time when people in Aberavon were complaining of losing rights.<sup>354</sup> His point was a relevant one: a future Board of Trade Pilotage Inquiry into trade in the Bristol Channel would include no reference at all to a settlement called 'Port Talbot' in its paperwork, only to Aberavon and Margam.<sup>355</sup>

Aberavon's sense of place, then, was based on historical and political factors whilst in Port Talbot commercial and economic elements contributed to its identity as a cradle of new business after 1894. *The Cambrian*, in promoting and publishing combined news for Aberavon and Port Talbot, prompted organisations, clubs and societies to follow suit and use both names, further impacting on Aberavon's standing as a discrete town and borough.<sup>356</sup> John Prest identified a similar situation at Ryde, on the Isle of Wight, where the town was also unsure of its identity: 'Was it a resort or a point of entry?'.<sup>357</sup> Unlike in Swansea, where 'tourism and industry. . . were forced to interact because of their equal dependence on the town's coastal spaces', the industrial and leisure sectors of Port Talbot and Aberavon tended to remain largely independent of each other, not least because of the mutual distrust that had developed between the two geographically and fundamentally disparate 'sides' of the river.<sup>358</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Concerted industrial development supported by the appropriate infrastructure was a crucial aspect of a town's success. Previous chapters have highlighted how areas with a significant industrial presence could dominate smaller neighbours with no industries, but this chapter has shown how the practice continued throughout the century and that newly created communities

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 1 February 1899 and 1897 OS Maps of Glamorgan XXXIIIA.NE & XXXIII.NW.

<sup>355</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 21 April 1914.

<sup>356</sup> Aberavon and Port Talbot Constitutional Club was opened in Station Road, Port Talbot in February 1898; Aberavon and Port Talbot Butchers' Association and Aberavon and Port Talbot Billposting Company advertised in *The Cambrian* on 18 May 1900. Other joint clubs and organisations formed in the area in this period included a Grocers' Association, Licensed Victuallers' Association, Master Bakers' and Millers' Association, a Liberal Association (formed in 1905), a football league, a Golf Club and a Cycling Club.

<sup>357</sup> J. Prest (1990), p.63.

<sup>358</sup> L. Miskell, 'A Town Divided? Sea-bathing, Dock-building and Oyster-Fishing in Nineteenth-Century Swansea', in Borsay and Walton (2011), p.114.

had the potential to eclipse incorporated boroughs.<sup>359</sup> Incorporation was aspirational for the growing towns of the nineteenth century and in many cases it was hard fought and hard won.<sup>360</sup> Autonomous self-government was perceived as recognition of a borough's high status, and this status was also assumed by the borough's elected representatives. This chapter, however, illustrates that notions of status associated with incorporation were dependent on the consent and acceptance of others. Trainor has identified a feature he described as the 'easily-affronted dignity' of new corporations and recognised it as either a source of tension or an obstacle to co-operation.<sup>361</sup> With some exceptions, Aberavon's new corporation showed a great deal of resilience in this period, but Margam's attitude to the ancient borough's attempts to assert its status was both a source of tension and an obstacle to co-operation.

Cannadine's notion of self-confident and middle-class local government gradually evolving to replace the patrician dominance of wealthy landowners goes only part of the way in explaining the dominance of Port Talbot over the ancient borough of Aberavon in this period. Prior to 1890 Margam had certainly been dominated by the rural élite in the form of C.R.M. Talbot. After 1890, however, patrician dominance in Margam's local government evolved into a patrician influence, with the combined presence of local industrialists and the agent of the principal landowner forming a powerful alliance on the local Board and then the district council. This combination not only ensured that industrial and landowning interests were maintained but also that decisions regarding the future of a community was based on joint commercial ambitions. Those decisions illustrate the extent to which some councils could exercise control over their districts.<sup>362</sup> Enterprising individuals such as Edward Knox could act as catalysts and transform a neglected docks area into a thriving urban and commercial centre. As the stagnation to 1890 shows, the presence of significant wealth alone as a guarantee of expansion is not borne out by the evidence in this case study. However, despite political will an absence of available resources proved a major obstacle in competing with accelerated growth in nearby settlements and contributed to Aberavon's decline. The capacity to exercise control was reduced in these circumstances as was the ability to see ambitions realised.

Aberavon's attempts to reinforce its status and identity in the face of challenge from the new community proved difficult. The borough lacked a resident benefactor, its landowners

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<sup>359</sup> For examples see R. Trainor, 'Peers on an industrial frontier: the earls of Dartmouth and of Dudley in the Black Country, c. 1810 to 1914' in D. Cannadine, (1982), pp. 70-132, p.74 and p.112.

<sup>360</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>361</sup> R. Trainor in D. Cannadine (1982), p.112.

<sup>362</sup> R. Roberts in D. Cannadine (1982), p.176.

were slow to promote development and there was very little physical space in which industrial, retail or residential growth could take place. Relative wealth in Aberavon had helped some grocers gain entry to the tinsplate industry and attempt to form an industrial base in Aberavon but as small operations they lacked the ability to diversify in the face of adversity and were unable to sustain their businesses to the extent of those in Port Talbot. Prior to this period the relationship between the docks and the borough had been mutually beneficial and as the closest town to the docks, Aberavon provided services and amenities to the seafaring community. From the mid-1890s, however, when new outlets at Port Talbot began the provision of goods and services Aberavon became alienated from its coastal neighbour. The fact that part of the docks was situated in the municipal borough meant little to Port Talbot. Neither were any concerns expressed about the relocation of official buildings and facilities away from Aberavon, which further undermined Aberavon's sense of historic importance and status.

The developing settlement near the established town offered opportunities for increased prosperity, but at the same time posed a threat to the concept of shared identity. Consequently, both the actions within the developing area and the subsequent reactions in the neighbouring, older community were instrumental in both constructing and modifying a sense of place. For some, the prospect of change was welcomed; for others, particularly those in the older settlements, change was resisted as spaces became contested. In emerging towns, where no sense of a shared past existed, identities could be constructed based on collective ideals of future prosperity or a sense of shared experiences. Conversely, the identities of established towns, particularly ancient, incorporated boroughs, were often based on past history and status which held little meaning to newcomers.

Prior to the 1890s, Aberavon's status as an incorporated borough had been assured. In this period, however, the value of its incorporation was in doubt. In many ways, the circumstances at the time meant that development at the beach was the town's best option as a means of retaining its status. Despite the fact that no district council had ever taken over an incorporated borough, there were many in Aberavon who were prepared to establish formal links with rapidly growing Port Talbot. Consequently, those who had raised the question 'Where is Aberavon?' could reasonably also have asked 'What is Aberavon?' as the borough became increasingly encroached upon by 'the other side'. Commercial activity on the eastern side of the river appears to suggest that it was the strength and influence of individuals outside Aberavon which was the dominant force in this period.

**Table 4.2: REPRESENTATION ON GLAMORGAN COUNTY COUNCIL 1889-1921**

The council consisted of 66 councillors and 22 aldermen. Half of the aldermen\* were elected for six years, all other representatives faced election on a three-year basis.

The two names in each year represent the winning and losing candidates in each election.

(A) and (M) denote that candidates were also elected members in Aberavon and/or Margam

1889	Name	Party	Occupation	Votes
Aberavon	Richard Jenkins* (A)	Liberal	Tinplate Manufacturer	401
	John Morgan Smith (A)	Conservative	Ironmonger	348
By-election	John Morgan Smith (A)	Independent	Ironmonger	418
	Evan Davies (M)	Gladstonian Liberal	Tinplate Manufacturer	347
Margam	Arthur Pendarves Vivian (M)	Liberal	Industrialist	618
	Llewellyn Howell (A)(M)	Liberal	Tinplate Manufacturer	377
1892				
Aberavon	John Morgan Smith (A)	Independent	Ironmonger	
	Returned Unopposed			
Margam	Arthur Pendarves Vivian (M)	Liberal	Industrialist	630
	Llewellyn Howell (A)(M)	Liberal	Tinplate Manufacturer	328
1895				
Aberavon	John Morgan Smith (A)	Conservative	Ironmonger	
	Returned Unopposed			
Margam	Arthur Pendarves Vivian (M)	Liberal	Industrialist	
	Returned Unopposed			
1898				
Aberavon	John Morgan Smith (A)	Conservative	Ironmonger	
	Returned unopposed			
Margam	Edward Knox (M)	Unionist	Land Agent, Margam Estate	
	Returned Unopposed			
1901				
Aberavon	John Morgan Smith (A)	Conservative	Ironmonger	
	Returned unopposed			
Margam	David Roderick David (M)	None stated	Tinplate Manufacturer	
	Returned unopposed			
1904				
Aberavon	John Morgan Smith (A)	Independent	Ironmonger	538
	Frank Bradley Smith (A)	Liberal	Architect	536
Margam	Edward T. Evans (M)	Liberal	Solicitor	770
	David Roderick David (M)	None stated	Tinplate Manufacturer	716

1907				
Aberavon	John Morgan Smith (A)	Independent	Ironmonger	710
	Frank Bradley Smith (A)	Labour	Architect	450
Margam	Edward T. Evans (M)	Liberal	Solicitor	892
	Godfrey Lipscomb (M)	Independent	Land Agent, Margam Estate	867
1910				
Aberavon	John Morgan Smith (A)	Independent	Ironmonger	729
	Jonah Charles (M)	Labour	Dockers' Union	337
Margam	Llewellyn David (M)	Independent	Tinplate Manufacturer	973
	Rees Llewellyn (M)	Labour	Collier	941
1913				
Aberavon	John Morgan Smith (A)	Independent	Ironmonger	
	Returned unopposed			
Margam	Llewellyn David (M)	Conservative	Tinplate Manufacturer	
	Returned unopposed			
1916	NO ELECTIONS HELD			
1919				
Aberavon	David Rees (A)	Labour	Trades Union Organiser	1016
	John Morgan Smith (A)	Conservative	Ironmonger	1010
1919				
Port Talbot East	John Thomas (Neath)	Labour	Checkweigher; Treasurer, Afan Valley Miners	787
	William Lewis (M)	Labour	Tinplate Worker	446
Port Talbot West	Llewellyn David* (M)	Independent/ None stated	Tinplate Manufacturer	986
	Thomas Griffiths (Former Maesteg councillor)	Labour	Secretary, Mid-Glamorgan Workmen's Approved Society	446 <sup>1</sup> 734

<sup>1</sup>The results of this election were reported in the Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder on 8 March 1919 and record the losing candidates' votes in both Port Talbot East and Port Talbot West as 446. The winning majority in Port Talbot West was given as 252 not 540, which suggests that the Labour candidate there secured 734 votes. In Port Talbot East the reported majority of 341 appears to confirm that the figures for that contest were correctly recorded.

## Chapter Five

### The Road to Amalgamation: Aberavon and Port Talbot 1910-1921

This chapter examines the process by which Aberavon and the urban area of Margam known as Port Talbot and governed by Margam Urban District Council (MUDC) joined with the industrialised communities in the surrounding area to become the Borough of Port Talbot in 1921. From 1836, when the name of Aberavon Harbour was changed by Act of Parliament to Port Talbot, the modest commercial and residential area on the eastern side of the River Afan around the docks had informally taken on the same name. Use of the name continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth as the community began to take on a distinct physical identity, but it was only when the new borough was established in November 1921 that Port Talbot gained official recognition. Key questions emerge regarding the reasons for the success of Aberavon's borough extension at this time, and how individuals within local governments made use of the amalgamation process to further their civic ambitions.

Forms of amalgamation had been discussed in the Aberavon area for almost forty years before the final borough extension was formulated. For decades, the ancient borough had been consistent in its willingness to provide services and support to the Port Talbot area of Margam, but unsuccessful attempts by Aberavon to assist with gas lighting and sanitary measures became commonplace. By 1918, however, the practicalities of amalgamation had become apparent to most decision makers within MUDC and the prospect of changing the name of the extended borough to Port Talbot made this particular proposal extremely palatable. It will therefore be argued that Margam's reluctance to merge with Aberavon was based on a long-held belief that the ancient borough was an inferior body and that Port Talbot had become the natural contender for lead authority.

Stobart's work on federation within the towns of the Potteries revealed a similar scenario there, with discussions on formal union having taken place since at least 1833 but not reaching any tangible conclusions until the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Stobart has provided a comprehensive account of the processes involved in amalgamation. His research details not only the specific demographic experience of the Potteries during federation but also the political strategies employed by local authorities to either avoid amalgamation or bolster their chances of becoming the lead authority if or when amalgamation occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Stobart (2003), pp.163-4.



Stobart's use of the term 'federation' highlights an important distinction between types of local government integration which requires clarification. Federation is defined as 'an organisation within which smaller divisions have some degree of internal autonomy'.<sup>2</sup> This chapter uses the terms amalgamate and merge interchangeably: the meaning of the former being 'to combine or unite to form one organisation or structure', and the latter 'to combine or be combined to form a single entity'.<sup>3</sup> Aberavon's scheme for a borough extension initially involved an expansion of the borough boundaries to include the urban districts of Margam and Cwmafon and form a new, larger borough called Port Talbot; the original authorities did not become members of a federated structure of government but merged to become a single unit of governance.

The chapter analyses the factors which led to representatives of the ancient Borough of Aberavon submitting a formal extension scheme that surrendered the borough name in favour of that of Port Talbot. By the summer of 1914, news reports confirmed that Aberavon had already agreed that any new borough should take the name of Port Talbot.<sup>4</sup> Having struggled since the 1890s to maintain a distinct identity in keeping with its borough status, in this period Aberavon appeared ready to reach a compromise in its ambitions for amalgamation. Previous merger proposals presented to Margam had been based on Aberavon as the dominant party, but Margam's resistance rested on perceived superiority due to its greater population and area. By 1910, the significant commercial advances around the docks at Port Talbot had added to its sense of dominance.

Four main points emerge from the research which form sections within the chapter: the reduced capacity of smaller authorities to manage the consequences of increased populations and new, mandatory responsibilities; the impact of population growth on the civic identity of a town; the capacity of labour to dominate the amalgamation agenda; and the decline of local influence by the Talbot family in favour of an assertive local government model as identified by Cannadine.<sup>5</sup> Section one examines how the combination of local population growth and central government intervention led to increased responsibilities for municipal authorities and led to a perception of local government as merely the implementation arm of Westminster.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Federation' in *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by A. Stevenson and M. Waite, 12th edn., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.520.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Amalgamate' and 'Merge', pp.39 and 895.

<sup>4</sup> *Herald of Wales*, 13 June 1914

<sup>5</sup> D. Cannadine (1982), p.4.

<sup>6</sup> J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), pp.284-286.

Ratepayers began to see the financial advantages of merger and by 1919 central government had started to presume in favour of local Bills for borough extensions, thereby increasing the number of successful amalgamation schemes.<sup>7</sup>

Section two examines how urban growth and urbanisation influenced inhabitants' perceptions of the physical spaces around them. In both Aberavon and Port Talbot a sense of civic pride found its cultural expression in new public buildings.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, inward migration and the spread of housing and service provision blurred both physical and psychological boundaries between settlements and diminished local identities. As amalgamation schemes emerged, and as Stobart noted in his research, public buildings took on the mantle of 'cultural capital', the value of which was crucial to each town's future prospects within a new municipal entity.<sup>9</sup> How each borough extension or amalgamation progressed, therefore, depended on the capacity of localities, individuals and groups to position themselves favourably and thereby maintain or even extend a town's status and political autonomy.<sup>10</sup> For many local authorities the amalgamation process was characterised not by a gradual shift from rivalry to willing collaboration but by a series of wars of attrition.

Section three assesses how the Great War affected the industrial economy and assisted the new Labour party in consolidating its base in the Aberavon and Margam area. Steel and coal workers gained in importance and were able to successfully negotiate for better pay and conditions; the Labour presence on local councils also increased. From 1914 the Labour Representation Committee (the LRC) was firmly committed to the principle of amalgamation. Labour members pressed for large, ambitious projects whilst conservative members, although keen to raise the status of their authorities, favoured a more incremental approach. The final section analyses how local élites affected amalgamation discussions in Aberavon and Margam between 1918 and 1921. Two crucial factors influenced the eventual outcome: the death of Margam landowner Emily Charlotte Talbot and the co-option of pro-amalgamation local industrialist Sidney Hutchinson Byass as mayor of Aberavon.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.277 and *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 1921.

<sup>8</sup> R.J. Morris and R. Rodger (1993), pp.8 and 44.

<sup>9</sup> J. Stobart, (2003), p.163.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.164.

**Table 5.1: Amalgamation Decisions 1910-20**

DATE	BODY	PROPOSAL	OUTCOME
18/5/1910	Aberavon	Alderman F.B. Smith proposed amalgamation of the urban district of Margam, the Borough of Aberavon and the rural district of Cwmavon	Passed unanimously
10/10/1910	MUDC	Rees Llewellyn (Labour) proposed rejection of Aberavon's scheme based on Aberavon's poor finances and conditions in Cwmavon	Passed
13/1/1913	MUDC	Rees Llewellyn proposed amalgamation to include the whole district from Kenfig Hill to Glyncoirwg	Defeated 5-7
12/7/1915	MUDC	Motion by Rees Llewellyn to petition Local Government Board for inquiry re amalgamation of all local authorities within Aberavon petty sessional division; Llewellyn cited Merthyr and Plymouth as successful past examples	Carried 7-2
21/7/1915	Aberavon	Cllr James Price moved support for the MUDC motion; majority in favour but suspicious; preference expressed for borough extension led by Aberavon	Referred to Committee
10/9/1917	MUDC	Proposal to convert Margam into a county borough; Rees Llewellyn urged that whole petty sessional division be combined into a Parliamentary area to be known as Port Talbot	Carried
30/7/1919	MUDC	Private meeting to debate Margam's amalgamation or extension of the Borough of Aberavon	Not published
16/10/1919	Local Labour	Meeting following joint Aberavon & MUDC meeting; sought agreement to establish a municipal borough to be co-terminous with new Parliamentary boundary; area population of about 63,000; meeting chaired by Alderman David Rees (Aberavon)	Adopted
20/10/1919	MUDC	All members present; larger scheme advocated by Labour Party (to create a new County Borough) now preferred by both Aberavon and MUDC	11-7 in favour
10/1919	Aberavon & MUDC	New borough should be named Port Talbot and cover the whole of the Aberavon Parliamentary Division. Differential rating for Margam and Aberavon	Agreed
27/10/1919	Aberavon	Public council meeting to confirm terms of amalgamation	Agreed
13/11/1919	Joint	Representatives from Aberavon, MUDC, Briton Ferry UDC, Glyncoirwg UDC and Neath RDC meet to agree proposals	Agreed
20/11/1919	MUDC	Letter sent to Aberavon Council withdrawing support for the proposed borough extension	Aberavon to proceed alone
5/2/1920	Aberavon	Special meeting to proceed with original and smaller scheme. Districts now included are said not to be opposing the scheme	Agreed

## **The Impact of Increased Populations and Mandatory Responsibilities**

The urban growth witnessed by industrial communities at the end of the nineteenth century showed no signs of abating in the early twentieth. The population of Aberavon more than doubled in the first two decades of the century whilst that of Margam fell short of the same feat by a mere 254 inhabitants (see Table 5.2). As the boundaries of the two communities began to merge and distinctions between them became unclear, so the prospects for a full and formal merger began to gain ground.<sup>11</sup> Merger between Aberavon and urban areas of Margam had first been suggested in the 1880s by the then mayor of Aberavon, T.D. Daniel but no decisions had been made on the form it might take.

