

RIVER WYE CANOE AND KAYAK GUIDE

MARK RAINSLEY





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Foreword

My first visit to the Wye, leading a group of young people, was an unforgettable experience; camping in the spectacular Symonds Yat gorge, swimming among huge brown trout, climbing Yat Rock, watching the kayaks looking like matchsticks on the river below, and kayaking through the rapids. It was to be the start of a long relationship with the River Wye; guiding and coaching, enjoying the water with family and friends, or just sitting on the bank watching the river go by.

Forty years on, in spite of pressure for regulation on our rivers, the essence of Wye life remains reassuringly familiar. Many thousands of people enjoy recreation in, on or beside the Wye every year, and we follow in the footsteps of those who have travelled the river, for sustenance, commerce or recreation, from time immemorial. From the numerous Wye guides and memoirs published over the years, we learn of Victorian ladies and gentlemen being rowed downriver to see the sights, while more energetic contemporaries tramp the route from source to sea or canoe the length of the river. This guidebook will help another generation of travellers to discover the River Wye. Have fun, and remember that the river is ours; never to exploit, but to explore, enjoy, care for, and safeguard for future generations of Wye travellers.

Pam Bell

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Introduction

*How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!*

William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' 1798

The River Wye is Britain's finest canoe and kayak touring river. There now, I've said it. What makes it so fine? Well, it has something for every kind of river paddler, from those seeking whitewater excitement to those favouring sedate cruising. The Wye is unusual in that it flows freely, without dams or weirs to interrupt its flow. Most of the river has sufficient water to paddle year-round, providing opportunities for a variety of day-long adventures and multi-day expeditions. The scenery along its 252 kilometres is never less than fine and is often spectacular, encompassing a wide range of environments from the mountains of Mid Wales, the hills and plains of Herefordshire, limestone gorges and the tidal reaches approaching the Severn Estuary. The wildlife is another draw, being diverse (from ancient woodlands and otters, to red kites and water crowfoot), in pretty good health, and easy to encounter from a canoe or kayak.

Paddling the Wye becomes even more enjoyable as you learn about its dimensions beyond the natural surrounds. History is writ large along the banks, from prehistoric hillforts, medieval castles and monasteries to – surprisingly – glimpses of the Industrial Revolution, which originated here. Through the remarkable Wye Tour, the river became the birthplace of package tourism and tourist guidebooks. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century artists participated in this adventure and left a huge legacy of travelogues, poems and paintings. Paddlers enjoying these today get to appreciate the Wye from a wider perspective; some excerpts are included here as they still offer useful information.

This is the first paddling guidebook to the River Wye which covers the entire river in all its moods, which offers detailed advice on planning trips and expeditions, and which explores the Wye's splendid wildlife, landscape, history and culture. I hope it helps you to enjoy many great adventures on this fine river.

Mark Rainsley

About the author

Mark Rainsley

Mark has spent three decades using paddlesport as a means of avoiding adulthood and responsibility. He is a fanatical paddler who has descended challenging whitewater rivers worldwide, and who is dedicated to exploring every nook and cranny of the UK's coast by sea kayak. He created the UK Rivers and UK Sea Kayak websites and is a prolific contributor to paddlesport magazines and other media. Mark authored the Pesda Press guidebook *South West Sea Kayaking*, and has contributed to other Pesda titles such as *English Whitewater* and *South East England and Channel Islands Sea Kayaking*.

Mark's earliest experience of paddlesport was on regular family holidays to the River Wye in the 1970s. He floundered around in a barge-like fibreglass kayak, which his dad also used to terrify the family by carrying out a death-defying impromptu descent of the Symonds Yat rapids. In more recent times, Mark has become a parent himself and has relished introducing his daughter to paddlesport via canoe expeditions on the River Wye.



📷 Mark at Symonds Yat, 1980.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all those friends and family who joined me during research for this guidebook. While paddling the wonderful Wye was hardly a hardship for them, tolerating my agenda and being bossed around for photographic purposes probably was! Special thanks to my favourite paddling companions; my lovely wife Heather and my gorgeous daughter Ellen.

The following folk provided expert input. Pam Bell was kind enough to write the foreword, as well as offering experienced input to the Access section. Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Officer Andrew Blake generously allowed us to reproduce their *Code of Conduct for Canoeists on the Wye*. Jane Hughes of Wye Valley Canoes provided useful perspectives from the hire and guiding industry. Grace Payne-James supplied a fun account of her Duke of Edinburgh expedition experiences on the Wye, and Dr Lizzie Garnett checked over the geology section.

