

## **Refusing to Fight – the legacy of dissent on the Black Mountain**

*'Away up on the mountain side, in wild and woolly Wales,  
They've dumped a lot of Johnnies out of good King George's Goals [Gaols]  
Such a set of vagabonds, I'm sure I never saw,  
For what's the use of soldiers who refuse to go to war?'*

*(Extract from an entry by B. Stevens in an autograph book belonging to conscientious objector, Peter Davies.)*



*Figure 1: Two conscientious objectors working on the Llanddeusant Home Office Scheme (Peter Davies Collection)*

### **Introduction**

Over the centenary of the First World War Dyfed Archaeological Trust have been investigating and recording the impact on southwest Wales of the conflict which overwhelmed the nation in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This study is part of a pan-Wales project funded by Cadw, which has enabled all the Welsh archaeological trusts to undertake research into the legacy of the war across the country<sup>j</sup>, and the results made available to the public through the website for the Historic Environment Record; [www.archwilio.org.uk](http://www.archwilio.org.uk).

As expected much of this legacy relates to the war effort and the massive military mobilisation which took place to take the nation to war, however a surprising story, and one in contrast to the dominant

military narrative, lies in a deeply rural and remote location, on the edge of the western Brecon Beacons. This is the story of those men who opposed the war and the increasing militarisation sweeping the country and in refusing to take up arms were criminalised and punished with hard labour in a work camp.

Llyn y Fan Fach (National Grid Reference SN80312187) is an unlikely location for a labour camp, today it is a popular place for walkers embarking on the route up Mynydd Du to the well-known summits of Fan Foel and Fan Brycheiniog. It is a classic geological feature created by a glacier scouring out a hollow to form a lake and more commonly known for the famous legend of the Lady of the Lake and the Physicians of Myddfai. This story, however, has an altogether more prosaic origin - the problem of Llanelli's water supply.

