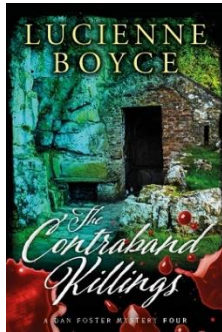


## A JOURNEY TO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ANGLESEY



The latest Dan Foster Mystery, *The Contraband Killings*, is set in 1799 on the island of Anglesey, north Wales.

Wales was a popular destination for travellers in the eighteenth century. Drawing on some of the travellers' accounts I used while researching the novel, I look at what drew people to Wales, how they travelled, and what they might find when they got there.

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### The travellers and their books

Welsh artist Edward Pugh of Ruthin (c1761-1813) – *Cambria Depicta*.

Cambridge undergraduates Joseph Hucks (1772-1800) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) – *A Pedestrian Tour Through North Wales in a Series of Letters* by Joseph Hucks.

The Reverend John Skinner, rector of Camerton (1772-1839) – *Ten Days' Tour Through the Isle of Anglesea*.

The Reverend Richard Warner of Bath (1763-1857) – *A Walk Through Wales in August 1797*.

Henry Penruddocke Wyndham, MP and topographer from Salisbury (1736-1819) – *A Tour Through Monmouthshire and Wales made in...1774 and...1777*.

## Why did people travel to Wales in the eighteenth century?

Then as now, for many visitors, the main attraction was the scenery. Joseph Hucks, who wrote about his tour with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, appreciated the “beautiful scenery of North Wales”. For Hucks, “the chief object of this expedition...is to explore the hidden beauties of nature unmechanized by the ingenuity of man; as well as to make some observations upon the human character under every different attitude it may assume; in short, to study nature in her works, and man in society”.

People saw Welsh scenery as wild, rugged and and romantic. They had a word for it: *sublime*. *Sublime* referred to the idea that nature was something that provoked an awareness of “terrific majesty” and “impressions of terror” according to Henry Penruddock Wyndham. Craggy mountains, chasms, and roaring cataracts struck the viewer with awe. “Sublime situations”, said Joseph Hucks, “excite sublime ideas.” Many travellers compared the north Welsh landscape to the Alps: some even thought Wales was better than the Alps.

Some travellers went to pursue particular interests. They included antiquarians like the Reverend John Skinner, rector of Camerton, who was a Roman enthusiast. When he spent ten days in Anglesey in 1802, he saw his visit through the eyes of Ancient Rome. Crossing the Menai Strait, he imagined himself following the same route as Paulinus Suetonius and his troops seventeen hundred years before, when they came to Anglesey to attack the British resistance to the occupying Romans. Skinner identified the very spot where the Roman forces reassembled after their crossing, and he also recognised places where the soldiers had made their camps.

In the same way, when the Reverend Richard Warner visited the Roman fort at Caerwent in 1797, he did not see the “miserable village” it had become. Instead, he pictured the temples and theatre, porticoes and baths of Agricola’s time. He also viewed a mosaic pavement which had been unearthed twenty years before.

In addition to Romans, Reverend Skinner saw many signs of Druids. Druids were big in the eighteenth century, and nearly every standing stone, stone circle and burial chamber was identified as Druidical. Every flat-topped stone was interpreted as an altar on which the Druids had made their awful sacrifices, before the Romans wiped them out. Skinner was a scientific observer and his account of his visit was written for the Cambrian Archaeological Association in London. It included accurate drawings, measurements, and detailed descriptions of the artefacts he saw. Like many other antiquarians he also visited ancient churches, where he copied Saxon inscriptions and the lettering on tombs.

Many artists were attracted to North Wales. One of them was J M W Turner, whose paintings from his journey include one of Dolbadern Castle.



*Dolbadern Castle*

The Welsh artist Edward Pugh, who was born in Ruthin but lived and worked in London, wrote his guidebook, *Cambria Depicta*, with the artist in mind and illustrated it with many of his own delightful paintings. He gave advice about the best places to paint or sketch, for example advising artists not to bother with the shore around Holyhead: “it’s very tame”, he said, “and offers nothing for the pencil”. He also included notes about the best viewpoints for what was worth painting. Conway Castle was a very popular subject, but why, Pugh wondered, did everyone draw it from the same side; you would think there were only two or three spots to sketch from. He advised his readers to try different perspectives.

