

1) Gateway to Gwynedd – the A5 road

Thomas Telford's great London to Holyhead trunk road (A5) will in all probability form the introduction to the new county of Gwynedd for those visitors approaching by car from the southern half of the United Kingdom. Built in stages from 1815 to 1826, it amalgamated and superseded the various roads built by private landowners and Turnpike Trusts, some only a decade or two previously, to form a direct and convenient route from London to Ireland. The circumstances influencing the development of this road as the principal mail route will be described in a later section of this book dealing with the port of Holyhead, but it is convenient at the outset of our tour of Gwynedd to visualise how the road network of the county evolved from its earliest days, with reference to the system as existing at present.

A major obstacle to travellers in the eighteenth century was the wide estuary of the River Conwy, which nowadays approximates to the easternmost boundary of the new county. The recognised points at which ferries operated were at Conwy itself, which was very dangerous, and at Tal-y-cafn, some four miles inland; safer but requiring a considerable detour from the preferred route which otherwise lay along the coast all the way from Chester. The first proper road in the district was constructed between these two ferries on the west side of the estuary in 1759. In 1772 the coastal road was extended over the Sychnant Pass to Bangor and thence to Pwllheli, becoming known as the Old Carnarvon Turnpike; and between 1777 and 1790 Tal-y-cafn was connected by a new road to Llanrwst, where it joined the existing route to Shrewsbury via Pentrefoelas.

In the meantime, Lord Penrhyn of Penrhyn Castle near Bangor, owner of the developing slate quarries at Cae Braich y Cafn (near what was to become Bethesda), was building a good road from his quarries to the shipping point (later Port Penrhyn) during 1790-1791. This was extended up to Llyn Ogwen by 1792, and thence via the Nant Ffrancon pass to Capel Curig, where he built an Inn (c1798). This road was intended to generally improve communications within the district, and the last link with the roads to the east was completed by the Capel Curig Turnpike Trust in 1802.

In its final form, this Trust's road ran from the older route at Pentrefoelas to near Bangor, utilising parts of Lord Penrhyn's earlier road. Its quality was such that it enabled the Irish mail coaches to be diverted onto it from September 1808; they had formerly travelled via Llanrwst and the ferries. Ironically it was in this same year that William Maddocks opened a new stretch of road on his proposed but abortive London to Dublin mail route, between Traeth Mawr (Porthmadog) and Porthdinllaen (276416). At this time, and again later during the "Railway Mania" period of the 1840's, the latter place was championed by some as a serious contender to the development of Holyhead as the principal port for the Irish Traffic, but it remains now as then, a small and isolated hamlet.

