

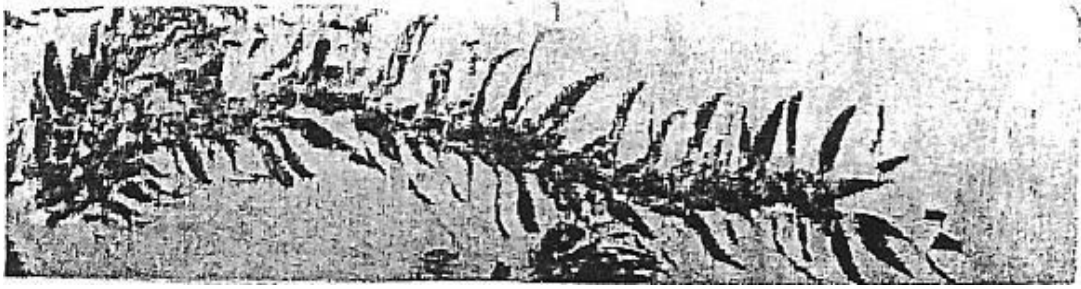


20 miles

Steven Hitchens

The Basin

2011



In thatchlight. Humb. Slowly weapons. Black, lyrical hallucinations.
Stang. Feltic. Deified mist. Tremble be firm. Drink in slag growth.
Perpetual weather. Sproad, blant. So snown. Perish into sky.

We enter the Basin by aqueduct and turnpike bridge. Single arch spanning a narrowing Taff a few hundred yards before it meets the Cynon. The Company's chief clerk and his assistants conduct business up at Navigation House. Offices, committee room, living accommodation for clerks and house servants, rooms for visitors on canal business, coach house, stables. Uninterrupted views of aqueduct, exchange wharves, tramroads.

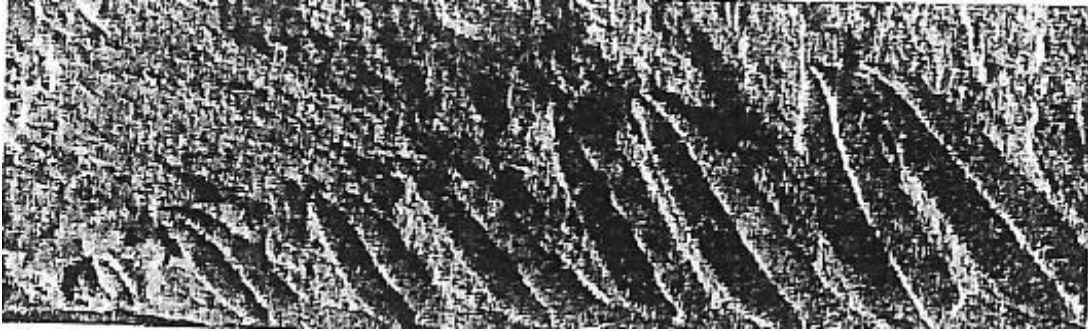
Nearby, Craig Evan Leyshon Tollgate. For every horse, mare, gelding, mule or other beast, laden or unladen, drawing any wagon, any carriage with timber, any coach, every score of sheep, swine, every score of oxen or other meat cattle. In loving memory of Ann, wife of Walter Morgan, Tollgate House, Abercynon, who died 1896. Double tolls every Sunday.



Glacial tracks crawl. Abandoned tramlines stream. Twisted
tributaries. Frost knife towns. Muddy amphitheatres. Iron valleys.
Shapes layer darkness. Downstream gasjets. Coal waterfalls,
camouflage draining. Spider head collieries. Glistening houses.
Millstone peripheries.

Abercynon is situated at the mouth of the coalfield interior. As the bevelled surfaces emerge from the sea, drivers of pack-mules, laden with glacial debris, often call there for refreshment. The ancestral river pattern begins to form, with the shopping centre being Margaret Street.

Behind Fife Street, the ice carves amphitheatre-like corries. Houses are produced by subaerial stream erosion. Streets appear along the belt of disturbance. Looking away to the north-east you can see chapels spring up to cater for the different denominations.



