

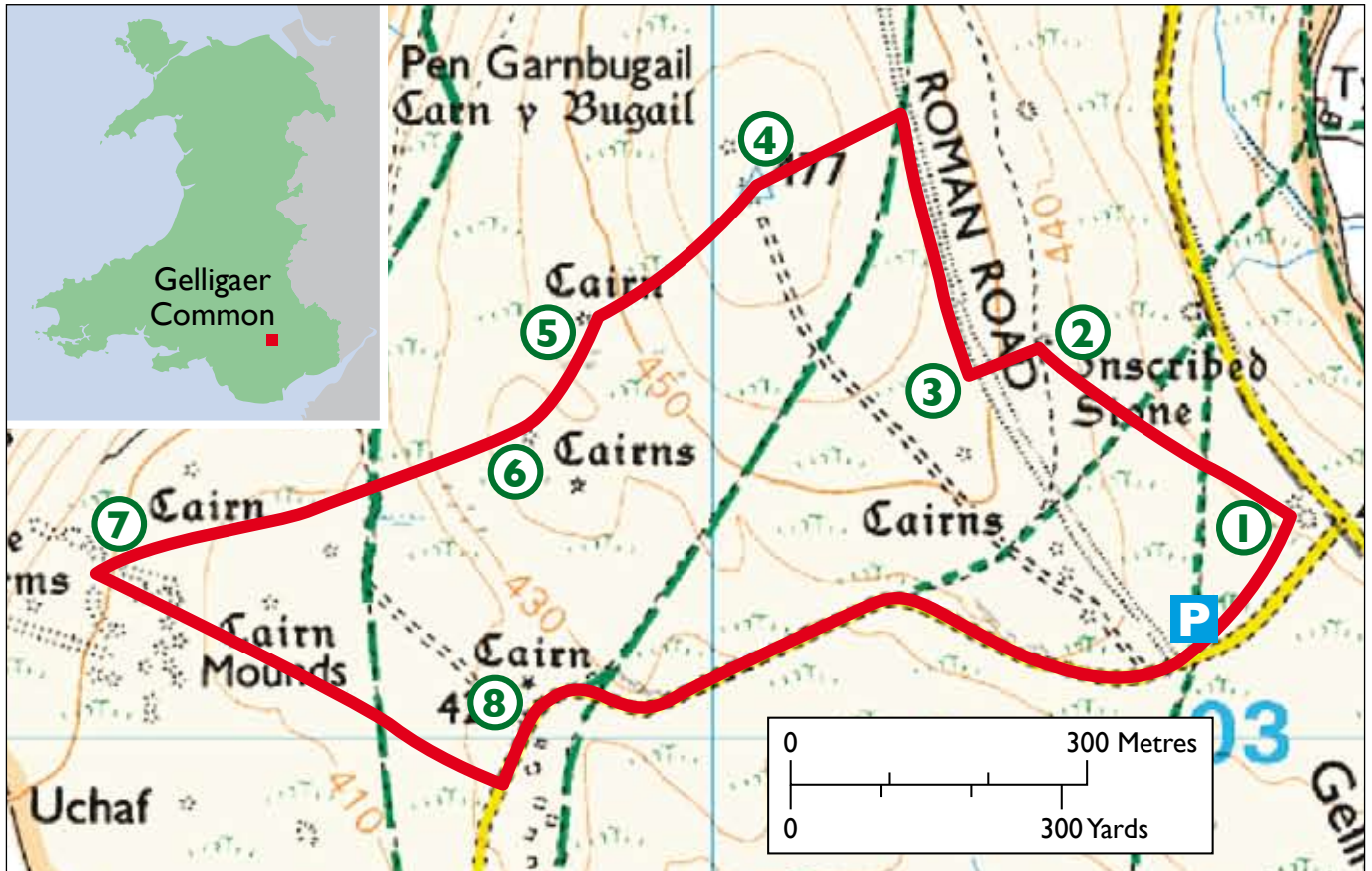
Gelligaer Common — an archaeological surprise

Frank Olding, heritage officer of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, takes us on a short walk from the heart of industrial Wales to a remarkable archaeological landscape ...

