

Oswestry & Border History & Archaeology Group

Newsletter

Issue 27

Autumn 2023



OBHAG's New President, Tim Malim, BA, FSA

Principal Archaeologist, Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust

Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to this Newsletter.

Website <http://obhag.org.uk> Secretary Gill Barrow Email: gillbarrow246@gmail.com

Introducing OBHAG's new President.

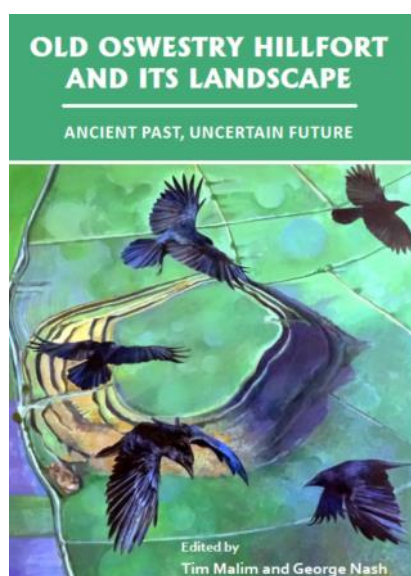
Our new President, our fifth President since our group was established in 1977 (as the Border Counties Archaeological Group), is Tim Malim. A member of OBHAG for a number of years, Tim last spoke to us in July 2022, when he talked about Old Oswestry hillfort and his recent excavations there.

He is currently Principal Archaeologist with the Clywd Powys Archaeological Trust, managing the Trust's Field Services Team on a part-time basis. He is also a director of his own company, Hampton Heritage Design & Consultancy. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and Chair of the Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers.

Previously he had spent twenty years in archaeological consultancy at Gifford & Partners (Chester) and SLR Consulting (Shrewsbury), becoming familiar with the diverse legislative, policy and guidance regimes relating to ancient monuments and sites of historic and archaeological interest that apply in the different jurisdictions of the UK and in Ireland. Key projects with which he has been closely involved have included a 10 year pioneering study of the preservation conditions and strategic management of Nantwich's waterlogged deposits and of the Bronze Age site at Must Farm, Cambridgeshire; excavation and scientific dating of Wat's Dyke at Gobowen; and the discovery of an Iron Age engineered road at Bayston Hill. He has also worked on projects in Rumania and Namibia.

Prior to that, Tim had worked on Cambridge University's and English Heritage's Fenland Survey, and in 1989 founded Cambridgeshire's Archaeological Field Unit which he directed for twelve years, undertaking major projects including those relating to Barrington Anglo-Saxon Cemetery, Stonea Camp Iron Age hillfort, and the Cambridgeshire Dykes. Tim has also been a course director for Cambridge University's extra-mural department.

He has published numerous journal articles, and books including *Stonea and the Roman fens* (2005), *Durovigutum: Roman Godmanchester* (2018) and *Old Oswestry & its landscape* (2020).



We are very pleased to welcome Tim as our new President and look forward to March 2024 when, following our custom, he will give his first 'presidential address' directly after the business of our AGM has been concluded.

Chairman's Introduction: John Pryce-Jones.

Welcome to our latest newsletter which, you will see, contains contributions from a number of our members. If you have been working on a subject within the broad range of history and archaeology which you believe may be of interest to other members, please contact Heather Hidden, our newsletter editor.

Writing this short note at the start of December, with snow on the ground, and sub-zero temperatures outside, it is a good time to look back to warmer days, and our summer programme. My recollection of events is that each of our outdoor events was blessed with dry and sunny weather. Our coach trip to Witley Court and the Firs, Elgar's birthplace, was really enjoyable – the Perseus and Andromeda fountain in Witley Court's gardens well worth the wait until the set time that it performed, and Witley's baroque church truly spectacular. The church's website describes it as Britain's finest baroque church, and it would be a challenge to find one better. Elgar's birthplace – the cottage itself, and a small museum nearby, too - were also well worth the visit. In July our return visit to Professor Gary Lock's excavations at Nesscliffe was thankfully not as hot as for our visit in 2022, but equally fascinating; and for my own guided walk around Victorian Oswestry, in September, the weather was if anything too hot and sunny - I recall searching out patches of shade where we could stop and stand away from the sun's rays.

Your committee has been busy developing an exciting programme for 2024 and, as I write, we are almost there in terms of our programme of talks. Details for the first four months of the year are set out in this newsletter, and the full programme will be found in our 2024 membership card, available for collection at our talk on January 12th. Our programme will include talks by Philip Hume on the marcher lords, the Mortimers, and by Toby Driver on the hillforts of Wales.

