

The Dinorwic Quarry Hospital

A solid grey granite building, now thankfully renovated after many years of dereliction, stands on a sunny hillside terrace overlooking a lake and the mountains of Snowdonia. It is surrounded by dense woodland and also, nowadays well-concealed, much evidence of abandoned slate quarry workings. Remote from any centre of population, this is not where



one would expect to find a hospital or even a convalescent home, but this was indeed its function, built to serve a community of over 3000 souls engaged in the dangerous activities of extracting slate from the steep mountainside and processing it into roofing and other building materials. Our picture was taken in March 1974, when vegetation clearance and restoration had just started.

Only three of the very largest slate quarries of North Wales had their own hospitals, and there is some contention as to which of the two great rivals was first in the field here, as with several other innovations. Lord Penrhyn is variously quoted as having started his in 1825, 1840 and 1842, whereas that at Dinorwic is dated from 1830, sometime during the 1830's, 1860 or 1876. The hospital of the Oakeley Quarry at Blaenau Ffestiniog was founded in 1848. The discrepancies arise from differing interpretations of the facilities initially provided or developed later.

The first hospital provided for the workmen of Dinorwic was a small building much higher up the hillside, in the district known as Allt Ddu where almost all of the earliest organised quarrying activity took place. It is marked on later maps as "Old Hospital" and was eventually buried under the encroaching slate waste tips. This is the facility referred to as having started in around 1830, and the "surgeon" throughout the period was one Robert Roberts. He had no formal qualifications, such not being necessary then, but was apparently an expert "bonesetter".

Over the following 30 years the Dinorwic Quarry was vastly expanded eastwards and southwards down the hillside towards Llyn Peris. This necessitated the building of a new railway at lake level and the closure of the original tramway from Allt Ddu during the early 1840s, and of course a vast expansion in the numbers employed in the workings. A new and larger hospital facility rapidly became necessary, and it was the dream of the quarry owner, Thomas Assheton-Smith to make it one of the best in the country. Unfortunately he died in 1858 before work could be started, and his widow commenced the project in his memory during 1860. She also passed on soon afterwards and further progress by the Trustees of their estate was steady but very slow, leading up to a formal opening of the new facility in the year 1876.

This is the building which can still be seen today. It comprised four wards, an operating theatre, dispensary, kitchen, servant's living quarters and a mortuary. The quarry was then approaching the peak years of production, and the provision of this "modern" and well-equipped facility was trumpeted by the management "to enable the men to get back to work as soon as possible after treatment", a sentiment which was obviously in everyone's best interest, not least their own.

Although the quarry owners provided the land and the building, the quarrymen were expected to support the provision of equipment and the running costs by means of a small monthly contribution from their wages, 6d (2.5p) initially rising to 1/- (5p) in later years. This was administered by a Club, overseen by the quarry management, to which every employee was bound to contribute. Those persons receiving treatment also had to pay for their own bandages and medicines. Many of the workmen mistrusted the company doctor (and with good reason, as we see below), and a very few that could afford to do so continued with their own private arrangements, but still had to pay the club fee. In exceptional and deserving cases though, the wives and children of the quarryman might also be granted treatment at the quarry hospital.

Perusal of the Hospital Accident Books in the Gwynedd Archives shows the wide variety of afflictions dealt with, including injuries from falling (wet slate being very slippery), blasting accidents, rope breakages, crushing by rock falls, sprains and ruptures from lifting heavy blocks, and of course cuts from the sharp edges of slates which often led to septicaemia.

The first doctor appointed at the new hospital in 1876 was Thomas E. Hughes, though he also had a private practice and so was not in full-time attendance. He introduced the use of ether and later chloroform as an anaesthetic during limb surgery, also pioneering Lister's recommended Carbolic Acid spray treatment as an antiseptic from an early date. His well-known successor from 1892 was Dr Robert Herbert Mills-Roberts, who had qualified in London at the age of 25 in 1887 and came to Dinorwic after short spells in practice at Birmingham and elsewhere. In his private life he was a proficient footballer and rugby player, and used his undoubtedly superb fitness to expound and promote what were then quite radical principles of healthy living to his quarrymen charges during the whole period of his tenure. He advised the men to keep themselves and their homes clean, to ensure they had plenty of fresh air and exercise, and a healthy diet (nothing much has changed between then and nowadays!). But "remember that there is no nourishment in tea". He was dismayed by the poor health of some of the workmen, and even tried to blame their wives for not taking sufficient care of them at home!

