

BLAENAVON INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE  
COITY TIP TRAIL

Approx 15 minute circular walk.  
Class: Gentle walk.

Coity Tip

The Coity Tip was created during the working life of Big Pit and its predecessor the Coity Pit, which was primarily an ironstone mine. Tips such as these were once a familiar site in industrial communities where waste rock and shale from the mining process was discarded on the surface, altering the landscape and environment forever.

When the tipping stopped, nature began to gradually reclaim the tip and surrounding area, which is now rich with plant and animal species. A pond has formed from the water running from the tip, and this has attracted many different forms of life. Some of the species found at the tip and pond are quite special and rare.

The Trail

On a sunny day keep an eye open as you walk along the trail - you may see Common Lizards basking along the edge of the boardwalk. Stonechats and Linnets can often be seen in the bushes either side of the track. Don't forget to look up as well: you may catch sight of a Buzzard soaring overhead.

Top Tips for Spotting Wildlife

Don't miss out! Spot the animals before they spot you!

- **Walk calmly, slowly and quietly.** Then you will see the birds before they fly away. The quieter you are the more you will see.
- **Use your ears.** Many of the birds are hard to see. They may be hidden in the bushes or flying high in the sky. Listen out for theirs songs then see if you can spot them.
- **Use your eyes.** Look all around you. See if you can spot any birds, lizards, butterflies or pond life. As you go up the hill you will spot many of the birds moving on just ahead of you.



- **Keep to small groups.** If you are in a big group divide up into several small groups – you will see much more wildlife.
- Look out for:**
- **Orange Tip Butterflies** – You can't miss those orange spots as they fly.
  - Shiny green **Tiger Beetles** – You may find these under stones or in the grass.
  - **Skylarks** – Look out for the narrow, white line along the back edge of the wing as they fly low over the grass. Meadow Pipits don't have this.



**In Spring listen for:**

- **Skylark's** joyful, whistling song which can go on for several minutes. The bird is usually just a speck in the sky while it sings.
- **Meadow pipit's** song with notes descending in tone as the bird drops back to the ground like a parachute.

1 Pontypool & Blaenavon Railway

If you look over to your right you can see the railway line of the Pontypool and Blaenavon Railway. The line from Brynmawr to Blaenavon was originally built in 1866 to transport coal to the Midlands, and eight years later was extended to meet the Great Western Railway at Abersychan & Talywain. Here the line carried on down the valley through Pontypool to the coast at Newport. The line was closed to passengers in 1941, and to goods in 1954, though the section from Blaenavon to Pontypool was in use for coal from Big Pit and other local mines until 1980.

Railway embankments and cuttings are largely unmanaged areas of ground that allow plants like rosebay Willowherb to establish themselves, as well as bramble and gorse bushes.



2 Coity Tip Pond

The pond is surrounded by fast-growing willows, which flourish on damp soils. The margins have Greater Bulrush, Lesser Spearwort, Marsh Horsetails and rushes.

In the deep water Canadian Pondweed grows. There may be thousands of tadpoles in the spring. Look out for birds like Reed Bunting and Willow Warbler in the willow around the pond.

Sloping down to the pond are wet grasslands with tussocks of Purple Moor-grass, Marsh Thistle and Hairy Willowherb. In the wettest parts, Southern Marsh-orchids may be found amongst rushes. The drier grassland patches have Wavy Hair-grass and Tormentil, with occasional patches of Bilberry (known locally as whimberries).

If you look carefully you will notice an orange deposit in the bed of the stream which runs into the pond. This comes from the ironstone that occurs naturally in the surrounding ground. Coity Pit and Big Pit both originally mined ironstone which was used for the world famous Blaenavon ironworks, which you can see if you look over to the opposite side of the valley.

