

BRYNMAWR HERITAGE TRAIL

Brynmawr (Big Hill), at an elevation of 1,200 feet above sea level is the highest town in South Wales if not in Britain. It owes its existence to the industrialisation of the Valleys, growing as a dormitory town around a criss-cross of tramways and turnpike roads, which served the ironworks at nearby Nantyglo.

Please take care on the roads. Parts of the walks involve some steep climbs over uneven ground and are not recommended for wheelchairs or pushchairs. Route 'A' should not be attempted in poor weather conditions.

You need to download a copy of the Heritage Walk map - Starting and finishing point: Market Hall Car Park.

Begin at the car park to the rear of the Market Hall Cinema, (voted best small cinema in Britain in 2014). (1). Markets have been held here for over a hundred years and are still a prominent feature of Saturday mornings in Brynmawr. Facing the Clarence Inn (2) turn right into Market Square. On the corner is the old town library (3) now the Brynmawr and District Museum. The old library was built with money from the Carnegie Fund in 1906. Next to this is the Institute (4) built in 1907, soon to be home to BRfm local radio station. Continue along into Market Square past the new library until you can see the front of the Market Hall (1894). This was constructed on land donated by the Duke of Beaufort. As its name suggests, the hall was initially built to hold a weekly market, however it has been a cinema since the early 1900's and is no longer used by the traders. In front of you stands the Town's War Memorial (5). On Saturdays, the market is now held here on the square in front of the Market Hall.

Walk through the square into Warwick Road; you are now following the line of Edward Kendall's tramroad built in 1795. As you come to the bus depot, look up Bailey Street. The large house next to the Fire Station was once a Synagogue (6). This reflects the time when Brynmawr had a strong Jewish Community which was well respected by the townspeople. When in 1911, anti-Semitic riots broke out in Tredegar and Ebbw Vale, the people of Brynmawr - guided by Sergeant Thomas Price - built barricades to protect the Jewish properties and headed off the rioters.

Continue along Warwick Road; to your right was a small 1930's factory unit (7). Today, the Bert Denning Centre has replaced it. The factory unit housed the Brynmawr Boot makers and was part of the 'Brynmawr Experiment' - a self-help scheme masterminded by the Quakers to enable the people of the town to weather the depression by creating employment and improving the environment. To your left you will see the Asda supermarket (8). This was formerly the Dunlop Semtex Rubber Factory. The buildings were notable because of the unusual design of the roofs; indeed when the factory was opened in 1947 it had the largest single span concrete roof in the world, (featured in the Festival of Britain in 1951). Sadly the building no longer exists but the boiler house still stands on Blaina Road.

The arches (9) constitute part of the boundary of the Semtex complex. They hint at Brynmawr's railway heritage. They are the remains of a viaduct that carried part of the MTA (Merthyr, Abergavenny and Tredegar) Railway (1864). This whole area was once a maze of tramroads and

railway lines.

Back a few yards to your right is the unusual red brick entrance to the Welfare Park (10). This was built using Miners Welfare Funds in the 1920's/30's. It is immediately obvious that the base of the park lies well below the street level. This is because it was built on the site of the former Heathcock Pond - one of a chain of ponds that once fed Nantyglo Ironworks. The park makes a pleasant place to picnic, with features including children's playing areas and a bowling green. Looking south you can see the site of the Nantyglo Comprehensive School (11) now demolished. Part of the land is where Crawshay Bailey's Ironworks once stood. The Round Towers visible in the distance were built in 1816. (See 'Nantyglo Heritage Trail')

Follow the perimeter of the park through Park Crescent and into Well Street. You are now walking along the line of the Darren Disgwylfa tram road built in 1818 by the Bailey's - (ironmasters at Nantyglo), to link Nantyglo Ironworks to the limestone Quarry at Darren Disgwylfa.

Walk to the St. John's Ambulance Hall (12) that stands on the site of the Tin Church (Mission Church). Prior to that, the area was known as Tinkers Row which was renowned for its links with the local Irish immigrants and is said to have been the focal point for many a good wake.

Cross George Street and continue along Well Street. The houses to your left (13) were known as 'Army Houses' because they were originally built for officers of the Salvation Army. The steps to your left led to the Citadel (14). The first street to your right is Hatter Street, the name reflects the days of cottage industries when hats were made here. As you travel eastwards along Well Street note the original cottages to your left that grew up along the side of the tram road.

