

EXPLORATION OF ROMAN ROUTE FROM CAE GAER TO TRAWSCOED



MARTIN DAVIES
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PREAMBLE

There is assumed to have been a Roman road running between the forts of Cae Gaer and Trawscoed. The strongest evidence of its existence is a road cutting on the hillside just south-west of Cae Gaer which heads straight in the direction of Trawscoed.

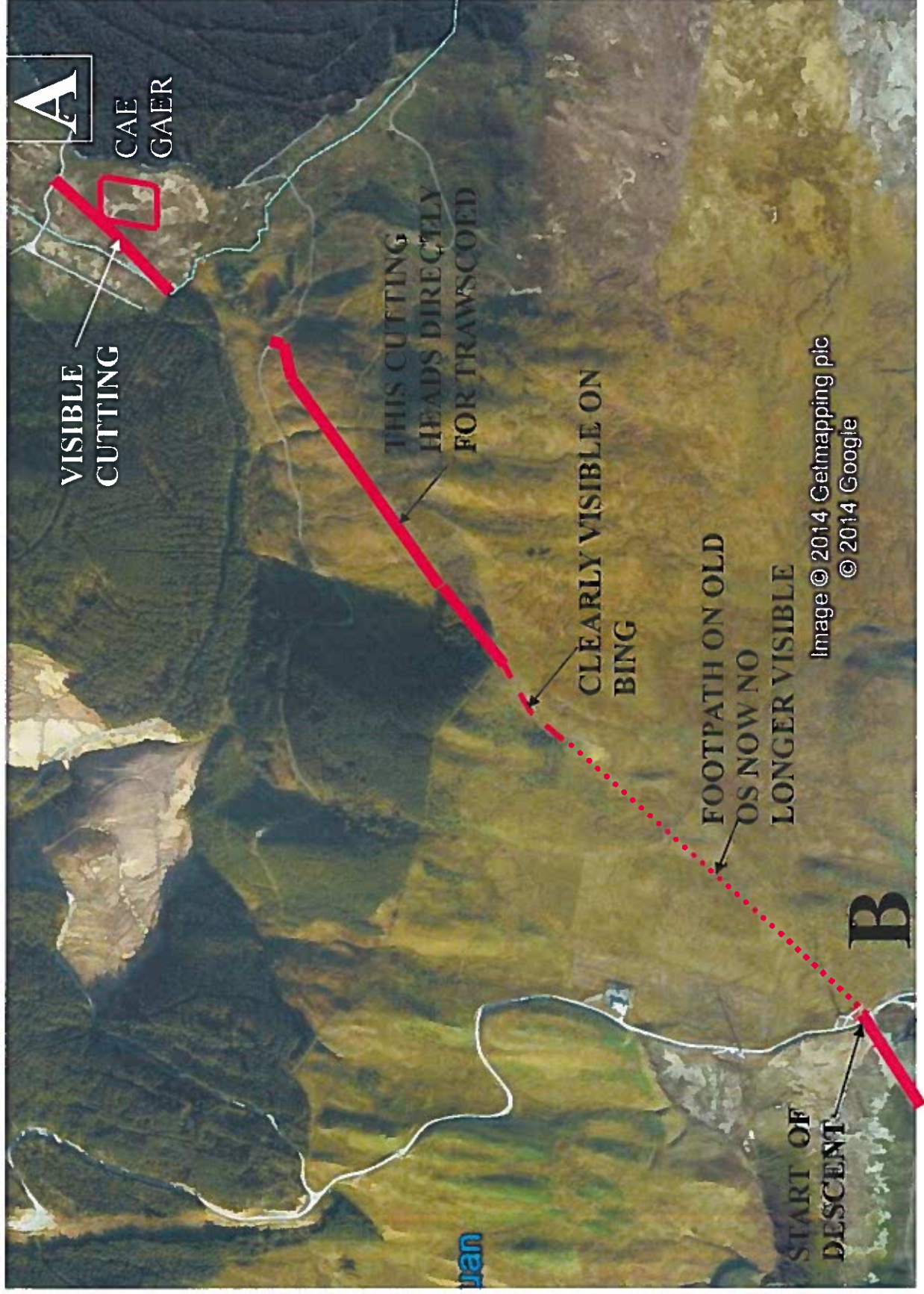
Starting with this virtually unambiguous cutting, the most likely route has been traced all the way between these two forts, taking into account the geography and Roman preferences for road siting. Features which co-incide with this expected route have been identified on the tithe map, old OS maps, RAF 1946 aerial photos, modern maps, Lidar, Google Earth, Bing Maps and on the ground. Traces on the ground takes the form of tracks, cuttings, agger, hedge lines, fords and in one case a possible river section. Evidence is at best circumstantial, but there is one stretch where a dig might produce positive results.

Nineteenth century mining has had its influence along much of the route, but this does not prevent finding clues any more than a build-up of layers of different ages precludes the investigation of an archaeological site. At the epicentres of mining activity however, where there are tips, inclines and ruined mine buildings dotted about, the wholesale disturbance of the area is generally such that any searching for surface clues is fruitless.

The complete projected route is shown with a red line on one A3 map, so that the degree of deviation from the 'crow flies' line can be seen. This route has been divided up into ten sections, A to K, which are represented on aerial views, with evidence discovered marked by red lines of varying strength to correspond to its physical presence on the ground. Where other nearby tracks are thought relevant to the argument, they are shown in orange. Within each of the ten aerial views, there is a basic level of annotation, but where a more detailed illustrated argument is needed, numbered nodes cross-reference to text and photos on separate pages.

It is thought likely that the road was built from Cae Gaer in the direction of Trawscoed, rather than vice versa, and headings and changes of direction have been considered on this assumption. Although it goes against the grain a little, the route has consequently been lettered, numbered and studied from right to left. Every length of possible road has been examined critically to assess whether it follows the most direct route, and if not, whether there is an obstacle which justifies the deviation. Lines on the ground viewed from the air have been studied to ensure that they have not been made, for example, by farm vehicles.

The majority of evidence is in the form of cuttings. These suffer from landslip on the uphill side (less if they are cut from rock) and erosion of the outer verge, which is often fill from the original cut. The rate of disappearance of a cutting depends on so many factors that they are surely impossible to date. One length of cutting in Allt Cordia, Cwmnewydion has a surviving width of track varying from 3m down to less than 1 metre, all below a seemingly consistent hillside slope. Many of the cuttings have had hedgebanks added at some stage, presumably for stock control, but their original width before the addition of the bank is taken into account in assessing whether they are large enough to be convincing.



