

# Nant Helen



## Summary

This opencast coal mine was due to cease coal mining in mid-2020 when a Welsh Minister decline to approve the Coal Authority licence for the coal mine. Despite this, Celtic Energy Ltd continues to sell coal mined at Nant Helen, which it claims was extracted over 2 years ago and stored at a nearby depot it also owns. At the same time, Celtic Energy Ltd has failed to restore the site by the mid-2022 deadline, and Powys County Council is taking enforcement action. As with East Pit and Margam, Celtic Energy Ltd transferred the land ownership to a shell company, with a restoration fund of just £19.8 million—over £10 million short of the £30 million restoration plan. The cheaper restoration plan leaves a partial void and overburden mounds so 10 million fewer cubic metres of soil needs to be moved.

# Nant Helen opencast coalmine

## Address

Celtic Energy, Onllwyn Distribution Centre, Coelbren, Neath, SA10 9HN

## Expected completion

Deadline for 30th June 2022 + 5 years aftercare. As of September 2021, approximately 50% of the void is filled with 'soil forming matter', and by September 2022, restoration remained incomplete with enforcement action underway.

## County Council

Powys County Council

## Mining operator

Celtic Energy Ltd

## Restoration by

Celtic Energy Ltd – ref: 19/1899/REM

## Cost of restoration

Estimated £19.5 million plus interest

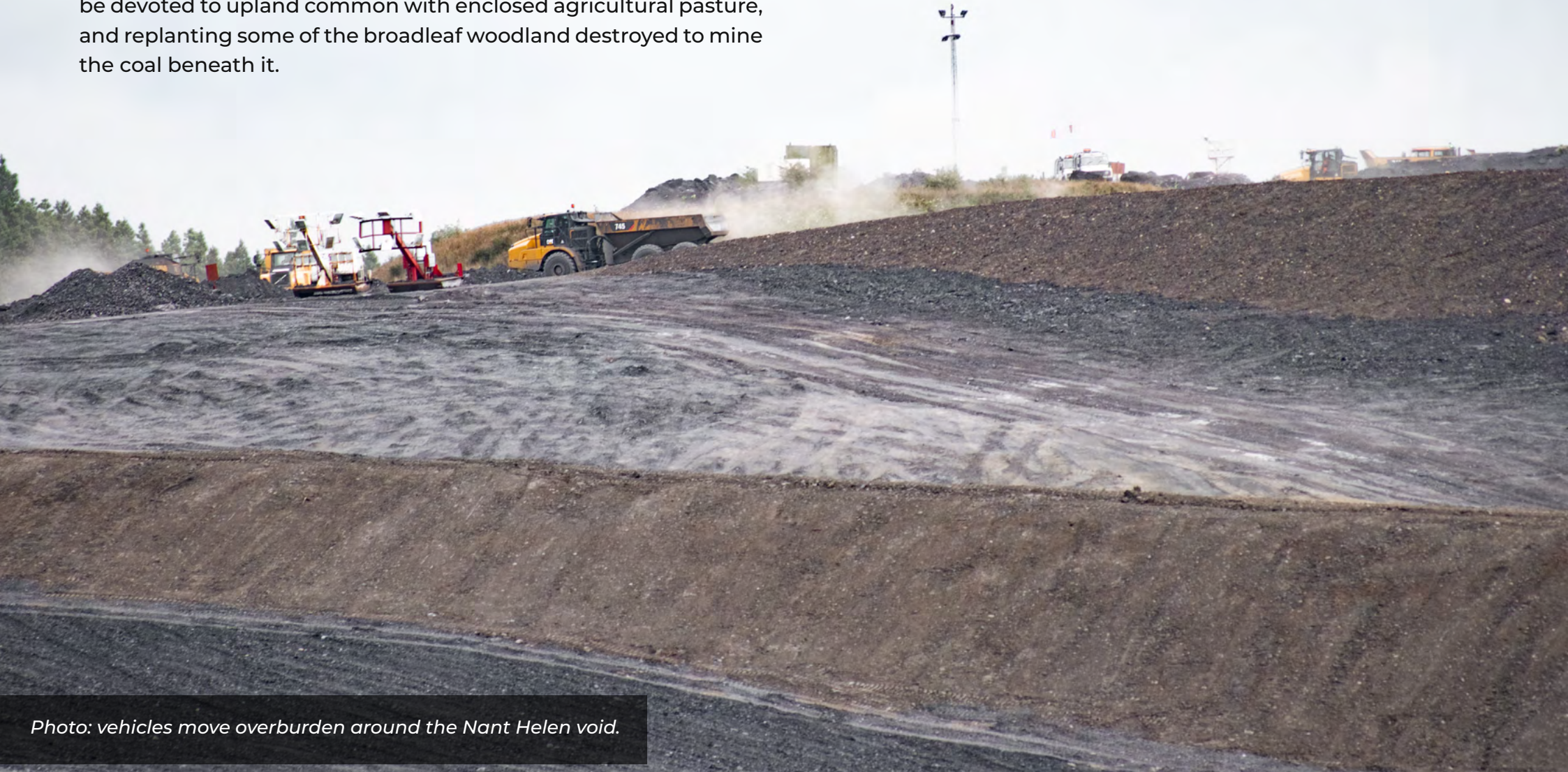


## What happens to the land after restoration

Planning permission was granted in 2021 for some of the site to be devoted to a “[Global centre of rail excellence in Wales](#)” train testing facility to be fully operational by 2025, at a cost of £150 million, with £50 million committed by the Welsh Government and £30 million by the UK Government. Remaining areas of the site will be devoted to upland common with enclosed agricultural pasture, and replanting some of the broadleaf woodland destroyed to mine the coal beneath it.

## Site visit (September 2022)

The report from a site visit identifies a high level of activity with up to 4 tractors and multiple trucks moving soil around the site. A large basin still exists with a large amount of exposed soil or overburden. Trees through the outer edges of the site, and grassland is visible on the rise to one side of the basin.



*Photo: vehicles move overburden around the Nant Helen void.*

## Views of local community

Tawe Uchaf Community Council and Ystradgynlais Town Council, along with Councillor David Thomas (Tawe Uchaf Ward) and Councillor Sarah Williams (Abercraf Ward), submitted concerns about the most recent restoration plans relating the extent of the void that will be permitted, the steepness of the sides leading to it and associated risk of drowning, and the potential for downstream flooding impacts. There were also concerns that the public consultation was conducted during a Covid19 lockdown, creating barriers to participation. Finally, an objection was raised that the proposed end use as a train testing facility will be a continuation of the visual eyesore created by 50-60 years of opencast mining for the nearby town of Caehopkin.

