

# **Tracks**

**Volume 2.**

**Dowlais Top to Bwlch ar y Fan.**

**(SO 078 083 to SO 032 205)**

**And other roads leading off to the west.**

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**Update of 2011.**

## **Summary.**

This volume of the series of "Tracks" starts in present-day Merthyr and continues northwards towards Brecon as far as Bwlch-ar-y-fan. It also examines roads and tracks, leading off this northwards route, at Dolygaer and Ystradgynwyn, towards the west via Penderyn and Ystradfellte as far as Glyn Neath and discusses the implications of such a route which changes Dolygaer from a "T" junction to a cross-roads..

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## INTRODUCTION.

I last updated this Volume in 2008. Since then I have continued researching and have found several things which are directly relevant and also accessed maps previously unavailable to me - in particular the Ordnance Survey surveyors drawings which, for the area covered in this volume, date from the 1811 to 1817 period. These are valuable in many ways from showing place names which are now changed, routes then in use which have subsequently become abandoned and are particularly valuable at the northern rim of the limestone basin where industrial development was so rapid. It was here where the industrialisation of a previously rural area of low population became, within a few decades, utterly changed. This aspect was evident in Volume 1, "Dowlais Top to the Usk", (Ref. 1) where, for example, Brynmawr was barely worth a mention but, by the time of the First Series of Ordnance Survey maps, published in 1832, was densely covered with a network of tramways and workings.

This aspect of the surveyors drawings was much less relevant for most of this volume which is well clear of the industry to the south but, nevertheless, have given valuable insights into early roads, tracks and place-names.

Those particularly interested in the Merthyr area might find the paper "The route of the Ogilby coach road from Pontsticill to Quakers Yard" (Ref. 2) of value.

It might be noted that roads to the west from various points on the main route to the north have been discussed but not those to the east. These have been examined in some detail in Tracks Volume 4, "Roads Centred on Pen-rhiw-calc." (Ref. 3).

Dowlais Top was originally chosen as the starting point in earlier editions of this Volume because it is where the east/west road from Merthyr across the heads of the valleys to the river Usk, discussed in some length in Volume 1., crosses the ancient road from Gelligaer (and the south to Cardiff via Caerphilly), and Brecon in the north. The road between Gelligaer and this point has also been discussed in some detail in Volume 1; in the present Volume the road north to Brecon as far as Bwlch ar y fan (SO 032 205) will be examined together with the relevant roads crossing it and leading to and from it.

This road, over much of the stretch, is considered to be "Roman", and I have no doubt that it was probably used by them, but the whole subject of

Roman roads is a far from simple one and Chapter 1. Volume 1. deals with this matter at some length and anyone seriously interested might profitably read this before proceeding with the present volume. My work, in all the volumes of "Tracks", has been concerned with Old Roads and any Roman attribution is obviously of interest but only within the general context.

Most of the map illustrations have been taken from early maps, particularly the First Series 1" and the 1947 1" Ordnance Survey maps. This has the advantage that, as both are on the same scale, direct comparisons of the areas being examined are easy to make. Also it is probably advantageous that modern trunk roads and many recent estates are not included on the 1" 1947 maps but they lack many details, such as mountain wall and fence lines, which are valuable if not essential for this type of work. It is therefore worth reminding the serious reader that they will need a modern 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey map unless they are willing to take this work on trust. It has not been possible to use any Ordnance Survey maps less than 50 years old because of copyright problems.

The earlier work was carried out using a GPS instrument of limited accuracy. In more recent years I have used a much more accurate GPS capable of, under good conditions, giving a position to within a few metres. Where it has been possible I have used this to re-check earlier readings. Readers will also notice that I have used both Imperial and metric measurements. For historic features the Imperial measurements will be more relevant and, perhaps, more meaningful.

For earlier versions of this paper [old-maps.co.uk](http://old-maps.co.uk) was very valuable in allowing one to download sections of 1:2,500 O/S maps of the 1880s but recent changes to their policy has reduced the value for the researcher. On the more positive side Google Earth provides the possibility of viewing satellite images of ground features. At the time of the last update of this Volume in 2008 the Google images over much of the mountainous areas were very poor but are now excellent.

Fig. P. 1. is taken from the 1960 quarter inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map of South Wales and it shows the various tracks researched in this and in other Volumes.

K. A. Martin. Tredegar February 2012.  
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## Chapter 1.

### **From Dowlais Top to Pontsticill. (SO 078 083 to SO 057 114).**

#### **(Including the old road past the Ogham stone to Talybont on Usk.)**

I called the first edition of this Volume " Dowlais Top to Bwlch ar y fan." and, this being an updated version, I will retain the title as, although there are considerable changes to the first chapter, the remainder have mainly some detailed updates. The changes to the first chapter have come about because I wrote a short paper - "The route of the Ogilby coach road from Pontsticill to Quakers Yard" (Ref. 2) - which had required some detailed research on the Merthyr area. Much of the resulting information is relevant to the first chapter of this paper and had to be included.

Pre-Industrial Merthyr was very different to that of today and one of the clearest early representations is that of Bowen in his map of 1729, updated in 1760, a section of which is shown as Fig. 1. This map reflects the features which were considered of importance to the traveller of that time. There are several points to draw attention to:

1) The well-attested Roman Road north from Cardiff to Brecon via Gelligaer and Dowlais Top is not shown. Presumably it was not considered of importance to the traveller at that time. In my paper on the route taken by the Ogilby coach road of 1675 it was shown that it was not then in use. This might be because it was in bad condition but, equally, it might have better suited the needs of the coach road to descend to the more occupied area in the valley for passengers to refresh themselves, change horses etc.

2) A road is shown running down the valley near the river (highlighted in red) which curves towards the west crossing the river Taff by the bridge (discussed later) at the top end and, further down the valley, at Pont y faen (known today as Pont Rhun) it could have, after crossing the bridge, continued over Mynnydd Merthyr to descend into the Cynon valley in the vicinity of present-day Mountain Ash. Pontrhun bridge is ancient being recorded by Leland in the 1540's, built originally of wood, very full details are to be found in W. L. Davis's "Bridges of Merthyr Tydvil" (Ref. 21). Otherwise the road continued down the valley and, on part of the original map not included, was described as "To Cardiff".

3) From the valley road a route (lined in green) rises, crossing the Ogilby coach route (lined in yellow) at Mountain Hare, which place seemingly had

a "Cross for direction on road", and rises over Twyn y waun to Milgatw, above present-day Tredegar. Elsewhere (Tracks, Volume 1, "Dowlais Top to the Usk." (Ref. 1) I have shown that this road continued over the Llangynidr moors to descend to Crickhowell and Llangynidr and is evidently a section of a long-distance route.

4) The main road up the valley and to the north is lined in yellow and is the one used by Ogilby as described in his "The continuation of the road from Chester to Cardiff" (Ref. 2) as far south past Pontsticill as the area around the old Pant railway station before descending downhill to the Mountain Hare. It then continued down the ridgeway of Cefn Merthyr to Treharris.

5) The present Merthyr/Brecon road (A 470(T)) did not at this time exist - hence the importance of the Pontsticill to Brecon road via Bwlch ar y fan. The present main road was, at first, a Turnpike road resulting from the 1787 Turnpike Act and originally, after passing Story Arms, took a route to the east of the Glyn Tarrel and this is the one shown on the First Edition 1" Ordnance Survey map of 1832. The route was changed to the present-day one through Libanus just around this time - too late for the map, which was surveyed earlier.

I give more detail concerning this in Ref. 2. but in this volume I am more concerned with the Roman road from the south past Gelligaer, along Mynydd Fochriw and how it continued north of Dowlais Top.

By the early days of the 19th. century Merthyr had expanded at a great rate and this can be seen in Fig. 1.2, which is based on the first edition O/S map of 1832. It can also be seen in Fig. 1.6, taken from the Ordnance Survey surveyors drawings of 1815 – 1817. These maps show the rate of development and, in particular the network of tramways, many laid on pre-existing foot tracks - I will return to further discuss Fig. 1.6 later in this chapter. By the time of Fig. 1.2 the basic features of the town including the turnpike road west to Neath, east to Abergavenny and down the valley (lined in red) can be seen. To bring the view closer to today Fig. 1.3 (1972 1" O/S) gives a more recognisable picture, although changes have taken place since then, in particular the trunk road system including the Heads of the Valleys road and the loss of most of the railways. Most of the roads seen in Fig. 1.2 can be seen in Fig. 1.3 and I have lined certain of them, which are most relevant to understanding my discussion, with colour-coded dots so that they can be more easily followed and this, in turn, has allowed the same route to be distinguished on the more modern map (Fig. 1.3.). This is difficult to do with precision as the entire area has been the subject of intense industrial and housing development. This means that a route which can be defined with some precision on the earlier map can often only be approximated on the more modern one. The colour coding is as

follows:

1) The red route is that taken by the Roman road from Cardiff to Brecon which, at around SO 063 103 divides into two branches. The western route descends to cross the Taf Fechan at SO 060 114 before turning northwards past Pontsticill. Back at SO 063 103 the eastward branch turns up Cwm Criban and is lined in blue. The area between Dowlais Top and just past the Baltic Quarry is very confused by industrial activity and it should be noted that the road north of Dowlais Top does not lie under the railway line and can only be clearly defined at the entrance to the drive of Blaen Morlais farm and by the stone wall, above which it must have run. After about SO 066 114, at the northern end of the quarry, the original track up Cwm Criban becomes clear.

From SO 066 114 this branch of the track turns to the north and east through Cwm Criban, passing the Ogham Stone at SO 073 132 (Photo. 1.1) with Cefn y Ystrad to the south, past Gwaun Nant Ddu to join the accredited Roman road from Dolygaer to Talybont-on-Usk at SO 090 162. This road up Cwm Criban, which has today become reduced to a path in places, must be of considerable antiquity as the Ogham Stone dating from the 5<sup>th</sup>. and 6<sup>th</sup>. centuries attests, was once well constructed as some surviving stretches near Gwaun Danydarren (SO 086 149) and SO 08423 15372, as Photos. 1.2 and 1.3 show. The old road at the latter point is so evident that a surface exposure was carried out at SO 085 153 and the well-dressed surface and substantial edge-stones were clear (Fig. 1.5). I believe, from this evidence, that this road was the route of choice to the Usk valley both from the Gelligaer via Dowlais Top and from the Roman fort of Penydarren via the routes lined in green on Figs. 1.2 and 1.3.

This might help to explain the route of the coach road used by Ogilby which, if the direct route south from Pontsticill was impassable for any reason, whether because of general deterioration or a failure of the Pont Sarn bridge, had to take an alternative. This alternative would have intercepted the Cwm Criban road in the vicinity of Garth (SO 067 098) and descended part of the way downhill towards the Roman fort before turning south via Mountain Hare as described in Ref. 2. This would imply that the Merthyr to Talybont road via Cwm Criban was still a viable road. It is worth mentioning here that in "Ancient Bridges in Wales and Western England" by E. Jervais (Ref. 4) Pontsticill bridge is noted as being mentioned in 1670 as a single arch bridge which was rebuilt in 1825 – but no data on Pont Sarn. Garth Farm is a farm believed to have been built on the site of a small castle or fortified manor, called Madocs Castle. This can be seen in Gothic script on Fig. 1.2. It is thought that the castle was abandoned in the fourteenth century and that the farm was built on the site



in the early eighteenth century or thereabouts. Some authorities doubt the existence of the earlier castle. I cannot judge but the Griffiths brothers (Ref. 8) suggest that the origin of the name "Madocs Castle", prior to being called Garth farm, was know as Tir Llwyn fadoc which somehow became transliterated as Madoc Castle. As usual they have a great deal of detailed material of historical importance concerning the site. It seems, however, that the site is likely to have had a long history.

At least in Romano-British times, and probably much further back in time, this route through the mountains to the river Usk in the vicinity of Talybont would seem to have been important and it must be significant that Ogham script is of Irish origin, and Irish incursions into Wales are well attested. Indeed, the crannog in Llangorse lake is now believed to have been built by Irish invaders. This old road would seem to be the most direct route between south and west Wales and the Llangorse area.

The disturbed nature of the area between Pontsticill and Fochriw Common, through which the Roman road ran, was remarked upon by Margary who said (he was travelling from the north to the south (Ref. 5).

