

3. Barmouth Maritime

It seems that a ferry has existed at Barmouth as long as the town has; if not longer. The ferry was historically run by monks, possibly from Cymer Abbey at Llanelltyd. Monks also resided in Barmouth at Plas Mynach.

Barmouth is a natural harbour sheltered by surrounding mountains. There was a good approach from the channel that exists today and a channel that ran between the island, Ynys y Brawd, and the harbour (where the causeway is now) with navigable waterways all the way to Llanelltyd. In those days the harbour was probably somewhere along Church Street with the water running along Water Street.

The Port Books of Milford record the first vessel bound for Barmouth as the Mary (Maru) of Fishguard in 1566, soon followed by the Michael of Milford. Early cargoes included grain, pilcorn, wheat, barley, oats and rye. Commodities which were not available locally.

In 1587 there is a record of Le Angell de Bermo, an 18 ton vessel belonging to Barmouth.

There is a record in the Caernarvonshire Port Books 1630-90 that in 1676 the Godspeed of Barmouth entered Pwllheli with a cargo of 6 tons of oak poles.

In the late 1700's / early 1800s there were three shipbuilding yards in Barmouth with many more lining the Mawddach. 318 vessels were built between 1779 and 1790, that's between 6 or 7 a year – and some of which were big square riggers weighing up to 200 tons.



Square Riggers in Barmouth

By 1779 the town was flourishing and an increase in shipping saw an Act of Parliament passed. This act enabled the *“repairing, deepening, enlarging and preserving the Harbour of Barmouth in the County of Merioneth”*. Barmouth Harbour Trust was created to put the act into effect. At this time the harbour was at Aberamffra, near the Clock House as you come in to Barmouth. The trustees erected a small stone embankment at a cost of £1,660 which helped increase the depth in the harbour. Five years later a new quay was constructed. The main reason for this improvement was the Wool Trade. Money for the harbour improvements was raised by loans with the borrowing power restricted to £9,000. From this point the principle port of Merioneth was improved as the trustees and officials developed the harbour as they saw fit. More improvements were made in the late 1800s.

