

## RECOLLECTIONS AND RUMINATIONS

David Ll Davies

Recently I have been somewhat haphazardly looking through past issues of *Melin*. Thus whilst browsing, I came across my favourite *Melin* issue, Number 24 of 2008. which includes an article titled "Some Recollections of a Welsh Miller's Son" by Kenneth Oliver Lloyd<sup>1</sup>. This article is favoured as the mill is located in the uplands of former Denbighshire, where my forebears originated and used this mill; and it reawakens my own childhood mill memories.

A summary of the article will be helpful. It concerns a mill called Felin Segrwyd in hilly southern Denbighshire, lying three miles southwest of Denbigh town. Its elevation is 150 mAOD which places it close to the northern flank of Denbigh Moors and Mynnydd Hiraethog. One and a half miles to the south of it and on rising ground is the village of Nantglyn which is at elevation 165 mAOD. This village and surrounding population considered Felin Segrwyd to be their local mill, which was sited on the Afon Ystrad. This river has its source on the moor above Nantglyn and is quite a modest stream, which in high summer posed problems for the miller because of its insufficient waters<sup>a</sup>.

After passing the mill, it flows northward towards Denbigh but

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<sup>a</sup> Over 20-30 years ago a local resident told this writer that someone a long time ago had told him that there was a seasonal (winter only) sawmill on the Namt Ystrad at Nantglyn

just before reaching the town turns east to join the River Clwyd.

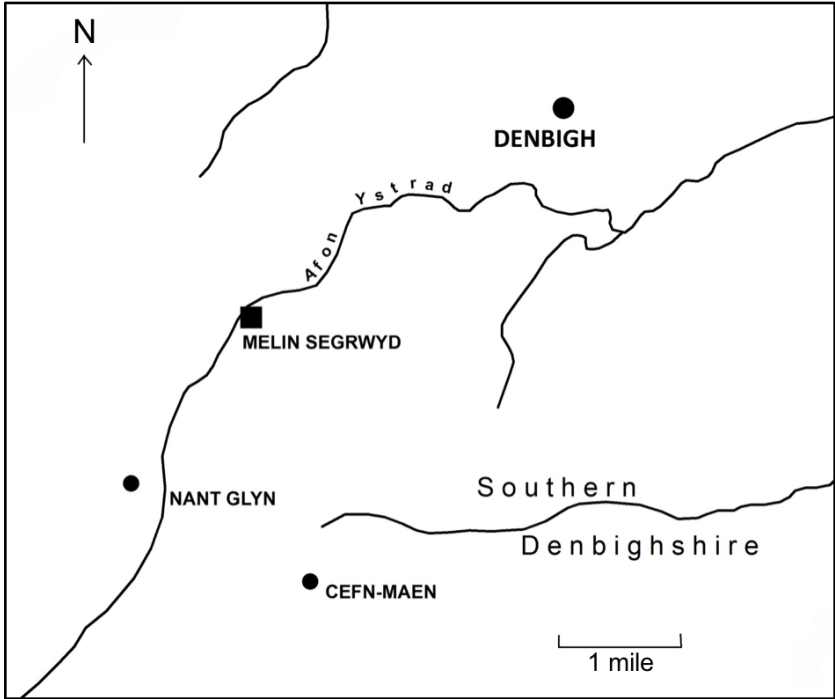


Figure 1 Location of Melin Segrwyd

The mill can be described in the present tense since it is still standing, a solid looking stone structure of three floors, with a four-roomed mill house attached. The last miller was Mr John Oliver Lloyd (1906-1999), the father of the author of the article. He closed the mill in 1959 because of insufficient demand for his services and so was unable to make a proper

living. The Lloyds had owned and operated the mill for at least four generations which is a highly unusual circumstance as almost all mills in Britain were tenant run. It is a Grade II listed building with most of its machinery and three sets of stones intact. The site description in the RCAHMW's online database, Coflein, is:

*Segryd corn mill was first mentioned in 1572, although the present mill and mill house are probably late eighteenth century. The mill is of rubble construction, two storeys high with a gabled attic, under a slate roof. An iron overshot water-wheel, set on the west side of the mill and approximately 4m in diameter, was supplied by an 840m-long leat from a weir across the river Ystrad. The milling machinery survives largely intact: there are three pairs of grinding stones with hoppers to the first floor, each with a corresponding flour bin below. The mill was in use until 1959. The two storey mill house is adjacent on the north side.*

Kenneth Lloyd, eldest son of the miller and the article author, was born at Melin Segrwyd in 1930's and lived there until he moved to University.



