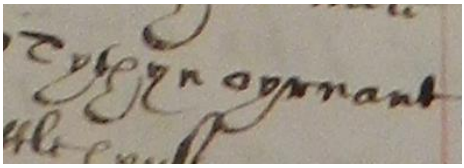
Oernant

Oernant at the beginning of the 20th century. The four properties that can be seen – Oernant Isaf (lower right), Oernant Uchaf (upper left), Tŷ Isaf (just to the right of Oernant Uchaf) and Fron Haul (further to the right) still remain today.

Oernant (Cold Stream) is the area nestling within the loop of the Horseshoe Pass, extending to the west of the village of Pentredŵr. Today just four houses remain in Oernant, although there were at least double that number of cottages in previous centuries.



A 1606 list of former Valle Crucis properties mentions Tythyn Oernant. Courtesy North East Wales Archives, DD/WY/5406.

The name Oernant is first mentioned in records in 1606 when Tythyn Oyrnant appeared in a list of one of the properties that had formerly belonged to Valle Crucis Abbey, dissolved by Henry VIII seventy years before. The Abbey had a number of 'grange' farms around the area and so we can see the earliest use of the land at Oernant was for farming. Whether Oernant was one of the areas of land originally given to the Cistercian monks of Valle Crucis by Madoc ap Gruffudd, ruler of northern Powys at the time of the Abbey's foundation in 1200, we do not know. However, being quite close to Valle Crucis it seems likely that it would have formed one of the early sources of crops and grazing for the monks.

The other main use for the land at Oernant was for mining slate. Although slate is known to have been used in North West Wales in Roman times the earliest quarries in that area date between the 12th and 14th centuries. We do not know when slate was first extracted from the quarries around the Horseshoe Pass, but in 1696 Edward Lhuyd noted in his book Parochialia that there was 'Very good slate at Oernant in maes yr ychen whence they are carried out to ye neighbouring counties', although up until the construction of the new road (the present Horseshoe Pass) in 1810 slate would heve been transported down to nearby Pentredŵr and out on the old turnpike road that ran through the village.

Very good Slate at oernant in maes yr ychen whence they are carried to ye neighbouring counties.——Mem' Plâs Ievaf. Their Fuel wood & Turf & some Coal from Rhiwabon 5 m. distant.

Extract from a transcript edition of Edward Lhuyd's Parochialia.

By the beginning of the 18th century the land at Oernant, along with the mineral wealth, had become the property of the Wynnstay Estate. The rental records for the Wynnstay Estate held at the National Library of Wales contain an entry for the Oernant Quarries from 1724, when Thomas ap Robert was paying an annual rent of £5 0s to the Wynnstay Estate for his quarry at Oernant. John Rogers was also paying 10s rent for what was evidently a much smaller quarry.

Of the houses at Oernant the oldest (although not now the building) is undoubtedly Oernant Isaf (or Oernant Farm), which would have been the grange farm for the Abbey. The other cottages were almost certainly built to house workers for the Oernant and other nearby quarries.

It is difficult to be certain when quarrying finished at the Oernant Quarries. A plan from around 1810 shows the quarries and a newspaper report from 1820 mentions them still being rented out.

An early map of Oernant and the slate quarries. The map is undated but the dashed line is labelled 'The new road from Ruthin to Llangollen', indicating that it is not long after 1810. Courtesy Llangollen Museum.

Oernant Slate Rocks.

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,

On Saturday the 14th day of July, 1810, between the hours of three and five in the afternoon, at the Royal Oak Inn, in Llangollen, either together or in lots, for such term or terms of years, and subject to such conditions as shall be agreed upon at the time of letting,

TWO very excellent ROCKS, called *Oernant Rocks*, just opened, and now in full work.

Oernant Slates for size and durability are equal if not superior to any Slates in the United Kingdom.

The Rocks are within two miles of the Llangollen Branch of the Ellesmere Canal, and three miles of the town of Llangollen.

The tenants, William Parry and John Hughes, will shew the Rocks; and further particulars may be known upon application to Mr. EDWARDS, solicitor, in Oswestry.