A

VISIBLE
CUTTING

CAE
GAER

THIS CUTTING
HEADS DIRECTLY
FOR TRAWSCOED

CLEARLY VISIBLE ON
BING

FOOTPATH ON OLD
OS NOW NO
LONGER VISIBLE

START OF
DESCENT

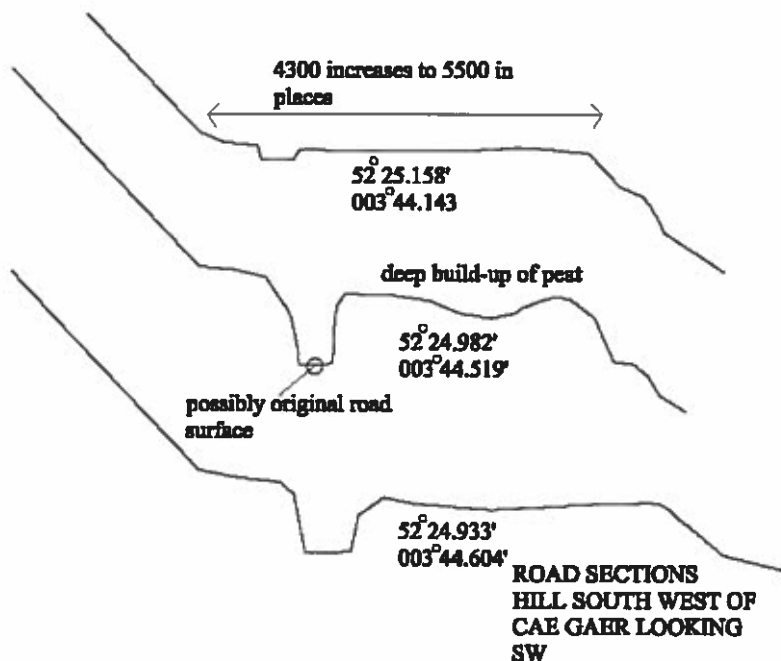
B

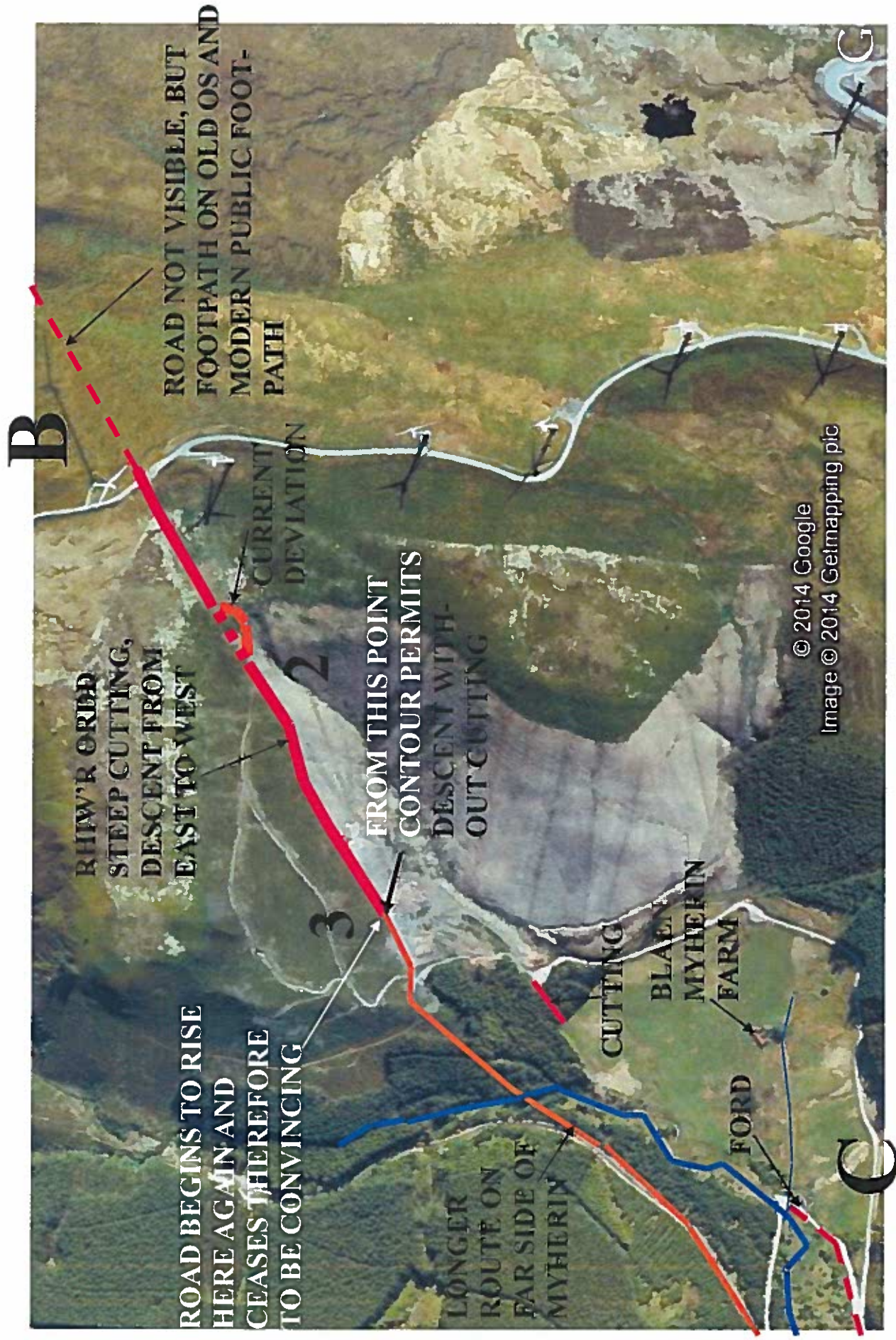
Image © 2014 Getmapping plc
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A to B

1. CAE GAER CUTTING

Apart from new Forestry tracks, there is only one old track in the vicinity of Cae Gaer fort, going past it from the NE, then climbing the hill to the SW, heading directly for Trawscoed. It is shown on the old OS maps as a footpath. The absence of other roads and the orientation make this highly likely to be a Roman road. Much of the cutting on the hillside lies under a deep peaty layer and has suffered from a varying degree of landslip. The photo looks SW.





B to C

2. RHIW'R ORDD

After the top of the Cae Gaer cutting, the road towards the present wind farm is soon no longer visible, but was marked on the old OS maps as a footpath and is still a public right of way. Once past the wind farm, when it begins its descent into the Myherin valley, it reappears.

The name Rhiw'r Ordd (sledgehammer hill) is of some concern because it is contemporary spoken Welsh and so would hardly be the observation of those watching its construction in Roman times. If it is a metaphor for the punishing climb heading NE, it is apt. Another possibility is that it is derived from imagining its construction. But there is one further possibility: at the top of the cutting is a decidedly non-Roman deviation, which has been dug out of the rock, presumably to by-pass what was an unacceptably steep section. If this was dug out (some time before the old OS) without the benefit of blasting, it would have involved hard work for several people with sledgehammers and bars: in this uneventful place, an event worth recording.

In its favour, Rhiw'r Ordd heads directly towards Trawscoed, in a direction re-calculated from the top of the hill. Also in its favour is that there is no other track heading straight down into the valley. There are other cuttings above to specific ventures but it is clear that they have simply used an existing route to their advantage rather than creating it.

3. At point 3, the cutting starts to go up-hill again and ceases to be convincing, and a T-off track heading due south is even less convincing. This is the point where I believe it was joined by the track from the north side of the Myherin stream, and also where a track is shown on the first edition OS only, heading down to Blaen Myherin farm. This is a key point, because here it has to be decided whether the road ran north or south of the Meherin stream. The old OS shows tracks each side of the Myherin, which have both now become in part forestry tracks. One has to favour the most direct route, which is south of the Myherin, and between points 3 and 8 is shorter by about 280 metres.

