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ABERAERON LANDMARKS.¹

In olden days the Aberaeron Bridge was a notable landmark. It is not on record when the first bridge was built and its exact location is not known. It is generally believed that in the year 1800 the bridge that crossed the Aeron was situated more or less on the site of the present structure. The first mention of the old bridge I found in the Quarter Sessions records. Here is a minute from the proceedings on 13 July 1773.

'Ordered that Henry Jones, Lewis Gwynne and Philip Pugh Esquires or any two of them be desired to fix upon a proper place for rebuilding Aberayron Bridge, presented to be out of repair, the old bridge being built in an inconvenient place and that they do also contract with proper persons for rebuilding the same and certify such contract at the next General Quarter Sessions of the Peace to be held by the said County, etc.'

It is therefore seen that the bridge in 1773 was in an inconvenient place and, according to local tradition, was situated some 15 yards higher up the river than the present one, with a sharp bend close to the pine end of 'Y Bont' (a thatched cottage) which made it difficult for horse-drawn vehicles to gain access to the bridge.

To the credit of Lewis Gwynne, Henry Jones and Phillip Pugh they soon got to work for on 12 July 1774 they reported that they had contracted with David and William Richard of St. Dogmaels to erect a new bridge in consideration of a sum of £185,

'the said Dd. Richard and Wm. Richard having entered into a Bond with sufficient security for the due performance thereof, and keeping the said bridge in repair for 7 years.'

The Cardi could drive a hard bargain even as long ago as 166 years. But what became of it? On 23 April 1781 a sum of £10 was paid David Richards for repairing both ends of the bridge. No explanation is given as to why the new bridge was not built. The bond and security must have been weighing heavily on the two Richards.

Some further repairs were carried out in 1781 by Dd. Richards.

At the Quarter Sessions in January 1783, Lewis Gwynne of Mynachdy complains that the bridge was

¹An address given at Aberaeron, 25 June, 1949.

‘very ruinous, broken and in great Decay for want of repairation.’

Why was Lewis Gwynne so interested in the bridge? Was it that he had the well-being of the inhabitants at heart? We know that Gwynne was the lord of the manor of Llyswen, otherwise Aberaeron, and it was to his benefit that the bridge and road leading to Llyswen Mill, where corn had been ground from time immemorial, were in good repair. However, Gwynne and several other gentlemen were asked to contract with ‘proper workmen’ for erecting a new bridge. Advertisements appeared in the Hereford and Gloucester papers inviting contractors to tender. John Ross of Carmarthen was also asked to print 100 copies of the advertisement for distribution. We know that the old bridge was demolished in 1783 and work was commenced on the new structure. As far as I know there is unfortunately no copy of the actual agreement extant, but from the meagre records available it can be gathered that one Griffith Jenkins was the chief builder of the new bridge and in 1785 a John Jenkins is mentioned. They were paid the sum of £100 in the two years 1784-5.

‘Consideration money due to them from the inhabitants of the County for rebuilding a certain bridge in this County called Aberayron.’

The arches of the bridge were made of long and large stones, which indicated that they came from the Cilgerran quarries, and probably the two Richards had brought them to the site, but had failed to secure the necessary guarantors to continue with the work.

Before the new bridge was completed improvisation was necessary and a flat-bottom boat was used to cross the river. The occupier of Aberaeron Uchaf (where Dolauaeron now stands) farmed the land on both sides of the river, and the maids had to cross the river to milk the cows. On a June afternoon in 1783 two maids crossed a rising Aeron, and after milking they went to Dolhalog, a nearby cottage where a ‘neithior priodas’ was in progress. While they were there the river rose after heavy rain and became a raging torrent (only Aberayron people know how quickly the Aeron rises and overflows its banks after a storm). The girls attempted to recross in the boat but when they were half way the rope snapped and they were lost in the swirling waters. Both were buried in the same grave at Llanddewi Aberarth. Here is the record :

‘June 23rd, 1783. Elinor Richards and Jane Valentine were buried. They were both drowned in crossing the river Aeron in a small boat.’

A tombstone was erected over their grave, but time has erased the inscription. A copy of the verse however is still in existence. Here it is :

Dyma'r fan dan garreg fedd,
Mae'n cyrph ni'n dwy yn wael ei gwedd,
Fe'n trowd yn sydyn maes o'r byd,
Wrth fentro i'r bad i groesi'r rhyd.

