

A494 DOLGELLAU TO SOUTH OF
BIRKENHEAD ROAD

- DRWS Y NANT IMPROVEMENT

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

REPORT NO. 78

GIAT 1170

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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for Gwynedd County Council Highways and Transportation Dept.

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INITIAL REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

As part of its improvements to the A494 Dolgellau - South of Birkenhead Trunk Road, the Welsh Office is proposing to upgrade the road at Drws y Nant. The proposed routes start at approximately SH810224 just to the west of Pont Esgair Gawr footbridge and run east for about 1.25 km to link up with the present road again beyond the Wenallt turning at SH819231.

Three alternative alignments, two on-line and one off-line, but all broadly following the existing road corridor, have been proposed. The off-line option follows the line of the disused Dolgellau to Bala railway from just east of Pont Esgair Gawr railway bridge (SH81322248) and leaves it again at Drws Y Nant bridge (SH81752290) to rejoin the on-line option and the present road. This option would require the renewal of the two bridges: the railway bridge below Pen-Y-Rhiw and the bridge crossing the Afon Wnion at Drws Y Nant. The on-line alternatives mainly follow the route of the existing road, but one of these would require a modification to the present course of the Afon Wnion.

Both on-line and off-line options would encroach upon derelict pastureland, sandwiched between the present road, the Afon Wnion and the railway embankment. There would also be some re-fashioning of the slope to the north side, presently covered by forestry and rough pasture.

The extent of the area of interest is a strip 200 m wide centred on each of the proposed routes, but expanding to include slip roads, and alterations to existing roads.

The proposals are to be accompanied by an Environmental Assessment, which is being prepared by the Derek Lovejoy Partnership for Gwynedd County Council. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust was contracted to undertake the archaeological assessment of the route, to be presented as part of the Environmental Statement.

2. ASSESSMENT BRIEF

An initial report was requested from Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, assessing the likely archaeological impact of the plans and suggesting mitigatory measures. A Suggested Project Design was agreed by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments and accepted by Gwynedd County Council.

The basic requirement was for a desk-top survey and field search of the corridor of interest in order to assess the impact of the proposals on the archaeological and heritage features within the road corridor and close enough to it to be affected. The importance and condition of known archaeological remains were to be assessed and areas of archaeological potential and new sites to be identified. Measures to mitigate the effects of the road scheme on the archaeological resource were to be suggested.

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust's proposals for fulfilling these requirements were, briefly, as follows:

- a) to identify and record the cultural heritage of the area to be affected by the proposals;
- b) to evaluate the importance of what was identified (both as a cultural landscape and as the individual items which make up that landscape); and
- c) to recommend ways in which damage to the cultural heritage can be avoided or minimised.

This report covers the work done under the first two stages of assessment, documentary research and walking the route, and includes recommendations for later stages.

N.B. Full details of ancillary areas likely to be affected by the road works, such as vehicle parking and turning areas, materials storage areas etc., have not yet been supplied. Experience shows that these areas are as likely to suffer damage as the actual landtake for the road. If all such areas fall within the corridor of interest, they will have been covered, but in order that all areas affected may be subjected to the same level of survey, any information relating to areas affected outside the 200 m corridor should be notified to the Trust as soon as possible.

3. METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

3.1 Desk-top Study

Consultation of maps, computer records, written records and reference works, which make up the Sites and Monuments Record, was undertaken at Gwynedd Archaeological Trust. Records (including early Ordnance Survey maps, tithe maps and schedules, estate maps and papers and reference works - see bibliography) were also consulted in the library and the archives of the University College of North Wales, Bangor, and the County archives at Dolgellau. Aerial photographs were inspected at the offices of Gwynedd County Council, the County Archives at Caernarfon and the Countryside Council for Wales.

3.2 Field Search

This was undertaken on the 13th January 1994 by two members of Trust staff. The whole length of the preferred routes were walked where possible (inaccessible areas included some fairly large areas of forest on the north edge of the corridor, especially below Wenallt Isaf (SH81552298) and areas along the railway embankment overgrown with scrub), and the rest of the corridor was either walked or observed from neighbouring fields, paths etc. Conditions were generally fairly poor for fieldwork, as a significant proportion of the land was extremely boggy with a thick growth of naturally regenerating birch, alder, and oak scrub, and the weather was dull, windy and wet, with poor light.

