

On the way home in the Clyne Valley – *Paul Reynolds*



This wonderful picture-postcard was recently offered on a well known internet auction site. As can clearly be seen, the subject is described as being in the Clyne valley and the photographer was M A Clare of Mumbles. Nigel Wassell describes the life and career of Clare on the following pages.

The picture shows four men riding in an iron tram pulled by a pony on a narrow-gauge tramway. There is no reason to doubt that it is indeed in the Clyne valley, although identifying where exactly is rather more problematical, given the changes that have taken place in the valley over the last hundred years.

The only narrow-gauge tramway that ever existed in the Clyne valley of the kind that is illustrated was laid by James Pridmore in 1920. Pridmore worked his way up from being a dock labourer until in 1919 he was able to set up West Glamorgan Collieries Ltd and opened a small slant called Ynys, or Rhydydefaid, slant (NGR SS 603920). The approaches to the mouth of the slant can still easily be seen in the form of a large pit, now favoured by mountain-bikers. In October 1919 he approached the Mumbles Railway & Pier Co to ask if they would be willing to extend their Clyne Valley branch from its existing terminus at Ynys Gate to his new colliery. Ynys Gate is in the vicinity of the large pond beside the cycle

track (ex-LNWR/LMS railway); it represented the end of the branch of the railway authorised by the Oystermouth Railway Act of 1804. This branch had been extended in 1841–42 by George Byng Morris as far as his new Rhydydefaid pit but as his private property, not as part of the Oystermouth Railway. It remained in use until the pit closed in about 1885. It was definitely standard-gauge, since it made an end-on connection with the standard-gauge Oystermouth Railway. The postcard cannot therefore be a photograph of this earlier railway.

The Mumbles Railway Co, not surprisingly, was unwilling to extend its branch for the benefit of a small colliery whose future must have appeared uncertain. Pridmore therefore laid a narrow-gauge tramway himself from the slant to Ynys Gate – not a major undertaking. The formation already existed and it would have been easy enough to obtain the necessary rails second-hand. In a letter to the Mumbles Railway Co of July 1920 he informed them that it was nearly complete and the company agreed to collect his coal at Ynys Gate subject to a minimum load of 50 tons. I described Pridmore's activities in an earlier article in this Bulletin¹ in which I wrote: 'Presumably the tramway was constructed but there is no evidence for it either on the ground or on maps'. How pleased I am to be proved wrong!

It is probably not possible to say where precisely the photograph was taken. If the men in the tram really were on the way home, then they must have been going down the valley and the photograph is taken facing north. It appears to show scrubby woodland on the eastern side of the track and the only spot where the 25 inch Ordnance Survey map of 1919 shows woodland on the east is immediately to the north of Ynys Gate; everywhere else there are just open fields on this side of the track – in modern terms, below the path that leads down from the adventure playground to the cycle track. The actual spot is now covered by the edge of the refuse tip. This would make sense because Clare probably didn't want to carry all his apparatus very far up the valley.

But if the location of the photograph is problematical, the date is even more so. Pridmore laid his tramway in the summer of 1920 but the

slant was abandoned in January 1921. On that reckoning the photograph must have been taken in the summer or autumn of 1920. But one look at the track as shown in the foreground shows that this is an impossible date. A good few years of vegetation has grown up on either side of the rails: we are certainly not looking at trackwork that had been laid only a few months previously. In other words, we are looking at a posed scene that was created for Clare's benefit a good few years after the slant closed. Clare locates himself at Mumbles on the postcard, but as Nigel shows, he moved from Mumbles to Mayals in 1925 and then to Three Crosses in 1930. Whilst Mayals could possibly be described as 'Mumbles', Three Crosses certainly cannot. This photo must have been taken before 1930, but given the state of the trackbed not long before 1930.

