

The Capel Curig Turnpike Road

It is difficult to imagine that before the 1790s, there was no road to Capel Curig capable of carrying wheeled vehicles. The approach from Bangor via Nant y Benglog was described by the travel writer Thomas Pennant in 1776 as 'the most dreadful horse-path in Wales, worked in the rudest manner into steps, for a great length'. The 'highway' from Llanberis to the market town of Llanrwst through Dyffryn Mymbyr and over Bwlch-yr-Haiarn was described around 1800 as 'a mere right of passage . . . exceeding rugged and uneven'.

Travellers to Bangor Ferry en route to Anglesey and Ireland mainly used the north coast route via Chester and Conwy, though this involved crossing the Afon Conwy by boat, sometimes with horse and carriage. An alternative route via Shrewsbury used one of the early Welsh turnpike roads, from Llangollen to Pentrefoelas (broadly on the line of the modern A5) constructed in 1777. The road then ran to Llanrwst, where travellers crossed the Afon Conwy over the seventeenth-century Pont Fawr and continued down the Conwy valley to Conwy. There was increasing pressure to shorten this circuitous route so that journey times could be improved.

In the 1790s, Richard Pennant, Lord Penrhyn, built at his own expense a road from Port Penrhyn along the south of Nant-y-Benglog to Capel Curig where he erected the Capel Curig Inn (later known as the Royal Hotel, now the Plas y Brenin National Outdoor Centre). In his portrait hanging in Penrhyn Castle, Lord Penrhyn points proudly to a map showing his new road with the new Capel Curig Inn in the background.



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He hoped that his road would eventually be linked up with the existing road from Shrewsbury to Pentrefoelas. But the new road through Nant y Benglog was quickly criticised – it proved precarious and coaches sometimes overturned. Neither the bridge built in 1800 nor the first

mile of road east of Capel Curig, which passed across the north-facing flank of Cefn y Capel was considered suitable for a turnpike road. To be useable in winter, the road needed to run on the sunny north bank of the Afon Llugwy.



John Evans' 1795 map shows Lord Penrhyn's original road from Ogwen to the Capel Curig Inn, the old horse-path north of Llyn Ogwen described by Pennant, and the 'highway' from Llanberis to Llanrwst over Bwlch-yr-Haiarn. There is no track to Betws-y-Coed.

Completing the Shrewsbury to Bangor Ferry route through Capel Curig required major improvement, including moving the line of road through Nant y Benglog with a new bridge near Gelli farm (Hen Bont), embanking the Llugwy Gorge near Tan y Bwlch (modern Cobden's), building a road between Capel Curig and Betws-y-Coed, which in turn required new bridges across the Afon Llugwy at Pont Cyfyng, and the Afon Conwy at Llyn yr Afanc (Beaver Pool). It was clear that other partners were needed to raise the investment funds required, by means of a turnpike trust which would have the ability to borrow money, compulsorily purchase land, and collect tolls to cover the cost of building and maintaining the road. In 1802, Parliament approved the establishment of the Capel Curig Turnpike Trust through 'An Act for amending, widening, improving, and keeping in repair the road leading from Porthaethwy Ferry otherwise Bangor Ferry, in the county of Caernarvon, to or near Pentre Voelas in the parish of Llanufydd, in the county of Denbigh'. This authorised the creation of a turnpike road from Llandegai through Capel Curig to Pentrefoelas. The new turnpike road was to join the old coast road from Conwy at Llandegai.

Lord Penrhyn remained a major investor, putting in £1,000 in 1802, together with several Shrewsbury innkeepers who were keen to capture the London to Dublin trade. By 1803, a new line of turnpike road was carried across the Nant y Benglog marsh on an embankment. Money ran short during the construction of Hen Bont near Gelli, leading the workmen to down tools till they were paid, and Lord Penrhyn came to the rescue with extra funds.



Hen Bont, which carried the new turnpike road over the Llugwy gorge near Gelli.

The initial tolls on the road were:

- Horse drawing a carriage or waggon - 8d
- Drove of oxen or cattle - 1s per score or pro-rata
- Drove of calves, sheep or pigs - 6d per score or pro-rata

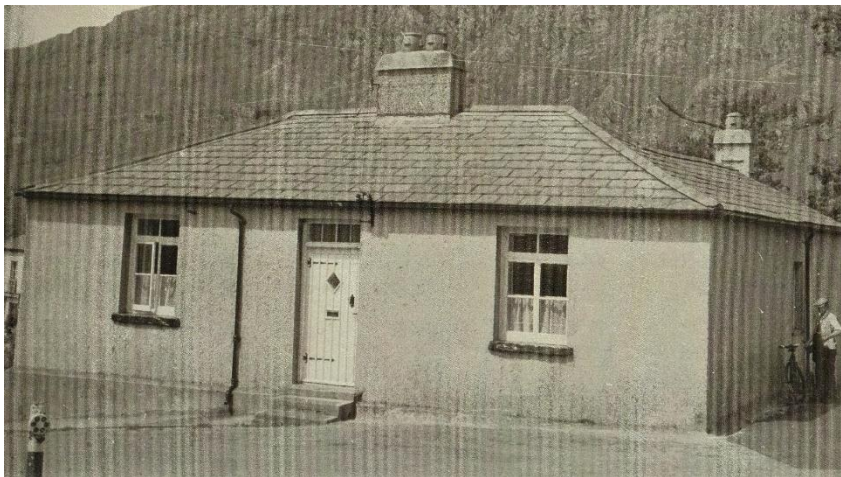
Double tolls were charged on a Sunday, presumably to deter travel on the holy day. To allay concerns that the toll road could raise farmers' costs, the Act explicitly laid down a series of exemptions. No tolls should be paid by the inhabitants of Capel Curig and other parishes along the road taking their horses, cattle, sheep or pigs to Llanrwst on market or fair days, or visiting the blacksmith to shoe a horse or repair farm implements. Carts could pass toll-free if carrying stone and gravel for mending local roads, lime or manure for the fields, hay or straw for use on the farm, farm implements, or taking corn to the mill for grinding for home use (though not for sale). Animals being moved between pastures were also exempt. Religious purposes were also catered for: clergymen attending church services or visiting sick parishioners and all parishioners attending Divine Worship in the parish church or a licenced nonconformist place of worship were also toll-free. Others excused payment included the mails, soldiers on the march, electors on their way to vote in Parliamentary elections, or parish constables escorting vagrants out of their parish.

