

Historical experiences of work in the Port Talbot steel industry – *Bleddyn Penny* (October 2018)

Bleddyn Penny kindly stepped in at short notice to replace the advertised speaker who was unable to be present. He presented a fascinating talk which clearly resonated with many members of the audience. It was based on his PhD research at Swansea University into the working life of steelworkers and their community. Whilst there is a great corpus of research and writing on the industrial history of Wales, coal had been predominant and other industries, including steel, were, he maintained, under-represented. His research concentrated on the post-1945 period and especially since 1951 when the Abbey works had opened. The opening of the Abbey works had been seen as a landmark in steel production, using as it did the most up-to-date technology then available on a far larger scale than had hitherto been known and in a modern, purpose-built range of buildings. A great many people were employed in the works, as many as 18,102 by 1960.

The question his research had addressed was what did it feel like to be a steelworker. In attempting to answer this he had used various documentary sources but above all oral history (despite the shortcomings to which he accepted that this method was prone). The experience of work varied according to occupation, rank, age and gender, and it varied again within each of these categories. Thus the experience of process workers, craft workers and staff workers was different, for instance as regards pay, hours or working conditions.

His research had focussed particularly upon process workers. Their initial experience of work had generally been one of fear and awe. Working conditions were often harsh and physically demanding in different ways according to a particular job but this was something that was accepted. Process workers were required to work shifts and they responded to the demands of the night shift in different ways. With the passage of time technological developments reduced the amount of physically arduous work that was required. It has been argued that such innovations reduced job satisfaction by making it more monotonous and deskilling a job, but Bleddyn did not find this born out by the respondents that he interviewed.

Health and safety was much improved with the passage of time. When the Abbey works started it was still very much a case of each individual being responsible for their own safety and during the 1950s and 1960s there were frequent fatalities and minor injuries were accepted almost as an inevitable hazard that came with working with hot, sharp steel. A particular danger was presented by gas that affected workers on the coke ovens. But with the Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974 a culture of shared responsibility between employer and employee was introduced.

In retrospect all Bleddyn's respondents looked back fondly on their time in the Abbey works. In particular they valued the camaraderie and the social benefits, a feature of life in the works that was enhanced by the many family connections that existed among the employees.