

Cynefin

Gorse Mills

These days it seems strange to want to mill gorse. Why should anyone bother? What use was it? The answer lies in the early rural life and the near subsistence level of hill farming in North Wales and other remote less productive areas of the UK.

For centuries people in Dwygyfylchi must have been gathering and cultivating hay, straw and any other crops including gorse to feed their livestock in the winter when the mountain grass became inaccessible. In the past there were many more horses, ponies, donkeys, mules, oxen and other grazing animals than now and feeding them throughout the year was a problem. Gorse was gathered or cultivated and harvested to supplement straw and hay and to extend the fodder stocks for the winter.

Gorse (*Ulex Europaeus*), 'eithin ffrenig' in Welsh, particularly the young shoots, was found to be surprisingly nutritious. There is about 16% protein in gorse compared with 27% for white heather. The gorse was harvested, cut up and bruised, then mixed with other fodder. Most of this would have been done by hand for centuries, but with the advent of the industrial era, use was made of machinery. The gorse mills comprised of a crushing machine, with two opposing rollers with heavy metal spikes, and a cutting machine. The obvious source of power for such machines was water from the numerous streams and rivers coming down from the mountains, just as water mills were used for grain and textiles. (There were some gorse mills powered by workhorses or mules.)

In the late 18th and early 19th Century there were half a dozen gorse mills in the parish of Dwygyfylchi, but little remains today. The gorse mill at Trwyn-y-Wylfa, a relatively prosperous farm, was built in 1798 and in use until about 1917 when it was demolished. The remains of the 'leat', the water channel which fed the mill from a mountain stream, is still visible behind the brambles and shrubbery from the Old Conwy Road.

There was a gorse mill at Llanbedr-y-Cennin on the Penygraig stream, built by a group of four farmers in 1810. In the centre of Penmaenmawr, behind what was Dunphy's, a grocers, (Westminster House) was a gorse mill fed by the stream that flowed through the Dingle. This one also powered a grindstone that was used by the local blacksmith for an annual fee.

Down the Old Mill Road (Hen Felin Ffordd) between Pentre Felin, where the New Mill was situated, and St.Gwynan's church, was Werglodd Felin Eithin (483) a field with a gorse mill. This was close to Cae Eithin (546), a gorse field, which indicates that at some time in the past gorse was cultivated there and processed at the nearby gorse mill.

The farms at Plas Ucha, Tai Bach, and Gwddw Glas, now called 'Rest Awhile', up Mountain Lane (was Lon Fain), all had gorse mills in use. There were probably others wherever water power was available and a need for a fodder supplement was necessary.

An old Denbighshire gorse mill has been reconstructed at St Fagan's museum (see photo).