*"The crowd of railways and works in the valley below the reservoir (n. b the Pontsticill) has obliterated everything on to Dowlais, and the road is next seen on the ridge of Gelligaer Common, where the present road along the ridge from Dowlais Top Station, after getting clear of the old quarries, straightens along the ridge and represents it as far as far as the hump of Mynnydd Fochriw."*

I would agree with him about the stretch north of Dowlais Top but I think that the 1832 O/S map gives a good appreciation of the route south of the east/west turnpike quite clearly, although it is not necessarily completely congruent - part of this can be seen in Fig. 1.2.

2) While this route north to Brecon is well accepted there are suggestions that an alternative route from Penydarren to Pontsticill existed. There is a body of evidence that the route was via Vaynor and a quotation from "Vaynor - A study of the Welsh Countryside" by Elwyn Bowen (Ref.6) who, in turn, quotes Brinley Richards as saying (page 190) - *"but one road is believed to have passed close to the western fringe of Cyfartha Castle grounds, whence it continued to the west, passing Gurnos Farm and crossing the Taf Fechan at Pontsarn. From the Glais brook the road travelled past Vaynor Church (100 yards from which part of the road can be seen towards Pontsticill"*. This route has some degree of uncertainty in places but it would make a lot of sense in its relationship to the Roman fort and is the one accepted by the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (R.C.A.H.M.W.), "Hillforts and Roman

Remains" RR2, (Ref. 7). They accept that the precise route, particularly in the vicinity of Vaynor, seems to have a degree of uncertainty. The earliest records I can find for Pontsarn bridge is that it was wooden and of uncertain antiquity, possibly a succession of such bridges, but preceded by a ford see "The bridges of Merthyr Tydvil" by W. L. Davies (Ref. 21) for more background. Pont Sarn bridge is, of course, clearly commanded by Morlais Castle and would seem to have been where, according to Rees (Ref. 13) the fourteenth century road would have crossed on its way to cross the Taf Fawr at Fedw. This will be discussed in Chapter 5.

This route has been lined in orange in Figs. 1.2 and 1.3. As to which route north of the fort may have been favoured at different times is difficult to say. The state of the bridges at Pont Sarn and Pontsticill at any given time as well as the river volume and speed might have been deciding factors. However at the time of Ogilby map of 1675 the Pontsticill route was used.

3) On Fig. 1.3 the route west of Pontlottyn has been lined in yellow. In Tracks, Volume 1, "Dowlais Top to the Usk", Ref. 1) I have shown that east of Pontlottyn an old road can be traced continuing via Georgetown (Tredegar), Pont y gof (Ebbw Vale), Nantyglo and Blaenavon to reach the River Usk at Llanellen. From Pontlottyn westwards two routes are shown, the one to the north passes over Twyn y waun and then through Ffos y fran, Mountain Hare, Merthyr (where it crosses the Taff). These roads can also be seen in Fig. 1.6 (taken from the Ordnance Survey surveyors drawings) where following route "D" west uphill from Pontlottyn and following "R" northwards to Twyn-y-Waun and hence down to Merthyr. This will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

The southern route is not relevant to this paper and has not yet been fully researched but old maps suggest that it might have headed for Bridgend.

So, to something which many such as the Griffiths Brothers (Ref. 8) have questioned, why was Penydarren Roman fort built where it was rather than at the seemingly more likely spot at Twyn y waun? From there it would have been on higher ground and better able to control both the north/south and the east/west routes and have been much better placed to have received signals. Was there a smaller station or fortlet at or near Twyn y waun? Certainly it would be more natural for travellers passing north via Dowlais Top, particularly those taking the eastern route up Cwm Criban to the Usk, to have taken the direct high-level route rather than descending into the valley - although travellers to the west might have found this satisfactory..

Actually descending to the vicinity of the Roman fort of Penydarren from

the Roman road from Cardiff to Brecon via Dowlais Top was not very difficult as, at approx. SO 103 132, just south of Carn y Bugail, a road descends to the west and north. This passed through Nant y ffin and can be seen clearly on Fig. 1.2 (1832 O/S) and can still be made out over most of the distance on Fig. 1.3 (1947 O/S). The route is lined in green on these maps and labelled as "A" on Fig. 1.6 - the Ordnance Survey surveyors map. The 1832 map (Fig. 1.2) shows it quite clearly passing through Ffos y fran and continuing to the river near the bus station. From here its ascent, also lined in green, can be seen heading directly for Pontsticill and a branch, lined in blue, heading uphill to meet the high level road near Garth (SO 0645 0950). It is worth mentioning here that in following this, and other routes over the mountains, that the most recent 1:25,000 O/S maps, such as the 2008 edition, are very confusing as great areas of "Access land" are overprinted in yellow and lined around and the earlier 2002 edition which I have used in my research is greatly to be preferred.

Of course, it does not necessarily mean that this road is Roman, although GGAT seem inclined to believe that it is so, not only that but they also seem to believe that this route via Penydarren was the main Roman road north rather than the high level route over Fochriw Common. Their report on Roman Roads in South-East Wales (Ref. 20) presents no evidence for their beliefs nor any references while the succession of early maps I have used in this paper make the routes quite clear. I would take this issue to remind readers that my concern is with old roads not specifically those with Roman attributions - indeed in this area the Romans would have been most likely to use existing ancient roads where they existed and, possibly, updating them for their needs. The great Roman military roads to be found in other parts of Britain are strategic roads - the autobahns of their day - and the main network of ancient roads were still there until perhaps supplanted by the newer ones just as the new roads of today take the bulk of through traffic.

As for the crossing of the River Taff near Penydarren there was an old stone bridge recorded as being in existence in the 16th. century. This bridge, and many others, is described by W. I. Davies in his most valuable book "Bridges of Merthyr Tydvil" which I have already referred to. (Ref. 21).

*"YNYSGAU: FIRST ROAD BRIDGE - MERTHYR BRIDGE".*

*An ancient bridge mentioned in 16th. century.*

*On about the same position as the later Old Iron Bridge (No. 299). Gave access between the hamlets of Gellideg and Heolchwormwd (Merthyr*

town), over Taff river.

*Listed as a bridge on the river Taff by Leland (1540s), and Merrick (1578), a list repeated by Lhwyd (1697). The bridge was shown by Bowen (1729). The Glamorgan Court of Quarter Sessions authorised a rate towards its repair in 1722. In 1733 it ordered the sum of £12 4s. 6d. to be raised by a parish rate to pay Lewis Thomas of Merthyr Tydvil for limestone dug, raised and hauled to the site, 'towards the rebuilding of Merthyr Bridge'. The bridge was mentioned in the Act of Parliament of 1760 for promoting the Glamorganshire canal.*

*It was a single-span stone arch bridge and it collapsed in 1795 after fourteen weeks of intense cold. It was replaced by the Old Iron Bridge (No. 299) which itself in the first nine years of its life was called Merthyr Bridge."*

This bridge was, in turn, replaced by the second iron bridge in 1879/80, built some 50 to 60 yards downstream.

Whether there was an earlier bridge, or possibly a built ford, than this is unknown but seems very likely and the siting of the fort at the river crossing point might have been exactly what the Romans favoured. Control of the crossing would have been of both strategic value and also a means of raising revenue through tolls. This could imply that the control of the east/west route was just as important to them as the north/south. Indeed it is most probable that the road to the west was of the greatest importance. A traveller could have passed through Hirwaun to Glyn Neath and, either continue down the valley to Neath, continued west via Ammanford and Llandilo to Carmarthen, to the Roman fort of Coelbren (SN 838 106) which was strategically placed near the head of the Neath and the Swansea valleys or northwards on the Sarn Helen to Sennibridge on the main Roman road to Carmarthen (M 62B). These roads are all shown by Rees (Ref. 13) as in use in the fourteenth century and some, such as the Sarn Helen, are known to be much older. The other possibility, after crossing the Taff, was to Aberdare which also provided a possible route to Neath. This road is shown in the first edition O/S map of 1832, running via Cefn Fford and past Blaen Twrch. Natural features such as rivers were also likely to have figured in tribal boundaries and this was a very turbulent area due to Silurian activities. Those interested in the Silurians and how troublesome they were to Rome would find Ray Howell's excellent book "Searching for the Silures" (Ref 9) well worth reading.

The Roman fort at Penydarren was not discovered until 1786 and not properly examined until 1902 – 1904. V. E. Nash-Williams, in his "The Roman Frontier in Wales" (Ref. 10) on page 106 says – "Roman

*occupation on the site of Penydarren Park was first noted during the construction of Penydarren House in 1786 but was not identified as a fort until the excavations of 1902 to 1904. This fort stood on a steep-sided spur 213 m. above sea level, commanding a wide view of the valleys to the east, south and north-west, and forming a link in the line of the road from the coastal fort at Cardiff to Brecon Gaer."*

This passage makes it clear that Nash-Williams believed that the Roman road from Cardiff to Brecon passed through here, and presumably, either crossing the river at this point or continuing north to Ponsarn.

There is more detail concerning the excavation although there seems to be some doubt concerning its dating but Nash-Williams suggests, for its building - "*The fort was founded under Julius Frontinus in approximately 74.*" and for its abandonment - "*The fort may have been abandoned, therefore, during the early years of Hadrian's reign.*". Hadrian reigned from 117 to 138.

For those interested in the discovery of the Roman fort at Penydarren the earliest account is that given by Charles Wilkinson in his "History of Merthyr Tydvil" (Ref.11).

Lastly, I will discuss the drawing of the area made by the Ordnance Survey surveyors in 1815 to 1817. I considered putting this in earlier to follow the Rees map of 1729 – 1760 (Fig. 1.2) but the drawings are rather simplified and I felt that they might cause confusion. They are simple because the practice was first to survey so as to position features accurately but to join them with more or less straight lines – leaving the subsequent survey to fill in the details of each route. This earliest survey resulted in drawings and the area in which we are interested is shown in Fig. 1.6. A few features of interest, such as ironworks, are shown and I have underlined some of them.

It can be seen that, at the time of their preliminary survey, the explosion in industrial activity has barely started and comparing this figure with Fig. 1.2 taken from the 1832 first published edition one can now see how the early routes have become better delineated and also the greatly increased number of buildings and transport systems. In order to draw attention to some which are most relevant to the roads and tracks in the area, I have identified these with letters or numbers. If these numbers appear to be idiosyncratic it is because I have used them in other papers such as the Ogilby coach road (Ref 2) and another yet to be completed. I have only colour-lined and coded those tracks which are the most clearly delineated, leaving others for local historians to ponder over if they wish. Deserving particular attention are:

“4”. The Neath to Abergavenny turnpike which seems to have had subsequent alterations in its descent from Dowlais Top.

“2”. This route is the one shown lined in green on the Bowen map (Fig.1.1). which rises from the riverside road to Twyn y waun. It can be picked out on the first edition of 1832 (Fig. 1.2) and has been described more fully in the paper on the Ogilby coach road (Ref. 2). From Dowlais Top, although it is not clearly delineated, it continued east via Waun Fair to meet the turnpike at this time but the route east of here before the turnpike was rather different as I discuss quite fully in Volume 1 of Tracks, “Dowlais Top to the Usk.” (Ref.1). The early road down Nant Carno has been highlighted. This road is described in more detail in Ref.1 and it has been shown to have continued across the top end of Rhymney Hill and descends to the Tredegar.

“I”. Is the road south of Mountain Hare used by Ogilby running along Cefn Merthyr to Treharris.

“F”. This approximates to the Roman road south of Dowlais Top to Gelligaer and Cardiff. I say approximates because many believe that the Roman Road ran southwards along the ridge of Mynydd Fochriw. There is still a metalled road beneath a surface layer of grass along the top of this ridge (this will be discussed in another paper presently under preparation). The present road contouring around the eastern side of the mountain has, seemingly, been adopted as being more suitable for transport once the area was pacified.

“R”. This road ran along the ridge of Cefn Brithdir passing the old chapel (now demolished) and the “Tegurnicas Stone”. The present stone is concrete and placed there by Mortimer Wheeler – the original is in Cardiff museum. This road later descends to Pont Aberbargoed, and either crossed it to Bedwellty Church and onwards to the east or continuing southwards to Bargoed.

“A”. Descends from the “Roman Road” to the west of a cairn at SO 0980 0307 allowing a descent from the Roman road to Merthyr. The continuation of the route “D” from Pontlottyn could also have taken it. This is the route lined in green on Figs. 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3.

“D”. Arriving at Pontlottyn after travelling on the road from the river Usk at Llanellen (as has been described in Ref.1) this road branches. One branch crosses to the west to pick up route “A”, just to the south of Carn Bugail, and descend to Merthyr or, of course, follow the Roman road south. The northerly branch crosses to the west at Twn y Waun and

descends into Merthyr to cross the River Taff before continuing to Neath.

