

## **Bryn Eglwys Slate Quarry *Script***

*Welcome to the Bryn Eglwys Slate Quarry Audio Trail, which starts outside Canolfan Abergynolwyn Centre.*

**Track 1: the Quarryman's Wife** - *Abergynolwyn Village (near Canolfan Abergynolwyn Centre),*

My day starts at 5.00am, stoking the stove to make my husband's breakfast before he sets off for the quarry. It's a 2 mile uphill walk so he needs something hearty to start the day.

We live in one of the slate houses built by the quarry company. The village has everything we need - a grocer, a fishmonger, a post-office, a general store, 3 bakehouses, 2 small sweet shops and 2 tailors. Goods come on the train from Tywyn and there's always great excitement when the train arrives. Supplies are hoisted down the incline (that's the steep slope from the railway line) in trucks. Sometimes the rope breaks and the trucks tumble down, spilling their loads as they fall!

Each afternoon I tend our allotment and take the scraps to feed our pigs. I meet the other women at the pigsties and catch up on village news. We look forward to pig-selling day, when the pigs are weighed outside the inn and we're paid in gold sovereigns!

During winter, when salmon are coming up the river, my husband and I go poaching. We hang the salmon in the chimney to smoke above a pile of burning leaves. It tastes wonderful!

My three younger children go to the village school but the older ones board in Tywyn, getting the train on Mondays and returning home at weekends.

We've great singers, poets and musicians in the village. There's a mixed choir, male choir, brass band and drama society. Everyone competes in the local Eisteddfodau and, in summer, the choirs walk over the mountain paths to Pennal and Machynlleth to give concerts.

We're a close-knit community and help each other out. If a quarryman is sick, we organise a concert and give him the proceeds. Money's often tight but we live a rich life here in Abergynolwyn.

**Track 2: Weekly Commuting Quarryman - Nant Gwernol Station (beside panel on platform)**

I live in Tywyn but work at Bryn Egwyls quarry as a slate dresser. Every Monday morning I pack my belongings for the week and walk to the station to catch the 6 o'clock quarrymen's special to Abergynolwyn. During the week I stay in the quarry barracks and return home on Friday evening.

We only pay half the normal fare but it still ends up in the quarry owner's pocket as he owns the railway too! He seems to own everything round here - most of Abergynolwyn village, and even the shop where we have to buy our quarry tools and candles!

Most passengers get off at Abergynolwyn Station but we quarrymen get a ride in the slate trucks to the base of Allt Wylt Incline. Some men hitch a ride up the incline in the empty trucks but it's very dangerous and strictly forbidden. From there it's still over a mile to walk up to the quarry. The chaps from Abergynolwyn village have an even longer walk. There's no time to waste as you have to be inside the quarry boundary wall by 7am when the quarry bell stops ringing or else there's trouble! But the old man who rings the bell always looks down the road and keeps ringing if he sees a latecomer!

We work hard from 7am until 5pm with just half an hour for lunch, but I enjoy the life and there's a real feeling of community. I share a room in the main barracks with three others, which costs 1s per week. We often have concerts and meetings in the big kitchen where there's usually a saucepan bubbling on the stove with hams and strings of onions hanging overhead. On summer evenings we tend the garden. I think we're lucky compared to men in other quarries.

### **Track 3: The Brakeman - *Allt Wylt Incline (beside panel)***

I'm responsible for getting the trucks safely up and down this steep incline. My job is to operate the brake lever to let the loaded trucks down at a slow and steady speed. I stand in the open as it's important to have a clear view down the incline but there's no shelter from the elements, so it can be really cold and wet. It takes a lot of skill and I'm proud to say that I've moved furniture up to the hillside farms without breaking a glass!

Accidents do happen though as cables can snap or trucks come unhooked. Once I warned the boss that a cable was frayed and, only a few loads later, it snapped when two loads of Countesses (they're big slates) were on the way down. The trucks crashed down the incline and ran into the back of three parked ones. All of them were wrecked!

You're not meant to ride in the trucks but lots of men do. I remember a chap called Dick riding down when the cable snapped. He was thrown from the truck into a Scot's Pine on other side of the stream but survived with just a sprained wrist! We call him "The Flying Dick" now!

You can always tell when an uphill truck has become unhooked. There's a momentary pause before it starts sliding down. A lot of people save themselves injury by getting out during that pause. On the down run there's no pause – the carriage just goes! The river-bed is littered with the remains of these accidents.

