‘More than an industrial boon’

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‘More than an industrial boon’: press coverage of Trawsfynydd power station’s construction 1955-1965

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Historical interest in nuclear power generation has grown considerably in recent years, but while technological development has often interested historians of science, the impact of power stations on the natural landscape in specific localities has received insufficient attention. The ways in which the construction of nuclear power stations impacted the lives, routines, and prospects of local people in rural north-west Wales have been neglected.[i] Both Trawsfynydd and Wylfa, the two stations constructed in the region, shaped employment opportunities and the demography of the counties of Merionethshire and Anglesey (now Gwynedd and Ynŷs Mon). Recent coverage of nuclear power has been predominantly national in scope.[ii] It receives limited mention in the major, modern Welsh history texts,[iii] and even fewer localised studies exist, particularly regarding north Wales.[iv] Primarily, these projects are noted in political history studies of the area, being seen as attempts to reinvigorate a local economy impacted by the decline of traditional industries such as slate and agriculture, and judged a failure.[v] Most published and unpublished research on north Wales and nuclear power has placed it either a national, political framework or a localised, high political context, in which atomic generation itself is a peripheral topic of discussion.[vi] Yet local parliamentarians were focused on the process of securing nuclear power stations to alleviate pressures catalysed by economic, social and cultural change.[vii] Missing from existing studies is a broader understanding of how and why the power stations were constructed in their locations, the processes which created them, and their impact on the local environment.

This article explores whether the imposition of the stations affected local communities, and created new ones, through an exploration of newspaper collections. Post-war news media is a useful historical source, as local newspapers act as a filter between local communities and the events that shape them. The case study demonstrates how a thorough review of media sources can highlight new avenues of investigation, providing further evidence for the national, as well as regional and local, impacts of the construction of (in this case) Trawsfynydd. Investigating how nuclear power was discussed, and by whom, from initial discussion over Trawsfynydd in 1955 to completion over a decade later, plays an important role in understanding the development of nuclear power in north-west Wales. This study examined full runs of two newspapers, the *North Wales Chronicle* and the *Welsh Nation*, alongside a review of a comprehensive archive of local media clippings compiled by the late Bangor academic Dafydd Glyn Jones.[viii] This selection was chosen to give a wide range of regional and Wales-wide perspectives on the period. Existing literature does not provide a detailed chronology and narrative of events that took place during the station’s conception, construction, and operation. We need a deeper examination of the wider social, economic, political, and cultural impacts of the stations upon the landscape, and consideration of how these significant infrastructure projects shaped the localities within which they were constructed.

‘Important and welcome proposal’

Local political parties were in favour of the British government’s post-war energy infrastructure projects. The Labour party, concerned at the effect of deindustrialisation and rural depopulation on local communities, and Plaid Cymru supported the proposed construction of atomic power stations at Trawsfynydd and Edern, on the Llŷn Peninsula. The Plaid Cymru president, Gwynfor Evans, who unsuccessfully contested Merionethshire in the 1945, 1950, 1955 and 1959 general elections, welcomed the decision to bring ‘substantial’ and ‘highly-skilled’ jobs alongside large numbers of construction jobs.[ix] Plaid Cymru’s primary concern was that construction should not undermine the character of local communities.[x] It was forecast that Trawsfynydd would create 1000 construction jobs, 200-300 jobs when operational, and provide sub-contracting work for 300-400 firms.[xi] It had the support of local employers' groups, such as the Llandudno Chambers of Commerce.[xii] This was a major project that would have a serious impact on the local economy. Evans himself called it an ‘important and welcome proposal’ and argued that it could prove ‘more than an industrial boon’.[xiii] Rather, the power station was to be at the centre of a sustained attempt to revive the regional economy.

On 14 August 1957, Central Electricity Authority (from 1958 the Central Electricity Generating Board CEGB) officials announced plans to build the United Kingdom’s fourth atomic power station at Trawsfynydd, on land that was ‘rock and broken and of no agricultural value’.[xiv] It was implied that Trawsfynydd would enhance the landscape rather than damaging it. Community consultation and approval, already a requirement in the 1950s, was sought and received by August 1958, with a letter of intent with contractors being signed the following March.[xv] Inevitably,

building an inland power station, some miles from the nearest connected port at Porthmadog, would be a difficult task.