The area of Twyn y waun show many features which seem to be roads and tracks but I have not lined any of them because of their lack of clarity - the area clearly being worked for iron ore the tracks for which would have had their own agenda.

Some of the other routes in the area of Merthyr have been discussed in more detail in "The route of the Ogilby coach road from Pontsticill to Quakers Yard (Ref. 2).

## Chapter 2.

### From Pontsticill (SO 057 114) to Dolygaer (SO 054 144).

The old road up the valley over most of the distance from Pontsticill to Torpantau can be seen in Fig. 2.1 (lined in orange), which is taken from the First Edition 1" Ordnance Survey map published in 1832 the area being surveyed in 1813 (revised 1830. Ref. 2) to which National Grid lines have been added so that a direct comparison can be made with the modern map (Fig. 2.2). The road was not significantly affected by the construction of the Pentwyn Reservoir between 1859 and 1863 but the construction of the Pontsticill Reservoir was a different matter. Empowered by an Act of 1911 it was contracted to Sir Robert McAlpine and Sons in June 1913 and, with a suspension of work during the First World War, was completed in 1927, and necessitated re-routing much of this section of the road (Ref. 12). This can be seen by comparing it with Fig. 2.2, which is taken from a 1947 1" O/S map, and the outline of the reservoir, which has been added (outlined in blue), to Fig. 2.1. A photograph, believed to be those of the chapel, taken in recent years at a time when the water level was low can be seen as Photo. 2.1. Fig. 2.3 is a map of the area between Vaynor and Dolygaer derived from the same source as Fig. 2.1 but enlarged.

A map of the general area, as reconstructed by Professor William Rees (Ref. 13), which I include for as complete a cover of the area as is possible, of roads in the fourteenth Century can be seen in Fig. 2.4, which shows the road north from Merthyr to Brecon via Pontsticill but not the section of road between Dowlais Top and Pontsticill. Instead he shows the road, as he perceived it, as descending from Dowlais Top to Merthyr and then taking the road north via Ponsarn. He does show the road up Cwm Criban but as originating in Vaynor, Fig. 2.4 is of an insufficient size to show the detail but on a greater enlargement of the area it appears to cross the river by means of the Pontsticill bridge from west to east to pass up Cwm Criban to Talybont on Usk. This point of crossing was called "Rhyd y Cambren" which my dictionary translates as "swingle tree". Swingle is associated with flax processing and swingle-tree with a pivoting cross-bar used on some carts. Whatever this may mean in this context is unknown to me. From this it would appear that Professor Rees was in favour of the route north of Merthyr as via Ponsarn. Before the present stone bridge at Pontsticill there was a wooden structure, such as might have been present at the time of the mapping of Ogilby's road, and there were probably a succession of such wooden bridges over a very long period of time. For times when the bridge was unserviceable there was a ford a short way down stream.



A section of the Ogilby route (1675) for a mile south of Dolygaer as far as Merhyr is shown in Fig. 2.5 and some numbers have been added which will be referred to in the text. It should be noted that the map shows north towards the foot of the map (note the compass rose) and that the strips start at the left hand side of the page. Each strip carries mile and furlong markers (from Chester) and "*Pont-Stucketh*" is shown at mile 120.

Fig. 2.6 is a section of a 1:2,500 Ordnance Survey map of 1880s, i.e. before the Pontsticill Reservoir was built, and this shows that, prior to the Pontsticill Reservoir the Roman road (M. 620, lined in yellow) from Talybont on Usk met the Pontsticill to Brecon road at approx SO 0555 1438. It also shows the "Roman" road from Talybont crossing the valley floor and the river at approx. SO 0555 1438 and continuing to the west as a dotted lined track (again lined in yellow) and captioned on the original map as "Site of Roman Road.". It also shows that the western end of the road from Talybont is connected to the Merthyr/ Brecon road by means of a straight link with the river crossing - this presumably connected with the building of the Taf Fechan reservoir. After the reservoir was built the road crossing the river reverted to a closer approximation to the original route. It is of interest that the first O/S survey shows benchmarks both on the direct route up the valley and also on the Pontsticill to Talybont route but not on that from Dolygaer to Talybont. I have no idea why.

At the time of the first Ordnance Survey maps (Figs. 2.1 and 2.3), before the construction of either of the reservoirs or the railway, much interesting detail can be seen.

1) The accepted "Roman Road" to Brecon is lined in orange north of Pontsticill in each case.

2) The yellow-lined road from the south, i.e. from Gelligaer via Dowlais Top, shows a bifurcation at SO 067 097 with one branch continuing north and east up Cwm Criban passing the "Ogham Stone" at SO 072 132, the head of Gwaun Nant Ddu at SO 084 153 and joining the "Roman Road" from Dolygaer to Talybont at SO 090 162. The other branch descends to cross the Taf Fechan by the bridge at SO 060 114 or, possibly at times, the nearby ford. After crossing the river this branch of the road ascends the west bank to join the accepted "Roman Road" north near Garn Pontsticill. This is the route used by Ogilby on his journey south from Brecon (Fig 1.1) - this section is discussed in Chapter 1.

3) What I find equally interesting is the network of roads to be seen on Figs. 2.1 and 2.3 running up the eastern side of the valley which shows,

with the exception of a short stretch just south of Dolygaer, what seems to be an alternative route up the valley. This is particularly clear in Fig. 2.3, which is an enlarged section from Pontsticill to Dolygaer where it is lined in green. Even in the missing stretch the field walls between Bryn Sae and Twyn-y-waun suggest a route of sorts.

I have shown in Tracks, Volume 3. "Roads Centred on Tredegar" (Ref. 14), that there was a cross-mountain route, probably for pack-animals, running from the Llechrhyd near Rhymney Bridge, over Twynau Gwinion and Cefn-y-Ysatad, and past the Ogham Stone (approx. SO 105 095) to pass under the later railway by means of an arch at SO 05801335 (Photos. 2.43 and 2.44 of that Volume) i.e. at Bryn sae near Car (both names underlined in red on Fig. 2.3). Much of the stretch from the Ogham Stone to near the railway is now severely damaged by forestry activities. Presumably this route then crossed the river by, probably, a ford and joined the "Roman Road" to Brecon. There might be added relevance to this river crossing at Car as I will discuss in Chapter 5.

The missing section of road can be seen more clearly in Figs.3.1, 3.2 and 3.3. In the earliest on taken from the Ordnance Survey surveyors drawings (Fig. 3.3) the section of road is marked with "A" and crosses the Nant Criban by a Pont Llydan. Unfortunately this was all buried under the large railway embankment where the Criban entered the Pontsticill Reservoir. A second road crossing the river passes through Neuadd, and is marked with a "B", but appears only to lead up onto the open mountain. Fig. 3.1, taken from the first published Ordnance Survey, is similar but lacks the property names. The crossing, "B" can also be seen on Fig. 3.2 (1948 6" O/S) which also shows the railway embankment burying track "A".

This system of roads to the east of the river were all destroyed by the construction of the railway. The Brecon and Merthyr Railway was built between 1859 and 1863 - the main events being:

01. 08. 1859. - Talybont to Pant (Dowlais) authorised.

18. 01. 1860. - First sod cut at Torpantau (Pedolau Farm).

Summer 1862, - First train through Torpantau tunnel.

20. 01. 1863. - Trial run from Brecon to Pant. Outwards with passengers and back with passengers and 17 wagons of coal.

19. 03. 1863. - Passenger trains from Talybont to Pant with coach connections at each end.

### 23. 04. 1863. - First official passenger train from Brecon.

As it will be shown in the next Chapter that such a road continued up the eastern side of the river above Dolygaer, it does give ground for speculation as to its purpose and its quality. At the least it provided a passage up the valley if the bridge or the ford at Pontsticill were unusable, perhaps because of flooding of the river, but it could also have provided a route north to the vicinity of Llwyn derlan fach (SO 048 164) where today there is a car park, from here a traveller could either have turned eastwards to follow the old road through Glyn Collwm to Talybont. Alternatively it could have crossed the Taf Fechan and turn north to Brecon via Bwlch-ar-y-Fan or, as will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, crossing the mountain to the west to reach the Taf Fawr valley and beyond.

The first edition Ordnance Survey map (Figs. 2.1 and 2.3) shows a cross-road at Dolygaer. The main road up the valley is met here by the "Roman Road" from Talbont on Usk and to the west by the short length of road leading to the open mountain near Twyn-Disguilfa. This cross-roads can be seen on Fig.2.5, which is a section of Ogilby's 1675 map from Chester to Cardiff where it is indicated as "Capel Tavechan" with the road to the east labelled "To Lanettee" and that to the west as "To Tavon". Lanettee is most likely Llandetty near Talybont while Tavon is a bit of a puzzle. Further research has shown that this road to the west has a great deal more significance than it appears and I intend devoting Chapter 5 of this Volume to it and to another route to the west from the upper end of the Pentwyn Reservoir. For the moment I will merely observe that at the time of Ogilby it certainly went somewhere worth mentioning and that the 1890 1:2,500 O/S map (Fig. 2.6) indicates it as "Site of Roman Road" – even if sceptics doubt the Roman label it would seem to indicate an old road which went somewhere distant. As for "Tavon" it is far from certain but it seems that Ogilby's surveyors were English and they might well have misunderstood what locals were telling them when they asked where it went. A possible explanation could be that Taf is pronounced Tav and avon is river so perhaps it was meant to mean the road to the greater Taf Fawr.

The road to Talybont on Usk to the east, is generally called a Roman road (M 620), and was marked as such on Ordnance Survey maps until recent times (i.e. the 1947 1" O/S map used here). Margary (Ref. 5) is quite happy with the designation and suggests that it might have been an alternative route which avoided the highest part of the Brecon Beacons which could prove difficult in bad weather. The Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales - Brecknock -Hill-forts and Roman Remains." (Ref. 7) is more coy and used the phrase "*Margary*

*considers...*" but points out that no direct evidence for a Roman origin has been found. Be that as it may I am happy that it is an old road and its use by the Romans, if it was already in existence, is not at all remarkable. Part of the road's Roman attribution is due to the " Gaer" at Dol-y-gaer, also believed by many to have been Roman, but, again, the Royal Commission is cool, listing the "Gaer" under "Suggested Roman sites and finds" and, after remarking that a cornelian seal was found here in the seventeenth century, comments that *"it is possible that this was Roman"*, (Ref. 7). It might be noted here that the Ordnance Survey surveyors drawing of 1813 - 1815, shown as Fig. 3.3, shows no fort site on Pen-y-gaer (present name) and the area of the cross roads was at that time called "Tor gaer".

This road from Dol-y-gaer to Talybont continues up Cwm Callan and at Pen Rhiw-calc is joined, at SO 0900 1645 by the other ancient track past the "Ystrad Stone" or "Ogham stone" at SO 0735 1320 (Photo. 1.1) which was mentioned in Chapter 1, where it was lined in green on Figs. 1.1 and 1.3. The route from this point eastward is not entirely straightforward and will be discussed in another Volume of Tracks (Volume 4). Clearly if one considers, as was suggested in Chapter 1., that anyone passing up the valley past Merthyr would first have arrived at a perfectly satisfactory direct route to the Usk valley, why would they have chosen to continue north to Dolygaer and then turn east? I will return to this in Chapter 5.

So, if the Dolygaer to Talybont road was Roman then it would have seemed to have been a rather pointless one. Anyone wishing to travel from Talybont to Brecon would most naturally have simply continued along the well-attested Roman road running parallel to the Usk. This is an accepted road passing over Allt-yr-Esgair and is described in detail by such as Margary and referred to by Theophilus Jones in his "History of Brecknock" (Ref. 15) as the "Strata Julia" (Volume 1, page 27). As for being an alternative bad-weather route then why not travel directly to the Usk valley via the easier, if possibly longer – depending on the final destination – route up Cefn-yr-ystrad and Pen-rhiw-calc to Talybont? It is only if Dolygaer was a stage on a longer distance road to the west does it make any sense. If this is the case then a fortlet at Dolygaer would have been ideally situated at a cross-roads and, at 12 km. from Allt-yr-Esgair (SO 123 245) where it would have met the Strata Julia from Caeleon to Brecon (M 62A), a short days march.

