

Great Archaeological Sites in Torfaen



5. UPPER RACE PONTYPOOL IRON ORE SCOURS



What is the best way to open a mine? In the past, miners in South Wales generally followed outcrops of coal back into the hillside to create adits into new seams, or they dug shafts straight down to intercept seams that ran under their feet. More recently, with most new mining taking the form of opencasts, miners use enormous earth-moving machines to strip off everything above the coal or other minerals they are after. Such machines of course are relatively recent inventions and did not appear in Britain until the Second World War. But a similar technique was in use before, employing something that is in plentiful supply in Wales – water.

This technique is known as hushing and could be used where the mineral deposits to be extracted were under the side of a hill. A reservoir was created on the hill above the deposits to be uncovered, and it was filled with water. When it was full, the sluice gate was opened allowing a huge volume of water (a 'race') to pour out, scouring away the topsoil and other loose deposits in its path. When enough of them had been removed to expose veins of minerals in the bedrock, extraction could begin. Naturally, the process caused permanent alterations to the landscape in the form of deep channels carved by the water, and huge piles of debris, as well as the remains of the reservoirs and their feeder channels.

Hushing was used by the Hanbury family above Pontypool from the 16th century to uncover deposits of iron ore which they smelted as part of their iron and tinplate business, creating a deep scar down the hillside (centred ST 276 986). The whole area got its present name, Upper Race, from this process. It was supplied with water via extensive watercourses, holding ponds and dams with sluice gates that could be opened to let the water out to scour the land below. The main scour itself contains smaller scours and dams, levels small pits and spoil heaps, and the whole landscape it thought to have remained almost unaltered since at least the 1870s.



The scours are on Mynydd Twyn-glas, which is Open Access common land above the southern end of Pontypool. A footpath leads up from Old Furnace. The nearest railway station is Pontypool & New Inn, on the Newport to Crewe line. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 171, Explorer Series sheet 152.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the 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 Upper Race Iron Scours have the PRN (Primary Record Number) 07976g. 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>.