



# Bowline Climbing Club

## Our Club 'Hut': Dinorwic Mill Cottage

Dave Unwin, 2024



*Courtesy of Katherine Mahar-Stephenson of Vermont, USA we have this photograph of her great grand mother. Laura Parry Evans, who is with her eldest daughter Mair outside Dinorwic Mill Cottage in 1910. It is recognisably what is now our club hut. (For more on this link, see the Historical Footnote)*

### The context

In the early post Second World War years, the UK saw a relatively large number of local climbing clubs established. These provided a means by which beginners could access the wisdom of more experienced climbers, transport to the hills in times when this wasn't generally available, and for many some form of cheap accommodation when they had got there. Often the latter would be in barns, youth hostels and the like, but in addition some clubs purchased and developed their own premises in the hills that, irrespective of their actual character, became known as *club huts*. Here, I describe how one such local climbing club, Leicester's *Bowline Climbing Club* (BCC), acquired and developed its own *hut* at *Dinorwic Mill Cottage* in the village of Brynrefail, Arfon.

## 1968: Acquiring a Ruin

By the early 1960s, in addition to camping and sleeping in barns, the BCC had begun to use huts belonging to other climbing clubs. The idea of owning its own first appears in a club *Newsletter* for March 1965 in a report of a meet on 29-31<sup>st</sup> January based on *Tyn Lon*, the *Ceunant Club* hut in Nant Peris:

*'(some) walked around Llyn Padarn admiring all kinds of antique wonders and cottages in various stages of dilapidation. They returned with great enthusiasm for the idea of buying a club hut'*

Despite this, discussion at the Annual General Meeting reported in the May 1965 *Newsletter* left this idea:

*'in a negative state.'*

Acquiring a hut requires confidence in the club's future and some cash in the bank. Although the club had been in existence since 1953, only by 1968 did both conditions seem to have been met. An energetic committee, chaired by Peter Thompson with John Davies, Sue Drinkall, David "Dinger" Bell, Frank Galbraith and Roger Wiltshire, was able to report in the *Newsletter* for May of that year that:

*"we now have enough cash in hand to start thinking about some serious ventures, which as far as the Bowline is concerned can only mean one thing, The Hut. Not just a hut any longer but The Hut".*

The 1968 Annual General Meeting of the club passed a motion proposed by Sue Drinkall mandating the incoming committee to raise funds to obtain a hut and to set up a small sub-committee, initially herself and Roger Wiltshire, to explore options. Interestingly, I can find no evidence of discussion about where in the hills to look for a site. It seems to have been assumed that any hut had to be in Snowdonia, rather than the Peak District, which in view of the organised meets at that time would have been just as logical. Perhaps the availability of affordable property in the then-depressed former slate quarrying area around Llanberis and Bethesda played a part in this, but, even so, another *Newsletter* reported somewhat discouragingly that:

*A start has already been made in looking at property. At first sight the prospect is discouraging with derelict sites at £300 (£4,433 at 2024 prices) and places with half a roof and two walls in the region of £450 (£6,650). However, even if these could be feasible if (a) nothing else is available and (b) a lot of money and labour is available.*

So it remained until October 1968 when, for all of £300 (£4,433), the club acquired a ruined cottage in Brynrefail that was at the time in use as a garage.

The circumstances surrounding the purchase remain moderately controversial, but the fact is that club secretary, the late Frank Galbraith (who died in 2023), purchased some land on which there was a ruined cottage (then in use as a garage)

for his own use. The purchase was at a very large *fire-sale* auction in which a great many properties belonging to the Assheton-Smith family's *Vaynol Estate* that at its height consisted of some 150km<sup>2</sup> of land and over 1,500 tenancies, were sold. At that time, I was living near Aberystwyth in Mid-Wales, visiting Snowdonia fairly frequently and can remember the excitement that this sale generated amongst the climbing community. In the same sale, a number of climbers and climbing clubs also purchased houses, cottages, and other assorted and unloved ruins.