Threats of industrial action over working conditions slowed construction. The CEGB hired shadow labour minister Alfred Robens MP (a former union official and later Coal Board chairman) to advise on workplace relations in the hope that it would ease difficulties.[xvi] To ease concurrent local concerns about limited employment opportunities, programmes were put in place that sent local boys to be trained in Manchester by the North-Western Region of the CEGB.[xvii] Not all work was for men. In late 1963, the CEGB advertised twelve jobs for women guides at Trawsfynydd and the Ffestiniog power station, the successful candidates all being wives of plant workers.[xviii] Services and socio-cultural entertainments for workers at the new stations were examined and a committee to assist with their integration was founded, which included the MPs for Anglesey and Caernarvonshire.[xix] Significant attempts were made to foster a sense of community and integrate workers into the local area.

With Trawsfynydd under construction, more opportunities followed. An atomic development and research centre (dubbed a 'North Wales Harwell' after the UK Atomic Energy Research Establishment) was to be constructed at Talsarnau (near Harlech, Merionethshire).[xx] It would employ a staff of 2000 and was welcomed by the chairman of the county council as creating a 'new era of prosperity for the county'.[xxi] Despite apparent interest from community leaders and the Government, this was never developed. However, after the Minister of Welsh Affairs then visited North Wales, he was inundated with requests for new factories and atomic power stations.[xxii] The CEGB received the support of many local councils, and the Trawsfynydd project was supported by Merioneth MP T.W. Jones and Merionethshire County Council.[xxiii] However, despite local and national support for such a large infrastructure project, there were concerns. Demand for increased electricity generation led to experimentation with very modern, expensive, yet largely untested technology. At this stage, health concerns were not widely considered, but the preservation of the landscape, about which the same government had recently legislated, was the source of most protest in north Wales.

'Destruction of beauty spots'

The most significant Welsh organisation actively campaigning on such issues was the Council for the Preservation of Rural Wales, which became the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales (CPRW) in 1962. Formed in 1928 by a group of activists associated with Clough Williams-Ellis, the architect widely known as the creator of Portmeirion in north Merionethshire, the group were committed conservationists, only willing to countenance projects that would 'improve' the natural landscape.[xxiv] While its committee was comprised mostly of local landowners, such as Williams-Ellis (at times president, vice president and chairman), his sister-in-law Cecily (who chaired its Caernarvonshire group) and an assortment of retired military officers and local notaries, it proved an effective campaigning organisation.[xxv] Previously, it had succeeded in persuading the government to include an 'amenity clause' in the North Wales Hydro-Electric Power Act 1952, to ensure that a landscape architect was required for proposed schemes within the newly-created Snowdonia National Park.[xxvi] Later, the organisation was successful in undermining plans for the construction of the Edern plant. Its effectiveness angered both Caernarvonshire County Council and the local MP, Goronwy Roberts, who suggested that 'more attention had been paid to the opinions of private bodies which did not speak with the voice of the people'.[xxvii]

Opposition in Merionethshire was different from that in neighbouring Caernarvonshire. After the initial announcement, the Rt Rev M.G. Haigh, Merioneth branch president of the CPRW and vice-chairman of the Snowdonia National Park joint advisory committee, suggested that the site would 'do less damage' than anywhere else in the national park.[xxviii] The fact that the Trawsfynydd site had previously been a military installation meant it was considered as idle developable land, rather than unspoiled natural landscape. While the local CPRW branch was amenable, the Caernarvonshire branch, at that time fighting the plans for a similar station at Edern, opposed construction.[xxix] Furthermore, official regional bodies were either ambivalent or presented qualified opposition. The Gwynedd River Board raised no concerns over its construction linked to the water quality,[xxx] but in January 1958 the National Parks Commission announced its opposition unless there was an 'over-riding and inescapable national necessity and after alternative sites outside the National Park have been zealously sought'. The commission noted that, however well-designed, it 'must remain "a large and incongruous feature" and must be "entirely out of place" in a National Park'.[xxxi] Issues of damaged landscape, and incongruity, were widely discussed by groups concerned by the Trawsfynydd project.

