History and Archaeology of the Ely Trail

This will help you to find some of the interesting historic and archaeological features along the Ely Trail. These include an Edwardian Pumping Station, the remains of a Roman Villa, and the Castle and Gardens at the National History Museum, St. Fagans. Click on the ‘icons’ to find out more....

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The term ‘Stone Age’ is used by archaeologists for the broad time period when men used stone for making tools and weapons. Such items survived far greater than those made from softer materials, such as wood. Today we can find evidence of this in flint and chert pieces that were shaped or chipped for use as cutting tools and weapons in the Early Prehistory Archaeology and Numismatics collections in the National Museum Wales.
The ‘Neolithic Age’ saw the beginnings of agriculture, the so-called Neolithic Revolution. Ground and polished stone were used to make tools for grinding, cutting, and chopping for the harvesting and processing of plants. Examples of stone artefacts from this period can be found in the Early Prehistory Archaeology and Numismatics collections in the National Museum Wales.
The ‘Bronze Age’ followed the Neolithic Age. It refers to a period when men used advanced metalworking techniques for smelting copper and tin to create a bronze alloy. These naturally-occurring ores are rare and often contain arsenic. Once melted together they were cast into bronze artefacts. Examples of Celtic bronzeworkers metalwork can be found in the Late Prehistory c2,000BC - AD43 Archaeology and Numismatics collections in the National Museum Wales.
‘Romans’ first arrived in Britain in 55 BC and stayed until about AD 410. During their conquest of Britain the Roman army came up against formidable opposition from the tribes in Wales, the major ones being named as the Silures, the Ordovices, the Demetae and the Deceangli. Fighting was often bitter, and it was not until AD 78 that the whole of Wales was occupied by the Romans. In the countryside, particularly on the south coast, there were farmsteads and villas, which were often the homes of the rich and successful. The Roman Archaeology and Numismatics collection at the National Museum Wales contains finds from the villas and farmsteads at Llantwit Major, Ely and Llandough.
'Medieval’ or the Middle Ages (including Norman) commonly dates from the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century to the beginning of the Post Medieval period at the end of the 15th century. Examples from this period, can be found in the Medieval and Later Archaeology and Numismatics and Art collections in the National Museum Wales.
'Post Medieval’ is an archaeological term used for the study of material during the last 500 years, after the end of the Medieval period. In Britain, this means anything from the Tudor period (1485-1601) to present day, including, Elizabethan, Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian. Examples of Post Medieval artefacts and art can be found in the Medieval and Later Archaeology and Numismatics and Art collections in the National Museum Wales.
In the early 17th century St. Fagans Village comprised the castle, the church, a few farmhouses and a corn mill by a bridge which then crossed the river. The corn mill of Post-Medieval date can be seen on the First Edition (OS Six Inch) maps of Ely and the Vale of Glamorgan. The mill was probably used to grind oats and barley into flour, as the climate was too wet to grow wheat. A working example of an early 19th century corn mill, originally operated by water wheel to produce white flour, semolina flour, wheat germ and bran can be found in the National History Museum, St. Fagans. The remains of the St. Fagans Corn Mill, which include old water channels and a wooden sluice gate, can be seen from Michaelston Road, St. Fagans but care should be taken when accessing the site.
Silver Stream Cottage is one of a group of estate buildings clustered below St. Fagans Castle. It was previously known as Brook or Bank Cottage and was the blacksmiths house. The ‘village smithy’ which stood immediately to the south-west was demolished in 1972. Parts of a 16th century cottage remains, but much of it was probably rebuilt in the late 18th to early 19th centuries (still visible from the interior). It is a two storey thatched cottage with white washed rubble walls, brick chimney stacks and bay diamond leaded windows which can be seen from Castle Hill, St Fagans.
St. Fagans Castle and Gardens

(Grade II Listed Building)

St. Fagans Castle lies in the west of Cardiff, overlooking the valley of the River Ely to the south and a lesser tributary valley to the west. The steep sides provide a natural defense, while level ground to the north and east is occupied by St. Fagans Village, much of which lies within St. Fagans Conservation Area.

The first castle at St. Fagans was apparently built by the Norman knight Peter Le Sore in c1091. Excavations carried out in 1978 and 1980 within the Castle grounds unearthed an area of the village known as 'The Cwm' and a Medieval vicarage.