Some visitors, like the Reverend Richard Warner, were mineralogists. Warner collected many samples during his trip. Tourists also visited picturesque ruins of castles and abbeys; and mansions like Plas Newydd on Anglesey; which is now owned by the National Trust. They stopped to look at bridges like Devil’s Bridge, slate quarries, and mining works.

On Anglesey itself, the copper mines on Parys Mountain were a great attraction, especially with artists. J M W Turner and Edward Pugh both visited; Pugh painted dramatic scenes of the vast open cast mine which employed hundreds of men, women and children. He recommended the mine to artists as “scenery so sublime” it was worth spending a couple of days there. He reported that the site might even be suitable for ladies to visit, though all visitors needed a guide as the mine could be dangerous.

Joseph Hucks described the “vast yawning chasm, displaying full to the view of the astonished stranger its sulphurous contents; hundreds of workmen employed in a variety of different occupations; some boring shafts, others selecting the ore, which is slung up to the top...in little baskets...[some] men are sedulously engaged in blowing up large pieces of the rock by means of gunpowder, the report of which reverberating from side to side, in this immense cavity, occasions such a tremendous explosion, that all nature seems to tremble to its centre.” Hucks concluded that “upon the whole, these mines bear an apt resemblance to the infernal regions”.

Hucks also noted the polluting effect of the works, as did the Reverend John Skinner who described how, “The approach to it is dreary in the extreme for the sulphureous steams issuing from the copper kilns have destroyed every germ of vegetation in the neighbourhood”. Even today, with nature taking back her own, Parys Mountain is a dramatic site.



*Parys Mountain today*

Some people went to Wales for the exercise. Walking, or pedestrianism as it was known, was very popular. Reverend Richard Warner’s book was written for “the Pedestrian”, who would be able to see more in his walk through the “Alpine country” than a traveller in a carriage or on horseback. Pedestrianism was not, of course, for women, who were considered too delicate.

Another popular activity was climbing mountains. Joseph Hucks and Samuel Taylor Coleridge went up Snowden but found the effort “fruitless and fatiguing...they could see nothing but the impenetrable clouds”. Richard Warner struggled up Cader Idris behind a Welsh guide who “skipped” up “six hundred feet of steep [slippery] rock” while Warner and his friend followed “dumb with terror”.

So eighteenth century travellers visited Wales very much like tourists today: to see wonders: wonders of the landscape, wonders of the past, wonders of engineering, and wonders of industry.

### **What did travellers need for their journey?**

First and foremost, they needed a translator. As Henry Penruddocke Wyndham pointed out, “little English is understood among the Welsh”. Like many tourists before and since, travellers grumbled when people of other nationalities did not speak English. Joseph Hucks complained that if he spoke to anyone “all we received in return was a stare, immediately followed by a grin, and concluded with a ‘tin sarcenick,’ which signifies ‘no Saxon’”. Reverend Richard Warner heard this as “dim sasna”, but did have the decency to acknowledge that he was as ignorant of their language as he was of theirs.

But even the more reasonable travellers were rude about the Welsh language. Joseph Hucks thought Welsh is “not very harmonious; but resembles rather the ravishing sounds of a cat-call, or the musical clack of a flock of geese when highly irritated.” Even so, he said, I feel much pleasure whenever I hear it spoken, being the old Celtic dialect.”

For Richard Warner even the charms of Welsh market girls could not make Welsh attractive: “The guttural sounds they uttered (which even the voice and manner of a Welsh girl cannot render pleasing or harmonious) were totally thrown away upon our ignorance, whilst the roughnesses and sibilisms of our own Saxon dialect only excited an arch laugh from these virgin descendants of the ancient Britons.”