It is said that for 50 years after this occurrence the first things taught to children by their parents was the Lord's prayer and the four lines which I have just given.

The bridge that was erected in 1783 served its purpose. It stood the stresses and strain of 130 years, and probably could have done service for a much longer period had not Aberaeron marched with the times. By 1911 Aberayron could boast of a thriving trade, and the County Council that year demolished the old bridge and built a new one to provide better access to the Railway Station. A local poet penned some appropriate lines to the old bridge under the heading :

YMSON YR HEN BONT.

O dan lethol bwys dadfeiliad
Wrth y byd mewn geiriau cariad
Gadewch i'm ddweyd fy mhrofiad
Cyn terfynu'm diwrnod gwaith

Caru wnes y porthladd tirion
Do a chludais ei drigolion
Dros furmurol ryd yr afon
Lawer blwyddyn faith.

I will now take you back again to the year 1800, and endeavour to give you a picture of Aberaeron as it was then. Commencing at Llanddewi Aberarth we walk towards Aberaeron, and the first habitation we come to is Cilgwgan-fawr, then a sizeable farm. The name Cilgwgan still remains, e.g. Morfa Cilgwgan, but there is now no trace of any building where the farmhouse stood. Next is Cilgwgan fach, another small farm. By the way, what is the origin of the word Cilgwgan? Has it any connection with Cadwgan, another name associated with these parts?

Next we come to Drenwydd-fach and then Drenwydd-fawr, and hard by there were four cottages inhabited by four families. A short way further on we see on the sea shore the entrenchment of a small castle, half of which has been washed away by the sea. Some two years ago, when I was a member of the local Council, the Ministry of

Works, as the guardian of ancient buildings and monuments, took a sudden interest in this fortification, and asked the Council if they could take over Castell Cadwgan. Their timing was unfortunate as the last remnant of Castell Cadwgan was demolished by the sea, about the year 1870. From here the road takes us to the bridge that I have already mentioned. From Drenwydd to the bridge there were no houses with the exception of one or two habitations. The area between the road and the sea, now covered by the town of Aberaeron, was a flat tract of land. Aberaeron Isaf, a small holding where Milford House now stands, had sufficient land to keep five cows. It was straw-thatched and Dafydd Cilgwan was the last person to live there before it was demolished. Aberaeron Ganol stood where the County Hall stands today, and Daniel Gwyn, the last inhabitant, kept five cows and a horse. Adjacent to Aberaeron Ganol was a tavern known as Tŷ Sian Daniel, and well known in those days as the meeting place of local fishermen. Thomas, a son to Sian Daniel, built the present Iantre House on the site of the old tavern. There were two warehouses situated roughly to the north side of the present Pier Cottage, one for storing salt, and the other to store grain, notably barley, to provide bread, and also home-brewed ale, the favourite beverage at that time.

Aberaeron Uchaf on the site of the present Dolauaeron was kept in 1800 by a lady named Mrs. Felix, and according to travellers of that time it was the best inn and hostelry for many a mile. The Rev. John Evans, B.A., of Jesus College, Oxford, describing his travels through Wales in 1803, writes :

‘ Crossing the mountains we descended into the Vale of Airon intending to halt for the night at a small inn called Aber-airon, but though our horses were jaded, the night perfectly dark, the rain pouring in torrents, and the wind blowing a hurricane, yet the good lady of the house [Mrs. Felix] feeling an independence she was proud to assert, refused us admittance, observing that she had but two spare beds which were already occupied; and that numbers of people who had previously arrived, were sitting up in the parlour to wait for the morning light to pursue their journey. Finding that it was twelve Welsh miles to another inn, and pitying our beasts more than ourselves, we determined to alight; after parleying amidst torrents of rain, and pleading humanity in vain, I suggested an appeal to that hospitality for which the country is famed, which had the desired effect: the hostler was called, a fire kindled in a small parlour, dry things brought, a comfortable supper prepared, and the best beds made an ample compensation for the previous state of anxiety. . . . The morning was peculiarly fine, which enabled us to admire the verdant strip of romantic scenery through which the Airon flows, under a neat stone bridge, a little below the house, into the sea.’