Dr Mills-Roberts was certainly innovative during his years at Dinorwic (he left in 1914 to serve with distinction in the battlefields of the First World War, and moved on elsewhere shortly after that conflict ended). The Dinorwic Quarry Hospital was one of the first in the country to introduce the use of X-Rays in 1898, only two years after their discovery. The original machine can still be seen in the hospital museum; a fearsome-looking thing but which uses exactly the same principle as today's modern equipment. The building was also

one of the first in the area to have hot & cold running water, and electricity. One luxury was a *heated* examination table (by means of a hot water bath underneath), no doubt greatly appreciated by those unfortunate injured men who had been carried down the mountainside in the cold and wet. A speciality of the hospital staff, aided by the quarry workshop craftsmen, was the manufacture and fitting of prosthetics such as wooden legs and arms, tailor-made for the recipients; and even clever gadgets for those such as one man who had suffered the loss of both arms “so that he was enabled to use a spoon and knife to feed himself, and to remove his cap on entering chapel on Sundays”

One aspect of work in the quarries, especially in the later large mills set up to process the rock into finished roofing slates and slab products was seriously neglected, even denied by both management and hospital staff for many years; that of inhalation of slate dust, causing pneumoconiosis of the lungs. The quarrymen themselves, going home covered in dust, and coughing it up in the mornings, knew well that it was detrimental to their health, but could not gain any support at all from the medical profession. Dr Mills-Roberts, to his utter discredit, banished the notion of any such problems completely. On one occasion, he went to the offices of the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths in Caernarvon to investigate the reported causes of death amongst quarrymen, compared to the general population who were not so employed. The figures, relayed back to quarry management, were unfavourable so he dismissed the exercise as “not of great service” and suggested that the matter was best kept quiet. There are other cases of quarry rockmen who had been terribly injured and crushed in their work, reported as having died of pneumonia or “syncope” (loss of consciousness, or merely a fainting fit). It is small wonder then that the management-appointed Doctor/Surgeon was often not trusted by the men!

As late as 1912, the management, no doubt aided and abetted by Mills-Roberts, boasted (in the Slate Trades Journal): “.....the quarrymen are treated free, by a highly-qualified surgeon and a staff of nurses.....serious accidents are relatively few – treatment mainly comprises cases of small cuts and bruises....” and best of all: “....*the work and climate is so healthy – the men are thrifty and contented....*”. Even in 1922, the doctor at the nearby Penrhyn Quarry reported that there were no cases of silicosis among his charges, and that the fine slate dust was actually “beneficial to health”! Shockingly, unlike the coal-miners, the many who suffered even in quite recent times were not entitled to any compensation until 1979, and only then from a Labour government fearful of losing a forthcoming General Election (which they did anyway). It was far too late for most.

The Dinorwic Quarry Hospital was latterly staffed by volunteers, quarrymen who had been trained under the auspices of the St John’s Ambulance Brigade. It was finally closed down as such in the late 1940s following the setting up of the National Health Service, being retained thereafter as a First-Aid Post still manned by volunteers until the final closure of the quarry in 1969. All the equipment was stripped out, but fortunately most was retained in store by the Caernarvonshire County Archivist. The building itself became hidden in encroaching undergrowth and increasingly derelict. It is therefore a pleasure to report that in a recent, more enlightened age, the hospital has been fully restored and fitted out once again with many former artefacts, including others such as wooden legs and stretchers recovered from

various other parts of the quarry and its workshops. As such, it is the only one of the former quarry hospitals of North Wales to survive largely unaltered, now open to the public free of charge and complementing the National Slate Museum as a fitting memorial to the toils and tribulations of the 3000 men who once worked here.

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