Pool town. Caves steam. Houses chatter. Glacial voices.
Carboniferous crowds. Coking species snapping. Concave cabins.
Melt lamp. Snake stones form rooms. Sandstone archway. Moraine
eels plopping. Sewage caves. Steam reservoirs. Bubble rooms.
Geological feathers ripple.

Now business had tears. Legends indeed. Bunched chapel. A rock
branches pasture. Rolled colders. Sidesprawl. We were iron; straining
lyrical mane. Sudded miners. Gallowed. The future numinous and
bronze.

The year began with a dead otter. 1889 – the Eastern seers, months
before the gleams, for a grocery shone around them. Two opposing
valleys could hide this time. But pressure of opinion forced them
enveloped in light to Abercynon.



Entrenched houses tunnel bare fear. Roof hisses dark fashion.
Mineral birds weight voices. Magpie erosion lamps. Blackbird leaves
wander fishless foliage. Threaded nettles. Glacial woodlands. Corries
ghost. Abandoned distance pipe hover roads. Estate sea wires thud.

We follow the Trevithick run. Riversound and birdsong. Council depot a ski slope of salt grit. Pallet stacks. Folded tabloid in truck dashboard, Jordan and Peter headlines, ex-page 3. Flash of underbelly as they dip into the trees and Dad salutes three for a girl. Car, I step into the stingies. Car, Dad. A burgundy Volvo. High Pressure Steam Engine, ten ton of iron, five miles an hour, Merthyr Tydfil to the Basin, 1804. Magpies the only birds that build a roof over their nests.

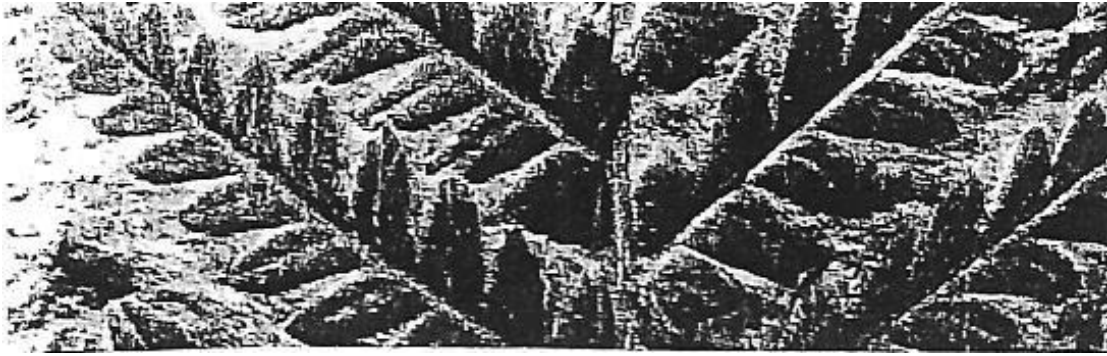
Feeder pipes tap reservoirs and streams to feed canal. Horses draw wagons down tramroad to barges. Pennant sandstone, sombre stone, best in the coalfield. Mallet and chisel blocks for houses, flags for pavement. River, canal, feeders, tramroads: lines converging, intersecting. In loving memory of Elizabeth, wife of Edward Bowen, Feeder House in this parish, who died 1892, aged 62 yrs. Blessed are they that die in the Lord. Wren's make nests of moss in rocky places.



Headwater towns. Marine captured buildings. Gasjets smoke eyes.
Iron trams float subaerial air-currents. Night wires. Eel tracks.
Ancestral sea beings. Disused carboniferous lives. Shrieking stone.
Roof beetles, scorpion gas dark-flaming. Timbers magnificent.

Continuous towns straggle in choked-like fashion down the course of the headwaters. These coalfield rivers are superimposed on a blanket of chalk, anglers sitting along the banks. With the lowering of the sea level, we proceed under the railway bridge.