Of course the Gaer might have been of greater importance than we now perceive and Margary's suggestion of an alternative, more sheltered, route than the one over the high pass at SO 032 206 might well be true but examination of the junction raises the speculation that the cross-roads indicated by Ogilby at Dolygaer (Fig. 2.5, "1") was indeed just that and the

Talybont to Dolygaer track continued from "Capel Tavechan" over the mountain to the west, past Garn Ddu and descend to Fedw and, from Fedw, to the Neath valley. It would also head towards the major Roman fort at Coelbren or to Neath and the coast. If this is true then we would have a road to the Usk valley reaching the river well to the east of Brecon and perhaps suitable for traffic on the Julia Strata (M 62A) down the Usk or past the Roman fort at Pen-y-Gaer (SO 168 219) towards Cwm Ddu and Talgarth. The possibility of such a route can be seen in Fig. D.1. (Taken from "An historical Atlas of Wales". by Prof. Wm. Rees (Ref. 16) or Fig. "D2" from the O/S map of Roman Britain.

This matter will be considered more fully in the Discussion.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **From Dol-y-gaer (SO 054 144) to SO 043 162.**

#### **(Including other roads leading off.)**

From the cross-roads at Dol-y-gaer the old road north ran more or less along the line of the present road until SO 043 162. After this point the route north towards the Gap and Brecon has been a matter of dispute: this section will be discussed in the next chapter. Although the main route of the early road seems to be uncontroversial until this point there are some roads leading off which are worthy of note and these will be discussed in order as we travel north. The general area is shown in Fig. 2.1 (1832) and 2.2 (1947) and the area under discussion in this chapter is shown on the 2002 1: 25,000 O/S map (Fig. 3.4) in part to give a modern overview and in part to allow grid referencing.

The first point of interest is at SO 048 156 where Ogilby shows a group of houses or buildings on each side of the river, marked as "2" in Fig. 2.5, and these are indicated on the 1832 Ordnance Survey (Fig. 2.1 and, at a higher magnification, in Fig. 3.1) which pre-dates the construction of the reservoir. The map shows a large complex of buildings, named Dan-yr-allt, on the eastern side of the river and this complex, now in a ruinous state, is still to be found and is recorded on modern maps of the area with the 1948 Ordnance Survey 6" to the mile map giving a very clear picture (Fig. 3.2) (It is shown as "A" on Fig. 3.4). This 6" map, in particular, also shows some roads or tracks leading off, one to the north (lined in green) running alongside the now abandoned track of the Brecon and Merthyr railway line, one to an "Old Quarry" which is cut off by the railway line, and one (also lined in green), rising towards the south/east, passing beneath the railway at SO 055 153

This latter track is of a very high standard and of considerable width (Photo. 3.1 taken within the Dan-yr-allt complex facing south), with a well-built culvert covered with large stone slabs over the Nant Sychnant, and passes under the railway line by means of a very large and high bridge (Photo. 3.2 taken facing uphill and 3.3 taken downhill from the track above the bridge) which would seem to indicate that the track was of some importance as a through route at the time when the railway was built and that the bridge could cater for large vehicles on the road. This adds to the observation that it seems that there was once a good road up the eastern side of the river.

In this latest update I have added Fig. 3.3, which is taken from the Ordnance Surveyors drawings of 1815-1817. It is clearly very similar to the first published O/S map of 1832 (Fig. 3.1) but I have included it because there are some interesting details and property names which were not to be seen on the first published version. There are several points of interest.

1) Pen-y-Gaer is unrecorded, 2) Dan-yr-Allt went under a different name, which is difficult clearly to discern, and shows tracks not shown on the later map, 3) There are many names which are not subsequently recorded, 4) "Capel Taffechan" is clearly shown immediately to the west side of the road and 5) The cross-roads is very clear on both maps. A bridge ("A" on Figs. 3.1 and 3.3) is shown at Pont llydan over the Nant Callan at approx. SO 060 145. Whether this bridge simply went to the farm at Tyn-y-waun or was part of a road up the eastern side of the river - discussed in Chapter 2 - would depend upon the nature of the structure. Unfortunately we are unlikely ever to know as it now lies under the railway embankment. There is still to be found another crossing of the Nant Callan at "B" (SO 06114 14492). This was originally a ford, approached from the north by a lane past the present outdoor activities centre. It is some 12 ft. wide with stone walls on each side. After crossing the river the track climbs up to the south and passes through a gate onto the open mountain. Today the stream is crossed by a footbridge, at SO 06065 14452, some 40-50 yards downstream of the ford. It is interesting that on the northern side of Dolygaer to Talybont road, almost opposite the lane leading to the ford, another track rises uphill to the proximity of the site of the supposed Roman station.

It was also observed that there was a track alongside the western side of the railway down the valley from Dan yr Allt to Dol-y-gaer (lined in pink on Figs. 3.2 and 3.4). The main question which occurred was the destination of the track rising uphill under the bridge: it showed clear signs that some time after the bridge construction it had been blocked off, possibly with the involvement of the railway company or the later forestry plantation as the blocking was done with railway sleepers as can be seen in Photo. 3.2, and traffic, which once passed through, now used the alternative route, which, although just possibly the remains of an old road up the eastern side of the valley, was more likely to have been built to aid the construction of the railway. They did just this down Glyn Collwn and there the railway construction track, complete with a fine stone bridge (at SO 084 168), now lost in a later plantation, caused me to spend a lot of time researching. For a while I thought that I had found a forgotten road and its true origin as an access track only became clear after much work. This track down Glyn Collwn, is discussed in some detail in Tracks, Volume 4, "Roads Centred

on Pen-rhiw-Calc, Chapter 6. I will return to this track alongside the railway presently.

For some distance above the railway line the track was quite clear, passing uphill to the south and east (Photos. 3.4 and 3.5) following the wall line shown on the 6" O/S map but then disappearing into the forestry estate (Photo. 3.6). Following it through the dense larch plantation was difficult and required crawling on hands and knees but it was just possible and the track was found to emerge from the plantation, first at a stone wall and ruined fence with cast iron fence posts on the edge of a steep-sided gully at SO 057 149 and, a little further uphill following the northern side of the gully, through a gate at SO 057 150 (Photo. 3.7) onto the open mountain. As has been found so often, this section of an important old road has been grievously damaged by the forestry activities. Although they now claim to pay much greater regard to archaeology than they did in the past there are still doubts as to whether they think of old transport links as archaeology and as being just as important as are structures.

This discovery answered a question which had previously been unresolved, namely the nature of the track which runs up to this point from the vicinity of Dol-y-gaer station and opens on to the mountain a hundred yards or so south of this gate (Photo. 3.8) through a remarkably fine wall, some 4ft. thick at the base and 3 ft. at the top, built with a proportion of dressed stone on a base of very large stones, 3ft. long and more in some cases. The source of these stones so near to the putative site of the Roman station give cause for some speculation - good stone was always re-used if needed (T. Eaton. Ref. 22). This uphill track from Dolygaer, it might be noted, passes over a slab bridge at SO 058 1485. It would seem most likely that this is a continuation of the track up from Dan-yr-allt. That is to say, the track from Dan-yr-allt emerges through the wall onto the mountain and, after a couple of hundred yards passes back through the wall and descends to Dol-y-gaer with the possibility that it may once have had a further southwards extension outside the wall towards the supposed Roman fort or to meet the Dol-y-gaer to Talybont road at approx. SO 065 151. It seems that Professor Rees thought that this short section of road from the vicinity of the fort to the station was old and included it in his map of Wales in the fourteenth century (Fig. 2.4). It will be clear from Fig. 5.4 (1904 1" O/S), which post-dates the Pentwyn Reservoir and pre-dates the Pontsticill, that the cross-roads at Dolygaer was diverted by the building of the Pentwyn Reservoir dam and that the original crossing was past an inn where the present car park is now situated. This map also gives an accurate position of Capel Taffechan - although labelled as a church. More on this in Chapter 5.. It also shows a short length of road precisely in line with that shown on the 1832 map (Fig. 3.1) and carrying an O/S bench mark (BM 1145.61) as confirmation. This is the same



alignment as the modern track uphill to the west from the present car park (Photos, 5.1 and 5.2).

The question why the track from Dan-yr-Allt to Dol-y-gaer should have taken such an indirect route arises but a look at the steep gorge cut by the stream between SO 0575 1495 and SO 0560 1585 provides the explanation. A closer look at the gorge lower down, where it is crossed by the railway line (Photo. 3.9. SO 056 148), shows that a major construction comprising a two-level bridge, one for the water to pass beneath the railway and another for the new road running parallel to the railway and immediately to the east, was needed to pass what must previously have been a major obstacle and casts serious doubt on whether there was an older road here before the bridge was built. This deep stream gully must be at least part of the reason for the track down the valley from Dan-yr-allt to have diverted uphill to the vicinity of The Gaer. It would seem also that it may date from the time when The Gaer was possibly of some importance and it must also be relevant, as can be seen on Fig. 3.1, that the track link from this area runs downhill to the later railway station where it could have turned eastwards to join the Talybont cross-roads at Dolygaer.

So, the track uphill through the forest from Dan-yr-Allt, which had subsequently descended to Dolygaer had fallen out of use when the railway provided a better alternative running alongside the railway track on its downhill side. The fact that the bridge beneath the track near Dan-yr-rallt had been blocked would seem to confirm that traffic using the eastern side of the valley now used the new route but had once been prepared to use a substantial diversion to get from Dan-yr-allt to Dol-y-gaer. The question of why traffic might want to use this route between the railway and the reservoir on the eastern side of the valley, or the older eastern route for much of the distance from Pontsticill to Dol-y-gaer, when there was seemingly a good coach road up the western side of the valley, springs to mind and is not easily answered. Perhaps it all depends upon different needs at different times and the general state of the roads available and whether or not there were times when crossing the river lower down was not possible..

The reason for this road, now all but lost in the forestry, may be uncertain but there is no doubt of its existence nor that it was a wide well-founded and graded road nor that there was a considerable settlement of some kind at Dan-yr-Allt certainly as far back as 1675. A cursory examination of Dan-yr-Allt, without excavation, made it clear that it had been used as a base of operations for the building of the railway, as did Pedole farm at SO 048 165, as debris approximating to this date were common including part of a broken electrical cell. Its stone-work had also been robbed to

some degree to build a shelter on the shore of the reservoir at SO 053 155 (Photo. 3.10). The use of Pedole by the railway constructors dates from around the beginning of 1860 and probably this date is also likely for Dan-yr-Allt. I believe that excavation at this site would be rewarding. Also running from the Dan-yr-Allt complex is a track which runs north parallel with western side of the railway (lined in green in Fig. 3.2) which can be traced as far as SO 050 163 where it enters the car park of the picnic site - once Llwyn derllan Farm (an earlier name is used on the Surveyors map of 1817 (Fig. 3.3) - but it is not clear whether this was an early road connecting Dol-y-gaer, over the pass at Blaen-y-glyn and then down Glyn Collwn, or a track put in by the railway builders to expedite their work although, again, the two uses are not mutually exclusive.

Returning to Dan-yr-Allt, the Ogilby map indicates buildings on the western side of the river (at "2" on Fig. 2.5 and "B" on Fig. 3.4) and this, in turn, raised the possibility that there was, at one time, a cross-roads at this point with another track across the mountain to the west. Certainly looking at the 1:25,000 O/S map of the area to the west a distinct route is shown crossing the mountain (Waun Wen) from above the forests to the west of the upper end of the Pentwyn reservoir towards Llysiog isaf on the Brecon-Merthyr road.

On Fig. 5.4 (1904 1" O/S) the track from Dolygaer and Dan yr allt between the railway line and the reservoir is clearly shown (lined in pink). Even more interesting is that both the 1832 map (Fig. 3.1) and the 1815-1817 surveyors map (Fig. 3.3) show the track connecting Dan yr allt to the main road up the valley before the reservoir was filled. This would seem to indicate that Dan yr allt was once on an active route from the main valley "Roman" road to the vicinity of Y Gaer at Dolygaer and had been demoted by the reservoir. Subsequently both the old route and the railway alternative route fell into decay although the latter might have had some use for a few years.

Some of this will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 4.

### SO 043 162 to The Gap at SO 032 205.

This chapter is likely to be controversial as it contradicts the National Monument record (Wales) re. Roman Roads (Reference 1-10,000 quarter sheet RR. NGR 621, Sub-record unit. from which this is an extract of the relevant passages.

#### ***“Llandrindod Common [SO0560] to Pont Cwm fedwen [SO0416]***

*Page 2. "From Bwlch y fan the logical route is that followed by the coach road, which descends at a constant, easy gradient, on a well-engineered terrace, to Pont Cwm y fedwen [SO042 163].*

*O'Dwyers suggested route to the west (4), dives very steeply down a natural gully to the deserted settlement at SO 026 194, and follows a disused track to Pont Cwm y fedwen. It is a most unlikely route for a Roman road, and would appear to have served the settlement."*

The report is accompanied by prints from a 6" Ordnance Survey map with their claimed route clearly lined in colour, this route is shown in Fig. 4.1 taken from a 1947 1" Ordnance Survey map, where it is lined in red, Fig. 4.2 is of the same area using a 1832 1" edition but the route suggested by the NMR cannot be similarly marked as it was not there at that date.

