

5) The lower Conwy valley – Llanrwst to Glanconwy

Llanrwst is an old market town, the most interesting feature of which is the magnificent three-arched stone bridge over the Afon Conwy, built by Sir Richard Wynne in 1636. Inigo Jones was reputedly employed as designer (see plaque on the centre arch) and the third arch, away from the town, was rebuilt in 1702. Ty Hwnt I'r Bont, the house next to the bridge, is a seventeenth-century stone cottage, formerly the Magistrates Court but now in the



care of the National Trust. The field behind, known as Cae Llong (the Ship Field) is a reminder that the river was once navigable this far: in medieval times sailing barges were built here. The larger part of the town of Llanrwst and the farms of the surrounding district were the creation of the Wynne family of nearby Gwydir Castle. The house and its beautiful chapel, Gwydir Uchaf (1673) are open to the public during the summer months. Llanrwst church almshouses, "Jesus' Hospital", were founded by Sir John Wynne in 1610.

Forestry was a thriving industry long before the coming of the serried ranks of conifers administered by the Forestry Commission, being developed mainly by the larger landowners of the area. The buildings of the Gwydir Estate Sawmills survive (791611), in use as store sheds, but the 25 ft diameter waterwheel that drove the machinery has been removed. Corn mills were situated at Pentrefelin (806603), which has been disused for some 25 years, and Maenan (Melin Maenan; 793658), the building of which is derelict although some machinery remains. A mill was established at the latter place by the monks of Maenan Abbey some 400 years ago: the present one is 160 years old and ceased operation in the 1940's. On the opposite side of the road is a grain dryer, of a type once common in wetter districts where a late harvest had to be gathered damp or not at all. The lower part of the building contained a brushwood fire or oven, whose heat penetrated the upper floor of perforated tiles on which the damp corn was spread. An alternative, older design sometimes seen had a plain stone slab floor, the corn being laid on a horsehair blanket. Such a drying kiln was essential since damp grain would clog the mechanism of the grinding stones during milling, and it is surprising that so few examples have survived.

The old Conwy Road, still on the west side of the river, passes an old but well preserved tollhouse at Pant-y-Carw before entering the village of Trefriw, almost opposite Llanrwst. The first printing press to be established in the county was set up here by David Jones in 1776, in the now derelict house known as Tan-yr-yw.

Nowadays Trefriw is probably best remembered by visitors for its woollen mills, founded in 1859 but now operating mainly in modern buildings of a notable size for this area, but this has not always been so. In Victorian and Edwardian times well-heeled but ailing gentlefolk ventured up the River Conwy from Deganwy quay by way of Conwy and Talycafn to Trefriw aboard a paddle steamer; their goal was the Chalybeate wells, the healing powers of whose iron-rich waters were world renowned. The Conwy was navigable this far at the time, but the quay to which the steamers brought their clientele until 1939 is now silted up. It has had a long industrial history, being used in 1622 to take lead ore to Beaumaris for onward transport by sea, and also from 1854 - 62 for the loading of lead, iron pyrites and sulphur from the local mines. Slates have also been handled here, and there are traces of limekilns. However, the prominent yellow-glazed stoneware balustrading and the grand staircase up to the main road (780636), heavily overgrown, date from Trefriw's period as a spa town. The Prince's Arms Hotel opposite, formerly the Belle Vue, was convenient for the needs of the visitors: a recent addition is the oil lamp and signboard from the L&NWR station at Llanrwst. Trefriw Wells themselves were discovered by the Romans, c150 A.D. Lord Willoughby de Eresby built the first free bath house in 1863 and ten years later the present grey-granite pump rooms were constructed by a private

company. They are situated at (778653), an invigorating step of some 1¼ miles from the steamer quay. A bridge was built to provide easy access also from Llanrwst railway station, and bathroom accommodation could be had, like contemporary train compartments, in 1st, 2nd and 3rd classes! The wells and pump rooms have been restored and are once again open for inspection by a new and perhaps more sceptical generation of visitors.

Activity of a somewhat more industrial nature resulted from these same rich waters higher up the mountainside. A steep inclined plane, whose 2 ft gauge track has only very recently been largely removed, leaves the road in the environs of the former Trefriw Sett Quarry (779651) and originally served the workings of the Cae Coch sulphur mine, off to the north side about 2/3 of the way to the summit drum house, which is near the skyline in our picture (right). The adits should be approached with extreme care, as the wooden roof props have been rotted by the drainage water issuing from them. The mine dates from c1750 and operated until about 1830: the workings were later used for bathing purposes and even today the water has a strong odour of dissolved sulphuric acid (picture below).