A couple of lads work at the top of the incline hooking and unhooking trucks on and off the strong cables that are wound round the big drum. As we send one loaded truck down, its weight lifts an empty truck up.

**Track 4: The Slate Splitter – *Overlooking the Site of Lower Mill (by the slate splitting panel)***

I work in the Lower Mill, splitting blocks into thin slates using a broad but thin triangular-shaped chisel. The aim is to get an even thickness over the whole slate. Thin edges are a sign of a poor splitter.

The blocks are cut down to size using big circular saws before we split them. The dresser then finishes them off by squaring the edges on the dressing machine. They used to do this by hand with a small knife, which is just as good but a bit slower than by machine!

I started work when I was fourteen, first as a labourer and then as an apprentice dresser and splitter. It's difficult to learn as you've only got poor bits of slate to practice on, as the experienced splitters won't give away a good piece. It takes a long time to work your way up. I finally got my chance when one of the contracted splitters was sick, and am now one of the most experienced men here. You gradually learn the feel of a slate block. Sometimes it's very stiff and you know it's going to be tricky!

We compete in the annual slate splitting competition at the Meirionnydd Agricultural show in Tywyn. We have to make 15 slates from one block, 2 1/4" thick. It's easy to get 16 from a block, but 15 is much harder.

We prepare our blocks carefully, cutting them to size and putting wet moss around them to keep them moist, then load them into trucks to be sent to Tywyn. I get a bit nervous at the competition as we're only allowed six or seven minutes to complete the task. Our slate is generally a bit stiffer than Corris or Aberllefenni slate, which puts us at a disadvantage. One judge said, 'It is not the best splitters that have won today but those from the other quarry because they have better rocks to split.'

**Track 5: The Quarry Manager - *Site of the Manager's House (by pine trees just off the path)***

I'm the manager of this quarry and live in the big house beside the pine trees. I took over when Sir Haydyn Jones, the local MP, bought the quarry in 1910. Bryn Eglwys slate is very strong and makes excellent roofing slates. There are Bryn Eglwys slates on Westminster Hall and the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth and they're exported across the world.

At its peak in 1885 the quarry employed over 300 men but we operate on a much smaller scale nowadays as the market has changed and the best seams have been worked.

We don't always make the profit we deserve as we have to pay royalties to three different landowners. They often argue about which chambers are being worked beneath whose land!

Our quarrymen are a very orderly set of men, not given to heavy drinking and debauchery. Almost all subscribe to a weekly newspaper and can converse intelligently about current affairs. During dinner times there are always debates, especially on a Monday, when they talk about the Sunday sermons. When elections are happening debate gets heated. They can really argue but you hardly ever hear anyone swearing. Most are deeply religious and we keep bibles in the barracks and cabans for lunch break reading and religious discussions.

Some are exceptionally literary and musical and there are often recitations, singing, and musical performances. Many are in the Abergynolwyn choir or brass band and a few have even won first prizes in the National Eisteddfod.

At the end of each quarry month the accounts are calculated, the quarrymen line up outside the pay window to receive their wages in gold sovereigns and there's a half-day closure. Everyone looks forward to payday!

**Track 6: The Rockman - near Daylight Adit (beside panel)**

I work in a team with my brother, our cousin and uncle. My brother and I are rockmen, quarrying underground. The others work in the mill splitting the slate we extract. A rockman's job is very skilful as you must blast the slate into workable blocks without shattering it. After blasting we prise the slabs off the rock face and break them into transportable pieces. We inscribe each slab with our team's mark to identify it before it's hoisted onto a truck and pulled by horses along the tramway to the mill.

Candles are our only light – we call them 'the miner's friend'. I use 5-6 per day. In some ways, the candle is better than a brighter light as you can see the dangerous parts of the rock more clearly.

I tie myself to the rock face on a chain attached to a peg in the rock, wrapping it round my thigh with a half-hitch. I then balance on the chain leaving my hands free to drill or use a crowbar. When I need to move I free my leg and climb down the chain. It's dangerous working high up in a chamber and handling explosives, with the constant risk of falling rocks!

Accidents do happen, usually when men are over-hasty and cut corners in the hope of earning more wages. 1877 was a really bad year as 4 men died underground. Two were crushed by a large piece of rock and another fell headfirst down the Narrow Vein shaft when he was unhooking lifting chains from a wagon.

Despite the danger, youngsters are always eager to start working underground. When a lad first comes down we test his nerves by walking him through the levels and blowing out the candle in a very dark place! If he passes that test we know he'll be all right.