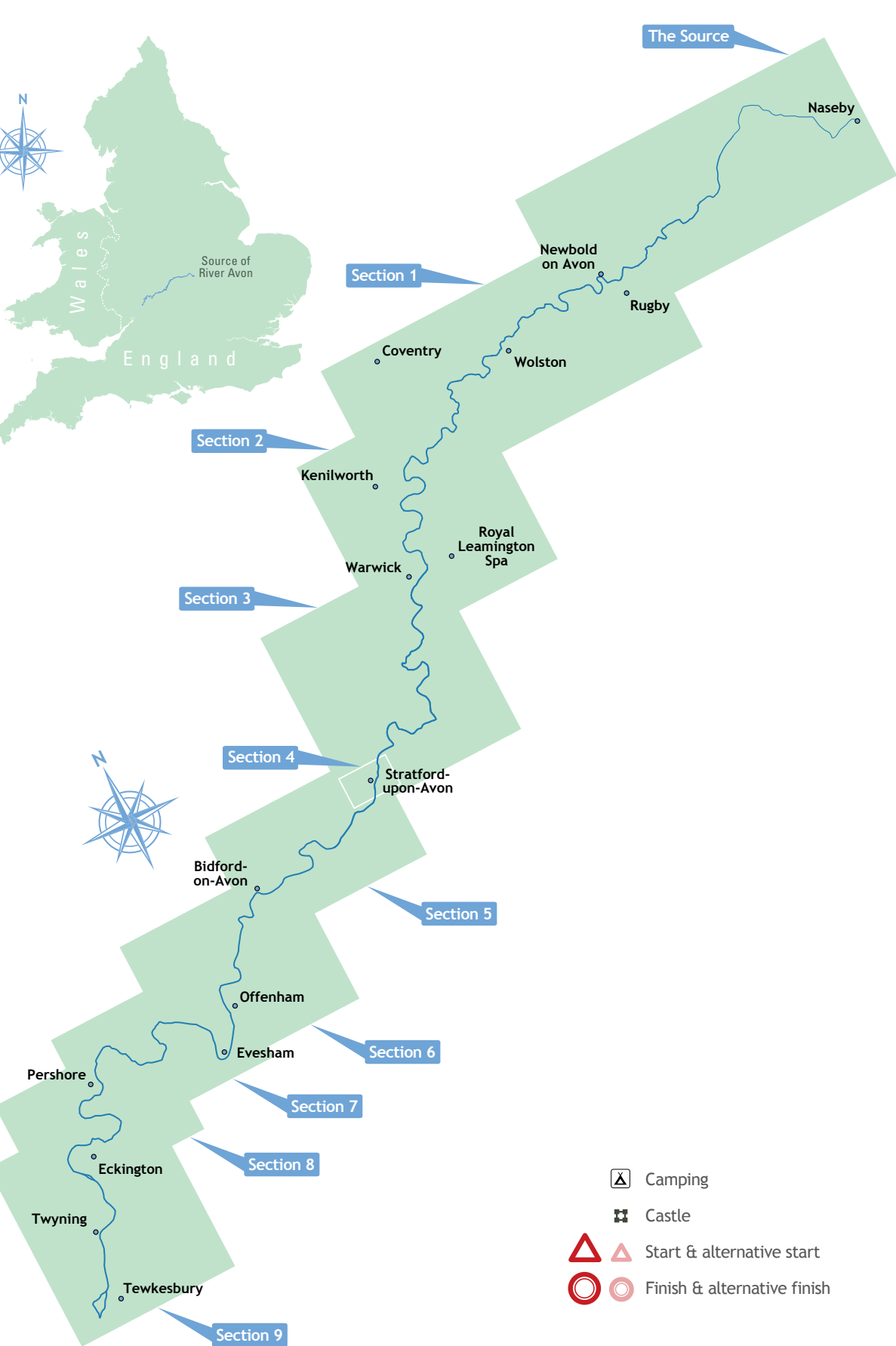






PADDLE SHAKESPEARE'S AVON

A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS



MARK RAINSLY



-  Camping
-  Castle
-  Start & alternative start
-  Finish & alternative finish

MARK RAINSLEY

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A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS

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Foreword

There are few of us who live far from water. Our cities, towns and villages were built around waterways; our poorest, our most affluent and our most diverse communities are rarely far from water. Water provided the fuel that drove Britain's industrial history. Earlier in history, water provided our means of transport, trade, a source of food and importantly, a place for us to play and meet.

