

Tower

Summary

A selling point of this opencast coal mine was that it would remove a few of the 286 coal tips that exist within Rhondda Cynon Taf. The opencast was located on the site of a deep coal mine that closed two years earlier, and would use the coal tips left behind to fill the void after extracting the coal. This shows some of the connections between opencast coal mines and tip restoration. Restoration works on this former opencast coal mine site were due to be completed by mid-2021 but the coal operator. However, Tower Regeneration Ltd, claimed Covid19 and heavy rainfall had delayed progress. Works were then expected to be completed by mid-2022 but a site visit in September 2022 reported that restoration works are ongoing. This might be because the land contours varied up to 2 metres from the plan and were forced to bring them in line with the plan. The coal operator was fined twice by Nartual Resurces Wales in 2021 for discharging silt laden surface water into the River Cynon over a 2 year period, up to 100x over the limit.

Tower Colliery Railhead

Address

Tower Colliery Railhead, Rhigos Mountain Road, Rhigos, Hirwaun, Aberdare, CF44 9UF

Expected completion

Spring/Summer 2022 + 5 years aftercare for agricultural areas, and 25 years for all nature conservation areas.

County Council

Rhondda Cynon Taff Council

Mining operator

Tower Regeneration Ltd, a company jointly held between Tower Colliery Ltd and Hargreaves Services Ltd, was created to carry out the mining and restoration works.

Restoration by

Tower Regeneration Ltd

Cost of restoration

Anticipated maximum cost (not yet completed): £21 million (reportedly held by the Council, and is being paid to Tower Regeneration Ltd pro rata as work progresses).



What happens to the land after restoration

A farmer owns around 50% of the land, which will be turned to agricultural use. It is proposed that some of the brownfield site will be allocated to 400 new houses under the Local Development Plan (not over the backfilled void), as well as “36 hectares of employment, a new primary school, a retail store of 2000m2 net floor space, medical/community centre, and informal recreation contained in a landscape setting”.

The final design proposal is to create 3 plateaus, encompassing 86 acres. The backfilled void area devoted to restoration, ponds with paths alongside, and open-access to the community. This would require further planning permission to go ahead.

Site visit (September 2022)

The report from a site visit described ongoing restoration: a large, fairly level area of exposed soil with several vehicles working on it, and a digger reprofiling a hill that slopes onto the level area. Sharp, vertical cuts into the slope are still visible. Large amounts of airborne dust was visible from heavy vehicle movements on the exposed soil. No remaining void could be seen.



Views of local community

85 out of 121 letters that were sent to the Council, raised concerns and objections towards the opencast application. These encompassed the environment, human health, landscape, employment, consultation, surrounding agriculture, and archaeology. Further letters of objection were received from Hirwaun and Penderyn Community Council. Later complaints were made regarding dust in the development phase of the opencast.

Quarterly meetings of the Tower Liaison Committee have been taking place with involvement of Community Council representatives.

Photo: entry path to the Tower Colliery former coal mine.

Notes

Permission was granted for the extraction of an estimated 5.9 million tonnes of coal over a void area of 131 hectares (total site area of approximately 253 hectares) with a maximum depth of 165 metres at the deepest part. The maximum rate of extraction was set at 1 million tonnes per year, with coal transport off site limited to 3 coal trains per day and 270 heavy goods vehicles per week.

The site encompasses an old deep mine that ceased operating 2 years prior to the opencast application submission, along with a few of the [286 coal tips](#) within Rhondda Cynon Taf, which would be remediated as part of the opencast restoration project.

