

FROM MINERS' PENNIES TO NATIONAL DISTINCTION: THE NEWBRIDGE INSTITUTE AND MEMORIAL HALL, 1898–2015

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This is a radical story, for the history of the Newbridge Institute and Memorial Hall, near Newport in south Wales, does not neatly replicate the expected history of such institutions in a coalmining village. Although the Institute and Hall are strongly woven into the history of the south Wales coalfield and the leisure and educational activities of the twentieth century, they have a persistent and courageous idiosyncrasy.

Markedly, on three occasions directly connected with three critical decisions, their story diverged from what might have been a reasonable expectation regarding their survival – firstly, in 1898, with the founding and specifically the financing of the Institute; then in 1925 with decisions as to the building, architecture, and décor of the Memorial Hall; and finally the renaissance of both buildings at the turn of the twenty-first century. The end result of these divergences has been a national prominence and distinction which would have astonished and delighted the founders and far outlasted their origins in the sinking of the local colliery. The story, then, is unusual and played out against the backcloth of the rise and fall of the south Wales coal industry. It is also remarkable in terms of both the scale of the achievement and, more speculatively, the motivations and causes behind it, which may be perceived more clearly when viewed within the localized context of their history.

Historical context

The coal-mining background is based on two collieries which began when the South Celynen Colliery was opened in 1876. This colliery followed the output of Monmouthshire, which more than doubled between that date and 1914, when it contributed around 385,000 tonnes per annum to Monmouthshire's 15,000,000 tonnes and employed around 1,700 men.¹ In 1983–4, just prior to its closure, this colliery produced around 1,685 tonnes weekly and 84,250 tonnes per annum with a loss of £59.50 per tonne.² The South Celynen was closed due to exhaustion in 1985.

The North Celynen Colliery was sunk in 1913, and in 1921 the last deep shaft in the valley was sunk at a depth of 1,550 feet to the five-foot Gellideg seam.³

1 John Elliott, *The Industrial Development of the Ebbw Valleys, 1780–1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 44, calculated from tables 2.5 and 2.6 (note: metric tonnes).

2 Trevor Boyns, 'The Coal Industry', in *The Gwent County History*, ed. by Chris Williams, Andy Croll and Ralph A. Griffiths, 5 vols (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), V, p. 53.

3 G. Spencer, *A Community Underground* (Crumlin: Treowen, 1994), pages not numbered.

At its peak the colliery employed around 1,200 men. At closure, around 152,100 tonnes per annum were produced with loss per tonne of £24.20. Their combined employment was 1040. In 1985 the Celynen North lost any separate identity through a merger with Oakdale. This colliery closed in 1989, thereby bringing to an end the deep mining of coal in Monmouthshire.⁴

Whilst the Newbridge Institute and Memorial Hall were to follow a divergent path from that of their historical environment, they found their drive, indeed their continuing if sometimes interrupted dynamic, in that same history. The direct causation of this path is inevitably obscure but they were the inheritors of a culture which from its beginning was of an independent and radical nature, finding its roots in the massive labour market dislocation of the 1830s and the ensuing Chartist Rising of 1839.⁵ This culture, albeit a slippery concept, requires a short description for it is the seed-bed of their future development.

The story begins in 1898, the year of a five-month strike, and coincidentally the same year as the genesis of the Institute, when the miners were forced to capitulate on terms which, particularly in comparison to the Rising of 1839, were both vengeful and foolish. This submission ushered in a long period of industrial conflict, with Newbridge and the Ebbw valley prominent, even dominant, in the early years of Welsh miners' trade unionism. The first regional lodge of the Miners Federation of Great Britain was formed at Newbridge in 1893, with the trade unionists of the Ebbw valley contributing three of the four senior positions to the South Wales Miners Federation formed in 1898. Thomas Richards, later to be a guest at the opening of 'the Memo' (the Memorial Hall), was secretary, Brace vice-president, and Onions treasurer, with their first office in Beaufort. Radicalism of a political variety continued, with strong support for the nascent Labour Party from Monmouthshire, which voted more strongly for Labour than Glamorgan in 1918.⁶ The Monmouthshire leaders soon replaced the accommodating Mabon (William Abraham MP) as the first president of the South Wales Miners Federation, with Brace even suing him, until they in their turn were replaced by the more syndicalist Rhondda miners about 1910. Industrial strife was, however, eased in the period from 1899 to 1909 by the relative prosperity of the Newport and Abercarn Black Vein Colliery Company which reported very high dividends ranging from 6% to 15%, the best continual run of profitability in the history of the company. This success may well have encouraged the committee to take risks.