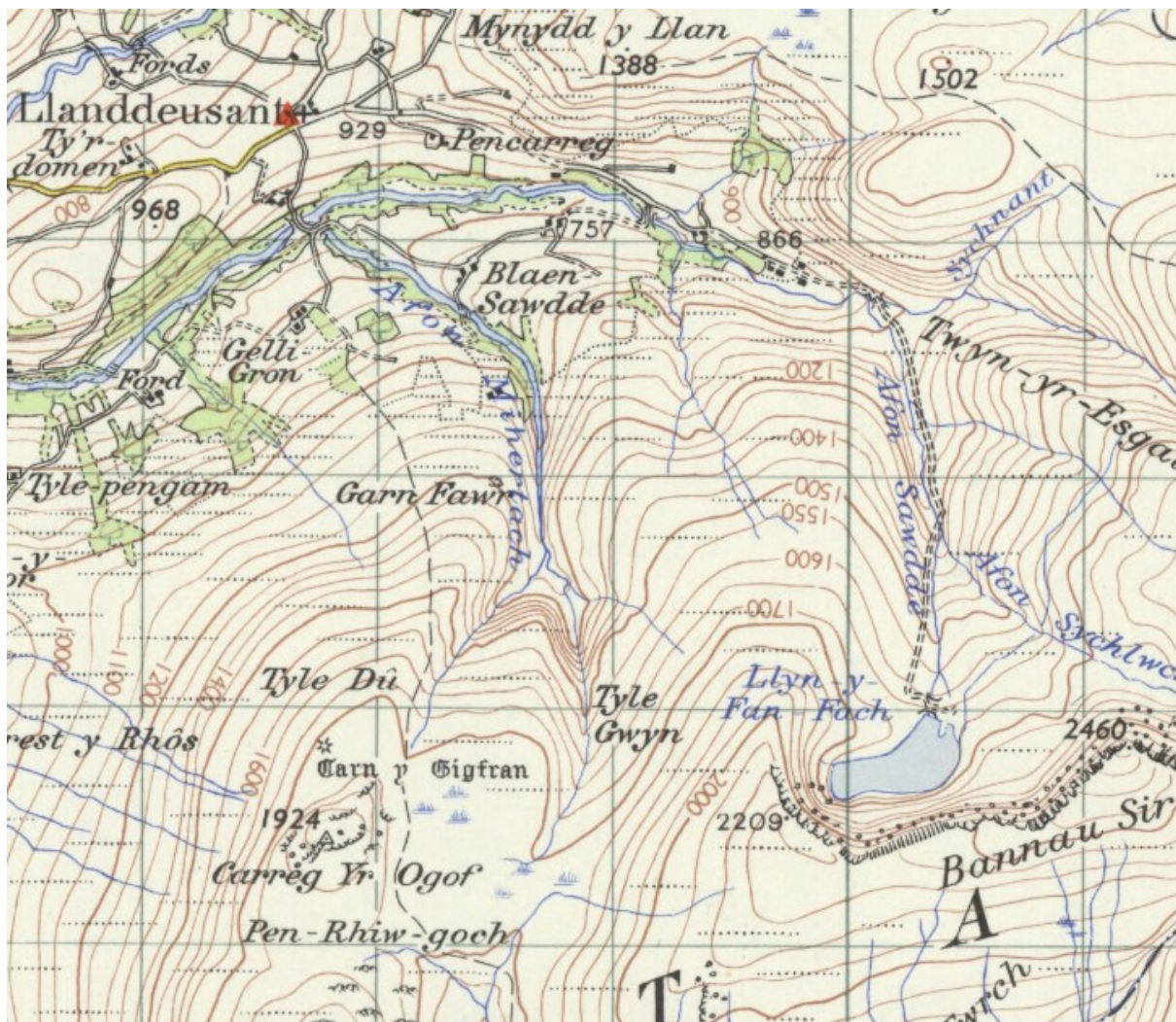


Figure 2: Llyn y Fan Fach is the source of the Afon Sawdde, and lies to the southeast of Llanddeusant. Ordnance Survey Sheet 140 – Llandovery, Publication date: 1960. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)

## A Supply of Clean Water for the Rural Districts of Llanelli

At the end of the nineteenth century the rural parishes around Llanelli were suffering from an inadequate water supply, relying on wells, streams and captured rain water. In addition the lack of a sewerage system meant that some supplies were becoming polluted and unsafe to use<sup>ii</sup>. A reliable supply of clean water was urgently needed and Llyn y Fan Fach was proposed as a suitable source by the vicar of Pembrey, a member of the Council who had formerly officiated at

Llanddeusant Church as the vicar of Llansadwrn and Llanwrda. Following a site visit - not an easy task from Llanelli in those days – members of the council engaged Consulting Engineers to put in place all the necessary surveys and a report on the suitability of the lake. The overwhelming verdict was that, 'Llyn-y-fan seems to stand alone in the field.....No other source will meet all the requirements of the case.'<sup>iii</sup>

The necessary Act of Parliament was obtained in 1912, and immediately the engineers were appointed and contractors put in place in order to start work. The work required building a concrete dam to raise the water levels in the lake by 10ft and laying a trunk main some 25 miles long to a reservoir near Llannon (NGR SN55191028), from where it would be delivered to the rural districts of Llanelli.

Work started in 1914 with the contractors recruiting Irish labour from Swansea and Llanelli Labour Exchanges. Conditions were harsh with accommodation provided in two wooden huts sleeping 175 men and a small shop for supplies, all located in a camp near the works, at an inhospitable height of 1200 feet above sea level.



*Figure 3: 1914 - Huts for the accommodation of workmen. (Llanelli Local Studies Library)*

Despite the bleak conditions of camp life there was evidently time for romance, as in February 1915 Williams Clemmens, who was a mason resident in the 'Small Hut Waterworks Llanddeusant' married Isobel Overman, of the same address. The happy event is recorded in the marriage register of the Parish Church at Llanddeusant. We learn a little more about William Clemmens when later that year he was up before the magistrates charged with selling liquors without a licence at the small hut. In October 1915 a local policeman had peered through the windows of the zinc building, and observed fifteen people, some of them very drunk, playing cards and ordering beers, which they then paid for.