Our waterways have a magical way of drawing us in. We walk along their banks, we swim and paddle in their waters. From a canoe, one moves with the flow of water. Gazing outwards from a world where we are most used to looking in. You adventure to secret corners, where familiar surroundings can suddenly feel new and exciting.

The privilege of being a paddler or a swimmer can be both inspiring and frustrating in equal measures. There are rivers where paddlers and swimmers are forced to use stealth, or restrict themselves to the fringes of the day to avoid challenge or threat.

Why?

Because few of our rivers are fairly shared. They are guarded closely, to keep them off-limits to the public. Signs emit angry messages from the trees, prohibiting canoeing. From time to time an unfortunate paddler is confronted and informed that there is no place on the river for anyone with a paddle in their hand.

Living, paddling and raising two young sons alongside a river has given me a deep-rooted passion to find a way to address this inequity. Last summer, I watched my younger son run his fingers through the water as we paddled near our house. He sat up sharp as a kingfisher zipped past, a millisecond of blue reflected with instant wonder in his eyes. At four years old, my eldest son has paddled through clouds of mayflies in the evening sun. He has seen sand martins nesting and herons languidly launching into flight. One can never match these experiences in words and pictures, they only come from *being there*.

Like many of our rivers in Shakespeare's day, the Avon would have been a vital artery for trade and travel. It would also have been a place where people played and enjoyed being by the river. Thankfully, the majority of the Avon is still a draw for recreational activity, with rowing boats, cruisers, anglers, swimmers and of course paddlers, all sharing the space. In places like these, where people still have access to water, they feel a connection to it and are inclined to care about its health. Elsewhere, where that centuries-old bond between communities and their rivers has been broken, the public is growing increasingly disconnected from the fate of their precious blue spaces.

To my mind, the Clear Access, Clear Waters campaign has a simple aim; to ensure that the next generation – my sons and your children – can *be there*. In campaigning for ‘open access’ and the protection of our precious environment, we paddlers (and swimmers, walkers, whatever) have to be prepared to bear the responsibility of paddling with care, with consideration and with respect. Respect for nature, respect for others.

Changing government policy is a tall order, matched only by the challenge of winning the hearts and minds of those who wish to exclude us. Despite the scale of the challenge, we must take it on ... and we have done. Through our campaign – *your* campaign – we continue to lobby and press for a fair and equitable right of access to our inland waters.

Fair, shared, sustainable open access to water. It’s not much to ask for. Is it?

Ben Seal

PLACES TO PADDLE MANAGER, BRITISH CANOEING

WWW.CLEARACCESSCLEARWATERS.ORG.UK



📷 Ben Seal.

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Introduction

"I should say that for canoeists the Avon is one of the most beautiful rivers in England".

Luscombe, W.G. and Bird, L.J. *Canoeing*, 1948

Shakespeare's Avon is a great river to dip a paddle into, whether by kayak, canoe or paddleboard. Paddlers seeking an expedition journey, those wanting to just splash about getting wet and those participating in every kind of paddling endeavour in-between will find something for them on the Avon. From its upper rural reaches past Rugby and Coventry, through the villages and market towns of the south Midlands to its confluence with the River Severn on the floodplain at Tewkesbury, the river is, at all times, engaging to paddlers.

The Avon's natural wealth and beauty might come as a surprise to paddlers who imagine that the Midlands is all industrial cities! The riverine wildlife and scenery are always attractive, and at times truly stunning. In the half-century since the Avon was restored as a navigation, the deep channelled waters and the numerous locks, with their white-water interludes, have greened over into precious habitats for a range of flora and fauna.

A review of a previous river guidebook written by the author included the (perfectly reasonable) comment, *"Ah, too much history"*. Unfortunately for that paddler, the Avon has more history crammed along its modest length than it seems possible for any single river to bear. It flows right through England's past of climactic battles, monasteries, castles, stately homes and the early industry of mills and navigation ... and we haven't even mentioned the Bard of Avon himself. The Avon's international fame is, of course, due to its associations with William Shakespeare, and whether or not you enjoyed your GCSE English lessons, it's impossible for paddlers not to get sucked into a little 'bardolatry' whilst enjoying the river.

This book aims to guide paddlers along the Avon and through its many locks and weirs, while also highlighting the river's remarkable natural and historical surrounds. I hope that it helps you to enjoy some great adventures on Shakespeare's river.

