

*POETS, PRIESTS AND PUBS*

# *EGLWYSILAN*

# *WALK*



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# EGLWYSILAN WALK

Situated on top of the mountain between the Taff and Aber Valleys, this walk has a strangely timeless feel, which is even stranger, considering it was located in the eye of the storm created by the Industrial Revolution.

*Eglwysilan* means Ilan's church, but very little is known about him, although there is a tradition that says he was one of the pre-Norman bishops of Llandaff and a

disciple of St. Illtud. There is a village named St. Ilan in Northern Brittany close to St Brieuc, who is also thought to have come from this area. St. Briavels, now over the border in England, is named after him. In the calendar of Welsh saints, March 9th has been dedicated to his memory.

The Book of Llandaff, which was compiled around 1100, calls the church Merthyr Ilan – the place where his relics were kept (compare Merthyr Tydfil – where Tydfil's relics were kept). When the parish was created in the 12th century, it covered an area of more than 30,000 acres, which stretched all the way from Rumney to Abercynon, which is a huge area, but at the time, it had a small population.

With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution and the huge increase in population in the valleys below, the parish shrunk geographically and there are now about 8,000 people within its borders, which comprise the Aber Valley, including the villages of Abertridwr and Senghenydd, together with the hamlets of Eglwysilan and Groeswen, which incidentally, has one of the oldest non-conformist chapels in Wales.



# EGLWYSILAN



**E**glwysilan is typical of many Welsh small villages that boast a church, a pub and very little else due to a depletion of the population. The church is strong, wide and airy and on the north wall is a sandstone slab carved with the figure of a warrior. This has been dated to the 8th-10th century.



<< Interior of Eglwysilan Church



# BRYNFAB (THOMAS WILLIAMS)

*Brynfab >>*

**B**rynfab was the bardic name of Thomas Williams who was born in 1848 and who died in 1927 and buried in Eglwysilan churchyard. While he is not well known now, he was highly acclaimed during his lifetime and even given a pension of £50 per annum for his contribution to Welsh literature – although it sounds paltry now, it would have been a considerable amount – almost the yearly wage of many workers of the time.



Probably why Thomas Williams is not much celebrated today is that most of his writing was done through the medium of Welsh, something which may surprise many, as the area where he worked and lived, rapidly became anglicised. Like many bards, then and today, Thomas was a farmer and he farmed The Hendre in the parish of Eglwysilan for over fifty years, composing poetry about every facet of life in Wales.



Also, like many other bards of the time, although he received very little education when he was a boy he continued his education on leaving school by simply reading as much as he could. As a result, he was able to edit the poetry column in *Tarian y Gweithwyr*, and contributed frequently to various periodicals on literary matters. As a bard, he seems to have competed in as many eisteddfodau as he could, he was a well known penillion composer and contributed greatly to Welsh cultural life in general

<< *Ibbetson: Penillion Singing near Conway, 1792 (National Museum of Wales)*



## BRYNFAB (THOMAS WILLIAMS)

In 1909 Thomas won a prize in the London Eisteddfod with a poem about Wales and one of the verses has struck a chord over the years and is almost as romantic as a modern song -

*O! wlad fach, cofleidiaf hi; - angoraf  
Long fy nghariad wrthi;  
Boed i foroedd byd ferwi,  
Nefoedd o'i mewn fydd i mi.*

*Oh, my little country, I embrace it and I will  
Anchor my boat of love there;  
Let the world's seas boil over it,  
It will still be heaven to me.*

His novel *Pan oedd Rhondda'n Bur*, 1912, gives a valuable description of the early life of the Rhondda Valley, where he went to live as a child with his parents. Thomas was a prominent member of 'Clic y Bont,' an interesting literary coterie at Pontypridd that included bards like Carnelian, Glanffrwd, and Dewi Alaw.

