Class, Work and Community

Port Talbot's Steelworkers, 1951-1988

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Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, steel has been one of Great Britain's most important heavy industries. As well as being a linchpin of the national economy, steel has been at the heart of industrial communities throughout the nation and provided employment for thousands of workers. Yet, the social history of those working in this vital history has received little attention from historians. This thesis, therefore, departs from the economic and technical approaches that have characterised much of the industry's historiography and concentrates on the historical experiences of steelworkers themselves. Focusing on the town of Port Talbot, which in 1951 became home to the largest steelworks in Europe, this study adopts a case-study approach to provide a detailed account of steelworkers' past experiences: their workplace, organisations, community and leisure lives and how these changed during the period 1951-88.

As well as considering what it was *like* to be a steelworker, this thesis also explores what it *meant* to be a steelworker. In doing so, it engages with wider academic debates regarding the nature of working-class community and society. Much of the vast historical literature produced on the British working-class has focused on its institutions (its mutual societies and trade unions) and the production of 'class consciousness', based on political solidarity and social cohesion. It is argued here, however, that such collective interpretations of working-class life can obscure the more personal and individual meanings they contained. Through its use of oral history, this thesis explores the relationship between individual orientations and group identities and argues that everyday understandings of class did not have to be primarily constituted in politics or collective action. For most steelworkers, group identities were entirely congruent with individual aspiration and personal material ambition and these, too, were important in informing steelworkers' wider understandings of politics, the workplace and society.

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. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

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Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
BISAKTA	British Iron Steel and Kindred Trades Association
BOS	Basic Oxygen Steelmaking
BSC	British Steel Corporation
CAWU	Clerical and Administrative Workers Union
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
GA	Gwent Archives
GKB	Guest Keen and Baldwins
ISTC	Iron and Steel Trades Confederation
NCB	National Coal Board
NUB	National Union of Blastfurnacemen
NUGMW	National Union of General and Municipal Workers
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
RBA	Richard Burton Archives
RTB	Richard Thomas and Baldwins
SIMA	Steel Industry Managers Association
SCOW	Steel Company of Wales
SRC	Shotton Record Centre
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TNA	The National Archives
VLN	Very Low Nitrogen [Plant]
WGA	West Glamorgan Archives
WTUC	Wales Trade Union Congress

Introduction

One of the more frivolous news items to appear in the *Western Mail* in 1963 was a story detailing a minor controversy that had erupted between the town of Port Talbot and the city of Sheffield. According to the article, the mayor of Sheffield had taken grave offence at Port Talbot's primary employer, the Steel Company of Wales (SCOW), who had recently commissioned an advertising campaign promoting their steelworks as 'The City of Steel'. In the eyes of Sheffield's mayor the slogan was a brazen attempt to usurp his own city's 'Steel City' epithet. 'In the first place,' he fulminated, 'Port Talbot is not a city. It's only a port.' 'Port Talbot,' he went on, 'has no right at all to usurp our name – I think it is shocking.'[1] The trivial tone of the story, however, masked a more latent anxiety, one which reflected a profound shift in the nature of Britain's industrial economy. By the early 1960s Sheffield's eminence as the nation's most important steelmaking centre was in decline and, indeed, had been for some time. Steelmaking remained important to the city's economy (and to the wider Yorkshire and north east regions) but the supremacy of the industry's old heartlands had been profoundly challenged by recent developments in south Wales. As early as 1956, the employers' association, the British Iron and Steel Federation, acknowledged that, 'in tonnage terms, South Wales and Monmouthshire is the most important of Britain's ten steel-making districts.'[2] The federation's report for the reorganisation and modernisation of the steel industry, published in 1946, ensured that south Wales received the largest share of the programme's investment and its most highly prized project.[3]

The opening of Port Talbot's Abbey Works in 1951 has a strong claim to being the most important industrial development in Wales' post-war history. Pagnamenta and Overy regarded the plant as 'the most ambitious post-war steel project'[4] and 'the largest and most technically advanced steel plant in Britain'.[5] Carr and Taplin, meanwhile, went further, describing the works as 'the largest and most

[1] *Western Mail*, 12 February 1963.
[2] British Iron and Steel Federation, *The South Wales Steel Industry* (British Iron and Steel Federation: s/l, 1956), p. 1.
[3] British Iron and Steel Federation and the Joint Iron Council, *'Iron and Steel', Reports to the Minister of Supply* (London: H.M.S.O., 1946), p. 13.
[4] Peter Pagnamenta & Richard Overy, *All Our Working Lives* (London: British Broadcasting Association, 1984), p. 90.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

modern plant in Europe'.[6] The construction of the Abbey Works enabled the expansion of Wales' steelmaking capacity and consequently the industry assumed an increasingly important role within the nation's economic and social life. Steel, as Chris Williams has noted, was 'until the 1970s the greatest single success story of the post-war Welsh economy'.[7] By 1964 the metal industries even employed more people in Wales than coal mining: a first in the nation's modern history.[8] Such a development reflects the significant expansion the industry had undergone, in south Wales in particular, but also the converse decline of Wales' traditional staple industry. The decline of the coal industry, which was already in evidence by the inter-war period, largely continued so that by 1973 there were over 85,000 fewer colliers in Wales than there had been in 1950.[9] Although the prosperity and expansion that had characterised the steel industry for the first two decades of this period did not last, it nonetheless deserves to be considered as one of – if not *the* – most important Welsh heavy industry of the post-war era. It is the historical experience of workers in this industry, specifically those working at the Port Talbot steelworks, that this thesis intends to explore.

Despite being consistently overlooked by historians, the historical experience of steelworkers since the Second World War makes for a fascinating and revealing case study into the evolution of work and working-class culture in Great Britain. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, steel is often considered a 'traditional' industry and steelworkers themselves are often held as emblematic of Britain's traditional working-class.[10] For the employees of the Port Talbot works, however, the period following the Second World War was one of dynamic change and few areas of steelworkers lives were entirely removed from the effects of modernity. The plant was at the vanguard of new technologies and processes, such as computerisation and automation, which profoundly altered the way steelworkers worked and the wider culture of their workplace. Whilst these developments may not have entirely eliminated the physicality of steelmaking or the dangers of the

[6] J.C. Carr & W. Taplin, *History of the British Steel Industry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), p. 597.
[7] Chris Williams, 'On a Border in History? Wales, 1945-85', in Gareth Elwyn Jones and Dai Smith (eds.), *The People of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1999), p. 218.
[8] David Thomas, *Wales: A New Study* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1977), p. 163.
[9] *Ibid*.
[10] See, for example, David Hall, *Working Lives: The Forgotten Voices of Britain's Post-war Working Class* (London: Bantam Press, 2012), pp. 215-270.

production process, Port Talbot's steelworkers felt the full impact of wider forces transforming the nature of work in Britain during the post-war period.

In other ways, too, Port Talbot steelworkers deviated from the image of the 'traditional' industrial worker often ascribed to them. During the 1950s and 1960s, Port Talbot steelworkers were amongst the best paid of the nation's industrial workforce and were considered, by some contemporaries, as emblematic participants in the affluent society. In their politics and broader conception of power in the workplace, steelworkers seldom conformed to the militant worker archetype that has characterised many historical interpretations of other groups of industrial workers, especially the miners.[11] Strikes and industrial disputes were a common feature of working life at the plant throughout this period but so too was a widespread respect for workplace hierarchies and a distrust of political radicalism. Through understanding and reconciling these apparent contradictions in action and belief and change and tradition, a case study of this kind can serve to bring greater understanding to the condition of working-class life in post-war Britain. What emerges is not the dissolution of the working-class, as some academics have been moved to speculate, but new interpretations of the relationship between collective loyalties and personal identities and aspirations.[12] Rather than adhering to a single way of life or political mission, personal understandings of what it meant to be working-class proved resiliently able to accommodate individuality and difference.

Steel Histories

Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, steelworkers have been considered a numerically and symbolically significant part of Britain's working-class, yet their history has scarcely been written. 'The men of iron and of steel have not been written about in the way the miners have,' reported the newspaper *Y Cymro* in 1951 and, arguably, little has changed in the intervening period.[13] Despite the

[11] See, for example, Hywel Francis & David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).
[12] Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of Working Class, 1910-2010* (John Murray: London, 2014), pp. 355-359.
[13] *Y Cymro*, 20 July 1951.

centrality of steel to understanding Wales' modern economic and social development, the history of the industry, and that of steelworkers and steel communities, has been largely overlooked within Welsh historiography. This state of affairs is all the more remarkable when considering the importance of industrial and labour history to modern Welsh history writing. Indeed, Martin Johnes has described labour history as 'the strongest tradition within modern Welsh historiography'.[14] Given the relatively small number of historians writing on the subject of Welsh history, the historiography of Wales' industrial regions is remarkably developed, yet, in several respects, it also remains exclusive and partial. Arguably this reflects the propensity of many Welsh labour historians to concentrate their studies within the geographical confines of the south Wales coalfield and histories of coal and colliers have tended to predominate. To a large extent, such an intense historical concentration on a single industry reflects the centrality of coal to Wales' modern political, economic and social development.

This theme is stressed in, what is arguably, the defining artefact of Welsh labour history, Hywel Francis and Dai Smith's *The Fed*. As well as documenting the development of trade unionism and workers' collective organisation in the south Wales coal industry, *The Fed* emphasises the importance of miners and mining communities in shaping the cultural and political form of modern Wales. For the most part this is characterised as a collectivistic proletarian culture with a strong emphasis on radical politics.[15] As with many of Welsh labour history's other seminal achievements, the left wing politics of *The Fed*'s authors have tended to guide their research interests as well as their analytical perspective. So it is that the historical importance of the miners, with their strong political organisation and record of militancy, has been repeatedly stressed, whilst other industries have been marginalised. Describing the state of the Welsh iron and steel industry at the outbreak of the First World War, Dai Smith argued that, 'the early advantages had gone and iron works, increasingly moved to the coast, were in as parlous a state as the slate industry, which had also irredeemably marked an area and formed a culture within a limited circumference.'[16] Although their cultural circumferences may have

[14] Martin Johnes, '"For Class and Nation": Dominant Trends in the Historiography of Twentieth Century Wales', *History Compass*, 8 (2010), p. 1257.
[15] Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed*.
[16] Dai Smith, *Wales: A Question for History?* (Bridgend: Seren, 1999), p. 62.

been limited, the effects of such industries were nonetheless significant for those who lived within them.

Whilst the coal industry and the politics of the coalfield have proved to be a fruitful area of historical research, the concentration of historians' efforts in this field has produced something of a historical deficit in Wales, in which other industries and alternative experiences of work have often been ignored. There have been exceptions to this trend, such as R. Merfyn Jones' study of north Wales slate quarrymen, but several Welsh historians have voiced the need for further research into other areas of past working life and community. Steven Thompson, for example, has argued that, 'historians of South Wales have failed to give sufficient attention to workers other than coal miners and the view of South Wales as mono-industrial might be partly attributed to this partial historiography.'[17] The mono-industrial interpretation also risks extrapolating a historical image of working-class life in Wales based on studies which primarily focus on a single group of workers. As important as the miners were, both numerically and politically, historians should be wary of making judgements about the nature of Welsh industrial society in its totality without due recognition of its internal social and occupational diversity. In this context, then, the historical study of other groups of Welsh workers, such as steelworkers, can add to our wider understandings of working-class culture and society. Chris Williams has specifically addressed this issue and argued that, 'without a history of steelworkers, our understanding of the nature of industrial society in, for example, Ebbw Vale and Dowlais, remains incomplete;'[18] Martin Johnes, meanwhile, has related this concern to broader debates on class, noting that, 'more studies are needed of other industries, notably steel, if the extent of class consciousness is to be understood.'[19] This study, therefore, aims to begin to address these concerns by providing a historical experience of industry and industrial community that has been largely absent from Welsh history thus far.

The historical relevance of Port Talbot and its steelworkers, however, is not confined to Wales and, therefore, warrants contextualisation in a wider British and

[17] Steven Thompson, 'Class Cohesion, Working-Class Homogeneity and the Labour Movement in Industrial South Wales', *Llafur*, 9 (2005), p. 89.
[18] Chris Williams, 'Going Underground? The Future of Coalfield History Revisited', *Morgannwg*, 42 (1998), p. 49.
[19] Martin Johnes, 'For Class and Nation', p. 1258.

international framework. Industrial life in Port Talbot had as much (and, indeed, arguably more) in common with Middlesbrough or Youngstown, U.S.A., as it did with Tonypandy or Pontypridd. Workers in the steel industry also may have recognised greater similarities in their workplace situation with those working in the automotive industry than with those working underground and a study, such as this, therefore, necessitates a broad and comparative historical analysis. It is an approach, however, that has failed to be fully realised in existing historical studies of the British steel industry. Much of the industry's historiography has been characterised by an overtly technical and economic approach and a company orientated or macro-economic perspective. The majority of full length historical studies of the British steel industry date from the period 1950-80 (loosely mirroring the industry's peak era of post-war expansion) but they display few of the social history influences that dominated trends in academic history during this time. Starting with the publication of David Murray's brief, *Steel Curtain: A Biography of the British Iron and Steel Industry* (1951), the following three decades saw a spate of publications on the history of the British steel industry, including: Duncan Burn's *The Steel Industry* (1961), Carr and Taplin's *History of the British Steel Industry* (1962), Keeling and Wright's *The Development of the Modern British Steel Industry* (1964,) David Heal's, *The Steel Industry in Post-War Britain* (1974) and John Vaizey's *The History of British Steel* (1974).[20] Almost all of these studies are concerned with the industry's technological development within an economic or corporate framework. Governmental policy, advances in production methods and business strategies are, therefore, posited as the crucial determinants in the industry's history.

The lack of any discernible social history influences within the aforementioned works can be partly attributed to the academic backgrounds of their authors. Several of these studies were written by economists (Vaizey), whilst other authors included geographers (Heal) and former steel industry executives (Burn). Although the number of histories published on the British steel industry diminished proportionately with the industry's own decline, from the mid-1970s onwards, the

[20] David Murray, *Steel Curtain: A Biography of the British Iron and Steel Industry* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1959); Duncan Burn, *The Steel Industry, 1939-1959: A Study in Competition and Planning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961); J.C. Carr & W. Taplin, *History of the British Steel Industry*; B.S. Keeling & A.E.G. Wright, *The Development of the Modern British Steel Industry* (London: Longmans, Green and Co LTD, 1964); David Heal, *The Steel Industry in Post War Britain* (London: David & Charles, 1974); John Vaizey, *The History of British Steel* (London: Weidenfel & Nicolson, 1974).

economic focus of these studies set a precedent for subsequent histories. Later historical studies of British steel, such as Bryer, Brignall and Maunders' *Accounting for British Steel* (1982),[21] have retained the economic focus of previous works whilst shifting the scope of their inquiry to account for the industry's decline. Stephen Tolliday's *Business Banking and Politics* (1987) adopts a similar economic history approach, albeit applied to an earlier period in the industry's development.[22] Economic themes have also predominated in much of the limited body of history writing on the Welsh steel industry, such as Brinn's *Development of the Iron and Steel Industry in the Port Talbot area*, Parry's unpublished PhD thesis on the history of the Port Talbot steel industry and chapters by Trevor Boynes *et al.* and John Elliot and Colin Deneen on the ferrous metal industries in Wales.[23] Most of these studies are concerned with relating technological developments in the industry to wider economic trends and government policy. The contributions of industrial and economic historians have left valuable accounts of steel's historical development and are necessary reminders that the fortunes of the industry were perennially entwined with wider market forces and political agendas. In other respects, however, they have been largely immune from recent trends in theoretical and methodological historical practice.

Alongside these economic and industrial histories has been another strand within steel history writing, trade union history. Although less developed than the industrial histories, the development of trade unionism within the steel industry, particularly the main steelworkers' union, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC), has been well chronicled. Often the writing of this history has been left to the trade unions themselves. The most comprehensive account of the development of the

[21] R.A. Bryer, T.J. Brignall & A.R. Maunders, *Accounting for British Steel: A Financial Analysis of the Failure of the British Steel Corporation, 1967-1980, and who was to Blame* (London: Gower, 1982).
[22] Stephen Tolliday, *Business, Banking and Politics: The Case of British Steel, 1918-1939* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987).
[23] David Brinn, *Development of Iron and Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area* (Port Talbot: British Steel Corporation, 1972); Stephen Parry, 'History of the Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area, 1900-1988' (unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Leeds, 2011) ; John Elliot, 'The Iron and Steel Industry', in Chris Williams, Sian Rhiannon James & Ralph A. Griffiths (eds.), *Gwent County History, Volume 4: Industrial Monmouthshire, 1780-1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011); John Elliot & Colin Deneen, *Iron, Steel and Aluminium* , in Chris Williams, Andy Croll & Ralph A. Griffiths (eds.), *Gwent County History, Volume 5: The Twentieth Century* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013); Trevor Boyns, Dennis Thomas & Colin Baber, 'The Iron, Steel and Tinplate Industries, 1750-1914, in Arthur H. John & Glanmor Williams (eds.), *Glamorgan County History, Volume V: Industrial Glamorgan, from 1700 to 1970* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980).

ISTC was written by one of the union's early general secretaries, Arthur Pugh.[24] Pugh's account takes the union's history up to the end of the Second World War and it was not until the publication of Martin Upham's *Tempered not Quenched* in 1997 that the post-war history of the ISTC was documented.[25] Like Pugh, Upham was a veteran of the union and had served as a fulltime research officer. Alongside these official union histories can also be considered Charles Docherty's *Sons of Vulcan*, a stridently left wing and polemical work that explains the development and inner workings of trade unionism in the industry. Unlike the cautious tone of Pugh and Upham's official works, Docherty is more critical towards the union and frequently berates them for their alleged conservatism and moderation.[26]

Sons of Vulcan is also one of the few works on the steel unions' history to give consideration to a local or rank and file perspective and, in this respect, is entirely atypical of the majority of history produced on the subject. Both Pugh and Upham's accounts are dominated by the dealings of the union's national leadership and centralised negotiating machinery. The description on the reverse of Upham's book, which purports to offer 'the story of the steelworkers', is therefore slightly misleading.[27] Like the industrial histories, the history of trade unionism in the steel industry has been marked by a macro perspective and has tended to favour the actions of general secretaries and executive committee members over branch leaders or rank and file workers. Far less historical research has been conducted on the history of trade unions within the steel industry other than the ISTC. The organisation of steelworkers by craft and white collar unions has been largely unexplored and their involvement in the steel industry is often overlooked in their respective union biographies.[28]

In its various manifestations, then, the historiography of the British steel industry has been dominated by a 'top down' approach, with much of the attention being centred on corporations, governments and industry or trade union leaders.

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[24] Arthur Pugh, *Men of Steel by One of Them: A Chronicle of Eighty-Eight Years of Trade Unionism in the British Iron and Steel Industry* (London: Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, 1951).
[25] Martin Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched: The History of the ISTC, 1951-1997* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997).
[26] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers: The Sons of Vulcan* (London: Heinemann Education Books, 1983).
[27] Martin Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched*, reverse cover.
[28] See, for example, Leslie W. Wood, *A Union to Build With: The Story of UCATT* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979).

Elsewhere, however, an alternative historical narrative of the industry has tentatively been revealed emphasising the historical significance of steelworkers themselves as well as their communities. A greater awareness of social history methods has been a marked feature of the historiography of the steel industry in America. Whereas the first generation of post-war British social historians often overlooked the steel industry, it has figured much more prominently in the American labour history writing of the period. David Brody's *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919*, for example, is indicative of studies of the American steel industry that often posited it as a site of class struggle.[29] The themes of class and conflict have been greatly expanded upon since 2000 with the publication of works, such as John Hinshaw's *Steel and Steelworkers*, which attempts to locate evidence of a working-class consciousness amongst Pittsburgh steelworkers and examines its relationship with other forms of social identification, such as race and gender.[30] American historians have also displayed a greater recognition of the communities surrounding steel plants and the social, economic and political interactions between the two. Bruno's *Steel Alley* and Linkon and Russo's *Steeltown U.S.A.* both explore these themes in relation to Youngstown, Ohio, where issues relating to capital, power and industrial decline emerge as salient dimensions of the industry's development.[31] The work of these historians also displays a greater recognition of the value of historical case studies as a means of uncovering more personal histories of industrial life. In this way, by focusing on a particular plant or steeltown, American historians have been able to restore a degree of historical agency to the steelworkers themselves.

On the whole, historians writing on the British steel industry have paid little attention to these themes, although Sydney Pollard's *A History of Labour in Sheffield* is a notable exception.[32] Pollard's case study of the Sheffield steel industries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries adopts a holistic approach in its concurrent analysis of workers' living conditions, workplace experience and political organisation. The result is a compelling account of working-class experience, both at work and in the community, but curiously this approach was not followed by

[29] David Brody, *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965).
[30] John Hinshaw, *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth Century Pittsburgh* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).
[31] Robert Bruno, *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Sherry Lee Linkon & John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work & Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).
[32] Sidney Pollard, *A History of Labour in Sheffield* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1959).

successive historians of the industry. More recent trends in the writing of Britain's steel history, however, show that the merits of Pollard's approach are, perhaps, tentatively being recognised. Amongst the limited published work on the subject to emerge in the twenty-first century, there has been an increasing concern with the social and psychological significance of the industry and a move away from a purely economic or technical analysis. Tosh Warwick, for example, has written on the paternalistic activities of steel magnates in Middlesbrough during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus employing an urban history approach in assessing the historical role of the industry within its wider society.[33] Perhaps most significantly, Robert Duncan's overview of the social history of iron and steelworkers in Scotland tries to convey the experience of work in the industry and makes extensive use of oral testimonies.[34] Although the history of the industry in the twentieth century only occupies a small proportion of Duncan's study, further research has been conducted in this area by David Bradley. Bradley's article on occupational health in the Scottish steel industry similarly utilises oral history methods to analyse the hazards and dangers that confronted steelworkers in the workplace.[35] Historical research on the British steel industry, however, remains scarce and it is yet to be seen whether more recent studies are indicative of an emerging trend in the writing of Britain's steel history.

At present there are, then, considerable gaps in our understanding of Britain's steel history but drawing upon scholarly work from other disciplines can help historians to overcome these difficulties. Since the Second World War, a considerable body of sociological work has emerged on the steel industry providing a significant collection of contemporary data and a valuable record for historians. Two studies from a social science perspective, in the form of unpublished PhD theses, have focused primarily on Port Talbot. Thomason's study of industrial change in south Wales in the 1950s devotes considerable attention to the effects of industrial

[33] Tosh Warwick, 'Middlesbrough's Steel Magnates and the Guild of Help', *Cleveland History*, 98 (2010).
[34] Robert Duncan, *Sons of Vulcan: Ironworkers and Steelmen in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009).
[35] David Bradley, 'Oral History, Occupational Health and Safety and Scottish Steel, c. 1930-1988', *Scottish Labour History Society Journal*, 46 (2011); David Bradley, 'Occupational health and safety in the Scottish steel industry, c. 1930-1988: the road to "its own wee empire"' (unpublished PhD thesis, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow, 2012).

expansion on the development of the town and its population.[36] Blewitt's analysis of Labourism in Port Talbot, completed three decades later, meanwhile adopts a different chronological and theoretical focus. Within a Marxist framework, Blewitt presents a critique of capitalism and labour politics through a consideration of the reactions of blastfurnacemen at Port Talbot towards job cuts in the 1980s (alongside a wide ranging exploration of the dynamics of the local Labour party and the cultural symbolism of workingmen's clubs).[37]

Most of the published literature on Port Talbot's steelworkers also has its origins in the social sciences and includes an eclectic range of academic approaches to the study of workers' experience. E. Owen Smith's account of the restructuring of wage and negotiating practices at the Port Talbot works in the 1960s purports to offer a study in business management but is primarily devoted to a sociological analysis of workplace relations.[38] With the accelerated contraction of the Welsh steel industry from the 1970s onwards, sociologists' efforts increasingly turned to assessing the effects of redundancy on steelworkers and steel communities. Much of this research was conducted by members of the Swansea Redundancy and Unemployment Research Group (formed in 1980 by a collective of sociologists based around Swansea University) who produced a number of studies centred on Port Talbot. Their most notable achievements included C.C. Harries' *Redundancy and Recession in South Wales*, a study of the effects of unemployment in the steel industry on family life and the community,[39] and Ralph Fevre's *Wales is Closed*, which considered the changing nature of employment in the steel industry and the increased use of contract labour after 1980.[40]

Social science research has also documented the experiences of steelworkers in other areas of Great Britain. Although limited in quantity, the findings of these studies present the opportunity to contextualise individual historical case studies

[36] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change upon Selected Communities in South Wales' (unpublished PhD thesis, University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff, 1963).
[37] John Blewitt, 'A Sociological Analysis of Labourism (with Specific Reference to Port Talbot)' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1983).
[38] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining: A Case Study in the Steel Industry* (London: Pan Books, 1971).
[39] C.C. Harries (ed.), *Redundancy and Recession in South Wales* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
[40] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed: The Quiet Privatisation of British Steel* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1989).

within a wider comparative framework. In keeping with sociological practice, the inquirers' subject plants are typically anonymised, although their identities are easily discerned through the descriptive detail provided. The first such study to appear after the Second World War was *Technical Change and Industrial Relations*,[41] which presented the findings of an enquiry by the University of Liverpool's Department of Social Science into the effects of technological development on the workforce of a north Wales steelworks in the early 1950s. It was not until the 1970s that an equivalent sociological work study emerged on a British steelworks with the publication of Peter Bowen's *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*.[42] Taking a smaller steelworks in the north of England as his object of study, Bowen's analysis is more concerned with the effects of industrial organisation on workplace relations and the implications of industrial change on the workforce's behaviour. Both studies collected extensive quantitative data for their sample workforces and these offer a rare insight into contemporary attitudes amongst steelworkers towards a wide range of workplace issues. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Valerie Walkerdine and Luis Jimenez's 'psycho-social' study of a Welsh 'Steeltown', *Gender, Work and Community after Deindustrialization* (2012), has applied psychoanalytic conceptions of gender and masculinity to studies of unemployed steelworkers in south east Wales and questioned the effects of unemployment on gender identification and class cohesion. Like, Harries and Fevre, Walkerdine and Jimenez's study is primarily concerned with the steel industry's social connotations, especially for those who found employment in it and lived in the communities surrounding it.[43]

[41] W.H. Scott *et al*., *Technical Change and Industrial Relations: A Study of the Relations between Technical Change and the Social Structure of a Large Steelworks* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1956); a summarised form of Scott *et al.*'s study was also published as, *Men, Steel and Technical Change* (London: H.M.S.O., 1957).
[42] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations, Industrial Relations and Industrial Sociology: A Strategic and Occupational Study of British Steelmaking* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976).
[43] Valerie Walkerdine & Luis Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community after De-Industrialisation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

The Development of Modern Steelmaking in Port Talbot

As the home of Britain's largest steelworks since 1951, the choice of Port Talbot as an historical case study to explore the industry's social history is highly apposite. Steelmaking began at Port Talbot in the first decade of the twentieth century but it was not until the construction of the Abbey Works, in the 1940s and 1950s, that the town's reputation as a preeminent steel centre was confirmed. The origins of the plant can be traced to the 1930s and the recognition by Guest Keen and Baldwins Ltd (GKB) of the need to modernise their existing Port Talbot plants. At this time, the firm owned two steelworks in the town, the original Port Talbot Works (built in 1901-02) and the adjacent Margam Works (completed in 1921). Both had suffered from a lack of investment during the economic depression of the inter-war years and parts of the plants were approaching obsolescence.[44] Local steel managers were also increasingly aware of developments in national and international steelmaking and that their own operations were being overtaken technologically, initially abroad but latterly at home, by their competitors. Although its benefits were slow to be acknowledged in Great Britain, the development of the continuous strip mill in the United States, during the 1920s, represented a ground-breaking advance in steelmaking technology. By obviating the need for the manual rolling and cutting of sheet steel and introducing a continuous and fully automated production process, Aylen and Ranieri argued that, wide strip mills, 'revolutionized not just the steel industry, but the entire industrial landscape.'[45] The eventual adoption of steel strip mills in Great Britain by Richard Thomas in Ebbw Vale (1938) and John Summers in Shotton (1939) raised the prospect of inefficiency and declining competitiveness in the event of the Port Talbot works failing to follow suit.[46]

According to Fred Cartwright, the Abbey Works' first general manager and an originator of the scheme, by 1938 GKB's planning had progressed to such an extent that it was a 'practical certainty' that Britain's third steel strip mill would be

[44] David Brinn, *Development of the Iron and Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area*, p. 8.
[45] Ruggero Ranieri and Jonathan Aylen, 'The Importance of the Wide Strip Mill and its Impact', in, Jonathan Aylen and Ruggero Ranieri (eds.), *Ribbon of Fire: How Europe Adopted and Developed US Strip Mill Technology (1920 – 2000)* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2012), p. 15.
[46] W. E. Minchinton, *The British Tinplate Industry: A History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), p. 238.

built at Port Talbot.[47] During March of that year a team of American engineers had been commissioned to produce 'a plan for building at Margam a four-high reversing plate mill', which crucially was to, 'allow for the mill to be converted into a hot strip mill' if future requirements deemed it necessary.[48] The location of what would inevitably be such a vast industrial undertaking, however, was fiercely debated both before and during the war and the construction of the Abbey in Port Talbot was contentious from the outset. With the post-war Labour government exercising strict national controls over the siting of new industrial plants, determining which region would receive Britain's new largest steelworks was the product of a multifarious range of competing interests; 'protracted and extremely complicated,' was how one historian described the decision making process.[49] Other south Wales steelworks were also desirous of a strip mill and plants at Newport and Cardiff were both, at various times, considered for development.[50] An entirely new steel works at Barry was also later claimed to have been a possibility, although it is unclear how fully developed this proposal was.[51]

In spite of this competition, in 1945 the planning application to build a strip mill at Port Talbot, the Abbey Works, was successfully submitted and construction began two years later.[52] Although some critics continued to claim that 'Port Talbot was not in itself an ideal site for a major modern works'[53] and the town's harbour facilities were widely recognised to be inadequate,[54] the site had much else to commend it. The seaside location was entirely congruent with contemporary trends in locating steelworks and the availability of ample moorland presented considerable room for expansion. Cartwright later berated how 'the rump of the old works' was inherited during the Abbey's construction but the existing plants at Margam and Port Talbot did allow new operations to be brought online quicker than would have

[47] Fred Cartwright, 'Preliminary Planning of Margam and Abbey Works', *A Technical Survey of the Abbey, Margam, Trostre and Newport Plants of the Steel Company of Wales Limited. A Special Issue of Iron & Coal Trades Review*, 1950, p. 9.
[48] David Brinn, *Iron and Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area*, p. 10.
[49] Kenneth Warren, *The British Iron and Sheet Steel Industry since 1840: An Economic Geography* (London: Bell, 1970), p. 205.
[50] Kenneth Warren, *The British Iron and Sheet Steel Industry*, pp. 191-194.
[51] Duncan Burn, *The Steel Industry, 1939-1959,* p. 81.
[52] Stephen Parry, 'History of the Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area', p. 136.
[53] *Ibid.*
[54] Kenneth Warren, *The British Iron and Sheet Steel Industry*, p. 226.

otherwise been possible.[55] Equally as significant as these geographic considerations, however, was the political force brought to bear in Port Talbot's favour. As a designated 'distressed area' during the pre-war depression, the generation of Labour politicians that came to power after the Second World War were determined to ensure that south Wales received a significant proportion of any new industrial investment. As Kenneth O. Morgan has argued, after 1945, 'never had government intervened so directly in the locating and prior support of new industry.'[56] The anticipated run down of much of the existing west Wales tinplate industry also helped rally political support for Port Talbot. As president of the Board of Trade and later Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton was the most proactive and vocal senior government minister in securing the strip mill for the town.[57] Dalton's refusal to give the steel firms the approval they desired for the tinplate redundancy scheme until he had received clarification about the site of any new development was one way in which he was able to ensure social considerations remained at the forefront of industrial decision making.[58] After the Abbey's construction, Dalton was able to proudly claim that, 'I did not fail those Welsh communities.'[59]

On the same day the Abbey Works project was officially publicised, the formation of a new company was also announced. Whilst news of the Abbey had begun to emerge throughout 1946, the identity of the firm undertaking the venture remained unclear. Conflicting newspaper reports during that year referred to both GKB and Richard Thomas and Baldwins (RTB) as the proprietors of the scheme.[60] However, at the annual dinner of the Port Talbot Chamber of Trade in February 1947, the SCOW was unveiled and, with it, the full details of the enormity of the scheme planned for Margam. The formation of the SCOW had been anticipated in 1945 by the merger of Richard Thomas with Baldwins Ltd, but the capital requirements of a project of the Abbey's scale required the combined resources of most of the largest steel and tinplate firms in south Wales. Political influence was

[55] Fred Cartwright, quoted in, Peter Pagnamenta and Richard Overy, *All Our Working Lives*, p. 90.
[56] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: A History of Modern Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.225 & 312.
[57] Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs, 1931-1945* (London: Muller, 1957), pp. 436-437.
[58] The Tinplate Redundancy Scheme was a government backed initiative to compensate owners of the old tinplate 'pack' mills whose plants were scheduled for closure as part of the industry's reorganisation.
[59] Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years*, p. 446.
[60] *South Wales Evening Post*, 8 May 1946; *Western Mail*, 6 November 1946.

also brought to bear with contemporary political thinking favouring mergers as a means of promoting efficiency and raising capital.[61] Joining with RTB and GKB were Lysaghts and the Llanelly Associated Tinplate Company to form the new conglomerate, who immediately became one of the largest steel and tinplate firms in Great Britain. Henceforth, the Abbey Works and Port Talbot became subjects of international interest. Throughout the construction phase, from 1947-1951, reporters were despatched to Port Talbot to update the wider public on the 'Margam II' project, as it was initially known. Most reporters marvelled at the scale of the work being undertaken; newspapers invariably stressed the project's £60,000,000 bill and its enormous size. The *News Chronicle* reported on 'the shifting of five million tons of sand which the process required; the diversion of roads and rivers and railways; the driving in of the first of the 30,000 concrete piles needed for the foundation…'. The reported concluded that, 'I don't think Margam is going to disappoint the hopes and promises placed in it.'[62]

Upon its completion in 1951, the Abbey Works was hailed as a national triumph. The occasion of the works' official opening, on 17 July 1951, was widely covered by the international press with most newspapers remarking on the success and significance of the event. *The Daily Telegraph* described it as a 'landmark in steel history',[63] whilst *The Times* wrote that, 'It is claimed that there has been no single project of this size in the British isles since the great days of the railway age.'[64] As far away as Australia, New South Wales' *Cootamundra Herald* celebrated the plant's opening as a 'showpiece of Britain's post-war recovery'.[65] The salience of the occasion was also commemorated by a number of programmes broadcast across the BBC, featuring live transmissions from the opening ceremony and a documentary on the plant's construction.[66] The official act of opening the new works was scheduled to be undertaken by the King, a further emblematic affirmation of the event's national importance (the honour eventually fell to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Gaitskell, after the King was forced to withdraw due to ill-health).

[61] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 314.
[62] *News Chronicle*, 25 October 1948.
[63] *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1951.
[64] *The Times*, 18 July 1951.
[65] *Cootamundra Herald*, 9 August, 1951.
[66] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, June 1951.

Whilst it is easy to view much of the rhetoric surrounding the Abbey's opening as journalist hyperbole, the plant's development cannot be separated from the broader position of the steel industry within Britain's post-war economy and the role it was assigned to play in the nation's economic recovery. Writing in 1959, David Murray positioned the steel industry at the centre of the nation's economic and industrial life: steel, he wrote, 'is, indeed so widely used in so many different ways that the tonnage produced, and, even more particularly, consumed, has long been taken as an index of the health and vigour of a country's economy.'[67] In this regard, steel cannot be viewed as simply *another* commodity – it was a vital national interest. This point formed the central theme of Hugh Gaitskell's address to the delegates and guests present at the opening of the Abbey. Gaitskell announced that, 'the 7,000 or 8,000 people who will be working here… will be doing a job for the nation as important as any in the country, and indeed more important than most.' The remainder of his speech stressed the central role of the steel industry to the nation's economic recovery: 'Steel,' remarked Gaitskell,

> Is almost literally the background of all industrial investment. Without steel investment would all but cease; and we must have more of it. But steel is much more than the means to new investment. It has laid the foundation and provided most of the substance of the recovery in our trade. No less than half our exports are metal goods of one sort or another, and that means, to a very large extent, steel.[68]

Viewed within this national context, the Abbey represented a vital contribution to the post-war economic recovery and served, what was widely recognised to be, one of the most pressing industrial needs of the nation.

The official unveiling ceremony, however, did not mark the end of the industrial developments at Port Talbot. Following the completion of the first phase of construction in 1951, dubbed development scheme 'K', there followed further programmes of development; development scheme 'L', which was announced in 1952; development scheme 'M', in 1956; and development scheme 'V' in 1960.[69] Cumulatively these projects saw the introduction of two new blastfurnaces, the erections of new coke ovens, as well as the decommissioning of older plant and the introduction of more technically advanced processes (such as the addition of a Davey

[67] David Murray, *Steel Curtain*, pp. 3-4.
[68] *Western Mail*, 18 July 1951
[69] David Brinn, *Development of Iron and Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area*, pp. 13-25.

United universal mill in 1958).[70] By 1963, steelmaking had ceased at the Port Talbot and Margam works and all future investment was concentrated in the Abbey.[71] Although the 1960s saw fewer large capital investments in new plant, rapid progress was made in the computerisation and automation of the production process. In 1967, *The Times* described the SCOW's decision to invest £1.4 million in six computers for the Abbey Works as, 'one of the most ambitious single projects undertaken by heavy industry,' and acknowledged the steel industry as 'becoming one of the single biggest users of advanced computer systems'.[72] By the 1960s, however, the introduction of new technologies was analogous with making labour efficiencies and streamlining the plant's workforce. Having peaked at over 18,000 employees in 1961, the numbers working at the works would steadily decline throughout the remainder of the period and accelerated dramatically after 1980.[73]

Alongside technology, political developments also signalled change for the Port Talbot works. Whilst the first nationalisation of the steel industry in 1951, by Clement Attlee's Labour government, proved to be short lived, the creation of the British Steel Corporation (BSC), in 1968, marked the end of the SCOW and the beginning of a prolonged period of state ownership. Nationalisation also brought new investment and the 1970s and 1980s saw the arrival of two significant new steelmaking technologies. The first of these was the Basic Oxygen Steelmaking (BOS) plant, opened in 1970. In the words of David Brinn, the BOS Plant was designed 'to bring the Company into line with the current practices of the large modern Japanese and American works'[74] and marked a pivotal evolution in the plant's production methods. British steel, however, experienced the full force of the economic downturn associated with the oil crisis of the 1970s and job cuts and plant closures dominated most newspaper headlines about the industry into the following decade. By 1980, steelmaking had ceased in some of the country's largest and most well-known plants, including Ebbw Vale, Corby and Bilston.

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[70] *Ibid*. p. 23.
[71] After the decommissioning of the Port Talbot and Margam works, it ceased to be necessary to differentiate between the different plants so the Abbey Works was increasingly referred to, simply, as the Port Talbot steelworks. Throughout this thesis, the term 'Port Talbot Works' is used to refer to the original plant whilst 'Port Talbot works' or 'Port Talbot steelworks' is used to collectively describe all steelmaking operations in the town.
[72] *The Times*, 4 May 1967.
[73] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed: The Quiet Privatisation of British Steel* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1989), p. 23.
[74] David Brinn, *Development of Iron and Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area*, p. 30.

Despite having to accept painful redundancies (the plant's workforce was halved as a result of the 1980 'slimline' agreement), the Port Talbot works survived as an integrated steelmaking plant and was able to secure some highly publicised new capital investments. According to Stephen Parry, the completion of the Continuous Casting (Concast) plant in 1982 represented, 'the most important addition to the plant between 1982 and 1988' and, 'allowed production of slabs of a more uniform composition, more consistent dimensions and with better surface quality.'[75] The introduction of Concast steelmaking also represented the final development towards the fully automated continuous casting of steel, an ambition that had first been tentatively realised with the development of the hot strip mill steelmaking process before the Second World War. With the privatisation of the BSC in 1988, the Port Talbot works entered a new phase in its history but the effects of the changes unleashed by the construction of the Abbey Works had left an indelible mark on Port Talbot, its industry and its steelworkers.



The Port Talbot steelworks, 2013.[76]

[75] Stephen Parry, 'History of the Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area, 1900-1988', p. 251.
[76] Photograph taken by the author, 2013.

Methodology and Research

The industrial developments that took place in Port Talbot following the Second World War were brought about through advances in technology, government policy and wider economic factors but they were also the product of human labour and collective endeavour. Efforts to recover these more personal histories of the steel industry, however, necessitate a departure from the traditional theoretical paradigms and research methodologies that have characterised most previous studies. Whilst recognising the importance of structural forces and institutions, this thesis aims to present a history of industrial work and community as it was understood by its participants, that is, the steelworkers themselves. Histories of workers' collective institutions serve a vital function but it is also important to understand the perceptions and interactions of individuals with and within these wider organisations. An awareness of how individuals related to and interpreted broader economic and political phenomenon is equally significant if we do not want the reality of ordinary past experiences to be lost to historical abstraction. This study does not profess to singularly achieve such a broad ambition but it does hope to point to future ways it might be realised. Such an approach owes something to, what has been described as, the 'infra-ordinary'. Joe Moran describes the 'infra-ordinary' in history as 'the unremarkable and unremarked upon aspects of our lives' but those aspects which, nonetheless, include actions and practices that are central to human experience.[77] Consideration is given here, therefore, to topics such as what steelworkers did during their rest breaks and how they went about getting a job as well as their trade unions and working practices.

This thesis eschews a single category of analysis and utilises concepts from social, gender, cultural and spatial histories in order to explain the changing condition of working-class life in a particular town and industry in post-war Britain. Contemporary sociological reports and sociological interpretations are also used extensively as well as concepts borrowed from social and post-modern geographies. This is largely a response to the nature of the subject matter. Steelworkers did not

[77] Joe Moran, *Queuing for Beginners: The Story of Daily Life From Breakfast to Bedtime* (London: Profile Books, 2007), p. 3; For a good introduction to the methodological and theoretical background of the history of the everyday see, Joe Moran, 'History, Memory and the Everyday', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 8 (2004).

define themselves in a single way and identities, like experience, were rarely static; they were contextually constructed and thus modulated over time and place. Individual identities and social understandings also reflected the diversity of human experience and the multiple spaces and relationships we inhabit. In this way, this thesis aims to present a broad cross-section of steelworkers' experiences, drawing upon their understandings of the workplace, the home and the community. Ultimately, this is a history of workers' post-war experience in Britain that seeks to reassert the importance of individual agency within broader processes of historical change.

In its efforts to uncover more personal narratives of working-class experience and challenge dominant structural narratives, oral history has been a highly significant tool within this study's research framework. As Joanna Bornat has argued, 'by means of the interview, oral historians are able to access personal experiences, eye witness accounts and the memories of people whose perspectives might otherwise be ignored or neglected.'[78] The way in which oral testimonies were collected and interpreted in this thesis, thus, warrants further explanation. Over thirty current and former employees of the Port Talbot works were interviewed as part of this study, representing a variety of occupations, ages and backgrounds. The way in which interviewees were located was largely random, albeit not in a statistically accountable manner. Interviewees were initially identified through local community groups, such as the Port Talbot Retired Employees' Association and the local historical society, and these contacts often generated further participants. Community social media websites have also been a highly effective way of locating interviewees and reaching people outside of established local organisations. The appeal for interviewees was purposefully inclusive and few specifications were placed on the type of candidate desired for interview; the only criterion was that they were employed at the Port Talbot steelworks in some capacity between 1951 and 1988. It was hoped that this would produce a variety of experiences of work, relating to different occupations, ages and genders, which would reflect the diversity of the plant's workforce. On the whole, this was successful and it was thus possible to gather memories of life in the works and the community from a broad range of

[78] Joanna Bornat, 'Reminiscence and Oral History: Parallel universes or shared endeavour?', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 457.

perspectives. Typically, however, most interviewees were male and over seventy and, in this respect, it would have been desirable to access more memories from female and younger workers. The difficulty in locating workers from these categories was often that they felt that their experiences were less relevant or, perhaps, even less important. Whilst older workers more readily appreciated the value of the experience they could impart, this was less so the case amongst workers under sixty, who presumed their memories did not extend far enough to be of use, or female workers, who did not consider themselves to be 'steelworkers' in the first instance. Through formulating an inclusive and wide ranging call for interviewees, however, it was possible to locate some members of these groups, even if not in the numbers initially desired.

The interviews adopted a semi-structured format, with a loose structure addressing several key themes whilst allowing interviewees the freedom to deviate into areas they considered interesting or relevant. It was hoped that this approach would adopt a middle position between the two extremes of oral history practice outlined by Paul Thompson: the highly structured questionnaire and the entirely unstructured conversation. Whilst questionnaire style interviews undeniably present greater opportunities for collective comparison and statistical analysis, the rigid nature of the format has been alleged to 'inhibit the memory' of the interviewee. The free-flowing conversational method, meanwhile, typically allows the interviewee greater scope to frame their experience in their own terms but works against consistency and targeted inquiry.[79] A questionnaire was thus devised for this study which sought to address key themes throughout all interviews but permitted digressions according to individuals' own experiences. Whilst all interviewees were asked questions about their workplace, politics, community and leisure activities, in individual interviews, some of these sections were more heavily weighted than others. Workers with an active involvement in trade union affairs, for example, tended to devote more of the interview to these activities, whilst those with a marginal interest in their union, naturally, had less to say on the subject. Such an approach works against achieving a high level of consistency and does not readily lend itself to statistical analysis but it does allow interviewees to stress what they

[79] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 225-228.

considered to be important about their own lives. As Alessandro Portelli has argued, 'the first requirement' of the oral historian is to '"accept" the informant and give priority to what she or he wishes to tell, rather than what the researcher wants to hear…'.[80] Difficulties were sometimes encountered, however, in accessing the areas of past existence that workers considered less historically significant. Most interviewees could understand the relevance of their work or their trade union activities but questions on the more 'mundane' aspect of life were often met with a more ambivalent response. It was often necessary, therefore, to stress that their past experiences outside work, in the home and the community, were also of historical interest.

Understanding the respective expectations of the interviewer and interviewee requires a consideration of the main theoretical issues relevant to oral history practice, namely the nature of the relationship between the interviewer, their subject and the wider social and cultural context. According to Lynn Abrams, intersubjectivity is, 'the interaction – the collision, if you will – between the two subjectives of interviewer and interviewee.'[81] Moreover, it describes the way in which the relationship between the interviewer and their subject informs the story that is told, based on their respective ages, genders, ethnicities, social and educational backgrounds and life experiences. The basis of this interaction can, therefore, influence the kind of information the interviewee presumes the researcher wishes to hear, as well as the style of narrative they put forward. In every instance during this study, there was a considerable age differential between the interviewer and the interviewee and often markedly different occupational and educational backgrounds. For male interviewees, in particular, there was often a sense that they needed to communicate the tough realities of industrial life and its associated masculine culture to an interviewer who had no practical experience of this kind of manual labour. In individual narratives of work, therefore, the hardship and deprivation of the industrial workplace were often stressed and given precedence over experiences of relaxation and work-based recreation.[82]

[80] Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 39.
[81] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 58.
[82] See, for example, interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.

Elsewhere, interviewees also sought to understand their individual life stories within broader collective and cultural narratives, reflecting theoretical notions of 'composure' and the effects of the 'cultural circuit'. As Lynn Abrams explains, 'the cultural circuit refers to the relationship between private or local discourses and national or public representations.'[83] During this study, evidence of 'national or public' representations informing personal narratives was apparent in a variety of ways. Interviewees' recollections of their community, for example, often sought to place the long-term changes they had witnessed within wider national understandings of post-war affluence and post-1979 deindustrialisation.[84] In many respects, Port Talbot's historical experience conformed to these national trends but, in other regards, the peculiarities of the town's local situation were sometimes obfuscated in individual accounts. The local steel industry began a sustained period of contraction from the 1960s onwards and yet, in several individual memories, these changes were inherently associated with the 1980s and the fiscal programme of the Conservative Thatcher administration.[85] Memories of the 1980 national steel strike were also occasionally conflated with the 1984/85 miners' strike, revealing the greater prominence accorded to the latter in the national memory.[86] In addressing these issues, the extensive use of contemporary documentary sources, such as newspapers and trade union records, has served to contextualise the oral histories within a contemporary historical setting. Misremembrances and the effects of composure can also possess their own historical significance. Interviewees' memories of the 1980 steel strike, for example, were highly illuminating even when they were not strictly historically accurate.[87] It was therefore the case that, as Portelli has argued, 'the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that "wrong" statements are still psychologically "true" and that this truth may be equally important as factually reliable accounts.'[88]

Memory is, of course, a fallible source whose accuracy is likely to diminish as time from the original event elapses. It is also selective and reflects the internal narratives that we construct for ourselves and how individuals make sense of, and

[83] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 68.
[84] See, for example, interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.
[85] See, for example, interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[86] See, for example, interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[87] See, p. 231.
[88] Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', p. 37.

give meaning to, their own lives. As Arthur McIvor notes, 'reflecting back in work-life interviews workers are genuinely trying to recall their experience but at the same are selecting, sieving and ordering memories, struggling to interpret meaning and make sense of the lives they have lived.'[89] Much of the debate surrounding the limitations of oral history, however, rests on the effects of nostalgia and the innate tendency to romanticise one's own past; 'old men drooling about their youth,' was how A.J.P. Taylor disparagingly described oral history.[90] Memories are constructed (and reconstructed) in contemporary settings and the past is thus invariably understood in relation to the present. As most of the interviews for this study were conducted at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014, the lingering effects of one of the worst economic downturns in modern history loomed large in most interviewees' minds and often engendered a greater affection for the 'better times' of a previous era. Hindsight can also impact upon memory and for many workers this was most apparent in their retrospective knowledge of the vast contraction of their industry from the 1970s onwards, an event few would have foreseen at the beginning of the period. Such considerations warrant constant reflection in the treatment of memory as a historical source but they do not negate the salience of oral history as a methodological tool. Drawing upon contemporary sociological questionnaire and interview data also allows for a degree of corroboration between contemporary and retrospective attitudes to certain issues and often shows the distorting effects of age on memory to be less than some of oral history's detractors have suggested.[91]

Utilising a wide evidence base of documentary material, in conjunction with oral histories, serves to mitigate some of the inconsistencies of individual memory. Alongside interviews with former works employees, this study makes extensive use of numerous documentary sources, including: trade union records, company papers and publications, government documents and publications, municipal and local council records and national and local newspapers. Historians, however, should be wary of drawing a straight distinction between subjective oral testimonies and objective documentary evidence. It is rather through the synthesis of a wide range of

[89] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 5.
[90] A.J.P. Taylor, quoted in, Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 10.
[91] For a summary of the theoretical objections to oral history see, Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, pp. 78-81.

historical materials that the distortions of any particular source type can be identified. Written sources can also pose their own challenges for historians and this is particularly true for the steel industry. According to John Elliot, 'considerable research difficulties have contributed to the British and Welsh iron and steel industries being much less favoured by historians than the coal industry.'[92] Elliot goes on to cite the inaccessible and incomplete nature of many steel company records as a particular obstacle to historical research. Indeed, many of the company records relating to Wales' largest steel companies are not housed in public archives. The majority of the company papers relating to the SCOW and BSC Port Talbot are housed in Tata Steel's Shotton Record Centre. Whilst the firm have granted access to their collection for this study, the material is skeletally catalogued and documents are only available for viewing by prior arrangement.

Those materials that are freely available, namely trade unions records and miscellaneous corporate publications, have found themselves widely dispersed in archives throughout Britain and are, in some instances, incomplete and partially catalogued. Invaluable to this study, however, have been the collected records of the ISTC's south west Wales division, which included the Port Talbot works. This collection, housed in Swansea University's Richard Burton Archives, includes correspondence between the union's fulltime officers, based in Swansea, and its national headquarters in London, as well as numerous letters between the ISTC and other trade unions at the works and a collection of minute books for several local union branches. These records provide an historical insight into the union's workings at Port Talbot as well as their aims, strategies and ideological understanding of industrial relations. In terms of their content, the records thus cover matters as diverse as health and safety and inter-union disputes, as well as more mundane functions, such as preparations for entertaining visiting officials and settling individual disputes over promotions. The trade union's records were typically more concerned with the formal institutions of national and local bargaining than the everyday attitudes and opinions of their members but they, nonetheless, reveal the intrinsic relationship between structures of power that underpinned the workplace and workers' conditions and wages.

[92] John Elliott, *The Industrial Developments of the Ebbw Valleys, 1780-1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 73.

The variety of the subject matter contained within this diverse body of source material has informed this thesis' broad thematic structure. Each of the six chapters focuses on a significant theme within the lives of Port Talbot's steelworkers: the community, the experience of work, the social divisions of labour, the process of industrial relations, conflict and industrial disputes and leisure and recreation. The first chapter positions the Abbey Works within its wider community and explores how the new plant shaped and remade its local society. Focusing on the two decades following the Abbey's construction, the chapter explores the ways in which power was negotiated in the town and how the steelworks came to influence the environmental and conceptual landscape of Port Talbot. As more than half of the plant's employees resided in the town itself, an analysis of how the place in which they lived changed and came to redefine itself is highly significant. The chapter also stresses that the contestation of power within industry was not just confined to the workplace. These struggles were manifested in the communities in which steelworkers lived as the interests of capital, community and national politics all vied to inform the future course of societal development. Emanating from these multifarious networks of influence, it is ultimately argued that Port Talbot developed a new civic identity during this time as a 'steeltown'. In this way the industry was more than a linchpin of the local economy, it was a symbol of collective endeavour and an important iconographic representation of the way in which the people of the town understood their community.

In the second and third chapters, the historical focus shifts from the community to the workplace. The second chapter is primarily concerned with the experience of work in the Port Talbot steel industry and makes extensive use of oral history material to provide first-hand accounts of working life at the plant. Often the condition of work is shown to be a fragmented one, with different production processes engendering a variety of workplace experiences, rather than a single homogenous occupational culture. Across the period, the nature of work in the steel industry also changed considerably and the effects of technology and health and safety legislation are shown to have had a transformative impact on steelworkers' quality of working life. Despite the divisions and changes that characterised working experiences, it is argued that, through the camaraderie of workplace friendships and the cooperative nature of work itself, the workplace still offered sources of

satisfaction and meaning for steelworkers. The third chapter is primarily concerned with the social relations of the workplace and the role of work in the construction of individual and group identities. Through these processes, it is argued that work was understood as an individual, as well as a collective, experience and that workers defined themselves through work in different ways, depending on their age, sex, rank and occupation. Even collective identities were often fragmented and represented the diverse range of professions and processes that contributed to steel production. Thus, whilst works employees may have seen themselves as steelworkers outside the plant, at work identities were more complex and displayed numerous hierarchical and occupational distinctions: between craft workers and process workers, manual workers and staff workers, as well as workers and managers and the numerous grades in between.

Establishing the nature of the social relations of work is a necessary precursor to understanding the practice of industrial relations and the causes of workplace conflict, which are the subjects of the fourth and fifth chapters. The fourth chapter considers the structural apparatus of industrial relations: the trade unions, the negotiation machinery and the contestation of power in a multi-union workplace. Throughout this period, the practice of industrial relations at the plant was influenced by prevailing economic and political conditions but it was also informed by workers' own attitudes towards work. Whilst due consideration is given, therefore, to formal processes of national and local workplace bargaining, the relationship between unions and their members is also explored; particularly, in reference to how rank and file members understood the function of their unions and the extent to which they identified with their wider beliefs and methods. An analysis of industrial relations at the Port Talbot steelworks, therefore, reveals a multifarious nexus of competing aims and interests which often transcended traditional class-based divisions. Although, the existing negotiating machinery was often capable of engendering harmonious working relations, strikes and industrial disputes were frequent occurrences at the plant and this is the subject of the fifth chapter. The causes of industrial disputes are explored as well as the ways in which they changed over time. Ultimately, it is argued that industrial struggles at the works were multilinear and frequently crossed the traditional lines of class that have been central to most understandings of workplace conflict. Notions of loyalty and solidarity at work were highly fluid and

strikes were the product of intra- and inter-union disputes as well as antagonisms between management and workers. Sectionalism, as it is traditionally understood, was thus not entirely predicated on a materialist interpretation of the workplace, whereby workers were brought into conflict with each other over wages, but reflected a pragmatic conception of industrial relations and a wide range of evolving interests and concerns. Often workers' attitudes towards industrial disputes were not only conditioned by workplace loyalties but also those of the community and family.

The final chapter looks at workers' lives outside the plant, specifically the way in which they used and derived meaning from their leisure time. This includes a consideration of corporate welfare schemes and how measures by the company to influence workers' leisure were interpreted by employees as well as other associational leisure activities based in the community. Workers' home lives and their relation to the domestic sphere also emerge as integral to how time was spent outside work. Whilst work is seen to have a determining influence on workers' leisure, through providing the economic means for recreation and structuring the chronology of non-work time, ultimately it is argued that workers were largely able to create their own out-of-work cultures. This not only explains why so many workers were immune to the enticements of corporate welfare but also how leisure was understood to be a time for the exercise of individual autonomy. In their leisure time, workers thus chose to pursue individual interests and social relationships that were not easily maintained or explored in work.

It would, however, be misleading to see these chapters in a compartmentalized and fragmented manner so the relationships between these themes and the interrelated nature of work, leisure and community are emphasised throughout. One of the primary values of a case study, such as this, is that it allows for a detailed and microscopic analysis of past experience, which, whilst being consistently aware of the broader economic and political forces at play, is nonetheless rooted in life as it was lived by the people who were there. Workers' lives were not confined to a single sphere and their identities eluded a single definition. It is thus necessary for a history of this kind to reflect the fluid nature of the worlds they inhabited. There is, of course, a need for general histories but, without the knowledge of the particularities and complexities of individual

experiences that microhistories offer, generalisation can turn into abstraction and even distortion.

Chapter One

'The City of Steel': The Abbey Works and the Remaking of an Industrial Community, 1945-1970

Introduction

The two decades following 1945 were ones of radical upheaval and change for Port Talbot and its surrounding areas. With the completion of the Abbey Works in the 1950s, Port Talbot was elevated from a provincial industrial town, of little national significance, to one of the most important steelmaking centres in Europe. By the turn of the next decade Port Talbot had become internationally synonymous with a single commodity: steel. During the same time, the town's population swelled by over 10,000 and new housing estates, shopping and leisure facilities and transport links were built.[1] Contemporaries were of little doubt that Port Talbot was entering one of the most accelerated and pronounced periods of growth in its history. Stories of Port Talbot 'the boom town', a magnet for itinerant workers from throughout the British Isles and beyond all rested on the Abbey Works and the expansion and success of the town's steel industry. Even the steelworks' nickname, 'treasure island', was suggestive of modern-day speculators in search of the 'big money' that could, allegedly, be earnt at the plant. For local historian, A. Leslie Evans, the construction and completion of the Abbey Works were truly 'stupendous achievements'. Writing in 1963, Evans, like many of his contemporaries, regarded the Abbey to 'have transformed Port Talbot, considered to be a dying port in 1938, into a boom town of nearly 50,000 people, whose standards of living have improved considerably during the last twelve years'.[2] Whilst traditional heavy industries, such as coal mining, were displaying worrying symptoms of decline as Britain entered 'the atom age' of the 1950s, the Abbey Works was held as a symbol of progress, modernity and post-war revitalization.

[1] A Vision of Britain through Time, 'Port Talbot MB through time', <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10293066/cube/TOT_POP> [Accessed: 18 June 2014].
[2] A. Leslie Evans, *The History of Taibach and District* (Port Talbot: s/l, 1963), p. 85.

The Abbey Works was undoubtedly a project of national importance but it was at the local level that its effects were most acutely felt. During the 1950s and 1960s, the requirements of this vast industrial venture were influential in determining Port Talbot's post-war development strategy. Housing, transport and the local economy all had to bend and conform to the needs of the steel industry. As the proprietors of this enormous industrial enterprise, the Steel Company of Wales established themselves as an influential and pervasive voice in local society. Their views, ambitions and requirements became a determining force in shaping the kind of society that would emerge in the post-war period; a town where steel was not only the dominant feature of the local economy but also a symbol of local influence and power. Writing in the 1980s, the sociologist Ralph Fevre commented that Port Talbot was a town 'built for steel and not for people'.[3] It was an assessment that testified to the way in which the industry had profoundly reshaped Port Talbot's urban environment and social composition since the war.

Port Talbot's post-war transformation into a steeltown – or 'the city of steel' as it was labelled in a SCOW advertisement[4] – was not just an indication of the importance of steel to local life but a recognition of its totally transformative effect on its surrounds. The relationship between the industrial and civic spheres was, however, symbiotic. Steelworks were dependent on their immediate environs for the manpower, skills and resources they needed and necessarily utilised local infrastructure and transport links to enable and maintain production. Any comprehensive historical understanding of the steel industry, then, requires an awareness of the places in which steel plants were situated and a locational context, which is social as well as geographic, for the process of production. Port Talbot was also home to a significant proportion of the Abbey Works' employees, with up to half of the plant's steelworkers residing in the town throughout the period.[5] As the history of Port Talbot's steelworkers can only be understood within the context of their communities, an understanding of the relationship between their place of work and place of residence is essential.

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[3] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed: The Quiet Privatisation of British Steel* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1989), p. 17.
[4] *Daily Mail*, 19 March 1957.
[5] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change upon Selected Communities in South Wales' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff, 1963), pp. 216-217.

Despite the Abbey's unequivocal influence upon its immediate locality, the relationship between industry and place has been largely absent from histories of the steel industry in Britain. The more expansive historiography of the steel industry in America, however, has displayed a greater recognition of the importance of community to the industry's historical narrative. Robert Bruno's study of class in the Ohio steel town of Youngstown, for example, explores the strength of the relationship between the steel industry and community and the interrelatedness of their development and subsequent contraction. Bruno's description of 'communities of steel' readily applies to Port Talbot during this period as the town developed and grew in response to the industry's needs. In Bruno's analysis, the relationship between industry and place was one which transcended a purely economic explanation and was manifest in all aspects of society, affecting social relations and collective identity.[6] The importance of place, and the role of industry in its formation, is also apparent in Linkon and Russo's study of 'work and memory in Youngstown'. In their analysis, Youngstown's historical development can be read as the product of repeated power struggles, with the steel industry acting as a dominant interest. This spatial analysis is plainly evident when they note that, 'landscapes are formed as individuals and groups struggle for control over property, over work, and, often, over each other.'[7] Linkon and Russo's emphasis on 'struggle' may exaggerate the extent to which such relations were predicated on conflict, but the conceptualisation of place as being the product of the negotiation of power has clear implications for the study of post-war Port Talbot. Steelworks were not only sites of economic production but also ones of cultural production, where new collective identities and civic meanings were formed.

Although far from comprehensive, trends in the writing of America's steel industry tentatively point towards a broader awareness amongst historians of the importance of place to the analysis of the past. Having coalesced from various strands of urban geography and post-modernist theory, the influence of 'the spatial turn' has been to reaffirm the importance of place and geography in processes of historical development. Moreover, rather than treating physical environments as a

[6] Robert Bruno, *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 36.
[7] Sherry Lee Linkon & John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work & Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), p. 15.

passive backdrop to historical events, the increased attention paid to geography in historical discourse has encouraged a critical engagement with space, one which sees it as the product of numerous social, political and economic forces. Space, it has been argued, also has its own agency and is capable of shaping social relations and collective identities. Up until the 1970s, geographer Edward W. Soja argues, academics from all disciplines failed to fully appreciate the implications of such an analysis. Soja's criticisms of geography (a subject which, he argues, 'treated space as the domain of the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile – a world of passivity and measurement rather than action and meaning') are equally applicable to his condemnations of history.[8] Whilst some historians have expressed reservations over embracing the more excessive theoretical rhetoric of the spatial turn, the assertion of space as an active and contested sphere, one which is continually made and remade through negotiations of power, offers an insightful analytical framework.[9] The rewards to be derived from this approach are plainly evident in David Harvey's historical and geographic exploration of the role of capital in the production of space. His edited collection of essays on the history of the car industry in Oxford, for example, brings together various strands of history, sociology and geography in its assessment of the effects of capital on the historical development of communities and environments.[10]

The implications of 'the spatial turn' for historians have, arguably, been most acutely felt in the field of urban history, where the importance of place to historical development has long been recognised. The urban history of post-war Britain, however, remains considerably less developed than for earlier periods. Moreover, studies of urban development since the Second World War have tended to focus on political planning, exploring the influence of successive government policies in determining national housing strategies and urban regeneration. Much of the urban history of post-war Britain, then, has focused on the perceived successes and failures of different government initiatives, as well as the designs and visions of the

[8] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 37.
[9] See, Ralph Kingston, 'Mind Over Matter? History and the Spatial Turn', *Cultural and Social History*, 7 (2010).
[10] Teresa Hayter & David Harvey (eds.), *The Factory and the City: The Story of the Cowley Automobile Workers in Oxford* (London: Mansell, 1993).

politicians, planners and architects behind them.[11] Some studies have recognised the limits of government influence and stressed the importance of local power networks in determining the course of urban development and town planning. Fielding *et al.*'s consideration of the Labour Party's attitude towards post-war housing, for example, reveals that national policy directives were often tempered by economic pressures and specific local interests.[12] The lack of specific case studies for this period, however, means the exact nature of the historical relationship between these different spheres and their influence on urban regeneration remains underdeveloped. The form and style of Port Talbot's own post-war development was profoundly influenced by a multifarious range of pressures and interests, reflecting the negotiation of power between national and local, political and economic, and capital and civic interests.

This chapter will consider the role of the steel industry within the broader economic, physical and social development of Port Talbot in the two decades following the Second World War. These decades constituted the industry's most pronounced and exponential period of growth, an experience which was mirrored in the expansion of Port Talbot itself. Rapid development in the steel industry initiated a visible transformation in the town's social composition as the Abbey Works' seemingly insatiable demand for labour undermined old patterns of employment and effected a change in the demographic composition of its locality. The first section of the chapter will consider these changes in greater detail, focusing on the effects of the steel industry on the local population, including patterns of migration and employment. In particular, the effects of the Abbey Works on the demographic composition of Port Talbot will be considered with reference to how the development of local industry enabled an influx of new arrivals into the town. New patterns of migration to Port Talbot were accompanied by changing trends in local employment with the steel industry engendering a transition from a multi- to a largely mono-industrial economy. It will ultimately be shown that the role of the SCOW in orchestrating these developments helped establish the firm as a dominant power within the region.

[11] See, John Stevenson, 'The Jerusalem that Failed? The Rebuilding of Post-War Britain', in Terry Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds.), *Britain Since 1945* (London: Macmillan, 1991).
[12] Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson & Nick Tiratsoo, *"England Arise!": The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

Perhaps the most tangible manifestations of the changes Port Talbot underwent during this time, however, were in its physical environment. In the wake of the Abbey Works, Port Talbot's geography was profoundly altered by the appearance of vast new housing estates, new transport networks and civic amenities. The next section will focus specifically on these aspects of the town's urban ecology and the ways in which the steel industry sought to shape and influence its environment. It will be argued that the dominance which the SCOW came to exert over the local economy conferred upon the company a unique influence, amongst private concerns, in determining the form and scope of the town's urban expansion. Local civic regeneration projects, therefore, could not ignore capital interests, even if local residents and municipal and national bodies occasionally sought to challenge them. Finally, this chapter will conclude by moving the discussion of industry and place beyond an analysis of Port Talbot's physical environment to consider its changing civic and social identity. During this period, it will be argued that steel came to permeate all levels of local society, influencing the character of local politics, culture and civic identity. All this reflects the extent to which steel came to fundamentally alter how Port Talbot understood itself as a town: its identity, purpose and destiny. In essence, Port Talbot was transformed from a town with a steelworks in it into a 'steeltown'. Alongside class, race and gender, the places in which people live are crucial indicators of identity, affecting their interpretation of the world as well as their understanding of their position within it. The significance of place in post-war Port Talbot, however, cannot be separated from the question of industry.

Population and Employment

The task of constructing and manning an industrial unit of the Abbey's size necessitated significant changes in the demographic and employment characteristics of the surrounding region. From the laying of the first foundations in 1947 and throughout the first phase of the plant's construction and expansion during the 1950s, the most pressing problem faced by the Abbey Works' management was the persistent shortage of local labour. Although the town's population had grown by over 4,000 between 1946 and 1951 (from an estimated 40,000 persons to 44,115), by 1958 the total amount of labour employed at the steelworks exceeded 'the total

occupied population of Port Talbot in 1951'.[13] Population growth was thus failing to keep pace with industrial expansion. Initially this deficiency was felt most acutely in the lack of skilled labourers needed to fill specific roles in the construction process but as time progressed the lack of available manpower became evident in almost all aspects of production and maintenance. Shortly after the plant's official opening, the *Port Talbot Guardian* reported, 'Abbey Works face new staff problem,' suggesting that this was not the first staff problem the plant had faced. Expressing the company's woes, the article observed that, 'workers are not coming forward in sufficient numbers, particularly general labourers.'[14] Indeed, these problems had been anticipated by the company from the outset of the plant's construction. In February 1947 managing director of the SCOW, Julian Pode, informed the Welsh Board of Health (WBH) that the company had severe doubts that their labour needs would be able to be met from the local area alone: 'At least 3,000' construction workers, he told the board's representatives, 'would have to be recruited from the areas outside daily travelling distance.'[15] As the national labour shortage persisted into the beginning of the next decade, securing the necessary skilled workmen to build and man the plant continued to present a recurring obstacle for the SCOW. In 1950, works manager, Fred Cartwright, informed the company's board of directors of the persistent shortage of skilled labour in the area, noting that the firm was struggling to obtain the necessary seventy-five electricians and seventeen steel erectors, amongst other skilled workers.[16] The following year, Cartwright was still complaining that the firm could not obtain the 300 labourers required by contractors.[17]

[13] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change upon Selected Communities in South Wales', pp. 216 – 220.
[14] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 4 May 1951.
[15] The National Archives, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Housing for proposed Strip Mill at Port Talbot: Notes of meeting held in Conference Room, 21 February 1947.
[16] Shotton Record Centre, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 11, Steel Division: Engineering Developments, September 1950.
[17] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 11, Steel Division: Engineering Developments, February 1951.

Table 1.1

Year	Total Labour Force
1948	4,337
1950	4,863
1952	9,071
1954	11,051
1956	13,754
1958	15,497
1960	18,102

Total number of SCOW employees at the Port Talbot works.[18]

Up until the early 1960s, the company's demand for labour showed few signs of abating and the plant's workforce continued to increase exponentially throughout the period. At the official unveiling of the Abbey Works in 1951, guest of honour Hugh Gaitskell spoke of the '7,000 or 8,000' who would find employment at the new plant but his estimations were quickly eclipsed by the Abbey Works' burgeoning labour requirements. Indeed, the continuous phasing in of new plant and machinery throughout this period brought about a drastic increase in the SCOW's Port Talbot workforce, from 4,683 in 1950, to 18,102 in 1960.[19] By the mid-1950s the labour shortage had abated slightly so that one company spokesmen believed 'that sufficient labour is in fact available in South Wales'.[20] However, many of these potential employees, he maintained, were still located beyond a commutable distance of the plant and provision would, therefore, need to be made to rehouse them within the area of the steelworks. Although it was later suggested that much of this increase in employment could be attributed to wasteful over-manning practices, the frequent concerns raised by company officials during this time reveals the urgency of their labour requirements.

Manpower shortages were a persistent feature of Britain's post-war labour market, with military service and the requirements of post-war reconstruction both

[18] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining: A Case Study in the Steel Industry* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1971), pp. 86-87.
[19] *Ibid*.
[20] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, B/D 11/1449, Letter from D. Young to F. Blaise Gillie, 15 February 1955.

making significant demands of the nation's working population. This adverse national condition, however, was further exacerbated in Port Talbot by local circumstances and longstanding historical factors. Inadequate housing provision and poor transport links were frequently cited by the company as problems when it came to recruiting workers in sufficient quantities. In a meeting with the WBH in 1951, Fred Cartwright listed the 'unwillingness of possible applicants to travel long distances' and the 'inability of The Steel Co. to promise that housing accommodation would be available near the Works' as two obstacles towards recruiting the necessary workers.[21] In raising these concerns with municipal and national authorities, Cartwright was explicitly seeking to rally political backing in pursuance of the company's interests.

