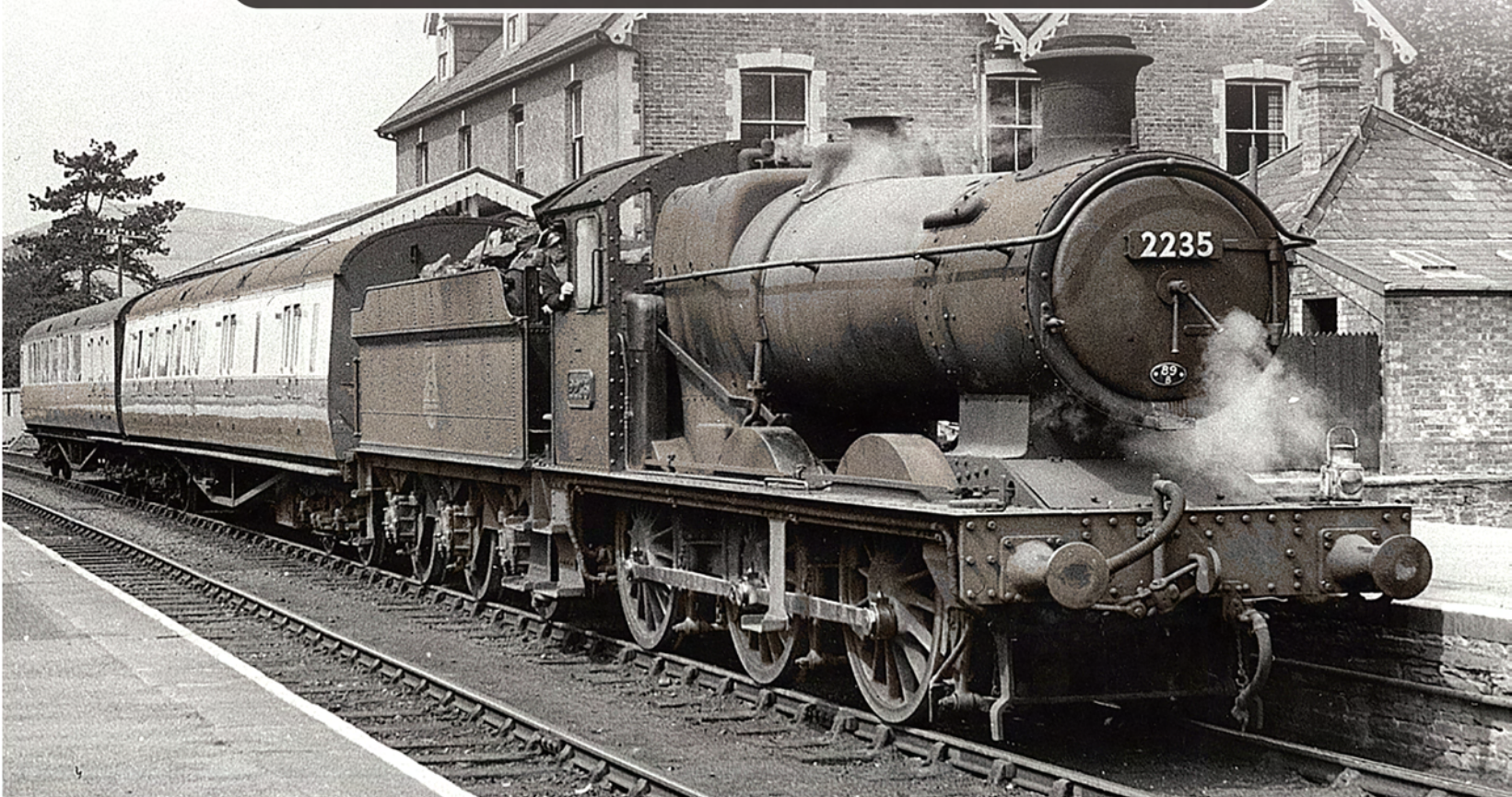


SOUTH WALES VALLEYS

Railways and Industry on the

BRECON & MERTHYR RAILWAY

MERTHYR-PONTSICILL JUNCTION-BRECON



JOHN HODGE & RAY CASTON

SOUTH WALES VALLEYS

Railways & Industry on the BRECON & MERTHYR MERTHYR-PONTSTICILL JUNCTION- BRECON



Front Cover Image: A classic scene at Brecon as Brecon-based 2251 Class 0-6-0 2235 has the 2.15pm service to Newport. (W.A. Camwell/SLS)

Half title page: Pontsticill on a warm and sunny day was a pleasant place to be alongside the reservoir, as here on 9 June 1962 with Ebbw's 2218 on a service from Brecon to Newport. (Colour Rail)

Back Cover Images:

The 6.15pm Brecon to Newport at Pontsticill behind Ebbw Junction's 3634 On 22nd August 1957, conveying a milk tanker which ran daily from Builth Wells to Aberdare which will be detached for onward transit via Merthyr. (Ian L. Wright)

The very detailed station nameboard at Cefn Coed on the joint B&M/LNWR line. (Ken Mumford Presentations)

