

Sarn Helen - A walk in the wake of the Roman Legionnaires by David Hammond-Williams, Tourist Information Centre at Aberdulais Falls

There's something special about walking along a track where you know thousands of walked before over thousands of years. Sarn Helen is such a place. The Romans built it. It was the A470 of its day- the main route linking the port of Nidum (Neath) in the South with the stronghold at Segontium (Caernarfon) 150 miles to the north-west.

In its heyday, it must have bustled as squads of legionnaires marched and drove carriages and chariots along its majestic length, on the high ridge between the Neath and Dulais valleys. By contrast, Sarn Helen today is a quiet – sometimes desolate – place. But if you know where to look, then the echoes of history can still be heard.

But you need to know where to look. You need to know where to start, even, because there is nothing in the way of signposts to tell you which route is the Roman route or where to join it. And there are plenty of opportunities to get it wrong.

We joined the path at Banwen, having been advised to walk from north to south. That way, you have a steeper but much shorter ascent at the start followed by a long gentle descent. Entering the village from the south (A4109), there's a T-Junction by Banwen RFC at the far end. You need to turn right towards the DOVE workshops into what turns out to be Roman Road (bit of a giveaway, if only there was a road sign). You drive a short distance through terraced houses in what appears to be a cul-de-sac. And you can see the track (for it ceases to be a road) going straight on away from you up the hillside. This is it. But again, there are no signs or even waymarkers to confirm that this is indeed the point of access.

And so you start to climb. Almost immediately, you are confronted with choices. There are paths and roads in all directions, many of them fashioned by the offroaders whose vehicles now seek to emulate the Roman carriages of old. Then there are forest roads too, in frequent use by rally competitors

and their followers. But nothing at this stage to indicate which fork the Romans took.

At this point we received some invaluable advice from a fellow rambler coming in the opposite direction: if in doubt, always choose the steepest option. Good advice indeed!

The path climbs steadily for the first hour, before levelling out to reveal panoramic views of the Brecon Beacons to the north and east, the Black Mountains to the west. About one third of the way up (perhaps less), at one particular crossroads, we encountered the one and only route indicator – painted in yellow on a rock.

Once you are up on the ridge, the route becomes much more straightforward, although the terrain remains relatively rugged. The road is showing its age! And it's not so hard to believe that the ruts threatening your ankles at every step were made by Roman chariot wheels.

Then, suddenly, you are over a crest and the flood plain opens out before you. Neath nestles and Swansea Bay shimmers. You can see the Gower coast stretching away on the right – Mumbles Head clearly defined as it just into the sea.

As you descend, the waymarkers suddenly appear. You join the Vale of Neath Trail and cross the St. Illtyd's long-range footpath. The gentle slope depends to a headlong descent through trees to the valley floor. Gradually, the sound of the traffic on the Heads of the Valleys road – almost conspicuous by its absence for most of the way - reasserts itself. And then there you are back on today's valley road. As we walked the few hundred yards back to Aberdulais and our car, they were playing cricket on the village green, just as they have been, probably, for a hundred years or more. I wonder what games the Romans played on that time-honoured piece of grass.

DIRECTIONS TO SARN HELEN

WALKING SOUTH - NORTH

From Aberdulais Falls, follow A4109 north. Take the first turning Right (B4242) towards Resolven. Pass Ynysygerwn Cricket Club on your Right and the Groundhog factory on your left. The southern access to Sarn Helen is few yards further on the left hand side (signposted By Way).

WALKING NORTH - SOUTH

From Aberdulais Falls, take A4109 north through Crynant, Seven Sisters and Onllwyn to Banwen (8-9 miles). At entrance to Banwen, take right fork (signposted Banwen RFC / DOVE). Go through village to T-Junction. Turn Right (Roman Road). The access to Sarn Helen is straight ahead at the end of the street.