

14) **Beaumaris and Penmon**

The coastal road to Beaumaris, built originally by Lord Bulkeley for access to his estate and becoming turnpiked in 1829, is flanked by expensively and sometimes frivolously - ornamented “Gentlemen’s Residences”; the stretch between Plas Rhianfa, the best surviving example (pictured below) and the Gazelle Hotel has been dubbed “Millionaires Mile”. The hostelry, situated on the foreshore below the main road, served for many years as a terminus of the long-established Straits ferry service from Bangor, latterly only a short crossing from the end of the pier directly opposite.



Just beyond, on the inland side of the road will be noted the magnificent wrought-iron main gates to Bulkeley’s estate, Baron Hill (581743). Despite the imposing entrance, the vast mansion itself some two miles further on is unfortunately in ruins.

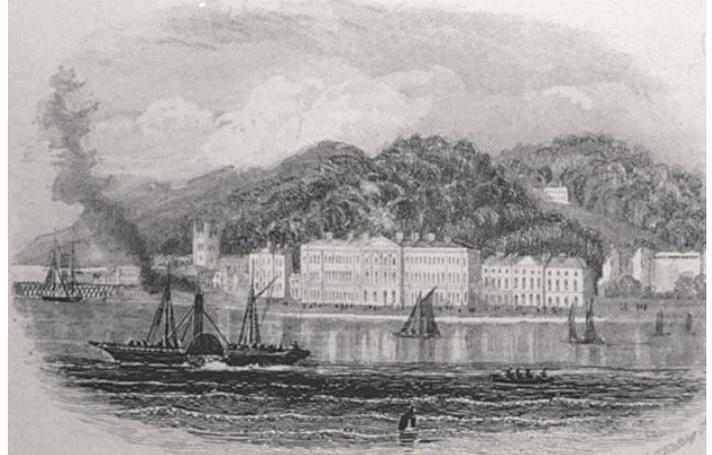
Built in 1776 by Samuel Wyatt, it saw use as a war prison during the 1940’s and later housed Polish refugees as “Beaumaris Camp” before being gutted by a disastrous fire in 1949. The house and its once-immaculate formal gardens are now overgrown and totally derelict.....



How different might this pretty wooded area have become, had one proposal of the 1846 “Railway Mania” period succeeded. The “Beaumaris & East of Anglesey and Chester & Holyhead Junction Railway”, commencing from the vicinity of the Marquis of Anglesey’s column at Llanfair P.G., was to serve supposed copper deposits at Cadnant and Garth; these were to be mined discretely so as not to interfere with the already-select residential atmosphere. To reach a lead works (previously closed in 1760) a branch was proposed to tunnel right underneath the house at Baron Hill, whilst the “main line” tapped also a “promising”

but non-existent coalfield at Lleiniog on its way to more realistic prospects at the marble quarries of Penmon. Driving along the road today it is difficult to visualize the gleam in the eyes of the promoters who were responsible for such schemes.

No railway was in fact ever built to serve the prosperous commercial and administrative community of Beaumaris, which thus retains a strange air of self-contained isolation to this day: its solid blocks of Georgian sea-front residences stand out prominently when viewed from the main road approach, or from the mainland shore of the Straits opposite, huddled together against the wooded backdrop of Baron Hill Park.....



As befitting a town with borough status stretching back many centuries, a moated castle and much other interesting architecture, both industry and new housing have been kept at a discrete distance. Our present attention will be confined to some of the more socially oriented aspects of the Industrial Revolution.

Beaumaris Gaol (604761), open to visitors in the summer months (as a museum!) was built by William Thomas of Holyhead in 1828-9 to the designs of Messrs Hansom (of Hansom Cab fame) and Welch, architects of York. Despite its dark and forbidding interior, it is said to have represented a marked advance in prison construction and management for those times. The installations include a unique treadmill, still in workable order, upon which prisoners worked their daily quota of penal labour, six at a time, to the gratification of their overseers. The wheel was installed in 1867 contemporarily with the “new gaol” extension and, unusually, did useful work in addition to providing exercise for the inmates. It is connected to a “Siemens Patent” pump which raised water from a well to fill storage tanks on the prison roof and so provide a supply of running water. The tread-wheel itself is 12 feet in width and six feet in diameter, and has bench-seat accommodation for six prisoners.

Another grim reminder of the nineteenth century judicial system is the gallows doorway leading out above the street, which was used for public executions. The gaol was closed as such in 1878, and has subsequently been used as a police station and town lock-up, before being opened for the tourists.

Still in its original use, however, is the Assize Court (607762), the oldest of its kind in the United Kingdom. Dating from 1614, it has been finely restored, and is also open to the public during the summer. A stout iron railing divides the interior, preserving the dignity of the court proceedings from the common rabble gathered in the stone-floored public area. The Mayor and Bailiffs were, unusually, seated in a gallery above the judge, and the origin of the term “the Bench” hereby becomes apparent. Despite harsh penalties for the most trivial of offences, we read that leniency could be expected in cases of smuggling, in which the island’s administrators were as interested as anyone else. The building has seen continuing use as a magistrate’s court since 1971, and proceedings are now held quarterly.

