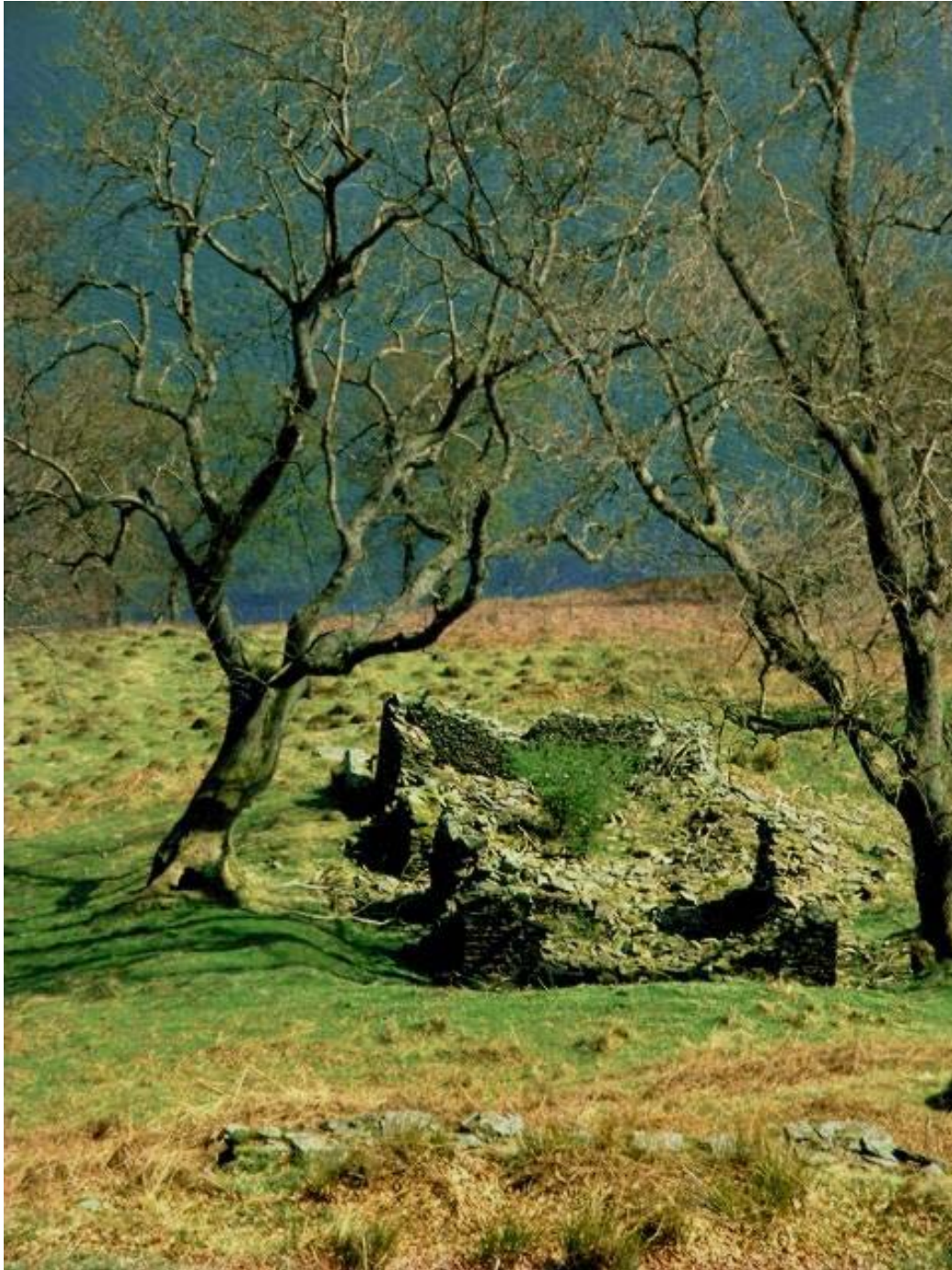


The Tyleri Valley “Heaven and Earth” Heritage Trails



**Cybertyleri and
Communities First Cwmtillery, and Abertillery**

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Section 1 – Introduction

1.1 Cybertyleri and Communities First, Abertillery and Cwmtillery

Cybertyleri was formed in 2006 to develop primarily internet-based projects to promote the communities of Abertillery and Cwmtillery and the surrounding areas with a particular emphasis on local culture and heritage. It is a fully constituted voluntary group with membership open to anyone with similar interests and aims and a dedicated core of members meets at least weekly, with open meetings attracting other members held on a more infrequent basis.