In meeting its growing manpower needs the Abbey Works, then, placed considerable demands on the local labour market, changing the character of local employment and accelerating wider occupational trends. The supply of labour in the immediate vicinity initially remained restricted by the continued occupation of workers in the locality's pre-existing industries. Although the Abbey Works would later establish Port Talbot's reputation as 'the City of Steel', the town had sustained a distinctly multi-industrial economy up until the plant's arrival, with steel coexisting alongside the tinplate and coal industries as the locality's main employers. The tinplate trade, in particular, had been a significant local employer since the nineteenth century and continued to occupy a large proportion of the available local labour. However, the continued expansion of the Abbey Works' own labour force during the 1950s was matched by an inverse decline in the numbers employed in these older industries. In 1953 the *Glamorgan Gazette* reported that 400 tinplate workers were to be made redundant from four of the town's 'old-type' tinplate works. The notice, issued to the town's tinplate workers in January of that year, also announced the closure of the town's four remaining tinplate works, bringing to an end the last vestiges of the local tinplate trade.[22] As with other numerous small tinplate works throughout the region, the closure of the Burrows, Ffrwdwyllt, Vivian and Villiers mills were a product of changing trends within the industry which saw the concentration of the majority of the nation's tinplate making capacity in the

[21] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Memorandum of Meeting Between Representatives of the Welsh Board of Health and the Steel Company of Wales Ltd, 6 April 1951.
[22] *Glamorgan Gazette,* 30 January 1953.

SCOW's two new ultra-modern plants at Trostre, Llanelli (opened 1951) and Velindre, Swansea (opened 1956). The region's collieries faced a similar fate as the industry underwent a period of gradual contraction throughout south Wales during the post-war period. With the closure of coal mines in Goytre and Bryn in the 1960s, coalmining ceased to be a significant presence in the industrial life of Port Talbot. The percentage of the town's male workforce employed in coal mining fell from 18.6 per cent in 1921 to only six per cent in 1951.[23]

As well as being able to draw upon the displaced labour from the contraction of the region's older industrial base, the Abbey Works was also successful in enticing workers from other professions into the steel industry. The prospect of better wages and promotion opportunities in the steelworks prompted many to abandon their existing trades for a career in steel, much to the consternation of some local employers. An article in the *Port Talbot Guardian* in 1951, for example, alarmingly reported that the town's bakeries were facing a 'staff exodus'. 'Like many other industries,' the report commented, 'the bakeries are finding that inflationary tendencies are causing skilled men to leave their trade and find alternative employment at heavy industries in the district.'[24] A Port Talbot resident, interviewed in the 1950s, concurred that 'They've [the SCOW] taken everybody. You can't get a painter in Port Talbot now – they've all gone into the Steel Company.'[25] The effect of these changes on Port Talbot's working population was to concentrate the majority of the locality's labour around a single workplace, the Abbey Works. Even those workers not directly in the employ of the SCOW could find their work tied up with the local steel industry with the Abbey Works supporting a host of subsidiary firms, such as construction and haulage companies. 'The steelworks was the main employer,' recalled one former employee, 'everyone had someone connected with the steelworks – everyone. Someone in your family was there, whether directly or indirectly, whether you were supplying them or whether you were working there as a contractor.' Indeed, he concluded that, 'everything was built around the steelworks.'[26] Until the completion of the British Petroleum petrochemical plant at

[23] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change upon Selected Communities in South Wales', p. 216.
[24] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 27 April 1951.
[25] Quoted in, George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change upon Selected Communities in South Wales', p. 269.
[26] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.

Baglan Bay in 1963, the Abbey Works' position as the pre-eminent local employer was unassailable.

Table 1.2

	Mining	Manufacturing (including Steel)	Utilities	Services
1931	16,634	12,925	7,215	13,990
1951	9,267	14,269	16,016	18,834
1971	3,640	27,540	3,440	18,650
1981	-	17,370	7,400	22,670
1991	2,860	11,050	4,830	24,900

Occupational trends in Neath Port Talbot Borough, 1931-1991.[27]

Although the SCOW successfully utilised the available manpower within the Port Talbot area, the finite supply of local labour proved a considerable barrier to the plant's expansion. An advert placed by the company in a national newspaper in 1951 made clear their desires to encourage workers from outside the immediate locality:

> The Steel Company of Wales has a large number of vacancies for Production and Maintenance workers of many grades, including General Labour, for their Abbey Works. All these jobs offer excellent prospects for early promotion for young and energetic workers. Houses are being made available for workers whose homes are not in the Port Talbot area, and in the meantime accommodation is available in the Steel Company's hostel near Porthcawl, at very low rates, with free transport to and from work.[28]

With their promise of accommodation and transport, these recruitment advertisements were, therefore, explicitly targeting workers from throughout south Wales and even beyond. Whilst as many as half of the new plant's workers commuted to work from outlying areas, the Abbey's ever increasing demand for labour had a clear and immediate impact on the town's demographic composition. According to Thomason, the Abbey's demand for labour, 'must perforce have extended the recruitment area and increased the residential population.'[29] Indeed, by

[27] A Vision of Britain Through Time, 'Neath Port Talbot District through time', <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10056615/cube/INDUSTRY_GEN> [Accessed: 25 April 2016].
[28] *Western Mail*, 2 May 1951.
[29] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change Upon Selected Communities in South Wales', p. 220.

1961, there were 10,000 more people living in Port Talbot than there had been in 1939. According to one estimate, between 1946 and 1958 the population of the wider township grew by twenty-five per cent.[30]

Table 1.3

Year	Population
1931	40,678
1939	41,518
1951	44,115
1961	51,322

Population growth in Port Talbot Municipal Borough, 1931-61.[31]

The significant increase in the number of new arrivals to the town during this period led some to dub Port Talbot a 'boom town' whose inexorable growth was analogous with that of its steel industry. 'You are a boom town now,' Hugh Dalton, the former Labour cabinet minister, told the town's residents in 1951. 'People are coming in from all directions,' he went on, 'and you are building up a great new community stimulated and reinforced by new blood from all over these islands.'[32] Such optimism reached new heights of hyperbole when in 1954 the Lord Lieutenant of Glamorgan publicly suggested that it was conceivable that Port Talbot's population might increase from 50,000 to 100,000 within the near future. Such a development, he went on, would place the town in a position to bid against Cardiff for the title of capital of Wales.[33] It was a remark that would later seem highly fanciful but such was the rapid rate of the town's growth in the 1950s that few knew when it would end.

When viewed within the wider context of Britain's post-war experience, Port Talbot's 'boom town' proclamations and suggestions of capital city status require some revision. The growth experienced by Luton (often portrayed as the archetypal post-war boom town), for example, was far in excess of Port Talbot. Luton

[30] *Ibid.*
[31] A Vision of Britain through Time, 'Port Talbot MB through time', <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10293066/cube/TOT_POP> [Accessed: 18 June 2014].
[32] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 21 September 1951.
[33] *Western Mail*, 5 February 1954.

experienced a population increase of over 20,000 in the 1950s alone.[34] Nonetheless, Port Talbot's post-war growth was in marked contrast to the demographic trends of the wider region. During the period 1951-61, Harold Carter noted that, 'with exceptions,' Wales' industrial towns all recorded 'heavy decreases in population'.[35] Whereas traditional industrial centres, such as Merthyr Tydfil and Llanelli, continued to suffer the effects of depopulation, Port Talbot's population grew, through migration alone, by an annual average of 1.52 per cent.[36] The impact of the plant on the town was such that Port Talbot was the only 'mining and manufacturing town' in south Wales to undergo a population increase through migration during this period, rather than the reverse'.[37] The rate of population increase even surpassed the county council's own forecasts. Glamorgan County Council's Town and Country Act report for 1951 predicted a population growth in Port Talbot of up to 50,000 by 1971 but this figure had already been surpassed by 1960.[38] Whilst these changes may have been less pronounced than some of the more sensational media reports suggested, its cumulative effect was significant and was acutely felt by the town's residents. One longstanding resident remembered the growth the town experienced in the wake of the Abbey's construction: 'well [the Abbey] made [Port Talbot] bigger, it must have been. People had come in from everywhere,' he noted, 'a lot of people came from Newport because of the old steel industry and expertise. Without the works it would have still been a smaller town – there's nothing else here, is there?'.[39]

As well as encouraging migration into the area through their national recruitment campaign, the SCOW also sought to enable and incentivise workers to move to the area of their new steelworks. The company consistently exerted pressure on municipal and national authorities to expand local housing provision but they also enacted their own measures to facilitate the inward migration of workers into the area. The most obvious result of these efforts was the company's acquisition of Stormy Down Camp, a former RAF Station near Bridgend, leased from the Ministry

[34] John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer & Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 38.
[35] Harold Carter, *The Towns of Wales: A Study in Urban Geography* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), p. 150.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 150.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 153.
[38] West Glamorgan Archives, Town And Country Planning Act 1947, GCC/PL X 1, Development Plan, Area No.1: Report of Survey by E. John Powell, 1951.
[39] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.

of Works by the company for the purposes of housing workers, mostly contractors, involved in the Abbey's construction. Free transport was provided to and from the site for the camp's residents and at least £18,000 was spent on modernising the camp's heating and kitchen facilities as a further means of attracting employees.[40] In a contracted labour market, firms, such as the SCOW, were pushed to devote greater resources to employee welfare in order to attract labour of a sufficient quality and quantity to their works. By the time the hostel was returned to the Ministry of Works in 1953, it had accommodated over 10,000 workers for varying lengths of time, thus indicating the scale of movement into Port Talbot during the period.[41]

The placement of workers with local families was also widely practiced and offered a convenient, albeit short term, source of accommodation for employees. Many of the initial lodgers were contractors employed in the construction of the plant but some went on to further employment with the SCOW and permanently relocated to the town. One steelworker recounted his experiences of coming from Scotland to Port Talbot as an employee of Matthew Arnold Ltd, a construction firm engaged on a contract for the plant's construction. Whilst lodging with a local family he found love in the town and a fulltime post at the works, eventually making Port Talbot his permanent home.[42] Similar experiences were undoubtedly repeated throughout the town. A meeting of the Committee of Chairman of Port Talbot Borough Council in 1947 recorded that lodging was common and, 'that it was necessary to provide billets for certain of the more essential men, in near proximity to the site in view of their having to called upon at odd times and having to take work home with them after normal working hours.'[43] So great was the shortage of suitable accommodation that one local councillor even proposed the restoration of wartime 'billeting powers', a compulsory order that would compel local households to accommodate workers.[44] Whilst this resolution was rejected by the council, it did indicate the extent to which the Abbey's construction required the total mobilisation of local resources and shows that the civic bodies contemplated invoking emergency powers to assist the SCOW.

[40] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 10, Guest Keen Baldwins Iron & Steel Co. Ltd. Board Report, March 1947.
[41] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, June 1953.
[42] Interview with William McPherson, 14 November 2013.
[43] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 19, Committee of Chairmen Meeting, 16 May 1947.
[44] *Ibid.*

The influx of contractors and workmen engaged on the Abbey's construction represented, to some, the beginnings of a cultural, as well as demographic transformation. Media and political commentators often seized upon the image of Port Talbot as a society in transition, where the 'traditional' Welsh way of life was giving way to a cosmopolitan society as new arrivals flooded into the town from throughout the United Kingdom. Once construction began on the Abbey Works, the *Western Mail* reported that Port Talbot soon 'heard the soft accents of Southern Ireland, the burr of Tyneside voices and dozen other dialects'.[45] A reporter for the company magazine of the steel firm Richard Thomas & Baldwins went so far as to describe Port Talbot in 1955 as a 'frontier town': 'Like all frontier towns,' he wrote, 'it experiences influxes of strangers, the tug of complex loyalties. From the valleys came the Welsh, from the sea the Irish, and from overland from the east, the English and the Scots. It is the complexity which strikes the visitor studying the heart of the great steel town.' Anticipating later pejorative media depictions of the town, the reporter's opinion of these developments was mostly critical. The town's increasingly multicultural composition, he argued, 'expresses itself not in the conflict on nationalities, but negatively, as an absence of personality.'[46] Thomason's sociological survey was less condemnatory but was, nonetheless, motivated by the emergence of 'a possible new social structure and culture, associated with the advances in technology and the consequences of these for the size of work force and size of income earned'.[47]

Phrases, such as 'frontier town', however, were often misleading as to the extent and diversity of migration into Port Talbot. Whilst SCOW advertisements looked to attract workers from as wide an area as possible, most of the town's new migrants had far more local origins. In a survey conducted amongst a sample of Aberavon residents in the 1950s, for example, seventy-three per cent of the new arrivals into the area originated from the tinplate districts of west Wales.[48] Even on the newly constructed Sandfields estate, only thirteen per cent of the inhabitant's sampled were born outside Wales (although this was significant in its contrast to

[45] *Western Mail*, 17 July 1951.
[46] *Ingot – The Magazine of the RSTC Group*, March 1955.
[47] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change Upon Selected Communities in South Wales', p. 256.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 222.

wider regional trends).[49] The high propensity of migration to Port Talbot from within south Wales was largely a product of the SCOW's own recruitment strategies, which often explicitly targeted south Wales workers. Conditional upon the government's approval of the Abbey Works scheme, the SCOW was committed to alleviate any unemployment arising from the reorganisation of the Welsh tinplate industry. Many of its new employees, therefore, were recruited from the west Wales heartlands of the old tinplate trade. Exaggerated tales of a 'gold rush town'[50] also masked the large percentage of Port Talbot steelworkers who commuted to the plant from surrounding areas. Up to half of the plant's employees did not live within the Port Talbot borough boundary and this significantly checked the town's population expansion. Indeed, according to Thomason, in 1951, Port Talbot's 'net balance of day population, at 7,126 persons, was exceeded only by Cardiff of the South Wales urban areas'.[51] Beneath the sensationalist media headlines, then, an equally important trend was emerging in which commuting was becoming an increasingly frequent and normalised part of working life. The notion of Port Talbot as a 'boom town', however, was widely voiced and further propagated the image of the Abbey Works as a dynamic instrument for growth and social change.

Housing and Transport

The cultural impact of migrating workers may have been difficult to quantify but the effects of population growth and industrial expansion were readily discernible in Port Talbot's changing physical environment. With the construction of the Abbey Works came a new urban landscape, one whose skyline was imposingly dominated by the works' towering blast furnaces and gasometers. Heavy industry had been a visible presence in the town for over a hundred years but the scale of the new works dwarfed its predecessors. The juxtaposition between Port Talbot's pre- and post-Abbey Works environment was all the more striking as the plant's construction entailed the obliteration of the once picturesque rural expanse of Margam moors. One former steelworker vividly remembered the area before the works' arrival: 'All the rest then

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 337.
[50] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 23 June 1961.
[51] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change Upon Selected Communities in South Wales', p. 217.

was sand dunes,' he remembered, 'beautiful. We used to go on a Sunday morning… and walk on down the beach. In the late forties, early fifties, when they built the Abbey, all that went.'[52] With the commencement of building work, this once tranquil and rural part of Port Talbot was rapidly transformed into a sprawling area of intensive industrial activity. A. Leslie Evans vividly remembered how the site, came to be 'a hive of industry; an army of workmen and technicians… swarmed over the site to start the preliminary work. At one time there were as many as 7,700 engaged'.[53] Henceforth, Port Talbot's imposing steelworks would be the town's most recognisable and enduring symbol.

The Abbey Works clearly made its presence felt visually but its impact on the local environment was also felt in other, equally pervasive, ways. Air-born pollution and grit, for example, were recurring reminders of the new plant's proximity to residential areas, particularly those of Margam and Taibach. For these residents, the recurring deposits of grit and dust emanating from the works revealed its persistent ability to affect the lives of those beyond its immediate workforce. Indeed, it was often housewives who bore the worst effects of the plant's pollution with the residual excretions of the blast furnaces necessitating continuous household cleaning and hindering the progress of domestic tasks; the *Port Talbot Guardian* commented in 1959 that, 'for the housewife, daily chores around the home have been made extremely difficult. Grit gets into the food, covers the windows and makes the week's washing filthy as it hangs on the line.'[54] For the residents of Port Talbot, then, the Abbey's presence was largely unescapable. Its impact extended well beyond the confines of the workplace into the civic and domestic spheres and its influence was environmental and social, as well as economic.

Alongside the erection of the new works, the most apparent visual indicator of Port Talbot's changing physical environment were the town's expanding borders and multiplying housing stock. Indeed, the greatest challenge posed by Port Talbot's rapidly increasing population was that of housing. In the two decades following the Second World War, housing was consistently at the forefront of local civic debates and the limitations and deficiencies of the town's existing housing stock were a

[52] Interview with Doug Hockin, 11 October 2013.
[53] A. Leslie Evans, *The History of Taibach and District*, p. 83.
[54] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 9 January 1959.

matter of widespread concern. The issue of the availability and quality of housing, however, also posed a significant anxiety for the proprietors of the Abbey Works. For the SCOW, housing was unfailingly regarded as their most pressing social issue and in no other area of civic life was the company's influence brought so forcefully to bear. The annual rate of house building during this period largely reflects the extraordinary demand for homes created by the steel industry and the pressure applied on the local council by the SCOW to meet this demand. Even as the first new homes were being erected, the council's housing strategy continued to grow and evolve in response to the demands of the Abbey Works. As new housing estates created new landscapes and suburbs, older residential areas were being demolished or transformed to make way for new homes, transport links and civic amenities. The post-war regeneration of Port Talbot amounted to nothing less than a fundamental reconfiguration of the town's physical geography and, with it, its character and social composition.

Any efforts made towards rectifying the locality's post-war housing issues had to take account of the less than favourable position of Port Talbot's existing housing stock. Glamorgan County Council's Town and Country Planning Act report of 1951 was inclined to understate the frequency of overcrowding in the borough, commenting that only in a few small areas of Taibach and Cwmavon 'does the population or the accommodation exceed 120 persons or rooms per acre'. However, the report conceded that these statistics did not convey a wholly accurate representation of the local housing situation. 'The waiting list for houses,' the author observed, 'gives evidence that some overcrowding exists.'[55] Oral histories of life in Port Talbot immediately before and during the Second World War also reveal the presence of substantial overcrowding. Remembering his experience growing up in the old Sandfields neighbourhood, one interviewee remembered, 'there were seventeen living in our house in Marsh Street.' He recalled that after his mother struggled to keep up with rent payments, the landlord 'allowed another family of five children to move in in two rooms.'[56] Henceforth two large families cohabited under one roof. Overcrowding, then, certainly did exist and was the most acute symptom of a lack of available housing.

[55] WGA, Town And Country Planning Act 1947, GCC/PL X 1, Development Plan, Area No.1: Report of Survey by E. John Powell, 1951.
[56] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.

The stagnation of local authority house building during the inter-war depression had undoubtedly accentuated the problem locally. Those houses that did exist were also of a mixed quality. Despite assessing the overall condition of the property in the area as 'fairly good', the Town and Country Planning Act contained damming accounts of the state of some of the Borough's residential areas. Of Cwmavon, for example, the report stated that, 'outworn houses built around the old works long since derelict with huge tips of waste, present an impression of decay and blight.' Elsewhere the report also noted the presence of 'obsolescent property' in Vivian Square and Richard Street.[57] When questioned, few of the people interviewed for this study remembered growing up in a house with electricity or an indoor toilet and a fitted bath was still considered a relative luxury up until the end of the Second World War. The compound effects of insufficient house building and the ageing character of many properties ensured that residential development would be central to any programme of post-war reconstruction. As Fielding *et al*. have observed, 'in such circumstances it was hardly surprising that rebuilding the home – and with it family life – should be at the top of most people's agendas.'[58]

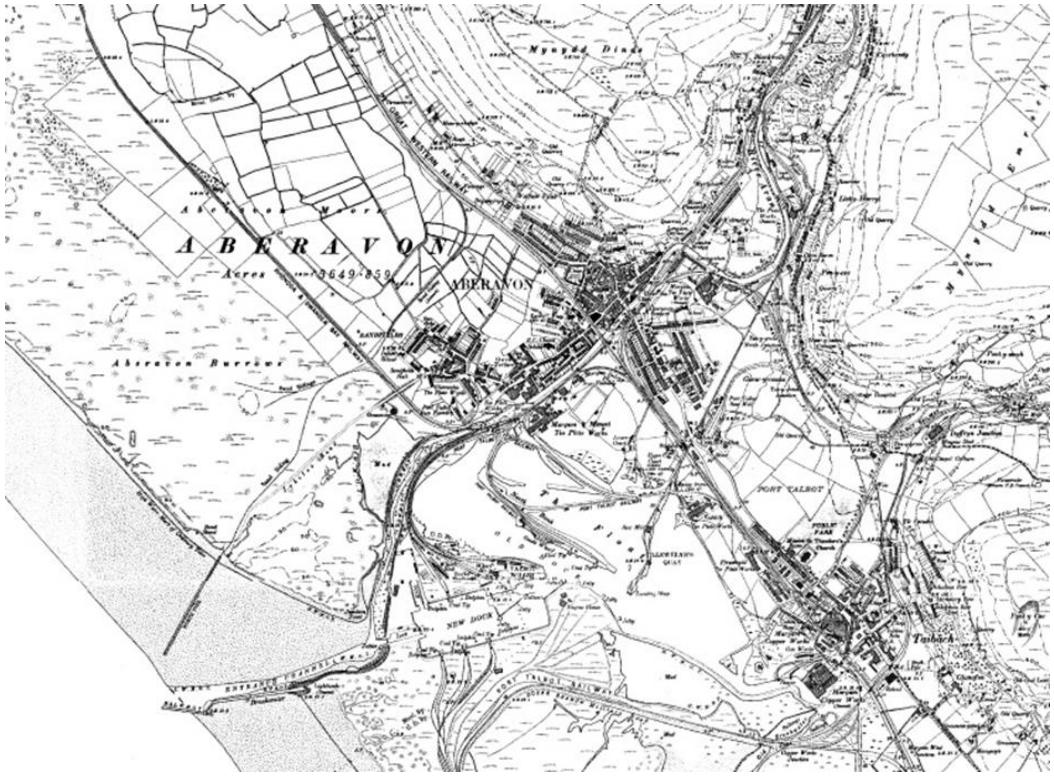
The state of housing in Port Talbot after the Second World War was, however, indicative of the national situation. According to Peter Malpass, 'the housing problem in 1945 was so severe and widespread that everyone argued that building up the construction programme as quickly as possible was the priority.'[59] Moreover, this problem was especially acute in Wales where, as Martin Johnes notes, at the end of the Second World War, 'The pre-war housing stock was in a dire state' and this was further accentuated in industrial areas due to the prevalence of poor quality nineteenth century dwellings.[60] Housing, then, was a national issue and, consequently, the British electorate demanded a national response. Indeed, evidence of the increasing widespread concern for the state of the nation's homes was already clear during the Second World War. Fielding *et al*. have noted that, 'popular interest in housing was certainly always intense during these years. From the summer of 1944 onwards opinion polls confirmed that most people viewed housing as the most

[57] WGA, Town And Country Planning Act 1947, GCC/PL X 1, Development Plan, Area No.1: Report of Survey by E. John Powell, 1951.
[58] Steven Fielding, *et al.*, *"England Arise!"*, p. 37.
[59] Peter Malpass, *Housing and the Welfare State: The Development of Housing Policy in Britain* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 67.
[60] Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 38 & 81.

urgent post-war problem.'[61] In many places, wartime aerial bombardment also further exacerbated pre-existing housing shortages. Port Talbot's own experience of the blitz was mercifully limited but stray Luftwaffe bombs, intended for Swansea, did result in the condemning of a row of houses in Corporation Road, Aberavon, and the loss of several lives.[62]

Although the SCOW sought to guide local house building initiatives to suit their own requirements, national directives and government policies were also crucial in determining the form of Port Talbot's post-war residential development. When the Labour Party came to power in 1945, it did so on the back of a firm electoral pledge to revitalise the nation's housing stock and build new homes. Under the guidance of Aneurin Bevan, Labour introduced a nationally coordinated effort to rapidly increase the quantity of available homes. Bevan's Housing Act of 1946, for example, 'trebled the money value of the Exchequer subsidy for local authority houses, extended the subsidy period to sixty years and altered the balance between Exchequer subsidy and local rate funding contribution from the pre-war ratio of 2:1 to 3:1.'[63] In keeping with Labour's ideological commitment to national planning and public ownership, the overwhelming majority of the new houses constructed would be built by local authorities with the financial assistance and guidance of the state. The state also intervened to impose strict guidelines on the quality of the new homes being built. Largely at the insistence of Bevan, the 1946 Housing Act stipulated, 'the new houses must be soundly built and of adequate size. Moreover, care would need to be taken about their positioning and relationship to amenities.'[64] The benevolent intentions of national planners, however, often struggled under the weight of local circumstances.

[61] Steven Fielding *et al.*, *England Arise!*, p. 36.
[62] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013; J. Ivor Hanson, *Profile of a Welsh Town* (Swansea: s/l, 1969), p. 136.
[63] Peter Malpass, *Housing and the Welfare State*, p. 670.
[64] Steven Fielding *et al.*, *England Arise!*, p. 103.



Port Talbot, c. 1910s.[65]

If Port Talbot's pre-war housing shortage presented the council with a significant challenge after 1945, the developing plans of the SCOW exacerbated the situation to the point of crisis. As early as 1947, SCOW officials began to make approaches to Port Talbot council about their predicted housing requirements for the new strip mill. At a meeting between the company and the local council in February 1947, the company outlined its housing requirements as follows: by February 1948, 1,000 prefabricated and 100 permanent homes would be needed, a further 450 homes would also be required by February 1949, as well as a further 450 houses by the following year – 2,000 houses in total.[66] The responsibility for this extraordinary house building programme was to fall almost entirely on the local council. From the outset, the SCOW made it explicit that, 'the Company would produce the Strip Mill, but they considered that housing of the workers was a matter for the Corporation.'[67] Furthermore, it was stated at a tripartite conference between the company, the council and the WBH that, 'if the houses would not be made available, it would be

[65] People's Collection Wales, 'Maps', <http://www.peoplescollection.wales/locate> [Accessed: 2 July 2014].
[66] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 19, Port Talbot Town Council: Special Meeting, 1947.
[67] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Notes on Conference RE Housing for Proposed Strip Mill Port Talbot, 6 February 1947.

improbable that the construction of the Strip Mill would proceed.'[68] The company, then, was emerging as a formidable presence in local affairs and the considerations of the steel industry were being heard as an influential voice in all discussions on post-war civic regeneration. Moreover, as the linchpin of post-war plans to rejuvenate the region's industrial economy, the Abbey Works' proprietors held considerable power in these talks. As a result of the Abbey's arrival, issues of civic regeneration were no longer purely civic concerns and industrial interests were also instrumental in shaping the town's strategy for urban expansion.

The enormity of the task faced by Port Talbot Council, in response to the steel industry's requirements, was apparent in the sense of alarm expressed towards the housing issue. The magnitude of the situation led the divisional general secretary of the Aberavon Labour Party to make a personal approach to Aneurin Bevan for national assistance in meeting the locality's housing needs. William Vaughan, the local party secretary, wrote to Bevan in February, 1947:

> Am writing to you personally and confidentially re enclosed matter because I think it is rather a big thing and that in the end you will have to tackle it personally and on a high level if a real and tangible solution is to be found for it, having in mind fact that we have our own domestic housing problem; and yet at the same time wish to do all we can to assist in this other vital national project [Strip Mill].[69]

Clearly Vaughan considered the challenge facing the town one which required national, local, and corporate cooperation and pressed Bevan that the Abbey was a project of national importance and, therefore, deserved special assistance:

> We are doing all we can in the ordinary housing sense and making a reasonable job of it; but this will knock us stone cold if we have to more or less abandon our own programme and concentrate on this, very important though it is. After all, although Port Talbot has been chosen as the site of the Strip Mill; it is a huge national project and vital to the nation in the world trade sense; and should be looked at from that angle when housing even is involved… I think the housing aspect, being part and parcel of the whole project, should be tackled in exactly the same way as the construction of the Works itself is to be tackled; namely in a special and national sense.[70]

[68] *Ibid.*
[69] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449 , Letter from William Vaughan (Divisional General Secretary – Aberavon Labour Party) to Aneurin Bevan MP, 3 February 1947.
[70] *Ibid.*

Although Bevan appeared to be characteristically insouciant towards local affairs, the letter reflects both the enormity and the difficulty of the social consequences of the Abbey Works' development as well as the complex and multilateral negotiations surrounding it.

With little assistance forthcoming from national government, the local council also had to contend with wider economic forces and political restrictions in formulating their response to the housing issue. The continued post-war shortage of building materials and labour meant the extent of local authority house building was subjected to stringent nationally dictated guidelines. In Wales, these controls were predominantly exercised by the WBH who, whilst being generous in their housing allocation for Port Talbot, repeatedly rejected the council's pleas for special financial assistance.[71] Although the SCOW made some modest efforts towards addressing the housing needs of their own workers (the company's board sanctioned £200,000 for the acquisition of 120 homes in Port Talbot as well as their existing accommodation at the Stormy Down hostel)[72] these were only ever intended as temporary expedients. Despite the protestations of Port Talbot Council, it soon became apparent that the burden of meeting the steelwork's housing demands would lie with the local authorities. The practical and logistical issues involved in erecting such a large volume of houses, however, proved far more contentious and reflected the factional interests of local industry, municipal and national bodies and local residents.

Initial efforts to formulate a solution to the Abbey's housing requirements, then, took the form of tripartite discussions between the borough council, the WBH and the SCOW. From the outset, the SCOW's primary agenda was to procure as many houses in as short a period of time as was possible. As late as 1955, the company's managing director, David Young, was lobbying the Ministry of Housing and Local Government for the provision of, 'further housing accommodation, beyond that at present being erected,' and repeatedly expressed, 'an urgent need for additional local housing.'[73] Arising from these discussions, which commenced in 1947, the first solution proposed to address the steel industry's housing needs was

[71] See, TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449.
[72] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 10, Summary of Estimates and Sanctions up to and Including Board Meeting, 10 June, 1948.
[73] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449 , Letter from D. Young [SCOW] to F. Blaise Gillie (Under Secretary for Wales, Ministry of Housing and Local Government), 15 February 1955.

the creation of a satellite town. Indeed, it was the opinion of the Borough Corporation at the beginning of 1947 that the housing requirements of the Company would mean the construction of a satellite town, probably between Margam Castle and the River Kenfig, entailing the purchase of 300 acres of land with its own separate sewerage scheme and sewage disposal plant at an approximate total cost of two-and-a-half million pounds.[74] The *Western Mail* also pre-emptively reported at the beginning of 1947 that, 'the site of the satellite town of more than 2,000 homes at Port Talbot is expected to be on Margam Moors.'[75]

This proposed 'Margam' site, however, came up against repeated objections from national authorities and, later on, the steel company itself. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries strongly objected to the encroachment of further urban developments on the agricultural land at Margam, whilst the Mineral Valuer and Regional Planning Officer considered the site 'unsuitable' owing to the possible coal seams that lay beneath it.[76] Later attempts by the council to restart the proposed Margam development in 1950 were swiftly despatched by the SCOW who strongly insisted on pursuing the development of existing housing sites, rather than expending more time on developing new ones.[77] Not for the last time, council instigated efforts towards rational town planning came up against the interests of industrial production. It was a clear example of the way in which a direct overture from the company could fundamentally alter the course of future development in the region and how speed, rather than planning, came to be the main driving force behind local house building.

For a time towards the end of 1947, then, it appeared unlikely that the influx of steelworkers required for the Abbey Works would be able to be accommodated within the borough boundary. A consignment of 150 temporary aluminium bungalows for strip mill workers had been approved for erection on a site to the north west of Port Talbot at Sandfields in 1946, but this location was largely considered unsuitable for any further development. Writing in October 1947, a representative of the WBH considered the Sandfields site as 'necessary to meet the normal housing demand of the Borough' but dismissed it as a possible location for the envisaged

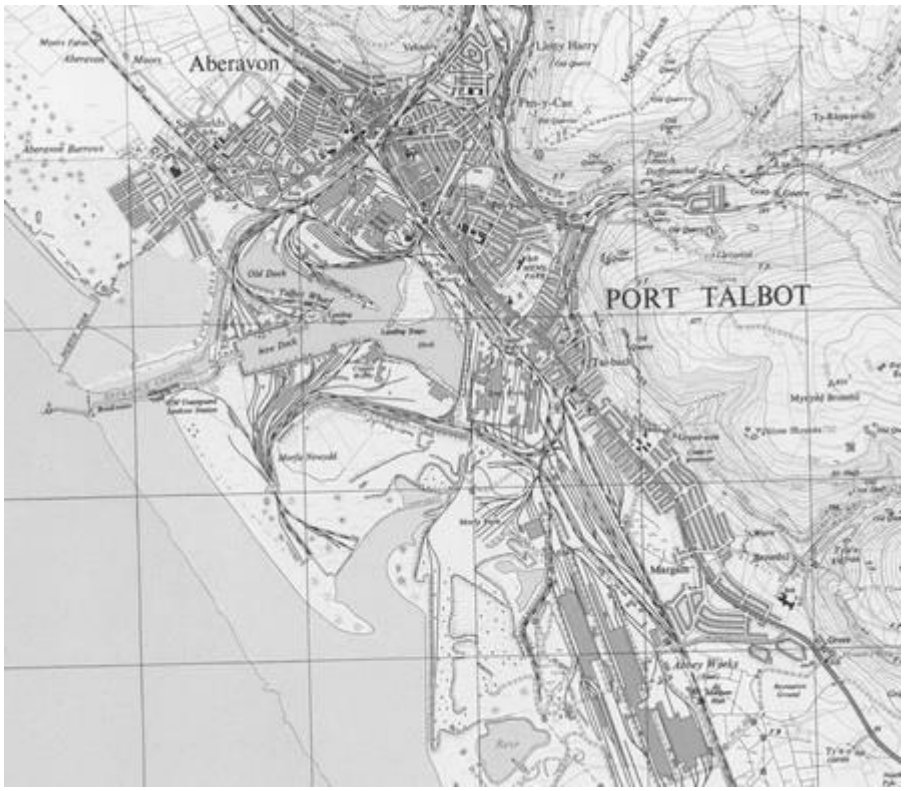
[74] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Notes on Conference RE Housing for Proposed Strip Mill Port Talbot, 6 February 1947.
[75] *Western Mail*, 5 March 1947.
[76] Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449
[77] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 22, Development Committee, 10 June 1947.

satellite town: 'Transport difficulties would become very acute if an attempt were made to house 2,000 workers from the Strip Mill', he wrote.[78] The most credible solution put forward was the development of the Pyle and Kenfig Hill areas, near Bridgend. C.H. Franklin, of the WBH, proposed that, 'the existing villages of Kenfig, Maudlam, Cornelly, Pyle and Kenfig Hill, could be linked together to form one community which would be adequate to serve the needs of industry in the area, including the Strip Mill.'[79] The proposals for the creation of this satellite settlement were at times conceived of as constituting a 'new town', in accordance with other new towns being created throughout Great Britain at this time. Indeed, there was some precedent for the designation of new towns in relation to steel communities, with Corby being one of the fourteen settlements given new town status between 1946 and 1950.[80]

Only one of these new towns, Cwmbran, was to be located in south Wales but for a time in 1947 it seemed highly plausible that the first Welsh new town would be located near Port Talbot to house the Abbey's workers. A document contained within the WBH's files noted that, in order to address the new steelworks' housing needs 'we have been asked to bear in mind the possibility of the creation of a new town'. Moreover, this proposed town, the document's author presumed, 'should be largely self-contained as far as basic commercial facilities and public services are concerned.' Despite the advantages of such a scheme, the memorandum also raised concerns regarding the new town's inevitable economic dependence on a single industry. As the report noted, 'the town would be mono-industrial in character, lacking social balance and dependent on the fortunes (admittedly favourable, however,) of one industrial concern. The economic and sociological dangers of this type of structure have been only too apparent in South Wales.' It concluded that, 'the creation of a separate town would imply, in effect, a segregation in a "Steel Town"; and as such would run counter to present trends of social planning.'[81] Curiously, the writer did not speculate as to the effects of the intense concentration of a single industry on Port Talbot itself despite accurately presaging many of its eventual

[78] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, General Appreciation of housing sites new and existing in relation to the Strip Mill at Port Talbot, signed: C. H. Francis (Welsh Board of Health), 23 October 1947.
[79] *Ibid.*
[80] David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945 – 1951* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 159.
[81] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Port Talbot-Margam Housing Requirements (No author or date), c. 1947/1948.

dangers. These concerns, alongside the accelerating pace of the Abbey's own development, led to the quiet dismissal of the proposed new town to the east of Port Talbot some time before 1950. In its place rose a new development which was to become a defining feature of the town's post-war regeneration and an immovable feature in the lives of many of the Abbey's employees, Sandfields estate.



Port Talbot c. 1950s (The Abbey Works is located south of the town and the new housing developments at Sandfields can be seen north west of Aberavon).[82]

The eventual housing estate at Sandfields dwarfed all other residential developments in the region and grew to be the second largest housing estate in Wales.[83] Contemporary media commentators frequently marvelled at the extent of the transformation. By 1964, the 750 acres site 'of wasteland, rabbit warrens, and huge sand dunes', as the *Western Mail* described it, had been transformed into 4,500 dwellings providing homes for 16,000 people.[84] There was, however, a small residential community on the Sandfields site prior to 1945 and some of its houses

[82] National Library of Scotland, 'Map Images', <http://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/print.cfm#zoom=13&lat=51.5936&lon=-3.7834&layers=10> [Accessed: 10 August 2015].
[83] Angela V. John, *The Actors' Crucible: Port Talbot and the Making of Burton, Hopkins, Sheen and all the Others* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2015), p. 5
[84] *Western Mail*, 2 September 1951; *Western Mail*, 20 July 1964.

even pre-dated the First World War.[85] The rapid development of the area, concomitant with the Abbey's own construction, however, transformed the existing neighbourhood beyond recognition into a modern conception of estate living. The estate also became synonymous with the development of the local steel industry with histories invariably describing it as being 'specially built' for the Abbey's steelworkers.[86] Throughout this period the estate consistently housed a higher proportion of steelworks employees than any other neighbourhood. By 1960, 4,000 of the plant's 18,000 workers called the estate home with most living in houses and on streets that were barely a decade old. In 1956, Thomason's survey concluded that seventy-four per cent of the estate's male residents aged fifteen and over were steelworks employees.[87] Sandfields estate or Sandfields 'neighbourhood unit', as it was sometimes known, was, therefore, a permanent feature in the lives of many of the plant's workers. It was also the most prominent example of the ways in which civic and urban developments were assimilated into the industry's agenda.

Given the estate's eventual size, it is a source of some irony that most of the parties concerned initially dismissed Sandfields' potential as a possible housing site. Even the SCOW, who advocated the estate's growth in the interests of expediency, recognised its geographic limitations. In response to a commitment by Port Talbot Council in 1950 to provide more homes for Abbey steelworkers, a company representative, David Young, told the WBH that, 'he did not particularly desire the houses to be built at Sandfields but understood that this was the only site available for houses.'[88] The Board similarly expressed repeated reservations about the Sandfields area.[89] The poor transport links between the neighbourhood and Port Talbot and the likely negative effect of any further house building on traffic congestion were all cited as reasons against its continued use. These concerns were shared by many local councillors. At a meeting to discuss the building of further homes within the Borough in 1947, Councillor Noonan forcefully objected to more houses being erected at Sandfields, arguing that 'the suggestion to establish another 250 aluminium houses in this area would not be tolerated'. Moreover, he argued that,

[85] WGA, Town And Country Planning Act 1947, GCC/PL X 1, Development Plan, Area No.1: Report of Survey by E. John Powell, 1951.
[86] Jon Gower, *The Story of Wales* (London: BBC, 2012), p. 281.
[87] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change Upon Selected Communities in South Wales', p. 335.
[88] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Notes of a Meeting held at Cardiff, 18 January 1950.
[89] See, TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449.

'it was necessary to provide conveyances for the workers concerned from the site to the works; this in itself would create a chaotic position by the great extent of traffic.'[90] Many of the concerns Noonan raised regarding traffic congestion would be subsequently realised and voices of objection towards the Sandfields development were consistently raised throughout the 1950s.

That Sandfields estate grew to its eventual size is indicative of the way in which the steel industry's demands came to govern the town's post-war housing agenda. Convenience, rather than suitability, proved to be the site's greatest asset. The rapid pace of house building, concomitant with the exponentially increasing demands of the steel industry, often forced the council to adopt the path of least resistance, rather than seeking more strategically informed or farsighted solutions. In this regard, local considerations and concerns were subjected to national directives and industrial demands. Offers of assistance from the WBH through the provision of temporary houses for the borough's strip mill workers were dependent on the council being able to quickly find a suitable site on which to erect them. One entry in the council minute book in 1947 read that 'unless the Council was in a position to immediately submit a site ready to receive these aluminium bungalows, then the allocation for Port Talbot would not be available'.[91] Later that year, Aneurin Bevan also personally intervened to remind the local authority of the urgency of choosing a site for further development. It was noted that 'Mr. Bevan feels it is essential that sites should be made available in the very near future, ready serviced for the laying of the foundation slabs'.[92] With repeated demands from the SCOW for more houses to be built and a national shortage of building materials, the local council often found itself acting in a reactionary role, thus hindering any efforts at concerted planning. As a large and sparsely populated site of little agricultural or mineral value within close proximity to the Abbey Works, Sandfields became the most expedient solution to the borough's housing needs. Although, not necessarily the most sagacious one.

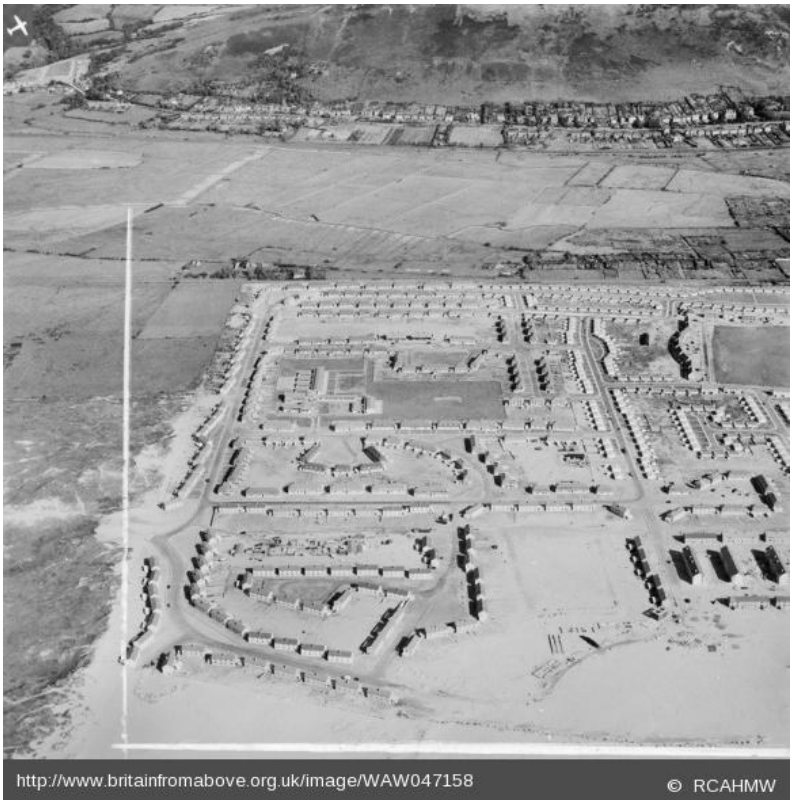
The completion of a further 250 aluminium bungalows at Sandfields in 1947 marked the tentative beginnings of the Sandfields estate. Although the first post-war

[90] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 19, Development Committee Meeting, 11 July, 1947.
[91] *Ibid.*
[92] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 19, Council Development Committee, 24 September 1947

homes to be built at Sandfields, a consignment of 105 Arcon Bungalows, had been completed a year previously,[93] the council's decision to allow the building of further homes on the site initiated a period of development that would last almost two decades. Up until 1950/51, house building largely occurred in a piecemeal manner, evidencing the council's cautionary approach to the site and the frenetic pace of the steel industry's expansion. During this initial phase of the estate's growth, there appears to have been little evidence of an overall design for the estate and houses were most frequently erected quickly in whatever quantities could be obtained from the WBH.[94] House building, however, proceeded at a rapid pace. By 1950, a further 375 homes were being erected for the SCOW, as well as the 250 aluminium bungalows already made available to them.[95] By the following year the council was celebrating the opening of its 1,000th post-war home with the majority of these being located at Sandfields.[96]

Most of these new homes were of pre-fabricated varieties. As a consequence of the contemporary shortage of building materials and local pressures, pre-fabricated houses offered the most expedient means of addressing the borough's housing needs. The 'Cornish' and 'Wimpey No-fines' styles were initially ubiquitous amongst the new estate, both of which, according to Lynne Rees, 'speeded up construction time enormously through on-site assembly, pouring a mixture of chippings (rather than a "fine" sand aggregate) and cement into specially made moulds.'[97] Given their significant practical advantages, any objections to the overwhelming predominance of prefabricated houses in the council's building programme were largely ignored. Although one councillor was arguing as early as 1951 that, 'The time is long overdue for the question of providing traditional homes instead of just prefabs',[98] the continued growth of the Abbey and its consequent demand for labour sustained the pressure on local authorities to build with haste.

[93] *Western Mail*, 2 September 1951.
[94] See, WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 19-20.
[95] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, December 1950.
[96] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 21 September 1951.
[97] Lynne Rees, *Real Port Talbot* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013), p. 126.
[98] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 2 February 1951.



New homes at Sandfields, 1951.[99]

The company was also keen to ensure that the council distinguished between local authority homes, for general allocation, and houses that were exclusively reserved for steelworkers. This distinction was significant. Occupants in the company allocated council houses were not appointed on the criteria typically employed by local councils, usually a points-based system reflecting an individual or family's particular needs and circumstances. Rather, the SCOW let its allocated houses on its own terms, which typically reflected the most immediate labour demands of the Abbey Works at a given time. As such, skilled workmen were usually the most frequent recipients of company allocated houses, especially those with skills that could not readily be found in the local area. Through its monthly news bulletin, the SCOW stressed to its employees that the council homes being built for the company were, 'primarily for key workers brought into the area to work in the New Works and at present employees normally resident in the Port Talbot Council Area or within easy travelling distance do not qualify and no houses can be

[99] Britain From Above, 'View of newly-built housing at the Sandfields Estate, Aberavon', <http://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/waw047158?search=port%20talbot&ref=110> [Accessed: 3 November 2015].

allocated to them until the needs of the non-residents have been met.'[100] In its initial consultation with the local council and the WBH, the SCOW also specifically spoke of the need of houses 'for the Artisan Class' to attract the kind of skilled workers and tradesmen it felt were lacking in the locality.[101] In this way, between 1946 and 1957, 921 homes had been allocated in Port Talbot for the company's 'key workers'.[102] Whilst post-war residential development in the region bore many similarities to the national trend, with the borough council assuming primary responsibility for new developments, the extraordinary demands of the steel industry presented unique pressures and, consequently, required unique solutions.

After this initial frantic period of house building there followed a more concerted effort towards urban planning. References began to be made to a Sandfields 'neighbourhood unit' and more consideration was given to facilitating the creation of Sandfields as a self-contained estate, complete with its own facilities and amenities, rather than a mere collection of houses.[103] In April 1950, a part-development plan submitted by Glamorgan County Council under the Town and Country Development Act was swiftly approved by the government, reflecting the greater efforts that were being made towards rational planning.[104] The plan itself was acknowledged by the county council as a direct response to the extraordinary circumstances of the steel industry's expansion and justified its need for urgent approval, 'having regard to the effect which the construction of the new hot strip steel rolling mill and cold reduction plant at Port Talbot is likely to have on employment and development in the surrounding area.'[105] As well as listing improvements to be made to the area's existing transport network and infrastructure, the county council's development plan advocated seven new 'proposed suburban shopping sites' at Sandfields. The report further confirmed that, 'suitable sites for

[100] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, January 1949.
[101] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Housing for proposed Strip Mill at Port Talbot: Notes of meeting held in Conference Room, 21 February 1947.
[102] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change Upon Selected Communities in South Wales' (unpublished PhD thesis, University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff, 1963), Table XI.
[103] *Western Mail*, 20 July 1964.
[104] WGA, Town And Country Planning Act 1947, GCC/PL X 1, Development Plan, Area No.1: Report of Survey by E. John Powell, 1951.
[105] *Ibid.*

community buildings have been allocated in the layout of the Sandfields Neighbourhood.'[106]

Indeed, by 1964, a glowing appraisal of the estate in the *Western Mail*, described the intent of its planners' design, 'so as to constitute a complete neighbourhood unit.'[107] This image of conscientious modern planning was initially embraced by the local press. The *Port Talbot Guardian*, for example, described Sandfields as being, 'proof of great engineering skill, and one of the finest achievements in the South Wales housing programme.'[108] Under the supervision of the borough engineer, Gordon Griffiths, there is also evidence which points to a greater degree of uniformity and consideration of style among the new homes being erected at this time. The *Western Mail*, for example, conveyed the image of an architecturally mindful neighbourhood, 'planned on the American lines of open estates, there are no front retaining walls, and instead, open grass verges from every house of the estate, give it a free and airy appearance that is most attractive.'[109] The *Port Talbot Guardian*, meanwhile, believed the estate's homes and layout had, 'been designed to give the airiness and symmetry which will be a lasting tribute to mid-twentieth century building.'[110]

In this respect, Sandfields estate broadly conformed to prevailing contemporary attitudes towards post-war residential planning. The 'neighbourhood unit' model of residential development, as conceived by the architect Sir Charles Reilly, became the favoured template for the housing estates erected throughout Britain after the Second World War. Reilly's vision of self-contained neighbourhoods based around open spaces was formally adopted by the Labour Party in their 1944 Housing Manual, which encouraged all local authorities to implement the model.[111] The influence of Reilly's architectural ideology is plainly evident in the planning of Sandfields estate. In several instances, the estate was explicitly referred to as 'a neighbourhood unit' and the terminology of the county and local council's plans strongly evidence Reilly's principle of dividing estate's into distinctive zones,

[106] *Ibid.*
[107] *Western Mail*, 20 July 1964.
[108] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 8 June 1951.
[109] *Western Mail*, 2 September 1951.
[110] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 8 June 1951.
[111] Steven Fielding *et al.*, *England Arise!*, pp. 104-105.

with each zone serving a particular function.[112] By 1951, for example, the Port Talbot Borough Council were making reference to a specific Sandfields 'Central Area'[113] and the county council's plans conscientiously noted that, 'requirements in respect of public open space, allotments, car parks, schools, health services, cemeteries, refuse tips, and other matters are stated and allocated in the Development Plan detailed.'[114]

In practice, however, the task of replicating Reilly's conceptually idealised neighbourhoods proved greater than the model's exponents anticipated. As Fielding *et al*. have observed, 'actually creating neighbourhood units in the years after 1945 proved to be a very much more difficult proposition than many had imagined.'[115] In Port Talbot, the local council's efforts to impose a coherent plan for the estate repeatedly came up against economic restrictions and national constraints. From the outset, the county council's own development plan conceded that it may, 'be necessary from time to time to advance or retard the development of certain areas or certain works in view of prevailing economic circumstances. There is no assurance that all the development proposed for the first five years will in fact take place within that period.'[116] The growing labour requirements of the Abbey Works throughout the 1950s meant there was no easing of the pressure to construct homes rapidly and in large quantities. This approach was apparent in the council's decision to approve the construction of several, rather unappealingly named, 'Minimal Houses' (possibly, taking advantage of the relaxing of some of Bevan's stringent standards for newly built homes by Macmillan's 1952 Housing Act).[117] In such circumstances, as Fielding *et al*. have noted, 'the ideal and the reality of new building began to become very different things.'[118]

Despite the enormity of the project undertaken at Sandfields, the SCOW believed that their immediate housing demands necessitated the mobilisation of

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[112] WGA, Town And Country Planning Act 1947, GCC/PL X 1, Development Plan, Area No.1: Report of Survey by E. John Powell, 1951.
[113] Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 23
[114] WGA, Town And Country Planning Act 1947, GCC/PL X 1, Development Plan, Area No.1: Report of Survey by E. John Powell, 1951.
[115] Steven Fielding *et al.*, *England Arise!*, p. 104.
[116] WGA, Town and Country Planning Act 1947, GCC/PL X 2, Development Plan, Area No. 1: Written Statement by E. John Powell, 1952.
[117] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 23, Housing and Town Planning Committee, 19 February 1952.
[118] Steven Fielding *et al.*, *England Arise!*, p. 105.

further resources, beyond those immediately available in the Port Talbot borough. Neighbouring local authorities were, therefore, also encouraged to contribute houses for the steel company's purposes. By 1955, it was recorded that Penybont Rural District Council had committed to the construction of 320 houses for the company, whilst nearby Porthcawl had committed to build a further 100.[119] Bridgend council was also later persuaded to promise 100 new homes for steelworkers on a new estate at Cefn Glas.[120] The long-term spatial distribution of the plant's employees was thus largely the product of these negotiations, which sought to reconcile the needs of civic and industrial concerns with the finite space and resources available.

The interests of the steel industry, however, did not always correspond with those of the local authorities and their residents and disagreements were not uncommon in the protracted dialogue on how best to solve the region's acute housing dilemma. As well as being subjected to pressure from the SCOW, councils were also beholden to their residents who, understandably, could feel resentful at the deployment of public resources to assist the company, especially if the interests of the company appeared to counter their own. The earliest concerns raised by Port Talbot Council related to the terms and conditions with which the SCOW was letting its allocated houses and the selection criteria it employed for appointing tenants. A meeting of the council in December 1948 cited a report, 'expressing the dissatisfaction of the Chairman and the Superintendent Collector upon the working of the Scheme for the letting of these houses upon selection by the Steel Company of Wales and its Contractors.' The report went on to state, 'that certain nominated tenants had not been granted keys' and warned the company of, 'the absolute necessity of insisting that the agreed Terms and Conditions applicable to the eligibility of persons applying for the tenancies of these houses being observed.'[121] Despite providing these dwellings for the company's use, the council continued to monitor the manner in which they were used to ensure that the company honoured its initial commitment to restrict their occupancy to key workers. The council were naturally keen to confirm this was the case in order to disarm accusations of

[119] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Houses for Steel Company of Wales Ltd. (no date or author), c. 1955.
[120] SRC, Steel Company of Wales: General Correspondence Files, 378/2, Box 4, Notes of Meeting Held at Council Offices, Glan Ogwr, Bridgend, 5 December 1955.
[121] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 20, Housing Letting Committee, 15 December 1948.

favouritism towards steelworkers. It was also, however, a means of reasserting their influence in civic affairs. Calling the company to account over an alleged misdemeanour in their use of council houses was an expression of the council's power in the ongoing negotiations over local influence and control.

Power and influence were also central to the debates surrounding the extent of public assistance given to the SCOW. As the 1950s progressed, councils and their residents were far more likely to question the use of public resources in assisting a company that was now declaring substantial profits. Throughout the decade, Port Talbot Council's minute books recorded a number of objections raised by certain councillors that the SCOW was not contributing proportionately to the house building programme and was monopolising local resources. One councillor felt in 1950, for example, that, 'in view of the fact that the Steel Company's Works were nearing completion there should be more craftsmen available to assist in the erection of houses.'[122] Tensions were most evident where it appeared the vested interests of the company were trumping those of local residents, an indignation that was heightened in a climate of persistent shortages of labour and materials and long waiting lists for local authority homes.

The decision by Bridgend Council to build one hundred homes for the company's employees, in 1955, was one such instance and prompted a popular backlash and revolt amongst some councillors. This was partly fuelled by the council's decision to build and let homes to steelworkers at higher rents, prompting allegations that the needs of local residents were being trounced in the interests of profit. In an arrangement struck between the council and the SCOW, the municipal authority agreed to build the homes for steelworkers on the condition that they would be let at a higher rate, reflecting steelworkers' superior earnings. Such an arrangement not only led to accusations of the council misappropriating public resources but also seemed to counter the egalitarian principles of social housing, whereby allocation was primarily determined by greatest need, rather than economic means. One local councillor voiced a wider grievance when arguing that, 'It is entirely wrong to build houses on one estate for the people who can pay an ordinary rent, and houses on another estate for the elite who can pay an economic [higher]

[122] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 22, Finance Committee, 18 January 1950.

rent.'[123] By 1955, the SCOW had also begun to announce considerable profits and even national bodies were beginning to pressurise the company to assist in meeting its own housing needs. A representative from the WBH told Port Talbot Council in 1955 that, 'it was now time for the Steel Company to do something themselves for their employees. There was probably a considerable number of their workmen who were in a position, and probably prepared, to buy their own homes.'[124] Although the prioritisation of house building for steelworkers could be the source of some animosity, tensions were typically localised in character and the general tone of the relations between the company and its surrounding communities was cooperative. Most councils and residents were broadly supportive of assisting the SCOW so long as the company's interests were broadly congruent with their own or the potential long-term advantage of abetting the firm negated any immediate sacrifice by the community. The negotiations which formulated the region's house building policy, however, reveal the, sometimes competing, interests of local and industrial concerns which dictated patterns of residential development and growth.

As profound as the expansion of the town's housing stock was the reconfiguration of its transport infrastructure. The development of new road, rail and public transports networks in Port Talbot accelerated apace in the post-war era, changing the town's geographic layout and the way in which its residents navigated and interpreted their physical environment. As Thomason identified, one of the main difficulties raised by the steel industry's expansion was the 'problem of adapting existing services for the new level of demand, as in road and rail communications'.[125] Indeed, developments at the Abbey were deemed to necessitate an overhaul of the town's existing rail network, with the creation of miles of new sidings and track to serve the increased volume of freight going in and out of the steelworks. A new Abbey Works railway halt was also erected, creating a designated station at the plant for employees commuting by train.[126] Elsewhere, existing public transport networks and timetables had to adapt to the chronology of work at the plant. As well as the

[123] *South Wales Echo*, 25 January 1956.
[124] TNA, Housing for Steelworkers, BD 11/1449, Note of interview between Welsh Board of Health and Port Talbot Borough Council, 23 March 1955.
[125] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change Upon Selected Communities in South Wales', p. 213.
[126] Robin G. Simmonds, *A History of the Port Talbot Railway and Docks Company and the South Wales Mineral Railway Company: Vol. 2, 1894 – 1971* (Lydney: Lightmoor Press, 2013), pp. 415-417.

fleet of buses maintained by the company to transport their employees to and from and around the plant, new public bus services were created and existing timetables amended to fit the needs of the Abbey's workers.[127]

After the Second World War, few issues provoked as much fervent consternation in Port Talbot as the state of the town's traffic congestion. One Briton Ferry industrialist described the clogged state of the town's roads in 1954 as a 'national scandal', noting that in a daily commute to work, 'he had stopped in his car as often as 17 times in travelling from the railway station at Port Talbot to the level crossing (800 yards), and it had taken him 20 minutes to cover that distance.'[128] Indeed, the largely Victorian lay-out of Port Talbot's existing road structure seemed entirely at odds with the demands of post-war society, demands that were greatly accentuated by the arrival of the Abbey Works. In the estimations of the *Western Mail*, 'when the Steel Company of Wales went into production the traffic problem was accentuated threefold and has been rising at an alarming rate ever since until now it is at times almost at a complete standstill.'[129] The town's traffic gridlock, however, was a hindrance to further development as well as a popular grievance. For the *Western Mail*, the roads running through Port Talbot were not only 'out-dated' but were 'seriously holding up progress'.[130]

Local traffic congestion also presented a considerable inconvenience to the SCOW. Poor road networks, it was feared, would hinder their employees' ability to get to work and affect their road haulage distribution network. Up until the mid-1960s, the company's representatives lobbied numerous civic authorities to proceed with schemes to alleviate the locality's traffic problem. In 1959, for example, David Young wrote on behalf of the SCOW to the Minister of State for Welsh affairs to note:

> The Management of my Company continues to grow more and more alarmed at the traffic conditions in Port Talbot, and with the increase in our operations and the resultant increase in operatives, we feel convinced that if no prompt remedial steps are taken, the operations of the plant may be severely

[127] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 30, Council Committee, 21 August 1958; See also, Keith E. Morgan, *Images of Wales: Around Port Talbot and Aberavon* (Chalford: Chalford Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 47-56.
[128] *Western Mail*, 3 July 1954.
[129] *Western Mail*, 5 April 1961.
[130] *Ibid.*

> prejudiced from time to time by the inability of the employees to arrive and leave the Works as is necessary. I know that you have appreciated this position, and have used your best endeavours to encourage the Minister of Transport to proceed as expeditiously as possible with his proposals regarding the By-Pass.[131]

Impatient with the local authority's efforts to modernise the town's existing road layout, the SCOW were also proactive in tackling the problem. A new road from Sandfields estate to the Abbey Works was completed in 1959, at the company's expense, and was intended to minimise the commuting time of their employees residing on the estate. The company's newspaper, *The Dragon*, believed that the estate's 3,750 steelworkers would, 'welcome news of the road, for at peak traffic times, such as shift changes and also at 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. the journey from the works through Port Talbot, a distance of about five miles, frequently takes almost an hour to complete.'[132] This initiative was also welcomed by the local council who 'appreciated their [the SCOW's] efforts in trying to alleviate the traffic problem in Port Talbot'.[133]

Ultimately, however, such measures were seen as a precursor to the company's desired goal, the commencement of the much anticipated town by-pass. The arrival of the Abbey Works and the ensuing pressures it placed on Port Talbot's transport infrastructure was one of the primary reasons the town became home to the first stretch of motorway in Wales. The A48 (M) through Port Talbot (the motorway physically transected the town) opened in 1966 and represented the most ambitious effort to relieve the town's traffic woes. However, as Martin Johnes has noted, the road was also 'a symbol of progress, a modern marvel that saved time and demonstrated the practical benefits to ordinary people of the age's technological developments and the rhetoric of modernization that dominated Welsh political discourse'.[134] The motorway's construction also reflected the contempt and disregard for the old inherent in much of the thinking that dominated post-war town planning. The destruction of three chapels and two-hundred homes, including the entirety of the historic village of Groes, to accommodate a later stretch of the motorway would

[131] TNA, Steel Company of Wales Correspondence (1), BD 25/79, Letter from David J Young (SCOW) to Lord Brecon (Minister of State for Welsh Affairs), 29 September 1959.
[132] *The Dragon*, September 1959.
[133] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 30, Council Meeting, 12 May 1959.
[134] Martin Johnes, '"M4 to Wales and prosper!" a history of a motorway', *Historical Research*, 87 (2014), p. 3.

not be especially mourned until much later.[135] Moreover, the extent of the urban destruction that preceded the new motorway's arrival, which further depleted the town's limited housing stock, also revealed the much wider environmental impact of the road's development. Like the construction of the Abbey Works over a decade previously, the completion of the elevated roadway of the M4 forever changed Port Talbot's urban landscape.

For most contemporaries, however, this was a small price to pay for progress. David Kynaston has remarked upon the palpable lack of sentimentality that governed post-war regeneration projects in Britain, noting that 'there was virtually no call for conservationism in the plans made for industrial cities and towns: there, the notion that the nineteenth-century industrial heritage might be worth preserving for aesthetic reasons did not feature'.[136] Elsewhere, Clapson has pointed to the increasing priority that was afforded to the motor-car as their numbers increased with prosperity: 'throughout the 1950s and 1960s', he argues, 'many older areas of towns and cities, some dilapidated, others in sound condition, were pulverized into the ground to make way for the motor car. The spread of ring roads and inner-distribution roads in town centres was evidence that enthusiasm for cars, and the ability to afford them, was spreading down the scale.'[137] The steel industry was not the only party with a vested interest in improving local transport links but, through its direct interventions and wider rational of modernity and progress, it was consistently at the forefront of the local civic regeneration agenda.

The debates and negotiations that formulated local housing and transport solutions thus revealed the way in which local, national and civic interests and the interplay of power between them remade Port Talbot in the post-war period. For geographers, such as David Harvey, the centrality of industrial interests to local discourses of power reveals the pervasive influence of capital in the production of space. Harvey argues that,

> Processes of capital accumulation do not exist, obviously, outside of their geographical settings and these settings are by nature immensely diverse. But capitalists and their agents also take an active and prominent role in changing

[135] *Ibid.*, pp. 7 – 8.
[136] David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, p. 165.
[137] Mark Clapson, 'Cities, Suburbs, Countryside', in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939 – 2000* (London: Blackwell, 2007), p. 63.

> these settings. New spaces and space relations are constantly being produced. Wholly new transport and communications networks and sprawling cities and highly productive agrarian landscapes are being made.[138]

The development of Port Talbot's own steel industry may not have produced the kind of 'sprawling cities' that figure prominently in Harvey's analysis, but its effects were, nonetheless, equally transformative for those who lived within its sphere of influence. The will of capital was not uncontested but its interests came to guide local and national debates over the town's future development, creating a powerful and enduring relationship between industry and place.

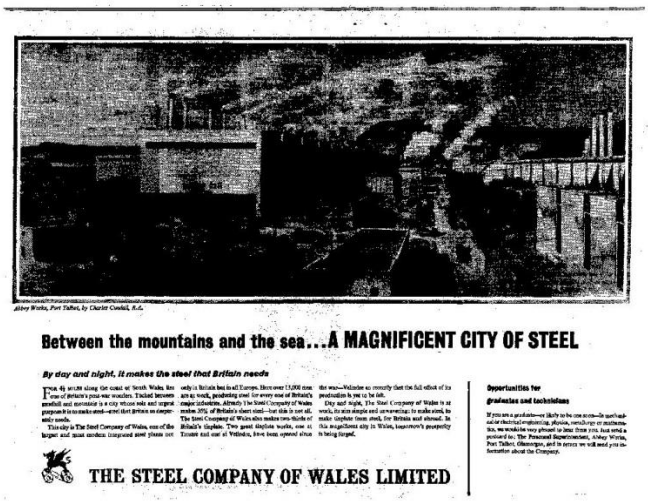
Civic Society

At his inaugural address in 1954, Port Talbot's new mayor, Ritchie Evans, told the audience present at the mayor making ceremony that, 'the works is now the single most important factor in our local life.'[139] It was a candid recognition that in the three years since the Abbey Works' opening its position within local society had become unassailable. Indeed, the opening of the plant confirmed the SCOW as the largest corporate interest in Port Talbot's history. No single firm had ever employed so many people locally and never before had the residents of Port Talbot been so dependent on a single workplace for their livelihoods. Even those not in the direct employ of the SCOW often had a vested interest in the firm's progress. Networks of family and kinship embedded the industry firmly in the community with almost everyone in the town knowing relatives and/or friends who worked in some capacity at the plant. As the town's Member of Parliament, John Morris, later observed, 'there was hardly anyone in the area who did not work there, or had some close relative on its payroll.'[140] With the completion of the Abbey Works, and the restructuring of the local economy around steel, the fortunes of town and industry became entwined.

The importance of the Abbey Works to the local economy was emulated in the unique position the plant occupied within civic society. If the official unveiling of the plant cemented Port Talbot's status as a steeltown, it also marked its transition

[138] David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the crisis of Capitalism* (London: Profile, 2010), p. 143.
[139] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 28 May 1954.
[140] Lord Morris of Aberavon, *Fifty Years in Politics and the Law* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 57.

into a company town, with the SCOW emerging as a ubiquitous entity in local society and politics. 'Steel towns are always company towns,'[141] remarked one sociologist and the size of the SCOW's operations at Port Talbot gave that firm a unique position within its community. In the decade following the plant's opening, the steel industry came to permeate all levels of local society; steel informed local political discourse and the plant's managers became recognised local worthies as the borders between the corporate and the civic spheres became increasingly blurred. Perhaps the most pervasive and long lasting influence of the steel industry on its society, however, was in its recognition as a new symbol of collective civic identity. For Port Talbot, steel was an economic necessity but it was also a source of collective purpose and pride as was manifest in the town's new epithet, 'the City of Steel'.



Abbey Works, Port Talbot, by Charles Cundall, R.A.

Between the mountains and the sea...A MAGNIFICENT CITY OF STEEL

By day and night, it makes the steel that Britain needs

THE STEEL COMPANY OF WALES LIMITED

'A Magnificent City of Steel', SCOW advertisement, 1957.[142]

Situated in a wider region whose history was largely synonymous with coal mining, the Abbey Works also set Port Talbot apart industrially from its neighbours and contributed much to the town's uniqueness. Local author Lynne Rees has observed that, 'the steel industry has defined Port Talbot since the 1950s, the way coal-mining defined the South Wales valleys during the previous hundred years.'[143] As much as its difference, however, the interconnectedness of the industry to all

[141] Colin Fletcher, 'Power in a Welsh Town: The Double Helix of its Industry and Social Life', in Glyn Williams (ed.), *Crisis of Economy and Ideology: Essays on Welsh Society, 1840 – 1980* (Bangor: B.S.A. Sociology of Wales Study Group, 1983), p. 120.
[142] *Daily Mail*, 22 February 1957.
[143] Lynne Rees, *Real Port Talbot*, p. 174.

aspects of local life made it a fitting symbol of civic identity. In their analysis of Youngstown, U.S.A., Linkon and Russo, described the role of the industry within the town as one 'where the shared work of steelmaking was so central, ideas about the relationship between work and place helped to form the community's identity and gave individuals a sense of themselves'.[144] The dominant position of the Abbey Works within the economic life of the region was such that the success and prosperity of the town became inextricably linked with its future fortunes. Steel thus came to command a central position within Port Talbot's post-war narrative, providing the town with a collective purpose that often came close to justifying its very existence. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, long since the industry's peak prosperity, one Port Talbot resident could still tell a newspaper reporter that, 'if it wasn't for the steelworks, we wouldn't have had the lives we've all had.' 'People in Port Talbot are proud to be steelworkers,' he went on, 'it has always been there.'[145]

The centrality of the steel industry to Port Talbot's collective definition of itself as a place reflects the way in which the development of the modern town coalesced around the industry. At the end of the Second World War Port Talbot was still a relatively new civic entity. The name Port Talbot had only been given official recognition in 1921 with the creation of Port Talbot Borough Council, formed through the merger of the longstanding Aberavon and Margam local authorities.[146] As a consequence, 'the 1920's were a notoriously difficult times in which to instil a sense of civic unity and pride,' according to one observer. Port Talbot had, 'no town hall. It has no theatre, either, and no newspaper of its own except the weekly Guardian.'[147] Into the 1950s, press reports still often used the old township names of Aberavon and Margam and, to this day, Aberavon remains the name of the parliamentary constituency and the preeminent local rugby team. Port Talbot, then, could arguably be seen more as a geographic expression, constituting several different communities, rather than a place in its own right. This is certainly how the term was understood by many of the town's residents at the beginning of this period.

[144] Sherry Lee Linkon & John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.*, p. 67.
[145] The Guardian, 'Welsh town with steel at its heart casts a wary eye at the future', <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/sep/25/port-talbot-wales-steel-tata-job-cuts> [Accessed: 31 July 2015].
[146] Sally Jones, *The History of Port Talbot with Photographs* (Port Talbot: Goldleaf Publishing, 1991), p. 77.
[147] *Ingot Magazine*, March 1955.

Thomason's sociological survey of Aberavon in the 1950s revealed that most residents were reluctant to identify themselves as being from Port Talbot and local identities were consistently stronger than civic ones.[148] A former steelworker similarly remembered that, before the Abbey Works, 'Port Talbot… was more little communities if you like. Port Talbot was known as Port Talbot but within Port Talbot there was Margam and Taibach, Goytre and Velindre and they weren't joined together and you were always considered "a Margam boy".' He could specifically locate the emergence of Port Talbot as a distinct urban entity in its own right, however, with the development of the Abbey Works: 'when the steel industry started then, there wasn't enough local people to carry on with the size of the work so they brought people in from all over the country. And doing that they had to develop the estate here [Sandfields] so, of course, it got together then as Port Talbot…'.[149] The gradual social assimilation of these communities was facilitated by their economic integration around the steel industry. As such, local economies and labour markets increasingly began to coalesce around the industry with local identities and cultures being assimilated into a new urban entity.