However there were further problems to be overcome before the Shrewsbury innkeepers were prepared to adopt the new turnpike road for their coach services. Lord Penrhyn's first road stopped at the Capel Curig Inn, built around 1798. It was granted a licence in 1800, after Lord Penrhyn installed a former butler, Joseph Griffith, as innkeeper. The inn's early guests came mainly from the Bangor direction using their own transport or sometimes walking and often stayed several days to explore the beauties of the local countryside and mountains. Before the inn could be used as a posting house, where public coaches changed horses, the Shrewsbury coach proprietors wished to be assured that there would be an adequate supply of fresh horses. The posting service eventually started in November 1805. The inn was probably expanded around this time to cope with the increasing number of visitors and their horses. In 1807, its stable yard comprised ten roomy stables and 12 bales for gentlemen's horses, loose stabling for 36 post horses with rooms over for hay and corn, two lock-up coach houses for six gentlemen's carriages, and open coach houses for 12 post carriages. In

addition, there was a saddlers' room, a hostlers' room, a smith's shop, water-powered machinery for cutting straw and crushing gorse for horse feed, as well as churning butter and malting for the hotel. The final badge of success came in 1808 when the Postmaster General adopted the Capel Curig route for the Irish mails.

When the Capel Curig turnpike road opened to traffic in 1803, it had toll gates at Coetmor Bridge (later renamed Dinas), Betws, and Hendre Isaf near the junction to Ysbytty Ifan - there was no toll gate yet in Capel Curig. In 1808, Baroness Penrhyn, Lord Penrhyn's widow, bought the farm of Ty'n y Lon in Capel Curig from Hugh Evans Esq., of Henblas in Anglesey. Ty'n y Lon farm originally formed part of Bryn Tyrch but had been sold off in the seventeenth century: it is now part of Royal Farm. The farmhouse stood approximately on the site of Llugwy Cottage. A tollhouse was then built on Ty'n y Lon land near the site of the later Telford tollhouse (confusingly also called Ty'n y Lon) which started collecting tolls in 1812.

Some coach passengers preferred to stay the night at the Capel Curig Inn and continue their journey the next day. But as journey times improved, many travellers did not want to lose time travelling off the turnpike road to visit the inn. Around 1820, George Hay Dawkins Pennant, the new owner of the Penrhyn estate, built a new coaching stable block, Yard (later converted into housing as Llugwy and Glan yr Afon Terraces), for the better accommodation of the mail and stage coaches. This was leased to the innkeepers of the Capel Curig Inn. Passengers who wanted a drink while their horses were being changed were served at the adjacent tap-room, which is now the farmhouse of Royal Farm.



***The former Royal Hotel
tap room for travellers
changing horses at Yard,
now Royal Farm
farmhouse***

Despite expenditure of over £20,000 on building and maintaining the road by 1815, the road was still unsatisfactory, given its importance as part of the Great Irish Road from London to Dublin. Tolls and loans only just covered the costs of building, maintenance and mortgage interest. A government enquiry concluded that on the 60-mile stretch between Chirk and Bangor Ferry there were too many steep gradients, the road was much too narrow on the side of rocky precipices, with the bulwarks guarding the precipices of superficial construction and now in a ruinous state. Between Bethesda and Ogwen the dry-stone wall parapet had been largely destroyed by travellers amusing themselves by throwing the stones down the precipice, leaving the road in a dangerous state. The road surface was not constructed to a high enough standard to cope with the amount of water running off the hills. The section across Nant y Benglog marsh still suffered from icing due to lack of sunlight on the boggy ground and was subject to frequent accidents. A new line of road was needed in many places to remedy these

problems. The whole road required proper bottoming, metalling, draining and parapet walls constructing.



Pont Cyfyng built by the Capel Curig Turnpike Trust and bypassed in 1815 by Telford's new road

The enquiry concluded that the private sector turnpike trust investment model could not cope with the level of investment needed to provide a road of national importance through a countryside consisting of a series of rocks, bogs, ravines, rivers, and precipices. Parliament therefore appointed Thomas Telford as chief engineer to improve the condition of the Chirk to Bangor Ferry road, granting £50,000 for the first three years' work. The road through Capel Curig was one of the first sections to be improved, with a new line on the north of Nant y Benglog – the current route of the A5 – a new bridge across the Ogwen falls, and a massive embankment alongside the Cyfyng falls to bypass the narrow Pont Cyfyng.

As the road was now largely publicly funded, Parliament decided to amalgamate the six turnpike trusts covering the road from Shrewsbury to Bangor and appointed a new commission to take over control. The Capel Curig Turnpike Trust was accordingly wound up in 1819. But in less than twenty years, the turnpike road had transformed Capel Curig from an isolated hamlet to an important coaching station, a resort for wealthy visitors, and a meeting place for justices of the peace and county society.

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