



Nefyn and the Sea

For centuries, the women of Nefyn, whether they were the wives of fishermen or of ships' captains were drawn to the tower at Pen y Bryn . They would have the same hopes and fears, wishing to see their husbands and loved ones returning safely from the sea.

Although the boats did not go out far, it must be remembered that the herring fishing season was during the winter. Since families in Nefyn were so dependent on the catch, fishermen would have to go out in all weathers.

The captains of Nefyn and their crews would sail to the far corners of the world during this period, in ships built on Nefyn beach. The families were very familiar with Labrador and Bombay, and rounding the Horn was a familiar experience to them. They would also be familiar with suffering losses, as the gravestones in Nefyn cemetery testify.

Compared to the rest of the northern coast of Llŷn, shipwrecks were fairly rare here, and since 1864 Porthdinllaen Lifeboat has always been ready to respond to emergencies.

The beach would be a busy place, with shipbuilding, fishing, net repairs and exporting of herring, and the residents would have earned a good living. Things would have been very different when the shoals of fish kept away, far from the bay.

Ships carrying mixed cargo came in at high tide and unloaded on the beach at low tide. There was plenty of demand for lime, coal and salt.

Luxurious houses like Craig y Môr and Y Dderwen were built by captains and shipbuilders. Some would name their houses after ships, like 'Ancon' and 'Edeyrnion' and other families would be known according to the name of the ship.

The beach is longer abuzz with these activities, but the beauty and romance are still there.

Mae haul ar dywod melyn - Haf y Delle mae nef dyn.

A nofaist ym Mae Nefyn?

There is sun on yellow sand – a Southern Summer

Where one finds heaven.

Have you swum in Nefyn Bay?



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government





Traeth Nefyn and Doc Bodeilias



Doc Bodeilias

Traeth Nefyn – Take the B4417 (Nefyn – Aberdaron) towards Morfa Nefyn. Turn towards the sea into Lôn y Traeth opposite the school, Ysgol Nefyn, and follow the narrow road (known as Lôn Gam) down to the beach.

Doc Bodeilias – There is no public footpath down here from Pistyll. This dock is at the eastern end of Traeth Nefyn (Porth Nefyn on OS Map) and you can walk to it from the bottom end of Lôn y Traeth.

Landing Stage at Wern: Take the path to the coast through the kissing gate from the B4417 opposite Wern (which is 1.25km from Nefyn going towards Pistyll) or walk along Traeth Nefyn.

A jetty was built of stone at Trwyn Bodeilias (headland of Bodeilias) headland for exporting setts from the quarries at Pistyll and Mynydd Nefyn (Nefyn mountain).

Remains of a wooden jetty can be seen near Wern, Nefyn where the setts from Chwarel y Gwylwyr (quarry of Gwylwyr) were loaded. An incline ran down to it.

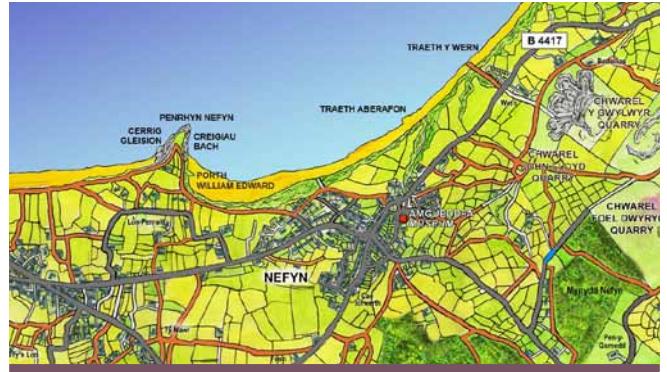
Nearby there are also remains of a lime kiln used for burning lime.

There are only a few names on places at Traeth Nefyn. But a short way out to sea are the 'Swanings' – a place to lay herring nets.