The group currently runs and maintains the popular award-winning Abertillery Online website (www.abertillery.net), one of the longest-running community websites in Wales established in 1998 by one of the founding members of Cybertyleri. Abertillery Online contains highly popular sections dedicated to researching and relaying the history, heritage and culture of the area.

Cybertyleri has recently successfully obtained funding for and commenced a novel heritage project in partnership with Newport Reference Library and Iimage Retrieval to digitise the Abertillery-based South Wales Gazette newspaper from 1888 through to 1937. These vitally important archives will be used to tell the story of Abertillery through the eyes of the local press with a new online site as well as a fully searchable archive for local and family historians.

In addition to its web-based activities, the group has also been involved in devising and organising local heritage walks in conjunction with the local heritage officer for Blaenau Gwent and is now focused on developing these trails both virtually online and also physically for locals and visitors to interpret the history and heritage of this unique area.

The Cwmtillery ward, which covers essentially the northern end of the town and community of Abertillery, and Abertillery town centre are both covered by

the Welsh Assembly Government's Communities First flagship programme, which intended to address social and economic deprivation through community-led regeneration. One of its primary aims is to combat economic inactivity and a number of key assembly strategies such as the Heads of the Valleys (HOV) initiative and the proposed Valleys Regional Park (VRP) have emphasised the vital role that tourism can play in creating employment and training opportunities for local people. The Cwmtillery ward and Abertillery CF partnerships have supported the activities of Cybertyleri and other local projects to try to help develop the area's tourism potential. The major objective of the Tyleri Valley 'Heaven and Earth' story trails is to produce and offer a coherent, attractive, quality community-led heritage tourism experience for visitors to the area.

1.2 The heritage and story of the Tyleri Valley

Whilst the backdrops and stories of the valleys' communities in south Wales naturally have much in common through coal mining and the production of iron and steel and their associated cultures, there are nevertheless unique flavours and distinct qualities found across the different valleys and their towns, villages and communities which should be revered and celebrated. The Tyleri Valley 'Heaven and Earth' story trails are intended to interpret the area's heritage in a way that not only attracts visitors to the area but equally importantly generates local pride and interest.

Abertillery is a unique valleys town with a rich cultural and industrial history set against the dramatic backdrop of superb mountain and valley countryside. Indeed, an article in the Architects' Journal in 1988 waxed lyrical about the setting: *'the scenery is spectacular – if (it) was in the foothills of the Pyrenees*

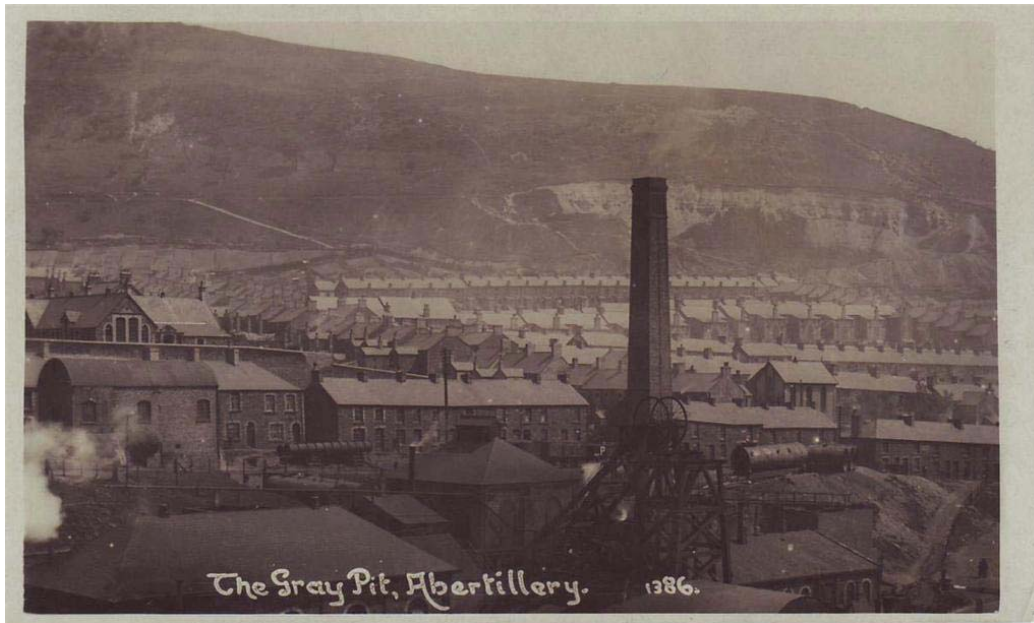
or the Alps, people would trek there for their holidays’.