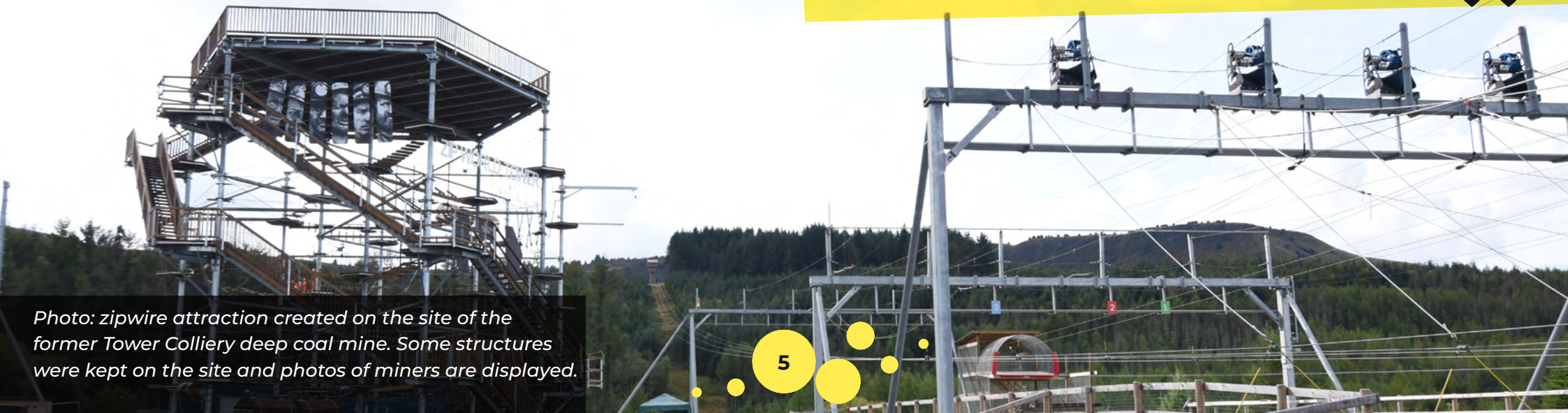
Rhondda Cynon Taff Council required £4 million towards the restoration to be paid by the mine operator before any excavation commenced to cover the substantial cost of backfilling the void should the company become non-functioning after the excavation

phase and the Council became liable. This money was paid into an account to which only the Council have access. The interest on this deposit has been used to pay The Coal Authority to advise the Council and vet progress invoices submitted by Tower Regeneration Ltd, with payments made quarterly. The Council report to us that they have retained sufficient funds in the restoration account so that, should the mine operator suddenly cease restoring the former opencast site at any point, restoration could be completed with the remaining funds by employing a new company—which would cost more.

The Coal Authority supported the application writing:

“...surface mining is critical to the continued supply of good quality coal for the UK, which offers security against the volatility of imported coal.”

Photo: zipwire attraction created on the site of the former Tower Colliery deep coal mine. Some structures were kept on the site and photos of miners are displayed.



Controversy

'Land Reclamation and Engineering' objected to the application on the basis of flood and run-off risk into local water courses. This, unfortunately, proved later to be well-founded. The drainage and attenuation measures agreed in planning conditions were not maintained and Natural Resources Wales successfully prosecuted Tower Regeneration Ltd twice in 2021, with over 13 charges spanning a 2-year period of polluting the River Cynon. Tower Regeneration Ltd was fined almost £38,000, and ordered to pay £39,600 in costs. Water samples indicated that the former opencast site discharged silt laden surface water into the River Cynon up to 100x over the limit. This is one of many cases where the conditions attached to planning permission are ignored by mining companies.

At the time of writing, the landscape contours vary by 2 metres to what was agreed in the planning application. Tower Regeneration Ltd claim this margin is within industry standards, but the Coal Authority disagree, putting this at just 0.6 metres. The Council is not disbursing further restoration funds until Tower Regeneration Ltd bring the contours in line with what was agreed or submit an application to agree the new contours.

The restoration was due to be complete by mid-2021 but, according to Tower Regeneration Ltd, progress has been delayed due to Covid19 and heavy rainfall, and was expected to be complete by mid-2022. The report from a site visit in September 2022 indicates restoration works are ongoing.