At the western end of the beach are houses that once formed a coastal community. There the fishermen would mend their nets and ships were built

Here also were once Creigiau Bach (small rocks) and Porth William Edward but they have now been lost under the sea defences.

Ports of Llŷn



The coast of Llŷn has remarkable variety. It has wide sandy beaches and bays, ports and creeks with easy access to them, and steep, inaccessible rocky cliffs. In other places, such as Porth Neigwl (Hell's Mouth) the waves are constantly eating away at the land and fields are lost to the sea. The Pwllheli area is part of a project studying the dangers of global warming as the sea level rises and threatens to permanently flood the town.

No one can be far from the sea in Llŷn and it has been a great influence on the lives of the inhabitants all through the centuries. Indeed, it would have been easier to bring goods in by ship than by cart. The drovers were probably the only ones who saw the need for better roads. The railway reached Pwllheli in 1867 and a wide variety of goods could thus be delivered . There was then a great reduction in trade through the ports, breaking with traditions that had continued for centuries.

In a document dated 1524, we can see that the names of ports where it was possible to land:

The bay of Dynlley between karrek y llan and the barre of carn'

The bay between Karrek y llam and penrhyn Dynllayn

The Crik of abergyerch

The Crik of porth yskadan

The Crik of porth y Gwylen

The Crik of porth ychen

The Crik of porth penllegh

The Crik of porth Colmon

The Crik of porth Veryn

The Crik of porth Yeagowe



The Crik of porthor and the Ile of Bardsey

The Crik of porth Muduy

The bay of Aberdaron

The bay of Nygull

The Roode of the two llonder of Stidwall

The Crik of Aber Soigh

The bay of Castellmarch

The baye of stydwalles to the geist

The haven of pullele in the myddes of the said baye

We can easily recognize them, and observe that the coastal names of Llŷn are centuries old.

Wherever the coast is rocky there are many names, but there are far fewer for sandy bays and beaches.

The names were given to them by people who went fishing or catching crabs, and they are still in daily use now. There is a story behind every name, be it a description of a rock or who discovered a particular hole where crabs could be caught. Some names referred to people or events, some long forgotten by now.

The Llŷn Coast Path is now part of the Wales Coast Path and everyone has the opportunity to appreciate the beauty by wandering from port to beach, on a route that almost never leaves the shore.

Shipbuilding



The last ships built at Nefyn in 1880

Between 1760 and 1889 123 ships were built in Nefyn and 57 in Porthdinllaen, but only a few were built before the middle of the C18th. The busiest periods were between 1840 and 1870. Most of the Nefyn and Porthdinllaen ships were sloops and schooners, and they were considered to be extremely strong. Of the 137 ships built here, almost half sailed for 30 years, and 19 for over 50 years. Many of them spent

years carrying slate. The ships for this work had to be particularly sturdy because the slates would be packed together tightly to avoid any shifting of cargo during the voyage.

Llŷn was a treeless area, but there were oak trees on the Madrun estate, timber was also brought from the Conwy valley, and was imported from the Baltic and Canada. Lack of timber was probably the reason for the smaller number of ships built between 1790 and 1810.

John Thomas, Fron Olau, was considered to be one of the principal early shipbuilders, and the King of Nefyn. The first ship he built was one to transport herring, then he turned his hand to slate carrying ships. He would walk over the Eifl mountains to Caernarfon and back every week to collect wages for his workers.

Robert Thomas, Y Dderwen, Nefyn built 13 ships between 1849 and 1866 and he employed over a hundred carpenters. At the time of the 1861 census, there were about 30 ships' carpenters in Nefyn, so the rest would come from nearby parishes, and there is mention of specific paths they used. There were also makers of ropes, sails and nails, and riggers. There was a rope walk for making ropes, smithies and sail lofts.

The last shipbuilder in Nefyn was Griffith Owen, Dyffryn, Morfa Nefyn.