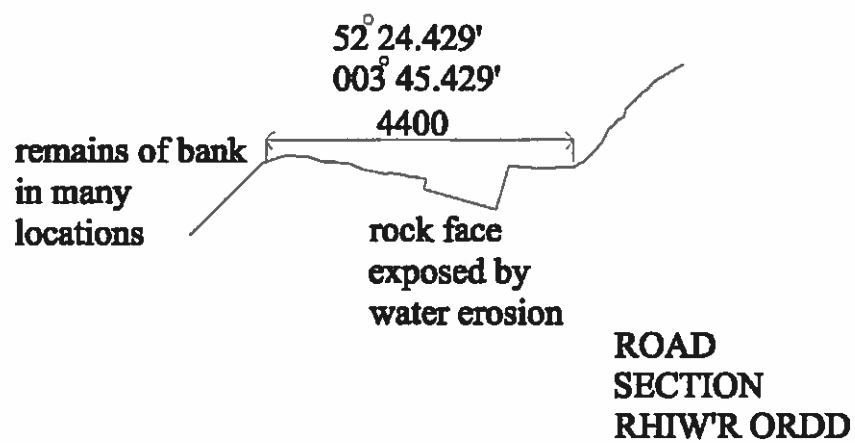


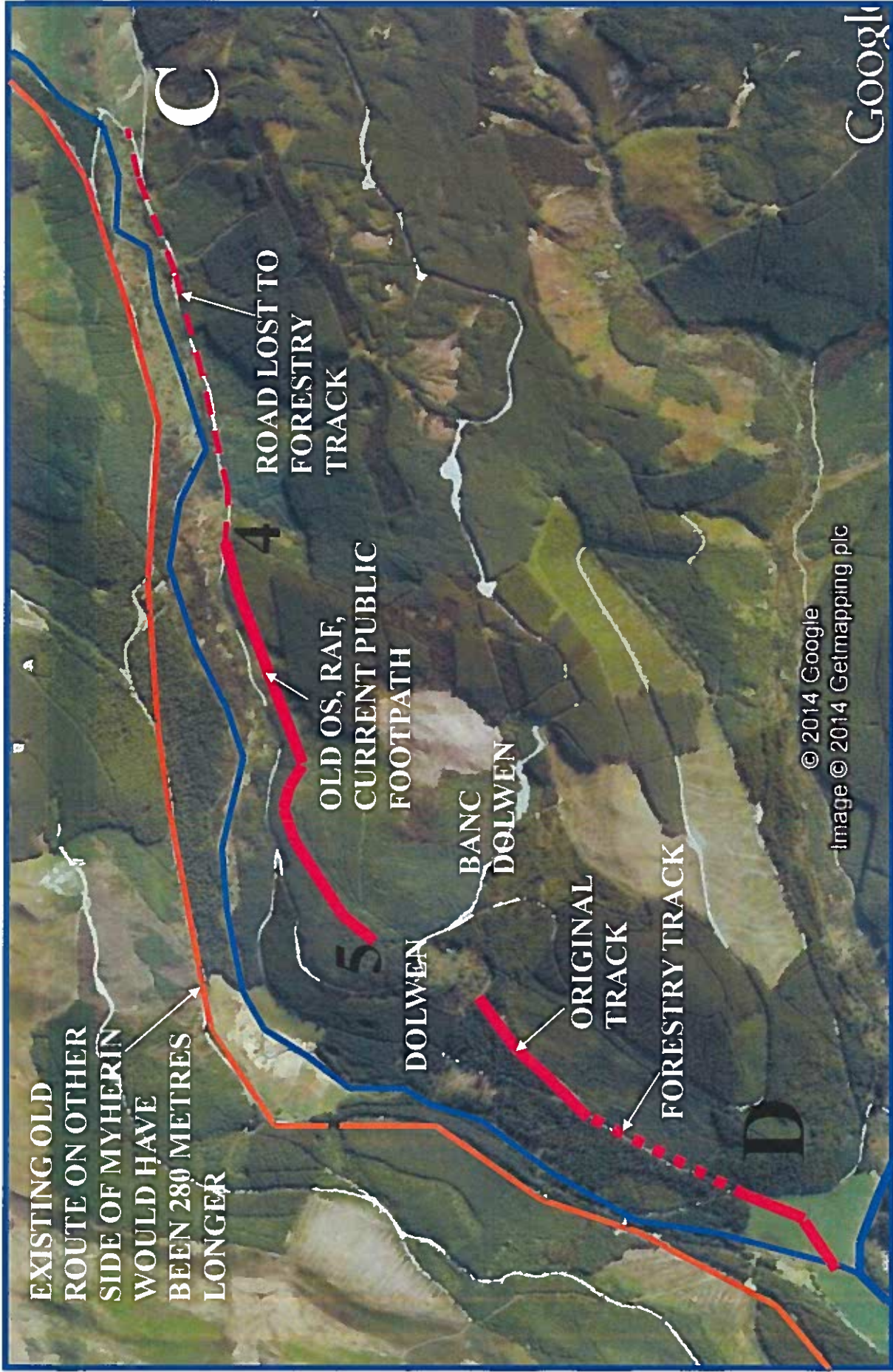
Rhiw'r Ordd from the SW

RHIW'R ORDD CONT'D



photo descending from the NE and section below from same direction





EXISTING OLD
ROUTE ON OTHER
SIDE OF MYHERIN
WOULD HAVE
BEEN 280 METRES
LONGER

ROAD LOST TO
FORESTRY
TRACK

4

OLD OS, RAF,
CURRENT PUBLIC
FOOTPATH

5

DOLWEN

BANC
DOLWEN

ORIGINAL
TRACK

FORESTRY TRACK

D

C

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Google

C to D. BANC DOLWEN CUTTING

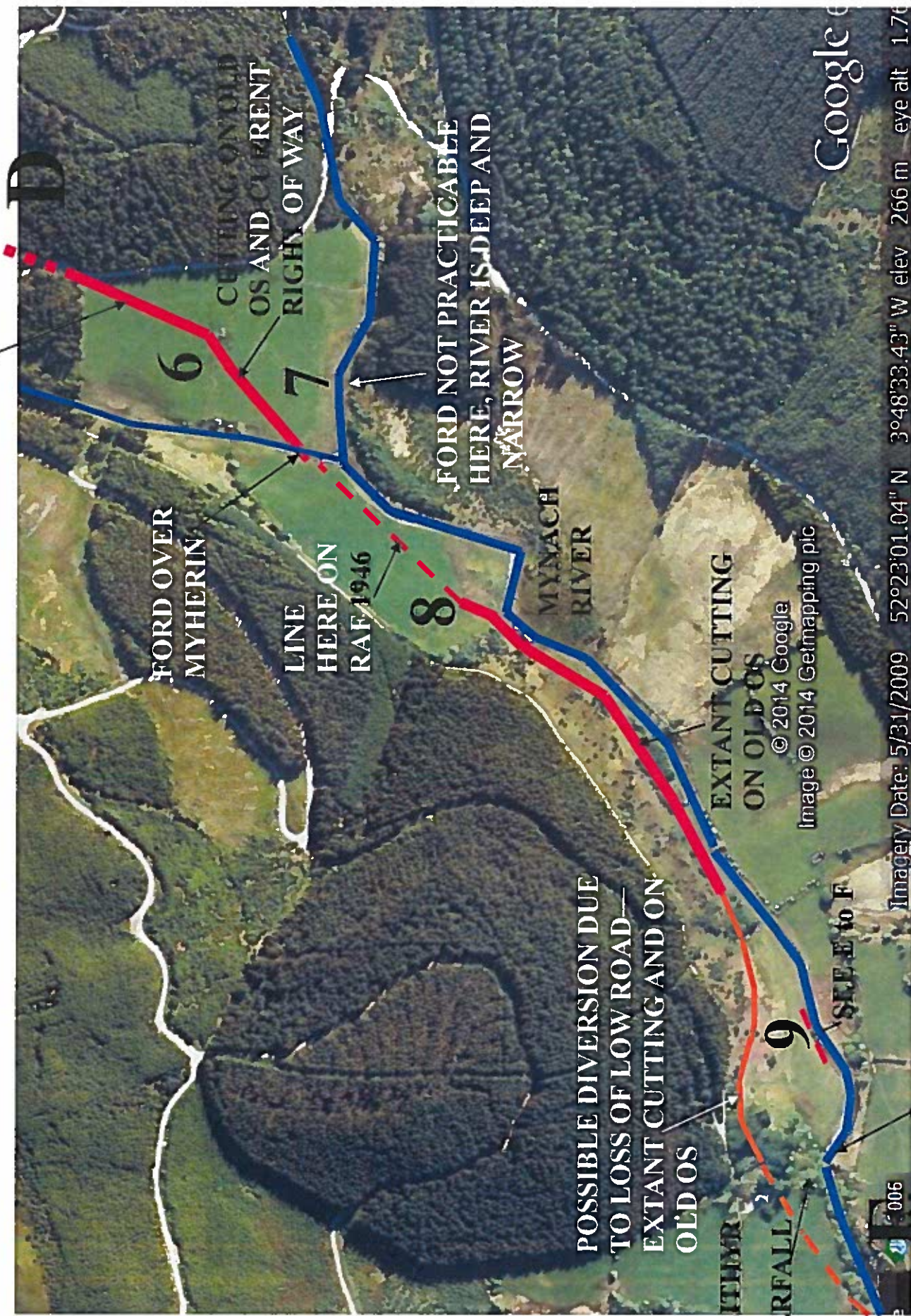
The cutting to and over the top of Banc Dolwen was pretty much the only route on the old OS and is clearly visible on the RAF verticals. Since the land has been taken over by forestry, a myriad of tracks have appeared. The old route, however, has evidently been identified and made into a public footpath. The high point is at Dolwen itself, and the road round was a compromise between gradient and economy of length.



Point 4. looking west and below, 5, looking NE



GRASS TRACK



Google

Imagery Date: 5/31/2009 52°23'01.04" N 3°48'33.43" W elev 266 m eye alt 1.76

6.D to E

The route makes a change in direction at 6. There is no hollow way down to the Mynach to suggest that the original route carried on south across the river at 7 and it would seem that a late decision was made to ford the Myherin and go down the NW side of the Mynach. One possible reason is that the Mynach here was found to be un-fordable, with large boulders and deep pools. The river could have been filled, but it is narrow at 7 and therefore the ford would have been too deep. A bridge could have been easily made, but would have been vulnerable to sabotage.