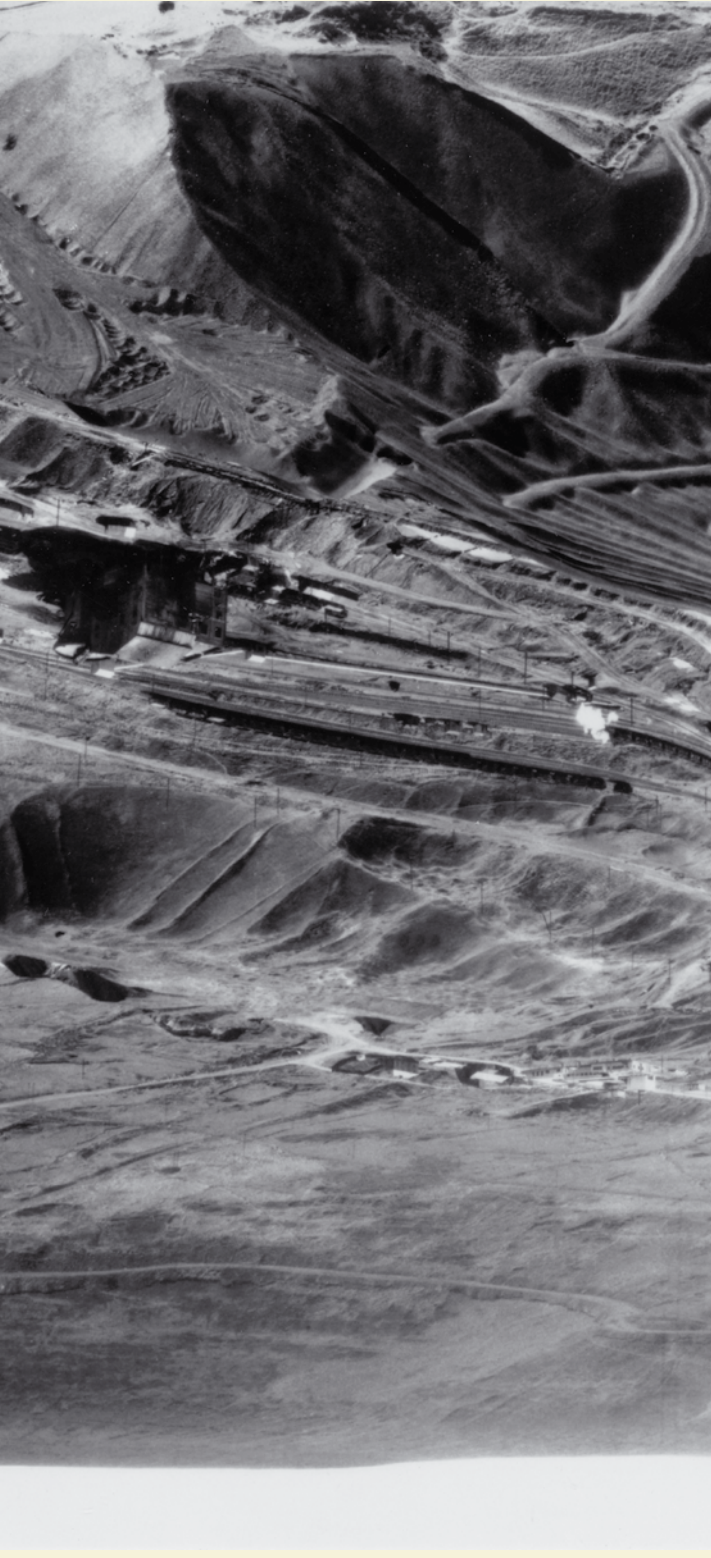
3 The tip spoil is being colonised by grasses (Sheep's-fescue, Heath-grass, Bents), Mouse-ear Hawkweed and occasional patches of Heather and Bilberry. Mosses and lichens both grow well between the plants. There is an interesting mix of species which like acid and alkali conditions. The vegetation is quite sparse and open due to the harsh nature of the soil.

Some uncommon plants like Carline Thistle, Maddar, Spring Sedge and Small Cudweed have colonised the less acid areas of spoil, and add to the biodiversity on the site.

The short grass cover of the tip is ideal breeding habitat for Sky Lark and Meadow Pipit.