Sites identified were marked on copies of 1:2,500 OS maps supplied by Gwynedd County Council, as accurately as possible without surveying. Forms were filled in assessing each site, and detailed notes made of the more important. Photographs were taken of all potential sites identified.

3.3 Report

All available information was collated, and transferred onto a single set of maps at a scale of 1:2,500 for convenience. The sites were then assessed and allocated to the categories listed below. These are intended to give an idea of the importance of the site and the level of response likely to be required, for ease of reference; descriptions of the sites and specific recommendations for further evaluation or mitigatory measures, as appropriate, are given in the relevant sections of this report.

In some cases, further investigation may result in sites being moved into different categories. The criteria used for allocating sites to categories are based on those used by the Secretary of State when considering ancient monuments for scheduling; these are set out in Annex 3 to Planning Policy Guidance 16: Archaeology and Planning.

(Notes)

3.4 Categories

The categories listed below follow the guidelines given in the 'Design Manual for Roads and Bridges' Volume 11, Section 3, Part 2, Paragraph 3.4, and allocation of a site to a category defines the importance of the archaeological resource of that site.

Category A - Sites of national importance.

Scheduled Ancient Monuments, Listed Buildings and sites of schedulable or listable quality, i.e. those which would meet the requirements for scheduling (ancient monuments) or listing (buildings) or both.

Sites which are scheduled or listed have legal protection, and it is recommended that all Category A sites remain preserved and protected *in situ*.

Category B - Sites of regional or county importance.

Sites which would not fulfil the criteria for scheduling or listing, but which are nevertheless of particular importance within the region.

Preservation *in situ* is the preferred option for Category B sites, but if damage or destruction cannot be avoided, appropriate detailed recording might be an acceptable alternative.

Category C - Sites of district or local importance.

Sites which are not of sufficient importance to justify a recommendation for preservation if threatened.

Category C sites nevertheless merit adequate recording in advance of damage or destruction.

Category D - Minor and damaged sites.

Sites which are of minor importance or so badly damaged that too little remains to justify their inclusion in a higher category.

For Category D sites, rapid recording, either in advance or during destruction, should be sufficient.

Category E - Sites needing further investigation.

Sites whose importance is as yet undetermined and which will require further work before they can be allocated to categories A - D are temporarily placed in this category, with specific recommendations for further evaluation. By the end of the assessment there should be no sites remaining in this category.

4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Introduction

Archive material consulted during the desk-top study provided dating evidence for known sites (e.g. Wenallt (13th Cent & 1582)), and maps of successive dates allowed an appreciation of the development of the landscape, in particular the impact of the railways. Estate maps and papers were mostly of relatively recent date, but Ordnance Survey coverage was good. Unfortunately the Tithe maps of the area were of little help, beyond confirming the name of the relevant estate - that of Nannau.

Lists supplied by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments gave information about listed buildings and scheduled ancient monuments, of which there are none within the corridor. Aerial photographs were by and large un-helpful due to the densely forested and scrub covered nature of the terrain.

Sites noted from documentary sources were identified in the field where possible, and in addition a number of previously unrecorded sites were identified. These are included, with the rest of the sites, in the Gazetteer. The total of sites allocated numbers in the Gazetteer was 10.

4.2 The Archaeological Background

4.2.1 Prehistoric

There are no known sites or findspots of the prehistoric period within the corridor itself though a standing stone of probable Bronze Age date lies just to the north east beside the railway embankment at SH82602361, and a number of Prehistoric cairns and settlements lie within a 5 km radius, indicating some level of activity for this period within the vicinity.

4.2.2 Roman

Drws y Nant lies on the probable line of the Roman road which ran between the fort at Brithdir and that at Caer Gai, and it appears likely that the Roman road passes through the corridor some where in region of the Drws Y Nant bridge (SH81752290). The road is known to approach the area from the north east on the same alignment as the present A494. Beneath the slopes of Coed Wenallt its line becomes visible where the present road makes deviations to avoid minor obstacles. At or near Drws Y Nant the road crosses the Afon Wnion to ascend to the south west, where it emerges as a macadamized lane between Esgair Gawr (SH81632241) and Llety Wyn (SH81192175).