The projected route to the next visible cutting at 8 has a line visible on the 1946 RAF vertical, but one cannot be totally sure that these are not marks made in the grass perhaps by a horse and cart; they would still, however, confirm a route.

The old OS clearly shows the track re-appearing at 8, and a cutting follows the Mynach down from here.

9. Having initially favoured the route N of the waterfall past Llaneithyr, I noticed a familiar (?) clay concrete in the river bank, which I have seen at other Roman river sections. This stretches possibly for 35 metres, and as at other sites, the river eats away the silt above it and the river pebbles below, leaving the slabs hanging until they eventually snap off. Also familiar was the orange clay (much of it stained black) where one would not expect clay to occur naturally. I found a few lumps under water which must have been there for a considerable time. Although the Bodcoll mine is nearby, there is no record of any industrial activity here. I saw no similar concrete elsewhere on the river.



'concreted' slabs which break off as they are worn under.



one of several lumps found in the river

10. False road river section.

It is worth showing here a false road section, which looked convincing from a distance, but when tested for its concrete qualities, its cohesion was so weak that the stones simply crumbled apart and would not hold together. This was a clear demonstration of the marked difference between stones loosely held together by organic matter and the solid concreted material found up river, which needed a large stone to break it apart.



false road section

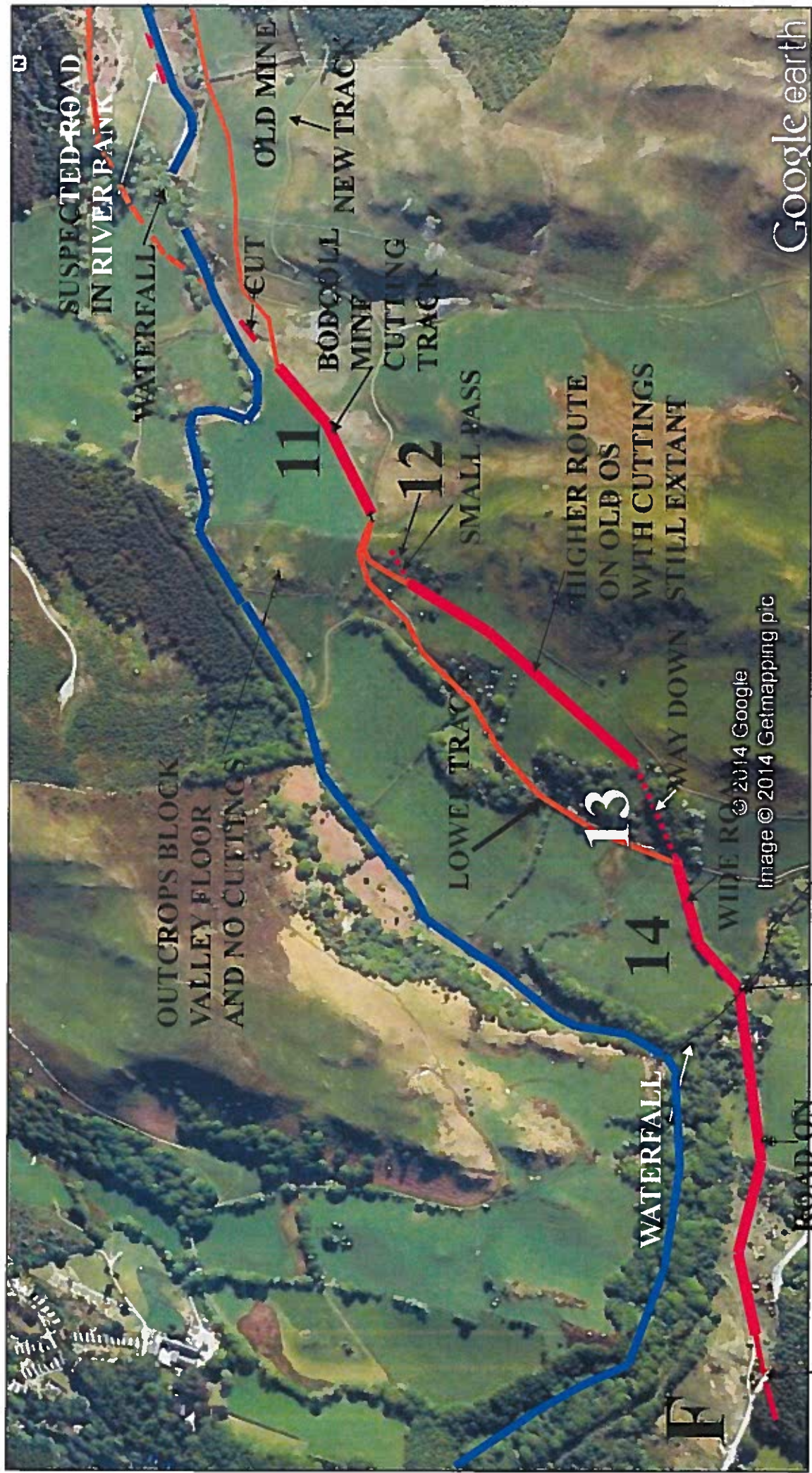
Where the fording point of the Mynach would have been, the river has moved considerably and there was no more trace of 'concrete' in the south bank, although the silt was right down to water level where one might have expected a ford.

