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Hidden treasures

Last updated: 26 August 2009

Mel Evans of Newport, Shropshire tells us about the hidden depths of Manod Quarry. If you know more about this, add your comments.

[Photos from Manod.](#)



"In 1940 when London was faced with intensive bombing by the Luftwaffe every night, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was very concerned for the safekeeping of Britain's art treasures and he issued an order for them to be moved from the museums and art galleries in London.

They must be taken to a safe place elsewhere in Britain and he was advised to have them sent to Manod Quarry in Blaenau Ffestiniog.

The priceless treasures were transported to a mountain which had been specially heated and ventilated to maintain the correct temperature.

The secret hiding place was eventually revealed many years after the end of World War II.

All the royal pictures from the palaces, from the Tate and the National Gallery were transported to north Wales. Among the treasures were 19 Rembrandts, Van Dykes, Leonardo da Vincis and Gainsboroughs, together with the Crown Jewels.

They travelled to north Wales in vehicles disguised as delivery vehicles for a chocolate company and were put in the care of the quarry manager, and were only ever seen by him. It is said that the worry of the responsibility shortened his life.

The caves were leased by the Government for 40 years, but when the lease expired in 1981, the Government refused to release the lease. For 40 years two brothers were employed to maintain the ventilation system, even though the works of art were returned to London and the wartime storage place was empty.

Behind the large steel and timber doors is a tunnel 1,200 feet long, 1,000 feet below the top of the mountain. The caves used for the safe storage are over 200 feet high, as high as a cathedral.

It would be interesting to know if people in Blaenau are aware of this and knew the two brothers."

[Photos from Manod.](#)

Manod novel Framed filmed for BBC 1.



[more from this section](#)

[Blaenau Ffestiniog](#)

- Ask a local
- Campbell's Platform
- Falcon Hildred
- Framed
- Friends of Cwmorthin
- Hidden treasures
- Lord Haw-Haw and the little Welsh cottage
- Moelwyn Race 2008
- Paddling club
- Photo tour
- Pictures on radio
- Rock cannons - a blast from the past
- Top trout
- What's in a name?
- Wild way home
- Works of art

- Blaenau Ffestiniog Camera Club
- Peter learns Welsh
- Bands index
- Ffestiniog Railway
- Tahla's digital story
- Panoramic view

[living in blaenau ffestiniog](#)

- Local public services
- Community events
- Useful links
- Have your say
- Local healthcare explained

[Weather for Blaenau Ffestiniog](#)



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your comments

Keri Llanelli

Re Grace Fowlie - it does rain quite a lot there but we've been several times to the area and there was nothing but glorious sunshine! I absolutely loved the program Framed and as I'd already seen the documentaries it was good to watch a modern version. We holiday in North Wales every year and always go to Blaenau Ffestiniog. Next year we'll go to Manod too.

Fri Sep 4 16:38:00 2009

Maria Hayes Blaenau Ffestiniog

I am an artist living in Manod. In 2000/2001 I made a series of paintings of Manod Fawr called Hollow Mountain which refer to this story. I was filmed by Double Yellow, a BBC Wales arts programme, and they included footage of the lorries bringing the work up to Manod and also interviewed historians and a local man about the event. The big painting I was working on in the programme now hangs in the Police station in Blaenau Ffestiniog. When I draw and paint Manod, I imagine the mountain remembers the paintings it stored and enjoy the secret... not so secret now though!

Thu Sep 3 14:13:33 2009

John Llewelyn Elias, Cardiff

My grandfather was John Idris Roberts from Borth-Y-Gest. Sadly he passed away in 1975, but he worked for John Mowlem as foreman at Manod during construction. My mother told me many stories about it, eg one of the lorries went off the road and rolled down the side of the mountain. Also there was a flooded hole, probably part of the old mine, but some workers used to dive in to cool off but because the water was so cold they never came back up. None of the local workforce knew what they were constructing and left before any of the artwork arrived. My grandfather was one of the few that remained to take delivery. When the mine was handed back I was fortunate enough to see inside, and as we walked around my mother became quite emotional after recognising my grandfather's handwriting on a piece of paper pasted on a board in one of the rooms after all those years. Sadly I only have one picture of my grandfather standing in the entrance with the large wooden doors open behind. If anyone has pictures or knew my grandfather at the time I would love to hear from them. The story that my mother always ended with was after the war, when all the art was returned to the National Gallery, but before the story of Manod had ever become public. She and grandfather visited the National Gallery and as they were walking around and talking about a certain piece, they were overheard by a member of staff and were told that my grandfather couldn't have possibly seen the particular painting because it had only just been re-displayed after the war. At which point my grandfather said that he had seen the painting, but not there. When he explained his role at Manod they were then given VIP treatment and saw parts of the gallery that the public don't normally have access to.