Not understanding the language could be more than inconvenient. During this period Britain was at war with France and people saw spies everywhere. Artists walking around with their portfolios under their arms, staring out to sea, making sketches: behaviour like this could lead to the locals suspecting them of drawing maps for the enemy. Edward Pugh was refused service in one inn because the people thought he was a French spy.

But Pugh was Welsh. One of his favourite jokes was to pretend he was English and could not understand what people said. As a menacing crowd gathered around him and he heard “that the general opinion was rather unfavourable to me...I suddenly turned round, and replied with some severity in their own language, to an observation which one of them had just made. It was not a little laughable to see the alteration in the people’s looks at this moment.” Having enjoyed his little trick, he was welcomed with open arms, and provided with a meal and a bed.

As well as a translator, travellers needed a local guide. These varied in quality. Henry Penruddocke Wyndham complained about guides who were as lost as he was, and “blundered about”. Warner, on the other hand, employed a guide called William Lloyd and found him “an intelligent man”.

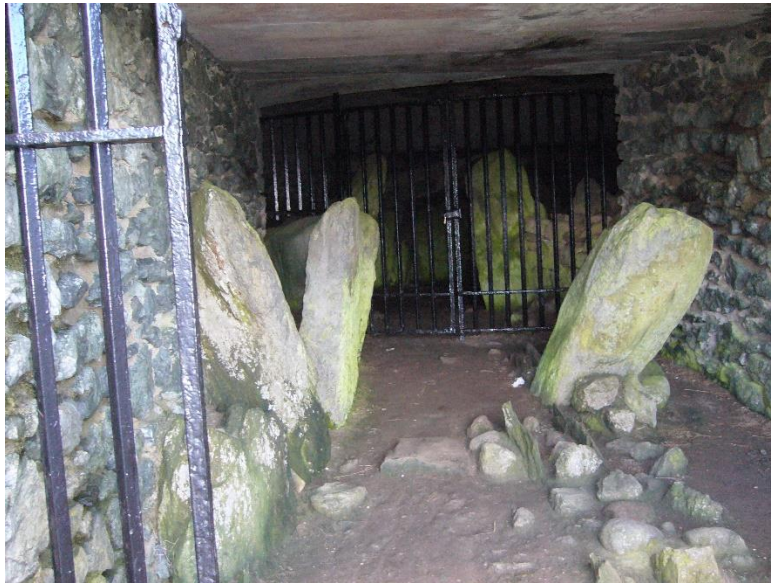
Unlike Dan Foster in *The Contraband Killings*, who takes his translator with him – Goronwy Evans is a Westminster police constable, originally from Wales – most travellers hired translators and guides when they were in Wales.

If they were going on a walking holiday, what equipment would tourists take? Richard Warner had this advice for his fellow travellers: “In preparing for a pedestrian tour, few arrangements are requisite: a single change of raiment, and some other little articles for the comfort of the person, form all the necessary baggage of a foot traveller. To convey these, however, light as they may be, in the most easy and convenient manner, is an object of importance.” He and his friend solved the problem by stuffing everything into their coat pockets. His friend had two large side pockets added to his coat, and Warner himself wore an old, shabby spencer – a short jacket – which his tailor adapted for him, adding “a sportsman’s pocket, that sweeps from one side to the other”. Apart from clothes, they took “maps and a compass.



Warner had to admit that the two of them looked very odd. Walking through a fair near Llangollen laughing at the clowns, puppets and quack doctors, they realised that they themselves had become one of the comedy turns. A “grin communicated from face to face,” said Warner, “it gradually increased to a giggle, and in a few minutes a general roar of laughter shook the village”. But Warner was a good natured traveller, and was able to laugh along.

The Welsh, incidentally, often found their English visitors amusing. On Anglesey, the Reverend Skinner and his companion met “two old women who enjoyed a hearty laugh at our walking in the rain to hunt after stones”.



*Hunting after stones on Anglesey*

Good boots were essential, of course, particularly as some of the roads were very rough. On the road to Caernarvon, Reverend Richard Warner described “mountain roads...of large loose stones, and pointed solid rock, not a little incommodious to pedestrians”. Their boots had to carry them over bogs and mountains, through mud and rocks.

