

*Arriving at
Dinas Mawddwy*

by Julian Hunt

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On his first visit to Meirion Mill, and the old station yard in which it stands, the visitor has good cause to wonder why such an individual collection of buildings came to be in this majestic setting. The high stone wall, the noble wrought iron gates, the imposing station house, and the broad gable of the mill building, all suggest a prosperous and confident era. In marked contrast, the village of Dinas Mawddwy, half a mile to the north of the station, betrays no sign of its tranquility having been disturbed for hundreds of years. How can this paradox be explained?

THE MANOR OF MAWDDWY

Even a century ago, to have talked of Dinas Mawddwy as a village would have caused considerable offence to the inhabitants. It was an important market town, and the centre of an ancient Lord-

ship, the Manor comprising all the parish of Llany-mawddwy, and all but a small part of the parish of Mallywd. Originally, the Manor belonged to the Prince of Powys, but for many generations it was held by a Shropshire family, the Myttons of Halston. The last of their line, “ mad Jack Mytton “, an infamous sportsman and eccentric, lost the Manor along with the rest of his fortune, and died, imprisoned for debt, in 1834.

Alongside the manorial institutions, Dinas Mawddwy had all the trappings of a borough, although its 14th Century charter was granted, not by the Crown, but by the Lord of the Manor himself. The Mayor, nominally elected each year by the burgesses, was usually a well-to-do farmer and a trusted ally of the Lord of the Manor. The Recorder always held his position in conjunction with the Stewardship of the Manor, and the Sergeant at

Mace also acted as Bailiff for the Manor. Borough Courts were held twice a year, as were the Courts Leet for the Manor which took place on the following day; the good attendance on these occasions may have had something to do with the sumptuous dinner provided by the Lord of the Manor.

Government Commissioners twice investigated Dinas Mawddwy's claim to borough status, and twice decided that, while irregular, its traditions were harmless. It was a cause of general regret therefore, when the Corporation's powers were extinguished by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1883, but the Manor, the Courts Leet and the good dinners survived many years longer.

THE COMING OF THE RAILWAY

By the 1860's, Dinas Mawddwy's importance as an agricultural centre was beginning to be chal-

lenged by market towns with better communications. Dinas Mawddwy could boast five fairs a year, but as merchants were now visiting the farms and dealing directly with the farmers, these too were in decline. In particular, the quarries and mines in the district, never flourishing, were now being seriously undercut by companies in areas like Ffestiniog where transport problems had been mastered.

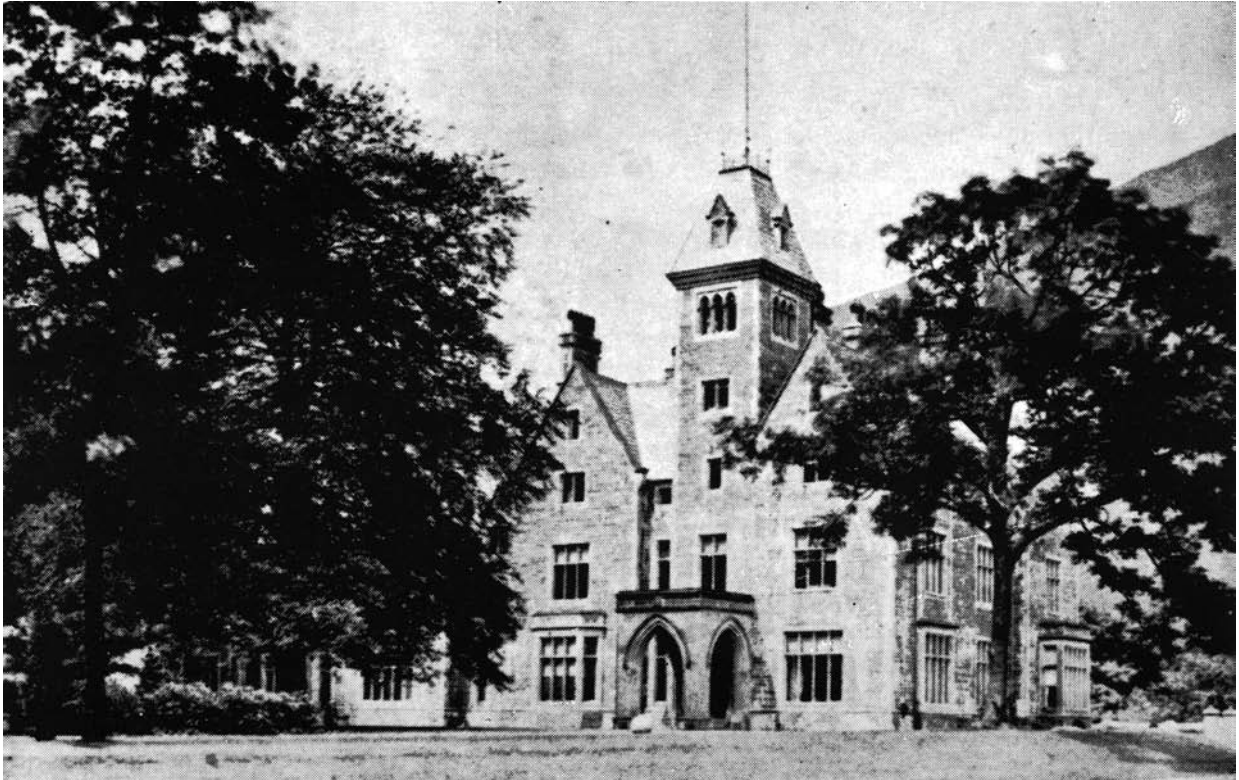
At this time, the Manor passed to Edmund Buckley, whose father, a prominent Manchester businessman, had purchased the estate for him in 1856. The young man had wealth, energy and imagination, and it was his ambition to transform Dinas Mawddwy into a garden city. He took up residence at Bryn Hall, Llanymawddwy, which he rented from the owner of that estate, as he thought it more commodious than the old fashioned manor house,