In 2017 Pete Thompson shared his memory of what happened and gives some hint of the controversy that surrounds the purchase:

*I can remember being with Bowline members on two occasions searching for possible Club Huts, but to no avail, so when Frank Galbraith told the committee about the forthcoming sale of properties from the Vaynol Estate we were very interested. As Frank announced that he was looking to buy a property on his own account it was agreed in committee that Roger Wiltshire and Paul Barrett would visit the area that the sale covered to see what was on offer and in our price range. I think the report was pessimistic and apart from Frank no other Bowline member was able to attend the auction. The auction took place on Saturday, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1968 and soon after Frank told me that he had bought a property and that he had a proposition for the Club. I was chairman at the time and called an early committee meeting. It was held at Roger and Denise's home; apart from Roger Wiltshire, Paul Barrett and myself I cannot recall who else was representing the Club. Frank's proposition was that he would build a bungalow on the land between the Mill and the end terrace house and sell the Mill building, less his building plot, to the Club, which could be converted to a Hut. Frank left the room allowing a free discussion. Paul and to some extent Roger were much against the offer arguing that Frank should have given the Mill and the land adjacent to the Club hut for the price that was paid for it. Frank's reply was that he had told us that he was buying on his own account and why had we not been at the sale! In other word take or leave it. To me the offer had lots to commend it: we wanted a building to convert, it was in a good location and we could afford the asking price of £300. I accepted Frank's offer. Sometime in early 1969 the contract was signed and Paul, Roger and myself were appointed Trustees. (Pers.com. Peter Thompson Nov. 2017)*

The entire lot included the ruin the club bought from him together with land to the west between it and a terrace of more modern houses on which Frank built the bungalow that now sits on the site. At the time, it did not include what is now the camp site on the eastern side and, as the photograph below shows, the building was pretty much a ruin. As Pete Thompson recognised, the location down a quiet lane, *Tai Felin* (Mill Houses), and accessible by car from Llanberis, then the social centre of climbing in Eryri, was absolutely ideal. The 1968 timing was also almost perfect, early enough to be affordable but late enough to benefit from the tourism based revival of the town in the 1970s. The years since 1968 have seen the old village school become an outdoor pursuits centre, then lie derelict for some years before its renovation and opening in 2004 as *Y Caban Cyf*, the area's best café. The same years have seen the terrace of cottages on *Tai Felin* fall into and out of disrepair, in some cases several times, but the hut has been continuously improved over the same period.

Although almost certainly at the time it was not realized by those involved, the site is also a short stroll away from some of Snowdonia's best *bouldering* at Fachwen. Jim Perrin's *A True and Authentic History and Description of Fachwen (Climber and Hillwalker* 1989, reprinted in his 1990 compilation of essays that had the title *Yes*,

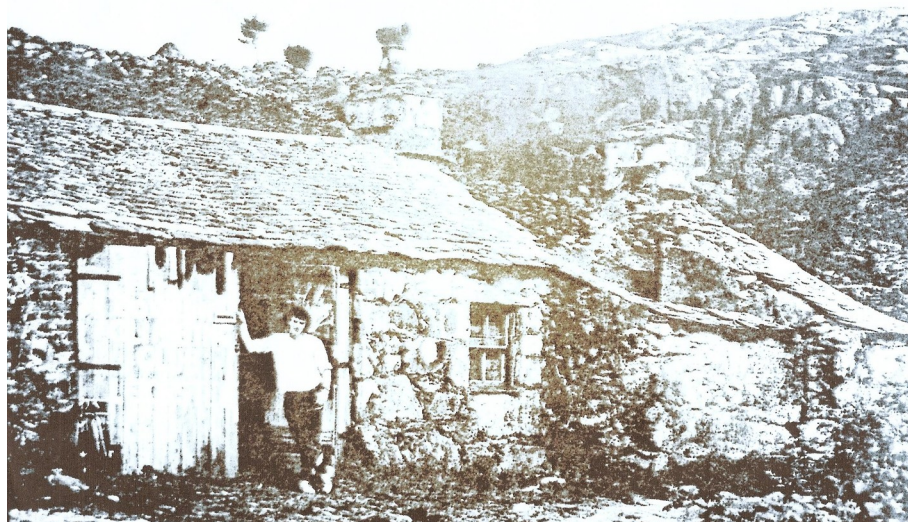
*to Dance*) does exactly what it says on the tin. In it, Jim claims to have first visited the boulders with the notorious Al Harris in 1967, which probably dates the start of any bouldering at the site, although before then *Lion Rock* above may well have been used before by one or other of the local outdoor pursuits centres.