Full details and firm dates for our summer programme are still being worked upon, but at this stage we are planning a visit to Weston Park – following up Gareth Williams' talk to us two months ago – and a visit to Shrewsbury, including an opportunity to climb Lord Hill's Column. We are also hoping to visit the excavations at Nesscliffe once again, and to have a further guided walk around Oswestry towards the end of the summer.

Please note that, as agreed at our AGM in March 2023, annual subscriptions will increase on January 1st 2024 to £14, or £12 for those 65 or over. Admission fees for our talks are unchanged at £2 for members and £5 for visitors. We believe that our charges remain very reasonable – they are essential for us to cover our costs (including room hire, refreshments, speakers' fees) and to allow us to maintain, and sometimes replace, our equipment.

Thank you once again Heather for editing and generally pulling together the material that has gone into this newsletter – also for publicising our activities in the local press and news media. We rely on the work carried out behind the scenes by all members of our committee and we remain keen for other members to join us on OBHAG's committee. Likewise thank you to the informal team of members who, unasked, assist with the setting out of chairs before our talks, and the putting away of those chairs at the end of the evening. This assistance is greatly appreciated – getting the chairs and tables to fit into the store room is always a challenge!

St Pabo, A king from Hen Ogledd: Tom Lerwill.

The complex network of lanes of North Anglesey around Llyn Alaw contains some lovely old churches and chief among them, situated by the shore of the reservoir, must be St Pabo's. It is one of the least 'restored' of Anglesey churches and retains many features of the 12th century, most notably the woodwork of the roof. It is a small stone building set in a typical circular churchyard, miles from any settlement.



At least four stone heads adorn the church, three outside the door and one inside, above the door itself(photo below). Stone heads like these are not uncommon in the area and they often prompt cries of 'reused celtic heads!' They do indeed look crude and prehistoric, but there is no clear evidence about their origin.



Courtesy of Tom Lerwill

Of definite medieval provenance in the church is the relief of King Pabo on display against the north wall. (Photo below). This was dug up in the churchyard in the 17th century, presumably having been dumped there during the Reformation. It is a finely detailed work, showing a king with a pleated robe, wearing a crown and carrying a sceptre.

The stone is a Flintshire sandstone and similar works can be found on Anglesey and in Bangor from the same workshop. It is thought to be 13th century, and originally would have been a coffin lid to St Pabo's shrine in the chancel.

So who was this King/Saint Pabo? A real historical figure, he is known as 'Pabo Post Prydain', Pillar of Britain, for his wars against the Picts in the 5th century, after the Romans had left.



Courtesy of Tom Lerwill

Like a lot of North Welsh royal families (e.g. Cunedda) he was part of the 'Hen Ogledd', the Old North, that area of North England and Southern Scotland which kept a Welsh identity well into the Middle Ages. After his battles, or defeats, he is reputed to have settled in Anglesey, founded his religious retreat and lived like a hermit – a common trope for early Welsh kings. There is no evidence for this, but there is no explanation for any other saintly founder of the church.

This remote and beautiful church is well cared for by local families. It is still consecrated and a thanksgiving service is held every November.

Coffin Rests, Stones and Coffin Paths: Zia Robins.

Soon after we moved to Milford near Baschurch in the 1980s, I used to ride up Dyas or Dyers Lane, a green lane that went east off the main road in Baschurch. I was curious as to why there was a strange short section of flat-topped wall to the south there. It was overgrown, in very poor condition, and set at an angle through the fence line, with a stile beside it which led into a grass field. In the 1990s I was talking to a lady in her 90s who knew the area well, and on asking her about this unusual section of dilapidated wall, she told me that it was the Coffin Rest on the old Coffin Path from Walford to All Saints Church in Baschurch.

In days gone by, if someone passed away in a nearby hamlet, with formal transport only affordable by a few, coffins would be carried by the pallbearers the shortest way to the local church. It was not considered correct to put the coffin on the ground, so Pallbearers would slide the coffin onto a section of wall built for the purpose, or a large flat-topped stone, to rest, or to change over, as there were often 2 teams of 4 bearers to carry a coffin. As well as rests along the routes, there were often rests near, or at the entrances to a church, on a lower section of wall, in the Lych Gate, or on a specially erected stone plinth nearby.