Finally, thanks to Franco Ferrero and his team at Pesda Press, and Don Williams of Bute Cartographics.

Photographs

All photographs by Mark Rainsley, except where acknowledged in the captions.



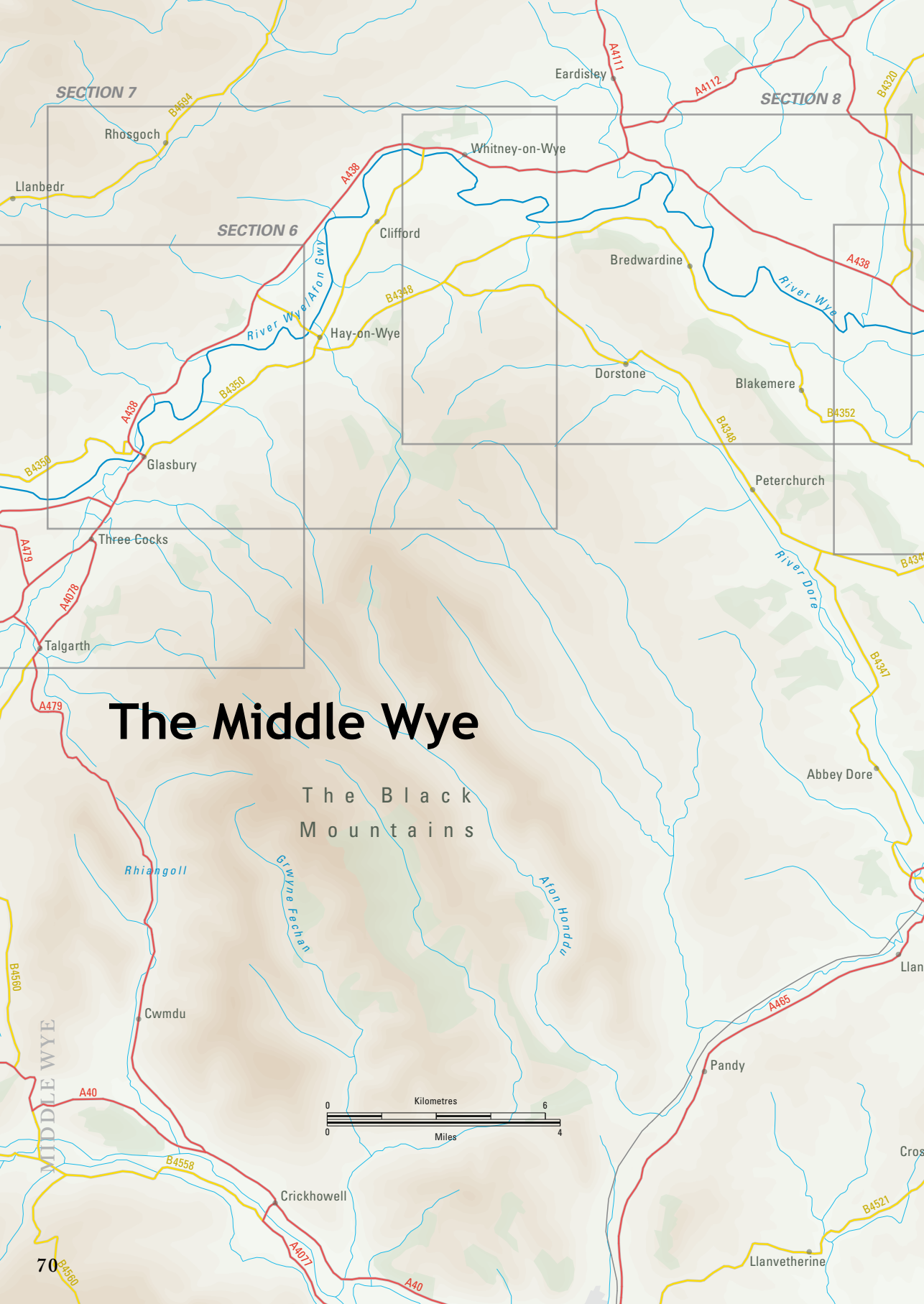
 Below Bigsweir Bridge.