1. 'James Pridmore and West Glamorgan Collieries Ltd', *SWWLAS Bulletin* 114 (July 2012), pp. 7-10

MELVILLE ARTHUR CLARE (1879–1965): A BRIEF MEMOIR OF HIS LIFE AND WORK – *Nigel Wassell*

Melville Arthur Clare was born in Brynmill, Swansea, on 23 August 1879, the eldest son of Melville Harry and Frances Maud Clare. Clare senior was a seedsman and florist with an established business in Temple Street, Swansea (alongside what is now Castle Square). Melville junior was baptised at Christ Church, on Oystermouth Road, Swansea, on 18 December 1879. Soon after his birth his father opened a second establishment at the Beaufort Nursery in Blackpill, where the family was recorded as living at the date of the 1881 census.

Neither of his parents was a native of Swansea – his father came from Cheltenham and his mother from Newport (Mon.), so it may not be too surprising that Melville junior's early years were somewhat peripatetic. By 1891 the family was living at Hillside in Newport, where his father was now a miller's salesman, and Melville had been joined by a younger brother, Stanley, and two sisters, Frances and Hilda. The fact that his parents were able to afford to employ a general domestic servant as well as a nursemaid for the children hints at a reasonably comfortable standard of living. By 1901 the family had moved again, to 76 Brunswick Street, Canton, in Cardiff, where his father, evidently having tired of seed, was now described as a 'Wine & Spirit

Commercial Agent' (i.e. a traveller in wines and spirits). Young Melville, now aged 21, was still living at home with his brother and sisters, but had taken a job as a grocer's assistant. This was merely a stop-gap, however, because his abiding interest was in photography and by 1907 we find him back in Newton, near Mumbles, where he had set up in business as a professional photographer (some of his earliest-known cards are of the Mumbles floods of that year). On 1 June the following year he married Emily Annie Wheeler at St Peter's church in Newton; they had a number of children.

To begin with, Clare worked from his home in Nottage Road, Newton. His main stock in trade at that time would have been formal and family portraiture. The era of the *carte de visite* had not yet passed and although Kodak had introduced folding and pocket cameras in the 1890s, few families would have had one and even fewer the knowledge and the expertise to produce professional or near-professional quality photographs. (After the First World War, 'pocket' cameras using the new 127 roll film became more widely available, heralding the beginning of a decline in demand for formal portraits taken by professional photographers with their heavy, clumsy plate cameras.) However,

few of Clare's early portraits appear to have survived, or at least they do not come onto the market very often, which is not too surprising since the vast majority would have been 'one-offs', produced for the sitter and their family and friends only. The First World War created a temporary increase in demand for this type of photography, as soldiers bound for the Front in their thousands had photographs taken for their loved ones to keep at home. M A Clare would have had his share of this work and one of his cards from the period displays some of the characteristics that help make his work identifiable. Dated 19 June 1915, it shows a young lad obviously far too young for military service, but dressed in full military uniform (obviously in emulation of an older relative). Most cards of this type are completely anonymous, or might simply have the name and address of the studio embossed on the front or back, but Clare has marked the print 'CLARE MUMBLES' in the bottom left corner and written the negative number '172' in the bottom right corner! These characteristics mark virtually all his work, although earlier views might be marked Newton, rather than Mumbles, whilst cards produced later in his life are usually stamped Gowerton. Sometimes his name is given in full ('M A CLARE'), at other times it is abbreviated 'M A C.'

It is not clear exactly how Clare advertised his services in the early years, because he does not appear in any contemporary Swansea directories, but in later years he did advertise in Kelly's *Directory of South Wales* and also in the *Mumbles Press*, whilst some of his flyers advertising a somewhat unique service to holidaymakers and pleasure seekers ('having obtained the sole photographic rights of the Mumbles bays' – see illustration) have survived. He was not even the only photographer in Mumbles (Edmund Phillips had a studio in The Parade from at least 1904 to 1926, and W I Lewis also appears in directories between 1914 and 1923) and it must have been hard for him to make a living exclusively from his camera to begin with. In 1911 we find him and his wife, with an 11-month-old daughter to feed, having to take in a boarder (actually his brother-in-law), presumably to help make ends meet.

As well as his studio work, Clare undertook numerous external commissions over the years. For example, on 2 May 1914, he was invited to

the Mumbles Bowls Club to photograph the start of their season. Cards of the event were made available to members (no doubt at a price) and less than a fortnight after the event one of the bowlers photographed was able to send a card featuring himself to a friend, remarking ruefully that the Mumbles club was 'doing well', having lost all three of its opening matches of the season!