Mark Rainsley

About the Author

Mark Rainsley

Mark has spent over three decades using paddlesport as a means of avoiding adulthood and responsibility. He is a fanatical paddler who has descended challenging white-water rivers worldwide, and who is dedicated to exploring every nook and cranny of the UK's coast and rivers by kayak or canoe. He is a prolific contributor to paddlesport magazines and other media. Mark has authored numerous Pesda Press guidebooks including *South West Sea Kayaking*, *Paddle the Wye*, *Paddle the Severn* and *Paddle the Thames*.



📷 The author.

Acknowledgements

It was Boxing Day, and my Christmas present had been a second-hand fibreglass kayak. My parents drove me outside Coventry to somewhere in the vicinity of Ryton-on-Dunsmore, launched me off at the first bridge they could find on the infant Avon and told me they'd meet me downstream somewhere. The river was flowing through barbed-wire fences along its sides and flooding across fields, I was wearing a woolly jumper and jeans and I'm not even sure that I had a buoyancy aid; welcome to 1980s parenting! By the time I met them at the next bridge, I was hypothermic, had blistered fingers and was hooked for life on paddling. Later, they drove me to slalom events at Stratford-upon-Avon and Luddington, and supported me in marathon races along the Avon. So ... thanks mum and dad, for helping me to start out in the sport and for getting me to the Avon.

Numerous friends and family came along and explored the Avon with me while I was working on this book; I'm lucky and grateful to have such great folk to paddle with.

*"I count myself in nothing else so happy
As in a soul remembering my good friends."*

Richard II

The following folk provided expert input; Ben Seal (British Canoeing's Places to Paddle Manager) was kind enough to write the foreword. Dr Lizzie Garnett offered input on geology. Heather Rainsley and Dick Whitehouse described their adventures on the Avon and Jenna Sanders offered advice on Duke of Edinburgh Award expeditions.

Finally, thanks to Franco Ferrero at Pesda Press, Vicky Barlow for her great design work, Don Williams of Bute Cartographic for the stunning maps, and Ros Morley and Andrew Whiting for their proofreading skills.

Photographs

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



📷 Evesham Weir.

