

## ONE MORNING IN MAY, 1959

*Norman Griffiths of Brynmawr remembers a day in May 1959 when his life was about to change. His journey to work records a town and valley soon to alter greatly.*

At 5 o'clock on a very warm May morning, I left my house in Alma Street Brynmawr to catch the 5.15 train to work in Six Bells colliery fitting shop. At that time in the morning very few people were around, apart from Tom Rees the milk on early deliveries from his Llanelly Hill farm. He gave me a wave and shouted that it was going to be a great day, and could not wait to get back home.

The walk to the station took me along the main road by the side of the Institute and onto the Square where only two buses were waiting. This would change at 6.05 a.m. when the first Griffin bus left for Blackwood. I passed two Leyland double-deckers parked outside Marie's Café, ready to take early shift workers to Ebbw Vale steel works. How strange to see the café closed - like the Windmill Theatre it seemed to be always open. In the square a previous night's clutter lay strewn but by 8.00. a.m. the council would have cleaned it up. I walked down Station Road past the Black Lion pub, Hodges Garage and Maggie Price's shop. During and after the war this lady would accept sweet rationing coupons well before the month they should have been used. On the right was the fair ground that hosted Deakins' fair for many years and just beyond was the Griffin Bus Company maintenance shop where my father spent all his working life. To its right was Phil Evans the barbers, Edna Woods' dress shop and the Griffin offices. Between the Office and Reg. James's Gents Outfitter was the railway line that crossed through the centre of Brynmawr passing a shop known locally as "James the Line". This line had once transported lime-stone from Llanelly Hill to Nant-y-glo Iron works. It crossed what is now the bus station, passed in front of the bus garage, and ran parallel with Windsor Road where a slight left hand turn took it to Nant-y-Glo. A local scrap dealer was asked by the Brynmawr Urban District Council if he would take up the track where it crossed the road, and agreed to do the job for nothing providing he was given all the scrap he found. The Council accepted his offer and, quite by chance, he discovered an extra three miles of track and had it free of charge

I would have looked towards Brynmawr station used by the London, Midland and

Scottish (L.M.S.) and the Great Western (G.W.R.) railway companies. A train stood on the G.W.R. platform while my own train waited for it to leave - this was nicknamed the "Budgie Train" whose seven carriages were pulled by two locomotives forming a "double-header" to take workers to the Royal Ordnance factory at Usk. At the height of the war this train ran a three-shift service, but at that period only once a day, returning at 5.30pm. The name "Budgie" was because of the many relationships that came about by having an integrated work force at the factory. Until the war, very few females worked in the small number of factories in this area, but this altered with the needs of war. Men were either in the armed services, coal mines or the steel works so female labour was pressed into service.

Station Road was also known locally as the "top road to Nant-y-Glo". Walking under the railway bridge you saw a fish and chip shop on the right, then you turned left to the station entrance. The station was at a much higher level than the entrance road, so you had to climb quite a number of steps to gain entry. To the right of the station you were able to see the Brynmawr goods sidings and marshalling yards of the L.M.S. together with the Station Master's imposing house. The marshalling yard was the area where goods train trucks were marshalled for their various destinations. This very large area, where now Blaen y Cwm school stands, was used to store railway trucks, vans, and low loaders together with various other rolling stock. Yet they seemed forgotten since nothing ever seemed to move, and the last I saw of them was being cut up for scrap.

At the station you walked up the stairs to the booking office where the clerk was comfortably installed. I paid two shillings for my return ticket to Six Bells and went through the turn-stile onto the platform. In later years I found out that this turn-stile was rare since there were only two others of its type in existence, one being at Swansea High Street station, but scrapped when the station closed. Wyman's book stall, was closed, waiting for the early morning papers to arrive from Newport.

