

# Rural Ramble: Banwen Romans and Waterfall Trail

## Walk in the footsteps of the Romans - see a spectacular waterfall

Banwen is best known as a former mining village but has a fascinating history long before mining – over 2000 years. The village is close to the ancient Roman fort of Ricus, first 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 a mosaic has been fashioned at the start of the southern part of Sarn Helen 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.

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

## The Route in detail

Leaving the bus stop at Banwen (GR 856097), Roman Road is ahead, an indication of the significance of the walk. Take a right turn and you will see terraces of houses on the road ahead and a path beyond heading towards the mountain. This is Sarn Helen and at the top of the street, evidence in the form of a very fine mosaic marking its route through Wales. Retrace your steps to a point just beyond the road junction where there is a plaque (right) 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.



Start point  
Banwen Roman Road (GR 856097)  
End point  
Coelbren village (GR 851118) or  
back to Banwen Roman Road  
(GR 856097)



O.S. Explorer OL12  
O.S. Landranger 160



5–6 kilometres



2–3 hours



Easy (Hard on descent to  
Henrhyd Falls)



The DOVE Banwen (open  
Mondays to Fridays)



The DOVE Banwen (open  
Mondays to Fridays)



Neath 17 kilometres



Banwen Rugby Club (adjacent)



Banwen on-street (free)  
n.b. this walk is designed for  
public transport users

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'.

The road goes straight ahead (Roman roads typically followed straight trajectories); cross the A4109 and continue; where it enters a bend, note (right) the site of a Roman marching camp though no earthwork trace remains. A little further on at Tonyfildre is a historic Sarn Helen stone marker (left), behind this are earthworks marking the site of Roman Fort Ricus. Sarn Helen veered north east here towards Brecon but our walk continues to Coelbren. At GR 857115 bridge abutments mark the crossing of the Neath & Brecon Railway. A little further at the road junction, head straight on and after 200 metres, you will see the car park for Henrhyd Falls.

Take a steep, winding path into the valley and you are rewarded by the stunning Henrhyd Waterfall, tallest in south Wales at 27 metres, which has a rare beauty even in dry periods but most majestic when in spate. Retrace your steps to the car park and road junction taking a right turn into Coelbren; after 0.5 kilometres, turn left into Station Road and site of Coelbren Junction station.

This was the junction of the Midland Railway from Swansea and the Neath & Brecon Railway. It closed to passengers in October 1962 and freight several years later. In 1963, it briefly became part of 'South Africa' in the filming of 'The Young Winston'.

Retrace your steps along Station Road, left to Heol yr Eglwys and left again to Onllwyn Road. At the junction of the A4221, cross, turn right then left and continue for 1 kilometre to the junction with the A4109 and a left turn will take you through Onllwyn to the bus terminus.

As you cross over the operational railway, you will see sidings (left) serving 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 Coelbren or Banwen.

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



Banwen and Coelbren are both served by the 58 bus direct from Swansea and Neath every hour weekdays' daytime; very limited Sunday service from Neath



First Day tickets Swansea Bay or Neath Port Talbot areas giving a day's unlimited travel (adult, youth and family options) can be purchased from the bus driver

If coming by train, Neath Plus Bus tickets for onward travel can be purchased with your train ticket.





3

St Patrick's birthplace?



4

Roman roads are usually dead straight



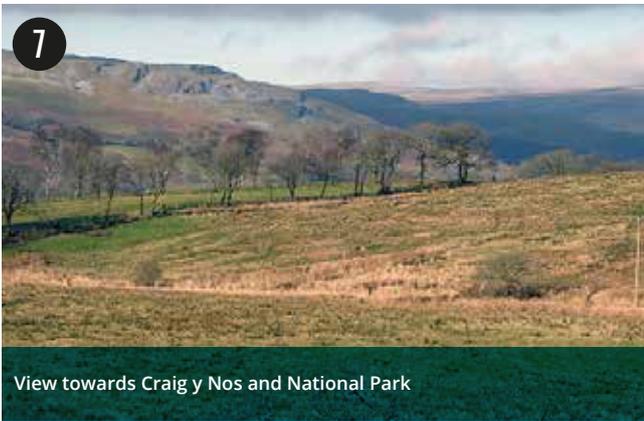
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Earthworks mark the site of Roman Fort 'Ricus'



6

Henrhyd Waterfall



7

View towards Craig y Nos and National Park



8

Coelbren Junction station site



9

Coal train at Onllwyn



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The X58 bus links from Swansea and Neath

