

The Proud Valley - Location of Captures 1, 2 and 3

According to IMDB web site, the film was shot on location in Neath, Port Talbot, Wales; Rhondda Valley, Rhondda Cynon Taff; Silverdale, Staffordshire, and Ealing Film Studios.

I had pointed out that the head code on the engine was current for the date of filming for the GWR for a '(class H) Freight, Mineral or Ballast train or train of empties carrying Through load to destination', while Jonathan Horswell of the Railway Movie Database believed that the sequence may be in the Neath Port Talbot area, where a GWR mineral train is seen running alongside the river Neath on the line between Neath and Aberdare via Hirwaun.

I started by finding a copy of the film on the internet, and there are a few, including a fake colour version which really detracts from the grittiness of the B/W version and isn't worth viewing!

From the stills for captures 1, 2 and 3 and from viewing the actual film, I worked out the topography of the area:

1. From captures one and two, there is a road on camera left, then the railway and on the right, can just be seen a river.
2. The valleys in South Wales run approximately north/south and at the time of filming, nearly every valley had a railway running through it (for the coal from the various collieries).
3. Watching the film, there are other details that aren't that apparent from the captures - the train is just coming off a curve further down the valley which can be seen behind the wagons, particularly in capture two; then it hits a fairly straight section where the engine is working hard due the gradient (captures one and two); then, in a missing section, there is a good close-up of the engine (but not good enough to work out the engine's number!) as it swings round another bend which takes the action into capture three, during which Paul Robeson jumps into the last wagon. While the train is coming up the gradient, there are a couple of somewhat naff studio cut-ins where Robeson looks at his badly worn boots.
4. As the engine is working hard, this means that the camera is looking effectively south and the train is coming north, against the grade.

I called up large scale maps for around 1915 to 1940 from the National Library of Scotland website (maps.nls.uk), and found the topography didn't match the Neath Valley, which was too straight. However, I did find a match in the next valley west between Aberdulais and Seven Sisters:

The road is now the A4109 with the location of the shoot about half-a-mile or so beyond the Cefn Coed Colliery Museum, Neath Rd, Creunant, Crynant, SA10 8SN; the river is the River Dulais. It is not possible to get a 'now' photo as the trees have grown too high and thick! Also, the location is nowhere near Staffordshire.

(Now for the nerdy stuff...) The railway was built as the Neath and Brecon railway to give access to various collieries, the line being completed to Brecon in 1867. An offshoot to connect with the Swansea Vale Railway, giving better access to Swansea, was ready in 1873. In 1922, the line was absorbed into the Great Western Railway, which is why 'GW' can be seen on the wagons in capture three and the head code is a GWR one.

On the way to Brecon, the railway went near (about a mile away) to Craig-y-nos, the home of Adelina Patti who was a famous and acclaimed opera singer; she first sang in public as a child in 1851 and her career lasted until 1914. She earned huge fees and appeared internationally. She acquired Craig-y-nos, described as a castle, and lived there between 1878 and 1919. The

nearest station was Cray but the road to it was extremely poor. Having good connections she asked the Midland Railway to provide a platform at Bwlch, which was only a crossing loop, but in time she had a private waiting room erected at Penwyllt, and she paid personally for furnishing it and providing a road to it from Craig-y-nos. She habitually travelled in a private saloon, and many highly placed people visited her at Craig-y-nos. Her costumes and personal attendants were accommodated with her in her saloon during her own travels.