The river crossing is thought to be in the region of Drws Y Nant because the geological form of the valley changes here from a 'U' shaped glaciated type, with its terminal moraine at this point, to a 'V' shaped form, generally avoided by Roman road engineers, because of the difficult terrain. The terminal moraine would also allow easy access onto the gentler slopes to the south west for the route.

4.2.3 Medieval and later

Settlement of the surrounding area during the Medieval period is known from the documentation but not well represented on the ground. The area of interest straddles the border of two medieval townships: Nannau to the north of the river Wnion and Brithdir on the south. The present-day parish/community boundaries of Llanfachreth and Brithdir are more or less unchanged within the corridor, apart from minor amendments made after the construction of the railway in the late nineteenth century.

Of particular interest is the farmstead of Wenallt (SH81622309)/Wenallt Isaf (SH81552298), just outside of the corridor of interest. Wenallt is mentioned in the 13th century Extenta Com 'Meryoneth and in several indentures now in the Nannau collection at UCNW. The earliest of these dated 1582, informs us that the land belonging to Wenallt was in the possession of the Cistercian Abbey of Cymer prior to the Dissolution. Cistercian holdings were numerous in the area and included land at Esgair Gawr (SH816224) and possibly an early Grange at Esgair-Wen. To the north west of the corridor lies the site of Pistyll Hen-Fynachlog (SH80652307), a spring, now dried-up, again with Cistercian connections.

The buildings all immediately outside the area of interest date from at least the late 17th century onwards, some of them being buildings of intrinsic merit, while some have group value with their associated outbuildings and walls. The Sub-Medieval hall-house and barn at Hendre Ffridd Y Mynach (formerly known as Gelliglewrach and Benglog), the only listed group of buildings in the area lies well outside the corridor at SH80582348. The early post Medieval cruck barn of Cefn Henfaes (SH80762213) lies to the west, again outside the corridor. The area was supporting numerous farmsteads by the end of the 18th century, including those of Esgair Gawr (SH81632241), Pen-Y-Rhiw (SH81262289) and Ty-Mawr (SH80782268), besides Wenallt.

4.2.4 Roads and Railways

The Merionethshire Turnpike Trust was formed in 1777 and before the end of the 18th century most of the existing main roads of the county, including the Dolgellau to Bala road had been brought under its wing. From the early cartographic evidence available the route of this road, from Rhydymain to just beyond Drws Y Nant, appears to have been altered around the beginning of the 19th century in favour of a lower route following the Afon Wnion.

By 1816 Merioneth had obtained its first coaching service. This service travelled along the Dolgellau to Bala turnpike road en route from Barmouth to Corwen and from there to Chester. Mail coaches plied the route daily on their way between Barmouth and Chester during the Summer months and every alternate day on their way to Shrewsbury and Liverpool. During the Winter the coach service only went to Chester. Carriages carrying goods from Chester, Ruabon and Shrewsbury were frequently to be seen on the road until the coming of the railway in 1868.

The Bala & Dolgelley Railway Act of 1862 paved the way for the completion of the standard gauge line after many months of scheme and counter scheme, however it was not until 1868 that the line actually opened. From the time the line was completed the Great Western Railway company worked over the line eventually amalgamating the nominally independent companies involved during the construction.

The line was some 27.7km in length running from Bala, via Llanuwchllyn, crossing the watershed of the Afon Dyfrdwy Valley at Garneddwen and into the narrow valley of the Wnion, through Drws Y Nant station, where the valley widens, and then down the steepest gradient on the line - 1 in 50 - to Bontnewydd station and eventually arriving at Dol gelley.

When the line opened the intermediate stations including Drws Y Nant had no accommodation except for a small booking hut. Substantial improvements were carried out in 1895, when the passing loop and Down platform were added, as well as the 23 lever signal box, which stood at the base of the ramp on the Down side. This controlled the level crossing gates. The main buildings at Drws Y Nant were also located on the Downside platform and comprised a brick built Booking Office and Waiting room with toilets.

