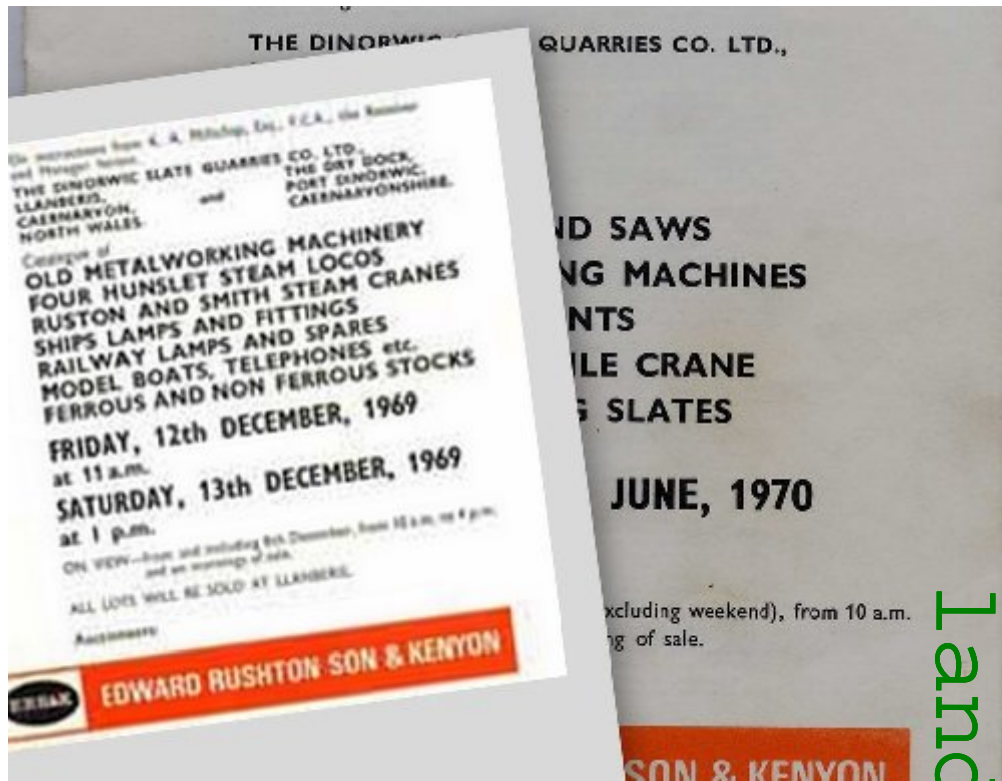


An Introduction to the Illustrated Dinorwic Quarry Sales Catalogues



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This “potted history” of the Dinorwic Slate Quarry concern is in no way intended to be a concise and detailed account, of which several excellent dedicated publications are already widely available. Instead, I have attempted merely to summarise the key dates, and give some impression of the sheer scale and “character” of the business, as a backdrop to the circumstances surrounding the final closure, auction sales, and dismantling which took place within a year or so from 1969.

Historical Background

The Elidir mountain, lying between Bethesda and Llanberis in North Wales, contains a vast bed of high-quality slate rock. On its slopes grew up two of the largest slate quarries in the world, Penrhyn, the property of the Pennant family of Penrhyn Castle on the north side, and Dinorwic, that of the Assheton-Smiths of Vaynol, on the southern side. In the mid-nineteenth century, it was likened to “ a colossal plum cake, out of which two boys are each trying to take the largest slice he can”. The slate strata were formed around 500 million years ago, by the combined effects of intense heat, compression and folding. The resulting material was found to be capable of easy splitting into thin sheets (up to 6 per inch thickness) and was totally impervious to water.

The Dinorwic concern had its origins in isolated small workings where the slate out-cropped on the surface of the ground, just to the south-east of Dinorwic village, from around 1700. The cottager tenants paid 20 shillings



a year to their landlord for the privilege of quarrying slate for local use. This development was sporadic and haphazard, resulting in good slate being buried by the indiscriminate tipping of waste rock from nearby workings. The quarries of Allt-Ddu and Bryn-Glas in this area had become well-established by 1771.

In 1788, realising its potential, the landowner Thomas Assheton-Smith granted a 21-year lease to three men, messrs Wright, Ellis & Bridge at £12 per annum; they formed the Dinorwic Slate Company to develop and expand the quarries into a unified whole. However, transport of the finished slate products was a problem; it was initially accomplished by a mixture of basket hampers on horseback, sledges, small boats on Padarn lake, and carts, mainly working to the busy port of Caernarvon. In 1793, a site at Aberpwll, on the shore of the Menai Strait some four miles to the north, was developed as a new shipping point for Dinorwic slate, known as Port Dinorwic.

Upon the expiry of the original lease in 1809, Assheton-Smith took over the working of the quarry himself, continuing as the Dinorwic Slate Co with messrs Turner, Jones & Wright engaged to run it for him. The port was greatly enlarged the same year, and in 1812 a new direct road between the quarry and port was laid down, helping to resolve the transport issue. Inclined planes came into use in the quarry, and in 1822-23 a tramway was laid down to the port, following mainly the course of the 1812 road. From 1809 to 1828, slate sales amounted to an average around £10,000 per annum, though demand fluctuated considerably. In the latter year, 300 men and boys were employed in the slate workings, and Port Dinorwic could load some 60-70 vessels per annum, of up to 200 tons displacement apiece. Thereafter expansion was very rapid, to meet the demand created by mass suburban house building in the Victorian era; in 1831 for instance 90,000 tons were shipped, and by 1842, 1900 men were employed.

This rapid development occurred mainly on the lower slopes of the mountain, down towards Llyn Peris from the original workings, and even into deep pits below the lake level. This gave rise to further transport problems, as all this slate had to be hauled uphill to the tramway, which itself was working at maximum capacity less than 20 years after it was built. The solution was a new wide-gauge railway at lake level, opened in 1843, proceeding generally some 2 miles south of the old tramway to a terminus above Port Dinorwic, thence by a chain-worked incline down to the quays. The railway was of 4-foot gauge, non-standard since at that time the national connected network did not extend into North Wales beyond Chester, and was quite unique for its time in that the small slate wagons were carried piggy-back fashion, two-abreast in groups of four, on the large railway wagons. Originally horse worked like the tramway it superseded, the Dinorwic Quarries Railway, more familiarly known as the Padarn Railway, became steam-operated from 1848 upon the delivery of two unusual new locomotives, the "Fire Queen" and the "Jenny Lind". At about the same time, steam power also began to be used in the quarry, for sawing and dressing of the slate blocks.

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