The late sixth- or early seventh-century stone (2) that once bore an inscription commemorating Nia-Froich — ‘the champion of the heather’

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The route of the walk

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Gelligaer Common is an expanse of bleak but beautiful upland moor sandwiched between the Taf and Rhydney valleys. Its windswept hills are but a short drive from communities whose names are synonymous with the industrial history of south Wales, including Ebbw Vale, home of this year's

National Eisteddfod. But this is also one of the most remarkable archaeological landscapes in Wales.

This short trail should not take more than two hours to complete but offers a microcosm of the archaeology of the south Wales Valleys before the Industrial Revolution.

A ten-minute drive from the A465 Heads of the Valleys Road brings you to the small car park on the mountain road from Fochriw to Bedlinog (SO 105031) and this is our starting point. Walk back towards the road running south from Fochriw towards Gelligaer. To the north of the junction between the two roads

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Before you start

Distance: Around 2 miles (3.2km)

Time: 2 hours

Map: OS Explorer 166 Rhondda and Merthyr Tydfil

Start/Parking: Car park on the mountain road from Fochriw to Bedlinog (SO 105031)

Nearest town: Fochriw

Terrain: Open moorland. There are moderate climbs and the ground is rough. Since the walk is on common land, much of it does not follow clear paths.

Please be sure that you have stout footwear and suitable clothing before you set out on your walk. You may find a compass useful for determining general directions when walking between the individual sites. Remember to follow The Countryside Code.



An aerial view of Pen Carnbugail from the north-west — Carn Bugail (4) is the prominent mound right of centre



The Roman road (3) that runs along the eastern side of Pen Carnbugail linked the forts at Gelligaer and Penydarren; the flanking ditches have been darkened for emphasis

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A model of the Roman fort at Gelligaer as it might have appeared in the early second century AD

(SO 106032) is a splendid ring-cairn (1) dating to the Early Bronze Age (2000–1450 BC).

The site comprises a circular, turfed-over bank about 49 feet (15m) across. Ring-cairns are a variant on the idea of the stone circle and probably served similar purposes. They certainly had religious and ritual functions and were often used as family burial grounds for the Bronze Age farmers and shepherds who spent their summers in these hills.

Walk to the north-west until you reach a thin pillar of stone (2) alongside a wide strip of low-cropped grass (SO 103034).

This is a memorial stone dating back to the late sixth or early seventh century AD. Along the northern face was once an inscription that read NEFROIHI — ‘the stone of Nía-Froích’. It commemorates an Irish warrior whose name meant something like ‘champion of the heather’ and reminds us of the presence of Irish kingdoms in south Wales during the Dark Ages.

Settling first in Pembrokeshire in the fifth century, the Irish soon expanded and established themselves in their kingdom of Brycheiniog (later Breconshire). This stone and another at Ystrad between Trefil and Pontsticill to the north may well mark the southern extent of their influence.

By turning west and walking about 30 yards (30m), you will cross the Roman road (3) that linked the forts at Gelligaer and Penydarren.

At this point, the road is about 39 feet (12m) wide overall. It runs for over half a mile (almost 1km) from the Bedlingog road, climbing steadily until it peters out on the northern slopes of Pen Carnbugail. By looking up the hill to the north, you will see the classic layout of a Roman road — a raised central section, called the ‘agger’ by archaeologists, flanked on either side by a ditch and an outlying bank. This is a section of the Roman road that originally ran all

When Arthur came to Gelligaer

The cairns at Fochriw captured the imagination of our medieval ancestors and were drawn into Arthurian legend. Sometime in the 1070s or 1080s, a monk from Llanccarfan in Glamorgan by the name of Lifris wrote a

Latin ‘biography’ of St Cadog, the *Vita Cadoci*, and among the tales he tells about the saint is an account of his birth.