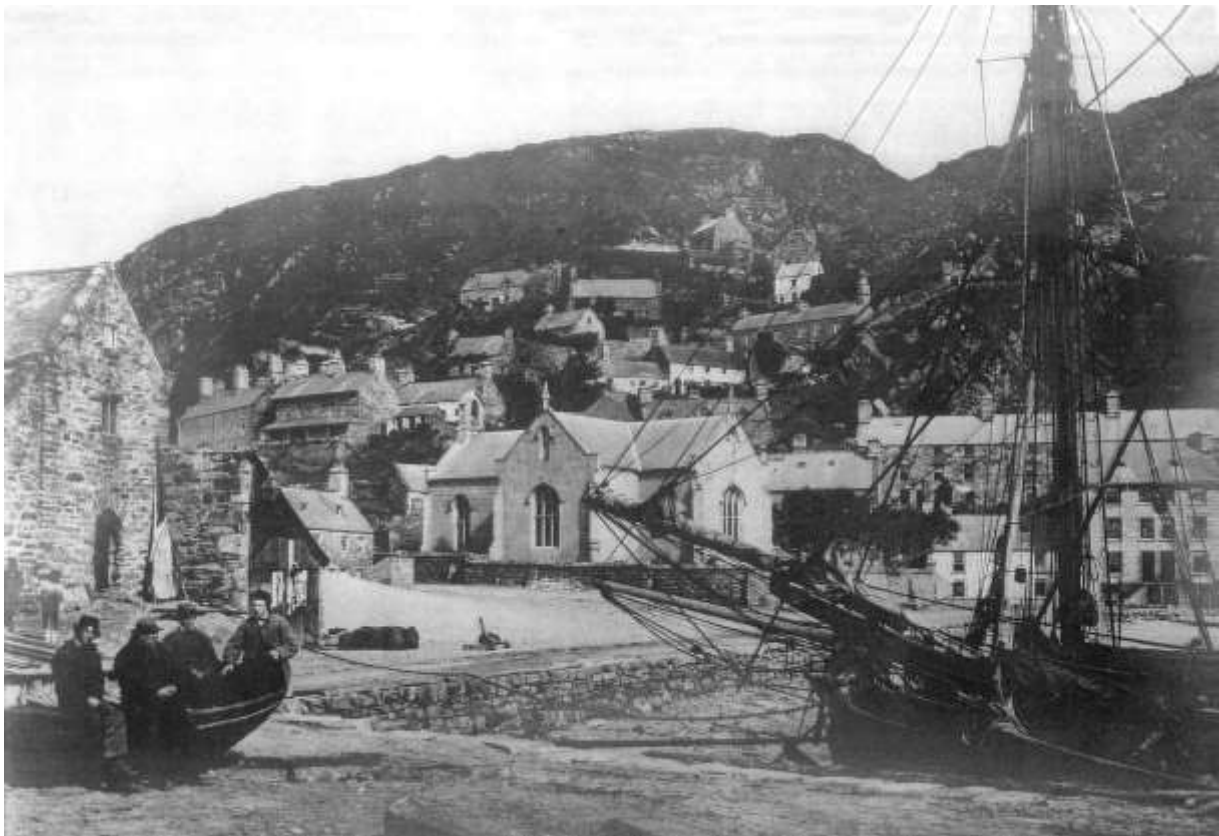


Aberamffra 1872



Aberamffra 1872

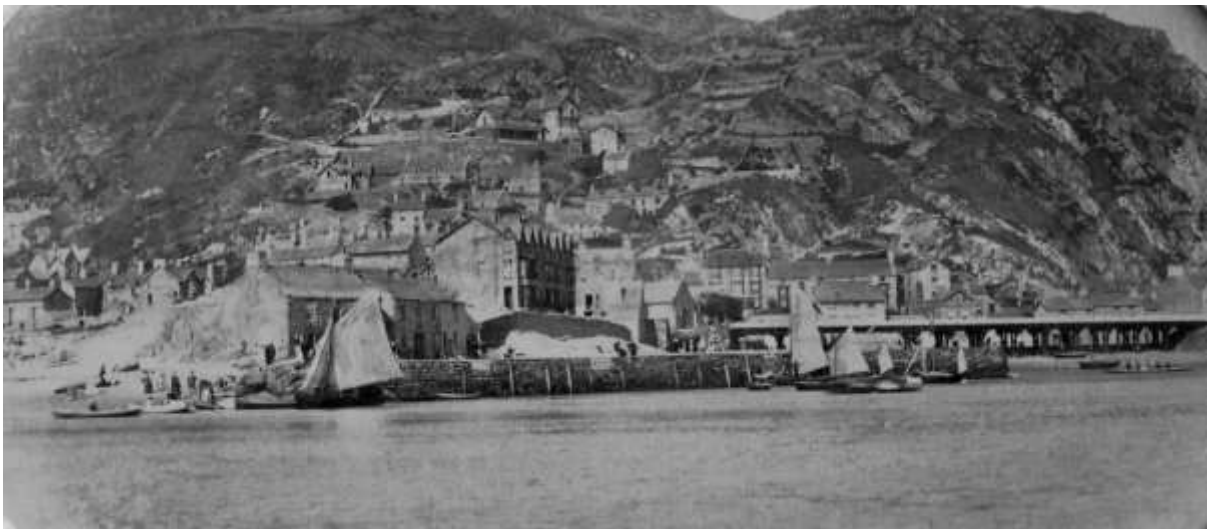
Barmouth became the most important port in the area and web or flannels were exported from here as well as stockings. Imports would include wood, wine, iron, corn, brandy, rum, tea, coal, tobacco, tallow, gunpowder, malt, butter, skins, ore, flour and lead as well as other items. There were many wealthy merchants in the town and schooners, brigantines and steamers came and went. Destinations included the Americas, France, Spain and Ireland. The wool trade was decimated by the War of Independence in America which had a detrimental effect on the shipping industry in Barmouth for a while, but the advent of the North Wales slate export trade took off in the early 1800s which saw an end to this period. Wool was still exported along with oak bark, timber, cheese and butter. Small sailing vessels would head up the Mawddach to fetch goods from landing places along the river. Square Riggers were a common sight at Barmouth before being replaced by Schooners.