The rise of coal in the valley was fed by a dramatic rise in population. Between 1901 and 1911, the county experienced the second highest increase in its history of around 30%, from 278,000 to almost 360,000 inhabitants. In percentage terms this had only been exceeded between 1831 and 1841 during the decade of the Chartist Rising. This period was also the first time for fifty years that the migration rate

4 Trevor Boyns, 'The Coal Industry', p. 54, table 3.12; Elliott, *Industrial Development*, pp. 70–71 (see table 3.11 for dividends 1874–1912).

5 David Jones, *The Last Rising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); for labour market analysis, see Elliott, *Industrial Development*, pp. 179–180, and for cultural analysis see Chapter 8.

6 Elliott, *Industrial Development*, p. 172.

was positive, with more people coming into Monmouthshire than moving out.⁷ However, the growth rates in the population were very uneven in the villages and towns within the Ebbw valley. Ebbw Vale was a substantial iron town in 1800 whilst Newbridge was still a hamlet based around the levels at Cwmdws. By 1830, Nantyglo and Risca were large centres of population whilst Abertillery did not develop until the 1850s and Newbridge for deep mining in the 1870s. There was thus a differential of around 50 to 100 years between the industrial development of towns and villages in the same valley.

The resultant localized history of the social and political development of the Ebbw valleys complemented what were at one time nine separate colliery companies and a similar number of iron and steel companies operating and competing in these valleys. There were six urban districts there, as compared to one in the Rhondda, and disastrously, by 1900, eight competing and dysfunctional water and sewage companies, making the Ebbw valleys one of the most diseased locations in Britain. Localism even spread to sport with six Monmouthshire rugby teams with first-class fixtures by mid-century, including four in the valley, when other areas in south Wales of a similar size were well served with one. These differentials may well have been the fundamental cause of this intensely localized culture which seems to have concentrated an ambition in miners to control their own local organizations as well as being involved in the wider development of trades unions.

This was, then, an area where the political, demographic, and industrial environment, enhanced by a short-lived commercial success, developed a localized vigour which expressed itself in industrial, political, and social forms. The history of the Institute and Memorial Hall is marked by this creative vigour which continues, albeit with lapses, to the present day. From such a context we would expect a culture coloured by a singularity in initiatives, a preparedness to take risks, and a marked inclination by the South Celynen workmen to distance their Institute from the over-involving generosity of their employers, the Newport and Abercarn Black Vein Colliery Company.

Phase 1 – 1898 to 1921

In this localized, radical place, the scene was set for innovation, and in 1898, the year of the strike, a group of South Celynen miners and others from the community formed themselves into a committee to establish an association to improve the local amenities of their town. The first meeting was held in the Long Room of the Beaufort Arms in Newbridge when a committee was appointed to find a suitable meeting place for the men. Rooms were secured in the Coffee Tavern at the top of Main Street, then known as Coffee Tavern Street. The Tavern was owned by the Colliery company and the rooms were provided rent free, which seems to have been the extent of their involvement.

Although its function and facilities followed the format of earlier workingmen's institutes, the capital funding of the Newbridge Institute was very different

⁷ Ibid., p. 166.

in that the mine workers financed the building themselves with the purchase of the freehold for £328 and a private mortgage of £6,000 borrowed from a Mr C. F. Morgan. The total was insured for £7,000 with the Co-operative Building Society. The final payment was made to Mr Morgan at his home in 1922. This little-known benefactor became the first Chairman of the Institute, serving until 1904.⁸ The interest was to be paid half-yearly and the capital paid back in portions of £100 to £500 yearly. This method of financing was consistent with the ownership of the Institute by the community as a form of economic and social co-operative, which was to play a primary role in its survival. Howard Stone, the Chairman of the Trustees, praised the initiative succinctly almost a century later:

It was incredibly courageous of the miners to take on a project like this – because of their bravery Newbridge got a state of the art building for the community.⁹

The solicitor was T. S. Edwards who lived in Newbridge at ‘Homelea’. He also performed a very considerable service to the Ebbw Valleys with his contribution to the stubborn and tragic sewage and water problems caused by this same highly localized development of the valley. The architect of the building was R. L. Roberts, a locally-based experienced architect.