Plas Dinas. This he pulled down in 1864, and, on a terrace overlooking the Rivers Dovey and Cerist, he built a noble mansion on such a scale as to rival the great houses of the established Welsh gentry. Construction went on for three years, and the work is said to have cost £70,000, about £500,000 in today's figures.

Mr. Buckley's next concern was that the district should have the benefit of rail communication. To survey the proposed line, seven miles long from Cemmaes Road on the Cambrian Railway along the Dovey valley to Dinas Mawddwy, he secured the services of George Owen of Oswestry, Engineer to the Cambrian. As Solicitor to the Parliamentary Bill, he employed David Howell of Machynlleth, late Secretary to the Newtown and Machynlleth Railway. The Mawddwy Railway Bill passed through Parliament in 1865, and work was com-

menced in the Spring of the following year. The Contractor was a Mr. James Taylor, and the original engine, "Mawddwy", was purchased by him. Construction costs at £40,000 must have surprised even Mr. Buckley as there is mention in the Mawddwy Railway minutes of an action against Mr. Taylor.

There is some confusion over the date the line was opened, for, despite the refusal of a certificate by the Government Inspector in September 1867, goods trains were soon running and the Buckley family travelled up and down the line on the foot-plate of the "Mawddwy". The official opening came in October 1868, but there were none of the wild celebrations customary on such occasions. Nevertheless, the district was very proud of its railway, and there was great enthusiasm for Mr. Buckley's plan to extend it to Bala, joining the Great Western



Plas Dinas, soon after completion in 1867

Railway at Llanuwchllyn. Those who have travelled over Bwlch-y-Groes, the highest road pass in Wales, will appreciate what a challenge this route presented. The project is put in perspective, however, when it is known that Mr. Buckley was a founder director of the Channel Tunnel Company, and that a tunnel of a mile and a half under a Welsh mountain was nothing to a man who would invest in a twenty five mile tunnel under the English Channel. The extension was never started, but it continued the object of local speculation for many years.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DINAS MAWDDWY

In December 1868, the inhabitants of Dinas Mawddwy found themselves celebrating Mr. Buckley's elevation to the baronetage of Great Britain. Their young benefactor was at the height of his power and no-one could remember such activity in

the place. The main road to Dolgellau, which in those days ran through the centre of Dinas, was being diverted above the town on a ledge cut into Moel Dinas. The primitive drainage, the cause of many an epidemic in the hot summer months, was being taken in hand by Mr. William Scott, a drainage engineer from Towyn. As Sir Edmund completed the wall around the Plas gardens, old cottages were "demolished and a chapel rebuilt at his expense further down the street.

At Minllyn, Sir Edmund was building new houses for his workmen to be known as " Mawddwy Cottages ". A keen promoter of local education, he paid for the extension of Minllyn School. Near to the Railway Station, a new hotel, to be called the " Buckley Arms ", was being erected, the main construction in reinforced concrete, then a revolutionary material. There was even a plan to build

a new Church for Dinas Mawddwy, as those at Mallwyd and Llanymawddwy were some distance from the town, but this project did not go ahead.

THE SLATE QUARRIES

Alongside the railway mania in Victorian Wales ran the craze for mineral prospecting, often in the most unpromising circumstances. There had long been quarrying operations around Dinas Mawddwy, as the same vein of slate exploited at Corris passed through the district, and was exposed at Hendredu and Gartheiniog near Aberangell, and at Cae Battyn and Moel Dinas above the town. Lead had been mined at Boncyn, Llanymawddwy, and in the Cowarch valley, where copper and gold were also thought to be in commercial quantities. The opening of the Mawddwy Railway brought new investment in these undertak-

ings which became more important sources of employment.

At Aberangell, Sir Edmund himself established the Hendredu Slate and Slab Company, and invested large sums in machinery and quarters for his men at the Quarry. A tramway, connecting with the Mawddwy Railway at Aberangell, was constructed, and by 1876, the manager, Mr. Edward Davies, claimed to be producing 150-200 tons of finished slate each month.

At Dinas Mawddwy, Sir Edmund let the hillside above the Railway Station to the Merioneth Slate and Slab Company. There had been quarries here since 1800, but the new company opened several new levels and linked them to the Railway with an incline, the line of which can still be seen. The trucks were brought to the large shed on the Aberangell road, where the slate was cut and planed,

while the finished slate was stored in the warehouse which now houses Meirion Mill. The Agent, Mr. C. Bobbins, lived at Dolbrawdmaeth, and became a prominent figure in the community. He had a work-force of 160, producing about 240 tons of slate per month.

