

So, how green is the valley now?

Professor Huw Bowen looks at the Lower Swansea Valley Project at 50

THE year 2011 is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Lower Swansea Valley Project (or LSVP as it was popularly known), a remarkable partnership established between University College, Swansea, the Welsh Office, Swansea Corporation, and the private sector.

This was a bold and path-breaking project that was to transform landscapes and lives, as Europe's largest site of post-industrial dereliction was cleaned up, "greened", and turned into a new environment fit for business and leisure activity.

By 1961 the need to "do something" about the Lower Swansea Valley was urgent and long overdue.

Swansea's days as a leading world centre of industrial enterprise and innovation were long gone, and the lingering deaths of the copper, zinc, lead, tinplate, steel, silver, arsenic industries were all but complete.

What was left behind was often described as a "moonscape", a scene of utter dereliction and destruction that made it appear as though the Valley had been struck by a gigantic hurricane or tsunami.

This situation had been caused by the very manner in which "Copperopolis" had been created. Swansea well deserved its 19th century description as "Intelligent Town", such was its reputation as a hotbed of scientific thinking.

But the copper industry magnates themselves were evidently not intelligent enough to understand the

long-term consequences of their actions. Of course, most of them probably didn't care.

They were motivated by a desire for short-term profit, and little thought was given to how copper smelting affected the natural environment.

The copper enterprises that had been established in the Lower Swansea Valley in the century and a half after 1720 served to create the world's first globally integrated heavy industry.

Copper ore was brought up the River Tawe to the sprawling smelting works (which eventually numbered 20 in total) from Cornwall and Anglesey; and then later from Chile, Cuba, South Australia, and other places.

The coal needed to smelt it was carried down the valley by wagonway, river, rail, and canal. Eighteen tons of coal was needed to produce one ton of refined copper. Refined and semi-refined copper was then shipped out to markets across the globe, notably in Asia, and Swansea copper played its part in the Atlantic slave trade.

By 1850, perhaps half of the total world output of smelted copper was produced in the Lower Swansea Valley.

Some of the copper magnates did give consideration to the lives and education of those who lived in the communities that sprung up around their works.

During the 1770s John Morris built multi-storied accommodation for the miners of Treboeth colliery in Morris Castle, whose ruined towers still overlook the Valley.

The Vivian and Grenfells gave their names to workers' settlements at Trevian (Hafod) and Grenfelltown (now Pentrechwyth).

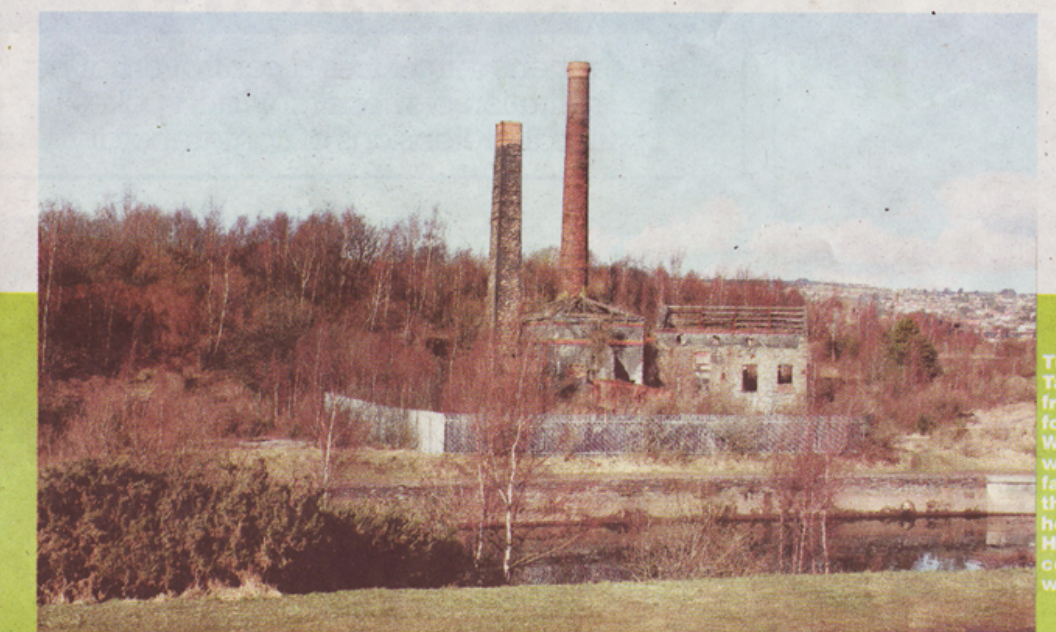
Seeking their place in heaven, or perhaps simply easing their guilty consciences, the copper masters sometimes sponsored the often magnificent chapels and churches that are still dotted throughout the Valley.