Making this purchase was a clear commitment by Pete and Frank that the club would continue and develop the site as its base. In addition to this contribution, and as documented in the Club's history from 1951-1976, they were the main driving force behind the resolution of the various crises in the club in the 1960s: without their inputs, I doubt that we would have much of a BCC today.

The December 1969 club *Newsletter* reported the purchase with a note that

*'The dawn of 1970 brings a new era for the club, ..., we hope to be well on the way to getting our own hut well and truly sorted out'.*

It didn't turn out to be that easy. Planning permission to convert it into a club hut was obtained in 1970, but it took at least another decade and a half to convert it into a comfortable base for climbing in North Wales.



*Early days at Dinorwic Mill Cottage. The gentleman leaning on the 'door' is Tony Gowland who thinks that the photograph was taken at Easter 1971. This is much as the hut was when it was purchased*

Although lots of people *dossed* in the hut in those early days, for example a *Newsletter* for 1972 notes that:

*'some members are arranging to spend Christmas at the hut'*

the first formal club hut meet of which records remain took place in March 1976, a full eight years after the purchase. Clearly, spending a weekend in the hut needed some indifference to discomfort, and may explain the curious fact that no official meets seem to have been based there. Bob Crosby (Pers. Com.) describes the hut on his first visit in 1970:

*We then moved up to the club hut on the Saturday night. It was just as the photo, with the sleeping section burnt down and the big double doors. There was an O/S toilet in a shed, (where the kitchen is now) and a small lean to kitchen at the back, but its entrance from the main room was bricked up. It was a soil floor still in the main lounge.*

Perhaps then it was just too squalid to entertain as base, or perhaps meets there were common enough as not to merit official status? There is a clue in a 1970 *Newsletter* entry in which, after a wet weekend in North Wales, its author writes:

*'suggest campsite and to make hut useable'*

I think that my first visit to the hut was with Pete Meads and Mike Brady in June 1975, the day before Pete and I climbed *White Slab* and then *Black Cleft* on Clogwyn du'r Arddu, my best day ever on British rock and a combination that nobody seems ever to have repeated (or at least reported to the UKC website). The excitement of that day may well have led to my failing to record anything in my climbing diary about the hut itself. A year later early in March 1976, after an enjoyable day of sleet and wet snow on the north ridge of Tryfan, also with Pete Meads, the same diary provides the first definite evidence of a visit:

*'an early retreat with lots of tea in the Bowline hut'*

### **1972 - 1980: Making it Useable**

Work to make the hut *useable* started in the early 1970s with a lot of the drive coming from Alan Swindale, Geoff Hine, Bob Crosby, John Dybdahl and others. In 1972 the double doors seen in the photograph were replaced by a bricked wall and single door, water was piped in to a single sink, a roof was put on a small outhouse in preparation for its being used as a toilet, and, after a fire, the burnt out roof shown on the photograph below was replaced.



*Hut work, most probably 1973/4. Alan Swindale is the person on the roof, Phil Tyler is on the ladder and one of the other two is said to be Mike Brady but neither he nor I know which*



In the same year a concrete floor replaced the earth floor of the sleeping area.

Although individuals worked hard in the 1970s to improve the hut, it was apparent that a major investment of time and money was required. Even as late as 1979, the hut remained more-or-less a shell, with cold running water, some bunks and a roof, but not much else, other than the occasional rat, for company. Clear needs were for proper sanitation to replace a squalid outside chemical toilet, a decent kitchen, and a wash room. It was realised that sanitation could be provided by piping waste to a septic tank sited in land to the east; in preparation in 1978 the Committee approved the purchase of land at the side of the building at a cost of £450 (£2,376 at 2024 prices) intended for a soak-away for sewage and as a potential campsite.



*The hut in 1977 before the major works.. These photographs were taken by Katherine Mahar Stephenson (q.v.) who visited the site in that year*

What was needed was a professional builder, cash and a cavalier attitude to financing. The stage was set for major change in the summer of 1980, when, with financial support of around £2,500 (£10,365) from a mix of agencies in the Midlands (*City of Leicester, City of Leicester Sports and Recreation Advisory Council, and East Midlands Sports Council*) the club employed a local builder to build on a toilet and kitchen block, and, for the first time provide proper sanitation. The total cost of this work was £5,800 (£24,047) of which the club had to find £1,500 (£6,219). This was at a time when the club accounts showed cash assets of just £672 (£2,786)! Much of the drive towards finding a builder and getting this work done came from ex-*Leicester Association of Mountaineers* (LAM) member the late Ken Vickers with local assistance from none other than the late, truly great, Joe Brown. As Club treasurer Roy Dick played a vital role in maximising what was in the bank and as Club Secretary my role lay in liaison with the three grant awarding bodies and with the builder once the work had started, and for much of the time club chair Phil Davies moved things along.