Reverend Skinner’s boots needed constant repair, and being something of a Grumbletonian he noted that “so bad is the workmanship of the shoemakers in Wales that the repairs of one day were destroyed by the exertions of the next, and it was a business almost as regular as eating our dinner when we arrived at the inn to send our boots to get mended.” Eventually they decided to get their boots “studded with nails according to the fashion of the country”.

Travellers had to brave storms, fog, and howling winds, and often got soaked through. Warner, caught out in a storm after nightfall, described how “we continually plunged into pools of mud, and stumbled over rocky fragments, alternatively hazarding the pains of suffocation and the fracture of our limbs”.

## Attitudes to the Welsh

Unfortunately, many travellers took their prejudices with them. If insulting the Welsh language was not enough, they also insulted the Welsh people. Henry Penruddocke Wyndham thought the Welsh were all drunkards, they lived in hovels, and the women were drudges.

Worse, many said that the Welsh were thieves and cheats, an accusation Edward Pugh angrily refuted: “[T]hey are by no means the characters described by a late tourist, who represents them as arrant cheats. That there are dishonest characters in this country, no one will attempt to deny; and where, it may be asked, is the country without them?” But, he said, “sincerity, honesty and charity” are “the predominant features of the Welsh character”.

Fortunately, some travellers were more open minded. Although he thought them “unpolished”, Joseph Hucks was charmed by the people he met: “there is a boldness and originality in all their actions...a love of liberty and independence”. Many travellers told stories of Welsh generosity and hospitality. Richard Warner noted more than one example, including his encounter with a farm worker who spoke English. When he and his companion asked him the way, the man not only offered to guide them, but took them to his cottage, gave them food – “cheese, brown bread, and oaten cake” – and a “good bottle” of ale, as well as his life story. The good bottle turned into three before they resumed their journey.

## Where to stay

For travellers then as now the quality of the accommodation was of particular interest. And, like everywhere, inns in Wales varied in quality. Richard Warner praised The Bull in Caerwent, where he had “a tankard of excellent ale, and a dish of bacon and eggs”. But he did not like the Welsh beer which he first tasted at the Beaufort Arms in Crick Howell; he found it “glutinous, heady and soporific”. Many travellers commented on how reasonably priced and excellent their meals were. And Welshman Edward Pugh enjoyed “the old national treat, Welsh rarebit”.

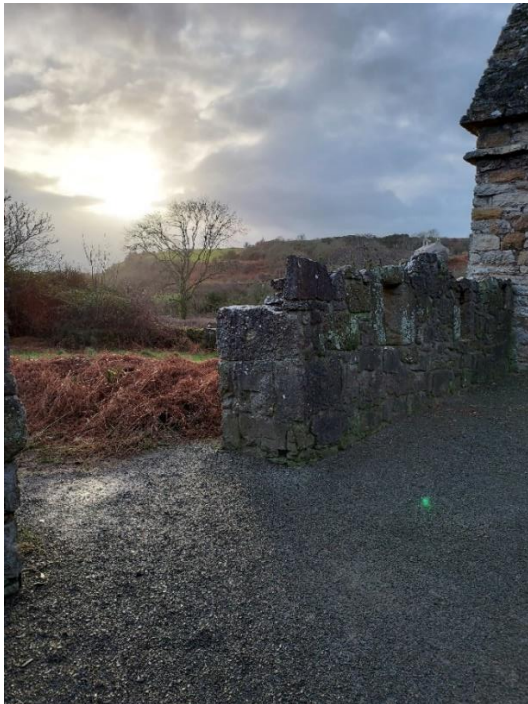
There were less pleasant places though. At Beddgelert, Warner and his friend were crammed into a tiny, stuffy room for the night, and, as he put it, “tormented by fleas”. John Skinner on Anglesey often complained about the poor accommodation and inadequate food. In one inn near Anglesey the sleeping accommodation was only separated by thin, deal partitions and Skinner was unlucky enough to be next door to a snorer.