The Newbridge Institute was not the first in the area, with Tredegar opening in 1861 and Llanhilleth in 1906;¹⁰ in 1939 there were more than one hundred miners’ Institutes in south Wales. The Newbridge Institute distinction lay in its initial funding, for the conventional building financing of institutes seems to have been by loans from the colliery company. This was the case of neighbouring institutes at Oakdale and Llanhilleth. The running costs, including the repayment of the mortgage, were paid by optional subscriptions, which very few miners refused, deducted at source, and scaled to the level of pay. In 1984 these ranged between 50p and £1 weekly.¹¹ The Institute was managed by a committee which in the first instance consisted of Messrs W. N. Jones, V. Phillips, H. Badge and H. A. Thomas. Other sources of subscription included workmen employed in surrounding levels such as Twyn Gwyn and the Crumlin Navigation Colliery, and billiard table charges.¹² In its first year, the Newbridge Institute registered 1,580 members.

The building’s date stone is inscribed with the year 1907 but the building was officially opened in August 1908. The ceremony was performed by the colliery owner John Beynon (later to be knighted). It was recorded that the committee awaited Mr Beynon at the Newbridge railway station to escort him to the ceremony

8 Andrew Gadd, *The Celynen Collieries Workingman’s Institute and Memorial Hall* (Newbridge: Friends of Newbridge Memo, 2003), p. 7.

9 Hilary McGowan, Alwyn Jones, and Howard Stone, *Conservation Management Plan for HLF, Celynen Collieries Institute and Memorial Hall* (Newbridge Institute Records, 2010), p. 48. This document contains a detailed description of the development of the Institute and Memorial Hall.

10 Llanhilleth Colliery Workmen’s Institute and Library, Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University.

11 Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University, Box 11 B, Item 26, 1986.

12 *Ibid.*, Box 1, Item 3, 1912 and Box 1, Item 3, 1926.

when a band advertising a circus happened to pass by. The chairman, somewhat embarrassed, had to explain that the band had not turned out in his honour!¹³ The rules of the Institute, which were revised in 1931, stated the objectives as follows:

To provide for its members the means of social intercourse, mutual helpfulness, mental and moral improvement and rational recreation.¹⁴

The activities of the Institute followed a conventional pattern primarily following that of earlier institutes. The Institute may also have been influenced by the Carnegie Library charity which made grants for the completion of 362 libraries in the UK, but it seems to have distanced itself from close contact with the charity. This appears to have been a trend in south Wales as there were only a very small number of Carnegie libraries established there, with the nearest at Brynmawr in 1905 and Newport in 1907.¹⁵ Indeed, the organized working-class movements in the mining valleys of south Wales basically ignored public library developments going on elsewhere in the second half of the nineteenth century. This disregard lasted from the late 1860s through to the 1930s and effectively halted public library development in these areas until the county library movement of the 1920s.¹⁶

One decisive impetus for the development of libraries came from the impact on literacy and education of two acts of parliament, the 1870 Education Act, appropriately supported for the Ebbw valleys by the one-time Chartist W. E. Forster, and the Intermediate Schools Act of 1889 which resulted in 710 pupils attending secondary schools in the Ebbw and Sirhowy valleys by 1912. By this date there was a higher percentage of both sexes proceeding from these secondary schools to university and teacher training than in England, with girls in a particularly advantageous position.¹⁷

The range of books in the Newbridge Institute library was eclectic, from Marx to Rider Haggard and G. A. Henty – those early twentieth-century champions of imperial adventure – and Sinclair Lewis, the American left-wing novelist. Mr Stephens the kindly librarian was a most effective custodian. The reading-room contained daily and national and weekly newspapers which were displayed on reading slopes, making reading easier for more than one person at the same time.