The more prominent remains in the vicinity of the incline, a crushing mill, workshop with hand crane (above right), and the drum house itself higher up, are from a much later working for granite. A tramway may be followed from the incline head for a short distance southwards along the hillside to the Gwydyr Quarry, in which track and points survive amongst the young trees.

Another small tramway (picture right) served the water company's chlorination house near Dolgarrog (built 1930), running a few hundred yards down to the roadside buildings by the bridge (774663), where also may be found the long derelict remains of the Dolgarrog Woollen Factory.

The village of Dolgarrog has a depressing industrial character, unexpected and seemingly misplaced in this otherwise scenic area of North Wales, and thus denigrated increasingly by the guidebooks over the years. Its growth was a



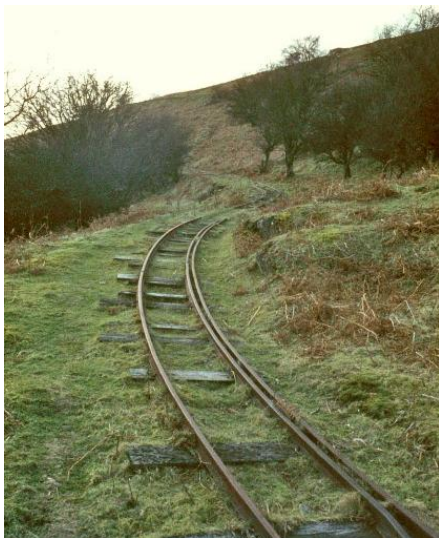
result of the aluminium works established in 1907 and still in operation as part of the British Aluminium Corporation. The smelter generated its own hydro-electric power by dams at Llyn Eigiau, built in 1907 and Llyn Cowlyd, built in 1922, connected to the works by three miles of pipeline. The original Eigiau dam collapsed in a storm in November 1925, devastating part of the village and causing several casualties. The frail nature of the dam wall, intended to hold back 160 million cubic feet of water, may still be examined, and much debris in the form of large boulders carried down in the flood can be seen beside the main road. The lakes nowadays form the water supply for Llandudno, Colwyn Bay and Conwy.

Some of the railway system used for the construction and subsequent maintenance of the pipeline is still in situ, though not much used in recent years. From a depot (763672) accessible by road, an incline down to the works built in 1907 survives in part, being a three-line (common centre rail) arrangement near the top (*photo: DVM*).....



It was constructed on the site of a previous incline forming part of the Cwm Eigiau horse tramway serving neighbouring slate quarries, which had closed down before 1890. The 1907 contractor's tramway to the Eigiau dam is now difficult to trace: it is the 1917 line to Cowlyd reservoir which has remained more or less intact, running south then westwards from the incline head, - a pleasant walk of some three miles. This new tramway, of 2 ft gauge, was built by Sir Robert McAlpine and Sons, sold to the Aluminium Corporation, and passed to the CEGB via the North Wales Power Co., who had purchased the hydroelectric side of the aluminium concern in 1929. Contractors using the tramway in connection with pipeline work in the past few years have provided their own (diesel) motive power, kept in the engine shed by the incline head. The following selection of pictures illustrates the route, starting at the incline head and finishing by the lakeside..... (*the 2nd to 9th images inclusive courtesy of D.V. Mills*)





The lowest stretch of the Conwy valley contains perhaps the most interesting group of extant watermills in North Wales; going northwards from Dolgarrog the Bulkeley Mill (761716) may conveniently be visited first. This building is now a private dwelling but retains its 15 ft diameter cast iron waterwheel with wooden spokes, and part of the drive machinery to the stones in what is now an attic bedroom. The site dates from before 1450 as a mill, but the present structure is mainly of the eighteenth century and listed as being of architectural and historical interest. There is a roof beam inscribed "RB 1689" (Richard Bulkeley?). The mill has also been known in Welsh as Melin Castell and Melin Penfro, and last worked in the 1930's. The house part is Victorian, being added as late as 1890.

The penultimate road crossing of the widening Conwy estuary is by means of the unusual Victorian 3-span lattice girder bridge at Tal-y-Cafn. It bears the monograms "TB Co 1897" (Talycafn Bridge Company) cast into the ironwork, a plaque commemorating "W. Alfred Dawson, Alfred Fyson, engineers; Alfred Thorne, contractor", and a faded marble inscription which is recorded here in full lest it should soon finally disappear from view:-

"This bridge opened on the 9th October 1897 in the 60th year of the reign of Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, was erected by and is the property of, The Talycafn Bridge Co., to whose chairman Griffith Griffiths esq. of Llican Isaf, Tynygroes, near Conway, is due the credit of supplying a long-felt want of the counties of Caernarvon and Denbigh".

