

In search of the Bohemian road

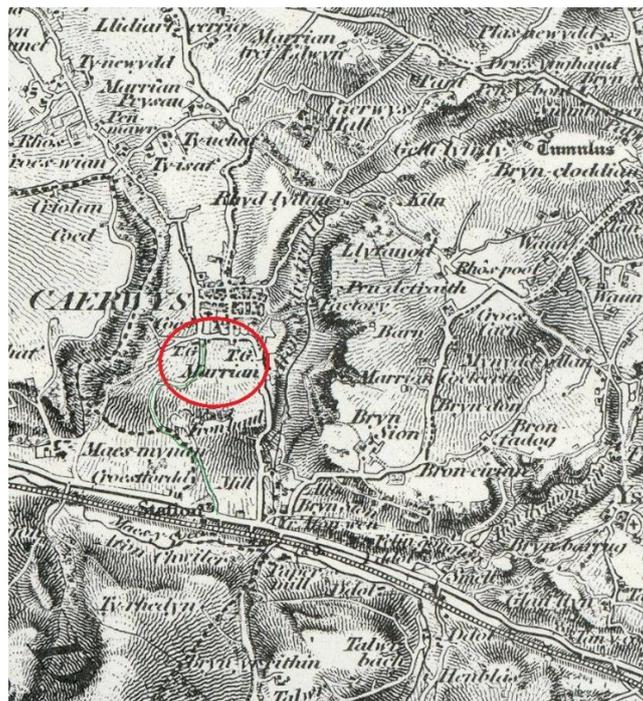
(With special gratitude to the consistently wonderful Caerwys Historical Society)

Inspired by materials shared on the Caerwys Historical Society Facebook page, I set about a brief investigation into toll gates, which led to the discovery of a mysterious lost 'Bohemian' road.

This micro-study illustrates the challenges facing the historian, such as the varying reliability and utility of evidence, and the role of opinion when reaching a judgement. Presented with the same evidence others will draw different conclusions; history is always being rewritten.

Until the end of the 19th century, toll gates (and associated cottages) regulated access to, from, and through Caerwys. Toll gates were unpopular with farmers and traders alike as the costs significantly impacted their income. It wasn't just in Caerwys that they were unpopular; the well-known Rebecca Riots (1839-43) took place in other parts of Wales, where farmers – often dressed as women – attacked and smashed the gates at night. During times of hardship, as after a poor harvest, the tolls were literally a tax on food. However, for those that owned the roads, harvesting the tolls was a very profitable business and they jealously guarded their rights to charge all travellers.

This small study originated from the sharing of a late 19th century map showing two toll gates close to each other at the south end of the Caerwys:



According to responses from the history group on Facebook, the eastern toll gate was near to where Bryn Derwen and Gwynfryn are today; apparently the ruins of the toll gate cottage are in the gardens. This toll gate would have collected tolls from those wishing to access Caerwys hill. However, this is contradicted by another source: <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/6114601>, which places toll gate immediately at the bottom of South Street. The scale and text on the map do not allow us to see which is correct. So, we need more evidence.

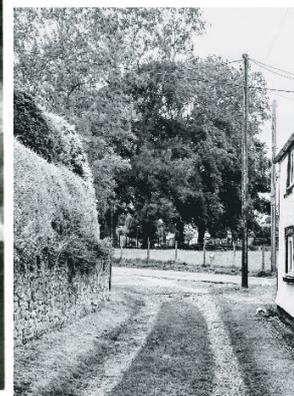
In the digital archive of the historical society we have sketched images (dating from around 1909 and produced locally by Scotcher, a newsagent in Holywell, as postcards) of toll gates around Caerwys. This one is the eastern toll gate:



The image still does not tell the exact location of the toll cottage as we can't be sure which direction the sketch was taken; however, on balance, from the road layout, it does seem to favour the Bryn Derwen and Gwynfryn explanation. The point is, another historian might take a different view.

The toll gate 300 metres to the west (see map) is more mysterious. Although nothing remains, the toll gate and cottage stood near to Argoed and controlled the now 'lost' road heading south towards Station Woods, then looping westwards (probably to reduce the gradient for heavy horse drawn carts and carriages) before rejoining the present footpath near to the Pwll Gwyn. The road is clearly marked on the 19th century map.

We do have a sketched image of the western toll gate, which confirms it being situated next to Argoed.



One gets the impression that the artist was looking north towards the glebe field, although the church is not visible (the modern view is included for comparison).

Following a suggestion made by one member of the Facebook group, I used a Google satellite view to see if any trace of the road remains. To be sure, the aerial image clearly shows a line of hedges marking the old, 'lost', road looping westwards, eventually coming out by the Pwll Gwyn, opposite the entrance to Caerwys railway station. This was confirmed by a field visit.