Doubts and questions remained in this period regarding the extent of any new borough's boundary as well as its name. Earlier discussions of merger had included the populous and thriving industrial centre of Cwmavon, where for decades local manufacturers had provided their workforces with residential, social, and educational facilities. By 1910, however, when Aberavon's latest proposal for a merger that included Cwmavon was put before MUDC, it was rejected on the basis of Aberavon's alleged debts and Cwmavon's deterioration into a 'pitiabile condition' following the departure of manufacturing companies; Cwmavon had become, according to MUDC, 'nothing but a mass of saturated sewage'.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, MUDC was said by Councillor Rees Llewellyn to be 'the best managed local authority in the United Kingdom'.<sup>13</sup> As Table 5.1 shows, Alderman Smith's motion had passed unanimously in Aberavon; it was based on removing the 'petty jealousies that existed between the districts' and providing better value for ratepayers, not on any attempt to gain power.<sup>14</sup>

As Chapter Four has shown, Port Talbot had experienced a recent rapid rise as a new commercial and residential district. Central to some Aberavon councillors' concerns in the 1890s was an anxiety that developments taking place on "the other side" were at the expense of the ancient borough's status. Other councillors were confident that the higher-ranking incorporated borough could undoubtedly retain the upper hand over the new community. In reviewing this situation in hindsight, the commercial and industrial dominance of Port Talbot appears to suggest that if amalgamation happened, the ancient borough would inevitably be

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<sup>11</sup> For examples see *The South Wales Daily Post*, 16 February 1910; *Evening Express*, 19 May 1910; *Cardiff Times*, 20 August 1910; *Western Mail*, 14 January 1913; *Cambria Daily Leader*, 11 November 1913; and particularly the *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914 and 20 June 1914.

<sup>12</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 15 October 1910.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Evening Express*, 19 May 1910.

subsumed against its will into the larger community. As no precedent or mechanism existed for this type of amalgamation, when a borough extension was submitted it was at the instigation of Aberavon Town Council itself and was the culmination of more than ten years of negotiations (see Table 5.1). A combination of urban population growth at a time when local authorities were scrutinising their finances in the light of central government legislation accelerated the process.

Central government's stance regarding local councils influenced a paradigm shift towards amalgamation as national legislation began to impact on the localities. John Davis noted how the growing burden of mandatory powers in the twentieth century accentuated rate disparities between individual authorities: small boroughs resisted amalgamation with larger ones and even steered clear of cooperation in joint committees for fear of inviting amalgamations.<sup>15</sup> Councils that had operated on a relatively autonomous basis for decades found adjustment to new mandatory responsibilities problematic. Furthermore, neighbouring councils with a shared history of local rivalry like Aberavon and Margam found themselves at odds with each other as they tried to implement local housing and social welfare legislation as discrete entities. The Maternity and Child Welfare Act of 1918, for example, 'gave legal recognition to local authorities' antenatal centres, for the supervision of expectant and nursing mothers, and to the infant welfare centres for children under five years which had been set up following the 1907 Act'.<sup>16</sup> In December 1914 a high rate of infantile mortality in Aberavon had been linked by the Sanitary Inspector to a preference for bottle feeding babies with tinned condensed milk.<sup>17</sup> In 1919, therefore, Aberavon offered to work jointly with MUDC on administering the terms of the new Maternity and Child Welfare Act at Margam Cottage Hospital, but in keeping with past practice a decision on Aberavon's offer was deferred by MUDC.<sup>18</sup> Rather than encouraging co-operative ventures, therefore, the interventionist legislation had the potential to reinforce rather than reduce differences.

Mandatory legislative responsibilities also undermined the standing of elected members. Significant executive powers at a local level were believed to be necessary to attract the 'best

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<sup>15</sup> Lipman, cited by J. Davis in M.J. Daunton, p.284.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.calmview.eu/SheffieldArchives/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=NHS4> accessed 30/10/2020.

<sup>17</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 18 December 1914: 25 of 47 infants who died between 1 January and 30 November 1914 were fed this way; see also B.M. Doyle in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.291 which states that a milk depot for poor mothers had been opened in Huddersfield as early as 1903, emphasising the way in which local decision makers could initiate and opt to carry out public health improvements.

<sup>18</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 15 February 1919.

men' into local government service.<sup>19</sup> Under the Victorian system of local government 'relatively few local powers were mandatory' and councillors had tended to operate with reference only to the electorate.<sup>20</sup> Elected members were also reluctant to defer to their salaried officials and often viewed advice, even that of legally qualified clerks, as the 'dictating' of someone who was 'only a servant'.<sup>21</sup> There was also resentment that the two cardinal principles of governance were being eroded by the centre: executive power was not being devolved as far as possible and the 'requirements of administrative rationalism' had replaced historical tradition as a means of defining a local authority area.<sup>22</sup> Adjusting to the directions of central government proved to be difficult, but extended autonomy could be attained by initiating amalgamation or extension.

Stobart identified three areas of concern in the political process of federation: public health; the local rates needed to provide a modern urban infrastructure; and concern for local political power.<sup>23</sup> The first two offered the means to improve services whilst reducing the burden on the ratepayer, but were offset by the third.<sup>24</sup> Aberavon was keen to join with Margam to share both the burdens and practicalities of the public health programme, but the latter continued to resist, preferring to promote a much larger, county borough amalgamation that would extend eastwards as far as Bridgend and thereby increase political power in the Port Talbot area.<sup>25</sup> Margam council remained consistent in its reluctance to accept Aberavon's overtures regarding amalgamation and throughout the period being examined in this chapter continued to pursue an expansionist agenda based on political gain. Boosting that agenda was the constant increase in the working-class population, which for MUDC was a means to an end but for Aberavon represented further pressure on both existing housing stock and ratepayers.

Economic migrants had come to the south Wales coalfield from all over the world and the majority of English immigrants who relocated to the area had done so in the first decade of the new century.<sup>26</sup> In 1911, 63.5 per cent of the population of Glamorgan had been born in the county, 13.5 per cent came from other Welsh counties and about one-fifth (23 per cent) had

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<sup>19</sup> J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.284.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Evening Express*, 9 August 1910; see also Chapter Three.

<sup>22</sup> J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.283.

<sup>23</sup> J. Stobart (2003), pp.163-4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.164.

<sup>25</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914 and 20 June 1914.

<sup>26</sup> K. O. Morgan, 'The new Liberalism and the challenge of Labour: the Welsh experience, 1885-1929', *Welsh History Review*, 6, (1972), 288-312, p.290.

been born in England or outside Wales.<sup>27</sup> Coal mining and the steel, tin and iron industries had formed Wales's 'basic industries' for over a century.<sup>28</sup> Alongside these industries were the associated professionals, trades, organisations and networks that supported them and their workforces and provided additional employment opportunities.

In the Aberavon and Margam area, the 1911 Census abstract noted the large increase in population since 1901 and attributed that growth to the development of iron, steel and tinplate works as well as to colliery development.<sup>29</sup> The native-born population of Aberavon had risen to 52% by 1911 and had been growing steadily since the 30% figure of 1851, indicating that a natural increase occurred as a result of new generations of migrant families.<sup>30</sup> As Table 5.2 shows, the population of Aberavon grew steadily up to 1921 when it passed fifteen thousand. Furthermore, the rate of increase doubled between 1901 and 1911 then continued to rise during the next ten years. Occupational data from the 1911 census offers a partial explanation for this continuation. Many of Aberavon's male inhabitants aged ten years and upwards were heavily involved in the nearby metal manufacturing industries but far more were employed as either general labourers, dock labourers, miners or building workers.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, not only could relatively unskilled immigrant workers find work in the area, but they were also less vulnerable to fluctuations in specific markets.

Hopkin has written that many Welsh industrial communities were relatively new and their populations had been swollen by young, single men looking for work in the mines or metalworks.<sup>32</sup> Aberavon was not a new community but the neighbouring development which had become known by the name of the docks at Port Talbot was a flourishing industrial and commercial centre. Demographic growth placed additional pressure on communities such as these, particularly when populations consisted primarily of young males. In 1911, the proportion of males to females in Glamorgan was high: 1000 males to every 925 females; in England and Wales as a whole the situation was reversed, with 1,068 females to every 1,000 men.<sup>33</sup> In both Aberavon and Margam unmarried males and females considerably outnumbered

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<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Health *Report of the South Wales Regional Survey Committee*, HMSO, 1921, p.11.

<sup>28</sup> See C. Baber, (1980).

<sup>29</sup> Census of England and Wales 1911, County of Glamorgan: Area, Families or Separate Occupiers and Population; extracted tables published 1914.

<sup>30</sup> Census of England and Wales 1851 and 1911, manual count of birthplace data.

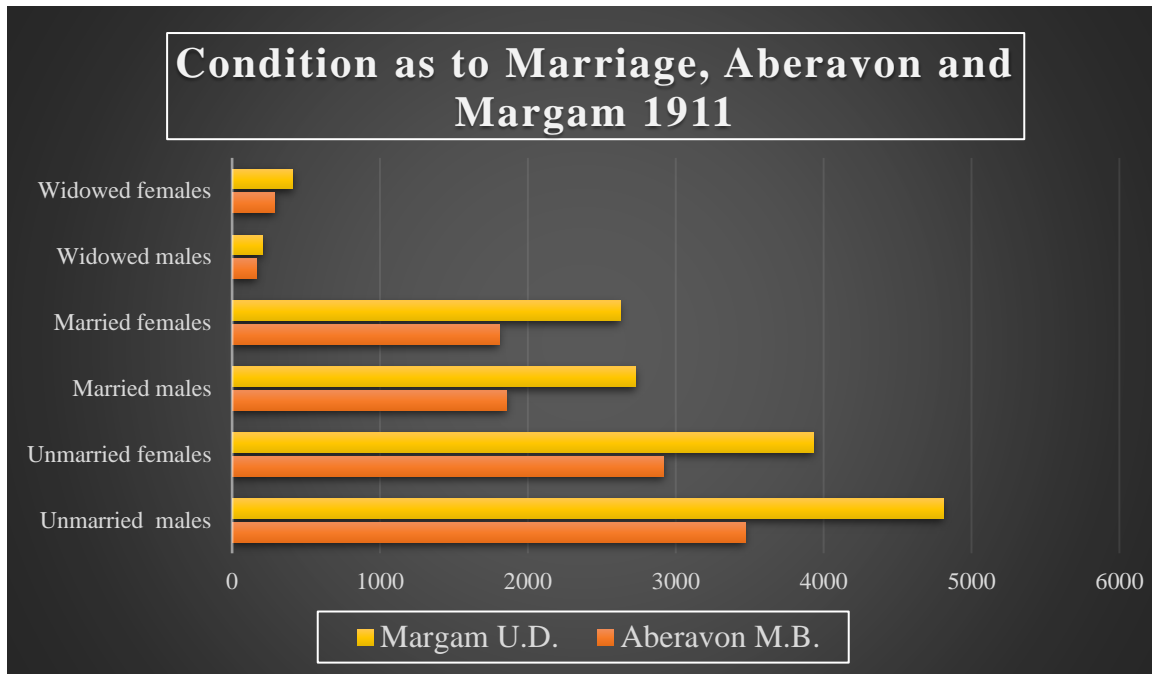
<sup>31</sup> Summary of 1911 Census of England and Wales, Table 24.

<sup>32</sup> D. Hopkin (1994), p.125.

<sup>33</sup> *South Wales Regional Survey*, p.13.

their married counterparts (see Fig. 5.1). Consequently, in industrialised areas marriages were numerous, the birth rate was high and overcrowding was common.<sup>34</sup>

**Fig. 5.1: Condition as to Marriage, Aberavon and Margam 1911**



**Source: Table 18, drawn from Tables Extracted from Census of England and Wales 1911, County of Glamorgan**

Boarding and lodging were commonplace for single men, but these houses were ill-equipped to accommodate multiple families.<sup>35</sup> Incomers boosted local economies but they also presented a problem to small communities where either housing or land – or both - were in short supply. In both Aberavon and Margam the number of separate families exceeded the number of homes available and the disparity grew as the century progressed and populations continued to increase (see Table 5.3). Both communities’ housing stock increased by 1911, but altogether more than four hundred families were sharing others’ homes and contributing to the public and personal difficulties associated with overcrowding. Housing the working classes in a higher standard of accommodation had been the intention behind the 1909 Housing Act, but the Act was permissive and relied on local authorities for its effective implementation.<sup>36</sup> Council housing for families was not a new idea and had appeared for the first time in the 1860s in Liverpool, but this had been provided only for the very poor who had been displaced by

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lodgers were housed on a room only basis whereas boarders were also provided with meals.

<sup>36</sup> Housing, Town Planning, &c. Act 1909 (c. 44).



slum clearance schemes.<sup>37</sup> After 1919, however, the focus of central government shifted to general needs provision that was designed to meet the housing needs of a much broader spectrum of the working classes.<sup>38</sup> For smaller local authorities the difficulties in meeting these needs could be a catalyst for amalgamation.

A population increase of 63 per cent occurred in the urban district of Margam in the first decade of the new century as industries and infrastructure developed. Central government investment in the local steel industry during the First World War proved attractive to potential economic migrants. However, the effects of the post-1918 economic depression on the more industrialised Margam district can be seen in the reduction in the rate of increase between 1911 and 1921. As Marwick has noted, an immediate boom after the war helped with reconstruction, but ‘Britain’s older heavy industries, in reality less in demand in a world at peace, had been artificially stimulated during the war’.<sup>39</sup> Despite the slump and a decline in the rate of increase, however, the population continued to rise and place further strain on the already inadequate housing infrastructure (see Table 5.2 and Table 5.3). For many MUDC councillors the growing population appeared to be an opportunity to underline its size and power in relation to Aberavon as well as stake its claim to county borough status.

**Table 5.2: Population increases in Aberavon and Margam 1881-1921**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Aberavon</b>	<b>Percentage Increase</b>	<b>Margam</b>	<b>Percentage Increase</b>
1881	4,859	+43	5,708	+10
1891	6,300	+30	6,274	+10
1901	7,553	+20	9,014	+44
1911	10,505	+39	14,713	+63
1921*	15,370	+46	17,774	+21

\*The 1921 Census figures refer to ‘Port Talbot Municipal Borough’ and ‘Margam Urban District’; the comparative 1911 figures quoted in that publication are those of Aberavon M.B. and Margam U.D. as above.

Source: [https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table/EW1921COU\\_M3?u\\_id=10073893&show=DB&min\\_c=1&max\\_c=11](https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table/EW1921COU_M3?u_id=10073893&show=DB&min_c=1&max_c=11) [Retrieved 24/9/2020]

<sup>37</sup> C.G. Pooley, ‘Patterns on the ground: urban form, residential structure and the social construction of space’, in Daunton (2018), pp.429-465, p.453.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.454.

<sup>39</sup> A. Marwick, *Britain in Our Century: Images and Controversies*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p.63.

Authorities with active, philanthropic élites as well as ample financial resources could choose to embrace the principles behind the 1909 legislation, but small, less wealthy areas were unlikely to implement housing reforms without duress. For its part, Aberavon had contributed to the housing of the working classes at an early stage and a number of building societies had been established. In 1881 the Aberavon Cottage Company (Limited) had been formed for the purpose of purchasing land on which houses could be built.<sup>40</sup> Although the majority of its shareholders were either councillors or council officials, the Cottage Company and the building project remained private enterprises. Having lost the bulk of corporation property when it was sold off by the old corporation prior to the 1861 charter, the council purchased building land at Fair Field in 1900 that by 1915 was said to have trebled in price.<sup>41</sup> As previous chapters have noted, however, available land for housing development in the borough was privately owned and in short supply, a fact that would be borne out in the 1921 Regional Survey (see below).

**Table 5.3: Housing Occupancy in Aberavon and Margam 1901 and 1911**

	<b>Aberavon 1901</b>	<b>Margam 1901</b>	<b>Aberavon 1911</b>	<b>Margam 1911</b>	<b>Aberavon 1921</b>	<b>Margam 1921</b>
<b>Population</b>	7,553	9,014	10,505	14,713	15,370	17,774
<b>Inhabited Houses</b>	1,372	1,764	1,792	2,771	2,504	3,386
<b>Uninhabited Houses</b>	145	139	38	106	-	-
<b>Building</b>	13	21	56	72	-	-
<b>Separate Occupiers/ Families</b>	1,478	1,811	2,033	2,964	3,095	3,925
<b>Calculated excess of households to homes</b>	106	47	241	193	591	539
<b>Calculated average occupancy</b>	5.5	5.1	5.9	5.3	6.1	5.2

Source Rows 1-5: 1911 Census of England and Wales, Classification of Buildings (Table 28) and [www.visionofbritain](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk) 1921 data accessed 20 November 2020 and 30 November 2020

In neighbouring Margam, land was plentiful but MUDC had faced housing problems in 1909 as the Housing Act progressed through Parliament. Insanitary housing had been identified

<sup>40</sup> *Western Mail*, 10 October 1881.

<sup>41</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 3 July 1915.

at a council meeting in September that year, but the council chose to defer to the landowner, Miss Talbot, whose agent, Councillor Godfrey Lipscomb suggested that new houses should be built for workmen via a building club, subject to Miss Talbot's agreement.<sup>42</sup> The matter was adjourned, but in December of the following year the quarterly report of the County Medical Officer stated, "By far the worst feature of this district is the huge number of unsanitary, unhealthy, and dilapidated premises that exist at Taibach".<sup>43</sup>

Unlike in Aberavon, evidence appears to suggest that mandatory responsibilities were accepted less readily in MUDC, where non-Labour councillors had become accustomed to operating within the scope of the landowner's largesse. This generosity appears to have had its limitations, however. In March 1911, the council found it necessary to prepare evidence of a 'dearth of workmen's homes' to support its application for a loan from the Local Government Board to cover Miss Talbot's costs of £500 per acre for land for building.<sup>44</sup> Labour's Henry Ellis proposed that the section of the Housing of the Working Classes Act which referred to municipal lodging houses be enforced by the Council but his proposal had no seconder and the matter was dropped.<sup>45</sup> Labour councillor Rees Llewellyn persisted, however, and by 1912 plans were in place to negotiate with Messrs. Vivian and Sons for the acquisition of their old cottages in Water Street to form part of the site for the proposed scheme.<sup>46</sup>

Map B, in the Introduction to this thesis, shows the extent of building in both Aberavon and Port Talbot at this time. It is evident that the housing just across the river from Aberavon which had begun in the late nineteenth century had spread further east, forming suburban, gentrified residential spaces.<sup>47</sup> The housing followed the pattern adopted by many local planners at that time and consisted of terraced 'bye-law housing' in styles designed for both unskilled workers and the lower middle class.<sup>48</sup> In Aberavon, 108 houses were built between 1914 and 1915 when the full extent of wartime shortages was yet to be felt.<sup>49</sup> Neither community, however, was able to fully resolve its housing difficulties by the time of the 1921 amalgamation.

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<sup>42</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 18 September 1909.

<sup>43</sup> *Evening Express*, 19 December 1910.

<sup>44</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 17 March 1911.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> PTL UD/Ma 1/5, MUDC Minute Book, 19 February 1912.

<sup>47</sup> Aberavon XXV.SW and Port Talbot and Margam XXXIII.NW.

<sup>48</sup> J.K. Walton in M.J. Daunton (2018), pp.715-744, p.718.

<sup>49</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 18 February 1915.