On returning the following day with a warrant, he found the men drinking and brawling and a quantity of cash which he took to be the illicit earnings. On summing up the case the defendant was described as a respectable man working as a mason on public works, previously working for 10 years at Rhayader, and before that at Derwent Waterworks and the Naval Base at Rosyth - his good reputation helped mitigate his financial penalty.<sup>iv</sup>

Clearly the conditions at the waterworks at Llanddeusant were so bad that retaining labourers became a pressing issue. The minutes of the Llanelli Rural District Council record an application to both the War Office and the Home Office for the employment of German prisoners of war or interned aliens to provide the necessary labour<sup>v</sup>, which was declined on the grounds that the site was too inaccessible. However, an alternative source of labour became available during 1916, provided by the Military Service Act, and conscientious objectors were engaged on the project, with the first tranche of 30 men arriving at Llangadog in early September<sup>vi</sup>.

### The Military Service Act and the Conscience Clause

By 1916, voluntary registration into the army had failed to generate enough new recruits to stem the losses on the British battle fronts and so the Military Service Act was introduced, which specified that men between the ages of 18-41 were liable to be called up. There was substantial opposition to the act and the No Conscription Fellowship had been established in 1915 as an organisation of men *'who will refuse from conscientious motives to bear arms, because they consider human life to be sacred and cannot therefore assume the responsibility of inflicting death'*. Their motives might be religious or political; Quakers and members of the Independent Labour Party strongly objected to the war and they, amongst other faiths and ideologies, worked to secure 'the conscience clause' in the act. This gave the right to claim exemption from military service - if the local Military Service Tribunal could be convinced of the authenticity of the objection. The tribunals could provide a certificate for conditional exemption, (the applicant was doing important work), temporary exemption (the applicant needed time to sort out his affairs) or, absolute exemption (the applicant could continue in his civilian occupation). In practice absolute exemption was rarely given and many thousands of conscientious objectors found themselves forced into army regiments<sup>vii</sup>. A bitter cycle of events would begin; the conscientious objector would refuse to sign his army papers, or put on a uniform, which would result in a court-martial for refusing orders. They would be sent to prison and after serving their sentence would be released straight back into the army where the whole cycle would start again, with subsequent prison sentences becoming longer and longer.

Almost 6000 men were imprisoned as a result, and in July 1916 the Home Office introduced schemes to allow conscientious objectors to be released from prison and undertake civilian work, usually hard manual labour at a variety of work camps all over the country. Those that were 'Absolutists' still saw this as contributing to the war effort and they continued to refuse, for them there was no alternative but to spend the rest of the war in prison. The Llanddeusant Waterworks which involved building the reservoir and infrastructure at Llyn y Fan Fach and the Llannon reservoir, became one such Home Office Scheme.

### Llanddeusant Waterworks Home Office Scheme

Between 150-200 men from all over the UK were brought to work at the camp to provide manual labour<sup>viii</sup>. In order to comply with Home Office regulations the camp was cleaned and improved, with the addition of kitchen facilities in a new hut, a laundry, a small hospital hut and provision given for a doctor to visit three or four times a week. Around 30 men were also billeted in farms in

the area.<sup>ix</sup> All the schemes were subject to inspections by the Home Office, and the camp at the waterworks was visited by Sir William Brace M.P., the architect of the Home Office Scheme, who in 1916 had chaired the committee tasked with devising a programme to tackle the problem of conscientious objectors.

Shortly after the arrival of the men in September 1916 a branch of the No-Conscription Fellowship was established at Llanddeusant, and the minute book records the camp Literature Society buying pamphlets to circulate to the men, including Bertrand Russell's, 'Pamphlet on Political Ideals', and 'Pacifism as a practical policy'.<sup>x</sup>

A register of conscientious objectors compiled by Cyril Pearce has identified over a hundred men at the waterworks at Llanddeusant, the majority from the northwest of England and the Midlands. A journalist from the South Wales Daily News reported: 'a large number of Lancashire men, a few from the Midlands. I could not hear of a single Welshman. Presumably the policy is to send the men right away from the districts with which they were familiar.'<sup>xi</sup> (In fact Cyril Pearce has identified 12 men from Wales including one from Llwynhendy, near Llanelli). Of their motivations the reporter identifies: 'Friends (Quakers), Plymouth Brethren, Church of England, Congregationalists, Christadelphians. International Bible Students.....and others. A considerable section of the men are Socialists, and their objection to war is moral and economic rather than religious.'

