

## 7) Conwy and district

The former borough of Conway (now usually rendered as the Welsh form Conwy) is entered from the east via a long, narrow causeway or "cob" across the entrance to the estuary of the River Conwy. This has always been the traditional crossing point; by a somewhat hazardous ferry until the embankment was constructed across the mudflats in the mid-1820's, as part of Telford's coast-road improvements. The artificially-narrowed river is now crossed at the western end by means of a modern steel and concrete bridge, on the seaward side of the two older and somewhat more famous structures built for Telford's road and the Chester and Holyhead Railway respectively.



The elegant suspension bridge was originally proposed, like that over the Menai Straits near Bangor, as a cast iron arch in 1802, but not proceeded with. Construction was commenced in 1822, and the chains were hung immediately after those at Menai, using the same teams of workmen and tackle. Unlike Menai, however, this bridge has never been rebuilt, and the chain links we see now are the originals, of wrought iron. At the western end the anchorage points are set in the castle walls, which tower above the road. The structure was finished in July 1826, whereupon the Irish Mail coach reverted to this route after travelling via Betws-y-Coed for just a few years. The main span of the bridge is 327 feet long and 18 feet above high water level, and the carriageway width 10 feet; unbelievably (to those stuck in a summer traffic jam on the new bridge) it was the main road crossing until as late as December 1958. Narrowly spared from destruction by a successful national appeal, it is now a footbridge, beautifully preserved and administered by the National Trust, who have a small information kiosk in the ornate Toll keeper's house at one end.

Robert Stephenson's tubular railway bridge, built 1846-48, is beyond the Telford Suspension bridge. Consisting of wrought iron box sections riveted together into a complete unit before being lifted into position on the towers, it was built as a small-scale trial of the method proposed and soon adopted for the successful bridging of the Menai Straits at Llanfair P.G., a feat that was considered impossible by many at that time. This method of construction has once again become unique since the total rebuilding of the Britannia Bridge after the disastrous fire of 1970.



At Conwy, the "Medieval" stone towers were presumably an attempt to appease those objecting to the intrusion of the railway into the environs of the Castle. These towers, of Mona marble, support the twin tubes carrying the railway lines, each 400 ft long and weighing 1300 tons. On the inland side of the

bridge at the end of the causeway, the Railway Quay is a survival from the construction days and retains an old L&NWR hand crane.



Only the roadside building of the Chester and Holyhead Railway's Conway Station has survived closure in 1965. Located next to the market (781775) it is in the distinctive style of Francis Thompson, architect of the line, but now dirty and unkempt. At the end of the former platforms, the line penetrates the old town walls by means of a splendid arch, specially designed to blend with the existing masonry, but which met with much opposition at the time of construction.

Conwy town itself, whilst containing much to delight the ordinary visitor in its thirteenth-century castle and virtually complete town walls, with several historic buildings within, has little further of industrial interest to offer. The steamer excursions to Trefriw Spa, mentioned previously, landed at the quay near the Wing Gate (Porth yr Adfor), still a pleasant spot outside of the peak summer months when not jammed totally by cars. The former Conwy Union Workhouse (775782) now forms part of the hospital, a conversion of use shared by many others of its type.

Before proceeding further along the coast towards Bangor, we return briefly down the valley of the River Conwy, but this time on the west side, to the villages of Henryd and Roewen. Near the former, the derelict workings of the Henryd Lead Mines may be seen on the left of the road (760745). Formerly in operation as the Pwllycochion mine from 1793, the present extensive remains in brick and concrete date largely from the very profitable reworking of 1892-1913. Then also known as Trecastell Mine, two giant waterwheels were erected here, one above the other, to pump water and wind ore from the main shaft. The supporting walls of the lower wheel still stand, and some parts of this may be found scattered about. Nearby is the shaft-head, covered by a protective steel cage, and a wooden ladder descending into the vertical shaft appears to be kept in good order. The building behind and above the waterwheels was the main office. Further south, beyond the spoil tips, some of the concrete hoppers and crushing plant structures date from the final reworking of the mine as late as 1951-2. An old arsenic flue may be traced leading from the mine buildings, under the road and terminating in a chimneystack on the hillside opposite. This would have been used to drive off impurities from the ore before it could be accepted by the smelting works.

Whilst in the locality, a visit to Gwenddar Mill is to be recommended (763745). This is unfortunately very derelict, like many others in the county, but nonetheless strongly reflects the atmosphere of the typical farm mill, as opposed to the usually larger and more recent types of estate mill we have so far noted. This mill was built in the late eighteenth century ("OH 1792" and "1799 HW" are decipherable amongst the beams) and there are interesting original wooden arched lintels to the doors. The waterwheel is a fairly modern type, being of all metal construction, 15 ft in diameter and overshot in operation. Millstones and all machinery are intact within the building, which is listed by the Royal Commission of Ancient Monuments and thus another prime candidate for urgent restoration.

