

Thomas Savin

Born 1826. Railway engineer in Wales.
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This account of the life of Thomas Savin focuses mainly on his role in bringing the railway to Aberdyfi, a fishing port on the coast of mid-Wales.

1. Introduction

The following introductory chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from

Thomas Savin was born in 1826, at Llwynymaen between Oswestry and Trefonen. Though he never lived in Llanymynech he had strong connections with the village and influenced its development hugely.

He started out as an apprentice draper in his father's shop, later becoming a partner in "Morris & Savin" of Cross Street, Oswestry.

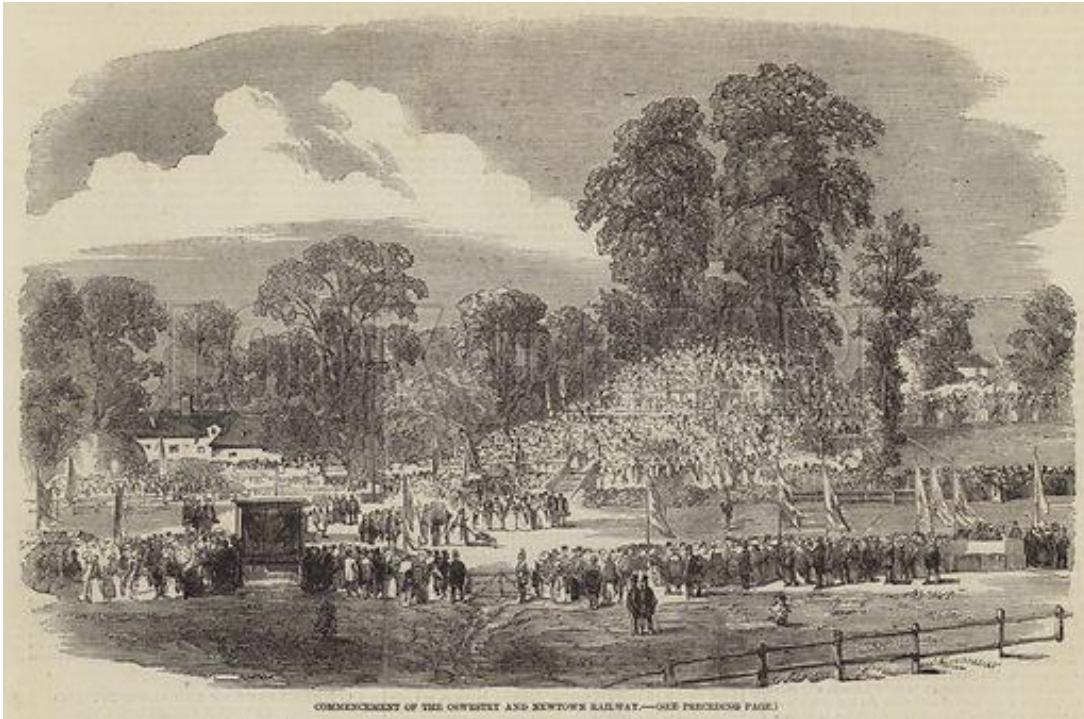
He married Elizabeth Hughes of Park Farm in 1852. They moved to Plasffynnon, on Middleton Road and had the house enlarged and rebuilt. He entered Oswestry Town Council in 1856.

He branched out from draping to being a hop and seed merchant, and a grocer, and owning the Old British Colliery. But the new thing in Britain was railway building, and this seemed to attract him like nothing else, because for the rest of his life he described himself as a 'Railway Contractor'. George Owen, another local Oswestry Railways man and future Mayor, introduced Savin to David Davies of Liandinam in a room over the tobacconist shop opposite the old Post Office in Church Street, Oswestry. This significant meeting started their railway building partnership. The feeling is that while Davies had the greater knowledge, Savin provided the energy and drive for what must have been a very difficult business.

Savin built at least ten different railways, in Wales and the border area. He was also employed to build the Bishop's Castle Railway in 1863, but he must have already been experiencing some monetary problems, because he took their £20,000 advance but never built the line. In that year he was appointed Oswestry Town Mayor, and around this time he began to build and buy a number of hotels on the Welsh coast. Also, in this year he took over the lease of the Llanymynech quarries, both the Welsh side owned by the Earl of Powis and the English side owned by the Earl of Bradford. Savin was already operating quarries at Porth-y-waen.

He was an immensely popular man in the area. When the Oswestry and Newtown railway was completed "hats were thrown into the air and healths were drunk to the victory for local enterprise. Oswestry parish church bells rang for two days, and the Rifle Corps band blew itself dry outside the

houses of Mr Savin, Mr George Owen and others. Mr Savin met with a fantastic reception at Oswestry. He was carried shoulder high through the streets of the town, accompanied by a surging crowd of cheering admirers, armed with torches, to the tune of See the Conquering Hero comes. The small haberdasher, who had been deemed incapable of organising railway schemes, had indeed become something very like a railway king!”



Completion of the Oswestry to Newtown railway.

Oswestry would not have become the important railway town it was if Savin had not insisted that the locomotive works for the Cambrian Railways was built in Oswestry, and not Welshpool, as was suggested. His five years of railway building must have been exciting and extraordinarily busy, but in 1866 everything crashed spectacularly. His estimate for the cost of the Machynleth to Barmouth Railway was wildly low, because he hadn't realised that at Aberdovey the railway would need so many tunnels.

