



The Backpackers Club

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Wye Valley Walk - May 2016

I recently spent six days hiking the Wye Valley Walk, from the mid-reaches in Hereford to the source of the river, near Plynlimon in mid Wales (see <http://www.wyevalleywalk.org/> for route etc). I'd started this adventure last October, taking two days to walk the 35+ miles from the sea at Chepstow, up to Ross-on-Wye. It's a beautiful part of the UK, as the website says 'the perfect mix of hill and river walking', and I was keen to do the rest. I provisionally booked the accommodation for most of the upper sections last November, but was a bit put off by the cost, with limited options in some areas and room prices up to £82/night.

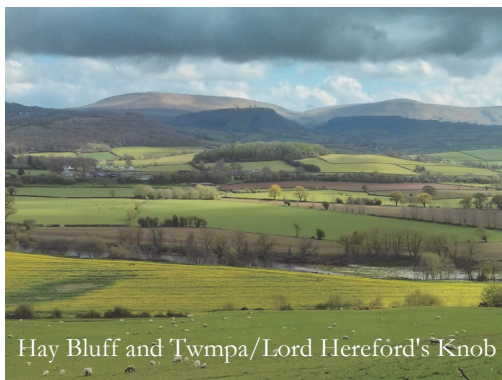
I then chanced across the Backpackers Club and started wondering if it might be possible to camp some of the nights instead? In January, I joined the Club, looked at the options in the LPD/FPD etc, bought a lightweight tent and other gear, and went on one of your club weekends, to help get me on the road. Chats with Anne Ling, Geoff, Sarah, Grant, and Roger at the Grand Union Canal, Rickmansworth meet convinced me, 'why not'? And I promised at the time to write up a trip report if it came off, so here it is.

The first day, Sunday, started slowly after a few pints the night before with a friend in Hereford. This section was mainly flat through apple orchards, though I did come across an unfortunate person being rescued by the Fire Brigade after falling half way down a steep cliff beside the river. That night, I did my first camp in the beer garden of the Red Lion Hotel in Bredwardine, one of the LDP suggestions. I enjoyed the salmon fishing paraphernalia at the pub, which was a great place to stop, £5 for the camp, including access to a shower etc. But after 15 miles, I felt tired already.

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Monday morning saw me climbing over Merbach Hill, before coming back down to the river, and on to Hay-on-Wye with all its bookshops and character. After a coffee there, and a chance to dry out a bit (it was quite drizzly these first two days), I carried on to Glasbury, and then back up the other side of the river to Hollybush campsite, a detour of 1.5 miles along the road. Dinner that night was at the Yak y Da Nepalese restaurant (excellent green curry, with Butty Bach beer, fusion cuisine?). I shared that camp site with some noisy peacocks, some empty tepees, and just two other campers who were starting a canoe journey downstream the following day. Although I'd got my pack weight down to about 8-9kg, I was feeling the weight by this



time.

The next two days, Tuesday and Wednesday, were the longest on my itinerary, both around 17-18 miles, and I was starting to realise what I'd taken on. The path sometimes stays fairly flat alongside the river, but there are also plenty of hills to get over too - the Cicerone guidebook suggests about 10,000ft of climbs over these six days of the route.

The rewards of course are the views over the river and the surrounding hills, including Hay Bluff and Twmpa/Lord Hereford's Knob, and sometimes right across to Pen-y-Fan and the other Brecon Beacons. For lunch, I stopped at the arts and crafts gallery at Erwood Station.

By the end of the day, I'd made Builth Wells for a fish and chips dinner and my third camp by the river at White House campsite, again almost Tuesday night was clear and cold, with frost on the tent in the morning, and mist rising off the river. I packed up with the tent wet, but managed to dry it out hung off a bridge at lunchtime in the sun and the breeze. The sunny weather had really arrived by this time. Having packed for the cold, and left my sun hat behind, I cut my buff in half to cover up my neck and forehead. By Wednesday night, with the longest days behind me and the end feeling closer, I had the treat of a real bed at the very nice Horseshoe Guest House in Rhayader.



Builth Wells pitch

The last two days, Thursday and Friday had a few less miles to cover, and I felt like I'd cracked it. I'd managed to pick up some sun cream by this time, phew, worth the extra weight in the pack. The views on these last two days were my favourites, particularly around Gilfach Nature Reserve in Marteg Valley,

where I saw my first cuckoo. I got my first views of still-distant Plynlimon on Thursday afternoon, and could see right up to Cadair Idris, I reckoned, to the North West. Lunch was a sausage roll with super noodles and a cup of tea, on top of the world - great. I had another bargain-priced room that night at the Black Lion Hotel in Llangurig, with more good food including some fresh Welsh cakes from the village shop the next morning.

My last day, Friday, took me over yet another hilltop first, before the final stretch up alongside the narrowing Wye, to just below the source of the river. Having passed so many tempting, crystal clear pools, and seen the river shrink from the estuary at Chepstow to this little stream, it seemed appropriate to have a quick ceremonial dip at this point. I have to admit it was a bit bracing at that time of year, so it didn't take long!

Finally, I made it to the official end of the walk at Hafren Forest car park, and then on towards that night's accommodation in Llanidloes. After some drama due to the lack of phone network coverage, I met up with my wife in our car in the end.



I've done quite a bit of day-hiking before, and the odd overnighter, but this is the first long distance, solo walk that I've tried like this. It was great to confirm that I could do it, nearly 100 miles, with just a few aches and some sun burn. Physically, I think I felt better at the end than I did at the start. And I was happy with the way I did it, some nights camping, and others in a b&b/pub.



I'd expected to meet one or two other walkers out on the path, but I hardly saw a soul for most of the route, just plenty of sheep, most of whom seemed quite intrigued to see me. If you like peace and quiet, and great scenery, I thoroughly recommend the Wye Valley Walk.

Thanks Anne and the other club members I met at the Rickmansworth camp, for helping me get into this new hobby. Now then, what's next?!

Dan Hoggarth



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