On a national level the Garden City Movement had encouraged a number of authorities in England to plan for a higher standard of housing for workers.<sup>50</sup> Key to this provision was an abundance of space on which to build the desirable, low-density properties that could attract affordable municipal rents. Good quality housing could also foster stability in communities. Whereas developing towns in Wales in the early part of the nineteenth century had been characterised as ‘frontier towns’ due in part to the transient nature of their populations, by this period it was possible for the higher-earning economic migrants to rent or even purchase a comfortable home of a good standard and put down roots.<sup>51</sup> The increase in salaried ‘white-collar’ work in this period also contributed to a sense of stability and ‘more workers became salaried with a greater security and regularity of payment and status’.<sup>52</sup> Housing, therefore, expanded to accommodate the new clerical classes and where possible it reflected the aspirations of local governments as authorities worked to establish themselves as the primary player in any amalgamation framework.

Aberavon and Margam had submitted three town planning schemes under the 1909 Housing Act: two from Aberavon of 3.5 and 3.6 acres in 1918 and one from Margam in early 1919.<sup>53</sup> Aberavon’s housing problem was serious and overcrowding was rife: in the North Ward 5,129 people lived in 1,054 houses, while in the South Ward 8,016 inhabitants occupied just 1,442 houses.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Aberavon’s Town Planning Scheme of 1919 was opposed by colliery interests whose mining rights and transportation plans for land near the proposed housing development had been held since 1888 but had never resulted in the establishment of a colliery.<sup>55</sup> Had the Aberavon scheme gone ahead, owners of the mineral rights would have lost ‘very valuable key positions’, not least of which was ‘easy access to Port Talbot Docks’.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the Town Planning Scheme document reveals that an 1855 conveyance by Aberavon’s old corporation transferred the mines, minerals and surface rights in that area to

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<sup>50</sup> For examples see S. Kay, *Homes for Welsh Workers from Robert Owen to “The Garden City Movement”*, (Abergavenny: 325 Press, 2014); M. Swenarton, *Homes Fit for Heroes: The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing in Britain*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), (ebook); and <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/> [accessed 26/8/2020].

<sup>51</sup> A. Croll (2000), p.18.

<sup>52</sup> J. Armstrong, ‘From Shillibeer to Buchanan: transport and the urban environment’, in M.J. Daunton (2018), pp.229-257, p.245.

<sup>53</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 22 November 1918 and *Cambria Daily Leader*, 25 April 1919; return of all local schemes reported in the *South Wales Weekly Post*, 16 August 1919.

<sup>54</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 26 April 1919.

<sup>55</sup> WGAS D/D GN/I/1496a, history and copy correspondence relating to Aberavon Town Planning Scheme 1919, and *South Wales Weekly Post*, 8 February 1919.

<sup>56</sup> D/D GN/I/1496a, copy letter from Messrs. Forster, Brown and Rees, Mining and Civil Engineers, Guildhall Chambers, Cardiff, to Moses Thomas, Town Clerk of Aberavon, dated 25 January 1919.

Henry J. Grant, Lord of the Manor.<sup>57</sup> The willingness of any local authority to reform and develop was therefore, as previous chapters have illustrated, heavily dependent on the endorsement of local industrialists and landowners. In Aberavon's case, however, the actions of the previous corporation also played a significant part in curtailing the town's development after 1861.

Despite setbacks, councillors remained open to innovation. MUDC sent representatives to the Housing and Town Planning Conference at Cardiff on at least two occasions.<sup>58</sup> Bricks were manufactured locally, but the 1915 Conference featured a new and popular method of building workmen's houses using manufactured concrete blocks, a system which larger municipalities, including Cardiff, had put into practice by 1920.<sup>59</sup> The 1917 Conference also prompted Aberavon Council to adopt a resolution calling upon the Westminster government to establish a separate Local Government Board for Wales that would be located in Wales and tasked with addressing many of the problems faced by industrial areas with rapidly increasing populations.<sup>60</sup>

Combined pressures from the expanding population forced local governments to consider the implications involved in the future housing and welfare of an increasing number of families. In 1915 the situation was exacerbated when the uncertainties of war prompted a phenomenally high marriage rate along with an exceptionally low illegitimate birth rate.<sup>61</sup> Shortages of materials due to the war meant that housebuilding in the area was 'at a standstill' for more than three years, despite the 'steady influx' of population.<sup>62</sup> By May 1918, when employment at the steel works had been escalated by the war effort and the promise of further expansion after the war, Port Talbot still needed about a thousand new homes.<sup>63</sup> Builders were plentiful, with 21 of 27 listed in the 1918 Trades Directory located in Port Talbot and the remaining six in Aberavon.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2; see also NAS Gn/I 7/1, copy conveyance dated 16 July 1855.

<sup>58</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 16 January 1915.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, and M. Swenarton (2018), p.125.

<sup>60</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 19 May 1917.

<sup>61</sup> A. Marwick (1984), p.40.

<sup>62</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 19 May 1917.

<sup>63</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 24 May 1918.

<sup>64</sup> *Historical Directories of England and Wales*, Trades Directory of Wales (North and South), 1918, University of Leicester Special Collections Online, <http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4> [accessed from November 2020].

Siting the new steel works at the location of the old Margam Copper Works meant a considerable increase in rates for MUDC.<sup>65</sup> Until that time the ‘largest share of the rateable value of the docks and railway company's estate’ was situated in Aberavon but the housing of the additional steelworkers as well as the miners working the prospective new pits that would supply the steel works presented a major problem for both local authorities despite the increase in rates.<sup>66</sup> It is apparent from Table 5.3 that some effort was made to address housing shortages in Aberavon and Margam but building supply fell far short of demand, particularly during the war years. In 1916, the annual report of MUDC’s Inspector of Nuisances, William Bishop, noted that there was ‘still a great dearth of suitable house accommodation for the working classes’ and that there was ‘not a vacant house in the district, and only five houses in course of erection’.<sup>67</sup> The prospect of increased population as a result of the new steelworks at Margam led Bishop to conclude that, ‘the question of housing accommodation requires the serious consideration of the Council as it is now impossible to deal with many of the insanitary dwellings and cases of overcrowding that exist in the district’.<sup>68</sup> As small councils, both Margam and Aberavon faced difficulties in reconciling their ambitions to develop housing of a standard that would raise the status of their communities with the realities of local government finance. As Table 5.1 shows, Aberavon persisted in its attempts to amalgamate as a means of addressing the disparities of rates and service provision but MUDC remained committed to a more ambitious scheme.

The rating system as a means of financing local government was becoming increasingly problematic. Use of public funds in this way had taken on ‘huge political importance’ and rising social demands after 1918 exacerbated the issue; ‘many [local authorities] found it increasingly difficult to meet the demands made upon them’.<sup>69</sup> Rising rates and expenditure along with ‘increasingly powerful labour movements’ put council officials under scrutiny.<sup>70</sup> This combination of maintaining low rates whilst at the same time meeting the raised expectations of a growing number of ratepayers proved difficult to reconcile in many smaller local authorities like Aberavon and Margam. Newspapers such as the *Herald of Wales* promoted amalgamation based on the savings to be made by cutting officer salaries and combining rather

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<sup>65</sup> *Llais Llafur*, 24 May 1918.

<sup>66</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914.

<sup>67</sup> WGAS D/D Xlm 95, cited by A. Dulley in ‘William Bishop and the expansion of Port Talbot’, in *Annual Report of the County Archivist 2013-14*, (West Glamorgan Archive Service, 2014), pp.31-34, p.32.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>69</sup> A. Beach and N. Tiratsoo, ‘The planners and the public’, in M.J. Daunton (2018), pp.525-550, p.535.

<sup>70</sup> B.M. Doyle in M.J. Daunton, (2018), p.298

than duplicating public works such as sewers.<sup>71</sup> In June 1914, the Special Correspondent of the *Herald* wrote a detailed account of the costs of these works and highlighted MUDC's decision to spend £25,000 on a new sewer with an outfall in the sea, similar to the Aberavon structure.<sup>72</sup> In addition, and despite MUDC's 1910 claim that it was exceptionally well managed, rivalry with Aberavon had prompted MUDC to try to establish its own gas works. Following arbitration, MUDC had to pay Aberavon over £30,000 in compensation and increase its rates; in contrast, the compensation allowed Aberavon to pay off its mortgages and reduce the rates.<sup>73</sup>

Accommodating the growing populations was given added urgency as the end of the Great War approached. War had curtailed both speculative house building and planned improvements led by local authorities.<sup>74</sup> Overcrowding remained a problem in Aberavon and a compulsory purchase scheme was introduced to prevent empty houses from being kept vacant while sale prices increased.<sup>75</sup> In the summer of 1917 the council revived a 1911 housing plan as part of a 'big push' to address the anticipated housing crisis.<sup>76</sup> The plan had originally been rejected by a Local Government Board inquiry as too expensive but the housing shortage in Aberavon prompted the council to reintroduce its scheme and at the same time assert the right of working families to comfortable homes. As a result, the Sandfields area was scheduled to benefit from the construction of 21 five-roomed and 32 six-roomed properties with another 200 planned to be built after the war when the Board intended making grants available to local councils for the provision of working-class housing.<sup>77</sup> In July 1919 Aberavon Council finally submitted a reduced plan for 33 houses on the land at Fair Field, also known as Corporation Field, each of which was designed in 'strict accordance with Mr. Tudor Walters' report'.<sup>78</sup> Originally costed at £1,000 per house the plan was rejected by the Housing Commission, but a revised estimate of £700 per house was accepted and the council took out a loan to fund the scheme.<sup>79</sup> Thirty of the houses were occupied by September 1921.<sup>80</sup>

Central government addressed the additional housing shortages imposed by the end of the war by agreeing a great housing programme; it was also a means of avoiding potential

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<sup>71</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> S. Kay (2014), p.22.

<sup>75</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 18 September 1918.

<sup>76</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 6 August 1917.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 17 July 1919.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 3 July 1915 and *Western Mail*, 23 September 1921.

revolution by the working classes.<sup>81</sup> The Tudor Walters report had already recognised an imminent increase in demand for housing and Addison's Housing Act of 1919 consequently 'ordered the local authorities to build unlimited houses and to let them at the equivalent of controlled rents, which were fixed at the 1914 level'.<sup>82</sup> Central government's new, mandatory approach assigned responsibility for these 'homes fit for heroes' to local authorities after 1919 but failed to confer any local influence.<sup>83</sup> However, although local councils were charged with delivering the housing, they were viewed by central government as too small and fragmented to perform the task adequately.<sup>84</sup> This perception was a clear signal to local government that amalgamation was the most efficient and effective means of delivering the provisions of the Act.

Both Aberavon council and MUDC were aware of the need for additional housing but were equally appreciative of the limitations they faced in stimulating private enterprise to deliver homes, especially during wartime when increased steel and coal production stimulated further inward migration. Aberavon's proactive stance in attempting to at least partly address its housing crisis indicates that there was no reluctance to tackle the problem. Councillors do not appear to have abdicated responsibility, neither is there evidence that elected representatives in Aberavon were becoming disillusioned with council business. On the contrary, in both Aberavon and Margam the annual elections were notable for the number of new Labour candidates fighting for seats in local government. By the early 1920s new standards of social welfare had been laid down 'and there were energetic local authorities, particularly Labour-controlled ones, ready to insist on the maintenance of these standards'; working men were becoming more class aware and more ready to give allegiance to the Labour Party.<sup>85</sup> As a consequence, amalgamation and a good standard of housing represented key features of Labour policy.

Improved education had contributed to demands from workers for higher social standards, and this, coupled with increased Labour representation on local authorities, meant that miners were 'revolting against conditions which their fathers accepted without complaint'.<sup>86</sup> The *South*

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The Oxford History of England: English History 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.147; see also J.A. Yelling, 'Land, Property and Planning' in Daunton (2018), pp.467-493, p.484.

<sup>83</sup> J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.275.

<sup>84</sup> P.N. Jones, 'The South Wales Regional Survey 1921: The Genesis and Legacy of a Regional Planning Milestone', *Llafur*, 9.4 (2007), pp.110-124, p.112.

<sup>85</sup> A. Marwick (1984), pp.57-59.

<sup>86</sup> *South Wales Regional Survey*, p.62 and *Cambria Daily Leader*, 24 May 1918.



*Wales Regional Survey* from which these words are taken recognised the ‘exceedingly difficult’ problem in Aberavon due to both the shortage and quality of available land; it also suggested that rates derived from industry should fund housing schemes within adjusted, amalgamated local authority boundaries.<sup>87</sup> The Survey also highlighted the lack of clarity regarding the status of both Aberavon and the urban area of Margam known as Port Talbot and referred to the ‘twin town of Aberavon and Port Talbot’.<sup>88</sup>

The investigative Survey was undertaken as a means of establishing the South Wales Coalfield as an area with ‘special circumstances’ for the future provision of housing.<sup>89</sup> This claim of exceptionality was based largely on the housing consequences of the growth of coal mining as an attractive prospect for economic migrants, who, as has already been stated, were usually young, single men.<sup>90</sup> As Gilbert and Southall have noted, by 1911 the South Wales Coalfield was the largest in Britain.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, whilst the number of miners in south Wales had increased since 1914, central government legislation in 1919 that had reduced the number of hours miners could work each week to 48 necessitated the employment of yet more workers who would need to be housed locally.<sup>92</sup>

Evidence had been taken in the spring of 1920 and was provided by a number of council representatives, including Aberavon’s mayor, Sidney H. Byass, and the agent to Margam Estate, Councillor Godfrey Lipscomb; the clerks and surveyors of both Aberavon and MUDC also testified.<sup>93</sup> By the time of publication in 1921, however, prosperity in the South Wales Coalfield had declined and the migration trends that had characterised the previous century were reversed; unemployment reached ‘appalling levels’ for a generation and the main recommendations of the Regional Survey regarding the construction of new council housing came to nothing.<sup>94</sup>

Aberavon’s position and identity in the period immediately before amalgamation appear to have been uncertain. Its council representatives had taken the lead in formulating the framework of a borough extension that included the urban areas of Margam, but the surrender

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<sup>87</sup> *South Wales Regional Survey*, p.32-33 and p.36.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.vi.

<sup>90</sup> D. Hopkin (1994), p.5.

<sup>91</sup> D. Gilbert and H. Southall, ‘The Urban Labour Market’, in Daunton (2018), pp.593-628, p.611.

<sup>92</sup> *South Wales Regional Survey*, p.19.

<sup>93</sup> *Western Mail*, 28 April 1920.

<sup>94</sup> P.N. Jones (2007), p.121.

of the borough name rendered the merits of the amalgamation unclear. In 1899, at the height of Aberavon's anxieties at losing official services and facilities to the new commercial centre at Port Talbot, Councillor Henry Stokes had been concerned to 'prevent Aberavon from being wiped out of the map'.<sup>95</sup> In 1921, when the Regional Survey was published, the maps which accompanied the Survey showed the neighbouring settlements of Cwmavon, Briton Ferry, Pontrhydyfen, Cymmer and Baglan but the municipal borough of Aberavon is absent from Plate 1 and barely discernible on Plates 2 and 3.<sup>96</sup>

### **Civic Identity**

Research and historiography both suggest that processes of amalgamation tended to consist of a basic conflict between protecting independence and identity or initiating advantageous alliances with neighbouring settlements. Local governments employed a number of different mechanisms to assert their primacy in the amalgamation race, not least of which was the accumulation of cultural capital.<sup>97</sup> By 1914 the commercial and civic centres of Aberavon and Margam were described in a pro-amalgamation newspaper article as 'one in all but name' and ratepayers were assessing the logic of maintaining two separate corporate bodies.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, it had been estimated that the combined administrative costs for the separate councils in the district were equivalent to a 'single public body eight times the size' and ratepayers could expect considerable savings along with improved public services if amalgamation was achieved; it was estimated that the saving in officials' salaries would be £2,000 a year.<sup>99</sup>

Within each community, however, work was being undertaken to accumulate the cultural capital that would boost perceived superiority when the anticipated amalgamation took place. When amalgamation discussions were revived in 1913, Aberavon's council pre-empted the outcome by borrowing £12,675 to fund new municipal buildings which incorporated not only a new council chamber and magistrates' court but also a shopping arcade.<sup>100</sup> Stoke-upon-Trent Borough Council had acted in a similar way and authorised construction of a 3,250-seat hall beside the town hall in 1908, two years before federation took place.<sup>101</sup> Hanley, not wanting to

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<sup>95</sup> *The Cambrian*, 15 December 1899 and Chapter Four.

<sup>96</sup> *South Wales Regional Survey*, pp.74-6.

<sup>97</sup> J. Stobart, (2003), p.163.

<sup>98</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 July 1915.

<sup>100</sup> *Bridlington Free Press*, 3 January 1913; *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 3 July 1915.

<sup>101</sup> J. Stobart, (2003), pp.173-4.

be outdone, built a new council chamber in the town hall, also in anticipation of the town becoming the civic centre of the new amalgamated borough.<sup>102</sup> In Burslem, in a ‘last defiant act’ before federation the borough council spent over £35,000 on a new town hall.<sup>103</sup>

Stobart noted that such civic buildings emphasised and celebrated local identity as well as municipal authority.<sup>104</sup> In addition, by locating municipal buildings at a central point in a town both the symbolism of the building and the elites who operated there could be accentuated.<sup>105</sup> In Aberavon, the new structure was in a prominent position adjacent to the town’s new market and had three frontages to the main streets.<sup>106</sup> Built of Forest of Dean stone and featuring four stone columns as well as a ‘substantial and imposing’ clock tower, the hall and its location provided a fitting example of Stobart’s characterisation of the central spatial placement of civic cultural capital.<sup>107</sup>

Competition and rivalry were also apparent in neighbouring Margam, where a missed opportunity by Aberavon in 1902 had led to MUDC reaping the benefit of funding for a Carnegie Library in 1914. As previous chapters have shown, in Aberavon the availability of land for development was severely limited. In contrast, MUDC’s access to land was sustained by the extensive Margam Estate and the largesse of its owner, Miss Talbot. The Estate’s land agent held a safe seat on the council and had been a permanent feature since its first elections in 1893, creating a convenient and advantageous connection between the community and its developers. In 1910, underlining the importance of that relationship the then agent, Godfrey Lipscomb, described his employer as ‘the best friend any council could have’.<sup>108</sup> As a result of yet another donation of land Port Talbot was therefore able to capitalise on Aberavon’s situation and acquire a prestigious Carnegie Library, the building costs of which were £2,306-17-6d, fully defrayed by the Carnegie U.K. Trust; the furnishing of the library was met by ratepayers.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p.174.

<sup>103</sup> J. Stobart, ‘Building an urban identity. Cultural space and civic boosterism in a ‘new’ industrial town: Burslem, 1761-1911’, *Social History*, 29:4 (2004), 485-498, p.485.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p.168.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp.170-1.

<sup>106</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 3 July 1915.

<sup>107</sup> J. Stobart, (2003), pp.170-1.

<sup>108</sup> *Evening Express*, 19 July 1910.

<sup>109</sup> History of Libraries in the Port Talbot District (May 2020): <http://www.taibachlibrary.org.uk/news/> [retrieved 16 October 2020].