Important notice – disclaimer

Canoeing, kayaking and other paddlesports, whether in a river or sea environment, have their inherent risks, as do all adventurous activities. This guidebook highlights some considerations to take into account when planning your own river journey.

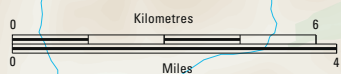
While we have included a range of factors to consider, you will need to plan your own journey, and within that ensure there is scope to be adaptable to local conditions; for example tides, weather and ever-changing river hazards. This requires knowing your own abilities, then applying your own risk assessment to the conditions that you may encounter. The varying environmental conditions along the River Wye mean that everyday good judgement is required to decide whether to paddle or not.

The information within this book has been well researched. However, neither the author nor Pesda Press can be held responsible for any decision about whether to paddle or not, and any consequences arising from that decision.



The Middle Wye

The Black Mountains



 Below Glasbury.





Section 7

Glasbury to Whitney-on-Wye

Distance	17.7km
Start	Glasbury SO 179 392
Finish	Whitney-on-Wye SO 269 472
Difficulty	Grade 1 and 2

Introduction

Justly popular as one of the finest trips on the Wye, this is a unique stretch of untamed winding river with many mildly-challenging rapids and a stunning backdrop of the Black Mountains to savour.

Launch points

Glasbury Bridge SO 179 392 – a small car park outside the scout hut, upstream of the bridge on river left. The river is reached through a

gate. A sign asks paddlers not to launch before 10.00 a.m. or after 4.30 p.m.

Hay-on-Wye SO 229 427 – a small car park with steps to the river, on river right downstream of Hay Bridge.

Whitney Bridge SO 259 475 – steps lead to the water from the river left bank, upstream of the bridge. A fee is payable to the toll bridge owners. Whitney-on Wye SO 269 472 – steps beside the Boat Inn on the river left bank.



Nearby attractions

The bookshops of Hay-on-Wye are well worth a browse, see www.hay-on-wye.co.uk. To the south of town, several Black Mountains summits can easily be accessed by walking or mountain biking from Gospel Pass.

Accommodation

The following campsites are beside the river; Hollybush Inn www.hollybushcamping.com, Digeddi Wildlife Camping www.digeddi.com, Racquety Farm www.racquetyfarm.com, The

Pound www.poundbandb.co.uk (behind the Boat Inn, Whitney) Whitney Toll Bridge www.whitneybridge.co.uk. The following campsites are nearby; Ashbrook Caravans and Camping www.ashbrook-caravans.co.uk, Black Mountain View www.blackmountainview.co.uk, Walker's Cottage www.hay-on-wye-camping.co.uk. There is a 'posh bunkhouse' www.wyevalleycanoes.co.uk at Glasbury, and Baskerville Hall Hotel www.baskervillehall.co.uk offers camping and 'dorm' accommodation.

B&B and hotel information can be obtained from the tourist information centre in Brecon on 01874 622485, www.tourism.powys.gov.uk and Hay-on-Wye Tourist Information Bureau on 01497 820144, www.hay-on-wye.co.uk.

Description

"The valley widens, the background softens, and the whole scene assumes the character of an English vale." (Leigh Ritchie, *The Wye: A Picturesque Ramble* 1841).

Various information sources and tour operators cite Glasbury as being exactly 100 miles upstream of the muddy take-out on the tidal shore at Chepstow. To be boringly pedantic, the distance is actually 162.3 km, or 101.4 miles ... but '100' undeniably has a cooler ring to it.

This section can become rather shallow in places, especially in late summer; loaded boats may occasionally find themselves grounding. Conversely, this section is not to be recommended in high water, as there are many tight turns where the current flows towards bushes and low hanging branches.

The parking area beside Glasbury Scout Hut and public toilets is always a bustling spot, with groups coming and going carrying gear from the scout hut to the river. The scout hut was opened in 1920 by Lord Baden-Powell himself, and is the oldest in Wales still in use. A gate leads to the river's wide gravelly flood plain and in summer it can be a bit of a trek to reach the actual water! You launch directly upstream of Glasbury Bridge, which has carried the A438 since it was built in 1923, being



 Crowded craft at Hay-on-Wye.

widened twice in the interim. The buildings on river right directly below the bridge are the base of Wye Valley Canoes; you won't fail to notice the huge, stacked pyramid of open canoes awaiting hire! If you are peckish, note The River Café, which they also run.