Edward Pugh had also heard about the Beddgelert fleas. He told the story of a traveller who, had “complained of having by teased by fleas all night, and the servant made this quaint answer: “Dear me, Sir, if we were to kill one of them, ten would come to its burying”. In spite of this bad report, Pugh found that his night was flea-free.

## How did people travel to Wales?

The cheapest and most easily available way was to walk.

Joseph Hucks and Samuel Taylor Coleridge walked all the way from Cambridge to Anglesey and back. Hucks made his return trip via Abergavenny to Aust, where he crossed to the Bristol side by ferry. From Aust, Hucks walked to Bristol, then to Exeter, and he may have made the last part of his journey by coach. He had been away for a month and walked 700 miles.



*Penmon, Anglesey*

Reverend Richard Warner set off from Bath at five in the morning on 14 August 1797, and got back to Bath on 31 August. He and his companion crossed the Severn from the ferry at Chestle Pill near Piling, which was known as the New Passage. That is, he would have done except that after they had paid for the crossing, the boatmen cheated them by setting off without them, so they had to pay extra for a private hire. Though they did go to North Wales, they did not actually cross to Anglesey.

The artist Edward Pugh travelled to Chester from London, presumably in a coach, and walked from there.

Otherwise people travelled by post chaise, as did Henry Penruddocke Wyndham of Salisbury in the 1770s. I do not know how he travelled to Aust, but from there he took the ferry that Hucks and Coleridge later used. When he got to Wales he used post chaises – coaches and horses which were hired at posting inns along the way, with a driver or postilion to drive them depending on what type of vehicle it was. Travellers paid a daily fee, which increased if they had more than two horses, and included the cost of returning the empty carriage to the inn where it belonged. They would also pay the turnpike charges. When Wyndham and his friend could not get a carriage they hired horses, though he complained about the prices.



As an alternative to post chaises, travellers could go by stagecoach. These were run by private companies, and there were a number of services to Holyhead. From London, one of these services operated from The Golden Cross at Charing Cross at seven o'clock on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday mornings, or Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon at 4 o'clock.

### **The Irish Royal Mail Coach**

Travellers who could afford it could travel on the Irish Royal Mail, which carried mail bags to Holyhead to be taken over to Ireland on the packet mail boats. That was how Dan Foster and Goronwy Evans travelled from London to Beaumaris. At that time, Telford's road had not been built, and there was no bridge over the Menai Strait.

The Irish Royal Mail set off from the Golden Cross every evening at 7 pm and travelled through Chester, Holywell, Conway, and Bangor. It took 46 hours to cover the 270 mile journey. The average speed of a Mail Coach was 7-8 mph summer, 5 mph winter depending on roads, and the horses were changed every ten miles. Changing horses was an extremely quick operation, which was managed in a couple of minutes.

There were many advantages to travelling by mail coach. They were not so crowded: passengers were limited to four inside, with one passenger being allowed to sit by the driver; later two or three more passengers were allowed to sit on a bench behind the driver. No passengers were allowed to sit near the mail box or the guard.

The Mail Coaches were faster too. They only stopped to drop off or pick up mail bags, and they did not have to stop, or even slow down, at turnpikes. The guard sounded his horn as they approached the turnpike and the operator had to run out and open the gate for them to sweep through. In addition, other traffic had to give way to the Mail Coach.

### **Following Dan Foster's Journey in *The Contraband Killings***

The Golden Cross was a famous coaching inn, mentioned by Charles Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers*. It stood under Trafalgar Square, where the lion on the south east corner and Nelson's Column are now.

At the Golden Cross, Dan and Goronwy could buy snacks from the maids who milled around the yard with trays of food and drink before boarding their coach. The yard was crowded with sightseers who came to watch the gleaming vehicles drawn by the magnificent, but sadly short-lived, coach horses, as they leapt away on their long journeys, just as many people like to watch aeroplanes take off or trains come in and out of stations now. Or they came celebrity-spotting: many coach drivers were celebrities, admired for the skill and speed of their driving. Trendy young men liked to copy their style, the heavy, caped overcoats and boots, scarves and hats, the long whips, the swaggering walk.