Raising the extra money was a huge club team effort. In the pre-internet and climbing wall age the club met every Wednesday at a nominated city pub where funds were raised by a weekly collection that was additional to the very modest annual subscription. Further cash was obtained by persuading friend of the club the late Doug Scott – the first Englishman to summit Everest – to give a very high

profile talk in the De Montfort Hall that, with a marketing campaign led by Graham Richmond, raised enough money to provide the financial security necessary to enable work on the hut to be commissioned. The lecture attracted a huge audience, said by Doug many years later to be his largest ever and, for the record, Doug's fee was so low, essentially a gift to the club, that the club recorded a profit of £1,280 (£5,306). The work in summer of 1980 added a toilet and kitchen block as well as proper sanitation by way of a soak away sewage disposal on the east.

So, some 12 years after its purchase, the club had made the hut *useable*. It remained to make it *comfortable*.

### **1983 to 2018: Making it *Comfortable***



*The club hut the end of the 1980s*

Further into the decade, in 1983, the club Chair the late Ray Dring, like Ken Vickers and others also a refugee from the collapsed LAM, and his business partner Bill Birtles re-roofed the bedroom and panelled all the internal walls. Terry Vaughan laid a proper bitumen floor, and Pete Bottrill installed, luxury of luxuries after a wet day on the hill, central heating. In 1989 more work by Pete replaced an old pot-belly stove fire with a gas fired boiler, removed a water tank that needed to be drained down after every winter visit, and built a drying cupboard.

So, by 1990 the hut had been made *comfortable*.

From around 1990 to 2017/18, very little work was done on the hut until, under the driving force of hut *guru* Paul Parker, a new round of internal and external work started. For some time it had been obvious that more secure storage space was needed, a need addressed in 2018 by the excavation of a level platform behind the hut for a large storage shed and overnight mountain bike store. Likewise, the old false ceiling in the lounge that concealed a multitude of sins was removed and the 1980s panelling was replaced by more thermally efficient covering. Both were fixed in a new round of spending, with the accounts showing a total of over £15,000 (£18,901) spent on the refurbishment. Finally, in August 2024 we

contributed our share of the costs of tarmacadam to cover the lane outside the hut and the car parking/turning area.



*The hut in August 2024*

So, there you have it. In half a century the BCC has converted the ruin that was *Dinorwic Mill Cottage* into a *useable* and *comfortable* climbing *club hut*, featuring a shared bedroom with an alpine style sleeping platform and two bunk beds together providing sleeping for a dozen or so people, a decently sized lounge with two refectory tables and comfortable sofas and arm chairs, a modern kitchen with cookers, fridges, microwave and so on, a toilet area with two sinks, a much-used shower, and two lavatories. Not including all the costs of early work on the hut, or the roofing and the original panelling done by Ray Dring and Bill Birtles, Pete Botrills' central heating and gas boiler, or any smaller items met from the clubs recurrent budget the total expenditure on making the hut *comfortable* since 1968 amounts to *at least* £56,000 (at 2024 prices).

The question that arises is:

*Is this enough?*

## **Using the Hut**

From time to time on wet days spent in the hut, I used to count the number of *bed nights* (one *bed night* is one person sleeping for one night) recorded in the hut occupancy books and have these data for the 21 years from 1998 to 2019. The annual totals are surprisingly consistent, showing a slow rise from around 500-550 bed nights at the turn of the millennium to 600-700 immediately before the COVID shutdown of 2019. Although it isn't all that well marked, there is a weak annual cycle with less use in the winter months (around 40/month) and more (around 60-70/month) during the high summer. Post COVID, things seem to be returning to an annual usage of around 650 bed nights.



