

The Commotes of Llŷn – Medieval Administration

During the Middle Ages, Gwynedd was divided for administration purposes into four *cantrefi* ('hundreds') and Llŷn was one of them. In the C12th / 13th during the reign of Gruffudd ap Cynan and Owain Gwynedd the cantref was divided into three commotes:

One of them was **Dinllaen**, and that's where the name Porthdinllaen comes from. The name in the early C13th was 'Dynthlayn', namely a fort (*caer*) + 'Llaen' (an Irish personal name) which referred to the coastal fort on Porthdinllaen headland (SH 275416).

The name Porthdinllaen suggests this was the main harbour for the commote, but the *maerdref* for the commote and the prince's court were in Nefyn. Dinllaen includes the parishes of Pistyll, Nefyn, Edern, Ceidio, Tudweiliog, Llaniestyn, Llandudwen, Boduan and Llannon.

Cymyddaen at the far end of the peninsula includes the parishes of Penllech, Llangwnnadr, Bryncroes, Llandygwning, Llanengan, Rhiw, Llanfaelrhys and Aberdaron. This commote is named after the yellow rock of Llŷn, *Maen Melyn Llŷn* which is on the sea cliff in Uwchmynydd (SH 139252) and the *maerdref* or administrative headquarters was in Neigwl. The prince would come to his court in the *maerdref* at times, where rents and tolls would be paid in money or by doing work – transporting or repairing.

In Deneio, Pwllheli these days, there was the *maerdref* of Cafflogion **Afloegion** (Cafflogion) and names like Henllys and Gadlys suggest a link (llys = court). The commote was on the eastern side of Llŷn and included the parishes of Carnguwch, Deneio, Llanfihangel Bachllaeth, Penrhos, Botwnnog, Mellteyrn, Llanbedrog and Llangian.

The commote was established by Afloeg, who was one of the sons of Cunedda from the *Hen Ogledd* (Old North) and the father of Eternus, patron saint of Edern.

There were a hundred tref units (individual farms) in a *cantref* (hundred) and names like Hendrefor and Llaur y Dref were used.

The Welsh nobleman lived in his own tref at one end of the estate, the *pentref*, which has given us the name Cefn Pentref, and Pentref in Botwnnog.

A holding of land which had been inherited was called a *gafael* and that gives us the name *Gyfelan* in Llangwnnadr.

Although Wales was under the English crown's control following the conquest by Edward I, the Welsh administrative system continued for some time. But Llŷn came to be administered as part of Caernarfonshire and soon Nefyn and Pwllheli came into existence.



The Development of Porthdinllaen



William Alexander Maddocks

The sea was the best way to transport goods in and out of Llŷn in the days before the railway reached Pwllheli in 1867 and the roads of Llŷn were improved. The trade in exporting herring from Nefyn was thriving, and ships regularly brought coal and lime to the smaller ports.

Thomas Pennant visited Llŷn in the 1770s and he recorded that it produced corn, the grazing land was excellent and 3,000 black cattle were sold every year. There would be exports of oats, barley, butter and cheese.

The most important port for this on the north coast of Llŷn was Porthdinllaen (harbour in Dinllaen), because it was safe and convenient. Smaller ports such as Porth Sgaden, Porth Colmon and Porth Ferin were also used, but in Porthdinllaen jetties and storehouses had been built, with convenient roads to get down to the beach.

Pwllheli harbour was developed by building cobs with the intention of developing trade there as well as expanding the town and protecting it against floods.

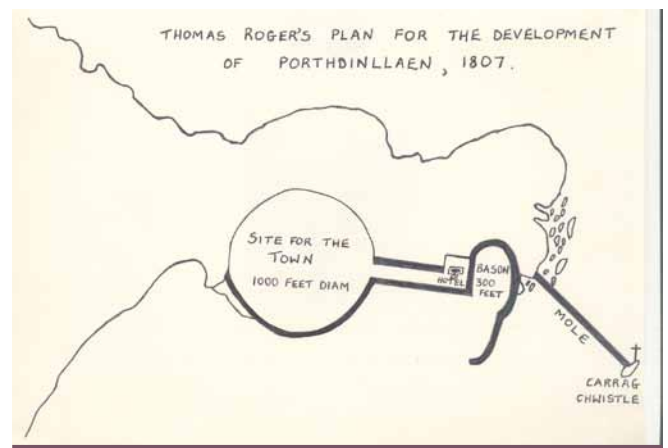
But astute businessmen had been looking at Porthdinllaen, and William Alexander Maddocks in particular wanted to achieve his vision of building Porthmadog cob, building a Turnpike Road and developing Porthdinllaen as the main port to connect London and Dublin.

