

The oldest railway bridge in Swansea

The remains of the oldest railway bridge in Swansea – and probably too in Wales – can still be found with a little perseverance in the forestry between Jersey Road and the A4217 expressway in the lower Swansea valley.

The remains comprise the stone-built abutments of a bridge that carried Chauncy Townsend's waggonway over a small brook running down the side of the valley. On the south-west side about eight courses of stonework survive. Only four courses survive on the opposite side and they are in a worse state of preservation. They are composed of irregular courses of local sandstone, apparently of dry-stone construction. Both abutments are lichen-encrusted and heavily overgrown and the entire area is overgrown with low-level vegetation and close to growing trees.

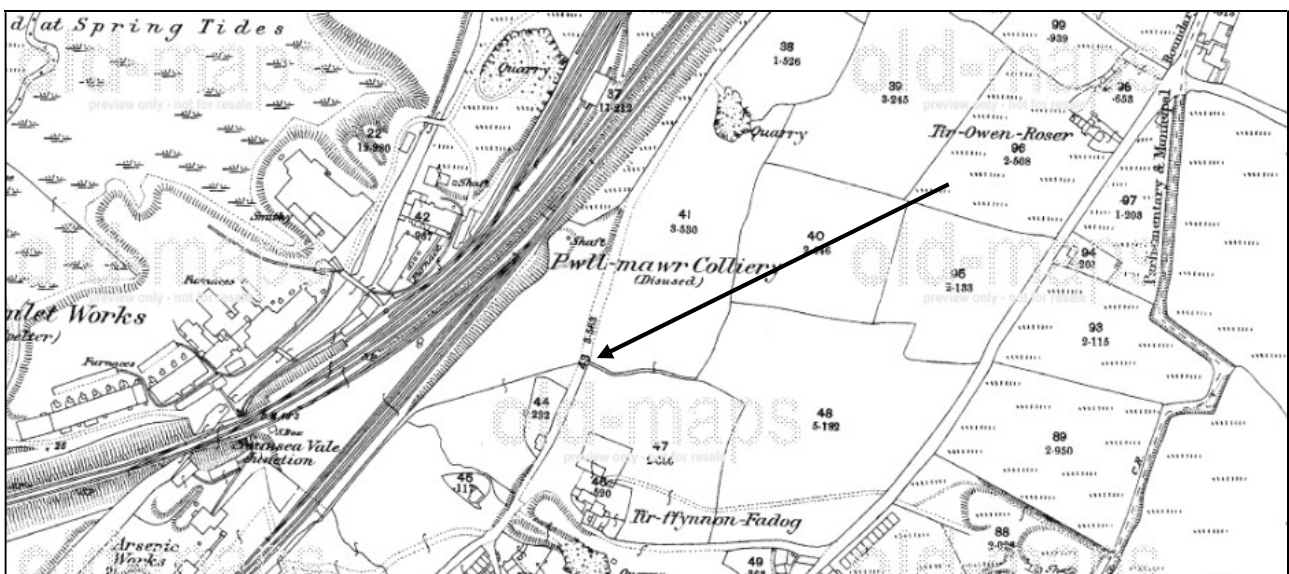
Townsend took leases of the Briton Ferry and Gwernllwynchwyth estates in 1750 that gave him control of most of the coal on the eastern side of the lower Swansea valley. He seems to have concentrated his efforts initially on the more northerly part of his taking. In order to get the coal down to the copperworks at White Rock and to the lead and spelter works that he was planning to build at Upper Bank and Middle Bank he had a wooden waggonway constructed.

The waggonway was designed and built by George Kirkhouse, a mining engineer from Gateshead whom Townsend had enticed down to Swansea. Kirkhouse followed the contemporary

practice of the north-east of England. No illustrations or descriptions have survived, but it can safely be assumed that the track was made entirely of wood. Sleepers would also have been of wood. The waggons probably had a capacity of around two tons, judging by figures from the north of England at this time. They were, of course, drawn by horses, perhaps two horses to the waggon. The wheels of the waggons, also of wood, were unquestionably flanged: the flanged rail, or tramplate, was yet to be invented.

The waggonway was probably built in 1754 or 1755 and remained in use until 1785 when Townsend's son-in-law and successor, John Smith, replaced it with a canal. The track was lifted but the course of the waggonway continued to be used as a road and it can still be seen clearly on the 6in Ordnance Survey maps of 1876. With the passage of time it fell more and more into disuse; parts of it were built over or incorporated into the modern street pattern. (Llwyncrwn Road in Llansamlet follows the waggonway). Finally its course has been almost completely obliterated by the recent afforestation of the lower Swansea valley and it is virtually impossible to follow it any more.

As can be seen from the photo, the abutments are at risk from erosion, natural decay, root action, scrub growth, vandalism, vegetation and the impingement of woodland.



The position of the abutments of Townsend's waggonway bridge of c.1754/5



**The bridge lies to the south of the remains of the Pwll Mawr engine house of 1877/8.
The grid reference is SS 67690 96116**

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