- Cover photograph: ©Steve Smith
- Enjoy the countryside and respect its life and work;
  - No access for motorcycles and off-road vehicles;
  - Guard against all risk of fire;
  - Leave all gates and property as you find them;
  - Keep your dogs under close control, preferably on a lead;
  - Keep to the recommended route;
  - Leave livestock, crops and machinery alone;
  - Take your litter home;
  - Take care near water;
  - Help to keep all water clean;
  - Protect wildlife plants and trees;
  - Take special care on uneven ground;
  - Make no unnecessary noise.





4 After Aberfan

The tipping of mine waste continued with little regard for safety until 1966, when a coal tip collapsed on the village of Aberfan killing 144 people including 116 children. Following this disaster, great efforts were made to make safe or remove large numbers of tips in Wales.

If you look to your right, you will see the remains of a coal tip which was re-profiled after the Aberfan disaster in order to make it safe.

5 An ever changing tip

The underground waste which formed the Coity Tip has spontaneously combusted and slowly burned over the years to form the ‘red ash’ which is visible in parts of the tip today.

If you look at the base of the tip you can see where some of this burnt waste has been added to repair damage caused when part of the tip was removed for use in building works.

This will eventually regenerate, as the rest of the tip has, but the timescale is very difficult to determine as it often relies on the prevailing micro climate, and other conditions. Some tips are very slow to establish; in others this happens relatively quickly.

6 The differences between the heathland and grassland vegetation at this point are due to the soils. The soils vary as different types of rock from the mine have been tipped in different places. On the dry, acidic spoil on the west side of the path, Heather and Bilberry dominate. On the flatter, better soils on the east side (towards Big Pit), grasses and flowers grow better and produce colourful grasslands. Some plants which fix nitrogen and improve the amount of nutrients in the soil have colonised the grasslands, such as Bird’s-foot Trefoil.

7 During times of hardship and depression, many people went ‘cool picking’ on tips. This was an illegal activity which could bring very severe penalties for those caught. However, during major disputes like the 1926 Miners’ Lockout and the 1984-85 Miner’s Strike, many miners were prepared to take that risk to provide fuel for their homes. If you look carefully, evidence of coal picking can be seen as indentations in the top of the tip.

In spring and autumn keep an eye open for birds stopping off on their way to and from more northerly nesting areas. If you are lucky you may see a Northern Wheatear perched on the waymarker posts: look out for the flash of white on its back as it flies.

8 If you look beyond Big Pit at the valley below the town, you can get a good idea of how the area would have looked before the Industrial Revolution. The only sign of human presence at the time would have been a few farms and cottages.

In December 2000, Blaenavon was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for the following reason:

“The area around Blaenavon bears eloquent and exceptional testimony to the pre-eminence of South Wales as the world’s major producer of iron and coal in the 19th century. All the necessary elements can be seen, including coal and ore mines, quarries, a primitive railway system, furnaces, the homes of workers, and the social infrastructure of their community.”

Although now overgrown, the tips that dominate the skyline to the left and north of the town would have been part of a black scar which spread across the original rural landscape as industry intensified. It would have been inconceivable to people living in the area then that this valley would once again be green and pleasant.

As you look out over the valley one of the commonest birds you will see is the Jackdaw which is the smallest member of the crow family. In the autumn and winter huge flocks of Jackdaws, Rooks and Carrion Crows



Aberfan, 1966



11 Some of the best heathland is developed on the steep slopes above the path, where there is a mixture of Heather and Bilberry (known locally as ‘Whimberries’). The large whitish clumps which look like sponges between the heath are a Cladonia lichen.

Protecting the Environment

When mines close there is often a problem with flooding. Flood water in mines turns acidic and becomes full of dissolved iron. If this water escapes into streams and rivers it can cause serious pollution that kills much of the life present.

A way of preventing this pollution is to pass the mine water through specially constructed reed beds which absorb the iron and purify the water before it enters the river.

A joint project between Big Pit, The Coal Authority and Torfaen County Borough Council has created a mine water treatment scheme to deal with the water issuing from Big Pit and the other mines in Blaenafon. This scheme at Blaenavon takes place at the River Arch the emergency evacuation route from Big Pit, just below the Gilchrist Thomas Industrial Estate.