The 'Porthdinllaen Turnpike Trust' and 'Porthdinllaen Harbour Company' were established early in the 1800s and were partly successful. But when it became a competition between Porthdinllaen and Holyhead, it was Holyhead that won.

The village of Porthdinllaen developed, that is, Henborth as well as Pen Cei and Porthdinllaen peninsula to the north and Pen Cei and Bwlch to the south.

There was a need to protect ships and their crews, and Porthdinllaen Lifeboat and Coastguard stations were established.

Porthdinllaen Harbour Company



Thomas Rogers's plan for the proposed development (1807)

In 1802 there was a meeting at the Crown & Anchor, Pwllheli to discuss roads that would link Porthdinllaen and the rest of Llŷn, using a network of turnpike roads. The 'Porthdinllaen Turnpike Trust' was established. The Porthdinllaen Harbour Bill was approved by Parliament in 1806 and a lease agreement made between the Porthdinllaen Harbour Company and Cefnamwlch estate, for the beach and foreshore. One of the prominent men in this campaign was William Alexander Maddocks, the main thinker behind building Porthmadog Cob.

This campaign was partly due to the Acts of Union between the Parliaments of Great Britain and Ireland (1800) to give Members of Parliament for Ireland a shorter and more convenient journey between Dublin and London. It was 30 miles shorter than the journey to Holyhead, and would avoid having to cross the afon Conwy and the Menai Strait.

King George I had presented £600 in the early C18th to build a pier at Porthdinllaen, but that work was not completed. When Lewis Morris drew up plans of the ports in 1748 he recommended that facilities here needed to be improved. When Hyde-Hall visited in 1809-11 the pier was

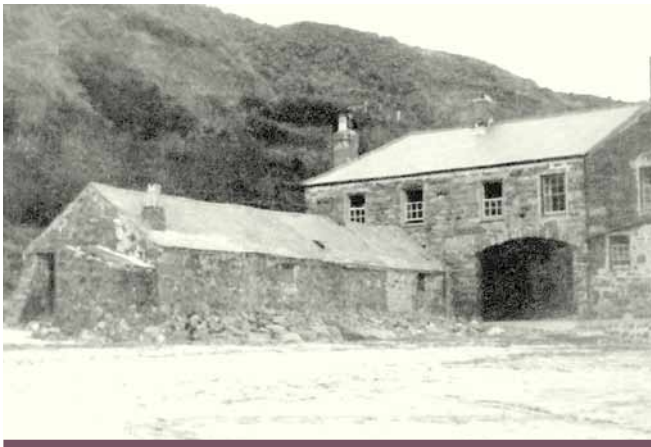


providing shelter for boats. Another prominent man in the campaign was Thomas Parry Jones Parry of Madryn.

William Alexander Maddocks went ahead with his intention to build the Cob (embankment) across the Traeth Mawr and build a turnpike road and put up tollgates. By 1808 the road was completed and work on the Cob had started. It was completed in 1811.

Thomas Rogers, a specialist in lighthouses, was given the work in 1807 of planning Porthdinllaen harbour, including building a pier 300 feet long from Carreg yr Afr (SH 27804210) to Carreg Chwislen, (SH 28184223) creating a quay for storehouses, a lighthouse, harbour and hotel. The work started the following year. He also had further ambitious plans to achieve.

Porthdinllaen v Holyhead



'Whitehall' – the name to create strong links between Dublin, Porthdinllaen and London

There was keen competition developing between Porthdinllaen and Holyhead, with strong arguments for creating a port in Llŷn to link London and Dublin. But developing Holyhead would mean the ships' captains from Holyhead having to be rehoused, and that went against Porthdinllaen. Enthusiasm and support developed in favour of Holyhead, and there were strong practical arguments; so much so that a Select Committee in 1808 recommended to the Parliament in London that £10,000 should be given as support to develop the port of Holyhead. That won the vote, by 121 votes to 42. So there is no truth in the story that Holyhead only won by one vote.

Any plans and practical desire to develop Porthdinllaen waned very soon afterwards. But a straight turnpike road was built to Morfa Nefyn and William Alexander Maddocks managed to achieve his main dream of building the Cob in Porthmadog and gain thousands of acres of land from the sea at Traeth Mawr.

There were a number of attempts to develop and improve the harbour at Porthdinllaen in the C19th and a number of requests that Jones Parry, Madryn improve the pier. So many ships were damaged because of its very poor condition. But nothing came of it and when Jones Parry died in 1835, because of lack of care there were years of rent owing to the Cefnamwlch estate.

