

Wye Valley walk

Michael Elcock and Dexter share their
experience of walking the Wye Valley



After completing the Cotswold Way six years ago, my friends and I decided to tackle the Wye Valley Walk, which runs 136 miles between Chepstow and Plynlimon. We thought we'd walk it over a three-year period so I divided it into 13 sections, making most similar in length. I've had Dexter since he was a puppy nearly seven years ago, but he only started walking long distances when he was a year old. The Wye Valley Walk was his first. I thought it would be ideal because he loves water. And, if I'm honest, I didn't envisage there being any problems because he hates being left behind. The route starts at the old Severn Bridge in Chepstow and heads upstream which means it's uphill the whole way!

A GROUP ACTIVITY

We planned the walks as a group but sometimes our schedules clashed which meant we didn't always complete each section of the route at the same time. Those who missed a specific leg caught up when they could and were often joined by other members tackling it again because they'd enjoyed it so much. We rang the changes though by walking it in the opposite direction. It's surprising what a difference that makes. I walked some sections several times and found quite a few diversions early on especially in the woods. This can cause problems because the route isn't well-marked so it's vital you check the signs regularly.



The river Wye meanders gently
through the countryside

PIC © MATTHEW DIXON / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Adventure **Wales**

EXPLORING SYMONDS YAT

The first leg, which runs 11 miles between Chepstow and Whitebrook, was quite a long way above the river but the views were wonderful — it must be one of the most understated parts of the country. The next leg was a few miles longer but just as picturesque, with the watery attractions of Symonds Yat a real highlight. And, if you fancy a drink, The Saracens Head Inn in Symonds Yat East is ideally placed.

Our next destination, Ross-on-Wye, was 16 miles away but we walked further because we fancied visiting the hotel and the castle in Goodrich then added another mile by deviating from the correct route at Howle Hill — having a guidebook, map and GPS didn't prevent us from taking a wrong turning. Goodrich Castle is owned by English Heritage and dogs are welcome in the grounds but should be kept on a lead. We ate in the bar of The Hostellerie at Goodrich.



The next leg, a 12-mile stretch between Ross-on-Wye and Mordiford, initially ran along the river but then headed away from the water. The signage was inadequate yet again. Leg 5 was between Mordiford and Sugwas Pool but we also investigated Hereford Cathedral, where the Mappa Mundi can be found — it was being renovated though so we didn't see it but things improved when we had lunch at the Spreadeagle Inn next door. It was extremely

dog-friendly and we enjoyed warming ourselves beside the fire, which was lovely after coping with the melting snow outside. Walking this section in January really was hard going.

QUENCHING OUR THIRST

Leg 6 ran between Sugwas Pool and Clock Mills (14 miles) via the apple orchards of Bulmer Cider. We left the route briefly so we could have a pub lunch at The New Inn,

Staunton on Wye. Afterwards we continued through Bredwardine and up Merbach Hill, which was rather muddy after the rain.

I'd purposefully made Leg 7 shorter (6 miles) so we could spend time investigating Hay-on-Wye and we had a leisurely lunch there then climbed Hay Bluff in the afternoon. It was extremely hot and, sadly, we couldn't reach the river very often so Dexter didn't cool off as much as he would've liked. I didn't help the situation

The views get more spectacular as you head through Wales

PIC © CHRISLOFTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK



I didn't envisage there being any problems because he hates being left behind

because I left his lead at the summit which meant climbing it again.

The next point on our route, Erwood, was 14 miles away and we found a diversion had been created so walkers didn't have to use the main road. Although this meant climbing away from the river, the views made it worthwhile. We had a quick drink at the Bridge End Inn, a friendly pub in Llyswen that I'd highly recommend. The old station at Erwood is now a craft centre — the tearoom makes a welcome sight and there are plenty of seats outside.

The 9th leg was between Erwood and Goytre via Builth Wells (11 miles). Here, the route is hilly and the countryside gets quite wild in places but the views are amazing. We found a welcoming pub, The White Horse, in Builth Wells where the car park ran beside the river. As everywhere, Dexter entertained the locals with his activities.

