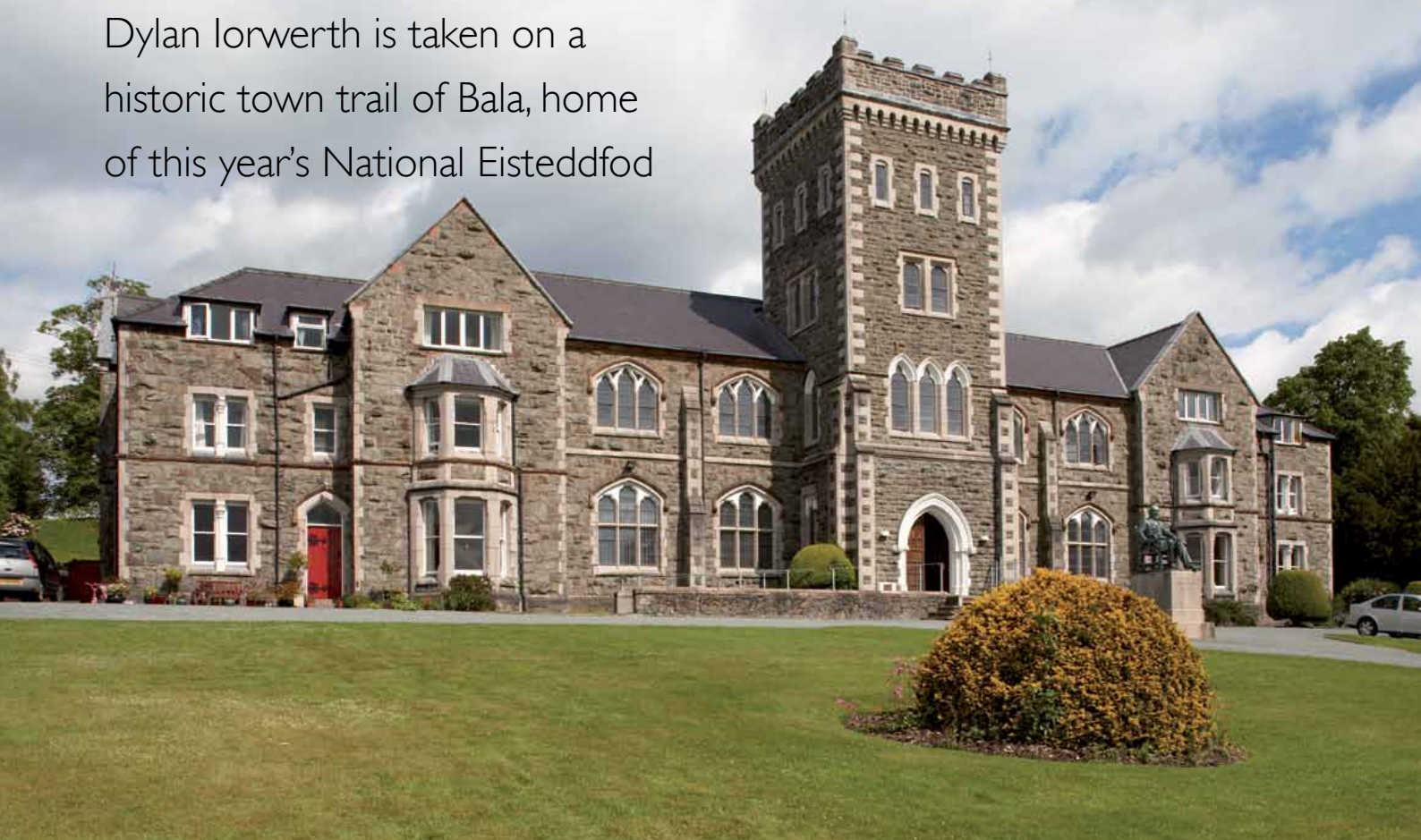


# The town between two lakes

Dylan Iorwerth is taken on a historic town trail of Bala, home of this year's National Eisteddfod



16 *Coleg y Bala (Bala College), the theological academy that symbolizes Bala's close links with Welsh Nonconformism*



1 *The motte at Bala, one of the largest in Wales*

On the table in front of him, Peris Jones Evans has a translation of a medieval document — a charter issued by King Richard II (1377–99). It refers back to a 1324 charter from the reign of Edward II (1307–27). This is the first mention of the borough of Bala, on the banks of Llyn Tegid, Wales's largest natural lake.

The charter, dated the third day of June, specifically grants rights to English residents and mentions the thieves and miscreants that used to gather regularly at the place known as 'Penllyn' in north Wales. It also establishes the right to hold two fairs at Bala, events that are still held successfully almost 700 years later.

