

24) Penygroes to Caernarfon

We have seen how the quarrying districts of Moel Tryfan and Nantlle Vale both sent their products by tramway in the general direction of the sea at Caernarfon, and can now proceed to follow these routes noting the changes that took place with the gradual development of the railway system. As already mentioned the 3 ft 6 in gauge Nantlle Railway was constructed circa 1828 down to Caernarfon quay, but was superseded by the standard-gauge network in 1869-72, leaving only the section from Talysarn to the quarries to survive as a horse-worked curiosity into BR days (it was the last of its type when closed in 1965). However much of the former route into Caernarfon can still be traced, since its course was far too sinuous to be re-used by the standard-gauge railway builders.

The LNWR branch terminus and slate transshipment point was called Nantlle station despite being located in Talysarn village. The station building (488529) survives complete with canopy, although it was closed to passengers as early as 1932.....



A new main road alignment cuts through what was the goods yard and runs along the old railway formation most of the way to Penygroes, with the former narrow village road and terraces of quarrymen's houses above. By the gasworks (477529) a steeply graded tramway route descends from an exchange siding to serve the New Vronheulog Green Slate quarries on the opposite side of the valley, which are still occasionally worked for decorative materials.

On entering Penygroes the route of the LNWR branch swings away from the new road and crosses the Porthmadog road before curving to join the Caernarfon - Afon Wen "main line" at Penygroes station. The fine Carnarvonshire Railway station building here was demolished in 1976.....



The Nantlle Railway route meanwhile lies straight through the village and is commemorated in the road now named "Hen Tramffordd" which marks its course (470532). The Nantlle ran a short-lived horse-drawn passenger service from 1856, and its station and stables were hereabouts. Around the village will be noted several examples of green/grey/red decorative patterned slate roofs, on quarry company "showpiece" houses.

The route of the line can be followed beyond onto a well-preserved field section between two stone walls (picture right) to rejoin its standard-gauge replacement at (468541).....

The NWNG (later Welsh Highland Railway) system terminated at the next station down the line, Dinas Junction (477587). The narrow gauge engine shed and workshops were sited just before the road bridge which spans both lines side by side: the station and interchange sidings beyond (closed 1937) are now used as a County Council depot.

Our picture shows the L&NW side of the station, looking north in 1969. The Welsh Highland bridge was off picture to the right, and their side of the station was in the trees beyond the signal post.....

The Nantlle Railway route is parallel to the standard gauge at this point and about 50 yards to the west (off to the left in the picture); it may be followed easily running northwards to cross the LNWR line, and in about half a mile it dives into a deep cutting followed by the extremely waterlogged Dinas tunnel (abandoned since 1869), of which both ends may easily be examined from the later railway route. The picture shows the south portal.....

At Bontnewydd there is another impressive reminder of the old line in the form of a high embankment and single, frail-looking stone arch bridge across the Afon Gwyrfai (480599), now a curious survival in the midst of a housing estate. The pictures below were taken before the new houses were built. In the left hand one, the standard gauge railway route runs from top left to centre right, behind the wall and trees.....