While I stood there, the first train from Abergavenny would come into the station on platform No 1, a 0-6-2 tank engine pulling a two carriage train. With its tall funnel it looked very old-fashioned - some of these locomotives were over sixty years old but had given very good service on the very steep incline from Abergavenny to Brynmawr and the on to Merthyr. Passengers got off the train, some going to the Semtex factory, others

travelling down the Western Valley on the same G.W.R. train I would be catching. Very quickly the L.M.S. train departed for Merthyr - it was always my ambition to have travelled on this train but I never did. The "Budgie" had by now pulled out and my train was pulling into platform 4. To my right was the locomotives' water supply, a long arm to which was attached a flexible pipe that could be swung over to fill the loco's tank. A long standing feud existed between L.M.S. and G.W.R. companies especially since the only water supply at Brynmawr was placed where only L.M.S. engines could use it. The G.W.R. loco had to fill up at Abertillery making sure that they had enough water to reach Brynmawr, and then return.

The 0-6-0 pannier tanker loco shunted its three coaches, painted in G.W.R. brown and cream, into platform 4 from where it would begin its bunker-first run to Newport at 5.10. a.m. The compartments seated ten people, five on each side; shutting the compartment door with an almighty bang you could open its window by means of a leather strap with a series of holes that fastened to a peg, allowing its opening to be adjusted. To the right, and above, the door was the "communication cord" and a notice stating that if it was pulled other than in an emergency there would be a £5 fine. Children travelling on their own might be brave enough to touch it, but never pull since it would automatically stop the train, the guard arrive at your compartment and later you would appear at the local Magistrates Court. On each side of the compartment were photographs showing towns and landscapes on the G.W.R. network to encourage visitors to them. In my regular compartment was one of St David's Cathedral, but it would be thirty years before I managed to visit this in West Wales.

Between the pictures was the heating control, always a problem. In the summer we had heating, in the winter none. The heaters used the locomotive's steam and being situated under the seats made some very embarrassing noises when the train started. This would be accompanied by a smell of bad eggs which was why the window was always open.

Promptly at 5.10 the train moved off. First of all you could feel the slack being taken up by the coach couplings as the train moved off with its proverbial whistle. Passing over the bridge spanning the main road from Nant-y-Glo into Brynmawr, the Town Square and Cenotaph half-came into view. I have often wondered how many

people leaving Brynmawr during the war would never again return, and for whom this would have been the last view of a town they knew so well. I remember this bridge and the high standard dressed stone used in its construction. Looking down I could see the old photographic studio with its corrugated steel roof and the Griffin Bus garage just beyond. This company, with other motor bus services would help Dr. Beeching kill local railways in years to come. To the left was the famous Boiler House and outstanding architectural nine domes of the Dunlop factory which brought a new working environment hitherto unknown to this area. In years to come I tried hard to save this building and make Brynmawr people aware that it was an essential part of our heritage and should be saved from demolition. However in their wisdom our elected local government members sanctioned its removal from the face of the earth, a monument to their inability and ineptitude to realise its value.

On the left we now passed Brynmawr No 1 signal box, controlling the Brynmawr - Beaufort line and single track to Nant-y-Glo. The locomotive fireman would take the staff from the signalman, locking this line to other traffic until the next box. Only when the fireman hands the staff to the signalman at Nant-y-Glo could the system be unlocked so signals could allow another train on the section. This foolproof system was devised by the G.W.R. for single line traffic and there was never an accident on any track that used it.

This length of track was called the "Missing Link", constructed to link the Western Valley G.W.R. line with the L.M.S. allowing through rail traffic to Brynmawr. It was not completed until the 12<sup>th</sup> June 1905 at a cost of £33,452. then considered a great deal of money and ran west of the Dunlop Semtex factory. To the right was Machine Pond and then Harry Thompson's scrap yard and remains of the siding to Waun colliery, still operating up until the end of the 1939-45 war when taken over by the National Coal Board (N.C.B.) and closed down. The left hand bend took the line under the railway bridge carrying the Brynmawr-Winchestown road around Waun Pond where the county of Breconshire is left and Monmouthshire entered. To the right was the green painted corrugated Winchestown infants school, feeder to Nant-y-Glo Junior on Limestone Road.

To the left were the remains of Nant-y-Glo Iron Works, some of whose walls were still standing, forming a play ground for children. In the war years great stacks of

wood were stored here: I wonder how many young people will ever know the history of the works and what impact it had upon Nant-y-Glo? In my mind I think of the workers' fight to get a living wage and be paid in coins of the realm rather than vouchers that could only be spent in the company shop, until abolished by the Truck Act. Passing under the road from Limestone Road to the south end of Winchestown, remains of the old Bush Inn came into sight, once the area's oldest inn where the pack mule and horse trains operating between Newport docks and Brecon used to stop. Just above was the new road to Brynmawr and the stack of an old boiler house that powered limestone crushing machinery. To its left a bridge passing Banna Park on its north side was for limestone-filled horse drawn trucks to reach the crusher. Beneath Porters Road nearby, a coal seam caught fire in the early 1950's causing the area to be isolated for many years until it burned out.

Visible also was the great pile of rubble on Limestone road, remains of the three-storey barrack type buildings constructed by Crawshay Bailey. People living in its front had a ground floor, one story dwelling, while those at the rear had two storeys. To the right of the rubble was the company shop, then still in business but in private ownership.

Passing the L.M.S. manned level-crossing and the road from Limestone Road to both Lodges that once allowed entry into Nant-y-Glo House once stood, the remains of furnaces built into a small hill could still be seen. A garden has now been constructed over the area, but the furnaces were then visible from the train. Left of the crossing was the house known as "Ty Doctors", (Ty Meddyg today). Here lived Doctor Bevan who was instrumental in building Nant-y-Glo Hospital and whose grave I found in Llangattock Church while looking for some of my own family, his work for the community now sadly forgotten. We then passed the junction allowing goods trains from the G.W.R. line to travel on the old iron work tracks. Above it was Farm Road, at one time the main road to Brynmawr from Coalbrook. Now there was a much better view of Ty Doctor which, in the war's early days housed the first London evacuees, brought here to escape German bombing.

Along the Farm Road used to be large blocks of slag from the furnaces, positioned along the railway side of the road to act as a wall. The slag in the blocks was like a very black glass and very hard, impossible to break without hitting with a hammer.

Between the road and the line running parallel with it at a lower level was the River Ebbw also known by the locals as “the stinky” and to the right was Nant-y-Glo Church cricket ground. The story is told that the longest distance a cricket ball has ever travelled took place at this ground. The ball was hit through the window of a passing train and was found when it reached Platform 7 at Newport Station. Behind the ground looking west is was a field known as “Cowboys Hat” in the grounds of Crawshaw Bailey’s residence, Nant-y-Glo House, so-called because of its shape. Looking up Garn Fach and Nursery Slope with its three gas lamps were visible, one at the top, the second at the centre and the third on the bottom. In winter snows we would sledge from the road near the fish and chip shop on the Garn all the way down Nursery Slope and then Station Road. It was at the age of six with other boys we saw from the top of Nursery Slope, a train of seven coaches pulling into Nant-y-Glo station laden with evacuees. It was also the first time we had ever seen a coloured boy and girl who had been evacuated to the area.

Within a short time fights broke out between the local boys and the evacuees whom we saw as intruders to the valley community. Every one felt very sorry for them, having to leave their families and one must remember the average age of these children was between five and ten years of age. Our gang would not accept them but we were told we had to be nice to them. They were found homes with local families whose children were expected to share with them. When local parents found out theirs sons had been fighting with the evacuees, justice was swift, many boys finding themselves in bed very early because of it. One thing that stands out in my mind was seeing an evacuee crying in the corner of Garn Fach School play ground. He could not have been more than seven to eight years of age but we all stood around making fun of him. Later our teacher told us he had just learned his father had been killed at sea. We were all very sorry for him and asked him to join our gang. It was the only way we could repay him for making fun of him crying and he remained a member until he went back to London.

From the station looking left we see Hafod-y-Ddol Grammar School that was fee-paying when first opened. It had an inclined playing field at the front of it that spread down towards the railway sidings. It was here mineral and goods trucks were marshalled by the G.W.R. ready for the final L.M.S stage of their journey north to Brynmawr.

As the train pulls away from Nant-y-Glo station the River Ebbw on our right soon

disappeared into a large culvert under the railway, to reappear on the other side. During my youth my friends and I were capable of doing many things that would make your hair stand on end, but I never knew anyone brave enough to walk the full length of this culvert which was about 100yards long. Soon the Nant-y-Glo signal box appeared, our staff being handed over to allow the signalman able to unlock the single line to Brynmawr. In return he passes another staff to give our train passage over the line between Nant-y-Glo and Coalbrook. Nant-y-Glo signal box was said to be the tallest in Wales at three stories high, its signalman having to come down to its second floor to give and receive staffs. To the right of the signal box is the spur line on which the L.M.S. 0-8-0 Drummond locos had to wait until they had clearance to move on to the G.W.R. line to Brynmawr. These locos were massive compared with the G.W.R. Pannier tank 0-6-0 but seemed to pull a very small number of goods wagons compared with them.

On the left Hafod-y-Ddol Grammar School playing field was again visible on a reclaimed refuse tip owned by the Nant-y-Glo and Blaina U.D.C. with, at its foot, the River Ebbw culvert. Behind the school was Farm Road running to the Three Horse Shoes past the Waun Marsley hut that, for many years, was the headquarters of the No 275 A.T.C. Squadron.

The Coalbrook signal box now appeared with its controlled crossing and sidings for Red Ash level high on Mynydd Garn-y-Cefn that sent its coal down via an incline where full coal trams pulled the empty up. It had a double section of track in the centre of the run so both tram journeys could pass each other, a system known as "The Ginney". At the bottom were coal screens and nearby Coalbrook House, often up to twenty empty trucks were shunted into the sidings ready for filling, along with empty trucks for Beynon's colliery. To the left was the walled shaft of "Peggy's Pit" down which we boys threw many stones shaft. The shaft stood on a mound about 100 yards from the Three Horse Shoes pub, and had been derelict for many years before filled-in.

The train now passed the old Trostre Colliery engine house, also derelict, and a number of lived-in cottages whose fronts came directly on to the railway track with only a small path between houses and line. To the left was the soccer ground the people of Blaina West Side had created from Beynon colliery's slag tips for their team West Side United. On occasions you could see the NCB loco "Sir Wyndham Beynon" hauling

trucks full of waste up to the slag tip overlooking the north end of Blaina. These trucks were emptied by hand by miners not fit enough to work under ground, which the NCB regarded as light work. Our engine gives a warning whistle as we approach the public footpath crossing the line near the "Lamb" public house.

Clearly visible in the field on the right, were the foundations of Nissen huts that housed soldiers stationed there during the war, manning a searchlight, sound detector, and anti aircraft gun. The sound detector was supposed to amplify the sound of German bombers approaching to bomb Ebbw Vale steel works, radar was then still in its infancy. If an incoming bomber was heard a siren would be sounded and allow us to take cover from an impending air raid. We boys went down to see the anti aircraft gun but were not allowed near it; I cannot remember it being fired but the search light was in regular use, largely to estimate the cloud base height over the area. With double British summer time then in operation, we seemed to be playing outside for long hours all day. The war only came home to us when we saw the wounded American service men at the military hospital in Gilwern.

Nearing Blaina we passed Shop Row on a lower level, with Railway Terrace on the higher. Shop Row was so near to the railway line that you were able to see into the bed room windows as the train passed; looking down towards the ground floor you saw the residents looking up at you. After a slight left hand bend the West Side (North) signal box came into view, its level-crossing gate operated by the signaller who now takes the staff unlocking the track to Nant-y-Glo so another train can enter it. To the right stood the old John Lancaster Company company office, very ugly and dirty in appearance. To the left was Beynon Colliery's check-weighing bridge, and sidings with coal-filled trucks ready to be taken by the G.W.R. to Newport docks, each filled with twenty tons of lump coal. A lecturer at the Abertillery Technical School I attended once told us that, when a locomotive fireman on one of these coal trains had marked the locomotive driving wheel's outer tyre during one journey to Newport. Arriving there he checked the mark only to find heat generated by braking had caused the tyre to move three quarters along the wheel circumference. A locomotive's "tyres" were of steel, and shrunk onto the wheel.

Entering the station the Nant-y-Glo, Blaina and Brynmawr Gas Works with its



large gas circular storage tanks were on our left. These tanks had rollers running in guide channels so they could rise and fall depending upon the amount of gas stored in them. A casing of water around the base stopped gas escaping, rather like a bell jar. The gas was made by burning coal but production had ended in the late 1940's of early 50's although a number of redundant cold tar railway tanks still remained there (tar was a by-product of gas making). The Blaina South signal box was situated at the end of the down line platform, and there was no need to exchange staffs because we are entering a double track. Passing the signal box we could see St. Peter's Church spire - it was said coal was not mined from beneath the church to prevent subsidence - and once past Blaina Institute, Mynydd James came into view. The whistle is blown as we approach the level crossing between Pilgrim's Garden and Dyffryn Park.

Now we passed the goods shed and offices, together with railway vans ready to be unloaded. To the right were remains of a large horizontal wheel, part of an aerial rope system that brought stone from the mountain quarry to build the many Blaina houses required during the area's industrial growth. Dyffryn Park was soon on the right and then the rail link to the South Griffin colliery, then not working, but housing ventilation fans for Rose Heyworth Colliery and a winding engine in case of an emergency evacuation of miners. A very large-diameter pipe running parallel with the spur line to the South Griffin colliery was for compressed air, and connected all collieries in the area.

It was around this colliery in the early 1930's that Hollywood director D. W. Griffith filmed part of his epic H. G. Wells' "The shape of things to come". Local people earned more money in one day working as an extra in the film than they earned in a week underground. The "Tyler's Arms" was passed on the left, then Glan-yr-Afon school and the Baptist Mission Church at the end of Blaina cemetery. The train now arrives at Bourneville Halt - I could never find out why Bourneville got its name, it seems alien to the area. This halt was manned at all times by one porter, come ticket clerk and ticket collector.

To the right it was possible to see the old Abertillery Road running under the railway bridge before making its way along the base of Arrael mountain towards Abertillery. The "Rhiw" coal level once operated here near Rose Heyworth Colliery but would be closed down by the N.C.B. The Rose Heyworth slag tip dominated the floor of

the valley, visible from miles away and whose two hoppers carried slag to its summit. Some years later it was suggested the slag be taken back down the pit to consolidate the ground and stop subsidence, but this was short lived and the tip remained in place for many years until the colliery closed. This colliery had its own halt for miners travelling on the train but most used the bus. In 1922 it was this colliery's miners who asked T. J. Jones of Brynmawr, Griffin Motor Bus Company owner, if he would run a bus service to the colliery. This became the first fare paying route between Brynmawr and Abertillery. The signal box near to the colliery was very dirty due to the fact that the coal screens were nearby, being the last place women were allowed to work in the collieries.

Down on the right was a playing field where I played all my schoolboy rugby -we were never allowed on the hallowed Abertillery rugby ground. This ground had an oval cycle track around it and in its heyday some very important cycle races were held there. I was at the Abertillery Police sports day when a crash occurred killing one rider and injuring many more. Now cyclists seem to enjoy flirting with motorists on the area's over-crowded main road. The whistle again sounded as we came up to the pedestrian crossing at Morley Road; to the right was Abertillery Park band stand, now in a very sorry state. Entering the station marshalling yards and a goods depot with its big hand operated crane for lifting heavy loads off the trucks was on our left, Oak Street just above it.

On the right and at a much lower level than the station were Ralph's Bus Company premises with some of its road fleet in its original Red and Yellow livery, others in that of the "Red and White" that had recently taken it over. Some very old A.E.C. and A.D.C. buses stood behind the main garage; now they would be collectors' items but these were awaiting the scrap merchant. To the left was the Empress Picture House, and a little distance away the Pavilion, always known as the "Pavvy". People then flocked to the picture house encouraged by being able to buy a train ticket that included in its price entry into any of the picture houses. These always ran two showings of the film together with Movietone News and trailers of those being shown the following week. The town also had a picture house called "The Palace".

At Abertillery were two watering places on up and down lines, with a very large water storage tank on a tall structure at the north end of the down platform. In the winter

a “devil” i.e. a large brazier, would be lit under this tank to stop freezing and preventing locomotives filling their tanks. Moving off the Gaiety cinema was visible which, since built over the river Ebbw, enabled rats living in the river banks to run into it, causing uproar amongst those watching the film.

Now we crossed the bridge taking the back road connecting town, Six Bells, Warm Turn and Aberbeeg. To its right was a fish and chip shop where many picture goers finished their night out with what is now termed a take-away meal. Next to it was the Ralph’s Garage Social Club, one of the many was established in pre war years; opposite, next to the “Empress” was Smiths’ sweet shop frequented by many going to the pictures. On the opposite side of the road was a monumental stone mason’s with grave stones propped against the wall, just the thing after a enjoyable night at the picture to bring one back to reality.

Just past the bridge to the right was Abertillery Tin Works, a long established industry, whose large chimney stacks belched black smoke into the atmosphere. The works itself was a conglomeration of buildings covered with corrugated steel sheets marked by fall-out from the smoking chimneys. A very dirty and foreboding place, I imagined, not very good for its work force. I was told the distinctive smell was from palm oil used in the tin-making process. Closed down when the industry was nationalised because of its out dated methods of production, its work was transferred to the larger Ebbw Vale works. The tin sheet was said to be of a very high standard compared with Ebbw Vale, but quantity prevailed over quality, and it closed.

Behind the Tin Works were towering gas storage tanks, the last gas making unit in the upper Ebbw Fach valley. To the left was junction with the line from Cwmtillery Valley and its colliery where it was claimed 53 million ton of coal had been mined up to the time of its closure. This was the last deep mine in the area once possessing an abundance of mines. Abertillery South signal box was passed, controlling the line from Cwmtillery, then the Vivian Colliery, shortly to be closed and the work transferred to that of Six Bells. A story circulated during the war that an American small artillery spotter plane that developed engine problems over Abertillery actually made a forced landing on the Vivian slag tips but I could never confirm if this was true or not. The next signal box on the left would be that of Nant-y-Gloes covering the line into the Six Bells sidings. To

the right were Arrael and Griffin Streets with the River Ebbw flowing in front, together with the massive compressed air pipe taking air to the colliery. A great deal of rubbish brought down the valley by the river was strewn along its banks and it looked very unsightly at that time. However this changed in later years with restriction upon industries regarding the discharge of waste. Today the River Ebbw has fish in it and foliage growing along its banks. The river has a new lease of life and long may it remain.

At 5.45am I got off the train at Six Bells Halt, the train continuing to Newport. I did much thinking on that May morning; normally I would have slept but this was the last day of my employment at the Six Bells colliery fitting shop. Like so many young N.C.B. tradesmen, the outside world beckoned me with much better conditions and wages, and many were leaving. There was a saying in the N.C.B. that the only thing it gave for nothing was ill health for the rest of your life, and I was adamant that it would not apply to me.

The following Tuesday I would be catching the 7.35am bus from Brynmawr to Tredegar to take up a new position in the engineering department at St James Hospital and, in later years, Nevill Hall Hospital. From that day on I had a very happy and enjoyable working life until I retired.

Norman M. Griffiths .

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Typical plateway and tram wheel used in the local area.