They found their vehicle in the line of Mail Coaches which set off every few minutes, with their distinctive Mail Coach livery of black and maroon, the wheels painted Post Office Red, and the Royal coat of arms on the door. The coach was drawn by four horses. The guard wore a scarlet coat, a black hat with a gold band and braid, and along with his weapons was equipped with a watch, and a horn to clear the road. At seven o'clock exactly, the Irish Royal Mail set off. Catherine Hutton travelled on the Irish Royal Mail to Holyhead in 1797 and was impressed by the suspension. The motion was, she said "as easy as anything, except sailing".

They reached Northampton at 5.25 in the morning, where they were allowed half an hour for breakfast. Because turn around times were tight, coaching inns would have horses and meals ready before the coaches arrived. Catherine Hutton was also impressed by this organisation; she was “struck with the singularity of finding the horses or the dinner waiting our arrival at the different inns, according as we were to proceed, or refresh ourselves, instead of having them to bespeak. It reminded me of those scenes of enchantment, where the castle door stands open, and the table is spread, before the stranger has even time to signify his wishes”.

Many travellers did not find the meals so magical. The food might be cold, drinks lukewarm, and if they ordered anything to be cooked fresh the chances were it would not have arrived by the time they had to reboard the coach.

From here, the coach travelled through Welford, Lutterworth, Hinckley, Atherstone, and Tamworth to reach Lichfield at 2 pm, where they had three quarters of an hour for lunch. Then on to Stafford, arriving at five minutes past five, with fifteen minutes for tea. They reach Chester at half past midnight and have an hour for supper, then it was back in the coach for breakfast at St Asaph at 6 am in twenty minutes.

At 9.25 am they arrived at Conway ferry for a crossing that took thirty five minutes. It was not always safe. Many ferries were lost in bad weather: on Christmas Day 1806, passengers begged the boatman to turn back in squally weather but he refused. Eleven people, some of whom were passengers on the Irish mail coach, drowned.

From Conway it was on to Bangor by the turnpike road. Having overcome the terrors of crossing the Conway estuary, passengers were now confronted with the mountain road around Penmaenmawr, overlooking the Menai Strait. Before 1772 the road was only a narrow track and beneath it, as one traveller noted, “100 fathoms down, [was] the roaring ocean...one false step in different parts must have inevitably proved fatal.” There was no wall, and the Welsh antiquarian Thomas Pennant recorded how travellers risked falling “on short rocks or into the sea, according to the state of the tide”. He told the story of a rector and a midwife who were swept off the road; the rector’s horse and the midwife died but he rector survived.

By the time Henry Penruddocke Wyndham travelled in the 1770s, the road had been widened and a wall built along the edge, but he noted the ever-present danger of rock falls which “sometimes interrupt the road and sometimes are impetuously driven, through the parapet, into the sea”.

Richard Warner noted that, “The road over this rocky mountain, which was formerly extremely rude and dangerous, has...been entirely altered and divested of a considerable degree of its horror. Still, however, it cannot be travelled without shuddering. Creeping round the side of the mountain, it hangs as it were in the mid-air, with a frowning precipice above and a steep descent immediately under it. The rocks on the right are nearly perpendicular, sometimes beetling over the road in a terrific manner...it is impossible for the traveller to lose the perpetual dread of his being every moment crushed to atoms under a torrent of huge stones. This danger, indeed, can never be entirely removed, as the united exertions of all the workmen in the world could never clear the face of the mountain from these innumerable masses. A lapse of this kind had happened a day or two before our passing the road, which would inevitably have swept us into the ocean, had we been within the sphere of its violence.

Several workmen were employed in repairing the breach it had occasioned in the wall that runs along the edge of the precipice...”

In 1799 Dan Foster still found the road a hair-raising experience.

Arrived at last at Bangor Ferry, passengers were given an hour for dinner at the George and Dragon, and to cross the Menai Strait to Anglesey. The George and Dragon was a very good inn: Edward Pugh called it a “paradisiacal caravansera”. Here, as in many Welsh inns, visitors could listen to the harp.