I later followed the public footpath from the green lane west across the road, and through the grass fields, to where I found another flat-topped Rest, all overgrown, in a wall on the west side of the lane, just off Nobold Road, Baschurch, and just a short distance from All Saints Church.

I set about trying to save these important parts of our history. With the help of Jessie Hanson, who was born nearby, we were able to get the Dyas/Dyers Lane Coffin Rest restored.



Restored Listed Grade II Coffin Rest'

As I recall, this repair work was done by Walford College, and it was also registered with English Heritage as 'Coffin Rest at NGR 426213 Baschurch 1268492 – Grade II Building'.

We tried to also get the Nobold Coffin Rest registered, but were told that this could not be done, as the wall had been rebuilt. It now forms part of the front wall of a garden. The sandstone composition of the wall is not dissimilar to the other Coffin Rest.



The adjoining walls have rounded capping stones, but the Coffin Rest section has the large flat stones on top to slide the Coffin on, similar to the registered one. The house owner has now cleared it all, and put a 'Coffin Rest Stones' plaque on it.

Coffin Rest, Nobold.

The straight nature of 'Coffin paths, Burial roads, Corpse roads, Lych Ways, Bier Roads, Procession Ways' etc. as they are known in different areas, was important, as no one wished to carry a heavy coffin further than needed. Tradition has it that these paths were never ploughed, leaving enough width for the Coffin and bearers to pass along them. They are generally now established Public Rights of Way, as is the path from Walford to Baschurch – FP0202/42/2 & FP0202/43/1.

I was aware of this, and was concerned when there were plans to build a new estate in the field south of the restored, and now Listed Grade II Coffin Rest, as the plans showed the Coffin Path was to be diverted. I objected to this in the Planning Application, and the estate was redesigned to leave a green area through the centre on the approximate line of the Coffin Path, but sadly the Coffin Rest is now out of context, just standing alone with the fence and stile gone. The first section of Dyers/Dyas Lane into the new estate has been renamed 'All Saints Way'

