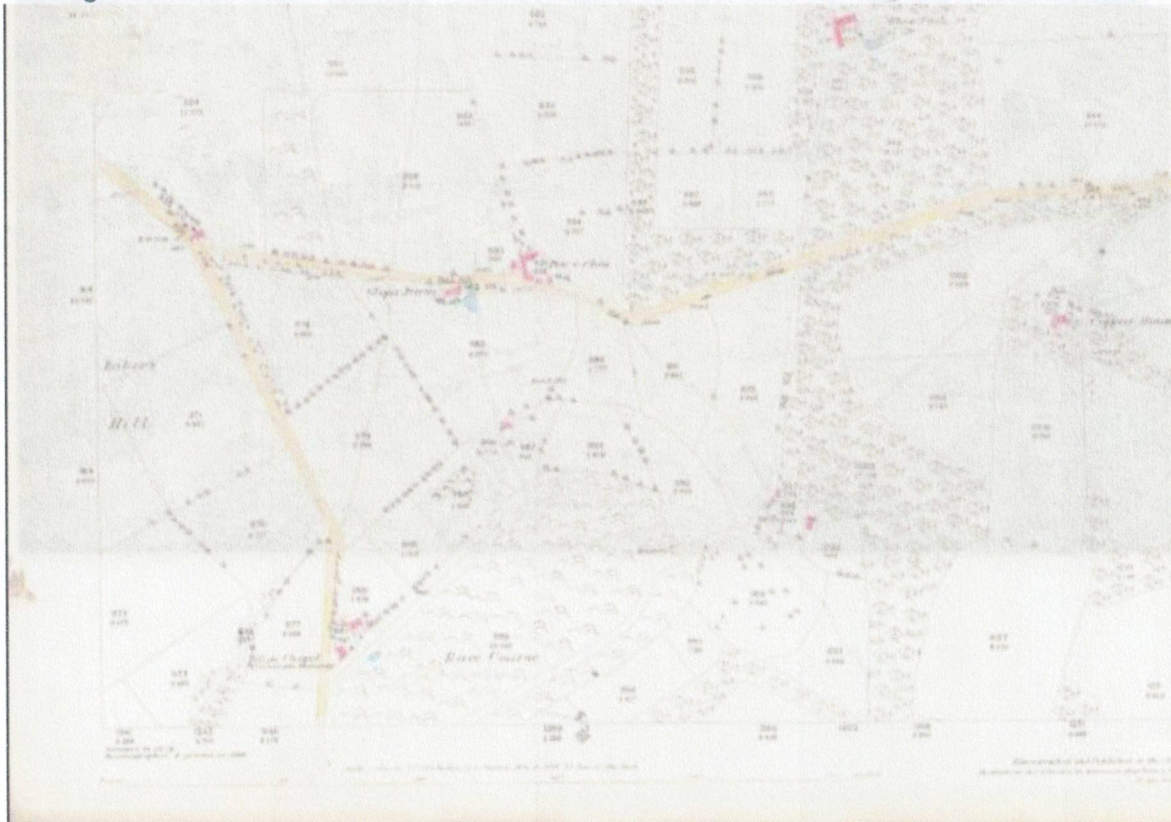


GLOPPA SAND & GRAVEL PIT.

I have always been intrigued by minor industrial railways and tramways. In about 1980 the first property I purchased was a cottage in Nant-y-Caws, just south of Morda, and I discovered a short length of cast iron plateway rail (i.e. iron angle, for flangeless wheels) acting as a lintel when opening out the inglenook. Also a number of stone sleeper blocks turned up in the area – it became apparent that a narrow-gauge plateway had been built in the early 19th century to transport coal from mines in Morda and Coedygo down the Montgomery canal. In fact a surprising number of narrow gauge systems in the area are known about, and are now described on the <http://www.oswestry-borderland-heritage.co.uk/> website. However this website makes no mention of a “tramway” which is marked on an old OS map at Gloppa sand pit (grid ref. SJ261316), so I decided to carry out some research on it. Incidentally, an internet search for Gloppa produced no other UK places of that name, but plenty in Norway and Iceland - apparently Gloppa is an Old Norse word that means "narrow opening" or "mountain gorge".