The development of snooker and billiards in the institutes is less well-documented both nationally and locally, though there is a photograph of the 1914 Newbridge team. The origins of the game are ancient and aristocratic and it is

13 Andrew Gadd, *The Celyn Collieries*, p. 7.

14 *Rules of the Celyn Collieries Workmen's Institute* (Records, Newbridge Institute and Memorial Hall, 1931), p. 1.

15 A. Black, S. Pepper, and K. Bagshaw, *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering: Early Public Libraries in Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1998), p. 139.

16 See Alistair Black, *A New History of the English Public Library: Social and Intellectual Contexts* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996).

17 PRO, ED91/92, 'Report on Education in Monmouthshire 1913', Board of Education (Welsh Department). See John Elliott, 'The Development of Secondary Industry in the Ebbw Valleys, 1850–1914: A Study of the Welsh Industrial Tragedy', *Welsh History Review*, 21 (2002), 65–67.

seemingly much-loved. Mary, Queen of Scots apparently requested that she be wrapped in the green baize of her table before her beheading.¹⁸ By the 1940s, billiards was the main game at Newbridge, with three tables for billiards and one for snooker. Good players had their own cues. There were matches against other institutes watched by as many as could be seated on benches around the hall. In the early 1970s the BBC television programme 'Pot Black' ensured the replacement of billiards by snooker, a much more photogenic game, with the Monmouthshire institutes becoming the development centres of many players of national distinction such as Doug Mountjoy, Ray Reardon, and Mark Williams.

Phase 2 – 1921 to 2003

The industrial environment of the Institute and Memorial Hall changed dramatically in the early 1920s when the Monmouthshire coal industry entered a long period of decline. This was marked by a decrease in coal output from 15,374 000 tonnes to 10,574,000 tonnes coupled with a decline in employment from just over 60,000 to 38,000 between 1913 and 1938.¹⁹ The period was shadowed by even more turmoil caused by the three-month lockout of 1921 and the General Strike of 1926, when the miners were on strike from early May to late November. Barry Supple, the leading historian of the British coal industry of this period, described those years in the following terms:

1921, which the 'Colliery Guardian' called the 'year of the great disillusionment', had witnessed a fundamental transition to the monetary values of depression and to a much lower level of activity which with brief exceptions were going to characterise the next 15 years.²⁰

Between 1921 and 1936, 241 mines closed in South Wales. Newbridge was inevitably deeply and disastrously involved in these troubles. Indeed, in early January 1927 1,000 South Celynen miners attacked the colliery manager's home.²¹ Thus the decision taken in 1923 to build the Memorial Hall does seem curious and imprudent, for the miners were already experiencing a relentless dislocation which would become far worse.

There were three countervailing forces but they seem slight in the face of this destructive onslaught: firstly, the determination of the initiators to build a memorial worthy of the 75 men from the colliery who had given their lives in the Great War. This resolve seems to be underlined by the absence of any mention in the Institute's

18 Mordechai Richler, *On Snooker* (London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2001), p. 5.

19 John Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics*, 2 vols (Cardiff: Welsh Office, 1985), I, p. 304 (table 2: Coal).

20 B. Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry, 1913–1946: The Political Economy of Decline*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), IV, p. 168.

21 *Western Mail*, 4 Jan 1927, quoted in H. Francis and D. Smith, *The Fed* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), p. 67.

records of the long and vicious strike of 1926, apart from the reimbursement negotiations regarding contributions from the lodges of Blaina and Abertillery for men who worked at the South Celyn. ²² A rather offhand note that unemployed members of the Committee could use their free time to distribute balance sheets further emphasizes the complete concentration on the building of the Memorial Hall. ²³

Secondly, there was the commercial success of the Institute, on which the loans had been paid off in 1922 and which could therefore be used as a surety for further mortgages. Thirdly, compared to 1898 there were now two collieries rather than one, with an approximate doubling of employment and thus of revenue from wages. Income for March 1926, a month before the strike began, records a subscription of £27.67 from the North Celyn and £29.16 from the South Celyn with Crumlin Navigation contributing £10.50. These sums give a total primary revenue of approximately £3,350 which would be diminished dramatically in difficult times. ²⁴

Discussions ranged widely about how to honour the dead. The Welcome Home Committee had been formed at a public meeting at the Institute only ten days after the Armistice. They commissioned commemorative gold medals presented to the next-of-kin at a ceremony in April 1920. Other initiatives came more slowly, with the decision to build the Memorial Hall not taken until 1923 and the original war memorial not unveiled until October 1936. ²⁵ This memorial is now at St Fagan's National History Museum in the townscape with the relocated Oakdale Institute.