Unfortunately, Mr. Bobbins over-reached himself. In January of 1871, Sir Edmund took his father-in-law to the quarry, and the gentleman wrote in his diary, “ Walked with Edmund and Dr. Whitehead to the farm thence to Minllyn Slate Works which are not flourishing “. By October of that year, the company was in liquidation, and at an auction in Manchester, its assets were purchased by the Carlyle Slate and Slab Company. This organisation continued the quarries and lent its name to the two houses next to the cutting shed, “ Carlyle Terrace ”.

A GRAVE SETBACK

Just as Dinas Mawddwy was adjusting itself to its new prosperity, an event occurred which cast a gloom over the whole district. On 19th May 1876, Sir Edmund Buckley filed a petition at Manchester County Court for liquidation of his affairs. To those who knew him well this came as a profound shock; to the inhabitants of Dinas Mawddwy who looked to the Plas family for custom or employment, the news came as a very serious blow.

A story circulated that Sir Edmund had lost £250,000 on the collapse of the market in Turkish bonds, but the real reason was not so far from home. His father had left most of his estate in trust, secure in the knowledge that the valuable tracts of housing, shops and business premises in Manchester would provide a reliable income for generations. Sir Edmund, however, in his attempt

to match the holdings of the most powerful Welsh land-owners, had used a power of sale given him as a trustee of his father's will, and converted his lucrative Manchester property into burdensome Welsh estates. Starting with the Eynant Estate (now largely submerged under Lake Vyrnwy) in 1868, adding the Aberhirnant Estate, stretching towards Bala, in 1870, and quietly purchasing the Bryn property in 1872, he pieced together an enormous tract of land, and had by 1876 begun costly improvements in every corner of his domain. Even as bankruptcy loomed, Sir Edmund was completing the purchase of Beach House, Worthing, a fine Regency house on the sea front, for use as a retreat from the London season.

It took more than three years to clear up Sir Edmund's affairs, during which time he retired to his Manchester home. The liquidator conducted

two sales at Dinas Mawddwy, but although much of the estate was disposed of, many of the tenants buying their farms, Plas Dinas remained unsold. The Hendreddu Quarry was sold to the Bradwells, two silk merchants from Congleton, Cheshire, while the Carlyle Slate and Slab Company bought the land which had been leased to them. The Bradwells, having bid for the estate in one lot, bought Dolbrawdmaeth Hall and several farms adjoining the Hendreddu Quarry, but they-were not to take on the leadership of the community as the Buckleys had done. Another large purchaser was Mr. William Bullock, later to be associated with the Minllyn Quarry.

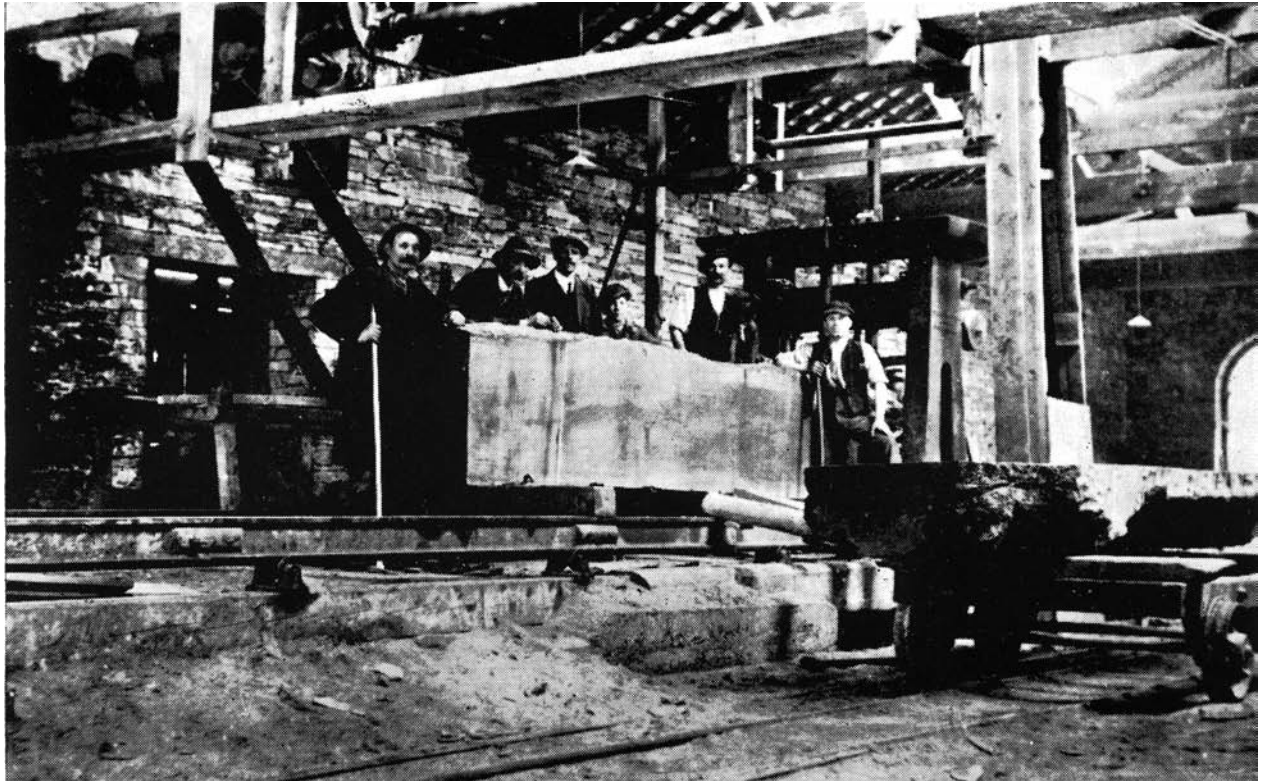
When all was settled, the Buckleys returned to Dinas Mawddwy, but they were now less of a force to be reckoned with and Sir Edmund himself became something of a recluse. Some looked to his

