

Secrets of the Extravaganza Beaches

Long ago Llandudno's beaches were dry land. On very low tides stumps of ancient trees still rooted in peat beds can be found on the shore. Carbon dating shows they are 8000 years old. At that time sea level was at least 10 metres lower and what is now a beach was a forest of alder and pine trees. Before then sea level was even lower still and 15000 years ago it was possible to walk to what is now the Isle of Man, crossing a tundra landscape where mammoth and other prehistoric beasts roamed. Human hunters were here too who were physically and intellectually equal to ourselves. Their tools, artwork and bones along with the bones of their prey have been found in limestone caves overlooking Llandudno. A 14000 year old carved horses jawbone from Kendrick's Cave, is internationally recognised as a most important art treasure from the Old Stone Age and a top exhibit in the British Museum.

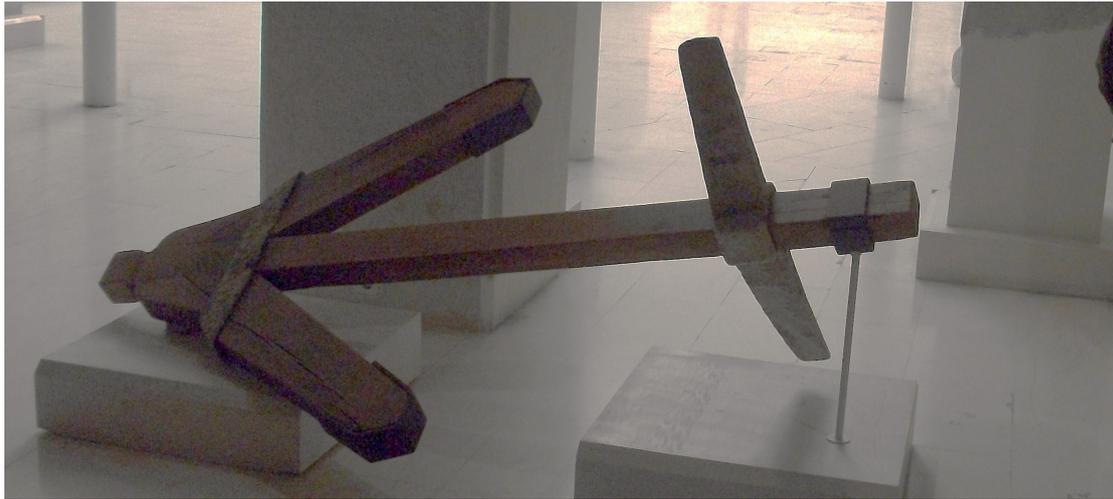


*The carved horses jawbone from Kendricks Cave
Courtesy of Llandudno Museum*

5000 years ago sea level rose to about where it is now. Although the shore line was then further out and the Great Orme became an island. It was separated from the mainland by tidal channels and a salt marsh. This marsh was known in Celtic folklore as the Morfa Rhianedd – The Maidens Marsh. During the Bronze Age when the world famous prehistoric copper mine was being worked its products would have been exported by sea as were the stone axes from Penmaenmawr. Sea trade routes have been plotted radiating out to the other British Islands and beyond. In short Llandudno's beaches first became sea ports thousands of years ago.

We can gain some idea of what sort of vessels would have been visiting the beaches from the discovery of the Bronze Age boat found in Dover which sailed around the British coast 3500 years ago. It was beautifully made of carved oak planks over 12m long stitched together with bindings made of yew.

Part of a Phoenician anchor found not too far away on the Llyn peninsular provides evidence of pre Roman trading vessels from the Mediterranean in the North Wales area.



A reconstructed anchor similar to the one found on the Llyn peninsula.

There is evidence that the Romans were active on the Great Orme. As Llandudno was alongside the sea route from the Mediterranean to their huge port at Chester, their ships would have been a common sight around the Great Orme. Copper ingots stamped with Latin marks have been found in the area. It has been suggested that as they were being taken to Rome they were seized by the local resistance.

After the Romans retreated the great Welsh King Maelgwyn Gwynedd established his Kingdom around the Irish Sea from his castle at Deganwy. Again the sea routes spread out. In 530 He endowed the first cathedral in Britain at Bangor and at a more local level installed St. Tudno on the Great Orme. The enclosure or 'Llan' of the church of St. Tudno gave rise to the name Llandudno. While the rest of mainland Britain became pagan, Wales remained Christian during the time of the Celtic Saints.

