



CANAL HISTORY

Goytre Wharf to Gilwern

Bridge 81 Notice Ty'r Abad (the Boat House). When the canal was completed in 1812 the management committee of 12 set out to view the canal in a boat from here. The boat and boat house belonged to Benjamin Waddington, father of Lady Llanover.

Two tramroads connected with the canal at Govilon. Near Bridge 98 was the terminus of the Llanfihangel tramroad and crossing Bridge 97 was Bailey's tramroad. The tramroads met near the warehouse.

The Baptist chapel in Govilon was first licensed for worship in 1696 making it the oldest still in existence. There is a gateway from the chapel grounds right on to the towpath.

The warehouse is now the office of Glandŵr Cymru, The Canal & River Trust in Wales who are responsible for the Mon & Brec Canal.

CANAL HISTORY

Learn more about the history of the canal as you walk, cycle or canoe.

At Gilwern the canal crosses the River Clydach on a massive embankment and aqueduct. This was the first major construction project of the canal when it started in 1797.

Goytre Wharf
The wharves and lime kilns here were built in 1810 with the purpose of carrying on the trade in coal and lime. A weighing machine and crane were installed, stables and workshops built as the site developed. The wharf is at the top of the kilns so it is likely that materials were brought to them by water.

Hill's Tramroad
Dating from 1825 the tramroad meets the canal after running around the Bloreng Mountain and down by inclined plane to Llanfoist Wharf with "The Boat House" a former canal warehouse. There is a tunnel running under the canal here.

St. Faith's Church
is situated in the village of Llanfoist. The graveyard contains the grave of ironmaster Crawshay Bailey, a major player in the story of South Wales.

The Wharves at Gilwern would have been very busy with connections by tramroad to the iron industry in the Clydach Gorge and with a tunnel under the canal carrying a tramroad to Glangrwyne Forge a mile away.

At Bridge 96 the towpath changes sides so this bridge was designed to allow the horse to cross over without having to uncouple the towing rope. The towpath was moved in 1811 and this is why you will see a winding hole (turning area) on the wrong side of the canal.

Bridge 100 leads to Llanwenarth House where the hymn writer Frances Alexander sometimes stayed. She wrote "All Things Bright and Beautiful" perhaps inspired by the scenery of the Usk Valley.

www.visitmonmouthshire.com

Bridge numbers 144

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Llanover Estate

Augusta Waddington was born at Llanover in 1802. In 1823 she married Benjamin Hall III of Abercarn who later became Lord Llanover. Benjamin Hall was an MP and first Commissioner for Works in 1855 when the Houses of Parliament were built. The bell was named after him, and “Big Ben” is known the world over. However he is overshadowed by his wife Augusta, Lady Llanover, whose great interest in Welsh culture and language is well remembered and has influence today. In a period when Welsh was in decline she promoted the language and created a cultural centre for all things Welsh at Llanover Park. Her interest was fostered by contact with the Welsh speaking tenants on the estate. While she was head of the estate the servants wore Welsh costume which was dying out in other parts of Wales. She encouraged the playing of the harp and welcomed musicians and academics to her home. She was a strong supporter of the Temperance Movement and eventually closed all the pubs on the estate. Only the Goose and Cuckoo in Upper Llanover escaped the purge. She lived most of her life at Llanover and died there in 1896 aged 94. In later years she was considered by many to be eccentric but at her death tributes to her passion for Welsh culture were paid by many who valued her work.

Dry Docks & Boat Maintenance

In Govilon you will notice a dry dock which was rebuilt in 1992 and is still in use today. A dry dock is a vital piece of equipment for the care and maintenance of boats and can be used for routine work and sometimes in case of emergency. A narrowboat is taken into the dock, the entrance is sealed up with with stop planks (thick wooden planks) and the water drained out by means of a sluice gate operated by paddle gear. While the water is drained out the boat must be steadied and controlled by ropes so that it settles on the bottom in the right position and level. Sometimes blocks of wood are inserted to keep the boat level on the bottom as many of the modern Mon & Brec narrow boats are not flat bottomed and have a shallow “v” hull. In the past wooden boats would be caulked (pushing tarred rope between the planks) and blacked with tar or bitumen. These days’ boats are dry-docked for painting, to have their bottoms blacked with bitumen or to have work done on the rudder and propeller, or on the most modern convenience installed, a bowthruster. In extreme cases major repairs can be done if they have developed a leak. Boats constantly rub against the sides and bottom of the canal and eventually a hole will develop and you get that sinking feeling!