Harbour 1860



The Quay 1864



The Quay 1875



The Quay 1875

With increased shipping came dangers out to sea and a few attempts were made to build a lighthouse at Barmouth to warn of the rocks. Each attempt failed with the structures being knocked down. The foundation of one is still here today at the Perch which can be seen just off Ynys y Brawd.

People of Barmouth have been volunteering to save lives at sea since 1828, when Barmouth received its first lifeboat. To date there have been 10 lifeboats at Barmouth, starting out with oars before progressing to motor and now jets. The first two boats under oar were unnamed. The first named boat was the Ellen in 1868. The Ellen was followed by the first of two boats called the Jones-Gibb I and II, named after their donor Mrs Jones Gibb of Tunbridge Wells.

Oars then gave way to motor with the arrival of the Lawrence Ardern Stockport. Next was the iconic Chieftain which served the town from 1949 to 1982 and the last boat to be slipway launched. The Princess of Wales came to Barmouth next, but too big for the boathouse, she sat on a mooring just off the Barmouth Bridge. The next occupant of the mooring was the Moira Barrie who came into service in 1992 before being replaced in 2019 by today's lifeboat the Ella Larsen.

We can't mention the lifeboats without referring to the D-Class Inshore Lifeboat which Barmouth first received in 1967. This was ideal for rescues in shallow waters, cliff edges and the estuary. Fast and manoeuvrable it became the workhorse of the fleet. The first D-Class in Barmouth was D-137.

The home of the lifeboat has changed through the years in Barmouth. The first lifeboat house was on the quay. The location is believed to be the shed next to Davy Jones Locker, to the right as you face it. In 1859 the boathouse then moved to near the start of Barmouth Bridge, built into the rock with its own slip. By 2004 the lifeboat

was becoming tidally restricted as to when it could launch so a new boathouse was built on the Promenade with a tractor launch and recovery system, from the beach, to ensure 24/7 cover in the bay.



Jones Gibb 1890 in the old boathouse



Chieftain on the slip 1967



Jones Gibb 1906



Chieftain 1978

In 1834 the Round House was built. It was built after a meeting between prominent residents and freeholders as a result of frequent drunken riots, usually late at night, also the constables had nowhere to place the offenders until they were brought before the magistrates. An application was made to the Magistrates to pay for the lock up from county rates and another application that more special constables were appointed. The seafarers in the town would often drink heavily after long periods at sea. It wasn't just the sailors as there were a number of women who habitually caused disturbances as well. The building was erected in a circular shape with a dividing wall down the middle, one side for the men and the other for the women. The building is said to be round so there are no corners for the devil to hide in!



Round House 1880

By 1867 the railway arrived in Barmouth and this saw a rapid decline in shipping. The town experienced hard times for about ten years. As sail gave way to steam one of Barmouth's most famous vessels came in to play, The SS Dora. The Dora was a 296 Gross Ton Coastal Steamer who plied her trade mainly between Liverpool, Barmouth and Aberdovey in the early 1900s. Owned by the Aberdovey and Barmouth Steamship Company she was sunk on 1 May 1917 when returning from Belfast to Liverpool. She was stopped by a German U-Boat under the command of Otto Steinbrink who ordered the crew into lifeboats before placing explosives on the Dora and scuttling her. The large building / shed on the quay, that the toilet blocks are attached to, is still known as the Dora Building to this day.



SS Dora newly arrived from Liverpool 1901

As tourism grew in the mid 20th Century motor boat trips became popular and local boatmen would advertise on boards on the sheds by the quay. There were a dozen or so small boats, licensed to carry twelve, including the Skylark, the Enterprise, the Sally, the Pansy and the May Queen. Three larger boats, licensed to carry 36 passengers, also provided boat trips they were the Prince of Wales, the Princess Royal and the Welsh Girl. As well as the ferry to Fairbourne the trips would go up the estuary to Penmaenpool, trips out into Cardigan Bay and trips to Mochras / Shell Island. Trips to Penmaenpool were a favourite with an 8 mile passage up the glorious Mawddach. The journey gave the most spectacular scenery but required considerable seamanship and navigational skills. The channel was always changing and knowledge of the location of the sandbanks was required.