The day a ship was launched would be an important day in the area, with hordes of people coming to the beach and cliff top to see the ceremony. The ship, its owner and crew would be blessed by the Parson or Nonconformist Minister, and then the festivity and celebration would begin.

There would often be a figurehead of a young woman or mermaid on the ship's bow, to add to her beauty. So it was not only the ship's strength and suitability for the sea that would attract the eyes of the prospective buyer and captain!

Nefyn Ships' Captains





The gravestones of the Nefyn ships' captains are to be seen throughout the parish's cemeteries, over 250 of them. There are many stones to commemorate seamen, but of course the families of a great number of those who went to sea were too poor to be able to afford a gravestone.

The seamen would have begun their careers in their early teens on one of the Nefyn sailing ships, under the paternal care of a relative or a friend of the family. Then the more ambitious ones would go to one of the navigation schools in the area, such as the one run by David Wilson, the excise officer for Porthdinllaen, or Hugh Davies, the 'nailer'.

They would be promoted gradually, achieving the rank of captain and getting their own barque or three masted schooner. They would sail to all parts of the world and be away from home for two or three years at a time. They would often take their wives and families with them.

It would be quite an honour for them to become part of that special fraternity, and they would gain greater status by building a larger house than usual in Nefyn and owning a share in their ships.

The wives and sweethearts would often visit Pen y Bryn Tower, hoping to see the sails appearing on the horizon.

The men returning would bring gifts from different parts of the world, and even a parrot or a monkey would reach Nefyn. On long sea voyages they would make models of sailing ships and then, after getting home, have racing competitions for them on the pond at Pen 'Rallt and discuss their voyages and adventures.

It's easy to lose oneself in the romance of songs like 'Fflat Huw Puw' and the sailing ships. But a sailor's life was hard, the storms fierce and living conditions primitive. Although the Nefyn ships were considered amongst the best, some would sink and we can only imagine the grief of the families. The ship 'Margaret Parry' sank on a voyage 'from Gaer to Londonderry' (Gaer = Chester) in 1848 and Captain Henry Parry and all the crew were lost. The ship was named after his wife.

Richard Jones, Captain of the 'Powys Castle' died on a voyage to Australia and Captain William Davies, Craig y Môr in RiodeJaneiro.

In the cemetery there is a memorial to John Owen, Cefn Maes who drowned – with a sextant reference number on it - Lat 24o 17N Long 36 o 37W.

By now, Nefyn's rich heritage has been recorded and we can enjoy and appreciate it at Llŷn Maritime Museum.

Mary Goldsworthy



Mary Goldsworthy

It was a great advantage for farmers and coal traders in the area to be able to take their carts onto the beach to collect their loads. This was how ships were unloaded in Porthdinllaen, Aberdaron, Abersoch and Llanbedrog. It would have to be timed carefully, to make sure the sailing ships brought their loads in at high tide. On some beaches, there would be 'Carreg y Ring' (stone + ring) a rock with a metal loop fitted in it, like the one on Aberdaron beach, to secure the ship. At low tide, the ships would be unloaded and the carts ready on the beach to take the goods. Then the ship could leave easily at high tide.

At Porthdinllaen, there were landing stages and storage buildings at Bwlch Bridin (SH 28224084) and the remains of Abersoch coal yards (SH 31522693) are to be seen on the Golf Course near Traeth Lleferin beach.

At Porth Sgadan, Porth Colmon and Porth Ferin there were storage yards near the shore that the ships could get close to.

Imports of coal increased when the tax on coal was removed in 1813. Ships came regularly from the coalfields and the 'Maggie Purvis' and the 'Tryfan' continued to carry coal until the beginning of the Second World War, to Porthdinllaen and Porth Sgadan.

There are remains of lime kilns in a number of places on the coast, showing that lime was sold to sweeten the land or prepare mortar. Names like Cae'r Odyn (field of the kiln) are just as common.

The 'soap-waste' that came here from Ireland was an effective fertilizer for the land, and popular with farmers. The waste from the shops of Dublin would be mixed with it, and children would dig in to look for treasures.

