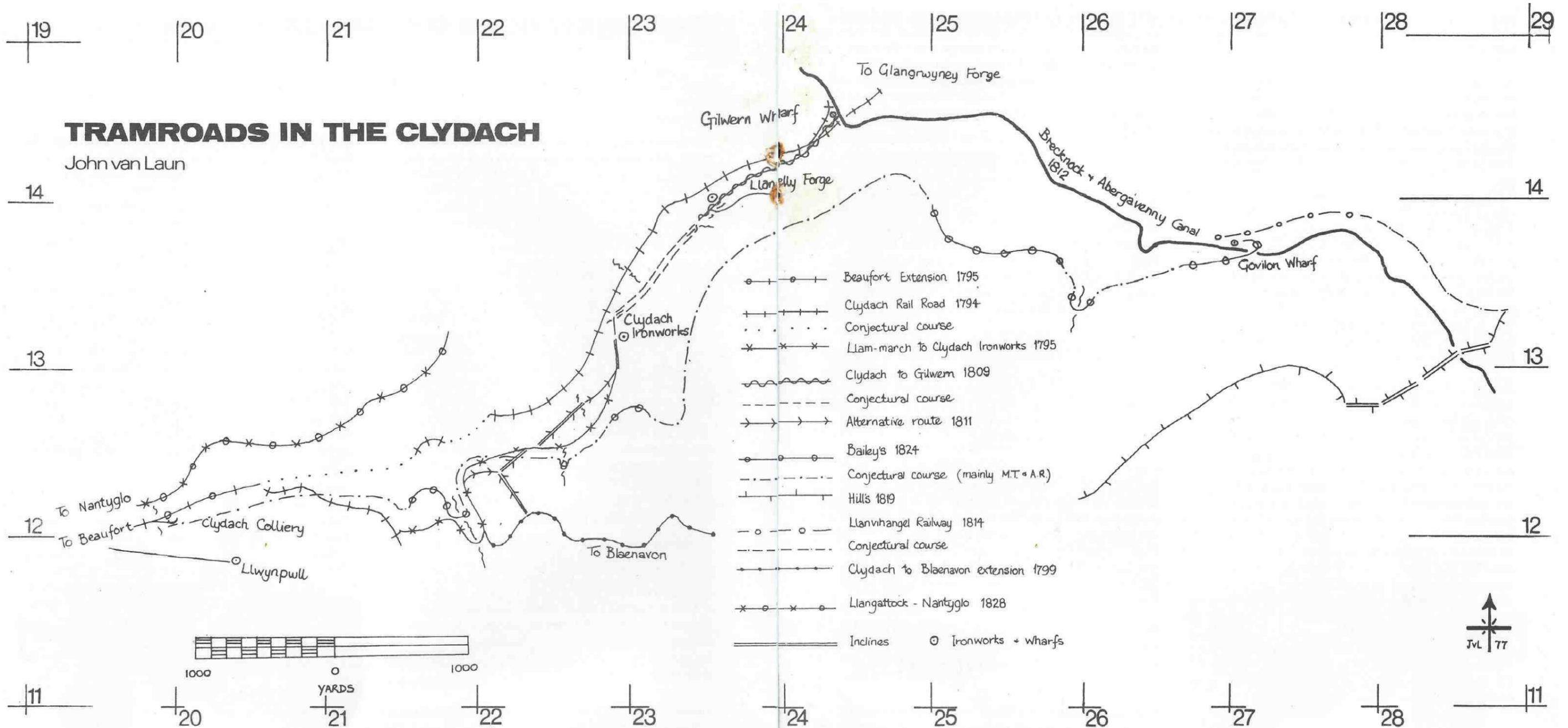


TRAMROADS IN THE CLYDACH

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The Brecknock and Abergavenny Canal Act was obtained in 1793 and the canal was finally finished and linked to the Monmouthshire Canal in 1812 providing through facilities to Newport.