It begs the question: why there were two roads heading south from Caerwys, both accessing the Mold-Denbigh road within 200 metres of each other? I think I may have an answer based upon another historical source (that was typed in the mid-20th century recording the memories of Mr John Griffiths) that has been shared amongst the Caerwys Historical Society Facebook group.

“Extracts from notes by the late Mr John Griffiths Hughes, Marian Prysau, Caerwys

Ffordd Myhernia. (Bohemian Road)

In the days when toll gates were used, travellers passing through Caerwys, wishing to avoid paying at the toll gates which was somewhere in the vicinity of Bryn Derwen, used to branch off past the Rectory and down past Argoed along the Bohemian Road. (This is the road, often called the Roman Road which branches off at the first 'kissing gate' after passing Argoed and joins the roadway through Maesmynan Woods). The Bohemian Road was frequented by gypsies”.

The reliability of this evidence by itself is questionable; however, it does chime with the sketched images and the map (and satellite images). The claim that it was a road initially used to reach the Mold-Denbigh post road and avoid paying the dreaded tolls seems fits in with the historical narrative set out above. That a small ‘side’ gate (as noted on the sketch) be constructed to catch those skipping the tolls is hardly a surprise. Sadly, don’t yet have a firm chronology, therefore these conclusions are open to challenge.

The study of history brings forth unanswered questions, and hence mystery. If like me you have walked the path to Station Woods a hundred times the idea that it was called the Bohemian Road will play on your mind. Bohemia is an area in the Czech Republic that was associated with the Romany people or Gypsies. My initial thoughts were that the reference made by Mr John Griffiths Hughes to the ‘Bohemian Road’ was used a product of his imagination. However, the Caerwys Historical Society committee came to the rescue, drawing my attention to the description of the boundaries of Caerwys from the 1911 census, where a census area was marked by:

’... the road Called Ffordd Mehemia [Bohemian Road] leading from Pwllgwyn to Croeswian’.

Yet another reference, Ffordd Mehemia [Bohemian Road] is found in a Vestry meeting (an annual meeting of parishioners) held in July 1885 which confirms what we have discovered so far. The meeting addressed the ‘the advisability of claiming the old road called Ffordd Mehemia, being an old turnpike road, already closed by Mr. Pickstone of Maesmynan Hall’ (from Flintshire Observer 30th July 1885). According to the news report Maesmynan estate was being sold and those at the Vestry meeting believed the Bohemian Road was a public road and should not be included in the sale. A committee was formed to investigate the matter and was charged with reporting back with their findings. We have no record as to the outcome of the committee’s investigation. This takes us in the direction of a rich landowner riding roughshod over the wishes of the parishioners to keep the public rights of way open; that must be for another day.

Yet another reference to the Bohemian Road is made by Canon Ellis Davies in his important work on ‘Flintshire Place-Names’. He claims that ‘Mehemia’ is mentioned in the Churchwardens’ Accounts of 1676 and 1679. Rather than originating with the Romany gypsies, Canon Ellis Davies suggests it might have been the name of an

alehouse situated near the Pwll Gwyn (which itself was a private residence in the 17th century).

Therefore, we have at least four distinct references to the *Bohemian Road*, allowing us to be confident that the name was in common usage for several centuries. We have not only discovered a lost road; we have unearthed a mystery. Why was it called the *Bohemian Road*? Was it really the stopping place of Romany gypsies? Or an alehouse? Was a rich and powerful landlord ignoring the wishes of the local people by closing off the road? It would be wonderful to find evidence, however, the myth is interesting enough for now.



Hedges and trees still define the Bohemian Road

The posting of that 19th century map onto the Facebook page triggered a micro enquiry that has led from toll gates to Romany gypsies. It also prompted a critical review of local historical sources and, even on this small scale, demonstrated how history is created. More challenging still, we entered the territory where history and myth coincide.

A brief note on sources.

To produce a short article like this involves using a number of historical sources, each of which needs to be treated with caution, and, where possible, confirmed with other evidence. Here is a list of sources with my comments:

1. General textbooks for background reading; I used mainly William Albert's *The Turnpike Road System in England 1663-1840*.
2. Works of reference: Canon Ellis Davies' 'Flintshire Place-Names'.
3. Historical maps, I used a range of maps from the 1830s through to the 1920s. Whilst useful they proved inconsistent and often not updated for many years (the map I have inserted, for example, shows both toll gates despite that fact that the western gate had been closed sometime before 1885).
4. Post cards from the early 20th century; very attractive sources but unclear as to when they were produced, so can be misleading. They are, after all, an artist's interpretation.
5. Recollections or oral history; in this case from Mr John Griffiths Hughes. His notes have been an important starting point and have often been confirmed by other sources.

6. Newspaper records – digitised collections held by the National Library of Wales.
7. Official census records.
8. Internet sources.
9. The comments and support of the Caerwys Historical Society, in all its forms.
10. Fieldwork – walking the Bohemian Road. The best bit!