3747 gets up steam at the Pentir Rhiw stop to tackle the Severn Mile Bank with a Newport to Brecon service on 7th September 1962. (Michael Roach)

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JOHN HODGE & RAY CASTON



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CONTENTS

Dedication	6
Acknowledgements	6
Introduction	7
Chapter 1 Services To & From Brecon.....	8
Chapter 2 Location Analysis	14
Merthyr High Street	14
Rhydycar Junction	21
Cyfarthfa Iron Works	24
Ynysfach Ironworks	28
Heolgerrig Halt	28
Llwynceilyn Junction	30
Cefn Coed	32
Vaynor Siding	40
Pontsarn	40
Morlais Junction	46
Pontsticill Junction.....	48
Dolygaer.....	73
Torpantau.....	80
Pentir Rhiw	105
Talybont-On-Usk	118
Talyllyn East Junction	132
Talyllyn Junction.....	135
Groesffordd Halt.....	153
Brecon Yard & Shed.....	155
Brecon Station (Free Street)	168
Brecon Mountain Railway	183

DEDICATION

The first volume in the series was dedicated to Ray's father, who worked on the B&M all his working career. This volume is dedicated to my father, Arthur Percival Hodge, known to all as Perce and Percy, who the late 1940s and early 1950s worked for the Western Welsh Omnibus Co. as a driver and was one of a small group who were entrusted with driving parties to points of interest and beauty throughout South Wales for day trips. He often visited part of the area covered by this volume, when he drove summer parties to the reservoirs, especially Taf Fechan at Pontsticill, and Dolygaer. As a former driver for the company at their Cross Keys depots, he

had built up a useful road knowledge of South and Mid-Wales from similar outings, and on his transfer to the Barry depot, this was well received. In railway parlance he 'knew the road', something well valued in the transport world. After leaving the Western Welsh, he was employed looking after Dinas Powys railway station, which involved learning all the new language and practices of railways. He finally moved into the Ambulance Service, first as a driver, rising to become an assistant Superintendent for the Barry depot. Following his retirement in 1965, he became a Town Councillor but was dogged by ill health from 1970 and died in 1974 at the age of 73.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many railway photographers visited this very photographable area, especially in its final years before closure and we have used photographs from a wide variety of photographers, to whom our grateful thanks are extended. In the early 1920s, a local Merthyr photographer Angus Lewis recorded the local scene as the privately owned railways in the Merthyr area went into government-sponsored amalgamation into the Great Western Railway. The Brecon and Merthyr appears to have been one of Angus' favourites and he took hundreds of pictures of B&M trains and engines at all the prime locations between Merthyr and Pontsticill, affording a superb record of railway activity in the Merthyr area in

the early 1920s. His collection became part of the wider Ken Nunn collection and was then taken over by the Locomotive Club of Great Britain and has recently passed to the National Railway Museum.

We are as usual very grateful to R.A. (Tony) Cooke for use of his Track Layout Diagrams in the area and Colliery Gazetteer in the area covered by this book and also to Ian Reese of Newport for his help in editing.

Every effort has been made to establish the correct ownership of photographs and other material used in this book, but if we have failed to properly identify any images etc., please contact john_hodge@tiscali.co.uk if there is a need to rectify the position.

INTRODUCTION

This is the third in our series of books on the Brecon & Merthyr and brings to an end our study of this fascinating line and its branches. Please see the first volume for a History of the Brecon & Merthyr Company and also the second volume for an analysis of the Freight Services at the Grouping.

The railway between Pontsticill and Brecon was set in some of the most beautiful and dramatic scenery in the country and gave rise to the saying that it was 'better to travel on the Brecon & Merthyr than to arrive', especially if you were travelling to one of the more industrialised towns on the southern part of their system. To the west of the railway, north of Pontsticill, large reservoirs had been constructed to provide water to the South Wales Valleys and these formed a lovely spectacle to the traveller with the mountains of the Brecon Beacons providing a contrasting view on the east side. Added to this, such lovely villages as Torpantau and Talybont-on-Usk provided

facilities for days out. The area was not without its problems for operating a railway. Principal to these was the Seven Mile Bank between Torpantau and Pentir Rhiw, seven miles at 1 in 38, which demanded a full water tank and a skilful fireman on the engine, which was limited to 120tons, and required double heading of many freight trains taking coal and agricultural traffic to historic Brecon.

The section between Merthyr High Street station and Pontsticill was much photographed at the Grouping in and around 1922 by local photographer Angus Lewis. The best of Angus Lewis' photographs were used in John Hodge's book *Six Railways to Merthyr*, published in 2014 by the Welsh Railways Research Circle and now out of print. As this work is no longer available, we have used several of those photographs featuring the B&M line from Merthyr to Pontsticill in this book. This will afford a view of the Merthyr-Pontsticill section both at the Grouping and in the years between then and closure.