Remains of ‘The Cwm’ - National History Museum

Extract of 1878 Ordnance Survey Map - Glamorgan Record Office
However, any surviving Medieval buildings within were removed with the construction of a large Elizabethan country house, built by Dr. John Gibbon in c1580-86 with formal gardens set to the north. By 1616 it was owned by the Lewis Family who furnished and panelled the interior. In 1730 Elizabeth Lewis married the 3rd Earl of Plymouth, part of the Windsor family and following the death of her father, Thomas Lewis-heir to the estate in 1736, the castle passed into the hands of her husband’s family. In 1852 the house was occupied by Robert Windsor Clive and his wife, Mary. When he died in 1859, Baroness Windsor continued to live at the Castle, and in 1868-9 carried out extensive restorations to the Castle and gardens.
The gardens have an underlying **Tudor** structure and still maintain much of their **Victorian** and **Edwardian** layout including structural planting, set out in compartments and terraces. The formalised ponds may be **Medieval** in origin and were certainly in existence in the 16th century. The grounds also include a **Victorian** water garden designed by Pulham and Company and **experimental woodland** laid out in the early 20th century.

The Castle and grounds remained under the ownership of the Plymouth Estate until 1946, when the Earl of Plymouth donated St. Fagans Castle and eighty acres of grounds for the opening of the Welsh Folk Museum.
St. Fagans Castle and Gardens

gardens were open to the public in 1947 and the castle on 1 July 1948. The site now known as the National History Museum is one of Europe’s foremost open-air museums and Wales’s most popular heritage attraction. The Castle forms the premier exhibit, refurbished in 1988 to represent a typical Welsh mansion of c1830. It now sits within a hundred acres of parkland where over forty well-chosen examples of Welsh architecture from different historic periods have been re-erected. Native breeds of livestock can be seen in the fields and farmyards, and regular demonstrations of farming tasks take place. There are also galleries with exhibitions of costume, daily life and farming implements.
The Church of St. Mary’s the Blessed Virgin has clear 12th century origins, with its first rector being recorded in 1301. It was greatly altered and enriched in the 14th century, a porch added in the 15th century and a tower rebuilt in the 17th century. The whole church was restored in 1858-60 by G E Street and includes a series of decorated windows. The restoration work matches fairly closely with the Medieval, was paid for by Baroness Windsor, who occupied St. Fagans Castle at that time.
Rebuilt Tower, Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary - St. Fagans

Church of St. Mary’s the Blessed Virgin

(Grade II Listed Building)

It is built of rubble stone with a roughly squared dressed stone tower, Welsh slate pitched roofs, a small pointed priest door, small vestry, ringing and bell chambers (the bells came from Leckwith Church) and some gargoyle heads. The interior is plastered and painted with a highly decorated chancel and nave. The Church, situated in the middle of St. Fagans Village on Crofft y-Genau Road, is still in use today.
The curling rink of Post-Medieval date was built by Robert Forrest, Deputy Lieutenant of Glamorgan in the 19th century. The rink's existence reflects the importance of the development of St. Fagans Village and the remains can be found in the Coedbychan Woodlands, accessible from St. Fagans Drive.
The hoard comprises two Bronze Age spearheads, five axes, and part of a sword blade that once belonged to the people who lived in Wales after 2,500BC until the middle of the first century AD. The hoard was found in St. Fagans Great Wood in 1862, while quarrying for stone to construct the Great Western Railway.

The woodland now public open space was renamed as Plymouth Great Wood in 1922, when it was given to the City by the Earl of Plymouth to be conserved as a place of public recreation. The disused Radyr Stone and limestone quarries are still visible in the

**Examples of Bronze Age spear heads and swords - National Museum Wales**
Bronze Age Hoard

southern section of the wood accessible from Llewellyn Avenue, Ely. The main railway line running adjacent to the woods is now part of Network Rail comprising the Swansea to London route and can be crossed via the level crossing on Michaelston Road St. Fagans.
A Neolithic flaked flint axe-head was found in Riverside Wood, immediately north of Frank Road in Ely near its junction with Riverside Walk. The woodland overlooking the River Ely is designated as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) for its ground flora including the rare and poisonous Monkshood.
A Corn Mill of Post-Medieval date appears on the first edition (OS 6 Inch) map of Glamorgan. The mill was probably used to grind oats and barley into flour, as the climate was too wet to grow wheat. A working example of an early 19th century corn mill, originally operated by water wheel to produce white flour, semolina flour, wheat germ and bran can be found in the National History Museum, St. Fagans. The remains of the Ely Corn Mill can be seen from Heol Muston, off Plymouth World Road and Frayton Green, off the bowling green and tennis courts to the east of Herbert Thompson Infants and Junior School.
A group of tutors and students including the brothers John and Charles Wesley who met at Oxford University in the late 1720’s became known as the Oxford Methodists. By the 1840’s the renamed Wesleyan Methodists began an ambitious and expensive programme of chapel and school building in mainly poor neighbourhoods. Wesleyan Methodism was less popular in Wales than in England until the 19th century when English immigrants increased congregations. The site of the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on Mill Road Ely, as noted from the 1880 First Edition (OS) map, is now occupied by houses. However an example of an active Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, the recently refurbished Wesley Church can be seen on Cowbridge Road East in Canton.
This is the site of the Post-Medieval Tower Brewery which opened in 1855 as part of the Ely Brewery Company, as noted from the 1885-First Edition (OS) map. In mid 19th century industrial South Wales it was far safer to drink the beer than to touch the water, as many victims of cholera found to their cost. According to a colour advert for Ely Brewery in an official handbook of Cardiff in 1955, its product is described as the ‘Beer of Good Cheer’. In 1960, Ely Brewery was taken over by Rhymney Brewery Ltd., described as the largest brewery business in Wales with a history spanning over 140 years. It was acquired by Whitbread in the late 1960’s. The site situated on Station Terrace, Ely is now the home of the Ely Brewery workshops.
This is the site of a Post-Medieval well near Ely Bridge, as noted from the 1885 First Edition (OS) map. It is now covered over by Riverside Terrace, Ely. The many local street names such as Everswell Road, Wellright Road and Brook Road in Fairwater give an indication to the waterways that ran through the area.
Altered Water Course along Ely River