Amassing civic cultural capital as a prelude to potential amalgamation appears to have also motivated Margam's decision to locate the new library on High Street, almost opposite the council offices.<sup>110</sup> Dressed in Bath stone, the building's exterior was physically imposing and housed a 'news room, reference and magazine room, juvenile room and lending library on the ground floor; a large lecture hall, ladies' room, book store, and librarians room on the first floor; and the basement [provided] lavatories and a heating chamber'.<sup>111</sup> Additional status was ascribed to the library by the Carnegie name, and Miss Talbot applied a strict protectionist clause to her land donation which specified that the building should be kept as a public good in perpetuity.<sup>112</sup>

Cultural capital was a means of differentiating between communities and it contributed to ideas of status and identity. In the period being examined here the physical distance between Aberavon and Margam had decreased but the two settlements remained very different in composition, particularly with regard to the presence of industry. As Stobart noted in his study of Burslem, however, cultural capital could also find expression in the industrial and residential properties of the commercial elite.<sup>113</sup> Port Talbot's new Customs House and the offices of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company both provided evidence of the growing status of the area (see Image 7 in Chapter Four). Additionally, the new, broad commercial centre at Station Road which connected Port Talbot by bridge to Aberavon underlined the prosperity of the area and has been said to have contributed to the River Afan losing its significance as a boundary between the two settlements.<sup>114</sup> The Rhondda & Swansea Bay Railway (R&SBR), however, followed the line of the river and remained a substantial barrier, particularly in relation to the level crossing gates which had been holding up pedestrians since at least 1901 and by 1910 were also hindering the passage of motor vehicles due to increased shunting at Port Talbot docks.<sup>115</sup> In 1914, the crossing was described by William Mitchell, the pro-amalgamation general manager of Port Talbot Theatres as 'an irritating division between the two towns'.<sup>116</sup>

Aberavon was not only physically separated from Port Talbot by the R&SBR, but it was also further divided into smaller units by the extensive transport infrastructure. Rail lines had

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<sup>110</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 16 July 1914.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> J. Stobart (2004), p.486.

<sup>114</sup> WGAS, D/D LE B/A 31, notes of A.L. Evans.

<sup>115</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 25 June 1910.

<sup>116</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 20 June 1914.

divided Aberavon on a north-south basis since the early tramways of the pre-locomotive industrial era had been used to transport freight between the docks and the many works of the Afan Valley. Construction of the South Wales Railway (SWR) in 1850, however, created an additional east-west division which added to the disconnection caused by the main road between Cardiff and Neath. Situated along the eastern bank of the River Afan the original R&SBR line had reinforced the existing river boundary between Aberavon and Margam since the early 1880s. Its 1895 westward extension to Neath and Swansea, however, consisted of an additional railway line running parallel to that of the Great Western Railway (GWR) which had taken over the SWR in 1863. Further impacting on the town were the main lines, branch lines and sidings of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company, which carried both freight and passengers between the coast and the coal-rich valleys of the hinterland.<sup>117</sup>

As Armstrong has noted, ‘railway lines became boundaries, defining neighbourhoods . . . with different social status’.<sup>118</sup> The railways cut areas into small units, ‘isolated from each other by these major physical obstacles’.<sup>119</sup> However, the isolation created by the railways was believed to strengthen solidarity within the separate areas ‘so that they became more cohesive and mutually supporting’.<sup>120</sup> In Aberavon, this effect was particularly noticeable at the time of amalgamation discussions with Margam in 1910. As noted above, MUDC had rejected Aberavon’s amalgamation proposal because of the latter’s alleged debts and the inclusion of Cwmavon. In consequence, Labour councillor David Rees of Aberavon emphasised the speed at which Aberavon was growing and the difficulties being experienced by the council in managing that growth; he moved that the time had come for the town to be split into two wards.<sup>121</sup> Opposition to his suggestion was based on concerns that formal division would make the lower part of town, the area south of the railway line, ‘a hotbed of Socialism’, but the motion passed by nine votes to three.<sup>122</sup>

Social and cultural differences between Aberavon and the urban area of Margam remained in place in this period. The coastal area on the eastern side of the River Afan was characterised by heavy industry whilst the town of Aberavon continued to offer retail and entertainment

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<sup>117</sup> See Chapter Four and O.S. Map of Glamorgan XXV, Aberavon including Port Talbot, Revised 1913-14, published 1921.

<sup>118</sup> J. Armstrong in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.247.

<sup>119</sup> Francois Bédarida cited by J. Armstrong in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.248.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 24 November 1910.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., and *Weekly Mail*, 26 November 1910.

facilities as well as numerous public houses. The beach at Aberavon continued to be a popular destination but remained undeveloped and the town's identity as a resort appeared to have been deferred. In contrast, a party of foreign journalists had visited nearby Porthcawl where the council were 'working as one man, endeavouring to transform Porthcawl from a seaport town into a health and pleasure resort'.<sup>123</sup> By 1914 new theatres and picture houses had become a feature of both communities but as a means of appeasing the landowner MUDC councillors were keen to ensure that performances were educational as well as entertaining.<sup>124</sup>

Differences in perception contributed to inhabitants' views about the status and importance of their communities. These differences informed and influenced opinions regarding amalgamation, and both research and the historiography suggest that personal identification with a locality in this period was directly related to age and length of residence. In Devonport and Burslem there had been active anti-federation campaigns against Plymouth and Stoke-on-Trent, each based on issues of local identity. The chairman of Devonport Liberal Working Men's Association, a carpenter called Simmons, testified at the amalgamation inquiry that 'those in favour of union were recent residents; the old ratepayers were against it'.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, in Burslem where 'fear of being 'taken over' or losing autonomy was especially strong' it had been 'clear that local identity was at the heart of Burslem's anti-federation campaign'.<sup>126</sup>

Neither Margam nor Aberavon ever resorted to a specific anti-amalgamation campaign but the period from 1910 was characterised by a series of 'tit-for-tat' extension proposals based on levels of political control (see Table 5.1). Opposition to amalgamation with Aberavon came from older, more established 'public men' such as MUDC's former chairman Major Thomas Gray and the General Manager of Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company, MUDC Councillor Edward Lowther.<sup>127</sup> Of those whose opinions were recorded at the time, a preference for amalgamation was most evident amongst three different but not necessarily exclusive groups: younger residents; those who had migrated into the area; and Labour supporters. It was also obvious that MUDC members were not opposed to amalgamation *per se* but were determined to define its terms and conditions as well as take the lead role in its

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<sup>123</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 11 July 1914.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, and *Glamorgan Gazette*, 21 April 1916.

<sup>125</sup> *Western Morning News*, 3 February 1914.

<sup>126</sup> J. Stobart, (2003), p.164.

<sup>127</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914.

implementation. As a result, Aberavon's suggestions, despite their merit, were consistently dismissed out of hand.

The legal mechanism existed for the urban area of Margam to become a borough in its own right. From 1877, central government was actively encouraging incorporation by permitting the costs of the process to be charged to the rates thereby paving the way for urban district councils to gain borough status.<sup>128</sup> Applicant towns were required to submit a petition to the Privy Council confirming a population of over 10,000, the support of the majority of ratepayers and proof of 'industrial viability and satisfactory local governance in the area'.<sup>129</sup> Having become an urban district council as a result of the 1894 Local Government Act, by 1911 the urban district of Margam, with a population of 14,713, seemed well placed to submit a petition for borough status that could have excluded Aberavon. The fact that the borough route was never pursued appears to indicate that MUDC was not content to achieve parity with Aberavon. Convinced of the superiority of Port Talbot the council pressed ahead with its ambitions for either a county borough or an extended borough in which Aberavon was no longer the lead authority.

Combined pressure from central government and ratepayers had compelled councils to consider how to avoid unwanted amalgamation into neighbouring authorities. Many councils took the initiative of reviving former amalgamation negotiations and driving forward plans for extending their boundaries. Many responded by intensifying attempts to improve their position under the 1888 scheme that had created county and county borough councils: towns which were not county boroughs sought that status and county boroughs sought to extend their boundaries by absorbing the suburban areas beyond their original limits.<sup>130</sup> This shift towards expansion was a crucial factor. It was particularly relevant in industrialised areas such as south Wales where links between improved housing conditions and industrial unrest were made all the more significant by vocal Labour activists, many of whom had become councillors.<sup>131</sup>

The Local Government Act (1888) which created county and county borough councils had originally stipulated that county borough status was available to only those towns where the population exceeded 100,000; such status allowed those towns to govern independently of county councils. However, by the time the Act was finally passed, the qualifying population

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<sup>128</sup> 40 & 41 Vict., c.69, The Municipal Corporations (New Charters) Act 1877; J.A. Chandler (2007), p.77.

<sup>129</sup> J.A. Chandler (2007), p.142.

<sup>130</sup> J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.276.

<sup>131</sup> M. Swenarton (2018), p.74.

figure had been reduced to 50,000. This change presented small yet ambitious councils with the opportunity to devise schemes of amalgamation that could extend their boundaries, increase the size of their authorities and number of elected representatives, and as a consequence gain them greater autonomy. After 1910, therefore, elected representatives in MUDC could realistically consider an amalgamation that would ‘embrace a population of 60,000 people’ and form a county borough.<sup>132</sup> Rees Llewellyn’s plan was to ‘create a demand’ for the scheme in the area and then ‘carefully and diplomatically’ engineer its success.<sup>133</sup>

Llewellyn was a collier who had been elected to MUDC for the first time in 1897 at the age of about 30. Although active in council meetings, in 1901 Llewellyn forced a by-election for his seat in Central Ward after being absent from the district for six months.<sup>134</sup> Said at the time to have ‘gone abroad’, Llewellyn was reported to have left his wife and eight children under the age of ten to travel to India to help settle a miners’ dispute, a notion corroborated in his 1925 obituary.<sup>135</sup> No evidence of Llewellyn’s presence in India has been located, but by early 1906 Llewellyn was back in Wales and had helped set up a branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) at Taibach; he became its first chairman.<sup>136</sup> Re-elected to his former seat in 1907 he was enumerated with his wife and nine children (two of whom had been born after his return) in the 1911 Census.<sup>137</sup> Newspaper reports of the time indicate that Llewellyn was a vocal advocate for socialist policies and by 1909, having failed to find work as a miner after his return from India, he had become secretary to the Municipal Employees Society of Wales.<sup>138</sup> As a leading member of the ILP he was an influential individual within the council and was distinctly pro-amalgamation; one obituary notice even credited him with responsibility for the amalgamation of Margam and Aberavon councils.<sup>139</sup>

Reduction in the qualifying population figure could also prove to be problematic. As the Local Government Bill was progressing through Parliament in July 1888, the municipal boroughs of Stoke-upon-Trent, Longton, Hanley and Burslem joined with the local boards of

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<sup>132</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 20 June 1914.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 11 September 1901.

<sup>135</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 10 October 1901 and Census of England and Wales 1901, High Street, Margam; obituary in the *Western Mail*, 6 April 1925. Note: Llewellyn’s second marriage in 1920 was to Gertrude Bartram, widow of a private in the 20<sup>th</sup> Hussars, who had spent most of her married life in India. Six of her nine children had been born in India but by 1902 Gertrude and her family were living in Cardiff, where her daughters Emily and Judith were born in 1902 and 1904 respectively.

<sup>136</sup> *Labour Leader*, 13 April 1906.

<sup>137</sup> *The Cambrian*, 29 March 1907 and Census of England and Wales 1911, 5, Gower Street, Port Talbot.

<sup>138</sup> *Evening Express*, 30 November 1909; and *Western Mail*, 6 April 1925.

<sup>139</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 10 April 1925.



Tunstall and Fenton to propose the creation of a new county borough of the Staffordshire Potteries.<sup>140</sup> If granted, their submission to the Local Government Board would have released them from unwelcome control by the proposed new Staffordshire County Council. The Potteries' proposal, however, coincided almost exactly with the reduction in the population qualification and gave Hanley, but only Hanley, the option to obtain county borough status.<sup>141</sup> The following February, Hanley made the decision to become a county borough; there is no recorded reason for that decision, but it has been suggested that Hanley was positioning itself against Stoke as the administrative centre of the new county borough.<sup>142</sup>

Whilst Hanley and Aberavon were very different in terms of size and composition, the histories of the two places had shared common links since the middle of the nineteenth century. Following Hanley's incorporation in 1857, the town clerk, Edward Challinor, had assisted Aberavon with its own incorporation in 1861, and a vote of thanks to him was recorded in the new council's minute book.<sup>143</sup> As Chapter Three has noted, Hanley continued to maintain a relationship with the council at Aberavon after 1861 due to the fact that the latter's town solicitor and later town clerk, Marmaduke Tennant, was the brother of Hanley solicitors and county court registrars Edmund and Alfred Tennant. Prior to setting up a law practice in Aberavon, Tennant had been articled to a Burslem solicitor, and there can be little doubt that the events surrounding attempts at merger in both Aberavon and the Potteries were shared between the brothers.

Creation of the county borough of Stoke-on-Trent in March 1910 had been unique in British urban history in that it brought together six previously independent urban authorities – a county borough (Hanley), three municipal boroughs (Stoke-upon-Trent, Longton and Burslem) and two urban districts (Fenton and Tunstall) - as a single administrative unit.<sup>144</sup> As Stobart noted, the subsequent amalgamation of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse to form 'Greater' Plymouth Borough Council in 1914 was the only other comparable example, and it was the Plymouth case that MUDC Labour councillor Rees Llewellyn cited as a model of multiple townships which had amalgamated successfully.<sup>145</sup> Although not quoted directly, Llewellyn's

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<sup>140</sup> [http://www.thepotteries.org/federation/001\\_what\\_is.htm](http://www.thepotteries.org/federation/001_what_is.htm) Accessed 20 November 2020 and 1 December 2020.

<sup>141</sup> The Potteries' proposal was submitted 2 July 1888 and the Local Government Bill was amended 9 July 1888.

<sup>142</sup> [http://www.thepotteries.org/federation/001\\_what\\_is.htm](http://www.thepotteries.org/federation/001_what_is.htm) Accessed 20 November 2020 and 1 December 2020.

<sup>143</sup> WGAS PTL B/A 11/1.

<sup>144</sup> J. Stobart, (2003) p.163.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote p.163; *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 17 July 1915; and <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/visitorsandtourism/museumsandheritage/boundarystones/threetownsamalgamationcentenarystone> [accessed 9/11/2020].

reported reference to the three towns being ‘always at loggerheads’ drew parallels with Aberavon and Margam.<sup>146</sup> Additionally, in an attempt to rebut any opposition based on the huge size of an amalgamated unit based on Aberavon’s petty sessional division, Llewellyn pointed out that the amalgamation of Merthyr’s districts into a county borough in 1908 had created a combined area of 50 square miles but had led to ‘increased prosperity and betterment of the entire district’.<sup>147</sup> Although the report implied that an inquiry by the Local Government Board was a smooth and simple process, it omitted the fact that opposition to amalgamation had been a feature in both cases.

Llewellyn, however, was only partly correct in his comparisons. The status of the merged authority on the south coast of England was very different from that of the urban area of Margam. Plymouth, like Aberavon, had been an ancient borough. It was incorporated under charter in 1439 and became one of the first 178 boroughs to be reformed under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835; following the Local Government Act of 1888 it became a county borough. Devonport, formerly known as Plymouth Dock, resembled Port Talbot in that it had been a tiny settlement that had grown to become larger than its older, more established neighbour. However, unlike Port Talbot it had become a municipal borough in 1837 and achieved county borough status in 1889, which indicated that its 1915 population was well in excess of 50,000. Devonport had formally opposed plans for amalgamation with Plymouth and Stonehouse, and its 54 councillors voted 50-4 against the scheme.<sup>148</sup> Despite that opposition, Royal Assent was granted on 10 August 1914, six days after war had been declared.<sup>149</sup>

In contrast to the Plymouth townships, the status of the area known as Port Talbot was still unclear at this point; no official, formally recognised urban settlement by that name existed. Although many of Aberavon’s inhabitants completed their addresses on the 1911 Census forms as “Aberavon, Port Talbot”, it was also acknowledged that “Port Talbot” was ‘only a postal name’.<sup>150</sup> Whilst the O.S. maps used the name Port Talbot to refer to the area inland from the docks, *Kelly’s Directory* of 1914 contained a map, ‘prepared expressly for [that] directory’ which placed the name Port Talbot in the water off Aberavon (see Map 5.1).<sup>151</sup> Compounding

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<sup>146</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 17 July 1915.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 8 May 1914.

<sup>149</sup> A centenary stone marking the amalgamation was erected in Plymouth’s Victoria Park on 1 November 2014.

<sup>150</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914.

<sup>151</sup> Glamorgan XXV 1913-14, pub. 1921 Aberavon (including Port Talbot): <https://maps.nls.uk/view/102342511>; *Kelly’s Directory of South Wales and Monmouthshire (1914)*.

the lack of differentiation was the fact that the entrance channel and the largest share of the rateable value of the docks and railway company's estate were situated in the municipal borough of Aberavon, not in Margam.<sup>152</sup> As such, some residential parts of what was known as 'Port Talbot' were actually in Aberavon. Furthermore, successive expansions at the docks had provided for deeper water and longer quays, features which Palmer has noted were instrumental in physically distancing the outer limits of a port from its older site.<sup>153</sup>

**Map 5.1: Trade directory map of 1914 placing Port Talbot in Swansea Bay**



Source: Kelly's Directory of South Wales and Monmouthshire 1914

### Labour and the Amalgamation Agenda

Hopkin has written that Wales was not a notable stronghold of socialism in the very early part of the new century and activists were said to be thin on the ground.<sup>154</sup> Socialist societies and organisations had developed in England but not Wales, so replicating that movement in Wales was dependent on 'missionary socialists' from England or through the arrival of experienced immigrants or visitors in a particular community.<sup>155</sup> In Taibach, the new ILP branch chaired by Rees Llewellyn had come about as a result of a 'productive' visit from William Trainer of Leeds, who had encouraged an initial membership of between 50 and 60.<sup>156</sup>

Hopkin's views are shared by Jones, who has written that it was an influx of English-speaking immigrants to the coalfield that was said to have transformed the coalfield valleys by

<sup>152</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914.

<sup>153</sup> S. Palmer in M.J. Dunton (2018), p.136.

<sup>154</sup> D. Hopkin (1994), p.122.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>156</sup> *Labour Leader*, 13 April 1906.

bringing in ‘alien’ values such as ‘materialism and socialism’.<sup>157</sup> Within these growing communities where boundaries were indistinct and emotional attachments to place were weakening, new political identities were created and cultivated. As Stead noted, the war years created a new set of conditions: labour consciousness was integrated into a new consensus and the Labour party that emerged after 1918 was led by men with a record of service to the community as a whole.<sup>158</sup>

By 1914, as Morgan has contended, Wales seemed to have become the major battleground for the class war; in no other part of Britain was the confrontation between capital and labour ‘more naked and complete’ and official union leadership was firmly in control of events.<sup>159</sup> Consequently, local authority decisions were influenced by a third factor in addition to mandatory responsibilities and ratepayer expectations: the growing strength of the local Labour party. Labour members with leadership ambitions for themselves and their colleagues had developed a new confidence and self-consciousness as a collective, and pressure for boundary extension prior to the outbreak of war became a primary ambition. Driving these ambitions was the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), a body which had made no secret of the fact that amalgamation and an increase in Labour councillors was its principal ambition. For Labour, ‘control of the town hall’ could lead ultimately to victory in national politics and add further legitimacy to the party’s political presence.<sup>160</sup> The LRC had made amalgamation the ‘chief plank in their local platform’ in Aberavon by the summer of 1914, and trades unionists had also committed to taking a ‘far more active part’.<sup>161</sup>

Labour’s stated commitment to amalgamation as a means of increasing the number of its representatives presented a huge opportunity, particularly in parts of south Wales, where Labour was already gaining council seats. In Aberavon, Labour gained only gradual momentum from 1910 to 1918 and Conservatives remained the largest group. In the more industrialised Margam, however, Labour had gained considerable ground since 1908 and following the 1910 election it had become the majority group on the council. Fig. 5.2 and Fig. 5.3 illustrate the political make-up of Aberavon and Margam councils in this period. In Aberavon, the borough council was comprised of sixteen elected members but the co-option of

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<sup>157</sup> P.N. Jones (2007), p.113.