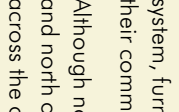
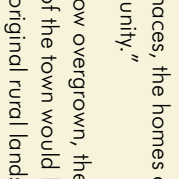
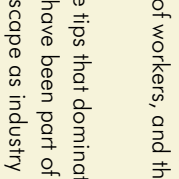
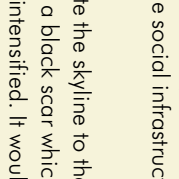
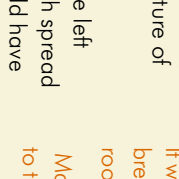
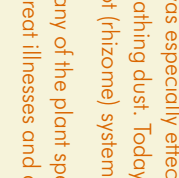
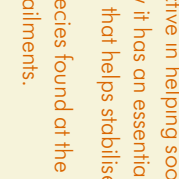
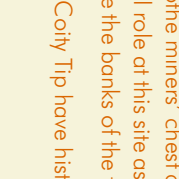
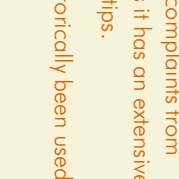
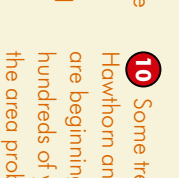
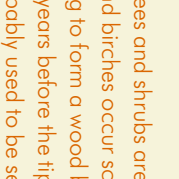
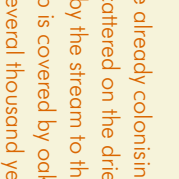
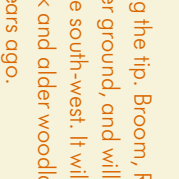
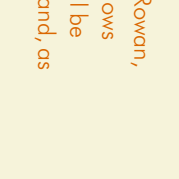
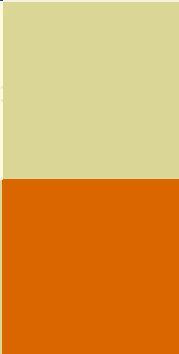
Reed beds

A Blaenavon Walks Pack is available which includes several walks in the Blaenavon area. The walks range from easy strolls to energetic hikes, with distances of just under 4km (2 ½ miles) to over 18km (12 miles). Included is the Iron Mountain Trail, a two-part circular walk which takes in the major sites of the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape World Heritage Site. This pack is available at the following outlets :

- Blaenavon Tourist Information Centre
- Blaenavon World Heritage Site Visitor Centre
- Big Pit National Coal Museum

A text only version is available for download at:  
[www.world-heritage-blaenavon.org.uk/visit/activities/walks/walks.htm](http://www.world-heritage-blaenavon.org.uk/visit/activities/walks/walks.htm)  
Further information about the World Heritage Site can be found at:  
[www.world-heritage-blaenavon.org.uk/](http://www.world-heritage-blaenavon.org.uk/)

Other useful websites:  
National Museum Wales including Big Pit National Coal Museum  
[www.museumwales.ac.uk](http://www.museumwales.ac.uk)



9 Coltsfoot is abundant in the grassland area to the east. Its yellow dandelion-like flowers appear in spring before the leaves and the wind-blown seeds rapidly colonise bare ground.

Before the National Health Service existed, Coltsfoot was essential in the treatment of all chest complaints and is still used in herbal remedies today. It was especially effective in helping soothe miners’ chest complaints from breathing dust. Today it has an essential role at this site as it has an extensive root (rhizome) system that helps stabilise the banks of the tips.

Many of the plant species found at the Coity Tip have historically been used to treat illnesses and ailments.

Lesser spearwort, which can be found around the pond was once used in a technique called ‘Blistering’. The juice of the plant was applied to the temples in the treatment of toothache, sciatica and other painful conditions.

Tormentil, is a very versatile plant used to treat many different complaints. Its name is derived from the Latin tormina meaning colic, which it was used

roost in the trees around the Gilchrist Thomas Industrial Estate. An impressive sight if you are in the area near dusk.

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