Maelgwyn is also said to have given a large fish weir to St Cybi to supply his monastic college at Holyhead with food. The remains of it can still be seen on the West Shore. The remains of another called Clawd y Gorad are on the North Shore. Records show that as much as ten tons of fish could be caught on a single tide by these ingenious structures which became illegal in 1860.

The arrival of those intrepid seafarers the Vikings culminated with the swashbuckling Gruffydd ap Cynan who came at the head of a fleet of long ships to claim his birthright as King of North Wales. By pretending to accidentally run aground on Llandudno's west shore he lured the Norman occupiers out of Deganwy Castle and defeated them. He went on to rule wisely and his kingdom prospered for many years.

By 1800 the copper mines of the Great Orme were being worked again but as it was still virtually an island there were no roads connecting it to the mainland all imports and exports were by sea. The boats that carried the copper ore to smelters in South Wales and Warrington would often be ballasted with copper slag for the return trip quantities of it can be found on the Llandudno beaches along with ballast rocks from far flung ports.

Limestone quarrying also became important and several quarry jetties were built. One on the site of the Grand Hotel served the Elephants Cave Quarry. Traces of this jetty can still be seen. In 1848 Captain Brookes sailed from there with a cargo of limestone for Liverpool but his boat was wrecked. His body was found on the shore at Hoylake and was buried in St Georges Churchyard Llandudno. It is said that he had reached the shore alive but was robbed and left to die.

The great Victorian transformation began after the 1809 reclamation of the Morfa Rhianedd salt marsh and the building of roads across it to the Great Orme. At first it was suggested that the planned new town should be called Port Wrexham and a deepwater harbour, St Georges Harbour built in the Bay. However after a meeting which began on the North Shore between an Architect and Lord Mostyn a prestigious resort was decided upon taking its name from the church on top of the Great Orme - Llandudno

So the hotels began to be built, but the only way for visitors to arrive was by sea. Paddle steamers would tie up to a buoy anchored to large limestone block dug into the beach, which can still be seen. This meant that passengers had to be brought close ashore in small boats and then carried. Stalwart locals and intrepid Victorian adventurers!



Arriving at Llandudno

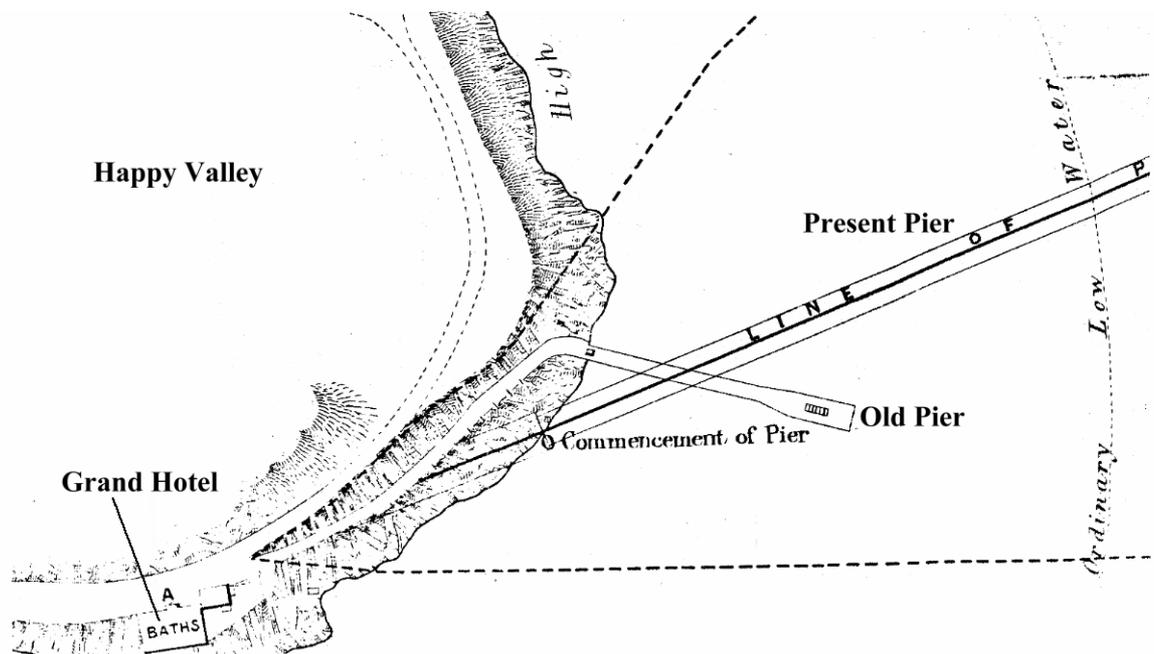
Building timber for the town was brought back from the Baltic and landed on the North Shore, as a return cargo, by slate ships operating from North Wales.