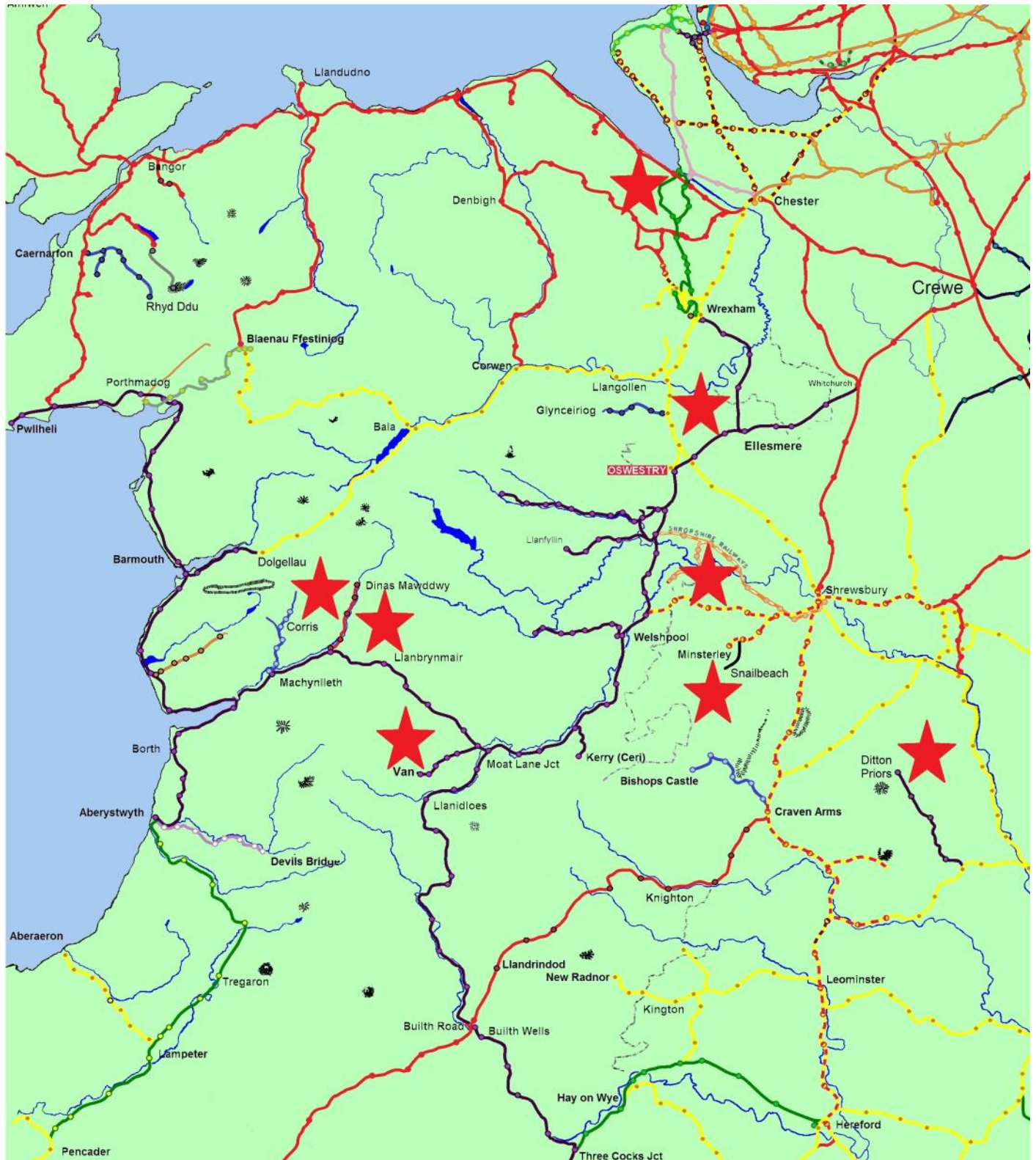


There were later plans put in for another new housing estate on the west side of the main Baschurch Road, again with plans to divert the Public Footpath. I again objected, stating that it was the Coffin Path, and the straight line of the path was important historically. The housing was repositioned, with the line of the Coffin Path there retained roughly on the line, but now just following the repositioned estate road, before crossing a field to the green lane up to Nobold Road, which then leads to the Church.

With the use of hearses and formal undertakers, Coffin Rests or Stones were no longer needed, and with their significance often forgotten, I suspect many were removed or broken up. I have not found a record of any other Listed ones in Shropshire, though there is one, not listed, in the Lychgate of St Andrew's Church in Hope Bowdler, claimed to be the only Church Lychgate with one in Shropshire. There are just 15 listed in England. I wonder how many other ones there are on footpaths to churches that are just not recognised for what they are. Look around next time that you are out for a walk and you too may discover one.

The Little Railways of the Marches: David Stirling

The total route mileage of the whole British railway system in 1913 was 16,401, the lines being controlled by many railway companies, varying greatly in size, the largest having just under 3000 miles of route. One of the conspicuous features of the Marches was the prominence of very small railway companies in the area. These are marked with red stars on the map below. Two of the really large companies feature prominently on the map, the London & North Western Railway (in red) and the Great Western Railway (yellow).



Wrexham, Mold & Connah's Quay Railway (WM&CQR) (18 miles long and serving the places in its title.) This is the only one of these small railways partly still in use.

Glyn Valley Tramway (8 miles, Chirk – Glynceiriog).

Shropshire Railways/Shropshire & Montgomeryshire Railway (30 miles Shrewsbury – Llanymynech – Nantmawr, with a branch from Kinnerley to Criggion).

Corris Railway (6½ miles, Machynlleth – Corris – Aberllefenni)

Mawddwy Railway (6¾ miles, Cemmes Road – Dinas Mawddwy)

Snailbeach District Railways (about 3½ miles Pontesbury station to Snailbeach mines).

Van Railway (6½ miles, Caersws – Garth & Van Road – Van mines)

Cleobury Mortimer & Ditton Priors Railway (CM&DPR) (12 miles between Cleobury Mortimer and Ditton Priors)

Bishop's Castle Railway (9¾ miles Craven Arms – Bishop's Castle)

Apart from being short, these railways had little in common.

The WM&CQR began as the Buckley Railway in the 1860s to serve the coal mines between Buckley and Connah's Quay in Flintshire and extended to Wrexham in 1866 and then north to the shore of the Dee estuary. It made modest profits. With help from the Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway (MS&LR) it extended over the Dee at Hawarden in 1891 giving it access to Chester and a new line from Hawarden up the Wirral to Bidston. The MS&L, whose stock market nickname was "Money Sunk and Lost" as it never paid a dividend on its ordinary shares, gradually took over the WM&CQR, which was formally absorbed into the bigger company in 1904, by which time the MS&L had renamed itself the Great Central Railway (and continued not to pay a dividend on its ordinary shares).

