

Great Archaeological Sites in Torfaen



4. COAL TIPS AT BLAENAVON



Coal has been mined in South Wales since the Middle Ages. Initially the mines were small shallow pits or adits worked by a few men who brought out the coal by hand. Unwanted spoil was dumped alongside the mine entrance, and when the mine was abandoned because it had become impractical or unsafe to continue, it left a typical earthwork in the form of a hollow accompanied by a mound of spoil, either alongside it or in a ring around.

The development of deep mining in the 18th century changed this pattern. The need to obtain ever increasing quantities of coal, first for the smelting of copper, iron and other metals led to improvement in mining technology and the invention of pumps powerful enough to deal with springs of water far below the surface. These new pumps were powered by steam, creating even more demand for coal, especially as the fixed engines burned coal themselves. And as the 19th century went on and the use of steam power increased, more and more mines were sunk. Spoil was now produced in enormous quantities and was hauled out on tramways and dumped wherever the mine owners found convenient space. This led to the enormous spoil heaps that in many people's eyes became synonymous with the South Wales valleys. Blaenavon was no exception, with the spoil dumped on the surrounding hillside in tips that still partly survive today in the historic landscape of the Blaenavon World Heritage Site. Even bigger tips were created with the introduction of opencast

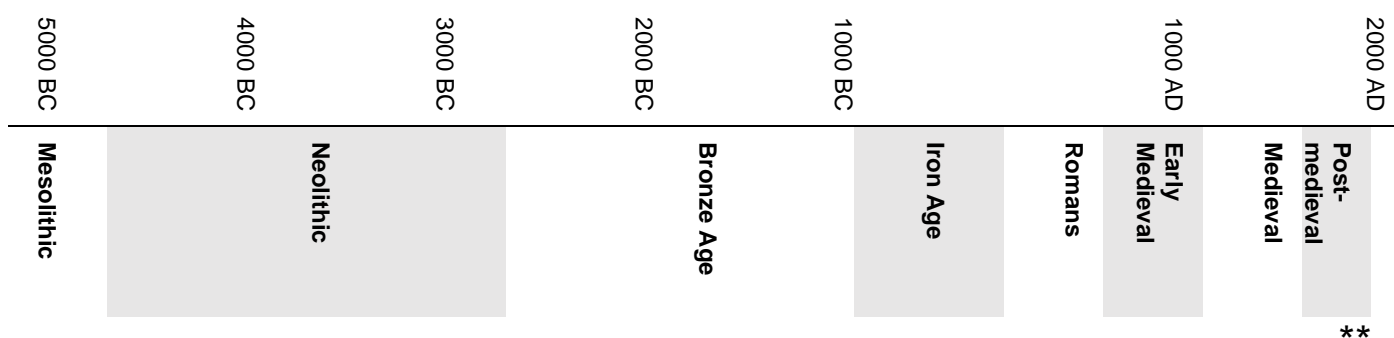
mining during the Second World War, of which the most notable are the Canada Tips on the hills to the north-east of the town, named from the input of Canadian troops with the new equipment necessary and skills to use it.

Many tips in Wales were rightly removed after the Aberfan disaster in 1966. In some areas, more recent opencasting has removed all traces of earlier mining, including the tips, as whole landscapes have been dug away. The ones that remain have gradually been greening and have become home to many interesting species of plants and animals. The importance of this biodiversity is gradually being recognised along with their archaeological and heritage importance.



Disused tips can be seen on the open moorland that overlooks Blaenavon from both sides of the valley. The Blaenavon Forgotten Landscapes project has devised a trail around Coity tip which can be accessed from a variety of sites on the web. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 161, Explorer Series Outdoor Leisure sheet 13.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the possible time-span)



You can learn more about the Blaenavon landscape on our Historic Landscapes pages at http://www.ggat.org.uk/cadw/historic_landscape/main/english/historical.htm. You can search here too for other Registered Historic Landscapes in our area. You can contact us via social media or through the methods given at the bottom of the page.