

Autumn newsletter 2008

Three canal walk

The Three Canal walk undertaken on September 14th this year was a great success. The weather was sunny but cool, the ideal weather for walking. Twenty-four people completed the six and half mile walk along the canals of the Neath Valley. The circular walk was along the Bryncoch Canal, the Tennant Canal and the Neath Canal, and gave the walkers an opportunity to explore the environment and heritage of the waterways.

The Bryncoch Canal, sometimes referred to as the Rhyddings Canal, or as Mr Tennants Canal was built as a narrow canal, circa 1805, and worked until about 1860. The canal was narrow, only wide enough for tub boats. The boats would probably have been about twenty feet long by possibly six feet wide and transported coal from a colliery at Bryncoch to wharves on the river Neath. The colliery was located near the present Dyffryn Arms public house at Bryncoch, and ran on the level, without any locks to a canal basin above the escarpment overlooking Cadoxton Church. A rope operated incline lowered the colliery trams down the hillside with a short tramroad connection to the river.

The Tennant Canal was completed in 1824 and the Neath Canal in 1795, both as standard narrow canals with boats of about 60 to 65 feet long and up to nine feet wide.

The walk commenced at Bryncoch at the main road lay-bye entrance to Gilfach quarry on the Pontardawe to Neath road, O/S ref 747994. The quarry is still working with no public access, and the entrance can be busy with heavy vehicles exiting and entering the quarry. A public footpath on the Pontardawe side of the quarry entrance gives access to the Bryncoch Canal. The short footpath is very boggy in places, but within a short distance an overgrown watercourse is reached; the Bryncoch Canal. Follow the canal route to the right, and cross the quarry road, the towpath and a very narrow canal can then be followed for about a half mile, crossing Gilfach Road (where a canal bridge originally stood) and ending at the canal terminus basin. Public footpaths lead through Leiros Parc housing estate across Leiros Parc Drive and Daphne Road to the woodland overlooking Cadoxton Church.

Follow the winding path through the woods, passing an old coal adit and exit onto Cwmbach Road. Turn right and then cross the main road alongside Cadoxton Church. We stopped at the churchyard to examine the murder stone, a gravestone commemorating a murder of a young woman in the 19th century. A short path alongside the church, formerly a tramroad, is very wet; a stream was flowing along part of it. The tramroad passes under an iron railway bridge with low headroom and arrives at the Tennant Canal. The bridge crossing the canal is minus its parapet walling so take care when crossing it.

Turn left and follow the towpath toward Aberdulais, the towpath is under restoration at the present time so it is very muddy in places. The distance is about a mile and a quarter. The Tennant Canal is quite wide in places and there are to be seen the remains of former barge loading structures along the offbank and a partly demolished canal overbridge. We saw a Kingfisher flying down the canal and a number of mallards and moorhens in and out of the offbank vegetation and a Buzzard overhead.

The A465 trunk road crosses the canal near Aberdulais and the towpath forms part of the concrete structure, it is not a pretty site and devoid of any colour or naturalness. Beyond this, one comes to Canal Terrace, a row of 19th century dwellings constructed alongside the canal. At the end of the terrace are the canal company's boat shed, the canal lock and the canal tollhouse. Immediately after the tollhouse is the imposing ten-arched Aberdulais aqueduct spanning the River Neath, constructed by William Kirkhouse. The River Dulais joins the river Neath at this location, hence the name of Aberdulais. There is no public access onto the aqueduct; it does not have a parapet wall to prevent anyone from falling off the structure into the river, so keep off.

Aberdulais Basin is at the end of the aqueduct and is where the Tennant Canal forms a junction with the Neath Canal. A skew bridge, known as Pont Gam, carries the towpath of the Neath Canal over the Tennant Canal entrance. We had our picnic here admiring the tranquillity of the basin. There is a railway bridge spanning the Neath Canal at this location, originally constructed for the vale of Neath Railway, but altered by the Great Western Railway circa 1895. Also close by is the Aberdulais railway viaduct, again for the Vale of Neath Railway.