PLATE 1 Photograph showing the mill wheel with John Lloyd in the foreground taken around 1970 (from the collections of the National Monuments Record of Wales: © Crown copyright: General Digital Donations Collection – Kenneth Lloyd)



PLATE 2 Photograph showing the mill and house from the roadside taken around 1970 (from the collections of the National Monuments Record of Wales: © Crown copyright: General Digital Donations Collection – Kenneth Lloyd)

The lives of almost all people are interesting, however humble or insignificant their roles were/are in the world, but only an imperceptible fraction ever surfaces as autobiographical material. Consider the period 1840-1940 in Wales when being a coal miner, a railwayman, or a farmer, was a very common occupation. Can you quickly put your hands on a personal narrative written by someone who held one of these three jobs? Unlikely, for the impediments are obvious and this explains why milling autobiographies are in the same category.

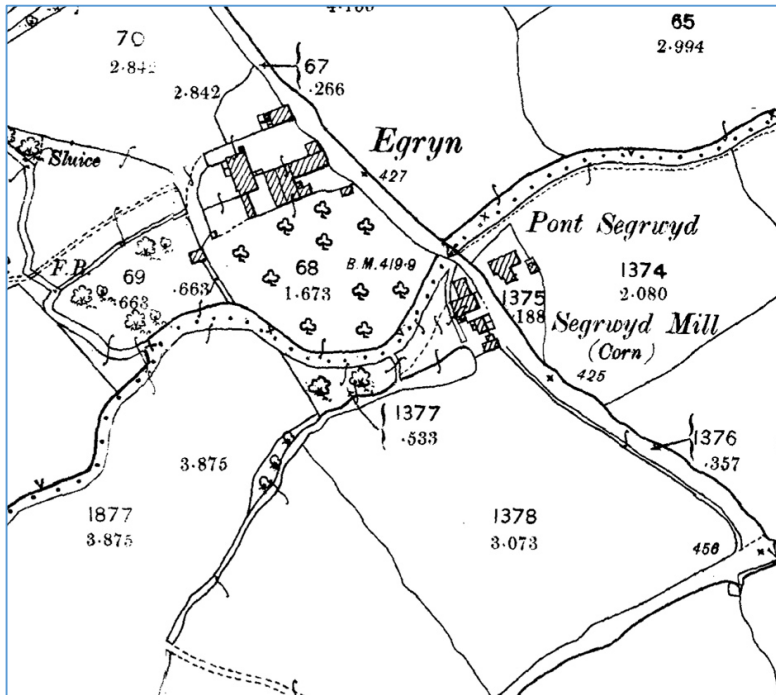


Figure 2 Melin Segrwyd (OS 25 inch/mile)

We now come to my forebears' connection with Melin Segrwyd. My great-grandfather, William Davies (1819-1904) wrote his life story in retirement. He had run a successful drapery business in central Liverpool and being fluently bilingual (like his father) had both Welsh and English customers. His narrative is in legible longhand in a discarded leather-bound ledger, the stoutness of which has helped to preserve our family's history. William never gave his work a title but it has always been called the 'Cofiant'<sup>2</sup>. He commences by providing details of his grandfather, William Davies (1749-1835), who was a moorland cattle farmer living above Nantglyn; he was also the local itinerant butcher slaughtering at his customers' farms and at some point had a butcher's stall in Denbigh market.

In between grandfather and grandson was David Davies (1785-1848) who comes across the years as a very forceful and relatively wealthy entrepreneur.

