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*The Rhondda connection and the
Cowbridge–Aberthaw Railway:
an aspect of South Wales entrepreneurial society
in the late nineteenth century*

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The events surrounding the creation of the railway line from Cowbridge to Aberthaw, 1889-1892, have always presented something of a historical puzzle. Why was such a line envisaged, when the chances were that it would run at a loss? Why, after years of refusal to consider supporting such a line, did the Taff Vale Railway Company suddenly change its mind in the year 1888? Why did the Cowbridge and Aberthaw Railway Company so speedily fail? Who made anything out of it? Various theories have been put forward, over the years. New evidence has recently emerged, which gives us some insights into the business methods of the period. In order to examine this evidence, we shall need to look far from the sleepy Vale of Glamorgan, and enter the world of the entrepreneurial society of the Rhondda Valleys, with its systems of entangled and interrelated business dealings.

Cowbridge's previous railway experience

The market town of Cowbridge, in the Vale of Glamorgan, had until the mid-nineteenth century been a major staging-post on the main road to Pembrokeshire (as witness the fine coaching-inns that are still to be found there). It had been a centre in which most of the local gentry had their town houses, and had had a flourishing social life. When the railways came, however, the main route of the South Wales Railway (later the Great Western Railway) to the West was routed via Llantrisant, about six miles to the north of Cowbridge. It has been suggested that this was the fault of the burghers of Cowbridge, who supposedly had not wanted the new-fangled mode of transport running through their territory (much as Oxford University had opposed the proposal to route the line via Oxford, and therefore eventually had to put up with a branch line from Didcot); but the truth appears to be that the decision had been made because the route via the Ely Valley to Llantrisant, and thence via the Ewenny Valley to Bridgend, was very much easier in engineering terms.

Whatever the reason, the decision as to the route looked like making the hitherto prosperous borough of Cowbridge into something of a backwater.

The town soon realised how much it suffered from its isolation from the railway, and from 1855 onwards people had begun to advocate the construction of a branch railway to Cowbridge from Llantrisant Station (which was in fact situated at Pontyclun, about a mile or so south of Llantrisant). It was at first difficult to get backing for the venture (the South Wales Railway was not interested); and it was not until the Llantrisant and Taff Vale Junction Railway was incorporated in 1861, to build a railway from the Taff Vale main line near Pontypridd to link with the South Wales Railway at Llantrisant, that the way became clear for a Cowbridge Railway, backed by the Taff Vale Railway. The Cowbridge Railway Company that was formed was run by local worthies, and was grossly underfunded. Though the Taff Vale Railway gave a small proportion of the initial funding needed, and agreed to use the line with its own rolling stock, the organisational backing needed for a successful venture was almost completely lacking. As years went by, the line, started in 1863, developed more and more problems owing to false economies in its construction, and at the same time the Company was getting deeper and deeper into debt. By 1874 it had not yet paid its contractors, and had paid only three of the twenty-three landowners over whose land the line ran, so that the landowners were now threatening to repossess their land. The Cowbridge Directors, faced by the loss of their line, tried in 1875 to get the TVR to lease their railway for £3,000 a year. The TVR offered half that sum. On this basis, the TVR took over the running of the line in August 1875.¹

Considerable work needed to be done on the line, which was in a very bad state after years of poor maintenance. (One of the main contractors used on this work was Richard Mathias, aided by his son William Henry Mathias, whom we shall see later). The railway was put into good working order, and the line from Llantrisant (Pontyclun) to Cowbridge remained in use until after the Second World War.

The experience of the Llantrisant-Cowbridge line might have been expected to give pause to anyone thinking of other north-south railway ventures in the Vale of Glamorgan, particularly as critics of this earlier venture had pointed out the lack of economic need for such a line through the Vale. Yet, within a very few years of the failure of the Cowbridge Railway in 1875, powerful voices were beginning to advocate an extension of the line to Aberthaw, on the coast.

Aberthaw

Aberthaw was at this time a small harbour at the mouth of the River Thaw, or Daw, almost due south of Cowbridge. It had been prominent in the coastal

¹ For information about the Cowbridge lines, I am indebted to Colin Chapman's book *The Cowbridge Railway* (Oxford Publishing Company, 1984)

trade along both shores of the Bristol Channel, but had declined in importance over the years. In the early 1880s a number of coal-owners, led by David Davies of Llandinam, had decided to try to find a suitable port as an outlet for their coal to bypass the Marquess of Bute's Cardiff monopoly. As is now history, they eventually decided on Barry. Among the original places they had thought possibly suitable for their purpose, however, was Aberthaw; but 'the engineering and other difficulties concerning sea currents were considered so great that it was decided to abandon the idea of using it, and attention was turned to the Barry Sound, between the Island and the mainland, instead'.² In 1884 an Act was passed for the construction of Barry Dock, and for the Barry Railway linking it to the mining valleys. This led to the mushroom growth of Barry, the population growing within a very few years from less than 500 to over 35,000. This appeared the death-knell for Aberthaw.