His other problem was that instead of taking money when he built railways, he often took shares. This meant he had a huge number of shares in a great number of companies all over Britain and the world. But contractors have to buy goods and services, and the people that provide those goods and services demand money, not shares, and on February 5th 1866 so many people wanted money he was forced to declare himself bankrupt.

It was discovered he owed over £2 million, a huge sum for those days, the equivalent of perhaps a billion pounds now. When Savin's finances were

sorted out, all his shares were taken from him to pay his debts, except for four small companies, one being the Llanymynech quarries. These companies were tiny in comparison to the ones he had partly owned before his crash, but he seems to have put all his energies into running them. But from now till he died he always seemed to have money problems, either owing money or complaining that he was getting a bad deal.

He obviously still yearned for greater things: he organised two demonstrations of gunpowder blasting at Llanymynech quarries, with local dignitaries invited to watch the explosion. The first experiment took place on 17th September 1867, with one and a half tons of gunpowder. An immense mass of rock was brought down, weighing about eight or nine thousand tons, and about half that amount was loosened. But this wasn't enough for Savin, and he wanted an even bigger experiment, using electricity to set off the explosive, and six and a half tons of blasting powder. An eye-witness on 11th March 1868 described the result:

“A few minutes after three o'clock, Mr Savin gave the final signal for the explosion, which, it is almost needless to say, was instantaneous. The effect was terrific. The huge rock was burst from base to summit with tremendous force, and poured down, with a fearful roar, on to the floor of the quarry, the dull thunder of the explosion causing a tremor to pass through the rock. Some of the debris fell at an immense distance, a portion of the tramway bridge was destroyed on the Oswestry road, beneath the rocks, and a large quantity of powder was carried over a mile distant. The noise of the explosion was distinctly heard at Welshpool, ten miles away.”

The report finishes, not surprisingly: “No other experiment of the kind has since taken place.”

Four years later there was a smaller explosion, but with deadly rather than comic results. It happened at Cooper's Rock, which is on the west side of the quarry, and shows the danger that quarrymen had to face, as six men and boys were killed. As a result of the Cooper's Rock disaster Savin conducted some experiments at Llanymynech with dynamite, which was then a new explosive; if it had been used at Cooper's Rock there would not have been such a devastating explosion.

In 1878 he became embroiled in the great Traction Engine Dispute. He had been unsuccessfully trying for several years to get a railway built along the Tanat Valley to Llangynog, where he owned quarries. Instead he used

traction engines to take slate from his works and coal to them. But these heavy vehicles made deep ruts in the road, apart from being smoky and noisy. Several people complained and he was taken to court. However, the Justice of the Peace was his old friend Sir Watkin Williams Wynn and the case was dismissed. A feast was held in his honour with songs in praise of him, as he was a major employer in the region. His last 10 years were full of petty disputes, about the traction engines, the leases for his quarries, his attempts to see the Tanat Valley Railway built, and always about bills he hadn't paid or paid late.

On the 20th July 1889 the Tanat Valley Railway was refused permission by Parliament Three days later, perhaps not coincidentally, Thomas Savin died. He is buried in Oswestry Cemetery.

He is largely forgotten now, among railway people, when others like David Davies continued to achieve greater success. But he seems the more interesting character, always trying new ideas and starting new projects, even if he overreached himself in a spectacular way. Without him it is hard to see that many of the railways in the area would have been built, and Llanymynech quarries would have stayed a much more minor feature.

2. The Castle Hotel, Aberystwyth

The following excerpt from Wikipedia describes Thomas Savin's venture in the hotel business.

Thomas Savin had an interest in or worked on a number of secondary and minor railways, including the Oswestry and Newtown Railway, Brecon and Merthyr Tydfil Junction Railway, the Hereford, Hay and Brecon Railway, the narrow gauge Corris Railway, the Kington & Eardisley Railway, the Bishop's Castle Railway. and Aberystwith and Welsh Coast Railway which connected the interior of mid-Wales from Machynlleth to the coast with the completion of the line and the opening of Aberystwyth station in 1864, and became part of the Cambrian Railways in 1865.



The Castle Hotel, Aberystwyth.

Savin followed up the opening of the last-named line with the creation of Aberystwyth's Castle Hotel to capitalise on the local seaside trade. He bought Castle House and converted it into a large hotel. He produced 'probably the first package holiday deal' whereby tickets bought by passengers at various railway stations in parts of England would entitle the buyer not only to the journey to and from Aberystwyth but board and lodging at the resort. It was opened in June 1865 while still incomplete but he had to stop work after £80,000 had been spent on it when he became bankrupt amid the failure of Overend, Gurney in 1866, at which point his enterprises involved a total of about £1.5 million. It was sold for £10,000 in