The first two years of construction of the Memorial Hall were marked by funding difficulties as building costs were increasing rapidly and the expected grant from the Miners' Welfare Fund did not arrive until March 1924, which emboldened the Committee to construct a balcony in the auditorium and a ballroom on the ground floor. Previous ideas for a gymnasium and swimming pool, though one had been constructed at Llanhilleth, were sensibly abandoned. A memorial tablet was laid in the foyer of the Memorial Hall which remains in place today. The Memorial Hall was opened on 14 March 1925. ²⁶

The magnificent auditorium became the rationale for the eventual survival of the two buildings. It was an extraordinary achievement, coloured with a wondrous eccentricity for a small place in the middle of a depression. The ballroom remained in use throughout the building's decline and somehow the great auditorium survived. It was described in its decaying state in 2007 by David McLees, formerly chief listings officer at Cadw, as follows:

After travelling up the relatively utilitarian stairs and landings, entering the magnificent auditorium is a complete contrast: the harsh realities of the fettered and painful world of coalmining dissolve into a glamorous world of unconstrained dreams and, miraculously,

22 Richard Burton Archives, Box 1, Item 4, p. 354.

23 *Ibid.*, Box 1, Item 5, p. 216.

24 *Ibid.*, Box 1, Item 3, 1926.

25 *South Wales Weekly Argus*, 31 October 1936.

26 Richard Burton Archives, Box 1, 1925, minute book entry, 7 February 1925.

the painted and ornamented interior of this Art Deco world remains intact. The rectangular interior is focussed on the stage (south) end with a rich proscenium arch supported by scrolled brackets and embellished by classical plasterwork including a key pattern frieze and a conspicuous Egyptian motif in the space above. The entire auditorium is encircled by a wood panelled dado incorporating radiator recesses, door surrounds with fretted and back lit exit signs and a small-pane glazing to upper parts of the original doors.

The eight paintings in the auditorium are plaster roundels with two long panels on the walls beneath the balcony. The paintings depict scenes of heavy manual labour such as coal mining and brick laying. The auditorium is also outstanding for the astonishing survival of its early proscenium, curtains, customised equipment – most notably two remarkable cinema projectors – the cast iron seating, with blue plush seating dating from 1939. The balcony is reached by a further flight of stairs going up on either side of the landing.²⁷

In its size and layout, the Memorial Hall auditorium is very much of the earlier period of the pre-1914 cinema/theatre, but its architectural style belongs to the art deco period when it was built, when cinemas, and to a lesser extent theatres, were fan-shaped to accommodate wider screens. They were often decorated extravagantly in exotic styles such as Egyptian (the Carlton, Islington), Moorish (Granada cinemas in Dover, Walthamstow, and Tooting) or in some cases Chinese (the Palace, Southall). Many, like the Memorial Hall, also had ballrooms.

Though the hall was constructed for silent films, it quickly became apparent that there was a need for the technology to show ‘talkies’. The popularity of films and dancing enabled the Memorial Hall to become very successful. As a result, a much-needed refurbishment was carried out in 1938–39 including the replacement of the seating in the auditorium. It is likely that the current paintings on the walls were installed during this time.

Peter Lord, the distinguished art historian and critic, was particularly impressed with the paintings and believes they could be from the hand of an itinerant German artist who was teaching art in the valleys in the late 1930s. This date could explain why the final paintings were never commissioned, as once the Second World War started the artist would either have been interned or could have left to avoid being arrested. Lord described the paintings as follows:

They predate by some years what is conventionally regarded as the arrival of the Expressionist tradition in Welsh visual culture at the hands of Herman, Koppel, and Martin Bloch. Seen in the paradoxical context of the overall richness of the imaging of Welsh industrial society in the mid-1930s but the relative paucity of painting, in my opinion the Newbridge murals are of the first importance to the

history of Welsh visual culture.²⁸

The murals have been recently restored at the Tate Gallery in London and their placement in the auditorium is currently being discussed.