The river braids around an overgrown island, directly below the bridge. With this and most such islands on this section, resist the temptation to take the narrower channel, should there be sufficient water – it is overgrown and often blocked by fallen trees or branches.

A glance at the map will reveal how the Wye sprawls, braids and meanders unhindered across the plain in the following kilometres. You might be reminded of your school geography

lessons! The red earth banks are being actively eroded on the outside of bends; take care not to get swept into overhanging trees and bushes. Look out for remains of a past castle's motte (artificial earth hill) hidden on the left bank, after 2km. A further kilometre takes you past a stream entering on river right; directly below this is Hollybush Inn campsite.

Over the next few kilometres of small rapids, take time to look back and enjoy the open views of the Black Mountains, which rise steeply to a lofty ridge overlooking the valley; the two prominent peaks are Hay Bluff (677m) and Lord Hereford's Knob (690m). When the river bends left along a wooded slope on the right, you have reached the border of the Brecon Beacons National Park, which follows the river for the next 2km. Another bend, this time to the right, hides a surprise; Boatside Weir, at Wyeclyff. This natural weir is quite harmless (and indeed washes out to become indiscernible in high water), usually being paddled via the exhilarating chute alongside the right bank.

The kilometre-long bend leading to Hay Bridge passes the campsite of the Hay Festival on

the river left bank; in May you will see their 'glamping' tents erected.

Hay Bridge (built 1957) is unusually high, towering above a multi-channelled rapid, the site of a long-ago collapsed weir. The town is to the right, and the right channel leads beneath the bridge to a landing stage and car park which is heavily used by hire operators and outdoor centres. Landing to stretch legs and explore Hay-on-Wye is recommended; note however that it's a steep walk uphill!

For 6km from Hay as far as Rhydspence, the Wye forms the border between Wales and England; paddle along the bank which best suits your national prejudices!

The first sight of note below Hay is the stone ruins of Clifford Castle, looming on river right. This was built after the Norman Conquest for William FitzOsbern, the newly planted Earl of Hereford. It was destroyed in 1402 by the forces of the mysterious Welsh insurgent, Owain Glyndŵr, who also destroyed the motte and bailey castle at nearby Hay.

Look out for the Inn at Rhydspence, above on river left. This inn dates right back to the 14th century, and was used for shoeing drover's

📷 *Black Mountains above Hay.*



📷 *Lunch stop below Glasbury.*





📷 Boatside Weir above Hay.

cattle during their journey from Mid Wales to market in London, and is sometimes called the ‘first house in England’.

Reaching Whitney Bridge, you have just a kilometre left to paddle. This peculiar construction dates from 1802, with two stone arches and three wooden spans; the stone parts survive from before the 1795 flood. This is one of the few privately owned toll bridges left in the country. You might also spot the site of another bridge just upstream, which carried a now-dismantled tramway.

The river splits around an island below Whitney Bridge with a riffly rapid, one of several such rapids which speed your passage down to the Boat Inn at Whitney-on-Wye. After carrying your boat up the steps, perhaps nip into the inn for some well-earned refreshment.

The Town of Books

Hay is famous as ‘The Town of Books’. This small town, located where the borders of Radnor, Brecon and Herefordshire meet, gained its modern *raison d’être* from Robert Booth. Owner of Booth Books and the self-styled ‘King of Hay’, in 1961 he had the inspired idea of promoting Hay as a sort of literary Mecca. Hay became the largest second-hand book selling centre in the world; there are currently over 30 bookshops and over a million books in Hay, although their trade has taken some knocks of late due to the impact of Amazon.com. In 1988 the first Hay Festival of Literature www.hayfestival.com was held, and this is now a major international event running for ten days each May.





Section 8

Whitney-on-Wye to Bycross

Distance	19.7km
Start	Whitney-on Wye SO 269 472
Finish	Byecross Farm SO 376 426
Difficulty	Grade 1, possibly one grade 2 rapid

Introduction

This is a lovely paddle, winding past varied rural scenery through a quiet corner of Herefordshire. There is almost no intrusion from the outside world. The flow is slow but there are occasional rapids and riffles to entertain you.