11. E to F BODCOLL MINE CUTTING

This cutting heads roughly towards Trawscoed, but at the top, there are offsets where it meets both the lower and higher routes which made no sense. Why not head straight for the bend? Lidar, however, revealed an old direct route, a small pass through to the higher road which made perfect sense, see arrow and 12 below.



E



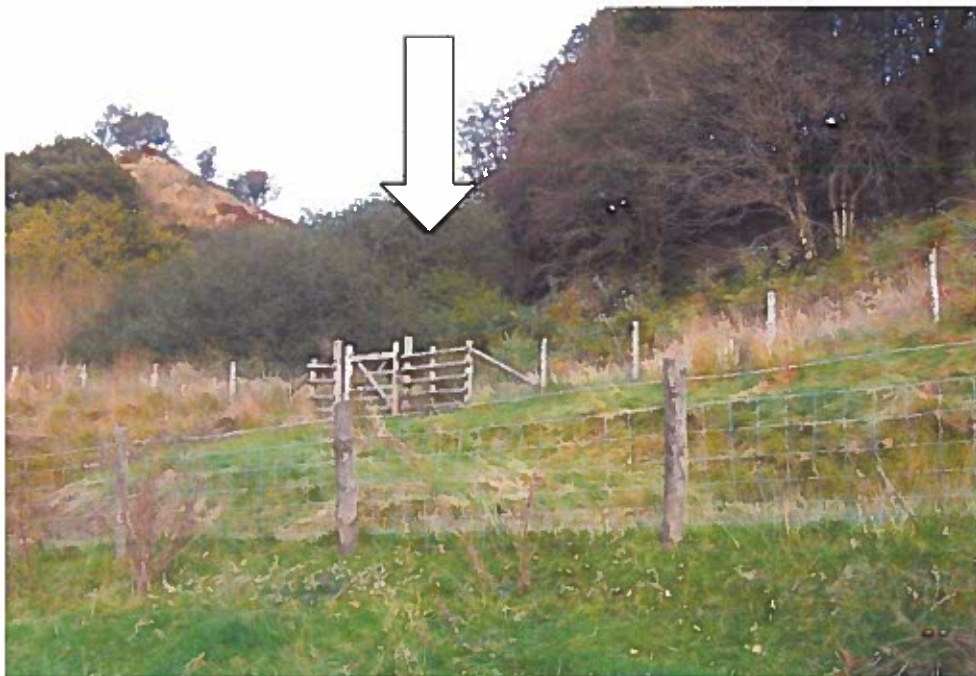
Google earth

F



12. pass to higher road, looking SW.

Unfortunately, Lidar peters out and cannot show the projected way down from the higher road, but this looks perfectly feasible, see photo below.



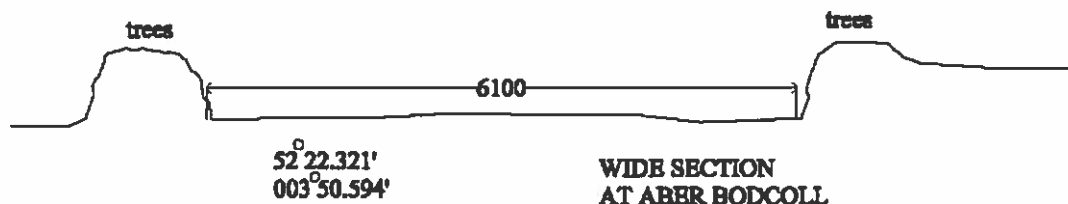
13. projected way down from higher road, too overgrown to view properly.

14. ABER BODCOLL WIDE SECTION

The typical increase in width where there is no cutting is shown here on the only visible bit of virtually un-cut road apart from a stretch of possible agger near Trawscoed, which compares favourably in width. The photo looks east, as does the section.



At the west end of this wide section the road changes direction and becomes a narrower cutting as it descends to the Aber Bodcoll ford. A possible reason for this change in direction would be the impassable canyon waterfall it is headed for; another, a reduction in cutting.



F

2 CUTTINGS



15. F to G. Cuttings each side of B4574

The lane up from Aber Bodcoll meeting the main road from the east seemed to veer too far to the north-west; this was when two old cuttings were discovered, apparently long-abandoned, each side of the road in the same line. Below: looking east towards Aber Bodcoll, track beyond far cutting arrowed.



Cutting to left heading for B4574 looking west; modern track to right.

16. BANC Y BONT

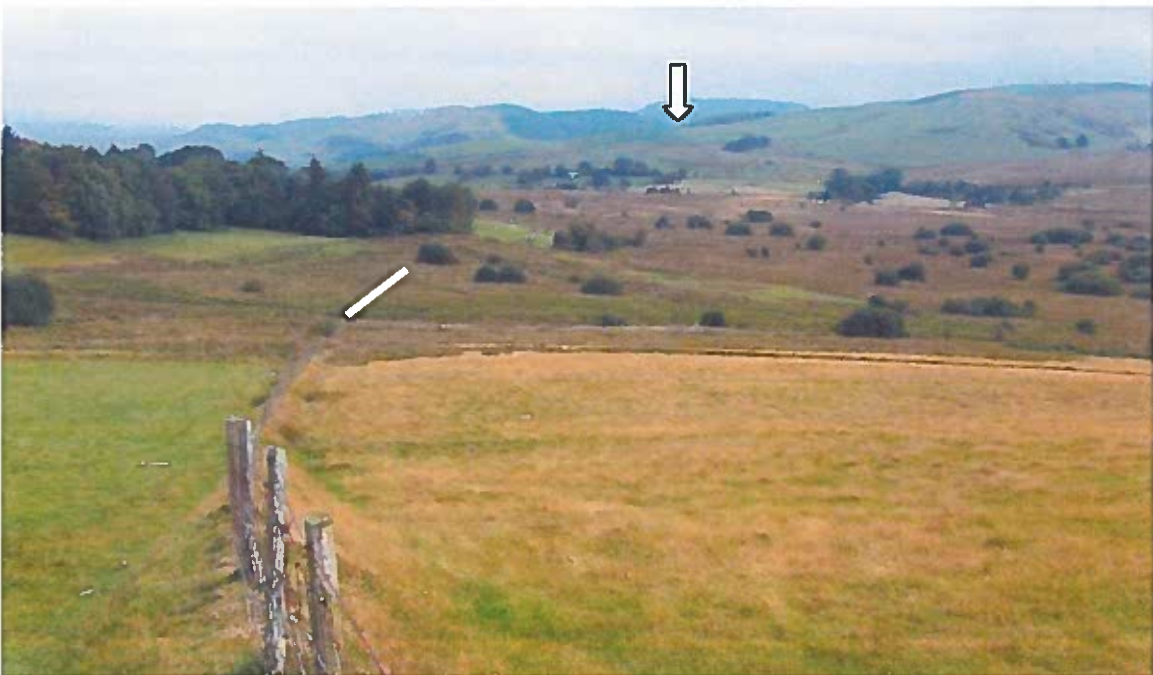
Several outcrops exist in close proximity to the old track, now a public right of way over the top of Banc Y Bont, which look as though they might have been quarried.



