



Underground With Siôn Dolgarregddu

I have many fond and frightening memories of the slate caverns at Llechwedd. I remember the many friends I had in the mine.

I was born in 1844 in Blaenau Ffestiniog at home. My family lived in the Dolgarreddu Terrace. These were a neat row of terraced cottages built for the workers at the slate mines. Everybody around us worked at the mine. In fact most of the village worked at the mine, the men, that is.

I remember how excited I was when I first went to the mine. It was in 1856 when I was just a lad of 12. I was fearful. I had heard so many stories. My father was a bit of a storyteller and he exaggerated a lot. A right scary place he made it out to be. I thought it must be something like Hell, going so deep underground. I was always frightened my Dad might dig right through and break into the Devil's Kingdom and drag him inside. But I was also pleased to be going into the mine. I could earn some money for my mother. I could start to pay my way. I was going to work in a man's world. I felt six feet tall already. I felt like a man!



Splitting and dressing the slates in the mill.

But when I got inside I felt so small. All the other men were so big, strong and tall. I was just a puny lad, but those years that followed soon put beef on my bones. And the caverns were so large. Not that it was easy to see. But there were candles burning everywhere. Some low down where we entered our cave and others so high up where I could hear men tapping in the dark. I looked everywhere to see if devils would appear out of the cracks in the rock. But did they appear? No, of course not! I can tell you it was not even warm in that cave. It certainly did not have the terrible scorching heat of Hell that I had heard about from the preacher at chapel on Sabbath days.

I went to work with my father and uncle. All the men worked in groups of four. Two worked on the cavern, digging out the slate, while two worked on the surface cutting the slate into mainly roof tiles. My father and uncle showed me first to take the slate they had dug and put a mark on it. I then had to put the slate on a truck that was taken up to the surface. Two of my cousins would recognise our marks, take off the slate and slice it and cut it. And very good work they did too. They could slice an inch block of slate into 35 to 38 tiles. You look at that on a ruler. You will see that was really clever work, that was.

As the beds slope downwards it has been necessary to mine deep underground. The chert was used to form natural roofs above each working area (chambers). The miners would make a tunnel immediately beneath the chert to the full width of the bed of slate. Working at right angles to the tunnel they then followed the angle of the chert to make opening shafts at 20 metre intervals. Each shaft was then widened, by removing the slate, to a width of 11 metres; leaving intervening supporting pillars 9 metres wide. Where the chert was very thick two or three chambers would be worked as one.

We worked all day long, and a long day it was too. And it always seemed a shame to me that we worked in daytime. I mean, we got up in the dark, except for summer, and worked in the dark in the cave while it was daylight outside. Then when we had finished work we went home in ... Yes, you've guessed it ... the dark! But I suppose if we had worked in the night then we would have gone home to sleep in the daytime and we still would not have seen the sunlight!

I said we worked all day, didn't I? Well, that is not entirely true. We stopped for a half-an-hour lunch at midday. Everybody in each cavern would stop for lunch and we would go into a specially built little cabanau for our meal. We weren't allowed to talk while we eat. But after we had eaten we would have discussions on topics of the day. This helped to exercise our minds. I learnt a lot from these times. Sometimes someone might read a pamphlet to us or we might even sing. We all loved to learn and sing. Most of us could read. We learnt to read at Sabbath school.

Nearly everyone went to chapel on Sunday. Three times on Sunday we went and twice in the week. We were taught how to read and write so that we could read the Bible. You see there were no schools for us. So if it hadn't been for the chapels we would not have learnt. We also learnt to sing. We sung great hymns and learnt to sing in parts. And when we men got to sing together, oh what a sound! Why, I would not be surprised if the angels in Heaven didn't put down their harps to listen when we sang. And on a Sabbath they must have had a lot to listen to in Blaenau Ffestiniog, because we had 37 chapels. In fact we had more chapels than pubs!

That all seems so long ago now. After thirty years in the mine I had to stop work because of ill health. That's the way it is for all miners. But at least I can now enjoy the daylight hours in the sun!

At Llechwedd the mines go down to a depth of more than 305 metres. There are 16 floors, the chambers being one above each other. The miners have to be very careful when digging out each chamber. They must leave pillars to support the chambers above them. In fact, the supporting pillars have to be directly beneath the pillars above or the roof would collapse.

The mines were worked by teams of four men, two men extracting the slate underground and sending their marked blocks to the surface for splitting and dressing. Slate is a word that comes from the Old French word 'esclater' meaning "to split" because slate is rock that can be split.

The slate was then transported by narrow guage Ffestiniog Railway to Porthmadog, where it was put on ships and sent all over the world.



Ffestiniog Railway

Mining at Llechwedd

In 1801, 732 people lived in the village of Ffestiniog. The slate was first discovered at Llechwedd in 1849, and soon a new town was built to house all the men and their families who came to work at the mines. This was the village of Blaenau Ffestiniog. By 1901, the population of the area had risen to 11,433. In 1991 that population had dropped to 5,349. At its peak, in 1895, 4,802 people worked in the 14 mines and quarries of Blaenau Ffestiniog.

The Llechwedd slate beds do not lie flat, nor are they vertical. They lie at an angle of 30° from the horizontal. There are five beds (veins) and each is sandwiched between layers of hard chert. Chert is hard rock rather like granite.