During the Second World War the audiences for cinemas grew, encouraged by the showing of the only pictures available of the war, the need for escapism, and improvements in technology. Two films per week would be shown but very occasionally a whole week would be devoted to one film star such as Deanna Durbin. Films with a Welsh mining interest such as *How Green was my Valley* (dir. John Ford, 1941) and *The Proud Valley* (dir. Pen Tennyson, 1940) also merited a full week. The great days of the Hall, strengthened by the inestimable Harold Jones as manager, were probably 1940 to 1960. The dance hall was at full swing during this era of foxtrots, waltzes, and quicksteps with two dances a week. These were enriched over a period of around fifteen years with a highly successful drama club competing in week-long festivals in the auditorium with clubs from elsewhere in south Wales.

Audiences dwindled with the arrival and spread of television. Only as films were about to die did the cinema chains invent what was to be their saviour: twinning and tripling their screen space. This entailed splitting a cinema building into two or more spaces, creating several auditoria and widening the choice of films available. The Memorial Hall survived these changes as fortuitously it was closed as a cinema in 1972. The last film to be screened was *The King and I* (dir. Walter Lang, 1956), ironically to a record audience.

Support between the two buildings was crucial. The 'Memo' was fortunate in being managed by the Institute and its ballroom was in demand for use by bands, discotheques, and private parties, making it impractical to dispose of the auditorium. For a variety of reasons the Memorial Hall auditorium therefore survived all the changes from the 1930s through to the present day. The Institute minute books record how Memorial Hall's films and dances subsidized the Institute.²⁹ Economic and social changes had a negative impact on more traditional forms of entertainment. Teenage society also initiated its own culture within its own age-group away from their families. The resulting financial crisis caused major changes to the Institute in the early 1960s which had an impact on both the physical shape and culture of the Institute and its social role and standing.

The minute books of the Institute record a decision to implement 'a scheme for a licensed bar and lounge'.³⁰ The Institute became a drinking club. Seemingly the committee was no longer motivated by their predecessors' more lofty intentions of educational improvement and social responsibility. Paradoxically, however, this complete change of purpose also ensured that the Institute and Memorial Hall survived when many others in south Wales were abandoned, demolished, or sold for alternative use. There were a few alterations, such as the link block to connect the Institute with the Memorial hall in 1963/64 and the disposal of the library. The

28 Peter Lord, 'Report for Valentine Walsh Conservation' (Newbridge Institute records, 2015).

29 Institute minute books, 29 August 1956.

30 Institute minute books, 13 October 1960.

organization as a whole slid into further decline once the cinema closed in 1972, though dances and live discos were held in the ballroom every week until the mid-1980s, featuring entertainers such as Tom Jones. The ballroom played an important role in popularizing the Punk and New Romantic movements of the 1970s led by local lad Steve Strange and featuring the future stars of the rock bands Dire Straits and Spandau Ballet.

The final blow, after almost a century of the Institute being central to the culture of a coalmining village, not only for those who worked in the industry but for the entire community, came with the strike of 1984/1985 and the closing of the North Celyn in 1985. The Institute continued for a while as the focus of Newbridge life when it became the base for the women of the south-east valleys who were raising money from all over the UK for the miners' cause, a role which was a most fitting finale.

The Institute drifted on until 2003 but financial difficulties and bankruptcy resulted in a dismal final execution and both Memorial Hall and Institute were closed, seemingly as permanently as the collieries which had formed them. The educative mission of the library and reading room, the pleasures of the billiard room, the splendour of the auditorium with cinema and theatre, the joy of the ballroom, and above all the memorial to the fallen of a world war were, it appeared, to be irrevocably lost and forgotten.

Phase 3 – 2003 to 2015

Local people were deeply concerned about the possible demolition and degradation of their splendid heritage into a car park or pub. For this heritage, from the singularity of the funding of the Institute just over 100 years previously, had in some curious but powerful organic way established what may be reasonably described as a social contract with Newbridge, particularly those inhabitants of an older generation and more distant recollection.