However, at about the same time as the coalowners had been considering Aberthaw as a coal port, a man called Daniel Owen had been perceiving other possibilities for the area. Owen was a powerful self-made man of local origins (he came originally from Llanharan), who lived at Ash Hall, Ystradowen, just north of Cowbridge. He had made a fortune as a timber merchant in Australia, but had now returned to Wales. Here, amid other ventures, he had founded a flourishing printing and publishing business, and then, with Lascelles Carr, editor of the *Western Mail*, had become joint proprietor of that newspaper in 1869. In 1884 Owen and Carr had combined all these business interests, including the *Western Mail*, into a company entitled 'Daniel Owen and Company Limited'.³

Daniel Owen's flair for the use of natural resources had made him a fortune in the timber business; he now, in the early 1880s, turned his attention to another natural resource, limestone. In this his judgement, as we shall see, turned out to be more faulty. The coast at Aberthaw was rich in lias limestone, both in the cliffs and in an extensive bank of pebbles, so much so that the limestone from the whole Glamorgan coastline had become known as 'Aberthaw limestone'.⁴ The lime itself was not produced, however, at Aberthaw, the stone and pebbles being shipped elsewhere for this purpose, in the small local coasting vessels which traded along the South Wales coastline, and over the Channel to Bristol, Somerset, Devon and Cornwall. A man called Stephen Collier from Bridgend, who had produced a plan for the production of lime at Aberthaw itself, approached Daniel Owen in 1881 for his backing. Later in the same year Owen, Collier, Lascelles Carr and James Hurman, the Traffic Manager of the Taff Vale Railway Company, visited Aberthaw, with

² Stan Awbery, *The Story of St Athan and Aberthaw* (Barry and District News, 1959), 43.

³ Public Record Office (PRO), BT 31/3316/19635.

⁴ Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales*, 1833. (extracted by Gareth Hicks, www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/GLA/Lewis1833Gla.html)

Owen making the case to Hurman for producing a lime works there, and for a railway to be constructed from Cowbridge to Aberthaw. Such a link would lead, via the Cowbridge Railway and Llantrisant, to the mining valleys, in which limestone was at such a premium for roadbuilding and public works.

James Hurman, as Traffic Manager of the TVR, was a crucial figure in the Company's practical decisions. A good example of the way in which the Board followed his advice is the occasion in March 1887, when a deputation of the residents of Llantwit Fardre, Llantrisant and Cowbridge attended the TVR Board to ask for the provision of additional trains between Cowbridge and Pontypridd (there were currently four a day), and to ask for a new station to be provided to serve Church Village, on the Pontypridd-Llantrisant route. James Hurman reported to the Board on these requests in April, effectively scuppering the idea of additional trains both because of lack of passenger demand and because of operational difficulties. He backed, however, the request for a new station at Church Village, and the Directors concurred.⁵

On the question of an Aberthaw line, Hurman does not seem to have been impressed. The TVR made it clear that they would not give their support to the idea. As Owen must have realised, without a rail link his project would be doomed. He was undeterred, however, and kept up his lobbying of the TVR for the next few years, but still without success. Indeed, as late as 1886, when the station lay-out at Cowbridge was rearranged, that arrangement '[did] not suggest that the TVR was then contemplating an early extension of the Cowbridge branch'.⁶ It looked as though there was no chance of a railway to Aberthaw ever being built.

It is surprising to find, therefore, that in January 1888 Owen appeared confident enough to go ahead with his scheme for the limeworks, even though at this stage 'there [was] no indication to suggest that the TVR was prepared to back Owen's proposal.' Yet without a rail link the scheme would not be viable. At all events, he, Lascelles Carr, Collier, and a local Aberthaw limestone merchant and shipowner called John Thomas (who owned five vessels trading from the port) leased the necessary land from Oliver Henry Jones of Fonmon Castle in December 1887, and the 'Aberthaw Pebble Lime Company Ltd' came into existence on 28 January.⁷ 'A gigantic limeworks on the famous Aberthaw shore [was] conceived, completed and working within the twelve months of 1888'.⁸

Dramatically, when the works were opened in December 1888, Owen was able to announce that the TVR had reversed its policy, and 'was prepared to

⁵ Colin Chapman, *The Cowbridge Railway*, 48. W.H. Mathias obtained the contract for Church Village station.

