

Farewell Rock: The Last Miners of South Wales

Hilary Powell

hilaryspowell@gmail.com

The last of the coal miners of South Wales emerge from a drift mine in the Upper Swansea Valley. They are soaked to the bone and covered in coal dust having spent the last eight hours in thirty inch seams on their hands and knees. The portacabins where they shower and change are streaked with black. Cobwebs hang heavy with black dust. One man emerges in flannel dressing gown, others have less to protect their modesty. I am there to witness this after days in supermarket car parks, working men's clubs and Welfare halls seeking out the last working miners of South Wales and eventually being led to them by the regional National Union of Mineworkers representative up a fir edged, dusty mountain track.



Figure 1. *Colliery track*



Figure 2. *Young miner Josh Evans*



Figure 3. *Miner Neil Jeffries*

I am here because of Josef Herman, a Polish artist who settled in and portrayed the Welsh mining town of Ystradgynlais in the 1950s. His 'Notes from a Welsh Diary' became a starting point to examine the very different contemporary landscape of industrial decline and recovery. In Spring 2016 I won the Josef Herman Cymru Print Residency to produce work at The Curwen Studios in London. The remit was to make work inspired by the collections of the foundation using the lithographic techniques that the studios specialise in.



Figure 4. *Print technician Steph working with the stone at the Curwen Studio*



Figure 5. *The images on the stone*

These techniques suited my purposes well. The invention of stone lithography at the turn of the 19th century transformed cartography. Maps and atlases had previously been produced by the laborious process of engraving and were very expensive. Lithography allowed for a faster method of reproduction and therefore further distribution of geographical knowledge. Lithography's cartographic history and etymology as 'stone writing' made it an ideal method to pursue a project exploring the impact an accidental carboniferous collision of geology continues to have on a landscape, people and culture.