The latter comment refers of course to the fact that even at this late date, the only road crossing of the lower Conwy valley was by Telford's bridge, with its severely restricted width and loading limits. The Talycafn crossing was the traditional post route prior to 1826, where the boat carrying the Irish mails capsized in foul weather on Christmas Day, 1806 with the loss of thirteen lives. A chain ferry was later installed, and is still commemorated in the Tal y Cafn Hotel at the east end of the bridge beyond the Railway crossing (the name means "place opposite the ferry boat"). The present bridge was constructed with toll booths and gates, but charges were abolished in 1929 when it was purchased jointly by the two county councils.

Bodnant, the home of Lord Aberconway, is renowned for its splendid gardens now administered by the National Trust. Within the grounds is sited another interesting estate mill building of unusually pleasant architectural style in an idyllic setting (798722). Formerly a flour mill erected in 1837, it now does duty as the estate sawmills and stores. It was called Furnace Mill, being situated upon one of several old iron-making sites in the Talycafn area. This industry started here in 1758, using charcoal brought in ships to Conwy from as far away as Chester, Pwllheli and Barmouth; the iron ore came from Lancashire. It was short lived however since within only a few years Abraham Darby was to demonstrate the smelting of iron with coke, and the furnaces were then removed to the coalfields.

To the north, near the village of Glanconwy, is a further notable group of three extant mills. Felin Isaf (corn, at 803750) retains its two waterwheels, together with one complete set of machinery and stones, although long derelict. Both wheels were pitchback in operation, the leat to the larger and newer one (18 ft diameter, of cast iron with wooden spokes) passing over the old 11 ft diameter one of similar construction, which it appears to have replaced. Each wheel drove a separate set of stones in the two mill buildings, and the whole forms a good though expensive subject for restoration.

Nearby Felin Uchaf (805747) was also a corn mill, but is now a dwelling with no mechanism remaining. Above, its leat may be followed back to an old timber sawmill "Felin Llifio", where there is another waterwheel of 10 ft diameter, similar to the others and again very derelict. This was once the sawmill for the Bryneisteddfod Estate, and the unusual cast iron notice warning against trespass will be noted beside the entrance gate.

Updates:- November 2011

Llanrwst Bridge is a listed structure. Ty Hwnt I'r Bont is open as a tearoom in the summer season.

Gwydir Castle, its grounds and chapel etc are open to the public from April to October. B&B accommodation is available on site. At the former estate sawmills, the Forestry Office is housed in a building dating from 1604, which has housed a small exhibition in recent times. The sawmill itself no longer exists.

The Llanrwst Church **Almshouses** have been fully restored, situated in an attractive conservation area.

Pentrefelin Mill is now a large private residence alongside the road. The Mill complex at **Maenan** is in residential and commercial use, with holiday lets available on site.

The former Pant y Carw **tollhouse** is a smart private residence, alongside the road. The house **Tan yr Yw** is restored as a holiday let; it is on the B5106 road directly opposite Trefriw Church.

The former **Trefriw steamer quay** remains derelict, alongside the river below the main road opposite the Princes Arms Hotel; there is footpath access to the river bank here. The Trefriw Wells Spa **pump rooms** are open to the public all year, with cafe and shop on site.

The **tramway incline** up to Cae Coch Sulphur Mine and Gwydir Granite Quarry appears to be on fenced-off private land. There is probably very little to see here now anyway, and the same applies to the Chlorination House tramway. Dolgarrog Aluminium Works closed down in 2007, and the extensive buildings are currently "mothballed".

The old (breached) **Eigiau dam** remains interesting to examine. An access road from the B5106 at Talybont runs to within a mile of the dam, terminating in a small parking area. Then continue south-westwards along the footpath. The main tramway incline route up from Dolgarrog is now occupied by large-diameter water pipelines. There is virtually nothing to see of the **tramway** at the incline top, or onward along the barren route to Llyn Cowlyd, so we were fortunate to have recorded this in some detail before it was dismantled.

Bulkeley Mill is a holiday let; the waterwheel can be operated.

Talycafn Bridge had to be rebuilt in 1978 due to extensive corrosion; however the (modified) masonry piers and commemorative signware were retained. The Tal y Cafn Hotel still functions at the junction with the main road.

The **Bodnant Estate mill** building survives within the gardens, open to the public February – November. **Felin Isaf**, on Garth Road, is in residential use, with holiday lets available. The mill is a listed structure and both waterwheels survive, though not currently operational. The **Felin Uchaf** site nearby is in commercial use, with nothing of interest to see; the sawmill building **Felin Lliffio** appears to survive but is not accessible, on private land.