CHAPTER 1

SERVICES TO & FROM BRECON

The biggest single event which affected services on the B&M at the north end between Merthyr-Pontsticill-Brecon, was the closure of the Cyfarthfa Ironworks at Merthyr and Dowlais Ironworks. Though Cyfarthfa re-opened briefly in the First World War, this brought to an end the period of Merthyr's greatness in that field. The aftermath began the end of its period of dominance and the start of its recession which was to last throughout the period until the Second World War and beyond, as all services have now disappeared except for that to Cardiff and Barry Island, handled over a single line in the Merthyr area. The only positive thing that can be said of the last sixty or so years is that it survived the Beeching cuts of 1964, which its sister town Aberdare initially did not, though its services were later restored. By far the biggest change in services occurred over the Merthyr-Brecon section, as the through services were progressively eliminated, cut short at Pontsticill where connections were made into the through services to and from Newport and Brecon. The latter were never many in number and remained constant from the early days of the service right through until the end with three or four services each day, the times bearing a remarkable similarity. A huge loss was also the through Summer services to Aberystwyth, the Taff Vale/Rhymney/B&M/Cambrian sponsored trains which originated at Cardiff Parade, Treherbert, and in earlier days at Newport and also the GWR-introduced Barry to Llandrindod Wells, all of which ran via Merthyr. The Aberystwyth services changed engines in

pre-Grouping days from Taff Vale to B&M double-headed tank engines or Cambrian 0-6-0s and post-Grouping to GWR 2301 Class Dean Goods. These services were discontinued at the onset of the 1939 war, never to re-appear.

In 1910, the Midland Railway provided an early morning train from Brecon to Swansea via the Neath & Brecon line, and two trains from Hereford to Swansea, interspersed with two workings from Hereford to Brecon. In the Up direction, there was an early train from Brecon to Hereford, followed by three trains from Swansea to Hereford.

The Cambrian provided three trains from Moat Lane to Brecon and three from Brecon to Moat Lane, with two from Builth Road to Brecon and one in return. The B&M itself provided three trains to and from Newport and one working to Dowlais and return.

In 1922, the Midland workings were as in 1910; the Cambrian provided four trains from Moat Lane to Brecon with three in return, plus one from Brecon to Builth Road. The B&M now provided four trains to and from Newport with appropriate connections.

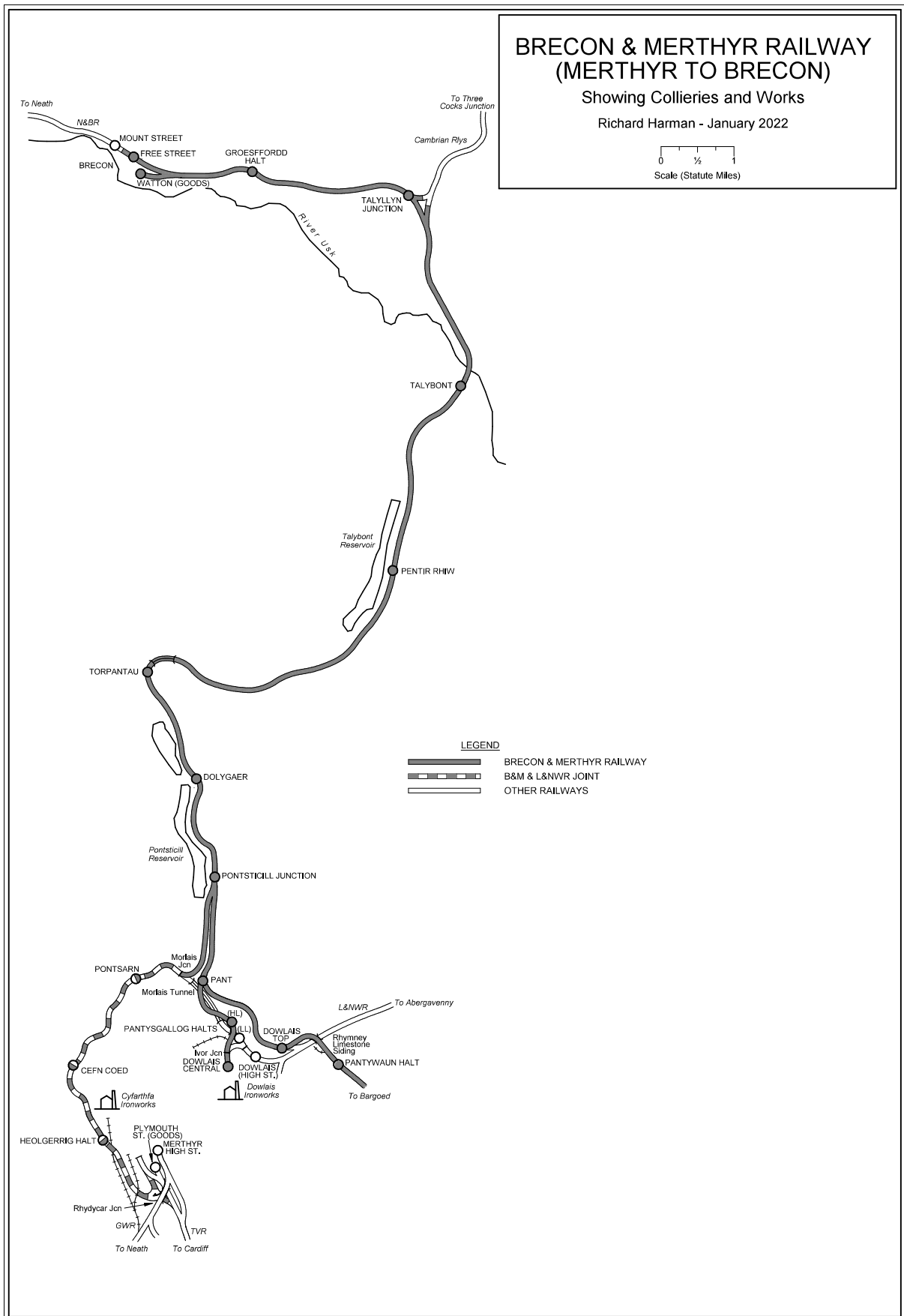
The 1923 Service Timetable shows an 8.25am Newport to Brecon (the later 8.3am), 10.45am Newport to Pontsticill (connecting into the 12.10pm Merthyr to Brecon) (later the 11.15am Newport to Brecon), 2.45pm Newport to Brecon (later 3pm), and 6.40pm Newport to Brecon (later 6.55pm, finally 7.7pm). Thus, over forty years the service at the Grouping was still recognisable when the line closed at the end of 1962. A post-Grouping