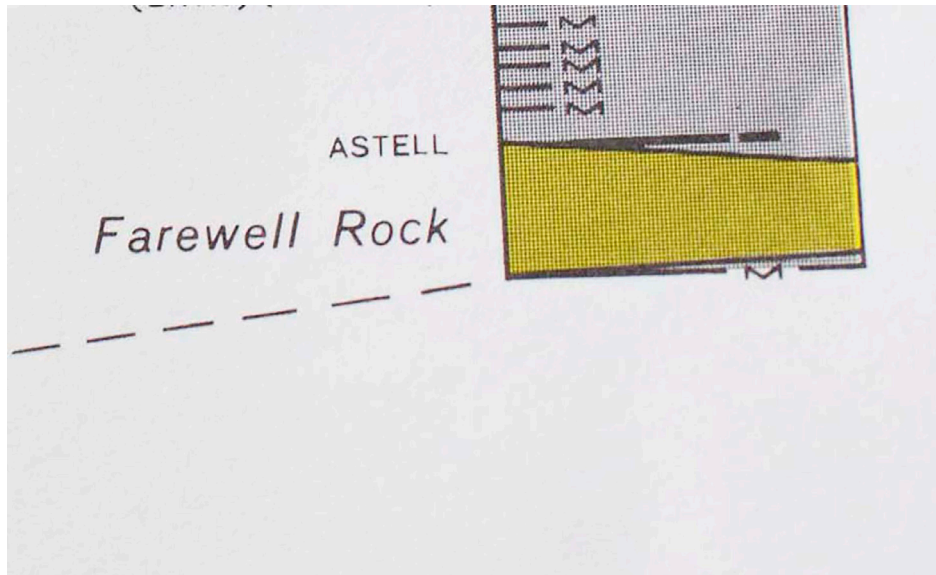


Figure 6. *Farewell Rock on the map*

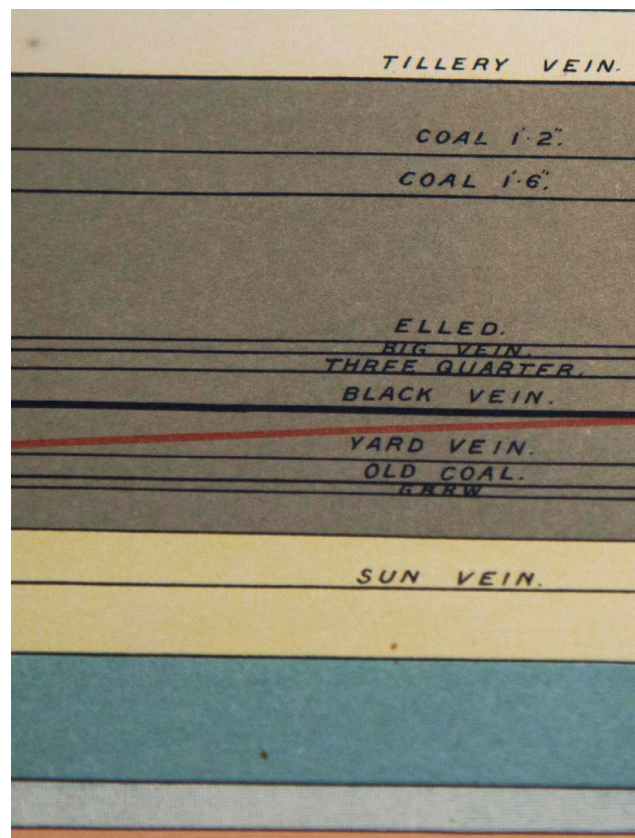


Figure 7. *Cross section of coal field veins*

The title of the project was stumbled upon on a walk through sedimented time with Brecon Beacon's Geopark geologist Alan Bowring. On the northern edge of the coalfield, we traipsed through a picturesque landscape that contained the raw materials of the industrial revolution (coal, iron, limestone, water) discussing the poetic language of the coal seams. Farewell Rock is the band of sandstone that lies below the coal measures. Once reached it signals 'a farewell to riches' and the end of coal – fitting now as the last open cast mines in the region are mothballed and the colliery faces its final weeks.

Alongside the pit closures there is a dying language of mining. A practical and poetic dictionary of colliery terms. Sun vein. Peacock vein. Brassy vein. Black vein. Raven vein. Bleeding veins. When a coalminer is cut by the hard rock he mines he is permanently scarred and these scars are blue. They call it being 'mapped'. Like military or prison tattoos you can identify a miner by these physical scars and in my short time there I saw many of them - blue lines reaching to eyes only just saved, the glass eyes of those that hadn't been, a man paralysed from the waist down but stating with conviction that he would go straight back down again, that he misses the camaraderie and purpose of the coal face.