He was the tenant of a 70 acre farm called Cefn-maen, which lay -and lies- a mile or so east of Nantglyn at 290 mAOD. He left the farming to his family and servants and was rarely at home. Instead he purchased young slaughter cattle and pigs within a radius of 50 miles or more and arranged drovings to London, Manchester and other cities. He did not travel with the droves but went by stage-coach to the terminal points to arrange sales and bank -much of the proceeds. It was during this period that the author of the 'Cofiant' describes the following episode when, he was about four and when the year would be about 1823.

*'On one occasion I recollect going with my grandmother to Felin Segroit (earlier spelling) with a sack of corn to the ground. The sack was tied upon the back of old 'Fanny' (very quiet old mare) and I was tied on top of the sack. About halfway on the journey there was a pond and on the way back Fanny would insist upon having a drink at the pond. Whilst doing this she pulled the reins out of my hands and I somehow slipped under her belly. I remember what a stew my grandmother was in. She began to throw stones at Fanny for her (my) very life and shouting. However, Fanny had her drink and brought me once more safe on shore and none the worse. The fact was the miller in starting from the mill had not tied me up very cleverly - I remember being more afraid of Nain (grandmother) hitting me with a stone than I was of getting drowned by Fanny. I think the old lady was really more frightened than I was for I had a good hold of the rope and I remember well the water splashing over my face. '*

Now what was the grain in the sack? Because it was a single sack and was in charge of grannie, I am inclined to think it was connected to domestic duties in the kitchen. The farm was unlikely to grow wheat because of its altitude, and could well afford to purchase wheat flour at Denbigh market, which was adjacent to wheat growing Vale of Clwyd. If the grain was to be bruised oats for horse feed, then likely the trip to the mill would have involved several sacks, a cart and a carter. This leaves us with the possibility of oatmeal for cooking or malted barley that required bruising, the latter being the basis for making beer. In those days most farms made their own beer and this was done by housewives in addition to their kitchen work.

Kenneth Lloyd's article brings back childhood memories of



another mill in Denbighshire but further south. This mill lay within a long narrow valley, holding the Afon Ceiriog. This river rises in the Berwyn Mountains and runs east for nearly 20 miles to reach the Welsh-English border village of Chirk. My mill was called Felin Lyn (Glyn Mill in English) and was located near the village of Pontfadog, four miles upstream from Chirk.

My recollections mainly stem from a three-year period from age five, when I started school, to age eight in 1936 when the miller died unexpectedly and the mill ceased to operate on a full-time basis. Mr Ned Evans, the miller, seemed to me to be a gruff old man who wisely forbade me to enter the mill or go near the waterwheel for safety reasons. The later restraint was no imposition because the mill had a public platform to view the wheel - well, sort of. Immediately behind the rear walls of the mill was the lane to the Graig and a culvert, carrying the flow of the headrace, ran under this lane. Its waters emerged directly onto a short wrought iron launder and then onto the wheel. Leaning on the lane's guard rail provided a close-up view of the ponderous turn of the wheel and the splash of water, fascinating to child and visiting adult alike.

Because I was the son of the mill owner who lived up the lane, Mr Evans just tolerated my frequent presence on the property. I acquired an intimate knowledge of the headrace for at least 300 m upstream. This stretch contained two sluices, the first a flow reduction/stop one and the second beyond it an escape for excess waters, which was usually partly open except in drought periods. I would have liked to play with these sluices but the gates were far too heavy for me and furthermore the

stop gate, which was close to a side-road, was padlocked to deter pranksters. My main preoccupation was to float pairs of twigs or paper boats down to some finish post and see which won. In summer there was also the fun of paddling in the stream and my lifelong taste for watercress started here where the plant grew well in certain places.

