

Summary

Celtic Energy Ltd was due to shut this opencast coal mine in 2006 and begin restoration. This was delayed by 3 extensions that Neath Port Talbot County Council agreed to, to fund restoration works. Celtic Energy Ltd had transferred the land to a shell company in 2010, so the Council had to permit the extension to secure £22 million in restoration funds—just over half of the £40 million required to deliver a full restoration. This sum was then reduced to £12.5 million in 2017 (2016/1102).

The restoration is purported to be complete, and the site is in the aftercare phase. Despite this, a site visit in September 2022 reported an abandoned warehouse with industrial detritus inside and nearby. Rusting barrels of hazardous waste were found to be leaking into the soil from an open-topped storage pool to one side of the warehouse, and some of the saplings planted have died without being replaced. A large concrete platform remains within the site.

Selar opencast coal mine

Address

Aberdare, Neath Port Talbot, CF44 9UR

Expected completion

Void filled by June 2020 + aftercare of 10 years for woodland and nature conservation areas.

County Council

Neath Port Talbot County Council

Mining operator

Celtic Energy Ltd

Restoration by

Celtic Energy Ltd (planning references: [P/2009/1040](#) in 2010 and [P/2013/720](#) (P2014/1108), 2013).

Cost of restoration

Estimated at £40 million, with £22 million contribution required in 2010 (P/2013/525), increased to £23.5 million in 2013 (P/2009/1040), and reduced to £12.5 million in 2017 (P2016/1102).



Photo: one of the more promising saplings planted as part of the restoration scheme.

What happens to the land after restoration

A mix of “agriculture, amenity, and nature conservation”. Digital maps submitted on 17 November 2014 indicate the majority of the 330 hectares is divided between broadleaf woodland (previously conifers before being replaced by the coal mine extension), open mountain grassland, pasture and rush dominated grassland, and “rough ground, ground with scattered trees and shrub”. Footpaths and bridleways are to be reinstated with some amendments.

Site visit (September 2022)

The report from a site visit indicates the restoration now seems complete with the site in aftercare. Despite this, oil drums were found leaking hazardous antifreeze MAINTAIN FRICOFIN LL into the local environment, amongst other substances. The data safety sheet highlights “Avoid release to the environment... Do not allow to enter drainage system, surface or ground water”. A rusting warehouse with bituminous oil drums, broken office chairs, and industrial equipment has also been abandoned in the middle of the apparently restored site. Long-dead saplings planted as part of the restoration scheme have not been removed and replanted, suggesting the area was not well attended during the aftercare period.



Photo: dead and dying saplings seem unreplaced/unattended to in the tree planting area.



Photo: viscous waste oil and anti-freeze leak out into the soil through the bricks of an abandoned, open-top storage tank.

Views of local community

248 letters, e-mails and pre-printed cards were received by the Council objecting to the 2010 application to expand the coal mine north and continue mining until 2014. These include comments from local residents the Neath Biodiversity Forum, the Department of Social Services Caerphilly County Borough Council and friends of the Earth Cymru. Objections related to a broad set of concerns including loss of amenities, environmental damage, and Celtic Energy Ltd's conduct in relation to other coal mining operations with a reference to its evasion of restoration at Margam/Park Slip.

In response to the 2014 smaller extension, the Council received 2 letters from local residents and 1 comment online expressing concern about noise, air quality, and the lack of bridleway access in the restoration plan. Powys County Council questioned impacts

of continued coaling on health from noise and dust, and impacts on traffic from coal transportation by road. Neath Port Talbot Ramblers Association objected to the application on the basis that the proposed extension would lead to further delays in reinstatement of rights of way.

43 letters of support for the application were sent to the Council, but the Planning Officer noted that these seemed to be "largely from suppliers or clients of Celtic Energy Ltd", such as Aberthaw Power Station rather than the local community.

John Morris, a local retired miner, was reported by Wales Online as "absolutely furious", indicating he didn't know restoration promises could be changed after they are originally agreed, in reference to the doubt over reopening a road shut 23 years earlier to allow for the coal mine.

“ Absolutely furious ”



Photo left: oil, industrial lubricants, and anti-freeze coat the surface of puddles of a nearby leaking tank that seems abandoned.

Photo right: rusting drum of anti-freeze. near to contaminated soil.

Notes

Opencast coaling for the site with restoration and aftercare was approved in May 1994 for a period of 12 years (completion by 2006). In 2005, a time extension was approved to the end of December 2010, followed by an increase to the extraction limit in January 2009. In July 2010, a size and time extension was approved, with another, smaller, size and time extension applied for in 2013 and approved in March 2014.

