

Introduction to Bro Hiraethog

This rural uplands in the County of Conwy, on the edge of the Hiraethog Moors is an agricultural area known also as “the Berfeddwlad” (the central and remote lands), in this instance, the upper lands between the Conwy Valley and the Vale of Clwyd. For this particular project, only four parishes responded which are; Llanefydd, Llangernyw, Llansannan and Nantglyn. Within its villages and communities is a wealth of fascinating history, spanning back over many centuries, that has also raised remarkable men and women of humble beginnings that become famous in literature and bardic circles and men who became highly successful in business.

In retracing our steps back to the 18th and 19th century, you would have seen a fairly remote area, with small farms scattered over it's fascinating landscape, with most farms belonging to large country estates that existed at that time. You would have also seen narrow winding roads with often steep hills in all direction, making the area almost inaccessible to the outside world. Nestling in that hilly landscape you would come across small villages and hamlets that nurtured culturally active communities that have existed to this day. Seven of those villages had an old church, usually dating back a further few centuries, but with much more nonconformist chapels, of various denominations, built not only in the villages but in remoter small but active communities.

During the years of 1824 a new road was built from Denbigh, through Groes, Bylchau and over the Hiraethog moors to connect to Telfords A5 at Pentrefoelas. A century later another new road was built, connecting Bylchau through Llansannan to Llanfair TH, thus joining the Abergele to Llanrwst road. As a result of these two roads, the area became far more accessible in both directions.

As the title of the project suggest, one notable character of Bro Hiraethog in olden days, as indeed in many other rural areas, is the presence of large country estates that owned most of the farms and agricultural lands. As an example one could quote the Dyffryn Aled Estate, owned by the Wynne Yorke family and their descendants. The estate owned 4,356 acres that comprised 65 agricultural tenanted holdings, who worked tirelessly to make a living for their families, often barely keeping their heads above the bread line. especially so during the severe agricultural depression that occurred from time to time. To quote a few of the estates, one could mention the Hafod Unnos Estate at Llangernyw, Nantglyn Hall at Nantglyn, the Cefn (Meiriadog) estate and the Llewesog estate which was one of the largest.

Another important character of this rural area was the emergence of Non-conformism, the Methodist, Baptist, Independents and Wesleyans, with Tanyfron chapel dating back to 1772. The church buildings were of course much older, centuries old in fact, and out of the seven churches, only two are closed as places of worship. E.g Pandy Tudur and Gwytherin. It was the church authorities that also built the first schools in their respective diocese. Despite having approx. twenty chapel, only a handful are still open, with the others having been converted into dwelling houses, during the last thirty years.

One cannot give a true historical account of this area without mentioning the churches demand for Tithe payment, levied on all agricultural land to the tune of 10% just to keep the local Vicar, Rector, Bishop and the church hierarchy in their life of comfort. Since the rise of nonconformist, very few of the Welsh speaking farmers attended the church, but rather their own chapels, but still were forced to pay the church Tithe. During the 19th century, many farmers resisted with the inevitable consequences of the Tithe Wars breaking out in different Parishes, especially as the church authorities could call on the Law to carry out their seizure of animals in lieu of the default payments. At a later stage, the church authorities succeeded in adding the Tithe amount to the tenants rental payments, which made it far more difficult not to pay the Tithe, resulting being thrown out of their farm.

As an illustration of the angst generated against paying the Tithe, we quote from an article, dated 2nd May 1894, that appeared in “Baner ac Amserau Cymru” an influential national weekly newspaper, with it's base in Denbigh and owned by Mr Thomas Gee. The article written by a ‘special correspondent, tells the story of Mr James Davies, of Nant y Merddyn Uchaf, who was strongly committed to resisting the annual payment to the church. Where the

bailiffs called to seize a cow in lieu of not paying a Tithe set at £5. 8s. having failed the first and second time, the bailiff arrived with more support to walk the cow to Henllan, then on the following day to Denbigh. A few thousand supporters of anti tithe farmers and friends gathered to witness the spectacle. The cow was eventually sold for £6.50s, a fraction of the cows actual value. Following the sale they all gathered by the old Town Hall to hear Mr Thomas Gee addressing the crowd, who was an influential advocate against the Tithe payments,

“During his speech, he said that it was essential to make a statement on behalf of the meeting and in response to the occasion which led to what had taken place on this day, and as the appointed chairman, he offered the following declaration:- ‘That this gathering is of the opinion the Church in Wales should be disestablished from the Church in England at the very earliest, in as much , that as a church establishment, it is inconsistent with the principles of National freedom of religion, and that it does not answer the purpose of it’s establishment, and being unbearably oppressive to the people, and a harmful influence to Christianity in the methods she has adopted to generate the wages of its clergy.”