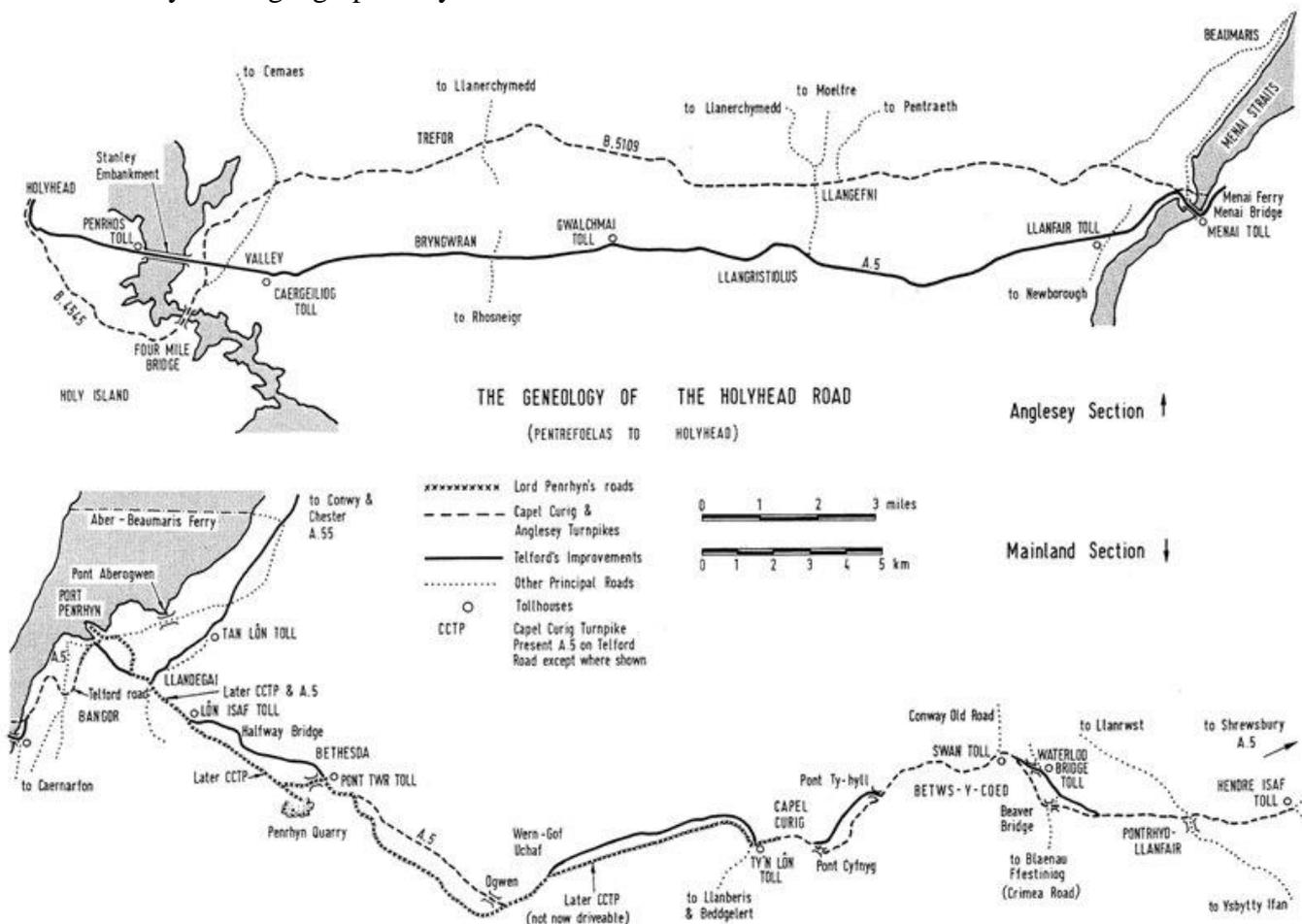
The final phase in the setting up of the present trunk road system commenced with the surveying of a new direct route to Holyhead by Thomas Telford in 1810. Telford (1757-1834), at that time engineer to the Shropshire Union Canal Company, was, however, unable to persuade Parliament of the necessity for these road improvements until 1815, when the Holyhead Road Commission was set up. Telford was appointed as engineer, and by 1819 he had undertaken the amalgamations and reconstruction work necessary to form the Shrewsbury and Bangor Ferry Turnpike Trust. The Wyatt family of architects, who will feature prominently throughout this book, were closely involved; James Wyatt is recorded as inspector of roads in 1816, with his brother Benjamin as clerk to the trustees and treasurer. Our map (next page) summarises the development of the Holyhead Road through the county of Gwynedd.

The last major obstacle was the bridging of the Menai Straits, completed in 1826, to join up with the new stretch of road across Anglesey which had recently replaced the old turnpike via Bodedern and Llangefni dating from 1765. It is thus seen that the overall development of the road network has been



influenced not so much by local needs as those of the Irish traffic. Upon the completion of the through route to Holyhead, the journey from Shrewsbury was reduced from some three days to only twenty-six hours, and the "Wonder" coach became the first in the country to cover one hundred miles in one day, c.1840. The use of the road for the carriage of the mail was however short-lived, as this reverted to the old Chester route upon the opening of the main railway line along the North Wales coast in 1849.

