

History

Located 7 miles to the north of Cardiff, Caerphilly sits on the southern edge of the South Wales coalfield. There is no longer any active mining in the area.

The first known settlers, the Celts, put up fierce fight but eventually conceded to the invading Romans who built a fort at Caerphilly in circa 78AD, north west of where the castle now stands. By the beginning of the fifth century Roman influence had waned. Saint Cenydd established a monastery on or near the site of the old fort in the 6th century. It later came under the tutelage of his son Ffili, who may be the source of the name Caerffili – Ffili's fort.

In the 9th and 10th centuries the area lay within the kingdom of Morgannwg (Glamorgan) which struggled for supremacy over its neighbouring kingdoms at the same time as being ravaged by external invaders. Despite such turbulence, the administration of Morgannwg became well established with the kingdom divided into "cantrefs" governed by a lord subject to the king, one of which was Senghenydd, an area between the rivers Taff and Rhymney extending from Brecon to the sea. This was in turn subdivided into three "cymydau" – Uwch Caiach, Is Caiach, and Cibwr. Caerphilly lay in Is Caiach.

The Norman Conquest in 1066 was followed by the invasion of Glamorgan in 1090/3, but such was the resolute resistance against attempts to penetrate the hill country that for almost two centuries Is Caiach was ruled by Welsh chiefs. From 1266 this changed. The Normans assumed control over the lordship of Senghenydd and with the construction of Caerphilly Castle in 1271 the native Welsh were subject to the tyrannies of the Lord of the Manor.

Caerphilly developed into a market centre supplying the needs of the garrison and the surrounding area and became the administrative centre for Lower Senghenydd. Such was its stature that although no official charter has been found and was probably never granted, it had all the trappings and privileges associated with a borough, albeit a small one of 80 burgages.

But this period of importance did not endure. With the loss of Welsh independence under Edward 1 the need for such a strong fortress largely passed away. As the garrison was progressively reduced, so Caerphilly's status as a market place and administrative centre began to decline in the 14th century, the process hastened by local support for Owain Glyndwr's rebellion in 1403 when both the castle and town came under attack.

The Welsh Tudor dynasty of the 16th century spelt and end to the ruthless baronial rule, the change reflected in the granting of the Lordship of Senghenydd and the Manor of the Herbert / Pembroke family and a squirearchy resident in the mansions of the Van, Genau'r Glyn, Tir Gibbon and Llanbradach Fawr. Under the reorganised system of local government Caerphilly was included in the Hamlet of Energlyn in the Parish of Eglwysilian in the Hundred of Caerphilly.

The 17th Century was dominated by the struggle for power between the Crown and Parliament, culminating in the Civil War in which the Glamorgan hierarchy mainly supported the Royalist cause. A defensive earthwork designed for artillery was built on the site of the Roman fort in the castle grounds.

Of more importance to the sparse population during this century was an economic revival. Industrial development in the Caerphilly area in the form of iron making and the production of coal from various outcrops brought new life to the area, and stimulated the revival of several fairs and markets, their popularity enhanced by the reputation of the stockings and flannel produced in a thriving domestic industry.

During the 18th century, although industrialisation was confined to the furnace at Penyrheol and some surface coal mining in the immediate area, the rapid expansion of the iron and coal industries in the hinterland had a dramatic effect. Occupying a strategic position between the industrialised areas of Merthyr and Rhymney and the port of Cardiff, the village thrived as a distribution centre.

Another feature of this century was the significant role that Caerphilly played in the nationwide Methodist revival. The first meeting of the Welsh and English Methodist Associations was convened at Grosvenor and Plas Watford, home of Thomas Price in 1743. Caerphilly was still rural in character with a population of perhaps 200. A particular feature of the culture was the harp, the outstanding exponent being Edward Jones who performed for George III.

Cheese had been initially produced on the local farms for domestic consumption to use up surplus milk, but at the beginning of the 19th century it began to provide a source of income for sale at markets and fairs. Such did the demand exceed the supply that in the following decades a cheese market was established to cater not only for the local produce but that from a wide area ranging from the Vale of Glamorgan to Chepstow. Caerphilly cheese gained popularity with the colliers who apparently appreciated its non crumbly texture which limited waste. Somerset cheese makers saw the benefit of the Caerphilly cheese method, ripening in two weeks whilst theirs took 12 months, and they were soon producing more than the Welsh.

In 1850 Caerphilly was still a market village noted for its castle, fairs, woollen products, cheese and was predominantly Welsh speaking. In the 1860s and 1870s the number of collieries and drift mines in the Caerphilly Basin increased and the population doubled to 1364 in 1871 and approached 2000 in 1881. Then came the sinking of deep level collieries at Llanbradach in 1887. By 1900 the population had doubled again to 4000. Welsh was now a minority language confined increasingly to older generation.

The 20th century witnessed the dramatic rise of the coal industry and the equally dramatic decline. The Caerphilly basins' industrial base has diversified and has a range of both manufacturing and services on the industrial estates and business parks that surround the town. There has also been a revival in the interest in the Welsh language.