The B & A Canal gave powers to build tramroads up to eight miles in length from the canal. The first of these to be built was the 'Clydach Rail Road' (sometimes referred to as the 'Brecknock and Abergavenny Rail Road') which ran from Gelli-Felin collieries to Glangrwyney Forge on the Usk. This was completed in 1794 and as was the custom at that time, laid with 'bar' rails. It seems that this road never changed to a plateway as did most of the early railways of South Wales after about 1800. Bar rails survive in places, some used as drain covers and in other places stone blocks bear the marks of bar rails only. The first part of this road to be constructed can be followed as a track from 2130 1210¹ to 2046 1231 from here it turned east down the northern side of the

Clydach but the route is conjectural due to the construction of the Heads of the Valleys road. The course of the tramroad can be seen again for about 50 yards as it makes a detour round the 'Drum and Monkey'. The remainder of its course can be followed from a pylon at 2197 1275 to just beyond Gilwern aqueduct. A tarred footpath leads from the pylon through the back of Cheltenham to 2270 1316 from here it can be followed as a road (an original bridge exists at 2306 1379). At 2420 1437 is a cottage named 'Machine House' and here the route divides. The road follows the course to the top of the lime kilns and the wharf at 2420 1471 but the main route leads under an arch in the canal aqueduct (2437 1450) and on to Glangrwyney forge (239 161) via a track at 2450 1472 and the tarred road running north to the river at 2409 1599. The latter point is possibly the site of the bridge destroyed by flood in 1795. A map entitled 'Plan of the Brecknock and Abergavenny Rail Road' dated 1795 shows the tramroad terminating at this point, but there was, no doubt, a ford leading from here to the forge.

By 1795 an extension from the 'Clydach Rail Road' had been built to Rhyd-y-blew near Ebbw Vale and the combined lines were used to bring pig iron from Beaufort Ironworks to Glangrwyney forge for refining. This extension made a junction with the earlier tramroad at 2046 1231 and now forms a footpath into Brynmawr and along Alma Street. An original bridge can be seen at 2023 1226.

Two branches to the Clydach Rail Road were constructed within the area. One from near Llwynpwll Farm (2033 1185) to join the Clydach Rail Road at 1946 1196. Edward Kendall asked for this in 1800 and it was subsequently let to the Brecon Boat Company and where the line crossed the Merthyr, Tredegar and Abergavenny Railway (1913 1191) was known as 'Brecon Boat Siding'. The other branch was from Clydach Colliery (1986 1213) to join the Clydach Rail Road about 200 yards to the west. This was authorised in 1812 and constructed by the Brecon Boat Company for £75 the accommodation arch to the colliery under the MT & A.

Railway can still be seen and a platform of rock leading from this shows the course of the branch. In 1794 a 1.3/8 mile long tramroad was surveyed by Thomas Dadford and Hugh Henshall from Llam-march 'Coal and Mine Works' to Clydach Ironworks. This was financed initially by the Canal Company but Frere, Cooke and Kendall, the proprietors of the ironworks were to pay eight per cent on the cost and for repairs. The tramroad was opened in 1795. The course of this route is now a road from near Gelli-Felin across a stream at 2196 1197 and by an even descent to Clydach at 2290 1309. This tramroad was a busy one and it was decided to double it in 1798, but the date of completion is not known. By 1811 it had become necessary to substitute a series of balance worked inclines. These rose in stages from 2251 1265 to 2226 1248 from here to 2205 1243 where there was a link with the earlier route at 2186 1232. A third, possibly later incline, rose from 2205 1243 to a head at 2220 1220. From the foot of the first incline (2251 1265) the tramroad followed a level course towards the ironworks and formed a

junction with the earlier road again at 2290 1309. A bridge with stone blocks is to be found near the bottom of the first incline, but this is not associated with it.

As already mentioned, the B & A Canal was not linked with the Monmouthshire until 1812, the Clydach Ironworks therefore sought a direct link with the Monmouthshire via the Blaenavon Tramroad. In 1797 the Monmouthshire Company allowed Frere, Cooke & Co a quarter of the tolls payable to them to be used to extend to Blaenavon. This link was completed by 1799. The route can be followed from 2240 1215 to 2393 1209 as a track, from here it can be followed as a tarred road to Blaenavon. Presumably there was a link from 2240 1215 back to the Llam-march line (possibly at 2187 1222 via the 'Jolly-Colliers', 2220 1220, and 2204 1198), at 2220 1220 there was a later link to the 1811 inclines. The Clydach-Blaenavon line was probably abandoned after 1812 but from 2283 1195 northwestwards it appears to have been retained to serve a colliery and adapted to 4 feet 4 inch gauge back to back of the wheels (a gauge favoured by Crawshay Bailey). Fish-bellied cast-iron plates three feet long have been found along this section.