There are two strands of evidence which point firmly away from the route described in the National Monument record; one is that found from old maps and records and the second from close examination of the more likely original route.

This stretch, between SO 043 164, just south of the Pont Cwmfedwyn, and Bwlch-ar-y-Fan at SO 032 205 has been the subject of a great deal of discussion concerning the history and provenance of this road and the precise route itself has been the subject of considerable debate. This is covered very well in the "Brecknock Hillforts and Roman Remains" (Ref. 7) on pages 163 to 165 inclusive. It would appear that opinions are divided over the "Western route" i.e. a route to the West of the river shown today as a footpath and the "Eastern route" represented by the present day track ascending on the eastern flank of the valley from a little way

below the lower Neuadd reservoir (SO 036 173) to Bwlch-ar-y-Fan (SO 032 205). This latter route is defended by the Ordnance Survey and the western one by others such as Margary and O'Dwyer. My own researches are strongly in favour of the western route, and this is also the conclusion arrived at by Professor D. Bissell who had, unknown to me, also been studying the same area.

I should, before describing the evidence, just deal with a few Caveats. Firstly I prefer to describe the road as an Old Road rather than necessarily Roman. Indeed the existence of cairns or, as they describe in "BRECKNOCK. Later Prehistoric Monuments and Unenclosed Settlements to 1000A.D." (Ref. 17), Page 110-113, "... are six circular structures, included in the cairn section for convenience, though not all are certainly cairns. Four could be ring cairns or even early huts", They describe these features which are centred on SO 0275 1925, in some detail, in the Bronze Age section as situated on a mound, - an island when the present reservoir is full (Photos. 4.1 and 4.2 were taken when the water level was very low). This would indicate that this area has seen occupation since the earliest times.

Bearing in mind that the western route passed immediately to the west of this mound and crossed the Taf Fechan by the Pont-ar-daf bridge at SO 028 193, as shown by Fig. 2.3 (marked "4") of the Ogilby 1675 route map and shown by name on the 1832 1" O/S map (Figs. 4.2 and 4.4). and that this was one of the few realistic places for a passage through the mountains it would suggest that such a route could have a considerable antiquity. The old track has been lined in orange in Figs. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 - the latter is taken from the 1813 O/S surveyors drawings. Certainly if such a road already existed the Romans would have found it convenient - they might even have carried out judicious repair and upgrading. Equally until the Agrarian and the Industrial revolutions such a track might still have been in use and I find it unnecessary to ascribe any particular date to a feature which might have served a similar function over a very extended period of time.

I find it difficult to understand the Ordnance Survey's faith in the eastern route when this is not shown on the Ordnance Survey surveyors maps nor on the 1832 Ordnance Survey map nor on the 1675 Ogilby map of the coach road from Chester to Cardiff while all show the western route quite clearly. It is also of note that on both the 1947 1" map (Fig. 4.1) and the 1904 1" O/S (Fig. 5.4) the appellation "Roman Road" starts immediately below Twyn y waun - whether fortuitously or by design I do not know.

### 1) The 1832 Ordnance Survey map.

The relevant area of this map taken from the 1832 Ordnance Survey map is shown in Fig. 4.2 with Fig. 4.1, at the same scale, of the 1947 (1913 with later corrections) 1" O/S map. An enlargement of the area most relevant to this chapter using the 1832 1" map and a 1947 1" Ordnance Survey map are shown in Figure 4.3 and 4.4.

The road from Bwlch-ar-y-fan via Pont-ar-daf and along the western side of the river is quite clear while there is no indication of the supposed eastern route on the earlier maps.

### 2) The 1675 Ogilby map.

This map is the strip map of the route from Chester to Cardiff and the relevant section is shown in Fig. 2.2. As I have previously found, the miles and furlongs markers allow us to correlate the features shown with those on the more recent maps and the following observations can be made.

a) Taking the position of the Pont-ar-daf bridge on the Ogilby map (marked "4") and using Figs. 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 we can arrive at O/S coordinates of SO 027 193 and use this as a reference point. Southward a building is shown on the surveyors drawing (Fig. 4.5) at a distance of 5 furlongs ( $\frac{5}{8}$  mile.) at "3". No building is shown here (approx. SO 029 183) on the 1832 map but there is a side road leading off lined in green on Fig. 4.4 which approximates with a "sheep fold" type feature on the modern 1:25,000 map; this feature will be discussed later in this chapter but its ruins are to be found at the upper end of the Lower Neuadd reservoir at the spot indicated by Ogilby. This building shown on the O/S surveyors map (Fig. 4.5) is named as Neuadd fach. This name appears on the 1832 map but, on this, its precise position is undefined.

### 3) Observations on the western track.

The opportunity was taken of the dry summer of 1995 to take advantage of the very low water levels in the Upper Neuadd reservoir which exposed the present day island at SO 028 192 in its original form as a mound (Photo. 4.1 and Photo. 4.2) with the river Taf Fechan running immediately on its western side. Just to the north/western side of the mound the river was, before the construction of the reservoir, bridged by Pont-ar-daf. The track portrayed on the early maps was clearly to be seen running north up this valley towards Bwlch-ar-y-Fan and could be traced back without problem as far as the normal reservoir surface (Photos. 4.3 and 4.4,

taken towards Bwlch-ar-y-Fan from SO 028 195 and 4.5 taken from the same position towards the present reservoir with the mounds clearly in view) but little remains of the original bridge except for some stones displaying little, if any, structural organisation although a more recent footbridge, suspected as being contemporaneous with the reservoir construction, is in place just a short distance upstream of the original.

To revert to the original plan of describing the route from south to north I will start at SO 043 162, some 300 yards south of Pont Cwmfedwyn at SO 0420 1673 on the present road.(Photo. 4.6), where the western road continues straight on up the western side of the valley and the modern road descends to cross the bridge and continue up the eastern side. The 1832 map (Fig. 4.4) shows an early bridge at or near this point leading to Tyn-y-waun (called Llwyn-on on the 1813 surveyors map (fig. 4.5). This farm has long gone and is presently a car park. The situation on the old western road for perhaps half a mile is a little confused as forestry machines have used the old road for some distance.

The road which is wide and well founded (Photo. 4.7) crosses in several places streams of different sizes, some substantial in wet weather, running off the mountain to the west and at this lower end of the track these streams are ducted beneath the track surface by modern corrugated metal pipes (i.e. at SO 039 163, SO 038 163 and SO 036 144) and any traces of an earlier culvert have been destroyed allowing some possible doubt about its course between SO 036 144 and the turning off to Talybont at Ystradgynwyn. However the old maps predating both the reservoirs and the forest plantation strongly suggest that the original route was followed. North of SO 036 144 the streams are accommodated by means of stone culverts (i.e. SO 034 169, SO 033 170, SO 032 171 and SO 031 172). These culverts are very substantial, spanning a track width of 17ft (5.2m.) and constructed of built stone sides spanned with very large stone slabs typically 6 ft.(2m.) long and 10" by 12" (.26x.3m) in cross-section and 6ft.(2m.) by 18" (.5m) by 6" (.15m.) thick. Typical examples are to be seen in Photos. 4.8 (SO 037 166) and 4.9. (SO 037 163). Except where the track surface was damaged the culverts were normally covered with a thick layer of metalling. The culverts were typically some 45" (1.5m.) wide with 20-24" (0.5-0.6m.) of airspace above the water. Allowing for sediment and debris build-up it is probable that they were originally at least 36" (1m.) deep, indeed possibly more as spans are not normally made greater than is necessary and water carrying capacity is better increased by increasing the height.

At SO 029 181, where the track crosses a major stream, stone structures are to be found on each side corresponding to a bridge shown on the 1832 Ordnance Survey map (Photo 4.10) and probably associated with

this a substantial stone gatepost (Photo. 4.11) is found on the northern side of the track at SO 029 178. A question arises here, is this gatepost the "Standing Stone" marked on the modern 1:25,000 map? I can't find anything else matching this description in the area.

For some distance the track is difficult to follow due to the disturbance cause by the construction of the Lower Neuadd reservoir but it can be picked up again by SO 088 183 (Photo. 4.12), where it is very clear with an undisturbed metalled surface, with a wall and an old, once laid, hedge on the western side and a little further on where it cuts through higher ground maintaining its level (Photo. 4.13). At SO 028 187 it meets a stream from the west and here there appear to be the remains of a stone abutment on its northern bank which might have been associated with another bridge (Photo. 4.14). After this point no further trace can be found due to the disturbance associated with the construction of the Upper Neuadd reservoir but an interesting feature can be found at SO 028 183 where a large sheep fold (Photo. 4.15) is to be found to the west of the track outside the boundary fence of the reservoir (The feature is clearly shown on a modern 1:25,000 map) and an old building to the east of the road is shown on the Ordnance Survey surveyors map of 1817 (Fig, 4.5). This is opposite the point where Ogilby shows a building at the 115 mile marker ("3" on Fig. 2.2) and examination of the ground immediately to the east of the track at this point, within the fenced area of the reservoir, shows the foundations of a building. It is possible that this old building was robbed to construct the sheep pen.

The track is now lost for some distance, except for a section at SO 028 186 which appears to be undisturbed (Photo. 4.16), as, according to the 1832 Ordnance Survey map, it lies under the water of the reservoir and can only be picked up again with certainty where it emerges from the water at SO 028 195 to climb up the gully to join the eastern road at Bwlch-ar-y-Fan. It seems as though there is also a spur to Ffald Newydd, a ruined settlement at SO 023 197(8), but the main track up the valley from here to Bwlch-ar-y-Fan is quite clear, if examined carefully when walking, with indications of early, now collapsed, drainage to be seen.

So we have the situation where there is evidence of an ancient, well-engineered road up the western side of the valley, far better engineered to be considered as a track to a minor settlement. The Ogilby map of the coach road from Chester to Cardiff clearly shows the road and all the associated features and buildings which he indicated can found where he described them. Both the 1832 Ordnance Survey map and that of the earlier O/S surveyors show a road which corresponds exactly with the old coach road but no alternative road up the eastern flank of the valley. Additionally it might be significant that the parish boundary between

Llanfigan and Modrydd follows the old route from the cairn at the upper end of the upper reservoir to Bwlch-ar-y-Fan and subsequently follows the track all the way to Brecon. While not being conclusive it is normal for such boundaries to follow ancient routes. Where then did the idea of the eastern route being the original come from?

The conclusion I came to was that the construction of the Lower Neuadd reservoir in 1884 and the Upper Neuadd, which was opened in 1902 (Ref.6), caused the original road to be rendered impassable and for a new one, by-passing the reservoirs on the eastern side and connecting with the railway spur from Torpantau used for the construction of the Upper Neuadd reservoir. It was at this time that I was put in contact with an old work colleague, Professor D Bissell who had also been working on the old road quite independently and who had come to exactly the same conclusion, mainly from record searches. Amongst his findings, which largely overlap with mine, there were two items of particular interest the first being that the stream which runs down from the Gap to the reservoir alongside the old road is called Nant-yr-hen-hoel which translates as "The stream of the old road". The second point, which is even more convincing, concerns the date at which the new road might have been constructed and I quote him here - *"Perusal of contemporary newspapers (Brecon and Merthyr) yielded no positive information, and unfortunately the records of the Roads Board have not survived. However, two useful items confirm a date between 1870 and 1885 for the construction of the new road (and probably its improvement over the Bwlch and down to Cynwyn). These are firstly a record (in Quarter Sessions Order Book for Michaelmass 1870) of work on the fences near Blaen Taffechan Bridge, costing £13/6/-. Secondly, the First Edition 6" Ordnance Survey of the area (surveyed in 1885, published 1885/6) shows the new road in place with the old one still in being. At this time Lower Neuadd was complete but Upper Neuadd had not been started. Pont ar Daf, alias Blaen Taffechan Bridge, is still indicated, as is also a ford about 80 metres downstream, a feature not discernible from the 1" maps of 1832 or later.*

*This seems to be the end of the search unless a lucky break occurs!"*

Professor Bissell also remarks on changes to the road as it passes over the Gap itself with *"strong traces over the final 100 metres of an initially higher track, cutting off the sharp bend in the present road at 032206 some 3-5 metres above it. This line would leave the pass occupying more or less the natural contours of the Gap without the deep notch excavated for subsequent improvement."* Later he wrote to me saying, *"The reservoir plans were finally tracked down to Powys Records Office. Those for the Lower Neuadd (planned 1875, completed 1884) show*



*planned diversions of the road, which corresponds with the description in Section 3 above. Those for the Upper Neuadd (planned 1894, completed 1902) show the old road as already disused, but make no mention of the new one across the hillside on the east of the Taf Fechan valley. The reference to Section 3 concerns the sharp double bend associated with Pont Cwmfedwyn and the possibility that it was influenced by an existing road to Tyn-y-waun."*

I feel that my work plus this extra information from Professor Bissell is sufficiently comprehensive as justify the credentials of the western route and to place the onus of proving otherwise on those who still claim otherwise.