⁶ Colin Chapman, *The Cowbridge Railway*, 52.

⁷ PRO BT 31/4048/25849.

⁸ *South Wales Daily News*, 8 February 1890.

assist with the construction of the railway.⁹ What had caused this change of policy on the part of the TVR? As the *South Wales Daily News* commented, on the fact that the swift construction of the limeworks had so closely been followed by the decision to construct a line, ‘the history of the undertaking [...] is rather peculiar’.¹⁰ Various unsatisfactory explanations have been put forward:

1. It has been suggested that the plans for the Vale of Glamorgan Railway (a subsidiary of the Barry Railway), from Bridgend to Barry via Ewenny and Llantwit Major, appeared to the TVR to be an incursion into its territory, and that an extension of the Cowbridge line to a point on the Vale of Glamorgan line like Aberthaw could have been of strategic value. As the Vale of Glamorgan line was, in 1886, not yet a definite proposition (indeed, after many vicissitudes, it was not started until 1894), this seems a thin reason – particularly as the Vale of Glamorgan hardly seems the TVR’s natural ‘territory’.

2. More seriously, it has also been suggested that the TVR, which had failed to get access to Barry Dock from the East via Penarth, might now have had in mind the use of the new railway as a means for accessing Barry from the West. It is, however, unlikely that the TVR had at this stage any idea of linking with Barry, as suggested. As Chapman has pointed out, they would have known that such a plan would have got into serious legal difficulties; and there is little evidence of such an idea in the speeches made by TVR representatives at the cutting of the first sod of the line, on 7 February 1890. These speeches were particularly cautious. George Fisher (the Chief Engineer of the TVR Company) warned that ‘a great deal would depend upon the inhabitants of the country through which the railway would pass’, and the engineer J.H. Brewer suggested that Aberthaw might now become ‘a seaport and seaside residence’¹¹ (presumably on the basis of the popularity of The Leys, an open area of coast nearby – now occupied by a power station – to which many people came from the valleys ‘by horse-drawn breaks’,¹² before the delights of Barry Island, accessed by the Barry Railway, supplanted it). It is true that, by 1892, Owen himself was putting forward for the first time the idea of an extension of the new line to Barry, no doubt because it was by then becoming clear that the line was already in serious financial difficulties, as was the Aberthaw Pebble Lime Company. But even at that stage ‘the attitude of the TVR was less clear’; and in the event, nothing of the kind was ever attempted.¹³

⁹ Chapman, *The Cowbridge Railway*, 53.

¹⁰ *South Wales Daily News*, 8 February 1890.

¹¹ *South Wales Daily News*, 8 February 1890.

¹² Awbery, *op.cit.*, 42.

¹³ Chapman, *op.cit.*, 61.

3. Another argument, put forward by the Chairman of the TVR at a critical meeting in May 1889 at which the decision was challenged by some of the shareholders, was that such a railway was bound to be built by someone, and that it was desirable that the TVR should have the line and protect its interests. This argument smacks of a post facto justification for the decision taken. As we shall see, it was not at all likely that anyone else would build such a line, given the grave doubts as to the financial viability of such a venture.

The caution of the TVR shareholders was understandable, given some of the warnings they had been given. One prominent shareholder, Major Brickman, who owned land on the proposed route, had said that ‘the traffic on the projected line would not be enough to pay for the greasing of the wheels of the trains’, and that the enterprise was ‘foolish in the extreme’; and the *Barry and Cadoxton Journal* had commented scathingly:

The question naturally arises in connection with the construction of this railway, ‘What is its object?’ It is difficult to believe that the Aberthaw Lime Works will ever be of sufficient importance to make the line pay. [...] The passenger traffic between Cowbridge and Aberthaw will certainly not be very great.¹⁴

