

6) The Llandudno area

The present-day busy holiday resorts of Llandudno and neighbouring Colwyn Bay, just over the county boundary in Clwyd, were mere villages at the beginning of the nineteenth century. That which now constitutes Llandudno was founded upon the copper mines of the Great Orme headland, which are thought to have been worked since prehistoric times, and certainly by the Romans. Reopened in 1782 by Sir Roger Mostyn, one hundred men were at work by 1800, and the mines produced 3000 tons of ore per year. The number of employees rose to a maximum of three hundred around 1835, at which time the shafts had reached their ultimate depth of two hundred feet. Royalties, equivalent to one-eighth of the value of the mines' production, were payable to the Bishop of Bangor as a condition of the lease of the properties. The proximity of the sea gave rise to extensive problems of flooding in the workings, which were breached disastrously in 1865. A vast new adit was cut to emerge on the cliffside near the present marine drive tollgate, but failed to ensure satisfactory drainage. The last year of major ore production was thus in 1870, and only sporadic reworking ensued up to 1900. There is now little to be seen of the industry apart from the remains of shaft-headings here and there, and some old miners' cottages at the foot of the Orme, near the edge of the new town.

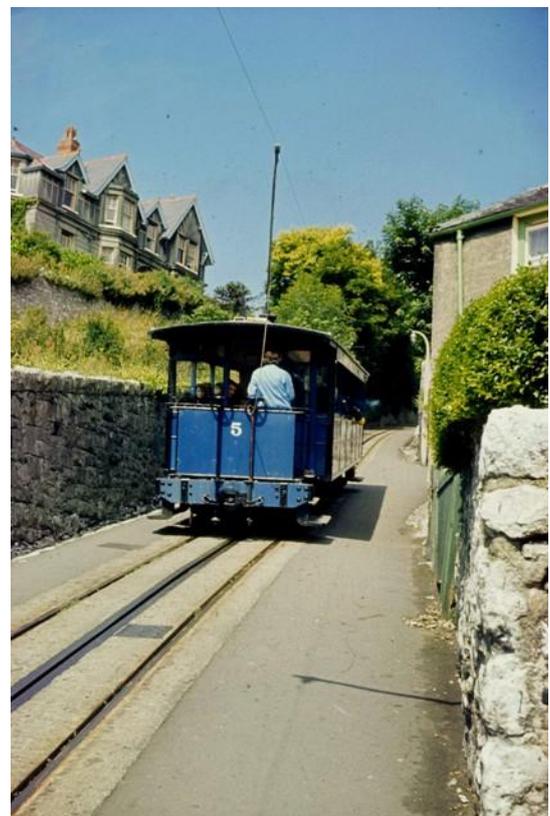
This latter, nineteenth century development was geared to the recreational needs of ailing city gentlefolk, and remains as an almost unspoilt example of a Victorian coastal watering place. The bulk of the town, a solid crescent of hotels and large residences facing the bay, and backing onto a rectilinear layout of shops and wide thoroughfares, was developed from the plans of Lord Mostyn in 1849.

The pier was constructed in 1875-7 and still hosts pleasure cruises to Liverpool, the Isle of Man and around Anglesey, as it has always done. Mostyn Street is the main shopping area, with row upon row of well preserved and ornate cast-iron and glass arcade frontages to complete the period seaside town atmosphere.



The main tourist "draw", apart from the shops and magnificent beach, is the remarkable limestone headland of the Great Orme, jutting far out to sea and appearing from a distance as a separate island, the town itself dwarfed on the low-lying isthmus joining it to the mainland. The "Orme" was the site of copper mines, and of later small stone quarries and the summit may still be gained without effort by means of an unusual cable tramway installed in 1902.

The Great Orme Railway is now operated by the local council, and consists of separately worked upper and lower sections each half a mile in length. From the covered terminus building at Victoria Road (778827) the lower-section cars are pulled up through a steep and narrow public street, which has to be closed to vehicular traffic on the days when the tram operates. A midway passing loop is followed by an impressive section at a gradient of 1 in 3½, the downward passage of which is enlivened by the presence of a seemingly right-angled bend at the bottom! The four single-deck bogie tramcars used, two on each section of the line, are the originals:



some of the earliest built by Hurst Nelson of Motherwell in 1902, though curiously the axle-boxes bear the date 1896. They are of 3'-6" gauge, now painted in a suitably pleasant and "dated" livery of royal blue and cream. The overhead boom and wire is used merely for telegraphic communication with the winding drum house, traction being supplied by the cable running in a conduit between the running lines, and controlled by a gripper/coasting brake operated by the car driver. The cable winding house is situated at the halfway point, where passengers have to transfer between the lower and upper-section cars. The winding drums were powered by a stationary steam engine until 1956, but are now electrically driven.



The upper section route is much less steep and cuts across open and windswept country on conventional trackage, remote from the road it has previously accompanied. The terminus near the summit hotel comprises a single car shed and setting down area, some 650 ft above sea level and with a glorious view of the mountains of Snowdonia. The unusual lighthouse building near the north-west extremity of the headland dates from 1862, and replaced a signalling station built 35 years earlier. The clock was made in 1846 and still keeps perfect time.

