

INDUSTRIAL GYFFIN

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Anyone walking today from Castle Square, Conwy, through Porth Sarn onto Llanrwst Road and toward Gyffin could be forgiven for thinking that this is not, and never has been, an area of industrial activity. It may be so today, but it has not always been the case. Even now, when crossing Pont Penarth, the scar remains of what for many decades was the site of Billington's Garage. Also, just across the way in Benarth Road, for 90 years up to the year 2000 the mussel purification tanks and government Fisheries Laboratory (now Riverside Business Park) were classified for planning purposes as 'light industrial'. Neither site was truly unique as there had been earlier industrial activity in both locations.



Billington's garage before demolition in 2012



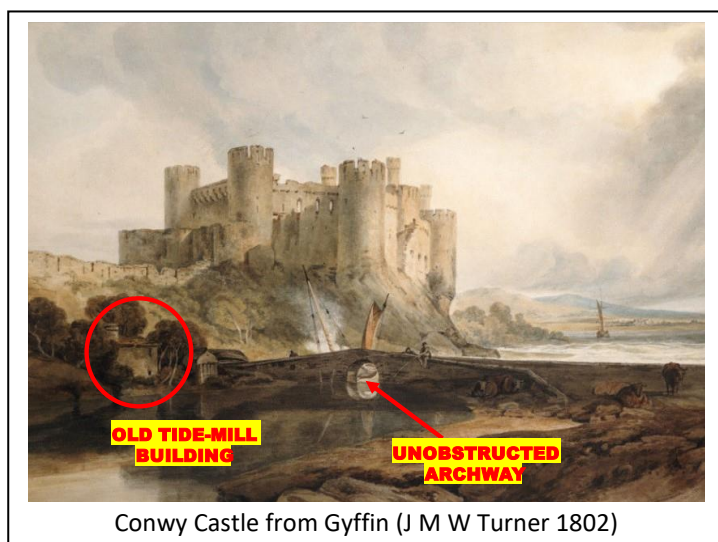
The Fisheries Laboratory, Benarth Road

Comparably 'light industrial' activity began here in the middle ages when a tide mill was built on the Afon Gyffin, more or less upstream of where Pont Penarth now is. Exactly when the mill was first built is not known but it is recorded as being rebuilt in 1296 after it was destroyed in the uprising of Madoc ap Llewelyn in 1294. For the mill to operate effectively, it had to allow the flood tide to flow upstream toward Gyffin with as little restriction as possible and then, at high tide, the river mouth was closed, except for a mill race,



Medieval Conwy showing the tidal mill at the mouth of the Afon Gyffin

to power the mill's water wheel. Tide mills such as this are always undershot (*i.e.*, the water flows under the wheel) and are less powerful than overshot wheels (*i.e.*, where the water flows over the top of the wheel into buckets that weigh the wheel down), as are found in many freshwater river locations. A great volume of water had to be stored to ensure the mill could work right through the ebb tide and into the early part of the flood. In this respect, the Afon Gyffin was ideal as virtually all of the area that is now concreted over on the Billington's site, Morfa Bach car park, Ysgol Porth Y Felin and Llanrwst Road itself, would have been inter-tidal mud flats and marsh, much as we see at low tide today on the bird reserve side of the river.



It is unclear how long the mill remained working but it appears to have ceased operation by the time J M W Turner was visiting in the late 18th C. Water mills are such artistically appealing subjects that one might expect Turner to have included a view of the Conwy tide mill in his canon of work, as he did the mill on the River Alyn at Rossett, south of Chester.

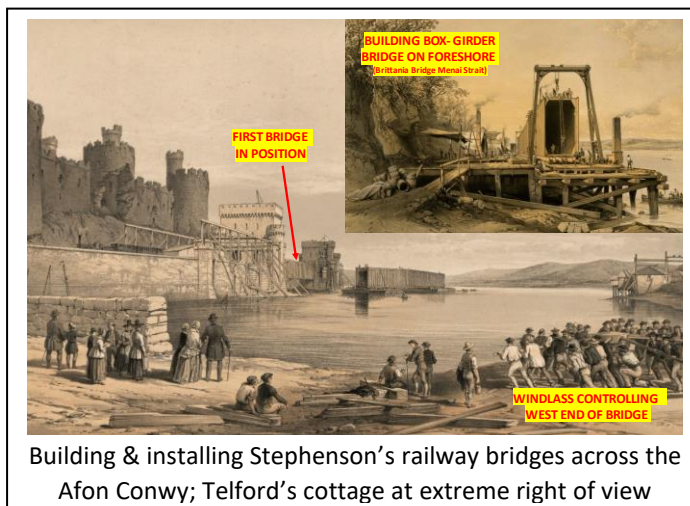
However, although one of his paintings of Conwy castle viewed from the south side does show a house on the tide mill site, it does not show a water wheel. It might be thought that this is merely an absence of detail or artistic licence but his picture of the castle painted in 1802 includes Pont Penarth. Significantly, there is an unobstructed view through the bridge arch which means that the earlier mill pond could no longer be closed off at high tide, thereby rendering a tide mill useless.



