



DARGANFOD HEN DAI CYMREIG DISCOVERING OLD WELSH HOUSES



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Dathlu Treftadaeth Cymru drwy astudio tai traddodiadol a bywydau'r bobl fu'n byw ynddynt.

CYLCHLYTHYR 50 Medi 2024

Celebrating Welsh Heritage through the study of traditional houses and the lives of the people who lived in them.

NEWSLETTER 50 September 2024

EIN GWEFAN

<http://discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk>

yw prif sianel gyfathrebu'r Grŵp - defnyddiwch hi i weld mwy o fanylion am y digwyddiadau diweddar a'r rhai sydd i ddod, ac i edrych ar ein llyfrgell sy'n cynyddu'n gyson ac ar nodweddion eraill.

OUR WEBSITE

<http://discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk>

Is the Groups main channel of communication please visit it to see details of recent and forthcoming events and to look at our growing library and other features.



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FROM THE CHAIR by Janice Dale

Janice sends her best wishes to all! She is away on holiday at present, admiring the alpine architecture of Chamonix -Mont-Blanc.



NEWS FROM THE BRANCHES

ANGLESEY BRANCH

Report by Clare Latham and Brenda Simpson

Our June visit was to the gorgeous little medieval church at Penrhoslligwy with links to a local map maker, followed by Plas Bodafon, a beautiful private house with medieval origins. We had glorious weather to explore both church and house, both containing a wealth of history. Our generous host at Plas Bodafon had collected many photographs, documents and artifacts from previous owners over the centuries and following a tour of the house, we had the rare opportunity to sit in the sunshine in a beautiful garden and explore the collection with a cup of tea.



Plas Bodafon



St Micheal's Church, Penrhoslligwy



The Maccudeceti Stone – translation given is 'of Maccudeceti, here he lies' – St Michael's Church, Penrhoslligwy

In July, we visited Hafoty, a gem of a hall house which is rarely open to the public but thanks to the Barons Hill Estate and Cadw, we got permission to open it for our group. We had a guide to bring the house to life for us – see 17thc sailing ships graffiti. And again, we had a sunny day so enjoyed a picnic in the garden afterwards.



C17th sailing ships graffiti - Hafoty

We went a little 'off period' in August with a guided walk of Llanddona following the artist Kyffin Williams' footsteps, looking at the old Welsh cottages he painted/drew in the village. We had resource packs that had copies of 10 of the paintings/drawings and we were able to stand in the exact spot that Kyffin stood when he painted these cottages.

These three visits neatly link to our visit to Oriel Mon on 11th September, where we will be having a talk from the Building and Collections Manager on both the current Mapping Anglesey exhibition and *A Place in His Heart* exhibition (a new curation of Kyffin's



Upper Floor, Hafoty

painting of East



Hafoty

Anglesey including the ones we saw in Llanddona but also a portrait of Henry Williams, the last tenant at Hafoty).

Our October visit will be to the Anglesey Archives where the lead Archivist is going to show us how to conduct a Parish Survey based on Penmynydd so we can carry out our own surveys of all parishes in Anglesey and see what historical gems we can uncover for potential future visits.

Note: There is a Cadw Open Doors event to access Hafoty 28-29th September 2024 – well worth a visit. See Cadw website for details: <https://cadw.gov.wales/open-doors-hafoty-medieval-house-0>

CAERNARFONSHIRE BRANCH

Unfortunately illness continues to hamper branch planning, though it is hoped things will be moving on again shortly.

CONWY BRANCH

Branch members have decided that future meetings will take place if and when any branch member requests one or has an idea for a visit or topic to discuss. In the meantime, some house history research is likely to continue.

DENBIGHSHIRE BRANCH

Report by Jenny Lees

Branch house visits and meetings in June were kindly hosted at *Pant y Llyn*, above Llandrillo yn Edeirnion, and *Lleweni Hall*, near Denbigh – both historically significant properties that have been saved from dereliction by the dedicated restoration work of their owners!

Pant y Llyn lies at around 1000ft above sea level on the western slopes of Edeirnion's Cwm Pennant - looking across the valley to the *Berwyn* range as pictured below.



Looking across the valley to the Berwyn range

Pant y Llyn is listed in the 'Other Houses' section of Edward Llwyd's 1699 *Parochialia*¹ for Llandrillo parish, and with its marked downslope siting could have existed earlier.

No existing houses have yet been found in North Wales dating from before the 1400s, but it is of interest that although Cwm Pennant now has only an average number of farmsteads, in 1292-3 Pennant 'township' had 23 taxpayers paying a total of around £7 - greater than that due from any other townships in Llandrillo parish!² In addition to evidence of medieval cultivation around the valley floor, there are also relics of early medieval settlements and agriculture extending much higher

on the *Berwyn* range above *Cadwst* than today - these may have had to be abandoned after the climatic cooling and natural disasters of the 14th century. Although now mainly pasture, large areas of Cwm Pennant were once under 'arable' cultivation, and these strips would probably have once been '*Quillets*' - separate strips of land held by different people but contained within a 'common' field or *Maes*. This arrangement is

¹ Edward Llwyd (1699) *Parochialia*; at Denbighshire Record Office and now also online.