Through the scale of its operations at the Abbey Works the SCOW came to be more than an employer, it was a pillar of local society. Speaking on the occasion of the opening of the new Aberavon and District Boys' Club, Fred Cartwright proclaimed that, 'there were not many towns in Britain in which industry and one company were so closely bound up with the life of the town, the council and everybody in it as our Company and the steel industry locally were bound up with Port Talbot.'[150] Cartwright's central role in the club's opening ceremony is revealing as to the position the steelworks' managers assumed in the community. Indeed, if figures, such as Cartwright, often conveyed the air of a civic dignitary, this largely reflected the status and influence they commanded in local society as well as the workplace. Whilst some historians have characterised the post-war period as marking the beginning of a corporate retreat from the civic sphere,[151] the size and scale of industrial units, such as the Abbey Works, made it hard for the private interests

[148] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change upon Selected Communities in South Wales', pp. 286-288.
[149] Interview with Doug Hockin, 11 October 2013.
[150] *The Dragon*, March 1963.
[151] See, for example, Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 141.

involved to negate their societal responsibilities. In his analysis of power structures in a west Wales steel town, Colin Fletcher argues that the influence of the steel firm was pervasive in all aspects of civil society. It was not uncommon, according to Fletcher, for the plant's managers to also hold positions of seniority within local churches and chapels and organizations and societies, ranging from local choirs to the Freemasons. As in Port Talbot, Fletcher observed that 'the Works' Manager appeared at most public functions'.[152] The presence of works managers, such as Cartwright, at civic events and functions was an opportunity for the company to make their presence felt in the community and assert their influence in social affairs.

This much was recognised by the town's politicians and civic officials who enjoyed close relations with the plant's senior executives and consulted them as key players in local networks of power. Soon after gaining the nomination of the local Labour Party for the Aberavon constituency, John Morris MP remembered being summoned 'to have lunch with the [steelworks'] bosses'. 'The chairman, the managing director and the finance director, were all there,' he recalled, 'it was a tough audience for a young man.' Looking back on his career, however, he recalled having 'a good and fruitful working relationship with the works, both management and men' and remembered being in frequent consultation with the plant's general managers, such as Fred Cartwright.[153] SCOW managers and directors were also prominently represented on local boards and trade groups. Manager, David Young, for example, sat on the Local Industrial Committee for Glamorgan and other works personnel were variously co-opted to sit on local council committees.[154] In turn, the social contribution made by senior works managers to their communities was often expressly acknowledged by civic bodies. The decision by the Port Talbot Borough Council to confer upon Julian Pode, chairman of the SCOW, the Honorary Freedom of the Borough, for example, was, in some respects, a formal recognition of the civic status he already commanded (Pode had previously occupied the role of High Sherriff of Glamorgan in 1948).[155] It aptly reflected the fluid nature of relations between the social and industrial spheres that defined Port Talbot society during this period.

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[152] Colin Fletcher, 'Power in a Welsh Town', p. 123.
[153] Lord Morris of Aberavon, *Fifty Years in Politics and the Law*, p. 57.
[154] See, SRC, Town and Country Planning, 378/9 Box 2, Minutes of the Meeting of the Town and Country Planning, Local Industrial Committee for Glamorgan, 4 July 1951.
[155] *The Dragon*, December 1956.

Given the ubiquity of the steel industry in Port Talbot society, it is unsurprising that the industry also came to permeate local political discourse and debate. This trend was manifest both at a local council and parliamentary level. Aberavon's Conservative candidate in the 1959 general election, Geoffrey Howe, hinged his entire election campaign on the future of the steel industry. '"The steel election," that's what we're fighting here in Aberavon,' Geoffrey Howe wrote in the *Port Talbot Guardian*. 'The prosperity of the entire Division depends on the future of steel. And remember, here in Aberavon say NO to State steel: vote Conservative and Howe.'[156] By portraying the privatised steel industry as a safeguard to local prosperity, Howe encouraged Port Talbot's voters to use their vote as a protest against Labour's intention to renationalise the industry. Howe secured less than thirty percent of the vote but in a safe Labour seat even this demonstrated the resonance of his message. Steelworkers were also well represented amongst local councillors and civic leaders, ensuring that steel issues always received frequent attention in local politics. In 1956, Port Talbot's new Mayor, Graham Griffiths, was an Abbey Works employee and numerous councillors were drawn from the plant's workforce.[157] This was particularly true amongst local Labour Party councillors, many of whom were also trade unionists at the works.[158] The SCOW even granted its employees a year's paid leave of absence if they were appointed town mayor.[159] Such was the relationship between company and local politics that Fred Cartwright noted, 'most members of the council are employed at our works and we have had more than one mayor from our works. To an extent this makes difficulties and makes one wonder where the duty of the company ends and that of the council begins.'[160] Indeed, steelworker councillors often used their position to raise issues pertinent to their workplace or their trade union in a manner which sometimes blurred the distinction between local councillor, union representative and works employee. During a council meeting concerning the closure of the Port Talbot Bar Mill, for example, Councillor Rees Matthews campaigned against the company's decision primarily on behalf of

[156] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 25 September 1959.
[157] *The Dragon*, June 1956.
[158] John Blewitt, 'A Sociological Analysis of Labourism with Specific Reference to Port Talbot' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1983), pp. 464 – 465.
[159] Lord Morris of Aberavon, *Fifty Years in Politics and the Law*, p. 57.
[160] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 9 January 1959.

his trade union rather than his constituents, although these were most likely not mutually exclusive categories.[161]

Steelworkers were also a significant presence within the local Labour Party and the primary steelworkers' union, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, exercised considerable influence in party affairs. The Aberavon constituency had been held by Labour since Ramsay MacDonald first captured the seat for the party in 1922 and was consistently regarded as one of the safest Labour seats in the country. Candidates hoping to secure the party nomination, however, were acutely aware of the need to secure the steelworkers' backing. John Morris, Member of Parliament for Aberavon from 1959 to 2001, wrote in his memoirs that winning the favour of steelworkers was crucial to his selection as the Labour Party's candidate for the 1959 general election. As he later recalled, 'my connections with the [steel] unions were self-evident. They had put me there.'[162] Morris was initially an unlikely candidate for the steelworkers' backing. Lacking any experience or, as he later admitted, knowledge of the steel industry he initially appeared an outside choice to succeed the long serving incumbent, W. G. Cove, upon his retirement in 1957. However, when a popular steelworker nominee, the ISTC-endorsed Emlyn Emmanuel, controversially failed to be shortlisted by the local party, Morris set about successfully wooing the votes of disenfranchised steelworkers. Indeed, Morris recalled that the 'key meeting' in his campaign to gain the party nomination was with Councillor Rees Matthews, 'a senior steelworkers' representative.' Writing in his memoirs, Morris later reflected that, 'my success was the vote of the angry steelworkers who had been denied their candidate,' and the gratitude he extended to the town's steelworkers remained for the duration of his parliamentary career: 'I owed it to them thereafter,' he went on, 'to make steel and jobs in Port Talbot and South Wales my top priority.' 'It dominated my life,' he continued, 'and I kept a close eye on whatever happened at Port Talbot steel.'[163] Outside of Port Talbot, steelworks employees were also helping to determine the region's political outlook. The wider influence of the ISTC was recognised in the election of Donald Coleman as the Member of Parliament for Neath. Coleman, who served as the Neath MP from 1964 to 1991, was a former

[161] WGA, Port Talbot Borough Council Minute Books, PTL B/PT 23, Council Committee Meeting, 19 March 1952.
[162] Lord Morris of Aberavon, *Fifty Years in Politics and the Law* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 58.
[163] *Ibid.* pp. 27-30.

Abbey Works metallurgist and went on to become one of the union's longest serving parliamentary representatives.

The steel industry's influence, therefore, transcended the economic sphere and was manifest in most aspects of local society and politics. Its elevation as a symbol of civic identity, however, was as dependent on its early successes as its ubiquity. The scale and size of the Abbey Works, alongside the technical advances it brought in steelmaking, made the project a story of national and international interest and conferred upon Port Talbot unprecedented levels of media interest and prestige. In contemporary press reports, therefore, Port Talbot became inextricably associated with steelmaking, which came to characterise popular perceptions of the town and largely define its image in the eyes of outside observers. As the source of the town's renewed prestige and international fame, the Abbey Works came to be interpreted locally as an unrivalled symbol of civic pride. This pervasive sense of town pride was most palpable in the local celebrations held to mark the plant's official unveiling. The scene was described in the *Western Mail*, who observed that, 'Margam and Port Talbot present a gay sight, with festoons of bunting and flags lining the streets. The station at Margam, built specially for the reception of trains bringing workmen to the works from all parts of South Wales, is also gaily decorated.'[164] Published in the same year as the plant's unveiling, the official Port Talbot town guide, compiled by the local council, was equally celebratory in tone and portrayed an image of the plant as a source of renewed civic pride and prosperity. The Abbey Works, the guide noted, has 'enhanced [the town's] industrial importance a thousand fold and presents Port Talbot with a future likely to totally eclipse its history steeped past'.[165] Indeed, it was not without reason that the *Port Talbot Guardian* described the opening of the steelworks as the 'most important day in Port Talbot's history'.[166]

Allusions to the town's history were common in the press around the time of the plant's opening and reveal the way in which the culmination of the Abbey project offered a moment for collective reflection, ruminating on the town's past and its ambitions for the future. Some may have doubted whether prosperity would last but,

[164] *Western Mail*, 16 July 1951.
[165] *Port Talbot (Glamorgan): The Official Guide, 1951* (Port Talbot Borough Council: s/l, 1951), p. 8.
[166] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 20 July 1951.

in contrast to the previous two decades of depression and austerity, the Abbey Works seemed to offer the genuine prospect of a brighter future for the whole locality. The *Port Talbot Guardian*, for example, keenly reminded its readers that it was 'the people of this town' who were 'the immediate beneficiaries'[167] of the Abbey Works arrival. The plant's completion also seemed to signal the dawning of a modern age with the advanced technology of the plant's new steelmaking processes acting as a metaphor for Port Talbot's own modernisation. The 1951 town guide described the Abbey Works as bringing Port Talbot into the 'age of super-modernism'. It went on to optimistically note that,

> Port Talbot displays all the birth-pangs of a "Boom Town" as it throws off its time honoured garb of yesterday and prepares to enter triumphantly the age of super-modernism clad in its robe of steel. The rust and corruption brought by the decaying hand of the depression is fast disappearing as current industrial development brings joy, life and hope to the area and presents the town's inhabitants with opportunities for un-precedented development and prosperity in every other field of social and communal life and endeavour. The ghosts of yesterday are being hurried and Tomorrow's challenging but optimistic vistas open out before them waiting to be traversed in confidence. Port Talbot is on the march – the "March of Time" towards progress.[168]

Describing the relationship between steel and place in Youngstown, U.S.A., Linkon and Russo argued that 'Youngstowners were proud not only of what they produced, but also of the benefits brought by their efforts – high rates of home ownership, impressive cultural resources, and a deep sense of hometown loyalty'.[169] The early successes of Port Talbot's new steelworks engendered a similar sense of local pride and were accordingly celebrated as the collective achievements of the town and its residents.

Emblems of civic pride readily lend themselves to collective identification and steel became central to the way in which Port Talbot defined itself internally and projected its outward appearance during the period. Often this resulted in an uncertain distinction between the town's civic and industrial societies. This ambiguity was a recurring feature of company and media publications and showed the numerous ways in which an industrial image was projected onto the civic sphere. The association found its most lasting expression in a series of advertisements

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[167] *Ibid.*
[168] *Port Talbot (Glamorgan) The Official Guide, 1951*(Port Talbot Borough Council: s/1, 1951), p. 8.
[169] Sherry Lee Linkon & John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.*, p. 2.

publicised by the SCOW throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Although the products being promoted varied, the advertisements' tagline remained the same: 'The City of Steel.'[170] Upon closer reading, the city in question was not Port Talbot but the Abbey Works, described by the company as a 'City'. However, the ambiguity of the advertisements soon led to the phrase becoming associated with Port Talbot as a whole. By 1964, the *Western Mail* was noting that 'Port Talbot has become well-known both as "the City that never sleeps" and the "City of Steel".'[171] The *Daily Mail*, meanwhile, wrote in 1961 that 'they call Margam the City of Steel',[172] leaving some uncertainty as to whether the reporter was referring to the town or steelworks.



Sebastien Boyesen's statue, 'Mortal Coil' in Port Talbot.[173]

The imprint of the industry on local civic culture proved enduring. An early expression of the steel industry's symbolic status was its implicit recognition in the town's new motto, '*Duwioldeb – Diwydrwydel*' or 'Piety – Industry', which was saliently added to the Borough Coat of Arms two years after the Abbey's formal unveiling.[174] Steel also became an omnipresent feature of the town's cultural and sporting landscape. Port Talbot Town Football Club's nickname, 'the Steelmen', has a longstanding association with the team and has since been formally adopted.[175]

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[170] *Daily Mail*, 19 March 1957.
[171] *Western Mail*, 30 September 1964.
[172] *Daily Mail*, 20 October 1961.
[173] BBC Wales Arts, 'Sebastien Boyesen Sculptures', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/galleries/sebastien-boyesen-sculptures/2> [Accessed: 3 November 2015].
[174] John Vivian Hughes, 'Municipal Regalia and Civic Treasures', in *Port Talbot Society of Arts Festival, 1974 – Official Programme* (Port Talbot: s.l., 1974), p. 35.
[175] Port Talbot Town Football Club, 'Club History', <http://www.porttalbottown.co.uk/?page_id=6775> [Accessed: 20 June 2014].

Elsewhere, steel has been represented in the town's memorial landscape with two statues commissioned by the local council in 2001, David Annand's 'Order and Chaos' and Sebastien Boyesen's 'Mortal Coil', serving as reminders of the industry's symbolic position within the community. Within the township, then, steel assumed a position of cultural and iconographic importance, as well as economic value, and in the two decades following the Second World War the town's very rationale came to be identified with the production of steel. In giving Port Talbot purpose steel also gave it meaning. As one of the SCOW's own advertisements pertained, 'day and night this city is at work. Its one concern is simple: To make steel, to make tinplate from steel, for Britain and abroad.'[176] If the advert was unclear as to whether 'The City of Steel' referred to the Abbey Works or Port Talbot, it merely reflected the very real ambiguities which characterised Port Talbot society. Indeed, the interdependence of the steel industry and the community and the former's commanding presence in local life rendered any attempts to draw such distinctions largely futile.

Conclusion

Those who lived and worked in Port Talbot during the period following the Second World War were acutely aware that they were experiencing a period of intense and extensive change. With the anticipation and eventual completion of the Abbey Works, their town became one of the most important steelmaking centres in Europe and the name Port Talbot was broadcast throughout the globe. Steel brought international recognition, pride and prestige, as well as the promise of a better future. Local residents may have been more cautious of the hyperbolic predictions of indefinite affluence promised by local worthies but most could at least expect the Abbey Works to provide work and security. For people who had memories of the 1930s even these basic preconditions of life were not taken for granted and the Abbey Works was, therefore, widely welcomed. Those who did not go on to find employment at the plant were still affected by the immense changes it brought about. By the mid-1960s Port Talbot was a larger town than it had been at the end of the

[176] *Daily Mail*, 19 March 1957.

Second World War, both in the number of residents it contained and the area of its built environment. The town, as the local 1956 guide observed, had acquired a 'new look' in the plant's wake.[177] Two vast and largely untouched natural expanses, at Aberavon burrows and Margam moors, had been buried under a giant new housing estate and the largest steelworks in Europe. Traversing the eastern part of the town, the elevated platform of the new M4 motorway was further evidence of the changing townscape and the inevitable destruction of the old that preceded the new. During the period, town councils throughout Britain adopted the mantra of civic regeneration but in Port Talbot the steel industry assumed the role of primary catalyst, both informing the pace and extent of change.

The steel industry's power over local development was both overt and passive but few areas of local life remained beyond its sphere of influence. As a result of the industry's dramatic expansion and growing labour requirements the local population grew and countered the wider regional demographic trend towards outward migration. This influx of new arrivals into the town may not have produced the kind of diverse cosmopolitan society hinted at in the press but it did accelerate wider processes of social and cultural change. The SCOW, however, also exhibited a persistent determination to have their voice heard in local affairs and successfully established themselves at the centre of the negotiation of power in the town. Although constrained by national policies and economic conditions, Port Talbot's post-war housing strategy was largely determined by the steel industry's demands and the works' managers were influential in guiding local housing provision. The scale of council house building was significantly increased to meet the industry's requirements but its demands also affected the location of new homes and their style. Often at the expense of rational planning, the SCOW encouraged the council to pursue a myopic approach to house building, one which favoured developing sites that were most readily available, rather than implement a more farsighted housing plan. The ubiquity of pre-fabricated homes amongst houses built in Port Talbot since the war also reflected the company's desire to erect houses in quantity, rather than of quality. As well as housing, the reconfiguration of the town's transport infrastructure further evidenced the company's demands and the firm was amongst the proactive

[177] *Port Talbot Official Guide – Issued by Authority of the Council* (Port Talbot Borough Council: s/l, 1956), pp. 22 – 23.

local concerns lobbying for the construction of the M4 motorway to alleviate local traffic congestion. Taken as a whole, no private interest was as influential as the SCOW in determining the form and character the town would assume in the years following the Second World War. If the SCOW had become a crucial participant in the local discourse of power, the numerous ways in which it shaped the town's post-war development reveal how successful it was in this arena.

As well as shaping the form of the town's post-war development the steelworks also helped construct its identity. The pervasive influence of the industry in local life, its economy, politics and society, engendered a collective identification with steel which saw the industry elevated to the position of a civic icon. Although the town's relationship with its steelworks proved more problematic as the industry's economic fortunes began to wane from the 1970s onwards, its initial success saw the Abbey Works imbued with notions of civic pride and local esteem. The attention the plant attracted from the world's media saw Port Talbot outwardly portrayed as a steeltown and this, in turn, came to define its own post-war narrative and understanding of itself as a place. Describing the collective experience of industry in Youngstown, Linkon and Russo have argued that 'place is a central aspect of identity, a source for defining ourselves, in part because places contain memories, and memories help us to construct our sense of self'.[178] In Port Talbot, the memory of steel and its central position within the locality persisted even as the industry's economic importance and workforce contracted. Steel came to be commemorated in the names of local sports teams and memorial statues and civic sculptures. The imposing blastfurnaces, silhouetted on the horizon, were a constant visual reminder of the industry's importance to the town's past and present.

Port Talbot consciously defined itself as a steeltown, with its distinctly working-class associations, and this informed the way in which its residents defined themselves. Indeed, during later decades of redundancy and recession steel could prove a suitable metaphor for the town's toughness and resilience in the same way that it had embodied the ultra-modernism of the 1950s. Individual identity was based on a variety of categories of existence but collective interpretations of place tended to stress points of common interest and unity. In Port Talbot no institution seemed to

[178] Sherry Lee Linkon & John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.*, p. 17.

unite the community as much as the steelworks. Upon its completion, the Abbey Works was cited as the basis of the town's future prosperity and almost all local residents came to have an interest in its continued success. Since the Second World War capital had transformed the local community and landscape, as Fevre described it, into a '*steel town*, built for steel and not for people'.[179]

[179] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed*, p. 17.

Chapter Two

The Experiences and Meanings of Work

Introduction

The completion of the Abbey Works in 1951 was widely heralded as an event of national importance, a milestone in Britain's post-war recovery and even the beginning of a 'new industrial era'.[1] Yet, for the thousands of workers who would go on to find employment at the plant, the steelworks also became imbued with a more personal set of meanings and associations. From the age they left school until their retirement, workers with a lifetime of service in the steel industry visited the plant on an almost daily basis. The chronology of the working day, and the multiple patterns of shift work it entailed, gave structure to their lives, with even the most basic of human functions, eating, sleeping and socialising, having to conform to the rigours of the production process. The workplace, however, was also a site in which meanings and relationships were formed. It was not uncommon for steelworkers to describe their work mates as being like family and, for most, the workplace occupied more of their waking hours than the home. Ross McKibbin, describing conditions in early twentieth century Britain, stressed 'the overwhelming importance to men of the workplace'. 'Home was where they lived,' he claimed, 'work was where they had their social being' and this undoubtedly continued to hold some truth into the post-war era.[2] For the works' employees, the Port Talbot works was important, not only as a means of economic subsistence but as a source of emotional significance and pride. Port Talbot steelworkers' identities, social relations, political beliefs and social values were all informed by their experience of work and the condition and culture of the workplace.

Although interpretations of the meaning of work vary considerably, the centrality of work to human experience has come to be widely recognised by historians and social scientists. For Paul Willis, 'work is a living and active area of

[1] *Western Mail*, 18 July 1951.
[2] Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880 – 1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 10.

human involvement – it makes, and is made, by us. It affects the general social nature of our lives in the most profound ways.'[3] Amongst historians, understandings of work have also been invariably entwined with the study of class and the development of working-class politics. The influence of industrialisation and modern production methods on the development of the labour movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are significant and have been well documented.[4] It is also the case, however, that, for workers themselves, the workplace had a wide variety of meanings and associations, only some of them political. Work, nonetheless, remains a subject with implicit political connotations and contemporary debates have persistently been played out in its history; as Patrick Joyce wrote in the 1980s, 'Present concerns are interwoven with visions of work in such a way as to create mythological pasts for political purposes, whether those of the left of the right; as for instance, that of the disappearing past of the supposedly "traditional" working class, or the would-be renascent past of the "Victorian values of self-help and entrepreneurship.'[5] Such interpretations bear witness to much of the existing historiography on work and class in Britain, accentuating the commonality and constancy of the industrial experience, rather than its variety and plurality. The trend in traditional labour histories to equate the history of workers with that of trade unionism has further reinforced this interpretation and, perhaps, marginalised individual experiences of work and the personal meanings they held.

This chapter, therefore, is primarily concerned with the experience of Port Talbot steelworkers at work and how they understood their workplace. Such an approach owes much to the increasing influence of sociology and sociological methods on labour history, the result of which has been to move beyond a conception of labour history as a discipline primarily concerned with class relations to one which attempts to encompass the experience of work in its totality. The statement of intent that begins Arthur McIvor's history of work in post-war Britain – to 'explore what it *felt* like to be a worker in this period and to what extent the experience and meaning

[3] Paul Willis, 'Shop Floor Culture, Masculinity and the Wage Form', in John Clarke, Chas Critcher & Richard Johnson (eds.), *Working-class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), p. 186.
[4] For perhaps the most famous example, see, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963).
[5] Patrick Joyce, 'The Historical Meanings of Work: An Introduction', in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 1.

of work changed over time'[6] – is indicative of this more recent approach. As well as an increased focus on the nature of work and the condition of the workplace, these analyses of work have also entailed considerations of how workers identified with their work, understood it, and how class based conceptions of work relate to identities and divisions centred on age, ethnicity, health, and gender. This historiographic shift has been associated with a greater emphasis on oral history and the gathering of individual testimonies as a means of recovering more personal narratives of work. Histories of Scottish steelworkers by Robert Duncan and David Bradley present the first evidence of the possible application of these methodologies for the history of the British steel industry, as well as the rewards they might offer.[7]

The term 'steelworker', however, is a problematic one and warrants some definition before proceeding further. In the popular imagination the steelworker is most readily associated with the image of the rollerman or the blastfurnaceman, typically bespectacled, clad in an apron and cloth-cap and standing in the glare of the furnace. The iron and steel industries, however, have always been characterised by a high degree of occupational diversity and steelworkers were amongst the most occupationally heterogeneous groups of Britain's industrial workforce. As an industrial process, the making of steel comprises many different stages of production resulting in a high degree of occupational differentiation. In his survey of *The British Worker*, the social investigator Ferdynand Zweig summarised the plurality of job identifications exhibited by steelworkers:

> Now take the iron- and steel-workers. Their jobs are innumerable. We find among them melters in the melting shops, rollers and assistant heaters in the rolling mills – where the metal is made into various shapes by working it back and forth between heavy rollers – blast-furnacemen, coke oven-workers, blacksmiths, joiners, electricians, fitters, boilersmiths, patternmakers, constructional engineers, bricklayers, and many other craftsmen, ancillary workers, stocktakers, etc.[8]

The trend towards greater automation and computerisation in the industry after the Second World War also resulted in a higher proportion of maintenance and clerical

[6] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain Since 1945* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 4.
[7] David Bradley, 'Oral History, Occupational Health and Safety and Scottish Steel, c. 1930 – 1988', *Scottish Labour History*, 46 (2011); Robert Duncan, *Sons of Vulcan: Ironworkers and Steelmen in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009).
[8] Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952), p. 36.

workers on steel companies' payrolls. After 1945, then, the steel industry was confronted with a workforce that was becoming occupationally less homogenous and more specialised.

Amongst this diverse and specialised workforce, however, three broad occupational groups can be discerned; process workers, who undertook most of the activities directly relating to making steel; craft workers, who were primarily engaged in maintenance and repair work; and staff workers, a diverse group of workers, encompassing senior managers through to junior laboratory assistants and typists, who were all characterised by their removal from manual work. Although these definitions are sometimes imperfect in their simplification, they nonetheless constitute a useful means of ordering the plant's diverse workforce and were the categories most frequently used within the industry itself. Some have questioned whether the industry's craft and staff employees could even be considered steelworkers at all. E. Owen Smith expressed caution when using the term 'steel-workers' in his study, 'because up until now,' he argued, 'there has been a tendency for craftsmen in particular to think of themselves as not primarily workers qualified to work in the steel industry alone, but rather as people of general skills who can transfer their allegiance over night.'[9] This chapter, however, takes the term 'steelworker' to encompass all workers in the steel industry regardless of their occupation. Such a definition does not necessarily reflect the way in which steelworkers themselves understood the term; it is unlikely that many process workers would have defined the plant's clerical workers in this way, for example. Regardless of their individual occupation, however, all of the plant's employees were involved in the manufacture of steel, either directly or indirectly, and it was partly from their shared final product that a sense of collective identity emerged from an otherwise socially and occupationally disparate group of workers.

This chapter examines steelworkers' experiences of work and the ways in which they derived meaning from the workplace. Taking workers' entry into the workforce as its starting point, the chapter then explores aspects of steelworkers' training, the condition of the workplace and the experience of work itself. This encompasses several interpretations of the work process and the associated issues of

[9] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining: A Case Study in the Steel Industry* (London: Pan Books, 1971), p. 165.

workplace hazards and occupational health. Consideration is also given to the role of technological change in the Port Talbot works across the entirety of this period and how this impacted on production methods and the workplace experience. Throughout the duration of this study, processes of steelmaking changed dramatically with a clear impact on how steelworkers worked and derived meaning from their labour. In face of these differing and changing experiences of work, however, the workplace still offered workers points of continuity and cohesion. The social relationships that existed between co-workers and the collective approach to work tasks allowed steelworkers to reproduce feelings of local unity and solidarity, which were fundamental in shaping understandings of work and maintaining social cohesion. Having established the way Port Talbot steelworkers worked and the meanings they derived from it, the following chapter will consider, in greater detail, the plurality of workplace identities which existed within the plant and the relationships that existed between them.

Entering the Workforce

Workers joined the Port Talbot works at different ages, with different sets of skills, motivations and expectations. Employment at the plant was also obtained in different ways and changed over time, reflecting the myriad means of formal and informal recruitment as well as changing managerial attitudes towards labour procurement. How workers went about finding work, however, was significant. The methods of getting work at the plant could largely determine workers' future career paths as well as establishing different occupational and social hierarchies so that one's own standing relative to other workers was often largely determined at the point of entry.

Despite the Steel Company of Wales' widely publicised recruitment efforts, until the 1960s, informal methods remained the primary means of securing a job at the works. Even in later decades, as entry into the plant was subjected to stricter controls and more formalised recruitment procedures, informal means remained important entry routes for some employees and continued to reveal signs of continuity with the pre-war world. Amongst school leavers and workers lacking academic qualifications in particular, familial connections and local kinship networks

undoubtedly remained the most significant way of procuring work. A culture of nepotism and 'putting in a word' was a persistent feature of obtaining employment at the plant. Theodore Kingdom commenced work as a bricklayer at the Abbey Works in 1955 and his experience of obtaining work was typical of many:

> With my uncles being in the works, really it was… what would you call it? Not nepotism, but I had a bit of a pull to be honest. My uncles put a word in for me and local management, and I had an interview then with it and told them where I'd been working and this that and the other. And they give me a year… how can I say? Let's see how you go along in a year.[10]

Word of mouth and insider knowledge also served as the principle source for learning of vacancies in the plant, especially for those workers not applying for technical or managerial positions. Arthur Bamford, a blastfurnaceman, recalled, 'that we heard news on the grapevine that they were looking for twenty men on the blast furnaces… It wasn't even advertised in the local papers, it was by word of mouth.'[11] Most prospective workers were thus reliant on a father, uncle or neighbour already employed by the company to facilitate their entry into the plant's workforce.

Such informal methods of recruitment were not unique to the steel industry. Paul Thompson's study of Coventry car workers revealed that, 'although some got their first factory job by applying directly at the factory gate or by answering an advertisement, some two-thirds of our car workers remember using a social network, usually initiated through their own kin, to introduce them.'[12] There is evidence to suggest, however, that these informal methods of recruitment persisted longer in the steel industry than elsewhere. After the Second World War, Joanna Bourke noted that, the overall ability of parents to place their children in jobs was waning but this picture was not uniform across all industries: 'A few trades (such as mining and work in tinplate and galvanizing works),' Bourke acknowledged, 'maintained a hereditary pattern of recruitment.'[13] In the Port Talbot works, however, even as job opportunities contracted at the plant from the 1970s onwards, a family connection could remain a vital asset for learning about and securing employment. Graham Rowland joined the Abbey Works in 1979 and remembered the influence of his

[10] Interview with Theodore Kingdom, 18 October 2013.
[11] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[12] Paul Thompson, 'Playing at Being Skilled Men: Factory Culture and Pride in Work Skills Among Coventry Car Workers', *Social History*, 13 (1988), p. 53.
[13] Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 113.

steelworker father in helping him find work: 'the steel industry was very much father to son,' he recalled. 'You can argue all day whether that was right or wrong but if your father recommends you for a position and you then take that position there is a good chance that you will succeed and be a good worker because you are retaining your father's name and reputation.'[14] By the 1980s, the influence of these informal recruitment systems had been greatly curtailed. In the aftermath of the dramatic contraction of the plant's labour force in 1980, it was common for workers to despair at the lack of opportunities available to their sons in the industry. Cyril Jenkins, a worker in the Abbey's Basic Oxygen Steelmaking Plant, lamented in 1984 that, 'sons can't follow fathers because we are in a situation where you can't employ new men. Once you break the chain that's it, you don't restart it.'[15] Nevertheless, social connections, as well as experience and qualifications, were often vital to securing work at the Port Talbot works and reveal the fluid relationship between the social relations of the workplace and the kinship of family and the community.

The widespread use of informal recruitment methods at the Port Talbot works shows a strong degree of continuity with older working practices but, after the Second World War, the nature of labour procurement in the steel industry was changing. Technological developments, of the sort associated with the Abbey Works, brought about the need for a more specialised workforce, with a greater emphasis on educational qualifications and technical training. Between 1958 and 1963 a report, by the Ministry of Labour's Manpower Research Unit, noted a forty-two per cent increase in the number of scientists and technologists working in the iron and steel industry.[16] The report attributed this dramatic increase to 'the demands of technological change and the resulting need for closer technological control; increased research and development; increased volume of production; and improved production techniques'.[17] When it came to manning the Abbey Works, then, the SCOW was keen to stress that their recruitment policy would be highly selective. In an article published shortly before the Abbey's opening, the SCOW informed its employees that, 'the plant which is being installed at Margam and Abbey Works is of

[14] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.
[15] Quoted in, Peter Pagnamenta & Richard Overy, *All Our Working Lives* (London: BBC, 1984), p. 101.
[16] *The Metal Industries; A Study of Occupational Trends in the Metal Manufacturing and Metal Using Industries* (London: H.M.S.O., 1965), p. 25.
[17] *Ibid.*

such quality that the new Works will rank amongst the finest in the world. It is therefore not surprising that the Company is anxious to ensure that they are manned by the most capable men available to ensure the highest efficiency.'[18] Within the context of a national labour shortage it may not have been immediately possible to translate these intentions into practice but it did unequivocally point towards the changes to come.

In practice, this emphasis on 'capable men' meant attaching greater importance to technical and educational qualifications, particularly for those employees wishing to occupy skilled craft and staff positions. Scott *et al.*'s study of a north Wales strip mill in the 1950s observed that, 'one of the major long-term consequences of advancing techniques and increasing scale of enterprise in industry generally is that formal qualifications tend to replace other criteria of recruitment to all but the lowest occupational levels.'[19] Several Port Talbot works employees stressed the importance of their schooling or their technical qualifications in obtaining work at the plant. 'The fact that I'd gone to Grammar School I think was an asset,' remembered Rolfe Mitchel.[20] Mitchel, who had previously worked for the National Coal Board, entered the Abbey Works in 1960 as a clerical worker in the Production Department, a skilled staff position. Len Mathias also believed that his GCEs in maths and the sciences were 'most certainly' the reason he was able to procure a job at the plant as a junior chemist. 'Chemistry, physics and the old sciences' were the GCEs 'that they'd want you to pass', Mathias remembered, if you were to be considered for a laboratory role.[21]

Educational progression could also open up other opportunities for new recruits. Former Port Talbot works employee, Vince Scanlon, remembered his decision to attend Neath Technical College as, 'the best thing I ever did.'[22] Like others of his generation, Scanlon was encouraged to apply for a coveted apprenticeship at the works by a SCOW recruitment agent who visited his school. The choice of establishments, like technical colleges, targeted by the company's

[18] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, November 1950.
[19] W. H. Scott *et al.*, *Technical Change and Industrial Relations: A Study of the Relations between Technical Change and the Social Structure of a Large Steelworks* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1956), p. 56.
[20] Interview with Rolfe Mitchel, 14 October 2013.
[21] Interview with Len Mathias, 4 October 2013.
[22] Interview with Vince Scanlon, 27 January 2014.

agents gives some indication of the kind of recruit they were seeking to attract, namely those who possessed good academic and vocational qualifications. By the 1970s, a university degree was also increasingly becoming a prerequisite for consideration for many management positions. Whilst some managers continued to be promoted internally from amongst the existing supervisory staff, a discussion paper drafted by the British Steel Corporation Management Committee in 1980 revealed that university graduates were increasingly 'regarded as the prime source' for managers.[23] Skills and qualifications, then, were not only a means of procuring work at the plant but also served to reinforce occupational and social divisions in work.

If workers used a number of different strategies to procure employment at the works, their motivations for seeking work at the plant reveal a considerable degree of consistency, both across different grades of worker and periods of time. Few steelworkers cited the appeal of the steel industry itself or the anticipated nature of their work as a primary impetus to acquire work at the plant. When Keith Foley joined the Abbey Works in 1968 he anticipated it would only be on a temporary basis: 'I didn't want to go into the steelworks,' he remembered. 'I went there temporarily until another job came along… My father was in there and my sister was in there and I just thought, I don't know, dirty old steelworks. I didn't particularly want to go in there.'[24] If other employees were less resistant to the prospect of working in the industry, it was the economic incentive of working in the plant, rather than the nature of the work itself, that held the most appeal. Many interviewees stressed the immediate economic imperative of finding work and the steel industry was frequently cited as the most available source of employment. The *Manchester Guardian* may have exaggerated the point when commenting that, 'for the people of this town there would be no use in looking for other work in Port Talbot. There is virtually nothing else to do,'[25] but, as the town's largest employer, the steelworks seemed the most obvious choice for many.

[23] Shotton Record Centre, British Steel Corporation - Divisional Management Committee Reports, 378, Box 10, 'Discussion Paper – The Recruitment and Development of Young Managers', March 1980.
[24] Interview with Vince Scanlon, 27 January 2014.
[25] *Manchester Guardian*, 13 October 1961.

School leavers, in particular, were often subjected to considerable social and economic pressure to obtain work quickly and, up until the 1970s at least, the works invariably presented the most immediate means of doing so. Dennis Spicer, who joined the Port Talbot Works in 1945, aged fourteen, remembered, 'I wanted a job – it didn't matter where it were! My mother was a widow and I had a ten year old brother and a two year old sister and her pension was ten shillings a week so whatever I could earn would help us.'[26] Female employees also remembered their decision to join the industry as being the most expedient option, rather than the most desirable. Jean Patten summed up her motivations for applying to the works as, 'Well, there was nothing much else in Port Talbot other than the steel industry and they had a good job, so I went and learnt shorthand typing.'[27] Such accounts act as a necessary reminder of the primacy of economic necessity as a motivation to work.

The lure of better wages, however, and 'the treasure island' myth that grew around the Abbey Works could also prove to be a powerful incentive. Up until the 1960s, workers found that they could earn as much being unskilled labourers in the steel industry as the skilled or semi-skilled jobs they had held elsewhere. Joe Stanton, a crane driver at the Abbey Works, recalled the reasons why he left his job with British Railways to join the SCOW:

> There was only one reason: because the money was much, much better than on the railway. I was a fully-fledged fireman on the railway and I know my best wage was something like £7, £8? And as a labourer my first wage in the steelworks was something like £12, which was a huge jump. Once I became regular in the steelworks it was much better again.[28]

The centrality of pay in informing workers' career decisions was also integral to Goldthorpe *et al.*'s concept of 'instrumentalism', an orientation to employment that was overwhelmingly economic and posited pay as the primary satisfaction workers derived from their work. Amongst the Luton car workers studied by Goldthorpe's team in the 1960s, the reason 'most frequently' provided for remaining in a particular job was 'the high level of pay that they could earn'.[29] As will be seen, once in work Port Talbot's steelworkers were able to derive meaning and pleasure from a variety

[26] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[27] Interview with Martin and Jean Patten, 29 October 2013.
[28] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[29] John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer & Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 56.

of work related activities, beyond its purely economic reward, but pay remained a significant consideration in most decisions to join the plant.

The overwhelming importance attached to pay in instrumental conceptions of work also failed to acknowledge the broader considerations inherent in informing decisions to enter the steel industry. Indeed, not all Port Talbot steelworkers recorded receiving an increase in wages when they joined the plant. Arthur Bamford was a fully trained fitter and turner working with a local contracting firm but left his carpentry job in 1974 to take a less well paid position in the Abbey Works. 'The money was much better working as a carpenter and a joiner at the time,' Bamford recalled, but the conditions of employment in the contractors' firm could not compete with the security of employment and career prospects offered by the steel industry.[30] Almost all steelworkers identified the promise of promotion and the permanency of employment as their primary motivations for joining the works. Joe Stanton remembered that when he commenced employment in the Abbey in 1955 early promotion was almost a certainty: 'I think for just about everybody without qualifications, you could get in there and become a top man on a mill or something in next to no time at that time.'[31] The long-term objectives of career progression and job security thus tended to figure more prominently in workers' reasons for joining the plant than the promise of immediate financial reward. When Ken Drew learnt he had been accepted onto the SCOW's apprenticeship scheme in 1955, his elated father told him, 'you'll have a job for life!'. 'He thought I'd arrived in life,'[32] Drew remembered, expressing the widespread sentiment that a career in the steel industry promised security and prospects.

Although the future of the industry was characterised by growing uncertainty throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the BSC continued to promote careers in steel as secure and worthwhile. An advertisement placed by the corporation in the national press in 1970 promised that, 'the steel industry today can offer school leavers some of the finest career opportunities available anywhere… The Corporation can offer school leavers – boys and girls – really first-class training and the promise of an

[30] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[31] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[32] Interview with Ken Drew, 3 December 2013.

interesting secure, and well paid future.'[33] It is clear that when steelworkers sought to explain their reasons for joining the industry these were the considerations that counted most. Peter Bowen's survey of steelworkers in the north of England, conducted in the 1970s, found that, 'when respondents were asked to rank their reasons for initially selecting employment in steel, security and adequacy of pay emerged as the two most important [factors].'[34] Whilst many of those questioned by Bowen would have entered the industry in earlier decades, jobs in steel still seemed to be associated with good prospects for career progression and lasting economic security, even as its immediate financial rewards lessened. The far-sighted aspirations of many steelworkers and the importance attached to economic security were registered in the repeated references steelworkers made to their pensions. Arthur Bamford considered the company's generous pension scheme the most important factor in his decision to join: 'Because of the position with my father,' he explained, 'who finished work with absolutely no pension, I thought my main aim is to get in somewhere where I'm going to work for the rest of my working days and finish work with a good pension at the end of it.'[35] For all grades of employees, then, entering the works offered the promise of a career, with its associated benefits of long-term financial security and independence. More than anything else, these were the incentives most highly prized about working in the steel industry and were integral to most steelworkers' meaning and conceptualisation of work.

Alongside technical and academic qualifications, the level of training received upon commencing employment at the Port Talbot works could serve as a salient indicator of social status within the plant's labour hierarchy. Variations in the type and intensity of training workers received upon joining the plant not only differentiated workers occupationally but also perpetuated labour hierarchies based on distinctions of skill. After the Second World War there was an industry-wide sense that a more concerted effort would need to be made toward training employees in order to equip them to deal with the technological challenges associated with new steelmaking processes. Indeed, for Keeling and Wright, 'no account of the postwar development of the steel industry would be complete without some reference to the

[33] *Western Mail*, 18 March 1970.
[34] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations: Industrial Relations and Industrial Sociology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 189.
[35] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.

exceptional activity on the part of certain companies, and on the part of the industry co-operatively, in the field of education and training.'[36] These efforts were evident in the establishment of a national Recruitment and Training Committee by the British Iron and Steel Federation in 1948, alongside area training committees whose 'objectives were to provide information and assistance on training matters to any companies wishing to take advantage of this and to provide common services such as co-operative training courses'.[37] At a local level, the SCOW also set about rationalising their training procedures and strategies throughout the 1950s. A memorandum presented at a company board report in 1950 stated,

> It is proposed that the major part of the present general offices of the Division should be utilised at Port Talbot as a training centre for apprentices, junior operatives and other general staff entering the Company. The development of these training arrangements – in co-operation with the local Education Authority – is becoming an increasingly important feature of the Company's administration.[38]

Both nationally and locally, increased investment and the creation of new training infrastructures pointed towards a greater degree of technical instruction and expertise across the workforce,

Alongside the creation of a new training centre, the SCOW also introduced new training schemes, such as the 'junior operative' programme, established in 1950. Announcing the programme in the *SCOW Bulletin*, a company spokesman promulgated,

> It has long been the custom in most works to place boys haphazardly in "production" jobs, a practice which is most undesirable as many boys have latent talent which if fostered by specific and sympathetic training will be of great value to the community. On January 9th of this year the Company, supported by the Trade Unions, launched a Junior Operative Training Scheme with the object of ensuring that 'Junior Operatives' will in future be carefully placed in appropriate jobs and given such training and education as will assist each of them, according to his intelligence and aptitude to develop into an efficient, contented worker and good citizen.[39]

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[36] B. S. Keeling & A.E.G. Wright, *The Development of the Modern British Steel Industry* (London: Longmans, Green and Co LTD, 1964), p. 151.
[37] *Ibid*., p. 152.
[38] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 11, Board Report for Meeting on 8 June, 1950.
[39] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, January 1950.

This programme, aimed at school leavers wishing to enter the plant's production workforce, existed alongside the apprenticeships available at the company's own apprentice school for craft workers. Lasting between four and five years, company apprenticeships offered prospective employees a comprehensive programme of training in traditional craft skills, such as, carpentry, bricklaying and electrical and mechanical engineering.

Moreover, company apprenticeships remained highly prized throughout the period, both for the reputed quality of the training they provided and the professional opportunities they afforded craftsmen upon completion. Serving an apprenticeship also came with a degree of occupational cachet, conferring upon workers a 'skilled' status. Ken Drew recalled a genuine sense of pride when he learnt he had been accepted onto the SCOW's apprenticeship scheme:

> I applied for an apprenticeship, had two or three interviews, and I've always been quite proud of obtaining my apprenticeship because 410 people applied and ten of us got it. Because in those days, and I assume now, if you had an apprenticeship in British Steel, or Steel Company of Wales, as it then was, it was a good apprenticeship. It was a five year apprenticeship and a very good one.[40]

For craftsmen, then, training was not only a preparation for the workplace but an indicator of status and skill and a central determinant of one's own worth relative to other sections of the workforce. Keith McClelland has argued that, 'The learning of technical skills was imbricated with the construction of social identities' and, for the works' craftsmen, their skills helped foster exclusivist occupational identities that differentiated them within the overall workforce.[41]

[40] Interview with Ken Drew, 3 December 2013.
[41] Keith McClelland, 'Time to Work, Time to Live: Some Aspects of Work and the Re-formation of Class in Britain, 1850-1880', in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 192.



Apprentices at the Abbey Works, c. 1950s.[42]

Whilst craft workers benefited from a formal apprenticeship, this was not characteristic of most Port Talbot steelworkers' experience of training. For many of the steelworks' employees, training was conducted 'on the job' and was characterised by a largely informal method of instruction based on observing and receiving advice from older and more experienced colleagues. Even participants of the new 'junior operatives' scheme (which was hailed by the SCOW as providing recruits 'as much experience and insight into the various departments and processes during the first year as could reasonably be covered'[43]) were often disparaging of the training they received. Despite the publicised commitments to the contrary, changes in company training procedures were often slow to take effect. David Thomas, who joined the Abbey Works in 1952 as a school leaver, remembered his induction period as a junior operative was mainly confined to running errands and making tea.[44] Indeed, most workers' memories of the scheme revealed it to be poorly defined and offering little practical advice for the production jobs it was mean to prepare them for. Joe Stanton's recollections of learning to operate a crane in the Cold Mill are

[42] Courtesy of the Port Talbot Historical Society.
[43] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, January 1950.
[44] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.

indicative of the training experiences of many process workers: 'Well I wouldn't even call it a training course,' he recalled. 'To learn the job you just learnt on the job. You hoped to find a driver who would be willing for you to learn with him.'[45] Fellow crane driver, Francis Needs, remembered a similar experience, 'I went to a bit of a training school and did a little bit of training. But then basically you go on the mill, you go with a driver and you sit with the driver and he teaches you all the tricks.'[46]

Even after the steel industry's nationalisation in 1968, there is little evidence to suggest training opportunities improved for Port Talbot's process workers under the BSC. John Pugh joined the Cold Mill in 1972 and remembered the main methods of instruction were entirely informal. By asking questions and observing more senior colleagues, Pugh recalled that, workers could acquire a range of skills that not only allowed them to perform their own task but also acquire a broader understanding of the production process: 'You wasn't paid to learn in them days,' he remembered, 'You would pick up things every day and to get on you've got to learn the next two jobs up. So if I was doing job nine, I'd know how to do job seven but I made sure I knew how to job seven, job six and job five. I was asking questions all the time and I thought I was pretty good at asking questions and getting answers.'[47] The experience and goodwill of older workers was, therefore, instrumental in equipping new recruits with the requisite skills and understanding necessary to integrate them into the workplace and rise through the ranks. It also, however, placed workers within existing social hierarchies, reinforcing the seniority, skill and experience of older workers in relation to the comparative naivety of new recruits. In their study of metalworkers in post-war Finland, Turtiainen and Väänänen observed that, 'becoming a worker was a gradual process which went hand in hand with skill and fraternal bonding.'[48] Informal methods of training were essential in facilitating this transition from boy to worker and not only informed youngsters' understanding of the process of work but of the culture and hierarchy of the workplace. With training largely dependent on the acquisition of practical experience, skill and age were thus integral to understandings of respect and status in the workplace.

[45] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[46] Interview with Francis Needs, 23 October 2013.
[47] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[48] Jusi Turtiainen and Ari Väänänen, 'Men of Steel? The Masculinity of Metal Workers in Finland after World War II', *Journal of Social History*, 46 (2012), p. 456.

The Condition of Work

No amount of formal training, however, could prepare most steelworkers for their initial experience of the workplace. Yet, to conceive of the Port Talbot works as a single workplace obfuscates the diverse nature of the steelmaking process and the plurality of workplace experiences recorded by the plant's employees. At the beginning of the period, steelmaking was split across three different plants (Port Talbot, Margam and Abbey) which, although under the ownership of a single company, exhibited their own subtle distinctions in working practice and culture. Even as the Port Talbot and Margam works were decommissioned and steelmaking increasingly became concentrated at the Abbey, making steel was still dependent on a number of distinct but interrelated processes, many of which were spatially as well as occupationally differentiated. A map of the layout of the Port Talbot steelworks from 1972, for example, lists no fewer than twenty-three different production departments, including: the ore preparation plant, cold mill, hot strip mill, coke ovens, engineering shops, docks, soaking pits and blast furnaces, to name but a few.[49] It would be more apposite, then, to think of the Abbey Works as constituting a number of different workplaces, each giving rise to their own specific processes, conditions and cultures. Given this occupational variety, it is not surprising that individual experiences of work for the plant's employees could vary considerably.

Despite the internal differences of steelmaking, new recruits' initial reactions to the steel industry reveal striking similarities. Manual workers' first encounters with the workplace were almost always characterised by fear and awe. Arthur Bamford described his first time working on the blastfurnace as a 'harrowing' experience, 'it was like stepping into hell,'[50] he remembered. David Thomas similarly remembered the fear he experienced when first confronted with the steelmaking process: 'At times it was quite frightening to be there because I'd never been near a melting shop,' he recalled, 'and I used to have to run messages across – what they called – the pit side, which was where all the metal and things were poured, and it was quite frightening for somebody of fifteen.'[51] Early senses of fear

[49] David Brinn, *Development of Iron and Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area* (Port Talbot: British Steel Corporation, 1972), p. 5.
[50] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[51] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.

could also be tempered by a feeling of awe and wonder at the sheer scale of the Abbey Works' industrial processes. Even workers with previous experience in the metal industries marvelled at the enormity of the plant. John Foley, who before joining the Abbey had previously worked in Port Talbot's Mansell Tinplate Works, described the plant as, 'a different world… the money and the conditions were completely different, far in advance of what they were in the old Port Talbot, Margam steelworks.'[52] Keith E. Morgan similarly remembered the Abbey's steelmaking process as, 'awesome, it is awesome. You're standing there and they turn the vessel up and "woosh!" – and all this flame shoots out.'[53]

The sheer unpleasantness and severity of the workplace was another unifying feature of working life for many manual workers. Workplace deprivations were common throughout the plant but they were likely to assume different guises in different areas, reflecting the specific conditions engendered by particular aspects of the steelmaking process. Amongst the most notorious workplaces within the plant were the coke ovens, where coal was heated in batteries to provide coke for the blastfurnaces. When interviewed in 2013, former coke oven worker Dai Ferris said, if he was asked to make the decision about joining the works now he, 'wouldn't have done it, because it was terrible conditions.'[54] Similarly, Paul Ace described the conditions in the coke ovens as 'absolutely atrocious'.[55] Dust, noxious fumes and heat were an omnipresent feature of work in this part of the plant, as Martin Patten remembered: 'It was terrible, a lot of dust, a lot of gas. The ovens were not completely sealed off and you're walking on top of them and the temperature is – if you walk in your ordinary shoes, you've got to wear clogs to go on top of the ovens because the temperature is so high. And it is a dirty, nasty job, they still do it.'[56] It was an experience largely corroborated by a *Western Mail* reporter, who described the conditions men worked under in the plant's ovens: 'The heat is particularly unbearable,' the reporter wrote, 'in the summer it saps the strength of the men. They breathe in gas for eight hours a day…'.[57]

[52] Interview with John Foley, 10 October 2013.
[53] Interview with Keith E. Morgan, 28 October 2013.
[54] Interview with Dai Ferris, 27 November 2013.
[55] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[56] Interview with Martin and Jean Patten, 29 October 2013.
[57] *Western Mail*, 11 May 1970.

Like the coke ovens, the blastfurnaces were renowned for the difficult and inhospitable nature of their working environment. The heat of the furnaces made for an uncomfortable and often exhausting working experience, as Arthur Bamford recalled: 'It was so hot. If you can imagine what it's like on a blastfurnace, if you've been there then you'll know. If you can imagine that in a temperature of, say, eighty-degrees in the summer, it got so bad that you couldn't breathe, you know?... It wasn't perfect but it was work wasn't it.'[58] Conditions were equally appalling for the bricklayers tasked with repairing and relining the blastfurnace walls. One contemporary observed that they 'worked in furnaces which were still hot and in which obnoxious fumes and unpleasant working conditions could exist'.[59] As a former bricklayer dryly remembered, 'if you put a dog here you'd be summonsed.'[60] Elsewhere in the plant, the Cold Mill, where steel was rolled and pressed, was characterised as being unbearably noisy and dusty. For John Foley, 'the dust was terrible, we had fume extraction but when it used to go through the strip mill it was full of dust. The noise was a completely different world…'.[61] The multiplicity of workplace experiences evidences the fragmented nature of the steelmaking process but also reveals the commonality of hardship as a widespread condition of work in the steelworks.

As well as enduring trying physical conditions, most manual workers also had to endure the privations of shift work. For process and craft workers, working life was chronologically constructed and regimented in accordance with the needs of the production process and the shift system was, therefore, an inescapable feature of working life in the Port Talbot works. It also served to differentiate manual workers from their staff colleagues and presented a salient divergence in the experience of work for these respective occupational groups. The regularity of the staff work pattern, nine a.m. to five p.m., presented an entirely different working chronology to the variance of shift work. Having been agreed between the employers and the trade unions in 1947, the forty-eight hour continuous working week was already in effect by the time of the Abbey's completion and constituted the national template for shift

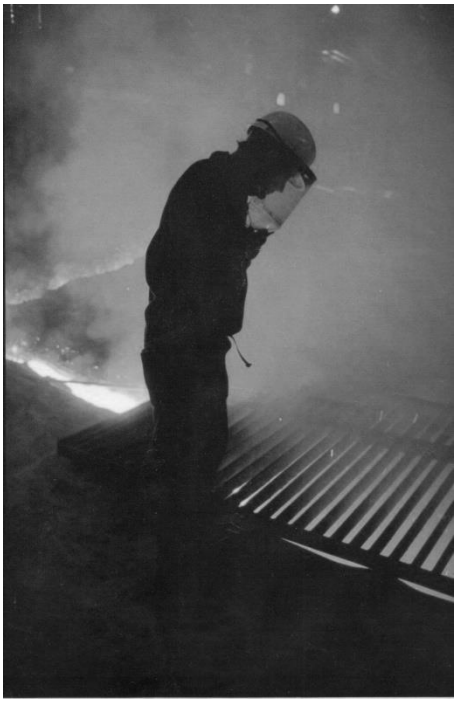
[58] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[59] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 252.
[60] Interview with Theodore Kingdom, 18 October 2013.
[61] Interview with John Foley, 10 October 2013.

patterns across the industry.[62] Despite varying slightly across the period, the shift rotas worked by Port Talbot steelworkers largely conformed to the national pattern outlined by Robert Duncan. 'For decades,' Duncan noted, 'steelmen worked an eight-hour day, on a three-shift pattern of 6 a.m.-2 p.m.; 2 p.m.-10 p.m. and 10 p.m.-6 a.m.'[63] After 1947, these shifts were worked by Port Talbot's steelworkers on a continuous rota; a typical shift pattern worked during the period could, therefore, consist of two morning shifts, followed by two afternoon shifts and two night shifts, concluding with a period of time off (the length of which depended on the particular variant of the system being worked). The exact combination of shifts altered with the introduction of different work rotas but the continuous working week and the recurring pattern of morning, afternoon and night shifts remained a constant feature of working life for shift workers.

For those workers with experience of shift work it was the night shift that elicited the strongest responses. For many, 'working nights' was a constant source of deprivation and resulted in extreme workplace fatigue. Joe Stanton articulated the feelings of many steelworkers when he commented, 'I never did like night shift… I found I wasn't ever getting enough sleep.'[64] Francis Needs similarly remembered that he 'could never get on with' night shifts, 'I was always a miserable bugger on nights.'[65] Many shift workers, however, found themselves quickly adapting to the peculiarities of shift work and even found sources of solace in the night shift. John Pugh's recollections of shift work reveal the way in which antisocial work patterns quickly became normalised by some workers: 'Initially,' he remembered, 'when I first started doing night shifts, you were a little bit tired. You did have the odd cat nap – you know? – when you were younger. But you got used to the night shifts, you got used to working shifts and I worked shifts for forty years.'[66] Even workers who 'hated night shift', such as Len Mathias, could draw consolation from the lack of supervision and more relaxed atmosphere of the plant at night. 'You didn't have any bloody day staff to nag you,' Mathias remembered, 'they were out of the way.'[67] The distinction drawn between 'day staff' and shift workers demonstrates the importance

[62] Arthur Pugh, *Men of Steel by One of Them* (London: The Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, 1951), p. 581.
[63] Robert Duncan, *Sons of Vulcan*, p. 193.
[64] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[65] Interview with Francis Needs, 23 October 2013.
[66] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[67] Interview with Len Mathias, 4 October 2013.

of shift work as a marker of status and as a source of division amongst steelworkers. As the mixed responses to the condition of shift work reveal, the experience of work was interpreted in different ways and a shared condition of work did not necessarily engender a shared workplace experience. The conditions of the workplace were also largely determined at the point of production and were, therefore, specific to each respective phase of the steelmaking process. Nonetheless, despite the differences in individual experiences of work, enduring the hardship and adversity of the workplace offered a mutual point of reference for manual workers, a part of the shared image of the steelworker.



Steelworker watching a torpedo fill at the Port Talbot works, c. 1980/90s.[68]

In many sections of the workplace, the unpleasantness of the working environment was compounded by the physicality and the exacting nature of work itself. Although technology would go on to profoundly change working practices over the course of the period, for many steelworkers intense physical labour remained a persistent feature of their working lives. Arthur Bamford, who joined the Abbey Works as a blastfurnacemen in the 1970s, stressed the physicality of his own work and the intense reliance that remained on workers' own manual labour: 'I've seen people coming off the cast house and being physically sick with the amount of

[68] Courtesy of the Port Talbot Historical Society.

exertion that's been taken over a ten hour shift or even an eight hour shift. Sometimes they worked overtime so they were out there for sixteen hours, physically shaking and unable to shower for being so knackered.'[69] Although working in very different conditions, craftsman, Terry James, also described the nature of his job as 'heavy work', involving the handling of weighty machinery and scaling towering cranes and scaffolding.[70]

Technology and the Workplace

The effect of greater technology in the workplace across the period tended to be to alleviate some of the more physically arduous aspects of production but progress in this area was uneven and not felt universally. Indeed, some workers even remembered the burdens of their manual labour increasing with the introduction of new production processes. A bricklayer at the plant remembered that as the scale of production increased so did his physical effort: 'Well they went from small ladles to big ladles and bigger ladles like,' he remembered. 'And when they come, heavier work was brought in so that their linings would last longer. They never made nothing light for you then. In a word, with progress came weight to be honest.'[71] The way in which steel was made changed considerably during the post-war period but the necessity of physical labour in the production process was never entirely eliminated.

Whether or not workers were the direct beneficiaries of new technology, they could not help but recognize the pace and extent of its advancement. Alongside improvements in health and safety, most Port Talbot works employees identified the encroachment of technology in the workplace as the single biggest change to their working lives. When asked about the changes he encountered at work during his time as an Abbey employee, Bob Leonard's response was typical in highlighting the enormous impact of technology: 'Well there was differences from old fashioned steelmaking to new modern steelmaking', Leonard remembered, 'the technical change was tremendous.'[72] From the outset, the Abbey Works had been held as a

[69] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[70] Interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.
[71] Interview with Theodore Kingdom, 18 October 2013.
[72] Interview with Bob Leonard, 27 August 2013.

marvel of technical progress and advanced automated production techniques. It was with good reason that the *Western Mail* described the works in 1956 as, 'the world's most modern plant,'[73] and the *Daily Telegraph* marvelled at its, 'push-button mass-production methods of America.'[74] The construction of the Abbey Works set in a train a transformation in steelmaking with profound consequences for the experience of those working in the industry.



Strip mill pulpit at the Port Talbot works, c. 1950s.[75]

Even workers with previous experience in the metal industries were often struck by the advanced technological processes in use at the Abbey. Ken Thomas described his transition from the old Port Talbot Steelworks to the Abbey Works as a 'terrific change!'. 'Things were a lot faster,' he remembered, 'things were moving a lot faster.'[76] Evidence of technological progress, however, was not solely restricted to the production process and was embedded in all aspects of working life. Dennis

[73] *Western Mail,* 5 December 1956.
[74] *Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1951.
[75] Courtesy of the Port Talbot Historical Society.
[76] Interview with Kenneth Thomas, 26 September 2013.

Spicer, for example, remembered his first experience of using a telephone took place at the Abbey Works: 'The first time I handled a phone was when I went down the works labouring,' Spicer remembered. 'There was a phone on the wall in the pit cabin and we had old hands there who if the phone rang wouldn't answer it. And we had one old bloke who'd take the phone off the hook and he'd talk to it like that [gestures from a distance]. But nobody had, it was different.'[77] As a self-consciously modern steelworks, technology was a ubiquitous feature of working life at the Abbey from the outset. For many workers, the technology of the workplace was far in advance of what they were accustomed to in their out-of-work lives and learning to utilise these new technologies came to constitute an increasingly important aspect of the induction to work and the learning processes of the workplace.

Whilst the effects of technology were felt by different occupational groups in different ways, the broad trend of technological progress was undoubtedly towards alleviating much of the heavy and physically intensive aspects of the labour process. The Ministry of Labour's 1965 study highlighted the effect of technology on process workers in the steel industry, noting, 'The point was made that the introduction of mechanical loading equipment into production processes has removed much of the heavy work from the process worker grades.'[78] This observation was frequently corroborated by the Abbey's production workers. When Kenneth Thomas moved from the old Port Talbot Works melting shop to the Abbey Works, he found that the physically exerting manual tasks he had once done by hand were now performed by machines:

> [As an] assistant teemer in the melting shop – in the old melting shop – it was a big bar you pulled down and pushed up to shut off the metal. Sometimes it wouldn't shut it off and you had to run for it! But that was the way: big strong, on and off, and shut and all that. But in the BOS Plant they had hydraulics and the hydraulics were fitted to the arm. And you just pushed a button and the button just lifted the arm up and down. I couldn't get over that – that was fantastic![79]

Technology, then, was sometimes welcomed by workers for making working life easier. Blastfurnaceman Michael O' Callaghan remembered, 'when I started there in [19]59, '60 odd, it was bloody hard work, because if a furnace went off quality it was

[77] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[78] *The Metal Industries; A Study of Occupational Trends*, p. 26.
[79] Interview with Kenneth Thomas, 26 September 2013.

hard work cleaning up because it was all manual. As the burdens got better, the quality got better, the furnace performed better.'[80] When compared with the unremittingly arduous nature of work in the region's pre-war metal manufactories the change was, indeed, enormous. Although some bemoaned the loss of traditional skills, for most Port Talbot steelworkers the effects of technology made the experience of work a less depleting and more endurable one. Technology was not able to entirely dispense with the need for physical labour but, as local author H.R. John observed, few steelworkers would have advocated a return to older working practices: 'When the Abbey and Trostre mills rendered the old pack-mills obsolete few tinworkers, if any, were sorry to see them close.'[81]

Whilst the general effects of technology in mitigating the more physically arduous aspects of work are widely recognised, it is also a frequently voiced accusation that, in the process, modernisation made work less interesting and intrinsically rewarding. This process, commonly referred to as 'deskilling', has been described by Thompson as, 'the replacement of skilled workers by machines or machine operatives; the division and sub-division of jobs, with any remaining skill allocated to a few specialised workers; and the fragmentation of the remaining semi- or unskilled tasks.'[82] The inevitable result of this machine orientated automation of the workplace is said to be a decreased interest in work and diminishing attachment to the workplace, or 'alienation'. In McIvor's definition, the process of alienation, 'might be defined as an increased detachment and disassociation from work which had come to lose its intrinsic meaning.'[83] Several sociological work studies of the 1960s and 1970s recorded the phenomenon as being endemic amongst British workers. Goldthorpe *et al*.'s study of Luton car workers, for example, recorded that, 'only a minority appeared to find the work they performed inherently rewarding, while on the other hand work-related stresses of one kind or another were quite frequently reported and in some groups were obviously acute.'[84] In his study of car workers at Ford's Halewood plant in the 1970s, Huw Beynon went even further, arguing that, 'If you work at Ford's, on the line, you let your mind go blank and look

[80] Interview with Michael O'Callaghan, 27 January 2014.
[81] H.R. John, 'The Tinplate Industry in Port Talbot', *Transactions of the Port Talbot Historical Society*, 2 (1971), p. 34.
[82] Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work: An Introduction to Debates on the Labour Process* (London: MacMillan, 1983), p. 91.
[83] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 54.
[84] John Goldthorpe *et al*., *The Affluent Worker in the Class*, p. 55.

forward to pay day and the weekend.'[85] In his final assessment, Beynon believed that Ford's Liverpool employees 'feel no moral involvement with the firm or any identification with the job'.[86] The expansion of technology and mechanised production processes in the workplace have thus been characterised as having an overwhelmingly negative impact on the experience of work: undermining workers' traditional skills, inhibiting workplace autonomy and sapping the satisfaction and meaning from work.

The scale of the technological change experienced by Port Talbot steelworkers during this period was immense, yet modernisation was rarely cited as a source of decreased job satisfaction amongst the plant's employees. Although the newspaper, *Y Cymro*, reported in 1951 that at the Abbey Works, 'the skill of strong men is replaced by precision machinery and a vast amalgamation replaces the more personal touch of the old timers,'[87] steelworkers' own memories of working life recorded little of the despondency and alienation characteristic of deskilling. This, however, is not to deny that certain new production methods negated some traditional skills and undermined various working practices, many of which entailed a considerable degree of individual judgement and autonomy. The Ministry of Labour's 1965 manpower study noted that, 'technological change in the [metal] industries had had marked effects on the manufacturing process, particularly where control by instrumentation has tended to supersede individual skill and judgement.'[88] These changes were particularly evident when traditional steelmaking practices, such as hand rolling, were superseded by the new automated strip mill technology. As a survey of technological change in a north Wales steelworks reported, 'less skill of the conventional type is required in the strip mill than in the hand mill because successful rolling depends less on the judgement and dexterity of the operatives.'[89] The kind of specialised skills, acquired by years of practical experience, and much in evidence in Sidney Pollard's account of the late-nineteenth century Sheffield steel

[85] Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford* (Wakefield: E.P. Publishing, 1975), p. 113.
[86] *Ibid.* p. 118.
[87] *Y Cymro*, 20 July 1951.
[88] *The Metal Industries; A Study of Occupational Trends*, p. 24.
[89] *Men, Steel and Technical Change* (London: H.M.S.O., 1957), p. 6.

industries,[90] had been made largely redundant by the Abbey's automated production methods.

By the end of the 1960s computers were also increasingly able to measure many aspects of the steelmaking process that were once dependent on human judgement, based as it was on a steelworker's cumulative experience and skill.[91] Describing the traditional role of a first-hand melter, Pagnamenta and Overy's image of steelmaking, with its emphasis on knowledge and individual discretion, was increasingly made obsolete by computerised methods of analysis: 'Few of the melters knew what was happening chemically, or could explain quite why they were doing what they did. They learnt the job from others, and were part of steel-making's tradition and mystique.'[92]

Despite this, job satisfaction in the steel industry remained high. All of the steelworkers interviewed for this study felt broadly positive about the nature of their work. 'I loved it,' recalled Ron Walters of his time at the Abbey Works, 'met some wonderful characters, wonderful characters.'[93] Even accounting for the distorting effects of nostalgia, contemporary sociological studies of steelworkers reveal similarly high levels of job satisfaction throughout the industry. Peter Bowen's survey of 'Ironhill' steelworkers, for example, noted that the 'majority of respondents believed their jobs to contain a variety of features enhancing the level of individual interest and satisfaction and as such increasing the attachment of steelworkers to their jobs'.[94] Technology was clearly changing the process of steelmaking and the nature of work in the industry but, for most steelworkers, this was not registered as a change for the worse.

Accounts of developments in steelmaking practice that emphasise the atrophying of traditional skills reveal a broader trend within the deskilling debate; one which primarily focuses on the skills that have been lost through technological

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[90] Sidney Pollard, *A History of Labour in Sheffield* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1959), pp. 166-169.
[91] For an overview of the introduction of computerisation in the south Wales steel industry, see, Jonathan Aylen, 'Automation of Strip Mills', in Jonathan Aylen and Ruggero Ranieri (eds.), *Ribbon of Fire: How Europe Adopted and Developed US Strip Mill Technology, 1920-2000* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2012).
[92] Peter Pagnamenta & Richard Overy, *All Our Working Lives*, p. 77.
[93] Interview with Ron Walters, 13 November 2013.
[94] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 189.

modernisation, rather than the new skills such technologies frequently required. As early as the 1950s, Ferdynand Zweig observed that, 'mechanization often develops new skills which are different from the old ones, but not necessarily less interesting,'[95] and this was repeatedly evidenced in steelworkers own recollections of technology in their workplace. Indeed, McIvor is amongst the few historians to have acknowledged that mechanization could lead to the 'reconstitution of skills in new expertise sets' as well as skills being lost. [96] For some workers, new technologies also posed additional challenges that were not necessarily welcomed. Paul Ace remembered technology adding a new level of complexity to his role as an electrician. Technology, according to Ace, made his work, 'a lot harder… I was doing more the physical part of it while the brainier ones would sort out the electronics and stuff like that. I did pick up on that, but at the end of the day I was a physical person, it was hard to – let's be honest I was thick [laughs], I don't like to say it but I was a bit thick in that respect.'[97] Workers found themselves having to acquire new knowledge and skills to master the intricacies of modern steelmaking. John Pugh's memories of learning how to handle the modern automated machinery of the Cold Mill reveal the high level of expertise such tasks entailed: 'You learnt,' he remembered, 'there was more expertise involved through using buttons, hydraulics, pneumatics, so your expertise got better with equipment then. It wasn't such a manual thing.'[98] Whilst the production line methods of the automotive industry may have offered car workers little compensation for the loss of traditional craft skills, in industries, such as steel, technology could offer new outlets for acquiring knowledge and displaying individual talents.

There has also been a propensity amongst exponents of the deskilling thesis to romanticise the alleged reward and meaning workers derived from older processes of manual work.[99] In this respect, as Ross McKibbin has rigorously argued, the major premise of the deskilling thesis is, 'both inarticulate and unproven. It presupposes that pre-industrial work was in some way expressive and purposive; that before labour divided… work and leisure were integrated, part of a unified mental and

[95] Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker*, p. 111.
[96] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 58.
[97] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[98] Interview with John Pugh, 9 September 2013.
[99] See, for example, Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

material world and mutually enriching.'[100] In keeping with the wider academic discourse on the workplace experience, many of the fundamental premises of the deskilling and alienation debate have their origins in a highly politicised interpretation of the labour process. Paul Thompson, for example, is amongst those who have argued that the encroachment of technology in the workplace had broader implications for the ability of workers to act collectively within a class-based frame of reference. For Thompson, 'the significance of the deskilling debate does not lie solely in the analysis of the trends in the nature of work. Of equal importance are the potential consequences for class consciousness, action and organisation.'[101] The introduction of technology could constitute a significant source of workplace tension, and the implementation of new machinery contributed to more than one industrial dispute at the Port Talbot works, but its implications and personal significance for workers defy a purely political analysis.