Tue Sep 1 12:35:16 2009



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NEWYDDION LLEOL



- Sardinia: Cymry yn 'ddiogel'
- Pontio: Dim prif weithredwr

Ben Cooper, Glasgow

A funny coincidence - yesterday, the day before the Framed drama was broadcast, we were at Manod as we were going underground in the Rhiwbach slate mine. Getting a small car up that single track road was bad enough - getting large lorries up there must have been a nightmare!

Tue Sep 1 12:30:17 2009

Mandy Cox from Oxfordshire

Just returned from a holiday near Blaenau, we stayed in a cottage in the grounds of Pengwern Hall and according to the history of the hall, the curators of the National Gallery lived there during the war. Fantastic place to stay and brilliant to watch the BBC's Framed a couple of days after our return.

Tue Sep 1 12:29:51 2009

Grace Fowlie, Edinburgh

I am reading Framed too, so I looked up Manod and found this site. I want to know if it really rains all the time in the real Manod? And is there a sign on the A496?

Mon Feb 2 09:54:48 2009

J&X

My son and I absolutely loved the book Framed and were lucky enough to spend our Thanksgiving holiday in London so we took a sort of Framed tour of the National Gallery. It was such fun and I think it really helps get children into the artwork when they have some sort of context behind it. We finished reading the book over two months ago and we're still quite enthralled by the ideas in it. Hence our landing on this website today. Very cool that the whole thing is based on historical facts. More from Frank Cottrell Boyce, please! And soon!

Mon Dec 29 10:16:25 2008

Hywel Owen, Groeslon

The pictures were carried on LMS Railway lorries from Bangor to Manod. My late father was one of the drivers specially selected for the task and were naturally sworn to secrecy. They were not allowed to stop under any circumstances and I recall that he was the driver who had to deflate and reinflate his tyres to pass under a certain bridge.

Mon Sep 29 09:47:22 2008

Ann Rowlands, Australia

My husband Roy is from Blaenau Ffestiniog and his father worked at Blwch Quarry (Manod) where the paintings were stored. His father and three others drove a shaft through from Graig Ddu Quarry to Bwlch, this was sealed up to restrict access, he doubts whether this shaft was ever used. George Evans worked as a carpenter at the time, Roy and his father walked round where the paintings were stored and his father lifted him up to look through the hatches at the paintings. There was a huge fan on the outside ventilating the cavern.

Mon Sep 22 10:26:22 2008

Mark Gibson, Holmfirth

In 1979 I was able to access the tunnel between the outter

door and the main storage chamber. I had gone into a tunnel lower down the hillside and worked my way up through the old workings. The fans were running I was able to go into the generator room and switch the lights on. The whole setup was well maintained and resently paint.

Thu Dec 20 09:46:52 2007

Amy from Windsor

I am an American expat living here for a few years with husband and two boys. We have all just finished reading "Framed" and discovered this website & info about the real Manod here. We are all fascinated. We will be going to the National Gallery to view the paintings mentioned in the book. My younger son wants to know if we can go to Manod to see the quarry! I highly recommend the book to all young readers.

Tue Aug 7 09:38:05 2007

Derrick Spragg, Loppington, Shropshire

My mother Myfanwy Davies-Humphreys from Borth y Gest worked as a secretary/PA for the quarry manager who I believe was called Captain Matthews. This was in the 1939-42 period I think. We grew up with the story about the art treasures being hidden in the Manod, but as time went on we were never really sure about the facts. Mam told the story to us when we were on one of the many holidays back in Borth y Gest. She saw the transport arriving and dealt with the paperwork but I don't think she was allowed in the caverns.

Thu Jun 21 16:58:52 2007

Shirley Jones Oxford

My dear late husband Idris, was born and lived in Blaenau F. for several years; one of his brothers lived there all his life and owned a small quarry. He ran an office where the little train station carpark is now. We visited Blaenau every year for 54 years.

He drove me up the perfect road to see the entrance of this quarry and told me the story of the art collection etc. He also added that the two brothers were not on speaking terms. That must have been dificult. However these rumours may not be true but as in most small towns spread even to an ex Londoner who has lived in the oxord area for years.