² Keith Williams-Jones (1976) *The Merioneth Lay Subsidy Roll 1292-3*.

thought to date back to an area of *medieval shareland* (open field arable) farming, extending over 12 acres south of *Cadwst* through the *townships* of both *Pennant* and *Garthian*.³

The Salusburys of *Lleweni* were amongst the most prominent North Wales families from C15th -17th, and the Salesburys of *Rug* (now *Rhug*) and *Bachymbyd* were a 'cadet' branch of the *Lleweni* Salusburys. By the late C18th *Lleweni* mansion reputedly had 100 rooms, and although mostly demolished in C19th and 20th, part of its magnificent c1770's part remains.⁴



Part of Lleweni former estate, showing Lleweni Hall to the centre

Our branch has begun work on DOWH house histories for *Lleweni* and *Pant y Llyn*, along with those for *Plas isaf*, *Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd*, and *Bryn Penllyn* - another Cwm Pennant house.

Following DOWH's dendrochronology and building assessment, histories for *Cadwst*, *Caenog*, *Hafod yr afr*, *Henblas* and *Henfaes isaf* are now largely completed, but we still await finalised building reports and the isotope dating results for *Cadwst*, *Henblas* and *Henfaes isaf*. Our house history of *Llennyrch*, Talsarnau, (dendrodated to c.1542–69) is now on:

https://discoveringgoldwelshhouses.co.uk/library/Hhistory/mer%20070_HH_%20Llennyrch.pdf

Further printed copies of *Cynwyd Scrapbook Five* are still available for sale at £5, and the book is now also online at <https://www.discoveringgoldwelshhouses.co.uk/page18.html> .

Our next Denbighshire branch meeting will be at *Hafod y calch*, Corwen on **Thursday 19th September at 2pm**; to include a talk by DOWH member Pam Buttrey on some fascinating former owners of *Cadwst*. Contact me at leesjenny@gmail.com if you would like to come. (Details of future house visits planned will be circulated by our Membership Secretary).

³ Robert J. Silvester (2000) 'Mediaeval upland cultivation on the Berwyns in North Wales'.

⁴ <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/300001060-lleweni-hall-including-stables-to-the-ne-denbigh>

FLINTSHIRE BRANCH

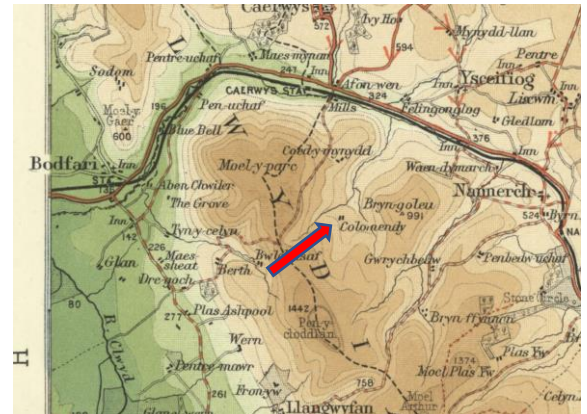
Report by Wally and Margaret Barr

In June branch members visited a mid-17th century house, Colomendy near Ysgeifiog, Mold. The meeting began with a Powerpoint talk on the history of Colomendy, given by members who have completed a history on the house. This can be seen at:

https://discoveringgoldwelshhouses.co.uk/library/Hhistory/flint%20010_HH_02%20Colomendy.pdf



Colomendy (c.1663)



Colomendy and area

(From Bartholomew's "Half Inch Maps" of England and Wales, 1902-1906)

July saw us visiting the Greenfield Valley Heritage Park, which occupies a hugely significant place in Welsh industrial history and retains many of the original foundations of early water-driven factories. The site also offers early 16th century Pentre Farmhouse, moved to Greenfield from Ysceifiog Parish in 1986.

Our August visit was to Plas Yw, Cilcain, a quite remarkable house with a moat on three sides. This moat could have its origins in Roman times although it may actually date from the medieval period. The house itself has an early wing and another wing added in the 18th century. Throughout the house there is no shortage of timber framing, including at least three ages of wattle and daub infill. Plas Yw is yet to be dendro-dated so for now the mysteries must remain.



**Visit to the Greenfield Valley Heritage Park
(outside Pentre Farmhouse)**

In September we will have a guided tour of Bodrhyddan Hall, Dyserth, a Grade 1 listed property and home to Lord Langford and his family for over 500 years.



Visit to Plas Yw, Cilcain



Three ages of wattle and daub in Plas Yw

MERIONETH BRANCH

Further plans for branch events are not available at present.

ARTICLES FROM AROUND AND ABOUT

A WORD OF CAUTION

By Peter Masters

We need to exercise caution when we research something especially now we have the help and benefit of AI. An uncorrected error gets repeated and then used in respected publications who have accepted the error as truth. This in turn gets picked up by the likes of Google and Wikipedia, so others looking for answers get directed by these search engines to those who's veracity is never doubted.

A case in point whilst researching a grade II house:

[<https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/wales#.XNPXMyjTV0t>]

I looked at the blurb which gave some "copied" information and it referred to the RCAHM site for its source. [<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/>] which in its turn used details from the excellent time maps of Wales web site [<https://places.library.wales/>].

It is stated that this large estate farm had 23 acres of land. This seemed a rather small amount of land holding. A visit to the tithe map site eventually found the house albeit in a different parish to that stated. And indeed the data says who owned it, who the tenant was and that it was 23 acres. However, looking at the map it seemed strange that the house seemed to be in an island of other land holdings, with its own fields detached from the house by a considerable distance. A closer inspection of the tithe assessment showed that the stated

23 acres was a subtotal and the next page was a continuation, and the actual holding was 95 acres. Which put the house right in the middle of the farm not on the margins.