Access across the lines was at the foot of the ramps at the Dolgellau end. There was further accommodation on the Up platform: a Corrugated Iron waiting shed and a similar goods lock-up.

Drws Y Nant had one siding with a loading gauge at its entrance. This was only able to cope with seven wagons at a time. Livestock was regularly handled and a cattle pen was provided nearby. The siding itself had an unusual feature: a scissor cross-over point which allowed access to the Down and Up loops. This was most likely introduced because of the steep gradient at this point - the wagons entered the sidings under their own gravity.

All freight services on the line west of Llangollen ceased in 1964 and on the line was officially closed in January 1965.

4.2.4 Conclusions

Sites of archaeological and historical interest of all periods lie immediately outside of the corridor - evidence for continued activity in the region since the Bronze Age at least. As far as it is possible to say with any certainty, sites within the confines of the area of interest belong to the Roman and Post-Medieval periods.

Of particular note is the alignment of the Roman road, thought to pass through the area; the route of the turnpike road and the changes in the route carried out under the turnpike act; and the line of the Dolgellau to Bala railway, with its station at Drws Y Nant and other associated features.

4.3 Gazetteer of Archaeological Sites

The sites are described in numerical sequence. Each description is accompanied by recommendations for work in the case of a threat to the site. Where the remains require evaluating before full mitigatory measures can be decided upon, the recommendations are for further assessment, and where the information is sufficient to allow it mitigatory measures are suggested. A summary at the end of the Gazetteer lists the sites according to their allocated category.

1. Bala & Dolgellau Railway Category C

The line was built in 1868 but is now disused, closed in 1965 after the Beeching report. The part of the railway within the corridor includes Drws Y Nant station itself and a stretch of line immediately to the west as far as Pont Esgair Gawr railway bridge SH81322248 (not affected), the embankment and cuttings, bridges, culverts, sidings etc. associated with it. Apart from the Station House none of the buildings associated with the station remain standing. The demolished remnants of the signal box lie on the track bed. While the trackbed between the platforms has been partially filled with rubble, probably from the now demolished brick-built Booking Office and Waiting Room. The most significant of these features are listed below:

- 1a Bridge over Afon Wnion. Iron girder construction. Pont Esgair Gawr SH81322248.
- 1b Bridge over Afon Wnion. Red brick. Below Pen-Y-Rhiw at SH81452276.
- 1c Cutting through bedrock. SH81482280.
- 1d Brick revetted sidings with wooden buffers still *in situ*. SH81662288.
- 1e Base of signal post. SH81642289.
- 1f Culvert carrying stream under embankment. SH81702291.
- 1g Bridge carrying minor road over Afon Wnion. Drws Y Nant SH81752290.
- 1h Station House. Drws Y Nant Station. SH81722289.
- 1i Up-line platform constructed of dark red brick. SH81762292.
- 1j Down-line platform, red brick, partially destroyed. SH81832293.
- 1k Brick base for corrugated waiting shed. Up-line side. SH81742291.
- 1l Concrete base (remains of.) for Corrugated goods lock-up. SH81802294.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: The track layout and associated features should be recorded by measured survey (including gradient profiles) and photograph. Sections across the line should be recorded to determine the method of construction.

2. Improved turnpike road on line of present A494 Category C

The revised route of the Dolgellau to Bala Toll road as it exists today, is thought to date from some time between 1797 and 1838. However it is unlikely that many of the features associated with the existing tarmac road belong to this early period.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: Record by photograph and description any features before destruction. The line of the Roman road may lie between the Drws Y Nant bridge (SH81752290) and the Wenallt turning (SH819231) and so a close watching brief in this area is recommended.

3. Large cairn SH81142249 Category E

Large grass covered probable clearance cairn on the north side of drystone field boundary.

Recommendation for further assessment: Trail trench to ascertain nature of remains.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: This site will be reclassified following evaluation.

4. Drystone wall and Track SH81172251C Category D

Crossing diagonally down the slope above Pont Esgair Gawr footbridge from east to west is a trackway associated with a short length of ruinous drystone boulder walling interspersed with mature oak trees. The track has been recently cut along its length by the insertion of a drainage pipe.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: This track is not included on the OS. map and so it is recommended that it is surveyed and its make-up recorded.

