



### The attitudes and actions of ironmasters

As a result of a booming iron industry, Merthyr had grown to be the 'Iron Capital of the World'. The four main ironworks were at Cyfarthfa (Crawshay), Dowlais (Guest), Plymouth (Bacon) and Penydarren (Homfrey). Profit was the ironmasters' only real concern, and they treated workers with contempt. Cyfarthfa became the most successful, amassing the Crawshays a fortune large enough to build Cyfarthfa Castle. Crawshay treated workers so badly that it earned him the nickname 'The Tyrant'.

### Living and working conditions in Merthyr

Houses in Merthyr had been built quickly and without much care, leading to poor living conditions for workers. Streets were narrow, and as the population grew from a few hundred people in 1750 to around 30,000 by 1831, there was severe overcrowding. Sanitation was poor, with sewers overflowing onto the streets and no waste disposal. Disease was rife, including cholera, typhus and typhoid.

Ironworkers' shifts lasted 12 to 13 hours and pay was low. They were also paid in tokens (known as 'truck'), which had to be spent in the expensive 'tommy shops' owned by ironmasters, leading to debts.

### Protest: timeline

**30 May:** Meeting at Waun Common; the Court of Requests had sent bailiffs to collect property from Lewis Lewis.

**1 June:** Chest taken from Lewis discovered with a local shopkeeper; the crowd takes back the chest.

**2 June:** The crowd moved from house to house, reclaiming goods taken by the Court of Requests. Thomas Williams' (a bailiff) house is attacked. The crowd moves to the house of Joseph Coffin, President of the Court of Requests. Court records are burned, and the house is ransacked.

**3 June:** Ironmasters and officials gather in the Castle Inn. 70 Special Constables are signed in. A crowd of 10,000 protestors surrounds them. Soldiers arrive, armed with guns and bayonets. The Riot Act is read before fighting breaks out. 16 soldiers are injured and 24 protestors are killed.

**4 June:** Soldiers seek refuge at Penydarren House. Protestors run the town in their absence.

**6 June:** Order is finally restored after the Riot Act is read again, and soldiers aim their muskets at the crowd.

### The actions of the authorities and ironmasters

26 protestors were arrested, including 18 of the leaders of the Rising.

Most were sentenced to time in prison; four were transported to Australia, and Lewis Lewis and Richard Lewis (Dic Penderyn) were sentenced to death.

Unions were banned by some ironmasters (Dowlais and Plymouth), although some reforms were made to improve living conditions. However, there was not much change in the ironmasters' harsh treatment of their workers.

### The treatment of rioters including Dic Penderyn

Lewis Lewis had his sentence reduced to transportation, but Dic Penderyn was hanged outside Cardiff Gaol on 13 August 1831.

Many believed Dic Penderyn to be innocent, with 11,000 signing a petition for his punishment to be reduced. The petition was dismissed, and his final words were 'O Arglwydd, dyma gamwedd' ('Oh Lord, this is an injustice'). Another man, Ianto Parker, later confessed to the crime on his deathbed.

Some improvements for workers had taken place, and the Parliamentary Reform Bill eventually passed, but workers were very unhappy that so few benefits had been seen despite Dic Penderyn making the ultimate sacrifice.

### Radicalism

Radicals in Wales sought to change the way the working class was exploited by the wealthy. They hoped to achieve this through political reform. During this time, joining political unions became increasingly popular in Merthyr.