Despite the recent erosion of the tramway's monopoly by construction of a chair lift to the summit, it is hoped that this splendid Victorian relic will long continue its daily routine of operation in the summer months. Certainly in this more enlightened age it deserves to escape the fate of the other, much longer, passenger tramway that once ran in this neighbourhood.

The Llandudno and Colwyn Bay Electric Railway Limited operated an eight-mile overhead-electric line of 3'-6" gauge between the two towns from 1907 until 1956; the end parts were urban street tramways, connected by an intermediate section running on reserved track across open fields. From a terminus at West Shore (773820) the route lay down the centre of Gloddaeth Avenue, giving rise to the present wide, boulevard-like appearance: the shelters formerly served the waiting tram passengers. Along Mostyn Broadway the tarred-over heavy tram trackwork and points are sometimes revealed (and indeed cause some embarrassment) during road works. Cutting across the fields, the line recrossed the main road at the top of the hill at Penrhynside and ran adjacent to it on reserved track towards Penrhyn Bay. Most of the rails hereabouts were removed during road widening works in 1970 but two of the overhead trolley-wire poles survive to hold up the "Welcome to Llandudno" sign. What was formerly the main tram shed at Rhos-on-Sea, with accommodation for twenty single and double-deck cars, is now a BRS parcels depot, much altered. Apart from this and odd sections of well-defined reserved trackbed, there is otherwise little to remind the present-day visitor of this fascinating system.

One of the latter-day cars is preserved, not hereabouts, but in its place of origin in faraway Bournemouth. Built in 1924, it came to Llandudno second-hand twelve years later, and found its way temporarily to Clapham Museum in London after the closure of this line in 1956. These were the last private, as opposed to Corporation-owned trams to run in the British Isles. Our pictures (below) show this splendid vehicle, in the Bournemouth Transport Museum at Mallard Road depot, Castle Lane.....



The village of Penrhynside mentioned above stands astride another rocky seaward promontory known as the Little Orme, enclosing Llandudno's bay sweeping round from its more famous opposite number to the west. This headland has likewise been quarried for limestone, and the workings of the Little Orme Limestone Co. Ltd may conveniently be explored from the direction of the Penrhyn Beach housing estate (822822). The quarry was opened in the 1890's and worked on three levels, the middle being most prominent and containing the crushing mill with hoppers for direct loading of ships waiting below. Situated on the very edge of the cliff, the location is perhaps viewed at its best during an autumn sunset, being somewhat reminiscent of a typical Cornish coastal mining scene. A tramway incline served the top level, where the stone winding house still contains its iron cable-drum. The railway track of 3 ft gauge has now all but disappeared, but some wagons remain in a state of gross dilapidation and the body of one at least now does duty as a cattle drinking-trough. Dotted around this site and elsewhere along the cliff-top are World War 2 lookout posts and anti-aircraft gun emplacements, whose remains intermingled with those of the quarry may cause some confusion in decades to come: the latter had ceased operations by 1931.

As a holiday resort district from its earliest days the Llandudno area has of course left few other signs of industrial activity. On a more domestic note, many of its original fine houses have survived: one of the lesser known, Rapallo House, Craig-y-Don, now contains a small local museum which includes a superb reproduction of a seventeenth-century Welsh farmhouse kitchen. This house was formerly the home of the art connoisseur Edward Chardon.

It remains then to look at how people were enabled to reach the specially laid-out amenities of the town and its beaches. Motor coaches were early visitors, from the heyday of the charabanc outing prior to World War 1: the ornate red brick structure on Argyll Road, which is still a coach depot, was probably built during this period to shelter such vehicles during the daytime.

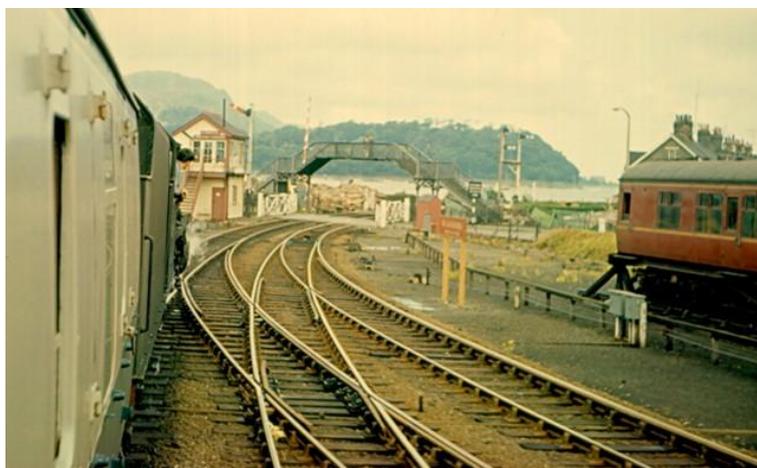
Llandudno railway station is the terminus of a three-mile long branch from Llandudno Junction on the Holyhead main line, constructed by the St. Georges Harbour & Railway Co. in 1858. The present town station building was erected by the L&NWR in 1891 and is largely in original condition although the overall roof of the train shed has been shortened recently from the platform ends. The broad carriage drive down the centre of the island platform, leading from twin



sets of iron entrance gates, lends a touch of atmosphere once common in provincial terminal stations but nowadays rarely found. Such a feature indeed often disappeared early with the need for an increased number of platforms, but at Llandudno the carriage stands still function sensibly as accommodation for cars parked awaiting train passengers. Beyond the station, extensive carriage and engine sidings formerly stabled stock from the huge volume of summer excursion traffic: what little of this remains is now dealt with at the Junction station. To the east of the main line station, goods warehouses with distinctive architecture survive in other uses, their sidings having long gone.