The volunteer who had transcribed the information either stopped at the first entry, or the project concluded before it was finished. So, all and sundry took the stated 23 acres as correct and now it's set in virtual stone.

John Jones	Head	74	79
Owen Jones	Son	36	43
John Jones	Son	43	
Mary Jones	Son	14	16
Total of Males and Females..		14	16

Another case in point was some missing children. Whilst doing some family history I was mystified by the apparent disappearance of a child who was listed on one census [1861] and again on another [1881] but not on the in-between census? A misspelling of the surname eventually found them on the database but still not the missing child, but a careful look at the original entry showed they were at the bottom of the page and the enumerator had pencilled in their names in the margins below the box . Not on the continuation sheet. As this was overwriting some printed text it was partially illegible. The entry could not be deciphered either by the person or machine so was ignored.

So always check the original documentation don't take what the digital transcription says as gospel or believe implicitly in "trusted "sources.

HESTER LYNCH THRALE

By Peter Masters

History is a giant jigsaw puzzle but unlike a standard puzzle where we put the pieces together to recreate a single picture. with history you can build a whole new picture or pictures from the same pieces.

When we had moved to the Llyn Peninsula some years ago, we began exploring the area and learning it's history. I recall one of the things we discovered was that a local house, Brynodol at Tudweiliog, had been visited by Mrs Thrale & Dr Johnson in 1773/4 when they were doing a tour of North Wales. Quite why they should be doing so and the significance of this event was not made clear. We later learnt that Mrs Thrale was born at nearby Bodfel Hall. Several decades later part of my involvement with Discovering Old Welsh Houses is compiling a database of historically significant houses. One such house is intriguingly labelled Mrs Thrale's House [Brynbella, Denbs].



Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, née Salusbury; later Piozzi (c.1741-1821), a Welsh-born diarist, author and patron of the arts (By Unidentified painter - National Portrait Gallery: NPG 4942, Public Domain)

So who was Mrs Thrale? She was born Hester Lynch Salusbury on 27 Jan 1741 at Bodfel Hall, on the Llyn peninsula in North Wales, (although only the gatehouse was ever built).

And as such, she was a member of one of the influential families in the Denbigh region. The family fortunes had waxed and waned with accumulating debts. Her father John of Bach Y Graig married a rich cousin's sister, but this did not save a profligate lifestyle nor did his being a co-founder and investor of Halifax, Nova Scotia in Canada and he died indebted aged 55. An only child Hester subsequently inherited the Bachegraig estate [Bach-y-Graig].

Hester's marriage in 1763 to Henry Thrale, brewer and businessman of London and later M.P, gave her an opening to London society life. She was mother to 12 children. And through her father claimed descent from Katherine(Catrin) of Berain. Hester was a diarist and commentator, and she also became the long-time companion of Dr Samuel Johnson, for 20+ years. An episode of much curiosity & scandal as he was 32 years her senior.

In 1773 the Thrales, Henry, Hester, their eldest daughter 'Queeney' aged 10 [Hester Maria Elphinstone, Viscountess Keith] and Dr Johnson partook in a Tour of north Wales. It was during this visit to north Wales that she also travelled to her ancestral home on the Llyn peninsula.



Bodfel Hall, Llannor, Pwllheli
 (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales)

Following the death of her husband Henry in 1781. She promptly sold his business interests and married Gabriel Piozzi. Although companions for several years any hopes or desire for marriage by Dr Johnson were soon dashed when she took up with Piozzi, her children's music tutor and artist.

The couple then hoped to settle in north Wales at Lleweni but it passed out of their reach. to the 1st Viscount Combermere. So they built a new Villa, Bryn Bella in 1794 using bricks from the nearby family house of Bach-y-Graig, built by Richard Clough⁵ [Catrin's 2nd husband] in 1567? which had the oldest bricks in Wales. Bach-y-Graig also reputedly introduced the stepped Gable roof.

Hester Thrale/Piozzi died after a fall, aged 80 in 1821. She is commemorated on the family plaque in the church at Tremeirchion along with her adopted son Sir John Piozzi Salusbury . He was attaché to the Marquess of Anglesey, Henry William Paget of Plas Newydd, at Waterloo [1815].

(I recently acquired a large weighty tome of some 1000 plus pages of a Welsh edition c1860 of Pilgrims Progress by John Bunyan. Frontispiece signed by Sarah Roberts, Bodfel Hall, 1863).

GRIFFITH OWEN, TY UNCORN, BLAENAU FFESTINIOG (1859-1918)
By Ann Morgan (assisted by Gill Jones)

Griffith Owen, my great grandfather was born in Tai cynhaeaf, Llanelltyd, near Dolgellau in 1859. He was the fifth of six children born to Richard and Mary Owen. Richard was a gold miner and farmed the eight-acre small holding, Tai cynhaeaf. Some time after 1871 Griffith left home to look for work as a quarryman in

⁵ Richard Williams -Ellis, a relative of Clough Williams Ellis who also claims decent from Catrin, tells us that the stained-glass window from Brynbella now resides in Glasfryn, their Family home on the peninsula.

Blaenau Ffestiniog and he appears in the 1881 census as being 22 years old, married and living in Tŷ Uncorn, which means 'one' chimney house. A photograph of Griffith Owen taken about 1900 shows him standing in the front garden of Tŷ Uncorn among rows of potato plants in the left 'half' of the house.