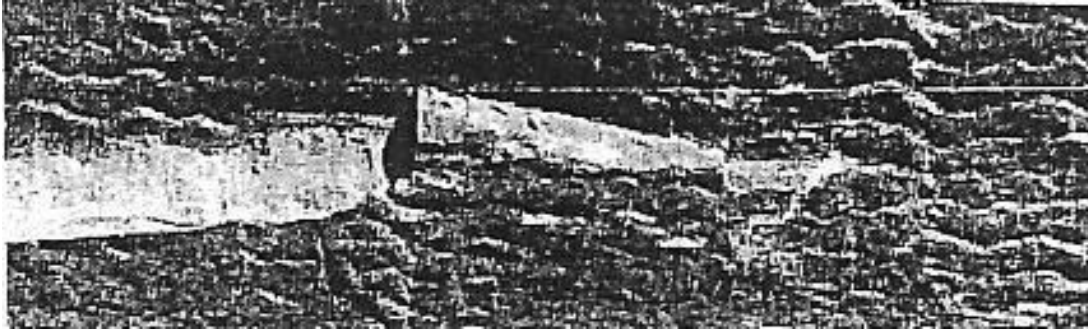
Mr Shepherd has constructed a large lake to the south-east of the town. A rock and moraine ridge holds back the glacial headwaters, a pool where the sheep are afterwards dipped. The bones of deceased waterfalls in the grit, underground caves and dry valleys in the limestone, built for officials of the Canal Company.



Sewage lifts, flanks glistening. Shaley birds. Water cracked feathers.
Enormous naked staring beetles. Gnats laughing crumbs. Chicken
figure gropes fire railway. Sycamore wet branches hang. Fish lamps,
dry rays. Boatmen boys blue-green. Lonely river district. Decayed
sun. Static rise.

The Volvo stops at the River Monitoring Station. Pylons toss cables from bank to bank. White-haired in sleeveless jacket, he peers across the weir at the watermark. Above, the A472 overpass bridges the roundabouts at Fiddler's Elbow. Drunk found sleeping hammocked in net between lanes. A Biffa lorry judders the join. Also of Edward Bowen, who died 1916, aged 88 yrs. Graffiti relics on cement pillars. And God shall wipe away all tears.

On the hill above Fiddler's I can see St Cynon's, the cemetery we visited yesterday. Crunching dried brambles and leaves up the hillside to uncover four-foot slabs of rusted stone. Ivy tendrils claw the headstone, pull it down into the earth. Some stones sunk into the subsidence. Some tilt out of ground. Some toppled, snapped in two. A tree bursts up behind one. When we peel the ivy away it leaves green veins across the worn engraving.



Headwater static dark. Blackbird ripple. Railway debris. Northern
course carriages. Slowly grass turns eastward. Ridge land beams. Sun
mines. Hills sparkle. Pond trams sun wet. Swim straggle eastward.
Long railway crowds kneel. Fox heads. Early lizards laugh dry rock.
Shaley ancestral winds.

The business was like fire on my own child. For I had been identified with the edge of things. The job of showing the future was closed. They were like a grey pile of ashes. They were like fairies. He returns

day after day to close the snow-shocked bodies shiver and we are always curious of the buried dust. Holy goods that were old materials. He ran as clear as we are always to be hated. But pressure of feet bare in 1900. His elbow, answering,

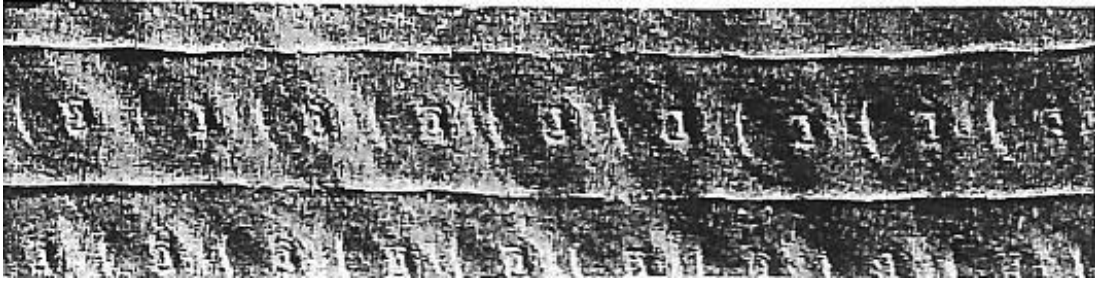
floated on the pit and the bottom flourished with a most substantial vision! He then struggled tattered robes across the notebook. Garments of leaves. Around him long before, young miners sit in legends of Scripture sky.