A notable feature of Telford's road, which now substantially forms the A5 trunk road, is that despite the inhospitable mountain terrain of North Wales, there is no gradient steeper than 1 in 20, nor any lengthy stretches with excessive curvature. There remain many features of interest dating from the original reconstruction works, and also some from the earlier Turnpike road system: these are detailed in the text as they occur geographically.



The new County of Gwynedd is entered in the vicinity of the small village of Pentrefoelas, which lies astride one of these long, straight and level stretches of the Holyhead road. Here is to be found the last water-powered corn-mill to remain in operation in mainland North Wales. Voelas Mill (874515) is over two hundred years old and has been in the hands of the Horsfield Family since 1972. Maize, barley and oats are purchased from local farmers and ground into flour used in the preparation of health foods, which are distributed weekly as far afield as London, Birmingham and other major centres. The machinery can now be worked electrically but this has not been found necessary in recent years. A two-acre millpond supplies the 15 ft. diameter cast iron overshot waterwheel which is working every day in winter to supply power to three sets of grinding stones (two normally in use), three sieves, a roller crusher and the sack hoist. A staff of five to six is usually employed and it is occasionally possible for visitors to be shown around, provided that they are not bothered by the universal presence of thick layers of flour-dust.

Away from the main traffic artery of the A5, an older road crossing of the River Conwy is found at the village of Ysbyty Ifan, which takes its name from the Hospice of St. John, a hostel on neutral ground famous for the asylum granted to thieves and beggars. The present river bridge of two arches dates from the early eighteenth century, as do the almshouses above the fork for the village off the B4407. Built originally by one Catherine Vaughan of Pant Glas, these were remodelled in 1880 by Edward Gordon, Baron Penrhyn, into whose vast estates they had then passed.



Near the bridge in Ysbyty Ifan there is another corn-mill (842487). Although ceasing work in the early 1950's due to the prohibitive cost of replacing stones (only one pair out of four was serviceable by then), the 12 ft. diameter overshot waterwheel survives together with traces of the leat bringing water from higher up the river. This waterwheel is of cast iron with wooden spokes, an example of an earlier mode of construction (and more common amongst the surviving ones in North Wales) than that found at Pentrefoelas.



It is often said that the corn-mill was the focal point of social life in a village community; possibly of nowhere was this more true than at Ysbyty. During the Second World War a generator was installed, which when driven from the 7 HP waterwheel supplied electricity to the whole of the village for half-a-crown a quarter per lamp. Of this institution there is a story, worth quoting in full as it told (in “The River Conwy” by Wilson MacArthur, Cassell and Co., 1952): *While we chatted, a woman came walking up to the mill and called out – “Mr Roberts! It’s ironing I am, isn’t it, and not enough heat in my iron, look you”. “You want more power than Mrs. Jones?”. “Yes, so I do, for my iron’s not hot enough, and the whole of the washing to do this very morning”. So the miller went to his controls and stepped up the output, and Mrs. Jones went happily off to finish her morning’s work.*

Such is the march of progress, for from the personal service exemplified by this delightful story, to the nationalised, computerised system of today is only twenty-five short years.

Keith A. Jagers 1978

Updates – November 2011

The Llangollen to Bangor section of the A5 Holyhead Road is now designated and promoted as a “Historic Route”. The sections of the Capel Curig Turnpike Trust road from Pont Ty Hyll (The Ugly House) to Pont Cyfyng, and from Pont Twr, Bethesda to Lon Isaf are still public roads, as is Lord Penrhyn’s route between Ogwen Cottage and near Pont Twr. That from Ty’n Lon, Capel Curig to Wern Gof Uchaf is a well maintained public footpath and bridleway. The lower section of Lord Penrhyn’s road through Penrhyn Park down to Port Penrhyn is mainly on private land and inaccessible.

Voelas Mill beside the main road at Pentrefoelas is intact, including the waterwheel, but appears to have been disused for some years. It is a listed structure.

The bridge, corn mill and almshouses at Ysbyty Ifan are virtually unchanged from 1978. The listed corn mill building and its waterwheel have been restored but are not operative. The Mill and the Bryn Ysgol Almshouses are owned by the National Trust, the latter let as holiday cottages