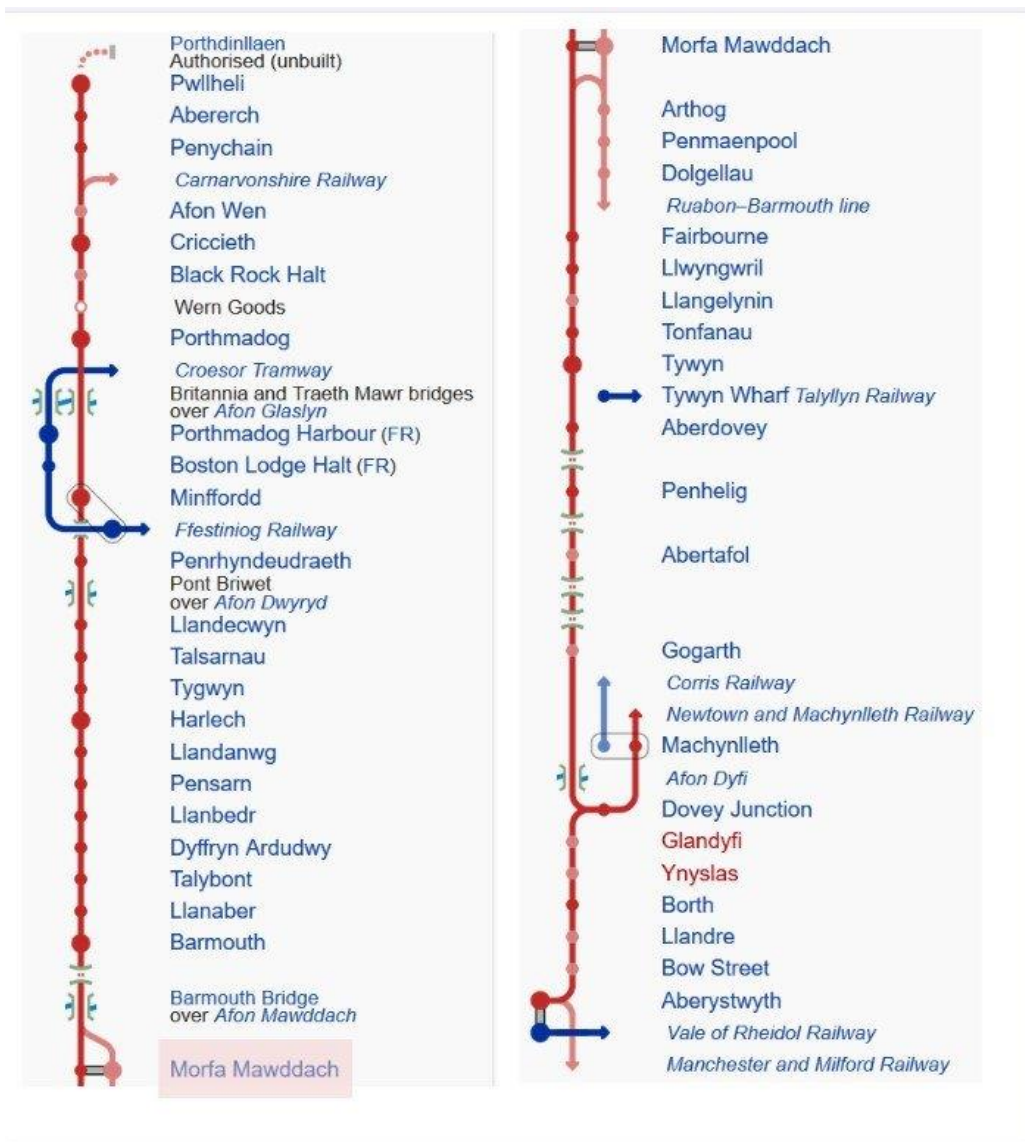
March 1867 when it was purchased to become the first building for the University College of Wales.

Savin owned a number of industrial companies across Wales. He owned a colliery, The New British Coalpit, at Coed-y-go, served by a branch line he built privately off the Oswestry & Newtown line, which carried twenty wagons of coal daily each way before the colliery closed in 1869.

3. The Railway Comes to Aberdyfi in 1864

The following, which was published on January 21st 2019, is reproduced, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Aberdovey Londoner website, produced by Andie Byrnes.

Today the Cambrian Line runs from Shrewsbury (Shropshire) to Pwllheli (Gwynedd) with a branch just after Dovey Junction to Aberystwyth. The section from Dovey Junction (to the southwest of Derwenlas) to Pwllheli in the north is known as the Cambrian Coast Line. There are two stops in Aberdovey, one at Penhelig and the other at the far side of the village, behind the bowling club. The arrival of the railway in the 1860s had a significant impact on Aberdovey, altering the economy and physically reshaping parts of the town.



The legend above shows the final form of the railway line, complete with information about which stations remain in use. I have split it into two to fit on the page, and Morfa Mawddach appears twice as a result.

The Aberystwith and West Coast Railway was authorised by a Private Act of Parliament on 22nd July 1861. The spelling of Aberystwyth as Aberystwith was the name in which the company was registered. To put this date into perspective, by the 1860s Aberdovey had a very successful shipbuilding industry, it was an important port for the transshipping of slate exports and was important for the import of grain and other goods. Copper mines had been established in the hills around the village and a growing tourist industry based on the beach was flourishing even without a railway. There were two Nonconformist chapels dating from the late 1820s and St Peter's Church had been established for nearly two decades.



The railway routed around the back of the village, rather than along the seafront as originally planned. Source: Hugh M. Lewis. Aberdyfi, A Glimpse of the Past.

The railway was intended to link north and mid Wales, to improve efficiencies in the export of local slate and to enable Aberdovey and Aberystwyth to serve as Irish ferry termini, linking Ireland with the Midlands. These were boom years for Aberdovey, and it must have seemed like more in the way of progress. Local people were not, however, blinded by the coming of the railway and significant disputes between

Aberdovey residents, the owners of the land (the Ynynsmaengwyn Estate in Tywyn) and the representatives of the railway company over exactly where the railway should run and how the harbour would be developed. The original plan was to send the line along the sea front but extensive disputes with Aberdovey business leaders and villagers, who were concerned about the impacts on shipping, ship building and tourism, lead to it being routed around the back of the village, an expensive compromise that required tunnelling through rock. The dispute is described in Lewis Lloyd's account on the subject in *A Real Little Seaport*. The need for the tunnels meant that the railway's contractor Thomas Savin's estimate for the cost of the railway was unrealistically low, and this contributed to his personal bankruptcy in 1866.