I love North Wales although haven't had he courage to go there since Idris died three and a half years ago. But being an artist he loved to sketch the area and as his father, an architect, designed some of the buildings in Blaenau (one chapel now pulled down) it made it even more interesting to me.

Mon Oct 9 10:27:14 2006

Martin Briscoe, Fort William

Nick McCamley has written an excellent book which has more information about the art treasures stored in North Wales during WWII:

Saving Britain's Art Treasures

N J McCamley

ISBN 0 85052 918 2

Thu Feb 16 20:19:40 2006

Michael Jones, Chester.

The BBC/HTV made certain documentaries on this subject. The Welsh version was 'Trysorau Dan Glo' and the English version was 'Buried Treasures' My father, Richard Meirion Jones (R.M.), featured in both programmes as he was the Chief Engineer (Ministry of Works), responsible for the installation, and maintaining the equipment which controlled both the temperature and humidity of the caverns, he worked in close contact with Martin Davies (National Gallery), Kenneth Clark and Ian Rawlins. I went there with him in 1983 when the quarry was returned to the owner. I have many pictures of that early time, inherited from my father. As for the comment above regarding a digger - the job of lowering the road was carried out by local men in the traditional way. The tyres on the vehicle, which was transporting the picture of 'King Charles on Horseback', were also deflated. This is how that vehicle managed to negotiate the bridge and bend.

Tue Jan 17 19:25:37 2006

John Williams, Willow Street, PA. USA

The Cave in the mountain was not the only place in Wales that kept priceless art work safe from bombing, Caernarfon Castle had many things from not only the UK, but the European countries that had fallen to the Germans, My Uncle Bob Black was in charge of most of the castles in Wales for the Ministry of works, I remember he was awarded a medal after the war for his work of safe keeping of the many items stored there, I remember see a cutting from a Newspaper showing him receiving the medal. from a king or Prince of one of those counties, If any one has a copy of that cutting I would very much like to see it posted on this BBC sight.

Fri Jan 13 04:05:25 2006

Alan Lewin from Manchester

Talking to a local near Manod in Oct 05 he told me he thought the pictures came by train and that he remembers railway vans delivering the pictures. They encountered a major problem because the vans would not fit under the railway bridge over the minor road which leads up to the quarry. They had to quickly get a digger to dig up the road and lower it for the vans to get under! Even today only medium size lorries can get round the tight bends at this bridge.

Tue Nov 22 22:14:10 2005

Pam Myers, Pennsylvania USA

Annwyl gyfeillion - Thanks for the story about hidden treasures in the North Wales slate quarries. I belong to a Welsh Chapel here in Delta, PA, which is a former slate-quarrying community settled by Welsh from Blaenau Ffestiniog. Over here, today (Nov 11) is known as Veterans Day. As the proud daughter of an American WWII veteran, diolch an fawr to all in Wales who put your lives on the line for our freedoms.

Fri Nov 11 13:23:05 2005

Tony Hodges, Hereford

I came across this article after reading a book called 'Framed'. Written by international bestseller Frank Cottrell Boyce, his novel aimed at the young adult age range is

based around the wartime paintings in the cave. With a modern tale based around these historic facts, the book explores what it would have been like living in the town surrounding these hidden treasures and the impact it has on the small society. It creates an incredible insight to what it may have been like.

The book has led me to research the historic fact from the wartime events, this very page being the first I have found. For people with a genuine interest in the events I would highly recommend reading this book, it will give you a new perspective and a whole new sense of enjoyment on the issue.

Fri Oct 14 23:53:13 2005

Mel Evans

There was a strange coincidence on the evening I posted the above article to you after reading VE day stories in newspapers and wondering if anyone would be interested in it. Later I switched on the TV with Melvin Bragg's South Bank Show, I believe, and then blow me if there wasn't an art curator or somebody at a museum talking about the very quarry!

In the photographs which accompanied the presentation they showed LMS railway vehicles driving up mountain roads, rather than chocolate delivery vehicles. Surprisingly, the film showed the unprotected works of art standing upright on shelves, which I believe would be unlikely for such valuable items, but who knows? Perhaps somebody does!

Fri May 13 10:35:59 2005

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Works of art

Last updated: 27 April 2006

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[Mel Evans on the Manod operation.](#)



Ministry of Works engineer Richard Meirion Jones, who was in charge of the operation at Manod.

