

HERITAGE, LEGEND and NATURE in the VALLEYS
WALK ND6 SARN HELEN, ST PATRICK & HENRHYD FALLS
The Romans, Saint Patrick and a Waterfall



Historic & Geographic Background

Banwen is best known as a former mining village at the top of the Dulais Valley but in reality has a fascinating history going back well before mining - over 2000 years in fact. The village is close to the ancient Roman fort of Ricus, first fort after Nidum (Neath) on the 'A470' of the times, the trunk road between Nidum and Segontium (Caernarfon).

Until recently, there was little in Banwen to mark its Roman connections, but now a mosaic has been constructed at the start of the southern part of Sarn Helen (above) and there are other, less obvious, signs of the occupation.

Legend has it that Irish patron saint Patrick was born here and a plaque has been erected on a standing stone alongside Roman Road marking this fact.

This walk also takes in another distinctive natural feature of the area, Henrhyd Waterfall, and a few pointers to the railway, past and present in Coelbren and Onllwyn.

THE WALK

Route summary and terrain

Most of the route is along secondary and minor roads and is relatively flat and easy walking. The track down to Henrhyd Waterfall is rocky and steep muddy after heavy rain.



This walk is not suitable for disabled people

Start point	Banwen Roman Road (GR 856097)
End point	Onllwyn road junction (GR 843103) or back to Banwen Roman Road (GR 856097)
Recommended Maps	O.S. Explorer OL12 O.S. Landranger 160
Distance/Time	5 - 6 kilometres; 2 - 3 hours
Grade	Easy (Hard on descent to Henrhyd Falls)
Refreshments	The DOVE Banwen (open Mondays to Fridays)
Toilets	The DOVE Banwen (open Mondays to Fridays)

THE ROUTE IN DETAIL

Leaving the bus stop at Banwen (GR 856097), Roman Road is in front of you, the first indication of the significance of the walk. Take a right turn and you will see a terrace of houses either side of the road ahead and a path beyond heading into the distant mountain. This is Sarn Helen and at the top of the street, you will see graphic evidence in a very fine mosaic marking the Roman road's route through Wales. Turn back, retracing your steps past the terrace of houses to a point just beyond the road junction and on the right hand side is a plaque marking the alleged birthplace of St Patrick.

If correct, this makes the patron saint of Ireland a Welshman. He wrote 'I was picked a stone out of the bog. I Patrick, a sinner, a most simple countryman, the least of all the faithful and most contemptible to many, had for Father Deacon Calpurnius, son of the late Potitus, a priest, of the settlement of Bannavem Taburniae. He had a small villa nearby where I was taken captive'. Born Maewyn Succat around 386AD, at 16 years of age he was captured and taken to Ireland where he was held as a slave for 6 years, working as a shepherd until he escaped. He was told in dreams to leave Ireland and return later as a missionary; after 15 years in France on religious study, in 431 A.D. Pope Celestine I named him Patricius and sent him on a mission to Ireland.

From here, you will see the road heading straight into the distance (most Roman roads followed straight trajectories). Cross the A4109 and head straight on; when the road enters a bend, look right and you will note the site of a Roman marching camp of which no earthwork trace remains. However, a little further on the left where the road turns at Tonyfildre (*land of the soldiers*), there is a historic marker stone for Sarn Helen, behind which are some earthworks marking the site of Roman Fort *Ricus*. Sarn Helen veered north eastward at this point towards Brecon but our walk continues towards Coelbren. At GR 857115, you will note bridge abutments marking the route of the Neath & Brecon Railway. A little further on, there is a road junction; head straight on towards Craigy-Nos and after 200 metres, you will see the car park for Henrhyd Falls.

From here, take the steep and winding path down into the valley and you will be rewarded by the stunning Henrhyd Waterfall, the tallest fall in south Wales at 27 metres. It has a rare beauty even in dry times but most majestic when in spate. Retrace your steps to the car park and back to the road junction taking a left turn into Coelbren village. After 0.5 kilometres, turn left into Station Road, at the end of which is the site of the country railway Coelbren Junction.

Coelbren was at the junction of the Midland Railway from Swansea St Thomas and the Neath & Brecon Railway from Neath Riverside. It closed to passengers in October 1962 and to freight (coal from Abercrave opencast) several years later.

Retrace your steps along Station Road, turn left into Heol yr Eglwys and left again into Onllwyn Road. At the road junction of the A4221, cross, turn right then left and continue along this road for 1 kilometre to the junction with the A4109 road.

On the left as you cross over the operational railway, you will see sidings serving the Onllwyn Washery where raw coal is prepared and 'washed' of impurities before transit to end user. It is one of the few places left in Wales where you can see once ubiquitous coal trains!

You can return by bus from here or walk through Onllwyn to the terminus at Banwen Roman Road.
Notes

All distances are given in metric
GR refers to Ordnance Survey grid reference

LOCAL TRANSPORT and PARKING

Train Station 

Neath 17 kilometres

Bus Stops 

Banwen Rugby Club (adjacent)

Parking 

Banwen on-street (free)

Buses 

Banwen is served by the 58 direct bus service from Swansea and Neath which terminates at Roman Road. Buses are operated by First Cymru and run on Mondays to Saturdays.

Tickets

First Day tickets Swansea Bay or Neath Port Talbot areas give a day's unlimited travel (adult, 16 & under and family options available) and can be purchased from the driver on the bus

[Plan your journey](#)

GALLERY



The clue's in the name!



A saintly product of Roman Banwen



The start of the final southern section of Sarn Helen Roman Road



Roman roads were usually straight and this part of Sarn Helen is no exception



Last trace of Roman occupation in Banwen: site of Ricus fort and Sarn Helen marker



Henrhyd Waterfall in Coelbren, one of the finest in Wales



The site of Coelbren station, junction for Neath (left) and Swansea (right)



As it was 55 years ago at Coelbren with a Neath to Brecon train in the station
The Swansea line is in the foreground. Note the pine trees were there then!



Onllwyn is one of Wales' last rail coal loading points

S Miles photo