eldest son, Edmund, born in 1861, to redeem the family fortune, and this hope was voiced at the young man's coming of age in 1882, but already he had his own debts at Oxford and seemed bent on the sporting life. It was he who founded the Buckley Otter Hounds, noted for their fine breeding, and he was also a great enthusiast for the game of Hockey. The settlement of the bankruptcy had left him the legal owner of the Dinas Mawddwy property, but his father continued its management. The most serious problem for the general populace was that the family no longer had the means to finance the Mawddwy Railway which gradually fell into disrepair.

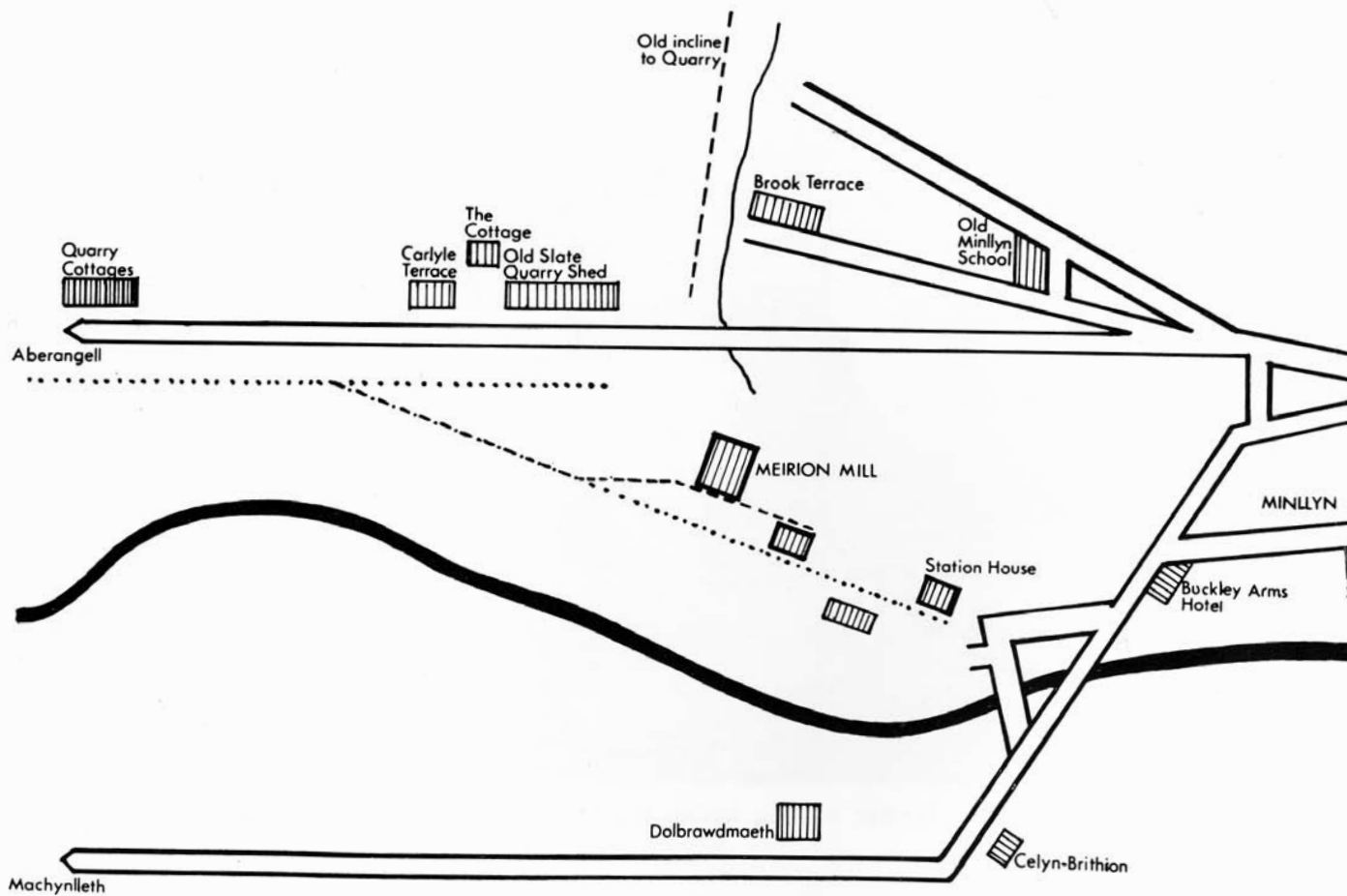
ENTER THE BULLOCKS

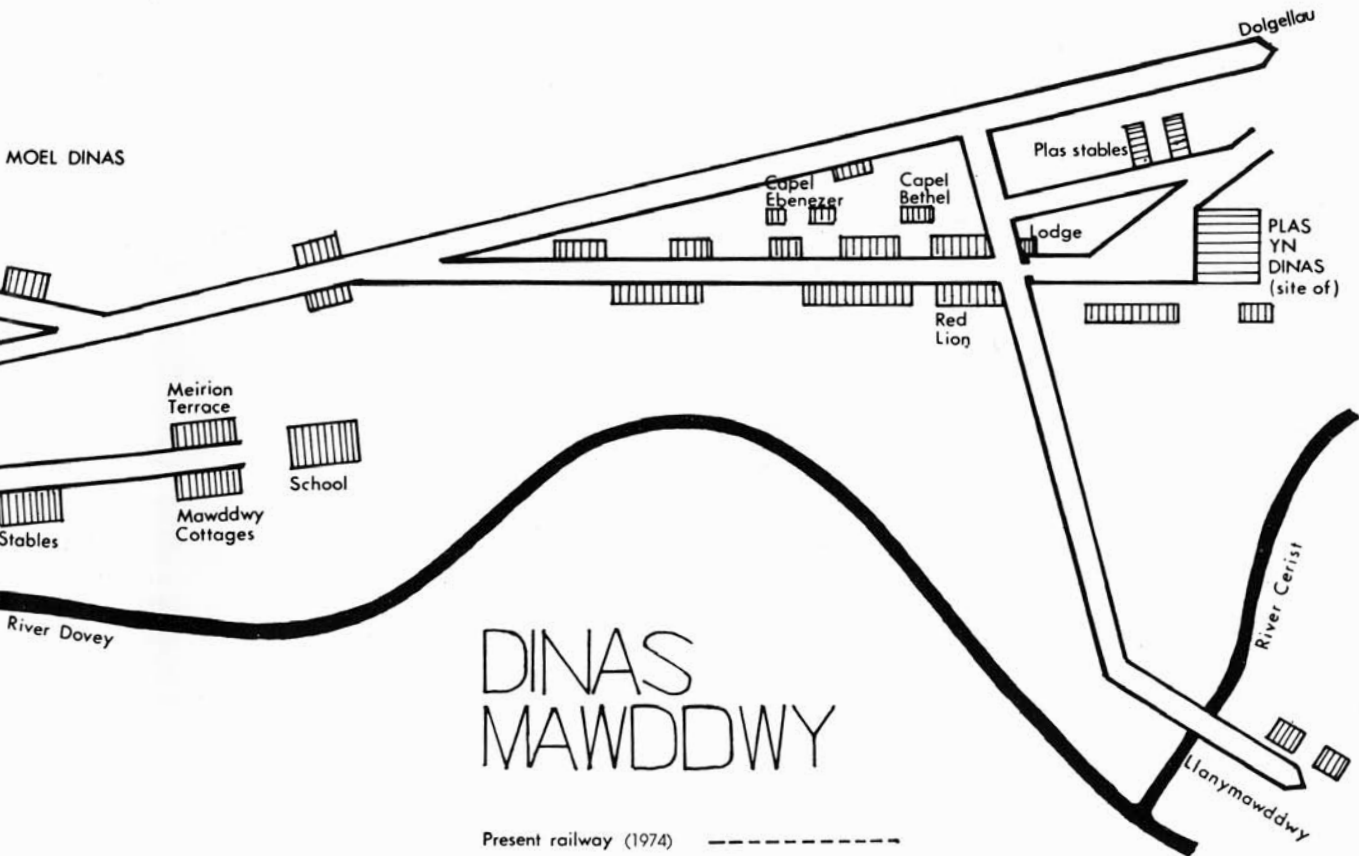
A further blow to local prosperity was the failure of the Carlyle Slate and Slab Company in 10

1887. Production ceased, and in February, the Quarry and surrounding lands were auctioned "by order of the mortgagees" at the Buckley Arms Hotel. The purchaser was Mr. William Bullock, a silk merchant from Macclesfield, Cheshire, twice Mayor of that town, and the same gentleman who had bought land at the sale in 1876. He died in 1895, but three of his sons, John, William and Thomas, came to Dinas Mawddwy to run the Quarry. They lived in the pleasant, low house, next to Carlyle Terrace, which is called "The Cottage". The brothers first came to the fore in January of 1895 when they were alone amongst the local traders in refusing to pay a higher rate for carriage on the Mawddwy Railway, imposed to meet the cost of new safety regulations decreed by the Board of Trade. Following a public meeting at the Buckley Arms, a deputation marched to the Minllyn



Timber sawing inside the Meirion Mill Building c. 1920





DINAS MAWDDWY

Present railway (1974) - - - - -

Former railway

Not to scale

R. P. 1976





The old railway goods shed 1966

Quarry where the manager, Mr. J. H. Bullock, was convinced that he ought to support the scheme which meant life or death to the Railway. Subsequently, the Bullocks entered into the social life of the community, both as church-goers and as prominent local councillors.