The crossing over the Menai Strait took ten minutes, and some travellers grumbled about how much the boatmen charged for a few minutes’ work. The boats could take carriages across, but the Mail Coach did not go on it. A coach and fresh horses waited for mail coach passengers on the Anglesey side for the onward journey to Holyhead. For other travellers, there was an inn with stabling, and horses and carriages for hire. Or, of course, their feet.

Apart from the ferry from the George and Dragon, there were a number of other ferry services. One of these went from Lavan Sands at Aberconway direct to Beaumaris, but by the time Dan Foster travelled was rarely used by travellers. The improved mountain road over Penmaenmawr might be reasonably safe, if alarming, but the Lavan Sands were still dangerous. To reach the ferry meant walking across four miles of sands while the tide was out, and travellers who got the timing wrong could be drowned.

Edward Pugh, who made the crossing without any problems, warned: “the passage should never be attempted on the approach of night”. From his landing place on Anglesey, it was a half hour walk to the town of Beaumaris.



*Beaumaris Castle*

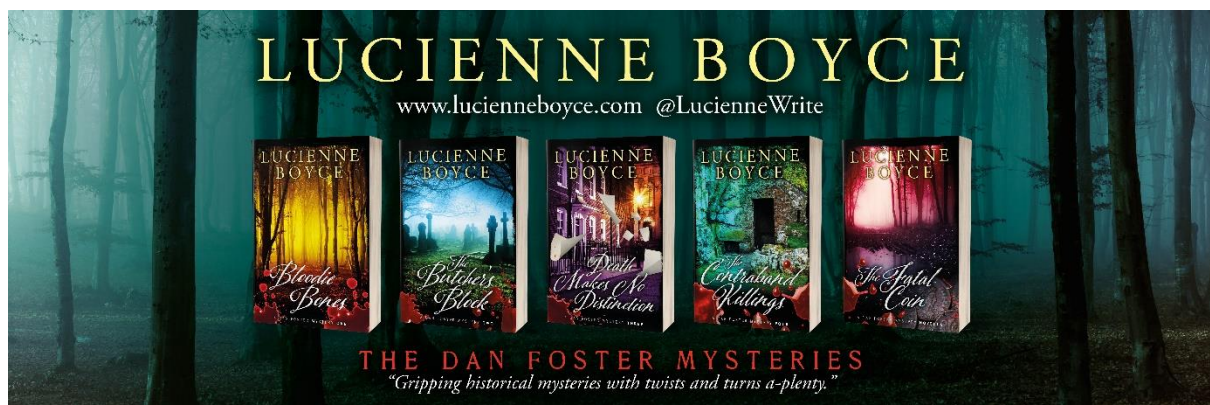
For Joseph Hucks and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Lavan Sands proved much more perilous. They carefully checked the tide and got directions, which “were only to keep a white house in view that belonged to the ferryman on the Anglesey shore”. They took off their shoes and stockings and set off but had only got half way when fog rolled down. They could no longer see the village behind them, nor the white house in front.

To makes things worse, darkness fell and “we could see nothing, nor hear anything, except the noise which the sea made in its approach, that alarmed us not a little”. Luckily, the ferry was on the mainland side and they heard the ferrymen calling them. For last few hundred yards they waded through a channel rapidly filling with sea water. At last they got into the boat, “though dripping wet, and shivering with cold...when we arrived at the inn at Beaumaris we made a fire that would have roasted an ox, and ordered a supper sufficient for ten aldermen”. In the morning Hucks looked out of his window to see that the “sea had covered all those immense flats we had so lately, I will not say with dry feet, walked over”.

There were chilling tales of other dangers that confronted the ferry traveller. One ferryman murdered his passenger and stole his luggage.

Luckily, our travellers survived all the dangers and arrived safely in Anglesey, where we will leave them to explore the Druidical remains, sketch, visit Puffin Island, and marvel at the copper mines on Parys Mountain. Or, in the case of Dan Foster and Goronwy Evans, catch a killer.

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