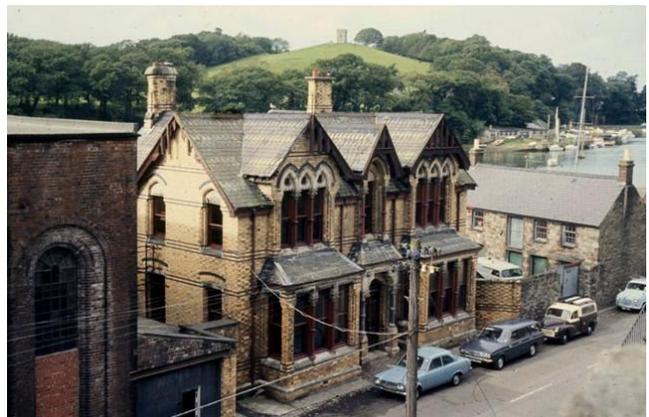
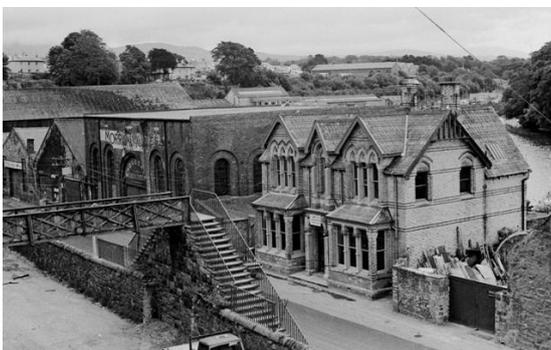
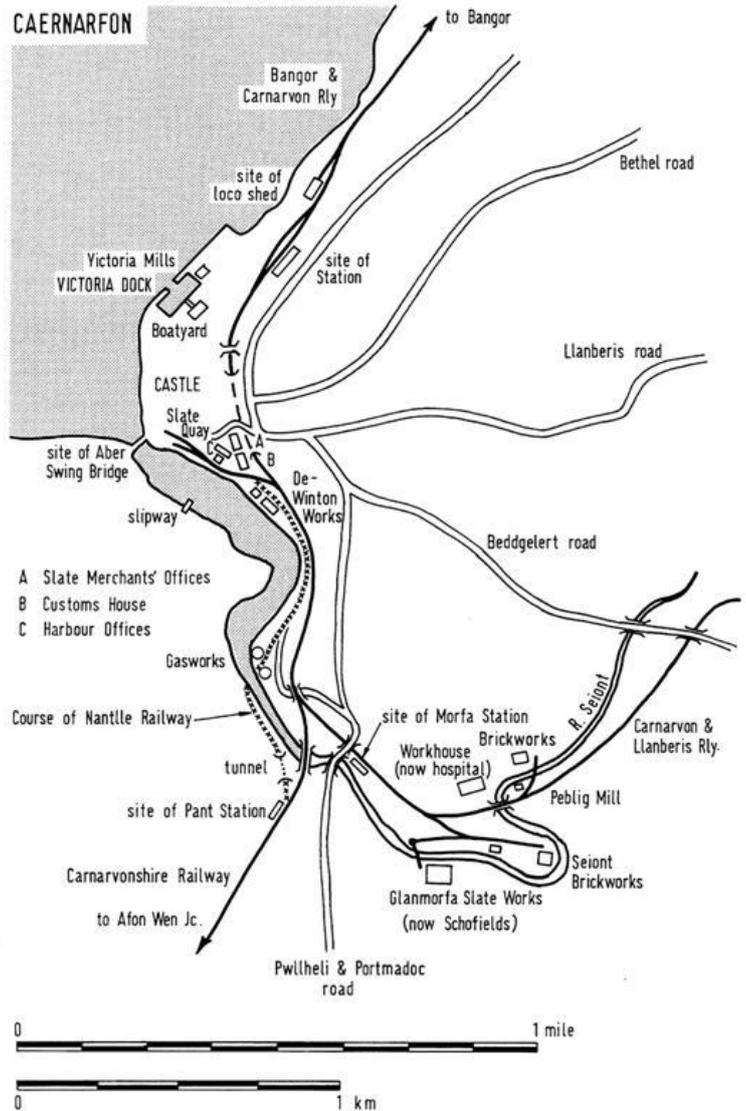


By Pont Seiont on the outskirts of Caernarfon the Nantlle Railway course deviates again, passing through its short Pant tunnel (482617; picture left), and may be further traced through the riverside woods to the point where it crossed the river opposite the gas works en route to Caernarfon quay.

The original Carnarvonshire Railway terminus at Pant was adjacent to the tramway tunnel, and the continuation is on the Caernarfon town line of 1870 built to link this and the Llanberis railway's terminus at Morfa nearby, to the Bangor & Carnarvon railway in the north of the town.....