At this time the development of the town could have taken a mediocre turn if it had not been for the determination of Lady Henrietta Augusta Mostyn that it should be a place to be proud of. There were money problems but the appointment by Chancery Court 1851 of architect and surveyor George Felton helped clear the way.



*Slate ships landing building timber from the Baltic at Llandudno.
Clawd y Gorad fish weir can be seen as a dark line running from the hotel on the left to the first boat on the right*

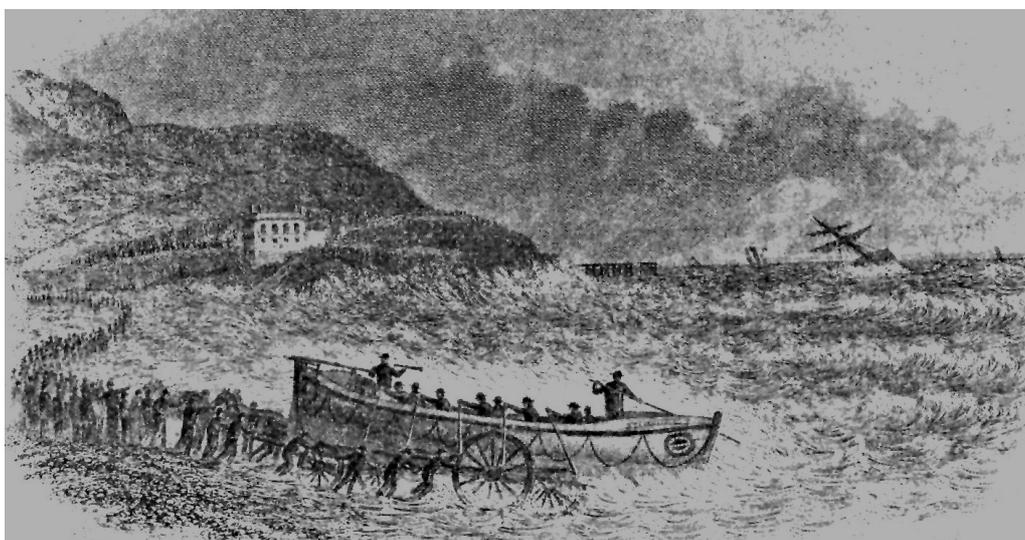
It is a telling comment that the George Felton, a freemason, ensured that some eight miles of drains, with mile long outfall pipes to discharge waste water at sea, were laid in the earliest stages of the town's construction. Most of the levels for this work being surveyed in 1852 by him as part of his active involvement in the Improvement Bill for Llandudno. During his time in office he laid out most of Llandudno designing and building Neville Crescent and most of the beautiful curving sea front hotels and promenade.



*Plan of the Old Pier overlain with the 1870 Design for the New Pier
[Courtesy of Ron Williams]*

Transport links to the town quickly improved with the arrival of the railway and the building of the first pier in 1858. It was badly damaged in 1859 in the hurricane that also sank the Royal Charter at Moelfre with great loss of life. A reporter commenting upon the damage at Llandudno wrote:

'There is a vessel at this moment laying at anchor, about four miles from shore, without masts or rigging, with two men and a boy on board and we have no life boat or any craft fit to go out to them.'



Launching the Sisters Memorial.

Between the 'stricken vessel and the' Headland it is possible to see the damaged first pier

There was obviously a need for a Lifeboat in the town and one was donated by two sisters in memory of a third hence its name 'The Sisters Memorial'. [The son of George Felton, George F. Felton was one of the first secretaries of the lifeboat station.]

The pier was repaired and in use until 1875 when it was replaced by a larger one. Remains of the first pier can be found beneath it. Building a pier had the same effect for a 19th century Welsh resort as building an airport has had for Spanish coastal villages such as Benidorm. Thousands arrived by steamer for holidays away from the industrial cities, to take in the wonderful scenery, enjoy themselves and breath clean air.

So buy an ice cream, walk on the beach, think of the countless thousands who have wandered there before; Ice Age hunters, people in the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, Romans, the Celtic Christians, Vikings, Victorians and be the newest part of the history of this beautiful place.