Since legs 10 and 11 (11 miles) and legs 12 (6 miles) and 13 (10 miles) were further from home we decided to stay overnight at Brynafon Hotel Wales because it was dog-friendly and, situated in Rhayader, was

near the end of leg 10 and the start of leg 11. We enjoyed it so much that we stayed there again when completing legs 12 and 13, even though it involved more travelling.

Originally a workhouse, the building has had many uses since it was constructed in 1870. It was used as Royal School for the Deaf then, after housing evacuees during the war, became a fire-drill site. After lying derelict, it was converted into self-contained accommodation in 1989 and finally a hotel. We stayed in one of the courtyard rooms and found the standard of decoration extremely high. It had its own entrance which made walking Dexter easy especially at night. The



quality of the food was exceptional with many of the ingredients sourced locally from the Cumbrian mountains.

ENJOYING THE VIEWS

Leg 10 (13 miles) of the Wye Valley Walk was between Goytre (just north of Builth Wells) and Rhayader. The scenery on this section was sensational helped no doubt by the superb weather. We walked into Rhayader and had a drink in one of the many pubs — it has the most pubs per head of population of anywhere in the UK.

Our destination the next day was Llangurig (11 miles) — the scenery was exceptional and we watched several kites flying ahead. Apparently they're thriving in Wales and we found a red kite feeding and rehabilitation centre at Gigrin Farm. As one of the locals put it, they're like sparrows around here. I wish I'd checked the public transport on this section because we could have used the bus rather than moving our cars around.

The next leg between Llangurig and Pont Rhydgaled (6 miles) was well signed, but the route was tricky because the posts weren't obvious. It was also extremely muddy. Nearing the end, the track splits so you can either go higher or continue along the river. Dexter, being a Flat-coated Retriever, chose the latter!



Although the Wye Valley Walk finishes at Plynlimon, the guide takes you to a viewpoint rather than the source of the river. We wanted to complete the walk properly so headed off-route and, despite the extremely boggy ground, eventually found the spring itself. Having completed the last stage, we crossed Plynlimon and walked to the source of the Severn, which is much easier to find because it's marked by a wooden post. The Severn Way, another popular route, starts here so there's a car park nearby.

FACT FILE



ADDRESS Brynafon, South Street, Rhayader, Wales LD6 6BL

PRICE A night with bed and breakfast costs between £38 and £57 per person depending on the standard of the room, with dinner extra.

CONTACT Tel 01597 810 735 or visit www.brynafon.co.uk

WYE VALLEY WALK

A route of startling contrasts, the Wye Valley Walk follows the river as it pours from the rocky cascades of its mountain source through the dramatic uplands, windswept hills and wooded gorges, meadows and orchards of the Anglo-Welsh borders.

Nikki Moore of the Wye Valley AONB explains, 'There are very few problems along the route because most of the stiles have been removed though some dogs struggle with the 395 steps from Eagle's Nest.'

Please keep dogs on leads when walking through fields containing animals and always remove any waste.'

TACKLING A LONG DISTANCE ROUTE

- Increase the length of your walks gradually until you know what you and your dog can achieve.
- Avoid walking long distances until your dog has reached maturity because growing bones can be harmed by strenuous exercise.
- Linear routes are tricky because you require a car at either end — I used public transport when tackling the



Pembrokeshire Coast Path and Hadrian's Wall but the service in Wales wasn't regular enough.

- Make sure you have the latest guide and map — even though we had a GPS, we missed several turnings because the signs weren't always clear and there are often diversions.
- Plan the route carefully and have contingency plans in case of emergency.
- Check the pubs' opening hours — we found that most are dog-friendly.
- The river flows at different rates depending on the weather so don't let your dog swim until you've checked it's safe and know they can get out easily.
- There may be animals grazing in the fields so keep your lead at the ready.



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