<sup>158</sup> P. Stead, ‘Working-Class Leadership in South Wales 1900-21’, *Welsh History Review*, 6 (1972), 329-353, p.350.

<sup>159</sup> K.O. Morgan (1972), p.301.

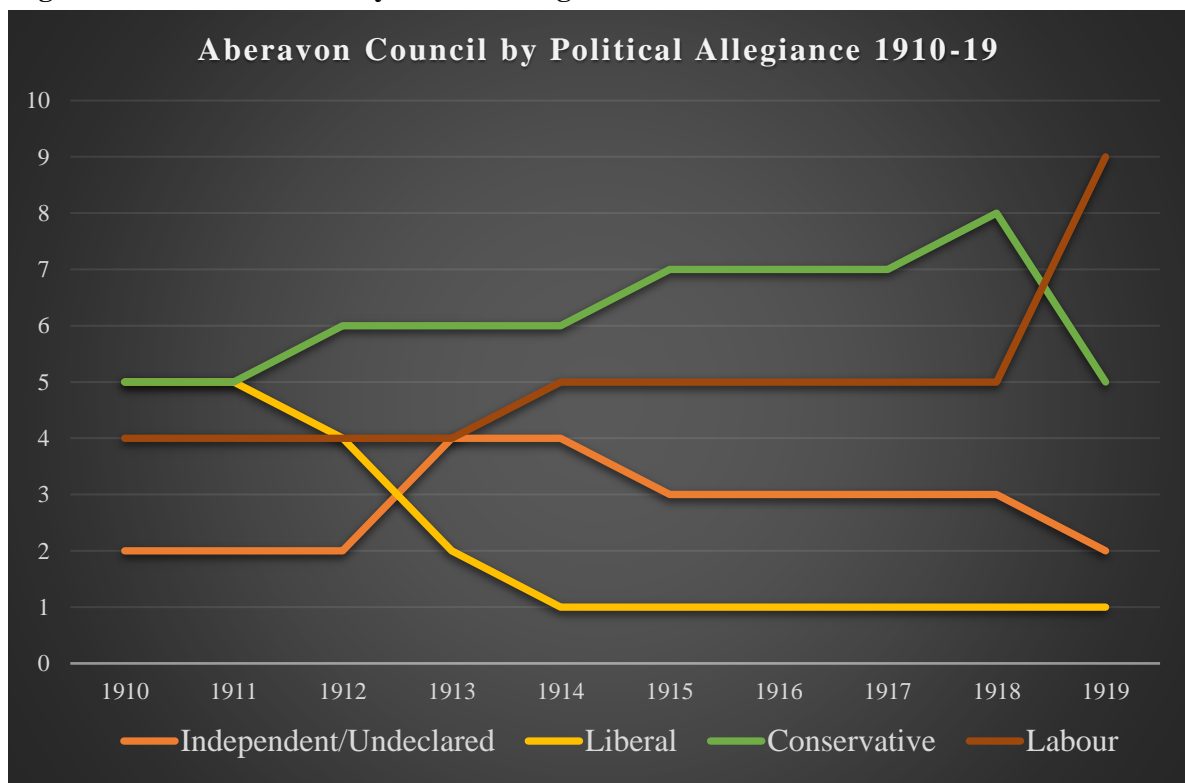
<sup>160</sup> B.M. Doyle in M.J. Daunton (2000), p.302.

<sup>161</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 20 June 1914.

Sidney Byass as mayor in 1918 raised the number to seventeen. In Margam, the four wards were represented by eighteen members. As the number of elected Labour members increased in each authority, so the prospects for merger were strengthened.

For Johnes, Labour’s broad support was as much due to its practical work and the personalities of its leaders as any commitment to a broad radical philosophy.<sup>162</sup> Margam councillors such as Tal Mainwaring, Harry Davies and Richard Evans were renowned for their speaking ability and tough negotiating skills, the essence of which they acquired as trades union representatives.<sup>163</sup> That experience contributed to success in local government and miners’ agents like Tal Mainwaring were men of great influence.<sup>164</sup> Coal mining, which had been the setting for a number of strikes in the immediate pre-war period, became a crucial part of the war effort and miners’ demands for higher wages and a better standard of living were consistently met by employers. The war, therefore, acted as a catalyst for Labour influence and amalgamation remained high on the local government agenda.

**Fig. 5.2: Aberavon Council by Political Allegiance 1910-1919**



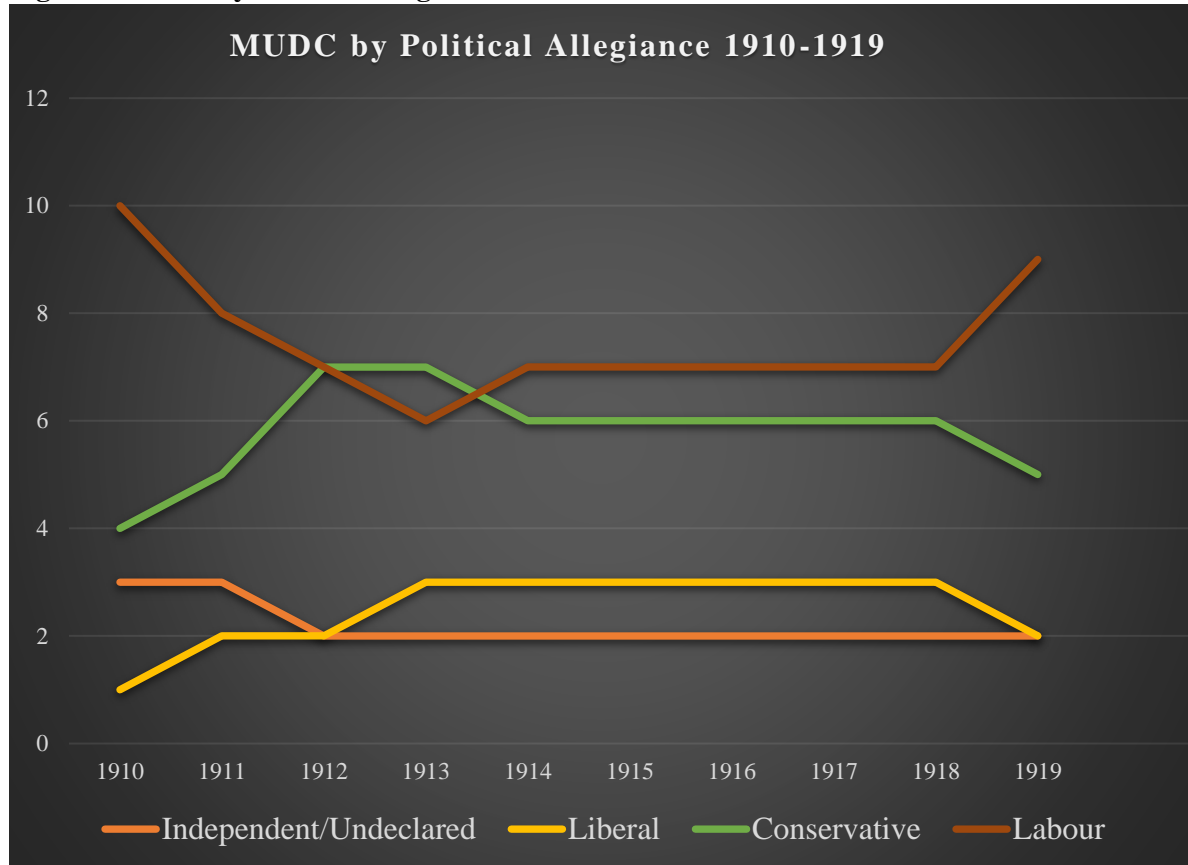
Sources: Welsh Newspapers Online

<sup>162</sup> M. Johnes, ‘For Class and Nation: Dominant Trends in the Historiography of Twentieth Century Wales’, *History Compass*, 8.11 (2010), 1257-74, p.1258.

<sup>163</sup> A.L. Evans, (1987), pp.19-20.

<sup>164</sup> P. Stead (1972), p.348-9.

**Fig. 5.3: MUDC by Political Allegiance 1910-1919**



Sources: Welsh Newspapers Online

The war years and the subsequent depression prompted - and sometimes forced - joint working between political parties as well as councils as they attempted to address issues such as food shortages, rationing and meat queues. Marwick has suggested that on a domestic level the initial shock of war was replaced with a short period of ‘business as usual’ before the full effects of the loss of manpower, rigid state control and food shortages were felt.<sup>165</sup> As Table 5.1 shows, amalgamation certainly remained the councils’ priority, but as well as managing differences in how each authority perceived any future merger the war years were also punctuated with addressing responses to central government legislation. In December 1917, the equalisation of war bonuses to salaried officials in Aberavon and MUDC was agreed without difficulty, revealing that in some circumstances at least the two councils could reach consensus.<sup>166</sup> Shared adherence to the philosophy of local government amalgamation fostered an ideological co-operation that was only rarely equalled by a commitment to collaborative working.

<sup>165</sup> A. Marwick (1984), p.37.

<sup>166</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 20 December 1917.

Local rivalries persisted throughout the period and continued to inform decisions, particularly those regarding joint working, which could occasionally be perceived as an acceptable alternative to amalgamation.<sup>167</sup> Aberavon and Margam had first attempted a collaborative scheme in 1910 and this coincided with MUDC's rejection of Aberavon's proposal to amalgamate with Margam and Cwmavon.<sup>168</sup> Included in the joint working plan were a hospital and a cemetery, but the plan was never implemented and Margam eventually established a cemetery of its own.<sup>169</sup> The extent of the rivalry between the two communities is evident in the fact that Miss Talbot donated land to Margam Council for a cemetery but 'on condition that it is used for Margam alone, and although the Aberavon Council are willing to pay they are not allowed to join'.<sup>170</sup>

Collaboration had been attempted again in November 1913, this time on the suggestion of Labour councillor Rees Llewellyn at MUDC, but it was agreed only with the proviso that its intention was the benefit of both communities not as a precursor to amalgamation.<sup>171</sup> The move had been prompted by Labour's mixed success at Aberavon's municipal elections. A joint standing committee was formed of equal numbers from each body with the aim of providing a 'refuse destructor, public cemetery, mortuary, public library, sanatorium, housing scheme, stone crusher at Bryn (to supply the metalling for the districts), and many other useful projects essential for the benefit of the district'.<sup>172</sup> Ultimately, however, suspicion of each other's motives and the consequences of the long-term rivalry between councils made joint working difficult. Margam, as shown above, gained a prestigious Carnegie Library and a public cemetery and each council eventually submitted separate housing schemes. No public mortuary was provided and the issue was raised again in 1916 when the LRC wrote to the council in Aberavon asking them to co-operate with Margam.<sup>173</sup> The council immediately resolved to have plans and estimates prepared for the conversion of an existing Aberavon building into a temporary mortuary but no decision was made on discussions with MUDC.<sup>174</sup>

Labour had been successful in its aim of separating the town into two wards and the November 1913 elections were the first to return representatives for the new South Ward and

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<sup>167</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 28 May 1910 and *Cambria Daily Leader*, 11 November 1913.

<sup>168</sup> *Evening Express*, 19 May 1910 and *Cardiff Times*, 28 May 1910.

<sup>169</sup> *Cardiff Times*, *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914.

<sup>171</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 11 November 1913.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 21 September 1916.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

North Ward. The results, however, were also noteworthy for the loss of four former mayors of the borough, one of whom was the first nominally Labour councillor to be elected in Aberavon, railway signaller turned licensed victualler, Timothy Owen.<sup>175</sup> Owen was returned to the council after a by-election later that month, taking his party to four members, and the choice for mayor that year was Labour's David Rees. Plans for amalgamation were boosted further by the April 1914 election of Labour's Rees Llewellyn to the chairmanship of MUDC.<sup>176</sup> His position had been contested but he was elected by eleven votes to four at a time when Labour held seven seats, the Liberals three, the Independents one and the Conservatives six; the remaining councillor, Calvinistic Methodist minister Reverend Thomas Howell, appears to have had no declared allegiance. Amalgamation, therefore, was taken to the top of both councils' agendas and was vociferously supported by Welsh newspapers such as *The Herald* and socialist publication *The Pioneer*.

*The Herald* had already emphasised the savings its ratepayer readers could make by combining authorities and avoiding duplication of works and salaries. Interviews of 'public men' on the merits of amalgamation in a follow-up article on 20 June 1914 included five Labour councillors who all supported the idea of merger.<sup>177</sup> Aberavon's mayor, Alderman David Rees; the chairman of MUDC, Rees Llewellyn; Aberavon councillor Timothy Owen; Secretary of the Dockers' Union Councillor Jonah Charles of MUDC; and Councillor Harry Davies, also of MUDC, all agreed that amalgamation represented an effective means of saving public money.<sup>178</sup> Davies had been returned at the top of the poll at the last election and was confident that the reason for his success was the electorate's support of his pro-amalgamation campaign.<sup>179</sup>

It is noticeable, however, that Rees described 'a fusion of two districts', Llewellyn called for a much larger scheme, and Owen stated that the unions were 'practically unanimous' rather than fully supportive. Crucially, the interview responses make it clear that amalgamation was not being driven by the general public. David Rees acknowledged that 'the virtues of the scheme [were not yet] publicly understood', and Rees Llewellyn accepted that 'a good deal of propaganda work was necessary to educate the general public' before active steps could be taken towards amalgamation; Llewellyn's overriding motivation was to 'create a demand' for

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<sup>175</sup> *Western Mail*, 3 November 1913.

<sup>176</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 25 April 1914.

<sup>177</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 20 June 1914.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*



a county borough.<sup>180</sup> Only two dissenting opinions were published: those of conservative MUDC councillors Major Thomas Gray and Edward Lowther, who both believed amalgamation would come about eventually but was ‘premature’ at that time.<sup>181</sup> Lowther, who was general manager of Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company at the time, did not believe that amalgamation with Aberavon in 1914 would be to Margam’s advantage.<sup>182</sup>

*The Pioneer*, a socialist weekly that had been launched by Keir Hardie in Merthyr in 1911, zealously promoted Labour’s pro-amalgamation message until publication ended in 1922. In combination with the LRC, *The Pioneer* was a motivating force for amalgamation. Labour activist Rees Llewellyn, whose 1913 proposal to amalgamate the larger surrounding area of Margam had been defeated 7-5 by MUDC, repeated the motion in July 1915 when it passed 7-2.<sup>183</sup> Aberavon’s reaction to its inclusion in a Margam-led scheme was unfavourable and fuelled by suspicion that Margam’s real intention was to exclude Aberavon entirely.<sup>184</sup> Crucial to Aberavon’s stance was the fact that at that time there had been ‘no instance on record of a District Council taking over a corporate body’.<sup>185</sup> Impinging on MUDC ambitions was the extension process itself, which made no provision for a district council to subsume an incorporated body into its jurisdiction.<sup>186</sup> The obstacle could be overcome, however, by one of two methods. The first was an application for borough status for Port Talbot which could have been followed by a borough extension that included Aberavon. The second was the submission of a borough extension by Aberavon that would change the name of the new authority to reflect the prosperous urban district of Margam that was known as Port Talbot.

Despite almost one-third of Aberavon’s councillors being Labour members, *The Pioneer* was scathing of Aberavon’s rejection of MUDC’s amalgamation proposal, citing the borough’s ‘ridiculous claim of parochial superiority over the Margam district’ as a hindrance to progress.<sup>187</sup> In fact, Aberavon had proposed amalgamation to MUDC numerous times since the 1880s but the rejected calls and proposals had been made by either Liberals or Conservatives, which clearly did not satisfy the demands of *The Pioneer* and the LRC. The extent of the latter’s influence was also evident in MUDC’s uncontested decision in 1915 to allow the minutes of

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 13 July 1915.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 22 July 1915.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 22 July 1915.

<sup>187</sup> *Pioneer*, 31 July 1915.

council meetings to be provided to the LRC as well as to ‘any union or society’ that applied.<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, Labour influence in the summer of 1915 led to both councils resolving to pass resolutions that tenders would not be granted to firms unless they paid their workers trade union wage rates and all employees were union members.<sup>189</sup> Despite these shared objectives, the personnel of both councils continued to find the process of joint working a difficult one.<sup>190</sup>

At a national level, general discontent and war-weariness amongst the working class led to strikes in May 1917 despite the trade unions having declared an industrial truce in August 1914 that was expected to last for the duration of the war.<sup>191</sup> The co-operation of labour was essential to the war effort and as a result its representatives could successfully demand higher wages and better living standards.<sup>192</sup> Average incomes of working class families between 1914 and 1920 rose by 100 per cent and slightly more than cancelled out the cost of living rises, but food shortages were a constant concern and had begun to affect south Wales from the summer of 1917.<sup>193</sup> Bacon was ‘continually refused’ due to transportation delays by the railways and questions were asked in Parliament.<sup>194</sup> Aberavon Council, again demonstrating a proactive stance, formalised a commitment to the provision of healthy food by outlawing the use of ‘diluted flour’ to make ‘war bread’ but its example was not followed by other councils.<sup>195</sup> MUDC, meanwhile, was organising special meetings of council to prepare evidence for an inquiry into amalgamation.<sup>196</sup>

For many councils, this period was marked by unprecedented demands on their time and resources. Soaring prices and the inequitable distribution of food were confirmed by a 1917 Industrial Unrest Commission of Inquiry as the principal cause of social unrest and Lord Rhondda was appointed as the government’s Food Controller. When Lord Rhondda’s Food Relief Scheme was launched, however, a special meeting of Aberavon Town Council decided against acting jointly with MUDC, preferring instead to set up its own committee. Rumours of fresh supplies to shops in Aberavon and Port Talbot in January 1918 resulted in a ‘crowd of women . . . practically beyond control’ stampeding the shops and ‘running wild’, while meat

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<sup>188</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 17 July 1915.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*; see also R. Trainor, ‘Urban elites in Victorian Britain’, *Urban History Yearbook*, 12 (1985), 1-17, p.6.

<sup>190</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 25 July 1914.

<sup>191</sup> A.J.P. Taylor (1992), p.28.

<sup>192</sup> A. Marwick (1984), p.47.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>194</sup> *Llais Llafur*, 7 July 1917.

<sup>195</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 14 July 1917.

<sup>196</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 10 July 1917.

queues formed in Swansea. Grocers in Port Talbot threatened to remain closed unless they had police protection but the two rival councils had managed to submit a joint rationing scheme that was awaiting the sanction of Lord Rhondda. Nevertheless, as Table 5.1 shows, it was schemes for borough extension and county borough status that continued to dominate.

Councils, often populated by local industrialists and the men who worked for them, were also conscious of the impact war was having on local industries. South Wales ports, including Port Talbot, were particularly dependent on the export of coal so the loss of overseas markets without the compensation of increased imports could seriously affect employment.<sup>197</sup> Trade at Port Talbot had increased substantially since the infrastructure improvements carried out as a result of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Act (1894).<sup>198</sup> Coal and coke exports had regularly exceeded two million tons since 1909 and reached record levels in 1913. The first year of the war was marked by a reduction in exports of more than half a million tons while imports of general merchandise more than halved to just under 48 million tons.<sup>199</sup> By 1915, Port Talbot had become a net importer of general merchandise, and the following year the figure for imported timber, essential for building work, had been reduced to ‘Nil’.<sup>200</sup> Consequently, the role of the men who supported workers’ rights and negotiated on their behalf for better pay and conditions was significantly increased.