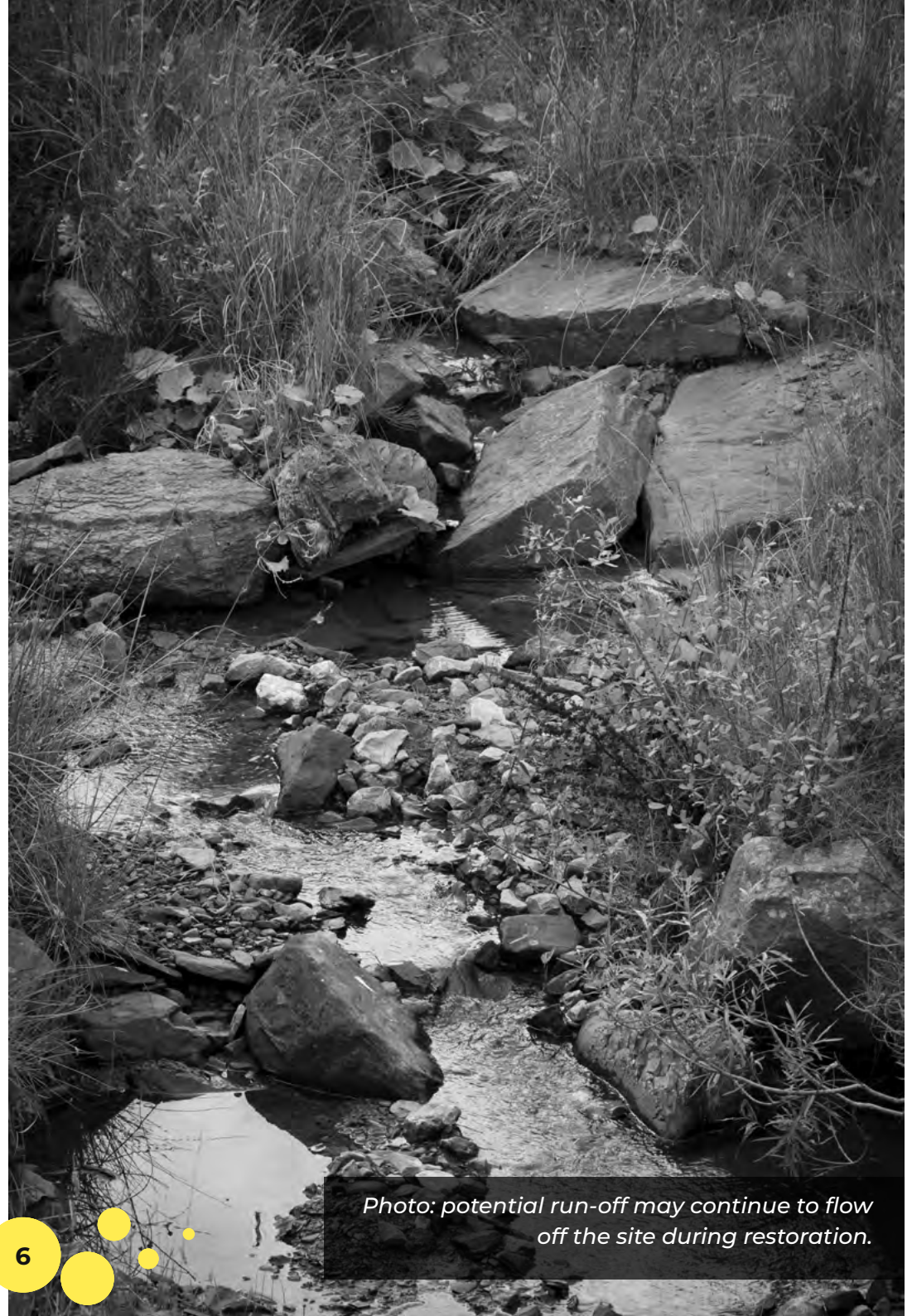


Photo: potential run-off may continue to flow off the site during restoration.

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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Coal Action Network works for an end to coal-fired power generation, coal extraction and coal imports in the UK, and for justice for communities affected by the UK's current and historical coal consumption and mining.

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