*A corpulent ship unloading coal
lying dry on the sand
and carts at work in their turn
and more arriving*



Translated from the works of J Glyn Davies

*'Llong gestog yn dadlwytho glo
yn sych ar dywod,
a throliau wrthi yn eu tro
a mwy yn dyfod.'*

J Glyn Davies

Local Shipwrecks



'Amy Summerfield' at Porth y Nant (March 1951)

There are comparatively few records of shipwrecks north of Nefyn. It may be that the main sea traffic sailed around Holyhead and didn't want to risk going through the Menai Straits and crossing the treacherous Caernarfon bar.

But in 1839 the 'Sapho' was on a voyage from the West Indies to Liverpool with a cargo of treacle when it got into difficulties off Pistyll. Captain Wallace feared for the worst and gave the crew two sovereigns each to sew into their pockets – to pay for their burial. The Captain's fears were proven right because everyone, apart from one young lad, was drowned. He was found next morning on the shore in an empty treacle barrel. Seven of them were buried in the same grave in Nefyn.

Trefor had a lifeboat in the late C19th. There was concern a lifeboat would be needed in this part of Caernarfon Bay because there was so much traffic of ships carrying setts from the quarries on the Eifl.

Trefor lifeboat station was opened in 1883 but the service was not needed and it closed later.

One of the few times the boat was launched was in December 1883. The 'Lady Hincks' was carrying a load of timber from America to Liverpool and went on the rocks in a stormy sea, on Trwyn y Tal. The lifeboat was launched but it capsized after being struck by a massive wave close to shore. The boat's masts struck the sea

bed and broke, and were washed ashore. Although the 'Lady Hincks' was wrecked, the crew got ashore safely.

Local tragedies happened, usually to local mackerel and herring fishermen. The 'Cyprian' went out in 1893 because two local fishermen were missing. The efforts to save them failed and their bodies came ashore at Llanddwyn.

Local fishermen had been lost a century earlier, and Robert ap Gwilym Ddu wrote poetry to commemorate the eight of them.

Shipwrecks

It's only to be expected that the Llŷn peninsula, extending out into the busy Irish Sea, would have been a problem for ship owners and captains over the years. The coast of northern Llŷn is rocky and dangerous and it's difficult to reach some of the bays to shelter because of their soft cliffs – Porthdinllaen is very open to every wind except one from the north-east.

With an increase in worldwide trade and more activity in the port of Liverpool, this stretch of sea became busier.

A report from 1863 says that as many as 206 ships were wrecked in a quarter of a century in the Porthdinllaen area.

There was a real need for a lighthouse, like the one on Enlli / Bardsey Island built in 1821.

The northern part of Cardigan Bay also became busier when the slate quarries opened in the Ffestiniog area. Ships sailed regularly from Porthmadog, but they could not see the light at Enlli. So a lighthouse was built on one of the St Tudwal's Islands in 1877.

Another danger in Cardigan Bay is Sarn Badrig – St Patrick's Causeway – and its shallow water, and many ships were also wrecked in Porth Neigwl (Hell's Mouth). But if a storm came up, there was nowhere better than the Roads – the sheltered haven between St. Tudwal's Islands and the mainland. Despite that, ships continued to get into difficulties even here, and a response was needed.

A lifeboat service came to Penrhyn Du, Abersoch in 1844, Porthdinllaen in 1864 and Pwllheli in 1889. There were also demands for a lifeboat station in Trefor, and in the late C19th with the increase in the export of setts from the Eifl quarries one was set up there. But it did not remain there for long.



Smuggling



The people of Nefyn were probably just as guilty of handling illegal goods as anyone else, but there isn't much mention of smuggling between Clynnog and Nefyn. The open coastline and lack of inlets probably kept smugglers away. Things were different in Porthdinllaen since it had much more activity, with import and export. The people of Nefyn could use that beach because it was so close.