Later than many other valley towns to develop, partly because of the area's inaccessibility owing to its difficult steep-sided wooded terrain, the population of the Tyleri Valley was still little more than a couple of hundred by the middle of the nineteenth century. Unlike the surrounding iron-making centres such as Blaenafon, Nantyglo and Tredegar, it had changed little from the scene some 200 years earlier when it was a hive of religious activity, one of the cradles of non-conformism in Wales. To the farm workers and labourers and their families in the Tyleri Valley, the lights of the furnaces of Blaenafon, Nantyglo and others glowing and flickering above the hill-tops at night must have been an eerie and possibly frightening sight.

In 1846, a new small tin works opened and within five years the area's first deep pit had been sunk at Cwmtillery on the site of Tir Nicolas Farm. By 1881, a steady stream of incomers attracted by work in the emerging coal mines expanded the population to a little more than 6,000. Then suddenly the trickle became a flood as Abertillery became a mini-Klondike with thousands of immigrants from rural Wales and the adjacent counties of England cascading into the narrow valleys in search of employment in the quest for black gold. By 1921, there had been an amazing population explosion propelling the number of residents incredibly to over 40,000, crammed into the hillside and valley houses in the town and surrounding villages. The same period saw Abertillery

blossom as a thriving “coal-o-polis” with thrusting civic, commercial and religious institutions and buildings to match its new-found status as Monmouthshire’s second biggest town. Much of the countryside’s beauty was hideously scarred and hidden by waste and spoil tips.



Then came the deep dark depressions of the 1920s and 30s, when social unrest and action surfaced from the unremitting gloom of unemployment and poverty, presaging the eventual slow decline of the mining industry. This culminated in 1988 with the closure of Six Bells colliery where just 28 years earlier, the last major mining disaster in Great Britain occurred killing 45 men.

Today, with the coal mining now just a distant memory, the Tyleri Valley countryside has recaptured its verdure and splendour. Nowadays, the scars are all but gone and the area has reverted in places to the scene inhabited four hundred and fifty years earlier by Nest Llywelyn as she hid non-conformists high up in Cwm Tyleri. The Tyleri Valley trails will tell the story of this valley through its people and its places.

Section 2 – Why do we want to tell our story?

2.1 Aims and Objectives

- ❖ To engender a greater sense of pride in the area and increase knowledge of its cultural heritage and identity amongst local people, in particular schoolchildren.
- ❖ To involve local people in developing and improving their area by protecting and promoting its natural and cultural assets
- ❖ To attract more visitors to come and enjoy the attractions of the Tillery Valley area, and gain a better understanding of the cultural and industrial heritage of the area and its natural landscape.
- ❖ To train local people to act as ambassadors for the area
- ❖ To stimulate the local economy by encouraging visitors through an attractive high-quality tourism experience.
- ❖ To help develop a vision for the future development of the Tillery Valley.