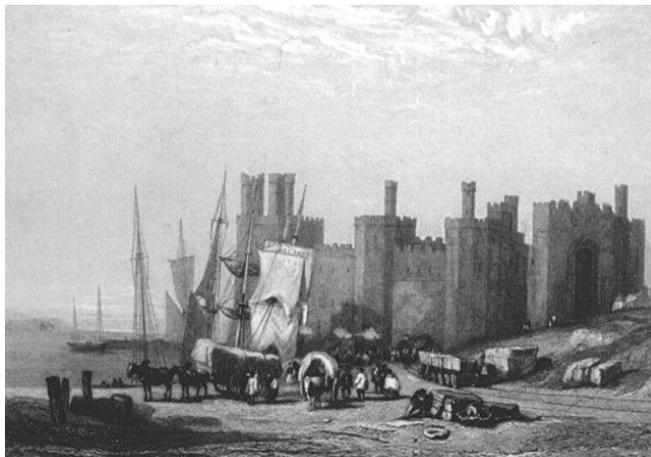
Taking the left fork in the road beyond Pont Seiont leads down to Caernarfon slate quay, in front of the castle, where many items of interest may be seen.

The warehouses of Morris & Jones ("Mace"), grocery wholesalers are the virtually unaltered factory premises of the famous locomotive and marine engineers, De Winton and Co. Ltd. This concern had its origins in a company started by Owen Thomas in 1843 (the Union Ironworks), whose son joined Jeffreys Parry de Winton in partnership sometime during 1860-5. A Limited Company was formed in 1892 by the surviving partners but was short-lived, being taken over by a London firm in 1895. 170-200 people were employed at this stage but the business finally failed in 1901. The ornate yellow brick building (481624) was the Company's office and the name may still be discerned in the glass panel above the door.....



The footbridge over the railway line, erected for the convenience of those employees living in the Henwalia section of the town, is an autographed example of the company's work of which numerous examples will probably already have been seen in the county.

The town railway runs into a "cut and cover" tunnel under the castle square, but the slate quay was served by sidings and the course of the Nantlle railway was also down the side of the roadway until 1869, running onto the quay as seen in this old print.....



On the quay itself note the Harbour Trust offices dated 1840 (picture below left) and the Customs bonded warehouse (right), a reminder of the international traffic in slate and copper.....



Some of the slate company offices remain too, although with somewhat diminished trade. That of Gordon H. Richards proclaims the continued availability of "Velinheli or Dinorwic Slate" while the last of the Nantlle valley firms traditionally operating from here, that of Pen yr Orsedd is next door.....



The importance of Caernarfon was not of course dependent solely on the slate trade as were many of the other sea outlets in the county. The establishment of the Castle by Edward the First in 1286 was to herald the early development of what was to become the principal commercial and shipping centre of Caernarfonshire. Much of the general trade of the town was carried on in the vicinity of the "new basin" at Turkey Shore, whose Victoria Dock (479632) was constructed in the 1870's. Dominating this today is Victoria Mills, a four-storey red-brick grain warehouse owned by the North Shore Mill Co., unique in this area of rural water-powered mills. It was gutted by fire in 1910 but was later rebuilt in a similar style. At the back of the dock a shipyard dating from before 1860 still operates, using a patent slipway with its sliding footbridge over dated 1883. Other items of interest around the dock are an old hand crane with octagonal wooden jib, and numerous cast iron



bollards and lamp standards. The steam dredger “Seiont II” seen in our picture above right still plies from here on its mundane duties up and down the Menai Straits.

Apart from the obvious tourist attraction of the castle and town walls, the more prosaic stone-faced covered market (Palace Street) built by Lord Anglesey in 1836, and the Working Men’s Conservative Club, 1871 (rebuilt 1886, Market Street) are of some architectural interest.

The town railway line emerges from its tunnel on the north side of Castle Square (note “H. Owen and Son Carnarvon 1869” on the bridge girders nearby) and Caernarvon station lies just to the north, by the former terminus of the 1852 railway from Bangor. Here were once extensive passenger, goods and locomotive servicing facilities but only the station building itself (below left) with its fleur-de-lys motifs outlasted the final closure of the railway in 1970-72. This too was sadly demolished in 1977, closely followed by the large “Station Hotel” on the opposite side of the main road, giving rise to a scene vastly altered in character within a very short space of time. Our general view of the station was taken on the day of closure, hence the crowds and special diesel train.....