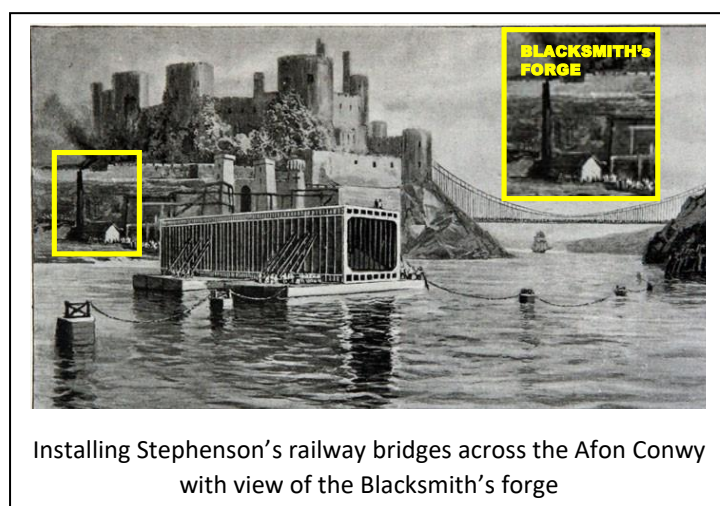
Within a 50 years of Turner's visits the mill house itself was probably demolished as Stephenson drove his railway track along the north bank of the Afon Gyffin, leaving little room in which to retain what was probably still a medieval timber-frame building. Before then, however, Telford built his suspension bridge across the river in 1822–1826. As the foreshore and adjoining land by Pont Pensarn was the

nearest suitable open space, it is reasonable to assume that this is where Telford stored his building materials and undertook as much preparatory work as possible.

Irrespective of whether or not this was the case, we do know that the Benarth foreshore is where Robert Stephenson built the wrought-iron box-girder tunnels for his railway bridge (1846–1848). Each track, both the up and the down line, has its own independent bridge. These were assembled from a series of box sections reinforced with tubes running the length of the bridge. On completion, each bridge was floated off the shore on pontoons and then jacked up to the right height to be positioned on the supporting towers and aligned with the rail track. It is a remarkable testament to early Victorian engineering that the structure is still bearing the weight of modern trains more than 170 years after it carried its first train.



Of less immediate significance is the small building at the extreme right (southern) end of the Benarth foreshore. This permanent structure was originally built by Telford (it is still known as Telford's cottage) but its purpose is uncertain. It may have acted as a site office or



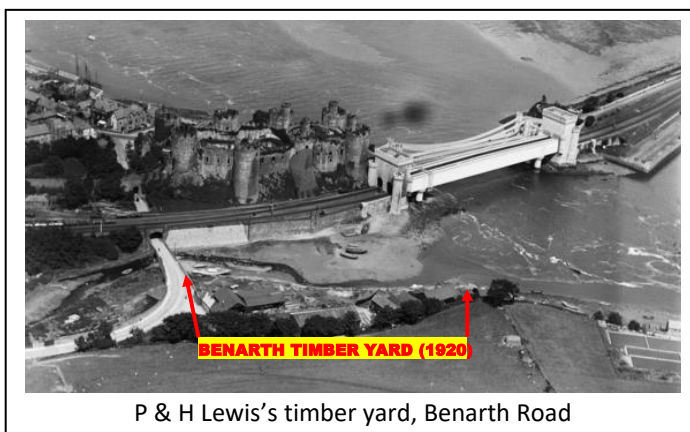
accommodation for the resident supervising engineers. It is still in use today, albeit as a private dwelling. A reverse view (*i.e.* from the right bank) of Stephenson's tunnel being launched shows another building with a very tall chimney by the mouth to the Afon Gyffin. Almost certainly this would have been the bridge blacksmith's

forge, possibly built by Telford as his bridge would also have required the services of a blacksmith.