A Water Course of Post-Medieval date, identified from the First Edition (OS Six Inch) maps of the study area of Ely and the Vale of Glamorgan. The course of the River Ely has since been changed at other places too, including for the building of the Grangetown Link road.
Bronze Age Sword

The main part of the leaf-shaped blade of a bronze sword, commonly known as the ‘Ewart Park’ type, lacking the hilt-plate and the top of the blade, was found on the former Wiggins Teape (Arjo Wiggins) paper mill site, at Ely Bridge.

Wiggins Teape was a specialty paper manufacturer and merchant, founded in 1761. By the late 1970s it owned paper mills, and factories all over the world. In 1990 it merged with Appleton Papers Inc. and was renamed Wiggins Teape Appleton plc, later trading as Arjo Wiggins. Operations ceased in 2000 and the site has now been cleared in readiness for redevelopment. Works will include open space, a bridge link into Ely and the creation of the last section of the Ely Trail. This will link the existing sections from Sanatorium Park, Leckwith and Wroughton Place (off Cowbridge Road West), at Ely Bridge.
Remains of Ely Roman Villa - Trelai Park, Caerau

Example of Roman pottery - National Museum Wales

On a low-lying marshy site; the villa was constructed in an angle between the main channel of Caerau Brook and a tributary which was straightened and deepened. The initial construction took place in the first half of the 2nd century and included two main blocks, Building I to the north and Building II to the west, which included courtyards. Surveys undertaken in 2001 also identified an early ditch enclosure surrounding the Villa site.

The main house (Building I) was a rectangular house with projecting wings, partly rebuilt, perhaps in the 3rd century. Building II had an attached bath suite and was demolished around the 4th century. Finds suggest occupation ceased around 325AD.
John Storrie, curator of Cardiff Museum (precursor of National Museum Wales) and author of ‘The Flora of Cardiff’ (1886), excavated the site of the Roman Villa on the Ely Race course at the request of the Cardiff Naturalists Society, in 1893 (as described in their Journals Volume XXVI [part II]). Many pre-Roman stone and pottery objects were found as well as a considerable number of Roman objects including silver and bronze jewellery, sharpening stones, pieces of pottery, pennant roofing, animal bones and part of a very thin human skull. In addition, Mr. Storrie discovered the remains of a primitive Roman foundry and evidence that local coal was used in its furnace for iron smelting and
the manufacture of a kind of early steel cAD56.

The remains of the Roman Villa are now preserved in the middle of Trelai Park, situated in Caerau on the former site of Ely Race course. The Race course was set up by the Cardiff Race Club in 1855, closing in the 1930's - the last race reportedly being won by Lester Piggott's father Keith Piggott. The site was acquired by the council in 1933, to provide parkland for the growing community of Caerau. The main access route to the park is down the lane leading off Vincent Road, Caerau. Other access points are from the 1950's housing estate to the north and a footpath which leads out of the park under the link road into Leckwith Woods.
Leckwith Old Bridge

(Scheduled Ancient Monument)

With its Medieval origins Leckwith Old Bridge has three arches made of course rubble stone. Two of the arches are pointed; the centre one is semi circular and has been rebuilt. It once took carriers’ carts from the salt marsh of Leckwith Moors, through Leckwith Village, Cadoxton, Barry and then on to the sea. When the new bridge opened in 1935, the old one was left in place to provide access to Leckwith Bridge House, which is still situated off Leckwith Road.
Outfall Sewer - Cardiff - Western District

Built in 1907 to 1910 by William Harper (engineer) as an Edwardian sewage pumping station, it comprises a single-storey yellow brick building with slate roof and six round headed bay windows with red brick arches.

Later owned by Welsh Water it is today known as the ‘The Pumping Station’. Accessible from Penarth Road, it is home to 35 antique dealers covering three floors with over thirty two thousand square feet of open-plan space, stocking various antique ware including militaria, mirrors and furniture.
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