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#)

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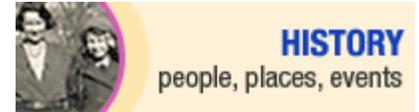
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[Blaenau Ffestiniog](#)

- [Ask a local](#)
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- [Paddling club](#)
- [Photo tour](#)
- [Pictures on radio](#)
- [Rock cannons - a blast from the past](#)
- [Top trout](#)
- [What's in a name?](#)
- [Wild way home](#)
- [Works of art](#)

- [Blaenau Ffestiniog Camera Club](#)
- [Peter learns Welsh](#)
- [Bands index](#)
- [Ffestiniog Railway](#)
- [Tahla's digital story](#)
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we have been reading a book about manod and its quarry and the paintings plus we learned a lot about the town. This is a really interesting web site about the quarry and all the different machines and the paintings. We found a lot about manod from this website.

Wed Jul 8 13:30:31 2009

Matthew and Jodie from ysgol borthyn

We have just finished reading the book framed and, we really enjoyed it. Then we thought that we don't really know what manod quarry looks like so we looked on this website and we really enjoyed looking at the photos.

Wed Jul 8 12:45:27 2009

Pauline Matthews, Llandrindod wells

My father, Capt. J.S. Matthews was the owner on Manod Slate quarry and ceased mining when the N.G. Pictures were brought from London. He arranged for some of the staff to use Pengwern Hall as their residence. I visited the quarry several times and saw the pictures. Photos in National Lib. Aberystwyth.

Mon Jan 12 10:00:53 2009

Maureen Futcher (nee Harrison Jones)

My grandfather, George Ernest Harrison worked as a caretaker at the National Art Gallery in London before the war & moved to North Wales when all the paintings were transferred to Manod. My grandmother accompanied him & they lived in Llanffestiniog.

Tue May 6 10:05:17 2008

Oliver Barrett, Cardiff

This is a very interesting piece of history. At the moment I'm reading a book on the goings on at Manod at the time called "Framed". A novel that I would recommend to anybody who's interested in this.

Wed May 30 09:09:54 2007

Mike Quirk from the Isle of Man

Absolutely amazing. I've seen some of this before on a TV programme, and I'm delighted that Mike Jones has taken the time and effort to preserve and present it in this way.

Congratulations Mike.

Sat Mar 4 18:51:40 2006

Peter Booth Brereton Staffs.

Very interesting, I have explored some of the other old workings but never managed to get in these. Will they be open to the public again?

Fri Feb 3 19:25:36 2006

Alan Gildersleve London.

This is dramatic. I had no idea that the pictures were all open and displayed, as it were. I hope this cavern is being preserved in working order. Who knows when we shall need it again, the way the world is going. Atomic bombs and things you know.

Wed Feb 1 21:25:02 2006

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LLEOL I MI

Gogledd Orllewin



Tai Hanesyddol

O blastai crand i ffermydd gwledig, camwch dros drothwy rhai o dai mwyaf

hanesyddol yr ardal

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Mel Evans on the Manod operation.



The main approach tunnel to the caverns.

1 2 3 4 5

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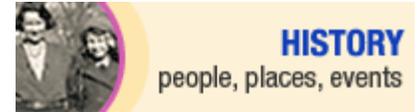
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- Ask a local
- Campbell's Platform
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- Framed
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- Hidden treasures
- Lord Haw-Haw and the little Welsh cottage
- Moelwyn Race 2008
- Paddling club
- Photo tour
- Pictures on radio
- Rock cannons - a blast from the past
- Top trout
- What's in a name?
- Wild way home
- Works of art

- Blaenau Ffestiniog Camera Club
- Peter learns Welsh
- Bands index
- Ffestiniog Railway
- Tahla's digital story
- Panoramic view

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Paintings from the National Gallery stored in Manod Quarry.

