

A story in stone
Cofnod mewn carreg
Dolgellau's history as told by its
buildings
Hanes Dolgellau drwy llygad ei
hadeiladau



Based on the trail designed and produced by the Dolgellau Civic Society. The Society aims to protect and promote the historic character of the town

We begin and end our trail in Eldon Square. Follow the route on our map.



"The character of the old town with its irregular streets, its solid buildings and hard grey stones is special. It is the unique product of local geology and local craftsmen. It has a sense of belonging to the magnificent landscape around it."

A story in stone

The Square is at the heart of today's town; the star around which everything revolves. Scattered around are smaller satellite open spaces. They are also called squares but that is really too grand a name to describe the irregular unbuilt spaces that result where several crooked streets meet. Unlike many of the towns of North Wales, whose regular street patterns were established by the occupying Anglo-Normans, Dolgellau began as a collection of serf dwellings and evolved organically over many centuries without a masterplan.

Although Dolgellau has long considered itself the county town and prime market of Meirionydd, its success and development has been largely due to the woollen industry of which it was the regional centre. The industry, which was largely hand-worked, reached its peak around 1800 and gradually declined in the following century, unable to compete with the output of highly mechanised mills.

In the latter part of the 18th century, it became fashionable for those of means to come and experience the wild romantic scenery. The town soon developed as a touring centre, providing the services of several harpists, and guides for mule trips to Cader Idris. The railway and later the motor car brought many more visitors and tourism continues to be a major influence today.

Much of the town was rebuilt in the relatively prosperous years of the wool trade, and the centre, at least, has changed little in the last hundred years. In the earlier buildings the stones are rough and irregular. As the 19th century progressed, more regular, dressed blocks were used. If you look carefully you can often see patches of earlier stonework that have survived rebuilding. The architecture tends to be bold and strong and relies more on proportions than ornament for its effect. Local stone, the hard grey dolerite, and slate were chosen as the building materials. Over two hundred buildings have been listed as being of historic or architectural interest. No other town in Wales has such a concentration.

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1 The imposing building (*ca.* 1886) of T.H. Roberts is a remarkably well preserved **ironmonger's** which still has its original fittings. At the turn of the century over 500 gold miners were

employed around Dolgellau; many of their picks and shovels must have come from here. A much older building, *Cwrt Plas yn Dre*, once stood on the site, and was reputedly a meeting place for the famous Welsh rebel Owain Glyndwr who temporarily controlled much of Wales in the early 1400s. Despite being the town's chief tourist attraction, the building was demolished in 1881. Parts were re-erected in Newtown.

2 By the mid 19th century Dolgellau had its own gas supply produced from burning coal. The **retort house** remains, though its chimney stack has been removed and slated over. Gas was stored in gasometers behind the works. The small building to the right was the governor house.

3 Arguably the finest architect designed building in the town, the **County Hall**, was built in 1825 at a cost of £3,000. The architect was Edward Haycock. This was the administrative headquarters of



Meirionnydd in the 19th century. Its role as a court house continues to this day. The porches were filled in in 1995, spoiling the simple elegance of the building. The slate in front is something of a mystery. At first sight it appears to be a milestone; the mileage figures were, however, carved at a later date. It may have originally recorded stagecoach fares.



4 The bridge was built in 1638 (the date is on the downstream side) and has since been widened and extended. It is called **Y Bont Fawr** (the

Big Bridge) to distinguish it from a smaller bridge that lay just to the south. Dolgellau has suffered from many floods.

One major flood in 1903 destroyed part of the bridge. The top end of Bont Fawr was raised to accommodate the railway which ran on the line of the present bypass. The station was just upstream of the bridge. Initially (1868) through-passengers were obliged to change as two rival railway companies, each with its own terminus, met here. The journey from London took eight and a half hours in the 1870s. By the 1930s it was down to five and a half hours, a journey time it would be hard to equal by today's public transport.

5 The now defunct **Golden Lion Inn** was once a coaching inn. The stagecoach journey from London took about twenty-four hours *ca.* 1830. It became the premier hotel of the area and was an obligatory stopping point for any passing European royals.

6 One of the very few **brick buildings** in Dolgellau and unique for its period (early 19th century). Note that the bricks were only used on the principal elevation.