Will Barnett and Rhys David Jones (Barmouth Lifeboat Coxswain) 1937



The ferry 1948



John Ellis Morris (Barmouth Lifeboat Coxswain) advertising boat trips 1950 (Shed is possibly the first lifeboat house)



William Griffith on the Enterprise 1950

At 10:55 on 22nd July 1966, Ned Jones aged 73, a man with over 50 years of experience on the Mawddach set off for Penmaenpool in command of the Prince of Wales. There were 42 passengers onboard, 6 more than it was licensed for; 15 were children between the ages of 3 and 12 years. The vessel grounded twice on sandbanks on its voyage up the estuary. The Prince of Wales arrived at Penmaenpool at 1145 with the flood tide running at full force between 4 and 5 knots. The vessel passed the jetty with the intention of turning to port to stem the tide for the approach to the jetty. It appears Mr Jones made the turn too late and was not turning as quickly as expected despite the tiller being hard over. In order to give the boat more speed he let go of the tiller to increase the speed of the engine. The boat was unable to complete the turn and the flood tide carried her to the bridge where she collided with one of the lower stretchers. These are solid beams that protrude from the upright members and are only visible at low water. This severely damaged the boat and left a large hole causing the boat to rapidly sink. Two lifebelts floated free and some passengers managed to reach these but the other lifebelts were tied to the boat and there was no time to release them. Despite the valiant efforts of Mr John Hall of the George III Hotel and his staff, 15 lives were lost. The tragedy affected the whole town and as a result all boat trips were stopped at the time.



John Jones advertising trips on the Prince of Wales 1958



Prince Of Wales 1966



Divers at the scene of the tragedy 1966

In the 1950s there was one lobster fishing boat on the quay, the MV Thomas Sinclair. Then during the 1960s more lobster boats came to Barmouth from Pembrokeshire and Cardigan. Lobster fishermen were a hardy bunch and would fish here for about 9 months of the year. Then in 1973, Iolo Hughes, a maths teacher turned lobster fisherman from New Quay, began landing bags of queen scallops from his boat Seren y Don. He had found a bed about 15 miles off Barmouth and would sneak out in the middle of the night. At first no one knew where he was fishing but soon the other fishermen found out and either converted or bought boats suitable for dredging. The boats could be out for over 36 hours at a time but it was very lucrative.

Before long boats came from Cornwall, France, Holland and Ireland; sometimes they would lie 6 or 7 abreast on the quayside. An ice plant was installed and huge refrigerated lorries belonging to the French firm Jarno were a regular sight on the quay. The trucks would groan out of town under the weight of the scallops. As the scallops became scarcer the fishing trade dropped off, there was still some fishing through the 80s but eventually the numbers dropped to a small amount of vessels. Eventually leisure craft became the main type of boating in the harbour with a few charter fishing boats offering Mackerel Fishing for the tourists and of course the Fairbourne Ferry.



Harbour 1968



Iolo Hughes on the MFV Enterprise 1969



The quay 1972



Fish truck 1972



The quay 1972



The quay 1972 - George Berridge, Raymond Lewis and Tony Page



Boy Nick 1988

Inspired by the adventures of Major Bill Tilman, the Three Peaks Yacht Race was started in 1977. Dr Rob Haworth, a local GP who knew Major Tilman, was going on holiday and decided to do it Tilman style, sailing from Barmouth to Caernarvon, climbing Snowdon, then sailing to Ravenglass and climbing Scafell Pike, then onwards to Fort William and climbing Ben Nevis. While explaining his idea to his medical partner, Dr Merfyn Jones, Dr Jones suggested it would make a marvellous race and so the event was born. The race is usually held annually and at its height attracted between 35 and 40 boats.



The Three Peaks Yacht Race



The Three Peaks Yacht Race

Although it has changed through the decades the quay still remains the focal point of the town and has always remained a beautiful place to visit.