Pipes jingle. Silences jump, lamp trickles. Grit fades. Lowering fern
black silence. Slow nettles dark. Downstream lark echo. Blackberries
hunt wren laugh. Lake nettles silently hoof. Walls move. Explorers
change, chalk fingers. Guides quietly disappear. Air moves, breaks
blue-green. Inhale.

Steep Goitre Coed lifts us to Top Locks. Sixteen locks in staircase pairs. Within one mile the boat drops two-hundred feet. The windswept hill slope of Five Locks marked Incline Top on the map. In loving memory of John Aston, beloved husband of Annie Aston, 5 Incline Top, who died Dec 19 1903, aged 30 yrs. Puddles in a ditch all that remain of the canal. Cut through by the New Road, A4059 to Aberdare.

As the canal loops westward, the valley unfolds. The Royal Oak appears on the towpath. Under Pont Haiarn, Iron Bridge, the boat bends into the eleven lock flight. Sinks like an elevator. Twenty-six feet between dark dripping walls. A concrete ditch of Coke and Stella bottles. We work the windlass, raise the paddles, as the canal flows down through the Little Park, past the steel slide, between the tangled swings.

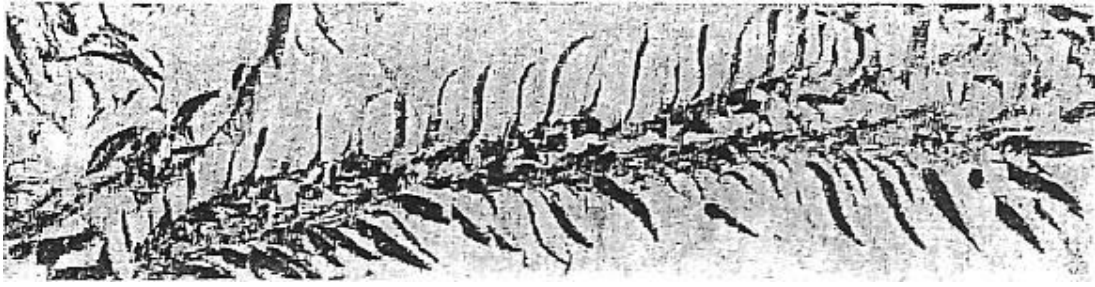


From a side road where a man sees the sky, I catch sights flickering
out. He gazes at us, on water full of shadow. He pokes out, jumps
and stands still, unthreading to show the light. Gleaming in the
immense silence of rails.

Fibulae song. Lignite corridors. Lampwhite, wren.

Of the Boatman there is no trace, the wide valley is dry. It has become a halfway house for barges on their way up and down the tributary streams which hang above the valley floor.

The two headstreams climb along the A4061 over the escarpment, giving magnificent views down into the cirque. This ridge is very precipitous, and animals straying from outlying farms often fall there and break their waters rushing rapidly down the steep valley sides.



In from the perpetual scars, the mind hills. Toil of river, late in warm galleries. I fed the closure of the light. I had been under Wales time. This violence, stiff and sweated. We had cold music of business.

Bottom of hill, just before the flats, a green garden gate brushed black. That tree wasn't there when we lived here. Dad points to a thick birch trunk in the back yard. That was where I learnt my skills. Cricket and football against the wall. Scores on the window ledge. Grandad kept that patch and grew things. That was the outdoor toilet. And that was where I fell into the canal and cracked my head, about where you are standing now.

The canal continues into the car park behind the flats, then disappears into a culvert.

Resources

George Ewart Evans, *The Strength of the Hills: An Autobiography*

Thomas Evans, *The Story of Abercynon*

Thomas Evans (trans.), *Glanffrwd's History of Llamwonno*

W. Hazell, *The Gleaming Vision, being the history of the Ynysybwl Co-operative Society Ltd. 1889-1954*

Joseph Keating, *My Struggle For Life*

Robert Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*

T.R. Owen, *Geology Explained in South Wales*

Stephen Rowson & Ian L. Wright, *The Glamorganshire & Aberdare Canals*