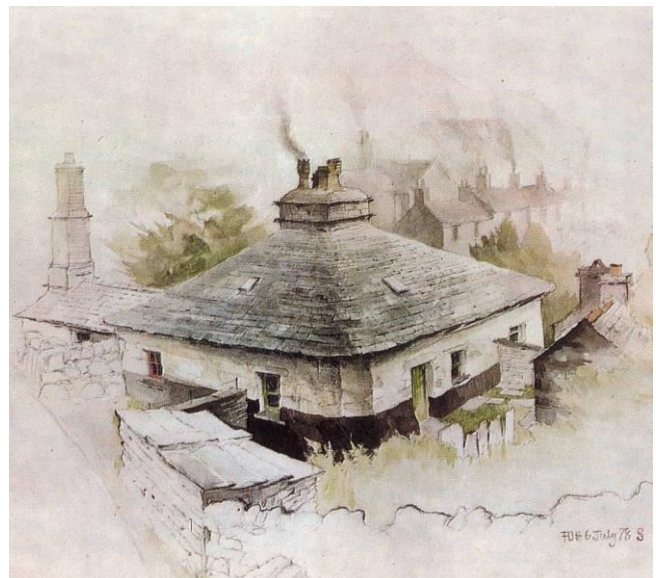
Griffith Owen at ŷ Uncorn 1900



Tŷ Uncorn – now listed as restored and inhabited 2009



Tŷ Uncorn (Falcon Hildred)



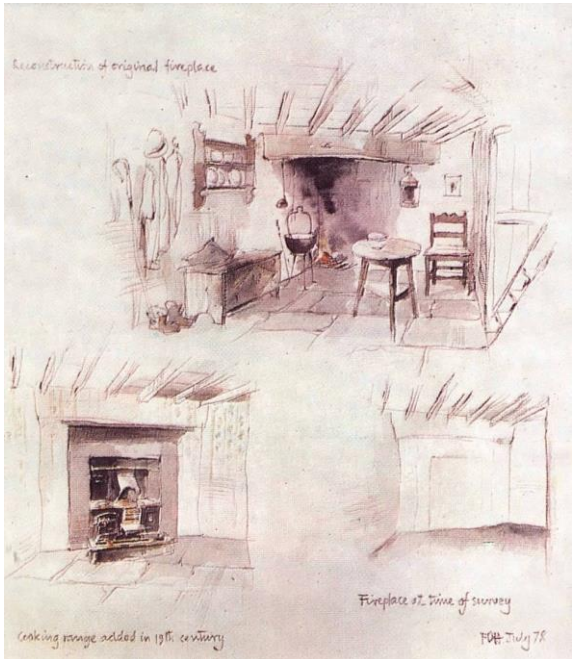
Tŷ Uncorn (Falcon Hildred)

The house looked very unusual and in the 1980s I began to research family history and the history of Tŷ Uncorn. The house was built by the Newborough Estate between 1810-1820 for the use of quarrymen as Lord Newborough had bought land and quarrying sites in the area of Blaenau Ffestiniog, known as Dolgarrog Ddu. The house is very close to the centre of the town. At that time the house was near the foot of an 'incline' reaching up to the quarry above - access to and from the quarry for both men and slates. Locally the quarry was known as 'chwarel' Lord (the Lord's quarry).

Originally two houses had been built but nothing remains of the second 'single chimney' house. Tŷ Uncorn is divided into four units with one central chimney; each 'quarter' had a front door and window. I think Griffith & Ellen must have occupied 2 quarters of the house giving them two ground floor rooms and two lofts. The garden was a good size for the time and the family would have benefitted from growing vegetables. Plum trees yielding small black plums are often found in old cottage gardens in North Wales.



**Tŷ Uncorn showing interior layout
(Falcon Hildred)**



Tŷ Uncorn interior (Falcon Hildred)

By the 1980s Tŷ Uncorn was a listed property and had been made suitable for occupation. Interest in the house has been shown by a local artist and historian, Falcon Hildred. He has kindly allowed me to include his very fine drawings of Tŷ Uncorn. The drawings show the structure of the house and the possible layout and use made of the accommodation.

My great grandfather died in 1918, but not at Tŷ Uncorn. He was at a house in The Square near the park. However, his photograph taken after his wife's death in 1903 shows him still at Tŷ Uncorn, so I think he may have remained at this address until shortly before his death. Other short reports about the house were produced by CADW and RCAHMW.

(Eds. We are most grateful to Falcon Hildred for kindly giving his permission to reproduce these images)

GWESPYR STONE – ‘NOTED FOR ITS EXCELLENCE’

By Irene Brightmer

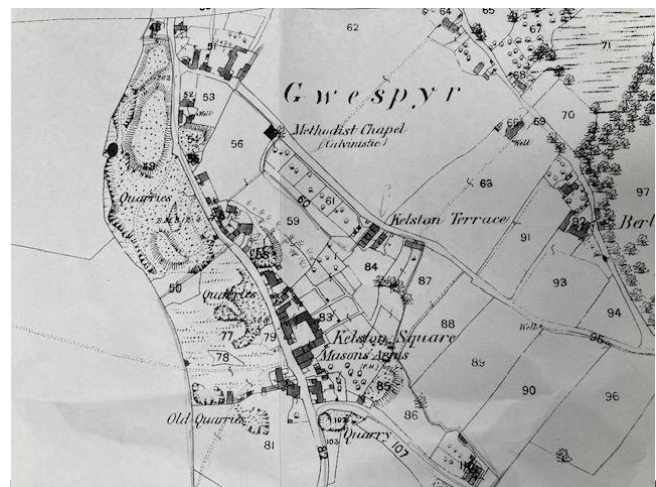
If you have ever visited castles in north-east Wales it is certain that you will have seen Gwesp yr Stone, even without realising. It has been used as a building stone for at least two thousand years and can be seen in notable buildings from different historic periods, as well as in the more recent local vernacular dwellings. It has also been known at times as Talacre Stone. Writing in 1778 it was Thomas Pennant, the traveller and writer from Downing Hall in Whitford parish, who remarked that Gwesp yr freestone was ‘*noted for its excellence*’.