An intermediate branch station typical of the L&NWR "country" style was provided at Deganwy. This is still open, and adjacent to it will be seen the large quay built by the North Western in 1886 to handle slate traffic originating in the quarries of the Blaenau Ffestiniog area. The Conwy valley railway from Betws-y-Coed southwards was originally to have been built as a narrow-gauge line on the Spooner principle, but was eventually completed to standard gauge specifications throughout. Whilst Deganwy has seen a fair amount of use as a shipping point for slate, the route failed to capture much business from the longer-established Festiniog Railway. Today, like so many others, the Quay witnesses renewed activity as a marina for pleasure craft, and only a few old lamps, a hand crane, and evidence of the railway connection survive as reminders of its original purpose.

Llandudno Junction station has altered much over the years since the construction of the diverging branches to Llandudno and Blaenau Ffestiniog; its growth as an important railway centre resulted in the neighbouring suburban development which takes its name. The first site of the station was close to the present junction of the Llandudno line: Blaenau Ffestiniog trains were originally routed alongside the river behind the engine sheds, which necessitated reversal into the station. Rebuilding into the ultimate form and layout occurred in the 1880's, but extensive track rationalisation since 1967, coupled with the disappearance of the steam locomotive, has reduced the operating interest considerably. The main road flyover replaced a level crossing on the Llandudno line curve, a notorious traffic bottleneck in the summer months: the traffic jams remain, but at least the railway service can now proceed unhindered! Our picture shows the old crossing still in use in the summer of 1966.....



and these two images also help to recapture the steam age at this once-busy station.....



The area between the original and realigned (present) Conwy Valley branch routes, approached via Queen's Road (797776), contained two brickworks. The clay pits are now flooded, but the buildings of one, which operated as the Llandudno Junction Brickworks of Edward Boase & Sons until 1957, survive in the centre of what is now a car scrapyards. Of particular interest is the 15" diameter x 36" stroke single-cylinder horizontal steam engine which once drove crushing machinery, with its Lancashire-type boiler adjacent. The engine has a flywheel of no less than twelve feet in diameter. The surroundings of this area are unfortunately a far cry from those for which Llandudno is famous; the devastation wrought successively by the railway installations, the brickworks and the car breakers being completed by recent rubbish-dumping activities in the abandoned clay pits. Moreover, all this does not seem to have discouraged the presence of a caravan site nearby!

Keith A. Jagers

November 1978

Updates:- November 2011

A representative part of the Great Orme **copper mine** workings is open to the public from March to October, including underground tours.

Pleasure cruises from **Llandudno Pier** are currently suspended, due to the landing stage being unsafe (the pier itself is open as normal for public access). Small vessels operate local pleasure cruises from the promenade landing stages during the summer months.

The **Great Orme Tramway** continues in service with the original cars and operating methods.....



The summit hotel is now a visitor centre, with extensive car parking. The Lighthouse building is let as holiday accommodation.

The former Llandudno & Colwyn Bay electric tramway **car depot** site at Penrhyn Avenue, Rhos on Sea is now occupied by the new Fairways Park apartment blocks.

The Little Orme **limestone quarry** site has been cleared and landscaped; a network of footpaths is provided, affording glorious sea views. Some scant remains of the winding house and its equipment survive at the top of the main incline.

The Llandudno Museum was moved into the town centre in the 1980s, and **Rapallo House**, at the corner of Fferm Bach Road and Roumania Crescent has reverted to private residential use.

The former **Coach Depot** on Argyll Road is now a car dealership and garage (the building on the right in this picture).....





Llandudno **railway station** retains its original road frontage buildings, but the platform overall roof has been further truncated to cover just the concourse area, the merest fraction of its former extent. All the goods yard structures to the south side of the passenger station have gone, and that area left as derelict land. However the L&NWR signalbox remains in use, together with semaphore signals on a somewhat denuded gantry.....



Deganwy station buildings have all gone, and just the lattice-work footbridge now graces the lengthy and windswept platforms. The original signalbox beside the level crossing to the north remains in use here also however. The railway quay area has been comprehensively (over-) developed as a yacht marina with commercial and residential accommodation, and nothing of interest remains to remind us of its former use.

Llandudno Junction station continues to serve, though with much reduced facilities compared to its heyday. The former **brickworks** area to its south is now wholly in commercial and industrial use, with the car scrapyard still dominant; there is nothing of interest to us here now.