2.2 Interpretive Objectives

We want people to:

- ❖ Learn and understand the influence of both nature and man in the development of the Tillery Valley
- ❖ Feel pride in the cultural and natural heritage of the area
- ❖ Discover more about our heritage by visiting the website and getting out and walking the trails to enjoy the assets the area has to offer
- ❖ Get involved in activities to improve the area further and promote it to others

2.3 SWOT analysis

Strengths

- ❖ Thriving local organisations e.g. Abertillery and District Museum Society, Abertillery Orpheus Male Choir, Abertillery Amateur Dramatic Society, Cybertyleri etc
- ❖ Well-documented folklore, cultural and industrial history
- ❖ Fine imposing Victorian buildings in the town centre as well as features such as the Kenneth Budd Abertillery history mosaic



- ❖ Superb surrounding countryside with a wealth of fascinating flora and fauna and excellent vistas

Weaknesses

- ❖ Lack of suitable amenities and facilities within the locality especially quality accommodation
- ❖ Lack of interpretation along the proposed trails
- ❖ Poor physical definition of trails in places
- ❖ Run-down, neglected and poorly maintained buildings and areas exacerbated by littering

- ❖ Lack of knowledge locally other than in some specialist groups e.g. Museum Society members
- ❖ Lack of a coherent strategy to coalesce features and points of interest

Opportunities

- ❖ Existing features and organisations – these could be fairly easily drawn together to create a cohesive trail (or trails) linking points of interest
- ❖ Existing projects (added value) – Stations of the Cross at St Michael's Church, Forgotten Landscapes based on Blaenafon World Heritage Site, CALON project Cwmtillery, South Wales Gazette digitisation by Cybertyleri
- ❖ Strategic links with other proposed projects in the Ebbw Fach valley and across the mountain to Blaenafon World Heritage Site

Threats

- ❖ Some buildings in serious decline



- ❖ Vandalism and perceived anti-social behaviour
- ❖ Poor accessibility of some areas

Section 3 - The story of the Tyleri Valley

3.1 The theme of our story – “Heaven and Earth”

The proposed major theme is to create a number of “Heaven and Earth” walks or trails in the locality which will tell the story of the area linking its cultural and industrial heritages against the backdrop of the spectacular surrounding countryside (see section 1.2).

Why “Heaven and Earth”? The Heaven and Earth elements are two main sub-themes that interweave the cultural and natural heritage of the area; Heaven refers to the religious and spiritual cultural elements highlighted by the story of non-conformism in the 1600s, the spiritual imagery of the late 1700s and the development of religious institutions in the area which played major roles in the area’s culture and history. Earth refers to the glorious countryside and landscape of the area as well as the industries it spawned - quarrying, tin making and coal mining, the foundations upon which the area developed. The two elements are interconnected and the potential aural confusion as “Heaven on Earth”, depicting a beautiful area, is deliberate.

The Tyleri Valley “Heaven and Earth” story trails – the fascinating chronicle of the last four hundred years of the Tyleri Valley, told through its people and places, documenting the area’s transformation from a beautiful wilderness, alive with religious activity and spiritual imagery, into a bustling vibrant coal-mining town, the second biggest in Monmouthshire and its subsequent decline.

There are five main chronological themes:

- ❖ The idyllic Tyleri Valley was one of the cradles of the non-conformist religious movement in Wales in the mid-1600s.
- ❖ The area remained an unspoiled beautiful wilderness, impervious to industrial development unlike its neighbours, at the end of the 18th century.

- ❖ By the mid-1800s, some small industries (Brewery, Tin works) had grown up and the first deep pits were sunk which along with the arrival of the railway heralded the industrialisation of the area.
- ❖ Around the turn of the 20th Century, Abertillery become one of the powerhouses of the south Wales economy based on coal-mining and the town's civic, commercial, and religious development reflected its status.
- ❖ By the 1920s and 1930s, the town suffered a massive economic decline, which led to civil unrest, and from which in many ways the town is still recovering.