Adjacent to the Court premises is an interesting pair of whitewashed cottages (picture below) occupied by ferrymen in the days when a service operated across the Straits from here over the Lavan sands to Aber. This was the official route to Holyhead prior to 1719 when it was transferred to the vicinity of what was to become Menai Bridge, but an independently run passenger ferry survived until 1830. At this time the sea came right up to the Castle Walls and these houses are provided, like others of the older buildings in the town, with slotted uprights at the bottom of the doorways, into which planks could be

inserted and reinforced with clay, to prevent the ingress of floodwater during exceptional tides. The visitor is told that these ferrymen's cottages are contemporary with the castle (c.1295); they are certainly very old but this is probably a considerable overstatement...

The present "Green" fronting the castle is built-up land, part of a flood prevention scheme carried out in the inter-war years.



Beaumaris Pier still retains partially intact the 2 ft 6 in gauge tramway (right) that was used during its construction, and possibly subsequently for some years to carry passengers and their luggage from the steamers moored at the pier head to the seafront hotels. (There was once a similar one in operation on the "new pier" at Bangor.)

The original premises of the David Hughes Grammar School, founded in Beaumaris in 1603 but now based at Menai Bridge, are situated near the Castle entrance; they have recently undergone extensive renovation and are used for community purposes. Two massive cast-iron water pumps from the town have been moved to the school grounds for preservation.



In a town such as Beaumaris, it is not altogether surprising to find the gas-works and lighting company's premises at a respectable distance from the commercial and residential areas. Despite this, no time was lost in ensuring their almost complete obliteration, and nowadays only the attendant's cottage remains (599760). Coal from the Anglesey Collieries at Malltraeth was used experimentally to produce gas here in 1857. The stone arch over the lane nearby once carried one of a complex system of carriage driveways within Baron Hill park; two other larger ones to be seen across the roads entering Beaumaris from the north look deceptively like old railway structures. Further into the undergrowth beyond the Gas House Cottage we find the remains of the School slate works, a gaunt three-storied stone shell which became disused before 1900, with easily-traced leats and waterwheel pits. These few items are the sole reminders of how lightly the industrial revolution touched upon Beaumaris.

At the nearby village of Llanfaes, an interesting old forge dated 1811 (picture right) is now unused and derelict inside, looking for a sympathetic custodian. It lies in a quiet backwater in the shadow of the old parish church (604778).

Unusually located in the rural surroundings leading to the Penmon headland beyond Beaumaris is the factory of Laird (Anglesey) Ltd., an offshoot of the Cammell-Laird Shipbuilding and Engineering group of Birkenhead. Involvement with marine work



is now restricted to production of decompression chambers and “floating bridges” to government contract and for export. Other products of this factory have included a number of London buses (as Saunders Roe Ltd; the famous 1950s RT type) and special bodies for refuse collection vehicles. Former boat building activities are recalled by the overgrown slipway, with its broad gauge rails and special transporter cradles, used to carry completed vessels across the main road and onto the foreshore (610774). The incline was installed as late as circa 1950, and was in use for only a few years. A transverser at the top connected with sheds, workshops and storage bays now also mainly unused.

Vessels built here, mainly naval cutters and other small craft, were the last in the line of a Beaumaris tradition stretching back to a period from 1780-1810, when the town’s shipbuilders supplied wooden hulls for use in the Anglesey Copper and Penrhyn Slate trades. However, Mr. Hugh R. Jones of the Beaumaris Instrument Company has recently started limited production of a two-cylinder compound steam launch engine, designed by the late Victor Mills (a senior design draughtsman at Lairds), and constructed to traditional standards. In the workshops in the centre of Beaumaris town a prototype engine is being installed in a beautifully restored 22 ft Shepherd’s of Windermere launch hull; perhaps before long she might be seen proudly steaming down the Straits on a summer afternoon, a sole reminder of recreation in an unhurried age now long vanished.

At several points around the tip of the Penmon promontory are the remains of various limestone quarries of very early origins, which supplied the high quality building stone generally referred to as Mona Marble. This was used in the construction of both Beaumaris and Caernarfon Castles in the thirteenth century, much more recently for the towers of the two bridges over the Menai Straits and of Penrhyn Castle during the years 1820-50.

On the right-hand side of the road leading to the Priory, an archway inscribed “Penmon Marble Quarries 1877” leads down to the stone quayside buildings of J. H. Hope’s Penmon Park Quarry (630804). This was operating only during the period 1875-91 and again from 1900 until final closure in 1910. Traces of the tramway incline from the quay to the quarry workings and the bridge by which it passed under the main road will be noted.

The Headland Quarry of Dinmor Quarries Ltd. (634815) remains in operation on modern lines, but still often employs the traditional mode of conveyance for its products, by ship directly from an adjacent jetty - in such a location infinitely more desirable and convenient than the use of lorries. Some 3 ft gauge trackwork survives in the old quarry from the railway system abandoned in 1966, and until recently one diesel locomotive remained, isolated in its former shed. In connection with a sea-wall construction contract, Messrs Howard and Co. also operated an entirely separate 3 ft 6 in gauge tramway layout put down in the late 1960’s and traces of this may also be found.