development by the GWR was an express service from Merthyr to Newport via the former Pontypridd, Caerphilly and Newport line, also worked by GWR 2301 Class. This was supplemented by a 'motor-car' service, which called at the intermediate halts between Pontypridd,

Caerphilly and Machen. This latter service survived until withdrawn in 1956, the express service being an early casualty of the 1939 war.

In 1930, the LMS withdrew the through passenger and freight workings to and from Swansea. They continued to provide





passenger and freight services to and from Hereford and Brecon whilst the GWR provided a passenger service from Neath (Riverside) to Brecon and had to institute a daily local freight service from Brecon to Colbren Jct. and return.

In 1938, the LMS provided four trains in each direction between Hereford and Brecon. The Mid-Wales line had four trains from Moat Lane to Brecon with three in the opposite direction. In each direction, there was a service with a long wait at Builth Wells. The ex-B&M service remained at four trains per day to and from Newport, whilst on the former Neath & Brecon, there were three trains in each direction, though by September 1952, the late morning services in each direction had become Saturdays Only.

The through services between Merthyr and Brecon and reverse were soon consigned to history by the GWR after the Grouping when they replaced them with connecting services between Merthyr and Pontsticill Junction. The Merthyr to Swansea services were replaced by an auto service from Merthyr to Hirwaun where they connected into Vale of Neath services between Pontypool Road and Neath and reverse, services to Swansea (East Dock) having ceased in 1935.

It was the practice for Brecon-bound trains to run into the Up back platform at Bargoed, at the north end of which they took water for the climb to Torpantau. Whilst the line and stations to Deri Junction were Rhymney Railway property, in pre-Grouping days, the ordinary passenger

service was provided by the B&M's usually four trains per day in each direction. The RR did exercise its running powers over the B&M to Fochriw for coal traffic, and workmen's trains were run to suit the shifts at local collieries. Prior to the demise of iron making at Dowlais ironworks, there was a huge coalfield in the area of Pantywaun, with trains both running locally to and from Dowlais with others coming in from the Rhymney and Bargoed directions. If ever an area changed beyond all recognition, it was certainly Pantywaun, which was destroyed when it became part of Cwmbargoed Opencast. The short single platform that survived until the line closed gave no idea whatever of its earlier history.

Post-Grouping, the GWR gradually began to supplement the basic passenger service by introducing trains Bargoed to Fochriw (then a very important mining area) and Dowlais Top from where a connecting bus service to Merthyr operated. These expanded to provide a service for those working in Cardiff and there was a shopping service on Saturdays to Cardiff Queen Street, this continuing until line closure.

Perusal of the relevant working timetables of the later 1950s leads one to the conclusion that closure was already contemplated as there was little in the way of positive service development, and timings and provision were becoming more and more unattractive. Management would doubtless protest that they were being pressurised by the rise in private car ownership and bus service expansion, but the rail services provided were often not useful or conducive to potential travellers. A prime example was the service between Neath and Brecon, where on Saturdays Excepted there was a single late afternoon service from Neath to Brecon and return. The service on the Mid-Wales line was not much better, where it was possible to travel from Brecon to Builth Road in the morning, but the first train to Moat Lane did not leave until 1.20pm. The only later train left at 5.6pm but did not run beyond Builth Road on Saturdays. On the

former B&M section, there was no service to Newport SX after the 2.5pm., though a 6.15pm (the return of the 3pm from Newport) was added later.

It was therefore no great surprise when proposals appeared to withdraw all the passenger services to and from Brecon in the early part of 1962, thus pre-Beeching. It took some time to arrange replacement bus services in some areas, but withdrawal of rail passenger services was completed to plan in December 1962. One wonders whether a Welsh Assembly, had it existed in those days, would have agreed with such a procedure. This left a gradually declining freight service from Merthyr to Brecon which ceased in May 1964. A commemorative last train was able to run on 2 May 1964 by the Stephenson Locomotive Society from Merthyr to Brecon and Dowlais Central on the return.