Take the second turning to your right; walk down the steps into Boundary Street (15). The property that is now No. 23 was formerly the 'King Crispin' pub where one of the local leaders of the Chartists, David Lewis, was landlord. His infamy was such that he became known as King Crispin. Following the Chartist March on Newport in 1839, he was found hiding in the pub in a shoe chest. He was taken to Brecon to be tried, found guilty and sent to Millbank Prison in London.

At the far end of the street is the Boundary Stone (16) from which it gets its' name. This stone marks the point where the parishes of Llanelly, Aberystroth and Llangattock meet. There is also a plaque on the wall to commemorate two Chartists who died in the uprising of 1839 outside the Westgate Hotel in Newport.

Turn left and then left again past the front of Heathcote House and along the path into Chapel Street. At the top of the street is Libanus Chapel (17) built in 1848. In 1870, there was a tragic incident in a warehouse near to the Chapel. The owner sent a boy into the cellar to fetch some stock. Due to the darkness the boy took a candle to light his way, unfortunately some sparks hit upon barrels of gunpowder stored there and a huge explosion followed. It is said that they found half the boy that day, and the rest of him three days later. There was a second victim, a young girl playing in the street who was hit by falling debris. The explosion had such an effect upon the buildings nearby that both Libanus and Calvary Chapels had to be reinforced with iron pins that are still visible today.

Walk back into Well Street, and then continue up the steps to King Street. Looking left you see

Calvary Chapel (18), it's now a meditation centre. Prior to the erection of this building in 1832 services were held upstairs in the Eagle Inn which stood on the corner of King Street and Fitzroy Street (opposite). Here you have a choice of routes: For those taking the shorter route, turn to point B in the text.

ROUTE A

Cross King Street, turn right and then take the second turning to your left into Clydach Street, again following the line of the Darren Disgwylfa tram road. Leases of 1821 refer to this section as the 'mine tramway' as a reference to the iron ore deposits of the Clydach Terrace area.

Follow the street as it curves to the right: on the bend stood Ysgol Gymraeg Brynmawr (19), the Welsh Language Infants and Junior School, formerly a Boys School built in 1904 on the site of the waste tip of a nearby level. Further along behind the nursery, also demolished and to the right, are the Heddfan Flats (20); here stood the Church School built circa 1870.

Walk on for a few hundred yards and then take the path to your right which leads down to St. Mary's Church (21) - completed on 25th July 1900, The Church and Vicarage (a Grade Two listed building) are beautiful buildings standing within their own picturesque St. Mary's Parish Church Churchyard.

Retrace your steps along the path and turn right, back into Clydach Street. Further along, again to your right is the clearing known in English as Frogs' Hole (22). Its Welsh name is Pant-y-Bicwn (Wasp's Hollow). It has now been renamed Valley View and houses erected. Pause here and enjoy the view.

As you continue your walk, take particular notice of the cottages (23), many of which were built alongside the original tram road - No. 77 remains virtually unaltered.

At the end of Clydach Street follow the path and cross the gravel road, go over the stile and take the path that follows the hedgerow. This path was part of the tram road, and the observant walker will notice stone sleepers still embedded in the earth.

Follow the curve to the left. You are now on 'The Patches' (24). These were areas where people would dig into the hillside to extract the coal and iron ore that outcropped near to the surface. Each section was identified by the worker's name - i.e. 'Dai's Patch'.

The flora of 'The Patches' is interesting; interspersed amongst the heather, bracken and wimberries you will notice a small grey-white member of the lichen family - a plant which only grows in areas with extremely pure air.

As you follow the path look down the hillside and watch the river Clydach wind its way through the valley. The river is a popular haunt for many wild birds.

Look right, to the opposite side of the valley where you can still see the scars and pockmarks left by the tramroads, patch mines, levels and quarries which have so markedly shaped our landscape. The route of the tram road has been eroded in recent years so care must be taken.

Where the path becomes narrow take a left turn up to the brow of the hill. At the top you will see large earth-mounds. These are recent in age and were built (when the area was landscaped) to form a windbreak for the sheep that graze there.

At the top turn right. As you walk look towards the Heads of the Valleys Road. On a good day you can see the post that marks the highest point of the road - some 1,350 feet above sea level.