On this old road, nearer to Brecon , is "Ty-cue" at SO 045 243 which be a corruption of "tir-cui" - a name implying the shoeing of cattle. This might suggest that the road north from Merthyr to Brecon was used by drovers.

## Chapter 5. Roads to the west from the Taf Fechan to the Taf Fawr.

In Chapter 2 I drew attention to a cross-roads at Dol-y-gaer with the western road pointing towards "Tavon" and in Chapter 3 I showed that there was another road crossing Waun Wen to the west from the upper end of the Pentwyn Reservoir. "Tavon" poses a problem, it might be a corruption of a Welsh word, but nothing springs to mind except that it must be remembered that Ogilby's surveyors were English and possibly misheard or misinterpreted a local Welsh speaker whom they asked. Taf with one "F" is pronounced "Tav" and "Avon" is river so perhaps the route was described to them as to the Taf fawr. Having walked the stretch of mountain from Dolygaer to Fedw there is no traces of any hostelry to be seen and the 1832 O/S map (Fig. 5.2) shows Fedw to have been no more than a few scattered houses, however the 1904 1" O/S (Fig. 5.4) shows an inn at Fedw plus a ford and a scattering of houses. The same 1832 map shows the turnpike road from Brecon to Merthyr resulting from the 1787 Turnpike Act (now the A 470(T)) but prior to this any earlier road which might have existed was presumably no more than track in unknown condition. It seems there must have been a track because many of the properties adjacent and connected to it. However it is clear that the old route west from Dolygaer passed through Fedw and continued to Penderyn. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 6 but it is without doubt an early a long distance route and might well have been recognised as such by Ogilby's surveyors.

The present road west from Dol-y-gaer starts quite impressively - Photo 2.5, taken at its emergence onto the main road opposite the car park at SO 054 144, and Photo. 5.2, taken a few hundred yards uphill along the track. The 1904 1" map (Fig. 5.4) shows that this was the site of an inn which the 1832 map (Fig. 5.2) also shows with the name of Pen twyn. The presence of this inn would seem to be appropriate at the crossroads shown on the Ogilby 1675 map (Fig. 5.1 - No. 1). There was also limestone extraction and burning in the area with the remains of a lime-kiln alongside the track a little further beyond. The track, however, continues to the west with clear metalling at SO 044 137 (Photo. 5.3) and SO 043 137 (Photo. 5.4). Both of these photographs show not only that the track has substantial metalling but also that it is approx. 12ft. (4m.) wide with a level lateral surface. The track continues, in an increasingly ruinous state, for some distance before becoming less distinct. Continuing up the slope (Photo. 5.5 taken facing east at SO 041 134), to SO 037 129 it now joins the distinct track shown in Fig. 5.6 where it is joined by a second track rising from the south/east. From here westwards the track is depicted as a double dotted line on the modern 1:25,000 O/S map (Fig. 5.1) continuing over the mountain, past Garn Ddu, to descend to

Fedw. The origin of the rising track from the east is a little uncertain but Figs. 2.3 and 5.2 (where it is lined in yellow) might imply that Llyngyrn and, particularly, just south of Car are possible places, however it would also seem most likely that it originally arose in Vaynor and such a route is shown on the Rees map of Wales in the fourteenth century (Fig. 2.4). This track between Vaynor and Fedw is delineated as a double lined on the 1904 1" O/S (Fig. 5.5) and as a bridleway on the modern 1:25,000 O/S map. This can be seen on Fig. 5.1 which also shows a footpath connecting them - both bridleway and the track from Dolygaer merge just east of Fedw. Although no metalling is evident past this point the surface over this stretch it is dry underfoot and is clearly delineated by marker stones at intervals e.g. at SO 023 132 (Photo. 5.7).

I find it particularly interesting is seeming confirmation of my main theme that tracks were often over very long distances. In Volume 3 (Ref. 14) I discussed a route running north from Rhymney Bridge crossing Twynau Gwinion, past the Ogham Stone at SO 073 132 and continuing over Pen Twyn mawr to pass under the railway bridge at SO 0580 1335 (Photo. 2.4 of that volume). In chapter 2 of this volume Fig 2.3 shows the relationship of the Ogham Stone to Car very well and it seems clear that the track from Rhymney Bridge passed Bryn Sae at approx. SO 059 135 and descended to cross the Taf fechan at Car (SO 049 153). At Car the 1832 map clearly shows the river crossing and this track continuing up the mountain to the west at least as far as approx. SO 049 133. This track rising to the west from Car agrees remarkably well with the dotted track rising from the south-east to meet the Dolgaer to Fedw track at SO 032 129 as shown on Fig. 5.1. This track from Rhymney Bridge (more properly from Llechryd) would then have been able to continue to the west but it did not start at Llechryd but from somewhere else to the south or east - a really long-distance route.

There are remains of structures on the southern flank of Garn Ddu (SO 026 123, Photo. 5.8) of unknown provenance. It might be relevant to the existence of an ancient trackway that the area to the south of Garn Ddu has many cairns and other signs of early human habitation. The early track from Vaynor noted by Rees is strong evidence for Fedw providing an important crossing point of the Taf fawr - his route is still clearly shown on the 1904 1" map.

The route taken by the road from Talybont in the east to the crossroads at Dolygaer has been discussed in Chapter 3. This is clearly seen in Fig. 5.2, taken from the first edition 1" O/S map of 1832 and this map also shows a road (lined in broken pink) eastwards from Fedw to just the south side of Garn Wen. It has been shown that there is a road with a metalled surface as far west from Dol-y-gaer as SO 043 137 and, as Fig. 5.1

(modern 1:25,000 O/S map) shows a double-lined track as far east from Fedw as SO 027 123, this would seem to give good grounds for confirming that a road across the mountains once existed. The 1904 1" O/S map shows the track to Vaynor clearly but adds nothing to the previous information.

What also must be significant is that almost opposite Fedw, across the Taf Fawr, is today an established "B" road, which can be seen on the modern map (Fig. 5.1) and is also present on the first edition O/S map (Fig. 5.2). This road continues over Cefn Sychbant to Penderyn and is discussed in Chapter 6 and is shown in Figs. 6.1 and 6.2.

It seems clear that there is a track from Dolygaer to Fedw and that it was almost certainly in better condition in the past. Taken together with the Ogilby map (Fig. 2.5) it was highly probable that there was a viable route over the mountain in 1675. This makes the idea of a westerly continuation of the Talybont-on-Usk to Dol-y-gaer road further towards Pontneddfechan and beyond more likely than not. There is certainly a present-day road from Fedw to Penderyn, the start of which can be seen on Figs. 5.1 and 5.2.

In Chapter 3 it was suggested that another over-mountain road to the west might be found starting at Dan-yr-allt, on the eastern side of the present Pentwyn Reservoir at SO 050 153, crossing the river and the mountain to the west to descend to Llysiog-isaf on the Taf Fawr at SO 008 139. The present start of the track is by a posted gate at the side of the main road on the western side of the reservoir and almost certainly passed through, or by, a complex of old buildings (SO 0535 1554), as indicated on the Ogilby map (Fig. 2.5) of the Chester to Cardiff coach road. These buildings are shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey map and clearly existed at the time of the survey (first surveyed in 1813 and revised in 1830). That it was somewhat more than an isolated cottage is strongly suggested by its name - Pentre-Wernan. This translates as Pentre - Village (or more likely hamlet in this situation) - Wernan - Swamp or Alder trees. Certainly this area might well have fitted the latter part of the name.

The route has been lined on Fig. 5.1 in purple and it can be seen that from Gwaun y Pynt at SO 0390 1555 to Llysiog Isaf the map delineates it as a double lined route i. e. a cart track. The problem today is that almost all the land on the slope to the west of the Pentwyn reservoir is covered in plantation forest and, judging by the stumps of older and larger trees, has been for some time, but at approx. SO 049 153, to the north of the posted path to the west, there was an area where the forest had been felled some years before my visit and the new growth was passable. Only a short distance up the slope there were two features, neither of which is shown

on the modern map (Fig.5.1), which seem to be significant. The first is a group of Scots Pines, which can be seen across the reservoir in Photo. 3.10, which often indicated occupancy and probably predating the present economic forestry. The second is extensive yardage of high quality stone walls at the site of the ruined buildings. One part of the stone wall runs down alongside the stream marked on the present-day map and the upper part enclosed at least some of the area of Scots Pines (Photos. 5.9 and 5.10). There is a well-formed gateway at the corner of the walled area and this seems again to show that the Ogilby map may be taken as a very reasonable representation of the actuality at the time of its production.

Uphill from here there is a forestry road flanking the mountain and running off this, almost directly uphill, are the remains of an older track with well-worn stones which has been used to some extent by heavy forestry vehicles which have damaged it over much of its length (Photos. 5.11 and 5.12). When I took Photo. 3.10 from Dan-yr-Allt in 1997 the track could be clearly seen with binoculars and is visible in the photo - I have indicated it on the photo with a series of small arrows. With over 10 years of growth it can no longer be seen today - or even found on the ground. The forestry strikes again.

This track can (could!) be followed to the top edge of the forestry, where it is badly damaged by what appears to be a water diversionary channel, running at a shallow angle across the mountainside - probably associated with the first forestry or the needs of the reservoir. Once above this area the old track becomes clear again as it is cut into the slope on the flank of the mountain to give a level track-bed (Photo. 5.13). This continues uphill to SO 0380 1545 where it loses definition as it is crossed by a north/south track along the eastern edge of the mountain but becomes very evident again as a wide clear track across Waun Wen to the west - shown in Fig. 5.1 (modern O/S map) where it has been lined in dotted purple.

When I first explored this area in 1997 it followed a dry period and the vegetation was not too rank and the track was easily followed across the mountain. The actual carriage-way was approx. 4 to 4.5 m. (13 - 15 ft.) in width on each side of which was an open border bounded by narrow, but deep, drainage trenches. The overall distance between the trenches varied slightly between 8.5 and 9m. (27 - 30 ft.). Despite the fact that on the more recent (2007) visit the entire mountain was saturated with water due to a wet summer the track surface was still level and firm even though probing with an 80cm. rod showed that there was no metalling. Since 1997 a sheep-fence has been erected along the line of the road with the posts being placed between the northern side of the track and the northern drainage trench - this can be seen in Photo. 5.14. It would

appear that this old road was a convenient, perhaps traditional, boundary feature and it also provided a sufficiently solid surface to carry the fencing materials, including a wide metal gate, without becoming rutted or apparently damaged in any way.

Crossing Waun Wen, using this road, is very easy and, when the western slopes of Cefn Ynys-fawr are reached, posts have been placed at intervals indicating the tracks continuing utility, probably for hill-farming. On the western slopes bad patches have been repaired, sometimes with stones and sometimes with old railway sleepers, and a "ford", shown on the modern map at SO 020 141 is interesting because it has been bridged with railway sleepers but appears to have the remains of an older stone structure beneath it. From here the track continues downhill and enters the forest above Llysiog-isaf through a gate. The 1904 map (Fig. 5.4) shows no track crossing the mountain but it might be observed that this map, in general, shows less detail than later ones. However it does show some things which are not subsequently recorded. For example, at Llysiog isaf there was then a "Millers Arms" and Pont Llysiog is clearly shown just upstream past the confluence of the Llysiog and the Taf (SO 1655 1425).

This old track can be seen very clearly using Google Earth although to what extent the more recent fencing has enhanced or diminished its clarity is difficult to say. However to give a general picture of the area discussed, and perhaps to illustrate the value of Google Earth, Fig. 5.3 covers the area discussed with the route indicated with small arrows. Dolygaer is indicated with a "D" and Dan yr Allt with an "E". The track from Dan yr Allt to Llysiog isaf can easily be followed by zooming in and following it as I have indicated. But the track from Dolygaer to Fedw is more difficult to follow with Google. It can be followed on foot and it is clear at each end, but the centre section is difficult and I have not lined it. The car park facing the lane is marked on Fig. 5.3 with a red dot.

