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Wild way home

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The rush hour home from Blaenau Ffestiniog's slate quarries never suffered from tail-backs. Community reporter **Huw Jenkins** finds out about their unusual mode of transport.



The wild car (car gwyllt) - it's not a Mustang nor a Ferrari, but a skimpy piece of wood mounted on a wheel and a rod of iron racing 50mph down a Welsh mountain.

Getting slate down the mountain from the high quarries of Ffestiniog was a feat of Victorian engineering ingenuity. The power was provided by a wagon full of slate going down to pull up an empty wagon on a pair of narrow gauge rails running the length of an incline. Between each pair of rails was a steel rope, running on rollers, which connected the dependent wagons.

The Craig Ddu quarry to the north of Manod Mawr had a set of three inclines to reach the road, and a fourth to link with the railway below which ran to Blaenau. This was the route to market. It was also the quickest way home for the workers after a hard day's work.

Emrys Evans, who was apprenticed at the quarry in the 1920s and 1930s, explained: "At the end of the shift the men were allowed to place their cars on the track and as soon as the four o'clock hooter blasted from the Oakeley Quarry, they were off.

"Most people started from the second incline. They were able to do these two inclines, run between them, put the car into an empty wagon, and reach the bus stop by the time the bus to Blaenau departed five minutes later. Buses were very punctual in those days."

The wild car was an innovation credited to the quarry's blacksmith in the 1870s. It consisted of very little: a piece of wood about two foot long and eight inches wide, with a "flanged" iron wheel towards the front and a V-shaped iron heel at the back.

An iron bar stretched out from the centre of the board across to the other track to provide the balance on the other rail. Speed was controlled with a brake, which consisted of a handle between the driver's knees that pressed a brake pad against the wheel - heels were also used!

"You simply sat on the car, pointed your legs straight out and leaned



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inwards onto the iron cross bar to get a good balance. The key was to avoid going too fast and losing control," said Emrys. "When I first started at the quarry I would follow down the man I was apprenticed to, with my feet pressed into his back. But after a couple of weeks I was going solo."

Just looking at the inclines and the cars makes one think of danger and accidents, and there were many.

Inexperience and recklessness were the main causes - unlike tobogganing out of control, there was no soft landing from a Car Gwylt.

Examples of reckless behaviour included riding two people to a car: the combined weight was too much for the brakes, and on one occasion the result was inevitable broken legs. A girlfriend riding on one's knee was a thrill in more ways than one!

In an attempt to limit the accidents the afternoon rush hour was led by a "captain" whose job was to ensure a steady and smooth descent in an orderly fashion. "But on occasions we would wait until they had gone and see how fast we could go," said Emrys with a twinkle in his eye.

Children not yet teenagers would occasionally sneak into the works and take a car out in the evening. Sadly in the 1920s two of them were killed as they collided into a slate wagon.

The Craig Ddu quarry is thought to be the only place where Ceir Gwyltton were used. "The inclines were ideal," said Emrys. "Not too steep as to be impossibly dangerous, and without long flat stretches that would make the effort unviable."

The practice continued until the quarry closed in 1939, reopening for only a brief period towards the end of war to supply slate for repairing roofs bombed in the London blitz.

Huw Jenkins

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