The Glyn Valley Tramway was built to carry granite and slate from the Ceiriog Valley to the world outside. It began in the 1870s as a horse-powered link from the quarries to the Ellesmere Canal at Gledrid, with passengers being carried between Pontfaen and Glynceiriog. It was built to a narrow gauge of 2 feet 4¼ inches (exactly half of the standard gauge), later eased to 2 feet 4½ inches, and was modernised to use steam traction and run between Chirk station and Glynceiriog in 1888. It made small profits but not usually enough to pay a dividend on the ordinary shares, until hard times struck it in the 1930s. It closed to passengers in 1933 and to all traffic in 1935.

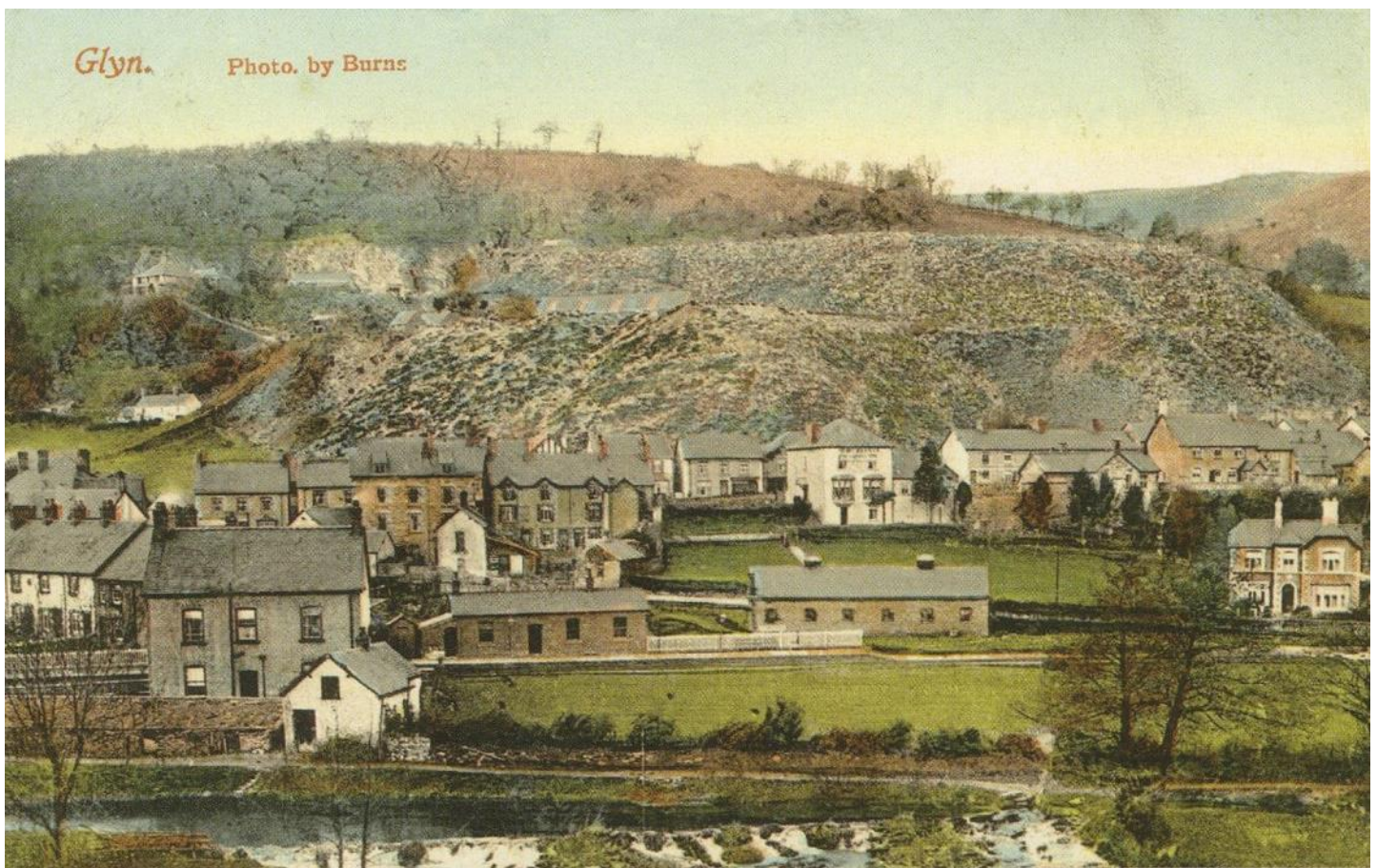
The Potteries, Shrewsbury & North Wales Railway condensed out of grandiose plans for railways in the area as a line from a station close to Shrewsbury Abbey to Llanymynech and onwards to Nantmawr Quarry with a branch from Kinnerley to Criggion Quarry. This opened in 1865 for goods traffic and for passengers between Shrewsbury and Llanymynech in 1866. It closed, reopened and closed again in 1866, reopened in 1868, then closed in 1880 and fell into decay. A new company, the Shropshire Railways, started to revive it, but without success. The line was rescued by Col. Stephens, who specialised in impoverished light railways, in 1911 and struggled on until 1936 when passenger traffic ceased. The War Department took over the railway in 1939 and used it until 1960, when it finally closed.