The conditions for the men were favourably reported in some of the press: 'They are well fed, and they all look well. The camp has been wonderfully free from serious illness, and the men as a whole are cheerful and happy.'<sup>xii</sup> However, the manual labour must have been a contrast from their previous professions which included; several clerks, an art student, a professional artist, an architect, several weavers from northwest England, a policeman, a schoolmaster, a photographer, a commercial traveller, an assistant manager and a fancy button maker - to name a few<sup>xiii</sup>.

That there was a clear sense of brotherhood amongst the conscientious objectors, despite their different motivations, is gained from the reports of various visitors. One describes an evening of entertainment on a particularly wild and wet occasion, where visitors travelling in a car from Swansea got stuck in 18 inches of mud and had to walk the last two miles to the camp. On arriving at 'Llyn-y-van Villas' they found all the men partaking of tea and, after receiving their permits to stay on the camp, set off for a packed church school room (provided by the vicar) for an evening of poetry, music, comic turns and artistic sketches drawn with lighting speed onto newspaper. To conclude the evening, 'The Red Flag was sung heartily, with Auld Lang Syne to finish, everyone clasping each other's hand, until we were united in one bond.'<sup>xiv</sup>

A personal insight into the lives of the men at the camp is gained through some of the entries found in autograph books belonging to two of the conscientious objectors; John Taylor from Leicester<sup>xv</sup> and Peter Davies whose archive also includes photographs and other documents<sup>xvi</sup>. Peter came from Penketh, near Warrington, Lancashire (now Cheshire) where he was a gardener at Penketh House. His refusal to enlist at the outbreak of war was due to his personal religious beliefs; he was confirmed into the Church of England, however he was not supported by his local church in his objection to the war and on his arrest was jeered at by the local vicar<sup>xvii</sup>. Refusing to sign his army papers he ended up in prison at Wormwood Scrubs and from there went to the Home Office Scheme at Llanddeusant. His wife, Helen, and their two children, came to stay on the nearby farm of Blaen Sawdde for several months, where Helen, who had previously been in service at Penketh House, helped with household duties.



Figure 4: Blaen Sawdde farmhouse with group including Peter Davies's daughter (Peter Davies collection)

The autograph book was a gift from Helen to Peter at Christmas 1916, and it records personal contributions from some of his fellow conscientious objectors including this entry which illustrates some of the mutual support shared amongst the men;

*Man, what is this, and why art thou despairing?  
God shall forgive thee all but thy despair. (F.W.H. Myers)*

I trust that these words will bring back to you many happy memories of our talks together in the "Valve House" However dark the future appears to us, and it is very dark, - it is a fact in human nature that "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." My sincere and earnest wish is that whatever you do do not despair.

Reginald S Atkins 26 Wood Hill Leicester.

Despite the comradeship and brotherhood evidenced in the writings of both the autograph books, the work was demanding and strenuous and the camp rules were strict. The works were managed by Mr D. A. Howell, an engineer who in 1914 had returned from a large water scheme in Russia. In using conscientious objectors as a source of labour he gave the following advice to a fellow Home Office Scheme manager (albeit one he didn't know was also a conscientious objector), "I would advise you to be very careful not to give in to them at the start otherwise you will have trouble. The men with Socialistic tendencies are the worst to handle. The religious objectors are alright." <sup>xviii</sup> They were "engaged on pick and shovel work mostly and our work is very arduous but we have succeeded in knocking them into shape". He complains of insolence and malingering and records a strike in November 1916 when the men refused orders to work in the wet – the strike lasted a week and it only broke when six men were arrested. The return to the army or prison was always a threat to the men, and it was acted on for this and other such offences as 'General laziness', 'refusal of duty', 'general insolence to foremen' and 'absconding from work'.

