



# The Slate Coinage of Blaenau Ffestiniog



Many of you will know of the stone money of the island of Yap in Micronesia; large calcite discs anything from one to twelve foot (30cm to 4 metres) in diameter. These are now only in use ceremonially. But, unsurprisingly, this is not the only example of stone currency in the world. Slate coins were in common usage in Blaenau Ffestiniog and much of North West Wales in the past, but is in that town where they were minted and persisted in use. It may be that one example inspired the other. The Welsh Oddities have previously made mention of the golden ages of Welsh exploration with Idris the Sick (and Trevor), Madog of Gwynedd and Marci Trebor who ventured into the Indian Ocean. Perhaps the latter adventurer sailed beyond the East Indies and into the Pacific.

Where the Blaenau Ffestiniog slate coins differ from those on Yap is that for much of their time they were rectangular. However, originally the coins were large and circular, perhaps up to six foot diameter and one foot thick. This was a big disadvantage when living in an area noted for its hills and slopes; so easy to lose control when moving one and having it roll down into the main street. The chronicler Gerald of Wales, in 1190, reported "*Heu tres viri boni et veri oppressus fragum deserto numquam per sex denarios ad consequi eorum fata contra infideles...*" He was recruiting for the Third Crusade at the time and the three men referred to would have volunteered their services to the cause before the accident.

During the later Middle Ages though the coins became rectangular and smaller, though still not small enough to be considered loose change, with sizes still up to 2 foot per side. While there is some evidence that the slate coins were used for trade within the town it seems that this was only for larger purchases due to the relative high value of the coins. As currencies go the slate coins must come close to the most complicated. The sizes were standardised with many different sizes recognised. The largest coins were the Brenhines, Tywysoges and Dduges worth 34s 6d, 28s 0d, and 24s 0d respectively. Smaller values were the Ardalyddes ( 20s 2d). Iarlles (16s 8d), and Is-iarlles (10s 8d). There were slightly smaller variants of each of these, while the smallest, the Hanner Sengl, had a value of 2s 1d. Clearly you needed good shoulders to carry the coins and an alert mind to conduct and trade with the slates.

It was the area of the slate that defined its value principally as above, but those values are nominal. Thinner coins could hold higher value because of the skill required to produce them and the fact that they were lighter to carry. The down side was that thinner coins were more likely to flake at the edges from use. If this was deemed excessive the owner of the coin could find themselves ordered by officials of the High Sheriff to have the coin resized to a lower denomination. Slate colour and tone could also add or subtract from a slate coin's value. Most were made from the common purplish slate of Snowdonia, but a green or even gold tinted slate could increase the value. So transactions using the coinage could be long and protracted. First there would be the usual haggling over the price, followed by even longer discussions over the value of the slate coins offered.

The good citizens of Blaenau came up with a novel and practical way of hoarding their savings. Anyone who has been to the town will have been impressed (or unimpressed as the case may be) by the high rate of precipitation in the area. The coins were used to cover their homes, and the slate roofing industry was born. Most usually the slates were collected and saved up as a dowry, which would then be used to roof the new bride and her husband's new home. As the slate industry took off and larger and larger quarries were exploited for their slate so the use of the slate coins declined. Slate quarrying was no

longer a cottage industry and the availability of literally millions of slates meant the currency suddenly experienced hyper-inflation. Once a small brewery could be bought for a few large slates, but soon it required a wagonload for half a pint of beer.

This wasn't quite the end of the story though. Small round slate coins were made to pay the children who worked in the quarries as general helpers. Each quarry produced their own, and they could only be spent in the quarry-owned shops, so are classed as tokens by numastists. Not only did each token have a simple machined design on it for identification, but the company accountants would check how much a lad was paid and how much was spent. Anyone found shaping their own coins out of the slate waste would be transported to the colonies along with their families.

And there are still some dowry-roofed homes in Blaenau Ffestiniog which obviously now sell for a premium. However, this is not the only legacy. The values of the old coins are still used as the names for the different slate sizes, except they are translated into English. The Brenhines became Empress size of 26 x 16 inches, while the Dduges or Duchess measures 24 x 12 inches, and so on.

The stamps released in 2006 show the history of the slate money up to the present day, and illustrates well that though centred on Blaenau Ffestiniog it was very much a part of everyday life across north and west Wales. The Welsh Postal Service debated long over whether to come up with themed designs for the stamps, but decided to use actual un-retouched images for the stamps.

The earliest shows Hywell Dda, Prince of Deheubarth. Around the year 900 he ruled the lands of west Wales, but soon became to be the most powerful prince across much of Wales. The illustration shows him collecting taxes on his yearly peregrination to the areas in the north of his influence.

Another 2<sup>nd</sup> class value shows Castell de Bere, which lies to the south of Dolgellau and within the influence of Blaenau's currency. Three of four large coins can be seen leaning against the Round Tower. Even now you can visit there and see the depressions these coins made, even though some scallies made off with them a couple of centuries ago.

From the later medieval period is a picture of some minstrels, believed to be a troupe of touring minstrels much favoured by the princes and lords in the area who went by the name of Bywyd Orllewin. It is thought that this was from a promotional leaflet for the minstrels with the slate coins featured behind them representing the going rate for them to perform at court.

Skip forward to the 1700s, and the scene of Caernarfon on market day. Look close and you will see a number of persons with slate money. But only one is pushing a round coin along; the others have the new-fangled rectangular coins tucked under their arms.

Slate coins were still in use in the early days of photography, evidenced by the shot of two 'mintners' performing synchronised block splitting. Some historians have argued that these men were just splitting slates for roofing, but their headwear is that of the employees of the Slate Mint.

Lastly there is a contemporary photograph of four terraced Dowry Cottages in Blaenau. You may be able to discern that each one is tiled slightly differently; a clear clue to such properties. Properties such as these will sell for three times the price of similar homes, due to the fact that the slates on the roof if stripped off could buy you a sheep farm or two in the hills even now.