Much of the former Northern Section of the B&M then lay amongst the weeds awaiting the demolition and recovery teams. It was not until the autumn of 1965 that the track lifters came to attack the Seven Mile Bank. It was soon found that the 350HP diesel shunters being employed could not cope with the gradient and what are now Class 37 diesels were brought in to replace them. This was the only use of diesel power on the Northern section apart from visits of ex-GWR railcars on enthusiast specials.

Passenger Services

In B&M as later in GWR days, connections were normally made at Pontsticill into the Newport to Brecon and return services, though there was a through train from Merthyr to Brecon at 12.10pm (arriving at 1.40pm) and one at 2.20pm on ThSO (arriving at 4.35pm). Services to Pontsticill were at 9.35am, 2.50pm (through train to Newport) 5.35pm and 7.20pm. A notable feature pre-1914 was a 2.5pm service from Brecon double-headed with portions for Newport and Merthyr, which split at Pontsticill and attached the 2.50pm from Merthyr. This uneven pattern of passenger arrivals and departures at Merthyr led to train crews and engines working both passenger and freight

trains in the course of a shift. This continued on parts of the former B&M until withdrawal of the passenger services.

The GWR continued the pattern of connecting with the four through trains between Newport and Brecon in both directions at Pontsticill but by Nationalisation, not all the Down trains from Brecon had onwards connections. Declining patronage enabled Merthyr services to be formed with just a single autococh, often hauled by a non-auto-fitted pannier tank, utilising run round facilities at both ends of the journey. In the event, passenger services between Merthyr and Pontsticill were withdrawn earlier than on the main line, ending on 13 November 1961.

Goods Services

Loads were severely limited by the seven miles of 1 in 38 (Seven Mile Bank) up to Torpamtau Tunnel and the 1 in 45 ruling gradient from Merthyr to Pontsticill. The 1902 WTT shows a 'Talyllyn Day Goods' and a 'Talyllyn Night Goods', both double-headed to Pontsticill with a maximum of around twenty wagons per train. These would then separately work trains down to Merthyr (Taff Vale), apart from one of the engines of the Day Goods which worked a passenger train

from Pontsticill to Merthyr. Loads back from Brecon to Pontsticill would again be limited to around fourteen wagons per train. There was also a working from Brecon that proceeded in much the same way, except that it worked to Pontsticill and back to Brecon, before running again to Merthyr. The upshot was that five trains worked to the Taff Vale and two to the GWR at Merthyr. Transfer trips between the Taff Vale sidings and the GWR would be worked by B&M engines as required, all part of the imbalance between passenger and goods services, reflecting on the engine and traincrew workings. The 1938 WTT shows an unbalanced Merthyr to Moat Lane goods with a Merthyr to Talyllyn and a Merthyr-Brecon, both with returns. By 1955, this had changed to two freights each from Merthyr to Talyllyn Jct. and to Pontsticill Jct. At least one of those to Talyllyn was regularly double-headed, the WTT indicating that assistance might be necessary on the return working of the afternoon train from Talyllyn if worked by one engine. After closure of the passenger service, the declining freight service continued to run to Brecon, largely composed of domestic coal and agricultural traffic with returning empties, until final closure in May 1964.