The “Heaven and Earth” theme will be told and developed through the stories of selected former inhabitants of the area concentrating on the five specific time periods:

❖ **Nest Llywelyn**

The mid-1600s – a time of religious unrest in this part of Wales. Nest Llywelyn lived in a farmhouse overlooking where Cwmtillery reservoir is now situated and hid and hosted non-conformists meeting in the area. The area has one of the first non-conformist meeting places in Wales at Gelli Crug. Nest Llywelyn will relate the turmoil of those times along two trails including one in the beautiful upper Tyleri Valley. Amongst its features will be the ruins of 16th century farmhouse, Ty Nest Llywelyn, Coed Pant Du – highest beech wood in mainland Britain and Coed Enynfa, hunting grounds for lords and where locals kindled charcoal in first early industries. The site of the meeting barn in 1654 adjacent to Gelli Crug house will also feature in a separate trail.

❖ **Rev. Edmund Jones**

The mid-late 1700s - known as “yr Hen Broffwyd” (“the Old Prophet”) Jones was born in nearby Nantyglo and wrote two books that chronicle the area's history and culture at the end of the eighteenth century. He wrote:

“And of the three valleys, the valley of Tyleri on the east side of the parish is the most delightful. The trees which are the chief glory of the Earth, especially the beech trees abounding about rivers great and small, the hedges and lanes

make these places exceedingly pleasant and the passing by the delightful and affecting; so that well-built houses with gardens trees and wall buildings about them in these warm valleys, with the prospect of grand high mountains about them would make very delightful habitations.”

The upper Tyleri Valley trail will include the cold and reputedly magical springs of Twyn Ffynhonnau Oerion, and Gwrhyd and Hendre Gwyndir (now ruined) farms where Jones's tells of local witches casting spells on each other.

❖ **John Russell**

The mid-1800s – Russell was involved in the sinking of the area's first deep mine at Cwmtillery in 1850. The Tillery Colliery just down the valley was sunk very shortly afterwards. The new tin works in Abertillery and Webb's breweries at Aberbeeg had been established just a few years earlier whilst the earth was now being quarried for Pennant Sandstone to build houses and also supply materials for Newport Docks, now more accessible due to the new railway. The Tyleri Valley was changing forever. Russell's business partner, Army Colonel Lawrence Heyworth was now also on the scene designing houses for his workers at Rose Heyworth and Blaenau Gwent rows.

The trails will take in some of the remaining elements of these industries including one that will feature the Kenneth Budd mosaic which depicts the area's transition from agriculture to industry.

❖ **James McBean**

The boom years of 1890-1910 - The tale of the town's Klondike-like boom seen through the eyes of its first surveyor and engineer, a former Army officer from Scotland and grandfather of world-famous photographer Angus McBean who spent some of his formative years in the town. The Victorian buildings in the centre will form the focus of the town centre trail here including; St Michael's Church (which will permanently house the new *Stations of the Cross* work by renowned artist John Selway, who lives and works in the town); the former Metropole Theatre, where Chaplin once played, now a

cultural and conference centre and home to the town's museum; the Arcade, Wales' second-oldest shopping Arcade and the imposing grand buildings that housed the town's former department stores, Morgan and Francis (David Morgan's second shop after Pontlottyn) and Bon Marche, Monmouthshire's largest department store.

❖ **Beatrice Green**

The depression years; the 20s and 30s – As the economic depression of the mid-1920s hit home, the inhabitants of the area struggled desperately. With mouths to feed and no income, there were reports of the highly distressing sight of discarded babies. Beatrice Green born and bred in Abertillery was a local women's activist and a member of the committee of the local hospital, funded by public subscription, which opened in 1922,. Marie Stopes worked with the local committee to set up the first hospital-based birth control clinic in Great Britain in 1925. A huge public furore ensued stirred up by the enigmatic local Baptist minister, Ivor Evans and the clinic shut within sixteen months. Green however remained a strong supporter of local women's rights with highly progressive views on nutrition, the value of exercise and the upbringing of children. Way ahead of her time in many ways, she was mooted to become the area's MP. She visited Soviet Russia to see for herself whether communism worked and wrote reports on what she viewed on. There she sadly contracted an infection and on her return died in late 1927 leaving behind a young family. Less than ten years later the area's travails continued with civil unrest in the town through riots in the town and nearby Blaina, with the means test and unemployment the root causes. In 1936, King Edward VIII visited Abertillery and met unemployed local men at the Glebe vowing to do something to alleviate the distress he had witnessed, but within weeks he had abdicated.