The next part of our journey was along the Neath Canal to Neath town, a distance of about two miles. On the first part to Tonna, the canal is squeezed into a narrow space between the river and the adjacent steep hillside. At Tonna lock, about a half mile from the canal basin, is a former canal barge building yard and workshops where the last Neath Canal barge, the Ivy May was built in 1934. The complex consists of the sawing shed, workshops, and a lock recently restored, and former canal cottage.

The towpath to Neath is very good with mature trees along the offbank, and marshlands on the towpath side. A mile and a quarter from Aberdulais, one comes to Llantwit Church, a beautiful little white painted church originally built during the Norman era and now standing alongside the canal offbank. The church retains its Norman tower and other features and is a delight to see. Shortly afterwards we enter the built up suburbs of Neath with the Neath Canal Company work yard on the offbank. A huge stone wall dominates the offbank area here, this supports a large building that was formerly the Neath Workhouse, erected in 1838 for the very poor unemployed of the area during the Victorian period. The rest of the way to Neath town the canal runs through a built up area with houses on both sides of the canal until one comes to the town centre. Here is a small canal basin where the Neath and Tennant Canals Preservation Society trip boat "Thomas Dadford" is moored. The views here are excellent with the Neath Castle dominating the skyline and several historic buildings complimenting the area. The canal and basin had many moorhens; mallards and swans, that all make the waterway an interesting place to visit.

After passing the town centre shopping area, the canal comes to a very low flat bridge, lowered during the 1950's to facilitate traffic along Bridge Street, which was once the main road into the town from Cadoxton and Skewen. Turn right and follow the road toward the river and cross the old bridge, at the end of the bridge turn right along the Tennant Canal. Follow the towpath back toward Cadoxton Church, along the way the towpath goes under a railway bridge with very ornate cast-iron balustrades. The railway originally ran to Cilfriw tinsplate works and collieries, but is now closed, leaving the bridge as an

industrial reminder of the past. The towpath is very narrow as it passes under the A465 road at this location, so please take care.

A half-mile from the river bridge one comes back to the bridge crossing the canal near the church. Retrace your steps pass the church, through the wood and the housing estate and along the Rhyddings Canal. Our party finished the tour with a well earned drink at the Dyffryn Arms public house.

Clive Reed 15 October 2008

Unusual use of the Swansea Canal

The Swansea Canal had a number of uses in the past, as a navigation for boats, as a water provider to industry, and as a water source to power water wheels. It one other unusual use, that of transporting items too large to move by conventional methods.

In 1929, the Ynystawe Patent Fuel works near Clydach closed. The equipment was disposed of as either scrap or sold on to another business. One of the larger items at the works that was sold for reuse was a steam boiler, probably a Lancashire boiler. The problem was how to get the large piece of equipment to Swansea. The boiler was approximately twenty feet long and over six feet diameter, much too big to move by lorry at that time.

In 1930, Morgan Bodeycombe, a blacksmith from Clydach, had an ingenious way of moving the boiler from Ynystawe. He was offered £5.00 if he was successful in the task. Five pounds in 1930 was more than a weeks wage for an ordinary workingman, the equivalent of £400.00 at today's rates.

What he did was quite simple. He blanked off all the water and steam pipes leading in and out of the boiler, all the gauge inlets, and the stoke-hole where the coal was thrown into it. The boiler was sealed and it should float.

He rolled the boiler into the canal and hired a horse to pull it from Charles' stable at Clydach. The boiler would easily pass through the canal locks and had sufficient buoyancy to float without snagging the canal bottom. The boiler was hauled over four miles along the canal, through the four locks between Ynystawe and its destination at Swansea where it was lifted out of the canal by using sheerlegs.

Morgan's unusual transport solution proved to be a winner, the boiler was moved successfully, Morgan was much richer, and it only took two days work.

Mr Douglas Bodeycombe, the grandson of Morgan Bodeycombe related the story to Clive Reed on October 14th 2008.

Clive Reed.