Thomas Savin (1826-1889) was a well known railway engineer, who built several railways in Wales. Although the contractors for the new railway are listed as Thomas and John Savin, Thomas was clearly the driving force. He had multiple business interests and often invested in his railway projects, meaning that he was far from impartial when local interests impacted business decisions, as happened in Aberdovey when villagers contested his plans to run the railway along the sea front and develop the harbour in ways that would have been harmful to local shipping and tourism interests. Savin represented the railway company in most of his dealings with the villagers.

Savin had originally intended to build a bridge across the Dyfi to connect Aberdovey and Ynyslas by rail, and this remained the plan for some time, but due to the local geomorphology, civil engineers decided that the bridge

could not be built and an additional 12 miles of rail had to be laid to go around the estuary, crossing the river just north of Gogarth instead. This meant that until the new stretch was built, southbound passengers had to cross the river by ferry between Aberdovey and Ynyslas, where a line had been built.



Penhelig shortly after the railway was laid, and before Penhelig Terrace was built, showing the railway tunnel and the shipyard just in front of the Penhelig Arms. Source: Hugh M. Lewis. Aberdyfi, A Glimpse of the Past.

All the necessary materials for construction of the railway were carried into Aberdovey by ship, except for the locomotive and carriages that were carried from Ynyslas over the river Dyfi to Aberdovey. Aberdovey served as the depot for most of the equipment and materials, including plant, sleepers and rails. The construction work on the Aberystwith and West Coast Railway began at Aberdovey in April 1862, and was built in a number of stages, as follows:



- By early September 1862 the line reached the river Dysynni and the first locomotive with 10 carriages was launched in South Merioneth and undertook the short trip from Aberdovey, stopping to pick up more passengers, to the river Dysynni and back again, carrying dignitaries and holiday makers. In the evening a firework display celebrated the achievement.
- In 1863 a track was laid down between Aberdovey and Llywyngwrl to the north along the Welsh coast, including the three-span steel plate girder bridge over the River Dysynni. This section of the line connected with the narrow gauge TalyLlyn slate quarry railway at Tywyn. Before the railway, slates were offloaded from the TalyLlyn single gauge railway, loaded on to the new line and taken to Aberdovey for loading on to ships.
- Before the section of line was built around the estuary, the s.s. Elizabeth was purchased to carry railway passengers across the river at Aberdovey to Ynyslas. The Elizabeth was a 30 horse-power Blackwall paddle steamer that was rigged for sail. She arrived in October 1863, and was captained by a Machynlleth resident Captain Edward Bell who was succeeded by his younger brother Captain John Bell. But she was not a success. At c.125ft long she was too long, and small boats had to be used to supplement the ferry service. The Elizabeth was owned by Thomas Savin, who sold it in 1869 to an agent in Londonderry.
- The section of railway between Machynlleth and Aberystwyth was completed by July 1864.

- The stretch from Aberdovey to Pwllheli was completed in August 1867, the delay caused by the building of the viaduct across the estuary at Barmouth. The line was originally intended to go along the Llyn Peninsula to Porthdinllaen, but this plan was abandoned and the terminus was established at Pwllheli. This section of the line linked at Afonwen Junction to the Caernarfonshire Line to Caernarfon.
- In 1867 the railway was also extended along the north bank of the river to Machynlleth. The line split at Dovey Junction with two branches, one going to Machynlleth and one going to Aberystwyth.



Photograph of the Temperance Hotel in Chapel Square, showing the bridge over Copper Hill Street in the background in 1867. Source: Hugh M. Lewis. Pages of Time.

As the Newtown and Machynlleth Railway had opened at the beginning of 1863 and absorbed into Cambrian Railways the following year, the two lines were now linked. Newtown was linked to the Oswestry and Newtown Railway (which opened in 1860), which in turn linked at Welshpool to the Shrewsbury and Welshpool Railway (which opened in 1862) and the Shrewsbury and Birmingham Railway (opened in 1847), the Shrewsbury to Hereford line (opened in 1853) and the Newport, Abergavenny and Hereford Railway (also opened in 1853) thereby linking mid and north Wales with the borders, south Wales the Midlands.

In 1866 the line had been integrated with Cambrian Railways under the Cambrian Railways Company, which was created by an Act of Parliament in July 1864 in order to amalgamate a number of companies operating in Wales. The Aberystwith and West Coast Railway was still under construction at the time of the Act, so was not included in the original amalgamation, but was incorporated two years after the first part opened. Cambrian Railways was head-quartered at Oswestry, where there is now a heritage museum celebrating the railway, the Cambrian Railways Museum.



Railway Tunnel on the other side of Penhelig

Heading to Aberdovey from Machynlleth, the line enters Aberdovey from the southeast at Penhelig Halt (added in 1933) where it emerges from a tunnel and is then carried over the road and follows a track through the back of the village before crossing the road again at the far end of Aberdovey, to continue along the coast to Tywyn. The spoil from the tunnelling operation that was required to run the railway at the back of the village was deposited in Penhelig, on land cutting into a former shipbuilding yard, and this was the site of the future Penhelig Terrace, which was built c.1865.

Two tunnels were required to carry the railway through the hillside alongside the estuary, and four bridges were erected to carry it over the coast road at Penhelig, under Church Street, behind St Peter's Church, over Copper Hill Street and at the far end of Aberdovey by the modern fire station. As soon as the line between Aberdovey and Machynlleth opened, the Corris and Aberllefenni slate carried on the Corris narrow gauge railway ceased to be loaded onto boats for transshipping onto seagoing vessels at Aberdovey, and was now transported instead by rail into Aberdovey. Much of the Welsh Coast Railway is raised only a few feet above sea level and it follows the coastline very closely for much of its length, making it one of the most scenic coastal railways in the UK.