On 15th June 1900, a party from the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club visited Minllyn and the report of the occasion provides a unique description of the Quarry.

After an early luncheon about half the party went up the Moel-y-dre to see the Minllyn slate quarries, by kind permission of the owners, Messrs. Bullock. These gentlemen were most courteous in accompanying their guests over the workings and explaining the details. They had also made arrangements to draw any who wished up the incline from the foot of the hill to the quarry. The nerves of some were unequal to this giddy proceeding, so only seven went up in the slate trucks, while the others climbed up on foot. At this quarry only slabs are made—not roofing slates, and they are sawn and planed to the desired shape. The largest and best are used for billiard tables; the smaller ones for mantel-pieces. The most novel and interesting feature, however, was, the engine that drives the machinery. In place of the huge boiler and pistons or cumbersome water-wheel, we see a compact little drum only a yard or so in diameter. This we are told is a turbine or hydraulic engine, worked by a tiny stream of water at very high

pressure. The pressure is obtained from the great fall (260 feet) at this quarry—higher than any other in Wales. The engine will work at any required power from nil to fifty horse-power and has cost practically nothing since it was started about six years ago, nor has it ever got out of order. After seeing the sawing and planing machines the party went into the workings inside the mountain, along the galleries and through the great chambers, in one of which there is a fine echo. As usual in such places the floor is very wet and muddy. A shot fired in the interior was heard as a dull boom. An impromptu cup of tea was provided in the office, and then all ascended to the top of the hill and on to the ridge dividing Blaen-y-cwm and Maes-y-glasau. The Messrs. Bullock, to whom our warmest thanks were tendered, here left us, and, under the guidance of Mr. J. J. Breeze, the walk was continued down the hill into Maes-y-glasau and thence home to Dinas.

THE MAWDDWY RAILWAY REVIVED

Despite the agreement with the local traders, the Mawddwy Railway Company had not the resources to repair its ageing equipment and was forced to terminate its passenger services in April 1901. The track and bridges were in such poor condition that a wholesale reconstruction of the line was needed. In a final bid to raise the capital required, Sir Edmund Buckley applied to the

Treasury for a loan and attended an inquiry, held by the Light Railway Commissioners at Machynlleth, on 30th September 1903. A report on the state of the line was given by Sir Edmund's stepson, Mr. Richard Burton, who had studied engineering in Germany, and who later worked on the Cape to Cairo Railway. Their efforts were of no avail, however, and although a Light Railway Order was granted, the scheme did not get off the ground. The Railway continued to deteriorate until final closure was forced upon the Company in 1908. The man of the hour was Mr. David Davies of Llandinam, grand-son of the famous railway contractor, and himself a strong voice on the board of the Cambrian Railway. Absorbing the Mawddwy Railway was to be a feather in his cap, so he was prepared to buy out the Buckley family's interest in the line, and to press his colleagues in the Cam-

brian to take on the work of reconstruction. He was fortunate in that he secured the financial backing of the local councils, whose generosity was then matched by the Treasury. The news of the grant, and of a fresh Light Railway Order, came a few days before Sir Edmund Buckley died, at Aberhiraant, on 21st March 1910.

The Cambrian engineers were soon at work and the track of the Mawddwy Railway was completely renewed with rails from the main line. At Dinas Mawddwy Station, a wooden shed near the gateway was demolished, and the wood-framed engine shed was rebuilt to about half its previous size. On the day of re-opening, 29th July 1911, the Station sported colourful decorations and assumed an air of cleanliness and precision. All were confident that it had now a sound and prosperous future.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Whatever hopes and ambitions the inhabitants of Dinas Mawddwy had nurtured were set aside in 1914. All around, men were leaving, quarries were closing, and timber was being cut. Messrs. Bullock gave up slate production in 1915 and their cutting shed became an ammunition store. Their warehouse beside the Railway Station was taken over as a saw mill, and the Station gateway was made wide enough for the timber lorries. On a cold afternoon in January 1917, Plas Dinas set alight, and no brigade could get through to save it. The Buckleys had not lived there since 1900, but the lofty ruins remained, a memorial to the family, until quite recently.

With the end of hostilities, H. M. Magazine left Dinas Mawddwy, but the Minllyn Quarry did not resume operations. The Railway lost its war traffic,

but did not regain its passengers. Taken into the Great Western system in 1922, its days were numbered when the first motor omnibus reached Dinas Mawddwy two years later. The meagre passenger service lasted until 1930 and the complete closure of the line was only put off when the country again went to war. This time, the quarry warehouse was used for storing machinery from the Rover Car Company. Nationalised in 1947, the Railway struggled on, but damage to a bridge over the Dovey settled the matter, and the line was officially closed in July 1951.