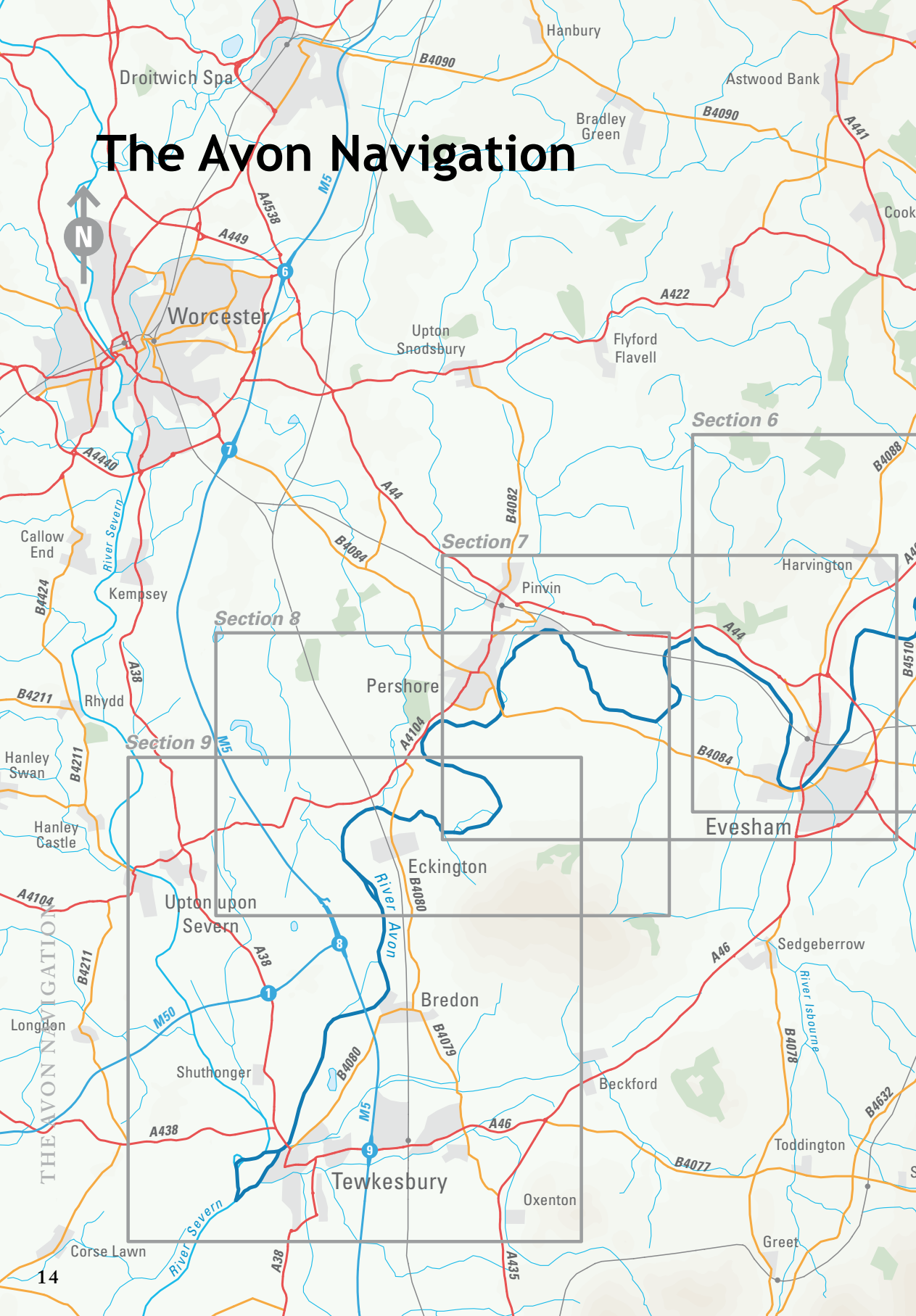
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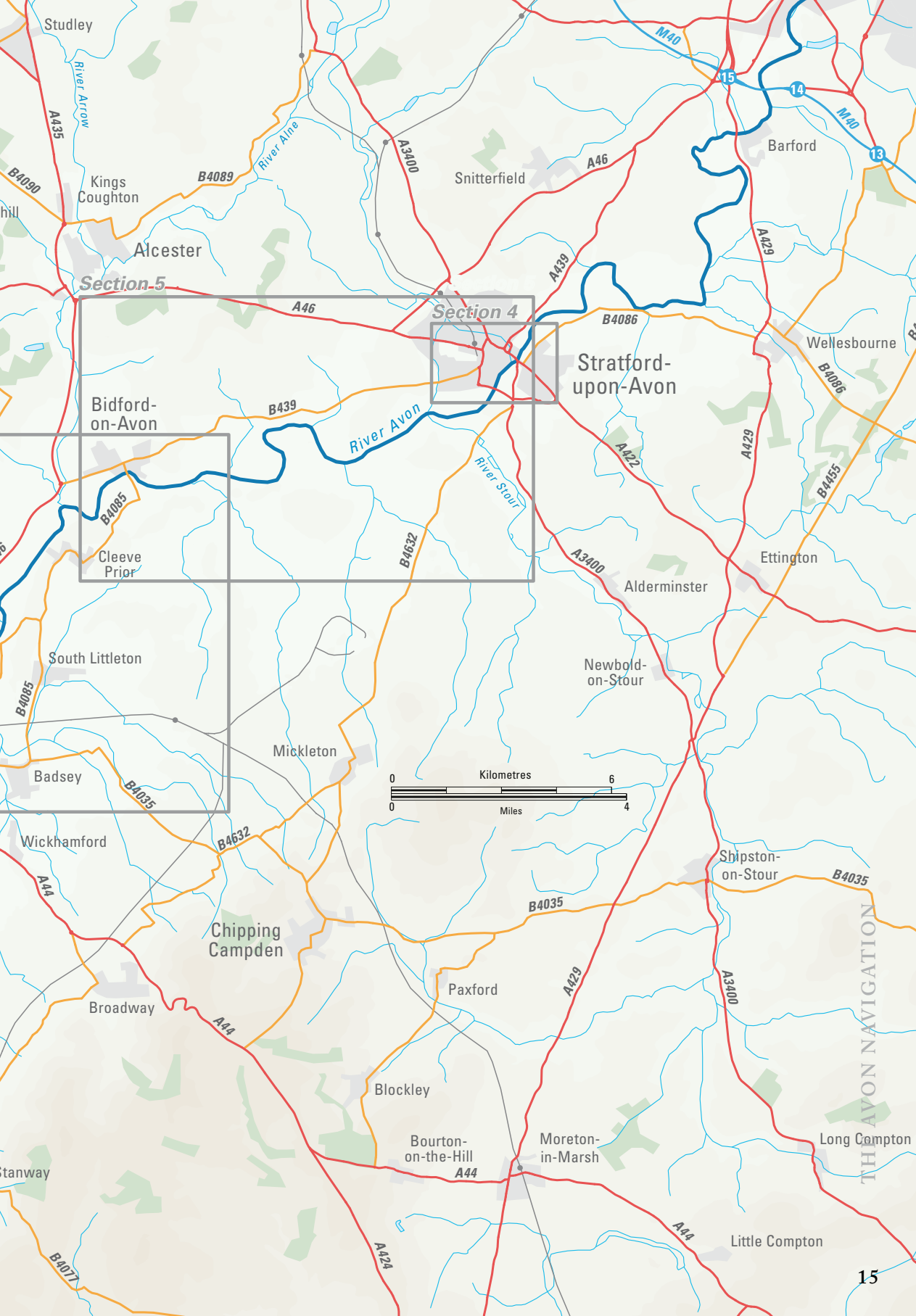
Canoeing, kayaking and other paddlesports, whether in a river or sea environment, have their inherent risks, as do all adventurous activities. This guidebook highlights some considerations to take into account when planning your own river journey.