Perhaps the most interesting and accessible remains of the older methods of working are to be seen in the disused Flagstaff Quarry (636806) owned by the same firm. An extensive 3 ft gauge rail system, partly intact, connected the quarry pits, crushing mill, limekilns and jetty, the whole abandoned since 1941 (pictures right & below). A bank of



two large kilns is provided with an incline running to the top; thence a wagon turntable gives access to the kiln mouth for direct tipping of the stone.

Further inclines descend into each of the two quarry pits from the upper level of a large dressing mill. The shell of the latter building has some line shafting intact, and a wooden beam bears the plimsoll mark from a ship - doubtless it was purloined for re-use from a vessel which had come to grief along these shores. Tram wagons tipped quarried stone into the top level of the mill, and crushed material descended via hoppers into further wagons running onto the jetty below, on the opposite side.

The large iron cooling-water tanks (right) were once linked to the condensers of horizontal steam engines, powering the lever-type stone crushing machinery in the mill. Both machinery and tanks were supplied by De Winton and Co., Caernarfon, as was also a 25 ft elevator wheel with buckets to scoop up crushed ore; this has now vanished. In front of the limekilns another building, used for drying, bagging and storage, contains a small hand-crusher bearing the maker's name, John Williams and Son, Phoenix Works, Rhyddlan, as well as another plate reading "T. R. Davies, Beaumaris".



Situated at the end of the toll road to Penmon Point, the coastguards' houses (1839) are built of local "marble". The adjacent Trwyn-Du light was commissioned in 1837 to mark the dangerous channel between the Anglesey mainland and Puffin Island (otherwise known as Priestholm, or Ynys Seiriol) just offshore, and also the notorious "Dutchman's" sandbank. The installation here was a direct result of the total destruction of the well-laden paddle steamer "Rothesay Castle", en route from Liverpool to Menai Bridge on the night of the 18th August 1831, with the loss of many lives.



A further small stone quarry was in operation from 1928 to 1956 on the north coast of the headland at Tan Dinas near Llanddona (593820). There was a 2 ft gauge railway system here, but this and most of the other equipment was largely dismantled around 1967, and nothing much of interest remains.

Keith A. Jagers November 1978

Updates – January 2012

Plas Rhianfa is currently undergoing sympathetic refurbishment, and is scheduled to re-open as a holiday retreat in April 2012. The **Gazelle Hotel** continues to function, and the ornate gates to the **Baron Hill Estate** are still prominent on the north side of the main road. The big house itself (a listed structure) has endured another 40 years or so of gentle decay, but is still substantially intact, externally at least.

Beumaris **Gaol and Courthouse** are both popular tourist attractions in Beumaris town.....



“**Green Cottages**” next door to the courthouse are renovated, but now have a garden area to the front which, although pretty, somewhat diminishes their previous distinctive character (right).....

Beumaris **Pier** has recently undergone extensive refurbishment, widening to its original width and re-decking, with a new floating pontoon similar to Menai Bridge Pier; the tramway rails have survived at the landward end (below).....



The former **David Hughes Grammar School** building functions as a community centre and public library, with the town **water pumps** still prominent nearby (picture right above).

The **archway** carrying the driveway to Baron Hill house over Mill Lane is a listed structure. The site of the town **gasworks** nearby is occupied by new detached residential properties; the former **school slate works** building adjacent is completely demolished with the area now heavily wooded.

The former Llanfaes **smithy** and its cottage have been fully restored and are in residential use with B&B accommodation offered. The Saunders Roe **slipway** is still discernable from the main road and on the beach, though long disused and heavily overgrown at the landward end. The factory premises, latterly occupied by Laird (Anglesey) Ltd. have been “mothballed” since 1997. The Beumaris Instrument Company remains in business (as “BICO”) though under different family ownership since Hugh Jones’

retirement. For further detail and pictures of the **Mills Compound Steam Engine** (“The Beaumaris Engine”) see the excellent David Mills website: www.mprints.co.uk/mills-compound

The **Penmon Park Marble Quarry** workings are no longer clearly visible from the road due to tree and vegetation growth, but appear to be accessible by footpath; some ruined buildings remain. The former tramway incline is now an access road to a B&B establishment, Gwyndaf, a useful base for exploring this beautiful area. The ruined crushing mill buildings may be explored from the beach.

Dinnor Park (or Headland) Quarry) closed down in 1978, and the site is now used as a large fish farm, with nothing of the old structures or tramways remaining.

Flagstaff Quarry remains the best-preserved and most accessible of the marble quarry sites around Penmon, and is still worth exploring. A footpath leads south eastwards to the site from the Priory car parking area, passing behind the Dovecote. The main quarry pit is somewhat overgrown, and virtually all ferrous material has of course long since been removed, but there are extensive ruined buildings on the foreshore.

The **coastguard houses and lighthouse** at Trwyn Du remain as a popular location for bird-watchers, walkers and photographers.

The dramatic cliffside **Tan Dinas Quarry** workings are easily visible from across the bay in Benllech, and are accessible (with great difficulty) on foot; the crushing mill ruins survive down on the beach.