17. RHOS Y GELL

The stretch through Rhos Y Gell, boggy low ground, gives away no clues, although there were 5 small homesteads in Victorian times close to the projected route, and one quarry. The fact that no cutting was needed might account for the lack of evidence, although this is the sort of ground where one might expect to find surviving agger.

The hedge line in the foreground is part of the Llantrisant hedge line, see below. Photo looks back NE to Banc Y Bont.



G



H

G to H. 18. LLANTRISANT HEDGE LINE

Llantrisant church was rebuilt in 1883 on an Early Christian site. Three Dark-Age crosses were dug up here in 1970. The hedge line which leads up to the church had (on old OS) two boundaries meeting it on one side and three the other, signs of a possible road. Where the hedge-line meets the church site is a rocky ramp with the boundary apparently in the centre, suggesting that the land of the redundant road was shared amongst two neighbouring owners. Both photos look up NE towards the ramp.

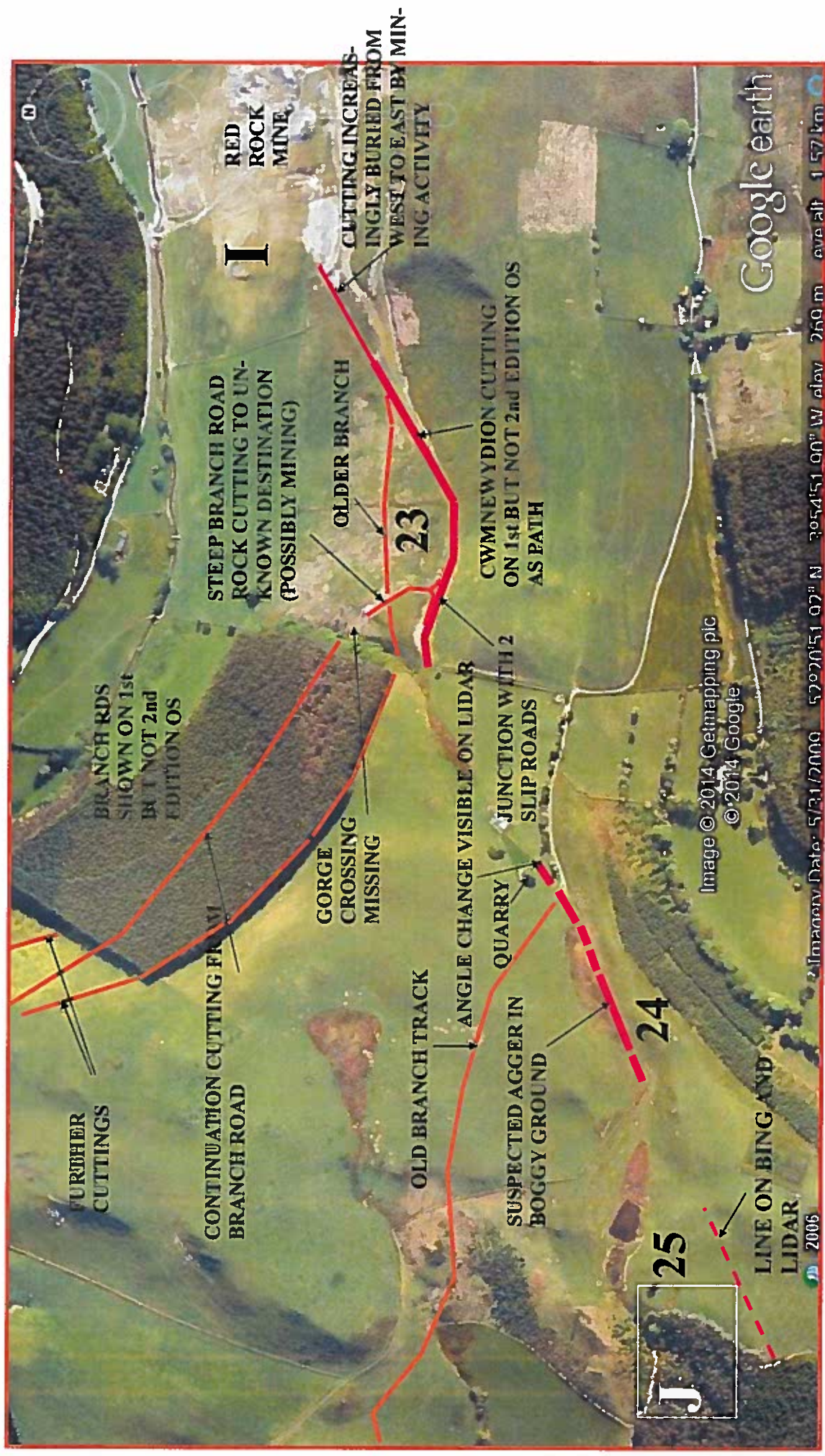
Why the ramp instead of following the gentler gradient to the west of it? The most likely explanation is that the raised east-west track already existed and was a Celtic route. It was of more benefit to marry up to it rather than plough through it with a cutting.

