

UNDER THE BRIDGE: IN SEARCH OF TWO
MILLS
MODERN AND HISTORIC STORIES ABOUT LIFE
IN BANCYFELIN AND BEYOND

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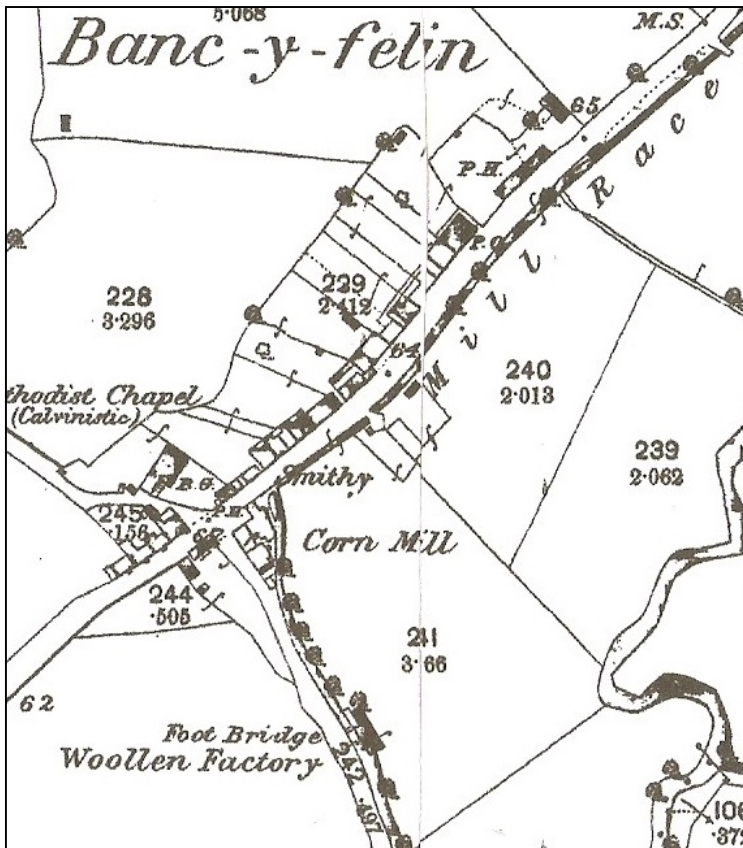


PLATE 1 Bancyfelin (taken from Second Series OS map, 1906)

BANCYFELIN CORN MILL

About 250 years ago, a man stood on the muddy coach road which ran from Carmarthen to St Clears. In front of him was the road to Llangynog. It went down a short gradient before levelling out. Behind him, the road went up the hill on the way to Meidrim.

The man looked left, back along the coach road towards Carmarthen. The road was level, and followed the contour. About 500 yards away, he could see the Afon Cowin coming down from the north east. The river passed under the coach road. Further along, the river then passed under the Llangynog Road about 200 yards in front of him. Between the two road crossings, the river had fallen by 10 or 12 feet.

The man had a vision. The vision was of a mill. If he could divert some of the water off the river near the point where it went under the main road, and channel it in an almost level ditch beside the road, he could then transfer the potential energy of the water into kinetic energy, as it fell down the gradient beside the Llangynog Road. The drop of 10 to 12 feet was more than enough to drive a water wheel.

In the days before electric power or engine power, the power of water was well understood. Perhaps the man had seen a mill powered by a wheel elsewhere. Perhaps there was already a small mill here. History does not record the precise event.

The man transferred his vision into a considerable commitment of engineering works. He started to construct a leat (a ditch or channel, also called a mill race) from the point where the river passed under the main road. The leat was

channelled under the road as well, and was then turned away from the river to follow the south side of the road, which was almost level. After 500 yards, the leat was turned south again. Here, he constructed a mill with a water wheel at the point where the contour fell away. The leat continued for another 250 yards alongside the Llangynog Road, until the water was returned to the river.

The fall where the mill was constructed was only 4 or 5 feet. The most efficient waterwheel is an overshot, but overshot wheels need a head of water of 6 to 8 feet or more as this was the average diameter of water wheels. The least efficient waterwheel is an undershot water wheel, where the paddles are flat and the water merely pushes them along. These only existed where there was little or no fall. The Bancyfelin waterwheel was likely to have been what was known as a 'breast shot wheel'. This is one where the water enters the buckets on the wheel about half way up. Recollections referred to later in this paper confirm that it was not an overshot wheel.

A small village then developed between what was formerly just a coaching halt at the farm on the side of the road (now the Fox and Hounds Inn), and the mill. In 1788, a Chapel was built opposite the mill. The village became known as Bancyfelin, reflecting the importance of the mill. For the next 200 or so years, the mill ground corn. It was one of about 100 mills that were developed in Carmarthenshire in the 1800's.

As the 20th century advanced, the demand for mill ground flour began to reduce. Cheap white bread became available in local shops, made from grain imported from North America in large

ships, milled in huge rolling mills at major ports around the coast and delivered daily to retailers.

By around 1970, all signs of the enterprise had disappeared. Houses now stand on the site of the old mill and its leat. Anyone travelling through the village today would wonder why it was called Bancyfelin, given that there is no mill.

But if the traveller looks closer, there is still evidence of this once considerable engineering enterprise to be found. Evidence of the former mill can be found in old maps and documents. There is evidence contained in old photographs. There is physical evidence in the form of the remains of the leat, and weights used by the miller. And there is evidence contained in the personal recollections of local people who can still remember the mill as a working business. Together, these build up a picture of what the mill was, and how it operated.