Given the terms of our 1970 planning permission, designed to ensure that the hut isn't in permanent occupancy, and assuming a capacity constraint of around 12 beds/night available for two weekend nights each week (when use might get close to capacity), this equates to around a half of the total available capacity. In other words, there is a long way to go before the hut might be seen as too small. Size matters, so perhaps it is the right size for a club that at maximum has had a membership of around 125. Think of other huts that you might know. Too big a property and too small a club is a recipe for endless maintenance work and a lot of work and worry associated with the necessary hiring out the extra space (e.g. the 46 bed Chamois hut at Waun Fawr? The Barrow Club hut at Coppermines?). Too small a hut and too big a club is a recipe for overcrowding and lack of essential maintenance (e.g. Ynys Ettws and/or Helyg?).

What perhaps might nowadays be called into question is the location. In 1968, and throughout the later years of the last century, Llanberis was the epicentre of British rock climbing. Saturday nights in the *Padarn Lake* were the place to see and be seen. Although there were frequent forays north to the Lakes and Scotland, most of the BCC action involved days in the Peak and weekends based on the hut. Nowadays, fashion has introduced a whole new range of climbing venues and styles made possible by improved protection devices and a more relaxed attitude to the use of bolts that in turn has greatly widened the geography in which we climb. In 1968 it would be quite rare to drive down Llanberis Pass on a Saturday afternoon without there being teams climbing somewhere on one side or the other. Nowadays, the main cliffs are often rope-less, the impression being that Llanberis is no longer the sport's centre. Perhaps having a hut in Eryri will become an encumbrance?

There is something else about our hut use that needs to be recorded, if only in the hope that the tradition it exemplifies will continue. Whether we like it or not, when using the hut we are occasional visitors who do not speak the language, are prone to arriving noisily late at night, and, from time to time, to exuberant behaviour in what for us is a *holiday* place. Brynrefail is a small, quiet, Welsh-speaking *working* village that, the excellent *Y Caban* aside, has seen better days. The capacity for conflict is obvious, but in over half a century of our being there, I can think of only one incident that might be seen to be hostile to the club.

There are many reasons for this, not least of which is the way that we have always tried hard to be a good neighbour and have paid without question any requests for funding to keep the lane in reasonable condition, but the main one has been our friendship with our neighbours in the Jones family who own the farm at the end of the lane.



*An evening drink with our neighbour Edrin Jones, sometime in the 1990s.  
(L to R; Dave Toach, Jan Griffiths, Edrin, Paul Parker, Kath Parker)*

In particular, Edrin Jones has been a great friend of the club who has kept his eye on the hut during the many days when it has been unoccupied, as has his son David who has recently bought the bungalow next door. Both have always been welcome in the hut to socialise and to share a drink or two. Let's keep it that way. It costs nothing to attempt a friendly (correctly pronounced) *Bore da, Noswaith dda* or even, at the right time, *Nadolig llawen* or *Blwyddyn newydd dda*.

There is a school of thought that says that having a hut makes climbing clubs go soft, spending their time maintaining and 'improving' it, and having virtually all their meets there, such that they lose the sense of adventure into the unknown that forms the essence of our sport. The alternative view argues that, at a time when some of the 200 or so local climbing clubs like BCC are quietly calling it a day, hut ownership provides a central focus that can keep a club together. I doubt that, when they signed the deal to purchase a ruined garage in Brynrefail, Frank Galbraith and Pete Thompson would have thought in these terms, but it seems to me that ownership of Dinorwic Mill Cottage has very much been part of the cement that has held the club together for over half a century.



*Going soft?  
A New Year's Eve party in the hut,  
sometime in the 1980s.*

Whether or not we've gone soft, or whether or not you'd nowadays want to have a hut near Llanberis, for many of us *Dinorwic Mill Cottage* remains very much our second home and the club should be proud of what over many years it has achieved.