An extension to the Llam-march line of 1795 was opened in 1809 from Clydach Ironworks to Gilwern Wharf. (The B & A Canal had been opened northwards to Brecon in 1800). Part of this can be followed as a footpath from 2351 1397 to 2423 1441. This passed through Llanelly forge on one hand and there was a branch from 2351 1397 towards the 'Forge Hammer'. Near this point a stone bridge crosses the Clydach and there are some stone blocks in place. The course of the tramroad from the Clydach works to 2327 1377 is conjectural and has been much disturbed. It is possible that a line existed on both sides of the Clydach as there are bridges at 2291 1332 and 2329 1371. The geology map based on that of 1903² shows a vague course for a tramroad to the north of the Clydach which would favour the use of the bridge at 2291 1332. The cast-iron bridge (2287 1326) dated 1824 although constructed as a tramroad bridge probably received little use for that purpose. In contrast with the cast-iron bridge at Robertstown, Aberdare, it shows no wear at all from the movement of plates. The Clydach bridge probably served the works offices on the north side of the river.

The last tramroad to be built down the valley was Bailey's, from Nantyglo to Govilon Wharf. This was opened in 1821, being laid as a 4 feet 4 inch plateway.³ Most of this tramroad was absorbed into the Merthyr, Tredegar and Abergavenny Railway in 1859 but there are a few points that can still be seen, mainly where the tramroad made sweeps into the tributaries of the Clydach or round spurs. The track from the west to east portals of the tunnel below Gelli-Felin (2150 1208 to 2179 1212) formed part of the tramroad and again at Clydach Camp tunnel a similar pattern was followed (2278 1265 to 2310 1265). Bridges still exist at 2183 1212 and 2597 1334 above Wildon's Ironworks. The latter is shown on the deposited plans for the MT and A Railway, Parliamentary Session 1858-9 from 2597 1346 to 2618 1342 and clearly marked Bailey's Tramroad. A siding into the works is also shown from 2623 1345. A longer stretch of the tramroad can be seen from 2501 1393 along the remains of an embankment into a farm track to join the metalled road at 2552 1367. From this point the line can be seen for 300 yards at Shop Newydd (2565 1365). The final piece of Bailey's Tramroad can

be followed mainly as road from 2640 1345 to the bridge over the canal near Govilon Wharf (2710 1368). Once over the bridge the tramroad swung sharply left into the wharf. From the wharf a short distance to the north another tramroad started (2677 1371) - the Llanvihangel Railway. This tramroad with the Grosmont and Hereford Railways (tramroads) formed links from Nantyglo to Hereford and Blaenavon to Hereford (via Hill's Tramroad).

Although not strictly in the Clydach Valley the extension from the Llangattock Tramroad to Nantyglo should be included as it runs for some of its course along the northern edge of the Clydach. This tramroad was extended from around the incline head (200 159) to Llangattock into Nantyglo in 1828. The tramroad can be followed from the incline head as a track to 2050 1570 and from thence by a tarred road to Nantyglo via Lower Bailey Street in Brynmawr. The course of this tramroad is very obvious and follows the contours for most of the way, although there is an embankment at Wern Watkin (2113 1527).

The tramroads described formed the main pattern of early communications in the area. Many of the feeders to these will have been re-aligned as circumstances directed and disappeared under waste tips but some must await rediscovery. An example of a feeder is the incline from 2281 1256 to 2262 1253, which probably carried limestone from Clydach Camp to Clydach Ironworks via the Llam-march line.

Tradition points to the closure of all the tramroads in the Clydach by 1911. The geology map based on that of 1903, although not entirely reliable shows the last of these tramroads in operation. The Llangattock line is shown from 2060 1691 into Brynmawr - almost its entire length. The 'Clydach Rail Road' is shown from Gilwern (wharf 2435 1446) to a point near Llanelly Quarries (2230 1250). A short section (about 200 yards) of the Glangrwyney line appears as part of the Llam-march line to the east of the canal.

The tramroads of the Clydach lie in an area about six miles in length and for most of this distance less than half a mile across. The area has a high potential for the early railway historian.

Acknowledgement

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References

- 1 All grid references are SO and taken from the 1:25,000 map.
- 2 Geology Survey of Great Britain (England and Wales) sheet 232. *Abergavenny*
- 3 *Hereford Journal*, 19 December 1891

Baxter, Bertram, *Stone Blocks and Iron Rails*, 1966 under 'Brecknock & Abergavenny Canal'. 'Llangattock', 'Glangrwyney', 'Beaufort', 'Llammarch', 'Bailey's Tramroad'.

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