Another tourist wrote an account of his journey through Wales in

1805. On the 13th day of July, 1805, he stayed some two hours at Aberaeron Uchaf and this is what he had to say :

‘ Being still sixteen miles from Aberystwyth, where we intended to take a late dinner, we found it necessary to halt for a couple of hours at the little inn of the little village of Aberayron kept by a very sensible and civil woman of the name of Felix. The situation of her house is delightful and we were not sorry that circumstances had arisen to make us decide in favour of this interesting route.’

Opposite Aberaeron Uchaf stood Bont Cottage, a very old landmark, and famous as being one of the haunts of Twm Sion Cati. Only the ruins remain today. It was also a tavern at one time.

I will briefly mention the other houses. Near Bont Cottage stood the Malthouse ; then we have Tyncoed and two small cottages close by, Tynyfron, Dolhalog, Tŷ Ffald Cwmmmins, Pengarreg-fawr, Pengarreg-ganol and Pengarreg-fach, and finally Butcher’s Arms, kept by Sarah Butcher. For such a small community, Aberaeron was well served with taverns at that time.

I have tried to give you a fairly complete picture of Aberayron as it was in the year 1800 and previously. At that time the Rev. Alban Thomas Jones Gwynne, lord of the manor of Llyswen, had not even thought of erecting a pier or forming a harbour, which enterprise resulted in the birth and growth of Aberaeron.

It must not be thought that during this time there was very little doing at Aberaeron. On the contrary it was a fairly busy place, although there were but few houses. Even before the harbour was built, farmers from a wide area came here in the spring and summer months to cart away lime and coal brought in by small boats from Llanelly, Swansea, and Milford Haven. Again in the autumn, people came from as far as the border counties of England to take home with them the herrings that were caught in the bay.

Pwllcam is a notable landmark and it is mentioned in the court-leet records of the manor of Llyswen, otherwise Aberaeron, as far back as 1788. Here is an entry on 9 October of that year :

‘ We present all persons who shall at any time throw limestone ballast or any other matter whatever that may obstruct the free passage of all vessels in and out of the river Aeron from a certain place called Pwllcam til over the Bar or mouth of the river, if the same remain unmoved above two tides, the Defaulter shall for every such offence pay unto the Lord of the said Manor £1/1/0 on demand.’

This is very interesting. The court leet at that time, the jury of which consisted of some of the principal inhabitants, thought it

important that the mouth of the Aeron should be kept clear for the free passage of vessels. Llanddewi Aberarth and Aberaeron shared between them some forty of these vessels. They were open boats capable of carrying 10 to 30 tons and were used chiefly to bring in coal and limestone during the spring and summer months, i.e., when they were not fishing for herrings. These boats certainly wintered in Pwllcam and between March and May a bar would be formed across the mouth of the Aeron by the deposit of shingle, making it difficult for the boats to take to sea again. A fishermen's club was formed in order to pay a certain sum of money to the owner of Sailors Arms, a nearby tavern, for clearing away the accumulation of sand and shingle and keeping the channel open. One spring when the Sailors Arms' man had commenced the work of clearing the bar, a great storm arose, the heavy rain greatly swelling the Aeron with the result that the bar was washed away in no time. As the river had performed the work the club refused to pay the owner of the Sailors Arms. A lawsuit followed, but the fishermen lost the case.

The following presentment, dated Oct. 1790, in the court leet is of interest—

'We present all masters of vessels that dig holes, pits or bedding for their vessels to rest, and lie in, without filling and levelling the same immediately after notice given or any other nuisance that may be hurtful or hindrance within the Liberty of the Navigation of the Creek of Aberayron within this Lordship. We fine every such defaulter the sum of six shillings and eightpence to be levied by the direction of the Lord of the Manor.'

We note that the fishermen dug holes or pits for their boats to keep them secure over winter, and probably to prevent them knocking against each other.

A great deal of herring fishing took place. We have Tŷ Sian Daniel much frequented by fishermen. Also the name Sailors Arms is indicative of the presence of fishermen and was also much frequented by the fraternity.

We have it on record that people from Herefordshire came all the way to Aberaeron on horseback and carried the fish home in large baskets (called 'cawelli' in Welsh) one on either side of the horse's flanks. Herrings were bought in thousands by farmers and others dwelling inland. Salted, they provided a welcome change of fare at certain periods of the year. The gathering together of so many strangers led to lawlessness, and the language, morals, and demeanour of the people left much to be desired. I expect that the home-brewed ale of Sian Daniel did not help matters. There were no policemen and no lock-up, not even a chairman of the magistrates' court, and the

only authority was the court leet. Things had come to such a pass that the following presentment was recorded by the court leet which met on 24 October 1795. Remember that this was 14 years before the harbour was built.