The reason for smuggling was to avoid taxes by buying goods cheaply. It was at its height in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the English Crown and its fleet were extending the boundaries of the British Empire. The government raised money by putting unreasonably high taxes on goods: on spices, spirits and tobacco for the rich and salt, soap and candles for ordinary families.

Salt was essential before the days of freezers, to preserve meat, butter and herrings. In the early C19th, salt cost a penny a pound in Ireland but over here there was an additional three pence in tax on it. It was smuggled to Llŷn and sold tax free for two pence.

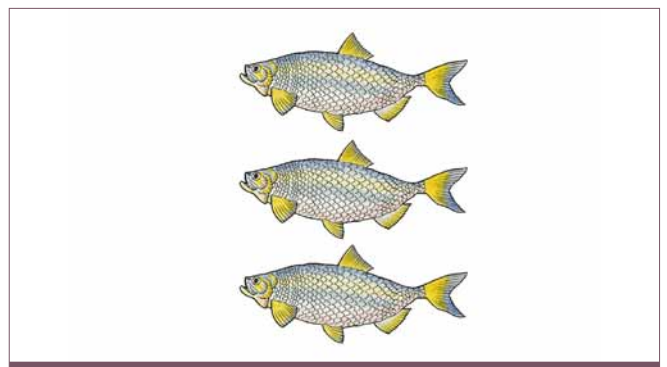
The taxes in the ports of Porthdinllaen and Pwllheli were collected by Officers (the 'seismyn' as Excise Officers were called). Officers would ride between these ports, looking for any signs of smuggling. There are examples of conflicts between officers and smugglers, and the smugglers would very often be helped by the local community. People found guilty were severely punished.

To be successful, smuggling depended on co-operation between the sailors and people on shore in Llŷn. The goods would be brought from other countries in large ships and transferred, usually to warehouses in Ireland and the Isle of Man, and collected from there in smaller ships. The goods would reach Llŷn in vessels that could be sailed easily in and out of inlets, or goods would arrive hidden amongst legal cargoes on trading ships.

The men on shore knew when to expect a ship, and the captain would send a message to them with a special lamp when it was within reach.

There would be detailed preparations for landing the goods, hiding and then distributing them. It was said that more smuggling went on in Llŷn than anywhere else, and there are tales of smuggling in every port and inlet in Llŷn.

The Beef of Nefyn



Prynwch benwaig Nefyn

Ni fu eu bath am dorri newyn.

Prynwch benwaig Nefyn –

Newydd ddod o'r môr!

Buy some Nefyn herring

There's nothing better for your hunger

Buy some Nefyn herring -

Fresh from the sea!

There are three herrings on all the coats of arms and badges of Nefyn – this fish was very prominent in Nefyn's history throughout the centuries.

The economy of Nefyn flourished as long as there were good catches of herring, and nobody went short of food then.

Thomas Pennant (1771) said there were plenty of herring available between Porth Sgadan and Enlli / Bardsey, and when there were plans in 1770 to build a turnpike road from London to Llŷn it was said the herring fishery here was the most important in Wales. The industry brought in thousands of pounds every year for the port of Nefyn, and for other villages along the coast, providing work for many people.



At the beginning of the C19th there were about 300 fishermen in Nefyn, looking after the boats and preparing the nets. In addition to all this, many were employed in salting and preparing smoked and dried herring and more people selling and exporting herring. They were experienced fishermen and one generation would learn from the next about the signs for the weather and the secrets of the sea and its tides.

The stock of herring was very unreliable, and since families relied on them so much for their support a shortage would cause great hardship.

Goronwy Owen described the situation in the mid C18th:

'In those bad years, when food was so scarce and so expensive, many people even had to sell their beds from under them to buy sustenance... most of the poor of Llŷn got their sustenance at Plas-yng-Ngheidio.'