1914 was something of a watershed year for Clare because in that year he was able to open a proper shop and studio at 12 The Parade, Mumbles, from where he traded for the next ten or eleven years – the halcyon years of the photographic activities in Mumbles for which he is best remembered and during which he became a familiar sight in the locality, 'travelling around on his bicycle with a tripod on his shoulder, capturing the villagers on his glass-slide negatives and recording activities as diverse as sports teams, the Royal visit and villagers' efforts in raising money for the 'Bit Fund'.' These last-mentioned events took place in 1919, a year in which Clare appears to have been particularly busy.

Melville Clare not only had a studio at 12 The Parade, but also he offered a framing service and, perhaps most visibly to local inhabitants and visiting tourists alike, he made and sold postcards of his local views, which were advertised prominently in the windows of the shop, to the extent that it became known as the Post Card Shop. His most popular subjects were undoubtedly of the local bays and beauty spots, and also of the Mumbles Railway, which in the 1920s was in its steam-hauled heyday, puffing along the Oystermouth seafront, within sight of the shop at The Parade.

By 1925 Melville and Emily Clare had moved from Mumbles to an un-named address in the Mayals and then, by 1930, to Williams Terrace at The Wern, near Three Crosses, where they were to live out the rest of their lives. The great era of the picture postcard was over, although they continued to be a popular way of sending messages at a time when few people had telephones and the postal service could be relied upon to deliver the next day (or sometimes even the same day), whilst they remained *de rigueur* for tourists and visitors to the area, of course. Clare continued to photograph until well into the 1930s – he photographed the new electric cars on the Mumbles Railway, for example, whilst in 1937 we find him cycling to Pont-ar-gothi, in the Vale

of Tywi, to photograph a motor-cycle meet. In fact, the amount of detail included in the captions to the last-mentioned photographs (now held by his grandson, Richard Clare), of both machines and riders, make it appear that motor-cycling might have been another of his hobbies. He also continued to make and sell postcards from his vast store of negatives, and these were now stamped (usually in purple ink on the reverse) 'M A Clare, Gowerton.'

It is not known exactly when M A Clare stopped taking photographs commercially. His views illustrated official guidebooks of Swansea, Mumbles and Gower in the 1920s (no doubt a useful source of income), and he is known to have worked for various local newspapers, possibly on a freelance basis. However, the fact that his sixtieth birthday coincided almost exactly with the outbreak of the Second World War, during the course of which photographic materials became virtually impossible to obtain for anything other than official purposes, would have severely curtailed his activities in any case. Kate Jones (who wrote a biographical leaflet about Clare for the Oystermouth Historical Association and to whom I am indebted for permission to draw upon her work) painted a nostalgic picture of his final years at the Wern:

Their cottage (now demolished) stood on a hill looking down across fields to the Loughor estuary. Local people recall the orchard, where children were allowed to help themselves to the fruit, and the shed where Melville Clare stored his photographic equipment. They speak warmly of Mr Clare

who loved to chat about his days as a photographer and show them his pictures of the Mumbles Train.

Melville Clare died at the Wern on 21 May 1965, and was buried with his wife at Llanyrnewydd church, in Penclawdd. His photographic legacy is highly significant and local historians have reason to be grateful for his recording long-vanished scenes of everyday life in Mumbles and Gower. As well as the familiar images of local bays and beauty spots, and his most popular views of the Mumbles Railway in its heyday, he had an eye for the obscure, such as the view of the Clyne valley tramway which inspired this brief note of his life and work.

Principal sources

Genealogical information (principally the Births, Marriages and Deaths indices, parish registers and census records) available to subscribers at the ancestry.co.uk and findmypast.co.uk websites. The Mumbles History website, maintained by John and Carol Powell, provided some information (including the quote of him cycling around the locality) and examples of his work; other examples are from my own collection and those offered for sale from time to time on eBay. I also consulted the run of local trade directories and Electoral Registers at Swansea Library. Finally, I am indebted to Kate Jones, Secretary of the Oystermouth Historical Association, for permission to quote from her biographical essay about Melville Clare, published by the Association in 2007.