Taking a wider perspective on the issue reveals that there is little evidence to suggest that working life in the Port Talbot steel industry was more rewarding in the first half of the twentieth century than the second, although there is considerable evidence revealing it to be more physically demanding and dangerous. 'We had plenty of fun,' recalled J. Ivor Hanson in 1969, describing his career in the old Port Talbot steelworks, 'but few if any would wish to return to such conditions of work.'[102] Indeed, one of the fundamental misconceptions of the deskilling argument is its assumption that the primary meaning of work was derived from the process of work itself. Whilst many steelworkers did not consciously dislike their work, the value which they gained from it was often found in aspects of the workplace experience not directly attributable to the work process. Even if automated processes and machinery had negated the use of traditional skills, steelworkers could still derive reward and meaning from a knowledge of the steelmaking process itself. Graham Rowland reflected that, 'I didn't realise how interesting the job was until I got in there and how passionate people were… I enjoyed the interest of the job itself and the actual steel itself. I think it's like a drug to be honest with you, it's something that you need…'.[103] David Thomas similarly recalled the inherent sense of value he

[100] Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class*, p. 150.
[101] Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work*, p. 91.
[102] J. Ivor Hanson , *Profile of a Welsh Town* (Swansea: s/l, 1969), p. 99.
[103] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.

derived from understanding the intricacies of the production process. 'It was changing all the time,' he remembered. 'You didn't know it, but you were building up a database on things, you were getting really good at what you did. I suppose it's like a bus driver – after so many years – and I didn't realise that I could look at anything to do with a piece of steel and evaluate it in seconds and say, that's no good or that's ok…'.[104] Even in a heavily computerised and automated workplace, such as the Abbey Works, workers still found opportunities to acquire knowledge and develop work-related interests.

Health and Safety

Alongside technology, the most significant change steelworkers identified in their experience of work across the period was in the field of health and safety. At the outset of the period, many steelworkers confronted the prospect of being injured, or even killed, at work on a daily basis and this undoubtedly informed Port Talbot steelworkers' perception of work, as well as the culture of their workplace. Throughout the period, the steel industry ranked highly amongst the most dangerous workplaces in Britain. In McIvor's assessment, 'the "traditional" heavy industries saw the greatest carnage, with the highest death and mutilation rates amongst coal miners, seamen and fishermen, iron and steel workers, shipbuilders, construction workers, and agricultural and forestry workers.'[105] Witnessing serious workplace accidents and fatalities or suffering an injury at work were common experiences amongst the manual workers interviewed for this study.

The nature of the risks workers confronted at work, however, varied according to the specific production process on which workers were engaged. Working in the Cold Mill, for example, John Pugh, remembered that,

> Most of the accidents in the Cold Mill were cuts to your hands, to your digits, because we were dealing with sharp steel – very, very sharp edges. So I would say predominantly minor cuts going up to tendons being severed. Fatalities: people being cut by steel flying. But mostly cuts to your hands and

[104] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.
[105] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 155.

> your arms because you're dealing with steel: very, very sharp metal every day.[106]

In other areas of the plant, the nature of the dangers associated with the workplace could differ considerably. In the blastfurnaces, Arthur Bamford, remembered gas as being an omnipresent danger:

> The biggest killer on any blastfurnace anywhere in the world is gas. The blastfurnace produces carbon monoxide in huge quantities and – as you know – carbon monoxide is tasteless; you can't smell it, you can't taste it, you don't know it's there. Gassings were a regular feature. It was nothing to hear about a gassing incident and in my first year, 1974, I think three men died. I don't remember the specifics about them, obviously, but everywhere I went that was my biggest fear, the gas situation, because I didn't know enough about it.[107]

The universal dangers associated with overhead cranes, operating heavy machinery and working at height were also a recurring source of accidents and fatalities. Local press reports from the 1950s and 1960s serve as a tragic reminder of the frequency with which falls and collisions could claim lives in the plant. The death of a contractor in 1951, who was crushed when a quantity of poorly secured steel rails fell off a lorry, was sadly not atypical of the weekly casualty reports that emerged from the Port Talbot works.[108]

The effects of working in the steel industry on workers' long-term health are more contentious. Hearing loss was a common complaint amongst certain sections of the plant's workforce and a visit of the Committee on Safety and Health at Work to the Port Talbot works in 1970 identified 'noise' as a primary concern: 'Some of the processes,' the report concluded 'e.g. on the pickling lines, were extremely noisy'[109] and several of the workers interviewed for this study attributed their hearing loss to their experience of work.[110] Industrial deafness was also a common condition amongst the Scottish steelworkers surveyed in David Bradley's oral history study.[111] Whilst workers in the Cold Mill were most vulnerable to long-term hearing loss, other health risks were more localised but no less severe. As a crane driver working

[106] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[107] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[108] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 17 August 1951.
[109] TNA, LAB 96/453, Visit of Committee on Safety and Health at Work to Port Talbot Works – B.S.C., 19-20 October 1970.
[110] See, interview with John Foley, 10 October 2013; interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[111] David Bradley, 'Oral History, Occupational Health and Safety and Scottish Steel', p. 91.

above the pickling line, where metal sheets were cleaned in vats of hot acid, Joe Stanton believed the noxious fumes he was made to inhale directly led to the loss of all his teeth before the age of thirty. Recalling how his time at the Abbey had affected his health, Stanton reflected, 'the biggest thing was I lost my teeth in less than two years of being in the pickle line on that crane… every day I came home from work my gums were black, just above the gums was black.'[112] Stanton also remembered how the effects of inhaling fumes from the pickling line led to him frequently feeling close to losing consciousness: 'I think it could have killed you if you was in there for any length of time.'[113] Such recollections reveal how the inhospitable environment of the workplace could present a constant risk to steelworkers' personal health.

The experience of industrial disease amongst steelworkers has been less well documented than for other sections of the industrial workforce, but most allegations have centred on the carcinogenic effects of working in the coke ovens. As early as the 1970s, Abbey Works coke oven workers expressed their concern at the potential links between cancer and respiratory disease and their working environment. In a letter to the general secretary of their trade union, a union representative for the Abbey's Grange Coke Oven workers demanded that greater action be taken to protect them from the effects of industrial disease:

> With reference to the fact that there is now every possibility of Cancer being a reality with certain coke oven operaters [sic], the members of my Branch are of the opinion that far more positive action should be taken at national level with every consideration be given to calling a meeting of all coke oven workers representatives to discuss, and [?] our preventative measures to protect the health, and lives of our members.[114]

At the time of writing, the ongoing legal action taken by three hundred former coke oven workers, including Port Talbot works employees, against the BSC, for failing 'to adequately protect workers from the significant dust and fumes generated', remains pending.[115] The result, however, offers the potential to finally resolve the alleged link between the steel industry and cancer and respiratory disease and reveal

[112] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[113] *Ibid.*
[114] RBA, Iron & Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/1, Letter from S.J. Mason to Bill Sirs, 24 August 1976.
[115] South Wales Evening Post, 'More than 300 coke oven workers act against British Steel and British Coal', 27 July 2013, <http://www.southwales-eveningpost.co.uk/300-coke-oven-workers-act-British-Steel-British/story-19579007-detail/story.html> [Accessed: 26 September 2014].

the true extent of the effects of industry on steelworkers' health. The risks and dangers endured by Port Talbot's steelworkers, then, were not shared equally. This disproportionate distribution of risk at the plant reflects the unequal relations of power which existed within the industry as well as the social divisions that permeated the workforce.

Danger and risk were characteristic of working life for many Port Talbot works employees but managerial initiatives increasingly attempted to mitigate the worst excesses of steel work. Preventative health and safety precautions assumed greater importance as the period progressed and constituted a fundamental change in the working practice and culture of the plant. Despite providing ambulances for their employees and convening safety committees,[116] the SCOW's initial health and safety measures were primitive and evidenced few advances in the field of occupational welfare since the inter-war period. In 1949, for example, shortly before the Abbey Works came into operation, the SCOW reported still using mice to check for gas.[117] Safety clothing, meanwhile, continued to be provided at employees' own expense and wearing it was seldom enforced. Many workers early recollections of protective clothing reveal how little had changed from the archetypal steelworker's uniform of the early twentieth century. Dennis Spicer remembered, when first entering the old Port Talbot melting shop that, 'you could pick up a pair of leather gloves which were issued to you, nothing else. Everything else you supplied: your boots, your shirt, your sweat cloths.'[118] Kenneth Thomas similarly noted of his early experience at the plant that, 'the only protection we had was a sweat cloth around our neck and a cap.'[119] Although some tangible changes, such as the issuing of safety helmets to certain employees in 1952,[120] revealed a more concerted commitment amongst employers towards accident prevention, in keeping with wider national trends in industry the onus for workplace safety continued to be placed on the employees. Workers, therefore, had to continue to provide their own safety boots (purchasable from the company 'by a deduction of 5/- per week'[121]) and accidents continued to be treated as an economic issue for which workers should take responsibility. SCOW

[116] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, November 1952.
[117] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, April 1949.
[118] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[119] Interview with Kenneth Thomas, 26 September 2013.
[120] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, June 1954.
[121] *Ibid.*

publications frequently contained exhortations for greater safety, with one such article noting that 90% of recent accidents at the plant 'could have been avoided had the persons concerned been more mentally alert and conscious of the fact that full safety precautions are required in our industry'.[122]

Most commonly, however, workers tended to rely on the advice of more experienced colleagues to help them stay safe in the workplace. Indeed, learning how to avoid and navigate the many hazards of work was a central component of many workers' informal training on the shop floor and part of the skill of being a steelworker. For Graham Rowland, 'health and safety was word of mouth really. You relied on people to look after you rather than a bit of paper, which you got now.'[123] Learning techniques for individual preservation in face of the inherent dangers of the workplace was as much a part of the skill of being a steelworker as understanding the steelmaking process itself. This was particularly evident in workers' attitudes towards contractors, who were often seen to lack the necessary experience and understanding of the industry to protect themselves from its hazards. David Thomas, for example, remembered that, 'the majority of accidents were contractors because they didn't know the workings of the place.'[124] Similar concerns were raised in the company newspaper, *The Dragon*, which reported in 1958 that, "In the Steel Division alone during the last 10 years 38 men have been killed by falls whilst on construction work of various kinds. The majority were contractors' employees – riggers, erectors, roofers, scaffolders.'[125] The knowledge and understanding required to stay safe in a steel plant thus constituted a salient distinction between steelworkers and outsiders.

Whilst health and safety remained matters of personal concern for the plant's employees, for the SCOW and the BSC they were largely economic issues. In managerial documents and company publications, workplace accidents were typically described in relation to their effect on the production process, through the rhetoric of 'lost time accidents' and the number of 'man hours lost' per incident.[126]

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[122] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, March 1954.
[123] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.
[124] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.
[125] *The Dragon*, May 1958.
[126] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, April 1949; SRC, BSC – Management Committee Reports, 378, Box 4, Report by the Director, Port Talbot Works, for the Month of February 1975 to DMC, 8 April 1975.

The Committee on Safety and Health at Work's visit to the plant in 1970 recorded that, 'management recognised that safety and health was an economic question.'[127] Across the period, however, the general trend was towards greater safety precautions, something which was recognised by most steelworkers. Despite conceding that 'progress was not even', Martin Upham considered that, 'on the whole the industry tended to become slowly safer all the time.'[128] This opinion was largely corroborated by workers' own personal recollections of work, many of which identified health and safety as one of the most significant changes they witnessed across their working careers. Paul Ace recalled that by the end of his career in the 1990s, 'health and safety was in good and proper. We were wearing helmets and boots and we were having clothes, suits – and things were good actually.'[129]

The influence of government legislation, specifically the 1974 Health and Safety at Work act, described by McIvor as 'the most important change since the Second World War in the regulation and control of workplace dangers',[130] also went some way towards engendering a more rigorous health and safety culture. As McIvor elaborates, the Health and Safety at Work Act also, 'introduced a new principle of "shared responsibility" for workplace health and safety between employers and employees,'[131] thus making employers more accountable for the safety of their workers. Although the success of the plant's health and safety measures are often hard to assess, with exact figures regarding the number of workplace accidents being hard to ascertain, the general trend across the period has been toward a safer and more regulated working environment. The progress of occupational safety, however, failed to completely eliminate the dangers associated with working in the Port Talbot steelworks and inequalities of risk remained a persistent feature of working life for the plant's employees. The deaths of three Port Talbot steelworkers during a blastfurnace explosion at the plant in 2001 tragically revealed the inherent and persistent perils of work in the industry.[132]

[127] TNA, LAB 96/453, Visit of Committee on Safety and Health at Work to Port Talbot Works, 1970.
[128] Martin Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched*, p. 214.
[129] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[130] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 180.
[131] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[132] *The Guardian*, 10 November 2001.

Staff Workers

Not all experiences of work in the plant were characterised by adverse conditions and the risk of personal injury. The workplace experiences of the plant's many staff workers reveal how understandings and interpretations of work could vary enormously across occupational groups, presenting salient social divisions amongst employees. Indeed, despite sharing a single employer and industrial workplace, the experience of staff workers often bore few similarities to their manual counterparts. As a sizeable, and numerically growing, section of the plant's workforce, throughout much of the period, the experience of staff workers is significant. Despite only employing 240 monthly and general office staff in 1948, by 1960 there were 1,874 such staff employees on the SCOW's payroll at Port Talbot and their percentage as a proportion of the plant's overall workforce had risen from 5.53 to 10.36 per cent.[133] The growth in the number of staff workers at the works was entirely congruent with broader occupational trends in the steel industry. As Upham notes, 'administrative, technical and clerical staff as a percentage of metal manufacturing employees rose from 13.7% to 18.9% in the years to 1958.'[134] Like the manual workers, however, staff workers did not constitute an occupationally homogenous group. As Charles Docherty explains, the 'staff' label embraced, 'all jobs from clerical and office workers, through technicians and engineering grades to the lower levels of management.'[135] The plant's staff workers, then, represented a broad occupational hierarchy comprising office employees, such as draughtsman, clerical workers and secretaries, as well as the company's supervisory grades, from foreman to sectional, divisional and middle managers.

Despite the diverse nature of their job roles, the plant's staff workers were typically distinguished from manual workers by their propensity to work days, a standard nine a.m. to five p.m. shift without having to 'clock in', and their removal from manual work. This distinction was as much spatial as physical, with staff employees' work being mainly confined to an office environment, rather than out on the plant. Naturally, the working environment of the office differed significantly from the conditions in the production departments and staff workers interpretations

[133] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, pp. 86-87.
[134] Martin Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched*, pp. 43-44.
[135] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 54.

of work varied accordingly. As a draughtsman based in the Abbey Works drawing offices, Doug Hockin described his working conditions as 'excellent, very good… the drawing office equipment, drawing equipment, drawing boards and design aspect was very good, very good. It was a happy environment to work in to be quite honest with you…'.[136] The material conditions of work for the plant's office staff were undoubtedly cleaner and healthier than those of production workers. As a steelworks typist, Jan Fletcher remembered the difference in workplace conditions between the head offices and the blast furnaces: 'You see, when you're in a head office it's all very clean and rooms in different departments, everybody's dressed tidily. Whereas, out on the furnace, out in the works, you get the men coming down, the manager in their hard hats and their clothes and your clothes end smelling up of sulphur, it's a dirtier atmosphere.'[137] Both in terms of its personal and environmental appearance the experience of work for manual and staff experiences of work presented a striking visual and sensory contrast.

The experiences of staff employees, such as Fletcher, are also revealing as to the often ignored experiences of female workers in the steel industry. Employment statistics for the Port Talbot works rarely recorded gender distinctions but national statistics reveal a marked increase in the number of females employed in the metal industries after the Second World War. The Manpower Research Unit's 1965 study into the metal industries in Britain revealed that 12.3 per cent of the industry's workforce was female[138] and anticipated this figure would increase over the ensuing period, noting that, 'for the future, employment opportunities for women and girls were expected to increase substantially.'[139] Throughout the period, the Port Talbot works' female employees were to be found entirely in staff positions, such as clerical workers and typists, as well as amongst the catering and cleaning staff. Paul Thompson has identified these characteristics of women's employment as being part of a national trend, arguing that 'the expansion of clerical labour associated with the growing complexity and scale of production pushed employers into drawing on a strata of women previously restricted to a few jobs like teaching.'[140] Furthermore, this pattern of employment for women in the plant constituted a segregation of

[136] Interview with Douglas Hockin, 11 October 2013.
[137] Interview with Jan Fletcher, 14 October 2013.
[138] *The Metal Industries; A Study of Occupational Trends*, p. 23.
[139] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[140] Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work*, p. 204.

female employees from the production process which, as well as reflecting contemporary societal attitudes towards gender, also removed women from direct competition with male workers. As Thompson goes on to note, 'new technology like the typewriter and the telephone helped women into the office by creating new categories of work not in direct competition with men.'[141]

Whilst the nature of female employment at the plant differed considerably from that of production workers, women's experiences of work also differed in other significant ways from their male staff co-workers. The working lives of the plant's female employees were usually shorter than their male colleagues with marriage or childbirth usually signalling their withdrawal from the workforce. As a clerical worker in the production department, Patricia Williams' experience was typical of many female employees when she left the plant in 1972 to have her first child. 'It was uncommon' for female employees to carry on working after childbirth, Patricia remembered, 'because there was no maternity leave then, so if you wanted to go back to work you basically had to have the baby, have a fortnight's holiday and be back in. You didn't have the choice of retaining the job.'[142] Once again, the nature of female employment in the works reflected broader societal trends. In Wales, Deirdre Beddoe summarised the typical pattern in females' engagement with the labour market, whereby 'many remained following marriage but left to have children'.[143] There is evidence to suggest, however, that these attitudes began to loosen over time and it was increasingly common for women to return to the Port Talbot work after childbirth. Jean Pattern remembered this trend amongst her female colleagues, noting that, 'people were coming back to work [after having children] even then.'[144] Nevertheless, the experience and condition of employment for female workers at the plant differed considerably from that of males, being characterised by more intermittent participation in the workforce and an inequality of employment opportunities and pay. In 1961, for example, the plant's 'Total Operatives and Works

[141] *Ibid.*
[142] Interview with Patricia and Douglas Williams, 26 November 2013.
[143] Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 142.
[144] Interview with Michael and Jean Patten, 29 October 2013.

Staff' male average weekly wage was £22, 3s. The average female wage for operatives and works staff for an equivalent week was only £6.[145]

Camaraderie and Cohesion

Despite the vast discrepancies in Port Talbot steelworkers' perception of work and experiences of the workplace, there were aspects of working life that offered points of mutual reference and gave meaning to the label 'steelworker'. Almost all recollections of working life at the plant, for example, were united in acknowledging the centrality of sociability and camaraderie to the working environment. For almost all of the workers interviewed for this study, going to work at the plant was an intrinsically social experience, where the processes of work were interspersed with chatter, jokes and games. Indeed, whilst many studies of work have typically focused on the production process, individual experiences of work were often primarily based upon the bonds of human friendship that existed on the factory floor. As Ross McKibbin has noted, 'the workplace was an important social institution. Men did not just work there, it was in the factory more than anywhere else that they had their social being.'[146]

It has often been argued that socialising in the workplace offered a distraction from the hardship of work or a means of withstanding its monotony. In his survey of British workers, Ferdynand Zweig, for example, believed that, 'human relations give colour and warmth to their jobs. Even on machines which completely govern the speed of their movements, those jobs never become mechanical to them, because they are humanized by their close relations with others.'[147] Robert Bruno was also of the opinion that the Youngstown steelworkers he studied saw their social interactions with each other as a compensation for their lack of satisfaction in work: 'To counter the psychologically restrictive nature of their work,' Bruno argues, 'steelworkers spontaneously recreated their workspace, interjecting their community life into the

[145] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/20/7/Box 24, Manning, Memorandum from Cost Department, 12 May 1961.
[146] Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class*, p. 156.
[147] Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker*, p. 110.

work process'.[148] For production workers, whose work processes had been most affected by the encroaching effects of mechanisation, workplace sociability could, undoubtedly, give meaning and pleasure to work and compensate for other, less satisfying, aspects of the job.

The exclusive interpretation of workplace sociability as a symptom of widespread disinterest in work, however, presents a somewhat reductive analysis. Indeed, if the only purpose of socialising in work was to alleviate monotonous job tasks then this fails to account for the frequent allusions made to workplace camaraderie by highly skilled craft and staff workers. Amongst manual workers, joking, games and badinage amongst colleagues (what Paul Thompson referred to as 'making out'[149]) was also cited as a means of alleviating the stresses associated with the dangers of production. Arthur Bamford recalled that the way workers rationalised the risks of working on the blastfurnace was to 'turn it into fun'.[150] A culture of practical jokes and high jinks was, as Bamford remembered, 'the type of humour that basically got us through it. It wasn't a laugh a minute, obviously because it was terrifying, but that's how they dealt with it.'[151] For other sections of the workforce, too, workplace sociability could make for a more enriching and fulfilling working experience. Indeed, it was not uncommon for steelworkers looking back on their careers to identify the friendships that existed within the workplace as what they enjoyed most about going to work. Even accounting for the nostalgic tendencies of retrospective reflection, the frequency with which such sentiments were expressed underlines their importance. Graham Rowland candidly revealed the emotional significance of the friendships he formed in the industry: 'It's been a wonderful insight to me, especially the social aspect of it because I've met quite a number of people.' 'It's your family isn't it?,' he went on, 'you spend more time with them than you do with your wife and you learn quite a lot about their problems and they learn quite a lot about yours.'[152] The importance attached to sociability across all grades of manual and staff workers, however, suggests its function was more than purely compensatory. Workplace friendships tended to add to the meaning and satisfaction workers derived from work, rather than act as a substitute for atrophying skills.

[148] Robert Bruno, *Steelworker Alley*, p. 62.
[149] Paul Thompson, *The Nature of* Work, pp. 160-161.
[150] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[151] *Ibid.*
[152] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.

Such friendships also served to reinforce the notion of the workplace as a community, with its own distinct culture and identity. The variety of occupations and processes that coexisted within the plant may have worked against the emergence of a single homogenous workplace culture but common points of interest and experience could, nonetheless, symbolically unify steelworkers as a group. Indeed, in the face of such entrenched occupational divisions, the shared relationship with the metal – the reverence and knowledge of the steelmaking process – could offer a sense of occupational identity to an otherwise fragmented group of workers. It was a sentiment expressed by Charles Docherty in his history of the British steel industry. Docherty described the common bond amongst workers as, 'an emotional, almost sensual, feeling for the metal being produced – a respect, and above all, a deep understanding for its texture, form and hardness and an inevitable love – hate attitude to the production process of steel.'[153] The veneration of the steelmaking process can be easily romanticised but, as the product of workers' combined labours, steel could present a means of common identification and a symbol of occupational unity that transcended the workforce's inherent heterogeneity.

These attitudes are also apparent in the reverence and pride Port Talbot steelworkers displayed towards their work and product. The importance of work as a source of self-identification and worth is argued by McIvor, who notes that, 'from road sweepers to lawyers, people defined themselves through their work, priding themselves on their skill, productivity, earning power, craftsmanship, strength, endurance, adaptability, graft, professionalism, service to the family, the community and society.'[154] This sense of importance that stemmed from work was observed amongst steelworkers by Ferdynand Zweig, who recorded that, 'they [steelworkers] take great pride in their work, knowing that the strength of the country depends largely on their output.'[155] For steelworker, Graham Rowland, it was the unique nature of the steel industry itself that warranted such pride and respect: 'What narks me sometimes,' he said,

> Is people make comparisons with other industries and there isn't any *other* industry. I've listened to people telling me, or trying to tell me about, "we

[153] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers: The Sons of Vulcan* (London: Heinemann Education Books, 1983), p. 3.
[154] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 60.
[155] Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker*, p. 37.

> should be doing this that way and"… I show them some of the things that we actually do on site. I say, "would you do that in Tescos?" It's a different animal and it warrants a different sort of respect and so do the people – it's a one off.[156]

For some workers conceptions of workplace pride were manifest in the masculine toughness and physical endurance their job required, whilst for others it was inherent in the mental abilities and skills they utilised, but they all informed understandings of what it meant to be a steelworker.

Conclusion

There was no single experience of work at the Port Talbot steelworks. Rather, life in the plant presented a multitude of interpretations and understandings of work, which were mediated by workers' individual experiences of the workplace. The condition of work at the plant changed greatly across this period. Personal recollections of work reveal the transformative effects of technology and the progress of health and safety on the working environment but advancements in these fields did little to engender a more universal condition of work. On the contrary, the encroachment of technology in the workplace tended to perpetuate skill-based divisions as more emphasis came to be placed on academic qualifications and specific expertise. Equally, despite overall improvements in health and safety the nature of employment at the plant could still vary considerably and some jobs remained more dangerous than others. In a sociological study of former south Wales steelworkers, Mackenzie *et al*. argued that, 'The shared experience of work is a strong influence over the creation of social collectivity. Work as a collective experience, not just in terms of the presence or absence of union organization but in terms of the shared experience of the labour process, may act as a basis for group identity.'[157] However, it is clear that work in the steel industry was characterised as much by its variety and plurality of experience as any 'shared experience of the labour process'.[158]

[156] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.
[157] Robert MacKenzie *et al*., 'All that is Solid?: Class, Identity and the Maintenance of a Collective Orientation amongst Redundant Steelworkers', *Sociology*, 40 (2006), p. 836.
[158] *Ibid.*

Despite its internal differences, however, the workplace community still displayed a strong degree of social cohesion. Steelworkers' recollections of work reveal a wide variety of workplace experiences but, on a daily basis, it was often the relationships formed with immediate workmates and the mundane practice of work itself that most greatly influenced personal perceptions of working life. As Keith Foley remembered, 'You've got your own little bunch of guys who you work with every day. You might be in a department with a thousand men but there's always your [pause]. If there's three of us who work in this room, for instance, we become friends...'.[159] Workplace sociability thus served not only to alleviate the periodic boredom of the working day but to counter the potential feelings of dislocation and anonymity that could arise from working in an industrial complex as vast and fragmented as the Port Talbot steelworks. Furthermore, the inherent camaraderie of working life was cited by all grades and occupations of works employees as being an integral part of their working experience and one which transcended (but did not eradicate) the occupational divisions within the plant.[160]

As will be explored further in the following chapter, divisions based on status, age, gender and occupation constituted salient markers of identity amongst steelworkers but, on a day-to-day basis, the experience of work was a primarily communal and collective one. The remarkable degree of solidarity and social unity steelworkers displayed within their own immediate work teams, for example, often counters their highly stratified conceptions of the workforce as a whole. Indeed, across all grades of workers, the social bonds within a particular work group or team were strong. Electrician Paul Ace, for example, remembered, 'As far as my shift was concerned, there was only me, my mate, a fitter and his mate – the four of us – and we did work as a team. And people on the [coke ovens] battery knew, leave them alone, they get on with it: we interfere and there's problems then.'[161] As a staff worker in the plant's inspection department, David Thomas also remembered that the nature of work itself was an inherently collective experience: 'people would work together as a team,' he remembered, to get the task done.[162] In this regard, the dislocated nature of the modern production process was still capable of reproducing

[159] Interview with Keith Foley, 23 October 2013.
[160] See, Interview with Doug Hockin, 11 October 2013; Interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.
[161] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[162] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.

feelings of workplace unity and social collectivity. As a symbolic representation of the plant's workers, the image of the metal itself became a metaphor for how steelworkers were perceived by the wider community: 'men of iron' renowned for their toughness and durability. For the individual however, it was primarily in the nature of their own specific relationship with the task and their immediate colleagues that they produced their own meanings of work and what it meant to be a steelworker.

Chapter Three

Divisions of Labour: Occupation, Gender and the Hierarchies of Class in the Workplace

Introduction

Working life in the Port Talbot steelworks revealed both the diversity and communality of the industrial workplace, yet it displayed little of its perceived homogeneity and consistency. Rather, the plurality of experiences contained within the plant gave rise to a highly intricate and stratified system of workplace relations. Typically, the social relations of the workplace have been equated with the process of industrial relations, whereby the workplace is largely conceived as a diametrically opposed two-tier class-based nexus. Deborah Massey presents a summary of this interpretation:

> The basic building blocks of a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie and the working-class, form the main axis. Each of these two classes is defined in relation to the other and by its degree of control over the process of production, its place in the relations of production…These are the two fundamental, and defining, classes of a capitalist society. It is their mutually defining relationship which enables the one class to exploit the other and to do so in a specifically capitalist fashion.[1]

It is a view that still informs historical interpretations of working-class society and the industrial workplace. In a comprehensive account of the history of the British working-class in the twentieth century, Selina Todd has argued that most workers still saw social relations in this way during the post-war era: 'Many workers believed,' Todd notes, 'that Britain was a two-class society composed of "them" and "us", and that "they" held power unjustly.'[2] At Port Talbot, however, steelworkers' own understandings of the workplace community revealed a highly stratified and

[1] Deborah Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (London: MacMillan, 1995), p. 31.
[2] Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working-class, 1910 – 2010* (London: John Murray, 2014), p. 266.

internally divided conception of social relations that contained multiple work based identities and defied a strictly bilateral interpretation.

Since the emergence of social history as a central discourse within British historiography, collective class based identities have been integral to historical interpretations of industry and the culture of the workplace. Much of the historical literature on work has focused on the role of trade unions and the communal experience of industrial production in inculcating conceptions of class and the formation of new social relations: what is often still referred to as a 'shared working-class experience'.[3] Historians of earlier periods have not been ignorant of the potential for division amongst workers; the distinctions between skilled and unskilled, male and female workers and regional antipathy have all been posited as barriers to greater class-based unification. However, the primacy of class has remained a persistent feature in historical understandings of workplace society.[4] E.P. Thompson, for example, argued that it was wrong to speak of 'working-classes', rather than a single, 'working-class,' owing to 'the consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interest of other classes', and, 'the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organisations.'[5] For Thompson, the notion of a working-class was predicated on a shared class consciousness, with its 'working-class intellectual traditions, working-class community-patterns, and a working-class structure of feeling'.[6] With the widespread deindustrialisation of the British economy since the 1980s, it has also become expedient to juxtapose the degradation and fragmentation of many former industrial communities with this traditional labour history interpretation of a collectivist pre-Thatcher working-class. Left wing commentator and author Owen Jones wrote in 2012 that,

> The old industries were the beating hearts of the communities they sustained. Most local people had worked in similar jobs and had done so for generations. And of course the unions, whatever their faults and limitations, had given the workers in these communities strength and solidarity and a

[3] Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005), p. 85.
[4] See, Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964), 'Trends in the British Labour Movement since 1850'.
[5] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-class* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 212-213
[6] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-class*, p. 213.

> sense of power. All of this had sustained a feeling of belonging, of pride in, a shared working-class experience.[7]

The industrial workplace thus continues to be posited as a site in which class-based identities and solidarities were created and sustained.

The ownership of the means of production represented a salient division within the social and economic relations of the workplace but its centrality in many historical studies of work has often obfuscated more nuanced and ubiquitous social constructions of labour. Many of these had a persistent and profound influence on workers' understanding and interpretation of work. As well as the economic divisions that distinguished workers from owners, the Port Talbot works' workforce was also internally delineated and defined, along the lines of occupation, education, age, gender and status. These categorisations not only informed the way workers defined themselves and each other but also affected their ability to act collectively; sectional interests were as likely to bring workers into conflict with each other as with management. Indeed, several historians have called for a more inclusive and wide ranging historical account of workers' experiences, one which recognizes the multiple and overlapping distinctions on which individual identities were based. Keith Gildart, for example, has argued that, 'labour history has attempted for too long to construct a cohesive canvas of a national working-class experience and consciousness.'[8] By considering the social relations of the workplace in their totality, therefore, historians have the opportunity to present a more accurate portrayal of workplace society, as well as a more nuanced understanding of working-class culture and identity. The social structure of the workplace could promote intense displays of unity and solidarity amongst workers but it could also accentuate difference and foster divisiveness.

This chapter explores the multifaceted social relations of the Port Talbot works further and considers how steelworkers understood the society of the workplace. Divisions of status are, therefore, analysed alongside understandings of occupation, gender and age as crucial determinants in the culture and social composition of the works community. Although work was a collective experience, it

[7] Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working-class* (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 48-49.
[8] Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity, 1945-1996* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), p. 5.

is argued that the workplace also offered steelworkers outlets to fulfil individual ambitions and advance personal goals. Numerous opportunities for promotion and social advancement at the plant gave rise to an elongated workplace hierarchy amongst steelworkers, based on commonly accepted notions of skill and respect, which blurred traditional distinctions between workers and managers. The chapter concludes by placing the findings so far within the broader historical discourse on work and class. In the final analysis, it is argued that collective workplace identities were rarely monolithic and were shaped by a wide variety of factors relating to individual situations and circumstances. Not only does this challenge the bilaterally diametric interpretation of social relations in industry but it also questions what it meant to belong to a particular group of workers and how this relates to existing interpretations of working-class identity and culture in Britain. The intention of this chapter, however, is not to dispel the notion of a working-class or undermine the economic inequality on which it is predicated. The immensely varied – and, at times, paradoxical – experiences of Port Talbot's steelworkers at work, however, reveals how, through the subjectivity of individual experience, a collective, albeit fluid, social identity could still emerge.

Occupation

Occupational identities were integral to the construction of social relations at the Port Talbot works and acted as a salient indicator of how workers defined themselves in relation to their colleagues. Moreover, these distinctions mattered to steelworkers whose attachment to their respective occupations could often be as strong as to the 'steelworker' label. Peter Bowen has stressed that, 'in essence the workplace is a society of occupations… so who we are in work is shaped by what we do: our sense of worth in employment is often occupationally based.'[9] Furthermore, Bowen argues that, 'the relative importance of occupations and the shifting status relationships between them are fundamental influences in both personal self-recognition and

[9] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations, Industrial Relations and Industrial Sociology: A Strategic and Occupational Study of British Steelmaking* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 20.

collective action.'[10] Occupational divisions also underlined the fragmented nature of the plant's labour force, where different production processes and occupations took places in different parts of the plant, many of which had little contact with each other. As Doug Hockin, an Abbey Works draughtsman remembered,

> I think it was about seventy-five per cent of them [employees] did keep to themselves. There was no interaction between people working on the deep water harbour with somebody on the finishing mills. Everybody knew they had to have a certain progress [process], like the rolling of the slabs and the tinning and the continuous casting and things like that. They knew it was happening but they were just involved in what they were doing.[11]

The divided character of work described here serves as a necessary reminder that occupational divisions were often reinforced spatially. With different processes being confined to different areas and production plants, most workers were given few opportunities for regular interaction with employees outside their immediate work station. Experiences of work, then, were mediated through each individual's interpretation of the workplace, the variety of which served to reinforce the importance of occupational identities.

One of the most salient occupational divisions within the Abbey Works was that which existed between process and craft workers. In contrast to Selina Todd's assertion that, 'the British working-class was becoming more homogenous at the beginning of the 1970s… the divisions between skilled and unskilled workers were narrowing,'[12] such distinctions remained an important source of identification and division amongst Port Talbot's steelworkers. It has previously been noted that the number of craft workers at the Port Talbot works increased significantly in relation to process workers after the Second World War. As a senior Iron and Steel Trades Confederation official told the *Western Mail* in 1969, 'In the old plants up to 80 per cent of personnel were members of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation [i.e. process workers]… in the new integrated plants, maintenance workers, as members of the craft unions, almost equalled production workers and this was to fundamentally modify the basic principles of industrial relations.'[13]

[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Interview with Doug Hockin, 11 October 2013.
[12] Selina Todd, *The People*, 293.
[13] *Western Mail*, 21 July 1969.

Early employment statistics for the Port Talbot works do not distinguish between craft and process workers, but the number of craft workers continued to increase throughout the latter half of the 1950s and into the 1960s: from 1,558 craftsmen in 1956 to 2,261 craftsmen in 1964.[14] The emergence of a more occupationally heterogeneous workforce, characterised by the rise of craft workers as a significant occupational group, could manifest itself in tension and animosity amongst the plant's employees. There was a pervasive feeling amongst the plant's process workers, for example, that craft workers considered themselves to be a group apart, somehow superior through the virtue of their 'skilled' status and the intensive nature of their training. As a process worker, Kenneth Thomas remembered that, 'I felt some of the craft workers did look down on us: the normal workers then, the steelworkers. They did look down on us, quite a few of them.' For Thomas, the craft-process distinction was never a barrier towards personal friendships but he did remember incidents where the division became manifest: 'they were sort of "them and us",' he recalled.[15]

Craft workers took considerable pride in their trades and the apprenticeships they had received and saw this as a confirmation of their own skill in relation to that of process workers. When asked why tensions were wont to emerge between the plant's craft and process workers, Paul Ace, an electrician, believed, 'Well mainly I think because craft people thought they were better than production [laughs]. You know like a social standing sort of thing…'.[16] The sense of status that craft workers felt their trade conferred on them was also apparent in the way that many craftsmen identified with the label, 'steelworker'. Peter Bowen's study of 'Ironhill' steelworkers, for example, found that craft employees 'were more emphatic in the belief that primary allegiance of the individual must be to a particular occupation rather than to the wider group of steelworkers as a whole: in this respect their occupational identification was noticeably stronger'.[17] Bowen's analysis arguably draws the distinction between craft and steelworkers' identities too strongly and fails to acknowledge that the two were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, other occupational loyalties could affect the strength with which workers identified

[14] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining: A Case Study in the Steel Industry* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1971), pp. 86-87.
[15] Interview with Kenneth Thomas, 26 September 2013.
[16] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[17] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 205.

themselves as steelworkers and the sense of affinity they shared with other sections of the plant's diverse workforce.

As well as defining themselves in relation to their specific trades and occupations, craftsmen were also capable of identifying themselves as a distinct collective grouping within the plant, united by a shared set of interests and grievances. Chief amongst these was pay. The dual system that existed for remunerating process and craft workers usually favoured the former, who benefited from a tonnage production bonus on top of their weekly rate. As Geoffrey Owen explained, 'the bonus enabled the production workers to benefit directly from improvements in productivity, and they became one of the highest paid groups in the country. These arrangements did not include craftsmen engaged on maintenance duties, or unskilled workers, who were paid a fixed daily wage.'[18] Occupational distinctions, then, were often underpinned by the pay packet and these could inculcate entrenched grievances when a particular section of the workforce felt their skill and status, in relation to other workers, were not being fairly remunerated. The relationship between pay and status was thus important, not only as a means of material reward but as an indicator of a group's worth and significance. Ferdynand Zweig noted that, for the British worker, 'The wage-packet also gives social significance to his job… The workers never compare themselves with those far above them, but they watch closely those who are treading on their heels or are higher up but not far from their own position.'[19] The separate pay status of process and craft workers was a recurring source of animosity at the Port Talbot works and a permanent reminder of their distinct occupational identities. It may have been possible to be both a craftsman and a steelworker but this does not negate the mutually exclusive loyalties and collective identities that divided the two groups.

The distinctions in status and pay that characterised relationships between process and craft workers were also manifest in the divisions between manual and staff workers, albeit in a different guise. Whereas both craft and process workers endured the shared experiences of manual work, with its associated privations of physical labour and shift working, the experience of the plant's staff workers

[18] Geoffrey Owen, *From Empire to Europe: The Decline and Revival of British Industry since the Second World War* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 119.
[19] Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952), p. 102.

engendered a fundamentally different working culture. In other industries too, the division between manual and white collar workers remained a divisive feature of workplace relations. Amongst Luton car workers, for example, Goldthorpe *et al*. noted, that 'such information as is available points to the continuance of the manual-nonmanual division as one of the sharpest lines of status demarcation – in work, in local communities, in voluntary associations'.[20] In the Port Talbot works, staff workers were not necessarily better paid than their manual counterparts, in many instances they were paid considerably worse, yet their staff status conferred upon them a degree of social and cultural prestige that closely resembled societal class-based distinctions. In the eyes of manual workers office work was intrinsically associated with more middle-class values, even if this was not reflected in the pay differential between the two groups. Indeed, this distinction was as much predicated on differences in the outward appearances of the two groups, rather than any pronounced difference in material reward. Staff workers at the plant typically wore suits, thus visually identifying them from process workers and revealing them to be removed from the dirt and physical labour that characterised manual work and, to a large extent, underpinned the image of the steelworker.

Many manual workers who made the transition to staff or managerial roles also recognised a change in the culture and approach to work associated with their new position. When Ken Drew transferred from his job as a craftsman to the plant's drawing office, he recalled an expectation to conform to a more respectable and moderate work outlook: 'When I was in the drawing office,' Drew remembered, 'again it was staff: "staff didn't do this, we're staff." This attitude prevailed throughout and then, as I became a middle manager, it became even more... You were management, you were one of us. We'll tell them what to do.' Drew went on to note that as a staff worker, 'we were never given protective clothing,' a recognition that white-collar work was not meant to be associated with dangerous and manual activities.[21] Process and staff workers were also spatially segregated within the plant; not only did they often occupy different workplaces but throughout most of the period staff workers enjoyed exclusive facilities, such as special canteen and toilet

[20] John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer & Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 25.
[21] Interview with Ken Drew, 3 December 2013.

facilities. As late as 1972, a resolution put forward by the Works Council[22] recommending, 'that the present distinctions within the Canteen Service should be abolished and that Staff Status Canteens should be available to all employees on the proviso that dress is suitable,' was rejected by the plant's personnel manager.[23] The stated insistence by workers' representatives that suitable dress would remain a condition of manual workers using staff canteens was indicative of the entrenched social divisions between the two occupational groups.

The privileges extended to staff employees, however, went beyond better workplace facilities and included a host of perks and benefits that were initially denied to manual workers. Although not necessarily better paid than manual workers, McIvor's assessment of the employment benefits available to staff workers reflected the inequalities that persisted at the Abbey Works throughout much of the period. 'Salaried "staff" occupations,' McIvor observed, 'frequently came with a range of perks and privileges (such as pensions and holidays with pay) and tended to be… more secure than routine semi-skilled and unskilled manual jobs.'[24] It was a state of affairs that also correlated with Goldthorpe *et al*.'s findings amongst Luton car workers. They concluded that, 'the work situation of white-collar employees is still generally superior to that of manual wage earners in terms of working conditions and amenities, continuity of employment, fringe benefits, long-term income prospects and promotion chances.'[25]

Predictably, staff workers' superior pension scheme, holiday provision and workplace facilities could be a source of considerable animosity amongst manual workers. A letter written to the chairman of the British Steel Corporation, Sir Charles Villiers, by a Port Talbot works process worker calling for parity, or 'Single Status', between manual and staff workers articulated the feelings of many of his blue-collar colleagues:

> Manual grades have felt for a long time a keen sense of injustice and discrimination at lack of equal sick pay and pension opportunities, the denial

[22] The Works Council was a joint consultation body comprised of trade union officials and management.
[23] Richard Burton Archives, Works Council, SWCC/BSC/A/1, Minutes of Works Council Meeting, 28 November 1972.
[24] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain Since 1945* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 17.
[25] John Goldthorpe *et al*., *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure,* p. 24.

> to them of extra holidays for length of service and, certain insecurity of continuous employment. The psychological reaction to this recognisable second class employee status must inevitably produce undesirable second class attitudes.[26]

These attitudes expressed the sense of injustice felt by many manual workers at the benefits denied to them but also hint at a broader prejudice exhibited by manual workers towards their staff colleagues. Like craftsmen, staff workers were a numerically growing occupational group within the Port Talbot works but their removal from the physical processes of steelmaking could lead to them being considered soft or superfluous. As E. Owen Smith observed in his study of the Port Talbot steelworks in the 1960s, 'manual workers are become increasingly restive with the difference between their status and that of staff workers. "Too many chiefs and not enough Indians" and "Too many gins and not enough tonic" are two recent epigrams that reveal the deep-seated resentment of manual workers to the increase in staff workers and status.'[27]

The oral histories reveal similar attitudes amongst the plant's process workers towards their staff counterparts, particularly those who worked in an office or undertook clerical work. 'We always considered it to be a better job, especially the staff side of it, we always thought they had it easy going,'[28] remembered crane driver Joe Stanton. It was a division often recognised by staff workers too. As a draughtsman at the Abbey Works, Doug Hockin remembered,

> It was a funny relationship really, [between staff and manual workers] because I think the staff there were working hard and under awkward conditions. And then they [manual workers] looked at you walking in, with collar and tie on, and they didn't appreciate it that there was another side to the steel industry. I don't think they resented you but they treated you as, "let's leave them well alone" like.[29]

The memories of clerical workers, such as Hockin, reveal the conflicting dual status of staff workers in the steel industry; on the one hand they enjoyed better working conditions, facilities and benefits, but on the other their status amongst manual workers was often held in lower regard. Peter Bowen's survey of Iron Hill steelworkers revealed a similar pattern of workplace relations. Bowen argues that in

[26] RBA, ISTC General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/8(a), Letter from Owen Hughes to Charles Villiers, 26 July 1977.
[27] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 138.
[28] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[29] Interview with Douglas Hockin, 11 October 2013.

a steelworks, 'the value of manual work is stressed and in a steel town the pride in steel making and the craft status of senior production manual workers is evident. In this context the status of the working-class clerk can be expected to be relatively low.'[30] Indeed, Bowen goes on to note that this often amounts to a 'status anxiety which derives from clerical work'.[31]

For manual workers who made the transition to staff posts, the change in the culture of the workplace and the sense of distance that emerged with former colleagues could be a source of dislocation or loss. David Thomas remembered he was initially reluctant to take a staff position: 'I wasn't that keen at first… I had a lot of friends which that wouldn't go down well, because I'd be telling them what to do.' When Thomas accepted the post, he recalled missing the camaraderie that existed amongst process workers: 'What I didn't like, I lost the camaraderie then. You know? I was on the [shop] floor, we'd have fun together in different ways and whatever.'[32] Both culturally and materially, staff workers thus occupied a distinct and distant position within the plant's social structure. The distinction between the two groups was not the only dividing line amongst the plant's workforce but it was a salient one nonetheless. In Richard Hoggart's 'them and us' characterisation of working-class life, workers who accepted staff posts were 'regarded now as on the side of "Them"'.[33]

Gender

The mutual exclusivity that characterised the relationship between manual and staff workers at the Port Talbot works was also symptomatic of the societal distinctions that permeated the workplace, especially the highly gendered nature of work at the plant. For manual workers, notions of masculinity were integral to their conception of themselves as steelworkers and informed numerous aspects of their working practice and identity. The basic premise of workplace masculinity lay rooted in the nature of the work itself; the very process of manual work and the skill it entailed

[30] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 224.
[31] *Ibid*., p. 239.
[32] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.
[33] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1958) p. 74.

was constructed as a masculine act. In Paul Willis' analysis, 'the brutality of the working situation is partially reinterpreted into a heroic exercise of manly confrontation with "the task".'[34] Comparative studies with metal workers in other parts of the world have similarly identified the production process as being imbued with overtly masculine connotations. Turtiainen and Väänänen's study of Finnish metal workers noted that, 'workers competence and technical skills laid the basis for working-class masculinity and industry and manhood became intertwined with each other.'[35] Skill and the wage packet thus underpinned an understanding of workplace masculinity that was integral to the overall conception of the steelworker.

As well as being associated with traditional patriarchal notions of work and male breadwinners, representations of masculinity were also manifest in the way in which men confronted their work tasks, specifically the more dangerous aspects of production. As H. F. Moorhouse has argued, 'Men can gain pride, respect, confirm identity, by pitting themselves against fear or furnace.'[36] In this way, the normalisation of danger as an axiomatic part of the workplace experience was common amongst Port Talbot steelworkers. 'Myself and a lot of other people take the danger for granted,'[37] remembered Graham Rowland. 'You take where you're working, you look around you; there's 500 ton cranes and you just take it for granted.'[38] Other manual workers displayed a similarly insouciant attitude towards the hazards of the workplace, acknowledging them not only as a necessary condition of work, but as an integral part of it. Recalling some of the dangers he and his colleagues encountered at work, Francis Needs remembered that, 'they took it in their stride. It was the job, that's what they did.'[39] Similar attitudes were common throughout many of Britain's heavy industries. In their account of work and masculinity in the Clydeside heavy industries, Johnston and McIvor noted that, 'dangerous, dirty, dusty and physically exhausting work, with the constant stream of

[34] Paul Willis, 'Shop Floor Culture, Masculinity and the Wage Form', in John Clarke, Chas Critcher & Richard Johnson (eds.), *Working-class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), p. 196.
[35] Jusi Turtiainen and Ari Väänänen, 'Men of Steel? The Masculinity of Metal Workers in Finland after World War II', *Journal of Social History*, 46 (2012), p. 457.
[36] H. F. Moorhouse, 'The "Work" Ethic and "Leisure" Activity: the Hot Rod in Post-War America', in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 242.
[37] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.
[38] *Ibid.*
[39] Interview with Francis Needs, 23 October 2013.

injuries and deaths in the pits, metal works and the shipyards hardened boys up, de-sensitizing them to danger and socializing them into a competitive, *macho* environment.'[40]

Indeed, the danger and risk of injury associated with working in the steel industry could be exalted by manual workers as an indication of their occupational worth and status, imbued with masculine notions of 'toughness' and acts of recklessness and bravado. These found frequent expression in manual workers' decisions to flaunt health and safety directives and refusal to wear protective clothing. Despite the unforgiving conditions endured by workers in the coke ovens, Dai Ferris recalled that workers never wore helmets, 'they always wore a flat cap and the shirt was open, we were macho men and all that.'[41] For both trade unions and management alike, persuading workers to wear protective clothing proved to be an exasperating process. The ISTC's south west Wales divisional officer despondently reported to his general secretary in 1962 that, 'the strongest resistance [to wearing safety clothing] is an emotional one and although there is every logical reason for wearing protective equipment the resistance is only slowly being overcome.'[42] Often, however, there were sound practical reasons for not wearing protective clothing. Early variants were usually hot and uncomfortable and could inhibit movement or dull workers' awareness of their environment. As McIvor has noted, however, it was hard to escape the conclusion that, 'actual bodily harm was risked for the sake of peer group status.'[43] During his first week on the blastfurnaces, Arthur Bamford recalled one such incident, where a colleague, 'one of the roughest men I've ever seen in my life,' proceeded to rub an oily glove into an open wound he had sustained at work. When Bamford confronted him about his behaviour, he replied 'I'll have much more for a black scar boy' (referring to the practice of linking compensation to the severity of the wound). 'It was crazy,' Bamford remembered, but it was also emblematic of a highly masculinised working environment in which withstanding injury and physical deprivation could act as a source of respect and status.[44]

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[40] Ronnie Johnston & Arthur McIvor, 'Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries, c. 1930-1970s', *Labour History Review*, 69 (2004), p. 138.
[41] Interview with Dai Ferris, 27 November 2013.
[42] RBA, ISTC General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/1, Letter from Mr. A.E. Vincent to Harry Douglass, 30 January 1962
[43] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 82.
[44] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.

A more malevolent manifestation of the machismo of the plant's working culture was the incidents of violence between workers that periodically manifested themselves both within and outside the workplace. The frequency of such incidents are almost impossible to assess but several former Port Talbot steelworkers recounted incidents of workplace violence or physical aggression between colleagues. Arthur Bamford believed that manual workers were less likely to socialise with each other outside of work due to the propensity for such gatherings to end in arguments or brawling:

> I suppose I would have been described the same by them, but wherever you went you had such a tough group of men they invariably end up fighting. The only way you could go out with your workmates was if you went out with the females as well, then it was fun. If you went out for a drink after work it was ok, but if you had a special occasion to go to that lasted longer than four hours it was, "yahoo!" – it was like cowboy town.[45]

Violence could also occur in the workplace itself. One such incident in 1954 involved the dismissal of a 'larry car' driver for physically assaulting a foreman. The company's report concluded, 'It is difficult to understand why the man should strike the foreman as they were next-door neighbours and very good friends.'[46] The aggressive character of the workplace can, however, be easily exaggerated; violence typically only manifested itself in isolated incidents, whereas amicability and sociability were mainstays of working culture. However, comparisons with other industries similarly reveal violence to be a recurring feature of working life in heavy industry, reflecting both the stressful nature and overt machismo of industrial work.[47]

The masculinity of the manual working environment was also constructed in opposition to the perceived femininity of office or clerical work, constituting a salient gender division within the workplace. McIvor has argued that 'prevailing notions of masculinity' portrayed 'clerical and other service sector jobs… as unmanly and effeminate',[48] an identification that was reinforced in the Port Talbot works by the confinement of female employees to mostly clerical roles. Paul Thompson has similarly argued that 'a system of allocating particular tasks to men

[45] *Ibid*.
[46] Shotton Record Centre, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 12, Steel Division - Report on Operations, June 1954.
[47] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 88.
[48] *Ibid*., p. 18.

and others to women'[49] represented a fundamental division of labour in Britain's post-war workplaces. Although the female staff at the Port Talbot works freely associated and socialised with their male colleagues, there was a persistent recognition that they should be kept removed from the masculine sphere of production. This gendered segregation amongst workers was delineated at the earliest stages of employee training with separate classes and schools for male and female employees disseminating different skills. The establishment of the SCOW's typing school in 1949, for example, was explicitly, 'for the purpose of training girls.'[50] These gender divisions remained apparent in later working life. A request raised at a meeting of the Works Council reveals the efforts that were made to maintain the highly gendered segregation of the workplace. In 1967, the council agreed that, 'female Staff be paid at different times, or at different locations to the men because of bad language in the pay queues.'[51] Although seemingly a move to protect female employees from manual workers' vulgar badinage, it also reveals the way in which the workplace was constructed and divided into highly gendered spheres: the tough and aggressive masculine world of production against the effeminate and sheltered office.

Status and Hierarchy

Whilst occupation and gender remained integral to the composition of social relations at the Port Talbot works, the society of the workplace was fundamentally predicated on a universal understanding of status and hierarchy. Signs of the hierarchical structure of the workplace were abundantly evident throughout the plant and were an inescapable condition of the work. When Martin Patten joined the SCOW in 1959, he was struck by the entrenched social divisions that permeated the workforce:

> I was shocked when I went there… you could tell a person's position in the hierarchy by the hat they wore, by their outer clothing: if they were in a suit they were at the top. And then you had people in white dust coats and people

[49] Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work*, p. 180.
[50] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, September 1949.
[51] RBA, Works Council, SWCC/BSC/A/1, Minutes of the Works Council Meeting Held on 28 March, 1967.

> in brown dust coats, and then you had people in overalls. And you could tell their rank by the canteen they went to and you could even tell their rank by the toilet they had.[52]

Historical understandings of the labour hierarchy have often been reduced to the perpetually antagonistic categories of worker and management or the divisive relationship between skilled and unskilled workers. A consideration of the social relations of the Port Talbot works, however, reveals a far more gradated and stratified depiction of status and authority within industry and, indeed, within the working-class itself. Notions of class were clearly important to how workers interpreted the social relations of the workplace but they were also highly fluid and gradated and resisted attempts at a monolithic interpretation.

In the 1950s, Ferdynand Zweig was eager to stress that the workers he studied did not constitute a socially egalitarian or homogenous group:

> The social ladder of the working-classes consists of innumerable rungs. Social and industrial levels are determined not only by the skill and grade of the job a man does, but by many other personal factors, such as health, physical strength, mental balance, age, spending habits, education, marital status, and the size of the family. The status of a man is, in fact, conditioned by the whole pattern of his way of life.[53]

This recognition of a more nuanced hierarchy of workplace authority, however, does not preclude an awareness amongst workers of management as a separate class. Indeed, it was well known that as a manager you were 'no longer one of the boys'.[54] Senior management, however, existed at the top of a highly stratified division of labour that exerted a powerful influence on the social relations of the workplace. As Turtiainen and Väänänen recorded in their study of Finnish metal workers, 'An understanding of social relationships and one's own place in the food chain of workers was essential in the social reality of the workplace.'[55] Moreover, the hierarchical composition of the workplace was rarely challenged by Port Talbot's steelworkers who typically viewed it as a fundamental precondition of working life. The way in which workers responded to authority at work, then, is not only telling as

[52] Interview with Martin & Jean Patten, 29 October 2013.
[53] Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker*, p. 21.
[54] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.
[55] Jusi Turtiainen and Ari Väänänen, 'Men of Steel? The Masculinity of Metal Workers in Finland', p. 456.

to how they interpreted the workplace, but also how meanings of work related to collective identities and understandings of the social order.

At the Port Talbot works, the labour hierarchy was strictly governed and explicitly delineated so that workers would be acutely aware of their own position within the pecking order from the moment they entered the workforce. The primary mechanism for regulating this hierarchy was the seniority system, a union governed system for controlling promotion and career advancement within the steel industry. Upon gaining a permanent post at the works, then, it was the practice for process workers to be placed within a 'seniority line' by their trade union branch, with each line consisting of numerous rungs which, as E. Owen Smith described, 'were distinguished by slight increments in pay reflecting not logical increments of responsibility but the result of years of ad hoc bargaining.'[56] As such, promotion for process workers was largely controlled by their local trade union branch and based entirely on experience and the number of years served. 'Dead men's shoes' was how one steelworker bluntly described it.[57]

Although regulated by the process workers' trade unions, throughout much of the period the seniority system had the implicit consent of management and could even be seen to constitute, what Gospel and Palmer described as, a 'bureaucratic personnel policy' whereby, 'employers built promotion ladders into the structure of their organisations.'[58] As a consequence of this, Palmer elaborates, 'employees entered the organisation at the bottom of the career ladders and not in mid-career. Such policies were usually accompanied by an emphasis on the importance of company loyalty. In the nineteenth century the civil service, the post office and many of the steel and railway companies adopted such policies.'[59] Indeed, the SCOW actively advertised opportunities for promotion as a benefit of employment at their Port Talbot works.[60] It was, however, the responsibility of local trade union branches to compile and maintain the lists of seniority. These contained details regarding each worker's length of service which, in turn, determined where they stood in line when an opportunity for promotion arose. The minute books of the ISTC's Morfa Coke Oven branch at Port Talbot, for example, are typical in detailing meticulous lists of

[56] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 151.
[57] Interview with Ken Drew, 3 December 2013.
[58] Howard F. Gospel & Gill Palmer, *British Industrial Relations*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 52.
[59] Gill Palmer, *British Industrial Relations* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 111.
[60] *Western Mail*, 2 May 1951.

workers' seniority and their respective promotion lines.[61] Although the influence of the plant's trade unions over promotion tended to wane from 1980 onwards, as successive managerial policies sought to curtail the power of organised labour, the basic principles of seniority remained in place for the duration of the period.

Another consequence of the seniority system was that it tended to enshrine promotion as a condition of employment for most process workers. Indeed, none of the process workers interviewed for this study recorded never having been promoted and most workers received numerous promotions throughout the course of their careers. Peter Bowen offers a more quantifiable assessment of steelworkers' opportunities for promotion in his survey of 'Ironhill' employees:

> Of those respondents whose job was part of a seniority line, the great majority reported actual experience of advancement; only a small minority stated that they had never received any promotion whatsoever. In more general terms 72 per cent of the same group believed that their lines of seniority offered guaranteed forms of promotion through experience and responsibility whilst only 28 per cent disagreed.[62]

This situation presented a considerably more fluid conception of workplace relations than the rigidly entrenched social divisions that are frequently purported to characterise British industry and society more generally. James Cronin's assertion that, 'sons tended to have jobs in the same class category as fathers, and when they did move or up or down the distance traversed was minimal,'[63] is indicative of this popular historical consensus. This, however, was not the case in the British steel industry. As Charles Docherty explained, 'Men employed in steel grow accustomed to waiting their turn; when a new recruit is located into a production job he is given a seniority number in relationship to his fellows which is his for the duration of his working life and will determine to what job he will subsequently be promoted.'[64] Most steelworkers, then, could aspire to, one day, hold more senior and better remunerated positions within the plant, fostering a culture in which long service was rewarded and respected.

The seniority system, however, had its detractors and many process workers exhibited an acute awareness of its deficiencies and limitations. Some workers found

[61] RBA, Margam Coke Branch, ISTC/F/144, Margam Coke Seniority, c. 1977.
[62] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 191.
[63] James E. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-1979* (London: Batsford, 1984), p. 142.
[64] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers: The Sons of Vulcan* (London: Heinemann Education Books, 1983), p. 40.

promotion through seniority inhibiting and restrictive. Individual seniority lines were often jealously guarded by union branches thus making it difficult for workers to transfer between different departments (a particular source of frustration for workers caught in promotion lines that offered fewer opportunities for career advancement). As Robert Duncan explains, as a result of seniority, 'Unless a worker was leaving for a position at a new works, a move elsewhere usually meant dropping down the promotion line, so this condition discouraged plant to plant mobility.'[65] Through seniority, promotion may have been open to all but the opportunities for promotion were not equally distributed amongst steelworkers. Some seniority lines were easier to rise through and had more rungs to climb and this could be a source of considerable resentment and bitterness for those workers who felt they were being denied the same chances for promotion as their colleagues in other departments. A works crane driver, for example, remembered his frustration at not being able to transfer to a department with more opportunities for promotion as well as his own limited prospects.[66]

Other process workers voiced the opinion that the system was anti-meritocratic and prioritised duration of employment over knowledge or ability. Dennis Spicer recalled that, 'if they were looking for someone to join the pit crew… whoever had been labouring longest got that job, whether he was any good or not. That was a bad thing.' 'It could be frustrating,' he went on, 'if you wanted a job and you knew someone that wasn't very good got it because he'd been there longer.'[67] It was a criticism echoed by business analyst E. Owen Smith, who opined that as a result of seniority, 'management had no freedom to make lateral transfers; they had no opportunity to match workers to the right jobs and thereby optimize the performance of a given group of men.'[68] Despite its inherent shortcomings, the seniority system provided steelworkers with considerably more opportunities for career progression and advancement than most other manual workers, a feature of working life in the steel industry that had a profound effect on the culture of the workplace.

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[65] Robert Duncan, *Sons of Vulcan: Ironworkers and Steelmen in Scotland* (Edinburgh, Bilinn, 2009), p. 201.
[66] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[67] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[68] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining,* p. 151.

Promotion through seniority, however, was not universally applicable, nor was it the only means of career progression. For craft and staff workers, where seniority lines were less integral to promotion, opportunities for career advancement were more haphazard and reflected a stronger degree of managerial influence. As the period progressed, many found that the conditions of promotion became more demanding with academic and technical qualifications exerting a greater influence over who progressed to the top posts. Some workers spoke of formal education as constituting a form of promotion ceiling. Despite receiving several promotions, Len Mathias, for example, remembered being debarred from more senior staff positions due to his lack of a university degree: 'I went up so far and stopped there... with the staff, what they brought in above you was all people who had degrees. That's the way it goes then.'[69] These frustrations were recognised by the BSC's senior management. A 1980 discussion paper circulated by the corporation on 'The Recruitment and Development of Young Managers' noted that, 'There is evidence of frustration of developing apathy amongst foremen who see their career outlets limited and there needs to be some defined programme to identify managerial ability at this level.'[70] Some employees, however, still rated their own chances of obtaining a management post as slight, whether as a result of a lack of qualifications or increased competition from graduates. As a craftsman, Paul Ace was acutely aware of the limits academic qualifications imposed on his own career progression:

> Well the promotion line was, from just being an ordinary electrician to a foreman and that would be about it. Unless you were well qualified to be an engineer, you'd have to have the schooling part of it. I could handle all the hard work but for the brains up here weren't very good so that wouldn't get me promotion to a junior engineer or an engineer – that was it.[71]

Nonetheless, Ace could still hope to attain the position of foreman, a senior supervisory role with considerable responsibility, and did so during his time at the plant.[72]

Autodidactism could also be a route to promotion for ambitious workers desirous to progress to senior posts. With the sponsorship of the SCOW, Ken Drew

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[69] Interview with Len Mathias, 4 October 2013.
[70] SRC, BSC - Divisional Management Committee Reports, 378, Box 10, 'Discussion Paper – The Recruitment and Development of Young Managers', March 1980
[71] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[72] *Ibid.*

started attending night school with the intention of leaving his craft job for a staff position. 'I went to night school and day release and got my HNC, Higher National Certificate, in mechanical engineering,' Drew remembered. 'So then I thought, I did all that to get on, to get a better job. And so I went to the Drawing Office, because I could have stayed in the Hot Mill and become a foreman and what have you, but I wanted… Obviously I must have been ambitious, I never thought I was, but I went to the Drawing Office to try and get further advancement.'[73] In this way it was possible for workers, such as Drew, to aspire to eventually hold managerial positions, something he achieved when he was appointed to a middle management post.[74]

The efforts some workers took to better their chances of promotion is indicative of the importance many steelworkers attached to career progression. Once again, the attitudes of Port Talbot works employees contrast greatly with many of the findings recorded in the post-war work studies. Goldthorpe *et al*., for example, were of the opinion that, 'for the large majority of men in our sample the possibility of promotion was of no real significance.'[75] The most common response amongst the Luton car workers they studied was that promotion was simply, 'not worth while,'[76] and that it was associated with more stress but little reward. Not all steelworkers desired to progress to management positions but most hoped to advance to more senior roles, not least, for the better wages that came with them. 'I was looking for money!', Dennis Spicer remembered, 'If your job paid more than mine, that's what I wanted. I had a wife who didn't work, I had kids - it's what I wanted.'[77] In the steel industry wage differentials between job grades were considerable. In a typical seniority line, outlined by Peter Bowen, the weekly base rate could vary as much as £20 between the most senior man and an entry-level position in 1972-3.[78] As well as promising better wages, promotion was also sought for the better conditions of work associated with it. In the Abbey Works coke ovens, for example, E. Owen Smith observed, that 'like most promotion lines, the work becomes less physically demanding the nearer the top a coke-oven worker gets. A wide differential between the bottom and top jobs is tolerated because the lower-paid workers aspire to the top

[73] Interview with Ken Drew, 3 December 2013.
[74] *Ibid*.
[75] John Goldthorpe *et al*., *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, p. 73.
[76] *Ibid*.
[77] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[78] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 175.

jobs.'[79] As Zweig noted, then, in the iron and steel industry, 'the promotion benefits are very attractive indeed.'[80] This possibility – and in most cases, guarantee – of promotion engendered a fundamentally different conception of social relations within the industry, where status and hierarchy were highly stratified and workers acutely aware of the incremental divisions of status that permeated their workforce.

The hierarchical structure of labour within the Port Talbot works was predicated on a widely held observance of skill and respect. More than any other occupational traits, these values underpinned the social structure of the workplace and determined the occupational culture of the plant. Indeed, a culture of respect and deference was pervasive throughout the plant. Bricklayer Theodore Kingdom remembered addressing his supervisors as 'Sir' and 'Mr': 'It was Mr Heywood then,' he recalled, describing his foreman, 'it wasn't Jack Heywood!'.[81] Skill, derived from experience, underpinned the seniority system and gave legitimacy to the hierarchy of the workplace. As Charles Docherty observed, 'experience in the industry is revered above all other attributes.'[82] The skills that workers most valued were those that were derived from an understanding of the job itself and the practical knowledge that was assimilated through hands-on experience. Dennis Spicer remembered that skill and expertise were the dominant currency of respect: 'Academia isn't for me - it's practical. If you've got a problem I'll find a way round it and I'll do my very best to do it.'[83] The conception of skill as being inextricably related to practical knowledge was widespread amongst industrial workers. Paul Willis recognised this sentiment amongst car workers, describing that an, 'important element of this culture is the massive feeling amongst the shop floor, and in the working-class generally, that practice is more important than theory.'[84] For most workers, these skills were something that could only be acquired through the direct experience of work. Graham Rowland believed that, 'You can't buy respect, it's earned and, unfortunately, it's earned over a length of time.'[85]

[79] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 114.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[81] Interview with Theodore Kingdom, 18 October 2013.
[82] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 40.
[83] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[84] Paul Willis, 'Shop Floor Culture, Masculinity and the Wage Form', p. 194.
[85] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.

The reverence exhibited by younger workers towards more senior operatives contradicts many existing interpretations of workplace relations in British industry. Huw Beynon's study of Ford car workers recorded a widespread antipathy towards supervisors amongst the plant's workers, frequently bordering on hostility. Beynon noted, 'most workers endure supervision while they are at work. Many of them resent it and have built up defences against the supervisor.'[86] Yet, in the Port Talbot works, supervisors were, for the most part, treated as figures of respect by virtue of their many years' experience and skill. Graham Rowland remembered, 'you had your… foremen if you like, we had teemers, you had first convertor men. They were the people who ran the plant and these people were gods to youngsters because they were looked up at and a lot of them were quite elderly so they warranted that respect.'[87] Seniority and experience also mirrored societal attitudes linking age with deference. 'Age differentials are extremely important in any social or psychological study of the worker,'[88] argued Ferdynand Zweig, and these were plainly manifest in the Port Talbot works. Indeed, at work distinctions based on age were often interpreted as an indicator of experience and were reflected in the older demographic of the supervisory staff. John Pugh recalled the respect that these senior figures elicited: 'The units that I worked on, the senior men were looked up to. They were roller men and operators, assistant roller men and assistant operators and certainly the foremen, who later became the superintendents. They were people that you would look up to there because they had been down there for so long and you respected their final decision if you like.'[89] That most of the plant's frontline supervisory staff had risen from the shop floor, through the seniority system, also engendered a more fluid and amicable conception of workplace relations. The 'us and them' mentality that characterised many sociological work studies, such as Beynon's, was less evident in the Port Talbot works owing to its tradition of internal recruitment and promotion based on experience.

The respect that workers displayed towards their immediate supervisors was often extended to the plant's senior management. Even if workers occasionally voiced grievances about their managers, few contested the nature of the workplace

[86] Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 192.
[87] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.
[88] Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker*, p. 54.
[89] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.

seniority hierarchy. The findings of Peter Bowen's study of steelworkers at 'Ironhill' are highly insightful in this regard. Bowen concluded that, 'survey findings reveal most steelworkers accepted and found it desirable that management held the majority of influence in the workplace.'[90] If managers led with the consent of their employees, they also often did so with their respect. As with the plant's senior operatives, the respect displayed towards managers was an indicator of their perceived knowledge or skill. Of the many senior managers who worked at the Abbey during the period, few evoked such admiring recollections from workers as Fred Cartwright. 'Fred Cartwright was ten foot tall,' John Foley, a senior trade unionist at Port Talbot, remembered.[91] Michael O' Callaghan concurred: 'I would say the finest director that Port Talbot ever had was Fred Cartwright [of the] Steel Company of Wales. He is the man that, in my opinion, [that] saved Port Talbot, put Port Talbot on the map with the new harbour and everything. That man to me was the number one director.'[92] Cartwright's extensive experience in the steel industry, having begun his career at the Dowlais Works in the 1920s, and his hands-on training made him an exemplar of that class of manager whose respect was derived from their in-depth industrial knowledge. All this contributed to a widespread mentality amongst steelworkers whereby they sought to advance their interests within the existing system rather than challenge it. Indeed, few steelworkers saw any reason to do so when the existing structure of the workplace appeared to serve their interests rather well.

Respect for managers, however, was not unconditional. Managers who were perceived to lack the necessary skills and understanding of the workplace often found their ability berated and their respect compromised. These attitudes were most commonly directed at university graduates, who constituted a growing proportion of the plant's managerial staff from the 1970s onwards. Having not risen through the ranks of the workforce, graduates were particularly vulnerable to accusations of ineptitude or lacking the necessary knowledge of steelmaking. Dennis Spicer articulated the views of many steelworkers towards the new breed of graduate managers entering the plant:

> I know when I was a foreman in there, I had one manager in particular – he would have shut the place if it had been left to him. He'd give you

[90] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 197.
[91] Interview with John Foley, 10 October 2013.
[92] Interview with Michael O'Callaghan, 27 January 2014.

> instructions what to do and you'd do something else and keep out of his pigging way. Some of them were as thick as planks! The fact that you've got a degree doesn't make you intelligent, it makes you knowledgeable perhaps but not intelligent.[93]

It was also common for workers to juxtapose the old style of managers, recruited from the shop floor, with newer graduates. 'We didn't have these people with micky-mouse degrees coming in and having jobs they couldn't handle,'[94] Ken Drew remembered. The low esteem with which many graduate managers were held not only reflected some workers own frustrations at being excluded from senior posts, but also the centrality of skill and experience to the plant's culture of respect. Robert Bruno's analysis of Youngstown steelworkers similarly concluded, that 'while workers recognized the de facto power of bosses, they would legitimize that authority only if it was accompanied by experience and knowledge of the job.'[95] Respect and skill, therefore, were the main determinants of power in the workplace. Despite the tensions that occasionally arose, for the most part the engrained culture of respect at the Port Talbot works reinforced existing hierarchies and offered a strong degree of social cohesion to the daily relations of the workplace.