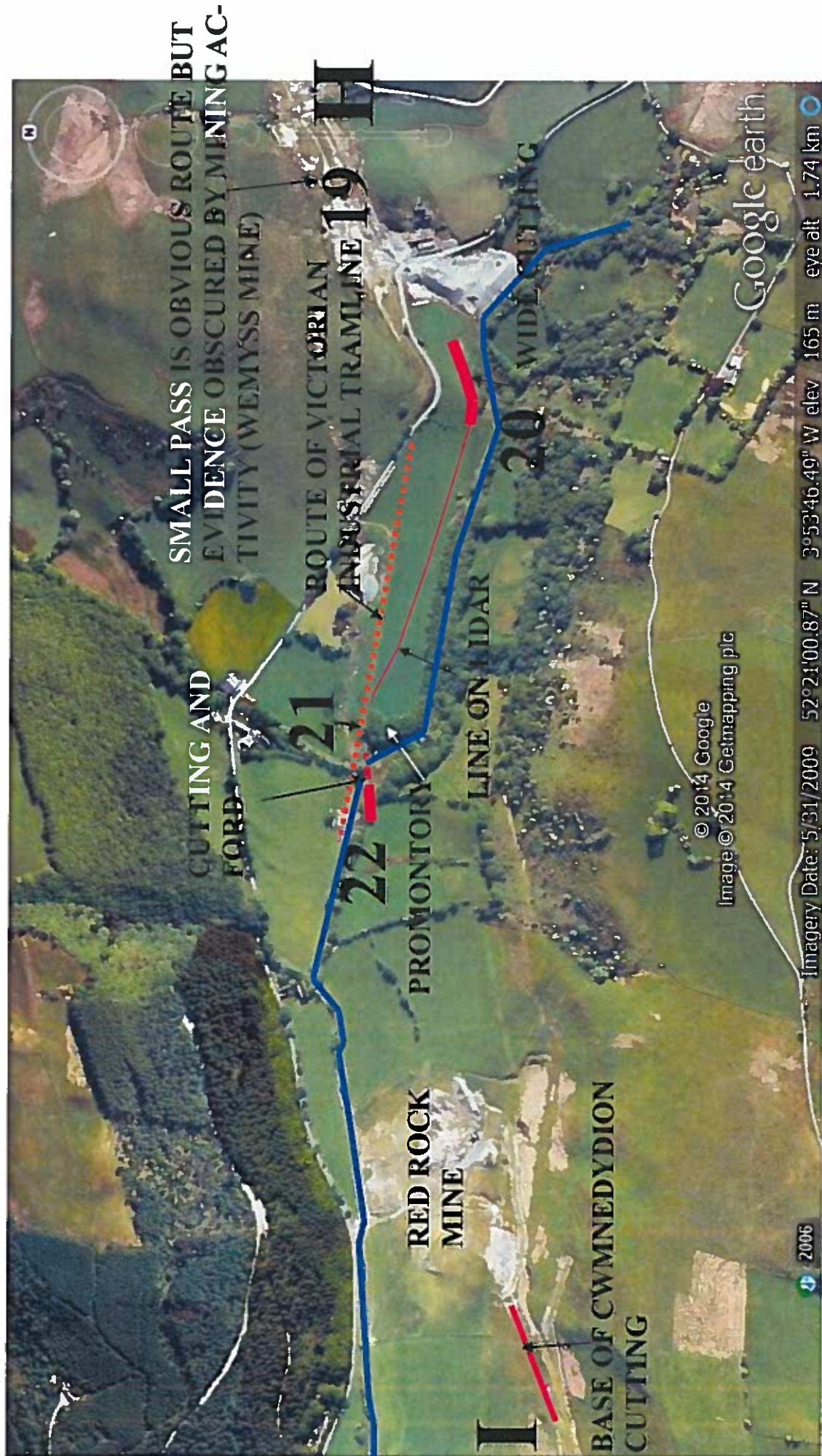
The name of the neighbouring farm, Blaen Pentre, points to the existence of a settlement here and makes the cross-roads more likely. Markings in relief, possible traces of a road associated with the hedge line are found on aerial views both north and south of the church.



Above: looking NE from east of centre boundary, below ditto from west of it. Note bank to west of ramp apparently carved or worn down into the rock.









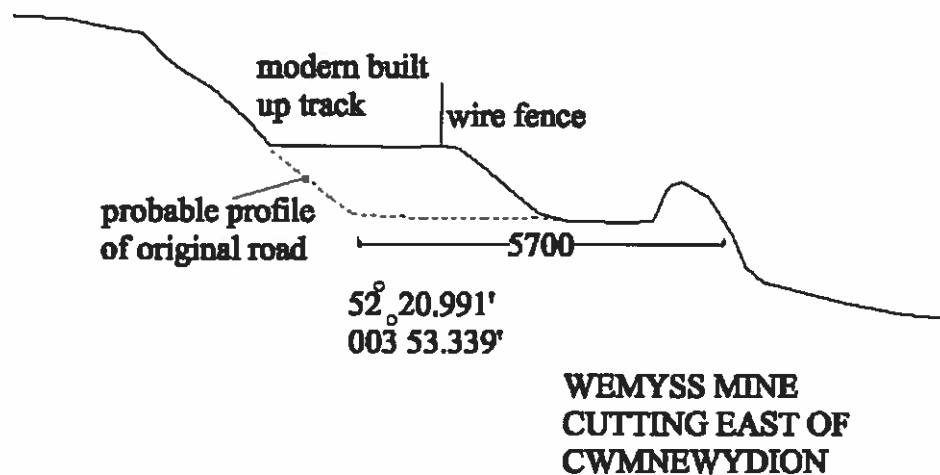
Although there is a route going in the right direction through the old Frongoch workings and the Wemyss mine complex, (see photo of pass above, 19) any actual tracks cannot be considered because the sites have undergone too much upheaval.

H to I. Wemyss mine cutting

The cutting shown at 20, however, is clear of this, and is significant, because due to its width, it confirms the existence of a bottom road leading into the Cwmnewyddion valley. The tithe map shows an L-shaped access from the upper road down to a (now ruined) house on this road (foreground L of centre) It is likely that this access was made when the Wemyss mine tip needed to block the route down from the east. The cutting has been built up and fenced in more recent times for agricultural access to the area below the tip.



Modern road middle right; old road cutting bottom left (arrowed) and spoil tip in foreground. Cross-section below towards NE.



21. FALSE CUTTING AT CWMNEWYDION UCHAF FORD

There is a clear line on Lidar from the Wemyss Mine cutting across the field to the end of a raised promontory which was too much of an obstacle to go through. The projected route goes round the end of this, but so did a tramline in Victorian times, shown on the 1st Edition OS. The cutting shown, with the spoil forming a bank the other side of where the tramline was, may or may not have been modified from a Roman cutting.



22. CWMNEWYDION UCHAF FORD

This coincides with a continuation of the old bottom road. To mitigate the steep and narrow descent in to the stream, a retaining wall was built at some stage so that the river could be filled and a level ford created which then had plenty of flood storage to keep it shallow. The picture looks east, with the obstacle of the promontory in the background.



After the ford, the road cuts through a second promontory and heads across the fields to the Red Rock mine. The photo below looks east. The cover photo looks west along the same cutting towards the Red Rock mine and Cwmnewydion cutting (23) in the distance.



I to J 23. CWMNEWYDION CUTTING

This is an impressive and dramatic descending hillside cutting which unfortunately appears to have been 'tidied up' for occasional access up to the top fields, though without losing its impact. It can be seen on the 1st Edition OS but not the second, presumably because it was no longer a footpath. It is currently a permissive path, accessed through the ruins of the Red Rock mine and via one of the mine cuttings whose formation drowned the bottom part of it, proving that the road came first. Traces of it continue down to the mine buildings, where it is finally totally obliterated.

Branch cuttings headed west show a lack of co-operation; one actually cuts through another leaving it stranded 8' in the air! The T-junction to this steep branch has a 'slip-road' from both directions, suggesting that the main route was live in both directions when it was formed. It is clear, as at Rhiw'r Ordd, that these small ventures were not responsible for the very directional main route.



View towards SW. The lowest visible length (arrowed) descends almost directly towards the viewer. The cutting coming from the left is related to mining. Below looking E.