Geologically Gwesp yr Stone is a sandstone, formed in the middle of the Carboniferous Age. It is at the top of the Namurian Series (formerly known as the ‘Millstone Grit’), which lies below the Coal Measures and above the limestone. For those who like to know ‘how old?’ it was formed around 320 million years ago, by a huge river bringing down sand and silt and depositing it into a delta in a shallow tropical sea. The deposit is about 300 feet thick. This is shallow, especially compared with the underlying Carboniferous Limestone which in places attains a thickness of almost 3,000 feet.

Fossils are very sparse, unlike the Carboniferous Limestone of nearby Gronant and Prestatyn hillside, which is rich in marine fossils. However, Gwesp yr Stone contains small nodules and larger concretions of ironstone formed into roughly spherical inclusions of varying size. I have one from the stone in the garden, which is a near-perfect sphere close to tennis ball size, and heavy, of course. In one of the disused quarries in Gwesp yr a playground has been constructed, and in the lower part is a designated RIGS, a ‘Regionally Important Geodiversity Site’ (something like an SSSI, but without the statutory protected status which the latter enjoys). The old quarry face shows the layers of the stone, since weathered, but its designation is due to the huge ironstone inclusion, more than a metre in diameter.

Gwesp yr Stone has been quarried and used locally as well as further afield at least since Roman times. It is mostly greenish-grey, but of varying colour and texture; the lower beds are more greenish-grey and especially fine-grained, while the upper beds are more grey-brown and medium-grained. Discoloration from iron within the chemical composition is not unusual. The stone is easily cut and shaped, eminently suitable for ecclesiastical and monumental work.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries a superior fine-grained quality was exported worldwide as scythe-stone. The scythe-stone quarry was located in the village of Gwesp yr down the hill on the left towards the coast; the site is now occupied by the well-concealed Seaview Caravan Park. The old quarry face is weathered and colonised by vegetation, so unfortunately it is now impossible to appreciate the quality of the stone. Another quarry was known for very durable stone suitable for steps, sills and kerbs.



The Old Quarries of Gwesp yr
(Reproduced here with the kind permission
Flintshire Records Office, North East Wales
Archives)

The Roman bath house in Prestatyn, known since the 1930s, was constructed of Gwesp yr Stone. In the Middle Ages Gwesp yr Stone was used in castles such as Ewloe, Flint and Rhuddlan, usually alongside other local stone too. At Rhuddlan the western gatehouse is of Gwesp yr Stone. And look closely at St Asaph Cathedral from the road and you will notice Gwesp yr Stone interspersed with red sandstone and very light grey Carboniferous Limestone. St Winefride’s Well (1512-25) in Holywell is of Gwesp yr Stone. So too is

Basingwerk Abbey, founded in 1131, and owned by the Mostyn family of Talacre until 1923 when it was handed over to the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works and now cared for by Cadw. It was said that there had been an intention to use Gwespyr Stone for the Houses of Parliament, but transport was too much of a problem. St George's Hall in Liverpool, opened in 1854, was also built of Gwespyr Stone, according to the 1919 sale particulars of the Talacre estate, but I have not yet been able to confirm this. An excavation in Ysceifiog (Flints) about 10 years ago discovered Gwespyr Stone on the site. It was in the garden of the approximately 100 year-old house of one of our own members (the late Hazel Formby). The excavation was exploring the site for details of an earlier house, already known to have existed. Perhaps we should be looking for similar archaeological evidence of the use of Gwespyr Stone in domestic settings elsewhere over the centuries?

