



## Iron valley

Discover the hidden story of  
Pontypool in South Wales

**Time:** 1hr 30 mins

**Distance:** 2 miles

**Landscape:** rural

Mention the Welsh valleys to most people and the first thing that springs to mind is coal. But here in Pontypool the hills are alive with a different raw material: iron ore.

The story of the landscape here is the story of Pontypool. The rich resources of this valley built the town and, by making one family very wealthy, brought about dramatic landscape change in the process.

But just how and why did this secluded wooded valley go from industrial powerhouse to the landscape of leisure it is today?

**Location:**

Pontypool, Torfaen, South Wales

**Start:**

Pontymoile Gates, Pontypool Park, NP4 8AT

**Finish:**

The Folly Tower, NP4 8JB

**Grid reference:**

SO 29060 00522

**Keep an eye out for:**

Views of the Severn Estuary and its two crossings

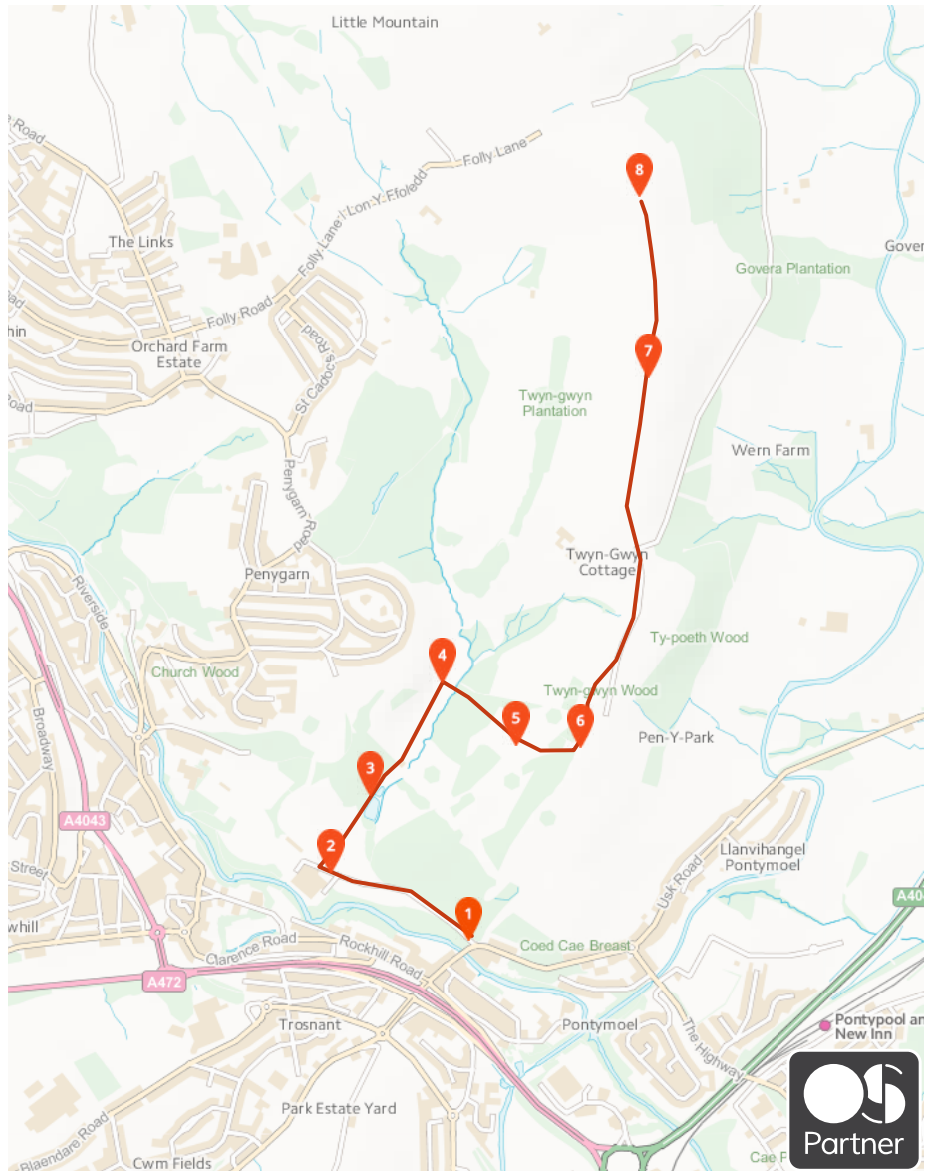
**Thank you**



Lauren Speed for creating this viewpoint. Lauren is a freelance heritage interpreter specialising in community projects.



## Route and stopping points



- 01** Pontymoile Gates, Pontypool Park
- 02** Active Living Centre
- 03** Nant-y-Gollen Ponds
- 04** Into the Woods
- 05** Pontypool Park Meadows
- 06** Shell Grotto
- 07** Along the crest of the hill
- 08** Folly Tower

## 01 Pontymoile Gates, Pontypool Park

These handsome gates stand proud at the entrance to the valley from which they were crafted. They are a fitting monument to the industry that made Pontypool famous, and an appropriate place to start our walk.