Conclusion

The Port Talbot steelworkers were not a socially homogenous group. They consistently exhibited an acute awareness of the divisions that pervaded their workforce; occupation, status, age and gender were all recognised as salient indicators of identity and important social categories within the workplace. How, then, are we to reconcile this definition of Port Talbot's steelworkers with existing understandings of Britain's industrial workers? Moreover, how can such a diverse and individualistic interpretation of work be understood as part of a broader working-class experience? The dichotomy between individual experiences of work and collective understandings of class, however, is not a new one. James Cronin has argued that, 'It may well be, in fact, that the critical question for historians is how the

[93] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[94] Interview with Ken Drew, 3 December 2013.
[95] Robert Bruno, *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 117.

persistence of divisions within the working-class coexisted with a popular image of a solidarity class.'[96]

Given the extent of the social and occupational divisions that existed amongst the plant's employees, it could also be tempting to view the occupation, 'steelworker', as a redundant label, a general term conveniently employed by outsiders to describe a disparate group of workers. The phrase steelworker, however, was not without meaning. When asked about their parents or neighbours' occupations, works employees usually referred to the occupational category 'steelworker', rather than individual job specifications, such as electrician, blastfurnacemen or draughtsman. Work-based identities, therefore, were contextually constructed and not monolithic. Individual occupational distinctions may have defined social relations within the workplace but outside the plant workers' collective association as steelworkers held greater resonance. This was equally apparent when steelworkers withdrew from the workforce entirely and were no longer confronted with the daily social distinctions of the plant. The findings of MacKenzie *et al.* revealed that, 'The continued importance of the steelworker identity became apparent as respondents repeatedly self-identified in terms of the occupational title of "steel-worker", post-redundancy.'[97]

These observations, however, cannot satisfactorily be explained in terms of a 'shared experience of this particular type of hard physically demanding and dangerous work', as MacKenzie's team suggested.[98] The dangers of working in the Port Talbot works and the privations of shift work could offer common points of reference but they could not overcome the inherently fragmented nature of the steelmaking process and the disparate experience of production within the plant. This interpretation also fails to account for any social mobility within the workforce. The abundance of promotion opportunities within the plant made it highly unlikely that a steelworker would remain within the same working environment over the course of a career and his workplace conditions and status could expect to vary accordingly. For steelworkers, however, social heterogeneity did not appear to be a barrier to sustaining a wider sense of occupational affinity and identity. Peter Bowen noted that

[96] James E. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain*, p. 150.
[97] Robert MacKenzie *et al*., 'All that is Solid?: Class, Identity and the Maintenance of a Collective Orientation amongst Redundant Steelworkers', *Sociology*, 40 (2006)', p. 838.
[98] *Ibid.*, 839.

it was the 'common culture' of steelmaking that imposed a sense of identity on an otherwise fragmented workforce: 'Such workers share a common culture based on the long traditions of steelmaking,' he argues, 'at the same time the meaning of this culture is expressed in terms of the differing, and sometimes contrasting occupational experiences of craft and production workers, manual and non-manual employees.'[99] Through its inherent malleability, the occupational culture of the steel industry was thus able to contain and give expression to its internal differences and divisions.

It was the economic imperative of work, however, which gave being a steelworker its class resonance. Understandings of being a steelworker were imbued with notions of class but these were rarely conceived of in overtly political terms. Indeed, historians have often been guilty of politicizing the working-class in a way that few members of that class would meaningfully be able relate to. In *The People*, Selina Todd expresses the history of the British working-class through a distinctly political narrative, that is, 'a vision of life based on co-operation and camaraderie, rather than fighting your way to the top.'[100] Yet, for most Port Talbot steelworkers it was the nature of their work as a source of identity that was the main determinant of one's class, rather than any sense of shared poverty or collective political destiny. It was not uncommon, therefore, for production workers in the Cold Mill to be higher wage earners than white-collar staff in the plant's central office but this did not fundamentally alter the perception of the one group as working-class and the other as middle-class. Richard Hoggart noted in the 1950s that 'One cannot firmly distinguish workers from others by the amount of money earned… steel-workers, for instance, are plainly working-class though some earn more money than many teachers who are not.'[101]

Being working-class was also not incompatible with being ambitious or desirous for greater material reward for one's labour. Often such attitudes were entirely congruent with the values of hard work which workers, arguably, prized above all others. When asked whether he still considered himself working-class after having accepted a managerial position, Michael O' Callaghan emphatically replied, 'Yea – yes! When I say working-class, I worked all my bloody life; I'm working-

[99] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 21.
[100] Selina Todd, *The People*, p. 366.
[101] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 20.

class – simple as that. I was still working...'.[102] Like many other works employees, O' Callaghan was ambitious and desired to further himself both economically and socially but class remained culturally as well as materially conditioned and often eschewed a strong political dimension. This understanding of class could engender a sense of social affinity with other wage earners but it did not necessarily manifest itself in an innate or all pervasive solidarity with other steelworkers or workers in other industries.

Notions of belonging to a distinct social group have always coexisted with expressions of individuality and personal interests and aspirations. Mike Savage's conception of 'rugged individualism' is highly pertinent in this regard. Savage has argued that, 'one of the problems involved in counterposing individualist against collective modes of male manual work cultures is the assumption that collective identities somehow subsume individual ones, that the two are necessarily at odds with each other.'[103] Savage further argues that 'far from individualism eroding class awareness, it may actually consolidate it.'[104] There is no reason, then, why the individualised nature of working experiences at the Port Talbot works should inhibit an awareness of class. An approach to class that recognises the aspirations and personal motives of the individual would also go some way towards explaining the development of intra-class hierarchies. Aspiration and social advancement are too often interpreted as being contrary to the supposed communality and solidarity of working-class culture but, in many ways, they were products of that culture's values. A strong individual work ethic and the importance of skill and experience as the basis for respect are often acknowledged as core working-class attributes.[105] Class, like the experience of work itself, was a subjective and contextually dependent construct and any attempts at defining a working-class experience must recognise the primacy of the individuals that comprised it.

[102] Interview with Michael O'Callaghan, 27 January 2014.
[103] Michael Savage, 'Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman & John McIlroy (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Volume Two: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 35.
[104] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
[105] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 60.

Chapter Four

The Industrial Relations Nexus: Trade Unionism and the Negotiation of Power

Introduction

The complexities of the workplace society, with its occupational diversity and social hierarchy, were mirrored in the plant's system of industrial relations. In their efforts to preserve amicable working relations and reconcile their differing interests and goals, the industry's management and trade unions developed an elaborate framework of workplace negotiation, involving numerous tiers of bargaining and a wide variety of participants. Its organisation and structure not only determined a host of working conditions, such as workers' pay and holidays, but also informed wider issues, such as who wielded control in the workplace and in whose interests. In both academic and popular conceptions, the negotiation of power in industry is often seen as a bilateral struggle: between workers and their collective organisations, on the one hand, and managers or owners on the other. In Richard Hoggart's analysis, 'The world of "Them" is the world of bosses,' against which the 'Us' of the working-class defined itself.[1] Undoubtedly this was a crucial axis on which workplace control was contested; however, as a consideration of industrial relations at the Port Talbot works reveals, it was not the only one.

Rather, the structure of industrial relations at the plant constituted a multifarious nexus of different aims and vying interests, resulting in a wide range of fluid alliances and loyalties. In these circumstances, local affiliations and sectional interests could assume greater significance than class-based solidarities and workers often proved willing to challenge the authority and influence of their trade unions as well as their managers. Like capital, organised labour did not constitute a homogenous group and the industrial relations machinery in place at Port Talbot existed to resolve internal disputes amongst trade unions as well as those between workers and employers. Through its analysis of the structure and the process of

[1] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 158), p. 73.

workplace negotiation and bargaining, this chapter seeks to explore these issues further; how was power understood and mediated in the workplace and what does the experience of Port Talbot reveal about the broader culture of industrial relations in Britain since 1945?

Since the publication of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *The History of Trade Unionism* in 1898, a vast body of historiographical work has emerged on the study of industrial relations and trade unionism; much of which has focused on the role of trade unions within society, the development of the labour movement and the role of industrial conflict in the formation of class consciousness.[2] For historians, the ascendance of social or labour history as the preeminent historiographical trend of the 1950s and 1960s engendered an unprecedented level of interest in the history of the working-class and their collective organisations and institutions, none more so than the trade unions. In this interpretation, the emergence of a mass trade union movement in Britain during the nineteenth century was posited as an expression of an increasingly polarised social class structure. Trade unionism, it was popularly argued, could not merely be seen as a new development in the machinery of workplace negotiations but as a manifestation of working-class consciousness and an expression of inter-class conflict. Hobsbawm articulated this narrative when arguing that, 'working-class experience gave the labouring poor the major institutions of everyday self-defence, the trade union and mutual aid society, and the major weapons of such collective struggle, solidarity and the strike…'.[3]

Like other labour historians, Hobsbawm was not above criticism of the trade union movement, particularly for its perceived moderation and conservative tendencies, but, alongside the Labour Party, they were still widely regarded as the most tangible manifestation of the burgeoning awareness of Britain's workers as a distinct social class.[4] This interpretation of labour politics and industrial relations owes much to Marx's analytical framework, emphasising the primacy of class, underpinned by economic inequality, as the central category of analysis. Jonathan Zeitlin, for example, identifies Hobsbawm, alongside his contemporaries E.P.

[2] Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1894); For a good introduction on the development of trade union history, see, Jonathan Zeitlin, 'From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations', *Economic History Review*, 40 (1987).
[3] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789-1848* (London: Abacus, 1977), p. 210.
[4] See, Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964), ch. 16.

Thompson and G.D.H. Cole, as one of several historians for whom, 'the influence of Marx went hand in hand with that of the emerging sub-discipline of social history in leading them to interpret trade unions and political parties as representatives of wider class forces.' The result, Zeitlin argues, is an 'interpretation of labour institutions as expressing a deeper class consciousness…'.[5] From the outset, labour history's understanding of trade unions and industrial relations has been deeply politicised with Marx's conception of class consciousness firmly embedded in its analysis.

Since the 1980s, the scope of British industrial relations history has been significantly enlarged by the introduction of new approaches and fresh areas of research. Howard F. Gospel, for example, has sought to reassert the importance of managers and managerial strategy in determining the character of workplace relations.[6] His analysis of the role of employer strategy in inculcating amicable working relations and harmonious industrial practice also offers a welcome shift in the focus of industrial relations away from its fixation with strikes and workplace conflict.[7] Elsewhere, some historians have begun to display a greater awareness of the variety of political attitudes and levels of institutional engagement displayed amongst workers themselves. The equation of trade union policy with rank and file belief has, therefore, been revealed to be more problematic than earlier histories typically suggested. Keith Gildart's work on *The North Wales Miners*, for example, highlights a lack of engagement with union politics amongst many miners and even questions the militancy of some senior trade unionists.[8] Similarly, the work of Ackers and Payne on British colliers further reveals an increasingly revisionist agenda amongst labour historians who have begun to question the assumed militancy of Britain's industrial working-class and the centrality of politics to their interpretations of the workplace.[9]

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[5] Jonathan Zeitlin, 'From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations', pp. 163 - 166.
[6] Howard F. Gospel, 'The Management of Labour', in, Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996).
[7] Howard F. Gospel & Gill Palmer, *British Industrial Relations*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 34-35.
[8] Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity, 1945-1996* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), p. 59.
[9] Paul Ackers and Jonathon Payne, 'Before the Storm: The Experience of Nationalization and the Prospect for Industrial Relations Partnerships in the British Coal Industry, 1947-72: Rethinking the Militant Narrative', *Social History*, 27 (2002).

The effect of such studies has been to shift the history of industrial relations beyond an organisational level to assess how, or whether, rank and file trade union members participated in workplace politics. Joanna Bourke's assessment that labour historians' focus on workers' communal institutions, such as trade unions, and collective lives has tended to marginalise the importance of individual perspective and experience in history is thus highly relevant. As Bourke notes, 'The intellectual fascination of British social history is found in elegant tones elucidating the development of working-class consciousness as experience in the waxing and waning fortunes of trade unions, workingmen's clubs, community pressure groups and political parties.'[10] If historians are to unpick the broad categorisations of past identity (class, gender, etc.) a greater consideration of the relationship between the individual and the collective is, therefore, necessary.

Much of this recent work is testament to the weakening influence of the Marxist paradigm as the primary theoretical framework for understanding the history of workers' politics and culture. The limitations of which, in respect to the history of trade unionism, are elucidated by Zygmunt Bauman, who has argued,

> Studies of actual labour movements became exercises in censuring their closeness to or deviations from the assumed [Marxist] ideal. Instead of analysing the genuine trends in the dynamics of labour movements, the adherents of the messianistic theories had – by the sheer logic of the approach – to assess the extent of "loyalty" or "treason" toward the vocation, the historic mission.[11]

In Bauman's analysis, the assessment of workers' organisations through a strictly Marxist criterion has obfuscated their intended purpose and failed to consider what their members sought to achieve through them. The move away from a politicised interpretation of class is also apparent in the history of the working-class itself. Historians have proved consistently aware of the social divisions that existed amongst workers but this was not usually viewed as a barrier to class consciousness. Labour Party biographer, Henry Pelling, for example, saw no contradiction in recognising the pronounced distinctions between skilled and unskilled workers and a wider, 'class solidarity among the workers which in the end facilitated effective

[10] Joanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.
[11] Zygmunt Bauman, *Between Class and Elite: The Evolution of the British Labour Movement, a Sociological Study* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), pp. x – xi.

political action in the interest of labour as a whole.'[12] This understanding of 'class solidarity', however, has been partially deconstructed by later historians, such as Ross McKibbin. McKibbin posits class as a fluid concept which existed alongside other categories of identity and was, thus, subject to numerous interpretations (and reinterpretations) and meanings. In this understanding, workers', 'political communication and group loyalties became multilinear: men could unite against masters, equally they could unite with them.'[13] Such an approach not only pays greater consideration to the internal divisions within the working-class but also recognises the importance of individualistic, as well as collectivist, orientations amongst workers. Like Joanna Bourke, however, much of McKibbin's research focuses on the experience of the working-class outside the workplace, in their leisure lives and communities, or the formal institutions of working-class politics, i.e. the Labour Party. The full implications of this analysis of class for the history of industrial relations have, therefore, yet to be fully realised.

This chapter details the way in which power was negotiated at the Port Talbot steelworks and the structures and ideologies that underpinned this dialectic. It begins with a consideration of steelworkers' collective organisations and wider understandings of workplace politics. As well as outlining the evolution and attitudes of the industry's largest trade union, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, this section will also explore the unstable dynamics of the complex system of multi-unionism which operated within the plant and the internal relationships between trade unions. This is followed by an analysis of the formal structures of negotiation in the workplace, including national and local collective bargaining arrangements and the, often, fraught relationship between them. As well as establishing how procedures of industrial relations evolved over time, it is argued that the fragmented nature of the plant's trade union and negotiation machinery perpetuated a multi-linear approach to the contestation of power at the plant, which undermined moves towards greater solidarity amongst steelworkers. Furthermore, in its final consideration of rank and file attitudes towards trade union membership and industrial politics, the chapter calls for a greater emphasis on the role of individual agency within historical analyses of workplace relations.

[12] Henry Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 4 & 78.
[13] Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 7-8.

Trade Unions

By the time of the Abbey Works' unveiling, the trade unions were well-established and exercised a powerful position in Port Talbot's steel industry. The three decades following the Second World War were often remembered by steelworkers as a period of growing trade union influence with both workers and managers alike acknowledging the unions undisputed role in the running of industry. Allusions to the strength the unions commanded during this time were pervasive in the oral testimonies: 'They had a lot of power. The blastfurnace union had a lot of power,' recalled Michael O' Callaghan.[14] John Pugh, describing his trade unionist father, similarly recalled, 'He had a lot of pull – the unions were *very, very* strong in the 60s, 70s…'.[15] Up until 1980, some contemporaries argued that even the plant's management were subordinate to the unions. As a former senior trade unionist, Ron Walters maintained, 'leading up to 1980, I don't think I'd be wrong in saying that the unions ran the plant and not management, they just went along for the ride.'[16] Throughout Great Britain, the period from 1945-79 saw an exponential growth in trade union membership; the membership of the ISTC peaked in 1970 with 133,749 members nationally.[17] The acceptance of corporatism as an integral condition of the post-war political settlement also accorded trade unions a voice at the highest level of government. Although some historians have pointed to the lack of any concerted attempts towards rationalizing trade unions and the continuance of pre-war structures, the negotiating power of trade unions undeniably increased.[18] McIvor, for example, has argued that 'unions were the main voluntary organization representing workers and a key agency in the power struggle in the post-war workplace'.[19] Even when confronted with declining memberships and an adversarial political climate, during the 1980s they remained crucial power brokers at the Port Talbot steelworks.

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[14] Interview with Michael O' Callaghan, 27 January 2014.
[15] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[16] Interview with Ron Walters, 13 November 2013.
[17] Martin Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched: The History of the ISTC, 1951-1997* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1997), p. 82.
[18] E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: from 1750 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 250.
[19] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 201.

Throughout the period, multi-unionism was an accepted feature of worker representation in the British steel industry. Whilst many historians have chosen to focus on single union industries, such as coal, where closed shops underpinned a strong union hegemony, most British workplaces employed workforces organised by more than one trade union. The *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations* reported in 1968 that, 'our survey suggests that even if white-collar workers and their unions are left out of account, about four out of every five trade unionists in Britain work in a multi-union establishment, and perhaps one in six of them belong to a grade of worker in which two or more unions are competing for members.'[20] Through the nature of its union structure, therefore, steel shared more similarities with manufacturing industries, such as the automotive industry, than traditional heavy industries like coal. Steelworkers were organised along occupational lines with their trade union corresponding to the nature of their job or section. The diverse nature of occupations found within the steelworks allowed a plethora of unions to establish a foothold in Port Talbot, with as many as eighteen separate unions, containing memberships ranging from over 13,000 to just nine, registered at the works in 1966.[21] Smith was not exaggerating when he observed that 'a steel works' trade union structure is complicated'.[22] Greater clarity can be brought to this unwieldy system through the categorisation of trade unions into process, craft and staff unions.

In terms of their numerical size and influence, the process unions undoubtedly wielded the majority of power within the plant's union structure. Although the process workers' unions included members of the colossal general unions, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW), who represented some auxiliary workers in the transport and packing departments, it was the industrial unions, the National Union of Blastfurnacemen (NUB) and the ISTC, who dominated the trade union scene at Port Talbot. The latter consistently accounted for over half of the entire workforce at the plant and was nationally the most significant union voice

[20] *Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations* (London: H.M.S.O., 1968), p. 29.
[21] The National Archives, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations - Productivity Bargaining: Evidence of the Steel Company of Wales, LAB 28/9, Appendix IV: Trade Union Membership, c. 1966.
[22] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 32.

within the steel industry. As the largest trade union within the Port Talbot steelworks (and the steel industry more generally) the evolution of the ISTC is worthy of further consideration.

The union came into being in 1917 through a series of protracted negotiations intended to bring about the merger of the numerous trade unions then representing steelworkers. Due to the complications inherent in realising such an ambitious amalgamation, a compromise solution was reached which saw the creation of two new organisations for the purposes of organising steelworkers; the first of which, the British Iron, Steel and Kindred Trades Association (BISAKTA), was a new trade union which all new process workers would join and members of existing unions could transfer to if they wished; the second, the ISTC, represented the new central organisation to which all existing unions would affiliate, including the newly created BISAKTA. The novelty of the solution was to allow, in effect, a merger of the existing steel unions to take place without fulfilling a legal requirement stipulating that two-thirds of all union members had to be in favour of such a move. Despite the apparent complexities of the arrangement, as John Thompson clarifies, 'the two organisations were working as one in all but name from 1917.'[23] By the end of the Second World War the distinctions between the two organisations had been all but entirely eroded and newspaper reports frequently used the two terms interchangeably. This false distinction was officially acknowledged in 1974 when the union finally discarded the BISAKTA moniker and officially renamed itself the ISTC.

Politically, since its inception the ISTC had always positioned itself towards the centre right of the trade union movement; Kenneth O. Morgan characterised the union's leadership as 'right-wing' and 'Gaitskellite'.[24] Throughout the period, the union rarely deviated from its commitment to moderation in industrial affairs and, up until the national steel strike of 1980, remained largely averse to condoning strike action. In an open letter sent to the industry's staff workers in 1968, general secretary, Dai Davies, outlined the union's industrial relations philosophy,

[23] John Thompson, 'Labour and Place: Trade Union Organisation in the British Steel Industry' (unpublished MPhil dissertation, University of Durham, 1994), p. 142.
[24] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life* (London: Harper Press, 2007), p. 183.

> BISAKTA believes in conducting its affairs in a responsible and intelligent way and has never regarded itself as one of two sides ranged against each other in a state of permanent hostility but rather as part of a joint enterprise where divergent interests can be reconciled by discussion and negotiation against a background of common interest in an efficient, thriving and prosperous industry.[25]

In this respect, the ISTC's position was largely congruent with the broader mood of the trade union movement after the Second World War. Britain's largest union, the TGWU, under the leadership of one of the eminent 'right-wing trade unions leaders', Arthur Deakin, occupied a similar political ground to the ISTC and shared its fervent anti-Communism.[26] Where that union gradually adopted a more leftist position, however, the ISTC's intransigent centrism remained. The union's approach to national bargaining was based on negotiation rather than confrontation and this was mirrored in the attitudes of its plant level officials. As a long serving ISTC branch official at Port Talbot, Dai Ferris was consistently critical of the militant tactics employed by some unions, berating their willingness to strike and criticising their approach to negotiating. The problem with some unions' attitude to industrial relations, he argued, was that they entailed 'nothing about compromise.' '[Compromise] to me,' Ferris elaborated, 'is the basis of coming together, you work out what everyone wants and then you go and sit down and negotiate and we'll have a bit of this, we'll have a bit of that…'.[27] Strikes were, therefore, to be avoided in favour of obtaining the best deal that was acceptable to workers and managers.

The union's centre-right position was also reflected in its autocratic structure, which exhibited a dubious commitment to industrial democracy and tended to concentrate power amongst its senior officials. Gill Palmer has observed that, 'some of the promotion-line unions were less careful with the formalities of democracy,' noting that, 'In the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation there was little chance for the less skilled members to determine policy. ISTC did not even have provisions for the usual annual delegate conference until 1976.'[28] Similar criticisms of the ISTC's hierarchical structure have been made by Charles Docherty, who argued that, 'they have created a highly centralised trade union structure which locates all power and

[25] Richard Burton Archives, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/3, Open letter from Dai Davies, 29 January 1968.
[26] Chris Wrigley, 'Trade Union Development, 1945-79', in Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 76-77.
[27] Interview with Dai Ferris, 27 November, 2013.
[28] Gill Palmer, *British Industrial Relations* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 121.

influence at national level and believes in the authority of a representative who does not refer his decisions back to the people whom they affect.'[29] In practice, this organisation manifested itself in a highly stratified chain of command, whereby national decision making was largely consolidated in the hands of the union's national executive committee: an elected body of twenty-one representatives intended to reflect the various regional and occupational differences amongst the membership, led by a general secretary.

For the purposes of administration, the union's membership was then divided into seven geographical regions, with the south west Wales division (division six) covering the Port Talbot works. By 1951 the region was the second largest ISTC division with a total of 20,490 members.[30] Each division was presided over by two fulltime appointed union officials, a divisional officer assisted by a divisional organiser, whose roles were to support and guide the plant officials. In contrast to branch officials, who were elected by their members, the divisional officers were fulltime union staff appointed to the position by the national executive. As well as being unelected, divisional officers also differed from branch officials in that they did not have to possess experience of working in the steelworks they represented. This constituted a fundamental distinction within the union's organisational hierarchy and the divisional officers were thus often perceived as the enforcers of the national executive's will. Finally, the most basic unit of worker organisation within the ISTC was the branch, with each branch corresponding to a specific unit of production in a plant. As such there were usually upwards of twenty – and sometimes more than thirty – ISTC branches operational within the Port Talbot steelworks during this period, although they could vary considerably in size; in 1963 the smallest ISTC branch at Port Talbot contained fewer than fifty members, whilst the largest branch, Abbey No. 4, contained over 900.[31] The branches were represented by an elected committee of branch officers who wielded considerable power on the factory floor. As a result of this highly stratified union structure, with limited scope for democratic participation, intra-union unrest was an ever-present possibility.

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[29] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers: The Sons of Vulcan* (London: Heinemann Education Books, 1983), p. 24.
[30] Martin Upham, *Tempered not Quenched*, p. 5.
[31] Gwent Archives, Journals and Records of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, D3417/1/46, Auditors' Report and Financial Statement, 27 November 1963.

Although lacking the numerical strength of the ISTC, the post-war period saw a significant increase in the size and influence of the craft and staff unions within the plant. Unions such as the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), The Electrical Trades Union (ETU, latterly EETPU) and the Amalgamated Union of Building Trades Workers (AUBTW, latterly UCATT), represented maintenance workers at the plant and found their influence increase as they recruited more members within the steel industry. Of the plant's 11,964 unionised manual workers in 1967, 2,541 were organised by craft unions.[32] Scott *et al.* observed a similar trend in a north Wales steelworks, where the introduction of a wide strip mill precipitated an increase in the number and importance of craft workers.[33] Moreover, they maintained that,

> These developments have increased the craftsmen's awareness of his position in the industry as distinct from his general role as a craftsman; they have accentuated, and made more apparent some of his long-standing grievances; and they have increased the power and ability of craftsmen as a group to take effective action in pursuit of their interests.[34]

Craft unions, therefore, were beginning to recognise the distinct needs of their workers within the industry and increasingly formulated strategies that reflected the specific aims and grievances of these members. Symptomatic of this heightened awareness at Port Talbot was the formation of the Joint Craft Committee in the early 1960s, comprising representatives of most of the plant's craft unions for the purpose of negotiating with local management. Its inception was an implicit recognition of the growing acknowledgment amongst craft unions that their interests and concerns within the plant were distinct from those of process and staff workers, thus revealing a fundamental rift in trade union cohesion.

[32] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 94.
[33] W.H. Scott *et al.*, *Technical Change and Industrial Relations: A Study of the Relations between Technical Change and the Social Structure of a Large Steelworks* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1956), p. 150.
[34] *Ibid.*

Table 4.1

Trade Union	Membership at Port Talbot Works (1967)
British, Iron, Steel and Kindred Trades Association	6,915
National Union of Blastfurnacemen	1,457
Amalgamated Engineering and Foundry Workers Union	1,234
Transport and General Workers Union	925
Electrical Trades Union	732
Amalgamated Union of Building Trades Workers	284
United Society of Boilermakers, Shipbuilders and Structural Steel Workers	173
National Union of General Municipal Workers	126
Amalgamated Society of Painters and Decorators	55
Amalgmated Society of Woodworkers	42
Plumbing Trades Union	12
British Roll Turners Trade Society	9

Non-staff trade union membership at the Port Talbot works, 1967.[35]

The penetration of staff or white-collar unions in the steelworks also tested the plant's existing industrial relations apparatus. Their growth and success in organising workers in the steel industry was one of the most remarkable features of the changing trade union scene at the plant during the period, with one contemporary observing that, 'Iron and steel, relative to other private industries was one of the best organized in the white-collar field.'[36] Up until the Second World War it had been

[35] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 94.
[36] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 42.

uncommon for staff workers in steelworks to be members of a trade union and managers were keen to foster company loyalty amongst this group of workers. The rise of specific white-collar unions, however, such as the Clerical and Administrative Workers Union (CAWU) and the Association of Supervisory Staff, Executives and Technicians (ASSET), during the 1950s and 1960s, profoundly challenged this pre-war consensus so that by 1968 it was estimated that half of the industry's white-collar workers were unionised.[37] The formation of the Steel Industry Managers Association (SIMA) in 1968, to represent the industry's middle-managers, added a further dimension to trade unionism at the plant, with the union arguing that lower and middle management could act as 'a third force' between the positions of capital and labour.[38] Like craft workers, the works staff employees were galvanised into union organisation by the recognition of a mutual set of aims and grievances that they felt were being largely ignored by the existing industrial unions. Low pay and limited promotion prospects were often voiced as particular concerns amongst staff employees. As such, proactive white-collar trade unionists, such as Clive Jenkins (a Port Talbot native and founder of the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs), identified the industry's foremen, laboratory staff and clerical workers as 'ripe for organisation' and set out to 'heighten an awareness that their worries were not unique – they *could* band together.'[39] The organisation of staff workers within the plant into separate unions further perpetuated the notion of a fragmented workforce characterised by the distinct and localised nature of its interests.

The multi-union system was recognition of the vast occupational differences that characterised working life in the steelworks and, its advocates argued, represented the only fair means of ensuring that each group received adequate representation and parity was maintained between them. In practice, the organisation of workers into localised groupings based around specific occupational interests and grievances invariably inculcated factionalism and sectional conflict. Philip Cooke described the trade union situation in steel as one 'where the traditional isolation and

[37] *Ibid.*
[38] Bob Carter, *Capitalism, Class Conflict and the new Middle Class* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 189.
[39] Clive Jenkins, *All Against the Collar: Struggles of a White-Collar Union Leader* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 27.

divisiveness of the industry continue to work against solidarity'.[40] The plant's trade unions also often exhibited fundamentally opposing attitudes towards industrial relations in accordance with their distinct historical and ideological traditions. Unlike the ISTC, the craft unions were often singled out for their alleged militancy and proclivity for striking. Hobsbawm identified a hardening of the craft unions' politics in the post-war period, arguing that with the devaluation of traditional craft skills, 'it was not surprising that the embattled labour aristocrat turned sharply to the left.' Moreover, he observed that, 'in the 1950s the characteristic working-class communist cadre was a metal-worker – at least a quarter of all delegates at party congress were normally engineers – and the chief spokesmen of the left in the Trade Union Congress represented such formerly conservative bodies as the Boilermakers, Electricians, Foundrymen and Amalgamated Engineers,'[41] all of whom maintained an established presence at the Port Talbot works. Stories of political radicalism amongst craft unions were also greatly inflamed by the contemporary press but the actual extent of communist infiltration within the Port Talbot works is highly questionable.[42] Individual craft union leaders were often keen to refute accusations of militancy: one declared, 'I'm not a militant, never have been.'[43] Political ideologues, therefore, were typically a minority amongst craft trade unionists. Like the process unions, craftsmen's representatives rarely actively sought conflict with management and recourse to industrial action was seldom politically motivated.

The perceived ideological gulf between the craft and process unions was, however, a frequent source of mutual suspicion and antipathy. ISTC officials closely monitored any potential left wing activism amongst the craft unions at Port Talbot amidst concern that this might radicalise their own membership. Writing to his general secretary in 1970, the union's south west Wales divisional organiser, Stan Biddiscombe, alarmingly reported on 'the possibility of a '"Red Cell" being set up' within the plant and identified several individual trade unionists as being 'suspect'. In an atmosphere of heightened tension following a strike by the plant's blastfurnacemen, he concluded that, 'I sincerely hope I am not chasing shadows, but a recent announcement that Rudi Deutchke [sic – left wing German student activist]

[40] Philip Cooke, 'Inter-regional Class Relations and the Redevelopment Process', *Papers in Planning Research* (Cardiff: Department of Town Planning, UWIST, 1981), p. 39.
[41] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p. 290.
[42] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 11 December 1959.
[43] Interview with Vince Scanlon, 27 January 2014.

was in the area during the Blast Furnace dispute set me thinking along these lines.'[44] Conversely, craft unions often regarded the process unions, especially the ISTC, as being 'soft' and in cahoots with the plant's management. Remembering his time as an ETU representative on the works multi-union health and safety committee, Paul Ace recalled the ideological demarcation between the craft and process representatives: 'Craft people, craft safety reps who were there, and any shop stewards, were very militant,' he remembered. 'The people who were on production tended to lean towards management…'.[45] Suspicion, rather than solidarity, then, was the main state of inter-union relations at the steelworks.

The antipathy that characterised inter-union relations at the Port Talbot works was further accentuated by the sense of competition that existed between them. Unions' influence within the plant was largely determined by the size of their memberships and this was the source of numerous internecine conflicts and sectional disputes, with different unions vying to recruit new members at the plant and even poach members from their rivals. Not only did this discourage unions from formulating cooperative strategies but it also promoted an acute sense of sectional insularity, whereby unions sought to protect their own memberships whilst checking the advance of others. Indeed, Smith described the industry as 'a classic example of the friction and mutual suspicion that can exist between craft and non-craft trade unions'.[46] These perpetual frictions most fiercely coalesced in demarcation disputes, which multiplied throughout the 1950s and 1960s and remained a permanent feature of industrial relations at the plant throughout the period. Demarcation, that is the reservation of certain working practices and job roles for members of a particular union, was not unique to the steel industry. Gospel has argued that this was a wider issue for British managers as, 'in the postwar period, job controls and restrictive labour practices were extended, re-established or newly created.'[47] Owing to its complex system of multi-unionism, however, the steel industry proved particularly susceptible to disputes of this kind. In its evidence submitted to the *Royal Commission on Trades Unions and Employers' Associations* in 1966, the SCOW

[44] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/4, Letter from S. Biddiscombe to D. Davies, 23 December 1970.
[45] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[46] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 32.
[47] Howard F. Gospel, 'The Management of Labour', p. 89.

conceded that they were presently dealing with no fewer than 116 separate demarcation disputes and cases of restrictive practice at their Port Talbot works.[48]

For the trade unions, demarcation disputes framed the plant's other unions as competitors and rivals for members, rather than potential allies. During the 1950s, for example, a long-running dispute between the ISTC and the TGWU over the right to organise packers in the Abbey Works Cold Mill led to threats of strike action and the intervention of the unions' national leadership. The suspicion between the two unions persisted into the 1960s, when a branch official at Port Talbot wrote to tell his divisional officer that he believed an ongoing demarcation issue was 'another case of the Transport Union trying their infiltration methods'.[49] The sustained efforts of white-collar unions to recruit staff workers in the plant were also perceived to constitute an additional threat to the power of the existing unions, particularly the ISTC who claimed it as their right to represent the industry's staff workers. The ISTC's south west Wales divisional officer, Jim Williams, for example, wrote concernedly to his general secretary of the progress made by the white-collar union, CAWU, in recruiting members at Port Talbot during the 1960s: 'We have discovered,' he wrote, 'that the Clerical and Administrative Workers' Union are now active in this Division, and in the Abbey Works they have already taken into membership former members of ours.' He went on to note that, 'We are giving the matter our attention and… are making every effort to get these men back into our organisation.'[50] The amount of time and energy expended by the plant's trade unions whilst embroiled in disputes with each other often contrasts sharply with the relative cordiality of their relations with management.

Bargaining and Negotiation

The rigidly defined structure of multi-unionism within the steel industry was instrumental in determining the nature of the plant's industrial negotiation machinery. At the Port Talbot works the relationship between management, trade

[48] TNA, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations – Productivity Bargaining: Evidence of the Steel Company of Wales, Lab 28/9, Supplement 1, Letter from D. John to J. Cassels, 6 June 1966.
[49] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation Branch Correspondences, ISTC/F/21, Letter from G. Pugh to A.E. Vincent, 27 September 1960.
[50] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/3, Letter from J. Williams to D. Davies, 15 November 1968.

unions and workers was bound by a highly codified set of conventions and structures that served to mediate the negotiation of power in the workplace. The main purpose of these structures was to facilitate collective bargaining, the industry's long-established practice for negotiating steelworkers' wages and working conditions. *The Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations'* defined collective bargaining as a practice that 'covers any negotiations in which employees do not negotiate individually and on their own behalf, but do so collectively through representatives'.[51] The practice of collective bargaining, however, was consistently more complex than this bilateral dialogue between trade unions and employers suggests. Negotiating at the works was highly stratified and a variety of agreements, from nationally coordinated discussions on wages to local shop floor haggling on specific aspects of working practice, all impacted on the experience of work for the plant's employees.

Some historians have argued that too much scholarly attention on industrial relations has been focused on the formal institutions of power broking, such as national negotiation machinery and employers' and workers' organisations. Paul Thompson, for example, has opined that, 'too often industrial relations writing has betrayed an equivalent formalism, whereby excessive emphasis has been placed on the formal mechanisms of collective bargaining.'[52] Subsequently, however, Jonathan Zeitlin has been amongst historians calling for a renewed focus on formal negotiating machinery, arguing that, 'relationships between workers and employers in the workplace were shaped less by informal groups or spontaneous social and economic processes than by institutional forces.'[53] Both interpretations warrant consideration but strict adherence to either position fails to recognise the full extent to which the practice of industrial relations profoundly shaped the material conditions of the workplace and workers experience of work. Moreover, by adopting one of these exclusivist viewpoints, historians have often been ignorant of the links between the official negotiating machinery and the more informal bartering system of the shop floor. Neither acted in isolation from the other and both were instrumental in determining the way in which steelworkers worked and the remuneration they

[51] *Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations*, p. 8.
[52] Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work: An Introduction to Debates on the Labour Process* (London: MacMillan, 1983), p. 29.
[53] Jonathan Zeitlin, 'From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations', p. 160.

received for doing it. Moreover, the relationship between them, as will become clear, was a pervasive source of tension within the Port Talbot works and constituted a central power struggle within the trade union movement itself.

By the time of the Abbey Works' unveiling, most of the national negotiating machinery covering the steel industry had been established for over half a century. Despite often appearing remote and removed from the material experiences of the workplace, these processes of national bargaining had a profound effect on workers in the Port Talbot plant, determining many aspects of their wages and conditions of work. At the beginning of the period, national negotiations were conducted by the steel unions on the one hand and the Iron and Steel Trades Employers' Association (ISTEA), of which the SCOW was a member, on the other. The ISTEA was the main employers' organisation in the British steel industry with affiliates that included most of the country's largest steel firms. Representing the collective interests of its affiliated bodies, it negotiated collectively on behalf of the steel firms and set national agreements for various aspects of steelworkers' pay and conditions. In keeping with the acute sectional interests that pervaded trade unionism in the industry, there was no facility or, indeed, desire for the unions to replicate the employers' example and negotiate collectively. Bargaining, then, took place on an individual union basis using the relevant established negotiating bodies.

For the ISTC, this comprised a complex system of joint negotiating boards, whereby union representatives met with members of the employers' association to negotiate basic wages and conditions relating to a particular geographical area or occupational category within the steel industry. In this respect, central ISTC negotiations were not truly national. As the union's former general secretary explained,

> Owing to the diverse character of the industry and of its products and the varying nature of the occupations of its workers, no settlement of wages and conditions of employment (apart from working hours) on a national basis, or by national conference, is practicable, such as might apply for example, to the railway service or coal-mining. Consequently negotiating machinery which relates itself to each branch or section of the industry must be provided.[54]

[54] Arthur Pugh, *Men of Steel by One of Them: A Chronicle of Eighty-eight Years of Trade Unionism in the British Iron and Steel Industry* (London: Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, 1951), p. 265.

At Port Talbot, most steelworkers were covered by two main negotiations bodies; the Heavy Steel Trades Board, which dealt with workers in the 'heavy' steel producing end of the industry; and the Sheet Trades Board, which negotiated on behalf of workers in the industry's rolling and finishing departments, such as the Cold Mill. As Peter Bowen elaborated, collectively these agreements, 'specified standard time conditions, guaranteed shifts, cost of living payments across steelmaking plants but allowed phasing by works agreements to suit local conditions.'[55] A similar institution existed for the industry's craft unions, the National Joint Trade Union Craftsmen's Iron and Steel Committee, which held similar negotiating rights with the industry's employers. The joint boards also served to arbitrate disputes between employers and trade unions where a resolution had not been able to be reached at a local level.

Up until the 1970s, however, national negotiations were often characterised by a high degree of cordiality between unions and employers and the former were mostly successful in achieving their primary goal: bettering their members' wages and ensuring that workers in the industry remained amongst the most highly paid members of the nation's industrial workforce. Whilst the market for steel remained buoyant, these aims were achieved with a minimum of friction. Hartley *et al.* observed that, 'these [national] negotiations deal exclusively with basic wage minima and differentials, and are customarily without major conflict.'[56] In keeping with the material aspirations of their members, achieving wage claims assumed the most important function of the union's national negotiating strategy. Indeed, Bowen has argued that the national pay award was at the forefront of the ISTC's national policy. He opined that, the 'objective of these strategies has been to preserve the favourable earnings performance of production workers irrespective of technical and economic change,'[57] and the ISTC proved highly successful at doing so up until the 1970s. Negotiating within a favourable economic climate and restricted labour market, the ISTC were able to extract significant concessions from the employers in relation to steelworkers' wages so that, between 1954 and 1959, steel firms' labour costs grew greater than the cost of new plant for the first time since the war.[58] Whilst political

[55] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations: Industrial Relations and Industrial Sociology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p.180.
[56] Jean Hartley, John Kelly & Nigel Nicholson, *Steel Strike: A Case Study in Industrial Relations* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1983), p. 27.
[57] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 97.
[58] Arthur Pugh, *Men of Steel by One of Them*, p. 592.

issues, such as nationalisation, were often relegated as lesser considerations, pay awards and improved working and holiday agreements remained the steel unions' primary goals.

Whilst producing largely favourable results for union members, the longstanding *status quo* of the industry's national negotiating apparatus was dealt a sudden rupture by the decision of the SCOW to leave the ISTEA in 1957. The SCOW was the first major British steel firm to withdraw from the employers' association with significant repercussions for union-management relations at the Port Talbot works. In essence, the company had entirely withdrawn from collective national agreements in order to negotiate its own terms at a local plant level. The firm resigned its membership of the association at the behest of Cartwright, who seemed increasingly wearisome with the collective approach adopted by the employers' association and the way which these agreements curtailed the autonomy of individual firms. For the firm, the final catalyst proved to be a decision to award a pay increase to a section of its Port Talbot workforce in direct contravention of a national agreement. With workers threatening to strike if the claim was not acceded, Cartwright informed the company's board of directors that, 'faced by the certainty of an immediate strike if we continued to apply the Employers' Association ruling about coke oven wages, it was decided to make the Union an offer of a complete overhaul of their wage structure, and the Association was informed of our action.'[59] There is some truth, then, in John Tripp's assertion that 'the SCW… left its employers' federation, the Iron and Steel Trades Employers, in 1957 because it wanted to pay higher rates than the federation was prepared to approve'.[60] But the decision to leave the employers' association was also intended to give the firm greater autonomy in its own industrial relations affairs, particularly in regard to fixing its employees' wages and conditions. It was, perhaps, recognition that the vast scale and novelty of the firm's operations at Port Talbot presented new problems and, therefore, required new solutions.

The most profound consequence of the firm's withdrawal from the national negotiating machinery was to precipitate a seismic shift in union power away from

[59] Shotton Record Centre, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 14, Steel Division: Report on Operations, July 1957.
[60] John Tripp, 'The Monster in Glamorgan', *Planet*, 1 (August/September 1970), p. 39.

the trade unions' national executives to the local branch officials. As such, the ISTC's national leaders reacted angrily to the SCOW's unprecedented decision. At a national executive meeting in 1957, it was formally noted that,

> The General Secretary was instructed to convey to the Iron and Steel Trades Employers' Association and also, if necessary, the British Iron and Steel Federation, the Council's extreme concern about the withdrawal from the Iron and Steel Employers' Association of the Steel Company of Wales and to point out the serious repercussion this is going to have on the smooth working of the industry's constitutional machinery.[61]

For the union's national leaders, the SCOW's decision constituted a direct threat to their right to negotiate on behalf of their members. Even though the national negotiating apparatuses were largely replicated at a local level, the concentration of most aspects of negotiating within the plant inculcated a fierce independence amongst Port Talbot's local union officials; an independence which persisted long after the partial reincorporation of the works into national bargaining with the industry's nationalisation in 1968.

With the nationalisation of the steel industry in 1968 came efforts to promote a more centralised approach to national negotiations. For both trade unions and the British Steel Corporation, state ownership offered an opportunity to rationalise the industry's complicated national negotiating machinery and move towards a more centralised bargaining structure. Community Union[62] general secretary and former ISTC official, Mick Leahy, told John Thompson that,

> Nationalisation gave the organisation new opportunities. Before, there was various agreements from varying bodies. You had the Midlands Wages Board, the Sheet Trade Board, the Heavy Steel Board, all these bodies. They tried to rationalise the whole of that for the first time. It was a great opportunity to move the industry forward in terms of better employment and all the rest of it. … It reinforced our centralised structure to a very large extent, as negotiations took place with the British Steel Corporation on a national basis.[63]

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[61] GA, Journals and Records of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, D3417/1/40, Minutes of Executive Council Meeting, 21, 22 November 1957.
[62] In 2004, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation merged with the National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades to form Community. At the time of writing, it is the main union representing workers in the British steel industry.
[63] Mick Leahy quoted in, John Thompson, 'Labour and Place: Trade Union Organisation in the British Steel Industry', p. 166.

Nationalisation also enabled greater cooperation between the industry's different trade unions at a national level, with the formation of the Trade Union Congress Steel Industry Consultative Committee (TUCSICC) in 1967 for the purposes of directly negotiating with the BSC on issues that affected all steelworkers (negotiations over wages, however, were still jealously guarded as the prerogatives of individuals unions). Moreover, the committee's early achievements proved impressive, with agreements quickly reached on, 'the holidays with Pay Agreement for manual grades; Employment and Income Security Agreement for staff and manual grades; Sick Pay Scheme; Superannuation Schemes; and the comprehensive agreement on a staff salary structure and related terms and conditions of employment.'[64] Whilst the industry's national trade union leaders and managers may have welcomed the opportunity to rationalise negotiation procedures, the Port Talbot works lay trade union officials staunchly guarded the independent negotiating rights they had procured during the 1950s and 1960s. At Port Talbot, branch officials continued to recalcitrantly flaunt their independence, defying their union leaders and managers alike. In 1974, the plant's general manager portentously noted that, 'the lack of control exercised by the District Officials is an increasing worry. Traditionally the ISTC were well disciplined,' he wrote, before concluding, 'but it is abundantly clear that this control is deteriorating progressively.'[65]

Analogous with the highly structured world of national negotiations was the fluid and informal bartering of the factory floor. Throughout the period, shop-floor bargaining was a pervasive feature of working life at the works and for most steelworkers constituted their primary source of contact with the mechanisms of industrial negotiations. Most shop floor bargaining was conducted via local branch officers and shop stewards, as ISTC branch official, Kenneth Williams, recalled.[66] The conduct of these negotiations were often informal and officialised by oral agreements but, through this kind of bartering, lay union officials exercised considerable power to negotiate on a host of local pay arrangements and working conditions. Moreover, the influence of shop-floor and plant level bargaining within the industrial relations nexus tended to increase throughout the period. According to

[64] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 119.
[65] SRC, British Steel Corporation Management Committee Reports, 378, Box 4, Report by Director in Charge for Month June, 1974.
[66] Interview with Kenneth Williams, 25 November 2013.

Smith, since the Second World War, 'the growth of plant or company bargaining has been of the most remarkable features of the full employment society.'[67]

The responsibility of branch officials and shop stewards even extended to negotiating bonus wage payments, which came to constitute an increasingly sizeable proportion of steelworkers' overall salaries. Indeed, the industry's complex wage structure, with as many as nine different components in determining a standard craftsman's pay, allowed considerable scope for haggling on the factory floor, particularly in relation to tonnage bonuses, fringe payments and 'special awards'.[68] Docherty explained that,

> Wages in steel are established by a two-tier system whereby the national rise is merely a cost of living increase. The real negotiations on wages and conditions are done at local branch level involving local working practices and use of labour. The bigger ISTC branches, particularly those on the manual side, are involved virtually the whole time on some negotiation concerning a group or groups of workers.[69]

In local negotiations, the firm's interests were typically represented by frontline supervisors, such as foremen and departmental managers. The result was an *ad hoc* series of local agreements that were often left entirely to the discretion of junior managerial staff with scant referral to company policy (where such a policy was to be discerned). Moreover, as a company report conceded in 1961, 'this highly inefficient and time consuming process was extremely damaging to the morale of the foremen who were under great pressure at all times to consider ridiculous incentive rates such as treble time.'[70] In contrast to the polite and refined tone of national negotiations, it was at the local level where disputes were most likely to emerge. As Hartley *et al.* observed, in the steel industry, 'disputes have been more common at local level where crucial details of incentives, manning and conditions are determined.'[71]

The greatly enhanced importance which shop-floor negotiations assumed at the Port Talbot works was entirely congruent with broader post-war trends in British industrial relations. One of the primary motivations behind the government

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[67] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 27.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 45.
[69] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers: Sons of Vulcan*, p. 156.
[70] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 15, Steel Division: Report on Operations, October 1961.
[71] Jean Hartley *et al.*, *Steel Strike*, p. 27.

appointment of *The Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations* in 1966, whose findings were popularly known as the Donovan Report, was the widespread recognition of the disparity and dysfunctional relationship between the formal processes of national bargaining and the unrestrained bartering of the factory floor. The inherent problems of this dual system were expounded upon in the report's findings, which noted that, 'workplace bargaining is fragmented because it is conducted in such a way that different groups in the works get different concessions at different times. The consequence is competitive sectional wage adjustment and disorderly pay structures.'[72] This consequent process of 'wage drift', whereby nationally negotiated wages bore increasingly less relevance to workers' actual pay, posed a central dilemma to the works managers and senior trade unionists alike, both of whom had a vested interest in restoring their authority over local trade unionists and rationalising workers' pay structures.

Whilst the trade unions' national leaderships willingly conceded a degree of autonomy to plant officials in local affairs, efforts by plant level trade unionists to combine and instigate collective workplace agreements posed a significant threat to the trade unions' traditional role and were staunchly resisted by national leaders. The ISTC's plant level organisation at Port Talbot initially took the form of the joint branch committee: a longstanding and well recognised unit within the union's organisational structure that allowed representatives of individual ISTC branches, within a plant or region, to collectively discuss issues that warranted a plant wide response. Officially, the committee's stated purpose was, 'to provide a medium for joint consultation and co-ordinated action on matters of common and general interest to the branches of which it is composed, and to maintain and where possible improve the organisation of workpeople eligible for membership of the Association at the works or in the area covered by the Committee.'[73] However, at Port Talbot the joint branch committee frequently overstepped this remit and exhibited a repeated willingness to flaunt national directives and assume responsibility for negotiations traditionally conducted by more senior personnel.

[72] *Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations*, p. 18.
[73] RBA, 'Joint Committees', ISTC/F/161(b), The British Iron, Steel and Kindred Trades Association: Rules and Constitution for Joint Committees Established in Accordance with the Provisions of Rule 4, Clause 16, 6 February, 1968

The battle over who should negotiate on behalf of the plant's members and the delineation of power occasionally erupted into outright intra-union war, with national leaders resorting to mass-dismissals and sanctions being brought against local officers in order to restore their authority. In 1959 an unofficial strike, instigated by the joint branch committee, spurned the national executive to depose of six union officials at the Port Talbot works and prompted the mass resignation of sixty-nine more in protest. In their assessment of the situation, the national leadership concurred that it was, 'clear that both the Branch and the Joint Group had… decided to act contrary to the rules of the Union and to the advice off the Divisional Officer and to call a strike that was completely without justification..'. Furthermore, the executive council inveighed, 'that such behaviour was not only calculated to impede the good relationships at present existing between the Employers and the Organisation, but could, if unchecked, lead to a situation where agreements which have proved advantageous to our members would be seriously interfered with.'[74]

Although the unofficial strike at the plant had ostensibly been motivated by the dismissal of a works clerk, there was little doubt that its real cause was the eruption of longstanding tensions between local and national leadership at Port Talbot. In his summary of the strike to his company board, Cartwright astutely observed, 'while the dismissal of a clerk initiated the strike, the reasons behind it were deeper than this.' He went on to explain that the ISTC joint group,

> Asserted themselves as an important negotiating body without reference to the proper channel of negotiation from individual Branch Secretary to Union Divisional Officer. Over the last two years considerable progress has been made in curbing the power of this group with the full support of the Union Headquarters in London and the local Divisional Officer. The Joint Group seized upon the dismissal of the clerk as a good opportunity to endeavour to re-assert their power. Their motives in this were not disguised, hence the sharp exchanges during the strike between the Union Officials and the Joint Group.[75]

In this regard, the fluid nature of the power struggle in the workplace could produce unexpected alliances, such as the combined efforts of Port Talbot managers and national trade unions to quash local union activism. Traditional solidarities based on

[74] GA, Journals and Records of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, D3417/1/42, Minutes of Special Executive Council Meeting, 9 March 1959.
[75] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 14, Steel Division: Report on Operations, February 1959.

class, then, were often defied in the multilinear struggle for power in the workplace.[76]

The autonomy the local unions were prepared to exercise in plant based affairs and the contestation of the works' power structure became more pronounced with the resignation of the SCOW from the ISTEA in 1957. Throughout the 1960s and 70s the intransigence and combative stance of the Port Talbot joint committee was frequently commented upon by national leaders. In 1971, in response to a query from the divisional officer about the formation of a new consultative committee at the plant, ISTC general secretary, Dai Davies, cautiously noted that, 'it seems to me that we get more than our fair share of trouble from the [joint] committee already operating within the Port Talbot area, and I think the formation of an additional one… is more likely to add to our difficulties that to ease them.'[77] Although the punitive measures of the national leadership were mostly successful in quashing the more rebellious elements of Port Talbot's unions, the 1980 national steel strike proved to be a watershed in the plant's industrial relations organisation. With mounting pressure from the plant's management for a more decentralised method of negotiating and a national union leadership temporarily weakened and distracted by the strike, senior trade unionists at Port Talbot, unprecedentedly representing all of the plant's main unions, agreed to the formation of a local multi-union committee in April 1980. Initially known as the 'slimline committee', due to its central role in the negotiations over the slimming down of the plant's workforce in the first part of the decade, the committee came to represent the main negotiating body covering workers at the plant, seizing significant bargaining privileges away from the national executive to the local officials. In the words of a subsequent chairman of the multi-union committee, the committees' formation 'was one of the best moves we ever made'.[78] Described by Ralph Fevre as 'the top-level multi-union committee', the slimline committee consolidated power to negotiate most of the major decisions concerning Port Talbot workers directly with the plant's management.[79]

[76] For more examples, see, pp. 204-217.
[77] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/4(b), Letter from D. Davies to S. Biddiscombe, 6 January 1971.
[78] Interview with Ron Walters, 13 November 2013.
[79] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed*, p. 114.

Indeed, from 1980 onwards the power wielded by the multi-union committee at Port Talbot often stunned full-time union officers and national leaders. As the ISTC's south Wales divisional officer from 1982 onwards, John Foley remembered, 'well, in my view the management had set up in Port Talbot a system where the various branches had allowed a works-wide committee, multi-union committee, to do things that I wouldn't allow in Llanwern [steelworks] and the other works… They could do all the negotiations for the plant.'[80] Efforts to reassert the will of the national executive over the Port Talbot representatives, however, proved largely ineffective. In the multi-union committee, local trade unionists found a means of defending their local autonomy and rights to make decisions affecting Port Talbot in Port Talbot, an ambition that had been in evidence at the plant since the 1950s. Criticisms about the national union's handling of the 1980 steel strike thus only encouraged the autonomous stance already evident at Port Talbot. The relative independence granted to the Port Talbot unions, through the SCOW's withdrawal from national negotiations, would not be readily relinquished.

Attempts by divisional officers, such as Foley, to influence the committee's decision making in accord with national policy were flatly rejected by its first chairman, Joe Lewis, and subsequent multi-union committee leaders continued his defiant stance. A former multi-union committee member, Kenneth Williams remembered that,

> Joe [Lewis] was a very strong and forceful man and he was absolutely determined – as later on Ronnie Walters and I were absolutely determined – that the fulltime officers would not negotiate for us. We'd negotiate ourselves, and Joe was determined on that. And then [John] Foley tried to invite himself to [the] meeting and Joe says, "Hey, fuck off! Meeting's not for you!" And we had a lot of that, so you'd have some tensions.[81]

This defiance, however, was met with strong initial resistance from the union's national executive. The decision by several of the union's Port Talbot officials to sign a local pay-deal in 1983, in direct contravention of a national agreement, was publicly decried by their general secretary Bill Sirs, who told the national press, 'the Port Talbot go-it-alone attitude is deplorable.'[82] In retaliation, the national executive punitively deposed of the local officials involved in the agreement but the measure

[80] Interview with John Foley, 10 October 2013.
[81] Interview with Kenneth Williams, 25 November 2013.
[82] *Western Mail*, 12 February 1983.

proved largely superfluous. The contestation for power continued to characterise intra-union relationships at the plant but the geographical struggle for control was gradually resolved in favour of the plant level officials. Structures of power at the plant were thus continually renegotiated throughout the period, creating a range of shifting alliances and interests that often paid scant consideration to traditional political loyalties. Independence and autonomy, rather than solidarity, were the local union leadership's primary objectives, which they pursued throughout the period with extraordinary effect.

Rank and File

By far the largest group within the workplace, trade unions' rank and file memberships – as distinct from proactive trade unionists or union officials – have traditionally received the least scholarly attention in histories of industrial relations. Where historians have attempted to bring into focus the relationship between trade unions and their members, it has typically been to show the tensions that emerged between a politically aware and militant rank and file and their restraining and conservatively minded leadership. Often associated with the emergence of the 'new left' in Britain during the 1960s and 70s, 'rank and filism', according to Zeitlin, 'discerned a fundamental split between the interests of trade union "bureaucracy", "leadership" or "officialdom" on the one hand and those of "rank and file", "membership" or "opposition" on the other.'[83] The 'rank and file' interpretation also offered a convenient theoretical explanation for the alleged stagnation of the labour movement in Britain, a popular concern of the intellectual left during the 1970s, whilst exonerating and preserving the mythology surrounding the radicalism of the industrial working-class. In its deconstruction of the unstable internal dynamics of labour movements, 'rank and filism' represented a welcome development in the study of industrial relations. Its strong reliance, however, on the militant worker narrative showed a familiar continuity with pre-existing industrial relations histories and inherited many of their deficiencies: namely, their failure to assess the true extent of workers' political engagement and the way this informed their attitudes to

[83] Jonathan Zeitlin, 'From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations', p. 165.

trade unionism and industrial relations. It is also highly questionable whether the politically militant shop stewards, who figured prominently in rank and file interpretations, were any more representative of their members than their supposedly remote national leaderships. In essence, rank and filism was a scholarly attempt to resuscitate a Marxist interpretation of industrial relations in spite of the historical evidence to the contrary.

The influence of politics in workplace relations can be overstated and risks obfuscating the overtly pragmatic attitude many workers displayed towards industrial relations. Port Talbot steelworkers were not apolitical but the extent to which politics motivated their outlook on the social order of the workplace requires some revision. Some historians have contrasted the restraint exhibited by Britain's steelworkers with the radicalism of the miners during the same period: one asked, 'if, by the early 1920s, the miners… were exceedingly radical and determined to improve their working lives, why were the steel-workers, often from the very same families, not at all radical?'.[84] It is a salient point but one which fails to fully consider that perhaps it was the miners, rather than the steelworkers, who were atypical in their political outlook. In accounting for the lack of political radicalism amongst certain sections of the industrial workforce, historians have traditionally emphasised differing economic circumstances and the restraining influence of moderate trade unions leaders.[85] Steelworkers were amongst the highest paid of Britain's industrial workers and their favourable economic position was likely to condition their politics. A purely economic causation, however, risks simplifying the complexities of political belief. As Ross McKibbin has argued, 'At a certain wage-level socialism presumably becomes unattractive, but it would be a crude sociology that put much weight on wage-levels as such.'[86] Moderate trade unions may have also sought to contain and even quash radicalism amongst their members but the extent to which they were able to determine their politics is easily overstated.

This contrast between steelworkers and miners is brought into even sharper focus in south Wales, where the geographic boundaries between steel and coal communities were frequently blurred and radicalism was held to be a mainstay of the

[84] John Vaizey, *The History of British Steel* (London: Weidenfel & Nicolson, 1974), p. 27.
[85] *Ibid.*
[86] Ross McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, p. 13.

region's political culture. Indeed, Keith Gildart remarked that, 'in the popular consciousness of the British people, Wales is an industrial society with radical traditions.'[87] Politically, support for the Labour Party amongst Port Talbot steelworkers, and British steelworkers more generally, was high and typical of industrial workers. Martin Upham had few reservations in claiming that, in the ISTC, 'the membership overwhelmingly backed the [Labour] party and ninety percent paid the political levy.'[88] Oral testimonies reveal a similarly high level of support for the party amongst Port Talbot's steelworkers. 'They all voted Labour!', maintained Ken Williams, a senior trade unionist at Port Talbot and Labour Party member.[89] Support for the party amongst steelworkers, however, was neither universal nor unconditional. That the Conservative Party were able to consistently secure almost a third of the vote in Port Talbot, at general elections during the 1950s, suggests that some steelworkers must have voted for the party. Some Port Talbot works employees even ran as Conservative Party candidates, such as Leslie Walters, a shift analytic controller at the plant, who unsuccessfully contested the Neath constituency in the 1974 general election.[90] Rank and file perspectives, however, point to such figures as being in the minority. Former steelworker, Kenneth Thomas unequivocally stated, 'I supported Labour all my life' and Paul Ace similarly concurred, 'I mean I've always voted Labour anyway, because I am a Labour person.'[91] Like many steelworkers, Thomas could trace a longstanding familial support for the party: 'my mother was a big Labour woman,' he remembered, 'she was on the committee in town here.'[92] Indeed, many steelworkers' politics were determined long before they entered the workplace and owed as much to familial and societal influences as the nature of their work.

The strength of support amongst steelworkers for the Labour Party, however, often belied the extent to which steelworkers actively engaged in politics or condoned party policy. Thomas' mother may have been actively involved in the local Labour Party but he conceded that his own political interests were minimal: 'A little bit had rubbed off on me,' he said, 'but it didn't stick, it was there but I didn't use it

[87] Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity*, p. 1.
[88] Martin Upham, *Tempered not Quenched*, p. 12.
[89] Interview with Kenneth Williams, 25 November 2013.
[90] *Steel News*, 21 February 1974.
[91] Interview with Kenneth Thomas, 26 September 2013; Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[92] Interview with Kenneth Thomas, 26 September 2013.

much.'[93] More recent historical studies of other groups of industrial workers have begun to reveal similar findings, challenging perceived notions of workers' militancy and the extent of political consciousness. Describing the Point of Ayr Colliery in north Wales, for example, Gildart observed that, 'the men at this pit were Labour voters but were not familiar with the ideology and policy developments of Labour in power. Many voted Labour because their mothers and father had...'.[94]

Few steelworkers described themselves as having strong political interests and fewer still recorded engaging in regular political discussions in the workplace. Michael O' Callaghan, for example, remembered that 'I don't think we'd talk about politics then, it'd be rugby or a couple of drinks… Nine times out of ten it would just be what's happened or what's the news and that's it; it'd be all about the plant.'[95] Even a prominent trade unionist remembered that, 'no, you never had a political discussion.'[96] Support for the Labour Party, then, was often culturally informed and did not translate into a politically left-wing interpretation of workplace relations. Not only was there an absence of militaristic attitudes amongst steelworkers but the influence of politics in formulating attitudes towards industrial relations was largely ephemeral. Although seemingly incongruous with the politicised history of the south Wales coalfield, the lack of strong political orientations amongst Port Talbot steelworkers was not untypical of British workers. Sandbrook, for example, has noted that in the 1950s and 1960s the working-class, 'generally regarded earnest political involvement as rather off and not very respectable, and active members of any political party, even the Labour Party, were often the objects of some suspicion.'[97] Pragmatism, rather than politics was the main determinant of employees' outlook on industrial relations and it is within this context that understandings of workplace solidarity must be interpreted.

The role of politics within steelworkers' conception of workplace relations can be more clearly realised in their response to two issues often portrayed as cornerstones of the ideology of the labour movement: nationalisation of industry and pan-worker solidarity. Having been subjected to two separate periods of state

[93] *Ibid.*
[94] Keith Gildart, *The North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity*, p. 29.
[95] Interview with Michael O' Callaghan, 27 January 2014.
[96] Interview with Kenneth Williams, 25 November 2013.
[97] Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: a History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2006), p. 35.

ownership, one might expect the nationalisation of the steel industry to invoke strong responses from Port Talbot steelworkers. Amongst colliers, it has been argued by one historian that, nationalisation in 1947, 'was enthusiastically celebrated in the coalfields of Britain from Kirkcaldy to Kent.'[98] Selina Todd has also written of the 'Miners and steelworkers who had cheered nationalization'[99] but, whilst most miners may have vocally celebrated the nationalisation of their industry, there is little evidence to suggest steelworkers did the same. By contrast, the first nationalisation of the steel industry in 1951 was reported by the *Western Mail* under the banner, 'no fanfare for steel take-over.' ''No flags flew,' the paper wrote, 'no sirens shrieked, and no bugles sounded when the steel industry of South Wales slipped quietly from the waters of private enterprise into the stagnant pool of state control at midnight… The steel worker couldn't care less.' The article concluded that, 'For many of the workmen, vesting day means little or nothing, and some do not even know that the industry is being nationalised.'[100] The Conservative leaning *Western Mail* was unlikely to offer a celebratory review of the industry's nationalisation but steelworkers' own memories of nationalisation largely corroborate the newspaper's account. 'I don't think it made a difference,' remembered Paul Ace about the plant's nationalisation. Instead of conceiving of state ownership in political terms, Ace was typical in being primarily concerned about its practical implications: 'the one question was whether we had a job,' he remarked.[101]

Often the apathy surrounding the industry's first nationalisation reflected the genuine lack of change that accompanied it. During the first short lived period of state ownership, from 1951-1957, the corporate brand of the SCOW remained intact as did most of its managerial structure. However, it also reveals a widespread lack of ideological commitment to nationalisation as a political goal amongst the plant's workers. Len Mathias articulated the thoughts of many in understanding the experience of nationalisation through the material changes it brought about: 'I think most of them felt the same way as me,' he said, 'it hasn't made any difference. It makes no bloody difference to us on the floor whoever owns it.'[102] Steelworkers,

[98] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945: The People's Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 35.
[99] Selina Todd, *The People*, p. 159.
[100] *Western Mail*, 15 February 1951.
[101] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[102] Interview with Len Mathias, 4 October 2013.

however, were not exceptional in regarding nationalisation with an air of indifference. Ackers and Payne's study of the Nottinghamshire coalfield has revealed a more geographically uneven response to state ownership amongst miners and has questioned the perceived enthusiasm for the industry's nationalisation in these areas.[103]

The second nationalisation of the steel industry, from 1968 to 1988, typically invoked a more favourable response from steelworkers, not least because it promised more tangible changes in steelworkers' conditions. Strong political desires for nationalisation were still rarely vocalised but practical benefits were inevitably welcomed. Joe Stanton, for example, considered that, 'I think when it was nationalised we were delighted. We thought that's going to be the big thing.' Like most Port Talbot steelworkers, however, Stanton's support for nationalisation was predicated on the material gains that it might bring: the promise that 'conditions would get better and pay might get better'.[104] Such attitudes were also conditioned by the changing economic climate for steel in the late 1960s. With the profitability of the industry waning and uncertainty mounting over job losses and plant closures, steelworkers' confidence in the private sector to deliver long term growth and prosperity had undoubtedly faded since the first period of nationalisation in 1951. Amongst some there was a belief that the government might demonstrate a greater social responsibility to steel communities and endeavour to protect jobs, although such hopes were comprehensively shattered by the plant closures of the mid-1970s and further waves of job losses during the following decade. Nonetheless, Port Talbot steelworkers' attitude to nationalisation reveals a highly pragmatic understanding of their own work situation and an equally practical conception of industrial relations. Very few steelworkers identified nationalisation as a fundamental challenge to the capitalist means of production and, if they had, it is questionable whether they would have desired it.

Neither the shared experience of heavy industry or widespread electoral support for the Labour Party seemed to inculcate strong notions of class or pan-worker solidarity, as conventionally understood, amongst steelworkers. Frequently these attitudes mirrored those of their trade union leaders. Describing the relationship

[103] Paul Ackers and Jonathon Payne, 'Before the Storm'.
[104] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.

between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the ISTC in south Wales, Ken Williams remembered, 'I always felt a tension between the steelworkers and the coal miners. They saw themselves as working-class heroes – [I] couldn't fucking stand talking to them.'[105] Tension and mutual antipathy could also characterise the relationship between steelworkers in different plants and regions. From the 1960s onwards the perceived failure of British industrial workers to develop solidaristic instincts and pursue a revolutionary socialist agenda was a recurring source of despondency amongst Britain's left-wing intelligentsia and was regarded as endemic of a more 'individualistic' orientation amongst workers. 'It seemed,' as Robert Taylor summarized, 'that the British proletariat was not prepared to play the revolutionary role that had been assigned to it by the forces of history.'[106] Invariably this approach exaggerates the extent of pre-existing class solidarities whilst also judging workers' political outlook by a largely fallacious set of criteria. The overwhelming majority of Port Talbot steelworkers did not want a revolution but a better workplace settlement, for themselves and their families. With this pragmatic conception of workplace politics in mind, it is unlikely that steelworkers would take action to support colleagues elsewhere, especially where this threatened to worsen their own economic position.

When in 1979, the ISTC sought to galvanise national support amongst its members in defence of the planned closure of the Shotton Steelworks in north Wales and the Corby Steelworks in the east midlands, many sections of Port Talbot's workforce were vocal in their reluctance to jeopardise the future viability of their own plant to aid steelworkers elsewhere. A letter written on behalf of the ISTC's Abbey No. 9 Branch to their general secretary, Bill Sirs, articulated the widespread resistance to the implementation of a proposed overtime ban in defence of the threatened steelworks: 'I must point out,' he told Sirs, 'that if your Executive recommendations to the Steel Committee are "carried" the "embargo on all overtime worked" would result in the complete closure of Port Talbot Works in a very short time.' Although expressing his, 'greatest sympathy with our brothers at Shotton and Corby,' he concluded that, 'with the best will in the world it will be extremely difficult to get the membership to make a sacrifice that will result in their own

[105] Interview with Kenneth Williams, 25 November 2013.
[106] Robert Taylor, 'The Rise and Disintegration of the Working-classes', in Paul Addison & Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000* (London: Blackwell, 2007), p. 377.

downfall.'[107] The ISTC's national executive received several other such letters from Port Talbot branches, all revealing a widespread lack of solidaristic support. Indeed, even where loyal branch leaders had sought to incite support for industrial action, their membership remained unmoved. One letter read, 'the decision taken against the advice of the Branch officials was unanimous, there was no individual present prepared to take any kind of action.'[108]

This apparent absence of class-based solidarities was a recurring phenomenon throughout the period and was most pronounced when steelworkers' own economic circumstances or job security came under threat. In 1956, the SCOW's intention to man their melting shop at Port Talbot with displaced metal workers from west Wales was met with fierce resistance from Port Talbot steelworkers. Fred Cartwright despondently reported to his fellow directors that 'about 10 West Wales men have been offered jobs on these furnaces' and, as a result, 'the Abbey Melting Shop Branch have issued notice that unless the Company withdraw the offer to these men they will go on strike on Sunday, 5th February.'[109] Whilst Port Talbot steelworkers may have felt sympathy for their colleagues facing redundancy in west Wales, this did not undermine their belief that local workers had a greater right to local jobs. In this regard, however, Port Talbot's steelworkers were not unlike other large sections of Britain's industrial workforce. Gildart's study of *North Wales Miners* revealed that their, 'aversion to the influx of outside labour focused on the defence of jobs for the existing members of the union and the needs of the local labour force.' 'There might have been a symbolic embrace of Labourism and internationalism,' Gildart goes on, 'due to the radicalism of the Second World War and the victory of the Labour Party in 1945 but, in many respects, the traditions of localism remained.'[110] Even amongst trade union leaders, who were typically more conversant with the internationalist values of the labour movement, local and community loyalties often exerted a greater influence than class solidarities.

[107] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/10(a), Letter from J. Keogh to B. Sirs, 6 November 1979.
[108] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/10(a), Letter from V. Thomas to B. Sirs, 24 November 1979.
[109] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 13, Steel Division: Report on Operations, January 1956.
[110] Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity*, pp. 45-46.