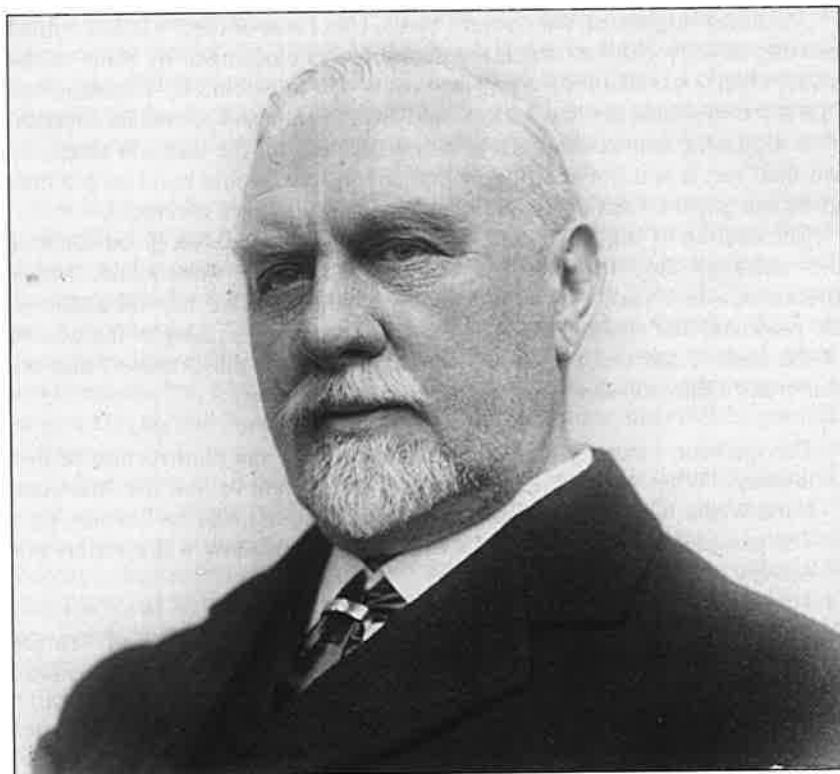
What, then, had caused the Taff Vale Railway to change its mind? To get some idea of the forces that may have been at work, we will need to look further afield, to Porth in the Rhondda Valley.

William Henry Mathias, and the Aber Rhondda Company

William Henry Mathias (1845–1922), who now becomes central to our story, was what the French would call a Rhondda ‘notable’. He was part of that inter-relating, networking group of prominent figures whom we find involved in almost every event or project of importance in the Valleys in this period. Like most of them, he was a second-generation entrepreneur. His father Richard, originally from West Wales, had come to the South Wales coalfield in the 1840s and, from fairly humble beginnings, had developed a successful contracting business, and also become a major contractor for the Taff Vale Railway. Richard’s success was, however, comparatively moderate. He left, at his death in 1890, the equivalent in modern terms of about £575,000. His son William Henry was to leave, in 1922, the equivalent of at least £19 million.

William Henry’s eventual success was to be based not only upon skill and flair, but also upon the ability to tap into all the resources of South Wales

¹⁴ *Barry and Cadoxton Journal*, 10 May 1889.



William Henry Mathias (1845–1922), Director of the Aber Rhondda Coal Company, and Contractor for the Cowbridge–Aberthaw Railway.

networking. To start with, he established a sound base, at the age of 20, when in 1865 he married Rachel, the eldest daughter of James ('Siamps') Thomas (1817-1901), the well-known owner of the Troedyrhiw and Tynwydd mines in Porth, of the Ynysfeio mine in Treherbert, and of the Energlyn mine in Caerphilly. Later, of course, in the 1870s, Siamps was to enhance his success even further by his successful reaching of steam coal at his Standard Collieries in Ynyshir, a mile or so north of Porth, in the Rhondda Fach. The old man's first mine, and the start of his fortunes, the Troedyrhiw, which he had bought in partnership with William Cope and John Lewis in 1850, will strangely enough be central to our story.

Porth was the town which was to be Mathias's home, and the centre of his activities, for the whole of his working life. By the time when we first see him, in 1886, at the age of 41, he had already consolidated a reputation as a successful railway contractor (being employed by the Taff Vale Railway on several large contracts), and as a builder of roads and bridges. He had also become well known locally, as a prominent figure in Porth society.

At this point in time he was just about to embark on the most successful two decades in his career, in which he (i) moved into a new field, as a prominent coalowner (ending up as first a Director, then the Chairman, of the highly successful Albion Colliery, Cilfynydd); (ii) became heavily involved in local government, both in the Rhondda (where he joined the Ystradyfodwg Local Board in this year of 1886) and at county level, where he was a prominent figure from the foundation of the County Council in 1889 for over 30 years; (iii) took on directorships in a wide variety of other businesses; (iv) became so widely acclaimed in the Rhondda that at his death he was described as 'the County's Grand Old Man'.

Much of this was in the future. In 1886 Mathias was however to embark on his first coalmining venture; and that venture, strangely, was to have certain links with the Cowbridge–Aberthaw Railway.