A local Gwentian king called Gwynllyw — after whom Gwynllŵg (the western part of Gwent) was named — eloped with Gwladys, a daughter of Brychan, king of Brycheiniog. Brychan, naturally being somewhat put out at this unruly behaviour, gave chase with his warriors.

When he had almost caught the couple, Gwynllyw and Gwladys came to a hill named *Boch Rhiw Carn* where they met Arthur and his boon companions, Cei and Bedwyr, playing dice. In later French and English tales these red-blooded Celtic heroes were transformed into the rather surly Sir Kay and wishy-washy Sir Bedivere. The ‘three vigorous heroes’ (*tres heroes strenui*) promptly defeated Brychan and his men

in a bloody battle, but not before Arthur has considered kidnapping Gwladys for himself! The happy couple went on their way, and the result of their newly-wed passion was the holy St Cadog himself.

Boch Rhiw Carn (‘the cairn of Fochriw’) is clearly a reference to Carn Bugail. So here we have Arthur, Cei and Bedwyr fighting a battle on the bleak moors above Rhymney — at least in the fevered imagination of an



The climb to Carn Bugail (4) is rewarded with splendid views over the surrounding countryside

the way from Brecon to Cardiff, linking the forts at Penydaren, Gelligaer and Caerphilly on its way. Gelligaer fort lies some 4 miles (7km) to the south (ST 134971) and can be reached by following the modern road that runs along the ridge.

Both the road and the forts were constructed by Julius Frontinus, the governor of Britain responsible for the conquest of Wales, between AD 74 and AD 78. The fort at Gelligaer was rebuilt in stone between about AD 103 and AD 111 and would have housed about 500 Roman soldiers.

On campaign, the Roman army often had to build 'marching camps' — temporary forts to give secure bases in hostile territory. Alongside the road from Gelligaer Common to the fort lies a series of 'practice camps' — these are 'mini-forts' built by the soldiers of the Gelligaer garrison as training exercises to prepare themselves for the real thing.

Follow the Roman road north for about 325 yards (300m) until it is joined from the left by a track. At this point, turn left and walk west

straight up the hill until you see the outline of the trig point on the summit of Pen Carnbugail (SO 101037). Heading for the trig point will bring you to one of the most spectacular Bronze Age sites in south Wales.

You are now standing on the Carn Bugail burial cairn (4). It consists of a flat-topped mound of stones about 50 feet (15m) in diameter and 3 feet (1m) high, edged with a kerb of massive stones. In the centre is a large stone-lined box or 'cist' with a large oval capstone that has been moved to one side to allow the cist to be robbed out about three hundred years ago. This is the chamber that once held the remains of the person buried in the cairn. When it was dug, the remains of urns and burnt bones were found.

This site also belongs to the Early Bronze Age (2000–1450 BC). At first, Bronze Age people buried their dead with a few offerings to take to the other world — a beaker, some flint tools and, possibly, a bronze or copper dagger. Later, from about 1700 BC, they began to cremate their dead and bury



The stones that now lie flat around this Early Bronze Age ring cairn (5) would originally have stood upright

their ashes and bones in pottery urns. Carn Bugail may well date to this period. To the north is another, smaller cairn — again with a large cist and capstone in the centre. Carn Bugail is linked to a story about Arthur and two of his knights, a princess called Gwladys and a saint called Cadog.

Walking south-westwards from Carn Bugail will bring you to the edge of the ridge looking down on the head of a shallow valley. Descend the slope to a horseshoe-shaped embankment



Capel Gwladys

eleventh-century cleric.

A further reminder of the story can be found at Capel Gwladys, about 3 miles (4.5km) along the Roman road and about 1 mile (1.5km) from Bargoed (ST 125993).