Contemporary sociologists often identified these kinds of behaviour amongst industrial workers as emblematic of the dissolution of solidaristic attitudes and the rise of working-class 'instrumentalism'. Goldthorpe *et al.*, for example, observed that, 'an absence of solidaristic orientations was revealed among our Luton workers not only in their pattern of out-of-work sociability but in their working lives as well, and in fact in the general way in which they interpreted the social order.'[111] Class, however, only ever represented one loyalty to which industrial workers adhered. The loyalty of the community, the immediate workplace and the family all exercised a powerful influence in the formulation of steelworkers' responses to industrial relations and often counter the notion that their attitudes were becoming more 'individualistic'. Achieving economic independence and financial security were the most important reasons steelworkers went to work and they exhibited a persistent willingness to defend these goals, regardless of whether they were being threatened by managers or other workers.

The pragmatic approach displayed by steelworkers towards workplace relations also defined their response to trade unionism. For most steelworkers being a member of a trade union was an inescapable feature of working life, not least because it was usually a condition of employment. According to a SCOW spokesman in 1966, 'membership of the appropriate trade union is a condition of employment at Port Talbot. This applies to operatives only, not to staff employees.'[112] In this respect, union membership at the works closely conformed to, what W.E.J. McCarthy termed, a 'semi-closed shop', whereby workers were expected to join an appropriate union soon after employment and both employers and trade unionists strongly encouraged workers to do so.[113] Most steelworkers, therefore, did not *choose* to join a union, they just did. Indeed, many remember being approached to join a union soon after they commenced employment at the plant. David Thomas, for example, remembered, 'in those days you wouldn't get away with not being in a union. You were approached and encouraged to go to join and go to the meetings. I

[111] John Goldthorpe *et al.*, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, p.164.
[112] TNA, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations – Productivity Bargaining: Evidence of the Steel Company of Wales, LAB 28/9, Supplement 1, Letter from D. John to J. Cassels, 6 June 1966.
[113] W.E.J. McCarthy, *The Closed Shop in Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 25.

think basically you wouldn't have job if you weren't in a union.'[114] For steelworkers joining a union was accepted as a condition of employment, even if the advantages of union membership were widely acknowledged.

A minority of works employees, however, recalled being subjected to intimidation and threats from local union representatives if they voiced objections to joining. As a works clerk (a staff grade), Keith Foley was not bound to join a union but found himself 'blackmailed', as he described it, into doing so. Foley reluctantly enlisted having been informed by a branch representative that 'you won't be here for very long if you're not in a union'. In Foley's opinion, 'you could call it robbery if you like, or blackmail, or coercion… but basically what it came down to, although it was your choice entirely what you did, if you didn't join the union you wouldn't be there very long.'[115] As a typist, Jan Fletcher, was similarly not obligated to join a trade union but found herself cajoled into doing so. 'I didn't agree with trade unions,' she told her local union representative, but 'in the end', she went on, 'I had to join really, I was put in a difficult position so I joined.'[116] Even some manual workers regarded trade union membership as something imposed on them rather than a voluntary association. Blastfurnacemen, Arthur Bamford, for example, pointedly remembered, 'I didn't want to be in a union' and resented paying union dues whilst being unconvinced of the benefits of union membership.[117] Indeed, even workers in highly unionised industries were capable of demonstrating a wide range of responses towards their collective organisations. Having surveyed a broad sample of oral testimonies from industrial workers, McIvor has argued that workers relationships with their unions were often complex, noting that, 'individual workers could hold widely differing and sometimes contradictory perceptions of the place of trade unions within society.' Some workers, he went on, 'were more critical and negative towards the unions, regarding them as overly powerful, with much resentment expressed towards being forced to join where "closed shops" existed.'[118] Although only representing a minority view, the experiences of workers such as Foley and Fletcher are highly revealing in exposing the dangers of equating union membership with participation or support.

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[114] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.
[115] Interview with Keith Foley, 23 October 2013.
[116] Interview with Jan Fletcher, 14 October 2013.
[117] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[118] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 202.

The majority of steelworkers, however, viewed joining a union as personally desirous, although rarely for ideological reasons. That most of the works employees thought favourably of the principle of trade unionism is conclusive from the oral testimonies. 'Yes, I believe in the trade union,' stated Graham Rowland,

> Because I believe in the history of the trade union and why the trade union was sought out. I don't believe in a lot of things that goes on with the trade union but the principle of the trade union was there to make sure people had a fair day's wages for a fair day's work and it wasn't given back to a truck system, which was exploited by the management.[119]

The historical associations of trade unionism with the advancement of the labour movement thus retained some influence in steelworkers' understandings of the origins of their unions and their theoretical purpose. Although ideological considerations may have informed steelworkers' understandings of the origins of trade unionism, it was the practical benefits to be derived from being a member of a trade union that held the most appeal. In Dennis Spicer's estimations, belonging to a trade union was a 'necessary evil' but as a member, 'you had someone to stick up for you. If a manager took a dislike to you he could send you on your way. It was insurance, that's all it was.'[120] Joe Stanton also primarily regarded his union as a service for furthering its members' interests and redressing grievances: 'It was the place to go if you wanted to say anything about your working conditions and stuff like that,' he remembered.[121] For process workers, in particular, the practical benefits of union membership were also patently evident in the seniority system, the union regulated system for controlling promotion within works departments. Where unions, such as the ISTC, were able to maintain a firm monopoly on career progression, union membership became less an ideological commitment and more a precondition for career advancement. As McCarthy explains, under such an arrangement, 'promotion opportunities will be vetoed by the union if the candidate for promotion is not, at the time the vacancy arises, a fully paid up member.'[122] The advantage of being a union member, then, was primarily to be found in the material benefits one could hope to derive from it.

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[119] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013. The truck system was a method of payment widely practiced in industrial south Wales in the nineteenth century, whereby workers were paid with company issued tokens, rather than money, which were only redeemable in the company store.
[120] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[121] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[122] W.E.J. McCarthy, *The Closed Shop in Britain*, p. 49.

In many respects, the understanding amongst steelworkers of trade union membership as constituting a form of 'insurance' is entirely congruent with the 'utilitarian' orientation to trade unionism exhibited by Luton car workers in Goldthorpe *et al.*'s *Affluent Worker* studies. In their analysis, the pragmatic understanding of trade unions' functions by car workers was part of a broader phenomenon of 'instrumental collectivism'. They elaborated, 'that unionism should have little significance for them [workers] other than relation to the immediate "bread-and-butter" issues of their own work situation is entirely consistent with their definition of work as primarily a means to extrinsic ends: their main interest in the union, as in the firm, is that of the "pay-off".'[123] As such, it is not surprising to discover in the minute books of the ISTC's Port Talbot branches, that the majority of union time was devoted to addressing individual grievances and resolving practical queries. A cursory glance through the minutes of the Morfa coke oven branch, for example, show disagreements over promotion and claims to man new equipment as the dominant issues occupying the majority of branch officials' time.[124]

Individual pay claims and wage anomalies were another pragmatic complaint members frequently took to their unions for redress. A letter from an Abbey Works branch official to his divisional officer asking for assistance in resolving an ongoing wage anomaly between NUB and ISTC roof cleaners was typical of the day-to-day activities of the plant's union staff.[125] Bauman's interpretation of workers' relationship with their unions is, therefore, astute. He argues that many unions came, 'to resemble institutions like building societies, whose members, in return for their contributions, can look forward to assured profits which they could not hope to obtain by investing their modest capital as individuals.'[126] Joining a union, then, did 'not necessarily involve any political implications or indicate a definite attitude towards social questions and the social order'. Rather, as Gildart observed of the north Wales miners, most workers 'saw [union] membership as an insurance policy to be utilized in times of crisis'.[127] For most steelworkers, trade union membership

[123] John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer & Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 106.
[124] RBA, Margam Coke Branch, ISTC/F/144.
[125] RBA, Abbey Works Branch Correspondences, ISTC/F/99(a), Letter from K. George to S. Biddiscombe, 23 may 1973.
[126] Zygmunt Bauman, *Between Class and the Elite*, p. 267.
[127] Keith Gildart, *The North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity*, p. 59.

was important but more as a means of protecting their material interests in the workplace than as an identification with the wider values of the labour movement.

The recognition of trade unions as a functional organisation designed to protect and further their members' individual interests goes some way to explaining the lack of involvement most steelworkers had in union affairs. Outside of the unions' branch officials, few steelworkers described themselves as 'active' trade unionists. Dennis Spicer's level of union engagement was typical of most. He evaluated the extent of his involvement in union affairs as minimal, commenting that, 'I used to go to the meeting if there was anything on but it wasn't my cup of tea.'[128] Joe Stanton similarly recalled in his branch that, 'the committee were the only active [members].'[129] Throughout the period, attendance at branch meetings was frequently poor and (unless a significant workplace issue, such as a wage rise, was impending) most steelworkers displayed a very limited engagement with the affairs of their unions. In a letter to the union's general secretary in 1967, the ISTC's south west Wales divisional organiser dejectedly reported on the low turnout at a recent meeting for the plant's staff workers: Although, 'All staff were released to attend this meeting,' he remarked, 'Unfortunately the response was very poor and the meeting was sparsely attended, and only by our own members.'[130] Sparse attendance was also a recurring feature of branch meetings. Joe Stanton remembered, 'I have been to quite a few meetings where there wasn't enough for a quorum. They'd have to wait to see if anybody else would come – "we need another two" [they would say] – and the quorum was only about ten or twelve and the membership in the Cold Mill was something like two-hundred.'[131]

Once again, this state of affairs was not unique to Port Talbot or the steel industry. *The Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations* findings bemoaned the poor communication between unions' leaderships and their members, noting, 'with average attendance at meetings well below ten per cent, this is the main link between unions and their members.'[132] In his study of the post-war British car industry, Jack Saunders was also keen to stress that participation in union

[128] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[129] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[130] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/3, Letter from J. Williams to D. Davies, 30 January 1968.
[131] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[132] *Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations'*, p. 26.

affairs varied wildly amongst members and was often dependent on contemporary circumstances. For car workers, he argues, 'trade unionism veered between passive, reluctant, or purely instrumental but sometimes also active and highly committed, depending on changing situations and historical moments.'[133] Apathy amongst unions' rank and file was also well documented in contemporary sociological work studies, although the reasons proffered to explain it are often unsatisfactory. Beynon plausibly attributed the trade union passivity of car workers to the tiring and physically demanding nature of their work, although there is little evidence to suggest that automated production processes were more exhausting than pre-existing forms of industrial labour.[134] More likely, it seems that trade unions were largely irrelevant to most employees' everyday experience of work. Bauman's explanation that, 'the unions have developed in a direction which occasions calling for active participation by rank-and-file members have, been reduced to a minimum,' is thus insightful.[135] Nor is there much evidence to suggest that worker disengagement in trade union affairs was a uniquely post-war development. On the eve of the First World War, McKibbin noted that eighty per cent of British workers were not even union members and amongst those who were, 'there is no simple identity between union membership and political identification.'[136] Unless a worker had a personal grievance in need of redress or a collective change to workplace practice threatened to alter his or her material circumstances, the union was of little use to them and, therefore, occupied a marginal position in their working life.

The sense of disconnect between union leaders and the plant's rank and file was also manifest in the wariness many steelworkers exhibited towards union officials. Comments suggesting union leaders were 'there for themselves' were not uncommon amongst the plant's employees.[137] When asked whether his trade union leaders represented him well, Kenneth Thomas, an ISTC member, replied, 'some of them did, some of them didn't.' Moreover, he remembered, 'some were in it purely for their own ends and they were ripping us off to suit their own pockets.'[138] In this regard, senior trade unionists could often provoke more ire amongst steelworkers

[133] Jack Saunders, 'The Untraditional Worker: Class Re-formation in Britain, 1945-65', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), p. 248.
[134] Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 202.
[135] Zygmunt Bauman, *Between Class and the Elite*, p. 277.
[136] Ross McKibbin, *Cultures of Class*, p. 2.
[137] Interview with Theodore Kingdom, 18 October 2013.
[138] Interview with Kenneth Thomas, 26 September 2013.

than the plant's managers. Throughout the period, workers' attitudes towards managers were mixed but there remained a consistent recognition of the necessity of the managerial role and they were seldom accused of the duplicity and avarice that was often levelled at trade unionists. Some workers resented the power trade union officials wielded in the plant and the divergence in status which emerged between them and their members. Keith E. Morgan, for example, remembered the unease he felt at the deferential attitude exhibited by the rank and file towards union appointed plant convenors. Ordinary members, he remembered, 'would come along and they'd knock on the door and they'd have to wait until the works convenor said, "come in,"… and they'd doff their caps like as if the works convenors themselves were managers… So it was a "them and us" internally as well.'[139] The considerable perks extended to trade union officials by managers also did little to disarm rank and file resentment. In the throes of an industry-wide recession, the company was still persuaded by union representatives on the works joint council to provide an annual outing for council representatives (a visit to the 1978 Welsh rugby union cup final on this occasion).[140]

More seriously, the reputation of certain trade unionists, and the plant's trade unions more generally, were also marred by accusations of corruption and wrongdoing. In a company board report, for example, Cartwright accused the bricklayers' union leaders of enforcing an arrangement whereby they received, 'a very considerable sum each week as a deduction from each of their fellow bricklayers.' 'Thus,' he continued, 'a type of gangster rule had developed in the local branch of the union.'[141] Similar allegations were voiced by a bricklayer at the plant who remembered, 'there was corruption in our union… they [union officials] had the pick of the jobs when they went in there and we had to have the rubbish.'[142] Stories of this kind did little to engender trust amongst the rank and file in their union leaders, nor encourage greater participation in union affairs. Trade union officials were not universally reviled figures (certain individuals did command considerable respect from their members) but they were typically remote and distant ones. Trade unions were thus viewed by most workers with an air of detachment and indifference

[139] Interview with Keith E. Morgan, 28 October 2013.
[140] RBA, Works Council, SWCC/BSC/A/11, Minutes of Works Council Meeting, 31 January 1978.
[141] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 15, Steel Division: Report on Operations, October 1961.
[142] Interview with Theodore Kingdom, 18 October 2013.

and most steelworkers' engagement with them was sporadic and restricted to personal workplace issues. Nonetheless, in the power they exerted in workplace negotiations, trade unions wielded considerable influence over their members' experience of work and, through the use of the strike weapon, had the power to directly impact upon their livelihoods and prosperity.

Conclusion

The ways in which power was negotiated in the Port Talbot steelworks reflected the growing complexities of collective organisation and representation in the post-war industrial workplace. As greater numbers and varieties of workers came to be concentrated in increasingly larger plants, industrial relations at the works came to resemble a multifaceted nexus, in which a variety of groups and factions sought to assert their influence and control over the means and condition of production. Labour at the plant may have been extremely organised, with steel being amongst the most highly unionised industries in the country, but its aims were rarely united. Multi-unionism, in particular, engendered a conception of workplace relations in which workers were more likely to identify common interests with their own occupational groups, rather than 'the workers' as a whole. The trend amongst the plant's trade unions to negotiate individually with management and secure separate terms for their members further reinforced an industrial relations culture in which sectionalism, rather than solidarity, predominated.

Sectionalism, however, not only promoted a more individual approach to workplace bargaining, it also transcended the traditional bilateral interpretation of workplace power. The fundamental inequality which underpinned the relationship between capital and labour remained but, in a workplace of competing interests, trade unions were just as likely to be brought into conflict with each other as management. Class was historically and culturally important to understandings of workplace relations but, as a theoretical paradigm underpinning industrial action, its influence is often hard to locate. Such struggles were also reflected within the trade unions themselves, with national and local leaders and rank and file members, often exhibiting fundamentally different attitudes towards the social order of the

workplace. The concept of power, however – the ways it was negotiated and the structures that facilitated it – remains significant to historical understandings of work. The balance of power was still the primary determinant of workers' conditions and remuneration and, as such, its influence was felt far beyond the workplace itself. In order to understand how power and influence determined the form of modern labour, however, it is necessary to recognise the multifarious ways in which it was contested and the fluid nature of the alliances and antagonisms it produced.

Whilst formal structures and collective organisations remain integral to the historical development of industrial relations, rank and file perspectives are also needed. Too often the labourism of the trade union movement has been regarded as a formulaic representation of workers' attitudes and ideologies and union membership has been held as indicative of support. Where historical rifts have been documented between trade union leaders and their rank and file these have most readily been interpreted as evidence of an increasingly militant membership discontent with the conservative restraint of their leaders, a view that continues to be propagated by historians.[143] In the Port Talbot steelworks, neither position was the case and oral testimonies reveal several instances of workers being members of unions they felt little ideological identification with or were reluctant to join. Even for those who wished to join a trade union, union membership was often viewed as a perfunctory obligation to be maintained in the event of a personal work related crisis or for the practical advantages of wage increases and career progression. The overt politicisation of trade union history and labour history more generally has, in several instances, produced a historical understanding of workplace organisation that largely fails to correspond with the way in which members understood such institutions or what they sought to derive from them. A history of trade unions 'from below', therefore, will not only present a better understanding of their function but also why they often acted in ways which seemed counter to the 'traditional' objectives of the labour movement.

[143] Selina Todd, *The People*, p. 287.

Chapter Five

'A New Dagenham'[1]: Workplace Conflict and Industrial Disputes

Introduction

The pervasive optimism surrounding the construction of the Abbey Works seemed to set the tone for a new phase in industrial relations in Port Talbot's steel industry. Both trade unions and management entered the post-war era with a renewed commitment towards conciliation and peaceful working relations, as partners in industry. Addressing the company's shareholders in his 1957 annual statement, the Steel Company of Wales' chairman, Harald Peake, declared, 'personally, I attach the greatest importance to the maintenance of good relations between shareholders, management and workpeople' and wrote sincerely of the company's 'friendly relations, with no less than thirteen trade unions'.[2] The industry's senior trade unionists struck a similarly placid tone. The assistant general secretary of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation encouraged steelworkers at a mass-meeting in Port Talbot in 1955 to, 'dismiss the stories of people like the Tolpuddle Martyrs for the humbug they really were.' The reality, he proclaimed, was that, 'the spirit of co-operation that existed between management and men in the steel industry was an excellent example to other industries and if it were more widely followed it would go a long way towards settling the country's economic problems.'[3] By the 1960s this rhetoric sounded increasingly hollow, even naive. During the next two decades the Port Talbot steelworks gained a degree of notoriety through the national press as 'the strike works' and 'a new Dagenham',[4] with scores of internecine strikes repeatedly halting production at the plant, culminating in the epic three month long national steel strike of 1980. A worsening economic situation, rapid technical change, inept management and greedy trade unions were all variously blamed for what was often portrayed as a catastrophic breakdown of industrial relations at the steelworks. By

[1] *The Financial Times*, 3 January 1964.
[2] South Wales Miners' Library, The Steel Company of Wales: Annual Reports and Accounts, Director's Report, 1957.
[3] *The Dragon*, January 1956.
[4] *Western Mail*, 17 February 1958; *The Financial Times*, 3 January 1964.

the end of the period, the tone and character of industrial relations at the plant had been profoundly transformed by over three decades of conflicts and struggles.

Although the existing machinery for resolving workplace disputes at Port Talbot often proved highly effective, its limitations were demonstrably exposed from the 1950s onwards. In both their frequency and character, the industrial disputes that arose in the Port Talbot steelworks during this period marked a discernible break with the industry's traditional ways of conducting industrial relations. After the 1926 general strike, the industry enjoyed a prolonged period of quiescence in industrial relations, characterised by a nationally low strike rate and amicable working relations within individual steel plants. Served by a moderate trade union, mostly benign employers and well-established negotiation machinery, workplace disputes were rare and most were amicably resolved through official channels. After 1926, Carr and Taplin argued that, 'it was usually found possible to settle issues of wages and conditions without recourse to extreme measures.'[5] The frequency with which 'extreme measures' were witnessed at the Port Talbot works after the Second World War, however, reveals the progressively antagonistic nature of industrial relations in the industry and, particularly, at Port Talbot. One of the most remarkable and unprecedented features of the plant's industrial relations culture throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s was the marked increase in the number of unofficial strikes at the plant, conveying an image of steelworkers as militants and the plant as strike prone. Although loosely conforming to wider patterns in the steel industry, accounting for Port Talbot's acknowledged 'extra-ordinary' difficulties in industrial relations requires an awareness of both its local and national context.[6] An analysis of the changing character and frequency of industrial disputes at the plant during this time is, thus, not only revealing as to the evolving dynamics of workplace relations but also how workers understood themselves as a class and their position within wider society.

Having outlined the structures and participants that facilitated the practice of industrial relations in the previous chapter, this chapter specifically considers the emergence of conflict and industrial disputes at the Port Talbot works. By focusing

[5] J. C. Carr & W. Taplin, *History of the British Steel Industry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 461.
[6] Richard Burton Archives, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/1, Letter from A.E. Vincent to Harry Douglass, 25 February 1959.

on episodes where the existing industrial relations machinery was unable to avert industrial action, this chapter questions the causes of workplace conflict at the works and what they reveal about the broader occupational and political culture of its workers. For historians and contemporary commentators alike, workplace disputes have often been framed as primarily political conflicts, waged between competing ideologies and classes. The 1984/85 miners' strike, for example, has been variously described as both, 'a challenge to the destructive profit- and market-driven transformation of economic life,' and one whose intention was, 'to smash not only the democratic institutions of their own union, but also of the country itself…'.[7] All strikes may have been implicitly political but often their primary goals were not the advancement of ideological causes. Material gains and self-preservation were recurring causes of strike action at the Port Talbot works and these conflicts could be fought against other groups of workers as well as management. In this regard, the personal narratives of industrial disputes, which emerge in the oral histories, often reveal very different understandings of workplace conflict than the politicised interpretations that are retrospectively ascribed to them.

Although the reasons for industrial unrest were wide ranging (and individual disputes could often contain multiple grievances), three main categories have been identified and these form the chapter's main constituent sections. They are conflicts which arose over, wages, job control and survival. Final consideration is given to Port Talbot's experience of the 1980 national steel strike, the industry's longest and costliest dispute of the period. Whilst a broad trend can be discerned, with job protection and the plant's survival increasingly gaining precedence over sectional wage claims and contested working practices as the period progressed, the changing nature of industrial relations at the works defies a strictly linear progression. Consistently, however, the nature of conflict at the plant failed to conform to a class based interpretation of workplace relations. This chapter, therefore, challenges historical interpretations of industrial disputes that primarily see them as political contests or ideological manifestations of class conflict. Workers struck for themselves, their work mates and even their families, but rarely for their political beliefs or class.

[7] Seumas Milne, *The Enemy Within: The Secret War against the Miners*, 4th edn. (London: Verso, 2014), p. ix; Ian MacGregor, *The Enemies Within: The Story of the Miners' Strike, 1984-5* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1986), p. 171.

Wages

When asked about the main reasons for strikes in the plant, most steelworkers had few reservations in proffering a single issue: wages. Former chairman of the plant's multi-union committee, Dai Ferris, maintained that working conditions 'and the pay packets were the two main issues. I mean, they'd go on strike for a penny. Those were the two issues I think that drove people's morale'.[8] For much of the post-war period, the high correlation between wage claims and industrial stoppages was a well-recognised national phenomenon. In the northern steelworks studied by Bowen, during industrial disputes, 'issues relating to wages and to other pay issues (bonus, conditions, overtime and lost-time) were clearly predominant.'[9] Hobsbawm, meanwhile, describing the national picture, elaborated that, 'the periods of maximum strike activity since 1960 – 1970-2 and 1974 – have been the ones when the percentage of pure wage strikes have been much the highest – over 90 per cent in 1971-2.'[10] Strikes at the Port Talbot works were capable of containing a range of different issues and grievances but wage claims were the most commonly recurring feature of industrial stoppages at the plant throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, across these three decades there were no fewer than fifteen significant strikes at the works in which wages were a significant contributory factor. As a result of the fractured nature of bargaining at the plant, these wage claims were always advanced by a particular section of the workforce, either by an individual department within the plant or a trade union, and, therefore, never mobilised the entirety of the works employees. Moreover, these strikes were almost entirely unofficial and locally instigated. They, therefore, usually lacked the official approval of the relevant unions and only rarely escalated beyond the confines of the immediate workplace involved.

In this regard, the nature of industrial conflict at the Port Talbot works was entirely congruent with the national picture. It was with growing concern that the

[8] Interview with Dai Ferris, 27 November 2013.
[9] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations, Industrial Relations and Industrial Sociology: A Strategic and Occupational Study of British Steelmaking* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 182.
[10] E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today*, 22 (September, 1978), p. 286.

Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations observed in 1968 that in the years immediately preceding their enquiry, 'the overwhelming majority of these strikes are not concerned with industry-wide in any way. They arise from workshop and factory disputes and are settled within the workshop and the factory.'[11] The increasingly localised nature of industrial disputes has also been remarked upon by David Gilbert, who posited them as a defining characteristic of British employer-employee relations during this period. Indeed, by the 1960s, he argues, 'a consensus seemed to be developing that Britain's industrial relations were distinctive in a number of ways, particularly in the frequency of small stoppages and in the unofficial and unconstitutional status of most strikes.'[12] The effects of unofficial stoppages, however, were often more severe than their localised nature suggested. A strike by 1,300 of the plant's blastfurnacemen in 1969, for example, was able to slash the plant's steel output by 750,000 tons and cost the BSC millions of pounds.[13] For management, trade unionists and workers alike, then, unofficial strikes and the wage issue remained a central concern during the period.

In this way, a relatively small group of strikers at the plant could disrupt production out of all proportion to their numerical strength. Indeed, the highly differentiated but necessarily integrated nature of steelmaking meant that a stoppage in one part of the works could bring about the closure of the entire plant within a relatively short space of time. Localised disputes, therefore, had significant implications and few of the plant's employees remained entirely unaffected by the unofficial wage strikes of the period, irrespective of whether they agreed with the strikers' motives. The sectional nature of wage disputes invariably worked against class solidarities and strikers typically drew little support from their fellow workers. Commenting on a 1961 strike by the plant's bricklayers, *The Western Mail* observed that, 'the mass of steelworkers, more filled with brotherly envy than brotherly love, felt and still feel little sympathy for the strikers who have done so well for themselves in the past.'[14] Indeed, the enforced suspension of work and consequent loss of earnings that unofficial strikes caused other workers did little to engender

[11] *Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations* (London: H.M.S.O., 1968), p. 19.
[12] David Gilbert, 'Strikes in Postwar Britain', in Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), p. 137.
[13] *Western Mail*, 9 August 1969.
[14] *Western Mail*, 16 October 1961.

solidarity with the strikers, especially when their motives for striking were interpreted as being the pursuance of their own material reward. In response to the several bricklayers' strikes of the period, Ken Thomas, a process worker, described an almost absolute lack of sympathy for the strikers amongst other employees: 'because they put us all out of work,' he explained, 'They put us all out on the road didn't they? And what they put us out on the road for was to fatten their own pockets, not us. It didn't benefit us at all. In fact, we lost money because of it.'[15]

If strikers could not count on much support from their fellow works employees, even less was forthcoming from kindred workers in other plants. During the inter-union dispute that accompanied the 1969 blastfurnacemen strike, for example, *The Guardian* observed the complete absence of solidarity extended to the Port Talbot men from blastfurnacemen at other steelworks. On the contrary, the newspaper noted, 'there is a good deal of resentment in Middlesbrough, Sheffield and Scunthorpe about the higher wages paid in Port Talbot.'[16] Similarly, when the plant's electricians struck in 1977 in a dispute over pay, entreaties for support and solidarity from fellow electricians went largely unheeded. One newspaper reported that the strike's local leader, electrician Wyn Bevan, 'dropped his plan to ask the electricians from the Velindre, Swansea, and Trostre, Llanelli, works to black imported steel.' When steel production was cut through strike action at Port Talbot, steel imports became integral to ensuring continued production at the Trostre and Velindre tinplate works. Bevan rescinded his plea, however, after a meeting in Gorseinon, intended to drum up support for the electricians' plight, attracted 'only twenty tinplate electricians – mostly shop stewards'.[17] The lack of support offered to striking workers was in keeping with the character of the strikes themselves; these were not political disputes, but local and material ones that formulated industrial conflict in the narrowest of terms.

Workers' attitudes towards striking colleagues often reflected the antipathetic attitudes adopted by their national union leaders towards unofficial strikes. Where their own members were involved, national trade unionists often excoriated unofficial disputes as an affront to the official agreements and established national

[15] Interview with Kenneth Thomas, 26 September 2013.
[16] *The Guardian*, 11 August 1969.
[17] *Western Mail*, 28 April 1977.

negotiating machinery, from which they derived their power. When in 1971 the majority of the ISTC's staff workers at Port Talbot staged an unofficial walkout in a protest over pay, the union's general secretary was emphatic in calling them back to work and beseeched them to adhere to the official negotiation machinery. In an open letter to the plant's staff workers, Dai Davies reiterated the union's orthodox response to unconstitutional action: 'The strike is an unofficial one,' he wrote,

> And if it continues will remain such because there can be no question of the Executive Council supporting actions which are in breach of the Organisation's rules. On the contrary the Executive Council instructed me to inform your members that they should immediately call of their unofficial stoppage and resume normal operations so that their claim can be processed through the established negotiating machinery.[18]

The strident line taken by trade union leaders often promoted a similarly intransigent response from the strikers so that management-worker disputes over wages soon conflagrated into intra-union conflicts concerning issues of representation and power. The decision by the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union executive in 1977, for example, to not officially sanction the wage claim advanced by Port Talbot's electricians quickly escalated into a bitter feud between the union's Port Talbot members and their national leaders. At the height of the strike, the leader of the Port Talbot electricians even announced at a mass-meeting that 'I am fighting the union more than the BSC, without a shadow of a doubt'.[19] Unofficial strikes over pay, then, could soon raise awkward questions about the nature of power within the trade union movement itself; specifically, where should the majority of power lie, who should wield power and for what aims?

Trade unions' leaderships could be equally scathing of unofficial stoppages by members of other unions, particularly when these disputes appeared to counter the immediate interests of their own members. When the plant's electricians announced their intention to strike in 1977, for example, the ISTC's national leadership explicitly directed its Port Talbot members not to lend any assistance to the strikers. In a directive that could have been issued by the plant's managers, the union's divisional organiser informed the national press, 'I have sent out circulars to my members at the Port Talbot steelworks telling them they are not to co-operate in any

[18] Richard Burton Archives, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/4(b), Letter from D. Davies 'To the Abbey Works Staff Members', 23 August 1971.
[19] *Western Mail*, 30 April 1977.

way with the strikers.'[20] Privately the union's divisional representatives went further still, assuring their national executive that they 'had applied pressure on the EETPU for a return to work' and 'would continue to do all in their power to restore the plant to normal working'.[21] In this regard, unions and their members often found common cause with management during unofficial disputes and actively collaborated on expediting a return to work; union sanctioned black-legging was not uncommon during the unofficial strikes of the period. Indeed, in his own account of his firm handling of the 1961 bricklayers' strike, Cartwright confidently informed his fellow directors, 'that the Company's action is supported by the overwhelming majority of our work force as indicated by the fact that, as yet, no Union has supported the bricklayer Union by refusing to work with staff who are laying bricks. This is a most unusual circumstance in modern unionized works.'[22]In their understandings of workplace conflict, trade union leaders consistently formulated strategies to protect the interests of their own members, rather than 'the steelworkers' as a collective.

The media reportage of these strikes frequently chastised the, allegedly, avaricious motives of the strikers and the growing greed of Port Talbot's steelworkers. Invariably reports contained exaggerated estimations of the wages the strikers were earning alongside the usual tropes associated with the lavish lifestyles of the workers of 'treasure island' (the term 'treasure island' itself only usually found its way into press reports during coverage of strikes). Describing a strike by bricklayers at the plant in 1961, the *Western Mail*, for example, outlined the greedy motives of the strikers: 'The desire for a bigger and bigger share in the profits of the works led the bricklayers into successive demands for bonuses and special payments that put them among the elite of the steelworks with pay packets around £35 a week.'[23] Reporting on the same strike, *The Daily Mail* elevated the bricklayers' alleged wages to '£50 a week' in an article tendentiously headlined, 'Me, my shares, and my Jag, by the striker.' The article went on to paint the strike's leader as an

[20] *Western Mail*, 1 April 1977.
[21] Gwent Archives, Journals and Records of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, D3417/1/60, Minutes of Executive Council, 18, 19 & 20 May 1977.
[22] Shotton Record Centre, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 15, Steel Division: Report on Operations, September 1961.
[23] *Western Mail*, 16 October 1961.

overpaid, Jaguar driving opportunist, who cynically manufactured industrial disputes to boost his own wages and those of his fellow bricklayers.[24]

The understanding of industrial conflict as being increasingly driven by material objectives and devoid of solidaristic instincts was also frequently observed by academics and came to dominate much of the scholarly analysis of strikes during this period. For some on the left, in particular, the increased frequency of unofficial disputes, centred on sectional wage claims, was endemic of 'the disintegration of the working-class' and the dissipation of class solidarities amongst industrial workers.[25] In 1978, Hobsbawm, encapsulated the general despondency that had beset Britain's left-wing intelligentsia. He argued that 'it would be a mistake' to believe that affluence 'has made the working-class more homogeneous. On the contrary', he went on, 'it seems to me that we now see a growing division of workers into sections and groups, each pursuing its own economic interests irrespective of the rest.'[26] For Hobsbawm these trends constituted a fundamental shift in the attitude of industrial workers and industrial conflict. He argued that,

> It now often happens not only (as sometimes occurred even 100 years ago) that groups of workers strike, not minding the effect on the rest—e.g. skilled men on labourers—but that the strength of a group lies not in the amount of loss they can cause to the employer, but in the inconvenience they can cause to the public, i.e. to other workers (e.g. by power blackouts or whatever).'[27]

Ironically, both commentators on the political left and right seemed united in maligning industrial workers for their avarice and abandonment of traditional class loyalties.

This interpretation, however, reveals a tendency to measure workers' behaviour against a set of criteria that many workers would not have recognised, let alone identified with. Most strikes were not intended to advance political points but extract material benefits. The steel industry's fragmented and unwieldy pay structure encouraged workers to advance claims locally rather than as a unified body, thus leading to the kind of unofficial local strikes that plagued the plant during the period. Accusations that steelworkers had abandoned a more noble set of working-class

[24] *Daily Mail*, 27 September 1961.
[25] See, Robert Taylor, 'The Rise and Disintegration of the Working-classes', in, Paul Addison & Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000* (London: Blackwell, 2007).
[26] E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', p. 284.
[27] *Ibid.*

virtues tended to exaggerate the extent to which such a value system previously existed, as well as simplifying the motives underpinning these disputes. Strikes were not simply manifestations of either solidarity or individualism. For the participants of these unofficial disputes the wage issue was imbued with a host of other concerns and could not be disentangled from understandings of pride, parity and fairness in the workplace. Although most steelworkers valued the material rewards of work, long-term financial stability was far more highly prized than short-term rewards. Unofficial strikes at the Port Talbot works, then, owed less to the displacement of traditional class solidarities by myopic avarice than the gross sense of inequality that arose out of the plant's massively unwieldy pay system. In Smith's appraisal of the plant's wage structure, 'convention and comparison have resulted in the relative wage structure within the industry, as indeed elsewhere, becoming virtually unrelated to skill, effort, ability, training or any other theoretical concept of labour economics.'[28]

This situation was greatly exacerbated by the two-tier wage system that had been established through the dual bargaining processes of national and local negotiations and the fixing of different rates for different jobs. As a consequence, strong trade union branches in the plant were able to negotiate a host of favourable bonus and top-up payments for their own members, whilst other workers looked on with increasing envy and resentment .The Cold Mill, for example earned the epithet 'the Gold Mill' due to the high wages the mill's sizeable ISTC branch were able to secure for its workers.[29] Once the perceived link between skill and material reward (an important precondition of workers' acceptance of a capitalist logic) was perceived to have been severed, the ensuing sense of injustice was readily channelled into organised protest. Indeed, in their explanation of the increased number of unofficial stoppages in British industries since the Second World War, the *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations* was highly critical of existing wage systems and the machinery used to negotiate them. They concluded that, 'it is apparent that considerable difficulties are encountered both in maintaining fair relatives between different groups of workers and keeping a reasonable amount of control over wage levels.' Moreover, they went on to note that, 'If groups of

[28] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining: A Case Study in the Steel Industry* (London: Pan Books, 1971), p. 47.
[29] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.

workers see that other groups with whom they have hitherto enjoyed equality are able to improve their position because of the vagaries of the pay system it is not surprising if they feel indignation and seek to recover a position of parity.'[30] In Taylor's analysis, 'the result was a resort to inter-union disputes, damaging conflicts between work groups and a serious collapse in any sense of cohesion or solidarity at the point of production.'[31] Unofficial disputes, then, were often manifestations of a pervasive sense of unfairness amongst workers but they also acted as expressions of frustration at the unwillingness of managers and national trade union leaders to address their grievances. Rather than expressing unrestrained greed, unofficial strikers were often united in intense displays of local solidarity, showing immense resilience in the face of overwhelming condemnation from managers, trade unionists and fellow workers.

Control

Concomitant with the recurring internecine disputes over wages were the frequent contests fought between managers and trade unions over working practices at the plant. The disputes that arose over working practice, although often associated with wage rows, were more palpable manifestations of the struggle for power on the shop floor. Unlike pay disputes, strikes arising over working practice were typically defensive actions with workers retaliating to changes instigated by the plant's managers. Throughout much of the period debates over working practice were dominated by the manning issue. Since the end of the 1950s, it had become a widely voiced complaint that the plant was grossly overmanned, causing inefficiency and contributing to the works' decreasing economic competitivity in a more parlous global steel market. The first item on a draft agreement submitted to the plant's trade union leaders by management in 1964 left no ambiguity as to the company's stance: 'The management is in no doubt,' it proclaimed, 'that the Divisions at Port Talbot are substantially overmanned.'[32] At Port Talbot, however, the trade unions had never

[30] *Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations*, pp. 104-105.
[31] Robert Taylor, 'The Rise and Disintegration of the Working-class', p. 381.
[32] The National Archives, Manpower Productivity Agreement, LAB 10/3118, Outline of the Manpower Productivity Proposals: Draft, April 1968.

regarded manning solely as an issue of productivity. Through the power trade unions exerted to monopolise certain jobs for their members as well as the influence they wielded over promotions, manning was a key determinate of workplace control. Anecdotally, one steelworker remembered local trade union officials were often able to determine the number of workers required to perform a specific job: 'They might go to a manger, for instance,' he recalled, 'in the good old days as they called it. If they demanded… another five men or ten men or whatever, then they would get them, that kind of thing.'[33] Local union officials, therefore, not only negotiated on behalf of their members but regulated several aspects of the production process – powers management were eager to curtail.

For local trade union leaders, the company's efforts to rationalise the plant's employment structure constituted a threat, not only to their members' livelihoods, but their own power within the works. In this respect, however, local attitudes diverged significantly from national policy. National trade union leaders typically viewed manning and demarcation disputes as damaging and unnecessary; as Martin Upham described, for the ISTC's leadership, 'demarcation disputes continued in a world which had rendered them irrelevant by getting rid of unemployment and want. They were an obstacle to that higher productivity which could make higher living standards possible.'[34] Despite having the backing of most national union leaders, attempts by the plant's managers to introduce greater workplace efficiencies, through the introduction of more flexible working practices, were staunchly resisted within the plant. The evidence of a hardening attitude amongst certain sections of the plant's workforce was evident by 1957, when Cartwright incredulously recorded that, 'The beginning of the introduction of automatic drinking machines caused a sit-down strike on the 20th August. The men and women employed in the canteens demanded that the machines should be filled by Confederation [ISTC] members and that all food made for these machines should be packed by Confederation members.'[35] The debacle over stocking vending machines was a portent of more serious disputes to come.

[33] Interview with Keith Foley, 23 October 2013.
[34] Martin Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched: The History of the ISTC, 1951-1997* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997), p. 5.
[35] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 14, Steel Division: Report on Operations, August 1957.

The nature of the disputes over working practice at the plant plainly revealed the role of management as active participants in the negotiation of workplace power. Trade unions and their members have often been portrayed as the principle instigators of industrial unrest but, as Simon Philips argues, this approach can lead to several 'dangerous assumptions'; namely, that, 'the history of workplace relations from the perspective of both the workforce and management was exclusively or predominantly shaped by the influence of the labour movement, rather than by other factors.'[36] Selina Todd has characterised the attitude of British workers in the 1970s by arguing that, 'They fought for more autonomy from politicians and employers and landlords. They wanted greater say over the management of their work.'[37] Steelworkers at Port Talbot were reluctant to cede further workplace control to management but most worker instigated action during this period was defensive and tended to react to offensive managerial initiatives.

The extent to which management was able to dictate the terms of working practice, however, was influenced by the wider economic and political climate. As a result of the prevailing labour shortage of the immediate post-war years and the political commitment to full employment, the SCOW were compelled to adopt collaborative employee strategies: conceding wage claims, hiring more workers than was strictly necessary and decentralising workplace control. In the view of one former bricklayer, the reason for the 'good' relationship he initially enjoyed with his managers was 'simple': 'the company needed steel in them days,' he recalled, 'and, of course, I think the workers had much more leverage than what they get now.'[38] The high demand for steel further compelled the company to maintain production and avoid potentially costly disputes, thus allowing the influence of local trade unions to advance unchecked. By 1958, however, Fred Cartwright was forced to concede to his fellow company directors, that 'there is no doubt that, in the initial stages the Management were forced to give way in order to keep the plant in operation, when purely from a disciplinary angle, it would have been wiser to have taken a firm stand.'[39] Initially, therefore, economic factors conditioned a managerial

[36] Simon Philips, 'Fellowship in Recreation, Fellowship in Ideals: Sport, Leisure and Culture at Boots Pure Drug Company, Nottingham c. 1989-1950', *Midland History*, 24 (2004), p. 107.
[37] Selina Todd, *The People*, p. 275.
[38] Interview with Theodore Kingdom, 18 October 2013.
[39] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 14, Steel Division: Report on Operations, February 1958.

attitude which was more readily prepared to concede to trade unions' demands for greater workplace autonomy and control of the factory floor, particularly with regards to areas such as demarcation and manning.

By 1960, however, the company's long term financial position appeared more precarious and a less favourable labour market gave the company the impetus and the means to adopt more combative labour management strategies. The decision in 1964 to employ the American management consultancy firm, Emersons, to implement a radical productivity bargaining scheme at the plant was the clearest indicator of management's renewed efforts to seize the initiative in industrial relations and reassert its authority over working practice. At the time of its implementation at Port Talbot, productivity bargaining remained a novel managerial concept and the SCOW were amongst the earliest British firms to attempt to implement such a scheme (Esso had pioneered a similar agreement at their Fawley refinery earlier in the decade). Owing much to the American school of scientific management, associated with Taylorism, productivity bargaining sought to completely rationalise labour structures and practices in the interests of promoting greater workplace efficiency. This involved simplifying complex pay structures and eliminating unproductive working practices, such as lengthy tea-breaks, and linking wage increases to the introduction of new efficiencies in working practice. Most significantly, however, it set out to slash excess labour and scientifically determine the exact number of men required to perform a particular task.[40] Implicit in productivity bargaining was the need to reaffirm managerial control over the labour process. A draft proposal of the agreement at Port Talbot, known as the Manpower Productivity Plan or 'the green book', stated that, 'there shall be no inter and intra union lines of demarcation and geographical boundaries between employees attached to Production, Maintenance and Service Departments.'[41] The intention was clear: to eradicate the existing system of job controls developed by the plant's trade unions in the interests of greater workplace flexibility and an acceptance of managerial prerogatives to freely deploy labour.

[40] Howard F. Gospel, 'The Management of Labour', in Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), p. 92.
[41] TNA, Manpower Productivity Agreement, LAB 10/3118, Manpower Productivity Plan (Green Book): Changes in Working Practices, 1968.

The SCOW enjoyed some early successes with productivity bargaining and were able to secure a deal with the plant's major craft unions through the provision of generous pay incentives. In retrospect, many steelworkers acknowledged 'the green book' as making 'a hell of a difference' but its implementation proved slow and gave rise to numerous, mostly unofficial disputes, as managers faced growing resistance from branch officers and shop stewards reluctant to concede their control over the conditions of work.[42] When E. Owen Smith's comprehensive account of the firm's experiences with productivity bargaining was published, several years after the scheme was announced, he pessimistically quoted one Port Talbot steelworker in concluding that, 'it is easy to sign an agreement, but to implement it is another thing. I do not believe that the present organizations stand any chance of implementing it.'[43] Throughout the 1960s, negotiations surrounding the green book contributed to a number of strikes at the works, most notably the 1969 blastfurnacemen's strike which lasted seven weeks and slashed steel production by 750,000 tonnes. *The Western Mail* described 'the green book' as one of the blastfurnacemen's 'myriad of grievances', observing that, 'negotiations on the "green book" with the NUB are at a standstill and the strikers constantly reiterate that it should be a negotiable document, not a plan to be swallowed, hook, line and sinker.'[44] By the time of the industry's second nationalisation in 1968, the plant had yet to reach an agreement with all its workers regarding the implementation of the productivity plan and its initial objectives were eventually subsumed by subsequent schemes. Nonetheless, control had been immovably positioned as a central issue of workplace conflict.

Once again, however, press coverage of strikes at the plant could prove misleading. On the issue of manning, there was actually considerable agreement between workers and managers with most sharing the firm's belief that the plant was grossly overmanned. Paul Ace, for example, recalled, 'well there was overmanning, definitely overmanning there. Well, as I said, jobs for the boys, there were people who were… honestly I don't know what half of them were doing. Yes, there was a lot of labourers there, loads of labourers, which weren't really doing anything.'[45] Amongst rank and file members, local trade union officials often came in for specific

[42] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[43] Quoted in, E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining*, p. 417.
[44] *Western Mail*, 31 July 1969.
[45] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.

criticism for enforcing demarcation and manning arrangements that many considered to be risible. Dennis Spicer, for instance, was of the opinion that the, 'the union would go in and ask for something, they'd ask for relief for this or an extra man and they'd give it to them to save interrupting anything. It was way over-manned, way over-manned.' Some aspects of working practice, he believed, 'was beyond in everyone's opinion.'[46] Even senior trade unionists failed to contest management's central allegation that the plant was overmanned. ISTC divisional officer, John Foley, for example believed that Port Talbot, 'was terribly overmanned and anyone that worked there would know that there was no need of it, no need of all this manning.[47] As with most aspects of working practice, steelworkers demonstrated an overtly pragmatic attitude towards manning and saw their own interests as aligned with the plant's continued prosperity, something which inefficient labour practices threatened to jeopardise. In a response to further job cuts at Port Talbot in the early 1980s, a senior NUB member told the national press, 'The people we represent are not morons. They understand quite clearly what is going on in the world outside, and they knew that there was no alternative.'[48] His remarks revealed a wider capitalist rationality that conditioned steelworkers approach to workplace issues.

The manning debate, then, represented many of the vagaries of the plant's industrial relations culture in that all the relevant parties agreed on the problem's existence and acknowledged its solution as largely unavoidable. Of course, the job losses associated with demanning were a source of considerable anxiety for the plant's employees as employment opportunities contracted and the terms of employment grew less secure. By the 1980s, John Pugh, for example, remembered that, 'everything was under pressure all the time but the biggest pressure was that threat of losing your job.'[49] The sources of conflict over manning, however, cannot be constituted as an ideological conflict of interests. In this regard, Peter Bowen's assertion that, 'clearly the steelworker was predisposed to view employment in "dichotomous" terms and could readily separate the interests of people like himself from those of the employer,' is evidently unsubstantial.[50] Port Talbot steelworkers actually shared their managers' concern in respect of the manning issue and many

[46] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 August 2013.
[47] Interview with John Foley, 10 October 2013.
[48] *Daily Mail*, 11 February 1981.
[49] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[50] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisations*, p. 211.

even viewed streamlining the plant's workforce as a necessary step to redress this. Steelworkers were readily able to 'separate the interests of people like himself from those of the employer' but this did not inherently present a dichotomous understanding of workplace relations. Goals, such as economic productivity, were broadly shared by both workers and managers, even if they differed as to how such objectives were realised.

Rank-and-file trade union members were capable of exhibiting a diverse range of attitudes towards workplace matters that were informed by a variety of considerations. In this way, workers' responses to changes in the workplace were formulated by both individual and collective instincts, which paid due importance to material considerations alongside the potential effects for one's own family and work mates. Individual responses to industrial disputes, then, could not be predicated on a single archetype and were informed by the particularities of each situation as well as each workers position within them. For local trade union officials negotiations over manning were construed as a struggle for control within the workplace. Amongst their rank and file members, however, a very different interpretation emerged which reflected an economic pragmatism more akin to that of the plant's employers. The meanings of industrial conflict were, therefore, subjective and were frequently reinterpreted to reflect the changing interests of the parties involved. Attempts to impose a single ideological interpretation of industrial conflict, therefore, fail to understand their meanings for participants as well as the fluid nature of workplace relations themselves.

Survival

By the 1970s, ongoing tussles over wages and working practice were becoming superseded by the more pressing issue of the plant's survival. The effect of this was to reconstitute industrial conflict at the steelworks in the guise of more geographic or regional struggles. The central sources of tension in the workplace, then, became increasingly externalised as a conflict over the plant's right to exist was fought between Port Talbot on the one hand and a remote bureaucracy of politicians, company directors and senior trade union leaders on the other. These conflicts also

brought Port Talbot's steelworkers into conflict with steelworkers in other plants as the contest for new investment and survival pitted different steelmaking regions against each other. The kinds of contests, that had become manifest by the 1970s, were indicative of what geographers, such as Massey, termed 'new spatial divisions of labour', constituting, 'whole new sets of relations between activities in different places, new spatial forms of social organisation, new dimensions of inequality and new relations of dominance and dependence.'[51] Historians have often ignored the spatial dimensions to workplace conflict but, in Port Talbot, geography could present a salient battle line. During the 1980 steel strike, it even seemed that conceptions of region and geography were displacing class as the central axis of the industrial struggle.

The changing nature of conflict in Britain's steel industry paralleled its worsening economic situation and the increasing displacement of workers by labour saving technologies. The 'Benson Report' into the state of Britain's steel industry, published by the Wilson government in 1966, did not directly identify Port Talbot as being under risk of closure, but the serious doubts it raised over the futures of giant plants, such as Shotton and Ebbw Vale, was enough to engender a mood of pessimism and anxiety in steeltowns throughout Britain. For many steelworkers, Bowen argues, Benson's findings, 'posed a real and bewildering personal threat to what had been regarded since the 1930s as employment in a secure and stable industry.'[52] The subsequent government's 'Ten-Year Strategy' for steel, announced in 1972, confirmed many steelworkers' worst fears and, whilst many of the closures it recommended were later overturned or forestalled by the Labour government's 'Beswick Review' three years later, widespread redundancies and even closure remained real threats facing all steelworks.[53] Although Port Talbot's future appeared more secure than many plants it was not immune from the BSC's ongoing redundancy program. In 1968 it was announced that 6,000 redundancies would have to be made at the plant over the next two years.[54]

[51] Deborah Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (London: MacMillan, 1995), p. 3.
[52] Peter Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organizations*, p. 148.
[53] Martin Upham, *Tempered not Quenched*, pp. 125-128.
[54] *Western Mail*, 11 January 1968.

For the steel unions and their members, plant closures and redundancies often presented a conflict of interests. Whilst the more moderate unions, such as the ISTC, were committed economic realists and thus refused to protect jobs where they presented clear production inefficiencies, redundancy threatened to drastically deplete union memberships and, in turn, undermine their bargaining strength. Most unions, then, sought to alleviate the worst effects of plant redundancies, by lobbying politicians to attract new industries to the affected areas and secure favourable post-work financial settlements for their members. When a number of redundancies were announced at Port Talbot in 1966, for example, the *Western Mail* reported that, 'union leaders at the Abbey Works, Margam, last night were hoping to soften the blows of the threatened redundancy. But there was no point in adopting a hostile attitude to the company because of the introduction of new technical processes, one union leader quickly pointed out.'[55] Rather than resisting demanning, trade unionists often acted in a supportive role to management, advocating reductions in labour as being in the best interests of the works' future viability. In response to the announcement of over 2,000 redundancies at Port Talbot in 1973, the local ISTC divisional organiser told his general secretary that, 'the long term objective is very clear and of course consistent with our aspirations at Port Talbot since you cannot subscribe to an argument that Steel can be produced here much cheaper than at Shotton and then quite deliberately prevent the increased efficiency the argument is based upon.' The challenge for the trade unions, then, was not how to resist job cuts but how to encourage their members to accept them; the divisional organiser went on to ask, 'can we secure the co-operation of the labour force without clearly defined objectives and the determination to achieve reasonable success?'.[56] As plant closures and jobs cuts accelerated towards the end of the 1970s, however, even the entrenched moderation of the ISTC was tested to breaking point.

Amongst steelworkers, the worsening market conditions for steel in the 1970s tended to bring local and regional identities to the fore, reconstituting social divisions along geographic lines as different steel plants aligned themselves in opposition to each other. With government policy moving towards concentrating the majority of the nation's steelmaking capacity in fewer large sites, the battle for investment and

[55] *Western Mail*, 23 March 1966.
[56] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/6(b), Letter from W. Carberry to B. Sirs, 17 February 1976.

survival became a fundamental source of tension within the industry. In 1968, *The Times*, for example, was moved to ask 'Who will win the Welsh steel battle?'. The article documented the rivalry between the Llanwern Works in Newport and the Port Talbot plant over who would be the beneficiary of new investment: 'Meanwhile, infra-group rivalries are boiling up over such issues as who gets the nod for the next South Wales project,' the paper wrote.[57] These contests were also played out within the trade unions themselves. In a 1968 letter from E.H. Hickery, the ISTC's south east Wales divisional officer, to Donald Coleman, Neath MP and an ISTC parliamentary representative, Hickery inveighed at the perceived efforts of the Port Talbot steelworks to undermine the viability of the Ebbw Vale and Llanwern plants. Hickery wrote,

> So far as South Wales is concerned, for many years I have expressed the viewpoint that it was the policy of the Steel Company of Wales to fold up R.T.B. [Richard Thomas and Baldwins]. You will recall that after much publicity and political pressures, S.C.O.W. tried to obtain a Narrow Strip Mill. I wrote to Lincoln [Evans, ISTC general secretary] and pointed out that if this was placed at Margam, it would fit in with the intention of S.C.O.W. to control the whole of the Tinplate market, fold up Ebbw Vale and possibly jeopardise the building of Spencer [Llanwern] Works. Lincoln accepted my view point, and as you know he opposed the building of the mill.[58]

The tangible sense of suspicion and antipathy in Hickery's letter reveals the growing regional tension that characterised industrial relations in the industry during this period.

Following the publication of Lord Beswick's review, the geographical axis of the conflict had shifted from west-east to north-south, as tensions emerged between Port Talbot and the Shotton steelworks over the future of the BSC's investment strategy. The conflict over future development plans between the two works even prompted the intervention of the Wales Trade Union Congress (WTUC) who convened an extraordinary meeting in 1975 between workers' representatives from both plants to end, what was described in the press as, a 'north-south rift about Welsh steel.'[59] The results, however, appear to have been mixed; commenting on the adverse effects further investment at Port Talbot might have on other Welsh steel

[57] *The Times*, 17 December 1968.
[58] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/3, Letter from E. Hickery to D. Coleman, 8 May 1968.
[59] *Western Mail*, 14 August 1975.

plants, one Port Talbot union official and local councillor unsympathetically quipped, 'it is unfortunate for Shotton and it is unfortunate for Ebbw Vale but it is a fact of life.'[60] It is impossible to assess the extent which objections from Port Talbot contributed to the BSC's eventual decision not to undertake significant future investment at the Shotton works but the corporation's decision to direct further investment to Port Talbot certainly contributed to the cessation of steel making at Shotton in 1980.

The regional conflicts that characterised the 1970s and beyond often blurred traditional class-based loyalties, producing incongruous alliances of local management, politicians and workers' representatives in the defence of geographically specific local interests. David Harvey has identified these trends more broadly as a peculiar manifestation of the increased mobility of modern capital, arguing that,

> Local solidarities that cut across class lines then become important in the attempt to lure mobile capital to town. The local chamber of commerce and local trade unions are more likely to collaborate rather than to struggle against each other when it comes to getting local development projects going that will bring in both investment capital and employment opportunities. The selling and branding of place, and the burnishing of the image of a place (including states), becomes integral to how capitalist competition works. The production of geographical difference, building upon those given by history, culture and so-called natural advantages, is internalised within the reproduction of capitalism.[61]

Trade unionists at Port Talbot were certainly actively engaged in campaigning for new investment at the works during the 1970s and 1980s, even where this meant potentially undermining the future prospects of other plants. The ISTC's divisional officer for south Wales, John Foley, remembered being reviled by some of the union's Scottish members because, 'it was about the place that I was trying to close Ravenscraig' (at that time Scotland's largest steelworks). Although Foley refuted the accusation, he conceded that he vehemently campaigned for any new investment to be directed towards Port Talbot: 'All I wanted to do,' he remembered, 'was to see that the investment we wanted we had. I went all over the bloody country, all over

[60] *Ibid.*
[61] David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the crisis of Capitalism* (London: Profile, 2010), p. 202.

Europe to press this! And eventually we had it… I just wanted to get what I could for my own plants.'[62]

In pursuing these aims trade unionists and steelworkers were not only brought into conflict with other plants but found themselves fostering alliances with their own managers and a host of local politicians and civic worthies. In the row that erupted during the mid-1970s over where future steel investment should be directed, a Joint Local Authorities meeting was convened featuring representatives of all the local authorities with a vested interest in the continued viability of steelmaking at Port Talbot, alongside representatives from the local BSC management and the plant's trade unions. The outcome of one such meeting, held in 1975, was a declaration that 'the development of the steel-making capabilities of Shotton would be completely uneconomic' and that 'the Joint Meeting of Local Authorities pledge its full support to the efforts of the British Steel Corporation and the Port Talbot Works Council in its efforts to ensure the future development of the Port Talbot Works of the British Steel Corporation'.[63] These trends were indicative of the broader phenomena identified by Massey when arguing that the nature of widening regional economic inequality meant, 'the primary aspect of group definition and allegiance may become geographical.'[64] It was not until the national steel strike of 1980, however, that the geographical dimension of industrial conflict at Port Talbot reached its apex.

The 1980 Steel Strike

The national steel strike of 1980 proved to be the most significant industrial dispute in the history of the British steel industry. Lasting over three months, between January and April, the strike was the industry's first nationally staged walkout since 1926 and, until the 1984/5 miners' strike, was 'the largest strike in post-war history'.[65] The traditionally moderate ISTC were moved to take the unprecedented

[62] Interview with John Foley, 10 October 2013.
[63] WGA, Afan Borough Council Minutes, DC/PT 3, Joint Local Authorities Meeting, 11 March 1975.
[64] Deborah Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour*, p. 58.
[65] Jean Hartley, John Kelly & Nigel Nicholson, *Steel Strike: A Case Study in Industrial Relations* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1983), p. 9.

action of calling a national strike over a pay dispute. Under the stringent new fiscal policies of the Thatcher government, the 1979 national wage negotiations between the BSC and the union collapsed over the corporation's intransigent offer of a two per cent wage increase. The BSC also entered the negotiations with a new determination to move away from the traditional annual national wage negotiation, preferring to finance future pay increases through local productivity deals agreed at a plant level. This was clearly an affront to the vested power of the union's centralised national leadership; Geoffrey Owen even argued that, 'the downgrading of national pay negotiations was a threat to the ISTC's raison d'etre.'[66] The more generous wage increases afforded to other public sector workers, notably the miners, furthered the union's indignation and eventually contributed to their decision to call for a national strike in December of that year. The ISTC had the support of the NUB, who had been offered a similarly paltry pay rise by the Corporation, and once the strike commenced in January the industry's craft unions soon followed the process workers' lead. Throughout the strike, the union's national leaders rigidly adhered to the pay issue as the dispute's sole aim but the uncertainty over the future of many of Britain's steelworks exercised a pervasive influence over the conflict. Indeed, in Charles Docherty's analysis, 'The national steel strike, although it was fought over the issue of wages, was all about a future for British steel.'[67]

Nowhere did the industry's future seem more uncertain than in south Wales, especially Port Talbot and Llanwern. During December 1979 it emerged that the BSC intended to dramatically reduce manpower at both plants by over 10,000 workers. Numerous methods were proposed to bring about these reductions, including the option of closing one plant entirely, but the overall effect was the same, to dramatically contract the combined steelmaking capabilities of both plants from 4.6 million to 2.7 million tonnes per annum.[68] The unprecedented scale of the redundancies involved challenged even the ISTC's pragmatic realism. In response to the BSC's announcement, Bill Sirs protested, 'they are trying to crush our people into the dust,' and John Foley, meanwhile, defiantly told the *Western Mail*, 'we will

[66] Geoffrey Owen, *From Empire to Europe: The Decline and Revival of British Industry since the Second World War* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 143.
[67] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers: The Sons of Vulcan* (London: Heinemann Education Books, 1983), p. 145.
[68] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed: The Quiet Privatisation of British Steel* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1989), p. 27.

not accept such a plan.'[69] The announcement of a national strike with effect from 2 January of the following year, however, did not officially set out to challenge the BSC's slashing of the Port Talbot and Llanwern workforces. In his autobiography Bill Sirs defended his decision to make the strike about pay, rather than jobs, by citing the reluctance of other unions in the industry to support the jobs cause.[70] Given the tepid response of many ISTC members towards the programme of national industrial action Sirs previously tabled in 1979 to defend the Shotton and Corby works, however, it seems unlikely whether he could have counted on the complete support of his own members in pursuing the jobs issue. Nonetheless, it was the local struggle against redundancy and closure that came to exercise the most pervasive influence over the strike at Port Talbot.



Demonstration in Port Talbot, 7 February 1980.[71]

The parlous situation Port Talbot found itself in at the time of the strike's calling also largely explained the mixed reception it received from local steelworkers. Despite promulgating their commitment to the strike cause, even the attitudes of many local trade unionists were privately more subdued. Tommy Fellows, an ISTC branch official at the time of the strike, remembered, 'it was the most stupid strike we ever went on. It was straight after Christmas, everybody was

[69] *Western Mail*, 1 December 1979.
[70] Bill Sirs, *Hard Labour* (London: Sidgwick & Jackon, 1985), p. 85.
[71] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 14 February 1980.

broke. Nobody had money. We spent all our money on Christmas, and children and everything…'.[72] Some local trade unionists were more supportive of strike action but it remained divisive amongst union leaders, even if a public front of unity was maintained for the strike's duration. Of the eight ISTC joint branch committees, representing most of the country's major steelworks, who wrote to the union's national executive in December 1979 offering their support for strike action, Port Talbot's name was conspicuously absent.[73] Amongst steelworkers, responses to the strike were even more varied and considerably more reserved. Although Bill Sirs would later write that his strike was '100 per cent successful… Every single member of the ISTC supported it', this was patently not the case.[74] Although none of Port Talbot's steelworkers defied the strike call this cannot be interpreted as unwavering support. Acting without a national ballot, many felt they had little choice in the matter. Keith Foley's recollections, for example, convey the resentment many steelworkers felt towards the strike: 'I didn't want to go on strike,' he said. 'I don't know of any of my colleagues in there who wanted to go on strike, I thought it was a bad idea. They all thought it was a bad idea.'[75]

The polarising response of the strike call in Port Talbot was articulated in an article in *The Times*, headlined, 'Split over Strike as Bubble Burst Nears.' The article featured two opposing views of the impending conflict, as expressed by local steelworkers, and concluded that, 'their views sincerely held, have split the workforce at the plant, who share only the certainty that the good times have gone.' In its final estimation, however, the article pessimistically noted, 'shellshocked and demoralised, it is extremely unlikely that the men of Port Talbot have the will to press for a national strike.'[76] Indeed, even at the highest level of national governance, it was recognised that the regions least enthusiastic for strike action were those where significant redundancies or closures were impending. In a confidential memo to Margaret Thatcher, on 17 December 1979, Secretary of State for Industry, Keith Joseph, confidently informed her that, 'the threatened closure areas, particularly in South Wales, appear to be less than keen on strike action over pay since this would

[72] Interview with Tommy Fellows, 28 August 2013.
[73] GA, Journals and Records of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, D3417/1/62, Minutes of Special Executive Council Meeting, 7 December 1979.
[74] Bill Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 91.
[75] Interview with Keith Foley, October 2013.
[76] *The Times*, 17 December 1979.

clearly facilitate and advance the closures.'[77] In the pragmatic interpretation of industrial relations exhibited by many Port Talbot steelworkers, the strike not only appeared to be being fought on the wrong issue but also threatened to exacerbate their already uncertain local situation.

During the strike itself, it also became apparent that a large proportion of the plant's workforce was failing to actively participate in strike duties. Whilst some steelworkers remembered the thrill of taking part in picket duty and travelling around the country as part of the steelworkers' mobile contingent of flying pickets,[78] many remembered staying at home, renovating their houses or finding work elsewhere.[79] Blastfurnacemen, Arthur Bamford, for example remembered, 'during the strike I went and did work elsewhere as a carpenter. Maybe I shouldn't have under all the union laws, being a scab or whatever, but I had a wife, two children and a mortgage to pay. My commitment wasn't to the blastfurnace union to be honest, it was to them so I just got on with it.'[80] Bamford's response was not atypical and reveals the multifarious and sometimes conflicting range of loyalties steelworkers had to negotiate during the strike. Rather than betraying an absence of solidarity, the decision by some steelworkers not to actively partake in strike duties often reflected these conflicting interests, putting loyalties to class, friends and family under intense strain. For the Port Talbot Strike Committee, however, the reluctance of many steelworkers to fully commit to the strike resulted in the adoption of an increasingly coercive line as the strike commenced. Indeed, by March, the strike committee told one local newspaper that, 'members who have failed to play their part in picketing would not be in a position to claim seniority, in the event of any job losses.' The committee went on to commend, 'the relatively small percentage of men and women who have elected to do picketing have been working long hours and in enormously difficult conditions…'.[81] Support for the strike, however, was clearly tempered by the prevailing economic uncertainty surrounding Port Talbot's future. Workers' responses to the strike were not so much 'moderated by the dead hand of weary

[77] TNA, Steel Industry, FV 11/82, Minute to the Prime Minister from Keith Joseph, 17 December 1979.
[78] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[79] Interview with Vince Scanlon, 27 January 2014; Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[80] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[81] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 20 March 1980.

fatalism', as one sociological study suggested,[82] but reflected an economic realism that struggled to reconcile the strike's collective aims with individual priorities.

As the strike progressed, however, an increasingly diverging narrative appeared between the national cry for better pay and the local concern over jobs and future survival. In Charles Docherty's account, 'as the weeks rolled on… the jobs issue assumed greater significance than the straight wage claim in one part of the country at least: Wales.'[83] Early on, the WTUC had identified the growing dispute over steel as an opportunity to push for a broader programme of industrial action by a coalition of workers in defence of Welsh industry. Directly wading into the ISTC's own impending pay dispute, the WTUC attempted to reposition the jobs issue at the centre of the strike's agenda. At a meeting of its general council on 17 December 1979, the WTUC issued a strident formula for future action in relation to steel closures. As well as demanding an enquiry into the state of the BSC's senior management, the formula also stipulated that, 'the present proposals for reducing production or closures within the BSC should be suspended until January 1981 or until the inquiry is complete and the findings have been published.' Failure to do so, it was further stated, would result in, 'action in the form of an all out strike for all unions involved together with support from other sections,' to take effect from 21 January, 1980.[84] The shock decision of the south Wales miners to defy their divisional leaders and not support action in solidarity with the steelworkers thwarted the WTUC's proposed general strike, but a 'day of action', organised for 28 January, successfully brought out 100,000 workers in Wales for a one day protest in defence of industrial jobs, with steel very much at the forefront of the public mind. The WTUC organised mass-rally in Cardiff to support its 'day of action' was supported by Bill Sirs, whose speech on the day, according to the *Western Mail*, 'received three standing ovations – one so emotional that he openly wept.'[85] With the intervention of the WTUC, then, fighting redundancies and plant closures assumed a central position within the strike's narrative in south Wales and in Port Talbot these aims were eventually given official recognition by local strike leaders. By 7 February, the leader of the Port Talbot Strike Committee, ISTC divisional organiser, Jim Carberry,

[82] Jean Hartley *et al.*, *Steel Strike*, p. 25.
[83] Charles Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers: Sons of Vulcan*, p. 200.
[84] *Wales TUC: Seventh Annual Report* (Cardiff: Wales Trade Union Council, 1980), pp. 25-26.
[85] *Western Mail*, 29 January 1980.

informed the local press, 'jobs are now clearly the issue and not just pay. We are incensed by the way the Corporation has handled this matter and we are determined to fight, because if the cuts go ahead, Port Talbot will become a ghost town.'[86] Earlier, Port Talbot had been the first strike committee to officially 'link together the current pay strike with the fight against plans to axe 11,300 British Steel Corporation jobs' and was soon followed by the strike committee at Llanwern.[87] Contrary to the strike's national agenda, local officials at Port Talbot publically pledged that their return to work would be conditional not just on the resolution of the pay dispute but on a commitment to save jobs.

In Port Talbot, the national pay strike was now emerging as a regional conflict for survival where local interests largely superseded the national agenda. These sentiments often found expression in publicly voiced criticisms during the strike that steelmaking in south Wales was being unfairly discriminated against by a geographically remote and hostile bureaucracy. In particular, there was a widespread belief that a 'northern mafia' – a cabal of Yorkshiremen, mostly former employees of the northern based United Steel company and now in senior positions at the BSC – were actively seeking to undermine the south Wales steel industry in the interests of preserving northern steelworks. At the end of the first month of the strike, for example, Carberry angrily told a local newspaper,

> The mood now is that we must press for an immediate change in management. That is what people are telling me loud and clear. The Yorkshireman should be returned to Yorkshire forthwith and be replaced by a home grown manager, who we know exists and would sustain the steel industry and look after the affairs of the Welsh steelworkers and people in a more acceptable manner.

Furthermore, he went on to describe the decision to halve the industry's south Wales workforce as 'an anti-Welsh and a vengeful decision.' 'Scotland,' he maintained, 'are getting a 25 per cent improvement and so is Sheffield, the land of the Yorkshire steel mafia.'[88] The regional persecution thesis was so widely voiced during the strike that it was even given serious consideration at a political level. In February, John Morris MP requested a list from ISTC divisional officer, Stan Biddiscombe, detailing

[86] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 7 February 1980.
[87] *Western Mail*, 16 February 1980.
[88] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 24 January 1980.

the names of all former United Steel employees holding senior positions within the BSC, which he duly received.[89]

Given the prevalence of nationalistic and regionalist rhetoric in the strike's local narrative, it is not surprising that many steelworkers still remember the strike as a conflict for jobs and for survival, rather than pay. In Joe Stanton's memories of the strike, for example, 'it was all about jobs.'[90] In retrospect, other steelworkers acknowledged the strike as being officially a pay dispute but regretted that it had not been fought over jobs. Dai Ferris, for example believed, 'if I remember rightly it [the strike] was fought on earnings, they should have fought it on jobs.'[91] The very nature of the strike itself, however, was understood in relation to the drastic cuts that had been announced by the BSC in the month of its calling. Although revealing a largely pragmatic reaction to the redundancies announced in the wake of 1980, Arthur Bamford's, recollections of the strike, nonetheless, posited the conflict as being part of a broader struggle for jobs and survival waged against a remote coalition of the government and the BSC: 'we knew a certain amount of jobs had to go anyway,' he said, 'but it was the government's way of saying enough is enough but they just went too far with it. It's as simple as that. When the pendulum swung the other way, they took it to its extreme then.'[92]

Contemporary reflections of the strike also reveal the extent to which jobs and the regional contestation of power had come to displace the pay issue. In a letter to the *South Wales Evening Post*, an Abbey Works crane driver beseeched readers to support steelworkers, not in their fight for pay, but 'in their fight for the future of Wales'.[93] Region and nation, then, became more important than class in many steelworkers' understanding of the strike and, as the strike went on, these issues proved to be far more emotive to strikers than the wage claim (the effects of which were irrelevant to workers who did not have the promise of a job to return to). When, in February 1980, striking steelworkers marched through Port Talbot in protest at the BSC, they did not sing 'The Red Flag' or 'The Internationale' but traditional Welsh

[89] RBA, Port Talbot Strike Committee, ISTC/F/183, Letter from S. Biddiscombe to J. Morris, 13 February 1980.
[90] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[91] Interview with Dai Ferris, 27 November 2013.
[92] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[93] *South Wales Evening Post*, 26 March 1980.

songs, 'Sospan Fach' and 'Cwm Rhondda'.[94] The regional contextualisation of the strike in south Wales, however, could also be used against the strikers. In a letter from a departmental secretary within the Conservative Party to the Secretary of State for Energy, it was intimated,

> That BSC should indicate to the unions that unless the strike ended soon they might be forced not to reopen either Port Talbot or Llanwern, at least until they could see whether they could regain sufficient sales lost through the strike. The purpose would be to engender a greater willingness by employees in both plants to return to work, lest theirs become victim.