Mathias's father-in-law Siamps Thomas, once his Standard Collieries at Ynyshir had become his major interest in the late 1870s, had decided to lease out the old Troedyrhiw Colliery. The mine was renamed the 'Aber Rhondda', and a Company called the 'Aber Rhondda Colliery Company Ltd.' (in which one of the leading figures had been the shipowner John Cory) had leased it for some years, but had wound itself up in March 1884.

This is where Daniel Owen comes once more upon the scene. He and William Henry Mathias (whose large house Green Meadow lay opposite the mine, on the other side of the Troedyrhiw – now Aber Rhondda – Road) decided to form a new company to continue the working of the mine. The Aber Rhondda mine was not at the forefront of Rhondda mines. It was not a steam coal mine, but continued to produce the house coal for which it had been reputed in the 1850s. By now the Number Three seam, its main claim to fame, had run out; and it was a matter of time before the Number Two seam did so as well. It could, however, be considered quite a shrewd move to lease it for a reasonably short period (taking advantage, in the deal, of its lesser value in the long term) and to continue to extract the valuable coal from the Number Two seam while the supply lasted. In coalmining terms, therefore, there was sense in the venture. Mathias and Owen may have had other factors in mind, however, in the forming of the new company.

This is the first sign we have of a close business relationship between Owen and Mathias. The two men may already have known each other socially. Owen's daughter had married the son of Mathias's old Porth friend, Dr Henry Naunton Davies, and Mathias and Lascelles Carr, too, knew each other socially.

Owen may have chosen to work with Mathias because he was the son-in-law of the freeholder of the mine. He may also have seen Mathias's proximity to the mine as an advantage, in that he could be (as he turned out to be) an effective 'on-the-spot' director. But there were other factors which accorded very much with Owen's preoccupations at this time. Mathias, with his professional roadbuilding and roadstone interests, and with his local government interest in the provision of limestone, was a natural person for Owen to cultivate. And Mathias had worked closely with all the main officials of the Taff Vale Railway, including George Fisher, Henry Oakden Fisher, James Hurman and J.H. Brewer, and was particularly friendly with James Hurman.

What comes as something of a surprise is that James Hurman turned out to be the third main partner in this mining venture. It was on 2 October 1886 that the first activities in relation to the new Company, the 'Aber Rhondda Coal Company Ltd.', took place. Four men (Daniel Owen, William Henry Mathias, and James Hurman, together with a Cardiff accountant, William Bartlett) negotiated on that date a lease of the Aber Rhondda pit from the Troedyrhiw Coal Company (whose active directors were Siamps Thomas and Matthew Cope, the son of one of Thomas's original partners); the lease included 'all the unworked portions of the No. 2 Rhondda seam, and the farm and lands called Penrhiw and Troedyrhiw [...], and the pit, and plant, sidings, fixtures....' etc.¹⁵

A month and a half later, on 15 November 1886, the new Company was formed. The three major shareholders were Owen, Mathias and Hurman. Of the seven people with lesser shareholdings in Aber Rhondda, three more had TVR connections. They were Henry Oakden Fisher, engineer (the son of George Fisher, the Chief Engineer of the TVR, and himself one of their engineers),¹⁶ Richard Wain, proprietor of the Penarth Hotel (which had been built by the TVR in Penarth in 1868) and Richard Mathias, William Henry's father, who had worked for the TVR as a contractor for over 40 years. The four other shareholders were Francis Lock (a contractor), Walter Bartlett and Ivor Roberts, both Cardiff accountants, and John Jones, the company's solicitor. The Directors of the Company were Owen, W.H. Mathias, Hurman and Wain, with Owen as Chairman.

The Aber Rhondda venture can be counted as having been a success. As a start in the coal industry for W.H. Mathias it was a comparatively modest one, but a remunerative one. It is more difficult to assess the value of the venture for Owen. All may, of course, have been perfectly straightforward: Mathias may have introduced his TVR friends to the scheme as natural partners, and Owen

¹⁵ PRO BT 31/3760/23446.