But in an unregulated environment these men also caused long-lasting damage to the land, population, and vegetation.

Huge copper slag tips were created, and the infamous smoke that belched from the smelting works poisoned the soil, damaged people and animals, and eventually destroyed most of the vegetation. The effect was to transform a once scenic valley into a vision of a living hell.

As one poet famously put it in 1897: "It came to pass in days of yore, The Devil chanced upon Landore. Quoth he, by all this fume and stink, I can't be far from home, I think".

It was against this background that the LSVP came into being, after a series of informal meetings held in 1960. The main driving force was Robin



The River Tawe taken from the former White Rock works site, far left, and the engine houses of Hafod copper works, left

Huws Jones, the director of courses in social administration at what has now become Swansea University. Huws Jones found the numerous train journeys he made in and out of Swansea to be a profoundly depressing experience such were the dismal scenes he witnessed through the train windows.

The following year, Huws Jones' working group became a formal committee and the emerging project was supported with grants of almost £50,000, including £22,500 from the Nuffield Trust. This allowed for the appointment of Kenneth J Hilton as executive director.

The scope of the task was at once recognised as being very considerable indeed. As the project's published report of 1967 put it: "The Lower Swansea Valley... is notorious for its blighted appearance. This once economically active area has in large part become derelict and is now covered with ruins and mounds of industrial debris; there are acres of noxious land that bear no vegetation at all."

The report went on to note that: "This blighted area lies at Swansea's front door for it adjoins the principal railway station and is only a few minutes by road from the High Street and the docks. The town suffers accordingly in reputation, morale, and in its economy."

The project set about identifying ways in which the Valley could be brought back to life. In order to achieve this, it undertook two types of detailed study.

Some examined the physical problems of the valley floor; others undertook socio-economic analysis of the resident and industrial populations.

These studies drew on the expertise of six departments in the University College, but there was also considerable input from the other partners, especially that supplied by RB Southall who was general manager of BP Llandarcy.

Twelve sub-reports were generated, and they incorporated numerous detailed recommendations. These ranged widely from the human ecology of the Valley through to estimates of the volume of waste material contained within the many tips and slag heaps.

Some intriguing suggestions were made, including the construction of an aircraft landing strip and helicopter port. It was acknowledged at the outset that this type of project had not been undertaken before in Britain, and the boldness of the ambition and method is still very striking.

It showed clearly how a university could become a very powerful agent of economic, social, and cultural change within the region in which it is located.

Of course, this is precisely what universities should be aspiring to achieve today.

The LSVP thus represented a prototype for large-scale socio-economic projects. It attracted very considerable interest because it provided a model for action in all blighted post-industrial areas.

Visitors from across Europe and the wider world came to Swansea to inspect the Valley and discuss what was referred to as the project's "experimental method".

The many and varied recommendations of the LSVP were not translated directly or immediately into action. Instead they framed discussion

of the development and regeneration processes implemented by successive local authorities after the project report was published in 1967.

These processes most obviously manifested themselves in massive land-clearance projects, which swept away millions of tons of industrial debris. Certainly the eventual outcomes were not always those envisaged by the authors of the report.

There can be no doubt, for example, that the creation of a large out-of-town shopping "zone" in the form of the Llansamlet Enterprise Park has inflicted significant long-term damage on Swansea city centre.

