The Swansea Canal & St Catherine’s Church at Pontardawe

Historic & Geographic Background

The area around Pontardawe has an interesting transport history and it is fortunate that the earliest form of bulk transport infrastructure, the Swansea Canal, still exists in parts. Not so fortunate for the railways in that the Midland Railway, which went from Swansea to Brecon via Pontardawe has been entirely obliterated by the A4067 road and the Tesco supermarket development.

The Swansea Canal was opened as far back as 1798 and, at 16¼ miles in length, was built to convey coal and iron from the Ystalyfera area and lower down the valley to Swansea Docks. By 1873, the canal was sold to the Great Western Railway who saw it as a way to compete with the recently opened Midland Railway on the opposite side of the valley. However, by 1902, the canal ceased to be profitable and traffic ceased in 1931, having only been active in the lower six miles from 1904. It was closed for navigation by a series of acts between 1928 and 1962 but is still used for industrial water supply from extant sections.

A railway was promoted by the Great Western Railway in 1911 to link the Swansea District Line at Felin Fran with Gwaun cae Gurwen to promote mine development there. Only short sections were built (serving Trebanos colliery from the south and Cwmgorse colliery from the west); the section from Trebanos to Cwmgorse had embankments, cuttings and a tunnel but without any track laid.

Pontardawe was an industrial town of considerable importance and had a functioning steelworks until the early 1960’s, together with associated metal industries. These, along with the railways and other industrial infrastructure have been almost completely obliterated, replaced by roads, light industry and retail developments.
### THE WALK

**Route summary and terrain**

**Start point**  
Clydach Mond (GR 695014)

**End point**  
Pontardawe Arts Centre (GR 723040)

**Recommended Maps**  
O.S. Explorer 165  
O.S. Landranger 159

**Distance**  
6 kilometres

**Estimated net time**  
3 hours

**Grade**  
Easy to Moderate, except the railway walk Moderate to Hard

**Refreshments**  
Pontardawe Arts Centre 🍵  
Greggs Café, Pontardawe 🍵

**Toilets**  
Pontardawe Herbert St
THE ROUTE IN DETAIL

From the bus stop at Clydach Mond (GR 695014), head north west on the A4067 road, cross the river and you will see the Swansea Canal on your left where you can join the towpath.

*Here, you can see some of the earlier restoration of the canal with the former lock in good condition. The canal below towards Swansea continues for only a short distance, beyond was filled in many years ago. Also of interest, across the road are offices of the International Nickel Co whose works is still open for business, a rare heavy industrial survivor.*

After about 200 metres, the path appears obstructed by a former council depot but it is safe to walk through this site and re-join the towpath at the other end before crossing under the main road and emerging at a small canal basin where there is a visitor centre (open weekends) and HQ of the Swansea Canal Society.

From here, you pass through a particularly attractive area with the serene canal on the left and Coed Gwilym Park below on the right. Continue along the towpath beyond the park for another two kilometres where you will reach a derelict lock. Just beyond here, the main path (also NCN43) veers away to the right, but there is a good path directly over the filled in section of canal almost into Pontardawe. The path passes under the bypass, climbs slightly and crosses the Upper Clydach River at a point where the canal is extant and on an aqueduct; come out in Herbert Street.

*It would appear that more recent industrial development was the reason this section of canal was filled in and it is hard to see where the link to the extant section just south of Herbert Street was; its higher level than lower section suggests there was another lock here.*

You may wish to take a short trip to the site of the ‘railway that never was’; if so, proceed up Herbert Street, go left at the traffic lights and along the B4603 road towards Trebanos. After one kilometre, turn right into Graig Road and after a short climb, you reach the abutments of a railway bridge; a footpath leads you up to the track bed of what should have been the railway from Trebanos to Cwmgorse but this section was engineered but track never laid.

Follow the formation parallel to Swansea Road for about 0.75 kilometres when you reach some houses (right); at this point, there is another abandoned bridge over what is assumed to be a former tramway. The going here is rough but not dangerous and the intrepid walker will be able to access the mouth of the never used tunnel (to which access is forbidden).

*A final bit of interesting information: a small flat-roofed building just inside the tunnel, built during the Second World War, not for storing ammunition, but for records of Pontardawe Urban District Council which were obviously considered of interest to the enemy!*

Retrace your steps to Pontardawe town centre.

Notes
All distances are given in metric
GR refers to Ordnance Survey grid reference
LOCAL TRANSPORT and PARKING

Train Station
Swansea 9 kilometres

Bus Stops
Clydach Mond (100 metres)
Pontardawe Jubilee (200 metres)

Parking
Pontardawe Council Car Park (charged)

Buses
Both ends of the walk (Clydach Mond and Pontardawe Jubilee) are on the X50/X51 bus route Swansea-Pontardawe running every half hour daytime and four times per day Sundays; bus services operated by First Cymru. If parking at Pontardawe, take the X50/X51 bus to Clydach Mond.

Tickets
First Day tickets Swansea Bay give a day’s unlimited travel (adult, 16 & under and family options available) and can be purchased from the driver on the bus.

Plan your journey
GALLERY: portraying the natural beauty and historic interest on this walk

The restored lock at Clydach

The Visitor Centre and Basin at Clydach

The attractive canal scenery north of Clydach
The unrestored lock just south of Pontardawe

The stub end of the canal crosses the Upper Clydach river on this aqueduct

The entrance to Pontardawe Tunnel on the abandoned railway