The charter makes provision too for building a wall and ditch to guard the borough and its Norman motte, which still stands at the eastern end of the modern town. When Peris Jones Evans takes groups of local people on a historic trail of the town, this is a good place to start ...

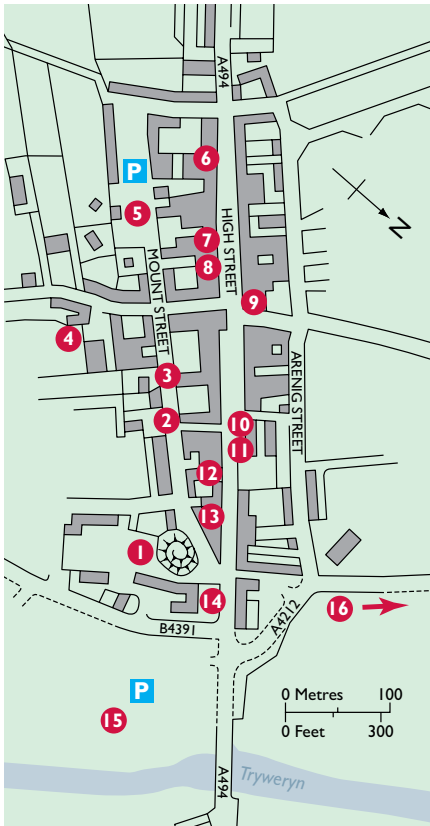
1 A path winds up through ornamental bushes to the top of the 'mount' one of the largest mottes in Wales, which now serves as a small garden to the town.

Archaeologists suggest that there might have been an earlier Welsh *llys* nearby; certainly, Tomen y Bala (the Bala motte) was seized by Llywelyn ab Iorwerth in 1202 when he punished the Lord of Penllyn, Elise ap Madog, for failing to support him.

Here Peris Jones Evans wonders about its name. Once thought to refer to a river outlet from a lake, the latest scholarship describes it as a piece of high ground between two lakes. In earlier times, says the local historian and former history teacher, the land to the east would have been very wet, and dry ground near a ford of the river Dee would have been crucially important.

From here, too, one sees the pattern of the town: a long main street, with two smaller lanes almost parallel on either side. This was a typical pattern for a planned medieval town, and Bala was laid out in fifty-three burgage plots by Roger Mortimer in about 1310. It remained more or less the same until the nineteenth century.

The motte, though, found other uses, says Peris Jones Evans. 'When George Borrow visited Bala in 1854, he describes local people crowding on the slopes of the



Map of Bala — the numbers refer to locations mentioned in the text



3 Houses in Mount Street show the transition from local stone to brick after the railway came to Bala in 1868

“mount”, knitting the woollen socks for which the town was famous.’

We follow Mount Street, the most southerly of the three medieval streets. The buildings here contain the small details which tell the history of a town.

For instance, you can see the back of the British School, a reminder of the nineteenth-century battles for the soul of education. The British School (1856) was non-denominational, in contrast to the church-run National School on the northern side of the town.

Then we come to one of the town’s most important buildings.

2 Capel yr Annibynwyr is the Congregational chapel, built in 1867 at the height of Nonconformist power, when Bala was a breeding ground for ministers. Opposite today’s chapel is the site of an

earlier chapel and academy for theological students, which operated between 1842 and 1869. One of the teachers was Michael D. Jones, from nearby Llanuwchllyn, the man who inspired the founding of the Welsh colony in Patagonia in 1865.

There was another, Methodist, academy and chapel a little further on, and above the town to the north is Coleg y Bala, the theological college, (built in 1863), now a Youth Centre for the Presbyterian Church of Wales.

‘The ministerial students were important for the economy of the town,’ says Peris Jones Evans. ‘Many people would have made money from providing them with lodgings and one of the most important businesses was the hiring out of horses, for students travelling to preaching appointments.’

We continue westwards and pass a



2 Capel yr Annibynwyr — the Congregational chapel

## Where the Romans camped

This year’s National Eisteddfod field is on the site of one of the most important Roman forts in Wales.

It was only in the dry summers of 1975 and 1976 that a series of parchmarks revealed a previously unknown

Roman military complex between Bala and the tiny village of Llanfor.

It has now been recognized as an important fort and a temporary camp with a timber-built vicus, or civic settlement.

## Heritage for Learners *Etifeddiaeth y Dysgwyr*

### Dyma’r Bala

### This is Bala

Here are some of the Welsh words in the various names

capel = chapel  
 coleg = college  
 henblas = old mansion  
 llan (eg Llandderfel) = church of (Derfel)  
 llyn = lake  
 Palé = stakes (palau, from the same root as pale)  
 Penllyn = head of the lake

plas = mansion  
 plas yn dre = mansion in the town  
 rhiwlas = verdant hill  
 stryd = street  
 tomen = motte  
 tan domen = under the motte  
 ysgol = school





4 *Capel Tegid with Thomas Charles's statue*

strange mish-mash of architecture ...