Aberdovey (Aberdyfi) Station, above, was built in a location that was at that time just outside the main village. It was equipped with two platforms flanking the tracks, and a fairly substantial single-storey railway building that survives in good order, but has been converted for residential use. It is a charming red brick-built building with a slate roof, finished in stone around its doors and windows. The front of the station has decorative black engineering bricks around the porch's archway and in a parallel linear arrangement in the walls. The porch is also equipped with twin stone columns.

Penhelig Station was added in 1933, by which time the railway was operated by the Great Western Railway, which absorbed Cambrian Railways in 1922, and was equipped with a single platform and an attractive little wooden shelter that remains today.

Great Western Railway					
On Monday, May 8th, 1933					
A NEW HALT					
WILL BE OPENED AT					
PENHELIG					
SITUATE					
between Gogarth and Aberdovey					
AND TRAINS WILL CALL AS UNDER —					
Trains leaving Dover Junction at	Will call at Penhelig Halt at	Trains leaving Barnmouth at	Will call at Penhelig Halt at		
WEEK DAYS					
8.40 a.m.	8.52 a.m.	7.28 a.m.	8.10 a.m.		
10.55 a.m.	11. 7 a.m.	9.45 a.m.	10.25 a.m.		
1.15 p.m.	1.46 p.m.	12.10 p.m.	12.51 p.m.		
3.40 a.m.	3.51 p.m.	2.15 p.m.	3.14 p.m.		
4.38 p.m.	4.49 p.m.	3.35 p.m.	4.38 p.m.		
6. 0 p.m.	6.12 p.m.	5.45 p.m.	6.25 p.m.		
8.12 p.m.	8.23 p.m.	7. 0 p.m.	7.40 p.m.		
		9.58 p.m.	10.57 p.m.		
SUNDAYS					
8.25 a.m.	8.45 a.m.	5.35 p.m.	6.15 p.m.		
S—Sundays only.		F—From Machynlleth.			
The Single Fare rates and for the new Halt will be as under —					
	First Class.	Third Class.	First Class.	Third Class.	
Aberdovey	s. d.	s. d.	Dover Junction	s. d.	s. d.
Gogarth Halt	0 2	0 1	Machynlleth	1 2	0 8
Town	1 1	0 7	Aberystwyth	3 11	2 4
Barnmouth	2 6	2 1			
Cheap return tickets available for return the same day will be issued to the following places for any train calling at the Halt.					
	To		To		
	1st Class.	3rd Class.	1st Class.	3rd Class.	
Town	s. d.	s. d.	Machynlleth	s. d.	s. d.
Barnmouth	1 3	0 8	Glandale	1 6	0 10
Dodderley	2 6	2 3	Aberystwyth	4 0	2 6
Dover Junction	5 0	3 0			
	1 2	0 9			
Pleasure and Goods Traffic will not be accepted for passengers to or from the Halt.					
Published at Station.		JAMES MILNE, Lateral Engineer.			
May, 1933.					

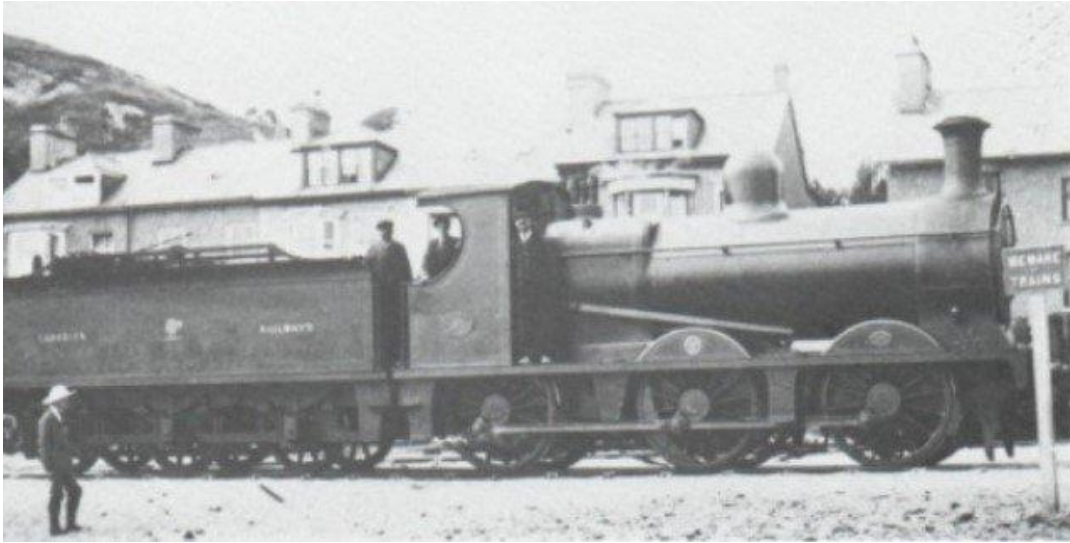
The GWR Railway advert for Penhelig Halt. Source: Hugh M. Lewis. Aberdyfi, A Glimpse of the Past.

The railway clearly improved the economic stability of Aberdovey in some ways, but it also had negative impacts. In its favour, it made it much easier for the evolving tourist industry to develop. Efficiencies in cargo handling improved, and international trade continued to be important. Cargoes that were not time sensitive still travelled by local ships, because their freight rates were so much lower, meaning that slate continued to travel by sea.

