

Black Powder and the Ffestiniog Railway

An article by **Bob Stevens**

The Ffestiniog Railway, built to a gauge of two feet and completed in April 1836, runs from Blaenau Ffestiniog high in the mountains of North Wales to Porthmadog, once a busy port on the Coast. Its length is just over 13 miles and its purpose was to convey slate from the quarries, mainly owned by Englishmen, to the waiting ships in Porthmadog harbour.

While the majority of the cargo carried was downhill from Blaenau a much smaller cargo, but without which there would be no slate, or very little, was carried back up to the quarries, horse drawn at first and later by steam locomotive, namely, Black Powder or Gunpowder.

In or around 1852 the Ffestiniog Railway built at their Boston Lodge works a number of wagons specifically for the carriage of Gunpowder to the various quarries in the area. These were built of thick sheet iron, two squares riveted together on either side and four similar squares wrapped over to form a roof. Two doors, with a heavy locking bar, are located at one end.

About this time James Swinton Spooner, son of James Spooner, one of the founder engineers of the Ffestiniog Railway, was the main supplier of Black Powder in the area, and seemingly able to charge whatever he liked for it. "I think you should have informed me you had raised the price." wrote J W Greaves in December 1852, at the same time sending Spooner a cheque based on the previous price of £40 a ton less 2½ % discount for cash. "When Mr Curtis was here lately I promised to try his Powder." added Greaves, but this had no effect on Spooner who was then living at Bryn Llewellyn, Ffestiniog, while the Curtis cousins were seeking new outlets for their Black powder factory in Argyllshire. By March 1853 Greaves agreed to buy 12 tons of Spooners Powder at the new price of £42 per ton, only to be told the price had now increased to £44 per ton, a price Greaves had to accept.

In 1864 the Curtis and Harvey partnership acquired the Glyn Neath powder factory in Breconshire and it was they who later operated the Gunpowder wagons on the Ffestiniog Railway. Specimens of these wagons are preserved and are on display at the Llechwedd Slate Mine, Blaenau Ffestiniog.

With acknowledgements to Llechwedd and other Ffestiniog Railways.