The initial impact of the war on trade at Port Talbot was significant. Copper and tinsplate production were in decline, and the Mansel works lost its lucrative blackplate trade with Russia and Eastern Europe; by the summer of 1916 the Mansel works had been forced to reduce its capacity from sixteen mills in the pre-war years to just four.<sup>201</sup> Shipbuilding, however, exceeded normal needs and new steel works were created near existing ports instead of on more economical sites near ore fields.<sup>202</sup> In early 1915 Baldwin’s announced plans to invest almost half a million pounds in building a new steel works in Margam.<sup>203</sup> *The Herald* looked forward to the ‘momentous industrial happenings’ and increased employment opportunities the business merger offered, but as has been shown above, councillors must have been all too aware of the social implications of the paper’s prediction that ‘within a comparatively short period

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<sup>197</sup> S. Palmer in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.145.

<sup>198</sup> See Chapter Four.

<sup>199</sup> *The Welsh Coal & Shipping Handbook: Tide Tables for Cardiff, Newport, Swansea, Port Talbot, Barry and Llanelly* (The Western Mail, Ltd.), 1925, p.104.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 24 August 1916.

<sup>202</sup> A.J.P. Taylor (1992), p.122.

<sup>203</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 15 May 1915.

the population of Port Talbot will be practically doubled'.<sup>204</sup> Although the increase would impact on housing and welfare provision, ambitious Labour councillors in MUDC were convinced that the greater the population, the greater their chances of securing county borough status.

Steel manufacture was temporarily boosted by central government intervention in 1916 but the concentration of steel and tinplate works along the south Wales coast made the region disproportionately susceptible to any downturns in trade. Industrial interests in Margam, therefore, were keen to capitalise on central government involvement in local manufacturing. The locations of three out of four new shipyards planned for south Wales had already been decided, and the mayor of Aberavon had approached MUDC councillor and Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company manager Edward Lowther to suggest that Port Talbot should bid for the fourth site.<sup>205</sup> Aberavon's municipal connections to a large part of the docks prompted the establishment of a joint development committee, and a new MUDC Development Committee was charged with dealing with the venture.<sup>206</sup> Again, Aberavon's proactive stance is noteworthy but although Admiralty representatives visited Port Talbot in early December 1917 to assess the scope for investment in the area, the bid was unsuccessful.<sup>207</sup>

Coinciding with the shipyard bid was Aberavon's plan to extend the borough and incorporate parts of Margam. In preparation, MUDC had been asked to share details of their mortgage and rate books.<sup>208</sup> Each council's reaction – MUDC's vehement refusal and Aberavon's decision to pursue the matter via a summons – emphasised the extent to which local authorities would defend and protect their territories, even within the additional constraints of war.<sup>209</sup> This reaction by MUDC underlines the fact that councils could be selective in their amalgamation negotiations. Just two months earlier, Aberavon had complied when MUDC's Clerk had been tasked with contacting all the local authorities involved in Margam's proposed conversion to a county borough to obtain details of their area, rateable value, population, present rates, and indebtedness.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 June 1915.

<sup>205</sup> *Western Mail*, 10 November 1917.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 8 December 1917.

<sup>208</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 13 November 1917.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 December 1917.

<sup>210</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 10 September 1917.

Marwick had no doubt that the war experience 'had created a more coherent and unified, a more assertive, a more self-confident, a more class-aware, perhaps even more class-conscious, working class'.<sup>211</sup> For Stead, the war gave many men the chance for leadership, partly as older leaders retired or died and mainly as a result of the realization that it was vital to involve w/c leaders in as many public spheres as possible.<sup>212</sup> As Doyle has written, up to 1914 'management of the urban environment remained the privilege of the middle class through their control of the council, the bureaucracy and most of the pressure groups'.<sup>213</sup> Furthermore, the potential for the amateur councillor to be overwhelmed with the raft of legislation he was required to administer opened the way for municipal officials to assert control.<sup>214</sup> The war years, however, were a period when the confidence Labour and its representatives had gained in addressing wages and working conditions was translated into effective and legitimate political action in local government. Indeed, many council seats at this time were gained by workers who were standing against their own employers.<sup>215</sup>

Working class organisations had gained new status in this period and the position of labour had been transformed.<sup>216</sup> Initial suspicion of Labour as extreme and disruptive had developed into acceptance of independent working-class representation even though that was within a framework of obligations and restraints.<sup>217</sup> Labour made headway in council elections and working-class pressure groups asserted their power.<sup>218</sup> During the last months of war and first months of peace labour's strong bargaining power, the product of a continued labour shortage, ensured further wage advances.<sup>219</sup> Furthermore, by characterising the war itself as a capitalist struggle, workers were able to strengthen the idea of a labour collective at local, national and global levels.

Labour's municipal gains were made mainly at the expense of Liberals. The last remaining declared Liberal of the 16 councillors in Aberavon resigned just two weeks after the November 1919 elections citing 'pressure of business'.<sup>220</sup> A similar situation existed in Margam where at the end of the period just two Liberal councillors remained out of a total eighteen councillors.

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<sup>211</sup> A. Marwick (1984), p.65.

<sup>212</sup> P. Stead (1972), p.350.

<sup>213</sup> B.M. Doyle in M.J. Daunton, (2018), p.312.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> For examples see *Cambria Daily Leader*, 8 April 1919 and *Western Mail*, 23 November 1921.

<sup>216</sup> A. Marwick (1984), p.47.

<sup>217</sup> P. Stead (1972), p.350.

<sup>218</sup> B.M. Doyle in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.313.

<sup>219</sup> A. Marwick (1984), p.47.

<sup>220</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 20 November 1919.

In the elections of April 1919, Liberal colliery owner John Walters lost his North Ward seat to Labour's James Lewis, a colliery fireman.<sup>221</sup> To many, the removal of Liberal Nonconformists from offices of authority marked the decline of 'traditional patterns and values of Welsh life and Welshness itself'.<sup>222</sup> Liberals had traditionally represented the party of Wales and the notion that Liberalism was the vehicle for growing national consciousness continued up to 1914.<sup>223</sup> Neither Liberals nor Lib-Labs could see any reason why labour would want separate political representation for itself, but their antagonism towards the Labour party meant that grass roots constituency Liberal parties simply withered away as younger radicals and women voters defected to Labour.<sup>224</sup>

Consequently, it was Labour councillors who promoted ideas for amalgamation and who would discuss those proposals at LRC meetings as well as in their own council chambers. The extent and importance of the relationship between the LRC and Labour councillors was demonstrated starkly in October 1919. Following a joint council meeting between Aberavon and MUDC to discuss possible amalgamation with Briton Ferry, Labour members called an urgent LRC meeting that same night to resolve to recommend a larger scheme to the district Labour movement.<sup>225</sup> Despite having resolved to better inform the public five years earlier, a campaign committee was appointed 'to educate people on the subject'.<sup>226</sup>

As local identities based on a sense of place became more obscured, councils, in particular, were keen to establish the parameters of future boundaries and stake their claims to superiority. Labour and the LRC, despite some electoral setbacks, experienced unprecedented gains in local government in south Wales during this period and continued with the stated ambition of an amalgamation that would further increase their political representation. Labour men who were full-time trade union officials were white-collar workers; although they were only one step removed from working miners they mixed socially with owners, managers, and professional men.<sup>227</sup> Furthermore, their fellow councillors were often Conservatives who shared labour's interests in the economic and social success of a locality but who differed ideologically. Despite

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 8 April 1919.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> K.O. Morgan (1972), p.290.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p.306.

<sup>225</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 17 October 1919.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> P. Stead (1972), p.348.

these differences, individual councils and their councillors appear to have been less concerned with internal differences than with at least maintaining and at best expanding their boundaries.

### **The Influence of Local Elites**

For Aberavon and Margam, the end of the war coincided with two significant events that would shape the future composition of the district: the death of Margam's benefactor, Miss Talbot, and the co-option of Sidney Hutchinson Byass as mayor of Aberavon. The Talbot influence had prevailed for over a century in Margam and reports of Miss Talbot's death, on 21 September 1918, described her as 'the richest woman in the country'; death duties were in excess of half a million pounds.<sup>228</sup> With no direct heirs to continue the Talbot presence in Margam, however, the area's dependence on the largesse of the Margam Estate had come to an end and the future of Port Talbot rested on the decisions of elected councillors.

As the post-1918 boom disintegrated into slumps and cutbacks, so rising social demands had been placed on local authorities: 'ratepayers' associations and pressure from conservative municipal reform groupings' attempted to curb the traditional practice of raising revenue from the rates but populations remained dependent on local government support.<sup>229</sup> By January 1921 Byass' Mansel Tinplate Works was operating on a day-to-day arrangement and a lack of orders for steel was expected to have the same effect on Port Talbot steel works.<sup>230</sup> Total exports for 1921 at Port Talbot were substantially lower than in any of the war years; at just over one million tons, total imports and exports were almost a third of their record wartime high in 1916 and pre-war high of 1913.<sup>231</sup>

Mandatory powers had become a growing burden for local authorities and accentuated rate disparities.<sup>232</sup> Consequently, small authorities, particularly those dealing with high unemployment rates and difficulties in the provision of housing, were in difficult financial positions. In these circumstances, where local power was becoming increasingly eroded yet ratepayer expectations were inflated, the ambitions and influence of local élites were crucial. As Hennock has noted, emphasis on the importance of individuals and their characteristics was a crucial factor in local government.<sup>233</sup> Aberavon's Conservative majority, no doubt in an effort

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<sup>228</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 28 September 1918; *Halifax Courier*, 24 January 1920.

<sup>229</sup> A. Beach and N. Tiratsoo in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.535.

<sup>230</sup> *Western Mail*, 1 January 1921.

<sup>231</sup> *The Welsh Coal & Shipping Handbook*, (1925), p.104.

<sup>232</sup> J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.284.

<sup>233</sup> E.P. Hennock, (1973), p.324.

to gain the upper hand in borough extension talks, quickly moved to secure the co-optation of local industrialist Byass as its new mayor.

Byass lived about thirty miles east of Aberavon at Llandough Castle, and it had been reported that although he was a borough magistrate for Aberavon, ‘very rarely ha[d] he been seen there’.<sup>234</sup> Roberts has written that as councils’ powers expanded the mayoralty was ‘no job for an absentee or titled amateur’.<sup>235</sup> Byass, however, was owner of Mansel Tinplate Works, a director of the Port Talbot Railway & Docks Company, a director of Port Talbot Steelworks Company and until 1914 had been a member of MUDC.<sup>236</sup> As a major employer in the area Byass had been generous and considerate to his workers throughout the downturn in the tinplate trade during the war and would be equally conscious of his workers’ difficulties in the economic depression of 1919-20; he was recognised and appreciated as a fair employer and as such his works were free from industrial unrest experienced elsewhere. Newspaper reports of his co-optation in 1918 congratulated Aberavon on its wise choice for mayor, stating, ‘It is never known for him to have a strike, or any serious dispute. He is very popular with his men’.<sup>237</sup>

Byass and his links with the borough were viewed less favourably in another publication, however. In addressing his past links with MUDC the ‘conservative’ but ‘independent on local affairs’ *Post* reported that he had resigned from that council in the early part of the war.<sup>238</sup> However, it had been recorded in 1915 that he had ‘lost his seat by an accident’ in the previous year’s election to a new candidate, Labour’s Jonah Charles, who took second place in the poll for Western Ward by 590 votes to the 484 of Byass.<sup>239</sup> Said to have ‘no aspirations for Parliamentary life’ Byass would have contested the Aberavon seat for the Conservatives in 1918 had it not been for the election compact and the selection of Jack Edwards, a Liberal, as the official Coalition “coupon” candidate.<sup>240</sup> Byass later confirmed his Parliamentary ambition by contesting the Aberavon seat in 1922 and 1923, each time losing to Labour’s Ramsay McDonald.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 9 November 1918.

<sup>235</sup> R. Roberts, in D. Cannadine (1982), p.210.

<sup>236</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 2 November 1918.

<sup>237</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 1 November 1918.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.* and ‘*South Wales Weekly Post*’, in Welsh Newspapers Online, National Library of Wales.

<sup>239</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 27 February 1915; *Cambria Daily Leader*, 7 April 1914.

<sup>240</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 30 November 1918.

<sup>241</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 9 November 1918.



Although amalgamation was a distinctly Labour policy, the drive to expand existing boundaries often transcended political differences by providing councils with shared objectives. As a means of driving through a favourable borough extension for Aberavon, both Conservative and Labour councillors were content for the unelected, non-resident Byass to become, and remain, their first citizen. The mayoral arrangement continued in 1919 despite Labour's 'clean sweep' at the elections that year, and again in 1920, when Charles Matthews, 'speaking for the Labour party' believed it would be 'unwise to change the mayor'.<sup>242</sup> Despite the economic downturn and the potential for industrial unrest that might rekindle ideas of capital *versus* labour, works owner Byass had become 'closely connected with the amalgamation question' and was an important lever in achieving the political ambitions of Labour and Conservative supporters.<sup>243</sup> His association with both Aberavon and Margam inhabitants and councils provided a sound foundation for amalgamation negotiations.

Byass clearly supported amalgamation. He led Aberavon's July 1919 deputation to MUDC where he outlined proposals for a borough extension and stated that Aberavon 'must be extended one way or another'.<sup>244</sup> Aberavon's financial position was by them 'exceedingly strong' but as Byass pointed out, there were no means of increasing housing provision to the east and the town planning scheme to the west had been delayed by mineral interests.<sup>245</sup> Byass recognised the importance of agreeing terms with Margam at this point, as Neath, Swansea, Briton Ferry and Margam were either considering extensions of their own or participating in amalgamations. Byass also appreciated that in promoting itself to MUDC, Aberavon was attempting to avoid a situation in which the borough could either be subsumed against its will into another authority or forced to initiate a costly campaign of formal opposition.

As has been shown, Labour's ambitions were extensive and their advocates remained determined. A conference of Labour representatives in October 1919 had proposed a scheme for the 'creation of a county borough' based on the boundaries of the new Aberavon parliamentary constituency which extended east from the rural parts of Neath as far as the rural parts of Bridgend, including Porthcawl and Kenfig, and contained about 63,000 inhabitants.<sup>246</sup> The new constituency had been created immediately prior to the general election of 1918, the

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<sup>242</sup> *Western Mail*, 10 November 1920.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 19 July 1919.

<sup>245</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 15 July 1919.

<sup>246</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 17 October 1919 and R. Grant, *The Parliamentary History of Glamorgan, 1542-1976*, (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1978), p.100.

first contest following the Representation of the People Act of 1918. The Act had created universal male suffrage for those aged 21 and over and gave women over the age of 30 the opportunity to vote in parliamentary elections. A week after the Labour conference, MUDC voted 11-7 in favour of adopting the scheme.<sup>247</sup> Days later, with five Labour councillors out of seventeen and an upcoming election in which further gains were anticipated, Aberavon abandoned its commitment to a smaller scheme and held a public council meeting to confirm terms (see Table 5.1).<sup>248</sup>

Worker representation in local government which helped to progress Labour policies had been enhanced by the Representation of the People Act 1918. The Municipal Franchise Act of 1869 had allowed single women ratepayers to vote in municipal elections and the Local Government Act of 1894 permitted all women who owned property to vote in local elections, become Poor Law Guardians and become elected to school boards. In the years prior to the 1918 Act, as previous chapters have noted, it was shopkeepers who benefited from the female vote. Labour had been unsuccessful in winning the new Aberavon constituency in the 1918 general election despite the franchise changes, but the female vote was said to have been responsible for Labour's 'clean sweep' in Aberavon's local elections of November 1919.<sup>249</sup> The fact that the successful candidates were two steel workers, a bricklayer and a miner illustrates the extent to which Labour ideas had come to influence not only workers but also their families. Aberavon's election results also meant that for the first time the largest party in both Aberavon and Margam, with nine seats in each, was Labour. The chances of an agreed amalgamation based on the policies of the LRC were therefore greatly increased.

A major turning point in the history of local government amalgamation occurred in 1919. Created by statute, a new Ministry of Health took over the responsibilities of the Local Government Board. The department's new Minister, Addison, was convinced that local authorities were incapable of social reform unless compelled by central government.<sup>250</sup> Post-WWI legislation such as National Insurance and pensions was implemented centrally and without variation so did not form part of local government responsibility although Addison conceded that housing policy could remain with the municipalities.<sup>251</sup> Reluctant to relinquish their powers to the centre, local authorities sought amalgamations as a means of retaining

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 23 October 1919.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 8 November 1919.

<sup>250</sup> J.A. Chandler (2007), p.128.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., pp.121 and 129.

autonomy and also delivering obligations. In consequence, the Ministry was presented with an ‘unedifying scrummage’ for extensions after 1919 which made an unfavourable impression on Whitehall and portrayed local authorities as ‘jealous fiefdoms more concerned with their boundaries and rate bases than with the public good’.<sup>252</sup>

Central government, however, was also encouraging towns and boroughs to extend. The Ministry of Health sent ‘helpful instructions on extension procedure’ to county boroughs at the end of each year ‘like Christmas cards’ although no equivalent direction was sent to county councils to help them counter the subsequent demand for autonomy.<sup>253</sup> Details of the process would no doubt have been passed from the counties to the municipalities by county councillors. In the case of Aberavon and Margam, the county councillors were also local members, Conservative Llewellyn David represented the new Port Talbot West constituency and Labour’s David Rees represented Aberavon. Port Talbot East was represented by John Thomas, a Labour councillor in Neath who was a checkweigher and the treasurer of Afan Valley Miners.

Encouraged by the Ministry’s promotion of the extension procedure, numerous authorities submitted schemes for approval and it soon became apparent that the successful passage of a Bill depended on there being no local opposition. In the spring of 1921, as a result of a large housing development Dover extended its boundary to include the port and the rural parish of River; with no opposition the scheme was passed.<sup>254</sup> On 31 May 1921, when the Aberavon, Neath and Swansea Extension Bill was being heard in the Commons, further Provisional Orders were read for Cardiff, Newark, Shaftesbury, Stoke-on-Trent, Taunton, Rotherham and Sheffield.<sup>255</sup> In June of that year the Cardiff Extension Bill was at Committee Stage in the Commons. This extension was opposed as Penarth, which would have been taken in by the scheme, believed that the waterlogged area between the two settlements acted as a separation and thereby prevented any future link with buildings; Penarth also emphasised its independence from Cardiff commerce and its close links with the coalfields of the Rhondda.<sup>256</sup>

By July 1921 it had become apparent that opposition, particularly from inhabitants, indicated the almost inevitable rejection of any borough extension proposal. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* noted that ‘practically every’ extension Bill opposed by inhabitants faced the

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<sup>252</sup> J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.278.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p.277.