A NEW ENTERPRISE

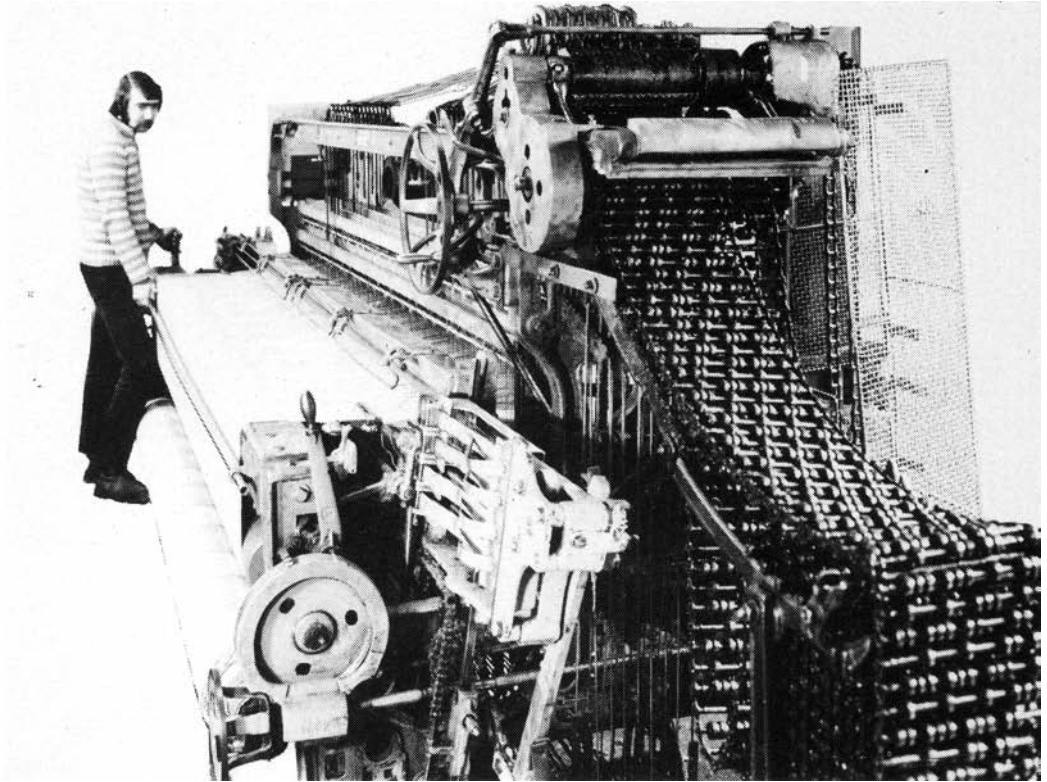
British Railways may have written off Dinas Mawddwy, but others saw exciting possibilities in this location. A group of Merioneth farmers had chosen ten sites in the County where they were to

spin and manufacture their own wool; the damp climate necessary for spinning, and the proximity to the English market had made Dinas Mawddwy an ideal choice for their first venture. In April 1946, a lease was taken on the old quarry buildings next to the Station, and the name “Y Gymdeithas Wlan” (Wool Society) painted on the doors. About 700 local farmers contributed, rather too much of their £30,000 capital being spent in converting the buildings and installing machinery. In May 1948, they were able to buy the premises from Miss Edith Bullock, the last representative of the family which had owned the quarries.

From the beginning, problems of management by committee were apparent, and the ambitious plans of the founders were soon to be modified by circumstance. Failure to obtain a licence to purchase wool direct from the farmer meant that their prime

aim, to control the price they received for their own wool, had to be abandoned. It followed that there was little point spinning wool bought from the market in Yorkshire when it had to be sent back there to be dyed, so that too was given up. Thus a saddened committee was left to run an ailing woollen mill, far removed from the source of its raw material, and even further removed from its original objects.

By 1952, with capital spent and losses mounting, the Welsh Agricultural Organisation Society, which had helped set up the mill, was called in to salvage what was left. Commercial sense dictated that the business be wound up, but sentiment was strong that the good name of agricultural co-operation should not be spoilt by one ill-fated project. So, the scale of the operation was cut, and the losses brought down to acceptable proportions. Appeals



The Dobcross Loom. Four are still working at Meirion Mill.

for new capital were made to various government agencies and private financiers, but none was forthcoming.

It was not until 1963 that Y Gymdeithas Wlan faced up to the hopelessness of its position and agreed to lease the mill to a Yorkshire firm, Turner Brothers of Bridlington, makers of candlewick bedspreads. This company put in new machinery, built up the labour force, and had some success in adapting the traditional Welsh product to the modern market. However, its offer to purchase the whole undertaking was turned down, there remaining a strong feeling that Y Gymdeithas Wlan should not be wound up unless the investors were paid back in full. Problems with local management finally persuaded Turners to leave Dinas Mawddwy, but credit should be given to a firm whose innovations in design and marketing pointed

the way forward for others.

With the staff under notice, late in 1965, the lease of the woollen mill was advertised in the national press, this brought an enquiry from a Cheshire industrialist Mr. Raymond Street.

Mr. Street had not the slightest intention of becoming a woollen manufacturer until he and his wife a Welsh lady, were shown over the Dinas Mawddwy premises in January 1966. Fascinated by the machinery and the processes they saw, they determined to take on the mill.