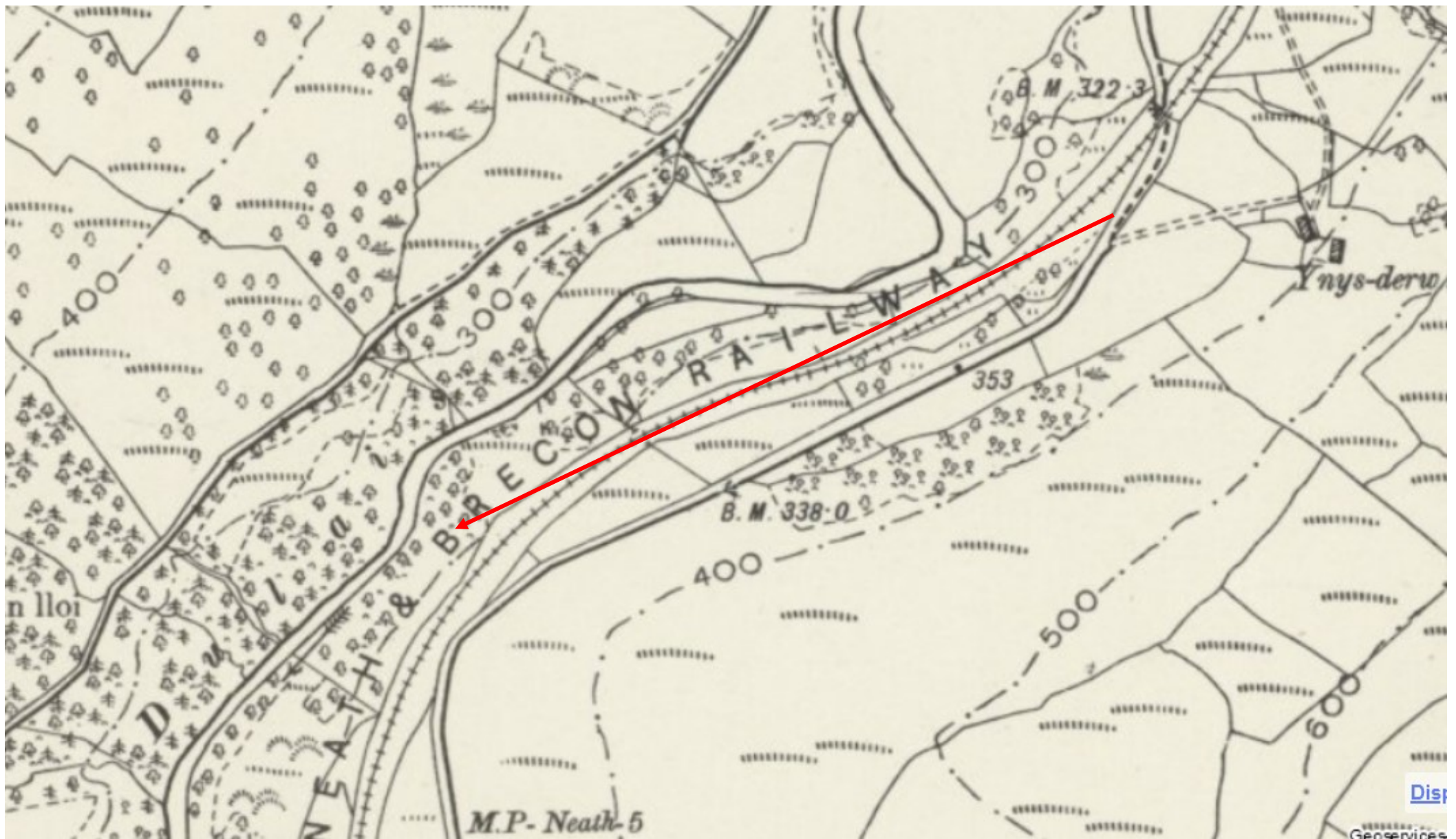
Her celebrity was such that the GWR publicity department was able to use her name to advertise the Severn Tunnel, newly opened to passengers, when she was returning from London to Craig-y-nos:

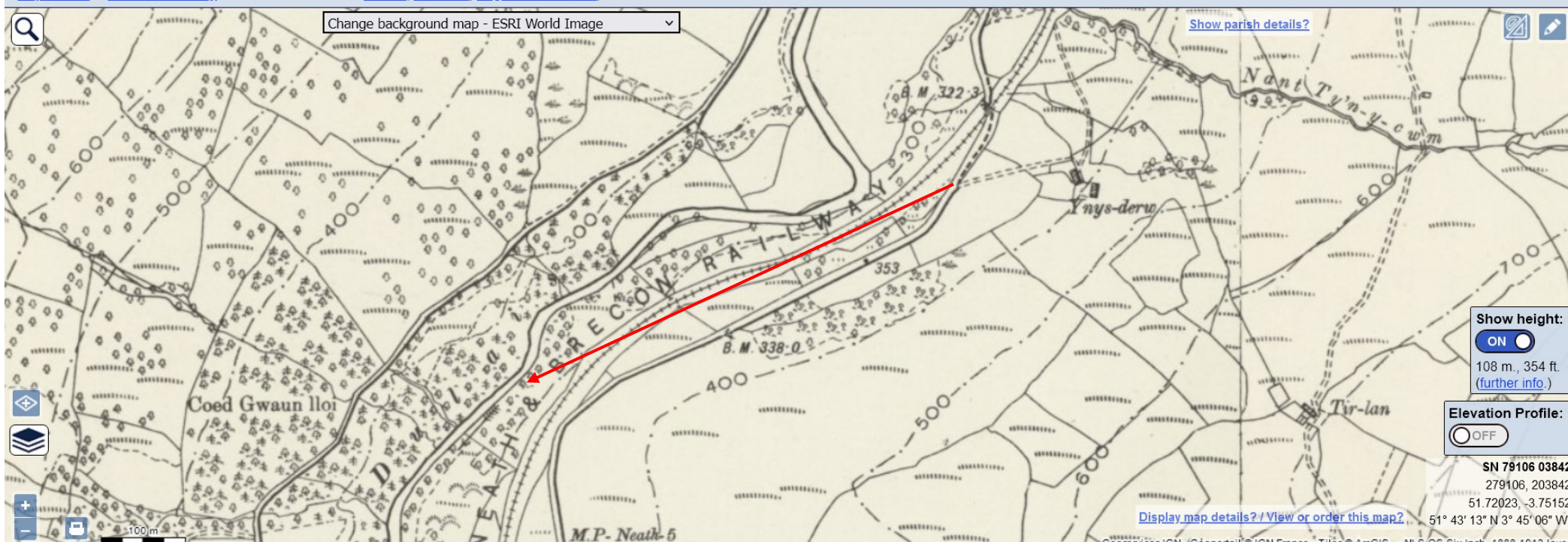
Madame Patti has practically opened the Severn Tunnel... It is true that very few people knew it, and perhaps Madame Patti herself did not know it, but everybody will be talking about it to everybody else. The facts are these. On Sunday Madame Patti and party—a large one—wanted to get from London to Neath with comfort and speed. A special train was arranged for, and the great songstress paid for it out of her own pocket, or wherever she keeps the great piles of money she has made. Many people will be interested to know that the special train ran along the new route through the Severn Tunnel, and that the whole distance from Paddington to Neath was comfortably traversed in four hours and twelve minutes. This was the first through train from London to South Wales via Bristol and the Severn Tunnel, and Madame Patti chartered it, rode in it, and paid for it, and therefore she has the honour of having opened the Severn Tunnel route to London.

While looking for this location, I remembered that I had bought a book on the History of the Neath and Brecon Railway some years ago. Sadly there was no mention of the filming of 'The Proud Valley' in the book, but there is half a page and a photo on the filming of a sequence of an armoured train being ambushed by the Boers being filmed for 'Young Winston' at Craig-y-nos in 1971. (This film doesn't appear in reelstreets!)

The track between Brecon and Onllwyn (now the end of the line) was lifted a long time ago, although the line of the railway can still be made out.

Dave Buckley





Maps home. Left: Ordnance Survey > 25 inch Scotland, 1892-1949 England and Wales, 1841-1952 Right: ESRI World Imagery

Left map: Ordnance Survey 25 inch Scotland, 1892-1949. Right map: ESRI World Imagery.

Left map details: SN 79061 03743, 279061, 203743, 51.71933, -3.75214, 51° 43' 10" N 3° 45' 08" W. Display map details? Swap maps

Right map details: ESRI World Imagery. Tiles © ArcGIS



Approximate position of Captures one and two