

Bryntyrch up to 1750

For nearly two centuries, Bryntyrch, or Ffrith Bryntyrch as it was originally known, was the glebe farm whose rent provided an additional income for the Capel Curig clergyman. This article explores the early history of the farm, and how it came to be sold to the Commissioners of Queen Anne's Bounty.

Until Capel Curig became a separate ecclesiastical parish in 1866, it was technically a chapelry within the parish of Llandegai, though most of its worshipers came from the parish of Llanrhychwyn and the Gwydir township of Llanrwst. From 1729 if not before, Capel Curig was served by the same curate as Dolwyddelan. These complex arrangements created problems over providing the curate with an adequate income. Tithes of a tenth of local farmers' crops, plus contributions on the number of cows, fleeces and lambs, were intended to provide the Anglican clergy with an income. A typical Church of England living in the early eighteenth century yielded around £35 a year. But in north Wales, the tithes did not often go to the local clergy. Those of Llandegai were paid to the Archdeacon of Bangor, who paid a small salary to the Capel Curig curate. The Dolwyddelan tithes went to the owners of the Gwydir estate – the Wynns of Gwydir until 1684 and the Dukes of Ancaster in the eighteenth century – who paid the curate of Dolwyddelan and Capel Curig a salary of just £8 a year. The curate from 1729 to 1784, Maurice Williams, therefore rented a farm at Penamnen in Dolwyddelan to supply most of his livelihood.

Queen Anne was concerned about the number of parishes where the clergy struggled with an inadequate income, and in 1707 set up a fund known as Queen Anne's Bounty to supplement the incomes of poor clergy. The churchwardens of Capel Curig applied to the fund in 1740 for a grant to augment their curate's income, and the churchwardens of Dolwyddelan followed suit two years later. The Commissioners of Queen Anne's Bounty agreed to provide an endowment of £400, which was to be invested in land to produce an annual income for the curate of Capel Curig and Dolwyddelan.

It took some time to find a suitable property, because most land around Capel Curig was owned by large estates and tied up in family trusts that did not allow sale. One of the few farms not owned by the Gwydir, Penrhyn or Berthddu/Mostyn estates was Bryntyrch, whose owner William Wynne of Wern agreed to sell it for £400 to the Commissioners of Queen Anne's Bounty in 1750.



Snowdon from Capel Curig showing Bryntyrch, 1840

So how had William Wynn come to own Bryntyrch farm, and why was he prepared to sell? Bryntyrch is first mentioned in the 1352 *Record of Carnarvon*, a survey compiled for Edward III after the conquest of Gwynedd to identify dues previously paid to the Welsh Princes. In the township of Gwydir was 'a hafod called Bentyrgh which is in the hands of the lord, and which Robert Pollard the chamberlain now holds and occupies . . . worth 16 shillings and 8 pence per year.' In other words, Bryntyrch was Crown land belonging in 1352 to Edward the Black Prince, son of King Edward III, and not part of the local clan lands. It was an area of summer pastures leased out to the chamberlain of the Principality of North Wales, (equivalent to modern Gwynedd), who was based in Caernarfon and was responsible for the principality's finances.

The next important reference to Bryntyrch occurs in 1548, when 'ffryth Bryntirgh' was leased by Edward VI for 21 years to Ryce Thomas, gent., at an annual rent of 21 shillings. It is clear from the wonderfully detailed description that Bryntyrch was now occupied year-round, growing some crops but largely a cattle farm:

'the frith of Bryntirgh contains 4 acres of arable, 40 acres of moorish ground and meadow, 30 acres of woodland, with a commodity of the mountains containing about 600 acres of ground but marvellous barren, whereon is built one dwelling house and five cottages for cattle.'

We don't know whether any of the 1548 farmhouse survives in the modern Bryntyrch Hotel, as there are no original timbers that would enable the building to be dated using dendrochronology (tree-ring dating).