Critics have said that in his lively and original personality, Brynfab was a noteworthy example of the popular culture of Wales. He is included here as a reminder that Welsh culture was flourishing well into the 20th century and that it is now standing its ground alongside the Anglo-American culture that has rocked the world.

Brynfab was also fulsome in his praise of other bards. This is a translation of an elegy to a fellow bard who died at the turn of the century.

*We that had loved him so, followed him, honoured him,  
Lived in his mild and magnificent eye,  
Learned his great language, caught his clear accents,  
Made him our pattern to live and to die!*



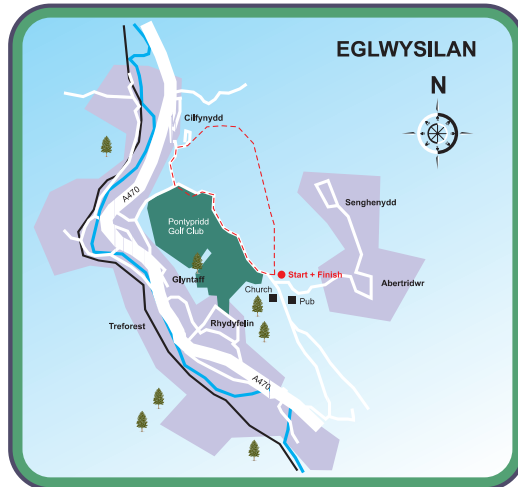
# THE ROUTE

**Estimated distance: 4 miles – Estimated time: 2 hours**

Start the walk in the Rose and Crown pub car park.

## THE ROSE AND CROWN

This is a traditional pub and, like other pubs with the same name, it is thought that the name comes from the end of the War of the Roses and the celebration of the new monarch, Henry VII. The Tudor Rose emblem belonged to the Tudor family, whose roots were in Anglesey and, as such, were welcomed by the Welsh. After all these years the pub is still well visited, even though it is quite isolated. If you decide to have a quick drink before you start the walk, your next stop is Eglwysilan Church, which stands next door – *eglwys* is Welsh for church (compare *église* in French and *iglesia* in Spanish).



# EGLWYSILAN CHURCH



*Eglwysilan Church*

This is a Grade II\* 12th century church which was probably constructed on the site of an earlier Celtic place of worship. The building looks almost pristine because of the careful restoration that was carried out by Graham Hardy between 1980 and 1984. This is one of the oldest churches in the county, and contains a monument from around the 8th century, which bears the outline of a warrior

The nave dates from the 12th century and the font probably also dates from the 12th century and made from stone that is likely to have been quarried before that date. The four south windows and the flattened round arch of the porch are from the same period. A new barrel roof was put in, in 1751 and it is suggested that William Edwards, the minister of Groeswen Chapel and the builder of Pontypridd bridge, carried out the work. William Edwards also carried out restoration work on the windows of the south wall and his initials are carved on an exterior lintel.



# EGLWYSILAN CHURCH

Pontypridd Bridge built by  
William Edwards >>

The grave of William Edwards and his wife are seen on your right as you leave the porch door. Inside the church, above the pulpit is a rood loft door.



Evan James, part of the father and son team who composed the Welsh national anthem, was baptised here – see the Pontypridd walk. Of course, the grave of Thomas Williams, (Brynfab), can still be seen here.

Apart from the Edwards Memorial, the burial ground contains the graves of many men and boys who were killed in the 1901 and 1913 Senghenydd Colliery disasters. The 1913 catastrophe was the worst in British mining history.

Leave the churchyard at the north entrance and come out onto the lane where you **Turn Left**.

Continue along the lane and you will come to a crossroads – **Keep Straight On** and you will see a cattle grid in the road just in front of you. **Cross the grid** and continue on the road until it forks to the right, with a gate in front of you..

Do not follow the road but, instead, take the path behind the gate. There is a sign with Eglwysilan Common on it

There is a path that goes up the hill in front of you, **Follow the path** but take the time to look behind you and the see the Garth Mountain, which was the theme for the film *the Englishman That Went Up A Hill And Came Down A Mountain*.