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, weather conditions and ever-changing river hazards (especially weirs!). 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 Avon mean that 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 of whether to paddle or not, and any consequences arising from that decision.

The Avon Navigation









Section 6

Bidford-on-Avon to Evesham

Distance 13.1km

Start ▲ Bidford Bridge SP 099 517 / B50 4AD

Finish ● Abbey Bridge, Evesham SP 033 431 / WR11 4BY

Introduction

“The garden of England ... In the spring the miles and miles of blossom are a sight to be remembered, while the air is scented beyond the power of the pen to describe.”

Alec R. Ellis, *The Book of Canoeing*, 1935
Welcome to the Vale of Evesham! The Avon flows right through the heart of this fertile region of fruit farms, orchards and market gardens, steering a course to the historic town of Evesham.

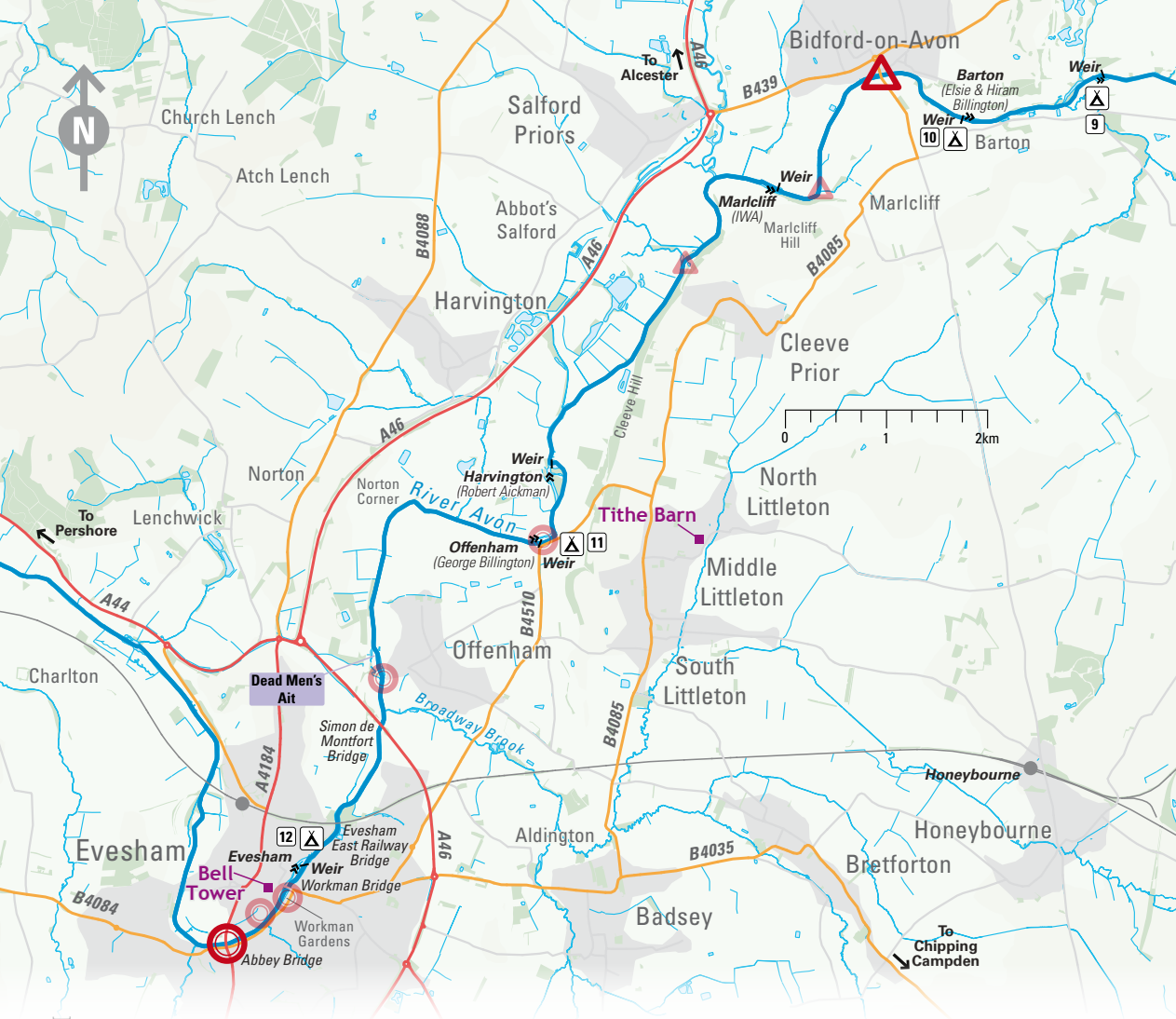
Launch points

Bidford Bridge SP 099 517 / B50 4AD – the Big Meadow, a large riverside car park on river

left below the bridge. Note that you will be automatically charged on entering. There is also a free 24-hour car park across the bridge, 100m from the water.

Marlcliff SP 093 505 / B50 4NT – small riverside parking area on river left at the end of a rough track leading downhill from The Bank in Marlcliff.

Cleeve Prior SP 080 499 / WR11 8JZ – footpath on river left leading a short distance, under a height barrier, to a small parking area at the end of Mill Lane. Road is steep and in poor condition.
Offenham Weir SP 065 470 / WR11 8QT – river left, launch at the ford track leading directly



to the weir. A tiny layby on a bend in front of houses. Parking also available at the Fish and Anchor Inn, with their permission.

Offenhams SP 049 457 / WR11 8RS – small parking area and picnic space beside the ferry slipway on river left at the end of Boat Lane, alongside the Bridge Inn.

Evesham (Waterside Gardens) SP 038 434 / WR11 1BU – roadside parking on river left along Waterside Road.

Evesham (Crown Meadow) SP 035 432 / WR11 4SS – pay and display car parks on river right

across Crown Meadow from the river, open in summer only.

