

Great Archaeological Sites in Blaenau Gwent



7. CEFN GOLAU CHOLERA CEMETERY



High on the hillside above Tredegar (SO13880757) is a small rectangular deserted graveyard completely separate from the modern Cefn Golau cemetery which lies some 150m to its north. The graves are untended, their stones covered in lichen. Where did the people in these graves come from, and why were they buried here?

The story they have to tell is one that has recently become all too familiar to us. In the 19th century, Britain was swept by waves of a global pandemic. These were caused by the deadly cholera bacterium, which spreads through infected water and food. The crowded conditions in the industrial settlements of South Wales were ideal for infection to rise exponentially – workers were crowded together in densely packed housing where a whole street might share one or two communal earth closets and draw their water from a nearby pump. Under these conditions it was all too easy for infected sewage to seep into the groundwater, which would then get into the pump from where it would be collected for washing and drinking.

The first wave of the pandemic arrived in Tredegar in 1832, having spread into Wales from England where it had arrived in the previous autumn. This lasted until

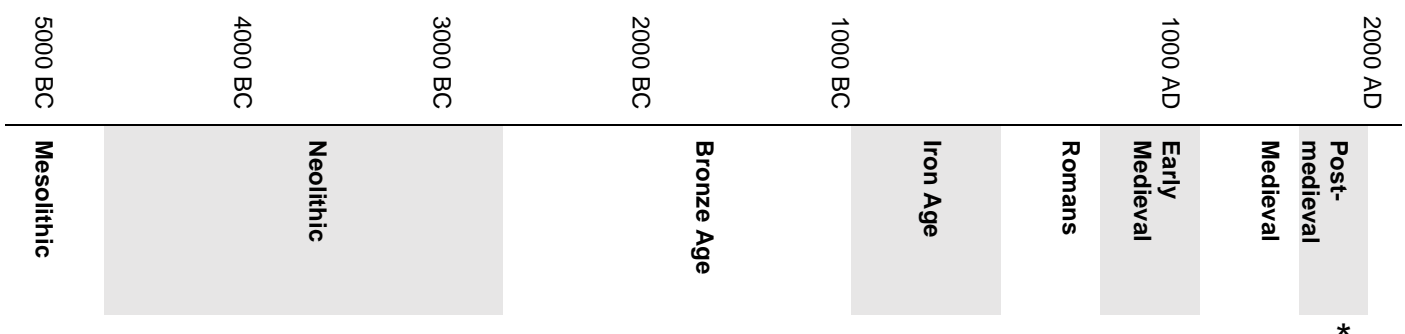
1833. A second and even worse wave followed sixteen years later in 1849 following outbreaks in Rhymney and Nantyglo. Hardly anywhere was unaffected – there was no understanding of how the disease was spread, and effective cure. Some people tried shielding at home but this did them no good if they were still drinking infected water. Others fled into the countryside, which risked taking cholera into areas that had not previously been affected. Still others flocked to the chapels. Traditionally it is cold weather that has been credited with finally bringing an end to the outbreaks, but herd immunity may also have had a part to play. The discovery of how the disease spread, leading to improved sanitation also helped, although there was also a smaller outbreak in 1866.

The incubation period for cholera is twelve hours to five days, its progress is swift and it has a 50% - 60% mortality rate if left untreated. Understandably, people were terrified of becoming infected. The dead still had to be buried, but nobody wanted them in graveyards of the local church or chapel. The solution therefore was to isolate them even in death. Special cemeteries in out-of-the way places were therefore created by many towns for their cholera victims; Cefn Golau is one of these. The inscriptions on the gravestones show that people who died in all three outbreaks were buried here, and that sometimes the widow or widower of victims were laid to rest at a later date in the same grave. Many of them had been employed in the Tredegar ironworks.

In other places rapidly expanding populations later in the 19th century meant that these emergency graveyards, such as the Pant cemetery at Merthy Tydfil, later continued in use to bury people who had died of other causes. But there were fewer pressures at Tredegar, and the Cefn Golau cholera cemetery remains as a memorial to all those who lost their lives in the Victorian pandemics.

The Cefn Golau Cholera cemetery is on open access land adjacent to the B4256 between Tredegar and Rhymney. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 161, Explorer Series sheet outdoor Leisure 13.

Timeline (the asterisk indicate the time-span)



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