The Crown lease of Bryntyrch was subsequently granted by Queen Elizabeth I in 1566 to one of her gentlemen pensioners, Henry Mackwilliam, and Dame Mary Cheeke his wife, at the traditional rent of 21s a year. By the late sixteenth century, income from the sale of monastic land was drying up, and the Crown resorted to selling the reversion (the next lease) of its lands well before the current lease expired. So in 1591, Elizabeth's officials sold a 60 year lease of Bryntyrch running from 1614 to 1675 to a London scrivener, John Wells, again with an annual fee farm rent of 21s a year. These English leaseholders probably used an intermediary to find a local gentlemen to take on the lease at a profit, who in turn may have rented the farm to a Capel Curig tenant farmer.

Bryntyrch was in the medieval township of Gwydir, which formed part of the commote of Nantconwy (equivalent to an English hundred), which stretched from Capel Curig to Trefriw and Penmachno. In 1617, Nantconwy was amongst lands granted for 99 years by James I to the trustees of the Duchy of Lancaster, to provide an income for Charles, Prince of Wales, the future Charles I. The trustees in turn assigned Nantconwy in 1628 to Thomas Glynne of Glynllyfon, Richard Prythergh of Inner Temple, London and a Caernarvonshire gentlemen, John Bodwrda, for an undisclosed sum. This lease ran for the remainder of the 99 year term till 1714. In practice, most of Nantconwy was already in private hands with the Wynns of Gwydir the major landowners, so it is not clear how the new lessees could exploit their grant, except for Bryntyrch, which they would be able to rent out after John Wells' grant came to an end in 1675. In the meantime, they had to pay him the usual 21s a year.

Bryntyrch featured again after the Civil War, when the Parliamentary government, also short of revenue, made a detailed survey of all remaining Crown lands and attempted to

sell as much as possible. In 1651, a certain Oliver Wallis bought the right to collect the Crown fee farm rents for Bryntyrch and seven other Crown properties in Caernarfonshire, paying 13 times the annual rental for his investment. He must have made a loss, because in 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne and resumed the title to Crown lands.

Shortly after this William Thomas Esquire a Caernarfon alderman and nephew of Sir William Thomas of Coed Helen, sought to add Bryntyrch to his already considerable property holdings. His estate included a mansion and malt kiln on the High St. in Caernarfon, two houses on the north quay and five other properties in the borough, as well as land in Llanfaglan, Llanllyfni, and in two Cheshire parishes. This involved firstly buying out the remainder of the Duchy of Lancaster 99 year lease from William Prytherch of Myfyrian in Anglesey, a descendant of Richard Prytherch, the last survivor of the three 1628 lessees. He also paid £30 apiece in 1663 to John Ellis of Pwllheli and a Caernarfon widow, Margaret Swetnam, to acquire their leaseholds of two parts of Bryntyrch, totalling 220 acres – most likely leased from John Wells and his descendants. (Tyn y Lon farm, originally part of Bryntyrch and which in the eighteenth century shared the Cefn Bryntyrch rough pasture in common with Bryntyrch, was evidently the third share of Ffrith Bryntyrch, but remained in separate ownership.)



1747 map of Bryntyrch - the earliest estate map in Wales
(National Library of Wales)

Bryntyrch then passed to William Thomas's descendants for four generations. Via his daughter and co-heiress Elin, it became part of the larger estate of William Griffith of Llandygwning, near Pwllheli. After their grandson Griffith Williams II, Rector of Mellteyrn on the Llŷn Peninsular died in 1741, the estate passed briefly to a bachelor son, William Griffiths III, and on his death in 1745 to his sister Eleanor. She had married William Wynne of Wern, heir to one of the most rapidly expanding estates in Caernarfonshire, based near Porthmadog. It was William Wynne who had his estate, including Bryntyrch, surveyed in 1747 – probably the oldest estate survey in Wales. But he had clearly over-stretched himself and in 1750 agreed to sell Bryntyrch, which was well away from his main estate holdings in Caernarfon and Llŷn, to the Commissioners of Queen Anne's Bounty for £400 in order to reduce his debts. The farm was rented out at £16 10s a year – a considerable

augmentation to the curate's income - though out of this he had to pay 18s 8d pa King's rent, as well as the costs of maintaining the farm buildings.

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