The village of Roewen is in a delightful setting between the Conwy Valley and the foothills of the Carneddau. Some of the farms round about still retain examples, though much modernised, of the distinctive Welsh "Long-House" which accommodated the family and their cattle under one roof, usually with a barn also attached. From hereabouts it is possible to walk into the Carneddau mountains, an area totally devoid of modern roads, but which was traversed by a Roman highway heading towards Aber; in places still well defined but marred by the accompanying electricity pylons.

Retracing our route from Roewen to the coast, the shell of a three-story building (772759), now serving merely as a farm store, was formerly a Candle Manufactory. Remains of a building over the Gyffin stream near the crossroads were the Conway Flour Mill: the waterwheels have gone, but the pipes and valves which fed them may still be seen. (778770)

Leaving Conwy westwards, the main coast road joins the Chester and Holyhead Railway line, the parallel paths necessitated by the narrowing coastal plain being maintained almost to the outskirts of Bangor. We are entering the famous granite quarrying district centred on Penmaenmawr, the first evidence of which is in the form of tramway inclined planes descending Conwy Mountain halfway along the straight stretch of road from Conwy town. The quarry here was closed down before 1950 and the equipment largely dismantled in 1965, so although affording excellent sea and mountain views which repay the stiff climb, there is little physical evidence of interest to be seen nowadays other than the actual workings at the rock face. Situated beyond the top level, the small reservoir and dam formerly supplied water to power the dressing mill machinery. The building near the foot of the inclines, beside the main road (757783) was not in fact connected with the granite quarry; in 1922 we find it functioning as the "Hadley Holiday Homes". One of the few permanent landmarks on this barren stretch of highway, it is of considerably superior architectural merit to the sprawl of holiday development that has taken place all around. To the west, between road and railway, were situated the quarry exchange sidings, where once plied a 4-4-0 tank engine purchased from London's Metropolitan Railway underground system. Beyond, road and rail head for the seemingly impassable bulk of Penmaen-Bach, descending sheer to the sea, and penetrated by tunnels for both trains and cars. The road tunnel was completed in 1932, replacing the older route that can still be followed around the headland. This itself had been rebuilt by one John Sylvester in 1772, prior to which it was recorded as being only seven feet in width, a daunting prospect in any but the calmest of weathers.....



## Updates – November 2011

The Conwy **suspension bridge** and the adjacent **railway bridge** survive of course, the former in the care of the National Trust and serving as a footbridge, with toll-house and distinctive “sunburst” toll-gate at its eastern end.....



Even the modern road bridge is quieter now, as the majority of through traffic is accommodated by the twin road tunnels of the A55 Expressway, beneath the river estuary, completely by-passing the town. The former **railway quay** still exists, though now grassy and track-less; amazingly the old L&NWR hand-crane on the quayside, or rather the remains of it, also survives.

**Conwy railway station** re-opened as an unstaffed halt on the original site, but unfortunately the old main station building was demolished during the period of closure. The arch through the castle walls survives (right), and the building adjacent, which I have heard referred to incorrectly as the “old station”, and has latterly served as a Visitor Centre, was originally an infant’s school.

The Conwy Union **Workhouse** on the old Bangor Road has been demolished; the new houses Cwrt Llewellyn now occupy the site.



Henryd (Trecastell) **lead mine** workings are in the densely-wooded area immediately opposite the terrace of former workmen's cottages, accessible by a network of footpaths including the Woodland Trust Parc-Mawr route. The chimney and adit entrances survive, but the Arsenic flue is heavily choked with vegetation. **Gwenddar Mill** house is a listed structure and has been fully restored for residential use. The waterwheel and some internal machinery survives. The roofless stone shell of the former **Candle Factory** is prominent and unmistakable on the west side of the valley road. The **flour mill** premises at Gyffin Bridge have been demolished – the “Old Mill” fish & chip shop occupies a small area of the site.

The former inclines from the **Conway Granite Quarries** are easily visible from the A55 Expressway, and are accessible by footpath from the stub-end of the old Bangor Road, up into the landscaped working areas. The “**Hadley Holiday Homes**” building, in use around 1960 as a bakery, survives as smart commercial premises, with lorry park and workshops to the rear; all the caravan sites have now vacated this area!

The short **1932 road tunnel** through the Penmaenbach headland still serves as the eastbound carriageway of the Expressway; westbound traffic is carried by a new, much longer tunnel further inland. The oldest road route around the cliff face remains available for cyclists and pedestrians only.