There were a number of schemes to build a railway to Porthdinllaen and improve the pier, but none of them were carried out. The 'Nevin and Porthdinllaen Light Railway' scheme intended to have one running from Pwllheli to Porthdinllaen, with a branch through Ty'n Coed to Nefyn, but nothing came of that. Then in 1913 there was a plan to build a railway from the Caernarfon direction to Porthdinllaen, for exporting slate, but that failed due to the First World War. In 1924 the G.W.R. were keen to extend their line to Abersoch, and to Nefyn through Cors Geirch (marsh + oats). The increase in tourism called for that kind of development, but once again it did not happen.

Cefnamwlch bought the shares of the harbour company in 1912 and they were the owners of Porthdinllaen until 1994. By now it belongs to the National Trust.

Henborth (The Village of Porthdinllaen) (SH 27575154)



In 1994 the Cefnamwlch estate transferred the village of Porthdinllaen (harbour of Dinllaen) to the National Trust, safeguarding it for the future. It was once a small fishing village on the sea shore, and like Nefyn it depended very much on herring fishing. The bay is wide and sheltered from all winds apart from one from the north-east. It was a safe and convenient haven for centuries since Caernarfon Bar and the 'Swillies' in the Menai Strait made it very difficult to get in and out of Caernarfon, and the coast of Llŷn is very rocky.



The small cottages to be seen there are part of the original village, but the larger houses were built at the beginning of the C19th, which was an age of enterprise in its history. This was the time of the Porthdinllaen Harbour Company.

Goods would be imported, for example clay pipes to Porthdinllaen in 1523 on the *Speedwell*. They may well have been for John Griffith, Cefnamwlch – he had a palace on the beach.

In the mid-C19th when Porthdinllaen was at its busiest as a port, 80 people lived there. The men were all either sailors, fishermen or shipbuilding craftsmen. This time of considerable activity continued for a century from the 1770s onwards.

The most prominent building on the beach, and the most popular, is Tŷ Coch. This inn is in the most attractive location possible. Next door to it is Tŷ Coch Bach.

There was another inn, Tŷ Gwyn, on the beach near Tŷ Coch and another again at the eastern end of Henborth (old + harbour). That was called the 'Whitehall' and the name was chosen so as to appeal to Members of Parliament from Ireland. There is an arch leading to the back of the building, and the name is carved into the masonry.

Tŷ Coch (SH 27574149)



Tŷ Coch and Tŷ Coch Bach

The original name of the Tŷ Coch (house + red) Inn was Plas y Borth (palace of the harbour) and it is the main tourist attraction in Porthdinllaen. The current building was built using red bricks – which explains the name. Captain Thomas Owen, a postmaster from Waterford, brought them here as ballast from the Netherlands in 1823. He had taken a 99 year lease in 1771 on part of the beach, for 10/- a year. There was an earlier building on the site, and signs of its windows can be seen in the cellar, and a fireplace. Thomas Owen also built Tŷ Coch Bach (house + red + small).

Tŷ Coch was the vicarage for the parish of Edern, and the Reverend John Parry Jones-Parry, one of the Madryn family, was the vicar from 1822 to 1863. He lived here, but when the new vicarage was built in Edern in 1828 he moved there and left the maid, Catherine Ellis to run Tŷ Coch as an inn. The vicar's son in turn came to own the Porthdinllaen Harbour Company, and he sold the assets to the Cefnamwlch estate.

A very prominent person who ran the tavern at one time was Mrs Jones, Tŷ Coch. She married for the second time in 1868 and moved from Caernarfon with her family to live there. Following the death of her husband she married again, to Captain William Jones of Nefyn. As well as being the innkeeper she also ran a nautical school and was the harbour master for Porthdinllaen – the only woman to do so in the whole of Britain. Jane Jones died in yn 1933 and was buried in Edern cemetery.

Owen Jones was another person who kept the Tŷ Coch, and he was captain of the lifeboat, M.O.Y.E. in the 1930s. This was the first motor boat.

Pen Cei and Trwyn Porthdinllaen (SH 27754165 & 27704200)



Pen Cei

Pen Cei (end of the quay) (SH 27704200) is between Henborth (old harbour) and the peninsula - Trwyn Porthdinllaen. By now there is a prominent white house on the site but there was once a dock here and King George I contributed towards building it. The quay extending out to sea was built using rock from the peninsula, but it was never completed. On the shore, in the quay, there are the remains of a blacksmith's forge that would have been so busy a century or two ago.