Gwespyr village

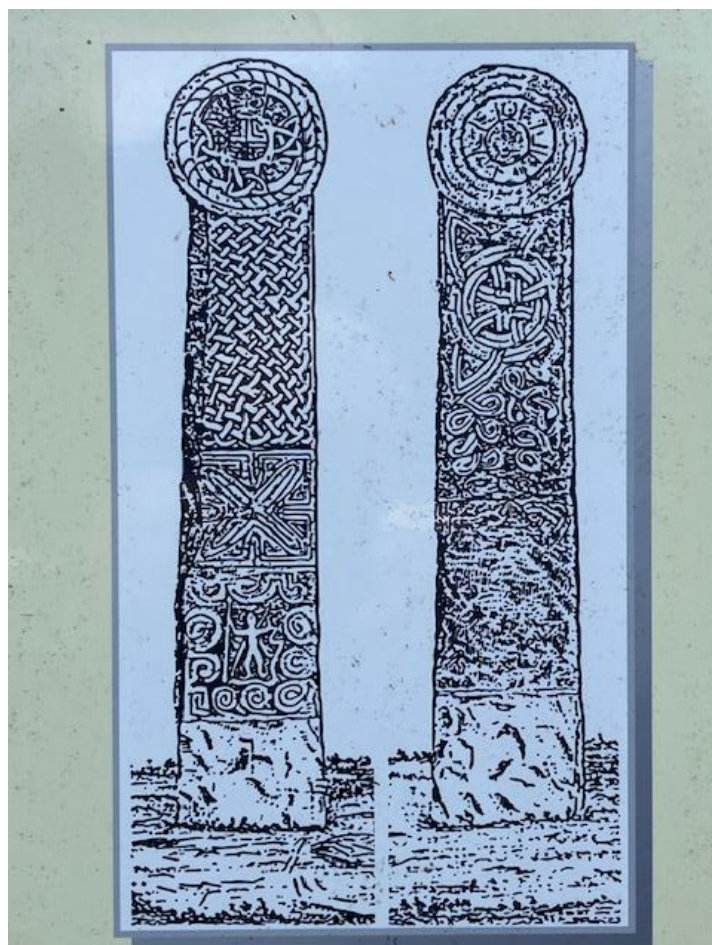


Maen Achwyfan, Whitford

Gwespyr has variously been recorded as 'Gwesber', Gwesbyr and 'Gwesbur' over the centuries. (Prestatyn is another local placename which is a Welsh form of its original Anglo-Saxon name, in this case 'Prestetone' meaning 'Priest's Town', which was its name in 1086.)

There is archaeological evidence of a Viking presence in the area pre-Domesday. At the bottom of Gwespyr hill a Viking burial was discovered in the 1930s. And not far away, in the neighbouring parish of Whitford, is the famous Viking cross known as Maen Achwyfan, now cared for by Cadw. Standing ten feet high in the middle of a field it is thought to date from the late 10th century and is of Gwespyr Stone.

Gwespyr is a village in northern Flintshire. It is half a mile inland and 300 feet high, at the northern tip of the Clwydian Range. It is one of several villages, along with Gronant and Llanasa itself, in the large and ancient parish of Llanasa. The name of the village of Gwespyr is a Welsh form of 'Wesberie', which is how the name appeared in the 1086 Domesday Survey. It is an Anglo-Saxon name and refers to the site's western position for the defence of the Saxon kingdom of Mercia. It provided an ideal lookout over the Irish Sea and the Dee estuary to warn against Viking attack from Ireland and the Isle of Man. The name



Inscriptions on each side of Maen Achwyfan

Most of the land in Gwespyr was owned for centuries by the Mostyn family of Talacre, the Roman Catholic branch of the ancient Mostyn family from nearby Mostyn. Their wealth was derived from farm rentals, lead mining, quarrying and coalmining. Members of the Talacre Mostyn family married into other R. C. families in Wales and England. They lived at Talacre Hall, now called Westbury Castle, until 1919 when they sold their North Wales estate due to crippling death duties after two family deaths in quick succession. The sale documents include maps and are held by the Flintshire Record Office in Hawarden. They are an important and valuable source of information. The family baronetcy dates from 1670 and survives today with the 15th Baronet who was born in 1975.

The present Talacre Hall is built of dressed Gwespyr Stone, of course! It was completed in 1829 and is a mock Tudor Gothic mansion designed by the Chester architect, Thomas Jones, replacing a large Jacobean house. But the Mostyn family has lived on the site since the 15th century. (Frances Mostyn of Talacre was the RC Archbishop of Wales from 1921 to 1939.)

All the houses and cottages in the old part of Gwespyr, now comprising the designated conservation area, are built entirely of local stone. The village is unique in this respect, since walls and cottages in neighbouring villages such as Llanasa and especially Gronant can be seen to include limestone as well as Gwespyr Stone. The latter is frequently used in limestone buildings for weight-bearing around windows and doors. The same is the case in old parish churches in many areas of Wales and England where limestone is the main building material, while sandstone supports door and window frames.



Bradford House (left) and neighbouring house with graded slates

Bradford House, my own cottage, is the middle and smallest of a group of three attached stone cottages on the hill in the centre of the Gwespyr Conservation Area. How, why and when it was so-named is a mystery: it is not a 'house' and there is no known connection with Bradford. This modest cottage was already called this by the time of the 1901 census, so I shall not change the name, however incongruous it seems now. The cottage had not been named in the 1891 census. Perhaps a member of the family living there moved to Bradford in the 1890s and local people began to refer to the cottage as 'the Bradford house'. The neighbouring cottage uphill was already called 'Quarry View' in the 1891 census, but was renamed 'West Winds' some time in the 20th century, perhaps because by then the quarry had closed.

All three cottages are built solidly of Gwespyr Stone, with very thick internal and external walls of coursed rubble, with Welsh slate roofs. Bradford House roof was replaced in the late 20th century with uniform slates, but note that West Winds uphill still has the original graded traditional slates.

The cottages probably date from the early 19th century and would originally have been occupied by the families of quarry workers. They are all now free of render, but old photos from early in the 20th century show all three covered in painted render, which may or may not have been original. The render was removed from the cottages at various times so the stone has since weathered differentially, which explains the overall variations in colour. The choice of different mortars also helps to explain the variations. Bradford House was the last to be stripped of render and the mortar used in re-pointing was a very light-coloured traditional lime mortar.

A notable feature of many old cottages in Gwespyr is the large slabs of Gwespyr Stone used to construct porches. These slabs are at least two metres by one metre, so that only two slabs were required for each porch, held together by iron brackets and bolts.

Similarly, the windowsills of Bradford House are constructed of huge single slabs of stone. But it had no porch until the late 20th century when the present rendered breeze block porch was added.

Outside the centre of the village to the west, in the direction of Prestatyn, is St Winefrides.