Walk on until you come to three ponds and the barely visible, scant remains of a few small dwellings (once occupied by a community of patch-mine workers), known as Rhas Fach or Little Race (25). Turn left here, cross the drainage channel at the walkway and head towards the stile. Once over the stile turn sharp right, following the path ahead over a small rise, you will see a fourth pond directly to your left. This may have been used by the patch-miners as a scouring pond. This process was common throughout the valleys area, and was described by Evan Powell thus:-

“After working several years on the 'pick and shovel' process, clearing the edge of the outcrops where convenient and practicable, the gradient of the strata was such that a considerable quantity of topping was to be cleared, and the minerals getting deeper into the earth, the miner was required to exercise his ingenuity and develop all his skill and energy. His next process was to drive small holes into the strata a certain distance, then to work the small pillars that separated the numerous holes, and suspending operations until the overlying strata would of their own weight fall in mass. In the meantime a small pond or reservoir was constructed and filled with water. The pond was situated in such a position that when its bank was broken the water rushed into the fallen mass, separating the mine and rubbish.”

Walk up the path ahead of you to a second stile (26). On this spot stood 'Slam Gate' an iron five-bar gate that would slam shut behind the traveller. Stop here for a moment, turn 180 degrees and enjoy the splendid view out over the Brecon Beacons National Park. From this vantage point you can see the three counties of Gwent, Powys and Glamorgan.

Cross the stile and walk up the path. This is thought to be an old pack mule route to the patches. As you go, notice the unusual fence posts made from old wooden railway sleepers. As the path drops, look to your right. This field (27) once a race-track, was owned by Mr. Wain (he also owned the first Griffin Hotel and Griffin Horse Drawn Carriages). In late 1800s, 'Wain's Park' was the venue of a great annual fair which attracted people from all the surrounding towns. After World War II the field was the home of an underground radiation monitoring station the remains of which can still be seen.

Turn to your left and look at the remains of a small bee hive shaped hut (28). This was built from local stone to protect the shepherd from the severe winter weather. It is now in ruins and only the base of the walls can be seen. This lies on private ground so please do not attempt to take a closer look.

Further along the path, behind the railings to your right is the cemetery (29), opened in 1853 by the town's 'Board of Health'. The 'Board' was the first of its kind in the country and was the result of the work of John Thomas who did much to shape the town.

Tucked into the right hand corner of the main Cemetery is the Jewish Cemetery (30). The names engraved on the headstones are an interesting reminder of the large Jewish Community that once dwelt in the town.

The path from 'Slam Gate' continues down hill and merges into Fitzroy Street. At the junction turn left; you are now in King Street (Continue on Route B).

ROUTE B

King Street is part of the original Merthyr to Govilon turnpike road constructed in 1812. Look down Glamorgan Street as you go, this single road once housed seven pubs. Walk to the pedestrian crossing noticing the now derelict site of the old Board School (31) and the Police Station (32) to your left.

Glance across to the building at the top of Beaufort Street which is now the Brynmawr Social Club and previously the Royal British Legion Club (33), it was originally the 'Griffin Hotel' owned by Mr. Wain. This may have been the site of a coaching inn.

Cross the road at the pedestrian crossing and continue along King Street As you walk you cannot help but notice a large empty space to your right (34). This was the site of Rehobeth Chapel built in 1828; it was the first Nonconformist place of worship in the town. The bardic chair of the Archdruid Crwys (one time pastor of the Chapel) was once proudly displayed inside but has since been returned to the family.

A little further along, to your left is Somerset Street. The house at the top of the street on the right hand side was formerly The Armoury (35), used in the mid and late 19th Century as an H. Q. and armament store for the local militia - The Brecon Volunteers.

Before taking the third turning to your right into Lower Bailey Street; (which runs along the line of 'Baileys Llangattock Tramroad' dated 1830) look across the road at No. 37 and 38 King Street. These are probably amongst the oldest buildings in the town and were originally the 'Prince of Wales Inn' (36). The house on the corner of Lower Bailey Street was once the "Vulcan" public house.

Follow Lower Bailey Street back to the car park.

The Borough gratefully acknowledges the help of Brynmawr Historical Society in the preparation of this leaflet.

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Revised July 2006. Eifion Lloyd Davies.

Amended February 2015