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#)

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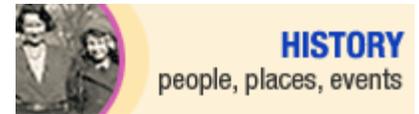
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- [Ask a local](#)
- [Campbell's Platform](#)
- [Falcon Hildred](#)
- [Framed](#)
- [Friends of Cwmorthin](#)
- [Hidden treasures](#)
- [Lord Haw-Haw and the little Welsh cottage](#)
- [Moelwyn Race 2008](#)
- [Paddling club](#)
- [Photo tour](#)
- [Pictures on radio](#)
- [Rock cannons - a blast from the past](#)
- [Top trout](#)
- [What's in a name?](#)
- [Wild way home](#)
- [Works of art](#)

- [Blaenau Ffestiniog Camera Club](#)
- [Peter learns Welsh](#)
- [Bands index](#)
- [Ffestiniog Railway](#)
- [Tahla's digital story](#)
- [Panoramic view](#)

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- [Local public services](#)
- [Community events](#)
- [Useful links](#)
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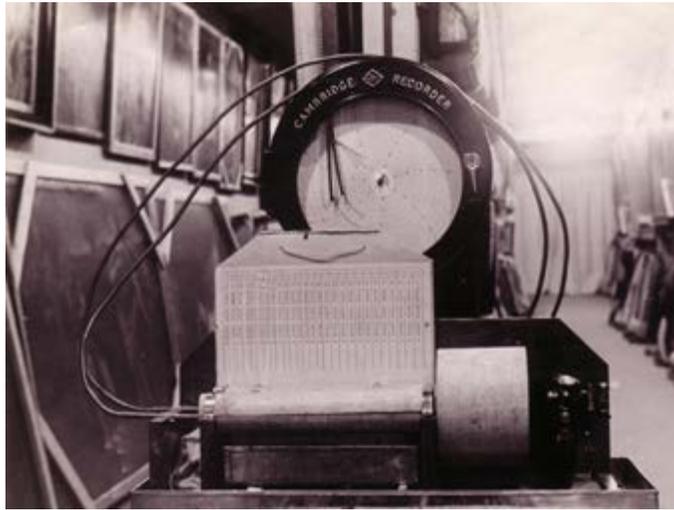
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A hydrometer and recording mechanisms ensure the paintings are kept in good condition.

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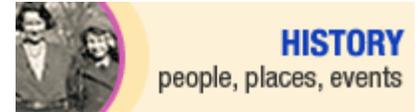
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- Hidden treasures
- Lord Haw-Haw and the little Welsh cottage
- Moelwyn Race 2008
- Paddling club
- Photo tour
- Pictures on radio
- Rock cannons - a blast from the past
- Top trout
- What's in a name?
- Wild way home
- Works of art

- Blaenau Ffestiniog Camera Club
- Peter learns Welsh
- Bands index
- Ffestiniog Railway
- Tahla's digital story
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- Local public services
- Community events
- Useful links
- Have your say
- Local healthcare explained

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Works of art

Last updated: 27 April 2006

Michael Jones from Chester shares his father's photographs of the work done in Manod Quarry to secure National Gallery art from wartime German attack.

Mel Evans on the Manod operation.



Catwalks were put up so the chamber roof could be checked.

1 2 3 4 5

My father, Richard Meirion Jones (RM), was the chief engineer (Ministry of Works), responsible for the installation, and for maintaining the equipment which controlled both the temperature and humidity of the caverns.

He worked in close contact with Martin Davies (National Gallery), Kenneth Clark and Ian Rawlins. I went there with him in 1983 when the quarry was returned to the owner.

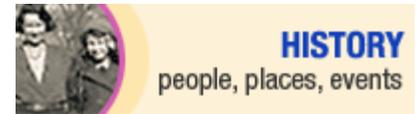
A small booklet put together by Emyr Williams and Nigel Hughes of Porthmadog in 1983, entitled *Manod Caverns, Blaenau Ffestiniog*, marked the opening of the 'mystery' caverns to the public for the day on September 24 1983.

My mother was interviewed by Anita Morgan in August 1989, for the BBC Radio Wales programme, *Wales at War* and recalled her memories of Manod Caverns, and the time my father spent there. My father had previously taken part in a television programme around 1982/3 - *Trysorau Dan Glo* and *Buried Treasures*.

Mel Evans on the Manod operation.

your comments

REES and CHRIS from borthyn



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- Moelwyn Race 2008
- Paddling club
- Photo tour
- Pictures on radio
- Rock cannons - a blast from the past
- Top trout
- What's in a name?
- Wild way home
- Works of art

- Blaenau Ffestiniog Camera Club
- Peter learns Welsh
- Bands index
- Ffestiniog Railway
- Tahla's digital story
- Panoramic view

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Weather for Blaenau Ffestiniog



Sunday
max 16°C
min 9°C



Monday
max 12°C
min 7°C

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