‘We present all persons that shall be guilty of swearing, brawling and taking Gods name in vain and also all drunkards that disturb the peace of his Majesty’s leige subjects every defaulter upon due proof to pay to the Lord of the Manor 1/-.’

One shilling was a large sum of money in those days.

To prove that herrings were plentiful here is another presentment dated 29 October 1791 :

‘We present all persons that shall throw or dispose of any filth such as dead stinking fish or any other kind of obstruction that shall be deemed a nuisance into the river shall be fined 1/-.’

Here are some of the names of owners of vessels at that time in Aberaeron—

Daniel Evans, Pengarreg.
Capt. David Rees of the German Mally.
Wm. Davies, Alltlwyd, Llanon.
David Owen, Llansantfread.
Lewis Jenkins, Voelallt, Ciliau Aeron.
Thomas Evans, Drenewydd.

I may say that some of these people were prominent farmers.

I will now endeavour to lead you up to the actual building of the harbour, which event led to the birth and growth of Aberaeron as we know it today. By his will dated 2 July, 1804, Lewis Gwynne of Mynachdy (in fact, the last of the Gwynnes, who were descended from Llewelyn Caplan, Lord of Aberaeron, and further back from Gruffydd ap Grono Goch, Lord of Llangathen) devised most of his real estate in Cardiganshire to his relation the Rev. Alban Thomas Jones of Tyglyn and his wife Susanna Maria. Here is an extract from his will :

I give and devise my Lordship or Manor of Llyswen otherwise Aberayron, with all the rights, Royalties, and privileges there to belonging and also all and singular my real estates situated in the several parishes of Llanbadarn Trefeglwys, Henveniew, Llanddewi Aberarth, Llanarth, Llansantfread, Nantcwnlle, Llanddewy Brevi, Llanerchayron, Llangwyrddon and Llandyssul to the use of my cousins The Rev. Alban Thomas Jones of Tyglyn and my relation Susanna Maria his wife and their assigns.’

A clause in the will stipulated that the legatee had to take the surname and arms of Gwynne within six months of coming into

possession of the estate. Lewis Gwynne died 25 November 1805. A simple tablet in Llanbadarn Trefeglwys Church commemorates his name and adds that

‘He was a man who take him all for all. We neer shall see his like again.’

The following extract from the *British Press* of 6 December 1805 relates to the death of Gwynne :

‘He lived very private, though possessed of an extensive estate, and accumulated an immense fortune, the bulk of which he has left to the Rev. Alban Thomas Jones of Tyglyn together with his real estate. He had in his house when he died such a quantity of gold that a horse could not carry the weight to convey it to Tyglyn about a mile off, and when put on a sledge it was with difficulty he could draw it there. The amount in gold is £100,000 besides £50,000 in the Stocks.’

He was generous to the poor, a friend to the necessitous, and an upright gentleman.

It is now clear that Alban Thomas Jones Gwynne was not risking much when he invested a mere £6,000 in erecting the harbour walls some three years afterwards. Two years after the death of Lewis Gwynne, Alban Thomas Jones Gwynne obtained an Act of Parliament to enable him to proceed with the building of the pier walls. It also enabled him to levy tolls, rates, and dues within the limits of the harbour. I have in my possession an original copy of the Bill the title of which is

‘A Bill to enable the Rev. Alban Thomas Jones Gwynne, his heirs and assigns to repair and enlarge or rebuild the quay or Pier within the Harbour or Port of Aberayron, in the County of Cardigan and to improve the Sd Harbour and to regulate the moorings of ships and vessels therein.’

As the Bill contains 14 printed foolscap pages, I can but give you a summary of it. The first two paragraphs of the preamble are as follows :

‘Whereas the Quay or Pier within the Harbour or Port of Aberayron, in the parish of Henvenew, and in the Manor of Llyswen otherwise Aberayron in the Cty of Cardigan, is become ruinous and insufficient for the accomodation and protection of the ships and vessels resorting to the Sd Harbour.