World Heritage Site

In 2000 Blaenavon was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site because of the significance of the monuments and buildings in Blaenavon and the surrounding industrial landscape. The site covers 12 square miles and the Mon & Brec canal at Llanfoist cuts through it from bridge 95 to 99. The canal here is a significant part of our industrial heritage connected by Hill’s tramroad to the ironworks in Blaenavon and the forges at Garnddyrys. The World Heritage Site has helped the area assert itself as deserving of recognition on the world stage after many years as a forgotten landscape. Only over the last decades of the 20th century were the importance, protection and study of industrial landscapes accepted after the land had been left scarred by ironworking and mining. Although the canal was first constructed to transport coal, lime and agricultural produce, it was not long before ironmasters and industrialists clearly saw that there were benefits to be had by using the canal as a transport network. Bringing iron ore up the canal from Newport to Llanfoist Wharf and thence by tramroad to the ironworks returning with trams loaded with iron, the finished product, made complete sense. The canal enabled expansion of heavy industry.

Glandŵr Cymru, The Canal & River Trust in Wales

The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal is navigable for 35 miles from Brecon to beyond Pontymoile near Cwmbran and is under the ownership of the charity The Canal & River Trust. Transfer of ownership from the previous government-owned operator British Waterways took place in July 2012. The Trust has responsibility for 2,000 miles of canals across England and Wales, rivers, docks and reservoirs along with museums, archives and many historic buildings. The Trust cares for the fabric of the canal carrying out maintenance and repair throughout the year. You will see Trust staff working along the canal doing a range of jobs. There are over 400 boats on the Mon and Brec Canal and these all have to be licensed and moored. There are opportunities to volunteer with the Trust, groups help to keep the towpath clear, work as lock keepers and in positions as trustees or on regional partnerships. There are many other roles for volunteers so why not join in?

www.canalrivertrust.org.uk

Canal Boats

Most of the boatmen were local and lodged overnight along the way at inns or farms. Very often boats were worked by a man and a boy, the boy would lead the horse along the towpath while the man steered the boat. There were plenty of places where the horse or pony could be stabled close to the canal ready to get going again in the morning. Some of the boats had no cabin at all and those that did had a very basic construction which could be used for storage or for mealtimes. They were not in the style of narrowboats on the main canal system which housed whole families. The boats here were not highly decorated with castles and roses but were plain and workmanlike; they could carry around 20 tons. Around the turn of the 20th century there were many instances of boats being used for Sunday school trips often with a photographer in attendance to record the event. The boat would be packed with people, up to 100, all in their very best clothes. At this time the boats carried varied cargoes including coal and manure so hopefully they were well cleaned before the outing!

Transport Networks

The canal should not be seen in isolation but as part of a transport network. Most of the network has now gone leaving behind clues which we can see as we walk the towpath and explore the area. Tramroads were used to connect the canal to industries and to sources of raw materials and can be seen at many points along the way. With the coming of the railways the canal found itself close to and crossed by several railways along its length. These railways offered cheaper, faster transport and soon took over from tramroads. This was the beginning of the end for the canal. At Govilon the Merthyr, Tredegar and Abergavenny Railway ran close to the canal. Construction was started in 1860 and soon reached Abergavenny and Brynmawr using part of the route of the old Bailey tramroad. The track took a tortuous route through the Clydach Gorge utilising tunnels and viaducts but was open in 1862. The line ran until it carried its last passenger in 1958. The stretch of track between Govilon and Llanfoist is now a cycle track. Many features of the railway survive in Govilon with names like Station Road and Station House in evidence. The railway bridge over the canal near Govilon Wharf is worth investigating. Look underneath and you can clearly see where the bridge was extended to take dualling of the line.