The first 25-inch OS map, published in 1874, shows a small “sand pit” in the area known as Gloppa (sometimes spelt Glopia), just to the north of the Old Racecourse on the hill west of Oswestry (ref. 1). Note that it also shows a small “quarry” near the easternmost part of the racecourse; although it is not marked on the later maps, it was subsequently enlarged, and can still be seen as shallow workings:



I found an article by A.C. Nicholson in the Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society for Feb. 1892 (ref.2), describing the site as “situate on the eastern slope of the ridge of Carboniferous rocks (Millstone Grit) which forms the western boundary of the Northern Shropshire and Cheshire Plain, and upon this and adjacent farms the gravels and sands are spread out. The main mass is comprised in a ridge of eskers about 1000 yards long, and appears to rest immediately upon the Millstone Grit”. [Eskers are long, winding ridges of sand, gravel, and boulders that are formed by glacial meltwater flowing through tunnels and channels within or on top of glaciers.]

It continues “A pit was opened here in the year 1888 for the purpose of getting sand for the filter-beds on the Oswestry works of the Liverpool Vyrnwy Waterworks, and since that date I have had it under observation; it is not now being worked... The portion of the deposit worked out forms but a small part of the whole, although about 33,000 tons of material have now been extracted.”

Some photos appear on the British Geological Survey website (ref.3), catalogued as "Gloppa, near Oswestry. Sand pit in drift", and stated as "taken 1/1/1892 by A.C. Nicholson of Oswestry for the BAAS report for 1892" but presumably they were actually taken a while earlier while sand extraction work for the waterworks was still in progress (copyright British Geological Survey, P2326 15 to 21).

The first shows the working pit with three simple inside-framed drop-side timber wagons, a horse, and no less than 26 men. The track gauge is difficult to determine, but looks somewhere between 2 and 3 foot. It appears that the excavated material is being thrown against screens to separate out large stones, and the material which passes through the screens is wheelbarrowed onto some very flimsy and unsafe-looking gantries to be tipped from a great height into the wagons:



The BGS website also includes four further photos of the eskers, but the workings do not appear in them.

Also found on the internet is a "Bye-gones" magazine report that on 13th June 1896 the same Mr. A.C. Nicholson FGS led an excursion of the Offa Field Club to visit Gloppa sand pit and various other local sites to study the glacial deposits, but mentions no details about the working of the pit (ref.4).

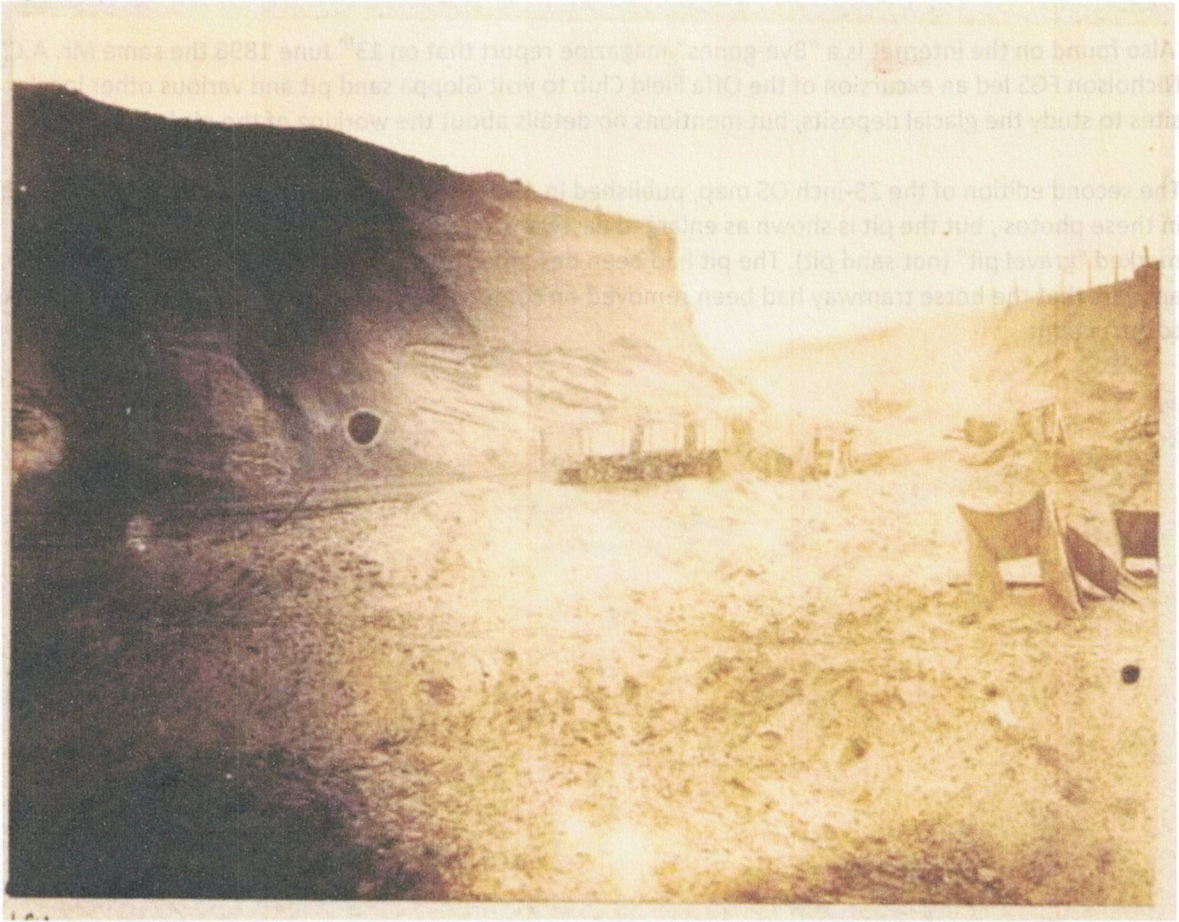
The second edition of the 25-inch OS map, published in 1901 (ref. 1), does not show the tramway seen in these photos, but the pit is shown as enlarged eastwards compared to the earlier map, and is marked "gravel pit" (not sand pit). The pit had been described in 1892 as "not being worked", so it appears that the horse tramway had been removed on completion of the first phase of the waterworks construction:



The land formed part of Lord Harlech's Brogyntyn Estate, and the National Library of Wales holds a "Draft lease by William Richard Baron Harlech to Liverpool Corporation of a sand pit at the Gloppa near Oswestry, Salop, 1899" and related letters (ref.5). This was presumably in connection with the enlargement of the Liverpool Corporation waterworks at Llanforda, Oswestry, where additional filter beds were completed in 1910 (ref.6).

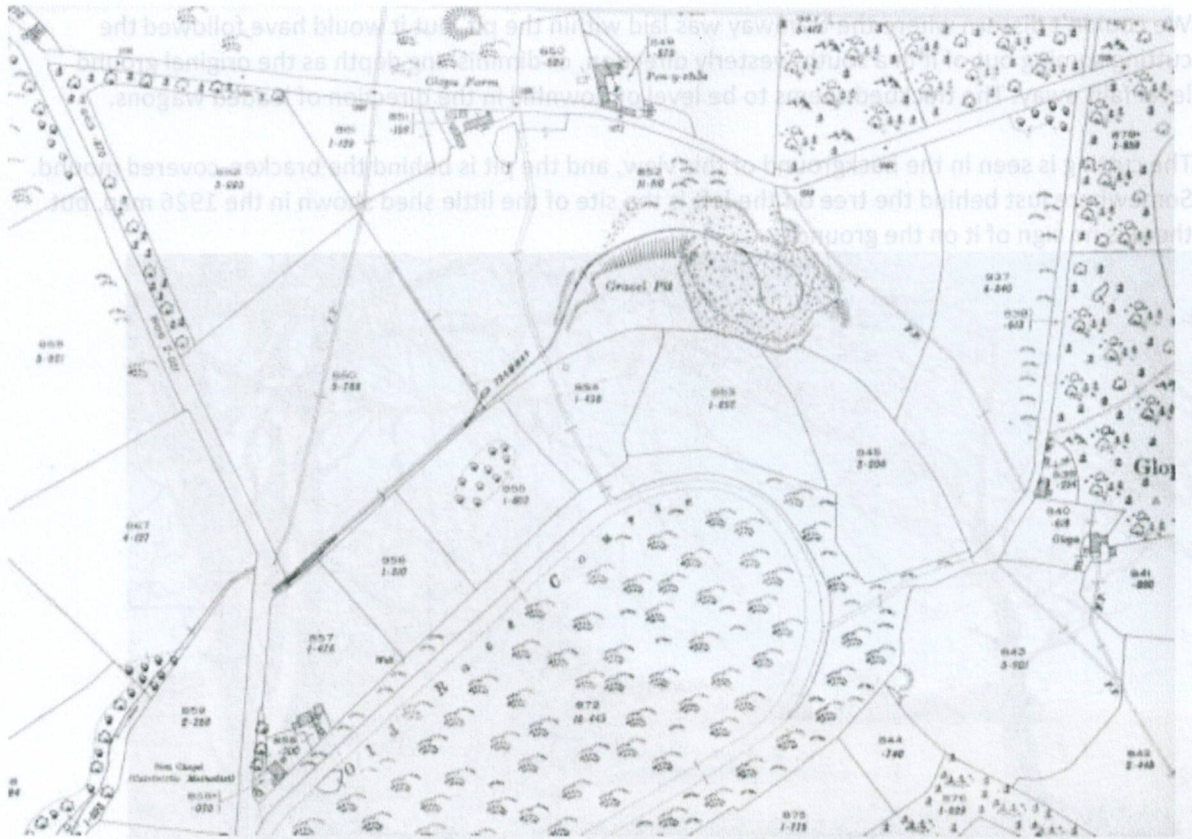
The next edition of the OS map in 1926 (ref. 1) is the one which shows the "tramway" running a distance of approx 400m south-westwards from a significantly larger gravel pit to a lay-by on the road between the racecourse and Carreg-y-big. It therefore seems that the whole line was relaid after 1901; within the pit there was a balloon loop, just before the lay-by there was a run-round loop, and about half-way there was a siding to a small shed. None of these features would seem necessary for a horse-worked line - but no information has been discovered about any locos at the site.