Chester Chronicle, Friday, 29th June 1810.

That the Oernant Quarries were bought by the Tottenham Estate and were operating in the mid 19th century is confirmed by another newspaper report from 1852 detailing an action brought by Captain Tottenham for the recovery of £15 for a year and a half's rent with respect to the Oernant Quarries. The Quarries were being leased by Alexander Reid, who at that time owned the Llangollen Flagstone Company and a number of quarries in the area.

Photographs from around 1900 show some of the workers' cottages at Oernant in ruins.

1810 saw the auction of two 'newly opened' rock faces at Oernant, which were, at that time, tenanted by William Parry and John Hughes.

An auction document for properties in 1831 includes as Lot 4 'A tenement called Oernant with the slate quarries thereon'. Many of the properties sold at that auction were acquired by the Tottenham Estate.

New County Courts.

BEFORE A. J. JOHNES, ESQ., JUDGE.

CORWEN.

The monthly Court for this district was held on Thursday, the 12th inst.

Tottenham v. *Reed.* – This was an adjourned case from the last Court. The plaintiff, Captain Tottenham, is a large landed proprietor in the neighbourhood of Llantysilio, Denbighshire, and the defendant, Mr. Alexander Reed, is an extensive slate merchant in the same locality.

The action was brought to recover 15*l.*, for a year and a half's rent, due Michaelmas last, in respect of the Oernant slate quarry, held by the defendant under the plaintiff. The case was proved by Mr. Sharp, of Llansantffraid, the plaintiff's agent, and other witnesses.

The defence was that another quarry called Bwlchmawr, was included along with the Oernant in the terms of the letting, and that the plaintiff had since taken possession of the former quarry, and so determined the tenancy.

The evidence adduced having proved insufficient to support this view of the case, judgment was given for the plaintiff with costs.

Mr. Adams, of Ruthin, appeared for the plaintiff; and Mr. Edgeworth, of Wrexham, for defendant.

Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald and North and South Wales Independent, 21st February 1852.

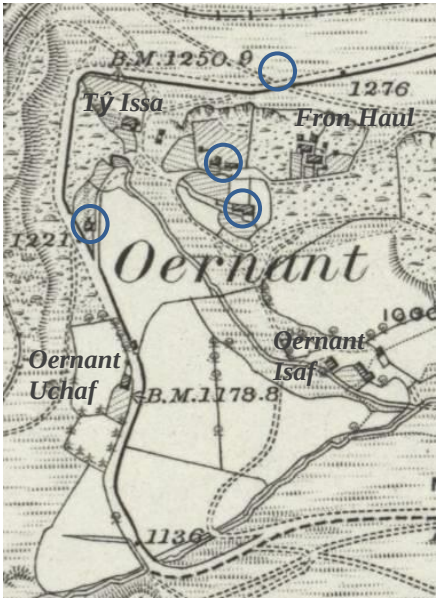
However, photographs from the latter part of the 19th century show some of the workers' cottages in ruins and certainly by the early 20th century the Oernant Quarries were disused, although quarrying at the adjacent Clogau and Moel y Faen quarries continued.

Today the rock faces at Oernant are lost in a forest of trees, although the ruins of stone built store houses still remain as memories to the industrial past of the Oernant Quarries.

The rock face and building ruins at Oernant in 2023.

Oernant and Clogau Cottages

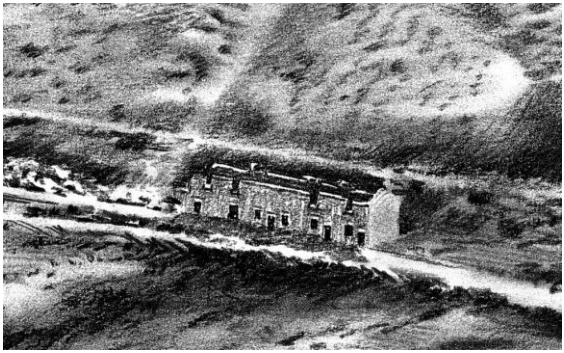
Some of the ruins of buildings at Oernant.