However, preserving the environment was expensive. In 1962 the cost of placing power cables underground from Trawsfynydd to Bangor, and then from Bangor to Connah's Quay in Flintshire was estimated at £1 million per mile. Instead, government ministers later approved the installation of cheaper overhead cables.[xxxii] As Katrina Navickas has observed, this was an issue that had inflamed protest across the United Kingdom, whether linked to nuclear or conventional power stations.[xxxiii] Debates over landscape preservation and rural land use predominated, although other interconnected concerns remained significant. In a prescient observation, the *Chronicle* suggested that once the site was selected, there would be arguments about 'land grabs,' the destruction of beauty spots' and that 'the Welsh way of life [would] be threatened by a nuclear power station'.[xxxiv] While opposition to construction subsided, campaigners continued to voice concerns about the construction of power lines, which were considered a blot on the landscape.[xxxv] Preservation of the natural landscape had a growing lobby, and there was now the legislative

backing (through national parks and 'area of outstanding natural beauty' designations) to allow organisations new arguments against power stations.

For Plaid Cymru, who was employed mattered just as much as the rate of pay. New jobs, it declared, should be for local workers, to ensure that work was retained for the settled, Welsh-speaking community.[xxxvi] An important contrast between 'Atoms for war and peace' was made in *Welsh Nation*, where a headline read 'Shall it be life or death'.[xxxvii] The priority was to use the atom for the benefit, rather than the destruction, of man.[xxxviii] However, by January 1960, support for nuclear power generation was included in a planning report for rural Wales published by Plaid Cymru.[xxxix] While the party's opposition to nuclear weaponry was public and undiluted, they accepted the necessity of the atomic power station in an area of economic distress.[xl] However, this did not stop their party officials trying to use it in relation to other policy concerns. They argued that the construction of the Tryweryn reservoir, which would give Liverpool Council a monopoly over water in the Tryweryn valley and which became an important nationalist political touchstone, could make securing sufficient water for Trawsfynydd difficult.[xli] Construction of the power station, alongside that of hydro-electric projects near Blaenau Ffestiniog and Aberystwyth, and the building of the Tryweryn reservoir (Llyn Celyn), were responsible for an increase in jobs which peaked in 1961.[xlii] Infrastructure jobs therefore blunted the impact of significant decline in both slate quarrying and agriculture. By 1965, testing demonstrated that Trawsfynydd would generate around 500,000kW of power for the national grid.[xliii] This was a significant input to help meet Britain's growing demand for electricity.

Conclusion

This article is only the first step in a larger research project. For example, my Bangor University colleagues Mari Wiliam and Seán Martin have explored the impact of Chernobyl on 'nuclear anxiety' in 1980s' Wales, while Martin's PhD research considers the impact of Trawsfynydd on the landscape.[xliv] This short study, part of my ongoing research, has suggested how newspapers accessible to communities in north-west Wales debated the development of nuclear power generation. It outlines the themes covered by the press, to assist in the reconstruction of key events upon which future research can build. As historians, once we know what happened, we can start to develop interpretations as to why. This article emphasises that, as with many national energy projects, development and eventual outcomes were not always pre-ordained. Fundamentally, Trawsfynydd nuclear power station was built despite alternatives, problems, and some resistance, not just because the British government chose to do so. For historians seeking to recover these stories, questioning myths and assumptions about the power of the post-war state, they are as important as understanding the influence of their policies on the localities they affected.

In the twenty-first century we must not forget the extent to which nuclear power was emblematic of post-war confidence and optimism that encapsulated progress, innovation, and modernity. It signposted economic growth, energy self-sufficiency, and national confidence, yet little work has examined, in this localised context, changing attitudes to nuclear power, its impact on the communities in which it was situated, and its effect upon national policies and within concurrent political, social-economic, and cultural developments in north-west Wales. This was not just the arrival of a technological novelty, but a significant national infrastructure project that influenced issues as diverse as community identities, language use, and attitudes to modernisation. Future research needs to consider whether the construction of power stations created new identities and social structures, altered the natural environment, and affected existing communities while creating new ones.

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