3 It looks like vandalism; in fact, says Peris Jones Evans, numbers 48–52 Mount Street provide evidence of one of the transforming events in Bala's history. Three of the houses are Gothic in style and built in dark local stone. They were obviously once part of a symmetrical five-house row, but two have been replaced with three-storey red brick houses.

'This is Ruabon brick,' says the historian. 'When the railway came to Bala in 1868, it became easy to transport the bricks in by train. Up until then, houses were in the local stone; after that, many were built in brick.'

The railway track ran on the far side of the lake, and a spur was added in 1882 passing the eastern end of the town towards the quarrying centre of Blaenau Ffestiniog.

4 Around the corner is Capel Tegid, built in 1866 for £4,000, whose precarious spire caused consternation but has now been restored. It is one of the cathedrals of Calvinist Methodism, explains Peris Jones Evans, erected when the fathers had

abandoned the asceticism of the early days.

Outside is the statue of Thomas Charles, one of the founders of the Bible Society and the Welsh Sunday School. His presence helped seal Bala's reputation as a centre for religion.

It was to see Thomas Charles that 12-year-old Mary Jones walked all the way from the foot of Cadair Idris to buy her own Bible. Her story helped inspire the society.

Back on Mount Street, and yet another chapel, a small far more modest building, now a heritage centre. This is Capel y Plase 5, in an area, says Peris Jones Evans, where slums used to stand — a jumble of small houses and courtyards crammed up against each other. As in many towns, this was the poor people's chapel as opposed to the more bourgeois Capel Tegid, where membership was a status symbol.

'People could come here in their working clothes as opposed to Sunday best. It was built partly to satisfy the demand from labourers working on the railway to Ffestiniog in the 1880s.'

6 Pyjamas. The word on the sign strikes you as incongruous as you work your way back round to the bottom end of the main street. There, in the town's first workhouse, the mystery is solved.

This workhouse was built in the 1830s in direct response to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Constructed in the local stone, it has grander apartments to either side of the main entrance, probably for workhouse staff. Despite its solid appearance, there were maintenance problems from the start, according to Peris Jones Evans.

Yet, it survived and took on many other lives, as military barracks, an oatcake factory, a water bottling plant and the locally owned pyjama factory, which still produced nightclothes until production moved to eastern Europe only a few years ago.

'The bottling plant belonged to Richard

## Rhiwlas — estates and political oppression

Rhiwlas is the most prominent local estate. The Price family are descended from one of Henry VII's supporters, but the estate itself was founded in the second half of the sixteenth century.

In 1859, the then squire, R. J. Lloyd Price, achieved notoriety when he evicted some tenants who had voted with the Liberals in a hard-fought general election. At nearby Glanllyn, on the banks of Bala Lake, Watkin Williams Wynn, north Wales's biggest landlord, turned out Michael D. Jones's widowed mother:

In 1850, Rhiwlas and Glanllyn between them consisted of 14,000 acres; by 1873, Lloyd Price was recorded as the owner of more than 18,400 acres with a rental value of more than £9,000.

Glanllyn is now the home of one of the Welsh League of Youth's residential centres — the movement was founded in 1922 by a local man, Sir Ifan ab Owen Edwards of Llanuwchllyn, who followed his father, Owen Edwards, as a champion of Welsh culture.

Another important country house was Y Palé near Llandderfel, built in 1871 by the railway magnate Henry Robertson. This is where Queen Victoria stayed on a rare trip outside London and Scotland in 1889, when she visited the Llangollen-based author of a biography of her beloved Albert. His house was not grand enough, though, so she ended up at Y Palé and graced several Bala businesses with her custom.



6 *The old workhouse, now a shop, was once a pyjama factory*



9 *The Royal White Lion's extension reflects the effect of the railway on local tourism*

John Lloyd, squire of the Rhiwlas estate. An eccentric man, he also established a whisky distillery at nearby Frongoch. That site later housed Irish prisoners after the 1916 revolution ... there are stories about a local man, Johnny Roberts, carrying Welsh books there as a child to give to Michael Collins.'

On the right as you walk eastwards back to the top of the town is Ye Olde Bull's Head **7**, the oldest tavern in town, built originally in 1692. And thereby hangs another tale ... 'It was here that people were drinking when the Methodist revivalist Howell Harris came to preach in 1739. According to the story, the vicar of Llanycil paid for drinks for some rabble rousers at the Bull's Head to encourage them to attack him ...'