Another pleasure, when the weather was dull or wet, was to play in the upper floor of the hillside bam, which was accessed from the lane. It had a lovely smell but now I have no recollection of what it held, probably hay. The miller's livestock was also an attraction. There was a cow and a horse and pig sties holding piglets squirming all over a very tolerant sow; not to mention dogs, cats and hens. Finally there was an intriguing activity that happened once a year in the spring. The tailrace was nearly 100 m long and was at the higher end of the mill meadow. The miller had a stop board and inserted it in the race which diverted the water into a permanent and very slight depression in the grass. This process was repeated a few times along the tailrace at 2-4 day intervals which gave the 2-acre meadow a good soaking. All in all, a fascinating activity for a young child.

I have found there are many similarities between Melin Segrwyd and Felin Lyn and have listed them below for curiosity's sake:

- approx same building era - late 18th Century;
- property same area size, max 12 acres;
- three-quarter mile headrace;
- 3 floors;
- 3 pairs of stones;
- millhouse attached;

- necessity of leat cleaning once or twice annually;
- finding fish in leat after head sluice had been closed;
- no indoor water supply (Felin Lyn had headrace water piped to scullery in 1905);
- outside privy (toilet);
- no electric lighting (Melin Segrwyd was wired for mains electricity in early 1950s);
- livestock including pigs and milking cow;
- vegetable garden.

Readers may be interested to know what happened to Felin Lyn in subsequent years. From 1936 to 1941 it was worked spasmodically and then stopped forever as the weir was damaged by a rampaging flood. Thereafter the property was let as a smallholding, with all machinery gutted in 1956. In 1962 the last tenant left and my father promptly sold the property, consisting of the mill with attached house, bam, sheds and 6 acres of fields. The house was very undesirable, lacking plumbing, sanitation and electricity. The purchaser was a Wrexham man of mystery who simply ignored the property and disappeared from sight about two years later. What a coincidence that his name was John Smith! Without a visible owner, the buildings slowly deteriorated but local farmers found themselves taking advantage of rent-free fields. Eventually all the structures became dangerous and local government had them demolished in 1981.



PLATE 3 Felin Lyn, Pontfadog, Ceiriog, Denbegshire  
(Photo taken 1981)

In 1941 the mill's weir became ineffective and thus deprived the headrace of water. So the overflow sluice lost its function and became an artificial deviation of Nant Gwryd. The sluice wings are stone slabs and may date back to original construction.

I had emigrated to Canada in 1963 and so lost contact with Felin Lyn but became curious about its condition on a visit to Britain in 1977. Starting in 1980, slow-paced research of its history commenced and like the proverbial snowball, gathered momentum and resulted in my publication of a 190 page

hardcover book in Wales in 1997<sup>3</sup>.

The production of this book made for very mixed vibes in me with the negatives possibly outweighing the positives. Creating the text in eight years seemed simple work compared with the nine years of trying to get it into print. First there was the frustration of finding that no commercial or academic press was interested in the lengthy manuscript and the need for so many illustrations. End of dream. Then in 1995 I was fortunate enough to receive a legacy which was large enough for me to consider self-publication of my 170 page manuscript. From that point on it was hard slog all the way. The production and marketing processes were tedious and the financial side was disappointing in that there was only a partial recovery of investment. It was an experience that I would not wish to repeat or recommend but for all that I am glad I did it.

These 'travails of publishing' led me to the conclusion a decade ago that *Melin* was an essential part of the Society's endeavours. These are to 'study, record, interpret, and publicise the mills of Wales'. The production of books about mills has been shown to be a costly venture and is virtually beyond the reach of individuals or small groups. The frugal solution is *Melin*, which is produced at small cost when spread out over the membership and has the virtue of being an accumulating reservoir of milling knowledge.

## REFERENCES

1. *Melin* 24, 2008, Welsh Mills Society, 91pp, pages 47-56.
2. Transactions Denbighshire Historical Society, Ruthin, Vol51,2002, 199pp, article 'The Cofiant of William Davies (1819-1904)', pages 135-154.
3. 'Watermill: Life Story of a Welsh Commill', David Llewelyn Davies, Ceiriog Press, 1997, 192pp, 60 illustrations.