Stone Slab Porches in Gwespyr



St Winefrides, Gwespyr
(showing the Teachers' house and Girls' Schoolroom)

It was built in 1857 as a Roman Catholic school by Sir Piers Mostyn of Talacre Hall. It was constructed of ashlar in the 19th century in Scholastic Gothic style, and was closed in c.1933 and converted to residential use (and happens to be the home of our newsletter editors). It housed separate school rooms for boys and girls, and lodgings for teachers and nuns. Probably the most famous one-time pupil was the local playwright and actor, Emyln Williams (1905-1987) who went on to make his name in London. Although both were built from Gwespyr Stone and within a few decades of one another, the appearance of the vernacular Bradford House of coursed rubble, and the architect-designed St Winefrides (by J. Spencer of Liverpool) of dressed stone could not be more different.

There is no quarrying in Gwespyr now, the last quarry closed in the 1980s. The only availability of the stone these days, either for repair or newbuild, is from reclamation. Old maps show the huge extent of quarrying in the village and the precise location of the individual quarries.

Nature has taken over in most cases, with scrubby woodland which is now home to a variety of plants, birds and other wildlife. Old quarry sites occupy the left-hand side of the road as you go down Gwespyr hill to the coast road (the A548); the one opposite Bradford House is now a children's playground. Lower down the hill the village hall perches on the edge of an old quarry and further down still, the site of the last working quarry became a recycling depot for metals, but that is now closed (2024).

Gwespyr may now be described as a dormitory/retirement settlement, home to workers who travel out of the village for employment and to people now retired from the local mines or coming from elsewhere, attracted to the coastal location. In the 20th century there were numerous shops and even a bakery. Large front windows in some of the cottages are reminders of their old functions as shops. Bradford House was one of those shops, and a 1950s photo shows a notice over the front door indicating that it had a licence for selling tobacco. At that time it also sold paraffin, which was stored in the garden. The glass pane in the original old door between what is now the front living room and the rear kitchen was inserted, so that approaching customers could be seen from the rear room.

There were two public houses in the village, one now closed, but the appropriately-named 'Mason's Arms' remains in business. It is a Georgian building but is rendered so its stone construction is hidden. But the former 'Talacre Arms' down the hill on the right is a large building of dressed stone like St Winefrides, showing the fine quality of Gwespyr Stone in all its glory.

THE TURBULENT SHORES OF NORTH WIRRAL

By Tim Biddle

My Grandfather Walter Leslie Biddle was born in 1887 and his brother Henry Neville a year later. They lived with their parents Henry, a wool merchant, and his wife Emily in Wallasey. Their house overlooked Bidston Moss (now the site of a massive housing estate), a wetland area fed by the river Birket. In the distance Leasowe lighthouse rose behind the embankment, the sea defence against the stormy north Wirral coast. Between the river and the sea much of the land was intensively cultivated. Its horticultural produce fed the mouths of the rapidly expanding population of Liverpool whose numbers increased from 77,000 in 1801 to 376,000 by 1851. A quarter of its residents originated in Ireland and were casualties of the 1843 potato famine.

The photograph (overpage), taken about 1895, shows Henry Carlisle (1832–1907), a Wallasey market gardener, with his son Ernest (1871-1929) sorting and packing what appear to be skirrets, outside Carlisle Cottage (destroyed by a bomb in WW II), School Lane, Wallasey.

Skirrets originated in China but were grown in Europe during Roman times. They apparently have a sweetish aromatic flavour. The photo is from the Foulger collection of 1913, collated by Wallasey Historical Society and attributed to the photographer J. Hill.



HN left, WL right



Ernest and Henry Carlisle
 (Reproduced with the kind permission of
 Wallasey Historical Society)

Walter and Henry decided to establish their own market garden and moved west along the coast to Great Meols onto land very close to the sea which was subject to periodic flooding. Their day-to-day activities are detailed in their 'product diaries' commencing 1907. Along with the surviving financial accounts it has been possible to trace the progress of the firm WL & HN Biddle, later managed by my father W. Alan Biddle.

It is unclear how they acquired their horticultural skills but there are several references in Biddle's accounts to H. Joynson & Bros. The Joynson's market garden was established in Wallasey in the early nineteenth century. It is likely that Henry and Walter served some sort of apprenticeship with the firm which was managed by Henry Joynson.

Before the expansion of horticulture Wallasey was a hamlet, population of 274 in 1801. By 1911 it had increased to 9,279. Fishing and agriculture provided employment but there were occasional extra benefits thanks to incidents on the coast. In 1863 James Stonehouse writes in 'Recollections of Old Liverpool':
'Wirral at that time, and in the middle half of the last

century, was a desperate region, the inhabitants were nearly all wreckers and smugglers – they ostensibly carried on the trade and calling of fishermen, farm labourers and small farmers, but they were deeply saturated with the sin of covetousness, and many a fierce fire has been lighted on the Wirral shore on stormy nights to lure the good ship on the Burbo or Hoyle banks, there to beat and strain and throb until her timbers parted and her planks were floating in confusion on the stormy waves. On stormy days and nights, crowds have been seen hurrying to the shore with carts, barrows, horses, asses, or oxen even, which were made to draw timber, bales boxes or anything that the raging waters might have cast up. Many a half drowned sailor has had a knock on the sconce.'



HN and WL, late 1930s

Even the clergy were complicit in these activities. Stonehouse continues: *'One would cry "now wait till I get down from my pulpit and doff my gown" and he would lead a stampede across the sandhills.'*



Meols' market gardens 1950's

The local paper the Weekly News dated January 1905 details the misfortune of the wreck of the Spanish steamer 'Ulloa':

'It was a chapter in the Wallasey story as wild as the great storm that caused it. It happened over a century ago. It brought vast crowds. It brought skirmishes with the forces of law and order. It was a massive public grab at harvest from the sea. A rich cargo came floating into town on the waves of the Mersey. A ship broke its back – and a town broke loose.'