However, it a number of shipbuilding yards had to be destroyed for the railway to be completed, and over the two decades after the railway arrived the shipbuilding industry went into permanent decline, aggravated by the Great Depression in Britain between 1873 and 1896). The last locally built ship was launched in 1880. Derwenlas, which was an important inland port and shipbuilding centre, was cut off from the river by the railway embankment, almost completely closing it down.

Although transshipping to seagoing vessels still took place at Aberdovey for international trade, ships were no longer needed for national transportation. It was was much more efficient to carry goods and livestock by train than by boat, so the previously coastal trade faded fast. The promised Irish ferry port never arrived, and as the railways expanded

and improved, minor ports lost out to big ports with better facilities and connections.



A Cambrian Railway steam engine shunting down at the modernized wharf in 1887. Source: Hugh M. Lewis. Pages of Time.

In spite of the Great Depression, the wharf and jetty were given a major overhaul in the early 1880s, and were provided with a tiny branch track that led into the wharf area and out on to the jetty. The new wharf and jetty were built on land acquired by Cambrian Railways for the purpose, opening in 1882.

Two large buildings were used for the storage of cargo and building materials, the jetty was around 370ft long and allowed ships to be loaded and unloaded at both high and low tides and animal pens were erected on the foreshore to hold livestock that was offloaded from ships. Railway tracks linked the jetty and wharf to the railway so that the transshipping process was far more fluid than it ever had been before. Exports included slate from local quarries.

Imports included limestone, coal and cattle from South Wales, potatoes and cattle from Ireland, grain from the Mediterranean, timber from Newfoundland, and phosphates and nitrates from South America. This will be covered in detail on a future post.



Penhelig Halt as it is today

Both Penhelig and Aberdovey stations remain open today. Penhelig Station retains its 19th Century wooden shelter in an excellent state of repair, but no other station buildings. The platform is reached by a fairly long flight of steps. Aberdovey Station is at ground level, retaining the original single-storey long brick structure on the one remaining platform. It has been converted into three cottages, with the rear facing on to the platform and the front now overlooking the football pitch and adjacent to the golf club.

The short branch to the harbour that was added in the 1880s was later built over. Neither of the stations is staffed. Tickets are purchased on the train itself and there is an electronic display containing information about the next trains due to arrive.

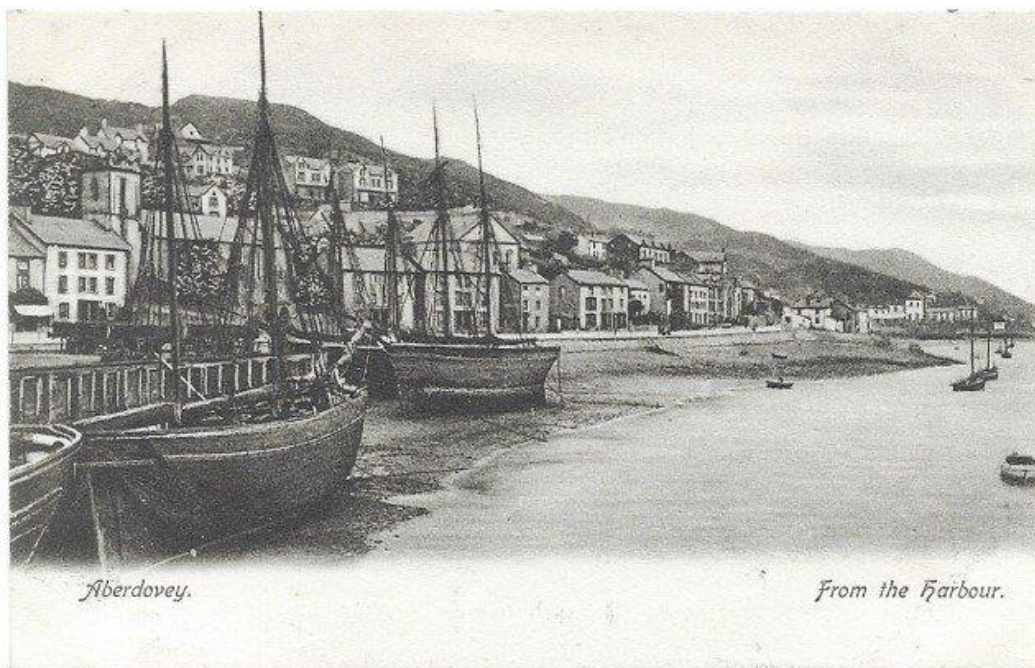
Because the platform is very low, built before platform heights were standardized, in 2009 a raised section made from reinforced glass-reinforced polymer was added. This type of solution is called a Harrington Hump after the first station to have one installed, and Aberdovey was only the third UK station to receive one, after a period of consultation with local residents. It was funded by the Welsh Government. The BBC website says that instead of the usual £250,000 to raise the level of a platform the Harrington Hump costs a mere £70,000. In 2014 part of the embankment was washed away, with the Daily Post reporting that the track was left

hanging in the air. A photo gallery on the site shows repairs being carried out.



Penhelig Lodge is to the left and below the level of the railway track and the tunnel in about 1865. The photograph also shows the newly built Penhelig Terrace, which is end-on in this photograph. Source: Source: Hugh M. Lewis. Pages of Time.

4. Aberdyfi: A Great Little Seaport



The following chapter is extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, from 'A Real Little Seaport: The Port of Aberdyfi and its People 1565 - 1920' by Lewis Lloyd. Published 1996.