¹⁶ H.O. Fisher was also, from January 1889 onwards, a colleague of W.H. Mathias's on the Glamorgan County Council, where he represented Penarth.

may have gone in with this without other thoughts. On the other hand, Owen may have seen the Company as a way of getting crucial decision-makers 'on his side'. Whichever was the case, this close financial partnership between major negotiators from both sides of the Aberthaw project was bound to make them more inclined to agree, and to work together. Certainly, the attitude of the TVR in relation to the Cowbridge–Aberthaw line appears to have changed by 180 degrees in the period between November 1886 (when the Aber Rhondda Company was formed, and when the signs were still adverse to any TVR approval of such a line) and the end of 1887 (the official decision of the TVR to back the scheme was admittedly taken at a TVR Board meeting on 27 August, 1888 – but Owen would hardly have gone ahead with building the lime works in January 1888 unless he had had some informal assurance by then that the TVR's attitude would change). It was H.O. Fisher who, in late 1888, undertook a survey of the proposed route (a survey which turned out, in the event, to have been an over-optimistic one). It is interesting to note, also, that Hurman now became a shareholder in the Aberthaw Pebble Lime Company Ltd.¹⁷

The Cowbridge–Aberthaw Railway

On 19 August 1889 the first meeting of the Directors of the Cowbridge and Aberthaw Railway Company took place in Cardiff. Daniel Owen was appointed Chairman of Directors, the other two being Sir Morgan Morgan, a former Mayor of Cardiff and (unsuccessful) Conservative and Unionist candidate for South Glamorgan, and his son Colonel John Morgan from Brecon. They decided that George Fisher and James Inskip should be made Directors as representatives of the TVR. J.H. Brewer was appointed Engineer and Surveyor. However, at the next meeting, on 26 September, Henry Oakden Fisher was appointed Joint Engineer with Brewer. The initial shareholders were listed. William Henry Mathias was among them, his 780 shares, of £10 each, only being exceeded by Daniel Owen (1000), Colonel John Morgan (1500), Sir Morgan Morgan (1000), and James Inskip (1000). There were five other shareholders, holding 200 or less; two of them were George Fisher and Henry Oakden Fisher.

Mathias's buying of shares in a company from which he expected other advantages was typical of his techniques.¹⁸ In this case, he clearly had his eyes on the contract for building the line. At a meeting on 23 January 1890 four tenders for the contract were considered. The Engineers (J.H. Brewer and

¹⁷ PRO BT 31/4048/25849.

¹⁸ See, for example, his buying of substantial quantities of shares in the Albion Steam Coal Company in 1891, and in the Windsor Steam Coal Company in 1898, prior in each case to becoming a Director in the Company concerned (in the latter case, of a new company entitled the Windsor Steam Coal Company (1901) Ltd).

Henry Oakden Fisher) recommended the tender of W.H. Mathias, and the Board accepted this.¹⁹

On 7 February 1890 an opening ceremony was held on the site of the new Cowbridge Station. George Fisher, for the Company, presented a silver shovel to Mrs Naunton Davies, daughter of Daniel Owen, who cut the first sod. The Revd David Watkin Williams, of Fairfield, Pontypridd (who had been buying a number of properties in the Cowbridge area) proposed the health of the railway, speaking of 'the great advantage it would confer upon the neighbourhood through which it would pass.' Sir Morgan Morgan spoke confidently of the future; George Fisher and Brewer less confidently, though Fisher insisted that it was the TVR's 'intention that it should be a success.'

Throughout the period of the contract (1890-92) William Henry Mathias divided his time between Cowbridge and Porth, keeping up his regular attendance at the Ystradyfodwg Local Board (rarely missing its fortnightly meetings)²⁰ and at the Glamorgan County Council (to which he had been elected in January 1889) which at this time met alternately in Pontypridd and Neath. He also played a prominent part in three of the latter's sub-committees, particularly the Roads and Bridges Committee (of which Henry Oakden Fisher also was a member).

Work forged ahead on the new railway, though it was discovered that the cuttings had to be made through rock that occasioned far more work than had been expected from the original survey. By August 1892 the line had been completed, and it successfully passed its Board of Trade inspection in September. The line was officially opened on 1 October 1892. A special train left Cardiff at 11.15, and took a circuitous route via TVR lines, first to Treforest, then to Llantrisant Junction, and then to Cowbridge, picking up guests at various points along the way. At Cowbridge they were greeted by Daniel Owen and Sir Morgan Morgan, and the party then proceeded down the line to Aberthaw, where the line was declared open by Mrs Beasley, wife of the Chairman of the TVR. There followed a celebratory luncheon at the Bear Hotel, Cowbridge, where some notable speeches were made, particularly a bullish one by Sir Morgan Morgan, who answered those who said the line would not pay by foretelling a magnificent future for Aberthaw as a port, equivalent to the meteoric rise of the port of Barry. 'At the terminus of the new line there was a natural harbour, and already a great number of small vessels visited it.'²¹

The line had cost about £120,000 (7.5 million on modern terms). This had exceeded the authorised capital by about £30,000 (1.87 million). That the venture was getting into financial trouble was soon clear:

¹⁹ Minute Book of the Cowbridge and Aberthaw Railway Company (PRO RAIL 140/1), entries for 19 August and 26 September 1889, and 23 January 1890.