Walking up the hill, **On Your Right**, down in the Aber Valley you will see Senghenydd, the village named after the Welsh saint, Cenydd.





# SENGHENYDD

Today the village looks positively picturesque, but it will always be remembered for two major mining disasters at the Universal Colliery, which was the employer for practically the whole village. At the end of the 19th century it was one of the deepest pits in the South Wales coalfield and was producing more than 183,000 tons of coal annually.

## **FRIDAY 24TH MAY 1901**

An explosion occurred between the end of the night shift and the beginning of the day shift, just as the last group of night shift workers was getting out of the cage at the surface. Underground there were still 83 men preparing for the day shift. The explosion that ripped through the pit killed 81 men and boys. Following the resultant enquiry into this and comparable investigation into others, many recommendations were made. However, very few had been implemented by 14th October 1913

## **TUESDAY 14TH OCTOBER 1913**

During the twelve years between the first disaster and the second, the mine had expanded significantly, Part of the workforce had to work as far as two miles away from the pit



shafts, and there were as many as a thousand men in the mine at any time.

On this occasion, the explosions caught the pit when there was a full contingent of workers underground. The day shift had been

down for two hours when the disaster took place. The explosions destroyed the pit-head gear, catapulting the cage in the Lancaster shaft up into the air, at the same time totally disabling the shaft. In the York shaft, the fan had been damaged, but continued to function. The fact that the fan was still



# SENGHENYDD

feeding air into the pit meant that the fires underground were also amply fed on the various levels, which must have caused a holocaust of truly biblical proportions.

The final death toll reached 439 men, with only 72 bodies ever being found. No British mining community has ever suffered such a tragedy. On that day 205 women were made widows and 542 children were left without fathers. The Universal Pit at Senghenydd closed in 1928.



## Senghenydd By T. Gwynn Jones (1913)

*A darker shadow lay upon the vale  
Than the smoke of the pits  
It was the heavy pall of the event  
Which swept away the now mute hundreds  
A living sacrifice on the altar to Mammon  
The lawyers and greedy barons of the fat dividends met  
And asked interminably who was to blame  
Why it was that hundreds were swept to a horrendous death  
Yet there was not one present who did not know the truth.*

Continue on the path up the hill until it forks **Take the Left Fork** and when you come to the next fork **Take the Right Fork**.

Look down in the valley and **On Your Right** you will see Cilfynydd.



# CILFYNYDD

Cilfynydd >>

Until the last quarter of the 19th century, Cilfynydd was only a few cottages built along the Glamorgan Canal,



surrounded by a few scattered farms, with a total population of about 100 people. But this was to change dramatically when the Albion Steam Coal Company began sinking colliery shafts in 1884, and by the early 1890s the population had reached approximately 3,500 people, with 1,500 men and boys were employed at the Albion. It appears that the colliery's early years were comparatively free of serious incidents but Cilfynydd was also the scene of one Britain's worst mining disasters on the afternoon of Saturday June 23rd 1894, when an explosion occurred, which was felt many miles away.

The effects of the explosion were horrendous. It brought about



the deaths of 290 men and boys and was the worst mining disaster in South Wales to that date until the explosion at the Universal Colliery, Senghenydd in 1913 in the neighbouring Aber Valley.

<< *The Albion Colliery on the day of the disaster.*

Continue southwards along the path and you will see Pontypridd **On Your Right.**



Continue southwards on the path until you come to a narrow tarmaced road and a sign that reads *Eglwysilan Common*.

**Turn Left** and you will see Pontypridd linking into Trefforest The birthplace of Tom Jones (57, Kingsland Terrace), this was once a very industrial village. Today it is now the home of the University of Glamorgan and now mostly a student village.



Walk along the road and you will come to a cattle grid. **Cross the Cattle Grid** and follow the road until you comes to the first crossroads that you came to.

**Turn Right** and *Eglwysilan* is just down the road.