Might this road have continued further west from Llysiog-isaf? There is a bridge across the Taf Fawr here (Pont Llysiog) and a bridleway continues at least as far as the main A 4059 at SN 982 132. I will discuss this further in Chapter 6.

This road, clearly of cart width, across Waun Wen crossing the Taf Fechan at Dan-yr-allt might be an alternative route to the west to that at Dolygaer but this one using the Glyn Collwm route from Talybont – passing through Ystradgynwyn and Dan-yr-Allt as can be shown on Fig. 3.2, taken from a 6" to the mile O/S map. The route taken by this road over Blaen-y-glyn before the changes made by the construction of the railway is discussed in Tracks, Volume 4, "Roads centred on Pen rhiw

calc" (Ref. 3)..

The existence of a second road over the mountains between the Taf Fechan and the Taf Fawr caused me, as committed hill-walker, to wonder whether travellers from e.g. Dol-y-gaer might for some reason chose to use the more northern crossing at Dan-yr-Allt and to, perhaps, take a shortcut. So I looked for one - and found it.

There is a track, apparently of a width more suitable for pack-animals than carts, through Coed Hir (SO 051 147, lined in broken blue on Fig. 5.1), which I followed from about SO 048 147 northwards, climbing gently around the flank of Tarren Tormwnt (there is a footpath shown on the 1:25,000 O/S map but I cannot be certain that the route I took is fully coincident). Over much of its distance the track is ruinous but occasionally metalling can be seen (Photo. 5.15) and, at SO 045 153, there is stone revetting on the down-hill side (Photo. 5.16). This track subsequently passes above the drainage channel previously mentioned and rise to meet, at SO 045 148, the up-hill track from Dan-yr-Allt at SO 049 153. Photo. 5.17 is a view back down this latter track from this point.

## **Chapter 6. Routes further to the west - to Glyn Neath and the Sarn Helen.**

If the over-mountain routes west from Dol-y-gaer and Dan-yr-allt can be justified then the implications are considerable. I shall deal with them in turn, starting at Dol-y-gaer.

### **a) West from Dol-y-gaer.**

It has already been shown in Chapter 2 that old maps indicated the commencement of a road across the mountain to the west. This section of road is termed "Site of Roman Road" on the 1886-88 1:2,500 Ordnance Survey map of 1832 (Fig. 2.6) and, while the Roman designation seems to raise hackles in some quarters, it at least implies that a road heading west once existed. Similarly, Ogilby (Fig. 2.5) draws attention to a road and actually gives it a destination - "To Tavon" - although where "Tavon" is might be is a matter of some uncertainty. The route itself as far as Fedw in the Taf Fawr valley has been described in some detail in Chapter 5.

But what happened after it reached Fedw? This question is, in fact, easy to answer as Fig. 6.1, taken from the first edition Ordnance Survey map shows the track from Dol-y-gaer crossing the Merthyr/Brecon road at Fedw and continuing west through Penderyn to Glyn Neath (lined on the map in dotted pink). Although this map has a discontinuity of about one mile to the west of Pen-yr-heol (SN 993 115) there would seem to be no doubt as to the continuity of the route - the name "Pen-yr-heol" being a bit of a "give away". Fig. 5.4, which is taken from the 1904 1" O/S map, is very useful as it shows the area of Fedw before the building of the Llwyn-on reservoir and that, at this time, the river is crossed by a ford. To the west of the ford this road soon joins another which crossed the river by the Pont ar daf bridge a little way upstream to continue westwards past Penyrheol. Fedw at that time appears to have been a reasonable sized hamlet with a mill, an inn and a scattering of properties on both sides of the river. Fig. 6.2 is of a similar area but is created from a merge of a 1962 Brecon sheet and 1972 Cardiff sheet 1" O/S maps. This clearly shows a continuous road from Fedw to Penderyn and a bridleway from Penderyn to Pontneddfechan is shown on the more recent 2002 1:25,000 O/S map. This latter map shows the road eastwards towards Glyn Neath starting as a yellow road but soon becoming portrayed as a bridleway. As it was clearly shown on the First Edition O/S map (Fig. 6.1) it would appear to have fallen out of regular use. It is worth adding that Rees, in his map of Wales in the fourteenth century, was quite clear on this road west from Fedw, past Penderyn and onwards (Fig. 6.5).



Closing in on the stretch from Penderyn to Pont Nedd Fechan Fig. 6.3 (1947 1" O/S) shows this route west of Penderyn more clearly (lined in dotted red) and it is portrayed with double lines identifying a track partially over open ground. At the time of the first published O/S map of 1832 (Fig.6.1) it is delineated much more clearly and it seems certain that its existence and, at this time, importance can be assumed. To emphasise this I have included here Fig. 6.4 taken from the earlier Ordnance Survey surveyors drawings of 1815 as it is particularly clear and because it gives names which have since been forgotten or changed.

Rees shows no over-mountain route from Dol-y-gaer to Fedw but is quite definite about the rest of the route west through Penderyn (Fig. 6.5).

The potential significance of the route from Talybont-on Usk via Dol-y-gaer, Penderyn, Glyn Neath and on to Neath can be seen in Fig. 6.7 taken from an old quarter of an inch to the mile contour map. Lovers of straight lines will find food for thought in that the route is as straight as possible given the rugged terrain over which it passes..

#### **b) West from Dan-yr-allt.**

Whereas the route from Dolygaer is quite clearly shown on a wide range of maps and, if one accepts the initial over-the-mountain road to Fedw, seems to be undeniable - the more northerly route west from the vicinity of Dan yr Allt is rather less clear. Before the route itself is discussed one must address who might use it and why. I will return to this more fully in the Discussion but it would seem clear that either it catered for traffic along the Glyn Collwn to and from Talybont or by those using the Roman Road north from Cardiff via Dolygaer to Brecon wishing to travel to the west and north-west.

This route, as far as Llysiog isaf, has been discussed in Chapter 5 and shown, lined in dotted purple, in Fig. 5.1., until it meets the old Merthyr/Brecon road. To the west of Llysiog isaf the route is shown as a footpath on Fig. 5.4 (1904 1" O/S), Fig. 6.1 (First edition O/S) and Fig. 6.2 (modern 1" O/S) lined in green and is designated as a bridle-way on the modern 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey map. This meets the Hirwaun to Brecon road (A 4059) at SN 9852 1420.

The big question is where did it go from there? Of course, it could have turned south towards Hirwaun or Penderyn but this would suggest that it was an equally desirable, or even preferred, route to the west than the crossing at Dol-y-gaer. Might this imply that traffic to and from Brecon via Bwlch-ar-y-fan (The Gap) might have found it useful for reaching other

destinations or that the road to and from Talybont via Glyn Collwn is older and more important than has been thought.

The other alternative which suggests itself from examination of Fig. 6.2, is via Ystradfellte, or its vicinity, to meet the Sarn Helen. This might be a good place to point out that Helen was in fact derived from Elen Lwyddog - a Celtic princess who married Magnus Maximus (Macsen Wledig of the Mabinogion). After Magnus's death in Gaul she returned to Britain, helped to bring Christianity to the Britons and promoted the building of roads to help link the many tribes.

This, of course, if true, would have further implications. In this general context the first possibility considered was where a road or track might have passed over Mynydd y Garn to meet the Avon Mellte at Castell Mellte and Castell Coch i.e. at the confluence of the Avon Llia and the Avon Dringarth. Here, from Pont-y-felin, would be only a short step northwards to meet the Sarn Helen at the Roman Marching Camp of Plas y gors (RM 63 - a large camp of 8.47 h. or 21.6 acres.). However, even after walking Mynydd y Garn several times, using large-scale modern maps and an accurate GPS no convincing route could be found although it was possible on foot and, of course, pack animals can go pretty much anywhere that has a firm footing.

This would leave the most probable link to cross the Hepste further south at around SN 946 113, perhaps near Llwyn celyn and Tir-dyweuydd or Ty-mawr to approach Ystradfellte by more or less the route taken by the present road. There is a ford across the Hepste at SO 950 116 at Llwyn celyn and another at SO 955 122 near Ty-mawr. At SN 9400 1213 the north-bound traveller might have continued north past Ystradfellte to meet the Sarn Helen at the Roman marching camp of Plas y gors (SN 9237 1638). Traffic intending to join the Sarn Helen could certainly have crossed the Mellte, at or near, the present Porth-yr-Ogof (SN 928 124). From here there is a bridle-way joining the Sarn Helen at approx. SN 9075 1285 which might be typical of, if not the actual route taken. Fig. 6.8 is a Google Earth image of the area between the present-day car park at Porth yr ogof and the Sarn Helen - possible routes can be clearly seen.

It is worth mentioning that the Sarn Helen as shown on the modern map (Fig. 6.2) has only one defined route in this area but the first edition map (Fig. 6.1) shows two possible routes in this area with the one missing from the modern map being labelled as the Sarn Helen.

However, if you step back from the map, it can be seen that the route northwards past Ystadfellte to the Sarn Helen was not necessarily to travel

only to Brecon. It is equally valid that, having reached about SN 925 184 the route via Heol Senni and Defynog to meet the road west from Brecon at Senni Bridge was equally, and possibly more, valuable. Whether this proposed alternative route was "Roman" or merely "Old" I do not know, although further research might throw some light on this. Nor can we make any assumptions on its quality i.e. a cart-road or pack-animal track although today it is designated as a "yellow" road on the Ordnance Survey map.

I have not cluttered Fig. 6.2 with lining as it is quite clear to follow and I did not want to prescribe a definite route for the area of SN 95 11.

## Discussion.

When I started to write this Volume I thought that the only controversial topic would be the question of the alignment of the road from just south of Pont Cwmyfedwen to Bwlch-ar-y-Fan. As it turned out that such was the sheer weight of evidence for the western route being that of the old road that I felt quite comfortable with defending this position. What I did not anticipate was that other decidedly controversial issues would be uncovered, namely:

1) The route to the Usk valley from the area of Dowlais Top via Cwm Criban, Gwaun Nant Ddu and Pen Rhiw-calch as being of major importance providing a direct continuation of the Gelligaer ridgeway road which also had a link to and from the Roman fort at Penydarren.

2) The generally accepted Roman road from Talybont-on-Usk to Dolygaer continuing to the west thus changing its status from a bad weather alternative to the generally accepted route through Bwlch-ar-y-fan to Brecon, as suggested by Margary, to that of a long distance cross-country route to possibly the Neath valley, Coelbren or Sennibridge.

3) A further track crossing the Waun Wen from the upper end of the Pentwyn reservoir to Llysiog-isaf and beyond, which was further accessed from Dolygaer and might mean a different destination to 2). It has been suggested in Chapter 6 that travelling northwards on the Sarn Helen, after reaching the Sarn Helen near Ystradfellte turning northwards, past the Roman marching camp of Plas y gors, to around SN 925 183, would have accessed the road to Heol Senni, Dyfynnog and Sennibridge - joining the Brecon to Llandovery Roman road west (M 62B), presently the A 40T. This could have been a useful route directly from Cardiff via Merthyr to join the main Roman Road (M 62B) west of Brecon.

and

4) A major track on the eastern side of the valley from Dan-yr-allt to Dolygaer which was still of importance when the railway was being built and before the building of the Pentwyn reservoir. This being part of the longer distance track on the eastern side of the river, shown in Figs. 2.1 and 2.3, running north from the vicinity of Pontsticill.

To put more clearly into perspective the major points raised in this Volume I draw attention to Fig. D. 1. This has been taken from the quarter inch to the mile O/S map of South Wales (1960) and covers the area from

Talybont in the east to Neath in the west. The tracks actually walked or driven over have been highlighted with green dots. The area to the east of Dolygaer, and for some distance into the Black Mountains, has been discussed in Tracks 4, "Roads centred on Pen rhiw-calc" (Ref. 3) and was the subject of Tracks 1 "Dowlais Top to the Usk" (Ref. 1.). This map is not of such a scale as to show the detail of the maps I have used in each chapter but put the tracks examined into a wider context.

It covers the area between Brecon and Neath and, when one adds in the accepted Roman road from Dolygaer to Talybont to the east (M 620), and the Sarn Helen from Neath to Brecon (M 622) in the west then it can be seen that it shows a direct and, on the large scale, a remarkably straight connection between Talybont on the Julia Strata (M 62A) and Neath (Nidum), a distance of some 30 miles (48 km) It is also demonstrated in Volume 4 (Ref. 3) that after crossing the River Usk then the road north and east continues through Llanfiangle Tal-y-llyn to Talgarth and beyond.

