

Gloucestershire engineering in Snowdonia

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I recently found myself in a storm-blown North Wales, and in an attempt to escape the torrential rain, visited Penrhyn Castle not far from the crossing to Anglesey. To find somewhere dry was part of the reason for being there, although the other attraction was the castle's small railway museum.

Briefly, built between 1820 and 1837, Penrhyn Castle was once the home of the Pennant family who had made a fortune, owning Jamaican sugar plantations since the middle of the 17th century. By the 1730s, they had moved back to England, becoming established as merchants in Liverpool and London, but later turned their attention to the burgeoning and lucrative Welsh slate industry. During the 19th century, the family made a second fortune as owners of the large Penrhyn slate quarry at nearby Bethesda.

The quarry lays claim to being home to one of the earliest narrow gauge industrial railways in the world - the Penrhyn Quarry Railway. This ran close to the Castle, transporting slate to the coast for export.

In 1951, the castle along with its associated estates was bequeathed to the National Trust, at which time the railway museum was set up in the castle's former stable block, once home to 36 horses. This focused mainly on industrial railway relics, industrial locomotives, and rolling stock, some of which was once used in the large Penrhyn slate quarry. The museum now houses a well-kept and interesting collection of early locomotives, but it was not this that caught my eye. Tucked away in a corner of the museum was a beautifully restored saloon coach, proudly sporting a brass plaque that read 'Gloucester Railway and Carriage & Waggon Company Ltd', once one of Gloucester's most important and long-lived engineering companies.



Apparently, the coach was built by the company around 1896, at the same time as the new main line of Penrhyn Quarries Ltd, and was used by Lord Penrhyn, his agent, and wealthy visitors for journeys between the company headquarters at Port Penrhyn and the slate quarries in Bethesda. At times, it was also used to take the quarrymen's wages to the office (under armed guard!). At its peak, there were more than 50 miles of track servicing the Penrhyn Quarries in and around Bethesda.

Where necessary, quarry workers were transported in rudimentary open topped 'carriages', a world away from his Lordship's plush well-appointed eight-seater saloon that sports padded seating and stained glass. The museum pointed out that a quarry workers waggon of equivalent size would carry no less than 60 individuals!



It's always gratifying to find items of Gloucester's industrial past in places where you wouldn't necessarily expect to find them. This seems to be particularly true when it comes to products from some of the major engineering companies such as the Waggon Works, Fielding & Platt, and Listers of Dursley. Gloucester industrial products truly did reach all four corners of the world and its often amazing where they turn up!

The moral of the story? Keep your eyes open when on holiday, wherever you go!

Post script

Penrhyn Castle's remarkable main staircase was undertaken by Thomas Hopper and took a team of ten stonemasons more than a decade to carve. Hopper used two contrasting stones in the construction – the walls are made of limestone that apparently came from quarries in Painswick – yet another interesting connection with Gloucestershire.