²⁰ Glamorgan Record Office, L/B Y/8-10.

²¹ *South Wales Daily News*, 3 October 1892.

Without the prospect of an extension to Barry, or of the development of a port at Aberthaw, the traffic potential of the new line was limited to the requirements of the lime manufacturing industry at Aberthaw, and the agricultural produce of the lower part of the Vale of Glamorgan served by the railway.²²

By July 1893 Beasley of the TVR was raising questions in relation to the Cowbridge and Aberthaw Railway's accounts. It soon became clear that the TVR would have to take the Company over. The Bill in Parliament to accomplish this took some time, but in an Act of 17 August 1894²³ the TVR acquired the Company, as from 1 January 1895, and on 19 December the last meeting of the Directors, presided over as usual by Daniel Owen, took place.²⁴ Meanwhile, the Aberthaw lime works, which had been the main cause for the construction of this line, had also been getting into financial difficulties. Seven months earlier, on 1 May 1894, the Aberthaw Pebble Lime Company had had to be wound up, and an Administrator appointed, because 'the Company cannot, by reason of its liabilities, continue its business.'²⁵ Daniel Owen's Vale of Glamorgan ventures appeared to have come crashing to the ground. He retained his interest in Daniel Owen and Co. Ltd, but in 1895 he died, and in 1896 that Company, too, was wound up.²⁶

Though the Cowbridge and Aberthaw Railway Company had done so badly, W.H. Mathias had himself done extremely well out of the venture. He had made thousands from the contract, in various tranches (and had also been allotted further shares in the company). In total the Company paid him £76,845 (about 4.78 million in modern terms), most of it in 23 tranches between April 1890 and July 1892, which were paid promptly. His final estimated account for £7,500, which was presented in December 1892, was not however paid,²⁷ and he was forced to come to the Board on 10 February 1894 to call attention to the fact that 'a large amount of money remained due to him upon the final certificate.' The Board, in dire financial straits and with the TVR takeover already in prospect, resolved to allow interest to him on the amount, at 3.5% per annum, backdated to 1 January 1893.²⁸ When he was finally paid, at the handover to the TVR, the Final Certificate had risen to £9,335.13.0, which, with the interest added as from January 1893, came to

²² Colin Chapman, *The Cowbridge Railway*, p.67.

²³ See T. I. Jeffreys Jones (ed.), *Acts of Parliament Concerning Wales, 1714-1901* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1959), 160.

²⁴ PRO RAIL 140/1

²⁵ PRO BT 31/4048/25849

²⁶ PRO BT 31/3316/19635

²⁷ PRO RAIL 140/2

²⁸ PRO RAIL 140/1.

£9,960.7.9.²⁹ Also, his shares in the Cowbridge–Aberthaw Railway were converted into the equivalent amount of TVR shares.

It is interesting to note that on the Ystradyfodwg Local Board, where limestone was regularly purchased in thousands of tons at a time, and where W.H. Mathias kept a stern eye on suppliers,³⁰ the Aberthaw Company was a principal supplier from the opening of the line to the time of the Company's demise in May 1894.³¹

In November 1901 the Aber Rhondda Coal Company was wound up 'because of the imminence of the expiry of the lease', and the mine was taken over by Siamps Thomas's 'Ynyshir Steam Coal Company', which was now owned (after his death earlier in the year) by his grandson William James Thomas (Mathias's nephew, and the future baronet and benefactor of Welsh hospitals). William Henry Mathias had been since 1892 a prominent Director of a vastly greater concern, the Albion Colliery Company, besides which this earlier Aber Rhondda enterprise must by now have seemed of little importance. In this same year, 1901, Mathias also became a Director, through his great friend (and local government ally) the Insoles manager and director Thomas Griffiths, of the newly-formed Windsor Steam Coal Co. (1901) Ltd., which ran the Windsor Colliery, Abertridwr, as a subsidiary of Insoles.

The Cowbridge–Aberthaw line continued until 1932, first under the TVR and then under the GWR, but always as a loss-making concern.