5. Pont Esgair Gawr footbridge SH81262250 Category D

Modern (20th Cent.) girder footbridge carrying official footpath across the Afon Wnion. Cemented stone bridge abutment probably contemporary.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: Recording by photograph and description.

6. Old trackway SH81342258 Category D

Leading towards Afon Wnion near railway bridge at SH81452276, the trackway is represented by a slightly scarped linear feature curving round the foot of a wooded slope. The track appeared on a map of 1862 running through a funnel shaped field, which narrowed towards its south end. The northern extent of the track no longer exists, having been destroyed by the construction of the railway.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: This site should be surveyed and recorded by photograph and description.

7. Original route of Turnpike road SH81762298 Category C

The lane turning off to Wenallt marks the route of the original Bala to Dolgellau road as it approaches Rhydymain (SH80502210). A change by-passing this stretch of road with a new road to the south was brought about under the Turnpike Act of 1777. The exact date for this change is unclear, though from map evidence it appears to have occurred some time between 1797 and 1838.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: Record by photograph and description. A watching brief is recommended to look for original road metalling confirming its identification as the turnpike route.

8. Trackway SH81732288 Category D

Former trackway running along side the railway embankment, respecting the former course of Afon Wnion pre-dating the construction of the railway. Appears on the 1838 OS. map.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: Survey and record by photograph and description.

9. Linear feature Category E

Raised linear feature running up-against, parallel to and eventually joining the same course as the present A494. Situated just east of the Drws Y Nant bridge, this could be a remnant of the original Roman road, or at least represent the remains of a slightly different alignment of the A494, probably since altered with the construction of the railway embankment and the subsequent creation of a new river crossing.

Recommendation for further assessment: Further field survey and trial trenching to establish the exact nature of feature.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: The site will be reclassified following evaluation.

10. Trackway SH818522298 category D

Probable trackway showing up as curvilinear hollow-way just north of present-day river. Appeared on a pre-railway map of 1862 as a narrow area delineated by field boundaries.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: Survey and record by photograph and description.

Field boundaries, tracks etc.

Minor and generally linear features such as walls and tracks have not been listed in the Gazetteer as individual sites, for various reasons including sheer weight of numbers, and the fact that the majority of them will only be partially affected, the unaffected portion remaining *in situ* as an adequate record. The necessity for archaeological recording and the possibility of mitigation are both limited. However, the patterns of fields, tracks and boundaries are nevertheless an important aspect of the historical landscape.

The most common type of field boundary in this area is the drystone wall, but examples of embanked walls, concrete post and wire fences (along the railway line) etc. were also noted.

Recommendation for further assessment: None.

Recommendation for mitigatory measures: Where a significant length of any field boundaries such as walls, field banks or slate fences are to be destroyed, the nature of the boundary should be recorded.

5. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER WORK AND MITIGATORY MEASURES

5.1 Further assessment work

Category E

This section summarises the work which is recommended to evaluate those archaeological remains whose status and extent are not yet established, i.e. sites in Category E. They will be reclassified and suitable mitigatory measures suggested following evaluation.

- | | | |
|----|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3. | Large cairn | Trail trenching to ascertain nature of remains |
| 9. | Linear feature | Further field survey/trail trenching to establish exact nature of feature |

5.2 Mitigatory Measures

This section lists the remaining sites according to category. The categorisation attempts to quantify the importance of the archaeological resource, as suggested in the 'Design Manual for Roads and Bridges' Volume 11, Section 3, Part 2.

Category A - National importance

None.

Category B - Regional importance

None.

Category C - Local importance

1. Bala & Dolgellau Railway
2. Improved route of turnpike road on line of A494
7. Original route of turnpike road

Category D - Minor and damaged sites

3. Large cairn
4. Drystone wall and track
8. Trackway
10. Trackway

A continuous watching brief should be maintained along the whole route during relevant stages of the work, as some sites will not be suspected until topsoil stripping reveals them, and sites identified in advance of the works may require further recording during construction.

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