CHAPTER 2

LOCATION ANALYSIS

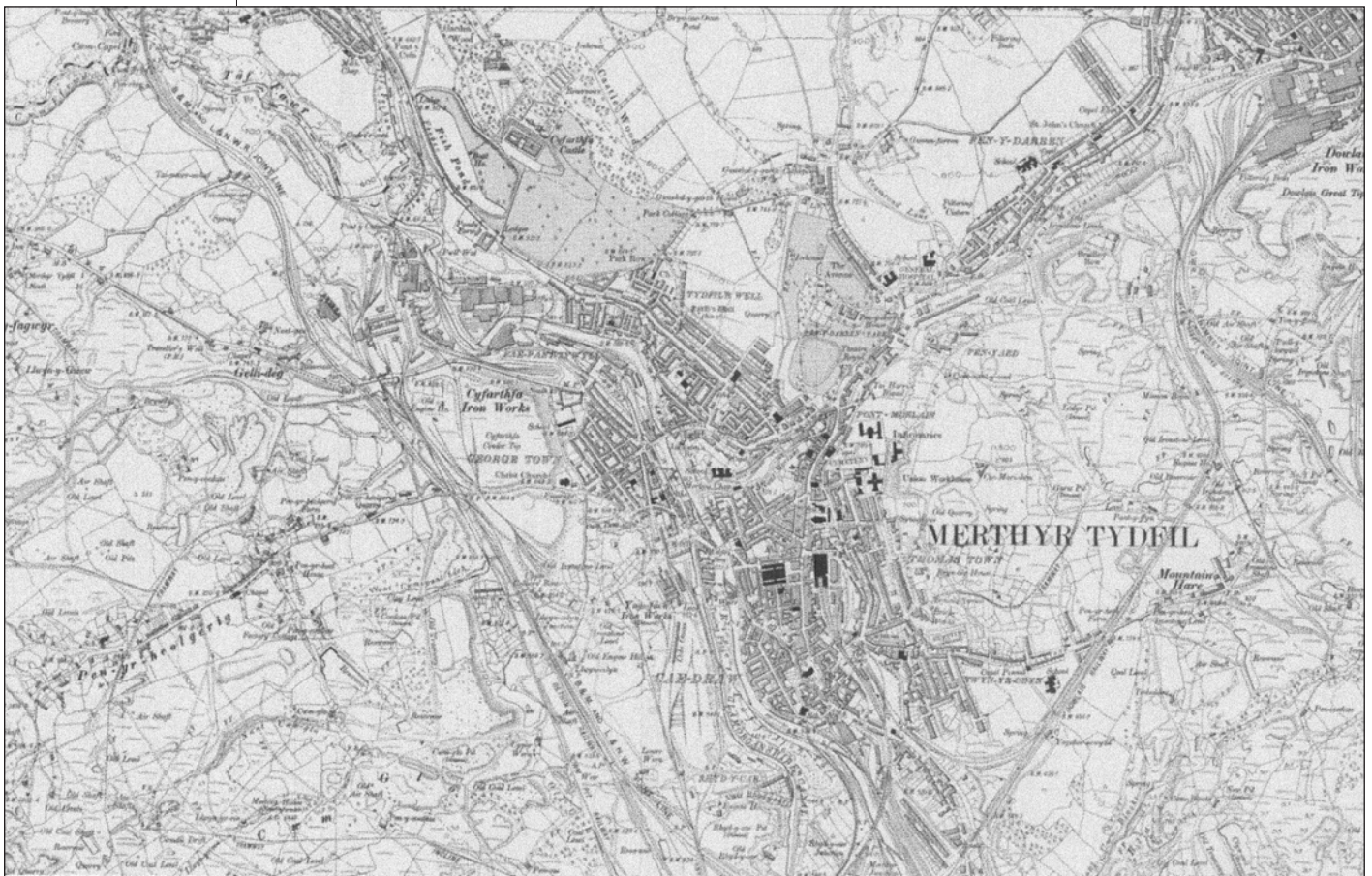
Merthyr High Street

Merthyr High Street station was opened on 2 November 1853 by the then broad-gauge Vale of Neath Railway, after surmounting considerable difficulties in the construction of Merthyr Tunnel on their line from Swansea. The station was typical of the Brunel design with arrival and departure platforms separated by two carriage sidings and an overall timber roof at the buffer stops end in train shed fashion.

By early 1865, a third rail had been laid down to accommodate narrow gauge working from the Pontypool direction, allowing the Vale of Neath to operate on

a mixed gauge basis, the broad gauge finally being abolished throughout South Wales in April 1872. The availability of the third line facilitated the entry of the B&M into Merthyr on 1 August 1868. After the removal of the broad gauge, there followed the removal of the Taff Vale passenger trains from their original Plymouth Street station (opened in April 1841) to High Street on 1 August 1877, and the entry of the LNWR from Dowlais and Abergavenny in June 1879. The final arrival was that of trains on the Quakers Yard & Merthyr Joint Railway, opened by the GW and Rhymney railways in April 1886. This covered the period of Merthyr's

OS Map of Merthyr
1888-1913. (National
Library of Scotland)



industrial greatness when it was the most important town in South Wales, due to the importance of its iron making industry alongside that of Dowlais.

Such a level of activity was beyond the capability of a two platform station and by the late nineteenth century, Merthyr had become a five platform station, by the introduction of a rather narrow wooden island platform in place of the former central carriage sidings, plus a platform and carriage siding to the outside of the overall roof on the Down side of the station. Beyond this on the Down side was a large goods yard and engine shed complex, stretching beyond the station signal box to the next box at Mardy Jct. The Taff Vale confined its goods activity to their Plymouth Street depot but stationed its locomotives at High Street joint depot.