<sup>254</sup> *Hansard*, 4 May 1921, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1921/may/04>

<sup>255</sup> *Hansard*, 31 May 1921, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1921/may/31>

<sup>256</sup> *Western Mail*, 24 June 1921.

same fate: the Swansea Bill had been rejected; the Cardiff Bill had ‘all the important areas cut out of it’; and the Neath Bill had been ‘so cut down that it was withdrawn’.<sup>257</sup> The Rotherham Bill had been rejected due to ‘strongly expressed’ inhabitants’ objections, but ‘where areas to be taken in were willing’, as in the cases of Barnsley and Sheffield, Bills were passed.<sup>258</sup> Discussions between all the local authorities involved in the Aberavon extension continued at a local level in the hope of reaching agreement before incurring the costs of formally opposing an extension but two final and crucial decisions remained: the full extent of the new borough’s boundaries and its name.

Aberavon councillors had conceded as early as 1914 that any new, enlarged body would not be known as Aberavon.<sup>259</sup> In 1918, as amalgamation became a realistic proposition, opinions were divided as to how the process would continue. MUDC, the ‘advanced section of the younger body’, favoured a ‘Greater Port Talbot’ while Aberavon’s ambitions at that time were more conservative.<sup>260</sup> Newspapers speculated on completely new names such as ‘Porthafan’, ‘Portavon’, ‘Afanport’ and ‘Avanport’, while leading officials of the Port Talbot Railway & Docks Company supported the use of ‘Port Talbot’, ‘a name familiar in commercial circles in all parts of the globe’.<sup>261</sup> In leading the amalgamation negotiations, Byass, who maintained links to both Aberavon Town Council and the Docks Company, made no recorded attempts to re-negotiate the name in favour of the ancient borough.

Ultimately, Aberavon submitted a printed Representation to the Ministry of Health which outlined its plans for extension. The document was based on the Labour conference decision of October 1919 and the subsequent agreement of MUDC.<sup>262</sup> Differential ratings had been agreed for the constituent authorities and practical decisions on the inclusion of parts of neighbouring Briton Ferry acknowledged a contemporaneous extension plan from the Borough of Neath. Despite agreement that the boundary of the new borough would be co-terminous with that of the Aberavon Parliamentary constituency, MUDC withdrew its support for Aberavon’s extension, very possibly because by that time Labour’s ambitions had extended to the abolition of Glamorgan County Council and its replacement with a number of new county boroughs; the

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<sup>257</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 1921.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 12 July 1919 and *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 13 June 1914.

<sup>260</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 22 June 1918.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> WGAS D/D LE B/A 31, Representation to the Minister of Health with respect to the alteration of the boundary of the Borough of Aberavon (1920).

creation of a new municipal borough no longer met Labour expectations.<sup>263</sup> In July 1921, giving evidence on the Aberavon Provisional Order to a House of Commons Select Committee, Sidney H. Byass would state that the amalgamation as amended at that time was supported by Labour ‘generally speaking’, which suggests that the party saw the principle rather than the content as more important.<sup>264</sup>

In February 1920, just days before the start of the Inquiry, Aberavon reverted to its original and smaller scheme which was said to be unopposed.<sup>265</sup> The new extension included Baglan Lower, Michaelston Lower (Cwmavon), the urban areas of Margam, and Briton Ferry. The borough extension submissions for Swansea, Neath and Aberavon were examined individually but considered in relation to each other. At the local inquiry, the evidence of a Briton Ferry witness included a rejection of industrial links with Aberavon, stating that the two places were ‘quite foreign . . . in every direction’ due to ‘isolated tracts of uninhabited land’.<sup>266</sup> In contrast, physical links to areas of Neath could be confirmed by rows of housing.<sup>267</sup> Neath had included the small yet industrialised area of Briton Ferry in its own extension plans, a move which would potentially reduce Aberavon’s rateable value by over £3,300.<sup>268</sup> For Arthur Collins, City Treasurer at Birmingham, consultant to Aberavon and a number of other councils including Stoke-on-Trent, Aberavon’s position of disadvantage in relation to Margam was clear: removing the Briton Ferry works would have a detrimental effect on a borough which was already providing ‘[o]nly the absolute essentials’ out of consistently low rates.<sup>269</sup> At this early stage in the process, therefore, it can be seen that extension was not necessarily a foregone conclusion and each district employed skilled advocates as a means of protecting their interests prior to the production of a Provisional Order.<sup>270</sup>

A high standard of advocacy was also a major factor at the Commons Committee Stage of the Bill, where Aberavon, Margam and Briton Ferry were each represented by a pair of lawyers, one of which was a King’s Counsel.<sup>271</sup> Aberavon’s case for extension was based on its alleged

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<sup>263</sup> *Western Mail*, 23 January 1920.

<sup>264</sup> WGAS DC/N L 1/62, House of Commons Select Committee on Ministry of Health Provisional Orders, (Aberavon, Neath and Swansea Extension) [Aberavon Order] Bill; evidence of Sidney Hutchinson Byass.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 February 1920 and 23 February 1920.

<sup>266</sup> WGAS D/D Z 36/5, Minutes of Local Inquiry 19 February 1920, evidence of Mr. Frederick John Taylor.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> WGAS PTL 51, Ministry of Health Local Inquiry, Proof of Evidence, Mr. Collins, February 1920, p.2.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>270</sup> WGAS DC/N L 1/76, Borough of Port Talbot Provisional Order dated 12 May 1921; Provisional Orders altered the boundaries of boroughs by virtue of Section 54 of the Local Government Act 1888.

<sup>271</sup> WGAS DC/N L 1/62; Neath was represented by the same K.C. as Margam.

importance as both a centre for industry and as a seaside resort.<sup>272</sup> The acreage of the new borough would increase from 2,000 to 20,000 and the population from 14,000 to 40,000.<sup>273</sup> By this time only six houses were without a connection to the sewers and there were no empty houses; ‘complete community of interest’ was said to exist between Aberavon and Port Talbot, which had become, in effect, ‘one town’, separated in part by a river but connected by two road bridges, two railway bridges and two footbridges.<sup>274</sup> Prior negotiations had led to agreements between the councils at Aberavon and Margam, but intervention by the Ministry of Health had led to Margam submitting a petition of opposition to the revised plan.<sup>275</sup> In addressing the scheme, Margam’s representative was keen to reject the idea of a borough extension for Aberavon, preferring to refer to it as an amalgamation with an urban district which had ‘a larger population and a larger rateable value’.<sup>276</sup> Margam, as ever, by virtue of its size saw itself as the superior body despite Aberavon’s borough status.<sup>277</sup>

Margam had objected to the inclusion of the Parish of Michaelston Lower, known as Cwmavon, since at least 1903.<sup>278</sup> Sworn testimony from Mr Arthur Collins, who had also given evidence at the local inquiry, highlighted the fact that Cwmavon’s population of 6,400 and rateable value of £12,500 rendered it incapable of paying for any further public services; the rating of £2 per head was stated as being one of the smallest Collins had ever seen.<sup>279</sup> Further, testimony from a Local Government Board inspector noted that the 6,400 population were living in just 1,170 houses, all of which appeared to have been more than ten years old.<sup>280</sup> Roads were in poor repair, no drainage or sewerage systems were in place and water, supplied by Neath Rural District Council, was available only from a number of standpipes, all of which were leaking; the costs of providing satisfactory public services were estimated to be about £40,000.<sup>281</sup>

In evidence Byass stated that as a means of offsetting being ‘saddled with that Michaelston Lower’ and creating a ‘makeweight’, the Order included a small part of Briton Ferry where

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., Introduction by Mr. St. John Raikes, KC, for the Promoters.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., evidence of Mr Arthur Collins.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., Mr Raikes.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., Mr Tyldesley Jones, KC, Counsel for Margam.

<sup>277</sup> For example see *The Cambrian*, 17 June 1904 when MUDC saw no reason why Aberavon should have representation on the Port Talbot Board of Schools.

<sup>278</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 17 January 1903

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., evidence of Mr Arthur Collins.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., evidence of Albert Henry Bicknell, I.C.E., Engineering Inspector under Local Government Board.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

Albion Steel Works, Baglan Tinsplate Works and a section of Briton Ferry Tinsplate Works were located.<sup>282</sup> Briton Ferry, however, felt itself to be more allied to Neath and objected strongly to the proposed boundary changes; a resolution to that effect had been passed in its Chamber of Commerce on 20 June that year.<sup>283</sup> Aberavon had originally claimed the whole of Briton Ferry, but amendment by the Ministry of Health had reduced the size considerably.<sup>284</sup> The new area of 26 acres being sought by Aberavon contained no housing, represented just one-thirteenth of the total parish, and held a rateable value of just £3,000, a figure which fell far short of the sum needed to improve Michaelston.<sup>285</sup> Byass, however, could see the potential for further industrial works in the large, open space along the seaboard to the west of Aberavon, including the large, undeveloped coalfield which had prevented Aberavon's Town Planning Scheme being implemented in 1919.<sup>286</sup>

Byass appears to have been influenced in the main by financial and industrial factors, but in considering the future government of the new borough he thought it 'most advisable that the wards should overlap [and that] the present little jealousies should be done away with entirely in that way'.<sup>287</sup> The original submission of ward boundaries, which had been agreed by both Aberavon and MUDC, had been based on the addition of a new Cwmavon ward, a north-south division for Aberavon based on the line of the Great Western Railway, and three Margam wards, a scheme which Mr. Raikes believed could only perpetuate the rivalry between Aberavon and Margam.<sup>288</sup> Following discussions with the Ministry of Health, Aberavon had revised its scheme to four larger wards which merged the identities of the two places and recognised their unification in the new, extended borough; as Mr Hooper of the Ministry put it, 'Aberavon no longer exists'.<sup>289</sup> Despite these arguments, however, the Committee preferred and unanimously accepted the original proposal of six smaller wards based on the old parish boundaries and the House of Lords concurred.<sup>290</sup> This decision hampered joint working by

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., evidence of Sidney Hutchinson Byass, Mayor of Aberavon.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., evidence of Myrddin Morris, Managing Director, Baglan Bay Tinsplate Works.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., evidence of Herbert Ross Hooper, Ministry of Health.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., Mr. Freeman for Briton Ferry.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., Byass evidence.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., evidence of Reginald Thomas Pryce-Jones, Clerk to MUDC.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., Herbert Ross Hooper, Ministry of Health.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid. and 11 and 12 Geo. 5, Ch. civ *An Act to confirm certain Provisional Orders of the Minister of Health relating to Aberavon and Neath* (Aberavon and Neath Extension Act, 19 August 1921); commencement date 9 November 1921.

enabling councillors to make accusations of past neglect in each other's localities rather than resolving what had become the shared public health issues of the new borough.<sup>291</sup>

Labour had stated its intention to fight all of the 18 seats being contested at the first round of councillor elections on 1 November 1921.<sup>292</sup> It was reported on 25 October 1921 that Labour had three nominees for each seat.<sup>293</sup> That objective was met in four of the six wards and exceeded in Margam Central where four Labour candidates stood for election; in Margam North the Party fielded two candidates.<sup>294</sup> At the 28 November by-election to fill the six vacancies created by councillors becoming aldermen, Labour again fielded a large number of candidates.<sup>295</sup> Rees Llewellyn, however, did not stand for election to the new borough but moved to Cardiff where he unsuccessfully fought Roath Ward in 1922, losing to Liberal George Frederick Evans by 828 votes to 2,933.<sup>296</sup>

Set against a backdrop of severe unemployment in the wake of the First World War the 1921 elections were remarkable in that despite the political allegiances identified in Table 5.4, not one designated Conservative or Liberal stood for election; candidates opposed Labour under the banners of the Ratepayers' Association, Disabled Ex-servicemen or Independents.<sup>297</sup> The tactic of standing on a non-political platform was a successful one and no Labour man was elected in either of the two Aberavon wards or the neighbouring Margam West ward. In contrast, in the more industrial wards of Margam Central, Margam North and Cwmavon, Labour candidates took the majority of available seats. The architect of the extension, Sidney Byass, a Conservative who stood for the Ratepayers' Association, severed his connection to Aberavon and stood as a Ratepayers' Association nominee in the new Margam West Ward where he took the seat by a substantial margin.<sup>298</sup> Byass was nominated as mayor of the new borough and in accepting said he had been honoured to have been mayor of Aberavon but that to be mayor of Port Talbot was 'a greater glory'.<sup>299</sup> In 1925 Byass was given the Freedom of the Borough of Port Talbot.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid. and *Glamorgan Gazette*, 6 February 1925.

<sup>292</sup> *Daily Herald*, 14 October 1921.

<sup>293</sup> *Western Mail*, 25 October 1921.

<sup>294</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 26 October 1921.

<sup>295</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 2 November 1921.

<sup>296</sup> *Western Mail*, 2 November 1922.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., and *Western Mail*, 29 November 1921.

<sup>298</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 2 November 1921; Byass topped the poll with 2,284 votes, 765 and 811 ahead of his Ratepayer colleagues.

<sup>299</sup> *Western Mail*, 10 November 1921.

<sup>300</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 21 August 1925.



As Table 5.4 shows, eight out of ten MUDC councillors had been successful at the elections, twice the number from Aberavon. Excluding the unelected Byass, nine of Aberavon's sitting councillors stood for election to the new borough; four were successful but none were Labour members.<sup>301</sup> This result can possibly be explained by voter reaction to newspaper reports just prior to the election which stated that the LRC had retained its controlling force in the district, and if elected, its selected candidates were required to pledge support to the Labour whip and take decisions in line with LRC directives.<sup>302</sup> Labour members' responsibility to the ratepayers was said to have been put in the hands of 'an obscure, undemocratic and despotic committee'.<sup>303</sup> Amalgamation had been achieved, but the future operation of the new council would be based on a delicate political balance.

### **Conclusion**

This period was one in which a variety of amalgamation schemes were initiated as responses to population increases and urban growth. Central government, by introducing mandatory reforms which minimised local autonomy, helped to accelerate moves towards models of amalgamation as councils and their councillors strove to assert themselves against threats to their autonomy. Smaller, less well-off councils were at risk of being included in another authority's extension plan against their will and the costs of opposing schemes were prohibitive. Communities did, however, invest funds in accumulating cultural capital as a means of establishing themselves as contenders for prime position as a lead authority in the event of an amalgamation. Consequently, although amalgamation can be seen as a practical financial solution to the duplication that could occur when neighbouring authorities expanded physically and became almost indistinguishable from one another, it was also a barrier to co-operation when rival authorities, even in wartime, often preferred to resist any form of joint working that might indicate assent to future amalgamation. By the end of the period, central government's predisposition towards unopposed local authority amalgamation increased not only the number of extension submissions but also the likelihood of success.

In the Aberavon area, a growing pro-amalgamation Labour presence in local government has been shown to have hastened the federation process, but the eventual outcome was also dependent on the influence of local individuals and groups. Therefore, although the increased presence of Labour representatives accelerated the amalgamation process, the eventual form of

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> *Western Mail*, 28 October 1921.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

Aberavon's extension was decided by a council led by an unelected Conservative. Dissenting voices appear to have been few and far between, but those that have been identified belonged to older, more established residents whose interests and identities favoured maintaining the *status quo*. Similar circumstances existed in Devonport. As is often the case, the voices of the working classes are largely absent, but they can be said to have found expression in the electoral success of the pro-amalgamation Labour party.<sup>304</sup>

Differences as well as similarities have been identified between the amalgamation and federation processes in Plymouth, the Potteries and Aberavon, emphasising the unique circumstances of each town and borough. Active opposition campaigns characterised resistance in both Plymouth and the Potteries, each based on the preservation of historical identity. Aberavon, in contrast, had been in favour of amalgamation since the 1880s even though it had been an historic borough since the twelfth century and been incorporated under the Municipal Corporations Act in 1861. Amalgamation was, therefore, elective and the borough extension was gained on Aberavon's terms. However, in the process the borough surrendered both its corporate identity and its name. Despite substantial investment in cultural capital in the form of a new public hall, Aberavon's status as the lead authority in the amalgamation was unquestionably inferior to that of Port Talbot, site of extensive industrial works and commercial activity in and around a docks that had become 'familiar in commercial circles in all parts of the globe'.<sup>305</sup>

Events in this period also underline the uncertain nature of incorporation itself. Whilst incorporated status had been an ambition for both established and developing towns since the 1830s, this chapter shows that its attainment was no guarantee of its perpetuity. The creation of county and county borough councils by the Local Government Act of 1888 added a new level of aspiration for growing boroughs as they dealt with the pressures of implementing central government legislation and maintaining local autonomy. As the experience of Hanley shows when the Borough of Stoke-on-Trent was formed, however, not even county boroughs were exempt from federation under a new name. Studies of Aberavon, Hanley, and Devonport show that neither municipal nor county borough status acted as a barrier to further extension and amalgamation.

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<sup>304</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 20 June 1914.

<sup>305</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 22 June 1918.

Research findings here concur with Croll's analysis that civic identities were not static and that perspective can be applied to the vagaries of local government reorganisation.<sup>306</sup> In Merthyr's case, incorporation in 1905 did not signify an ending. Three years later the borough gained county borough status which it held until local government reorganisation in 1974 and the creation of Mid-Glamorgan County Council. Accumulation of cultural capital could reinforce identities and status, but outcomes were rarely certain and often indeterminate. Consequently, amalgamations should be seen not only as dependent on actions and reactions within local communities but also as temporary conditions within particular historical contexts.

Delivery of social welfare policies such as pensions and national insurance was outside the scope of local authorities and required implementation at a national level. The scale of the task and the capacity of local members to achieve uniform provision were doubted by Westminster, but municipalities appeared suited to actioning government housing policy due to the small numbers of houses scattered all over the country.<sup>307</sup> As responsibility within local government diminished, individuals and groups sought to re-assert themselves within their localities. Labour councillors' enthusiasm for county borough status reflected both an ambition to increase seats at the national level and a desire to extend the scope of their powers. In pressing the socialist agenda and relieving Conservative and Liberal businessmen of their seats, Labour provoked central government into a policy of greater control and centralisation. In this context, amalgamation can be viewed as a means of diluting a party's dominance at a local level by enlarging the pool of eligible councillors. By 1919, when central government's predisposition towards granting borough extensions had become reminiscent of its 1835 inclination towards incorporation, reorganisation of local authority boundaries had become commonplace.

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<sup>306</sup> A. Croll (2000), p.135.

<sup>307</sup> J.A. Chandler (2007), pp. 312 and 129.