In the event, it was concluded that, although 'there was indeed little solidarity between the two sites,' such a move, 'would almost certainly be counter-productive at present, and should in any case not be highlighted publicly.'[95] The manipulation of steelworkers' local situation in this way reveals the extent to which the strike had become a manifestation of inter-regional tensions as well as a protest against the BSC.

The ISTC executive called steelworkers back to work in the first week of April, having secured a sixteen per cent pay raise, a result they hailed as a victory in face of the Corporation's initial two per cent offer. The sense of betrayal many steelworkers felt, however, when their national leaders agreed to resume work, having secured no guarantees over the impending redundancies, was the final recognition of the local transmogrification of the strike's aims and priorities. Indeed, when it became clear in the month following the strike's end that the redundancies would proceed apace in accordance with the 'slimline' formula, as initially stated by the BSC in December, one Port Talbot steelworker wrote in outrage to Bill Sirs: 'In regards to the nature of the [redundancy] agreement with all the ramifications emanating from it, in respect of the working practices, and the job losses… I am obliged to ask myself, what were the demonstrations, speeches, and the strike all about.' He concluded, 'It all has a hollow ring about it, and I believe that the majority of members in the Port Talbot area, feel a sense of humiliation, and outrage at what has been signed.'[96] Despite being one of the most reluctant plants to commit to the

[94] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 14 February 1980.
[95] TNA, BSC Pay Negotiations, BT 255/1007, Letter from P. Ridley to the Secretary of State, 21 February 1980.
[96] RBA, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation General Secretary Correspondences, ISTC/F/11(a), Letter from R. Argyle to B. Sirs, 23 April 1980.

dispute, Port Talbot witnessed some of the worst tensions and scenes of violence in the strike's immediate aftermath. An incident in the week following the return to work, where a crane driver refused to unload a lorry implicated in crossing picket lines, prompted a mass unofficial walkout and a violent episode which saw angry steelworkers barricade managers in the works general office and hurl missiles through its windows. Police were called to resolve the episode which resulted in three arrests. The front page headline of the *South Wales Evening Post* the day after the return to work was announced, 'Betrayed! Say Angry Steelmen,' conveyed much of the mood in Port Talbot.[97]

It is likely that the sense of betrayal felt by many steelworkers in the strike's aftermath would have been even more widespread had it been known at the time that negotiations over redundancies at the plant were proceeding between managers and local union officials even as the strike progressed. As early as 11 January, Emlyn Williams of the National Union of Mineworkers' South Wales Area was aware that, 'rumours were rampant that I.S.T.C., the Union now involved in the steel strike for wages and not survival, were actively discussing with the worker directors the formula in relation to the slimming down of both plants [Port Talbot and Llanwern] although undertakings had been given that no negotiations with B.S.C. would take place until the Wales T.U.C. gave permission.' The NUM's reliable trade union informants within Llanwern had told the union that discussions over the 'slimline' agreement had taken place on 2 January, the day the strike commenced, and it is therefore probable that similar discussions were underway at Port Talbot at the same time.[98] Although the slimline agreement was not signed in Port Talbot until 15 May 1980, in his sociological study of the steelworks published after the strike, Ralph Fevre was also of the opinion that 'consultations with the union took place during the steel strike'.[99] These accounts largely make a mockery of Bill Sirs' own description of the slimline negotiations, which claim that they took place under his leadership after the strike's conclusion.[100] Moreover, the meticulously kept minutes of the meetings of the ISTC's national executive record almost no mentions of the slimline

[97] *South Wales Evening Post*, 2 April 1980.
[98] *Minutes of Area Executive Council Meeting, 1980: National Union of Mineworkers – South Wales Area* (London: National Union of Mineworkers, 1980), pp. 6-12.
[99] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed*, p. 32.
[100] Bill Sirs, *Hard Labour*, pp. 115-116.

agreement and Bill Sirs was not amongst the trade union signatories of the final document.

The revelations about the nature of the slimline agreement also seriously challenges the Port Talbot trade unionists professed commitment to saving jobs during the national steel strike, which was made an explicit pledge of the Port Talbot Strike Committee in February 1980. Indeed, one senior trade unionist at the plant later conceded:

> It was quite strange because in the steel strike we acted as union officials as if the strike was about redundancy, and the impending redundancy, but we knew it was about money. In a sense we were dishonest with the members because we kept talking about saving jobs, but we knew we weren't – or at least, I assume the others knew they weren't. I knew we weren't, because I knew it was inevitable that with such massive losses it was unsustainable.[101]

For the trade unionists involved, then, the slimline agreement was a pragmatic response to a challenging economic situation that sought to provide the best possible outcome for the future of both plants. For members, however, the national steel strike and its eventual outcome revealed the ambiguities and subjectivity of industrial conflict and the vagaries of the vast power nexus at the centre of industrial relations. The traditional narrative of class was blurred from the outset by geographic rivalries and differing goals. Moreover, local leaders acted in an almost conspiratorial manner, concealing their actions from both their members and national leaders, so that when the conflict was finally resolved it was unclear to many steelworkers what they had actually been fighting for.

Conclusion

The resolution of the 1980 steel strike engendered a seismic shift in the industrial relations culture of the Port Talbot works. The internal union struggle between the local and the national organisations was largely resolved in favour of the former, albeit with the continued protestation of the national executive. In rejecting their national leaders, the ISTC's local union officers and the other union representatives on the multi-union committee were brought into a far closer relationship with local

[101] Interview with Kenneth Williams, 25 November 2013.

management, thus precipitating a shift in understandings of authority in the workplace. Without recourse to the national negotiating machinery, the hand of local managers was also strengthened. As a former chairman of the plant's multi-union committee, Ron Waters believed that the national union leadership were answerable to him even as he remained deferential towards the BSC:

> I've always had a belief that I was an employee for British Steel, but the John Foleys and the Bill Sirs were *my* employees, they worked for me and I didn't work for them. They worked for me because we paid their salaries. So it's a switch, Brian Moffatt [Port Talbot manager] is my boss, I've got to take what he says, and then these people [national trade union leaders] coming from London I say, "hang on, no, no, we tell you – we're paying you!".[102]

If such a sentiment, expressed by a senior trade unionist, appears incongruous with the historiography of the labour movement, it was entirely in keeping with widely held understandings of industrial relations in the steel industry. For most steelworkers, workplace conflict was not framed in political terms. It was about getting the best workplace settlement – or as trade unionists often described it, 'getting a deal' – for themselves, their families and their work mates. The workplace issues that most concerned steelworkers, those of wages, conditions and security, were predominantly material and as long as capitalism presented the best, or most likely, way to achieve these goals they had little interest in challenging it.

Steelworkers may have shared a broad set of common workplace goals but they were rarely united in their efforts to secure them. Often steelworkers felt their position could be best advanced as a section, pursuing a localised interest or grievance, and organised protest was, therefore, likely to bring strikers into conflict with other sections of the workforce as well as managers. Many causes of conflict, such as changes in working practice, were also largely reactionary and changed over time. Moreover, they affected individual groups within the plant differently, often leading to different responses amongst steelworkers. Traditionally the struggle for power in work has been conceived of in terms of a class struggle: the perpetual contestation between capital and labour. Yet these terms are in themselves problematic. As has been seen, neither capital nor labour were homogenous groups and both struggled to contain an evolving array of competing interests, cultures and ideologies. Workplace conflict at Port Talbot, thus, did not conform to a single

[102] Interview with Ron Walters, 13 November 2013.

overarching ideology. Rather, it was repeatedly reshaped and reconstituted to face the changing priorities and material situations of the present. Steelworkers consistently proved adaptable in formulating alliances and strategies that they felt would best address specific grievances and the plant's managers were equally mutable in the labour strategies they employed. Understandings of consent, cooperation and conflict were not predetermined but continually renegotiated between a wide variety of parties looking to further their material position and economic settlement within the workplace.

For historians who conceived of industrial relations through the Marxist paradigm, the recourse to sectional conflict and the absence of strong class solidarities, which became increasingly common amongst workers after the Second World War, were a source of recurring despair (Hobsbawm's defeatist *The Forward March of Labour Halted* being, perhaps, the best example).[103] In few places, however, was this latter-day Marxist pessimism more evident than in Wales. When Gwyn A. Williams poetically described the Welsh as 'a naked people under an acid rain', it was not just in response to the overwhelming defeat of the 1979 devolution referendum but the apparent dissolution of the 'tradition of the *Welsh Working-class*'. At the beginning of the 1980s, Williams despondently wrote of 'the puny response from Wales to the repeated calls for protest and action from British trade union and Labour organizations' and appeared resigned that, 'there seemed to be little response from a population readily accepting the values and arguments of the new dispensation.'[104] Loyalty and solidarity, however, have never been the sole preserve of class. Rather than evidencing a collapse of will or absence of commonality, Port Talbot steelworkers' approach to workplace conflict evidenced a range of competing loyalties and allegiances. Notions of class, therefore, coexisted with the ties of family, mates, community and nation in informing workers' conceptions of the workplace and their responses to the struggles within it. To judge workers against the ideal of the prototypical Marxist proletariat fundamentally fails to understand the totality of their experience and how it informed their conception of power at work. Within this understanding, there is no reason why managers should axiomatically be considered the enemy or workers elsewhere *de facto* allies. Most

[103] E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted'.
[104] Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 298, 299 & 305.

steelworkers did not understand the relations of the workplace through the prism of an unbending analytical framework, nor should historians attempt to understand them through one.

Chapter Six

Friends, Family and Community: Life outside Work

To be a steelworker was a salient indicator of identity for the employees of the Port Talbot works but it was not the only, and perhaps not even the most important, way they defined themselves. Martin Johnes has argued that there were 'three spheres at the core of working-class life: work, home and leisure',[1] yet too often histories of industrial workers have concentrated their efforts on the former, making only obligatory concessions to the latter two fields of existence. Writing in 1983, Stedman Jones argued that, 'For social historians, systematic interest in popular recreation and debate over the use of leisure is relatively recent,'[2] and the subject has been frequently overlooked in case studies of industrial workers.[3] Such an approach not only belittles the importance of home and leisure within workers' lives but fails to appreciate their significance in the formulation of individual and collective identities and cultures. The workplace was one such site of cultural production but it was not the only one. Indeed, if work is taken as a precondition of existence and an economic necessity, then it is arguably outside the realm of production that workers were most able to exercise their right to self-determination and to construct their own cultures. Indeed, the anthropologist David Graeber has observed, that, '(as anyone who works from nine to five can testify) the idea that you can alienate your liberty, at least temporarily, endures. In fact, it determines what most of us have to do for most of our waking hours, except, usually, on weekends.'[4] In this understanding, non-work time is when wage earners are at their most free and best able to lead the lives they really desire.

Steelworkers were united by a common employer but outside the factory gate they assumed a plurality of coexisting identities: fathers, friends, train enthusiasts,

[1] Martin Johnes, 'Great Britain', in, S.W. Pope and John Nauright (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Sports History* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 448.
[2] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 76.
[3] See, Sidney Pollard, *A History of Labour in Sheffield* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1959); Ben Curtis, *The South Wales Miners, 1964-1985* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).
[4] David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (London: Melville House Publishing, 2011), p. 210.

passionate footballers and even jazz guitarists. Frequently they exhibited as much pride and passion in their locality, family, musical ability or sporting prowess as their work. The condition of work undoubtedly exercised a pervasive influence over all aspects of steelworkers' lives, not least through determining the chronology of leisure time and the economic means available to pursue recreational activities, but this should not relegate the leisure and domestic experience to a mere bi-product of the labour process. Pressures emanating from work existed alongside, age, gender and the ties of family and neighbourhood kinship as crucial determinants in the ways in which steelworkers structured their out of work hours, the activities they pursued during them and with whom. This chapter seeks to question the relationship between work and leisure further and argues that whilst work exercised a pervasive influence on steelworkers' leisure activities it existed within a broader contextual framework of personal and societal factors. Some historians have argued that the historical influence of a common workplace has been to contribute towards a more homogenous out-of-work culture. Paul Thompson, for example, characterised the 'South Wales mining and tinwork communities' as having an 'egalitarianism born of tough manual labour'.[5] After the Second World War, however, steelworkers' lives outside of the plant remained intrinsically personal and plural experiences, often mirroring the fragmented nature of work itself.

For the post-war generation of Marxist inspired social historians, the study of working-class leisure retained a distinctly political emphasis. Leisure was related to issues of workers' politics in which it could either serve as an expression of a deeper working-class consciousness or a distraction from political activism. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, identified the changing pattern of working-class leisure after 1945 as being symptomatic of the political disintegration of Britain's working-class. Leisure, he argued, was a distraction luring workers away from the arena of organised class politics and, thus, undermining the class struggle. Hobsbawm bemoaned that, 'Trade unionists or party members who had once turned up for branch meetings or public political occasions, because, amongst other things, they were also a form of diversion or entertainment, could now think of more attractive

[5] Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 111.

ways of spending their time.'[6] For historians, such as Hobsbawm, then, the preeminent historical question pertaining to working-class leisure was not how it was understood by its participants but its effect and role within the formation of class culture and awareness. As Savage and Miles note, 'the problem for Marxist writers lay in explaining why it was that the British working-class appeared more interested in going to the pub or winning the football pools than in setting up barricades and seizing political power.'[7]

In these accounts, the interpretation of leisure as a passive distraction of workers' collective energies was aligned with an understanding of non-work time as an extension of the wider class struggle for autonomy and control. In this analysis, leisure was interpreted as a contested sphere in which bourgeois efforts to shape working-class leisure were pitted against workers' own collective agency. Despite warning against 'overpoliticizing leisure', Gareth Stedman Jones framed his historical interpretation of working-class recreation within the broader debate on whether workers' out-of-work lives constituted a form of 'class expression' or 'social control'.[8] Like historical studies of the workplace, class based interpretations of leisure imbued it with notions of solidarity and resistance that often conveyed a highly misleading interpretation of the position of leisure in people's lives. Leisure, of course, was never an apolitical sphere, nor was it immune from wider social forces, but its expression in solely class terms failed to truly understand its meaning for its participants. Equally importantly, as Davies argues, 'this tendency to focus upon the political repercussions of developments in leisure has meant that the diversity of working-class experience has sometimes been obscured.'[9] Leisure was a plural experience, as informed by notions of age, gender and location as class, and this always militated against any form of out-of-work homogeneity (both in its indigenous form of class expression or bourgeois attempts at social hegemony).

Whilst labour historians have characteristically regarded working-class leisure habits as a primarily political phenomenon, the fields of social history

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[6] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 307.
[7] Mike Savage & Andrew Miles, *The Re-making of the British Working-Class, 1840-1940* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 5.
[8] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, p. 88.
[9] Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), p. 2.

concerned with sport and popular culture have been more cognisant of their broader purpose. Historians associated with the cultural turn in social history, such as Andrew Davies, have adopted leisure as a central category of analysis and revealed it to be integral to historical constructions of working-class culture and identity. 'Leisure', Davies argues, 'was central to the formation of masculine identities in working-class neighbourhoods' and identifies 'drinking, gambling and sport' as being as important to workers' conceptions of themselves as their occupation or political affiliation.[10] Since the 1980s, calls for the study of communal and recreational aspects of working-class life, such as football and cinema, have been vociferously made by historians, such as Holt, Stedman Jones and McKibbin, and have greatly enriched historical understandings of working-class identity and community.[11] However, whilst the trend amongst orthodox labour historians has been to marginalise leisure or treat it as a politicised arena within the broader class struggle, sport and cultural historians have sometimes retreated to an antithetical position. Gareth Stedman Jones argued in 1983 that 'it would be a mistake to develop' the history of leisure 'into a subject in its own right', but this trend can be identified in the field of sport history.[12] Sport and leisure have, on occasion, been treated as separate and distinct categories of analysis and there is thus a need to relate them to other aspects of working-class experience: specifically, work and wider social and economic constraints.[13]

Most striking, perhaps, is the demarcation some sport and leisure historians have drawn between recreation and work. Peter Borsay, for example, has warned against defining leisure 'negatively', as simply that which is not work, arguing that this 'belittles the position of leisure in people's lives' and similar reservations have been expressed by Hill.[14] Historians are wise to be mindful of these concerns but the definition of leisure as a distinct, and sometimes exclusive, category of study risks removing it from the broader context of workers' experience. This much has been

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[11] See, Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*; Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relation in Britain, 1880-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[12] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, p. 87.
[13] For an overview of the position of Sport History within wider British historiography, see, Dilwyn Porter, 'Sport History and Modern British History', *Sport in History*, 31 (2011).
[14] Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure: The British Experience Since 1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) p. 5; Jeffrey Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 6.

recognised by Johnes, who argues that, 'any study of working-class pastimes needs to address not only its multiple meanings for participants, but also its relationship with the wider political and economic forces that structured its form, experience and meaning.' Johnes goes on to call for an historical understanding of leisure which fully acknowledges its position within wider society, observing that, 'working-class culture was neither autonomous nor able to operate outside the wider material constraints imposed upon it by an unequal society.'[15] The consideration of leisure within the broader contextual framework of steelworkers' work, politics and community, offers a less insular and more integrated analytical framework for understanding the full significance of workers' out-of-work lives.

The segregation of the history of sport and popular culture within the broader discourse of social history has also obfuscated the interminable and sometimes ambiguous relationship between work and recreation. Indeed, Borsay argues that the postulation 'of work defining leisure rests on the assumption that it is possible to distinguish clearly between the two activities'.[16] Despite the rigours and toil of working life in a steel plant, most workers recalled the innate sociability of the workplace and also found time for the pursuit of non-work related activities. Playing cards, darts, practical jokes, communal cooking and reading all took place within the confines of the Port Talbot works and blurred the boundaries between work and play. These activities clearly bore no direct relation to the task of production and brought recreational pursuits into the workplace. For the purposes of this chapter, however, leisure will be defined as distinct from worktime. This is not to belittle the position of leisure in relation to work, as Hill and Borsay suggest, or deny the possibility for leisure in the workplace, but to acknowledge the different quality of time outside of work. For steelworkers, non-work time was intrinsically associated with rest and recreation, rather than production, and for manual workers was given physical manifestation in the symbolic act of clocking-on and clocking-off. The self-determination available to steelworkers during this time further reinforced this distinction. As McKibbin argues, 'the individual control of time was perhaps the main difference between formal work and hobby work.'[17] Moreover, leisure time

[15] Martin Johnes, 'Pigeon Racing and Working-class Culture in Britain, c. 1870-1950', *Cultural and Social History*, 4 (2007), p. 373.
[16] Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure*, p. 3.
[17] Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class*, p. 162.

was associated with different spheres of activity and communality. The home and the neighbourhood, albeit never entirely outside the sphere of industrial production, provided a distinct geography to leisure time.

Studies of corporate welfare and industrial paternalism present another historical interpretation of working-class leisure, one which explicitly positions issues of workers' recreation within broader questions of politics and industrial relations. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, corporate leisure schemes were an important component of many industrial firms' labour relations strategies, whereby employers sought to directly influence the way in which their employees utilised their out-of-work hours. Steven Crewe explains the proactive stance some employers demonstrated towards their workers' leisure, noting that, 'in large-scale manufacturing and service industries, those who worked together were increasingly urged to play and relax together.' The overall effect, he argues, was implicitly political: to promote 'commonality, comradeship and identification with the firm'.[18] Other historians have analysed similar schemes throughout Britain, offering insights into the workings of different welfare initiatives and their relationships with the worlds of work, politics and society. Simon Philips' account of industrial welfare at the Boots Drugs Company in Nottingham, for example, posits the firm's benevolent welfare policies as salient indicators of power in industrial politics and societal relations.[19] Historical studies of industrial paternalism, therefore, explicitly challenge the isolationist approach to working-class leisure, revealing the complex relations between work and leisure culture and their broader position within society. Existing histories of workers' welfare, however, have been typically framed around debates on social control or reveal a company orientated perspective. Whilst the former interpretation has tended to understand welfare schemes as part of the broader struggle for power in work, the latter, revisionist, position has sought to show their effectiveness and popularity amongst workers. As will be seen, neither fully explains the experience of corporate welfare schemes in the Port Talbot steel industry or the ways in which it was interpreted by workers. In their leisure lives,

[18] Steven Crewe, ''What about the Workers?': Works-based Sport and Recreation in England, c. 1918-c. 1970', *Sport History*, 34 (2014), pp. 548-549.
[19] Simon Philips, ''Fellowship in Recreation, Fellowship in Ideals': Sport, Leisure and Culture at Boots Pure Drug Company, Nottingham c. 1883-1945', *Midland History*, 24 (2004).

steelworkers were rarely the passive recipients of corporate munificence nor were they ideologically predisposed against it.

The focus of the existing historiography on leisure is also chronologically restricted, with historians primarily concentrating their efforts on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[20] This not only presents a considerable deficit in understandings of working-class culture since the Second World War but belies the enormity of the change that took place in popular leisure habits during this period. Indeed, contemporary observers and social commentators were of little doubt that the two decades following the war witnessed a seismic shift in the possibilities and habits of working-class leisure. The out-of-work lives of Britain's workers had long been a matter of interest (and frequently concern) amongst middle-class observers but the renewed interest displayed in the subject after the war suggests that this was a period of significant and accelerated development in the fields of popular leisure and recreation. Much of the contemporary debate centred on politicised fears surrounding the decline of Britain's traditional working-class culture, as increased affluence and the multiple possibilities it presented offered more extravagant and privatised leisure pursuits that threatened to undermine its social cohesion. One of the central theories expounded in Goldthorpe *et al.*'s *Affluent Worker* studies, was the concept of 'privatism'. In their own words, 'privatism' constituted, 'a process, that is, manifested in a pattern of social life which is centred on, and indeed largely restricted to, the home and conjugal family.'[21] The rapid popularisation of household televisions from the 1950s onwards and the proliferation of home-based entertainments further seemed to suggest the emergence of a distinctly isolationist working-class leisure culture. The greater choice of leisure pursuits available to many sections of the working-class, alongside environmental changes in the character of their neighbourhoods and homes, as embodied in the rise of the housing estate, further fuelled fears of a decline in 'traditional' values.

Many of the social scientists' conclusions reflected the particular political anxieties of their time but they also made clear the strong correlation between the economy, the wage packet and possibilities for leisure and recreational

[20] Martin Johnes, 'Great Britain', p. 454.
[21] John H. Goldthorpe *et al*., *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) p. 97.

infrastructures. The intrinsic relationship between the wage packet and leisure was also clearly evident in the latter half of the period. From the 1970s onwards, when any notion of 'affluent workers' had been banished from popular discourse, concerns about the poverty of working-class leisure were seen as symptomatic of the decline of heavy industry, dwindling wages, insecure work and mass-unemployment. Crime and drug use, particularly amongst the young, in industrial areas were cited as evidence of a lack of leisure and recreation facilities, as well as economic means.[22] During the half-century following the Second World War, Port Talbot's steel industry was identified as being an archetype of both the affluent and the post-industrial society with all the fluctuating trends in working-class leisure culture this entailed: from 'Treasure Island' to 'Giro City', as the sociologist Ralph Fevre evocatively described it.[23]

This chapter will proceed to further explore the relationship between work and leisure and the way in which they informed individual and group identities. Whilst it stresses the importance of work in setting the economic and chronological parameters of leisure, it argues that, despite the shared experience of employment in the steel industry, leisure remained a deeply plural and personal experience. Work did influence the character of steelworkers' leisure and informed the meaning they derived from it but so too did other factors, such as age, place and individual personality. Within these numerous societal and economic constraints, however, leisure time remained inherently associated with the exercise of individual autonomy and the pursuit of the self. This did not necessarily entail an isolationist approach to leisure but showed a determination by steelworkers that, unlike work, leisure time was *theirs* to do with as they chose.

In exploring these issues further, the chapter continues in a thematic structure focusing on three main conceptions of steelworkers' leisure. The first of these is concerned with corporate leisure, specifically the measures enacted by the Steel Company of Wales and the British Steel Corporation to develop a comprehensive welfare infrastructure for its employees. The motives for the company taking such a

[22] See, for example, Valerie Walkerdine & Luis Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community after De-industrialization: A Psychosocial Approach to Affect* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 163.
[23] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed: The Quiet Privatisation of British Steel* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1980), p. 38.

direct interest in its employees' leisure are considered alongside the responses of employees to their efforts. The limited success of the SCOW's recreation programme is argued to be symptomatic of the diversification of working-class leisure culture in the post-war era, which largely resisted any attempts at coerced homogenisation. The second section considers the way in which the workplace was able to indirectly influence workers' leisure, specifically through the wage packet and the wider economic constraints it placed on recreation. Within a broader analysis of contemporary debates concerning affluent workers and post-industrial societies, this section explores the relationship between local leisure infrastructures and local economies and how they affected the possibilities for recreation available to steelworkers. Finally, the third section examines the different ideas of leisure exhibited by steelworkers, focusing on debates surrounding notions of private and public leisure. Deliberation is therefore given to the roles of the domestic and public spheres within steelworkers' leisure time and the ways in which they understood and derived meaning from these activities. Whilst work profoundly influenced the way in which leisure time was structured, in its final analysis this chapter will argue that the kinship networks based around community and family were often largely impervious to direct corporate influences and steelworkers sustained a varied and vibrant leisure life. Workplace identities were not entirely abandoned at the plant gate but outside work, for most, they assumed less importance. Steelworkers had little choice but to be anything else for most of their waking hours so during their leisure time they embraced the opportunity to assume other guises, be they fathers, fishermen, club committee representatives or any other source of personal fulfilment.

Corporate Leisure

In assessing the relationship between steelworkers' work and out-of-work experiences, the sphere of corporate leisure undoubtedly presents the most marked and proximate field of comparison. It has been argued that the post-Second World War era marked the beginning of a rapid retreat by employers and industrial magnates from the sphere of industrial paternalism. Both Steven Crewe and John Griffiths have argued that 'the transformation from post-war austerity to affluence'

signalled the demise of large corporate welfare schemes, which failed to withstand growing competition from out-of-work alternatives and the welfare state.[24] Some historians have located this trend even earlier; Holt argued that 'the socio-religious impulse' of benevolent employers to provide sports facilities for their workers 'declined at the end of the nineteenth century'.[25] These analyses, however, prove contrary to the experience of Port Talbot's steel industry during this period, where corporate interest in worker leisure reached new levels of organisation and investment. The most tangible expression of this impulse was the ambitious and comprehensive employee welfare scheme embarked on by the SCOW in the two decades following the Second World War, which surpassed all previous local efforts.

The historical precedent of corporate influence in steelworkers' recreation had been well established by the SCOW's predecessor firms. For much of its history, organised sport in Port Talbot developed alongside industry and under its close supervision and patronage; the formation of Aberavon Rugby Club in 1876, for example, had been strongly encouraged by the owners of a local tinplate works. The Gilbertson family, who provided much of the initial impetus and capital for the construction of the first Port Talbot steelworks, also enjoyed a reputation for benevolence in matters of employee welfare.[26] By the inter-war period, with steel now firmly established as the locality's dominant industry, steelworks' proprietors had moved beyond patronising civic institutions to establishing their own sport teams. Local historian, A. Leslie Evans, noted that, 'following the First World War, Margam and Port Talbot Steelworks had [rugby] clubs,' and by the outbreak of the Second World War, the works, under the ownership of Guest Keen and Baldwins, sustained a soccer side and five crickets teams, all based in a works welfare clubhouse.[27] Throughout the first half of the century, then, the trend appears to be towards an expansion of corporate leisure provision, rather than a contraction. The Victorian understanding of organised workers' leisure and sport as morally reforming and conducive to amicable workplace relations retained considerable

[24] Steven Crewe, 'What About the Workers?', p. 562; James Griffiths, ''Give my Regards to Uncle Billy…': The Rites and Rituals of Company Life at Lever Brothers, c. 1900-c. 1990', *Business History*, 37 (1995), p. 38.
[25] Richard Holt, *Sport and the British*, p. 144.
[26] David Smith & Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise: The Official History of the Welsh Rugby Union, 1881-1981* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p. 27.
[27] A. Leslie Evans, 'Some Reflections on Local Sport', *Transactions of the Port Talbot Historical Society*, 3 (1981), pp. 28-35.

currency amongst Port Talbot's steel magnates into the twentieth century. These developments, however, could not anticipate the dramatic growth in employee welfare services experienced after the Second World War.

Even before the Abbey Works had been officially unveiled, the proprietors of the SCOW were already envisaging a significant rationalisation of steelworkers' welfare and exhibited a renewed commitment towards its provision. On 24 November 1949, the old Sports and Welfare Association, established by Guest Keen and Baldwins, was officially disbanded and replaced by a new Sports and Social Club, consisting of 'a temporary Committee of 13 elected members, 2 representatives from each section, and 4 members nominated by the Company, all under the chairmanship of Mr. W. F. Cartwright'.[28] A fulltime secretary was also appointed to oversee the club's activities and was later joined by a residential 'club-house steward and stewardess'.[29] The subtle change in the organisation's title, with 'welfare association' being replaced by 'sports club', hinted at the renewed focus on employee leisure and recreation that the organisation was tasked with directing. In November 1952 a brand new works clubhouse was formally unveiled in Margam, adjacent to the Abbey Works, and served as the base of the Sports and Social Cub as well as a multi-purpose centre for company sport and social gatherings and society events (a function it continued to serve for the duration of the period). In its glowing appraisal of the clubhouse, the *Western Mail* described it as 'the best-equipped, most up-to-date sports club built in Britain since the war' and noted its extensive sport facilities – including playing fields, 'first-class tennis courts' and bowling greens – and recreational areas – 'a large ultra-modern bar, with a kitchen behind.'[30] The *South Wales Evening Post* concurred, describing it as 'a magnificent new pavilion comparable with anything of the kind' and one 'which might well turn Port Talbot into one of the principle cricket and sports centres in Wales'.[31] The scope of the new clubhouse was, therefore, comprehensive and included facilities to cater for most sports as well as recreation facilities, such as a bar, for socialising and relaxing.

[28] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, May 1950.
[29] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, September 1950; *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, November 1952.
[30] *Western Mail*, 2 December 1952.
[31] *South Wales Evening Post*, 28 November 1952.

The initial cost of the clubhouse development born by the company was considerable, totalling £71,781,[32] and continued investment in extensions and renovations over the following decade brought the overall amount sanctioned on the clubhouse's development to over £100,000 by 1962.[33] The investment of company resources into developing and improving works leisure facilities was explicitly designed to make work based leisure activities a more attractive proposition for employees and, thus, encourage them to devote more of their leisure time to the firm. Such intentions were openly promulgated in the company's various media outlets, such as the company newspaper. In 1952, for example, *The Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, informed employees that, 'it is to be hoped that efforts at present being made to increase the membership will continue to bear fruit and that the membership will reach a total worthy of the sports club of a world famous Company.'[34] Indeed, a purely statistical analysis of club membership would suggest the corporation was highly successful in achieving its aims; in the year following the construction of the new clubhouse the number of employees prepared to pay the nominal weekly subscription for club membership rose from 3,000 to 7,800, accounting for over seventy-five per cent of the workforce.[35]

Analogous with the far-reaching development of the works recreational facilities was the multiplication of company clubs, societies and sports teams. The increase of works based leisure opportunities was most apparent in the field of sport where, following the reconstitution of the new Sports and Social Club, 'steps were taken to extend the activities of the club by the introduction of new sections covering almost every branch of sport.'[36] A typical inventory of the Sports and Social Clubs' activities, taken from a single week in November 1959, offers a representative overview of the extent of the club's activities. These included: one soccer match (versus Kenfig Hill), one junior rugby match (versus Nantyfyllon), both men and ladies hockey fixtures, multiple judo sessions and numerous inter-departmental tournaments, for sports such as table-tennis and snooker.[37] The extensive range of

[32] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/1, The Steel Company of Wales (Port Talbot) Sports and Social Club: Report on the financial assistance received from The Steel Company of Wales, 1957.
[33] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/2-3, The Steel Company of Wales Limited Sanction/Expenditure to Date on Sports Clubs, 1962.
[34] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, November 1952.
[35] *Ingot News*, November 1953.
[36] *Ibid.*
[37] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, Cart/1/39/1, Forthcoming Events for the Month of November, 1958.

possibilities for engaging in company sport was designed to engage workers of all ages, sexes and levels of commitment and ability. Catering for more skilled and serious sportsmen and women were the plant's senior sports sides for cricket, soccer and rugby, all of which were highly professional and competed in both local and national leagues. The works rugby team, in particular, acquired a reputation as one of the most skilled and accomplished company sports teams in Wales and was the first steel club to be awarded full Welsh Rugby Union membership status in 1974.[38] Five years previously 'history was made' when the works rugby team defeated preeminent local side Aberavon in a local seven-a-side tournament.[39] The organisation and dedication required to achieve such on field successes gives a sense of the time and resources both participants and the company dedicated to works based sport.



SCOW cricket team, 1948.[40]

Although only the most able sportsmen could hope to represent the company in its topflight sports sides, the SCOW did not conceive of works sport as a minority interest. All employees were encouraged to participate in some form of sporting

[38] *Steel News*, 19 September 1974.
[39] *Steel News*, September 1969.
[40] Courtesy of the Port Talbot Historical Society.

activity and numerous opportunities were created for them to do so. These efforts resulted in a myriad of departmental teams engaged in a perennial round of inter-departmental tournaments, for sports ranging from rugby to darts, and were explicitly designed to encourage widespread employee participation. This intention was made clear in the company newspaper which, in anticipation of the works' annual sports day, urged employees that,

> There are to be more departmental competitions this year and it should be the aim of every member of each department from the Manager to the youngest boy to see that his department acquits itself well. There is still time for those individuals and departments who have not yet entered to do so now, and this is the opportunity for many athletes who have hesitated in the past to line up with the champions, to show what they can do.[41]

Female employees too were encouraged to participate, in departmental ladies hockey and tennis teams, so that every section of the workforce was represented. The number of departmental teams recorded during this period suggests the company's pleas were met with considerable enthusiasm; for example, forty-two department bowls teams from across the plant competed in the 1959 round of inter-departmental tournaments. [42] With few physical barriers to participation, sports such as bowls and darts proved particularly popular and offered greater opportunities for mass employee participation than rugby or soccer.

Sports events may have been the most visible and publicised aspect of the Sports and Social Club's activities but the club also acted as a hub for numerous cultural and artistic societies as well as social events. For musicians, there were the SCOW Band and Male Voice Choir and the post-war period also saw the formation of numerous works hobby and cultural societies, such as a dramatic society, film society, motoring and sailing clubs, which were all affiliated to the Sports and Social Club. Amongst those who made their mark on the works amateur dramatic society was Leo Lloyd, a former mentor of Port Talbot's most famous acting export, Richard Burton. According to Angela John, whilst working at the plant in the mid-1950s, Lloyd, 'produced winning plays in the Steel Company of Wales' annual inter-departmental Drama festival.'[43] Although most clubs invited small financial

[41] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, June 1953.
[42] *The Dragon*, May 1959.
[43] Angela V. John, *The Actors' Crucible: Port Talbot and the Making of Burton, Hopkins, Sheen and all the Others* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2015), p. 63.

contributions from their members, they were heavily reliant on the use of company facilities and regular and extraordinary donations from the corporation to underwrite their activities. The SCOW board of directors, for example, sanctioned the expenditure of £2,000 on a new set of instruments for the works band in 1962 and routinely made payments to the band and choir to support trips away to compete in competitions and eisteddfodau.[44]

The clubhouse also acted as a centre for society functions and informal gatherings, which sought to promote the inherent sociability of the workplace. Departmental dances were a regular feature of the plant's 'forthcoming events' bulletins throughout the 1950s and 1960s and other social occasions and trips were organised at a sectional level. Jan Fletcher, a works typist, recalled being invited to one such dance by her future husband, 'because in those days each department would often have an annual dinner dance,' she remembered.[45] During the early years of the SCOW's existence, Paul Ace was aware of a vast variety of social functions being laid on for apprentices, such as him. 'We had a big apprentice club', he noted,

> Everybody was in the club and that was the social aspect of it. Every year… a big annual dance was organised, we had probably a top line band from somewhere. Twice a year besides we'd have a social event of dancing and music in the YMCA in town. Every weekend, practically every weekend, we'd be organising buses to go somewhere in the area for dances and things like that. And occasionally, once or twice, we did do trips up to Western [-super-Mare] on the boat so that was a great part of it.[46]

The clubhouse itself was intended as an arena for out-of-work sociability, with its ample bar facilities revealing the centrality of alcohol and drinking to steelworkers' culture of male bonding and masculine recreation. Indeed, as part of a £60,000 'face-lift' in 1964, the club received a new 'lounge bar' to further encourage employees to devote their leisure hours to the company's own recreation facilities.[47]

A consideration of corporate leisure is highly demonstrative of the ways in which questions of workers' recreation were never far removed from those of the workplace but also how leisure was intrinsically related to wider issues of politics and social power. Despite their espoused benign intentions, company welfare formed

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[44] Shotton Record Centre, Steel Company of Wales Management Reports, 378/1 Box 15, Subscriptions and Donations, February 1962.
[45] Interview with Jan Fletcher, 14 October 2013.
[46] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[47] *The Dragon*, September 1964.

an important part of many large organisations' labour policies and industrial relations strategies. Corporate recreation, it has been argued, was an articulation of employers' soft power and inculcated placid and cooperative shopfloor relations, as well as the health and wellbeing of the employee. In her overview of welfare capitalism in inter-war America, Elizabeth Fones-Wolf summarised the aims of corporate welfare advocates, arguing that, 'plant-based activities built up esprit de corps, improved health, and contributed to better relations between employees and management, while increasing efficiency and reducing absenteeism.'[48] Integral to this conception of welfarism was the use of company sponsored recreation as a means of promoting loyalty, identification and, perhaps, even affection towards the firm through the construction of a fictive work community. Speaking at the south Wales finals of the BSC's inter-works cup in 1972, Dr D. P. Roderick, a director at the Port Talbot works, told the assembled competitors and managers that, 'functions such as today's can help all of us in the British Steel Corporation build up an allegiance from which can emerge a successful enterprise.' He went on the elaborate that, 'the joining together of people in such events as we have all enjoyed today surely must lead to harmony not only on the field of sport but also in the place of work.'[49] These objectives had been implicit in the paternalistic instincts of Port Talbot's nineteenth century industrialists and continued to inform the SCOW's corporate leisure strategy. At the formal unveiling of the new clubhouse in 1952, a recently retired works manager told the *Western Mail* that the clubhouse 'indicates the good feeling and mutual affection which exists between the company and their employees'.[50]

[48] Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, 'Industrial Recreation, the Second World War, and the Revival of Welfare Capitalism, 1934 – 1960', *Business History Review*, 60 (1986), p. 245.
[49] *Steel News*, September 1971.
[50] *Western Mail*, 2 December 1952.



Celebrations at the SCOW clubhouse, c. 1950s/1960s.[51]

Whilst much of the SCOW and the BSC's thinking about corporate leisure reflected the inheritance of older notions of industrial paternalism, this ideology received new vigour from contemporary managerial strategies emanating from America. In his study of Americanization in the post-war Italian steel industry, Ferruccio Riccardi highlighted the impact of, 'the human factor – a concept from human relations theory,' which Italian steel magnates gleaned from their visits to American steelworks. Riccardi goes on to argue that, 'their view of America was accompanied by a "moral" conception of workplace relations that did not hesitate to use the family as a model to identify the ideological contours of what a company should be: a full-fledged economic and social entity modelled on a real community.'[52] Given the frequency which SCOW representatives visited American steelworks in the same period, evidence suggests they returned with similar conclusions. Cartwright undoubtedly gave employee welfare provision considerable attention from the earliest stages of the Abbey Works' planning, as is evident in the unusual precedence given to worker amenities, such as locker facilities and messrooms, in a 1949 lecture on the design of steelworks.[53] The construction firm tasked with the plant's layout and planning similarly recalled the high priority

[51] Courtesy of the Port Talbot Historical Society.
[52] Ferruccio Riccardi, 'The Circulation of Practices: Americanizing Social Relations at the Cornigliano Steel Plant (Italy), 1948-60', *Labour History*, 51 (2010), p. 237.
[53] Fred Cartwright, *The Design of Iron and Steelworks: Read Before The South Wales Institute of Engineers at Cardiff on 15th December, 1949* (Cardiff: Western Mail and Echo Ltd., 1950), p. 115.

attached to employee welfare and noted that, 'each of the various dining rooms will be provided with a lounge and this building is so arranged that the main room can be turned into a cinema or recreation room providing stage facilities and other amenities so that the building can be used as a workmen's club.'[54] Far from being an afterthought, corporate welfare strategies were integral to managerial strategy and embedded in the plant's design.

For some employers, the notion of a works community, with its own distinct social and leisure culture, was also a powerful bulwark against rival out-of-work alternatives, specifically those presented by trade unions or other independent workers' organisations. John Griffiths argues that the welfarist policies enacted by Lever Brothers at their Port Sunlight Works reflected 'the desire on the part of the Lever Brothers to defeat unionism'.[55] By the post-war era, it is implausible that the aim of eliminating trade unionism was either achievable or desirable for the Port Talbot works managers but corporate welfare strategies could, nonetheless, be utilised as a means of curtailing worker engagement in union affairs and diluting class-based solidarities with corporate loyalties. The local organisation of the ISTC offered no leisure facilities for its members capable of rivalling those of the company and, in this respect, differed greatly from the proactive efforts shown by other trade unions in the field of worker recreation. The welfare movement organised by the National Union of Mineworkers and its predecessor, the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF), offered many south Wales mining communities a comprehensive leisure infrastructure, including eisteddfodau and gala days (which 'were initially supported solely by the union'[56]), as well as workmen's institutes and welfare halls. Although financially supported by the National Coal Board, historians have been keen to stress the role of mining unions and miners in creating their own leisure provision. Francis and Smith have argued that during the 1930s, the SWMF 'initiated its own socio-political institutions' and after 1945 the miners' 'Welfare movement tapped the socialist enthusiasm of the mining valleys'.[57] That the ISTC failed to develop any welfare institutions comparable to those of the NUM in part

[54] 'A Technical Survey of the Abbey, Margam, Trostre and Newport Plants of the Steel Company of Wales Limited', *A Special Issue of Iron & Coal Trades Review, Layout and Planning of the Abbey Works – By the International Construction Company*, c. 1952.
[55] John Griffiths, 'Give my Regards to Uncle Billy…', p. 35.
[56] Hywel Francis & David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), p. 429.
[57] *Ibid*., pp. 427-431.

reflects its overtly pragmatic understanding of trade unionism but also reveals the proactive efforts made by the SCOW (and other Welsh steel firms) in monopolising this sphere. Corporate leisure, then, was an arm of managerial strategy and represented the broader ideological contestations of the workplace.[58]

The welfarist activities of the Port Talbot works had ambitions of reaching beyond its own employees and also sought to influence the leisure culture of their families and the wider community. Brad Beaven has argued that the turn of the twentieth-century witnessed the retreat of industrialists from the civic sphere, postulating that, 'whereas the nineteenth-century paternalist attempted to project civic ideals from a municipal platform, the twentieth-century paternalist had more limited horizons that did not extend beyond his own workforce.'[59] Although indicative of broader trends, this assertion is entirely contrary to the situation in post-war Port Talbot, where the steelworks' central position within the town and wider economy made its civic obligations hard to ignore. Perhaps the most visible, and certainly most publicised, example of the works orchestrating communal leisure events were its annual gala and sports days. Intended as a genuine extravaganza of entertainment and a highlight of the annual social calendar, these events were designed to appeal to the wider community as well as steelworkers. In this respect, the works gala days can be seen as a corporate reimagining of the miners' equivalent, where the values of working-class solidarity imbued in the latter were substituted with the celebration of the company and paternalistic notions of a works community. Even before the official unveiling of the Abbey Works, one annual works sports day hosted by the plant was able to draw a crowd of 10,000 (at a time when the number of workers at the Port Talbot plant numbered less than 5,000).[60] The event grew in size and popularity throughout the 1950s and 1960s and was subsequently rechristened 'family day' and 'gala day' reflecting the variety of entertainments available and its explicitly family and community orientation.[61]

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[58] See, Bleddyn Penny, '"Where Welfare Holds the Key to Prosperity"? Industrial Paternalism and Industrial Relations in the Ebbw Vale Steel Industry, 1944-1962', *North American Journal of Welsh Studies*, 8 (2013).
[59] Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-class Men in Britain*, 1850-1945 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 142.
[60] *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, July 1950.
[61] *The Dragon*, February 1966; *Steel News*, 19 August 1971.

Many gala day activities were aimed to directly appeal to those outside of Port Talbot's core workforce, with events being staged solely for women and children. The children's 'fancy-dress' parade, for example, or the pageantry of the crowning of the 'steel queen' were emblematic of corporate leisure targeting the wider community. Indeed, this holistic approach to employee leisure is evident in the running order for the plant's 1966 family day, which included events such as, 'horticultural, cookery, bowling, cricket and cycling competitions, as well as displays of weightlifting, gymnastics, fireworks and judo.'[62] The annual gala and sports days at Port Talbot mimicked similar events staged by other large firms throughout Britain. Simon Philips' study of the Boots drug company in Nottingham, for example, describes the firm's annual sports day as 'the most celebrated event of the Boots sporting calendar'. Moreover, Philips notes that company sports days were 'imbued with meaning beyond the playing of sport alone', arguing that they 'contributed to creating and maintaining a cohesive workplace culture at the company'.[63] These events, allowed the firm to project an image of itself as a benign and responsible exponent of ethical capitalism whilst also building a sense of allegiance and unity between industry, workers and the community. Such ambitions found their realisation in the image of the 'company man', whose work, social and leisure life was predominantly associated with the firm.

Public events, such as sports days, were intended to improve the company's standing in the wider community and foster good public relations. This much was acknowledged by the Sport and Social Club's general secretary when informing Fred Cartwright of the potential benefits of hosting a sports day for children: 'There is one subsidiary but none the less important factor,' he wrote, 'which is the publicity attached to such an event which I hear in the past has been widely reported in the national newspapers wherever a large number of children of employees of any firm have been given such entertainment.'[64] Public relations was clearly at the forefront of works managers' minds when such schemes were considered. At Port Talbot, however, encouraging family participation in the corporate leisure sphere was not restricted to a single day and was evidenced in a calendar of annual events, which

[62] *The Dragon*, October 1966.
[63] Simon Philips, 'Fellowship in Recreation, Fellowship in Ideals', p. 117.
[64] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, Cart/1/39/1, Letter from J.A.R. Freeland to Fred Cartwright, 8 April 1958.

also included trips to the seaside and Christmas pantomimes. Even the works clubhouse was intended as a leisure environment for the whole family, with the addition of a children's play area to the club's facilities in 1953.[65] Elsewhere, the works remained proactive in supporting civic sports and recreational societies with the similar intention of boosting its public persona. Amongst the donations sanctioned by the SCOW in the 1950s and 1960s were, a sum of up to £8000 for the erection of new floodlights at Aberavon RFC, £200 towards the completion of a clubhouse in Sandfields estate and an annual subscription of £200 to the Port Talbot YMCA.[66] This patronage allowed the town to improve and develop its existing leisure infrastructure whilst projecting a benevolent and munificent image of the SCOW as a corporate entity. Such efforts were increasingly important during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when the works' commitment to the welfare of the locality were being questioned with an increase in complaints over plant generated noise, dust and pollution.[67]

In this aspect of corporate-community relations company publications served a valuable function. Despite their primitive beginnings as basic newsletters advertising events and detailing technological developments in the workplace, they soon broadened their focus to include more items devoted to recreational pursuits and hobbies, often emulating the style and content of contemporary lifestyle magazines. With the replacement of the SCOW's first employee publication, the perfunctory *Steel Company of Wales Bulletin*, with *The Dragon* in 1955, the works newsletter was significantly enlarged and reimagined as a twelve-page inclusive newspaper, with designated sections for lifestyle, culture and sports alongside the regular stream of workplace news. The first edition of *The Dragon*, published in December 1955, stated that, 'the paper is being posted free of charge to the home and address of each one [employee] in the hope that it will be read and welcomed by the whole family.'[68] From the outset, the paper imagined its designated audience as comprising of steelworkers' families, as well as its wide demographic of employees, as was apparent in the paper's varied features on subjects as diverse as motoring and

[65] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/2-3, The Steel Company of Wales Limited Sanction/Expenditure to Date on Sports Clubs, c. 1962.
[66] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1, Box 14, Subscriptions and Donations, November, 1958, February 1959 & February, 1960.
[67] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 9 January 1959.
[68] *The Dragon*, December 1955.

women's fashion. Throughout the duration of its publication, until it was superseded by the BSC's *Steel News* in 1968, *The Dragon* maintained a specific women's section containing advice on female fashion, domesticity and make-up tips. The paper's reach, then, was considerable. Three years after its original publication, the paper could boast a circulation of 26,000 making it, in the words of the SCOW, 'probably one of the most widely-read Company publications in the United Kingdom.'[69] How many employees actually read the paper, however, is harder to quantify (although a later survey of *Steel News*, suggested that four out of five employees regularly read the company paper).[70]

As well as the regular coverage devoted to the recreational and sporting life of the steelworks, the works papers sought to further inculcate notions of a corporate community, imagined as a shared leisure culture that brought together the spheres of domesticity, recreation and work. Steven Crewe, for example, has argued that, 'management strategies were aided by house magazines in helping to create a corporate identity and organizational culture in the workplace fuelling a common bond and identification with the firm.'[71] The importance works managers attached to company publications within their overall employee relations strategies was apparent in the keen interest they displayed in them. Upon returning from an official visit to Germany in 1961, Fred Cartwright presented a selection of German steelworks magazines, intended as inspiration for his own company newspaper, to his colleagues at Port Talbot. In the attached note, he wrote to a company director,

> I enclose herewith one copy of the *Hoesch* magazine and one copy of the *August-Thyssen-Hutte* magazine. You will have already seen many copies of both, but I think their continued excellence emphasizes the value these magazines must be in their public relations. To my mind they are outstandingly better than any British equivalent.[72]

Through their seemingly benign coverage of contemporary leisure and lifestyle issues, the works magazine served as a powerful medium for the dissemination of corporate values.

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[69] *The Dragon*, December 1959.
[70] *Steel News*, 10 October 1974.
[71] Steven Crewe, 'What About the Workers?', p. 546.
[72] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/29/3, Letter from W. F. Cartwright to M. J. Layton (Director and Sales Controller), 9 May 1961.

Based on the favourable evidence presented in works magazines and other company publications, it is tempting to imagine corporate leisure initiatives as being highly popular amongst employees and successful instruments of managerial influence and persuasion. In their portrayal of works recreation, both Crewe and Philips assess employers' efforts in this field as being mostly effective. In his final analysis of welfare at Boots, for example, Philips rates the measures enacted by the firm as successful in inculcating a paternalistic corporate culture and encouraging widespread employee participation in corporate welfare: 'Given that participation was voluntary and that Boots were located in a city with a variety of channels for spending leisure,' Philips concludes that, 'participation from a fifth of the workforce was admirable.'[73] Like other historians, however, Philips fails to differentiate between membership and participation, a distinction which is rarely made in company publications but is, nonetheless, crucial in assessing the impact of corporate leisure on its intended audience.

The SCOW could boast that club membership stood at over 11,300 members in 1960, over two-thirds of the total workforce,[74] but private correspondence amongst the club's organisers reveals that the actual rate of participation in company leisure activities accounted for only a small proportion of this figure. In a letter to Fred Cartwright, written in 1958, the Sport and Social Club chairman, J. A. R. Freeland, estimated that out of the total club membership, only 400 could be considered 'regulars' with a possible further '600 people who use the Club from outlying areas with varying frequency'. In total Freeland estimated, 'that 1,000 members use the inside facilities and some 2,000 the outside facilities on a regular basis.'[75] Notwithstanding the third of the works employees who had not subscribed to the club at all, this figure still constitutes a small percentage of the club's overall membership. Indeed, in 1962, Freeland informed Cartwright that, 'it must be remembered that of the 10,800 ordinary members perhaps 9,000 make no use of the club's facilities whatsoever.'[76] Clearly, then, many steelworkers either joined the club out of a sense of employee obligation or because its membership fees were kept low enough that

[73] Simon Philips, 'Fellowship in Recreation, Fellowship in Ideals', p. 119.
[74] *The Dragon*, April 1960.
[75] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/1, Future of the Sports and Social Club and Submission to the M.D.C. (from J.A.R. Freeland to Fred Cartwright), 24 March 1958.
[76] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/2-3, Steel Division Sports and Social Club, 20 January 1962.

workers were prepared to join even if they were not regular participants. The club, however, did struggle with a transient membership and many members clearly exhibited little commitment to it and individual subscriptions lapsed with relative frequency. For this reason the club's organisers actively discouraged any proposed increases in subscription fees; as Cartwright explained to Julian Pode in 1961, 'I do not think increasing the subscription would necessarily offset the loss of members.'[77] Several of the club's sport sections also struggled to maintain a dedicated membership; the men's hockey section, for example, with only twelve members had barely enough players to field a team.[78] The glossy images of a thriving work based sporting life published in the company's newspaper could thus be highly misleading. How far corporate leisure provision was successful in promoting its desired public and workplace relations outcomes must, therefore, be measured against this overwhelmingly mixed rate of employee participation. Whilst some steelworkers devoted a considerable amount of their leisure time to works based pursuits, it is clear the majority spent it elsewhere.

Steelworkers' lack of engagement in corporate leisure activities is also apparent in the oral histories. Some workers clearly fully participated in works sport and social events and these evidently fulfilled an important function within their social and recreational lives. Ken Drew, for example, remembered the works club as being 'packed every night of the week. There was tennis tournaments there, bowls tournaments, conker tournaments and that place was packed with people'.[79] Other steelworkers, whilst not describing themselves as club regulars, still remembered making use of its facilities for departmental gatherings and sporting fixtures, which clearly constituted an important position within their social lives. Inter-departmental sports tournaments proved particularly popular, presumably because they acted as a natural extension of the inherent sociability of the immediate workplace. Rolfe Mitchell, for example, fondly remembered participating in these numerous sporting competitions: 'In those days,' he recalled, 'we entered the football, the cricket, the darts, the table tennis – everything we entered. We won it purely on the number of

[77] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/2-3, Letter from W.F. Cartwright to Julian Pode, 25 April 1961.
[78] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/1, Future of the Sports and Social Club and Submission to the M.D.C. (from J.A.R. Freeland to Fred Cartwright), 24 March 1958.
[79] Interview with Ken Drew, 3 December 2013.

people that were entering – it was that sort of department. Everybody would enter into the spirit of it...'.[80]

Participation in works based leisure activities, however, was often sporadic and in some cases entirely absent amongst employees. The extent to which employees engaged with corporate leisure was often determined by the temperament of the individual or the section of the plant he or she worked in. In the Cold Mill, crane driver Joe Stanton remembered, 'they did have inter-departmental [tournaments] but the Cold Mill never bothered entering, never had a team.'[81] Even fewer steelworkers recorded frequently attending the clubhouse as a venue for regular socialising and this number appeared to dwindle across the period. Fitter Terry James often socialised with work colleagues in Port Talbot but this seldom took place at the works club. 'I didn't use their facilities all that much,' he recalled, 'occasionally for a special occasion but not a lot.'[82] Even John Pugh, who remembered the club 'was quite busy in them days', conceded its popularity waned over time: 'it's not so busy now, which is a bit of a shame.'[83] Employee participation in works sports and social events, therefore, was not predetermined and was conditional upon a variety of factors, both personal and work related.

The limited success of certain corporate welfare initiatives has been attributed, by some historians, to an inherent distrust of such schemes by workers. In this politicised analysis of workers' recreation, corporate welfare is seen as a means of social control and is thus met with hostility and disdain by its intended users. Noel Whiteside, for example, has argued that, 'organised labour had traditionally viewed with some suspicion those private systems, sponsored by some employers, which aimed to increase workers' loyalty to the firm.'[84] Brad Beavan depicts a similar image of worker antipathy towards corporate welfare, arguing that, 'the tight control that management attempted to exert on the company's provision of workers' leisure was largely met with indifference from the shop floor and in some cases outright hostility.'[85] There is little evidence to suggest, however, that these issues figured

[80] Interview with Rolfe Mitchell, 14 October 2013.
[81] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[82] Interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.
[83] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[84] Noel Whiteside, 'Social Welfare and Industrial Relations, 1919-39', in, Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1914-1939* (London: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1987), p. 212.
[85] Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-class Men*, p. 144.

prominently in Port Talbot steelworkers' understanding of corporate welfare or their decision to participate in company initiatives. Overwhelmingly, questions regarding who provided and controlled the provision of welfare were less significant than the convenience and the quality of the facilities on offer. Beavan goes on to argue that the only means of sustaining corporate welfare schemes was for firms to relinquish control to the workers: 'Unless they had some autonomy over the direction and nature of company-sponsored leisure schemes,' he maintained, 'the works' institutions had little chance of survival.'[86] From its inception, Port Talbot's Sport and Social Club had made some concessions to democratic accountability, through the election of workers' representatives to its committee, but, for most steelworkers, issues of power and control did not figure prominently in their conception of leisure. The presence of workers' representatives did much to bolster the firm's projected image of corporate welfare as a symbol of industrial cooperation but there were no recorded calls for greater employee control over the scheme during the period.

The company was also the Sport and Social Club's most generous benefactor and the club's very survival, therefore, was largely dependent on the firm's continued involvement in its affairs. Throughout the period, the club was seldom financially self-supporting and its subscription fees and bar takings rarely covered its expenses. In 1961, for example, the club received a grant of £4000 from the company simply to cover its annual deficit.[87] A summary of the club's financial position from 1953-56 reveals a similar trend with its average annual loss amounting to over £1000 during this time.[88] Detailed financial reports for the club's operations are not available from the 1970s onwards but an impressionistic survey of its fortunes from company publications and oral testimonies suggests that declining employee participation in corporate leisure during this time was commensurate with decreasing company investment in its provision. As the global market for steel deteriorated during this decade, reducing spending on employee leisure was an easy cost saving measure for the BSC. Corporate leisure, arguably, also came to assume less importance within firm's overall recruitment and industrial relations strategies. With national unemployment rising, firms, such as the BSC, had less impetus to try and

[86] *Ibid.*
[87] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/2-3, Steel Division Sports and Social Club, 20 January 1962.
[88] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Subject Files, 378/8 Box 9, Memo from D.J. Young to J.A.R. Freeland (Chief Assistant to Personnel Superintendent), 9 June 1958.

proactively attract workers to their firms with extravagant welfare schemes. The club's declining membership during this time, however, further supports the assertion that its limited earlier successes were largely dependent on the company's willingness to invest in new facilities. Without the extensive programme of investment in recreational facilities undertaken by the company during the 1950s and 60s it is unlikely that the club would have been able to compete with the multiplying variety of recreational opportunities available outside the workplace. Whilst some historians have found it tempting to interpret faltering employee welfare schemes as a politicised rejection of social control by class conscious workers,[89] the real explanation lies elsewhere.

A more convincing interpretation of employee attitudes to industrial paternalism is the increased choice of recreational pursuits afforded to workers by the general rise in their disposable income and improved living standards during the 1950s and 1960s. Crewe has argued that, after the Second World War, 'growing leisure opportunities outside the factory gates – many workers could now afford their own cars and chose to spend their spare-time on family visits or days out – constituted a challenge to organised workplace-based recreation.'[90] The proprietors of the Port Talbot works exhibited a consistent awareness that their own leisure schemes existed in a wider recreational market. Correspondence between the club's chairman and Cartwright, for example, demonstrates a patent understanding of the necessity to provide leisure facilities of a standard high enough to entice employees away from the ample alternatives outside work. Writing to Cartwright in 1958, Freeland, the chairman, advised the company against making grants to other sporting or leisure societies unless they were matched by an equivalent contribution to the works club. To not do so, he argued, 'would have a most adverse effect on the existing good morale at present in evidence.'[91] Cartwright himself was often highly critical of the standard of the corporation's welfare facilities and in 1961 beseeched Julian Pode to sanction a £150,000 redevelopment of the club to do away with the existing 'ugly' buildings and 'worn out and filthy dirty' huts.[92] Such attention to

[89] See, for example, Noel Whiteside, 'Social Welfare and Industrial Relations, 1919-39'.
[90] Steven Crew, 'What About the Workers?', p. 562.
[91] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/1, Future of the Sports and Social Club and Submission to the M.D.C. (from J.A.R. Freeland to Fred Cartwright), 24 March 1958.
[92] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/2-3, Letter from W.F. Cartwright to Julian Pode, 25 April 1961.

aesthetic details reveals something of the competitive leisure market the works' proprietors were operating in. It is a simple causation, however, to suggest that declining participation in works based leisure schemes was entirely predicated on an increase in consumer choice. When deciding how to spend their non-work hours, steelworkers were clearly presented with a variety of choices but so, too, had their predecessors.

For steelworkers, the decision whether to take part in company recreation schemes was primarily a pragmatic or a personal, rather than an ideological, one. Consistently the facilities' provider mattered less than their convenience and suitability to the individual's pattern of out-of-work life. The most common reason given for not regularly visiting the Sports and Social Club, for example, was its location. Terry James described the works club as being 'out of the way'. 'Now the steel company facilities were at Abbey end,' he went on, 'and the town was about… you're talking about a mile, two miles perhaps distance. It's better going to town than going all the way out there.'[93] Being located away from the town centre and poorly served by public transport, for many of the plant's employees the works club was only accessible by car, which, as well as limiting the attendance of non-motorists, also put limits on alcohol consumption. Joe Stanton remembered, 'if I was going to any social event you wouldn't want to take the car. Even in them days when they used to say you could drink three pints without worrying about it.'[94] Despite rarely attending the works club, Stanton recognised its facilities were superior to many of the local alternatives but deliberations over quality existed alongside considerations of expedience and practicality, with the latter often proving most influential.

Geographic considerations were inherent in how and where all workers chose to spend their leisure time. As Brian Jackson explained in his sociological survey of Huddersfield in the 1960s,

> A few miles is a big and costly difference to a working man… And clubs are anyway, not places to make a "trip" to – like a pantomime. You casually drop into the pub on your way home from work or back from the shops or stroll

[93] Interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.
[94] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.

> there with the dog on an evening. By their nature, they have, for most working people, to be a few minutes away only.[95]

The club's proprietors were equally aware of these considerations and the disadvantages their location posed to them. For the club's general secretary, the clubhouse's position in relation to where most of the works' employees lived presented the greatest barrier to promoting further participation: 'Probably the most important difficulty is that of geography,' he informed Fred Cartwright, 'The Clubhouse is situated at the extreme end of a long narrow built-up area, beyond which there are no inhabited areas for eight or nine miles. I estimate that only about 3,000 of the Club's 10,000 members live within a 2 ½ mile radius, i.e. up to the Avon River and I consider this is the maximum radius that a man will come for a purely social evening.'[96] For many steelworkers, then, the club simply did not fit into their pattern of out-of-work life.

Given the prevalence of more convenient venues for leisure and sociability in Port Talbot, it is understandable why many workers shunned the works' own facilities. To interpret this as an ideological rejection of corporate interference in workers' leisure, however, is to misunderstand the way in which steelworkers understood their non-work time. If the company's own motivations in this field were implicitly political, steelworkers' assessments of how they utilised their leisure were primarily practical and personal. Stedman Jones has argued that, 'the primary point of a holiday is not political: it is to enjoy yourself, for tomorrow you must work. To write into recreation a symbolic form of class consciousness – leads precisely to the inrush of theories of incorporation to explain why workers have appeared to accept the capitalization of leisure with apparent passivity.'[97] Just as the primary purpose of a holiday was not political, neither was having a drink with friends, playing darts or most other leisure activities steelworkers regularly involved themselves in. Where leisure time was spent and who with was, for most, not a political choice. Like their attitude to the workplace itself, pragmatic considerations exercised a powerful influence in where and how steelworkers spent their out-of-work hours. The welfare provision maintained by the works' proprietors may have succeeded in fostering a

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[95] Brian Jackson, *Working Class Community: Some General Notions in Northern England* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1968), p. 66.
[96] RBA, Fred Cartwright Papers, CART/1/39/2-3, Letter from C. Wordsworth to Mr. W.F. Cartwright, 21 April 1961.
[97] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, p. 89.

more benign corporate image but most employees remained impervious to its allure. This they did not so much by resisting the power struggles inherent in the corporate leisure sphere but by disengaging with them all together.

Economies of Leisure: Affluence and Beyond

Despite the mixed results of the Port Talbot works' own recreation initiatives, conditions emanating from the workplace were a crucial determinate in informing the quality and character of steelworkers' leisure. Individual use of leisure remained inherently constrained by one's economic means and, as such, the wage packet represented, arguably, the most significant link between work and recreation. Prior to the Second World War, many historians cited economic circumstances as a salient causal factor in the development of an indigenous working-class leisure culture. For Borsay, it was the shared economic situation and poverty of Britain's workers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that did 'much to account for what many historians see as a central feature of popular/working-class leisure: its articulation and reinforcement of neighbourhood and community ties'.[98] When, after the Second World War, academics and social inquirers sought to explain the perceived demise of this working-class leisure culture they similarly did so in primarily economic terms, with affluence now usurping poverty as the main causation.

Throughout this period, then, the wage-packet has consistently been perceived as a principal indicator of how workers utilised their out-of-work hours and the kind of leisure culture they created. During the 1950s and 1960s, the economic position of Port Talbot's steelworkers improved significantly with the condition of full employment facilitating a substantial increase in wages across the period. Wage differentials within the workforce remained considerable but the overall trend was undoubtedly up. According to E. Owen Smith, 'the 1950s… gave rise to buoyant market conditions in which SCW and other companies conceded large wage claims,' making Port Talbot's steelworkers amongst the best paid in the

[98] Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure*, p. 97.

industry and amongst Britain's manual working-class more generally.[99] In 1954, average earnings in the SCOW's 'Steel Division' (Port Talbot) were £13 6s 11d compared to £11 4s 1d at its Newport works.[100] In the context of a period of national wage inflation, the average wage differential between Port Talbot's steelworkers and those of British manual workers in general was greater still, with the average manual weekly wage in 1954 standing at only £9 17s 8d.[101] During the period 1948-59, Cooke alleged that, 'the differential between average earnings in steel production and those in all other industries increased so that even during the 1960s… there was parity between unskilled process workers in steel and skilled workers in other industries.'[102] Up until the 1970s, then, it could be confidently claimed that most of Port Talbot's steelworkers had, financially at least, 'never had it so good.'

The success of Port Talbot's steel industry in the 1950s and 1960s and the concomitant rising living standards of its workers offers a necessary corrective to the popular pessimistic interpretation of British heavy industry (and the Welsh experience more generally) since the Second World War. In summing up the fortunes of the Welsh economy in the twentieth century, Dai Smith largely ignored the economic growth of the early post-war years. Instead, he contrasted, 'the non-stop roller-coaster of wonder that was South Wales down to the 1920s with the subsequent long-fall into economic disaster and then national subsidy that has been our lot for most of this century.'[103] A narrative of decline and contraction, which came to prominence in the 1970s, has thus dominated much of the discourse on the traditional industries and industrial regions. This account remains plainly evident in much of the academic writing on steel communities, with the themes of industrial rundown and societal decay elevated to the fore. In their sociological study of a south Wales steeltown, for example, Walkerdine and Jimenez summarised its history as being defined by 'chronic instability and insecurity'. [104] 'Steeltown', they went on,

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[99] E. Owen Smith, *Productivity Bargaining: A Case Study in the Steel Industry* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1971), p. 24.
[100] SRC, Steel Company of Wales Board Reports, 378/1 Box 12, Personnel Employed and Average Earnings for Week Ended 17 July, 1954.
[101] Department of Employment and Productivity, *British Labour Statistics: Historical Abstract*, 1886-1968 (London: H.M.S.O., 1971).
[102] Philip Cooke, 'Inter-regional Class Relations and the Redevelopment Process', *Papers in Planning Research* (Cardiff: Department of Town Planning, UWIST, 1981), p. 34.
[103] Dai Smith, *Wales: A Question for History* (Bridgend: Seren, 1999), p. 33.
[104] Valerie Walkerdine & Luis Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community After De-industrialization*, p. 7.

'saw a huge influx of people, some relative wealth but also, terrible poverty, pain, hurt and crises of various kinds.'[105] This overwhelmingly negative synopsis of life in a steeltown bears little correlation with the memories of those working and living in these communities during the 1950s and 1960s. Former SCOW employee, Doug Hockin, for example, remembered that during these decades, 'the money started to come into Port Talbot with the Steel Company of Wales and people took advantage of it then. Whereas when we were children there was one car in Margam and that was it, now everybody had a car each or televisions and radios even!'.[106]

Steelworkers may have been inclined to romanticise the affluence of the post-war period in contrast with the prolonged financial recession still greatly in evidence at the time of interviewing but improvements in the national economy and living standards were widely remarked on by contemporaries. 'Port Talbot, always considered to be a busy place, apart from the depression days,' remarked a reporter for *Y Cymro* in 1951, 'became a real boom town. To shop keepers, café proprietors, barbers, to all business men in the town, the erection of the huge steel city on the stretch of sand dunes between the town and sea spelt prosperity.'[107] Some contemporaries were inclined to temper this optimism with a note of caution, revealing a latent anxiety that the prosperity might be ephemeral, but few in Port Talbot denied the improvements. Looking back on the previous decade, the local newspaper concurred in 1960 that the town had, 'stepped over the threshold of prosperity into a new and exciting future in which every resident can play his or her part.'[108] The security and prosperity enjoyed by post-war steelworkers may have only been relative to the material hardships endured by their parents but it, nonetheless, effected a real change in the quality of their out-of-work lives, both at home and in the community.