Humphrey Lewis

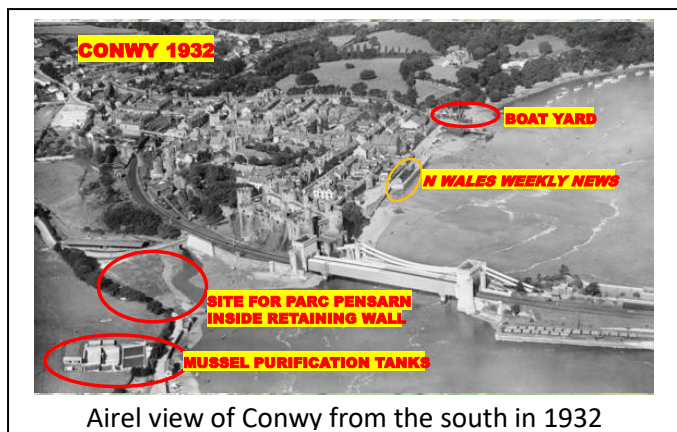
Apart from the increasing rail traffic and associated movement of goods, there was a brief period of relative inactivity along the Afon Gyffin until the brothers Peter and Humphrey Lewis established a timber yard in Benarth Road during the 1870s. Their father, Watkin Lewis, had first set himself up as a timber merchant in Llanrwst and his son's followed him into the business there. Indeed, the census for 1871 shows that both brothers, Peter aged 32 and Humphrey aged 29, were single and living at 162 Denbigh St., Llanrwst. By 1878, however, we know that they had established P & H Lewis Timber Merchants in Benarth Road, Conwy, as they were fined £2 in November that year for obstructing Benarth Road with baulks of timber (and not for the first time!). This business was run by Humphrey while Peter managed affairs in Llanrwst. They also had a timber yard at Deganwy quay and a small boat yard at the north end of Conwy town quay, where the area of beach is just outside the spur to the town wall.



P & H Lewis's timber yard, Benarth Road

By the time of the 1881 census, Humphrey Lewis was living with two of his sisters at 65 Castle St., Conwy. Later that year he married Adelaide Starkey and soon after built *Muriau* (now the Tourist Information Centre) on Rose Hill St. as his family home. By 1891 Humphrey and Adelaide had four children, a daughter Phoebe and three sons: Arthur (who died in 1917 serving with Royal Welch Fusiliers at Arras), Humphrey Jr and Wilfred. Humphrey Sr became a pillar of the local community and served as Mayor of Conwy. He did not live much longer to enjoy his success as he died aged 56. Adelaide continued to live in *Muriau* and by 1911 the business was being run by Humphrey's three sons. At some stage, however, they sold the boat yard by the town

*Muriau*, the Lewis family home



Airel view of Conwy from the south in 1932

wall to Albert Wood, another Mayor of Conwy. In about 1920 Wood sold the boat yard to George and John Crossfield, members of an established timber merchant and boatbuilding family from Arnside, Cumbria. At the same time, the Crossfields had a timber yard at Deganwy so it may be that they had bought the Lewis family business,

including the yard Benarth Road.

Shortly after Humphrey Lewis's death in 1898, and while his sons were still running the business in Benarth Road, the site, but not the business, was bought by Conwy corporation. In about 1910 the corporation stabilised the water frontage with a retaining wall extending from Pont Pensarn to the cottage at the southern end of the timber yard. Much of this wall is still in position and is maintained as an important feature of local historic interest.

By the mid-1930s the Benarth timber yard had closed but the boatbuilding site at the north end of the town quay was still in use by John Crossfield. The vacant infill land behind the retaining wall previously occupied by the timber yard was developed as Parc Pensarn and bowling green. Before the demise of the timber yard, however, a



Present-day view of the retaining wall built by Conwy corporation c. 1910

new light industrial enterprise was established further along Benarth Road. In 1913 Conwy corporation commissioned the town surveyor, Freeman Delamotte (a sometime Southampton semi-professional soccer player), to devise and build a means of purifying mussels. Although the purification tanks Delamotte built did not work as he had envisaged, they met the requirements for a system devised by Dr Robert W Dodgson and the subsequent work that

underpinned the scientific cultivation and research of shellfish through to the end of the millennium. The site is now Riverside Business Park.