Foreword

By Professor K. O. Morgan, The Queen's College, Oxford.

It is a pleasure to be invited to write a brief introduction to this fascinating study of the port of Aberdyfi and its people by Dr. Lewis Lloyd. The maritime trade of Cardigan Bay, particularly in the aftermath of the coming of industrialization, is an important, if too often neglected, aspect of modern Welsh history. Aberdyfi, with its thriving coastal and ocean-going sailing activity, its fine brigs and schooners which set forth from its harbour, its bustling shipbuilding industry in the yards at Penhelig, and its vibrant maritime community of sailors, shipwrights, carpenters, boatmen, ferrymen, customs officers and the like, was pivotal in this process.

In its heyday, from the 1850s to the 1870s, its vessels carried slate in abundance from the neighbouring quarries at Corris and Abergynolwyn. In return, they brought back timber from Newfoundland and Scandinavia, wheat from eastern Europe, and nitrates from South America. But by the

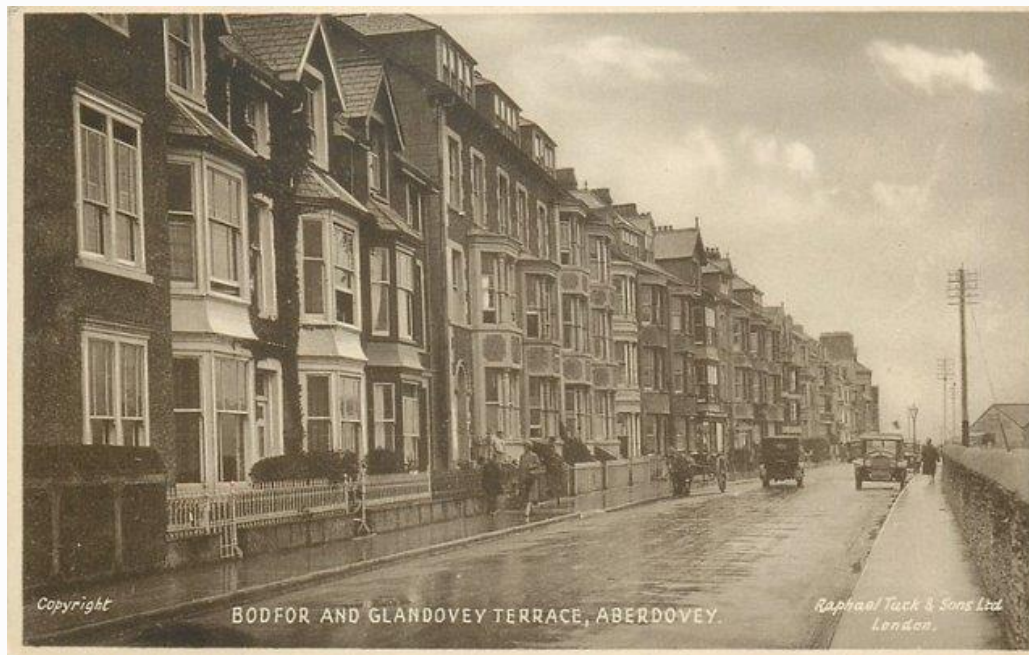
turn of the century the coastal shipping trade was already on the wane, as the railway, road transport and overweening competition from much larger ports marginalized Aberdyfi, along with other ports like Portmadoc, Barmouth and Newquay along the Bay. By the later twentieth century, the former glories of the port are a distant memory, with the tourist bustle of the Midlands sailing fraternity to replace them.

Welcome consumer prosperity has come in its wake but at the cost of emasculating an ancient and evocative folk culture and of some environmental hazard. The stretch of sand on which I once gazed when I drew back my bedroom curtains each morning is now an asphalt car park. Even so, the past, that different country, lives on. The charm and character of Aberdyfi have received attention in print often before, from the golfing sagas of Bernard Darwin to the delightful local history of Dewi Morgan and Hugh Meirion Lewis. But a proper historical study, based on the records of the seaport of Aberdyfi and those who worked there, is undoubtedly needed, and Dr. Lloyd must be congratulated on having provided it.

But I have personal reasons, quite apart from my metier as an historian, for welcoming this book. I am myself a product of the seafaring community described here. My mother's family came from Aberdyfi and I lived there, and went to the local 'council' school, for several years in my early childhood. My parents lived there in retirement until 1962, and my mother, I believe, emotionally never really left it, down to her death in 1989. I still have relatives in the little town and always delight in returning to the haunts of my childhood (preferably in the winter when the traffic has receded). Memories of the port of Aberdyfi (or Aberdovey as we spelt it in those politically incorrect times) were interwoven intimately into my early experiences, and to some degree they still are. I heard of my ancestor, Evan Evans (on my grandmother's side), who had been pressganged to serve on Nelson's man-o'-war, The Abou Kir, and fought at the battle of Trafalgar. I have by me, as I write his Napoleonic musket and his pension form of 1813, granting him an annuity of £10 for life, with anyone who impersonated him punishable by death!

My mother's father, Owen Owen, had sailed from Aberdyfi many times before the first world war, voyaging as far as Norway or Spain. Later he became a boatman and fisherman and I much regret that he died just before I was born. The 'boatman's seat' on the harbour front was, in my

childhood, a haven for veteran sailors, refugees from Dylan Thomas, every one, it seemed a 'captain'. I particularly recall one stalwart who was blind and shouted at us noys as we raced along the jetty. I was told years later by the late, much-lamented Professor Alun Davies that a feature of his extra-mural classes on world history in Aberdyfi would be disconcertingly loud (and unanswerable) demands for the latitude and longitude of places mentioned.