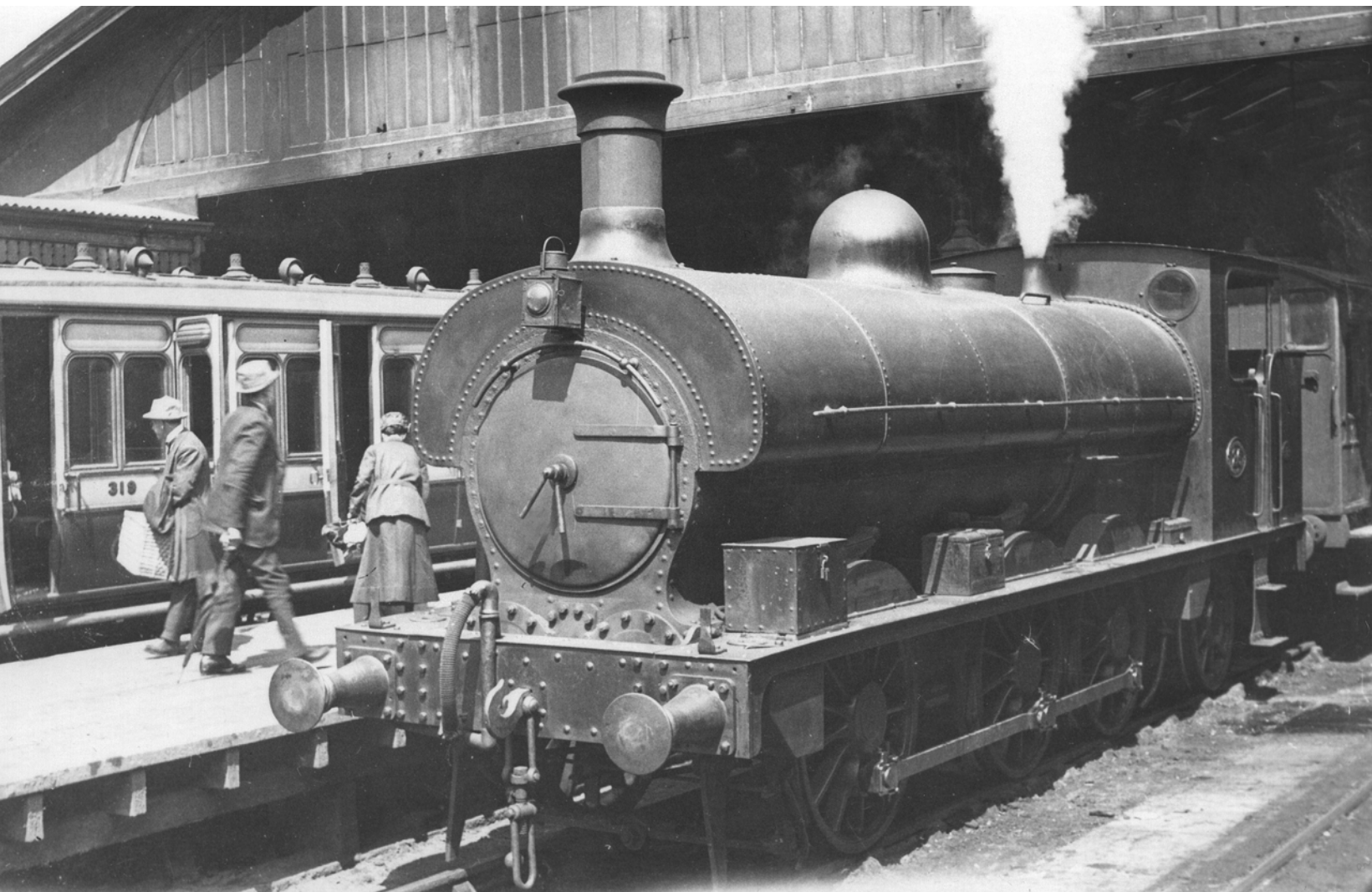
In January 1894, there were around twenty-eight passenger services departing daily with about twenty goods

workings, not including local transfers. By 1901, daily passenger train departures had risen to thirty-two and by 1910 to over fifty. Following the Grouping, the number of passenger workings had risen due to the introduction of a Merthyr to Newport and return service with around eighteen goods workings. Prior to the Second World War, there were still around fifty passenger workings each day, including through services from Cardiff/Treherbert to Aberystwyth and Barry to Llandrindod Wells, each of which reversed and changed engines at Merthyr, the former bringing Cambrian 0-6-0 engines to Merthyr in some years, and in others being worked by B&M double headed tank engines. Following the Grouping, these passed to GW working with double headed veteran panniers and 2301 Class 0-6-0s.

From September 1939, the longer distance passenger workings to Mid-Wales (by then to Moat Lane) and Newport

Merthyr showing part of the original layout in the 1920s with an unrebuilt Taff Vale Class A departing with a service to Cardiff. (LCGB/NRM)