Mr Gee announced that he had numerous important facts that he thought was his duty to bring to the attention of the meeting, as they were most relevant to what had just taken place, particularly as an explanation on the situation of the church and nonconformism in the parish of Llansannan.

In 1891, he said, The population of this parish was 1,133, and comprise 15,545 acres, which amounted to 25 square miles. The total Tithe for the parish was £656 per annum. This sum being shared as follows:- The Bishop of St Asaph received £15. (for what came a voice from the crowd). The church authorities had £220, and the local Rector and Vicar at Llansannan had £413 in addition to his large and comfortable rectory, and in addition the Vicar of Gwytherin received £7. And that is how the £656 of Tithe, paid annually by the local small farmers, was shared out. Another interesting fact is that there is in this large parish only one church, built between five or six centuries ago. It is also worth noting that the established church did not do anything to improve the conditions for it’s congregation to pray and worship, throughout the last centuries as they have yet to spend a single penny on this building since it was built.

Last Sunday, the number of people in both the church and chapel service were enumerated. It was discovered that 1,129 people had attended the three chapel services, while there was only 88 in all three Welsh services held in the church.

Because of the continued troubles against the payment of Tithes, the treasurers of the church establishment succeeded to have the tithe payments included in the rental payments of every tenanted farm, with the inevitable result that any refusal to pay the combined rent, the farmer and his family would be served with an immediate eviction notice. Of course they could only do that on farms that belonged to the estate.

On the other side of the coin there was the majority of the ‘Werin’, the ordinary country folk, often referred to as the culturally educated mass of the population. It is from their midst that so many exceedingly famous individuals have excelled in many different fields of expertise. There were scholars like Sir Henry Jones of Llangernyw, The literary genius of William Salisbury, who translated the New Testament into Welsh. Trebor Aled became a famous bard, often used by the more famous gentry of his period. Then there was Isaac Roberts, born in Groes Bach and became a wealthy businessman in Liverpool, but his true calling was his fascination and achievement in British astronomy. Another equally successful entrepreneur in retailing was the founder of Morris & Jones in Liverpool, born in Lletý’r Eos and started working in his fathers shop in Llansannan.. One must also mention Twm o’r Nant, Thomas of Nant Isa Farm, who has often been referred to as the Welsh Shakespeare. The list goes on and on, as every village could boast of other individuals who were destined for great achievements.

Any description of Bro Hiraethog would not be complete with a brief introduction to the four parishes:-

Gwytherin: This parish nestles in the armpit of the |Hiraethog Moors, with two sides of the mountain stretching along the top end of the parish, like two arms embracing it’s rural landscape. From the Graianog Bog, higher up in

the mountain springs the Cledwen River that flows through the village, towards Llangernyw before joining the River Elwy.

It was probably thanks to Saint Winifred that really put Gwytherin on the map back in the 7th Century. We know that Gwytherin was an old community, dating further back into the realms of forgotten history, because according to local tradition, the abbot Elerius had gone part of the way to meet St Winifred, who was on her way to a safe sanctuary in a Convent, located in a secluded spot above Tai Pella farm. It is therefore believed that a monastery and convent existed at Gwytherin, and that is where St Winifred's went to escape her assailant at Holywell.

On the North side of the church are four upright standing stones, dating back to 5th or 6th century, with a Latin inscription on one reading "VINNEMAGLI FILI SENEMAGLI" which can be translated as Gwynfael ap Henfael

Due to the parish being rather remote, it is still a Welsh speaking enclave, despite that many English people have moved into the village, but all the farming families have Welsh as their first language.

Pandy Tudur: Pandy Tudur is located on the edge and far reaches of the Cledwen and the Elwy rivers, being approx.. 5 miles from Llanrwst. The original area of Pandy Tudur was in the upper reaches of the Llangernyw Parish, named Blaenau Llangernyw, and sometime in the past a fulling mill (a Pandy) was built on the river Derfyn, to wash and clean the cloth, which had been woven from local wool, and over the years a village sprung up around it

It is an agricultural area with farms keeping stock and sheep, with a few milk farmers. The contours of the land raises from 550 to 1,200 feet with a fairly high rainfall on account of its proximity to the Snowdonia mountains.

The local school, (built by the local people in 1848) closed in 1969, resulting in the children of Gwytherin, Llangernyw and Pandy Tudur joining together in Ysgol Bro Cernyw, (Bro Cernyw School) a new community building at Llangernyw, built early in 1970.