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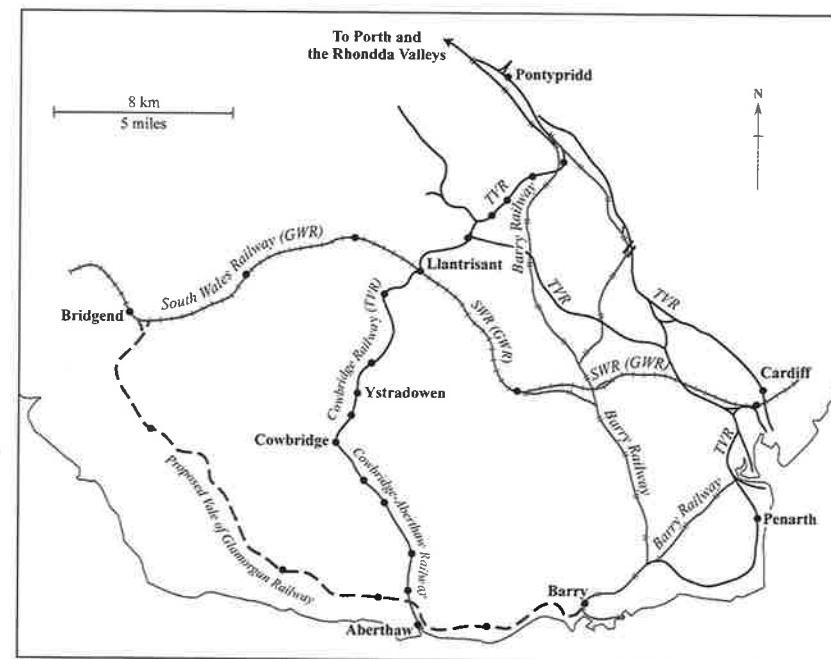
Wales has all the advantages, and all the disadvantages, of being a small country. It is a place where everyone of note appears to know everyone else of note. This can be very heartwarming, particularly to those who have spent some time outside the country, and then return, to find that they still remain part of a vast network of acquaintances and friends.

Like all such societies, it does however contain dangers. One can be so keen to introduce friends to friends, to 'enable' activities because of one's wide and varied connections and involvements, that one can sometimes forget some of the proprieties in relation to the conduct of business affairs. The involvement of the TVR executives in the same business venture as a man with whom they were having to deal on other very delicate matters may have been perfectly innocent; Mathias may just have been pleased to involve his friends from a variety of spheres in what promised to be a remunerative venture, and not have thought about the implications of this down in the Vale

²⁹ PRO RAIL 140/2

³⁰ See, e.g., his treatment of the Machen Limestone Company at the meeting of 28/11/90 (Glamorgan Record Office, L/B Y/8)

³¹ Glamorgan Record Office, L/B Y/12.



of Glamorgan; and Owen may have joined the venture, similarly, without afterthoughts. And the TVR change of mind about the Cowbridge–Aberthaw Railway may have come about perfectly innocently, perhaps because of the opportunity the Aber Rhondda venture gave for more intimate and lengthy discussions, in a private capacity, about the matter. A suspicion remains, however, that there was more to it than that. The change of mind was so violent, and so sudden; it coincided so closely in time with the setting-up of the Aber Rhondda venture; and it was kept secret until the last minute.

Like so many in South Wales in the late nineteenth century, William Henry Mathias appears to have been almost unaware of the possibility of clashes of interest. As a Director of the Albion Colliery, and a magistrate, at the time of the 1893 Hauliers' Strike, he was prepared to hear the cases for summonses against the workers from his own colliery, and to issue the summonses.³² On the Ystradyfodwg Local Board, he never seems to have declared an interest, and he often accepted membership, or Chairmanship, of sub-committees that would to a modern eye seem inappropriate (such as where his own companies, or his father-in-law's, were involved), but which may to his fellow-members

³² *Pontypridd District Herald*, 12 August 1893.

have seemed appropriate precisely because of his involvement. The same can be said of his involvement in the awarding of contracts, when at times members of his own family (his uncle, brother and brother-in-law) were concerned.

Yet he was not alone in this. When we look at the practices in local government, and in business, in South Wales in this period, we see that such lack of concern was not so much an exception as the rule. All one can say is, that in such a climate, only the closest observance of the proprieties can raise anyone above suspicion; and such observance could hardly be expected, when it was relatively unknown.

The jury has to remain out about the propriety or otherwise of activities of the protagonists in the history of the Cowbridge-Aberthaw railway venture and the Aber Rhondda Coal Company. All one can say is, that there was clearly a connection between events in the Rhondda and in the Vale of Glamorgan in the years 1886-7.