And several bold ideas never came to fruition, which explains why, perhaps fortunately, there is no aircraft landing strip in the Valley.

Equally, though, there is no doubting the enormously beneficial impact that the project has had on the landscape, environment, and general quality of life for the inhabitants of the Valley.

In admittedly piecemeal fashion, Swansea has been equipped (eventually) with some first-class sports facilities, such as the Liberty Stadium which stands on the site of the former Morfa Copper Works.

But one of the most important elements in the success of the LSVP was the emphasis that was placed on community involvement. This was most evident in extensive tree-planting schemes, which saw hundreds of local children and volunteers involved in the planting of many thousands of trees, shrubs, and plants.

Project conservators such as Steve Lavender, who supervised these schemes during the 1970s and 1980s,

were key figures in helping to bring the Valley back to life.

They helped to ensure that, as Prince Charles put it in 1981, the LSVP became a "remarkable work of environmental renaissance".

The tree planting schemes had a considerable effect on those who live and work in the Valley, as well as those who approach Swansea by rail or road. Indeed, many parts of the Valley now have a tranquil rural calm to them, which is a far cry from the days when the area resembled Dante's Inferno.

Even the River Tawe has come back to life. For years it was orange and toxic; now rowers and the occasional motorboat make their way between Swansea Marina and the Morfa bridge. Indeed, anglers are sometimes now to be found on the river bank.

This would have been quite unthinkable 50 years ago.

What then of the future? It is noteworthy that the LSVP made no direct connection between the area's industrial past and its future development. In other words, there was no mention at all of the need to preserve, conserve, and use the historic buildings that were scattered across the Valley.

Indeed, many sites, such as the White Rock Works, were blown up and cleared by the Territorial Army, so that today there is little left of an important works established in 1737.

In some ways, this is not surprising. During the 1960s, industrial heritage was not yet widely seen as acting as agent for change or regeneration.

More to the point, perhaps, the most urgent priority in 1961 was land reclamation, and dealing with

dereliction and dangerous buildings, with a view to improving the physical environment. Almost inevitably, therefore, destruction was the forerunner of reclamation and, in order to achieve this, the LSVP report recommended "vigorous action".

Yet, despite all the destruction, close inspection reveals that much remains of the industrial sites that put Swansea firmly on the map, and paved the way for Wales to become the world's first industrial nation.

Stephen Hughes, of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, estimates that there are, in fact, still 173 copper-related historic sites of international significance in and around Swansea.

Many of these sites, such as the great engine houses of the Hafod works, are in the Lower Swansea Valley where they remain neglected. They are often out of sight and therefore out of mind.

To all intents and purposes this means that they play no part in the shaping of local identities, civic consciousness, or even general awareness of the major part that Swansea played in the making of the modern world.

It is because of this that a project based at Swansea University is now exploring new ways in which the industrial heritage of the Lower Swansea Valley can be used to continue the process of economic and social regeneration begun by the LSVP. This project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, brings together a range of partners in a number of different events and initiatives.

Coming up next, on March 5, is a free, city-wide, copper festival which,

among many other things, will be marking the 50th anniversary of the LSVP. It is only right and proper that Swansea celebrates the quite extraordinary contribution it made to the universal problem of how communities come to terms with post-industrial decline and dereliction.

Swansea certainly didn't get everything right, but there is a great deal of which it can be justifiably proud.

But (almost) the last words should come from Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. He wrote in 1967 that: "The re-builders of the Lower Swansea Valley will live in the records of Wales; the legacy of the exploiters and polluters will be erased by new trees and houses and grassy slopes. The green will be back in the Valley."

I can't say that I always agree with His Royal Highness but, on this occasion, he was absolutely right.

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For information on the Swansea copper festival go to www.copperday.org.uk. You can follow Swansea University's ESRC copper project on Twitter at twitter.com/copperhistories

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BOOKS ➔

Llansamlet copper and arsenic works, top, and White Rock works, bottom, in 1961