

Monastic Trail – Hen Eglwys Walk

Waymarked ●

Distance **4km/2.5m**

Ease of walking

Some steep sections

Starting place

**Track next to the Visitor Centre,
leading past the small stone building**



This trail begins on the main track which leads past the wooded slopes of the Iron Age hillfort. Follow the track for 400 metres, passing between the stone building on your right and the base of the Celtic settlement to your left.

You will see a large beech tree in the road. At this point the trail splits four ways:

The Monastic trail (purple) drops down to your left

Your trail plunges downhill alongside the overflow from the leet (stream). During Talbot's day it was this that supplied water to the Castle. A pipe fed off from this leet to work a pump which was kept in a hut alongside the track- a similar pump piped water up to the reservoir, which sits on the top of the hill fort. Initially an emergency supply for the Talbot family, it was probably in use during the early 1940's to supply water to the American troops billeted in the Castle.

Continue down the track. It becomes narrower as it runs through an avenue of rhododendron. Very few plants grow beneath the dense canopy of this shrub. Further along the view opens up to reveal the winding stream of Cwm Philip; alder trees line its banks, a favourite haunt for the dainty long-tailed tit.

A ford is next but there is no need to cross. Brown trout dart out from the shadows of the stream's banks and if all is quiet you may see a heron standing motionless, waiting to catch a passing fish in its long dagger-like bill.

Fifty metres on from the ford, the stream widens and negotiates a walled bank. A glance at the large beech tree growing with its roots firmly fixed within the wall will suggest that this sandstone barrier is old. Take a closer look by walking onto his promontory but be careful, the sides are steep!

This feature is a dam and millrace. The stream waters, held back to form a pond which is now largely silted over, were channelled through a narrow gap in the wall to form a millrace. The force from such a head of water turned the wheel of the mill, which was positioned alongside.

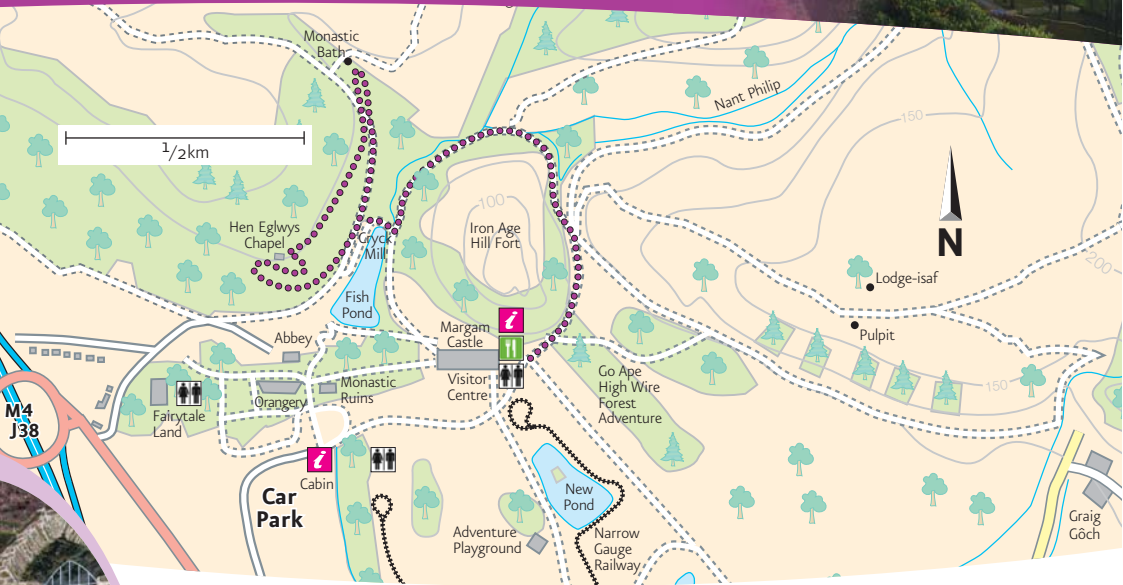
Beech, ash, oak, plane and alder line the trail. You will soon reach a stone bridge, which crosses the stream as it cascades down into the pond. Follow the track through the metal swing gate, past the copper beech and along the bank of Fishpond. During the Victorian era it was this track that provide the main entrance up to the castle; horse drawn carriages would be driven up this path along the pleasantly landscaped carriageway to the courtyard within the Castle.

Fishpond, the lake to your left, formed the centrepiece of Talbot's landscaped gardens. He dammed the stream, which once powered the monastic mill, and created a botanical paradise around its margins.

Only one wall of Cryck Mill is left standing with its gabled windows typical of Cistercian architecture.

Turn right up a steep tarmaced road just past the mill; your route leads along a wooded hillside.

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Ferns grow in clumps upon the damp roadside banks, their delicate fronds giving an air of mystery to the scene, heightened by the call of the raven and buzzard gliding over head.

Where the road bends, there is a splendid view, to your right, of Cwm Philip valley, Margam Forest and the tree-clad hilltops with bracken-covered moorland. This road leads to Crugwyllt Farm, but our route branches off to the left, onto a path which leads across the slope to Hen Eglwys, the old chapel.

However, there is a very interesting 15th Century monastic 'bath' a short distance away in the forestry. To reach it, continue along the tarmaced road a few metres to where a smaller track drops down to the right. Follow this for about 100 metres to where concrete pillars (tank traps) are positioned; the building is just below the track on your right hand side. Recently renovated, the 'bath' was possibly a private facility for the Abbot.

Retrace your steps and join the footpath that leads across the hillside to the chapel. Whilst walking across the wooded hillside towards the chapel, note the rich variety of trees growing along the route; oak, beech, birch, sweet chestnut and hawthorn.

Breaks in the foliage allow good views of the castle and iron age hillfort. Follow the path as it opens out on reaching the chapel... what a wonderful view!

Hen Eglwys stands prominently on top of the hill which overlooks the Abbey Church and Orangery Grounds. Possibly built in the 15th century, it is characteristically Cistercian in architecture. It is most likely to have been built here to serve the local Abbey community. Only monks would have been allowed to worship in the Abbey and so lay people has to have their own place of worship, Hen Eglwys. A small farming community lived on the hill close to the chapel. They did not have to endure the long steep climb up to this place of worship. Nor do you, as from here there is a steep descent along a zigzag path down towards Fishpond.

Before you continue, stop to enjoy the view. Spot the Castle, the Abbey church, the medieval Arms houses an the Orangery. The path down from the chapel is steep so please take care. The hillside you descend through has many gnarled oaks and other stunted trees that have resulted from the thin soil and salt-laden winds. Your path emerges at Fishpond where you have a good view of wild duck and other water birds.

Continue along past Fishpond back into the Park, through the swing gate and along the same track that you travelled along earlier. Once again, you will walk around the base of the hillfort, passing the ford on your journey back to the Visitor Centre. However, there are still things of interest to see. On your return journey you may notice things you overlooked earlier, a particular flower perhaps! Animals are constantly on the move and you may see different species to those you spotted on your outer journey. So, be alert!