Mr. Street was instrumental in founding the Welsh Weavers Association.



Meirion Mill - the weaving shed circa 1975

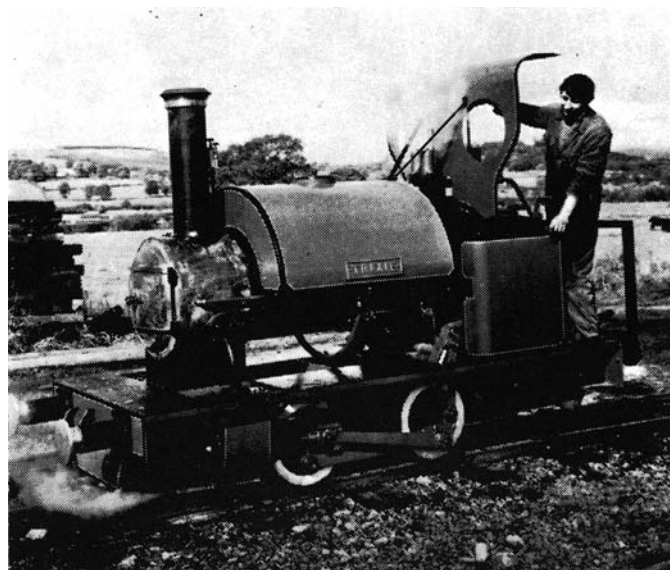
and was Chairman for the first four years of its existence. The Welsh Fair, the first of which was held at Llandrindod Wells in October 1973, was a notable personal achievement, springing from his own desire to promote all Welsh craft industries under one banner. One of his ideas yet to bear fruit is the adoption of a symbol, like the Welsh Woolmark, by which any Welsh craft product might be recognised.

A NEW RAILWAY ERA

From the first, Mr. Street had been conscious of the debt he owed to the old railway engineers whose station design is the key to the attractiveness of the Meirion Mill site. While landscaping and improving access to the mill, he was careful not to disturb what remained of their work. Engine and goods sheds were put in good repair; the

station-house tastefully converted into a coffee-shop, and the heavy wrought-iron gates to the platform lovingly restored by Messrs. John Jones of Eglwysbach and William Lloyd of Pontygarth. The original intention was to establish a small railway museum, but the increasing number of visitors suggested that the mill could support its own light railway. Late in 1974, an opportunity arose which was to make this idea a reality. Word came of a newly-built two-foot gauge 0-4-0 saddle tank locomotive on display not ten miles away at the Alternative Technology Establishment at Llyn-gwern, where it had been a feature of the Duke of Edinburgh's visit in November. The makers, Alan Keef of Oxford, were to have recalled it to their works, but terms were agreed just in time and 'Trixie' arrived at Dinas Mawddwy on the 15th January 1975.

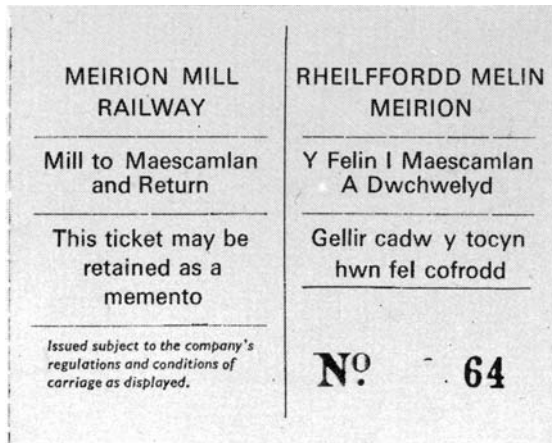
The preparation of the line began immediately with the pegging out of the route along the track-bed of the old Mawddwy Railway as far as Maescamlan, a distance of about $\frac{1}{8}$ mile. 60 tons of ballast, 600 wooden sleepers, and 14 tons of rail went into the construction of the permanent way. Meanwhile, further equipment was arriving. Alan Keef supplied a National diesel locomotive as auxiliary motive power, two passenger carriages were purchased from Butlins, and several Hendreddu Slate Co. wagons were rescued from Gartheiniog Quarry. Opening day was the 19th July, and in its first brief season, the line carried 4,897 passengers. In charge of the operation was Ken Whittaker, a city accountant who was drawn into the scheme when he came to Dinas Mawddwy to complete a book on Welsh railways. His experience in this field proved invaluable and he stayed to see the



0-4-0 Saddle-Tank Locomotive 'Trixie'

line safely through its first year.

Sadly the railway was not to survive the period of rapidly rising costs and inflation of the 70's. The rails were given to the Centre for Alternative technology at Corris, Trixie went to Belgium and the popular little diesel Tadpole' went to a peat cutting job in Cumberland.



THE PARADOX MADE CLEAR

The movement of economic and social change is slow but inexorable and has produced the charming decay of Dinas Mawddwy. Occasionally, individuals stand against the tide, and the quarries, the station, the Plas, and now Merion Mill are monuments to their endeavours. Those who love the place should not worry unduly if changes occur, for the scale and grandeur of its setting will always overshadow man's exploits at Dinas Mawddwy.