Herring had to be imported from the Isle of Man in 1831, but in another year there were too many of them and they were spread on the land as a fertilizer. The seasons following that were bad ones, and local people believed it was revenge from God for so much waste.

The herring catch declined throughout the C20th and by now they are very scarce. But Brian Owen describes being part of a group catching a massive haul of herring on New Year's Eve 1951 in nets on the beach and in the 'Swanings'.

Herring Fishing



The fishing season varied, sometimes it ran from July to October, other times from September to November or even on into January. Some people started fishing when there was *dŵr newydd* – 'new water' – at the time of the new moon in August, others before Thanksgiving – the third Monday in October.

The squire of Cefnamwlch complained that farmers were neglecting the land in favour of fishing, but Hyde-Hall said in 1811 that he had seen no evidence of that. The seasons for the two occupations did not clash.

The economy of Nefyn flourished when there were good catches of herring, and nobody went short of food then.

The boats went out in the evening, to set the nets before dark.

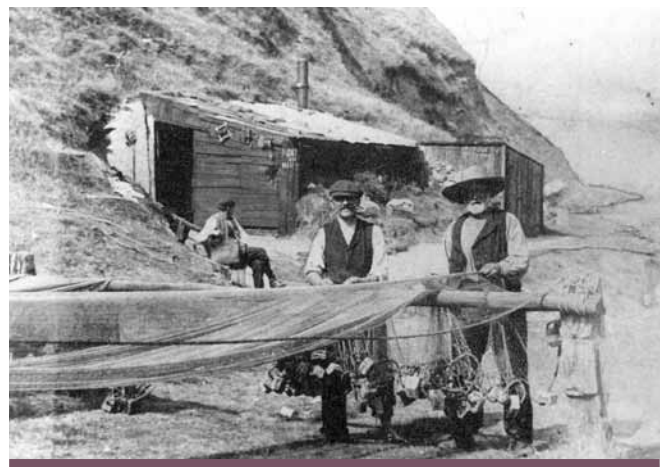
Each area fished within its own territory, and kept strictly to that.

At the time of a new moon, the herring came closer inshore and nets were set in Camlas Nefyn (canal of Nefyn). Near the peninsula, Trwyn Nefyn, in the Swanings, only one end of each net would be anchored, and the other could move freely with the tide. This would also avoid accidents that could happen when a big fish or seal swam into it, chasing the herring.

The fishermen knew the signs of the herring's arrival. The porpoises would be seen hunting, or gulls diving. There would be oil on the surface of the sea or a sheen under the water. Herring and the basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*) eat plankton, and the shark would also come into the bay.

The nets would be checked before daybreak, the fish removed and the nets reset. A net could be in the sea for 5 – 6 days but it would have to be checked every day.

Herring Boats and Nets



Double ended boats were popular in Nefyn, about 5m (18 feet) long. Smaller ones would have to be used in the Aberdaron area in rougher sea.



The nets used were comparatively fine, 25mm (1 inch) and 50m (20 fathoms) long and 2m to 2.5m wide. After setting them, they would be like a wall in the water, with corks along the top to keep them at the surface. Stones (called *poitshis*) would be fixed along the bottom to keep it down. Nets would be set by the fathom, 2m or as far as a man could extend his arms in both directions. Dressed stones were used, with an inlaid groove for the cord attaching them to the net. Straw or wool would be used to tie them on, because those would break free easily in stormy weather.

Anchors were used to keep the nets from moving too much in the tide. The first anchor would be thrown from the boat, taking the net out with it. The boat would drift along the net, then the second anchor would be thrown out, and the *bongi* (a leather float) to show where the net was. Two buoys, the *bwi cledda*, would be tied to the ends of the nets, using ropes 4 fathoms long.

Selling and exporting



It was claimed that Nefyn herring were very special

'Penwaig! Penwaig!

Cefna fel ffarmwrs,

Bolia fel tafarnwrs!'

Herring! Herring!

Backs like farmers,

Bellies like innkeepers!