The result of this contract, firmly in place during the development of the National Lottery and the Heritage Lottery Fund, was a campaign beginning with around 400 people attending a public meeting in 2003. Don Touhig MP (later Lord Touhig) spearheaded the movement to save the buildings and worked with the last remaining trustee, Mel Spiers, to call this meeting in order gauge community interest and participation.

The economic circumstances were unfortunately not propitious for the regeneration of a large and foundering building. An indication of the continuing dire state of the economic future of Newbridge may be found in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita statistics produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): in 2009, six years after the closure of the Institute in 2003, the Gwent Valleys were ranked with the lowest GDP per capita in Wales of £16,642, below the least prosperous of the English counties or regions, and amongst the lowest of all European regions. The nearest comparative English regions of Cornwall and South Teeside were recorded as £19,356 and £21,237

respectively.³¹

However, once more the convention of having small regard for economics seems to have continued. Out of this public meeting a support group, Friends of the Newbridge Memo, was formed to restore the buildings and return them to the use of the community. The Celynen Collieries' Institute and Memorial Hall, now registered as a charity with limited liability, was created in 2003 specifically to save the Institute and Memorial Hall from demolition. Their aim was as follows:

By investing in the heritage of the past, we aim to bring benefit to the future by creating a project that will provide access for all, and enrich the cultural and educational experience of the people of Newbridge and the surrounding area.³²

A committee was appointed and two new trustees were elected onto the Board of Trustees. The appointment of the dynamic and competent Howard Stone as Chairman was of crucial importance. In a little over twelve months the campaign gained significant press coverage and was included in the prestigious BBC2 television programme 'Restoration', coming a close second in the final voting on 8 August 2004. Disappointment on the night soon led to an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a project planning grant.

The Caerphilly County Borough Council and the Welsh Assembly perceived the restoration of the Memorial Hall as a key development in the regeneration of Newbridge and its immediate area; they also recognized its significance as a building of considerable national importance. In 2006 they commissioned a master plan from W. S. Atkins and the buildings were placed on the County Council's At Risk Register to show they needed immediate investment if they were to be saved. Cadw supported this move by changing the listing status of the Memorial Hall from Grade II to Grade II*, enabling the charity to attract funding more readily. Cadw also offered a grant of £100,000 in addition to their grant for work on the Institute of just over £229,000. Arrangements were then made to give protection to the charitable body and the buildings which would not limit the trading activity of the charity. This resulted in the creation of a trading company, Newbridge Memo Ltd. The resultant management framework is the most tax-efficient means by which to reclaim VAT, thereby enabling considerable savings on restoration and future running costs.

In order to apply to the Heritage Lottery Fund a project team was appointed with specialist historical, conservation, and project management skills. Initially in 2007 a Conservation Management Plan was written by the conservation architect for the project, Alwyn Jones, and the social historian, Hilary McGowan, both of whom became deeply and most constructively involved with the project. Their research included interviews with some of the older residents, many of whom remembered the opening of the Memorial Hall.

In 2009, the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded the Memorial Hall a Round 1 pass

31 GDP statistics for European regions.

32 McGowan, Jones, and Stone, *Conservation Management Plan*, p. 60.

with development funding, and in July 2009 Caerphilly County Borough Council gave permission for the restoration of the building. This allowed the Conservation Management Plan to be updated to reflect the new scheme which was now in two phases: Phase 1, The Institute and Phase 2, The Memorial Hall. This document supported a round 2 submission to the Heritage Lottery Fund in February 2010 which approved a grant of £2,900,000 for the Memorial Hall. Work on the Institute began in 2010 and was completed in July 2013 with total costs of £ 2,442,481.³³

In contrast to the Memorial Hall, the structure of the Institute was considerably altered during the restoration. The billiard hall and newspaper reading rooms, which had occupied most of the ground floor, were combined into a library and information room complete with computers, with the second floor structured as a function and meeting rooms. The library is administered by the Caerphilly County Borough Council, which has been highly and crucially supportive of the restoration both financially and publicly, on a 25-year lease. This reconstruction process has returned the library with its excellent facilities to the centre of Newbridge. These include a computer suite with 17 computers, a children's area, an adolescent area with separate computers, comfortable seating and a good range of daily papers and magazines. In July 2013, after various setbacks due to petty crime and bad weather, Phase 1 of the project was unveiled by Manic Street Preachers frontman and former Memorial Hall employee, James Dean Bradfield.