Let's look at them in more detail. Can you see the delicate grapes and vine leaves? They are a good example of the craft of iron moulding practised at the ironworks in nearby Blaenavon. Today they represent the culmination of almost 600 years of iron manufacturing in the area - a symbol of the skill of the Pontypool iron workers.

The gates date to the 1720s and were a gift from the Duchess of Marlborough to the local Hanbury family. The Duchess's nickname was Sally and the gates are known locally as the 'Sally gates'. We will learn more about the Hanburys as we continue our walk.

As we pass through the gates, we are entering the park as the Hanburys once did. Before you is a scene more characteristic of a country estate. That's because it once was. Long before rows of houses filled the valley sides, the hills were green and sparsely wooded. A perfect place for a wealthy family to build their estate.

This wide, winding driveway brought visitors on a pleasant carriage ride up to the big house (now a school). This was as much for the owners' benefit as their visitors though. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, highly formal landscape gardens were the height of fashion. What better way to show how fashionable you were than to make your guests travel through your formal gardens to reach your house?

Look carefully at the driveway. Can you make out the lines of trees that flanked each side? It may be more difficult than you think and we will discover why later on.

### Directions

Continue along the driveway until you reach a junction in the path and a signpost pointing you to the Ponds and the Ski Slope.

## 02 The Active Living Centre

To our left is the Active Living Centre. This spot marks the real beginning of our landscape story. There is mention of iron making in this area as early as 1425, but it is the arrival of Richard Hanbury that really kicked things off.

Hanbury was a goldsmith or banker from London who saw business potential in this little valley. This spot is thought to be the site of his first iron forge built in 1577, without which the landscape around us would not exist. Although he never lived here himself, Richard Hanbury's business venture sparked a family connection with the area that continues to this day.

But why this particular valley? Keep an eye (and maybe an ear) out for clues as we continue.

### Directions

Turn right at the signpost and take the path to the Ponds, passing the grounds of the famous Pontypool Rugby Football Club on your left. Continue over the rise and stop once you reach two large ponds.

## 03 The Nant-y-Gollen Ponds

These ponds are an excellent example of how Richard Hanbury and the other early iron workers were able to exploit the landscape to their industrial advantage. The Torfaen valley is criss-crossed by streams and rivers - did you hear the distant roar of the Afon Llwyd on our way here?

The Hanburys were quick to recognise this free source of energy, as demonstrated by these ponds in front of us. They dug out what was originally one large mill-pond and used the water to power the forge further downstream.

Water was also used to extract the iron ore from the ground. One reason this valley was so popular for iron production is that the ore lies close to the surface. Therefore, workmen could simply loosen the soil and use water from the streams and rivers to wash away the waste, leaving behind the iron ore. The river is said to get its distinctive colour from this process, hence the name Afon Llwyd or 'grey river'.

Now take a look around. Can you spot any other sources of power? The answer is in the trees. The ponds are surrounded by Sweet Chestnut trees which are now, like the ponds, purely decorative. However, they were planted initially as a source of charcoal to power the iron forges. Sweet Chestnuts are an ideal source of charcoal as they are very adaptable and sprout vigorously after being cut back, quickly providing more timber.

#### Directions

Continue past the ponds towards the wooden chalet hut. On your right you'll notice the dry ski slope, another example of how the steep terrain of this valley has been put to use. Just beyond the chalet hut, the path becomes grass. Follow the grass path along the line of the valley until you see a small wooden bridge to your right. Head towards it and stop once you reach the bridge.

### 04 Into the Woods

Beneath the bridge flows one of the many streams in the valley. It marks a boundary between the open grassy valley and the wilder, wooded area. But looks can be deceiving! As wild and natural as the woods look, they are just as carefully crafted as the formal gardens of the park.

In the eighteenth century the formal lines and driveways fell out of favour. Like so many wealthy landowners at the time, the Hanburys employed the services of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown to make their landscape look more natural. Do you think he was successful?

#### Directions

Cross over the bridge and head up into the woods. Here the trail becomes steep and narrow – this part of the park certainly feels very wild! Continue uphill until you reach a grassy clearing. On your left you will pass a signpost to the mysterious 'grotto' which we'll visit later. Stay to the left of the clearing and continue uphill. A little further on, the landscape opens out even more and your grassy path should meet another one coming up from the right. Stop here and turn to face downhill.

### 05 Pontypool Park Meadows

Turn around so that you are facing down the slope and look out across the valley. This is where the impact of the Hanburys is most apparent. Can you see the mountains in the distance? They mark the start of the Brecon Beacons and offer a glimpse of what the Pontypool Valley might once have looked like.

When Richard Hanbury was first drawn to the area, he found a steep, sparsely wooded valley with a scatter of houses at the bottom. Compare that to the view in front now. The success of the Hanbury forges grew the tiny settlement into a thriving town. At one time Pontypool was larger than nearby Newport and the capital city of Cardiff!