## An Historical Footnote

A task for any future club historian might well be to research the full history of *Dinorwic Mill Cottage*, about which virtually nothing had been assembled until 2018 when, by way of the club nameplate on the door and the internet, out of the blue an American, Katherine Mahar-Stephenson, contacted the club to say that her great, great grandfather had lived in the building that became the hut:

*Date: Fri, 6 Jul 2018, 13:16*

*Subject: Dinorwic Hut*

*To: <[thechairman@bowlineclimbingclub.co.uk](mailto:thechairman@bowlineclimbingclub.co.uk)>*

*Good evening,*

*I just wanted to send a note and say thank you for taking care of the cottage that my Nain was born in in 1917. I have attached a photo of my great-grandmother, Laura Parry Evans and her oldest daughter, Mair, in front of the cottage. This photo would have been taken about 1910. I have been lucky enough to visit this old beauty twice. Never having been able to get inside, I was thrilled to see the photos you posted on your site. Could you tell me please, if you know what it looked like inside prior to it being renovated? I would love to picture it in my mind. All the best to you and your club from the USA!!*

*With warmest regards,*

*Katherine Mahar-Stephenson*

As a first year college student in the USA, in 1977 Katherine won a prize that enabled her to visit her ancestral home in Wales. From that first visit we have copies of photographs of the cottage in 1910 showing Katherine's great grandmother with her eldest daughter Mair, as well as two that show the hut in 1977, a couple of years before the major work of 1980. It remains to be established who owned the cottage back in 1910, but a reasonable inference is that it was part of the Vaynol estate and thus rented or leased to the Evans family by the slate baron who owned the great Dinorwic quarry. Katherine made a second visit in 2010 and so saw how we have transformed things.

She has established that her great, great grandfather Ellis Evans served in the First World War with the 38<sup>th</sup> (Welsh) division that was involved in the notorious battle of Mametz Wood early in July 1916 at the start of the lunatic Somme offensive. Ellis was one of the few lucky ones to survive, but returned to Wales in 1917 suffering from what at the time was called *shell shock* (now PTSD). Her grand-mother was born in the hut later in 1917. Ellis worked in the Llanberis slate quarries where at that time conditions were appalling. He emigrated in 1923 to work in the slate quarries of Vermont in the north-east of the USA. Some idea of what life would have been like for slate workers and their families in Eryri a century ago can be obtained from the study by R Mervyn Jones (1981) *The North Wales Quarrymen, 1874-1922*, (University of Wales Press, *Studies in Welsh History*, 4, 359 pages) or, in a more sanitised and less political way, by a trip around the Llanberis Slate Industry Museum.

But why emigrate to Vermont?

The links between the Welsh slate industry and that in Vermont are fascinating. Early in the nineteenth century, slate had been discovered on the Vermont/New York State boundary. Katherine describes its discovery thus:

*Slate in Vermont was famously discovered around 1839 when a Welsh émigré, visiting a farm in Fair Haven, kicked over a loose group of stones declaring, "There's slate here."*

In 1850 the area centred on the towns of Poultney (population then 2,419), Castleton (3,016) and Fair Haven (902) was a quiet agricultural one, with a few local traders and what was a very small slate industry. Even today it's a place with small towns in bosky valleys well off the tourist track. At first, the slate in Vermont wasn't seen to have much potential, a consequence of inadequate transport, at the time using carts to the Hudson and the Champlain Canal, as well as a lack of a skilled labour force. As a result, much of the production was milled and converted into low volume high cost slate products such as school slate boards and billiard table bases rather than into high volume roofing slate. The coming of the railway made good the first deficiency and the arrival of the Welsh did the same for the second. The Welsh arrived in 1845, when 62 migrants from the Llanberis/Llanrug area came to work the slate, followed by more from Bethesda and Deiniolen in order to escape tithes payable to the Church of England in Wales and a depression in the north Wales slate industry. Increasingly too, the area was subject to immigration from unskilled Irish fleeing the potato famine as well as a mixture of Italians and Slovaks, but the dominant labour force was made up of skilled quarrymen from Eryri.

The book by Gwilym Roberts (1998) *New lives in the valley: Slate quarries and quarry villages in North Wales, New York, and Vermont, 1850-1920* (New Hampshire Press, 470 pages) expands on this. He notes that by the late nineteenth century, on the heels of a prolonged strike in the Penryn Quarry in Wales, Welsh immigration to Vermont was so great that:

*...the record book of the old National School in the quarry village of Rachub [Wales]...shows the notation 'Gone to America' occurring more and more frequently during the 1880s and 1890s*

Typically, to get to Vermont they paid about £8 (£860 at 2024 prices), often for one family member to emigrate and get established before he (usually a male under 30 years old and often a monoglot Welsh speaker) became established enough to save the fares for the rest of the family. Early migrants went from local Welsh ports, but the later, safer way was via cart to Menai Bridge, boat to Liverpool, and then a squalid but tolerable steamer to New York. From there they dispersed, many to Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, but some took a boat up the Hudson and then the railway to Fair Haven and Rutland County, Vermont.