On the 1874 Ordnance Survey map the locations of buildings that are now gone or just ruins are marked in blue.

With the opening and expansion of the quarries at Oernant came the need for providing housing for the workforce and their families.

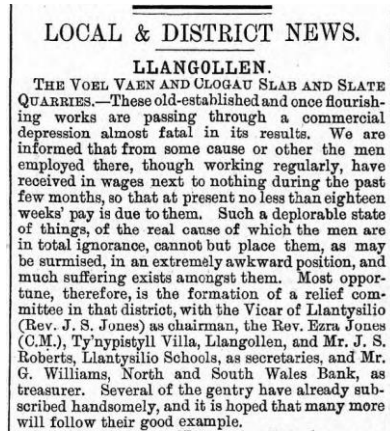
The peak in numbers was in the 1870s when there a total of 58 people living in Oernant. Of those, 27 were living in the four properties that remain today. The remainder were in 6 or 7 houses that are now ruined or gone. With the exception of Bank or Hen Bank/Bonk it is difficult to identify who was living where or indeed which house was which, as occupants and house names changed frequently and many were not marked individually on the tithe map. The property names that were used at different times included Tan y Graig, Tŷ Isa Craig, Brynffynnon, Gilfach and Tŷ Newydd, but many times they were simply marked as Oernant.



A painting by Alwyn Dempster Jones of the Clogau Quarry cottages when they were still ruined in around 2000.

In addition, from 1861 to 1881 there were one, two or three cottages named Pen y Clogau, but from the name it seems reasonable to assume that these referred to the workers' cottages up near the entrance to the Clogau Quarry and not to those down in Oernant. Nearly all of the men who lived in the cottages were either quarrymen or labourers. Some of the labourers were agricultural and the rest were general – most likely working in the quarries. The only exceptions were Thomas Hughes of Bank Foel Faen and John Thomas from Pen y Clogau, who were both engineers, Edward Hughes from Gilfach, who was an engine driver for ten years and Sem Davies at Pen y Clogau who was a blacksmith.

A slump in the British economy in 1879 saw a rapid decline in the fortunes of North Wales slate quarries, including the layoff of workers and shorter working hours. Some quarries survived the slump but many never really fully recovered. There was a brief respite in 1883 but by 1886 the tone had changed – 'The Voel Vaen and Clogau slab and slate quarries: These old-established and once flourishing works are passing through a commercial depression almost fatal in its results. We are informed that from some cause or other the men employed there, though working regularly, have received in wages next to nothing during the past few months, so that at present no less than eighteen weeks' pay is due to them'. By 1887 men had started to leave the area to find work elsewhere and in 1890 the workforce went on strike because of the money owed to them. By 1891 only one of the Oernant/Clogau cottages remained inhabited and by 1901 they were all empty.



LOCAL & DISTRICT NEWS.

LLANGOLLEN.

THE VOEL VAEN AND CLOGAU SLAB AND SLATE QUARRIES.—These old-established and once flourishing works are passing through a commercial depression almost fatal in its results. We are informed that from some cause or other the men employed there, though working regularly, have received in wages next to nothing during the past few months, so that at present no less than eighteen weeks' pay is due to them. Such a deplorable state of things, of the real cause of which the men are in total ignorance, cannot but place them, as may be surmised, in an extremely awkward position, and much suffering exists amongst them. Most opportune, therefore, is the formation of a relief committee in that district, with the Vicar of Llantysilio (Rev. J. S. Jones) as chairman, the Rev. Ezra Jones (C.M.), Ty'nypistyll Villa, Llangollen, and Mr. J. S. Roberts, Llantysilio Schools, as secretaries, and Mr. G. Williams, North and South Wales Bank, as treasurer. Several of the gentry have already subscribed handsomely, and it is hoped that many more will follow their good example.

The article about the plight of the slate quarries in the Llangollen Advertiser, 29th January 1886.

By David Crane.