Evesham (Abbey Bridge) SP 033 431 / WR11 4BY – Viaduct Meadow car park, on river right directly below Abbey Bridge. Pay and display.

Description

The crowds enjoying the river around Bidford Bridge are nothing new; from the Victorian era until the Second World War, this attractive village with its Georgian High Street was a popular daytrip from Birmingham. Novelist



📷 Marlcliff.

Barbara Comyns wrote a semi-autobiographical novel about her upbringing in Bidford;

“Awful people called trippers used to come to our village on Public Holidays ... They hired boats from Hollands and on the river they went, but often ended in it. They couldn’t row or punt, but splashed, screamed, showed their braces and got drunk ... they really were beastly and were always giving the village girls babies and making an awful noise, the babies as well as the trippers.”

Barbara Comyns, *Sisters by a River* 1947

The site of a former watergate is marked by shallow islands downstream of the bridge. The flow was controlled by adjustable paddles and rymers until the watergate was removed in the 1950s.

The Avon bends south upon leaving Bidford and maintains this course for just a kilometre until Marlcliff Corner, where Marlcliff Hill

rudely forces it west. This 30m-high cliff of marl (clay) is densely tree-covered, with dog roses adding colour.

“A bare scar of green and red marl, here covered with long gray grass and dotted with old thorn and crab trees, here clothed with hanging woods of maple, ash, and other trees, straggled over and smothered with ivy, wild rose, and clematis.”

Arthur Quiller-Couch,

The Warwickshire Avon 1892

Marlcliff Lock (AKA Inland Waterways Association Lock) is possibly the wildest on the river, tucked beneath the river left scarp with no road access. Due to the marl clay’s hardness, the Gloucester prisoners struggled with construction in 1969 and the lock channel had to be blasted out by Royal Engineers.

Paddle around the barrier above the weir to inspect. The weir is a messy (and slightly



📷 Marlcliff Weir.

overgrown) slope of boulders, down which a route can be picked, with care. Below, the water flows quickly among reedy channels. If portaging around the lock, either launch below this or cross the island to launch below the weir. The following kilometres enter the Vale of Evesham proper.

