

BACON family, iron-masters and colliery proprietors

Though the Dowlais Iron Co. had been formed in 1759 and John Guest of Broseley had been engaged as its manager early in 1760, it was ANTHONY BACON (1717 - 1786) who was the real originator of the pre-eminence of Merthyr Tydfil as the iron-smelting centre of Great Britain, and who converted it from a hamlet into a flourishing manufacturing town. He was baptized on 24 January 1717 at St Bees, Cumberland, the son of William Bacon, a ship's captain, and his wife Elizabeth Richardson.

By an indenture dated 29 August 1765, Anthony Bacon, then of London, and William Brownrigg, of Whitehaven, Cumberland, leased virgin mineral land, amounting to about 4,000 acres, stretching from Cyfarthfa for about eight miles down the Merthyr or Taff valley - a district which contained some of the best seams of coal in South Wales, with rich beds of iron-ore, all in close proximity to limestone and with an abundant supply of water for power. The land was obtained upon very cheap terms, viz. £100 p.a., with no royalties to pay, for ninety-nine years. Arrangements were made with neighbouring farmers to secure their surface leases in order to erect the necessary buildings and furnaces, houses for the workmen, railroads, watercourses, the opening of drifts, levels, the sinking of pits, etc. These further leases were obtained at an annual rental of about £150 to £200, again without any royalties or wayleaves to be paid. A road was soon made down the Taff valley to join the old Roman road through Gelli-gaer and Caerphilly to the small port of Cardiff. A blast furnace was soon erected at Cyfarthfa and a feeder constructed to carry water to it. As the furnace was erected on or near the place at which the lower seams of the South Wales coalfield came to the surface, and as several iron-masters were already producing pig-iron from coke instead of charcoal, it seems probable that the furnace erected used coke from the very first. Later on, a forge was erected for making bar-iron, with foundries, etc. Though the difficulties which the partners had to surmount were enormous, the moment seemed opportune. There was then an increasing demand for iron, which could not be met by home production, necessitating large imports from Russia and Sweden at high prices.

After twelve years the partnership between them was dissolved (22 July 1777). Bacon soon extended his enterprises by acquiring the lease of land granted to Messrs. Guest and Wilkinson. He also leased some land direct from the earl of Plymouth; on this he erected a blast furnace in addition to that at Cyfarthfa. Three years later (1 July 1780) he acquired the lease of the Hirwaun iron-works, with liberty to raise iron-ore or coal from the common of Hirwaun Wrgan.

In 1775 the War of American Independence broke out; this necessitated a great increase in the production of iron for cannon-balls and other implements of warfare, etc. Bacon soon secured a contract for the supply of guns and cannon, and erected foundries for casing and a boring mill. He was, however, prevented from directly manufacturing guns and cannon, because an Act, passed in 1782, disqualified members of Parliament from holding Government contracts. But Bacon stuck to his seat in the House of Commons - he had succeeded John Wilkes as member for Aylesbury in 1764 - and immediately entered into negotiations with **Francis Homfray** of Stourton, Staffordshire, which resulted in a lease (27 September 1782) by which Bacon granted to **Homfray** a 'mill for boring cannon at Cyfarthfa, as also the lower works, called the Foundry, with a pool of water and other premises, for a term of fifty years at £20 per annum.' He was also to supply **Homfray** with the necessary metal made at his blast furnaces at Cyfarthfa, Plymouth, and Hirwaun. After some two years **Homfray** complained that he was not receiving sufficient metal and tapped Bacon's furnace at Cyfarthfa. A quarrel ensued, and, in October 1784, **Homfray** assigned his lease to David Tanner of Monmouth, and soon afterwards established his three sons in a new iron-works at Pen-y-darren.

Before Tanner had transferred his lease (in or about March, 1786) to **Richard Crawshay** of London, later the celebrated iron-master, Anthony Bacon had died at Cyfarthfa (21 January 1786) at the age of 67. He had left 'the extensive Works of Cyfarthfa, Plymouth and Hirwaun, all in full operation, guided by his single will,' together with an estate called 'Banklands' in the parish of Workington; he also held, in partnership, a vast estate in the province of Virginia, in the American Colonies. He was considered to be one of the wealthiest men in Britain at that time.

Bacon had married Elizabeth Richardson, but their only son had died in 1770, aged 12. He had, however, five natural children by Mary Bushby, of Gloucestershire, all of them minors in 1786 - Anthony, Thomas, Robert (Smith), William (Smith), Elizabeth. Their mother was provided with a sum of £1,000, together with a sum of £50 annually to maintain each of the four younger children, while in her care, until they were taken away by the executors for their education. **Richard Crawshay**, who later became the owner of the Cyfarthfa works, was a witness to the will, but was not one of the executors.

Bacon's son, ANTHONY BACON II, when of age, was to receive the Cyfarthfa estate; THOMAS was to receive the Plymouth furnace, etc. The Hirwaun furnace and collieries became the joint property of Anthony II and Thomas, while ROBERT, it seems, had the mines, etc., at Workington. ELIZABETH was to receive a clear annuity of £300 when she became 21. WILLIAM, then a baby, was to receive the remainder of the trust funds, provided the sum did not amount to more than £10,000, when he came of age.

The sons, as soon as they were married or of age, appealed to the Court of Chancery for their possessions. **Richard Crawshay** took over the Cyfarthfa works from Anthony Bacon II, paying him for the mineral lease a fixed rental of £5,000, plus a royalty of 15s. per ton on coal and iron raised over and above the quantity on which the fixed rental was based. The Plymouth works were likewise disposed of by Thomas Bacon to Richard Hill.

In October 1799 the brothers Bacon took over the interest of Mr. Glover in the Hirwaun works. But it is evident that they had neither the desire nor the ability to become great iron-masters like their father. Anthony sold his share in the Hirwaun works to Thomas for £3,000, and, by deed dated 27 and 28 January 1806, bought the Mathews estate at Aberaman, and retired there. In February 1814 he sold his entire mineral rights at Cyfarthfa to **Richard Crawshay** for £95,000. He died at Aberaman, 11 August 1827, and was buried at Speen, Berks.

Anthony Bacon II was the father of ANTHONY BACON III, usually called General Bacon, (1796 - 1864). He married Lady Charlotte Mary, second daughter of Edward Harley, 5th earl of Oxford.

Thomas Bacon, who was often at Aberaman, was at one time the possessor of the 'Gododdin' of **Aneirin**, one of the most valuable manuscripts in Welsh. (See *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, xi, 109-12.)

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Sources

Personal research

L. B. Namier, 'Anthony Bacon, an 18th century merchant,' in *Journal of Economic and Business History*, November 1929.

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