Nefyn herring sold well and the prices were high, according to the *Cambrian Mirror* (1848) but the herring of Cricieth in Cardigan Bay were much smaller.

The people who bought and sold herring (called *croeswrs*) would often be ready on the shore for the catch, keeping to the same boat every time but paying the fishermen after selling the fish.

Herring would be counted in threes, a number called

the *mwrw* (two fish in one hand and one in the other). There were 40 *mwrw* in a *cant* (hundred), which was actually 120 herring, and 5 *cant* of herring in 1 *mwys*, which was 620 fish.

The payment for the herring would be shared equally between the boat's crew, and one share would go to the boat. In 1910, there were about 40 boats in Nefyn, with three or four fishermen to each boat. It was usually the boat's owner who would steer, with the crew rowing.

Nefyn was the main fishing centre in the C18th and C19th. There is mention of exporting herring in 1714 on the 'Speedwell'. Lewis Morris said that five thousand barrels of salted herring were exported in 1747. David Thomas described how five or six small ships had arrived in Cork with loads of Nefyn herring in early February 1762, to be loaded onto the king's ships, when they were about to set off for His Majesty's Plantations. He said the ships stayed for three or four days to transfer the fish but had terrible weather on the journey back to Wales.

Amongst the multitude of goods imported into Nefyn were empty barrels to hold herring and salt for preserving them.

Salting and Drying

Salting

In Nefyn, Porthdinllaen and Llanbedrog there were *strysa*, salt stores, and in Palace Street Nefyn there's a house called 'Tŷ Halen', the Salt House. Salt was imported from Ireland for £1 a ton but there would be a tax of £12 on top of that. There was considerable smuggling of salt in the area, and people were punished for it.

Since salt was so expensive, sometimes the Nefyn boats would transfer their herring to Irish ships while out at sea and herring would sometimes be salted aboard.

The other herring would be salted at home and on farms. One way of doing that was by using brine (a mixture of water and salt). The mixture would be tested by putting a potato in it; if the potato rose to the surface the water was salty enough.

For a longer lasting form of salting, the herring were placed in layers in barrels, with layers of salt in between, and turned from time to time to make sure the salt soaked into them. Later, after wiping them



clean, the herring would be put back in the barrel with plenty of salt, and left like that.

The payment for salting a barrel of herring was six pence.

Red Herring

Red herring would be prepared by pickling the fish, without opening them, for five or six days, then washing them and hanging them up in the smokehouse for five to six days. In Nefyn, they were pickled again and smoked for a further time, so that they kept for longer.

Dried Herring

In Nefyn, dried herring would also be prepared, by spreading dry bracken on the floor on a sunny day and putting the herring on it. They would then be packed with coarse salt in wicker baskets, 100 to 150 in each basket. They would be taken to Caernarfon and other places to be sold.

Tŵr Pen y Bryn



Directions: Follow the B4417 (Nefyn – Morfa Nefyn) for about 150m from the 'Groes' crossroads on the square in Nefyn and you'll see it on the right.

There was originally a wooden tower here and the present one was built around 1846. That was when the shipbuilding and herring fishing industries were most successful in Nefyn. The people of Nefyn, particularly the women, would come to the top of the tower hoping to see their husbands' and fathers' ships returning after sailing to all corners of the world. They would wait for weeks to receive unfamiliar gifts from foreign countries, but more importantly to welcome their loved ones home safely.

Nefyn was an important townlet in the Norman period and a motte and bailey castle was built on this site. In 1095 Gruffydd ap Cynan landed here to try to collect men for an attack on Aberlleiniog Castle on the banks of the Menai Straits.

Tŵr Pen y Bryn was recently restored by Cadw. During that work, a room was discovered in the lower part of the tower that was used to lock up drunks until they were sober again.



Follow the Story

Find out more about the area's industrial past by visiting Porthdinllaen - Once the location of one of the busiest harbours in Llŷn and now a village owned by the National Trust.