It was in the early hours of December 30, 1904, that the 'Ulloa' from Barcelona, failed to pick up a Mersey Pilot and was swept in a fierce gale on to the treacherous Burbo Bank off New Brighton. From her holds fruit and wines floated shoreward. The calm life of Wallasey was shattered in much the same way as the gale had torn 'Ulloa' apart.

Dawn visitors to the sands at New Brighton and Leasowe found cases and boxes of oranges and lemons, and hundreds of casks of wine. Oranges, grapes and other luscious fruits have been, within the periphery of Wallasey, more abundant than was ever known before. They were piled in heaps from the Red Nose to Moreton. Contemporary reports described the washed-up cases of oranges, lemons, grapes and onions as 'uncountable'. They represented well over half the total cargo of the ship.'

Apparently even market gardeners benefited from the event.

'News of the wreck spread quickly. People came over from Liverpool and Birkenhead. They brought with them containers of every shape and size. According to local reports at the time 'some people walked, some hobbled, and others ran.' They brought handcarts and wheelbarrows, baskets and boxes. Some were filled by the local greengrocers and market gardeners.'



'Helping Themselves'

Less contentious was the practice of beachcombing. Henry Joynton's great granddaughter Jill recalls one night when her grandfather walked down Harrison drive with a hand cart to haul back a very heavy sea sodden bolster of a tapestry.



A section of the same tapestry woven by Lee's Tapestry Works, Birkenhead which operated from 1908 to 1970

Jill added that it was cut into smaller sections which were distributed among the family and used variously as a cover for a piano stool, a draught excluder for a door and a tablecloth. Other items salvaged that night included a bottle of sherry saved for Jill's Dad's 21st birthday. In the event it proved undrinkable having been contaminated with sea water!

My family lived at Meols, and my brother Nev and I regularly patrolled the shore for treasures but much to our disappointment found very little apart from seashells.

ZOOM LECTURE SERIES 2024-5

From our Research Co-ordinator Martin Cherry

Wednesday 9 October 2024

Matt Osmont, Practice Director at Donald Insall Associates

Conservation and creativity: breathing new life into old buildings

A leading practitioner from a leading conservation practice, Matt will talk about the challenges of conservation—giving historic buildings a sustainable future—looking in detail at Plas Gwyn, a wonderful sixteenth-century gentry house on the Llŷn and Porth Mawr, one of the gatehouses in the town walls of Caernarfon.

Wednesday 13 November 2024

Mary-Ann Constantine, Professor at the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies

Recovering Downing Hall: Exploring the world of Thomas Pennant (1726-1798)

Downing Hall, the Flintshire home of naturalist, antiquarian and travel writer Thomas Pennant, is now a heap of rubble, but it was once a busy hub for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. Pennant's correspondence network stretched from America to Siberia, but he was also a keen advocate of 'travels at home': his collaboration with artists such as Moses Griffith and John Ingleby has left us with a fascinating visual legacy of the buildings and landscapes of north Wales at the end of the C18th. In this talk, Professor Mary-Ann Constantine will share some findings from the Curious Travellers project, which has been editing Pennant's letters and his tours of Wales and Scotland, and exploring his specimen collections in the Natural History Museum, London.

Wednesday 11 December 2024

Scott Lloyd, research manager for the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales

Mapping North Wales before the Ordnance Survey

By popular acclaim, a return visit from Scott Lloyd. He spoke to us before about early nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey mapping and this time will focus on the varied pre-Ordnance Survey mapping that survives for North-East Wales which can be helpful in researching the history of houses. The talk will also discuss some of the different issues surrounding their use and look at how they can be used in a digital age.

STOP PRESS!

A short notice from our webmaster Peter Masters

The house history of Plas Gwyn, the subject of our October Zoom talk, is now available online on our website. The house is our banner picture on the website.



Discovering Old Welsh Houses

Who we are

Discovering Old Welsh Houses studies and celebrates the traditional houses of North Wales both between the 14th and the mid 17thc and the lives of the people who lived in them. We have six active branches that hold meetings and arrange visits on a regular basis.

Further information including branch activities can be found under Events, Branch contacts can be found under Contact Us. We are a voluntary organisation with both Welsh and English speaking members.



What we do

We hold meetings that encourage members to get together and exchange ideas and information.

We arrange visits to houses and other historic buildings that are not normally open to the public.

We give talks and presentations on a wide range of topics related to Old Houses, many of them on Zoom.

We encourage and help members to publish all aspects of the history of individual houses and villages, taking an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach as well as documentary evidence (including poetry).

We also apply for grants to carry out specialist work such as laser scanning and building recording.

We produce a quarterly magazine **Discovering Old Welsh Houses**.

Membership benefits include guided research, Training in Land active use and other services. Donations to our Field Notes and House Database. Occasional guided visits to previously researched houses. [Listings of the houses]. Members' Zoom talk by prominent speakers. A volunteers branch near you.

Membership

We have over 200 members. [Click here](#) to see the benefits of becoming a member and how to apply.

Membership is £15 pa for individuals and £20 pa for two individuals living at the same address.

Life membership is available for £200.

Joint Life membership is available for £350.



A members research group



Members on a house visit