**Table 5.4: PORT TALBOT BOROUGH COUNCIL, NOVEMBER 1921**

NAME	WARD	FORMER	OCCUPATION	PARTY	1921	BIRTHPLACE
Cllr. Gwyn W. Saunders	Aberavon North	Aberavon	Licensed Victualler	Conservative	Ratepayers' Association	Cwmavon
Ald. Hopkin Bevan Jones	Aberavon North	Aberavon	Retired Engineer	Conservative	Ratepayers' Association	Pyle
Cllr. William Rees Thomas	Aberavon North	-	Auctioneer	Conservative	Independent	Aberavon
Cllr. T. Llewellyn David	Aberavon North	-	Metal Merchant	Conservative	Ratepayers' Association	Margam
Cllr. Tudor Frederick Jones	Aberavon South	-	Solicitor	Liberal	Ex-serviceman	Aberavon
Ald. E. Marchant Jenkins	Aberavon South	Aberavon	Metal Merchant	Conservative	Ratepayers' Association	Port Talbot
Cllr. Karl S. Wehrle	Aberavon South	-	Solicitor	Conservative	Independent	Swansea
Cllr. Percy Foley	Aberavon South	-	Army Disabled Pensioner	Conservative	Ex-serviceman	Aberavon
Cllr. John Samuel	Cwmavon	-	Miner	Labour	Labour	Cwmavon
Cllr. Richard T. Williams	Cwmavon	-	Medical Practitioner	Liberal	Independent	Abercrave
Ald. John Jones Edwards	Cwmavon	-	Colliery Checkweigher; Lodge Secretary	Labour	Labour	Cwmavon
Cllr. Joseph Davies	Cwmavon	-	School Attendance Officer	Labour	Labour	Cwmavon
Ald. Henry Davies	Margam Central	MUDC	Colliery Checkweigher; Lodge Secretary	Labour	Labour	Taibach
Cllr. Edward Heycock	Margam Central	MUDC	Railwayman	Labour	Labour	Taibach
Cllr. Taliesin Mainwaring	Margam Central	MUDC	Miners' Agent	Labour	Labour	Margam
Cllr. Joseph Alfred Brown	Margam Central	-	Political Agent	Labour	Labour	Taibach
Ald. Godfrey Lipscomb	Margam North	MUDC	Estate Agent	Conservative	Independent	Canterbury, Kent
Cllr. Richard Evans	Margam North	MUDC	Colliery Checkweigher; Lodge Secretary	Labour	Labour	Monmouthshire
Cllr. W. Maddock	Margam North	-	Farmer	Liberal	Ratepayers' Association	Llangynwyd
Cllr. James Lewis	Margam North	MUDC	Colliery Worker	Labour	Labour	Pontrhydyfen
Cllr. G.H. Cound	Margam West	MUDC	Ship Broker	Conservative	Ratepayers' Association	Margam
Ald. Sidney H. Byass (M)	Margam West	Aberavon	Tinplate Manufacturer	Conservative	Ratepayers' Association	Reigate, Surrey
Cllr. Evan Dummer	Margam West	MUDC	Solicitor's Clerk	Liberal	Ratepayers' Association	Margam
Cllr. Thomas Williams	Margam West	-	Builder	Liberal	Ratepayers' Association	Aberystwyth

Original source of names, occupations and parties: Peter Jackson, 'The Interaction of Industry and Organised Religion in a changing industrial culture pattern', M.A. Thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1957, Table IX. Amendments, birthplace, additional ward and 1921 candidacy information sourced from the British Newspaper Archive and original newspapers

## Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to establish why the ancient Borough of Aberavon was successful in achieving incorporation under the Municipal Corporations Act (the MCA) in 1861 and yet its elected representatives opted for extension under a different name in 1921. The amalgamation of Aberavon was an important event in the urban history of south Wales as the borough extension mechanism was utilised to create a new borough with the name of a settlement which until that time had no official status. Furthermore, the amalgamation enabled an unincorporated body with a larger area and population to combine with a smaller yet incorporated body and take the leading role.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Aberavon's proud history the research findings suggest that the proposed extension was an agreed compromise. As chapters four and five have shown, by 1920 Aberavon appeared to have reached the limits of its development and had taken on the role of a suburban community with an extensive yet undeveloped beach area. Its docks had been passed into private ownership and renamed, potential building had been blocked by business interests and it was acknowledged in the 1921 Regional Survey that in the limited amount of land available for housing near Aberavon the risks of subsidence or flooding were too great to consider construction.<sup>2</sup> Further expansion was out of the question and the close proximity of the commercial district of Port Talbot militated against redevelopment projects.

Amalgamation in 1921 formalised the status of Port Talbot and provided residents of Cwmavon with both borough representation and the reassurance that their community would benefit from improved standards in public health provision. In Aberavon, the potential loss of the borough name had been a matter of public record since at least 1914 but was believed to be an important issue only for older, more established residents who held a collective patriotic attachment to the name.<sup>3</sup> The opinions of the older inhabitants were, however, becoming less relevant as the demographic composition of the area altered over time. The change of name provoked no strong reaction from older inhabitants in the local press, neither did later negotiations involve any attempt to reverse the decision. This suggests that the practicalities of amalgamation which had been promoted for so long by Aberavon's council were also being

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<sup>1</sup> Census of England and Wales 1921, population data online at Vision of Britain.org.uk: [https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table/EW1921COU\\_M3?u\\_id=10073893&show=DB&min\\_c=1&max\\_c=11](https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table/EW1921COU_M3?u_id=10073893&show=DB&min_c=1&max_c=11) [retrieved 24/9/2020]: Population of Margam, 17,774 (14,713 in 1911); population of Aberavon 15,370 (10,505 in 1911); population of Michaelstone Lower (Cwmavon) 6,201 (5,538 in 1911 and 5,318 in 1881)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Health *Report of the South Wales Regional Survey Committee*, HMSO, 1921, p.32.

<sup>3</sup> *Herald of Wales*, 13 June 1914.

recognised by residents. By their very nature, amalgamations involved an inevitable loss of status and identity for smaller boroughs which had been included in the extensions of larger neighbours. In Aberavon's case the research evidence suggests that the extension was something of a 'sacrificial proposal' in the interests of the public good.<sup>4</sup>

At the start of the period being examined, central government's involvement in local matters was influenced by the financial interests of landowners who, it was believed, were best placed to make decisions regarding their localities.<sup>5</sup> By the close of the period, when Westminster representation had expanded to include a broader range of classes and occupations, a number of attempts had been made to apply indirect control over local authorities to ensure effective delivery of services. In response, some local authorities reacted by taking advantage of legislation which could extend their status, their boundaries or both. Potential therefore existed for central government directives to be appropriated and revised at a local level, taking them beyond the scope of administrative exercises devised to satisfy the centre.

Creation of county councils under the Local Government Act of 1888, for example, had been intended to provide a mechanism of oversight on behalf of central government. For MUDC the Act represented an opportunity for expansion that could create a local county borough council and thereby eliminate the need for unwelcome supervision by a higher tier of government. The value and efficacy of local government reorganisation were therefore dependent on local responses and the means of quantifying the success of central government's decisions were not straightforward. Historical context was of considerable importance in determining municipal outcomes, and the political changes which took place in south Wales during and just after the First World War were no exception. By 1919, in response to the growing presence of socialists on local authorities the opinion of central government had tilted clearly in favour of granting extensions.<sup>6</sup>

Original motivations for Aberavon's amalgamation in the early twentieth century had been two-fold: the potential savings to be made for ratepayers by combining the existing council bodies and the stated aims of a Labour party eager to translate local gains into national ones. Research has revealed that a key factor in the extension process was the strength of local

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> J.A. Chandler (2007), p.5

<sup>6</sup> For examples see *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 1921 and J. Davis in M.J. Daunton (2018), p.278.

Labour. Consultation was not a feature of the proposed borough extension and the views of Aberavon residents were largely irrelevant without a formal campaign of opposition. Nevertheless, extensions to the franchise between 1832 and 1918 had provided increased opportunities for participation in the electoral process, and Labour councillors who stood successfully for election on a policy platform of amalgamation after 1914 considered their successes at the ballot box as validation. Little documentary evidence of the views of the general public exists and opinions which were recorded after 1921 were primarily those of the sort of public men interviewed by the *Herald* in 1914.<sup>7</sup> However, the success of Labour at the local polls in this later period suggests that the policy was a popular one which could be pursued in council chambers and beyond.

Aberavon's incorporation in 1861 had presented the new council with the opportunity to make a difference to the growing but neglected town and as Chapter Three has shown the success of incorporation could be measured by the positive impact of a new and active elected body. Despite financial constraints Aberavon's council had committed to adopting the Local Government Act of 1858 and was able to deliver a number of public health improvements for the town, thereby vindicating the decision to pursue incorporation. Further visible evidence of change had been provided by the revival of civic processions and regalia which underlined the authority of the council and helped forge positive images of it as a vehicle for improvement. Councillors wore their robes with pride during public processions.

Following amalgamation, however, many members of the new council at Port Talbot saw no dignity in what they called 'dressing members up in fur and feathers and marching through the town looking like a lot of teddy bears'.<sup>8</sup> A resolution against the wearing of robes at mayoral functions was lost by just one vote, but the members supporting the proposal were committed in their refusal to wear the robes in future.<sup>9</sup> The decision can be said to represent an attempt at differentiation, but it is significant that half of the 24 members of the new body had been councillors in predecessor bodies (see Table 5.4). Of these, only a quarter had been members in Aberavon, where the wearing of civic regalia had been customary for almost sixty years. In contrast, throughout their tenure the urban district council members in Margam had possessed

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<sup>7</sup> *Herald of Wales*, 20 June 1914.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 23 November 1923.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

no visible markers of their civic status, and the resolution can also be seen as an attempt to remove the customs of Aberavon from the new borough and establish those of Margam.

Tangible benefits as a result of amalgamation are therefore not in evidence in the years immediately following the formation of the new council. For at least two years a failure to implement public utility works to relieve unemployment was heavily criticised in the newspapers.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, 800 people were waiting to be housed in the borough while properties were lying empty.<sup>11</sup> The situation was still being discussed in February 1925, when a lengthy council meeting included ‘allegations and counter allegations’, ‘farcical voting’ and accusations against former Aberavon Council members present for not having carried out works that had become the responsibility of the new borough.<sup>12</sup> Incorporation in 1861 had led to a concerted effort by the new council to differentiate itself from the old corporation. After 1921, however, the new borough council appeared to be making every effort to replicate MUDC, even to the extent of maintaining long-standing rivalries at the expense of the delivery of public services and a commitment to the new community.

As a borough, Aberavon ceased to exist after 9 November 1921.<sup>13</sup> Its exact location and function had become unclear and its situation became reminiscent of the residential areas around the docks in the years following the name change to Port Talbot in 1836. After 1921, residents would have been aware that the two Aberavon council ward areas remained unchanged, but there was little to counter the idea of Aberavon and Port Talbot as one town. Within the council chamber hopes of unification had been hampered by the new ward boundaries which mirrored the previous municipal-urban district division between Aberavon and Margam and therefore sustained old rivalries.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, even though the borough extension had been proposed by Aberavon the number of its elected representatives in the new body had been reduced by half to four members each for the North and South wards (see Table 5.4).

Aberavon was not completely lost after 1921 but its limits and identity became much less distinct. Despite the creation of the new borough the parliamentary constituency of Aberavon

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<sup>10</sup> *Glamorgan Advertiser*, 25 August 1922; *Western Mail*, 8 December 1922; *Western Mail*, 25 January 1923.

<sup>11</sup> *Western Chronicle*, 3 March 1922.

<sup>12</sup> *Glamorgan Gazette*, 6 February 1925.

<sup>13</sup> DC/N L 1/62, House of Commons Select Committee July 1921, evidence of Herbert Ross Hooper from the Ministry of Health.

<sup>14</sup> For examples see *Glamorgan Gazette*, 18 February 1924 and 11 September 1925.



which had been formed in 1918 retained its name, although its boundary to the east at that time still extended as far as Porthcawl and parts of Bridgend.<sup>15</sup> More recently, following devolution in 1999 and the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales a new Aberavon Assembly constituency was created, the boundaries of which were coterminous with those of the parliamentary constituency as revised in 1983. Construction of the M4 motorway in the 1960s destroyed much of the built heritage of both Aberavon and parts of Port Talbot, obscuring any separation between the two communities.<sup>16</sup> Demolition of Aberavon's old town in the 1970s to accommodate a new shopping centre and a revised road layout blurred the boundaries even further.

Today, the River Afan continues to serve as a narrow boundary between the two places which since 1996 have formed part of the Borough of Neath Port Talbot but place names can be inconsistent. Port Talbot Library, for example, can be found in 'Aberafan Shopping Centre, Port Talbot'; Aberavon RFC play at the Talbot Athletic Ground in Port Talbot; and Port Talbot Town AFC play in Victoria Road, Aberavon.<sup>17</sup> In very many ways, then, the commercial district which began to emerge on the eastern side of the River Afan after 1894 influenced the construction of a shared spatial identity between Aberavon and the growing community known as Port Talbot.

Many of the public buildings lost in the 1960s and '70s were constructed at a time when communities were positioning themselves to either promote themselves as potential lead authorities in a merger or avoid being subsumed into a neighbouring authority. Consequently, the evidence of a town's ambitions and its inhabitants' commitment to the community found gradual and visual expression in the buildings and structures which came to represent them.<sup>18</sup> Public buildings, particularly those funded by rates rather than public subscription or private contributions, became important reflections of shared communal interests. Stobart's study of Burslem noted that large industrial works could also act as signifiers of local wealth and shared identity.<sup>19</sup> After 1910, an abundance of cultural capital in the Port Talbot area that comprised civic, public, residential and commercial structures provided tangible evidence of the area's

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<sup>15</sup> The boundary was diminished in 1950 to exclude Porthcawl and the areas within Bridgend.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed account see M. Johnes, 'M4 to Wales – and prosper!' A history of a motorway', *Historical Research*, 87.237 (2014), pp.556-573.

<sup>17</sup> Aberavon RFC was founded in 1876; its original ground was in Aberavon but due to the building of the steel works in the early 1900s the club was displaced.

<sup>18</sup> See J. Stobart (2003).

<sup>19</sup> J. Stobart (2004), p.498.

prosperity and boosted local ambitions for county borough status. From 1917, the construction of Margam Steel Works added to the area's sense of prosperity and shared identity.

The concept of shared identity was a major factor in shaping attitudes to both incorporation and amalgamation. Rapid population growth in industrialised areas was inevitably generated initially by inward migration.<sup>20</sup> For small towns like Aberavon, where a group of hereditary corporation members had dominated for so long, the vast numbers of newcomers diluted the powers of the old burgesses and eroded the borough's traditional identity. Furthermore, immigrants who had established businesses in the town were instrumental in setting a modernising, reformist agenda that reflected the industrial progress taking place at the time. Following incorporation in 1861 it was the reformers who received most support at the ballot box each November as the new borough identity prevailed. The research has revealed that in a number of amalgamation cases it was the newcomers whose emotional attachments to their adopted settlements were less acute than those of more established residents who were more likely to support amalgamation.<sup>21</sup> Strong identification with a specific place can therefore be seen as a potential barrier to change.

It has been demonstrated that Aberavon was the architect of its own demise and this has paved the way for further research into what might appear at first sight to be extensions by natural progression. Stobart's enlightening research on the 'unique' federation of the towns of The Potteries in 1910 provides an example of a county borough, Hanley, becoming part of a new administrative unit that was centred in Stoke-on-Trent, which until that time had been a municipal borough.<sup>22</sup> Whilst the growth of Devonport prior to amalgamation with Plymouth bore some similarities to that of Port Talbot, the differences in legal status between the two places rule out a direct comparison. It is no coincidence that the unusual circumstances of amalgamation in Plymouth and federation in Stoke-on-Trent were raised in legal arguments at the House of Commons Select Committee in July 1921 when the Aberavon Provisional Order was progressing through Parliament.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> H.J. Dyos, (1982), p.5.

<sup>21</sup> For examples see *Western Morning News*, 3 February 1914 for Devonport; J. Stobart (2003 and 2004) for Burslem; and Aberavon and Margam's 'public men' in *The Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 20 June 1914.

<sup>22</sup> J. Stobart (2003), p.163.

<sup>23</sup> WGAS DC/N L 1/62, House of Commons Select Committee July 1921.

The research has highlighted the peculiarities of Aberavon's borough extension and has demonstrated how attachments to places and processes can change over time. Individual influence has also been found to have played a major role in shaping both the physical and municipal features of communities. In many instances the changes came about as local reactions to national conditions, as was the case with incorporation as a result of industrialisation, or amalgamation as a central government response to the social demands of urban growth. Regular revisions of local authority boundaries have the capacity to not only emphasise the uncertainty of a sense of place for its inhabitants but also to reinforce local identities as a reaction against change. Evidence suggests, however, that the impact of inward migration, the influence of 'out-dwellers' and the co-option of a non-resident, unelected mayor finally fractured Aberavon's already fragile identity and prevented it from reaching its full potential. Creation of the new Borough of Port Talbot in 1921 can therefore be seen as the completion of a series of events set in motion by the hereditary corporation almost a century earlier.

This study has accomplished its objective by providing an explanation for the disappearance of the ancient Borough of Aberavon in favour of a new Borough of Port Talbot. The research involved has not only identified the key factors which led to the eventual borough extension in this specific instance but also raised further questions regarding the permanence of municipal status and institutions. Croll has already noted that Merthyr Tydfil's incorporation in 1905 after seven attempts 'did not signify an ending'.<sup>24</sup> Urban growth and population increases contributed to Merthyr's transition to county borough in 1908, but uncertainty returned during the economic downturn of the 1930s when the extent of outward migration prompted consideration of an imposed reversion to municipal borough. Ambitions for towns and boroughs were therefore dependent on the criteria set by central government and the historical context within which events occurred. As the study has shown, these criteria were adjusted over time as a means of ensuring that the objectives of Westminster were being met by the municipalities.

Studies of the municipal histories of specific Welsh towns are not extensive.<sup>25</sup> More recently, a general trend appears to have emerged which prioritises cities and regions. Having

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<sup>24</sup> A. Croll (2000), p.135 (Merthyr was made a county borough in 1908); see also England, (*Llafur*, 2007), pp.10-25.

<sup>25</sup> For examples see L. Miskell, (2006); J.W. Pritchard, (1994); J. Light, (2005); J. England, (2007); and A. Croll (2000).

been neglected in academic work for some time, local government has been shown in this case study to be an important factor in the development, standing and understanding of Welsh towns and boroughs. Processes and outcomes of not only incorporations but also amalgamations varied, and local individuals and groups differed in their approaches. Assessment of Aberavon's borough extension must therefore rest on consideration of any positive features which emerged for the town and its inhabitants after 1921. As has been demonstrated by the research evidence, Aberavon's incorporation was followed by a period of concerted effort on behalf of the new borough's elected members which resulted in a number of improvements. In contrast, amalgamation represented a significant reduction in status, authority and potential for Aberavon.

Local government matters. Direct and personal links can exist between electors and elected members which are not replicated at other levels of government. Democratic accountability is therefore as close as possible to the citizens concerned and the principle of subsidiarity is maintained. Almost two centuries have passed since the 1835 Act paved the way for elected self-government at a local level, but the reconciliation of council budgets and public service demands is as much of an issue in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth. Periodic local government restructuring has occurred in Wales as a result, and devolution shifted the decision-making 'centre' from Westminster to Cardiff for many aspects of public life. Proposals for mergers between the 22 local authorities in Wales have been debated and abandoned since 2015 but despite decades of discussions, directives and interventions no solution to the budgetary problem appears to have been identified.

In assessing the impact of incorporation and amalgamation on the town of Aberavon it has become clear that questions remain regarding the value of both incorporation and amalgamation and that further research is warranted. Future studies, for example, could reveal the extent to which urban districts with 'industrial viability' took advantage of central government legislation and applied for borough status after 1877.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, such research could provide evidence of the roles of individuals and groups from neighbouring authorities in influencing specific outcomes. Comparisons or revisions such as that undertaken by Doyle are equally valid for twenty-first century authorities.<sup>27</sup> The relevance of such investigation has

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<sup>26</sup> 40 & 41 Vict., c.69, The Municipal Corporations (New Charters) Act 1877; J.A. Chandler (2007), p.142.

<sup>27</sup> B.M. Doyle (2007) and B.M. Doyle, (ed.), *Urban Politics and Space in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Regional Perspectives* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), ProQuest Ebook Central version, pp.1-27.

increased in an era when borough councillors are not only in receipt of a regular allowance but can also receive pension benefits, both of which are intended to incentivise elected representation as a career choice and encourage a broad range of skills and attributes into the council chambers. This thesis, therefore, serves as an attempt to not only stimulate renewed interest in local government but also to address a growing gap in the study of municipal history to date.

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