A serious shortage of food in 1917 led to a food production camp being established to grow potatoes on land near to the camp. Horses rejected by the military were provided for ploughing and some of the conscientious objectors were directed to work on the cultivation of crops. It was reportedly a very productive scheme, with above average yields.<sup>xix</sup>

In addition to the construction of the waterworks at the source of the intake, a water main had to be laid 25 miles through Llanddeusant, Gwynfe and Trap to a reservoir to the northeast of Llannon from where a number of supplies were directed to the districts around Llanelli. The main itself was built with navy labour with accommodation for the men in mobile huts, but the reservoir and valve house at Llannon was built with labour from 30 conscientious objectors who were housed in a camp on the site, which was almost as close to Tumble as Llannon. Recent research has shown how kindly the men were treated in the village with invitations to tea a regular occurrence and the use of the miners' library and institute put at their disposal.<sup>xx</sup>

### **The Archaeological Legacy**

In 2016 Dyfed Archaeological Trust successfully made an application to the Brecon Beacons Trust for funding, which together with backing from Cadw, supported a project to study the remains of the camp and the waterworks. In 2017 fieldwork was carried out by a number of volunteers and supervised by Dyfed Archaeological Trust to investigate the archaeology which relates to the Home Office Scheme and the conscientious objectors. The results have been recorded in the Historic Environment Record and made available online through the website [www.archwilio.org.uk](http://www.archwilio.org.uk). There are 35 new records (PRNs 111180-111192, 112062-112081, 110407, 110410) which have been created relating to individual structures or features. Documentary sources have been used to inform the research and existing records such as that for Blaensawdde Farmhouse (PRN 7119), have been updated to acknowledge its association with the Home Office Scheme.





*Figure 5: The valve house and filter beds under construction (Peter Davies collection)*



*Figure 6: Llannon valve house and reservoir wall, now adapted into a private dwelling.*





*Figure 7: Illustrations like this one in John Taylor's autograph book have been helpful in identifying further structures (The Record office of Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland)*

The camp which was erected initially for the navy labourers and then housed the conscientious objectors was temporary in nature, and likely dismantled soon after the completion of the scheme in 1918. However there are subtle signs of the whereabouts of the camp and structures associated with the construction. In particular hut platforms are visible and a small stone building survives which is the magazine for storing explosives. Photographs and drawings in Peter Davies's archive, John Taylor's autograph book and within the engineering report by Jones and Dŵr Cymru show a range of buildings and structures which in some cases have left traces discernible on the ground.



*Figure 8: Recording the magazine where explosives were stored.*

A more lasting legacy of the scheme is encompassed in the monumental architecture of the waterworks itself, from the dam wall raising the level of the water, the filter beds and associated valve house and the sophisticated water management features channelling and regulating the flow of water to the intake. The masonry was clearly of a high standard and undoubtedly professional masons such as William Clemmens were tasked with the skilled work while the conscientious objectors and navvies before them carried out the hard manual labour. The reservoir and valve house at Llanddeusant, which is clearly a pair with that at Llannon (now converted into a private dwelling), exhibit fine masonry and architectural details.

Whilst the results of the fieldwork are now recorded within the Historic Environment Record, a number of community events have taken place to raise awareness of the site's history. Secondary schools were also invited to engage with the project and, with support from Wales for Peace, who have researched the history of pacifism in Wales during the First World War, a number of school visits were carried out to explore the site and discuss ideas of conscience. Educational resources resulting from these sessions are available, along with a downloadable leaflet, on the Dyfed Archaeological Trust's website<sup>xxi</sup>.

Thanks to the studies of Cyril Pearce we now know the names of the near 20,000 men who opposed the war and identified themselves as conscientious objectors, and we can identify those individuals who worked on the Llanddeusant Home Office Scheme. Together with the personal documents of Peter Davies and John Taylor there is much more to be pieced together of the story of the conscientious objectors at Llanddeusant, particularly investigating their individual motivations and the social history of the camp. This study has taken a small step to make the link between these men and the archaeological remains still to be seen of the now redundant waterworks and its associated camp. Their story was known only by a small number of local people, a few of the

descendants of men who laboured there and those researching the field of conscientious objectors. It is hoped that through this piece of work and the resulting records we can highlight this story more widely in the local community and raise awareness of their legacy.

