



These two pieces were unearthed at the rear of Bethel Chapel, Wesley Place, Beaufort



This photo was taken at the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagan's, and the trams at Beaufort would have looked very similar to this

### A Piece of Local History

In the autumn of 2017 some workmen, who were clearing a collapsed bank and rebuilding a wall at the rear of the chapel, unearthed two lumps of rusting cast iron which were left propped against the rear wall of the organ chamber. They were discovered earlier this year and brought into the chapel for a closer look; it was clear that they were two pieces of a single iron artefact with a possible history of over two hundred years.

A map, belonging to the local family history group, which hangs in the schoolroom at Bethel, shows a tram road running in front of the chapel connecting a coal level to the north with Beaufort Ironworks to the south. Bethel was built in 1832 and extended in 1851. The iron works was opened in 1780 so it is possible that the tram road preceded the chapel by several decades, and the street named after Wesley grew up alongside it. The Beaufort Ironworks closed in 1861 but the map shows that in 1880 three tram lines, which had connected quarries, clay pits, or coal levels to the iron works, still ran north to south across the main street of Beaufort (part of a well established stagecoach route between Abergavenny and Merthyr Tydfil), and every one seems to have sprouted a chapel; Soar chapel stood in Baptist Place, Ebenezer in Primitive Place, and Bethel stands in Wesley Place to this day.

In 'Portraits of the Past' (Barber and Blackmore 1996) Chris Barber says that the earliest tramways used L shaped rails, known as plateways, with cast iron sleepers which proved to be unreliable because they were brittle and snapped under load. Wooden sleepers were not found to be a great improvement. In 1799 a system of stone blocks to support the plates was introduced, each stone weighed about 1 cwt with a hole drilled into it. An oak peg was driven into the hole and an iron spike was then hammered into the peg to hold the plate in position. (Many of these stones are still to be found in the land around Blaenavon).

Our specimen may therefore be one of the earliest (and least reliable) sleepers (or spacers) used in plateway construction. What is still clear is the shape of each end which could hold an L shaped plate (facing outwards).

Was it cast aside because it fractured or did two hundred years of burial find its weak spot; and how did it come to be buried behind Bethel chapel? We will never know, but it is safe to claim that it dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup>, or even the late 18<sup>th</sup>, century and played its part in the birth of the Industrial Revolution here in Beaufort.