Two doors away from us in Bodfor Terrace, in a house evocatively named Pomona perhaps after some Orcadian venture, was Captain Williams, a very old man with a fine late-Victorian moustache and, more memorably a colourful ship's parrot with an equally colourful vocabulary. There would be stories of the dangers of storms in the Bay of Biscay and the still greater terrors of sailing 'roung the Horn'. Our own house, too, contained many relics of our maritime past, with ships' jars, tanlges of rope and a clutch of lifebelts. The fact that my father came from Borth, just across the Dyfi, actually strengthened the seafaring mystique since so many of Aberdyfi's mariners originated from that little sea-girt village far away in distant Cardiganshire and accessible, it seem only via Mr. Eliis Williams' efficient ferrying services.

The sea and sailing provided the context of life in Aberdyfi even in the early 1940s; the railway still ran to th epierhead. The lure of hte sea had been reinforced by the recnet opening of the Outward Bound sea school. A simple pleasure was to walk past the lifeboat slipway and the derelic

shipyards to visit my great-aunt in Penhelig. When I revisited my parents' grave a few months ago, I was again struck by how many of the monuments in Aberdyfi's cemetery testified to losses through shipwrecks or other disasters at sea. These are important artefacts of folk memory. Unfortunately, another symbol, the large rock alongside the road by the nineteenth green on Aberdyfi golf course on which old sailors (I presume?) had painted the name 'Cape St. Vincent', has been removed for road widening, another casualty from Aberdyfi's seafaring traditions.

1st December 1995.

Introduction by Lewis Lloyd

'In those old days, Aberdovey was a real little seaport. I can show pictures of her with five or six schooners, barques and brigs lying at anchor. The sound of caulking the sides of ships is as natural to me as hush-a-by baby is to many a child. It rings in my ears now as I feel my hot hands drawing a needle in and out of a long nightdress seam I was doing as a little girl ...' (Miss Buddug Anwylini Pughe, 1900).

In its heyday Aberdyfi was a good deal more than a coasting port with a modest fleet of locally built smacks and schooners. Like other ports of Cardigan Bay - Cardigan, Newquay, Aberaeron, Aberystwyth, Barmouth, Porthmadog and Pwllheli - Aberdyfi possess a number of deep-water or ocean-going vessels which sailed to distant places and Aberdyfi's larger schooners, especially those built at Aberdyfi by Thomas Richards, sailed to St. John's Newfoundland, and to Labrador along with Porthmadog's famous 3-kated schooners or 'Western Ocean Yachts'.

Aberdyfi was, in short, a complete and diversified small port. Aberdyfi's attractiveness tends to obscure the port's former purposes as a place of work and centre of commerce albeit on a human and indeed intimate scale.

Aberdyfi's heyday as a port coincided almost exactly with what may be called the 'British economic Miracle' from the 1850s to the late 1870s. Aberdyfi developed in this period as primarily a slate exporting port. The demand for roofing slates and slate slabs increased quite markedly in the 1850s whilst, by the early 1880s, a severe depression in general trade was evident. Moreover, the days of wooden sailing ships were strictly numbered. During the buoyant decades the expanding slate trade inspired a

substantial increase in local shipbuilding and confidence in the local and general economy led to investment in several ocean-going vessels by local investors, as was the case elsewhere, along the seemingly remote shoreline of Cardigan Bay. Some of these investors turned to steam-powered vessels by the 1880s.

Whilst oak bark and timber, farm produce and lead ore and copper ore featured in the exports of Aberdyfi there was never serious doubt as to the port's staple trade in its heyday, i.e., the slate products, roofing slates and sabs of south Merioneth. The slate trade sustained the port during the latter half of the nineteenth century no matter how diverse were the trades of the schooners design and built at Aberdyfi primarily for the purposes of that trade. The slate trade underpinned maritime activity in general even when the trade was in quite steady decline by the turn of the century.

The arrival of the Coast Railway in the 1860s proved something of a boon since slates were conveyed from quarries in the Talyllyn area to tywyn Wharf Station on the Talyllyn Railway and thence to Aberdyfi for export on the Coast Railway.

Other schemes connected with the railway at Aberdyfi proved much less successful. They included the steam ferry Elizabeth which was intended to carry railway passengers between Ynyslas and Aberdyfi but proved unsuitable for that purpose; and the plan to provide a link, for goods, passengers and livestock (sheep, pigs and cattle) between the Irish and English Midlands via Aberdyfi by means of steamers of the Waterford and Aberdovey Steamship Company.

This scheme was introduced in the 1880s but ended in disaster. However, the modest Steamers Telephone and Dora provided a regular and reliable service between Liverpool and the north Cardigan Bay ports for several years under the auspices of the Aberdovey and Barmouth Steamship Company from the 1890s.

Aberdyfi's role as a fishing port must not be neglected. Aberdyfi was the centre of the bountiful herring fishery of Cardigan Bay in the days of Elizabeth I and whilst Aberystwyth later assumed that role Aberdyfi remained a significant sea-fishing port; and the salmon fishing on the river Dyfi remained an important feature of the local economy by 1920 when this study is concluded.



The steamship Dora at Barmouth.

5. Historic Postcards of Aberdyfi

The historic postcards of Aberdovey below, dating from the early 20th century, have been reproduced with acknowledgement and thanks from the website of the Aberdyfi Community Council.