The Memorial Hall has retained its ballroom and the splendid auditorium has been restored as a cinema and theatre. Funding was confirmed from Big Lottery and Cadw for phase 1 and work began on site in January 2011. There are still some tasks to be completed, such as the development of a garden fronting the Memo, but at a total cost of £3,833,830 the Memorial Hall was officially opened by Prince Charles in December 2014, thus formally completing and distinguishing this remarkable project. Lord Richard Attenborough summarized the achievement very aptly in his support for the Memorial Hall entry for the BBC 'Restoration' prize:

For me any single building that combines the proud self-sufficiency of a Welsh mining community with a gorgeous but dilapidated art deco cinema as a lasting tribute to the heroes of the First World War is a compelling cause indeed.

The Celynen Collieries Workman's Institute and Memorial Hall is not some crumbling monument to the wealth and privilege of a bygone age. Its very existence proves that ordinary people can become truly extraordinary through vision, generosity and sheer determination. The same community with the same sense of civic pride that brought it into being is trying desperately to save this handsome building today.

They certainly have my support. I hope they also have yours.³⁴

The renaissance of Newbridge Institute and Memorial Hall, with an appropriate

33 See Appendix for full grant information.

34 Lord Richard Attenborough in Newbridge Institute Records.

serendipity, coincided with international plaudits for three Newbridge men. In 2006 there was a major exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London, viewed by almost 34,000 visitors, of the portraits by Angus McBean, amongst the most distinguished photographers of the last century and a man who spent his early life in Newbridge. The distinguished sporting history of Newbridge is marked by the naming of the new railway bridge after Joe Calzaghe who became in 2000 the longest reigning world champion boxer. Thirdly, with an even more fitting serendipity, the site of 'The Lydia Benyon' cottage hospital, originally developed by the coal-owning Thomas and Beynon families, is now the location of the splendid international golf course and Celtic Manor Hotel which hosted for the first time in Wales the Ryder Cup in 2010. This site was generously developed by the billionaire son of Newbridge, Sir Terry Mathews, who lived his early life in a nearby street to the Institute and was born in that same hospital.

The future of these buildings seems assured. The occurrence of new challenges will doubtless to be faced with the same determination as the three primary challenges of the past 120 years. Perhaps in doing so localism will make room for some broader and more inclusive strategies. It may well be that the Ebbw Valley and the adjacent valley of the Afon could benefit from being marketed as a complete tourist attraction as well as separately. For the different sites of Tredegar House, the Institute and Memorial Hall, Blaenavon Big Pit and Iron Works, and the restored canal locks at Rogerstone have a considerable synergy. They all relate to the very different but highly integrated dimensions of the same industrial story. The Chartists who marched down both valleys add a further piquancy to this history. Together they arguably form the most complete and splendidly visual industrial history in the UK.

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APPENDIX

Development Grants

(Source: Records, Newbridge Institute and Memorial Hall)

	Memo (£)	Institute (£)	TOTAL (£)
Convergence Funding	942,295	822,273	1,764,568
CAFP		295,310	295,310
Big Lottery		500,000	500,000
Cadw	100,000	129,200	229,200
CCBC Library Services		60,572	60,572
Own Funds		68,000	68,000
CFRT	26,400		26,400
HLF	2,534,029		2,534,029
HLF Phase 1 Costs	231,106		231,106
HLF Activity Costs		460,126	460,126
Volunteer Time		87,000	87,000
TOTAL	3,833,830	2,422,481	6,256,311

Explanation of terms and abbreviations

Cadw	Welsh Government historic environment service
CAFP	Community Facilities Activity Programme.
CBBC	Caerphilly County Borough Council
CFRT	Coal Field Regeneration Trust
Convergence Funding	European Regional Development Funding (obtained with the assistance of Caerphilly County Borough Council)
HLF	Heritage Lottery Fund

*From Miners' Pennies to National Distinction:
The Newbridge Institute and Memorial Hall, 1898–2015*



Newbridge Institute



Memorial Hall