The main recognised Roman stations and roads, together with the numbering system devised by Margary (Ref. 6) are shown on Fig. D. 2. which is an extract from the Ordnance survey map of Roman roads in Britain (1956) to which I have added the Margary notation. The area which I have been discussing is perhaps clearer in Fig. D.3. which is taken from Rees's "Historical Atlas of Wales" (Ref. 16).

Although it is dealt with in detail in Volume 4 it is worth explaining here why, at the eastern end of the Pen Rhiw calc ridgeway, the road shows two branches. The road accepted by Margary as Roman continues straight on to cross the Usk at approx. SO 1175 2240. It is presumed to have continued on approximately the same alignment to Allt yr Esgair (R.C.A. H. M. W. "Brecknock. Hillforts and Roman Remains (Ref. 7. H.F. 47) who, obviously find it necessary to remark that, "*interpretation of the remains is rendered difficult by afforestation.....*". It is described as a large multi-vallate fort on a prominent ridge. The Roman road from Caerleon to Brecon (M 64A) (sometimes called the Julia Strata) runs along the ridge. This is the route seemingly used by Rees in Fig. D.3.

I believe that the other route descending from the ridgeway, locally known as the "Old Parish Road" (described in Tracks 4. Ref 3), to cross the Usk at Scethrog might have been equally important. At Scethrog it met the M 64A but also crossed to continued northwest through Llanfihangel Tal-y-llyn to Talgarth and beyond. It also strongly suggests that there was a route to Brecon along the southern side of the Usk passing near the Roman villa of Maesderwyn (SO 0962 2585, RV 1) – a clearly important site. This branch appears to be the one favoured by the Ordnance Survey i.e. that portrayed in Fig. D.2. as opposed to the Rees map (Fig. D.3.).

There was also a further road descending from SO 120 188 to Llangynidr as discussed in Volume 4 (Ref. 3).

The reason for the route west from Dan yr Allt to Llysiog Isaf is rather less clear although it could have afforded a direct link with Ystradfellte and the Sarn Helen from Neath to Brecon (M 622) and the Roman fort at Coelbren. Coelbren (SN 853 103) is interesting in that it provided security on the Sarn Helen (M 622) between Neath and Brecon Gaer but it also to traffic up the Swansea valley. It has been noted that this traffic could also have turned north/westwards to meet the Roman Road west of Brecon at present-day Sennibridge. Today the present A 4067 follows this route passing through Glyntawe and Defynog - such a route is shown on the map of Wales in the fourteenth century by Professor William Rees (Ref. 13) as joining the Roman road west at Rhyd y bru, now Sennibridge. This is not to suggest that it was a Roman road although Rees depicts is much straighter than does the 1832 O/S map. The 1832 first edition O/S map shows it as a typically wandering and contouring road - in contrast to the Sarn Helen which is well graded and contoured and is accepted as being of Roman origin.

I would like to bring in here a view which it is easy to forget. That is people, perhaps especially Romans, were not interested specifically in roads and tracks alone for transport but also with water which could offer transport links. It is widely accepted that the best means of transport of bulky, heavy or fragile goods was by boat. This is obvious on the sea routes but was also true of rivers with suitable flow and gradient. Apart from the heavy weights which can be moved with a modest labour force boats offered good security both from theft and from breakage. This has been made clear by the considerable work done by Selkirk in his book "On the Trail of the Legions" (Ref. 18). The book is a mine of information and has many valuable references.

Because the gradient of the River Neath from Sea level to Glyn Neath is approx. 1:600 and such a gradient would easily allow flat-bottomed boats to pass using weirs and flash-locks and abundant labour for hauling - and that was something the Romans always arranged if it was needed by using their own troops as well as by co-opting locals as required.

We tend to forget that waterways were the route of choice for transporting heavy goods even up to recent times. For example, the Wye was used at least as far as Hereford in the twelfth century and navigation of the river only became less used because of the frequent weirs set up by mill owners. Even so, hand haulage still existed in the early days of the nineteenth century as the following quote shows - "*At Coedithals weir*

*above Brockweir we counted 32 men dragging one barge. The men were harnessed 8 at a time to the rope by a chest band. The strain was so great that at times the men went down on their hands and knees to cling to stones to get a better grip. We heard that further upstream that no less than 50 men were required. Where possible sails were used but no horses were used.*" (Transcribed by P. Morgan-Jones from "Odd items on Wye Navigation.". Possibly taken from Knight's "The land we live in."

A further quote, to which I cannot find the attribution, concerns boats tying-up at Eaton on the River Lugg in 1906 to carry bells from Leominster Cathedral for re-casting.

There is much more evidence for the use of waterways to transport heavy loads, and anyone interested should really read the exhaustive research carried out by Selkirk (Ref. 18), but enough for now to see why I feel that Glyn Neath, and the proximity of the Roman fort at Coelbren, might be a significant destination for a road. The idea also helps to make sense of Fig. D. 2 which is taken from the O/S map of Roman Britain (1956) to which I have added the accepted Margary road designations and Fig D.3. which is a small section taken from Plate 14 of Rees's "Historical Atlas of Wales" (Ref. 16). From these maps the Roman road from Talybont to Dolygaer make sense only as a section of a longer link to Coelbren or Pontneddfechan. It might be noted that the Roman station at Allt-yr-Esgair (SO 129 235) is in direct line on the eastern end of this road while the fort at Pen-y-Gaer is clearly not directly related although traffic down the Cwmddu valley, e.g. from Talgarth and beyond, could easily access the the Dolygaer route (M 62A). The Cwmddu road past Castell Dinas, despite being acknowledged as ancient, has not been given a Margary number as, presumably not accepted as Roman. Whether or not this is the case it is enough that it is a very ancient route. The R.C.A.H.M.W. in "Brecknock Hillforts and Roman Remains" (Ref. 7) does not specifically mention a Roman fort but confirms that this fort, commanding a high pass between the Usk and the Wye valleys has a long history. It was known to have been both an Iron Age fort and a mediaeval castle.

I have discussed the possible use of the Taf for transport in my paper "The route of the Ogilby coach road from Pontsticill to Quakers Yard" (Ref. 2) but in essence the river would have been quite satisfactory, at least as far as the confluence of the Taf and the Cynon at Abercynon. I have suggested that loads could have been transferred to a land route at Treharris with a short haul to the Roman fort at Gelligaer to join the Cardiff to Brecon Roman road. It must be remembered that the type of water craft used were probably flat-bottomed and carrying perhaps 5 to 10 tons. When the river valleys, much later, developed canal systems the vessels were typically 60 ft. long, 7ft. 6 inches wide, had a draft of up to 3 ft. and

carried at least 25 tons. Because they moved on a deliberately level water surface with very low currents such loads could be hauled by only one horse.

This reason for Romans to chose to position their fort of Penydarren near the river rather than on higher ground near the accredited Roman road from Cardiff to Brecon has been discussed earlier but it has been shown in Chapter 1 that there were diversions to and from the ridgeway route and its position was clearly considered important. Its position, on a high bluff overlooking the river, would seem to indicate that there was an important crossing. In Volume 1 I have shown that there were two east to west routes - one following approximately the heads of the valleys route and another running from Llanellen on the River Usk to Neath via Nantyglo, Ebbw Vale, Tredegar, Pontlottyn, Merthyr, Aberdare and onwards converging on this crossing and, probably even more important, the route west through Hirwaun to Pontneddfechan and all the other possible routes from this area as discussed. Such a river crossing would have needed securing and would have given the opportunity to tax users. The river itself might well have formed a tribal or inter-tribal boundary and, if so, would have had a strategic importance.

It seems that the high-level ridgeway road from Gelligaer was always the most important long-distance north/south route and, further, that this implies that the route up Cwm Criiban, past the later Ogham Stone, to join the Usk and the Strata Julia near Talybont-on-Usk, was likely to have been a route of choice to meet the Caerleon/Brecon Roman road and continue to other destinations north of the Usk, such as Talgarth either via Llanfihangel Tal-y-llyn or the Roman fort of Pen y gaer and up the Cwmdu valley. For direct traffic to Brecon the road up the Taf Fechan valley and over Bwlch-ar-y-fan is shorter but steeper and much more problematic in bad weather but probably faster for marching men. At Dolygaer a traveller could have continued north to Brecon, east to Talybont or west to the Neath or Swansea valleys.

Which route were chosen, perhaps at different times before, during and after, the occupation, we just do not know but, again, it does highlight the reason for possible Roman interest in Dol-y-gaer, apart for being a way station on the route north to Brecon unless it also, as has been suggested, had a role in maintaining an east/west route from the region of Allt-yr-Esgair on the Strata Julia and its continuation north and east towards Talgarth and to the Glyn Neath area to the west. It is also worth bringing up one of the main concerns of the whole series of Volumes which comprise "Tracks" which is that people moved over the landscape for many years before the Romans came and have done so ever since they left. In the days of travel by "shanks pony" - whether animal or man -



routes evolved to link places of importance to them as directly as possible. The quality of the chosen route would have depended on the mode of transport used e. g. wheeled vehicles would have needed firm surfaces and reasonable grades while the ubiquitous pack animal, the main mode of transport in this area well into the Industrial Revolution could have a much wider choice. It is also forgotten that carts and pack animals were quite unconcerned with crossing a river through a foot or so of water provided that there was a firm bed underfoot and the current was not excessive.

From the many miles I have walked exploring roads and tracks, some of which have been described in this Volume and some in others, one thing is clear to me and that is that the road and track network in the past was much more extensive than we have imagined. In addition to the many old roads which have been continually upgraded and are in use today there are others which served other needs and have now faded into obscurity. Of these some have vanished because of the ravages of time, were even deliberately destroyed by removing the pitching and dressing for other uses, by landowners wanting to end a right of way or even by having tramways laid on them, but some can still be found by the use of old maps and records and by careful inspection of every yard of their likely route. Because, as time passes, the losses are likely to increase, not only because of the continuing actions of natural forces but also because of the increasing pressure on land by various forms of development, it is important that this type of work is not only done but properly recorded. A good example of how old roads and tracks can be first fragmented thus losing their value and quickly becoming lost is described in Chapter 5. Here it is shown how a long distance track, which at the time of the building of the railway (around 1860) was deemed to be important enough to warrant a bridge for it to pass under the track. However, even if the track still retained some value after this date the filling of the Pontsticill reservoir in 1927 it was ended then. By this time it was also outmoded by the new forms of transport and other developments. Today after the development of the turnpike roads, very rapid industrial development, the canal, the railways etc. it is only on the undisturbed (by such as forestry) areas of the mountains that detailed searching may find traces of the older systems. Even when undisturbed by man the natural forces, perhaps particularly water once gutters and culverts become blocked, quickly wash-out old tracks. I mention some specific examples of this in Volume 3 (Ref. 14)

Before closing this Discussion I must again raise the problem of the general perception of the state of the country before the Romans came, as it seems that a considerable proportion of people are still of the opinion that the inhabitants of Britain ran around in skins and daubed on woad.

While it was true that most workers on farms or estates (the bulk of the population in earlier times) were tied to the land by custom and, perhaps, law there were also many travellers whether for trade, ecclesiastical or various authorities.

I was aware of this perception before I started writing the series of Volumes of "Tracks" and, in Volume 1, the first Chapter is almost entirely devoted to this. Those interested might refer to this Chapter in Tracks Volume1, "Dowlais Top to the Usk" but I will repeat one quotation from "The History of the Countryside", by Olive Rackham (Ref. 19) - *"From the Neolithic onwards Britain has had a fully developed network of major and minor communications. The known Roman roads are but a small part of a system which penetrated to every part of England; they are no more representative of all roads in the Roman period than motorways are representative of all twentieth century roads"*. Our perceptions are, it seems, coloured by the great network of strategic Roman roads such as Watling Street, the Fosse Way, Ermine Street etc. and we fail to perceive the multitude of roads from A to B which evolved from the needs of people who lived in the land.

The problem with writing about old roads and tracks are that, unlike a closely defined archaeological site, they tend to continue to distant, sometimes unexpected destinations. Each section researched throws new light on the system and raises new questions about the adjoining areas and the work never really ends - just a continuing updating.

What is very clear is that roads and tracks went from one place to another, often over great distances, and the only way to make sense of them is to step back from the map to look at the pattern made by them. If you were now to decide that you wanted to travel from place to place the pattern will suddenly make sense.

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