The second shows a narrow-gauge track with three similar wagons (or perhaps the same ones coupled together):



The third shows a side view of the strata with the track (and loose rails or possibly a second track), together with one of the gantries:





In February 2025 I explored the sand/gravel pit and the tramway trackbed with friends Tom Lerwill and Chris James, by kind permission of the local farmer (there is no public access). The pit itself is about 20m deep with sides sloping at around 45 degrees, and the material is sandy soil with rounded pebbles of various types of rock. It is quite overgrown with gorse, brambles, shrubs and trees, and it is difficult to make much sense of the hummocky surface which was left in the base of the pit when working ceased many decades ago. This view is from the rim of the pit looking approximately south:



We couldn't discern where the tramway was laid within the pit, but it would have followed the cutting coming out of it in a south-westerly direction, of diminishing depth as the original ground level falls away. The trackbed seems to be level or downhill in the direction of loaded wagons.

The cutting is seen in the background of this view, and the pit is behind the bracken-covered mound. Somewhere just behind the tree on the left is the site of the little shed shown in the 1926 map, but there is no sign of it on the ground:



A view taken from the road during the snow of January 2025 clearly shows the height of the embankment increasing as it nears the lay-by:



The sand pit may have been used for additional filter beds constructed at Llanforda waterworks over the years, or for other purposes, but we have not discovered when it ceased working. The c.1950 "Provisional Edition" OS 1:25,000 map still shows the tramway, but the version published in 1957 incorporating partial revision up to 1949 does not, although it does still mark the "gravel pit" without adding "disused".

No artifacts have been found, and no information has been discovered about the tramway itself, its gauge, or its rolling stock. However 2'0" gauge tramways were used at Llanforda filter beds (which I intend to deal with in a separate article in due course), so it seems likely that similar rolling stock may have been used here.

References:

1. OS maps from Oswestry Public Library and National Library of Scotland website.
2. Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society, Volume 48, Pages 86 - 95
3. British Geological Soc. GeoScenic website, photos P2326 15 to 21.
4. "Bye-gones" magazine July 8 1896, page 401, National Library of Wales website.
5. National Library of Wales, file 47/24.
6. Wikipedia, "Liverpool Corporation Waterworks, Vyrnwy Scheme."

Henry Thomas 15.3.25.

Looking towards the road from the same spot, the tramway embankment can be clearly seen. The elegant row of large beech trees may have been planted around the time the tramway was laid:



As it approaches the road, the embankment broadens for the run-round loop, and ends in a dense hedge (seen in the background of the photo above).

This detail of the 1926 map shows that the tramway continued into the lay-by, with cross-hatching perhaps indicating a timber structure so that wagons could be tipped directly into Lorries. However no signs of this remain on the ground, and the whole area has been cleared:

