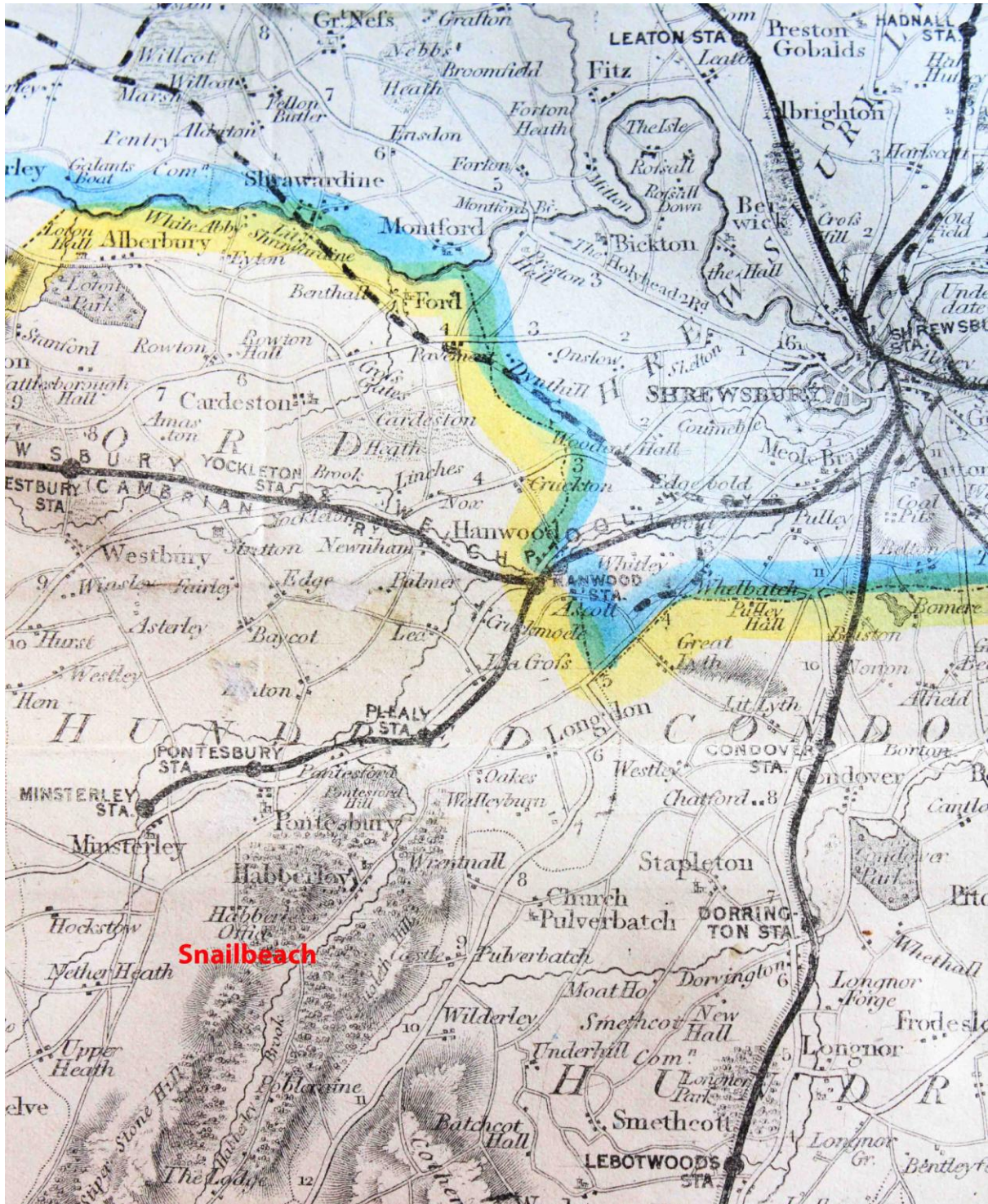


4 N Snailbeach District Railway

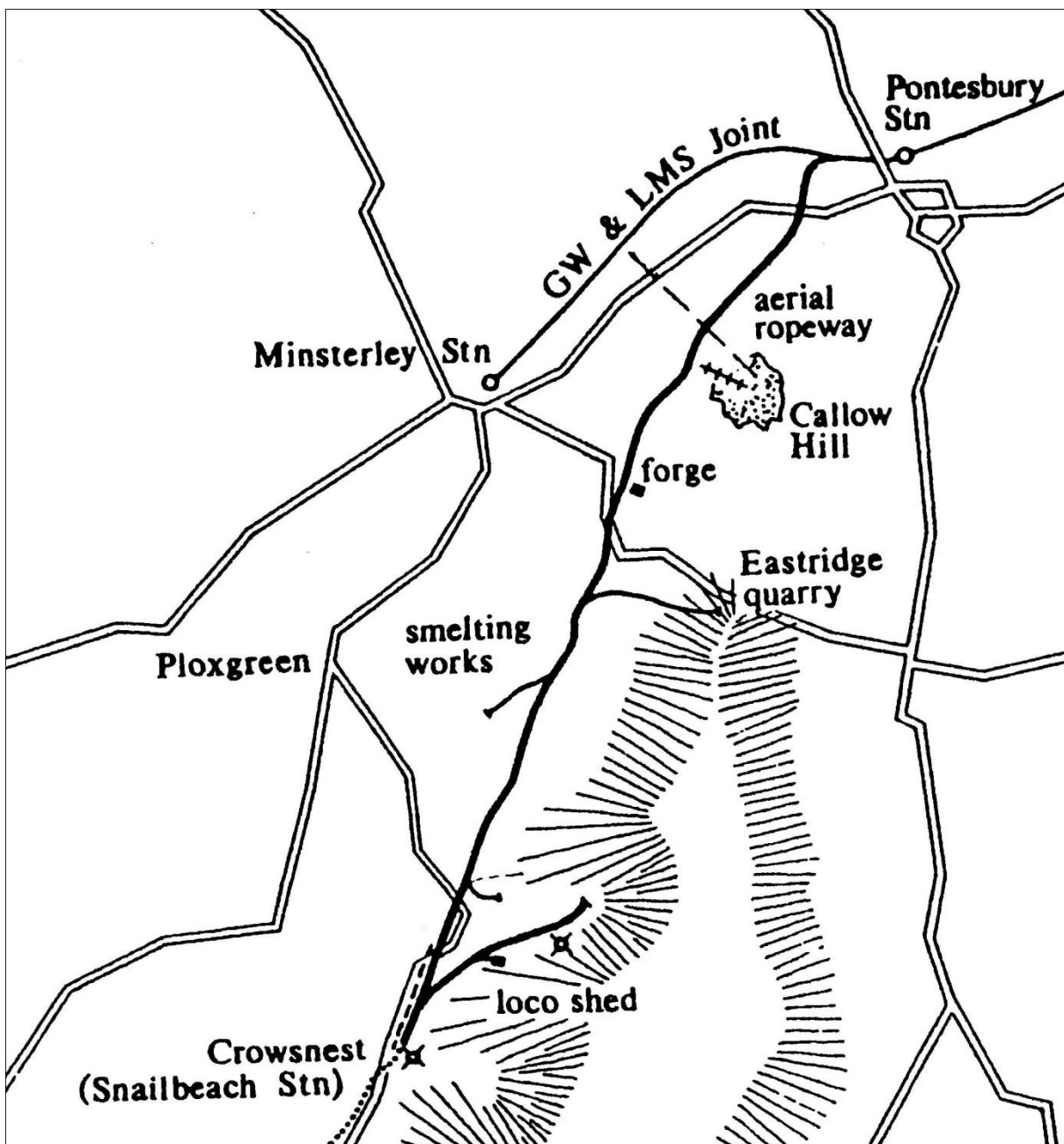


A railway map of 1870 shows the network of railways reaching out towards Snailbeach from Shrewsbury. The last link, from Hanwood to Minsterley, was completed in 1861. The immediate

effect on Snailbeach was that good quality coal could be brought to the smelter at Pontesford. The Nag's Head Colliery, which had worked the poor quality coal at Pontesford since 1785, was closed. Plans to extend the railway beyond Minsterley came to nothing, leaving the lead mines of the area a few miles from main line communications. However, in the great days of Snailbeach Mine, 3,000 tons of lead had been produced each year without the need for a railway to transport it. Even this quantity of lead provides traffic of just 10 tons a day, and this would not be enough to justify building a railway. (See the Wagoner's Tale)

But now that good quality coal could be brought closer to the mine, and with several other large mines nearby, the combined loads of coal and lead could justify building a narrow gauge railway. Henry Dennis, the mine manager, had experience of small mine railways in Wales, and was on the board of one of these railway companies, the Glyn Valley Tramway Co.

By 1873 the Snailbeach District Railways Company had obtained the Act of Parliament needed to



construct the railway. Raising the money to build it proved more difficult. The Act had specified that the trackbed should be wide enough for a standard gauge railway, and that the minimum gauge should be half the standard width, two feet four inches (71 centimetres). This would have been ideal for a passenger railway, but it made the project very expensive.

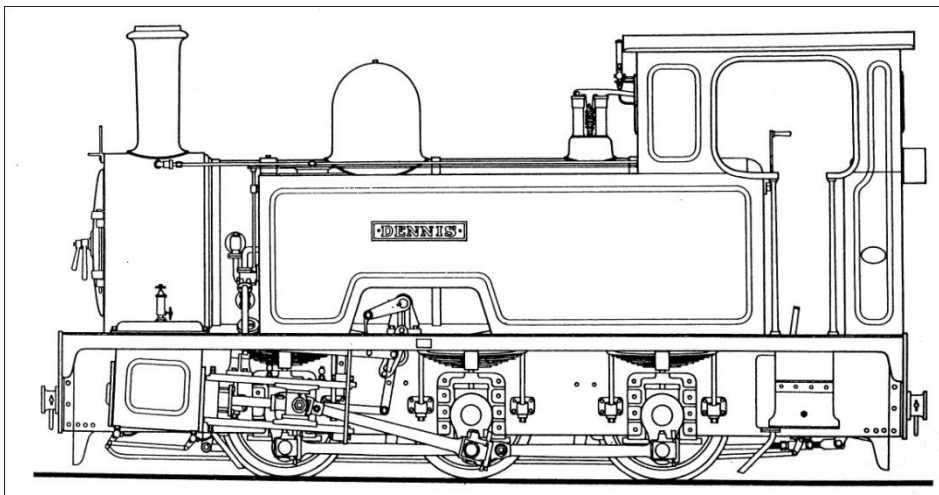
Henry Dennis had surveyed the line. No train could tackle the steep hill from Minsterley, the nearest point to Snailbeach, so the railway had to meet the main line at Pontesbury. Even so, the line had steep gradients and tight bends. It was just over three miles long and cost £20,000. This was twice as much as the total cost of all improvements to Snailbeach Mine which were made in Henry Dennis' time.

The railway opened in 1877, by which time the shareholders had contributed £16,000, and a loan of £4,000 had been taken out. Shareholders received a return of 3% per year on their investment from 1878 to 1883. Besides serving Snailbeach Mine, the railway also handled traffic from three other mines further south, at Tankerville, Pennerley and Bog. The combined traffic amounted to 14,000 tons per year.

In 1884 the price of lead fell, and mining became unprofitable. Snailbeach Mine survived, but almost all the other lead mines in Shropshire closed. This reduced the railway traffic to 5,500 tons a year. With actual lead production down to little more than a thousand tons a year, most of the traffic was either coal for the smelter and mine machinery, or Barytes which had begun to find a market.

Although the railway had two engines, only one was in use, and only one engine driver. Of the total stock of over 50 wagons, less than half were actually needed. There wasn't enough money to maintain either the engine or the track, and the whole railway began to decay.

