

HOW I GOT INTO SLATE

My grandfather was the Secretary of the Coal Exchange in Manchester and was also connected with the West Leigh Colliery Company. One of my father's early memories was of hitching a ride on the steam loco that plied between their wharf on the Bridgewater canal and the colliery to take the men their wages. For a while my father worked at the West Leigh colliery as a compensation clerk, and then at Llay Main Colliery, near Wrexham but eventually was apprenticed to the Town Clerk of Leigh as a Town Planner. He pursued this career for the rest of his life, eventually becoming a Deputy Divisional Planning Officer in the old Lancashire County Council based at Bank Street, Bury. When that was amalgamated into the Manchester Division he transferred there and on the re-organisation of Local Government he was re-deployed to Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council from where he subsequently retired.

As a child, my world was full of maps and plans. My father used to take me with him every Saturday morning "to the office" where I would happily draw on the multi-coloured papers, play with the hole punches or even, if I was especially good, be allowed to play with the typewriters and the telephone exchange! The office had an ancient creaking lift, which I could ride in as a treat - it was actually faster to walk up the stairs. Whenever we could, we went out "on inspection" and my father would take a selection of his files with us. We would tour "his" territory while he looked at the sites of planning applications and made his notes, and inevitably we would end up at a pub somewhere on the way home where he would have a Guinness and I would have a packet of crisps in the car. I coloured in maps and drew pictures on the back of them. Discarded maps were my painting canvas and obsolete office stationary my paper darts. Small wonder that I grew up with a love of maps and diagrams and a desire to understand what they represented.

I was never really a dedicated train spotter although I did, with my friends, "spot" bus and engine numbers and go on various trips to engine sheds. However, since the age of 4, we had always gone on holiday to Kinnel Bay, near Rhyl, in North Wales, initially staying in a (very) small caravan and later renting various bungalows for a week or fortnight. I well remember the huge queues of people on the middle Saturday of our fortnight struggling on and off the buses with giant suitcases to Rhyl to catch the trains - those were the days before everybody owned a car - or two. It was therefore with some interest, in my late teens that I learned about the Festiniog and Welsh Highland Railways and the industries, which had spawned them. Intrigued by the resurgence of the Narrow Gauge Railways, my father and I began longer and longer forays from Kinnel Bay to find them. My mother, although not very interested, vaguely remembered her experiences of the Festiniog in the 1930's when she had been walking in Wales and they had been taken by main line train firstly to Blaenau Ffestiniog and then by the Ffestiniog itself to Tan y Bwlch, where they walked up onto the ridge and gazed on Cnycht before returning for tea. She also remembered being taken to a slate mill somewhere near Llangollen with its screeching saws...

The railways were interesting, yes, but James Boyd's books were full of little track plans and quarry branches and tantalising glimpses. What really crystallised it was one year when my father took up an invitation he had been given through his work to visit the Penmaenmawr Granite Quarries. Abandoned narrow gauge tracks abounded, there were inclines, tips, ancient machinery (I remember a DC Ruston excavator, its 10,000 volt cable snaking across the quarry floor!), belt driven compressors and much more. I was hooked. We saw an advert in the paper saying that the Penrhyn Quarry was open to the public - we phoned up and went along, touring the cutting sheds and getting a glimpse of the workings. All their railways had gone, but the industry was fascinating.

Then Llechwedd, in Blaenau, opened its doors as Quarry Tours and I was increasingly aware of a whole new world of quarry maps and plans... The publication of Rhosydd Quarry gave me at last a technical insight into what the slate mines were all about.

In 1974 Gloddfa Ganol, on the old Oakeley Quarry site, opened to the public as the Ffestiniog Mountain Centre and we, naturally, went along for a look. The tiny "grotto" seemed a pale and childish imitation of Llechwedd, but the museum overlooking the open workings housed the most fascinating, complicated and almost incomprehensible maps I had ever seen. Surreptitiously I photographed the easiest one to see. Jean Lindsay's History of the North Wales Slate Industry went home with me, and while it was fascinating, where were the maps, diagrams and above all photographs to explain it all? At home I enlarged my photographs of Gloddfa's map and stared at it in wonder. Here was a spider's web of tramways, inclines and, wonder of wonder, the details of the workings.

In Easter 1975 we hired a caravan at Porthmadog and I started to investigate the quarries in earnest. At first I thought of nothing more than an album of pictures, a book like many of the railway titles I had seen. A brief perusal of the resources in Gwynedd Archives at Dolgellau and Caernarfon showed that there were many photographs and other quarry documents there which could prove useful. I had already corresponded with Wil Roberts, Gloddfa Ganol's proprietor, over the incredible map, and he seemed amused by my suggestions that a copy would surely be safer on public display than the original - I wanted a copy for myself, of course.

So, one fateful day, I set out from Porthmadog to catch the bus up to Blaenau, the mist was down when I arrived, and I climbed up through the cloud and Votty to ice and snow at Maenofferen. From there I wandered across the moor above Llechwedd and eventually made my way down to the main road before trekking back up again to the Gloddfa Ganol entrance. The sun broke through the cloud and I introduced myself to Wil, who was on the gate. I explained my ideas for a picture book and he looked around him. "*I think there's enough here for a book on it's own*" he said. That was it, we talked of nothing else for a long time and I went away with an outline, not for the full history - that was to come later - but for something more than a Guide Book to explain about the quarry.

So was born "Candles to Caplamps" my technical description of the techniques of slate mining and dressing and began my long association with Gloddfa Ganol. I worked on the history of the Oakeley Quarries, I traced, drew and re-drew the maps, I "advised" Wil on what the maps showed and where both he and the Ffestiniog Slate Company was working. After he and I explored the accessible New Vein workings on Floor 5 and they became a public underground tour, I produced a small guidebook for it entitled "A Walk into the Slate Mountain." I designed a slate tablet Viewpoint, designed and created display

materials and became his unofficial Quarry Historian. I met up with others similarly interested, and was introduced to Michael Lewis and the IA courses at Plas Tan y Bwlch. Through Wil I made contact with Graham Hall, then of King's Youth Hostel at Dolgellau, who asked me if I could write something on Cwmorthin Quarry - which he subsequently published. Many years later my original ideas for a picture book came to fruition, though more tightly focussed as "Slate from Blaenau Ffestiniog.." Some of my friends from Plas came together as "Adit Publications" and reprinted first Michael Lewis' "Rhosydd" and then my Cwmorthin, as well as gradually publishing the results of the mountain of reports which the Plas IA group had produced over their years of field work and research into the quarries and mines around Blaenau.

My father made many friends amongst my contacts and the older men who worked at the quarry and certainly enjoyed some of the strange adventures our series of long suffering Austin Maxis endured. I remember well the time we took one of them down to the bottom of the quarry pit to see Wil, down rutted tracks really suitable only for excavators and over sharp jagged slate ends which cut thick rubber to shreds. We managed it (and back again)! Unfortunately my father's prediction that he would be dead before I actually managed to finish and publish my history of the Oakeley Quarries proved all too true.

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