Launch points

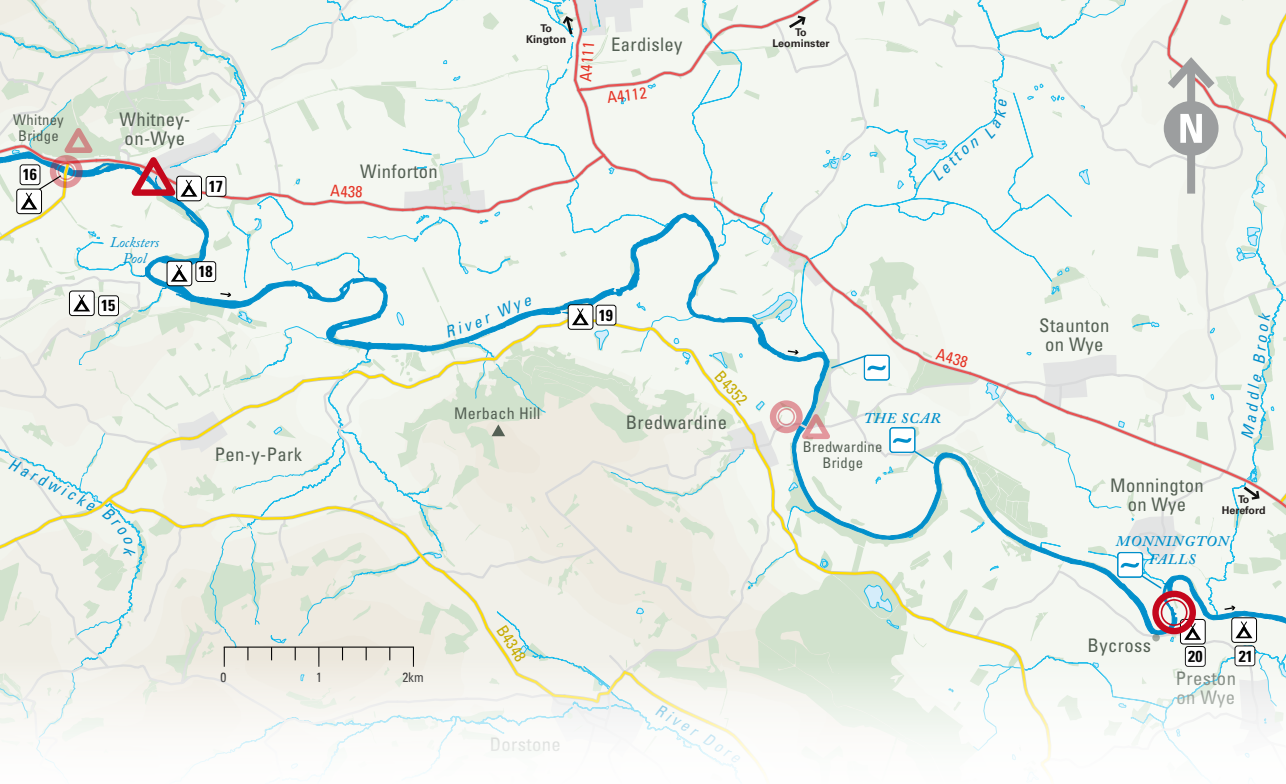
Whitney-on-Wye SO 269 472 – park and launch beside the Boat Inn on the river left bank.

Bredwardine Bridge SO 336 447 – emergency use only? There is a footpath to the road on

river right below the bridge, however there is no parking and the bank is very high and steep. Byecross Farm SO 376 426 – steps and a canoe ramp lead up to the campsite entrance.

Nearby attractions

A steep walk up Merbach Hill offers a fine viewpoint of the Middle Wye's open valley. Brobury House Gardens www.broburyhouse.co.uk are right beside Bredwardine Bridge, a great spot for a picnic.



Accommodation

The following campsites are beside the river:

The Pound www.poundbandb.co.uk (behind the Boat Inn, Whitney), Oakfield Farm 01497 831373 (just past Locksters Pool), The Weston 01981 500396 (above Turner's Boat), Bycross Farm www.bycrosscampsite.co.uk.

B&B and hotel information can be obtained from Visit Herefordshire 01432 268430 www.visitherefordshire.co.uk, and Hay-on-Wye Tourist Information Bureau on 01497 820144, www.hay-on-wye.co.uk.