The condition of affluence not only affected steelworkers' standard of living but also the wider leisure culture they inhabited. During the 1950s and 1960s this was abundantly evident in Port Talbot itself and was reflected in its burgeoning local leisure infrastructure, sustained by the wages of steelworks employees. 'People won't have the old stuff anymore. They want the best, 'was how one Port Talbot club

[105] *Ibid.*, p. 164.
[106] Interview with Doug Hockin, 11 October 2013.
[107] *Y Cymro*, 20 July 1951.
[108] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 1 January 1960

chairman described the changing expectations of his patrons.[109] Affluence was widely considered by post-war social observers to be remaking workers' use and understanding of leisure but in Port Talbot these issues were also inextricably linked with the expansion of local industry. Whilst much historical attention has been concentrated on the role of workers' collective agency and mutual institutions in the construction and improvement of local leisure cultures, much of the contemporary comment on affluence and leisure in post-war Port Talbot focused on the Abbey Works. The *Financial Times* in 1964, for example, described the steelworks as, 'acting indirectly as Lady Bountiful' to the township.[110] Meanwhile, the official Port Talbot Guide for 1951 observed that, 'current industrial development brings joy, life and hope to the area and presents the town's inhabitants with opportunities for un-precedented development and prosperity in every other field of social and communal life and endeavour.'[111]

The benefits emanating from the Abbey Works, it was reiterated, not only extended to those working at the plant but to the town as a whole. This much was apparent in the increasing number and variety of activities and venues to spend one's free time. By 1964, eleven betting shops, two night clubs and a casino had opened in the town since the Second World War.[112] The opening of the Afan Lido in 1965, a giant sport and recreation complex, was the most significant municipal contribution to leisure provision in the town's history and, with its Olympic sized swimming pool, was one of the most lauded projects of its kind in Wales. As local author Lynne Rees observed, the Lido was 'a landmark building in Wales' and 'a symbol of prosperity in the town'.[113] Historian Peter Stead similarly remarked that, 'The Afan Lido was the first modern building of its type in Wales - it represented the beginning of a new age and was seen very much as a turning point. In those days,' he went on, 'Port Talbot was a prosperous town – the steelworkers were very highly paid and the lido was a symbol of that new industrial prosperity.'[114] Despite being conceived and

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[109] Quoted in, Colin MacGlashan, 'A Minority Looking for a Miracle', *The Observer: Wales Today*, 30 October 1966, pp. 15-16.
[110] *Financial Times*, 10 January 1964.
[111] Port Talbot Borough Council, *Port Talbot (Glamorgan): The Official Guide*, 1951 (Port Talbot: s/l, 1951), p. 8.
[112] *The Financial Times*, 10 January 1964.
[113] Lynne Rees, *Real Port Talbot* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013), p. 119.
[114] Peter Stead, quoted in, BBC News, *Afan Lido History*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_west/8418548.stm> [Accessed: 25/07/2015].

implemented by the local authority, the steel industry received much of the credit for enabling the programme of civic redevelopment which resulted in the Lido's creation. Port Talbot historian Sally Jones, noted that, 'the works produced such a bountiful harvest of rates and other income for the borough of Port Talbot that it was able to plan developments liked the Afan Lido and Sports Centre Complex (1965) and the new Aberafan Centre (1976).'[115] A popular image thus emerged in which the wealth emanating from the Abbey Works percolated into the pockets of the town's steelworkers and the tax coffers of the local authority, facilitating a boom in local leisure provision.

Perhaps the most tangible expression of the intrinsic relationship between work, economy and leisure, however, was the town's flourishing club culture. Indeed, the 1960s was a boom period for Welsh clubs and, as Martin Johnes notes, many took the opportunity to 'undergo renovations and expansions to meet increased demand'.[116] The increased demand from Port Talbot's steelworkers meant the town sustained twenty-three clubs by the 1960s, most of which had opened since the Second World War. At the largest club, the Bay View Social Club in Sandfields, bar taking reached new highs in that decade, totalling over £100,000 in 1963 alone. The *Western Mail* observed that, in the period since the war, the number of clubs in Port Talbot 'has increased considerably'. 'Balance sheets issued by the clubs in recent weeks show that club life in Port Talbot is booming,' the article went on and left readers in little doubt that the success of local club life was mainly attributable to the purchase power of the town's steelworkers.[117] The consequences of affluence were written in the financial accounts of the locality's clubs but, John Blewitt has argued, it was also discernible in their culture. From his first hand observations of the town in the early 1980s, Blewitt noticed that many local clubs had become more 'entertainment orientated', diluting some of their traditional cooperative principles in order to accommodate more bingo and dances.[118] With more money to spend and greater financial security, the workingmen's clubs traditional services of mutual assistance and insurance arguably mattered less to steelworkers than having a good

[115] Sally Jones, *The History of Port Talbot with Photographs* (Port Talbot: Goldleaf Publishing, 1991), p. 84.
[116] Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939*, p. 100.
[117] *Western Mail*, 4 March 1965.
[118] John Blewitt, 'A Sociological Analysis of Labourism (with Specific Reference to Port Talbot)' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1983), p. 521.

time. For local sports clubs, whose survival depended on the economic contributions and subscriptions of their members, the affluence emanating from the steelworks also contributed to a sense of fresh optimism and renewed vitality. It is no coincidence that Aberavon RFC entered 'the most successful period in its existence' at the same time the steelworks reached its own commercial peak.[119] It appeared to many observers that the improved condition and pay of work in the steelworks had not only broadened the possibilities of individual leisure time but fundamentally bettered the character and quality of the recreational culture of Port Talbot society.

For contemporary academics and social enquirers, collective improvements in the material condition of working-class life and its diversifying leisure culture were symptomatic of broader trends in working-class communities, which coalesced around the discourse on affluence and the 'affluent society'. The phrase, 'affluent society' entered popular discourse in the 1950s and originated in a number of contemporary sociological studies which sought to assess the effects of the working-class' improved material circumstances on their political affiliations, attitude to work, out-of-work behaviour and class-status.[120] Some alleged that the collective effect of these changes was the 'embourgeoisement' of the working-class and the dissolution of its traditionally collective culture. That there was a profound change taking place in the nature of working-class life seemed beyond dispute.[121] Writing at the beginning of the 1960s, Richard Hoggart observed, 'I should guess that it is a long time since British people as a whole, and working-class people in particular, felt so sharply the sense of change in their lives.'[122] The impact of this transformation, however, was widely disputed. The chorus of opinion on the political left was inclined to see working-class affluence as much as a problem as a positive development. Contemporary political anxieties emanating from the declining electoral fortunes of the Labour Party provoked fears of working-class embourgeoisement and a widespread adoption of middle-class values amongst Labour's core voters. If the shared condition of poverty and manual labour had been the socio-economic basis underpinning working-class culture, then the condition of affluence threatened to undermine that culture entirely. Richard Hoggart, often cited

[119] David Smith & Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise*, p. 27.
[120] See, John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958).
[121] John Goldthorpe *et al The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure.* p. 22.
[122] Richard Hoggart, 'Changes in Working-class Life', in Michael A. Smith, Stanley Parker & Cyril S. Smith (eds.), *Leisure and Society in Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 28.

as one of the most vocal advocates of the embourgeoisement thesis, cautioned against the interpretation that 'the working-classes are becoming more middle-class', but nonetheless forewarned of a dystopian future where the working-class had metamorphosed into a 'conformist classless mass'.[123]

Whilst shared economic circumstances and the experience of traditional industry were presented as the main conditions sustaining working-class culture, it was in the sphere of leisure and the community, many contemporary academics argued, that this culture was best realised. In expressing the quintessential attributes of traditional working-class life, Goldthorpe *et al.* looked to the community and the pattern of sociability:

> The tightly knit network of kinship and the close ties of familiarity between neighbours are the products of successive generations of families living out their lives alongside each other. The strong sense of communal solidarity and the various forms of mutual help and collective action reflect the absence of any wide economic, cultural or status differences.[124]

This image of a largely cooperative and communal society came to dominate popular conceptions of the 'traditional' working-class culture, which post-war sociologists claimed was under threat. As Selina Todd has argued, 'These researchers' findings have been influential – perhaps too influential – in creating an image of what "traditional" working-class life was like.'[125] When Eric Hobsbawm sought to identify a 'common style' of 'British proletarian life' in the nineteenth century, he similarly located it in a communal leisure culture. For Hobsbawm it was these 'non-political aspects… the rise of football as a mass proletarian sport, of Blackpool as we still know it today, of the fish and chip shop' that underpinned the culture of Britain's working-class.[126] The effects of affluence on this overtly communal and collective depiction of non-work time was seen to be increased 'privatism', a retreat towards more home centred entertainments and a fragmentation in the way in which workers used their non-work time.

Intruding middle-class interest in the leisure habits of workers, however, was not a uniquely post-war phenomena; Brad Beaven, for example, notes that during the

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[123] *Ibid.* pp. 36-39.
[124] John Goldthorpe *et al.*, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, p. 86.
[125] Selina Todd, *The People*, p. 176.
[126] Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today*, 22 (September, 1978), p. 232.

1930s, 'the intelligentsia on the left consistently worried about the "use of leisure" or the "leisure problem".'[127] The consequent decline of the associational aspects of workers' leisure, those pursuits that had been based around the local friendly society or trade union, were, nonetheless, seen as symptomatic of a declining way of working-class life. Even the primacy of the pub as the central institution of workers' sociability was deemed to be under threat. The social observer, Ferdynand Zweig, lamented in the 1950s that 'the pub life of Britain is on the decline'. For Zweig, 'the development of bus routes and other means of communication, the popularity of cinemas, and last but not least the development of working men's clubs,' were to blame. In his final assessment, he considered that Britain's pubs 'cannot ignore the profound changes taking place in the life of the common man'.[128] Amongst the left-wing intelligentsia, however, declining pub attendance was less of a source of anxiety than what was perceived to be a fundamental change in workers' conception of leisure. Individual pleasure and hedonism, rather than self-help and autodidactism, were now, it was alleged, the primary goals of workers' recreational lives. 'The left,' as Robert Taylor explained, 'deplored what it saw as a corresponding decline in attendance at Workers' Educational Association classes, and they pointed to an alleged fall in the working-class use of public libraries and a drop in the number of brass and choral societies in industrial towns.'[129] The most tangible evidence of the decline in working-class culture, it was argued, was the intellectual and political poverty of its recreational life.

In Wales, few groups of workers were as readily associated with the affluent worker phenomena – and were subject to such public excoriation for their allegedly lavish lifestyles – as Port Talbot's steelworkers. It was an image encapsulated in the plant's epithet, 'treasure island', which conjured images of a modern day gold rush, with avaricious speculators rushing to the plant in search of financial reward. The popular association between the town's steelworks and the 'big money' of its employees endured into the 1970s, with one steelworker remembering the local joke that the acronym, BSC, stood for 'Butlin's Summer Camp', rather than British Steel Corporation. The suggestion was that Port Talbot's steelworkers were under-worked

[127] Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-class Men*, p. 132.
[128] Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1952), p. 138.
[129] Robert Taylor, 'The Rise and Disintegration of the Working-classes' in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000* (London: Blackwell, 2007), p. 377.

and overpaid and only interested in having a good time.[130] When the BBC came to make its landmark 2012 history documentary series, *The Story of Wales*, it was Sandfields estate, the home of many Port Talbot steelworkers, which was used to illustrate the Welsh experience of the affluent society.[131] In contemporary portrayals, however, the leisure habits of Port Talbot's steelworkers were depicted in a largely pejorative and supercilious manner and were most commonly associated with profligacy, hedonism and shallow materialism. Allusions to the town's new casino in the press seemed to represent the recklessness with which steelworkers spent their wages and the image of the 'bricklayer in a sports car' who 'drives past his bank manager in a swirl of dust', was a common motif.[132] Even whilst the works was in the midst of a prolonged industrial dispute, *The Times* was moved to comment that, 'the steel company has brought unusual prosperity to the town, and this is displayed in the cars which bring workers to sign on at the employment exchange and in the smartness of their suits.'[133] The media's fixation with the relatively affluent lifestyles of Port Talbot's steelworkers seemed to suggest that their leisure culture was somehow incongruous with their class.

More than this, in the aspersions of media observers, the leisure habits of Port Talbot's steelworkers were not only improperly decadent but also a betrayal of a more honourable working-class value system, with its emphasis on moral respectability and intellectual improvement. The poet John Tripp, for example, described Port Talbot in 1970 as a, 'restless wilderness. The basis of social life in this industrial insult are the packed working men's clubs, offering solidarity, mutual support for eternal grievances, mindless bingo and endless supplies of alcohol. In a way it is the end of the world, the place to which the greed, cynicism and insensitivity of our century has brought us.'[134] If the miners' library summed up all that was virtuous about working-class culture – its mutuality, morality and respect for learning – then it arguably found its antithesis in the image of the working men's club, with its petty gambling, drinking and anti-intellectualism. Steelworkers' exaggerated leisure habits became a totem for a host of contemporary political and social grievances and the antithetical emblem for a romanticised pre-war working-

[130] Interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.
[131] 'Wales and Britain', *The Story of Wales*, BBC One, 26 March 2012.
[132] *Western Mail*, 20 October 1961.
[133] *The Times*, 18 October 1961.
[134] John Tripp, 'The Monster in Glamorgan', *Planet*, 1 (August/September, 1970), p. 38.

class nostalgia. When the condition of affluence appeared to stall from the 1970s onwards, certain sections of the press took equal relish in documenting Port Talbot's fall from grace. One *Western Mail* columnist cynically disparaged the town, writing, 'some have been moved to eulogise about Port Talbot. It has been called the Swinging City, the Blackpool of Wales, a busy booming town, even the new Costa Brava. I can only assume that intensity of the purple prose increases in direct relation to awfulness, for it is few of these things.'[135] As an archetypal image of the traditional industrial working-class, the steelworker proved a ready target for media condemnation and projected political anxieties in a period of rapid economic and societal change.

In both its academic and popular guise, however, debates surrounding working-class affluence typically sought to portray a unified account of workers' leisure that stressed change over continuity and sameness over diversity. The term 'affluence' itself has also been recognised by several historians as problematic, not least in its tendency to obfuscate the significant discrepancies in pay evidenced amongst workers and the uneven progress of improving living standards. As outlined in a previous chapter, all steelworkers may have benefited from rising wages but these benefits were not felt equally and were affected by numerous factors relating to rank, occupation and gender. The uneven progress of affluence often revealed social divisions amongst workers themselves and these were manifest in their use of non-work time. How often workers could indulge in recreational pursuits and their access to leisure goods remained intrinsically related to their pay packet and the hierarchy of the workplace was, therefore, materially reflected in the leisure sphere. Even the most banal of recreational activities, such as going to the pub, could act as a reminder of the incremental inequalities of wealth amongst steelworkers. 'Drinking,' as McIvor argues, was not only integral to male sociability but, 'also reflected a man's earning capacity, with "big drinkers" equated with hard workers.'[136] As a works fitter, Terry James described his own drinking habits as moderate compared to some of his colleagues and his visits to the pub were limited to weekends. Whilst recognising that some workers drank excessively, he remembered, 'I never did

[135] *Western Mail*, 17 May 1974.
[136] Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain Since 1945* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 90.

[laughs]. I couldn't afford to do it anyway [laughs].'[137] Access to status leisure goods, such as a car, could also constitute material rifts within the workforce. Crane driver, Joe Stanton, purchased his first car in 1962 but remembered this was atypical amongst his colleagues: 'I was the first working man that I knew to have a car,' he remembered.[138] The image of bricklayers driving Jaguars popularised in the press, therefore, obscured a far more socially stratified pattern of leisure which left some workers economically excluded from the burgeoning possibilities for recreation available during the post-war period. 'Leisure pursuits,' as Borsay argues, 'may be shared, but invariably they were shared in very different ways that reflected inequalities in wealth, power and status.'[139] These inequalities characterised the pattern of out-of-work life amongst steelworkers and were also reflected in their communities.

The affluent worker thesis was also often ignorant of the ways in which the use of leisure was heavily informed by factors other than individual economic status, such as age and familial situation. In his assessment of the leisure habits of British car workers, Paul Thompson saliently cites age as, perhaps, the most important determinate of how non-work time was spent.[140] Younger steelworkers, many of whom still lived with their parents, often found themselves with more disposable income for recreational pursuits than their older counterparts. As Johnes notes, 'living at home with rising wages and a relatively healthy job market meant that the young were well placed and able to enjoy their youth,' and many steelworkers certainly did so.[141] Recognising the increased purchase power of young workers, the emergence of a discernible youth culture during the 1950s and 1960s cultivated a new market for leisure, creating new patterns of out-of-work recreation constructed around age. Keith Foley's recollections of riding motorbikes and drinking in local clubs were typical of how many young steelworkers spent their non-work time: 'We used to go everywhere around south Wales on those bikes,' he remembered, 'we'd go drinking in the clubs in and around Port Talbot, Baglan… we used to have a

[137] Interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.
[138] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[139] Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure*, p. 105.
[140] Paul Thompson, 'Imagination and Passivity in Leisure: Coventry Car Works and Their Families from the 1920s to the 1970s', in David Thoms, Len Holden & Tim Claydon (eds.), *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20th Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p. 246.
[141] Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939*, p. 100.

bloody good time – I remember that!'.[142] That young people wanted to go out and have fun with their friends seems unlikely to have been a unique development of the post-war era or specific to Port Talbot's steelworkers.

Younger steelworkers use of leisure also remained largely unconstrained by the domestic and economic responsibilities of marriage and parenthood and were, therefore, more disposed towards public spheres of recreation, especially the town's pubs and workingmen's clubs. It is unsurprising, then, that steelworkers often conceived of their leisure lives as two distinct chronological periods. When asked how they spent their out-of-work hours, it was not uncommon for some to seek clarification as to whether this referred to their pre- or post-marriage lives. Terry James chronologically ordered his leisure life in this way and remembered, as a young man, 'going to the pubs and have a drink and socialise that way – invariably [laughs]. Later on,' he commented, 'when you get married you've got to [cut] back.'[143] Len Mathias similarly saw his leisure life as divided into two distinct periods, 'before marriage and after marriage.' 'Because once the babies come along,' he went on, 'that changes your life all together. When I was single we were always up the town in the pub, went from one pub to the other pub.'[144] Regardless of their economic means, then, the way in which steelworkers used their leisure time was likely to change in accordance with their age and their life situation.

By the 1970s, the concept of the affluent society was receding into nostalgia as economic growth stalled and the future of Britain's heavy industries seemed uncertain. The gradual erosion of the economic gains made by Port Talbot's steelworkers was once again evidenced in their leisure lives as their decreased purchase power imposed greater limits on their use of leisure and restricted the facilities available for them to enjoy it. During the 1970s and 1980s in particular, the contraction and decline of Port Talbot's leisure and welfare infrastructure closely followed the steelworks' own worsening economic position. As Lynn Rees notes, if the steel industry was the prime originator of the 'treasure island' myth, its 'decline in subsequent decades, and brutal redundancies in the 1980s gave rise to the equally

[142] Interview with Keith Foley, 23 October 2013.
[143] Interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.
[144] Interview with Len Mathias, 4 October 2013.

expressive, Giro City'.[145] After the watershed of 1980, where 6,833 jobs were lost in a single announcement, mass redundancy, short-time working and wage stagnation greatly curtailed the leisure possibilities available to steelworkers. The consequences of this were most acutely felt by those who had been made redundant, particularly the young who were less likely to benefit from the generous severance packages made available to older workers (or were likely to be excluded from the job market as school leavers).

In their sociological study of Port Talbot in the aftermath of 1980, C. C. Harries *et al.* observed that, 'the immediate response to a fall in household income is to cut back on the amount available for social spending, which will mean a curtailment of the man's social activity.'[146] Going to work itself was also an inherently social experience so many of those made redundant often found themselves excluded from kinship networks in both the community and the workplace. Ken Thomas voluntarily accepted redundancy after the 1980 steel strike but remembered, 'I lost the camaraderie, the people I worked with, talked with, drank with… I missed that, I couldn't see them, I couldn't arrange things. That hit me for a bit.'[147] Amongst the Port Talbot families surveyed, Harries *et al*. identified 'leisure, entertainment and holidays' as the lowest priority category amongst household expenditure and, therefore, usually the first to be sacrificed when confronted with a decline in wages or indefinite unemployment.[148] Going to the pub, watching sports matches and partaking in hobby societies were all dependent on steelworkers' financial means to do so and one of the most immediate consequences of redundancy or insecure working was its consequent negative effect on leisure time.

Port Talbot did not witness a return to inter-war levels of unemployment (the local jobless total peaked at seventeen per cent) but the restructuring of the local job market, with permanent jobs at the steelworks being replaced by lower paid and more insecure contract work, continued to curtail individual use of leisure and impact on the locality's existing leisure infrastructure.[149] The deteriorating aesthetic character of the local high street, with its dwindling number of shops and clubs, was

[145] Lynne Rees, *Real Port Talbot*, p. 174.
[146] C. C. Harries, *Redundancy and Recession in South Wales* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 148.
[147] Interview with Ken Thomas, 26 September 2013.
[148] C. C. Harries, *Redundancy and Recession*, p. 162.
[149] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed*, p. 98.

a stark visual representation of the atrophying leisure culture of the town as a whole. As Martin Johnes describes, after the closure or contraction of local industry, 'the town centres that were left behind were often tired and tatty, overloaded with charity shops and fast-food joints and with boarded up chapels and working men's clubs, to remind people of better times.'[150] In 1983 three supermarkets and a cinema closed in Port Talbot, followed by a nightclub and a hotel the following year.[151] Perhaps the most symbolic closure, however, was that of Bay View Social Club in the 1990s, which three decades previously had set new records for annual bar takings in Port Talbot.[152]

For social commentators, the problem of working-class leisure was no longer one of hedonism and materialism but boredom and degeneration. The interviewees questioned in Walkerdine and Jimenez's sociological study of post-industrial 'Steeltown', frequently described the place they lived in as 'boring, that there was absolutely nothing to do except go to the pub and get drunk and hang around, and that there were no decent shops and that there was an increasing drug problem'.[153] Being financially excluded from the remaining leisure institutions was also seen to contribute to an increase in the numbers of people looking to more illicit recreational pastimes, such as anti-social behaviour and substance abuse, as a way to counteract boredom and depression. From 1980 onwards, incidents of vandalism and petty crime were reported with increased frequency in the local press and many steelworkers despondently recalled the effects of poverty on the communities they inhabited. 'It [unemployment] creates the disease doesn't it?', Graham Rowland observed, 'unemployment, it creates the drug use because people don't have money to enjoy themselves and they're looking for other kicks.'[154] Often those worst affected were the young and school leavers, many of whom had never worked at the plant but their inability to obtain the kind of secure and well paid employment available to their parents was equally symptomatic of the works' decline.

Like affluence, however, financial insecurity and unemployment were able to determine the material means available for leisure activities and inform wider

[150] Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939*, p. 372.
[151] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed*, p. 40.
[152] Lynne Rees, *Real Port Talbot*, p. 118.
[153] Valerie Walkerdine and Luis Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community after De-industrialization*, pp. 163-164.
[154] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.

recreational infrastructures but they could not prescribe a single approach to its use. The image of drug abuse and social decay, associated with the 'Giro City' epithet, undoubtedly reflected a broader societal truth but the worsening local economic situation affected recreational life in a variety of, often unpredictable, ways. For some steelworkers, the experience of recession and redundancy facilitated a transition to a more home-orientated and family centred lifestyle, which was often welcomed. As Martin Johnes notes, although some workers struggled 'to adjust to their wives being the breadwinner', others 'found some fulfilment in spending more time with their spouse and sharing tasks together'.[155] One of the former steelworkers profiled in Harries *et al*.'s study of redundancy in Port Talbot noted that, although he spent less time socialising with male friends after losing his job at the steelworks, he had come 'increasingly to prefer a drive with his family, and perhaps with another married couple'. He concluded that the changes in the way he used his leisure time since redundancy were only 'in part because of a need to economize' and also reflected a genuine 'wish to spend more time with his wife and children'.[156]

Having being removed from the kinship of the workplace, some redundant steelworkers also looked increasingly to their hobbies and sporting interests to fulfil their need for sociability. Since redundancy, one former steelworker recalled devoting more time to his local pigeon racing club, which increasingly became the focus of his leisure and social life.[157] If steelworkers had less disposable income to devote to their hobbies after redundancy some at least found they had more time. Redundancy also did not necessarily entail the kind of post-industrial poverty that came to be associated with the image of 'Giro City'. Many steelworkers even welcomed redundancy, particularly if it came with the guarantee of a generous severance package and the promise of top up pay on future wages. Reflecting on the aftermath of the 1980 slimline agreement, Ken Thomas recalled, 'what they got out of it was a redundancy package and the package suited me. Of course, a lot of people it didn't suit but it suited me and it worked out alright. Although I didn't have a job at that time I didn't want a job. I was out and free and enough money to carry on.'[158] In such circumstances redundancy could be seen as opportunity to lead a more

[155] Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939*, p. 260.
[156] C. C. Harries, *Redundancy and Recession*, p. 151.
[157] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[158] Interview with Ken Thomas, 26 September 2013.

fulfilling and enjoyable leisure life and many steelworkers considered it a positive development in their lives. In the aftermath of a wave of plant redundancies in 1981, some Port Talbot travel agents even reported of 'queues forming… before premises open their doors', as former steelworkers lined up to purchase foreign holidays.[159] Despite the preeminent position of the local steel industry in determining the leisure culture of its immediate locality, individual use of non-work time remained a deeply plural and personal experience.

Public and Private

Although much of the contemporary sociology was concerned with the effects of economic change on workers' use of leisure, it also set out to question the way in which the idea of leisure itself was being reinterpreted. Central to this was a conception of leisure that was becoming more domestic orientated or 'privatised'. In the estimations of some contemporary social inquirers, privatism appeared an irrefutable and irreversible development in the social lives of Britain's working-class. For Goldthorpe *et al*., the increasingly home centred leisure lives of Luton's car workers was one of the most striking findings of their sociological inquiry: 'In the case of manual workers,' their study observed, 'a shift away from a community-orientated form of social life towards recognition of the conjugal family and its fortunes as concerns of overriding significance.'[160] Privatism, it was argued, was symptomatic of improvements in the living conditions of the working-class, which afforded them greater comfort in their home lives and a greater choice of home based entertainments; the television being chief amongst these. However, this trend was also attributed to changes in the ecology of the working-class and its urban environment. In particular, the new housing estates, which emerged throughout Britain during the 1950s and 1960s, were seen as contributing towards a more introverted pattern of communal existence that failed to replicate the mutualism and sociability of the older neighbourhoods. As will be seen, associational and social leisure activities were integral to how most steelworkers spent their non-work hours but the home occupied a position of unrivalled importance within their leisure lives.

[159] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 12 February 1981.
[160] John Goldthorpe *et al*., *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, p. 163.

It was in the home where the majority of steelworkers' time outside work was spent and was thus the place where the greatest share of their leisure lives were lived. As such, Hill notes, 'there is good reason for thinking that a great deal of leisure, if not sport, is best understood by considering the changing nature of the home and family.'[161] Attempts to understand the historical significance of the home to workers' leisure lives, however, pose numerous scholarly challenges, not least because the ordinariness of its function tends to belittle its salience. According to Lyn Abrams and Linda Fleming, the home 'symbolises and encompasses those activities which are deemed banal, monotonous, repetitive, even trivial, so much so that its intrinsic value as a measure of social life is regularly overlooked'.[162] For steelworkers themselves, the domestic sphere was thus simultaneously both immensely important and largely unremarkable.



New home on Sandfields estate, c. 1950.[163]

In contrast to the inherently public spheres of the workplace, the pub or the club, the home also constituted a largely private space within steelworkers' lives and this remained the case in their oral testimonies, where greater emphasis was

[161] Jeffrey Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 95.
[162] Lynn Abrams and Linda Fleming, 'From Scullery to Conservatory: Everyday Life in the Scottish Home', in Lynn Abrams and Callum G. Brown (eds.), *A History of Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 48.
[163] Courtesy of the Port Talbot Historical Society.

invariably placed on their public, rather than private, personas. This, however, should not diminish the historical significance of the private sphere in workers' leisure but it does raise issues as to its interpretation. For much of the post-war period, home-centred leisure amongst workers was treated by academics as a form of social malaise or seen as endemic of a disintegrating communal culture. Mark Clapson notes, that, 'during the post-war years, psychologists, sociologists, cultural critics, novelists, and not a few pop stars, continued to discern worrying symptoms of social isolation in suburbia.'[164] There is little evidence to suggest, however, that steelworkers articulated their own experiences of domesticity in these terms. For most, the home represented a welcomed retreat, rather than an enforced isolation, from the outside world and offered a space to pursue private hobbies and individual interests, as well as maintaining the bonds of family. Indeed, although the home is frequently labelled a 'private' sphere the importance of communal familial bonds should not be underestimated. As Johnes argues, 'it was in such relations that people found a happiness and emotional reward that could more than compensate for the stresses, disruptions and inequalities of modern life.'[165] Indeed, when asked where he spent the majority of time outside of work, one steelworker simply answered, 'well, we had family and children.'[166]

If privatisation was a characteristic feature of post-war working-class leisure in Britain, it must be acknowledged that this was as much due to the agency of workers themselves as much as any changes in their economic or environmental circumstances. Alongside the need for male sociability, Brian Jackson witnessed amongst working-class clubmen in 1960s Huddersfield, 'their obligations and indeed, yearnings, towards the world of women and children, the world of "home".'[167] For workers, then, the degree of relative isolation the home afforded could also act as a form of relief from the incessant social activity of the workplace. Taking evidence collated by Mass Observation reports on working-class attitudes towards the home during the Second World War, Fielding *et al.* summarised that the, 'home was not simply a place in which to live, it was also somewhere to retreat from

[164] Mark Clapson, 'Cities, Suburbs, Countryside', in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000* (London: Blackwell, 2007), p. 60.
[165] Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939*, p. 379.
[166] Interview with Paul Ace, 3 September 2013.
[167] Brian Jackson, *Working Class Community*, p. 62.

the outside world,' and this was certainly true for most steelworkers.[168] In this respect, male and female conceptions of the domestic sphere were likely to differ considerably. Whereas men were far more likely to view the home as a place of rest and a retreat from the world of work, these lines were far more blurred for many women, much of whose work was centred on the maintenance and running of the household.

The post-war period also saw the dissemination of more home based entertainments and gradual improvements in the standard of housing that made the domestic sphere a more appealing place to devote one's leisure time. The proliferation of televisions, for example, provided a natural focal point for domestic recreation amongst families. The *Port Talbot Guardian* reported in 1954 on the remarkable growth in television ownership amongst local residents, commenting that at, 'the moment there can be no denying that there has been a boom, too, in the sale of TV sets. So far this year 3,200 licenses have been taken out, as compared with 1,200 last year.'[169] The television was not the first home based entertainment which promoted a greater familial insularity – the wireless had performed a similar function during the inter-war period – but it did, nonetheless, provide greater variety for domestic leisure (at least, for those who could afford it).

More generally, improvements in post-war housing that were synonymous with the new estates, such as Sandfields, made the home a more comfortable place to spend non-work time. Johnes notes that with the distribution of domestic electricity, 'the length of people's leisure time was extended, even if just for activities like reading, and in some homes previously dark hallways and landings suddenly became places that could be lingered in rather than just passed through.'[170] For one former Port Talbot works employee, moving to a new house on the Sandfields estate as a child was a revelatory event and one which forever transformed his domestic experience: 'Well it had a toilet upstairs and a toilet outside as well,' he remembered, 'two toilets – fantastic! In my previous one [house] in Gladys Street it was an outside toilet, no light… I always remember it.' The move to Sandfields also brought his first experience of household electricity, a marked improvement from the home he left

[168] Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson & Nick Tiratsoo, *'England Arise!': The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 38.
[169] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 5 November 1954.
[170] Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939*, p. 73.

behind where gas lighting was restricted to only three rooms.[171] During his time as the minister responsible for housing, Aneurin Bevan's strict regulations regarding the size of post-war homes also ensured that most of the houses built on new estates were not only better equipped but considerably larger than older dwellings. It is unsurprising, then, that one historian has observed, 'the new estates had physical and social characteristics that made them desirable places to live… Modernity in all its forms was valued over the past and there was a widespread preference for new houses and modern design.'[172] Whilst much of the contemporary sociological debate was concerned with declining sociability, steelworkers typically attached greater significance to improvements in their domestic experience. These positive developments in the domestic environment were also documented in the contemporary press. The *Western Mail*, for example, flatteringly described Sandfields as, 'the miracle of the Sandfields Housing Estate at Port Talbot,' and commended it as having 'much to offer the 16,000 inhabitants who already call it home'.[173] Where workers had once been largely compelled to seek certain recreational pursuits in the public sphere, the improved quality of many homes now presented them with a welcomed alternative.

The domestic environment offered steelworkers opportunities for communal entertainment, such as television, family sociability and the pursuit of individual hobbies, but equally significant was its function as a place of rest. Workers engaged on shift work, in particular, frequently recalled arriving home from work exhausted and spent much of their leisure time recouping from their irregular work patterns. 'You're coming home from work exhausted,' remembered Ken Williams, 'perhaps at three-o-clock in the afternoon and wanting to go to bed for a few hours. It has a huge impact on your life shift working, it's horrible.'[174] The inevitability of shift work for many was a constant reminder of the way in which the parameters of leisure were delineated by the chronology of industrial production. Borsay argues that, 'work is our principal occupation and obligation since it is the means by which we live. The opportunity for leisure, therefore, is directly related to the volume of work that we

[171] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.
[172] Peter Malpass, *Housing and the Welfare State: The Development of Housing Policy in Britain* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 83.
[173] *Western Mail*, 2 September 1951
[174] Interview with Ken Williams, 25 November 2013.

have to do and the time that this takes.'[175] For steelworkers, the continuous nature of the production process and its dependence on a large army of shift workers gave their leisure time a distinct quality that was often at odds with that of their family and friends. The consequences of shift work, then, were not only felt on the chronology of leisure but also its quality. Ken Williams remembered, shift work 'dominates your family, because you're sleeping when everybody else is out and about and they've got to keep quiet'.[176] Working shifts also interfered with steelworkers' ability to maintain familial commitments and relationships. Speaking about her steelworker husband, Patricia Williams remembered, 'when my daughter was small she was in athletics, well he couldn't always go and support her. You couldn't always go to anything, you had to work out ahead what his shift would be.'[177]

In this way, the impact of shift work was felt by all members of the household. Graham Rowland's memories of growing up in a household with a father working shifts at the steelworks were typical: 'Well obviously you had to be very quiet when you come home from school because he was in bed,' he remembered, 'I think I didn't really see a lot of my father.'[178] When shift workers were not sleeping, many recalled their domestic leisure time as being dominated by waiting for the next shift to begin. Ken Williams vividly described the feeling of, 'waiting to go into work, because you didn't have a sense of not being in work, you were just waiting to go into work. So there wasn't free time between, you're just sitting there waiting...'.[179] In this way, the nature of work not only determined the time available for leisure but also affected its quality and the way in which individuals spent it. The irregular chronology of shift work thus had a clear impact on the character of steelworkers' domestic life as a whole. Whilst the domestic sphere may have acted as a source of solace and privacy from the rigours of production, this did not stop the condition of work structuring its experience.

After the Second World War, the changing character of workers' houses brought about significant material improvements in the domestic experience for many but it has been argued that this was at the expense of their social and

[175] Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure*, p. 193.
[176] Interview with Ken Williams, 25 November 2013.
[177] Interview with Patricia Williams, 26 November 2013.
[178] Interview with Graham Rowland, 10 December 2013.
[179] Interview with Ken Williams, 25 November 2013.

communal lives. The new estates came in for particular condemnation. In John Stevenson's assessment, 'although many of those rehoused were generally satisfied with the improved amenities of the new council houses, some became a by-word for bleakness and anonymity with an intensification of the problems already beginning to be evident on the pre-war estate.'[180] Estates were accused of being deficient in the communal facilities necessary to sustain community life, such as pubs and shops, as well as lacking the mutual interdependence embedded in the cramped geography of pre-existing workers' terraces and tenements. The physical destruction of these older neighbourhoods, under the auspices of slum clearance, was, for some, an act of social vandalism that seemed to symbolise the very destruction of the working-class itself. In his lamentation for the widespread clearance of Britain's 'tightly-packed working-class communities', Richard Hoggart argued that, 'they were not simply row upon row of shabby dwellings for masses of workers. They were more like interlocking villages, with their own close and embracing ways of life.'[181]

As the largest development of its kind in the region, much of the debate on estate living in Port Talbot centred on Sandfields. No other housing development was as emblematic of the town's post-war urban transformation or its association with the steel industry; by 1959 3,750 works employees (not including contractors) were residing on the estate making it the densest concentration of plant employees living within a single neighbourhood.[182] The extent to which living on a new housing estate contributed towards a more privatised leisure orientation, as exponents of the 'embourgeoisement' thesis suggested, however, remains contentious. Invariably, the geographical dislocation most experienced when moving to the estate, alongside an absence of any shared community experience or history, contributed to varying early feelings of communal anonymity and social alienation. 'People didn't really know each other,' commented one former steelworker and Sandfields resident. 'They come from various areas. Whereas in Gladys Street [in old Aberavon] everybody knew each other, close knit then. Neighbours would be on your doorstep, that type of thing, talking to each other.'[183] Other local estates came in for similar criticism. A former works employee who left Port Talbot to live on a new estate near Porthcawl reflected

[180] John Stevenson, 'The Jerusalem that Failed? The Rebuilding of Post-War Britain', in Terry Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds.), *Britain Since 1945* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 102.
[181] Richard Hoggart, 'Changes in Working-class Life', pp. 29-30.
[182] *Port Talbot Guardian*, 30 October 1959.
[183] Interview with David Thomas, 15 October 2013.

on the difference in community experience: 'What I did miss,' she remembered, 'when I lived in Ynys Street, where I was born, was that the streets had back-to-back [houses], [there] was a back lane, and that's where all the kids used to play cricket and everybody had… you'd be in and out of each other's houses or back gardens… That was a community area and I missed that when I went to the other house because it wasn't there then.'[184] Similar sentiments were initially expressed by commentators in their appraisals of the new estates. One reporter for *Ingot Magazine* gave this gloomy portrayal of community life on the Sandfields estate: 'the sense of deprivation is most common among the workers who come from West Wales, where they lived in small communities. At present they feel they haven't found anything in the town's new housing estates to compensate for the loss of roots in a well-loved society.'[185] That the estate initially lacked communal facilitates, such as pubs, clubs and libraries, did little to speed the integration of its new residents.

The failure of the workplace community to replicate itself in the lived in community, however, was not unique to the condition of estate living and it is easy to exaggerate the sense of social deprivation and communal absence experienced by their new residents. This often results from fallacious comparisons between post-war estates and older working-class neighbourhoods, which universally tend to exaggerate the extent of the community feeling of the latter. Historians, such as Joanne Bourke, have rigorously challenged this assumption, arguing that, 'established working-class districts were not the desirable neighbourhoods portrayed in many accounts,' and notes that cramped living conditions were as likely to facilitate malicious gossip and intrusive snooping as promote mutual assistance.[186] Whilst the process of geographic displacement and removal from existing kinship groups inevitably engendered a temporary sense of dislocation for some residents, it is impossible to ignore the thriving social life Sandfields came to sustain through the increasing number and success of its clubs during the 1960s and 1970s. Local historian Sally Jones acknowledged the estate's early difficulties but ultimately concluded that, 'as time went on and young families were born and grew up on the estate, Sandfields became a genuine neighbourhood, complete with schools,

[184] Interview with Jan Fletcher, 14 October 2013.
[185] *Ingot – The Magazine of the RSTC Group*, March 1955.
[186] Joanna Bourke, *Working-class Culture in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Ethnicity and Class* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 158.

churches, shops, pubs and clubs.'[187] Memories of life on the new estates were also relative to one's own personal experience and responses thus varied. One former Abbey employee and Sandfields resident, for example, considered the old estate to be infinitely better to the present-day one showing that, for some, the old estate was becoming romanticised in much the same way as Hoggart's 'inter-locking villages'. Describing the estate in the 1950s and 1960s, he said, 'It was good, it was good… I'd go up down and I knew most of the people, knew most of the people in town but it's all altered now. You go to town now and I don't know any bugger!'.[188] By the end of this period, then, Sandfields estate was recognised as a distinct community as well as a residential neighbourhood and sustained a social and communal life comparable to any other neighbourhood in Port Talbot.

The proliferation of new clubs and pubs on Sandfields estate was, however, the clearest indication of the continued importance of sociability and communal recreation to steelworkers' use of non-work time. Whilst the domestic sphere occupied a salient position in steelworkers' out-of-work lives, the concept of 'privatism', as a defining condition of the post-war working-class experience, belied the inherent sociability of much leisure time. The variety of venues and activities cited by steelworkers as presenting opportunities for socialising suggests that communal spheres of leisure were able to survive the disruptions of the new estate and co-exist with the increasingly important position accorded to the domestic sphere. Local pubs and, especially, clubs continued to occupy a central position for socialising with friends and the maintenance of communal ties, reflecting the longstanding association between alcohol consumption and masculine work cultures. Even amongst the sample of redundant steelworkers surveyed by Harries *et al.* after 1980, fifty per cent stated they visited the pub often or fairly often.[189] Amongst working steelworkers, Ken Thomas explained that, 'drinking was a big thing then,' and 'on our days off… we'd arrange to do different cars, in the clubs, and we'd disappear for a couple of days… come back in the night drunk.'[190] Sport, both participation and attendance, was also popular amongst steelworkers and served an important function in maintaining and extending social networks. Ken Drew, for

[187] Sally Jones, *The History of Port Talbot with Photographs*, p. 84.
[188] Interview with Francis Needs, 23 October 2013.
[189] C. C. Harries, *Redundancy and Recession*, p. 100.
[190] Interview with Ken Thomas, 26 September 2013.

example, opined, 'most of my social life is sport, rugby perhaps… I played squash until I was seventy-one, I played rugby until a good old age, I played cricket.'[191] Drinking and sport were, of course, not mutually exclusive activities. On his days off, Dai Ferris, recalled going 'for a pint in the rugby club or The Sker [local pub], play darts, a gang of us you know'.[192]

Many steelworkers also integrated socialising into their hobbies and pastimes. Dennis Spicer noted that 'fishing was my love' but his description of this hobby did not conform to the popular image of the solitary fisherman. 'When I worked down the VLN [Very Low Nitrogen Plant],' Spicer went on, 'there were a gang of us that used to go dragging [fishing].'[193] Hobbies, then, could act as a means for facilitating communal affiliation as well as offering the potential for personal fulfilment and reward. Johnes has accounted for the importance male workers attached to sociability 'as another source of manliness'. 'Indeed', Johnes goes on, 'men's need to reaffirm their manhood by associating with one another probably had an added importance because of the uncertainty of home and work as bases of masculine identification.'[194] Although steel was one of the few industries that retained its overtly masculine associations in the post-war period, sociability continued to fulfil an important role in steelworkers' leisure lives as a mean of collectively reaffirming one's identity and place within the community. For the industry's manual workers, in particular, the masculinity of the workplace may have actually served to reinforce and perpetuate the significance of male sociability to non-work time but, crucially, steelworkers could satisfy this impulse in ways that reflected their own personalities and out-of-work situations. For some, this meant fishing with friends but for others this involved heavy drinking in a workingmen's club or any number of associational activities and pursuits.

Associational recreation, however, served a clear purpose for most steelworkers, one which is more easily discerned upon closer examination of the nature of their informal social relations. Overwhelmingly, patterns of out-of-work sociability amongst steelworkers owed more to social networks based around the immediate community and family than the workplace. Some steelworkers did recall

[191] Interview with Ken Drew, 3 December 2013.
[192] Interview with Dai Ferris, 27 November 2013.
[193] Interview with Dennis Spicer, 5 September 2013.
[194] Martin Johnes, 'Pigeon Racing and Working-class Culture in Britain', p. 372.

socialising with work colleagues outside of work but these associations tended to be irregular and restricted to specific workmates. 'Only on special occasions' was how Arthur Bamford described his associations with his co-workers outside work and this response was typical.[195] Some steelworkers even recalled having almost no contact with work colleagues beyond the workplace, despite enjoying amicable relations with them during working hours. Bob Leonard's responses to questions about his social activities revealed a broader truth amongst the plant's employees:

> Q: Did you get along with people you worked with?
> A: I did, yeah.
> Q: Did you socialise with them outside work?
> A: Not particularly, no I knew one or two and that but I didn't.[196]

Out-of-work sociability then was seen by most as distinct from socialising in the workplace, not least because it typically involved different participants. Local associations formed in the immediate community and based around communal institutions, such as the local pub or sports club, were thus far more influential in determining the nature of sociability outside of work. Joe Stanton's social life, for example, was largely based around local sports clubs, such as Margam United AFC and Margam cricket club; as he remembered, 'we had a few dances in the big canteen but they were with Margam Cricket Club, you could hire the hall there. Never with the steelworks – I can't remember any socialising.'[197] Keith Foley, describing his regular acquaintances in Port Talbot's clubs, similarly remembered, 'I had lots of mates in there as well but, no, my sort of close mates who I went out with regularly, they weren't steelworkers.'[198] For Foley, as with many steelworkers, his recreational life was based around friendships formed in childhood and the immediate community, rather than the workplace. Beaven's assertion that, 'unlike those of women, male friendships were usually forged at work rather than in the neighbourhood,' is therefore misleading in this instance.[199] Steelworkers had strong friendships in the workplace but they were often restricted to this sphere. Through the social networks they inhabited in their non-work time, steelworkers frequently embraced the distinction between work and leisure.

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[195] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[196] Interview with Bob Leonard, 27 August 2013.
[197] Interview with Joe Stanton, 26 September 2013.
[198] Interview with Keith Foley, 23 October 2013.
[199] Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-class Men*, p. 140.

The relative failure of bonds of kinship formed at work to replicate themselves in the community reveals many of the practical constraints the steel industry imposed on its workers' leisure time, as well as what workers themselves sought to gain from their out-of-work lives. The emergence of a widespread commuter culture, concomitant with the concentration of south Wales' steel industry in fewer larger plants, could place considerable geographic barriers to colleagues socialising outside of work. In this way the concentration of more workers in fewer workplaces could actually work against out-of-work sociability. This changing pattern of employment was observed by Rosser and Harris in their sociological survey of post-war Swansea: 'The thousands of workers in heavy industry now have to travel much further afield,' they noted, 'to the new steel and tinplate works at Margam and Velindre and Trostre and beyond the Borough boundary: for large numbers the close link which existed between work and residence has been broke.'[200] The termination of the link between work and residence was also associated with the breakdown of the relationship between work and associational leisure. Len Mathias who lived in Sandfields, popularly characterised as a steel community, recalled barely socialising with his work colleagues, 'because you all lived in different areas.' He went on,

> So apart from the occasional time when you might make a special occasion, but apart from that you didn't spend time together, because they come from all different places. They come from valleys, everybody to work in the steelworks didn't they? But we all lived in different [places] so you didn't spend time with them, no socialising, no...[201]

Patterns of shift work which produced irregular periods of non-work time also conspired against extending workplace relations beyond the plant.

Despite the practical difficulties presented to steelworkers socialising with their colleagues outside of work, steelworkers also exhibited a sense that leisure time was distinct from work time and that this time was to be devoted to the pursuit of interests and relationships that could not easily be maintained in work. With the ample opportunities available to socialise in work itself, some workers did not feel a strong impulse to pursue these relationships further outside the workplace. As John

[200] Colin Rosser & Christopher Harries, *The Family and Social Change: A Study of Family and Kinship in a South Wales Town* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 72.
[201] Interview with Len Mathias, 4 October 2013.

Pugh remembered, 'you socialised a lot with the people you worked with because you were with them eight hours a day, seven days a week – they become part of your family.'[202] Leisure time, therefore, remained primarily given over to social activities that could not be pursued at work: spending time with friends from school, a local club or the extended family. The failure of the steelworks' own leisure facilities to engage the majority of the plant's employees further reflects this conception of leisure time as being devoted to pleasures and relationships that were absent in work.

The shared experience of work, therefore, did little to engender a communal leisure culture amongst steelworkers. In contrast to much of the historical literature on 'traditional' working-class society, the relationship between the occupational community and the out-of-work community was weak and did not manifest itself in a homogenous working-class leisure culture. Single industry communities with a traditional industrial base, such as Port Talbot, have often been singled out by historians as embodiments of the interrelated nature of work and society, where workers' leisure and sociability is portrayed as an extension of their workplace experience. This historical conception of industrial society is implicitly advocated by Dai Smith in his reaction to processes of de-industrialisation in modern Wales: 'If particular occupations, essentially dominated by males, infused their work-derived ethic through whole communities, there is no sign that the emerging workforce will be anywhere near as distinctive or as homogenous,'[203] he noted. The relationship between work and leisure has been made more explicit by Ramsden, who, in his study of post-war Beverley, has argued that the prevalence of traditional industries 'may have been a contributory factor in the persistence of older gendered social practices. Masculine "communal" sociable cultures continued well into the post-war years'.[204] If the leisure habits of Port Talbot's steelworkers, however, did represent the continuance of older patterns of sociability they seldom conformed to this image of an integrated work and leisure culture. The diversity of recreational activities pursued by steelworkers during their non-work time reveal a highly fragmented pattern of leisure based around individual hobbies and local clubs and institutions. Conceptions of masculinity formed in the workplace may have implicitly informed

[202] Interview with John Pugh, 9 October 2013.
[203] Dai Smith, *Wales: A Question for History* (Seren: Bridgend, 1999), p. 20.
[204] Stefan Ramsden, 'Remaking Working-class Community: Sociability, Belonging and 'Affluence' in a Small Town, 1930-80', *Contemporary British History*, 29 (2015), p. 11.

notions of male sociability but it is often hard to discern how far these differed from the wider gendered conception of leisure in the period. The social bonds of the workplace were rarely replicated in the community and whilst work may have determined the economic parameters of leisure it had little influence over its form. Ross McKibbin's assertion, that 'for many men there is no relation between work and leisure, work time and free time, and that preferences between the two are as much temperamental as occupational', is therefore astute.[205] Communal association and sociability remained integral to most steelworkers' conception of leisure but how they chose to satisfy these needs owed more to the individual, his personality and his upbringing, than his workplace.

Conclusion

Like the experience of work, the leisure lives of Port Talbot's steelworkers are more remarkable for their diversity than their sameness. Consistently, the use of leisure reflected factors relating to the individual: their age, gender, familial background, personality and preferences. Work may have given leisure its chronology and provided its material basis but the scope for the exercise of individual agency remained vast. Steelworkers were thus largely free to determine the form of their leisure lives, albeit within a structure that owed much to the condition of work and their physical environment. 'Men make their own history,' Karl Marx famously wrote, 'but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather, they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited,' and this was also true of Port Talbot's steelworkers.[206]

Changes in material and environmental circumstances profoundly influenced the quality of steelworkers' leisure and emphasised the relationship between work and non-work time. As the source of the wage-packet, work provided the economic means to pursue and sustain leisure activities so what steelworkers did outside the plant was inherently constrained by what they could earn in it. This reciprocal economic relationship was widely commented on during the affluent decades of the

[205] Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class*, p. 161.
[206] Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte', in Mark Cowling and James Martin (eds.), *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)modern Interpretations* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 19.

1950s and 1960s, where steelworkers' rising wages facilitated a significant change in the nature of their leisure culture. Sheet steel from the Port Talbot works went into the construction of many of the era's iconic consumer durable goods, such as televisions and motorcars, and these offered numerous new leisure possibilities for the plant's employees. Luxury status goods were not within reach of all, however, and this point was often lost in the initial debate on affluent workers. Nonetheless, the sight of a better paid colleague buying his first car did as much to reinforce the material link between work and leisure amongst steelworkers as media aspersions about 'big money'. From the 1970s onwards, the condition of declining wages, insecure working and redundancy proved a far crueller reminder of this fact as well as revealing the inextricable relationship between work and its wider leisure society. Even those steelworkers who still found themselves in fulltime employment after 1980 were confronted with a dwindling number of communal entertainments to spend their wages on. In that decade the town lost clubs, shops and cinemas at a rate not seen since the inter-war depression. Leisure time itself was also primarily determined by the chronology of production which, for many steelworkers, involved the irregular and disruptive nature of shift work. The condition of work, then, was influential in determining steelworkers' possibilities for leisure but it did not prescribe a common approach to its use.

Even the proactive efforts of the works' proprietors in the field of employee recreation and welfare failed to engender a more homogenous out-of-work culture. Rather, the distinction between the minority of employees who fully participated in the works' recreational life and the rest came to represent another fissure in the workforce's fragmented leisure lives. The SCOW and, later, the BSC may have conceived of the Sports and Social Club as an instrument of labour management and a rich source of good publicity but, to most employees, it was an irrelevancy. Regular club users may have absorbed some of its projected values, of benign capitalism and corporate munificence, but most retained a distinctly depoliticised view of its function. This, however, was entirely in keeping with most steelworkers' attitude towards leisure. For their participants, the decision to use the works club or join a works sport team was more likely to be based on entirely pragmatic issues, such as the price of a pint or the travel time involved, as any ideological acceptance or rejection of its perceived motives. This point is often missed in existing histories of

welfare capitalism in which employee recreation schemes are either portrayed as battlegrounds of social control or seen as emblems of a flourishing corporate culture. Both interpretations have invariably inscribed an overtly political reading of worker recreation onto participants who infrequently understood them in these terms. Leisure was not apolitical but a politicised reading of its use should not obscure the pressing personal realities of the everyday.

The indifference that characterised most steelworkers' responses to work based welfare schemes, however, also reveal the personal nature of leisure and the clear distinction which was retained between work and non-work time. Even allowing for the numerous points of interconnection which inevitably arise in a town so heavily reliant on a single industry, leisure was understood as a separate sphere to work and a shared workplace thus did not manifest itself in a common out-of-work culture. In many cases the leisure sphere proved remarkably resistant to the influence of work and prioritised the individuality of personal experience over the collective circumstances of the workplace. This was particularly evident in steelworkers' pattern of out-of-work sociability which revealed a variety of kinship networks, only some of them related to work. These trends suggest an understanding of leisure time as being devoted to relationships and interests that were not easily maintained at work, such as school friends or family. In this regard, steelworkers' leisure time displayed little of the 'privatism' held to be symptomatic of working-class affluence. New estates, such as Sandfields, brought greater comfort to the domestic sphere and many steelworkers welcomed the increased opportunities this brought for solitary rest and spending time with family. This, however, did not signal the demise of the working-class community. Sociability remained integral to most steelworkers' conceptions of leisure and the immediate locality, with its streets and clubs, was central to maintaining these relationships. Moreover, as changing patterns of commuting and shift work created new barriers to pursuing workplace relationships outside work, the importance of the immediate community as an arena of sociability could increase. Hobbies and interests could also act as focal points for sociability but, like the out-of-work experience more generally, they were immensely varied and revealed few consistencies across the workforce. Whilst environmental and work related factors remained instrumental in creating the conditions of leisure, the autonomy of the individual was the key determinant in its use.

It is highly probable that the way in which steelworkers chose to use their leisure time was a reaction to the condition of work but, crucially, the form this reaction took was entirely dependent on the individual and the nature of their personal relationship with the workplace. Leisure time may, therefore, have been predicated on utilising skills no longer necessary in the workplace but it also could be a restful and escapist antidote to the physicality of labour. The variety of activities steelworkers undertook during non-work time is telling: refereeing football matches, playing jazz guitar, researching local history and family trees, going to church, doing DIY, drinking, playing rugby and taking part in amateur dramatics to name but a few. Any attempt to relate this plethora of pursuits to the shared condition of work would inevitably fail to account for the diversity of human personality as well as the untold variables in individual history and circumstance not directly related to the workplace. By its very nature, the experience of industrial production sought to impose a degree of homogeneity on its workforce, through its overarching system of assigned job roles and prescribed tasks. Non-work time, however, offered steelworkers an alternative sphere, where the individual was free to utilise his or her own agency – albeit within set material parameters – and locate their own source of personal fulfilment and happiness. This could be found in social relations, family and/or friends, hobbies and interests or a combination of all of these. Work gave steelworkers a wage, an occupational identity and, for most, it even offered sources of satisfaction, but it was outside of work that the majority sought lasting fulfilment and happiness.

Conclusion

In 1988 the British Steel Corporation was privatised, bringing an end to twenty years of state ownership of the nation's primary heavy industry. It was an occasion quietly mourned (although scarcely resisted) by the left but it also possessed a wider resonance. In industrial communities, in particular, the event offered an opportunity for reflection and contemplation on the state of Britain's industrial economy and the profound transformation it had undergone since 1945. Talk of a new industrial revolution[992] and the pervasive hope that had surrounded British industry at the end of the Second World War seemed naively optimistic from the vantage point of the late 1980s, where all the nation's major heavy industries, coal, steel and shipbuilding, had experienced two decades of economic embattlement and sweeping contractions in output and manpower. Gone, too, was the political will and ideology that regarded heavy industry as a central pillar of the national economy and one which should, therefore, be directed by the state in the interests of both social and economic considerations. The defeat of the 1984/85 miners' strike conclusively shattered (if there was any doubt remaining) the corporatist post-war settlement, which legitimised the trade unions as a recognised force in matters of economic and industrial planning and the established voice of labour. In place of corporatism came the 'new realism': a gradual admission by the mainstream of organised labour and the Labour Party of the permanency of Thatcherite neo-liberal economics and the imperative to advance their objectives within the new system, rather than seek to overthrow it.[993] In every sense, Britain, it was alleged, was now a post-industrial nation.[994] Communities based on the traditional industries, that had been a ubiquitous feature of the nation's cultural landscape since the inception of the industrial revolution, were forced to contemplate new futures and seek alternative identities.

Despite enduring a political and economic situation that appeared unremittingly hostile to its continued survival, in 1988 the Port Talbot steelworks remained the largest in Great Britain. As the town's primary employer, the works

[992] *Y Cymro*, 20 July 1951.
[993] John McIlroy, *Trade Unions in Britain Today*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 210 – 212.
[994] *The Times*, 10 April 1989.

continued to command a central position within its local economy and society. From the nadir of 1979/80, when the twin blows of slimline and the national steel strike threatened to end steelmaking in the town altogether, the plant had even recovered to break new production records and was hailed, in some quarters, as a symbol of the BSC's new commitment to efficiency and profitability. The *Daily Mail* in 1981 was moved to celebrate 'the supermen of steel' at Port Talbot, who were 'tearing down job barriers to prove we can still beat the world' and, by 1986, The *Financial Times* claimed that the Port Talbot works was 'rolling on the road to profit'.[995] Indeed, the fate of Port Talbot contrasted strongly with some other of Britain's other major steelworks. Plant's that were regarded as giants of the industry at the beginning of this period, such as Corby, Bilston, East Moors, Shotton and Ebbw Vale, had all ceased steel production by 1980. Over the next fifteen years they were followed by the remnants of the west Wales steel industry, based around Swansea and Llanelli, and the Ravenscraig works in Scotland (a plant that post-dated the Abbey Works in its construction). The decision by the BSC to invest a further £75 million in a new sub casting plant at Port Talbot in 1988, arguably, sealed the fate of the Scottish steel industry.[996] At the time of writing, Port Talbot is the only operational iron and steelmaking plant remaining in Wales.

Within a certain narrative, then, the Port Talbot works can be seen as the great survivor of the British steel industry but its continued viability came at a considerable social cost. Over twenty years, between 1961 and 1981, over 13,000 jobs were shed at the plant as well as the closure of the original Port Talbot and Margam steelworks. By 1988, the number of workers employed in the local steel industry had returned to under 5,000, roughly the level it had been before the Abbey Works' construction. Although difficult to quantify, job losses in the steel industry undoubtedly also had a 'knock-on' effect in the community and Port Talbot experienced many of the symptoms of urban and social decay associated with post-industrial regions throughout Great Britain. 'The decline of disposable income in Port Talbot,' as Ralph Fevre notes, 'explains the closure of supermarkets, nightclubs and hotels.'[997] Whereas in 1951, however, it had still been possible to find

[995] *Daily Mail*, 11 February 1981; *Financial Times*, 11 June 1986.
[996] *Financial Times*, 15 September 1988.
[997] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed: The Quiet Privatisation of British Steel* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1989), p.40.

employment in other local industries and manufactories, efforts to diversify Port Talbot's economy in the 1980s failed to deliver the kind and volume of stable and secure jobs that the works had provided.

Despite being granted Special Development Area status and receiving millions of pounds of investment from the Welsh Development Agency and the European Economic Community, local efforts at job creation were disappointing; it was estimated that for one such scheme, the construction of a new industrial estate at Baglan Moor, an average of £2 million was invested for every job created. Moreover, as Fevre argues, 'Where new jobs *have* lasted they have rarely been as well-paid as the jobs they were intended to replace.'[998] Fears, expressed by some locals, at the beginning of the 1950s about Port Talbot becoming a town that was putting all its 'eggs in one basket', seemed to be being realised.[999] By 1988, the association of steeltown had become both a blessing and a curse for Port Talbot. Whilst the relationship between the industry and the town had become a more complicated and problematic one, steel's significance remained uncontested: in 2001, one local councillor and former steelworker told a national newspaper that, 'If the steelworks closes, the town closes. This is it; it's all we've got.'[1000] Port Talbot remains one of the few working-class communities in Great Britain which is primarily sustained by heavy industry.

The turbulent experience of Port Talbot's steel industry since the Second World War, however, reveals broader changes in the nature and experience of British working-class life at this time. Both inside and outside the workplace, everyday life for workers was subjected to the full force of prevailing economic and political currents but, through the constancy of daily habits and rituals, it also retained a sense of familiarity and continuity. Nowhere were these conflicting currents of change and continuity more apparent than in the workplace itself. Although often considered a 'traditional' industry, changes in Port Talbot's steelmaking processes were analogous with wider trends in the British workplace, such as the increased use of mechanised and computerised production procedures. Steelworkers thus had to adjust to new

[998] Ralph Fevre, *Wales is Closed*, pp. 45-49.
[999] George Frederick Thomason, 'An Analysis of the Effects of Industrial Change upon Selected Communities in South Wales' (unpublished PhD thesis, University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff, 1963), p. 270.
[1000] The Guardian, 'Life of a community under threat after steel plant tragedy', <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/nov/18/ameliahill.theobserver>, [Accessed: 6 July 2015].

work tasks and job roles and find alternative ways of reasserting their pride, masculinity and skill at work. Whereas individual judgement, learnt through practice and experience, and intense physical labour were once exalted as the primary qualities of a steelworker, now technical knowledge and skills assumed a greater importance within the plant's automated manufacturing methods. Health and safety precautions at the plant also improved and were more likely to be enforced by the plant's management, underpinned by statutory legislation. The comprehensive regulatory framework that was in place by the end of the period further physically distanced operatives from the inherent dangers of the production process, which fundamentally changed the character of the shop floor. 'You don't see anybody,' remarked Bob Leonard describing the changes that had taken place in the workplace. 'Maybe one person,' he went on, 'but you go up into the pulpit and they're sitting there on their screens and they run the plant on the television screen.'[1001] The basic product remained the same but the way it was made had changed enormously and, with it, the very character of the workplace itself. Like most British workers, the workplace remained a source of pride and occupational identity for Port Talbot's steelworkers but new production methods also created new relationships with work and old values were subjected to new interpretations.

Changes in the nature of production also affected the ways in which power was negotiated at the plant and the internal contestations of the workplace. In the 1950s and the 1960s, it was commonly alleged that 'the unions ran the plant and not management'.[1002] Undoubtedly, the sellers' market and restricted labour supply of the period enabled trade union influence to expand in the works, with management adopting a conciliatory approach towards labour relations in order to maintain full production and fulfil their orders. Trade unions at the plant were thus able to secure control over many aspects of steelworkers' promotion rights, as well as prerogatives over the manning of new machinery and equipment. Issues of workplace control were clearly significant but the struggle for influence at the plant was a multifarious nexus, rather than a bilateral exchange. Unions fought amongst each other for the right to represent steelworkers and secure negotiating and bargaining rights for particular production departments within the works; in their proactive efforts to

[1001] Interview with Bob Leonard, 27 September 2013.
[1002] Interview with Ron Walters, 13 November 2013.

expand their own influence unions could resort to undermining their rivals. Throughout this period, most British workers were employed in a multi-union workplace and an explanation of the evolving internal dynamics of the trade unions is, thus, integral to understanding the successes and failures of post-war industrial relations and the labour movement. Collective solidarities were neither innate nor monolithic and had to adapt to contain changing individual interests and goals. The relationship between local trade unionists and their national leaders, for example, was characterised by prolonged periods of antipathy, often bordering on hostility, which displayed a primarily geographic, rather than class based, conception of workplace power. Workers consistently redefined notions of loyalty in ways that suited their present circumstances and the ties of place and community thus proved enduring.

In this understanding, local trade unionists were as likely to view their own, London based, national leaderships with the same kind of suspicion reserved for the remote bureaucracy of the BSC. By the end of this period, the Port Talbot Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (which had merged with the National Union of Blastfurnacemen in 1986), had largely dispensed with their national leaderships all together and had taken to conducting multi-union negotiations within the plant in a largely autonomous manner. As Stephen Parry has noted, 'A surprising consequence of this at Port Talbot was that local management and unions were drawn closer together. As shown earlier the different management levels within BSC had different agendas. At works level these often coincided with the local unions.'[1003] If such an alliance appears incongruous this, perhaps, reveals a fundamental flaw in traditional historical understandings of workplace relations. Class and politics mattered to steelworkers but there were often other considerations that mattered more, such as the everyday concerns of being able to provide for oneself and one's family and the future of one's workplace and community. Trade unions repeatedly sought to foster alliances and working arrangements that advanced their own interests and, as such, loyalties and relationships were continually transmuted, revealing the complex process of reconciling differing interests in a changing workplace.

[1003] Stephen Parry, 'History of the Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area, 1900-1988' (unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Leeds, 2011), pp. 234-235.

Despite the pervasive influence of economic, technological and political developments, however, the workplace also offered sources of continuity with the past and comforts of familiarity. These trends become most apparent when the historical focus is shifted to the particular and everyday aspects of workers' past experiences. Indeed, Joe Moran has argued that, 'From the point of view of history and memory, the everyday is therefore significant because it is a sphere in which the modern and the residual can coexist.'[1004] Steelworkers were plainly aware of the transformation their industry had experienced but the use of oral history reminds historians of the points of cultural continuity and personal everyday experiences that transcended generations and structural changes. Relationships formed at work, for example, could often last the entire duration of a working life and, in some instances, even longer. Whilst production processes continued to evolve, the companionship and sociability of the immediate workplace offered a source of stability. The human relationships of the workplace were also central to steelworkers' experiences and memories of work, interspersing job tasks with moments of companionship and even fun. Regardless of their age or occupation, in oral testimonies steelworkers almost always cited the sociability of work as the most enjoyable aspect of employment at the Port Talbot works. For Terry James, the best thing about his career in the plant was the, 'camaraderie: the people that you work with and know. Similar to the miner down below, he'd have his people around him and we did the same. You know, the people you knew and worked with. I think that was the big plus there.'[1005] Such relationships, however, could also provide a source of stability in the face of disruptions to working practice and act as a means of perpetuating work cultures. Intergenerational relationships, in particular, were integral to training new employees at the plant but it was also through such interactions that cultures, as well as skills, were transmitted.

Even as work in the industry became safer and less physically arduous, conceptions of masculinity associated with steelworkers' toughness and 'hard men' image remained intact, revealing the ways in which such attitudes were culturally received as well as occupationally constructed. For Arthur Bamford, the culture of rugged masculinity that existed amongst steelworkers was one of the most striking

[1004] Joe Moran, 'History, Memory and the Everyday', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 8 (2010), p. 56.
[1005] Interview with Terry James, 17 November 2014.

aspects of his early experiences at the plant: 'I hadn't known *men* until I went on the blastfurnaces,' he remembered, 'I hadn't known what *men* were…'. He went on, 'these people were hard, and I don't mean physically hard now, I mean hard – they were men of iron to be honest.'[1006] In this way, conceptions of masculinity and ideals of manliness, based on endurance and toughness, were continually renewed across the period and remained important to how steelworkers understood their own role as men in the workplace. These attitudes were perpetuated in the nature of steel work itself. Whilst working conditions may have improved significantly across the period the inherent dangers and deprivations of the Port Talbot works were shared across generations. In her essay on 'Everyday Masculinities' in twentieth-century Scotland, Hilary Young has argued that, 'The dirt, noise and monotony of a job were challenges to be overcome by strength and discipline,'[1007] and, in this way, the continual potential of danger and the privations of shift work at the Port Talbot works acted as daily sources of masculine affirmation. The blastfurnace explosion at the plant in 2001, which claimed six lives, was a poignant reminder that the risks of steel work could be mitigated but never entirely eliminated.

Even amongst people working in the same industry and living in the same town, however, experiences and understanding of work, community and leisure were likely to vary. Occupational differentiation was particularly pronounced in the steel industry but other industries, such as the shipbuilding and automotive industries, also contained a variety of production processes. Such differentiations ensured that there could be no simple or single definition of what it meant to belong to a particular group of workers, even if outsiders consistently looked for one. These issues are brought into clearer focus in the Port Talbot works where there existed a wide range of occupational groups, often with fundamentally different conceptions of work and workplace relations. The plant's process, craft and staff workers may have had a shared interest in the steelmaking process but, in several respects, they shared little else, possessing different trade unions, occupational traditions and even inhabiting different cultures. For much of the period, the manual process and craft workers were not even permitted to share a canteen with the more middle-class orientated staff

[1006] Interview with Arthur Bamford, 26 November 2013.
[1007] Hilary Young, 'Being a Man: Everyday Masculinities', in Lynn Abrams & Callum G. Brown (eds.), *A History of Everyday Life in Twentieth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 210), p.141.

workers. Each grouping also possessed its own internal hierarchy reflecting subtle gradations of rank and status. Conceptions of individual skill and respect underpinned this hierarchical understanding of the workplace and differentiated workers within it based on their respective experience and attributes. Across almost all industries, the existence of other categories of identity, such as age and gender, challenged the idea of the workplace as an occupationally or socially homogenous community and the shared everyday experiences and cultural references of working life were, thus, invariably subjected to individual interpretations.

Just as the experience of work in the Port Talbot works was a plural experience, so too were steelworkers lives outside the plant. Whilst work offered most steelworkers some intrinsic rewards and satisfactions it was, nonetheless, the economic imperative that made most attend and accept the prescribed regimes and tasks of working life. Individual perspectives of life outside work, however, show that steelworkers held distinct conceptions of work and non-work time, with the latter being given over to the pursuit of interests and relationships that were typically denied in the workplace. Steelworkers may have embraced the masculine bravado associated with the 'steelworker' archetype at work but, in their leisure time, occupational traits coexisted with a multiplicity of other social identifications. The ties of family and friendships, formed at school, through mutual hobbies or the neighbourhood, for example, proved far more common sources of out-of-work sociability than relationships established in the workplace. Describing his colleagues at the plant, Len Mathias was typical in regarding that, 'I was work mates with them, but I wasn't social mates.'[1008] Advocates of the affluent worker thesis were often inclined to identify these trends as evidence of an emerging privatism in British working class life but this fails to account for its continued sociability. Rather, such remarks are telling of the ways in which individuals looked to exercise their own autonomy and individual agency outside of work and embraced the opportunity leisure time presented to pursue alternative guises. For many, this entailed a devotion to the seemingly mundane, but, nonetheless, significant domestic sphere and the emotional bonds of the immediate family. Hobbies and passions, similarly, provided outlets for personal fulfilment as well as providing a source of identification and

[1008] Interview with Len Mathias, 4 October 2013.

associational kinship, such as the ardent football or rugby fan or keen amateur historian or musician.

Often, however, academics have too readily sought to define notions of collectivity in ways which deny individuality. As with other sections of society, a sense of self was as important to the working-class as belonging to a group. The individual histories that emerge from oral testimonies thus act as a necessary corrective to the emphasis on collective or common experiences that have characterised much working-class history. 'Class,' according to Selina Todd, 'is a relationship defined by unequal power, rather than a way of life or an unchallenging culture. There can be no "ideal" or "traditional" working class. Instead there are individuals who are brought together by shared circumstances and experiences.'[1009] Todd is, of course, right to stress the unequal power on which class relations have always been predicated and to recognise the importance of individuals within wider social groupings, but it is also true that everyday understandings of class did not have to be primarily constituted in politics or collective action. For some steelworkers, being working-class simply meant going to work, working hard and securing financial independence. To return to Michael Callaghan's attitudes towards class: when asked whether he still considered himself working-class, despite having risen through the ranks to a managerial post, he replied, 'Yea – yes! When I say working-class, I worked all my bloody life; I'm working-class – simple as that.'[1010] In this way, feeling part of a wider class was entirely congruent with individual aspiration and personal material ambition. Understandings of class could coalesce into a political force, and often did so during general elections or periods of industrial unrest, but they also existed in more ephemeral and abstract forms. If Port Talbot works employees displayed a largely ambivalent or indifferent attitude towards their trade unions this was primarily because most saw them as utilitarian organisations offering individual protection in times of need, rather than as agencies of class-based politics. Steelworkers' personal histories thus reveal that political considerations and concerted collective action were not at the forefront of most understandings of everyday life. Happiness, based on security for oneself and one's family, and the satisfaction derived from communal associations, hobbies and interests were far

[1009] Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class, 1910-2010* (London: John Murray, 2014), p. 7.
[1010] Interview with Michael O'Callaghan, 27 January 2014.

more important to most in their personal pursuit of fulfilment. This, too, has been an important agent of historical change.

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