



Gold Mine Licensing Stamps



Back in the 1980s I remember a news item about two young women who went on a camping holiday at Bontddu near Barmouth in Gwynedd. On the first day one of them found a few flakes of native gold in the stream that ran at the bottom of the campsite. For the next week they spent their time panning for more and eventually accumulated enough to actually pay for their holiday. This pointless exercise, however, was enough to cause the Clogau mine to be reopened for the umpteenth time.

Welsh gold sells at premium prices, and has traditionally been used for wedding rings of the royal family. In truth it no different to gold from anywhere else, and in fact any claims that Welsh gold has a richer colour is the result of adding a bit of copper to it. Much is made of jewellery with 'a touch of Welsh gold'. This is achieved by adding as little as 1% Welsh to 99% other gold.

Welsh gold is found in the ancient rocks stretching up from the area near Dolgellau up into Snowdonia, as well as a few other locations. Its presence has been known for over 4,000 years. The Mold Gold Cape, one of the treasures of the British Museum, is from the Bronze Age. It appears to be an ornate ceremonial artefact which fitted over the wearer's shoulders and covered the upper body. Gold was one of the reasons why the Romans had an interest in Wales. Mining was sporadic of the centuries until the 1869 Welsh Gold rush, stimulated by the opening of the Clogau and the Dolaucaethi mines. For the next few years every stream and creek boasted a community of grizzled prospectors jealously guarding their own patch, spending all daylight hours panning for gold. A few did strike lucky and found a nugget big enough to retire with, or at least that was the explanation for when one of them gave it up. The rest eked out an existence from the few flakes they found.



Eventually by the twentieth century most gold was extracted by underground mining, with narrow gauge trains hauling tons of rock to the surface, where it was crushed and the traces of gold recovered by mechanical processes. It was not just gold; silver would also be found in the same rocks. There was enough to keep the mines in commercial operation sporadically. Nowadays the few still open are but tourist attractions showing how it was done.

Less well known is the second Welsh Gold Rush of 1929-30, when new deposits were found in Caernarvonshire, to the west of Snowdonia. This was at the time

of a world financial crisis and as you all know, when the markets are jittery about currency and stocks investors will resort to gold. One canny Welshman, Eifion Emlyn Jones of Bangor, saw this coming and negotiated with the land owners across a swathe of estates in the area. He gained the exclusive licensing rights to mining in the area, and the landowners would get a percentage of all the profits made. Jones would charge for the mining licences and also take his own larger percentage of the profits. The Caernarvonshire Precious Metals Mining Corporation was born. Jones charged a modest £5 per yearly quarter for each goldmine in operation, and £5 for silver mines. A mine was defined as one tunnel entrance, and if gold and silver was extracted two licenses were required. Most mines were potential sources of both, so both licences were required four times a year. To cap it all, all gold and silver extracted had to be brokered through Jones' corporation. Miners also had to be recruited through him, so he not only made more money acting as an employment agency, but this also allowed him to place his own spies within the mines, both ensuring that all gold was declared to the corporation, but their wages were paid by the licensees. While some of the mines extracted a decent enough amount of the precious metals, most swapped hands frequently as the operators went bust, and new hopefuls moved in. The only real winner was Eifion Jones, who was officially 'a rich man' by 1935, when he sold up and retired. This was but one of his many commercial interests, all of which made him money without actually doing much work.

And the stamps? These were produced to make the certificates of licensing look official. The design was by Eifion's wife Haf Jones, and printed by the Menai Print Works, which was part owned by Jones and his brother. The gold stamp shows a scene from the Bryncelli mine, and the silver a scene from the Nant Gwernol mine. It was Haf who insisted that they were triangular. Firstly it made them look different and a step above run-of-the-mill stamps. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly to her, she would boast to others that the three sides represented how Eifion made money from the licensing, from the employment agency, and from the brokerage of the gold. She didn't stint, however, on the embellishments on the stamps. These were 23 carat gold leaf, or 0.975 sterling silver leaf. However in true Jones family form when the licenses were renewed each quarter the old ones were taken away and the leaf carefully scraped off and recycled. Finding these stamps with the original gold and silver is not an easy task. The leaf does have a tendency to rinkle a bit and wear off, so handle these carefully. And as you may guess, Jones also sold the frames to fit the certificates.