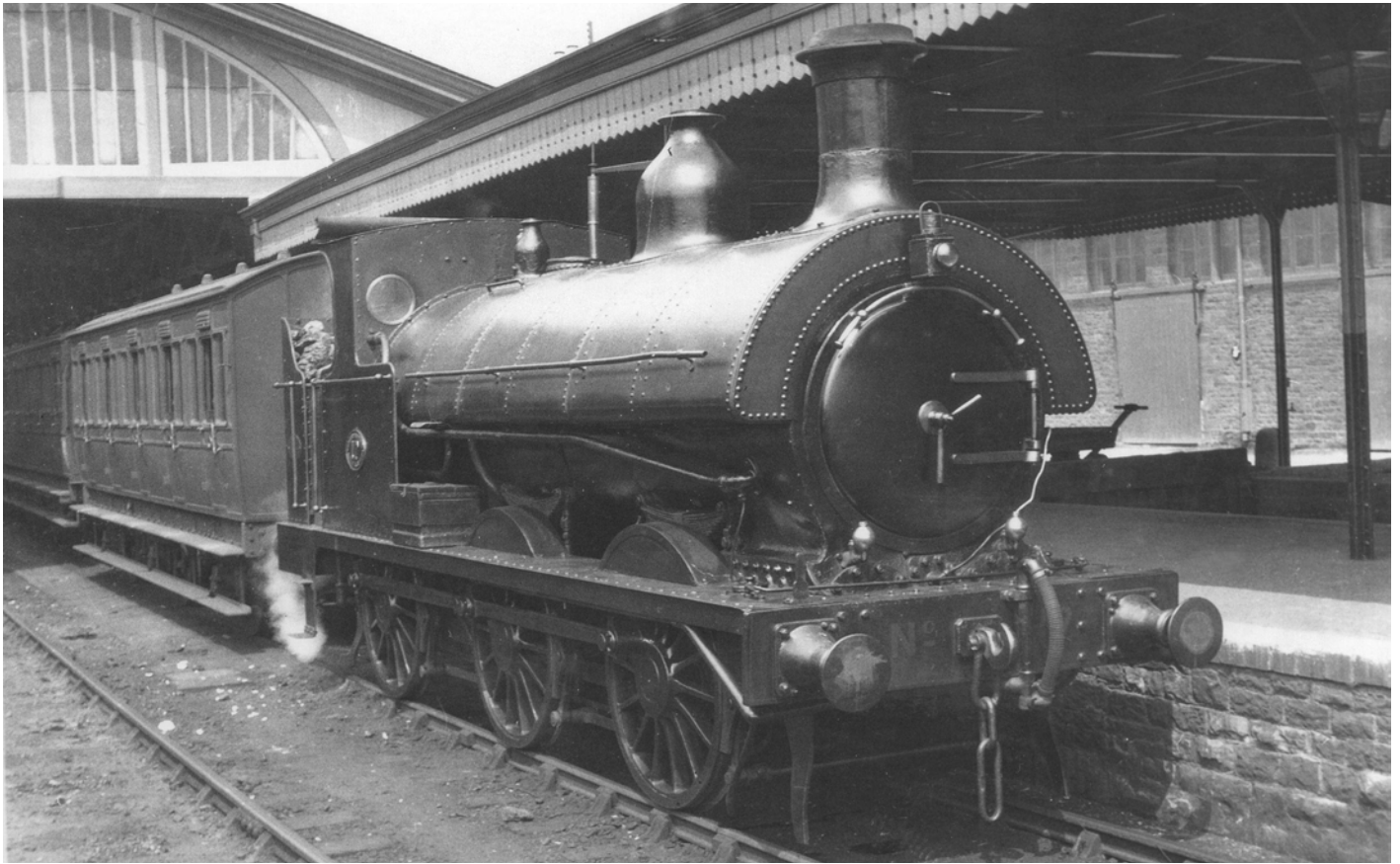


The large B&M 0-6-2 Saddle Tanks were much used on Merthyr to Brecon services and here No. 26 on the 12.10pm service stands alongside LNW stock on an Abergavenny train at Merthyr station c.1922. Unfortunately, these engines did not last long under the GWR and all were withdrawn shortly after the grouping, the final one in 1928. (LCGB/NRM)

were withdrawn and in 1951 workings over the Quakers Yard & Merthyr Joint line were curtailed by the deterioration of Quakers Yard viaduct just outside the High Level station there. In fairly rapid succession, the services to Abergavenny ceased in January 1958, to Pontsticill Jct. in November 1961 and Hirwaun in December 1962, leaving only the service to Pontypridd, Cardiff and Barry, which fortunately survived the Beeching cuts of 1964. With the national withdrawal from sundries traffic in 1972 and wagon load in 1976, all by then handled at Plymouth Street, this left only the hourly DMU passenger service which deteriorated in use during the later 1960s and 70s until rescued by the regeneration of the Valleys services during the 1980s. The facilities

required for this service were far too great as provided by the former layout and this was gradually reduced until a new single platform was created with the former train shed sold off for redevelopment as a Tesco store. The station is now managed by Transport for Wales. Just over half a million passengers a year use this service, though the level has reduced in the last five years; this however should be a firm basis for a positive development for the future.

John Hodge's book *Six Railways to Merthyr* recounts the industrial and social history of the town leading up to the Grouping and beyond and is recommended to those who wish to appreciate the railway photographs of Angus Lewis in the early 1920s.



There was a service each day at 2.50pm from Merthyr to Pontsticill in B&M days which on arrival was attached to a Brecon to Newport train. The train from Merthyr was always worked by a Dowlais engine 17 or 18 with target D2 and is seen here waiting to depart at Merthyr c.1922. (LCGB/NRM)



Summer services ran from Cardiff and Treherbert to Aberystwyth joining up at Pontypridd and worked from Merthyr by Cambrian 0-6-0s as here with 885 c.1922. Some years the B&M worked these trains with two engines on from Merthyr and after the Grouping the GWR worked them with two Panniers or a 2301. These trains took the Tallylyn East Junction curve to access the Mid Wales lines. (LCGB/NRM)

Two B&M saddle tanks are seen backing onto an Aberystwyth train at Merthyr c.1922 and will work the train to Talylyn East Junction where a Cambrian engine will take over. (LCGB/NRM)

B&M 8 on the Ynysfach Loop at Merthyr with a B&M Brakevan with the Taff Vale line to Plymouth Street in the background and the GWR line into High Street on the Viaduct, c.1922. This engine fared quite well under the GWR and lasted until 1933 as 2184, based at Ebbw Junction. (LCGB/NRM)