## Notes

Nant Helen opencast coal mine was first granted permission on 20th February, 1985, on the condition of a restoration scheme that detailed filling the void, and an aftercare scheme of 5 years (application number: B.3700).



Photo: remaining void at Nant Helen.

# Controversy

Celtic Energy submitted an application in 2018 and was granted permission by Powys County Council in 2019 to delay the restoration and secure a time extension until 2021 to extract a further 800,000 tonnes. That decision was subsequently called in and overturned by the then Welsh Government Environment Minister, Lesley Griffiths in June 2020. The Welsh Government used powers conferred to it in the Wales Act 2017 for the first time to reject a licence from the Coal Authority, rendering the license invalid in Wales, and therefore preventing the coal mining it would otherwise have authorised.

A £19.8 million Financial Restoration Guarantee Bond has been accrued, falling short of the [£30 million](#) that was due in total, with the planning officer noting “Celtic Energy Ltd was not in a position to meet the quarterly payments after December 2015”. The smaller amount was [deemed sufficient by the planning officer](#), on the basis of a restoration plan by Celtic Energy Ltd in 2016 that was £16 million cheaper than the restoration strategy agreed in 2012.

Most of this saving comes from moving around 10 million fewer cubic meters of soil required to completely fill the opencast void and remove the overburden mounds, instead creating a steep-sided “valley” with slightly reduced woodland planting (Ref19/1899/REM). [This creates another ‘coal tip’](#) of which 2,456 litter Wales. 2021 saw fresh calls for their reclamation amid fears of another [Aberfan tragedy](#) if the coal tips become unstable, estimated to cost £500-£600 million.

As with other opencast coal mining sites owned by Celtic Energy Ltd at the time, land ownership of Nant Helen was transferred to Ash Regeneration, a subsidiary of Oak Regeneration, absolving Celtic Energy Ltd of the legal responsibility to restore the site.

Powys County Council responded to an FOI request in September 2022. stating that it has taken enforcement action against Celtic Energy because it “has been unable to complete the restoration of the site in line with the time frames specified within the above planning permission, the site is currently considered to be in breach of planning condition”. What happens to the land after restoration



*Photo: trees bordering the void indicate what might have been lost to the Nant Helen coal mine.*

*Photo: coal stored in Bryn Bach Coal Ltd's washery.*

## Disclaimer

Efforts have been made to corroborate assertions and figures reported in good faith herein, but the authors acknowledge inaccuracies and errors may have been made; planning documents can be highly technical and companies operate opaquely. We welcome Councils and companies to get in touch to highlight evidence that improves the accuracy of this report.

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