Katharine has discovered that Ellis travelled first to New York on one of the most famous of the *White Star Line* ships, the accident-prone *SS Cedric*. Built in 1903, the *Cedric* weighed in at 20,904 tons, at the time the largest ship in existence, and spent most of its peace-time life on the Liverpool to New York run carrying around 500 passengers in first and second class and a further 1,000 in third class accommodation.





White Star Line's SS Cedric

From the ship's list of 'aliens' requiring formal entry into the USA we can get a snapshot of Ellis at that time. He is listed by the officials as aged 42, a *minar* (sic., quarryman?) with fair skin, dark hair, brown eyes and tattooed arms. He is also literate, able to read and write English. He lists his nearest relative as his wife Mrs L. (Laura) Evans who remained resident at what is written as *Dinorent Mill, Brynarfail*. Following what was a very typical pattern, a year after his journey he was able to send for his wife and family to join him in Vermont.

27	UNDER 16	Warrington	V. Kenneth	1	✓	✓	✓	S Child	-	-	✓	Do Britain	English	English
28		Dunns	V. Ellis	42	✓	✓	✓	Miner	Yes	English	✓	Do Britain	Welsh	Welsh
29		Ryan	V. Ellen	41	✓	✓	✓	Domestic	Yes	English	✓	Do Britain	Irish	U.S.A.

Section of the SS Cedric's list of 'Aliens' seeking entry into the USA  
Ellis Evans is on the middle line

The Eryri slate industry Ellis came from differed from that in Vermont in four main ways. First, except around Nantlle where they were deep pits similar to those in Vermont, in Eryri slate was extracted from large open quarries (Penrhyn, Dinorwic), or mines (Blaenau). Working slate in pits is intrinsically more dangerous than in open quarries. Second, almost all the industry in Wales was controlled by two great landowning barons, Pennant (Penrhyn) or Assheton-Smith (Vaynol/Dinorwic) whereas in Vermont there was a multiplicity of rapidly changing owners. Third, light railways built to the coast meant that Welsh slate was easily transported to market, whereas in Vermont carting was needed even to reach the nearest railhead. Finally, the Welsh industry was organised as an almost feudal society where the quarryman's employer was also their landlord or, if the worker owned their own cottage it was on land belonging to the company, their lessor. Two factors that compounded this relationship were the disjunctions between worker and management created by language and religious observance. On the one side were often monoglot Welsh speaking non-conformist Chapel going quarrymen and on the other a high church going, English speaking quarry owner and their management. Moreover, in Eryri the way the labour force was organised into essentially independent gangs mitigated against any organised union activity until well into the twentieth century, and then only after protracted and bitter strikes.

It is hardly surprising that work in far away American valley was an attractive proposition for any Welsh quarryman. There the Welsh immigrants set about creating facsimiles of the institutions they knew from home, such as the eisteddfodau, debating

societies, Sunday schools in non-conformist chapels, basic community led health insurance by way of friendly societies, and so on, some of which have continued to today, more than a century later. Little wonder that emigration to what letters from Vermont to relatives in Eryri must have praised seemed to offer an attractive *new life in the valley*.

Times change, as did the slate valley in Vermont towards the end of the nineteenth century, with immigration increasingly from Italy, central and eastern Europe, and, around 1900, the arrival of electricity, gramophones (very significant in relation to Welsh singing traditions), telephones and the *horseless* carriage (mostly early 'steamers'). So, the Vermont slate valley matured, but at the same time the industry started its long decline until WW1 and changing roofing technologies, more-or-less killed it off. However, nobody will be surprised to discover that after the First World War and Spanish flu epidemic, in the early 1920s there was another mass exodus from north Wales to work in the slate industry of the USA. We know that, as was often the way, Ellis Evans moved first in 1923, to be joined by the rest of the family in 1924.

Katherine still lives in Poultney, where she worked in the Ambulance Service, and where many of her relatives still work in active quarries. She is delighted that her ancestral home is being looked after so well by our club. Should she visit Wales again, perhaps to catch up with her cousin who lives in Anglesey, I trust the club will do the right thing by way of welcome.

*(c) Dave Unwin, August 2024*