"... a vast green plain, soft and warmly sunlit, dotted with villages that clustered around square stone towers, flecked with the lighter green where the willows traced the meanderings of the Avon."

Harry Hopkins, *England is Rich* 1957

Although this idyllic description still holds true, modern industrial farming dominates the landscape beyond the river; stepping ashore or driving shuttle, you soon encounter enormous glasshouses, vast fields of covered fruit and seemingly limitless orchards.

The River Arrow, a sizeable tributary winding south from Redditch, joins the Avon on river right at a left bend. Garrett explored upstream on the Arrow; *"... into this mouth you may pull your boat, and ascending the tortuous tributary for some hundreds of yards, find shady spots in which to lie concealed from the observation of*

trippers on the Avon" (*The Idyllic Avon*, 1906). After another kilometre, the steep wooded river left bank is resumed when the Avon comes alongside Cleeve Hill. This was the site of Cleeve Lock, the star attraction for daytrippers on boat tours from Bidford; Garrett called it, *"perhaps, the finest place for boating on the Avon"* (*The Idyllic Avon*, 1906).

A ruined stone wall juts out on river right at SP 080 499, marking the site of Cleeve Lock. It's worth landing to explore the overgrown lock chamber, a well-preserved diamond shape, left high and dry by dredging. Cleeve Weir was breached in 1939 and Cleeve Mill was demolished during the 1960's 'restoration'. A ford ran below, used in 1265 by Prince Edward to cut off Simon de Montfort before the Battle of Evesham. Bodies found buried alongside the ford in 1824 were assumed to be drowned soldiers of Montfort's. They were re-buried at the Owen Stone (see page 110).

On river left, a steep rough road leads up to Cleeve Prior, a village of honey-coloured Cotswold limestone cottages with a sixteenth-century manor house. If you find yourself at fifteenth-century St Andrew's Church, seek out the grave of Sara Charlett who died in 1693, aged 309!

Cleeve Lock's lost heritage is thankfully recalled by the delightful **Harvington Lock**, two kilometres downstream. The weir is encountered first, a long and gently sloping structure dropping off to river left beneath a walkway. Hold off from paddling this until you've explored the lock area. The river channel splits. The left



📷 Harvington Weir.

(centre) channel leads to a covered dry dock. This is the original Robert Aickman Lock, built by the Upper Avon Navigation Trust (1969), on the site of the original circular lock. The far river right channel leads to Robert Aickman New Lock, built in 1982 after the first one kept silting up. On river left directly below the New Lock is Harvington Mill, a substantial ruin almost completely obscured by ivy and other greenery.

Portage New Lock on river right, otherwise head back up and paddle the weir. The weir feeds into a riffly channel, only re-joining the navigation channel after 500m. This whole lovely locale is dedicated to Aickman's memory, and there is a memorial to him alongside New Lock. He founded the Inland Waterways Association in 1946 and fought hard for the Avon to be restored as a navigation: *"Below Stratford all is ruin on the river for many miles"* (*Portraits of Rivers*, 1953).

Just 300m after the channels reconverge, a sharp right bend signifies the approach of **Offenham Lock**. The blind bend, an ominous-looking barrier and stern warning signs are somewhat off-putting ... however, if you *"Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood"* (*Henry V*) and venture past the barrier into the river left channel, you'll find yourself faced

📷 Offenham Lock.



by the smallest weir on the Navigation, with tourists wading across it! Overlooked by the Fish and Anchor Inn (a campsite), Offenham Weir is a driveable ford, marked on maps as a footpath. Size isn't everything, however; the smooth lip can of course generate a powerful stopper in higher flows. Below the weir, the river ripples across rapids channelled by waving water-crowfoot, with low branches to duck.

Offenham Lock (AKA George Billington Lock, named for a donor who died a week after completion in 1969) is most memorable for the quirky lock keeper's hut, a cylindrical tower built in 1981 and resembling a miniature lighthouse. It was designed to be flood-proof, but has been out of commission since 2007, when ... you guessed it, it was flooded out. Portaging, it is easiest to re-enter the water on the river left side of the lock.

The Fish and Anchor Inn is an obvious place to head for some shore leave (under new management, thankfully, after featuring in a 2007 episode of TV show *Ramsey's Kitchen Nightmares*). Footpaths lead from the pub steeply uphill to the Owen Stone (the remains of a medieval cross, perched atop a prehistoric mound) and the villages of South Littleton and Middle Littleton, the latter boasting a huge tithe barn dating from 1367–77 and now in the National Trust's care.