With iron forges working across the valley and teams of experienced ironworkers, the Hanburys took the natural resources of the area and turned them into high quality iron goods. Pontypool became

synonymous with superior quality iron and many new techniques, such as tin-plating, were pioneered here. Pontypool became famous for the 'japanning' process, where a layer of oil varnish was baked onto iron items like plates and bowls, producing a highly-polished and hard-wearing black layer that was then decorated in an oriental style.

Pontypool iron was exported all over the world, in particular wrought iron gates and railings. As well as products, knowledge of iron-working was also exported. The first iron forge in America was reportedly built by two brothers from Pontypool!

#### Directions

Turn back uphill. Ahead of you in a small clearing you will see a small stone hut. Head towards it and soon you will reach a fork in the path. Take the left fork up a gentle slope. As you near the top, follow the path round to the right and onto the hilltop. Alternatively, you can take the right fork for a more direct but much steeper route to the top.

## 06 The Shell Grotto

Our reward for scaling the steep hill is the stunning view out across the Usk Valley, and in the distance the Severn Estuary. Take a moment to enjoy the view and see if you can spot three famous river crossings.

On a clear day you should be able to see from left to right: the Severn Bridge, the Second Severn Crossing and the Newport Transporter Bridge. These views are the reason for the little stone hut just behind you. Rustic and ancient-looking, the grotto is actually another example of the Hanburys crafting beauty from the landscape around them.

Built from local sandstone in the late eighteenth century, the Grotto is typical of the romantic garden features that were the height of fashion at the time. They were built to look old and were often cave-like inside. This Grotto is no exception – hidden inside is an elaborate fanned ceiling covered with intricate patterns of sea shells and coral. The walls are set with glistening minerals and real stalactites from local caves. Even the floor is decorated, although more gruesomely with bones and teeth from animals that once roamed on the estate.

From this spot, the Hanburys could picnic and enjoy stunning views of the landscape that made them wealthy.

#### Directions

Follow the small path down the slope and through a small group of trees. Pass through the kissing gate (the first of many) and continue down until the path meets a larger path. Turn left and follow this path along the hillside. Be aware of livestock as the path passes through working farmland.

## 07 Along the crest of the hill

As we continue following the hilltop path you will see plenty of evidence of human intervention in the landscape, much of it by the wealthy Hanbury family. Everything in the immediate landscape is for a specific purpose. Acres of farmland supplied fresh produce to the estate, whilst the tree plantations provided charcoal to power the hungry furnaces of the iron forges.

As you walk along the path, keep an eye out for views of the wider landscape to the right. In the distance you will see a glittering body of water nestled among the rolling hills. Although very picturesque, this too is a not natural feature. In the 1960s, the valley was flooded to create Llandegfedd Reservoir, swallowing up several farms and a village in the process. Local folklore says that on low water days, the top of the old church steeple can be seen poking above the surface.

### Directions

Continue ahead as the path steepens. Soon you will reach the final kissing gate. Pass through the gate and continue up the path as it opens onto the wild grassy hilltop. Head towards the grey tower for the final breath-taking stop.

## 08 The Folly Tower

*"Here where the hill holds heaven in her hands; high above Monmouthshire the grey tower stands."*

So wrote local poet Myfanwy Haycock in 1937. The folly has inspired generations of locals to make the trek to the top of the hill but did you know this viewpoint is over 2,000 years old? As you enjoy the full panorama, it is easy to see why the Romans are supposed to have chosen this site for a watchtower.

The function of this landscape has changed repeatedly since the Roman era when it was a useful defensive viewpoint. With the arrival of the Hanburys, the focus turned to leisure. In the late eighteenth century it became fashionable among the wealthy to build follies (buildings with no functional purpose) on their estates and the Hanburys were no exception. The original tower was constructed in the late 1760s and used as a summer house and lookout point for hunting deer.

But in the Second World War, the visible location of the folly became a problem with concerns it could be used as a landmark to direct the enemy to the nearby munitions factory in Glascoed. The folly was demolished and the hill stood empty for many decades. The local community never forgot it though and in 1994 after years of campaigning and fundraising, the grey tower began to rise once more from the hillside. It was opened in 1995 by Prince Charles and remains an important local landmark.

This trail has taken you through a landscape that is home to the Welsh iron industry. This steep, wooded valley was the perfect place for iron working. It had an abundance of iron ore that could be easily extracted, a plentiful supply of water for ore extraction and powering the forges, and trees to provide charcoal for the furnaces.

The Hanbury family were quick to recognise the potential of the Pontypool area and grew rich from the iron industry here. They used their wealth to transform the landscape into their vision of the perfect country estate. The park continues to be enjoyed as a landscape of leisure today.

### Directions

To return to the Shell Grotto and make your back down through the park. If you have time, visit some of the other landscape features built by the Hanbury Family such as the beautiful Italian Gardens and the Gorsedd Stone Circle.

 Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!