Returning southwards, Eryri hospital now occupies what was the Caernarvon Union Workhouse (486615); adjacent was a large brickworks, connected to the Llanberis railway, of which some buildings and machinery survive in rather derelict condition.

An interesting diversion, formerly very difficult of access and only recently opened up to the public is the Belan Fort complex beyond Dinas Dinlle. The dock here was used for unloading Anglesey stone for the rebuilding of Glynllifon mansion (destroyed by fire in 1836) and can still be used by sea-going visitors, a much more direct access from Caernarfon than is possible by road. Yet another option is suggested by the adjacent abandoned airfield, soon to be revived for pleasure flights. Belan Fort was built by an eccentric Lord Newborough, apparently to defend the Menai Straits from invasion by Napoleon. It retains its full complement of fire power, an accidental episode with which recently made national headlines. A small museum contains amongst other items, the paddle wheels from two of the Newborough family’s straits cruisers, and other small craft.

The Newborough family seat of Glynllifon (457554), an impressive neo-Palladian mansion (picture right), is now an agricultural college. An interesting feature is the waterwheel-powered machinery in the carpenters shop on the estate. Water for the house was originally pumped by another large waterwheel, but now only the stone towers of the leat are to be found (457540).



In the rural hinterland of Caernarfon were once many woollen and corn mills, of which several remain of interest. At Cae-Athraw the large farm outbuilding in a camping site (506628) was the “Snowdon Factory” of John Rees’ Caernarvon Woollen Factories Ltd., later a bacon factory but remaining water-powered. The faded inscription on the side of the building was intended to be read from the train on the adjacent Llanberis railway. Felin Wen (509631) has an intact 15 ft cast iron overshot waterwheel 6 ft wide but the building, in a pleasant riverside setting, has been partly converted to a holiday home. This site has also been used as a pottery, there being a circular brick kiln included in the outbuildings.

Bontnewydd corn mill (483598) prominent in the village centre is now used by builder’s merchants. Behind it lies a small fulling mill with two waterwheels, one of them undershot and only 4 ft in diameter. Only scant remains are to be found here now.

Felin Undaf (“First Mill” 466583) is an old site on which the buildings alone survive; it was possibly a tandem mill with two wheels. The oak lintels in Bangor Museum are from here and are dated 1663.

Melin Llwyn Gwalch at Groeslon (472565; picture right) is also very old, an interesting building with vaulted floor and arched windows; the upper storey consists of slate slab flooring laid upon wooden joists.



Nearby Felin Forgan, another corn mill (480567) disused for twenty years, retains its 18 ft diameter waterwheel which the owner intends to restore. The site used to be higher up the hill, and the story goes that the river changed course one night during a storm. The mill was carried down and rebuilt stone by stone by one Mr. Morgan, hence the name “Morgan’s Mill”.

Oddly sited away from the main quarrying areas is the “Inigo Jones Slate Works” at Groeslon (471551), formerly the Tudor Slate Works. It is still in operation on traditional lines using two (De Winton?) planing tables and various other interesting items of equipment, well worth an inspection during working hours.

Keith A. Jagers November 1978

Updates – February 2012

The L&NWR **Nantlle station building** survives, but has been rendered, modernised and extended, now looking quite nondescript. The platform and goods yard area is occupied by new buildings, a car park, the bypass road and a recreation area. The new road then follows the old standard gauge railway branch westwards, just to the south of the old village road.

The former tramway route to **New Vronheulog slate quarry** now forms a rough track leading to the Gasworks cottage, and is largely obliterated beyond. The quarry itself has the usual flooded pit, and some very ruined buildings remaining.

Around the village of **Pen y Groes**, several of the decorative slate roofs may still be seen. This example is between County Road and the new road from Talysarn.....