Description

The church at Whitney-on-Wye dates from around 1740, replacing its predecessor which was washed away by a flood in 1735. This flood also removed the rectory and much of

the village; looking at the height of the land above the water, this is almost impossible to imagine today.

Launching from the Boat Inn, the flow initially carries you swiftly alongside a long island. Henceforth, key characteristics of this section are the subtlest of riffles, interspersed with slow deep pools; the first pool encountered is Locksters Pool, on a left bend. Here, in 1927, the largest salmon ever rod-caught in British waters (27 kilos!) was hooked out by Mrs Doreen Davey.

The field on river right after Locksters Pool Farm is a campsite, albeit a minimalist one lacking fresh water or facilities; highly recommended! The author has watched otters playing here, early one morning.



📷 *Rapid upstream of Bredwardine Bridge.*

The next ten kilometres are some of the most benign on the whole river, allowing you to drift and soak up the scenery. Merbach Hill rises directly from the river right bank to a 318m summit, before you pass by Turner's Boat Island, an overgrown and swampy tangle of channels. The distinctive hefty-sized cows quietly watching your passage with red coats and white faces and markings are, of course, the locally bred Hereford Cattle. These supposedly produce the finest beef in world; herds were introduced to the USA around 1816, and also shipped down to Argentina, from whence they have returned to the UK as tins of corned beef.

When the river bends sharp right with trees on both banks, brace yourself for a sudden wake-up. Bedrock slabs funnel the flow to the inside of the bend, causing a notable rapid ... well,

📷 *Bycross.*



it feels notable enough after ten kilometres of flat water! Be alert, as the current trends towards bushes and overhanging trees.

Bredwardine Bridge is 600m past the rapid, perhaps the most attractive bridge on the whole river. Six red brick arches arc high above the flow; its height is perhaps why it was the first bridge along the river to survive the 1795 flood. It was built in 1769 as a toll bridge on the site of a former ferry. It's not quite as authentic as it first seems though, having been rebuilt in its original form in 1922. Getting a canoe in or out here isn't very practical, but if you don't mind a slippery scramble to the footpath on river right, it is possible to visit the gardens of the Victorian Brobury House, directly across the bridge. As you paddle past Bredwardine, note the earthen remains of a motte and bailey castle



Byecross Farm campsite.

on river right, located here to control the river crossing. The river is now hemmed in by dense foliage on both sides. After adjusting to a world of greenery, it's a bit of a jolt when the red sandstone cliffs of Brobury Scar are reached, after several kilometres. Called 'The Scar' on OS maps, these loom 50m above a long, right bend. At water level, a rapid speeds your passage, with angular sandstone blocks

Bredwardine Bridge.





 Brobury Scar.

disrupting the flow. Nonetheless, your eyes will most likely be inclined upwards at the undermined beech trees hanging precariously over the precipice, roots reaching into space. Directly ahead is Moccas Court, an impressive 18th-century brick mansion. The name Moccas comes from the Welsh *moch rhos* (swine heath!), perhaps inappropriate for a Grade 1 listed building, built from a design by Robert Adam, with gardens laid out by Lancelot

'Capability' Brown. Nowadays it is a very expensive hotel. Just past the mansion is the site of a former toll bridge built 1867–9 by Sir Velters Cornewall (of Moccas Court). This was removed after being damaged in a 1960 flood. After a placid kilometre floating past orchards, the Wye bends left in front of some private houses; at the end of the bend on river right is the landing platform at Byecross Farm Campsite.

📖 Front Cover – Lady Park Wood, near Symonds Yat.
📖 Back Cover – Whitewater near the source of the Wye.



RIVER WYE CANOE AND KAYAK GUIDE



ISBN 9781906095512



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The Wye is one of the most beautiful rivers in the world, and offers a wide range of opportunities for canoeing and kayaking. This guide provides the information you need to plan your own Wye day, whitewater or touring trip.

The author, Mark Rainsley, has paddled the Wye for many years and has written several books on canoeing and kayaking.

The author, Mark Rainsley, has paddled the Wye for many years and has written several books on canoeing and kayaking. The guide covers the entire length of the river, from the source to the English Channel, and includes detailed information on river conditions, hazards, access points, campsites, and local facilities. It also provides suggested itineraries for both whitewater and touring expeditions that range from 3 to 5 days. To help you plan your journey there is advice on equipment, safety and access, as well as information on wildlife, culture and landscape.

MARK RAINSLY

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