

## Cefn Golau Cholera Cemetery

This isolated site, set on the bleak mountainside to the west of Tredegar this is one of the most evocative in the south Wales valleys. With its few remaining gravestones set against the lowering skies, the site serves as unique introduction to one of the most painful chapters in the history of Blaenau Gwent. Here rest the mortal remains of at least two hundred people, victims of the "King of Terrors" – cholera. There were two major cholera epidemics in Tredegar, the first in 1832-33 and another seventeen years later in 1849. A lesser outbreak also struck the town in 1866.

Today the site has little more than twenty-six standing gravestones, surrounded by the broken fragments of many others. Many have had their inscriptions erased by the harsh weather conditions.

However, the remaining stones and their inscriptions provide a wealth of information about the early industrial history of the area and some of its social experiences. The dates on the stones show that the isolated cemetery was first used to bury the victims of the cholera outbreak of 1832-33, followed by those of 1849 and 1866.

The gravestones of 1832 are few in number but are distinctive from the later stones. Their headstones are smaller and the kerb and footstones are made of fragments. The script on the stones is bold and there is an elegant craftsmanship in their floral designs.

The stones of 1849 are more numerous and much larger than those of 1832. The inscriptions are in Welsh or English with a mixture of both. The bulk bear the date of the months August and September 1849 when the epidemic reached its height. Dates of deaths outside the cholera years reveal that spouses who survived the epidemic chose to be buried with their loved ones, despite the fact that this cemetery became taboo amongst local people.

The later epidemics are represented by a single stone dated 1866.

The Cefn Golau Cemetery is a scheduled ancient monument of national importance and is protected by law.

### Cholera Epidemic - Tredegar 1849

The long hot dry summer of 1849 descended on Tredegar amidst great apprehension engendered by the news that cholera was in Rhymney in July and at Nantyglo in August. News of the horrendous outbreak at Merthyr would be rife in the town. Cholera was no stranger to Tredegar, having first "visited" the town in 1832. It was during this outbreak that the site at Cefn Golau was first used. The

painful deaths that accompanied this outbreak had left a legacy of fear amongst the people, heightened by the fact that doctors were still baffled by the causes of the disease.

In August, the worse fears were confirmed when an excise man, T. Price, who resided in Charles Street, which was regarded as one of the healthiest locations, became the town's first victim.

In less than a month there was scarcely a street in the whole town that was not affected. The town was in the grip of the "King of Terrors". The authorities began cleansing operations and lime and disinfectants were distributed. The doctors frantically searched for a cure, trying all known remedies, but without success. Many people turned to religion as a saviour and the local chapels were packed during the outbreak.

People also resorted to covering themselves with ointments and taking quack cures. Still, the death-toll mounted. People began to leave their homes and flee into the countryside. Those remaining steered well clear of the cholera victims' funerals. People stayed indoors and watched the processions from a distance. So great was the fear that hardly enough people could be found to help in the burial of victims. Such was the stigma attached to the disease, that some families buried their dead at night time on the mountainside.

What was particularly horrifying for people was that whole families who were fit and healthy in the mornings could be dead by the evening. The disease reached its height in the months of August and September but, with the onset of cold and rainy weather, the disease began to disappear. Many looking for the cause of the disease began to blame the influx of poor Irish immigrants, many of whom were in a ragged condition and carrying lesser diseases. However, educated opinion was fast concluding that dirty and squalid conditions were the chief source of the disease.