And whereas Alban Thomas Jones Gwynne Clerk, Lord of the sd Manor is willing and desirous at his own expense to rebuild, enlarge, improve, and maintain the said Quay or Pier and also to improve the sd Harbour.’

It was also enacted that the old quay dues be abolished and new ones granted. There were penalties for obstructing officers appointed

by the lord of the manor to measure ships and vessels to ascertain the tolls and dues. Wharfage was charged on goods remaining on the quay beyond a limited time. The only ships exempted from duty were vessels in His Majesty's service. It was further enacted that the lord of the manor could establish bye laws,

'for better regulating governing and managing all or any of the carts drays, wheels or other carriages, and of horses used for the carrying and removing of the goods etc.'

A clause was inserted here that bye laws were to be submitted to the Quarter Sessions of the County of Cardigan for approval.

An interesting paragraph in the Bill relates to the limits of the harbour. It extended from Craig Ddu in the north to a certain point called Carreg Ina in the parish of Llanina to the south. It is clear that Gwynne was looking after his own interests, as a certain amount of trade existed in the creek of Llanddewi Aberarth. This was also the case in Cei Bach and the limits of the harbour covered both these points. He would be able to collect dues from both these places. Gwynne, however, did not bargain for Evan Phillips of Llanddewi Aberarth. Evan, a merchant, refused to pay tolls and dues on merchandise, with the result that the issue was thrashed out at the Great Sessions at Cardigan. Evan Phillips proved that cargoes had been loaded and unloaded at the Llanddewi Creek from time immemorial and proved ancient rights to the hilt, and won the case brought against him by the lord of the manor. No tolls or dues or any other charges were afterwards made at Llanddewi.

Some time later the Cei Bach people took similar action, but they failed to prove the existence of ancient rights.

The building of the south-west pier was commenced in 1807 and finished in 1809. When completed it was deemed desirable to place an inscription on a stone in the pier.

'As a memorial of good will to his fellow creatures, as an encouragement to the Trade of this Harbour and as a means of preserving many valuable lives and much property this south west pier was erected at the expense of Thomas Alban Jones Gwynne, Lord of the Manor of Aberayron.

Lewis Davies, William Green, Edward Ellis and Wm Lewis Masons under the direction of Mr. John Wood Mariner.'

I have looked in vain for that inscription and no one alive today seems to know anything about it. I found a copy of the inscription in a Tyglyn album housed in the National Library of Wales.

Finally, I wish to say a word or two on the first few houses that were

built by Gwynne and which formed the nucleus of the present Aberaeron. It is generally believed that the present Red Lion on the quay was the first, but this is not so ; the first houses erected were built in the shape of a half moon almost opposite the present look-out and running to the end of the Welsh Back. They were built in a court yard and the only entrance to them was through a door which can be seen even today in the quay wall. Ffair Glan y Môr was held in a meadow on the sea-shore, and after these few houses were built, the fair was certainly held in the courtyard.

Next Gwynne built ten houses on meadow land near the shore further north. He called these 'Mynachdy Row'. I wonder if there are people alive today who would recognise this name—I doubt it, but if I mention 'Bedlam Barracks' a good many people will know it at once. This was the name given to Mynachdy Row in later years. Gwynne also erected a school not far from the sea shore, somewhat between Mynachdy Row and the harbour. In conclusion, I wish to say that Gwynne and his experts made a grave error in siting his first houses and the school too near the sea. They did not foresee that the weight of the tides would be thrown to the north of the harbour where he built his first houses. The first houses to be submerged were the four half moon houses. In a few years the same fate overtook the School House and Mynachdy Row or Bedlam Barracks.

Finally, may I read to you two verses from an ode of lament to the old school, composed by one of the pupils ?

O enwog hen ysgoldy,
Ti chwalwyd gan y don,
'Does ond dy seiliau heddiw
Yn aros ger fy mron.
Mae gweled dy adfeilion
Yn dwyn i'm meddwl i
Ryw liaws o atgofion
Am bethau gynt a fu.

Mae tonnau'r weilgi heddiw
Yn treiglo dros y fan
Lle gynt bu'r athro clodwiw
A'r plant yn gwneud eu rhan.
A chwarae heb ddychrynu
Y mae gwahanol bysg
Lle gynt y bu hyfforddi
Ym mhrif ganghennau dysg.

Aberaeron.

GWILYM JONES.