Barclays Bank **8**, in the main street where Thomas Charles's wife, Sally Jones, had a shop is further up on the right with a plaque recalling Mary Jones. Opposite is The Royal White Lion **9**, where George Borrow once breakfasted, was a coaching inn that was extended substantially when the railway came with its influx of new tourists. Bala Lake — *Llyn Tegid* — was famous for its fishing and the Aran mountains above were great attractions for fans of the picturesque.

The town hall is now clothed in scaffolding in a restoration project that is partly financed by Cadw. There is mention of a market cross being here until some time in the early nineteenth century — the market would have been held on the ground floor. Up above was the court where some of the leaders of the Quakers were arraigned in the mid-seventeenth century.

The court sessions explain the presence of some substantial buildings towards the eastern end of town. These were the town houses built for the local gentry. The most prominent is Plas yn Dre **11** on the left-hand side, now a public house. Owned by the Lloyds of Rhiwaeodog, the most famous of the family was Simon Lloyd (d. 1836), a patron of Thomas Charles. Next to it is Goscombe John's handsome statue of T. E. Ellis **10** the great Liberal politician and Chief Whip who would have rivalled Lloyd George were it not for ill health and an early death at the age of 40 in 1899. The funeral cortege stretched for hundreds of yards on the road from Bala to his home village of Cefniddwysarn.

Tucked into a gap on the opposite side of the main street is the 'English' Chapel, **12** built in 1811. This building and its predecessor were chapels of ease for the



**11** *Plas yn Dre, once a town house for the local gentry*

church at nearby Llanycil.

Despite being the largest settlement by far, Bala had no parish church; the five parishes of Penllyn are centred on some of the nearby villages — Llanycil, Llanfor, Llanuwchllyn, Llandderfel and Llandrillo. In Welsh these are known as *Y Pum Plwy* — which led to the lake being known at one time as *Pimblemere!*

Next is Henblas **13**, which once housed a woollen mill shop; the royal arms on the wall reminded everyone that Queen Victoria herself had once ordered cloth here — wool shot through with red silk.

**14** By now we are leaving the town and close to the 'mount' on the right-hand side. Between us and it, the *Cyfnod* restaurant is housed in the old grammar school with its Latin inscription above the main door and the arms of Jesus College, Oxford, on the wall. It was founded in 1712, but rebuilt in 1851 with financial support from the college. Known as *Ysgol Tan Domen*, it was the boys' school where one of Wales's most famous historians was educated, the late Professor Sir Rees Davies.

And then there is the Green **15**. Once a vast open tract of land where meetings were held. Engravings show thousands of people listening here to Nonconformist preachers; today, it is a car park. The railway line took a good part of the old public space that used to reach as far as the once-meandering Tryweryn river. Its course was altered in the 1950s, but greater change was on hand. Near its source, the village of Capel Celyn was drowned in 1963 to build a dam for Liverpool. There is still bitterness amongst those who remember but, says Peris Jones Evans, the event changed Bala too.

'The narrow road out of town was widened to take construction traffic and



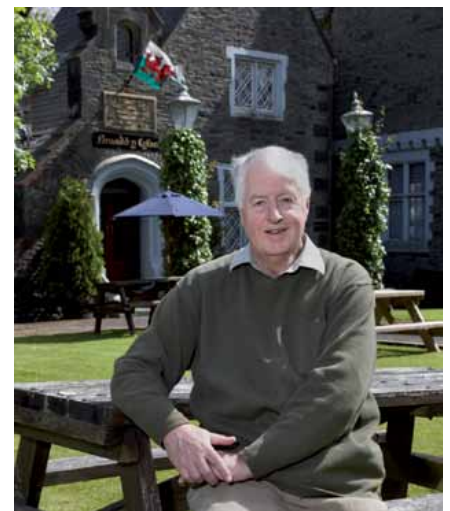
**10** *T. E. Ellis, Liberal Chief Whip*

that has now become the main route for visitors from the English Midlands through to the Llŷn Peninsula. At the same time, it became possible to regulate the water in the river Tryweryn, creating the conditions for canoeing and water sports.'

Outdoor activities, including sailing, are now amongst the most important economic drivers. Throughout the summer and at weekends, tourists throng where theology students once strolled.

**16** Look northward from the Green and you can see *Coleg y Bala* on a little hillock, with the stern statue of Lewis Edwards, another Nonconformist great, on the tarmac outside. Opposite the college is Michael D. Jones's home and, just behind that, the house where Betsi Cadwaladr lived, a nurse in the Crimean War; the Welsh Florence Nightingale.

Look straight ahead, and you see the gates of the Rhiwlas estate and the fields where the National Eisteddfod has found a home three times ... in 1967, 1997 and, now, in 2009. ☘



**14** *Peris Jones Evans outside the old grammar school*