

# Great Archaeological Sites in Cardiff



## 7. TONGWYNLAIS IRONSTONE MINES



Fforest Fawr on the hillside above Castell Coch is now a very peaceful, rural spot, a beautiful woodland of mature trees and other vegetation, and a popular spot for recreation, but it was not always like this. Below the surface is an extensive network of mining galleries and shafts, which were created to exploit the haematite that formed millions of years ago within the limestone bedrock. Haematite is a form of iron ore that can occur in various forms, best known as the reddish-brown masses that gave it its name, from the Greek for 'blood', or as dark silvery-grey crystals. The mines extend right under the woodland and beyond, including the area around Ty Isaf to the east of Tongwynlais village, and in places as far Cwm Nofydd.

Some of these mines appear on old maps. For instance, in the middle of Fforest Fawr the Tongwynlais sheet 1st edition of the 6" Ordnance Survey map of Glamorgan marks 'Slade Pit (Ironstone)'. This was obviously active in 1875 when this sheet was surveyed, but by the time the surveyors came round again in 1898 it had gone out of use. The entrance to this pit is still open and is known as the Blue Pool. Another pit that is still visible is known locally as the 'Three Bears Cave'

because of the three galleries in it – one large, one middle-sized and one small. Other mines make their presence known by the hollows made in the surface of the ground caused by the galleries collapsing underground. One of these collapsed galleries appears on the old Ordnance Survey maps and is marked 'Intrenchment'. The surveyors clearly did not understand how it had been formed and thought that must have been deliberately dug as a military defence rather than being the result of ground movement.

We cannot be certain when mining for first started under Fforest Fawr, nor where it was smelted. Although slag from a bloomery – an early form of furnace for smelting iron – was found in Nant Cwm Nofydd, we do not know where this furnace was or where exactly it was situated. It is possible however that the iron industry here goes back to the Middle Ages. Later, ironmaking in South Wales received a great boost, especially in the 18th century as the newer blast furnace technology expanded, as all the necessary materials – iron ore, limestone and charcoal (later coal) could all be found together in the same place, as at Tongwynlais.

The people who know these mines best are cavers who have the knowledge and experience to explore them safely. However, the rest of us can still appreciate something of the scale and extent of the ironstone mining industry here from the traces that are visible at the surface.

The main car park for Fforest Fawr is 1.5km beyond the entrance to Castell Coch. The nearest railway station is Taffs Well, on the line between Cardiff Central and Aberdare or Treherbert. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 171, Explorer Series sheet 151.

**Timeline** (the asterisks indicate the possible time-span)



You can learn more about this site, and other similar archaeological sites in Wales, by going to <https://www.archwilio.org.uk/arch/>. Please read and observe the Conditions of Use. The main PRN (Primary Record Number) for the Tongwynlais ironstone mining complex is 06433s, and you can search for other similar sites here too. You can contact us via social media or through the methods given at the bottom of the page. You can find more about the South Wales iron industry via the industrial pages of our timeline <http://www.ggat.org.uk/timeline/timeline.html>