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without funding provided by Brecon Beacons Trust and support from Cadw. Brecon Beacons National Park Authority provided access and support for both fieldwork and public events, with Judith Harvey particularly providing invaluable help by way of her time and transport. The valve-house and filter beds are now in the ownership of Llyn-y-Fan Hatchery, who also allowed access and assistance, for which we are grateful. Former employees of Dŵr Cymru; Chris Stretton and Phil Owen have also been most helpful, the former in providing documentary information and photographs and the latter for access to and information on the valve house and reservoir at Llannon. Llanddeusant Church and Youth Hostel were also very obliging in providing a venue for events and fieldwork.

Cyril Pearce, who has compiled the register of conscientious objectors, has been most generous in supplying copies of his database and other relevant sources he has discovered and Aled Eirug has also very helpfully shared information from his research for his PhD on the Opposition to the First World War in Wales. We were also very grateful to receive help and support from Wales for Peace who have been charting the history of pacifism in Wales.

Mary Walmsley set this project in motion, when on visiting Llanddeusant some years ago to discover the place where her grandfather had spent the war, shared photographs from his archive which eventually found their way to the Dyfed Archaeological Trust. Mary has been extremely helpful and generous in allowing access to her grandfather's archive of documents and photographs.

My colleague Sarah Rees and former colleague Huw Pritchard ably delivered this project, undertaking research, fieldwork, educational visits and numerous walks and talks and they also benefitted from the help of numerous dedicated volunteers to whom we extend grateful thanks.

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<sup>i</sup> The four Welsh archaeological trusts; Dyfed Archaeological Trust, Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust, Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust and Gwynedd Archaeological Trust.

<sup>ii</sup> Llanelli's Water Past and Present; Dr Roscoe Howells, 2013, <https://www.llanellich.org.uk/files/232-Llanelli-water-past-and-present>

<sup>iii</sup> A full account of the scheme is recorded in, 'An Historical and Engineering Survey of the Conversion of Llyn-y-Fan Fach into a Reservoir. 1914-1967'. By R.C. Jones, Llanelli Rural District Council Engineer. (Llyfrgell Llanelli Library LC12222)

<sup>iv</sup> The Amman Valley Chronicle and East Carmarthen News, 25<sup>th</sup> November 1915

<sup>v</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> June 1916, Minutes Llanelli Rural District Council.

<sup>vi</sup> 31<sup>st</sup> August 1916, Minutes Llanelli Rural District Council.

<sup>vii</sup> Cyril Pearce has produced a register of conscientious objectors of the First World War which numbers nearly 20,000.

<sup>viii</sup> R.C. Jones, *ibid*

<sup>ix</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> September 1916, Minutes Llanelli Rural District Council.

<sup>x</sup> 'Minute Book of the Llanddeusant Branch of the No-Conscription Fellowship, October 1916 till...' (Royal Armouries Collection; LLAN 1/1)

<sup>xi</sup> Llais Llafur, 24<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

<sup>xii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xiii</sup> Cyril Pearce, *ibid*.

<sup>xiv</sup> Pioneer, 21<sup>st</sup> October 1916.

<sup>xv</sup> The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland.

<sup>xvi</sup> Thanks to Mary Walmsley, Peter Davies' granddaughter, for access to his archive.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mary Walmsley, Peter Davies collection.

<sup>xviii</sup> Letter to FC Crowther ESQRE from DA Howell, Waterworks Engineer, 24<sup>th</sup> March 1917 (Bradford Peace Museum)

<sup>xix</sup> R.C. Jones *ibid*

<sup>xx</sup> Aled Eirug, 'Opposition to the First World War in Wales'. PhD Thesis, Cardiff University, 2016.

<sup>xxi</sup> <http://www.dyfedarchaeology.org.uk/ww1/conscientious.html>