Here, within an impressive boundary dyke, you can see the restored foundations of a small, rectangular chapel with a modern carved cross marking the site of the altar. Although tradition has it that the chapel

was founded by Gwladys in the sixth century, these remains are medieval in date. A carved grave slab found here and dated to the eighth or ninth century can be seen in the porch of Gelligaer church.

On the open moorland of Fforest Gwladys, about 550 yards (0.5km) to the south-east of Capel Gwladys, is one of the best-preserved and most accessible of the Roman practice camps (ST 131991).



The larger of the two platforms (7) that form part of the deserted late medieval settlement known as Dinas Noddfa; this was the site of a house with stone and turf walls

(5) about 36 feet (11m) across with large stones sticking out of it (SO 099034).

Originally, the stones would have stood upright forming an impressive ring — this is another ring-cairn and again dates to the Early Bronze Age.

Climb up the low ridge that rises to the south-west of the ring-cairn and on the summit is another well-preserved Bronze Age burial cairn (6) about 20 feet (6m) across with a large central cist and massive capstone (SO 098033). From this cairn, walk west again to the edge of the ridge.

You are now looking down onto a level plateau edged in the distance by a strong

drystone wall. In the summer, this is home to a fine stand of thistles that grow as tall as a man's chin!

Drop down the ridge and walk westwards through the thistle field for about 500 yards (0.5km). This will bring you to the deserted medieval settlement known as Dinas Noddfa (SO 094032).

As you walk across the plateau, you will notice several turfed-over heaps of stone — these are 'clearance cairns' formed by clearing stone off the surrounding land for cultivation. You will also notice long, low banks that once formed the boundaries of ancient fields.

Following the most northerly of these banks will lead you to the very edge of the plateau with an almost sheer drop below it. Here you will see two level platforms cut into the slope of the hill (7).

These platforms once held medieval buildings and were excavated in the 1930s by the eminent archaeologist Lady Aileen Fox. The larger, lower platform measures some 65 feet (20m) by 33 feet (10m) and was occupied by a house, with stone and turf walls and a ridged roof. In the middle of each long side was an entrance with a porch.

The upper platform is smaller — (about 50 feet (15m) by 26 feet (8m)) — and was occupied by a less imposing building with turf walls and a single entrance. Dinas Noddfa was probably occupied during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by local Welsh shepherds scraping a living from marginal land.

From Dinas Noddfa, head roughly south-east until you hit the Bedlinog road. Follow the road eastwards back towards the car park. As you come towards an outcrop of rock on the left hand side of the road, you may notice a small prehistoric burial cairn (8) near a track joining the road from the left (SO 098031).

Only about 16 feet (5m) across and nowhere near as impressive as Cam Bugail, this site shows the huge variation in the scale of Bronze Age monuments.

Another 900 yards (820m) along this road will bring you back to the car park and the starting point of the trail. ☘

Heritage for learners *Etifeddiaeth y dysgwyr*

Comin Gelligaer — yn llawn trysorau

Mae Comin Gelligaer ar y tir uchel.
Mae'r comin ar y tir uchel rhwng cwm Taf a chwm Rhymni.
Mae'r comin yn llawn trysorau.
Mae'r trysorau'n hynafol iawn.
Mae rhai yn 4,000 oed.

Dyma beth sydd ar y comin:
Sawl carnedd.
Ffordd Rufeinig.
Olion caer Rufeinig.
Sawl maen hir.
Olion pentref canoloesol.

Mae ... ar = ... is on
tir uchel = high ground
rhwng = between
cwm = valley
yn llawn trysorau = is full of treasures
trysorau = treasures
hynafol iawn = very ancient
rhai = some
oed = of age
dyma beth sydd ar = this is what is on
sawl = several
carnedd = cairn
Ffordd Rufeinig = Roman road.
Olion = remains of
caer = fort
maen hir = standing stone
pentref canoloesol = medieval village