

The Landmark Trust

COED Y BLEIDDIAU, VALE OF FFESTINIOG

Blaenau Ffestiniog was built as a centre for the slate mining industry that sprang up in the area from the mid-18th century. By the early 19th century, the industry was booming. A narrow gauge railway was laid between 1833 and 1836 to bring slate in wagons from the quarries around Blaenau Ffestiniog down the 21.3 km to Porthmadoc, another new town created to serve the needs of this new industry. This was still the dawn of the age of steam, so gravity (managed by brakemen) took the slate wagons downslope; they were hauled back up by horses.

By the late 1850s, this horse tramline was reaching its operational capacity, with output from the Ffestiniog slate quarries still rising. In 1862, it was decided to adopt steam locomotives. At just under two feet wide, the track hugged the contour line on the steep slopes and during the 1850s and '60s some of the sharper curves, including the line at Coed y Bleiddiau, had been reduced. Steam engines had not been built for such routes before but George England & Co in London took on the challenge. The first official train ran on 23 October 1863, and in 1865, the Ffestiniog became the first narrow gauge railway in Britain to carry passengers.

Coed y Bleiddiau was built in 1863-4 for the eventual Superintendent of the line, Thomas Henry Hovendon, between Hafod-y-Llyn station (from 1872 replaced by Tan-y-Bwlch) and a watering stop at Dduallt. At the railway's peak, nine trains a day puffed merrily past. The cottage originally had just three ground floor rooms, with a single first floor bedroom at the rear. Superintendent Hovendon had two wives and seven children. The family continued to live in the cottage after his death on 30 December 1903, aged 64, but by 1913, the railway no longer needed the cottage for its employees.

Coed y Bleiddiau was then let as a holiday home, and here the associations of this humble cottage become more glamorous. From 1925 until 1933, it was rented by composer Granville Bantock, a leading figure in early 20th-century British music. Bantock was a conductor of the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and moved easily through the international worlds of the arts and classical music, counting as his friends Edward Elgar, Richard Strauss, Thomas Beecham and Sir Henry Wood, founder of the Proms. Bantock was knighted in 1930. He enjoyed many family holidays at Coed y Bleiddiau with his family and friends. His daughter Myrrha wrote that 'No one who stayed at Coed y Bleiddiau was anything but happy there. The lovely mountains all round, the feeling of peace and of being completely cut off from the civilised world was peaceful to the spirit.'

From 1930, Bantock's friend Harry St John 'Jack' Philby became a visitor to the cottage, taking over the lease in 1933 and keeping it until 1947. Philby was a leading authority on, and sympathiser with, the Arab world, who could not, most felt, be relied upon to put his own country's interests first. In 1939, Philby stood as parliamentary candidate for both for the Labour Party and the right wing British People's Party, founded by Oswald Mosley.

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In 1951, Babs and Bob Johnson took up the lease. Still remembered by many, they were a popular couple on the line, who tended a well-kept flower garden in front of the cottage and gathered sphagnum moss locally for use as medical dressings in Merseyside hospitals. The Johnsons lived at the cottage until 2006, until finally their advancing years made this no longer practical.

Meanwhile, from 1955 the Ffestiniog Railway Company was heroically reviving and then operating the railway line. This continues to absorb all their resources and after 2006 Coed y Bleiddiau became a sad eyesore, too remote to justify repair for permanent occupation. The Railway Heritage Trust suggested Landmark might help, and in 2013 we took a long lease on the cottage. By then, the cottage was severely dilapidated, and needed complete repair and refurbishment when Landmark took it on. The roof was tackled first thanks to an unsolicited donation, and once we had met our overall funding target, work began in earnest in 2016.

Rotten woodwork, plaster and ceilings was stripped out carefully, retaining all we could of the original fabric. Where necessary, new slate floor slabs were fitted on the ground floor, and wooden floorboards replaced on the first floor. We discovered that the cottage's small rear extension was put on very soon after its first construction – perhaps due to Mr Hovendon's growing family.

Although the building is tiny and its construction fairly simple, its isolated location made the project difficult logistically, even with sterling help from the Ffestiniog Railway. Delivery of materials took three days; a day to load up, a day to transport down the line, (sometimes in the old hand operated trolleys), and a day to unload. The building was completed rewired and new services installed (including a septic tank) before re-plastering, putting in a new bathroom and kitchen and rebuilding the chimney stacks. Sash windows and the tiny, rickety porch were dismantled and taken to our furniture store to be re-made. Externally, the joinery has been re-painted in brown and cream, traditional livery of the Ffestiniog line for its intermediate stops.

Two exciting discoveries were made: the first, an 1837 railway mile post from the days of the horse tramway that had been used as a lintel for the bathroom window. This is only the fourth such post to be found, and has been returned to the Railway. We also found the name 'Hovendon' scratched into a window pane in curly script. We can only speculate whether this was engraved by the Superintendent, or by one of his mischievous children. Now anyone who chooses can experience the magic of this place, and of occasional steam engines passing the front door.

Coed y Bleiddiau is available for self catering holidays for up to four people all year round. To rent Coed y Bleiddiau, or any other Landmark building, for a holiday please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk or phone Booking Enquiries on 01628 825 925.