The Mawddwy Railway opened in 1867 and was moderately successful, but not profitable. Passenger services ceased in 1901 and it closed entirely in 1908. The Cambrian Railways and the local authorities promoted its reopening as a light railway, worked by the Cambrian. In this form it reopened in 1911 with modest success. Passenger traffic lasted until 1930 and freight until 1950.

The Van Railway opened in 1871 for goods traffic serving the lead mines at Van (Y Fan) and two years later for passengers. It was notable in having the distinguished Welsh poet John “Ceiriog” Hughes as its manager. It closed completely in 1893, but was reopened, for freight only, by the Cambrian in 1896, as the waste from the lead mines was a useful material for keeping railway tracks weed-free. Goods traffic lasted until 1950.

Cleobury Mortimer & Ditton Priors Railway was a light railway (meaning that it did not need the expense of an Act of Parliament and was allowed to use simpler signalling and level crossings than a “normal” railway). It opened in 1908 and worked its own traffic until 1923 when it became part of the Great Western Railway. It closed to passengers in 1938 but RNAD traffic kept it in use for freight until 1960.

The Bishop’s Castle Railway was not quite the disaster that the Shropshire Railway was, but not a great deal better. The plan was for a line from Craven Arms to join the Cambrian Railways at Montgomery with a branch to Bishop’s Castle, but difficulty in raising the capital caused the part west of Lydham Heath to be dropped, leaving that station as a dead end at which all trains had to reverse. The line opened in 1865 and went almost immediately into insolvency. It survived, however, becoming gradually more decrepit until it finally closed in 1935.



Postcard showing the track of the Glyn Ceiriog tramway running parallel to the road and the river with the quarry behind. Station building alongside track has a smart white fence but sadly no train!

OBHAG Summer Visit to the Excavations at Nesscliffe.

Pictures courtesy of Alex Olah.



Professor Gary Lock updated OBHAG members on the year's progress, and demonstrated the massive semicircular walls of the very impressive guard chambers which flank the entrance causeway

During excavation of the big ditch at the front of the rampart the team found evidence for several furnaces – including the ceramic walls of furnaces; lots of charcoal which should give a radiocarbon date, lots of slag which is the waste product of furnaces and bits of iron.

The furnaces may have been built in the ditch as it was a sheltered spot and they were perhaps used for making small tools.



The view of the rampart from within the fort showing details of the internal construction with outer and inner faces and perpendicular walls joining the two. These stone boxes or cells were filled with random rubble.



A large area of the interior ground surface was stripped off as the search for further evidence of occupation continued. No Iron Age round houses was found but there were large amounts of Roman material, including pottery and part of a quernstone, indicating continued occupation well into Roman times.

OBHAG Spring Programme 2024

Meetings are at 7.30 pm on the second Friday of the month at the Methodist Church Hall



John Pryce-Jones with OBHAG members. Summer Walk 2023. Courtesy of Alex Olah.

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| 12th January | 'The history of cockfighting in Shropshire & the Welsh border'
<i>John Pinfold</i> |
| 9th February | 'Celebrating our history & heritage - Oswestry's High Street Heritage Action Zone'
<i>Samantha Jones</i> |
| 8th March | 'What do we understand about Old Oswestry Hillfort?'.
<i>Tim Malim, OBHAG President</i>
The talk will be preceded by OBHAG's AGM |
| 12th April | 'The Myttons of Halston Hall'
<i>Nigel Hinton</i> |

OBHAG Membership

Adult£14.00
Senior Citizen/Full Time Student...£12.00 Junior(5-17years)..... Free

Subscriptions are due annually on January 1st and should be paid at the January meeting or sent to the membership secretary. Cheques are to be made payable to 'OBHAG'. Please do not send cash in the post. For details of payment by bank transfer (preferred method) please see the membership form which is available on the website or from the membership secretary.

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