

Rhyd-y-car (41)



What is it?

- This is a row of six cottages from Rhyd-y-car in Merthyr. In 1801, Merthyr was the largest town in Wales, with a population of 7,000.

What do we know about the houses?

- They were moved from Merthyr in 1982 and re-erected in the Museum between 1984 and 1987.
- This is a good example of an early terrace. There were two terraces at Rhyd-y-car; there were 16 houses in one, and 13 in the other.
- The cottages were built around 1795-1800 by Richard Crawshay, an Ironmaster in Merthyr, to provide housing for his workers. They portray the following periods, showing how they might have looked if they hadn't been moved to St Fagans: 1805; 1855; 1895; 1925; 1955; 1985.

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Who lived here?

1805

- The cottage is decorated as the home of a young family from west Wales working in the iron ore mine. The rustic oak furniture comes from west Wales – it was given to the young couple as wedding presents.
- The iron ore miners belonged to the upper working class, and could afford to buy luxury goods.

1855

- This was the home of Margaret Rosser, a 48-year-old widow who was originally from Carmarthenshire, her son John, who was 19, a 14-year-old daughter and, another son who was 12. Mrs Rosser made a living from selling milk around the area, her son John was a miner and the younger son probably worked underground too.
- Her husband, William Rosser, had died by the time of the 1851 Census. He had been an iron ore miner.

1895

- This was the home of William Richards, originally from St Ishmaels, Pembrokeshire, his wife, who was born in Merthyr and their daughter. William Richards was a railway signalman (Rhyd-y-car was surrounded by railways at this time) on the Vale of Neath railway, the Taff Vale station and the railways between the works and tips.

1925, 1955 and 1985

- Due to the moral issues surrounding rebuilding the homes of living people or people within living memory, the last three cottages are the homes of representative families.

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Points of interest

You could focus on themes during your visit for example, living conditions, food, building materials, energy.

Living conditions

- There is one bedroom upstairs in all the cottages. In the first four the parents usually slept downstairs, the children would sleep upstairs.
- There is no toilet in the first two cottages (1805 and 1855). People used the slag heaps and cinder tips nearby. By 1855 they possibly had a communal toilet. In 1895 the toilet would have been shared with the neighbours.
- Around 1851, an oven was built at the end of each terrace and used for baking bread.
- When the terrace was built, the residents either had to collect water from the stream at Rhyd-y-car, the river Taff or the Glamorganshire canal. Following the inquiry into the cholera epidemics of 1849 and 1853, the cottages were improved and a water pump was provided near to the terraces.
- By 1895, the furniture doesn't look so rustic. Some pieces were mass-produced, such as the chiffonier (decorated sideboard) and were sold at reasonable prices in local shops in Merthyr. There are more textiles in this house, which gives it a cosier feeling (e.g. the chenille tablecloth, the socks on the table legs to prevent marking).
- Notice the coffin drop in the 1925 cottage. This was a way to bring a dead body down from the bedroom.

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Food

- In 1805 people would have eaten from the wooden bowls. They cooked over an open fire and often used the large cooking pot.
- In 1855 they would have eaten from dishes. They would cook on the fire using the bakestone or griddle and the clockwork spit (on the right) in front of the fire.
- In 1895 the fireplace has a small oven, but the griddle or bakestone was still an important piece of cooking equipment.
- In 1925 you can see that the living area has been split; with lino and the best furniture on the side closest to the door and the everyday furniture by the fire. As neighbours passed the door, they only saw the 'best side'. The 'best side' was only used on Sunday.
- By 1925 running water had reached the houses for the first time.
- In 1955 there is a kitchenette. The shed in the garden was used as a living and workroom.

Building materials

- Notice the different materials used in each of the cottages for example slate, stone and plastic.
- In the first two cottages (1805 and 1855) the windows don't open; by 1895 they have sash windows, which allowed fresh air into the cottage.

As you go around you might like to think about the following question:

- What changes as you move from one cottage to another and what stays the same? Compare them with your home today.

Where can I find more information?

- Eurwyn Wiliam, *Rhyd-y-car: a Welsh mining community* (1987) can be bought in the Museum shop.
- John Davies, *A History of Wales*, pp 307-488.
- Gwyn A. Williams, *The Merthyr Rising*.