Just as it seemed that the end had come, Sir Henry Dennis (as he was by now) found a new source of income for the railway. He was associated with a company which opened a quarry for road stone, and the railway was ideally placed to transport stone to the main line. Traffic would go up to 20,000 tons a year. On the strength of this Sir Henry ordered a powerful new engine, weighing twenty tons and costing almost a thousand pounds, which was named Dennis. The quarry traffic ensured the survival of the railway after Snailbeach Mine closed in 1911, but no profit was ever made. The irony is that since loaded mine wagons could roll down the hill without an engine, this powerful engine was only used for bringing the empty ones back up to the mine.

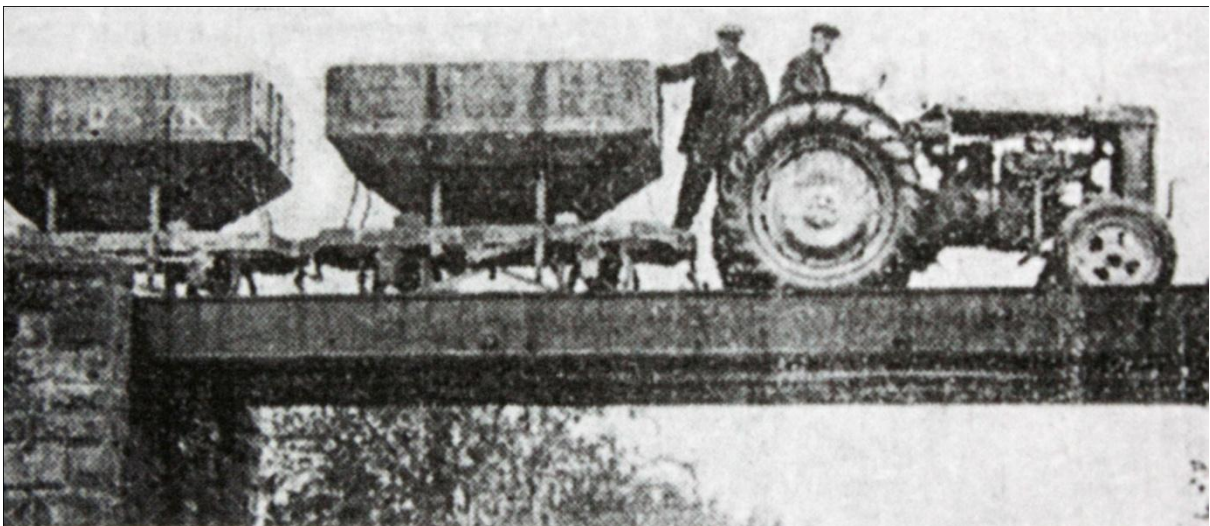


The railway after lead mining ended

In 1923 Colonel Stephens, who was rescuing many small railways, took over management of the line. The track was relaid. He bought surplus railway stock which had been used during the First World War; three engines and a number of wagons. With an assured future, traffic started to increase, but the railway never made a profit. Colonel Stephens died in 1931 and the railway was run on a shoestring after that. Only one engine was needed, so all three were used in turn. The driver, named Gatford, ran the railway single handed.

The only traffic was now going downhill from the Callow Hill Quarry to Pontesford. To save money the loaded wagons were allowed to roll down the steep gradient to Pontesford under their own weight, with a brake van attached to slow them down. The engine was only steamed on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays to pull the empty wagons back up to the quarry. Since the engine was kept in the shed at Snailbeach, this was a six mile trip to pull the wagons just one mile up to the quarry.

The driver worked throughout the Second World War. He was still working beyond the age of 70. He made things easier by leaving his engine by the garden gate overnight, rather than returning it to the engine shed.



In 1950 all the engines were scrapped, and there was no money for replacements. A tractor was used to haul the wagons until the railway closed in 1959. Of course it only had to pull the empty ones up the hill.