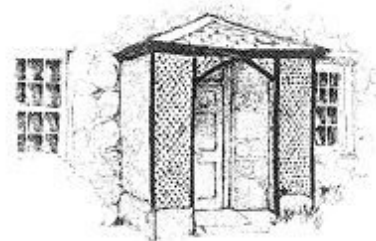
7 **The Old Town Hall** (Y Sosban), dated 1606, once fulfilled the judicial and administrative functions of the town. Two dungeon-like rooms downstairs served as a lock-up for vagrants and drunkards.



8 The present **Church** (St Mary) dates from 1716, with a chancel added in 1864. The masonry is, unusually, of dressed slate with blocks overlapping at the corners, log-cabin style. The timber piers inside were brought over the mountains by ox-cart from Dinas Mawddwy. A carved stone effigy (*ca.* 1350) of Meurig ap Ynyr Fychan lies in the NE corner of the church. The first mention of the church and indeed of *Dolkelew* is from 1253. The Cistercian Cymer Abbey (founded 1198) two miles away, was the main religious centre and a major influence until its suppression in 1536.



9 **Tan y Fynwent** This fine town house dating from the late 17th century was the rector's residence at one time and was possibly built as such. Note the unusual positioning of the chimneys and the 19th-century lattice-work porch. Such porches are one of the characteristic architectural features of the town.





10 Dolgellau's own pyramid, a monument to local bard and schoolteacher Dafydd Ionawr (1750-1827).

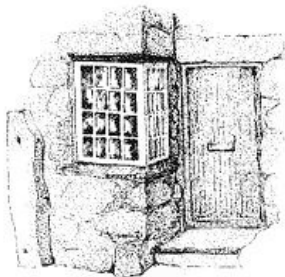
11 The Marian Dolgellau's main green space and one of its greatest assets, was given in trust to the town in 1811. It has been the focus of the town's leisure activities for generations. By the 16th century there was a bowling green surrounded by ditches to keep out grazing animals. It lay under the car park. A hollow in the grass in the cricket outfield marks the site of a cockpit. The stone circle was set up in 1948 to proclaim the National Eisteddfod of Wales the following year. Using stone-age technology for advertising in this way is a peculiarly Welsh phenomenon.



12 The Lawnt is the historical centre of Dolgellau. We can imagine the first settlement grew up around the slightly raised ground in the area of the Church. The Lawnt is now a residential area but as you walk through you will see evidence of former commercial activity such as shop windows. Hope House (no.4) on your right was a woollen factory. A

little further up the road on the left, the building with the tall window was Dolgellau's first bank, established in 1803.

13 The former **police station** dates from the mid 19th century. Its delicate Gothic windows present a very different image of the law from that of the modern police headquarters across the river.



14 The **toll house** of the former turnpike road to Tywyn. The toll keeper's viewing window can be seen in the right hand corner of the gable elevation, with the stone post for the tollgate adjacent. Each of the roads from the town was turnpiked at one stage. Turnpikes were extremely unpopular in Wales and caused riots in the 1830s.

15 At the height of the religious revival at the beginning of the 20th century Dolgellau had about ten **chapels**. Their services, Sunday schools, prayer meetings and bible readings were a major social focus of the town. In 1829 the Sunday School at Salem Chapel had 400 children and 71 teachers. The main chapels were largely rebuilt

in the late 19th century (Tabernacl 1868, Salem 1893, Ebenezer 1880, Judah 1839/1928). Several chapels have been converted to other uses recently; a post office, a theatre, a dental surgery.

16 The **large stones** embedded at the foot of the wall on the left protected it from the hubs of passing carts.

17 The cast-iron **gates** to Bryn Ffynnon which you pass on the right were made in Wolverhampton in the late 19th century. Bryn Mair, the adjacent house a little further up the hill, also has a grand entrance. The finely dressed gate pillars of the intractable local dolerite are a testament to the craftsmanship and patience of the mason.



18 Viewpoint over the town. Most of the prominent buildings outside the historic centre are publicly owned. The mountain in the background to the far right is Aran Fawddwy. Moel Offrwm is directly opposite, and Y Garn and Diffwys lie to the left beyond the Mawddach estuary.