The old **Nantlle Railway** route through the village can be followed along County Road, Lon Pitar (“Hen Tramffordd”) and Tram Road. Along the latter, on the west side the cottages Terfy, Ceiriog and Cadfar are shown on older maps as “Railway Terrace”. Where the road becomes a grassy track, alongside the farm, the continuation between stone walls northwards to rejoin the later L&NW line is easily traceable. A few yards to the west side of the latter, the Nantlle Railway course continues and is joined by the Lon Las Eifion “greenway” cycle route and footpath, which runs from Brynceir through to Caernarfon. The site of **Groeslon station** is now a car park.

The former **Dinas Junction** site is now of course entirely narrow-gauge territory, a through station on the revived Caernarfon – Portmadoc Welsh Highland Railway, which has its main workshops and locomotive sheds here. The old WHR booking office and goods shed have been nicely renovated. The Nantlle Railway route is still clear on the western side, and shortly after the cycle track joins the railway, the old **Dinas tunnel** (north portal) may still be seen in the undergrowth, lower down on the east side; the south portal has collapsed. The **Afon Gwyrfai bridge arch** at Bontnewydd also survives, a listed “Ancient Monument” but rather neglected in recent years. The WHR trains can stop at a halt nearby, on request. **Coed Helen tunnel** at Pant, Caernarvon may be glimpsed from the train on the west side, as it passes under Coed Helen Lane.

Towards Caernarfon Quay, the former **De Winton engineering works** building remains in commercial use (currently heating & plumbing supplies). Next door, the fine brickwork of the old **office** premises has been crudely rendered over and the windows boarded up; sadly now in very poor condition. The Welsh Highland Railway terminus is right opposite, and the footbridge continues to serve. The former L&NWR **Town Tunnel** under Castle Square was converted to a one-way road (Glan Mor Ucha) in 1995.

On the Quay, the **Harbour Offices** (right; picture by David Mills) and the **bonded warehouse** are in good condition, but all that remains of the old **slate company offices** are a couple of tatty lock-up garages.

Victoria Dock is now mainly used by Caernarfon Sailing Club, including the now rail-less slipway with its footbridge and old boat-building shed adjacent. The large **mill** on the north quay was demolished and a modern apartment block occupies the site. A fine hand-crane survives, but all the old lamps and bollards appear to have gone. The resident **steam dredger** “Seiont II” was broken up in 1999. At the south end of the dock on **Bank Quay**, the former Naval Reserve drill battery building (on the left in our picture) is used by the sailing club, and the old mortuary (right, behind the anchor) now houses a small but interesting maritime museum.

In the town centre, both the **Market Hall** and Working Men’s **Conservative Club** are still distinctive, nowadays both in alternative uses.

The former Carnarvon Union **Workhouse** building is now used by Eryri Hospital for administration and staff accommodation, surely much better equipped than in its previous role! The nearby **brickworks** are now operated on a much larger scale by Messrs Hanson Brick, with modern buildings and equipment.



The **Belan Fort** complex is now a grade-1 listed site, operating since 1992 as a marine research centre; renovation of all items is complete or ongoing, and self-catering holiday accommodation is available. The nearby airfield is used for seasonal pleasure, training and charter flights.

Glynllifon Park is open to the public daily in season, and some days through the winter. The house is available for functions. The sawmill steam engine was famously restored by the late Fred Dibnah, and the iron parts of the old waterwheel may still be seen.

The former **woollen mill** building west of Pontrug now serves as a cafe in the garden centre here. **Felin Wen** now has the Sumna Tandoori Restaurant in the old mill house adjacent to the road, but the mill itself is a private property around the back, down by the river. It seems in good repair, but the status of the waterwheel is not known. In the centre of Bontnewydd village, the old **corn mill building** is converted to the “Gwyrfai Mills” industrial units, but the remains of the fulling mill behind have been removed to create a car park. At **Felin Undaf** the site and old buildings are in residential and commercial use. **Melin Llwyn Gwalch** has been restored as a large private dwelling. **Felin Forgan** is a private site, but with a public footpath running through; the status of the old waterwheel is not known.

The **Inigo Jones slate works** is now a popular tourist attraction, open all year round, with workshop tours available.