The area is predominantly Welsh speaking, despite the influx of non-Welsh speakers into some of the local houses, it has not really affected the Welsh language cultural activities of the community. The chapel remains open and still relatively strong in attendance, a new extension was built a few years ago, that included a new kitchen and toilets, which has strengthened its use as a community center, and of course meets all the necessary regulations for a meeting place.

Llangernyw: This the largest village with the parish and straddles the A548 between Abergele and Llanrwst. The cross roads at its center has one road leading to Llansannan and the other, Westwards to Eglwysbach. The village has a shop, a small antiques outlet, a pub and a monumental stonemason. It has three chapels and a church with one of the oldest Yew tree in this country. It has a primary school and community center, combined and built early in the 1970's. Worthy of note is the home of Sir Henry Jones, who started life as a cobbler, but by serious study became a famous educationalist in Scotland, the small house in which he was born and bred is now a museum dedicated to his achievements.

Nantglyn: About four and a half miles South from the old market town of Denbigh, Nantglyn in olden days stood on an important crossroads and an essential overnight stay for those pilgrims on their way from Holywell through Ysbyty Ifan and on to Bardsey Island, where reputedly 20,000 saints have been buried. There are ancient references to a religious cell or church dating back to 700 AD, and dedicated to Saint Mordeyrn, an early religious mystic.

With the building of the new road in 1825 from Denbigh through Bylchau to Pentrefoelas, the road through Nantglyn have lost their strategic importance and now only serves the local population and the farming community. The older part of the village has a collection of stone built houses, hardly changed in the last few hundred years, with the river Lliwen dividing the old village from the more recent dwellings.

Once again, Nantglyn can boast a number of eminent individuals, that shone in their respective fields of expertise, not forgetting those who stayed and became characters in their own right as local bards and commentators, including the famous Twm o'r Nant, who many referred to as the Welsh Shakespeare.

Llanefydd: Despite being located in rural Conwy, it enjoys superb views down to the coastal towns and its blue seas. The village is approx.. 6 miles to the West of Denbigh, and once again dependent on, and serving the agricultural community, with its history spanning back centuries. If you ramble through its beautiful landscape you will come across very old farmhouses in solid stonemasonry, small windows and large chimneys, farms like Berain, the home of Catherin of Berain, the beautiful and influential lady who inherited a large swathe of land and who also became famous due her four marriages, all to wealthy benefactors.

The Grade 1 church, dedicated to Saint Nefydd and Saint Mary, founded in the 5th century, In 1978, archaeological excavations in a cave at Bont-Newydd, in the east of the community, unearthed the teeth and jawbone of an 11-year-old Neanderthal boy dating from 230,000 years ago, the oldest human remains discovered in Wales.

In his comprehensive book on the history of Llanefydd, Etifeddiaeth Bro (Inheritance of a Community), Gwyn Ffoulkes Jones, says that Llanefydd has also raised individuals of importance to this area and to Wales. Here has been bred man of literature, preachers and other prominent individuals shaping the history of Wales. Twm o'r Nant was born in the parish but his parents moved to Nant Isa, Groes when he was a boy. One could also mention Iolo Goch and a William Roberts who became a famous preacher.

Llansannan: A popular tradition states that "Llansannan is 10 miles from Denbigh, 10 miles from Abergele and 10 miles from Llanrwst, but is far closer to heaven." Well be that as it may, it is certainly an old settlement with its origins dating back to the mist of a bygone era. Another tradition argues that the flat meadows below the old Dyffryn Aled Estate house, was once a lake and the first dwelling huts was built at the top end, below where the church stands today.

As a village it is geographically located in a shallow bowl, sheltered from the harsh winds and gales of winter. It is approx.. 164 m / 538 ft. above sea level, raising to almost 305 m / 1,000 ft. around its perimeter, resulting in heavy snow falls, with many of its narrow roads being blocked for days at a time. From the Rhyd y Bedd reservoir, built in 1930, up on the Hiraethog Moors, being the source of the river Aled, which skirts the village on its way to the sea, with the area taking its name Bro Aled, from the river.

Today it is a vibrant community, with the Welsh language still the predominant language of most of the cultural activities, which is nurtured by a long tradition of the nonconformist way of rural life. While the old church school, is now a summer house, a new school and community centre was opened in 1967, all under one roof and the community has made good use of the building, with different activities being held almost every night of the week.

In addition to the church and it's three nonconformist chapels, a century ago, the village had five shops, with two having a dressmaking section, , three taverns, two blacksmiths, a cobbler, two or three joiners and cart and furniture making craftsmen, a village reading room, donated by the Wynne Yoke family with Mr John Evan Morris, who later became a successful Liverpool business man, denoting most of the reading materials. It was a community serving, and dependent on the local farming industry. Today it is mainly a commuting village where people travel to work to nearby towns and the seaside resorts.