Section 4 - Who do we want to tell our story to?

4.1 Our audience

The following groups of people of all abilities and cultures are our target audience:

- ❖ Local people especially those who currently are not engaged with the heritage of the area and do not utilise the countryside.
- ❖ Visitors to the area
- ❖ Users of the Abertillery Online website
- ❖ Local schools

4.2 Developing our audience

We hope that as the trails are developed both virtually and physically, more people will visit the area. A network of local partners including local organisations e.g. Abertillery and District Museum Society, Cybertyleri and local authority departments will be created to progress and promote the project and get more local people involved.

Section 5 - How, when and where?

5.1 Project plan

The project plan is as follows with a phased implementation:

Generation of the trails

Two heritage walks in the area were devised by Frank Olding, Heritage Officer for Blaenau Gwent back at the start of the 1990s. We started revamping one of the trails last year with our Steeped in History walks and these will be revisited, amended and re-interpreted using the storytelling approach outlined above where appropriate. Two new trails in different areas will be devised as well to give a more complete picture of the area's heritage. The trails will be available to walk with interactive guides available online (see below) and through new leaflets.

In total, five different trails are envisaged:

- ❖ Town centre
- ❖ Gelliecrug
- ❖ Cwmtylleri
- ❖ Rose Heyworth/Blaenau Gwent
- ❖ Abertillery Park area

A dedicated website with an interactive trails map.

A new dedicated site detailing the trails with an interactive map - www.tyleritrails.com – will be set up, allied closely to the Abertillery Online site with links created from that and other sites including the BBC South East Wales site and more local sites e.g. Cwmtillery Online.

This will allow visitors to understand the area and its attractions and facilities especially the trails before coming and also provide an attraction for those who are for whatever reason physically unable to visit the area.

A sister website run by Cybertyleri will archive the story of the town's development around the turn of the 20th century through the eyes of the first local newspaper, The South Wales Gazette and which will help inform in particular the stories of James McBean and Beatrice Green.

Interpretation/information points and public art on the trails

We will consult and work with local people to produce a public art and interpretation media/information strategy using where possible local artists such as John Selway, who has expressed great interest in getting involved and producing new works.

Interactive interpretation and involvement events

We will work with Creative Communities, Head 4 Arts and local organisations and institutions including the Museum Society and the Metropole to hold events using actors and local people as well as to act as guides and hosts for visitors. One possible event is to tell the Marie Stopes/Beatrice Green story as a play and discussions with the playwright Margie Douglas have already taken place.

Community engagement

We will work with local community groups to do environmental improvements and clean-ups specifically in areas covered by the trails, getting them involved in their environment and heritage. We have already do and have done this through Communities First partnerships in Abertillery e.g. the Green Walk and the Kenneth Budd Mosaic (in conjunction with local schools) and Cwmtillery e.g. the CLEAN community group at the Cwmtillery Lakes are as well as setting up a walking group in the area.

Local schools resource pack

A resource pack will be devised in conjunction with the local schools, both primary and secondary (Abertillery Comprehensive School) to ensure that pupils are made aware of their area's heritage. We already have experience

through Communities First of working with the schools on events e.g. part of the BBC's Coalhouse project at Rose Heyworth School whilst the Museum Society also works with local schools and youngsters on history projects and through a new Saturday morning club, supported by Communities First.

Section 6 - What resources do we need to tell our story?

6.1 Staff and/or volunteers

The Cybertyleri group will be involved in devising and designing the website on a voluntary basis whilst other local voluntary organisations

6.2 Financial and other resources

Financial outlays are expected to include (all figures are provisional at this stage):

Website development and hosting - £500

Walk leaflets – £2000

Local schools resource pack - £2000

Public art and interpretation media – *to be costed as this is an essential part*

Interactive interpretation days including Beatrice Green/Marie Stopes play - £5000

Environmental improvement projects along the trails - £5000

6.3 Time schedule

The project will be phased as outlined above in section