Celtic Energy Ltd claimed they were mining anthracite coal supplied for domestic and cement kiln heating, electricity generation, filtration, and to steelworks. Selar opencast coal mine covers an area of 330 hectares with some 180 hectares forming the main operational area.

Unfortunately, comparison with the original restoration scheme (P1999/0596) is not possible as it's not been scanned and made available online, originally filed in June 1999, and Covid restrictions means the paper copy is currently inaccessible.



Controversy

The site was sold by Celtic Energy Ltd to Sycamore Regeneration Inc., a subsidiary of Oak Regeneration Ltd, for a nominal amount along with the legal liabilities to restore it after coaling. Celtic Energy Ltd did the same with East Pit, Margam, and Nant Helen opencast sites around the same time. The Planning Officer's Report is much less explicit and briefer in narrating that context for this application compared to some of the other coal mine extensions Celtic Energy Ltd applied for. Deep within the 2010 Planning Officer's Report, it is admitted that, at the time of application, there were insufficient funds to pay for restoration—as was the case with the restoration commitments made by Celtic Energy Ltd at its other opencast sites. A condition of the permission would therefore include progressively paying £23.5 million into a restoration fund. Although that's little over half the envisaged £40 million cost of restoration, it took “extensive discussions with the operator”, indicating the tense negotiation required for Celtic Energy Ltd to agree ‘in principle’ to pay even this amount towards restoration. This was reduced to £12.5 million in 2017, with a scaled down restoration by Celtic Energy Ltd (P2016/1102).

The difference in the full restoration cost and the amount to be paid was hoped to be made up by the progressive restoration and partial backfilling of the void in tandem with the new coal mining applied for, reducing the final restoration liability to be paid out of the fund. Within the 2010 report, the Planning Officer wrote that if there was an opportunity to increase the restoration fund, that would be positive. Accordingly, the 2014 extension required the restoration fund to be increased by £1.5 million to £23 million. It's unclear how material this reduction of liability for the Council was in their decision to approve the 2010 and 2014 extensions.

As with Nant Helen, Margam, and East Pit, Celtic Energy Ltd has sought to retain a void in this restoration plan, presumably to reduce the significant costs involved in backfilling opencast voids. The Planning Officer does not allude the cost-savings involved, indicating it's of minor impact; “The proposal to leave a part of the void as a geological feature will not be significant in the landscape and can be engineered and screened appropriately”.

The 1994 opencast coal mining application to extract 3.1 million tonnes of coal was granted with the knowledge it would result in the loss of the Selar Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSI). Celtic Energy Ltd claimed it would mitigate this loss with the ‘translocation’ of species rich grassland from the Selar Site of SSI to the newly created ‘Blaengwrach Nature Reserve’. The acceptability of losing this SSI to a coal mine indicates the importance given to coal mining over even a highly protected environmental status at the time. Although the UK's coal dependency had reduced by almost 35% since the first permission was granted, and consumption had been in clear decline since 1975, the 2010 Planning Officer's report for an extension still recommended approval.

There's also a rigid adherence to the idea that ecosystems and the lives within them are standardised interchangeable units. This manifests in the belief that ecosystems can be destroyed now if new ones are started in the future (it's not clear what the animals are meant to do in between), or an ecosystem can be destroyed here if another is ‘started’ over there. In reality, every ecosystem, and the animals within it, are as unique as humans and the neighbourhoods we live in, and when they're destroyed, they're gone forever.

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Both the prioritisation of coaling and the outlook on ecosystems held by the Planning Officer briefing planning councillors is most visible when they write:

The working of the site will result in the loss of 7.7 hectares of this habitat. Most of the habitat for breeding birds and wintering birds would be lost... On restoration it is proposed to create 19.3 hectares of broadleaved woodland to replace the loss within the site... The Environmental Assessment considers this to be a significant adverse impact at a district level

...however, in some instances, social and economic interests may justify development proceeding despite such impacts on biodiversity.

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Photo: inside a derelict warehouse in the middle of Selar containing a pile of broken office chairs, oil drums, and industrial debris.

The Coal Authority's input:



Encourages and supports the proposal which is seeking to work coal in environmentally and socially acceptable ways



The 2013 [P/2013/720](#) application delayed restoration plans for 3 years, originally due for completion by February 2017—though some restoration on areas of the site not worked was taking place alongside the coaling. This delay was despite local residents reporting impacts in the form of noise, dust, blasting, light pollution, and associated transportation movements of the existing coaling activity (though these reports are fairly low in quantity).

Photo: concrete foundations around the warehouse contain industrial waste that seems to be abandoned.

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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