When was the mill built?

Before looking at the evidence of the mill's existence, is there any evidence to show when it was constructed?

Water corn mills have existed since the 10th century, as they were mentioned in the old Welsh Laws by Hywel Dda. However, most people ground their own corn using a quern stone well into the 17th century. By the 18th century there was a mill in nearly every parish.

The mill at Bancyfelin was probably built around the 1770's. There is no direct evidence to support this, but the date is suggested for the following reasons.

First, a 1729 map of South Wales (Bowen) does not name the village. It just shows two buildings either side of the road. The construction of such an enterprise would have needed the commitment of several households, and the ongoing business would also have employed workers from a number of houses. The map does not show enough buildings.

Second, the turnpike road was built in 1772, probably over the line of the existing coach road between Carmarthen and St Clears. The coming of the turnpike would have ensured that the miller had the potential for a steady passing trade with the wider community.

Third, the Chapel in Bancyfelin was first established in 1788. The Chapel would only have followed the initial development of the village, because it was then sure of a regular congregation, including those working in and around the mill.

Finally, Court records confirm that it was a going concern in 1800 (see below).

1 Evidence of the mill on old maps

a) The 1841 Tithe Map for Llanfihangel Abercowin

The 1841 Tithe Map for the area clearly showed the leat. It was labelled 'Mill Stream' and numbered '81'. It leaves the Cowin just upstream of the bridge, goes under the bridge, then turns away from the river to follow the contour back to the roadside. The Tithe Map has an inset at a larger scale which also shows the 'stream' right next to the road. It turns down the slope to power the mill, which is also numbered '81'.

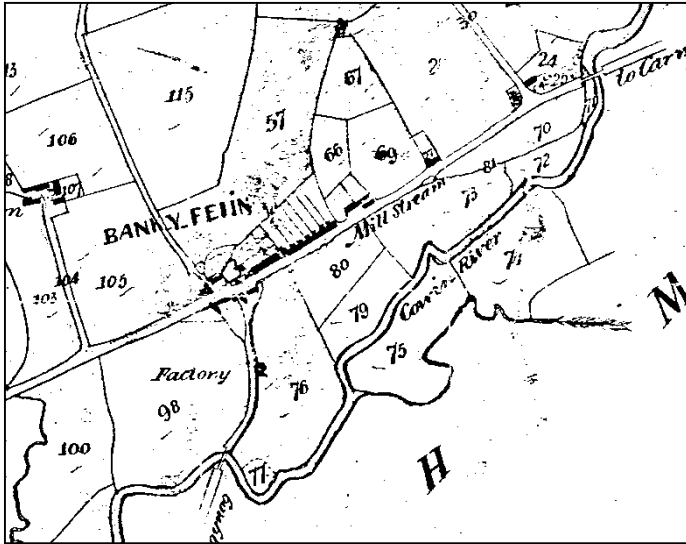
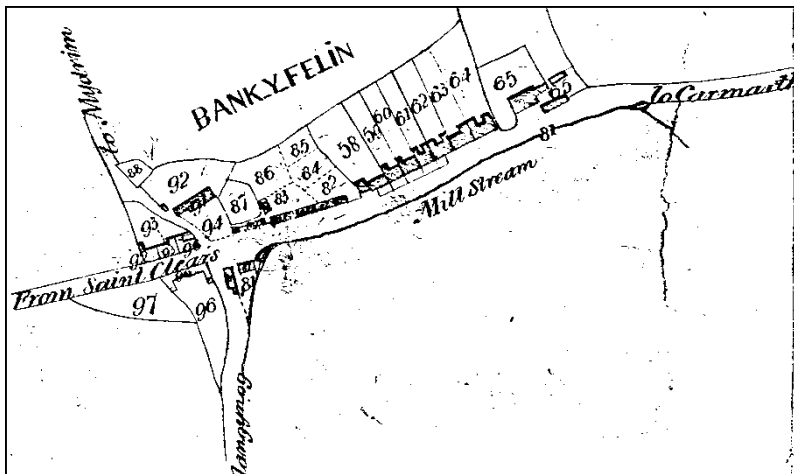


Plate 2 a and b An extract of the 1841 Tithe Map (above), and a larger scale insert on the Tithe Map (below)



The triangle of land between the leat and the roads was the obvious place to locate the mill because the head of water could turn the mill wheel half way down the slope.

b) OS maps dated 1880 & 1906

The first series OS map, published in 1880

The first OS map (Plate 3) shows the leat as the major feature in the village. It is labelled '*Mill Race*'. The map also shows how the miller controlled the water entering the leat because at the point where it leaves the Afon Cowin just upstream of Pont Goch, there is a '*Sluice*'. This was a sliding gate which would have been lifted when milling was planned, and lowered when the mill wheel needed to stop. About 25 yards before the crossroads, the leat is seen to turn away from the road, and pass to the rear of the '*Corn Mill*'. This is where the mill wheel must have been.

There is a footbridge ('*F.B.*') crossing the leat just beside the mill. This gives pedestrians access into field 241. The leat then continues beside the Llangynog Road until it rejoins the river at Pont Newydd.

The map also shows that there were at least three bridges over the leat, one linking fields 234 and 235, one leading from the road opposite the school into field 236, and one from the road leading into 3 small enclosures and an agricultural building.