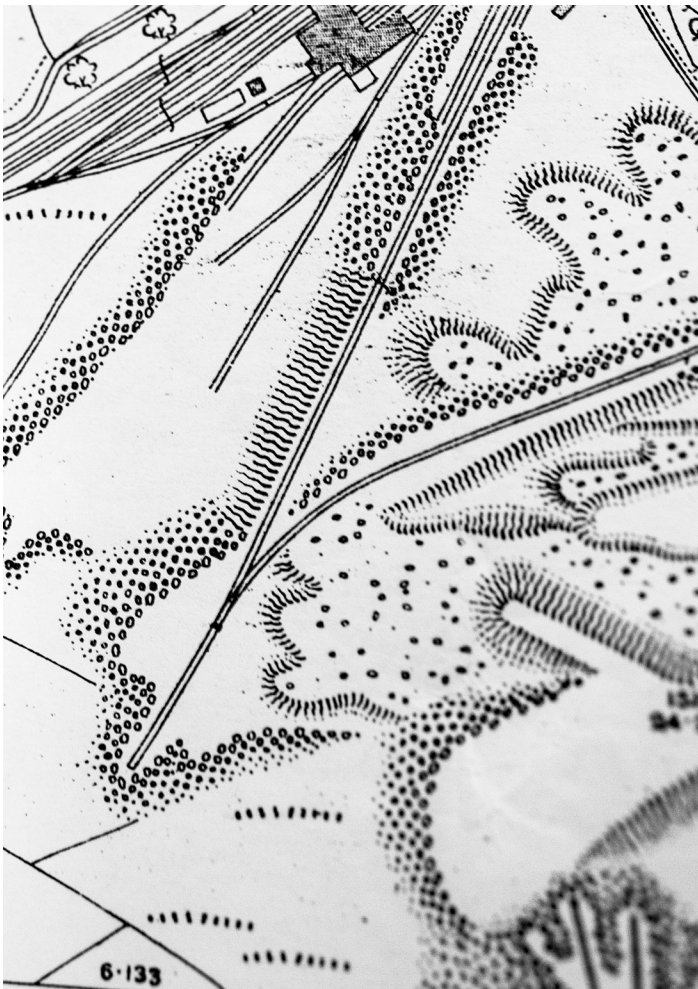


Figure 9. Map detail



Figure 10. Map detail

My photocopied call-outs for 'Maps and Miners' yielded maps spread out on coffee morning tables and a meeting with the last working mine surveyor exploring his own vast collection of colliery plans and sections. I worked with these to build up layers of line drawings to map onto the coal faces I had collected. Contours and strata layered onto features already scarred by the experience of geology.



Figure 11. *Welsh brites piled high at the coal distribution centre*



Figure 12. *The coal testing laboratory*



Figure 13. *Coal dust on the walls*



Figure 14. *Coal laboratory paraphernalia*

These images have a final layer of coal dust. A chance encounter with the maintenance man of a Rugby club in its empty car park, a phone call later and I was on a dusk tour of the local Celtic Energy distribution centre. Passing a family of rabbits sheltering in this scaled-down black mountain range, John my guide points out his small holding across the valley where dying industry and subsistence meet. Piles of graded coal sparkle in the fading sunlight around the makeshift laboratory where they test and grade the anthracite coal. I leave with a large bag of precious, dangerous dust aware that this Black Diamond becomes black lung in many a miner.



Figure 15. A portrait of Neil 'Bolts' Evans (top left)

Figure 16. A portrait of Simon 'Sam' Thomas (top right)

Figure 17. A portrait of Will 'Ring Leader' Jefferies
(bottom left)

The project brings together material, method and meaning and carries on my creative practice of taking materials beyond and outside of their usual use and value. This began on the development sites of London, working with demolition crews to salvage roofing zinc that I then acid etched with portraits of these men and sites. In both projects I have worked with traditional print techniques – attracted to them because of the alchemical transformations they involve and their histories (lithography in cartography, etching in the depiction of ruins or romantic ruinology). The making of the work is its own form of cartography as I both navigate and map a new terrain, confronting the fragility and resilience of people and place. The map markings transcribed onto miners faces become tribal, tracing the song lines and scars of the valleys that are mapped onto more than just landscape.

6 months on and the colliery I visited is closing down. The men face upheaval and unemployment. They bid farewell to the harsh rock that has sustained them and their communities but the legacy of coal lives on in hearts, minds and lungs. The portraits of these last of the miners are touched by a geological imagination and reality. Charted on and in stone, layered with plans and coal dust, they are topographies and blueprints for pride, decline and recovery.



Figure 18. *Simon Thomas with his portrait at the Big Pit National Mining Museum*



Figure 19. *Big Pit National Mining Museum*

Land of our fathers
And mothers
A Union
Cradling husbands
sons
Daughters crushed
By pride and geology.

It's in our blood
Peacock veins
Blue scars
Strikes and scabs
Exposing kin
Extracting souls
Mothballing identity.

Black diamond shines on
Dark valleys
A weight
A lost language
Of song
Reverberates
As laboured lungs strain.

Anthracite addiction

An everyday become extraordinary
We are the coal face
The last of the last
Going down
Seeking fortunes
Defying futures
Bound for house fires

Industrial evangelism dies
In the half light of Swansea Bay
A carboniferous collision
With China Shipping

Container dock

Farewell Rock.