19 Ffynnon Plas Ucha is one of several springs in this part of town. Now almost forgotten, this perennial source of clean water used to be an important resource for local residents.

20 Y Domen Fawr (Meyrick Square). The name suggests a dump or mound once stood here. In the early 19th century it was a crowded warren of little houses, workshops, shops and "tippling houses". The population density of the whole town used to be much higher. The 1801 census recorded 2,949 inhabitants. Today the population is slightly lower but there are at least twice as many dwellings.



21 Tan y Gader The birth place of many Dolgellau folk, this house (built *ca.* 1800) was used as a maternity home. The unusual wheel window in the attic gable can be seen in several houses of similar age in the area. Note

houses of similar age in the area. Note the pretty dormer bargeboards.

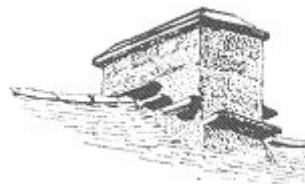
22 The Catholic Church, completed in 1966, was the fulfillment of a lifetime's dreams and efforts by local priest Francis Scalpell to have a more noble structure for his church than a former chip shop. The Maltese Cross to the left of the west door commemorates his Maltese origins.

23 Fro Awel is a typical vernacular cottage. The design, with its low roof and hipped dormer windows, is typical of the mid 17th century to mid 18th century. The rear wing was once a candle factory to supply the gold mines.

24 Siop y Seren was built in 1800 partly for commercial use with a shop extension added later. Note the stone bridge at the back on the second floor. This gave weavers access to the loom rooms in the upper two storeys.

25 Wtra Plas Coch The name *wtra*, used for a narrow lane, comes from the Shropshire word "out-track", a farm road. The Unicorn and Plas Coch (to its right) were built around 1700. Originally they had steeply pitched roofs with dormers and tall chimneys. In the early 1800s the roof level was raised (see gable end of Plas Coch). The Clifton Hotel, next door, was rebuilt around 1820 from the old town jail (1716-1813). John Howard, the penal reformer, visited the jail in 1774 and commented on its filthy state. Little had improved by 1788, when prisoners petitioned about the maggots and "nasty filth" in the water which came from the river Aran where sheep skins were washed.

26 Bwthyn Pont yr Aran A vernacular cottage of the 17th century. Note the roof details: the slates laid in diminishing courses and the inset stone slabs to shed the water away from the base of the chimney stacks.



These are a common feature in Dolgellau, which enjoys an annual rainfall of around 70 inches. The ground floor is below road level. This is also true of the older buildings along Wtra'r Felin, which leads from here to the church. Perhaps this was the site of the road that led east to the centre of the town. The buildings behind housed a fellmongering business, where sheep pelt were processed. The business closed in 1989, thus ending the long tradition of processing wool and sheep-hides in the town.

27 The present **bridge** is built on top of its much narrower predecessor. The view from here is tranquil today but two hundred years ago it would have been very different. The Aran was the power source that drove the fulling machinery and later the carding and the spinning mills. There were several fulling mills along its banks where the cloth was beaten and washed to close up the fibres. Tour writers of this time talk of the streams "resounding" with

the sound of the pounding wooden mallets, and of the tenter racks where the cloth was then dried and bleached "extending along the hills". The lengths of hand-woven cloth, called *webs*, were around two hundred yards long.



28 The Square: meeting place, market place, trading place, and the venue for fairs, community events and festivals. It contains several buildings of interest. Eldon Row to your right as you look up the Square was built in 1810. It was named for Lord Eldon who won a lawsuit for the local squire. Neuadd Idris above it was built in *ca.* 1870 as a market hall (now converted to shops) with assembly rooms above. Plas Newydd, at the top of the Square, dates from the 17th century, with the bays facing the Square added around 1800. Central Buildings, to your left, was formerly a warehouse and shop for the locally produced tweed. Ty Meirion used to be called London House. It was an emporium for goods from a London merchant. Many Welsh towns have their London, Liverpool or Manchester House. If you go round the back of the building you can still see the hoist and loading bay on the third floor. Ty Meirion now houses a display on the Quakers. Their strong faith led to persecution and many left to start a new life in Pennsylvania. The famous American women's university of Bryn Mawr derives its name from a Quaker farmhouse just above the town.



Acknowledgements



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