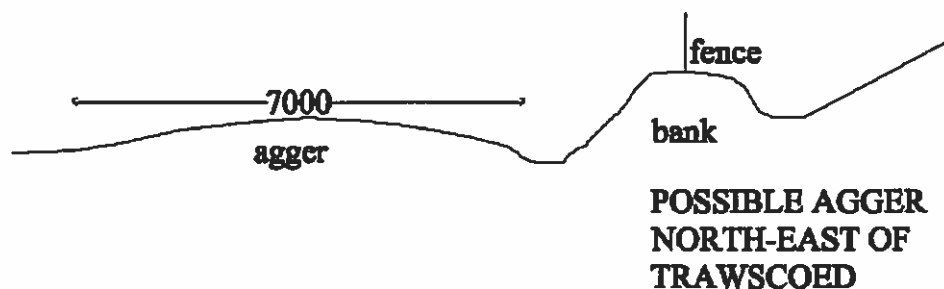
24. AGGER WEST OF BANC CWMNEWYDION

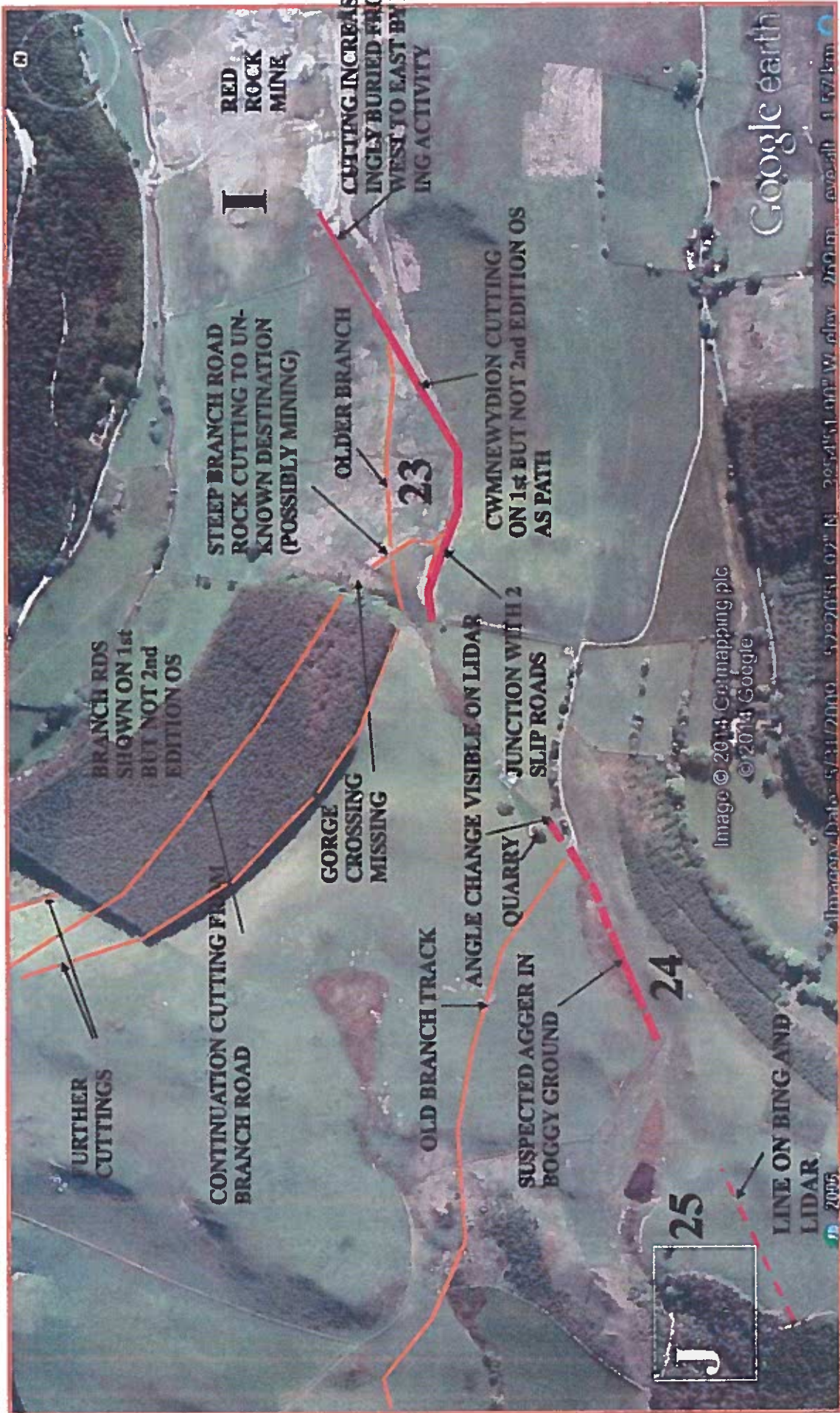
This line of suspected agger heads straight for Trawscoed fort and is in boggy ground. It has become misshapen, apparently collapsed, in some areas, which could mean that it is built off a timber corduroy on boggy ground. I have seen false agger created from the spoil thrown by digging two parallel ditches 6m apart, forming a convincing stone build-up; but in this case there is only one (probably post-Roman) ditch, and the spoil appears to have been used to form the hedgebank. A dig here might well prove the existence of a Roman road and confirm its route.

If it is genuine, the fact that this stretch heads straight for Trawscoed fort, but does not head as accurately in the opposite direction towards Cae Gaer, would lend weight to the theory that it was built from NE to SW.



Photo taken towards Trawscoed. Cross section below drawn looking NE.

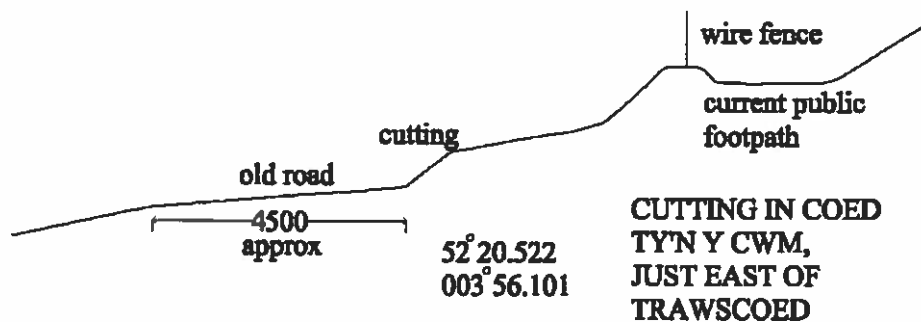




J to K

The line at 25 is visible on the ground as well as on aerial views. A straight descent is possible through the wood at this point (avoiding a knoll to the south) to the existing spinal forestry track which runs through it. At the bottom of the track, the present public footpath is un-convincing, being too narrow, but leading off it and roughly parallel to it is an old cutting which runs down until the last point arrowed in the field.

The drawn section was measured in the woodland further to the east. The photo (from west) shows the west end of the cutting in profile against the woodland. Both looking NE.



From here on, the last bit of possible evidence is a few lines just visible on Lidar where there is now a field boundary fence. Beyond Trawscoed fort, the route lines up with the end of my projected Ceredigion route. As the crow flies, it is 12.5 miles from Caersws to Cae Gaer, 12.5 miles from Cae Gaer to Trawscoed. A 'crow flies' line of 12.5 miles down my Ceredigion route from Trawscoed ends up at Aberarth.