Between Pen Cei and Trwyn Porthdinllaen is the lifeboat station (SH 27804192), above a pleasant beach. Thomas Rogers' plans from 1807 show that a hotel was to be built here, at the base of the cliff, but that never happened.



The Porthdinllaen Lifeboat Service was established in 1864. It was the bravery of Robert Rees and other men that prompted the Rev. Owen Lloyd Williams, vicar of Nefyn, to write to the establishment drawing attention to the dangers of the sea on the north coast of Llŷn. As a result, the first lifeboat, the 'Cotton Sheppard' came here, travelling on the railway to Pwllheli and then sailing to Porthdinllaen. That was the beginning of a century and a half of voluntary service and a number of boats have been stationed here, saving lives in menacing storms in Caernarfon Bay.

A bigger boat arrived here in 2012 and the stone lifeboat shed had to be demolished and a larger one built in 2013/14.

On the highest part of Trwyn Porthdinllaen stands the Coastguard Hut, near the famous golf course.

Bwlch Brudyn and Pen Cim (SH 28224084 & 27674132)



Pen Cim and Warws Dora

The road comes down to the beach from Morfa Nefyn at Bwlch (Bwlch Brudyn) (SH 28224084). There were two platforms here for unloading ships, and a lime kiln and coal yard near the end of the road. There was another platform for loading bricks from the brickworks at the top of the cliff near Penrhos (where the National Trust car park is now) between 1868 and the end of 1906. After the tall chimney was demolished, the rubble was used as a foundation for the road leading to the Golf Club.

In the sea, about 20m from the shore, is Maen Brudyn. There are romantic explanations this rock has something to do with astronomy and that it only becomes visible at low tide in March. But the name has an Irish origin, 'bratan' for salmon, although it can be a name in Moelfre for a guillemot, or a personal name!

It was suggested by Thomas Owen, who was very involved with the development of Porthdinllaen, that Henblas could be turned into units for captains and sailors who called in at Porthdinllaen. It was at one time an inn called 'Tanrallt' (under the cliff).

Pen Cim (SH 27674132) is the small peninsula on the beach that divides Porthdinllaen bay. The water is deeper here, and it was an ideal place from the early C19th onwards for loading and unloading goods from ships. On the peninsula is Warws Dora (warehouse of Dora). The 'Dora' was a steamer that brought goods here regularly, but it sank in the Atlantic in 1917. Another one that did the same work was the 'Telephone'.

There were another two warehouses here but they were destroyed, and by now there are two summerhouses.

The trade declined in the second half of the C19th after the railway reached

Pwllheli and the roads improved.

*'Y llongwr melyn wrth y craen
a'i sgwrs rhwng 'speidiau;
daw môr byd mawr i Bortinllaen,
a'i ryfeddodau.'*

J Glyn Davies

Trade in Llŷn



Pen Cob, Pwllheli in the train and buses era

Travelling on land was very difficult before the turnpike roads were built, from Porthdinllaen to Boduan and the branch towards Pwllheli and Porthmadog, in the early C19th. The turnpike road from Llanbedrog to Pwllheli was built in 1824.



In Llŷn, there would only be footpaths and tracks for donkey carts, but there wasn't much need to wander far because there were fairs in Aberdaron, Sarn, Nefyn and Pwllheli. At the fairs, farm produce would be sold, farmhands and maids would be hired, and stalls selling crockery and sweets would be popular.

There was a demand for cattle from Llŷn and the drovers would take them long distances to the big markets, following the drovers' routes. Animals from Llŷn would be gathered together in Sarn Mellteyrn, Botwnnog, or Llanengan and Llangian, and walked through Rhydyclafdy and Efailnewydd to Y Ffôr, avoiding crossing the marshland at Pwllheli. They would meet others coming from the direction of Nefyn. Cattle would be shod in Efailnewydd to help them walk on the harder roads.

It was often much more convenient to travel by sea. The residents of Enlli / Bardsey would often be more familiar with the city of Liverpool than some nearby areas in Llŷn. There is mention of a girl from Uwchmynydd who would go around the area collecting eggs and take them on a sloop from Aberdaron to sell in Liverpool.

The biggest trading ships would come to the port of Pwllheli which was the main port on the southern coast of Llŷn. Porthdinllaen harbour developed on the north coast. Ships could bring coal and limestone, unloading on the beach just as they did on other beaches. Local traders, carriers and farmers would meet them on the shore.

But the smaller ports were also busy, for example Porth Ysgaden, Porth Colmon and Porth Ferin.



Follow the Story

Find out more about the area's industrial past by visiting the Llŷn Maritime Museum, Nefyn – Learn more about Llŷn's maritime heritage by visiting the museum housed in St Mary's Church.