About 300m below Offenham Lock, the remains of Lower Harvington Lock are well hidden on river left. Depending on the water level (and reed density) it is sometimes possible to float among the gate supports and walls, surviving from 1820.

Bredon Hill will be first spotted at some point along this stretch, rising behind Evesham.

📷 Offenham Weir and the Fish and Anchor.





📷 Offenham.

The sharp left bend directing the Avon south towards Evesham is called Norton Corner. The river right embankment was the course of the Redditch and Evesham Railway, now a footpath. Behind, the slopes are covered with apple trees. Cue William Bliss ... *"The glory of Evesham is, of course, its orchards, and the best time to come down the Avon is a late Easter or an early Whitsuntide ..."* (*The Heart of England by Waterway*, 1933).

The large island 1.5 kilometres below Norton Corner is Dead Men's Ait (Ait, Old English for 'island'). The name references human remains discovered in the eighteenth century, believed to be Welsh soldiers massacred in the aftermath of the Battle of Evesham. The downstream end of the island is marked by the Bridge Inn on river left. This spot was an important crossing point; the Old London Road negotiated, *"a narrow stone bridge for foot-*

men" (John Leland, *The Itinerary*, 1535–43) and when this collapsed, a ferry service operated, continuing until recent years.

Offenham is a short walk up the road from the pub. The village, now surrounded by glasshouses, takes its name from King Offa of Mercia (the Dyke builder) who resided here. A left turn up Main Street will take you past the Church of St Mary and St Milburga (restored in 1862, named after a saintly noblewoman possessing power over birds) to the village's centrepiece.

"... standing up in the centre of the street – a tall gaily painted May-pole, telling of the days when it was "impossible to sleep on a May-day morning"

James Thorne,

Rambles by Rivers: The Avon 1845

Maypole dancing still takes place here in early June, during Offenham's Wake Week.

The boundary of Evesham is marked by the concrete Simon de Montford Bridge carrying



📷 Evesham Weir.

the A46 Evesham bypass. After Evesham East Railway Bridge a kilometre further, Evesham Marina is on river left, followed by the slipway of Gas Works Wharf on river right (no gasworks since the 80s); this is noteworthy as it gives access to Evesham Caravan Site, a possible camping spot.

Evesham Weir is a massive construction spanning diagonally across the river and marked out by a floating barrier and raised walkway. Although **Evesham Lock** is located 150m further downstream on river right (beside the distinctive A-frame lock house, built in 1976 over a sluice and mill stream), there is a signposted portage path close to hand on river left, albeit close to the weir's 'event horizon'. This leads alongside the weir face into the weir pool. The weir lands on rocks, making it uninviting if not exactly unpaddle-

able: *"These violent delights have violent ends"* (*Romeo and Juliet*). Don't paddle the tempting-looking chute, the former 'punt rollers' are gone, leaving exposed metal bolts. Workman Bridge was historically the end of the Upper, and start of the Lower, Avon Navigations. The bridge was built in 1856, named after Mayor Henry Workman. The previous medieval bridge was heavily damaged during the Civil War. Below the bridge, trees and public parks line both banks.

Workman Gardens line the river left bank; these were created in 1864 on the former site of warehouses, using foundations recycled from the old bridge. The whalebone arch was erected in 1906; the bones (three centuries old) were replaced by replicas in 2012. Evesham's River Festival is based here for several days every July.

Bidford-on-Avon and Shakespeare

"Bidford, where is alleged to have occurred the drinking bout which lead to Shakespeare's death."

Robert Aickman in *Portraits of Rivers* 1953 Bidford-on-Avon's claim to fame is that Shakespeare possibly drank himself to death there. Nothing concrete is known about what ended the playwright's life. Half a century after his death, Vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon John Ward reported tavern gossip that, *"Shakespeare, Drayton, and Ben Jonson had a merry meeting and, it seems, drank too hard, for Shakespeare died of a fever there contracted"*. Bidford's Falcon Inn enterprisingly claimed that theirs

was the offending pub and that Shakespeare had been a regular, showing off his supposed chair and tankard. A 1762 magazine article embellished this with a tale of Shakespeare and friends joining a drinking contest against the 'Bidford Topers', where the writers became 'intolerably intoxicated' and slept under a crab apple tree. The tree became known as Shakespeare's crab, which survived until being stripped apart by nineteenth-century souvenir hunters (Crab-tree Farm on the B439 marks the spot). The Falcon Inn was on High Street and is now a private home.

Abbey Gardens are on river right, overlooked by the imposing 33-metre Bell Tower, the only remnant of Evesham Abbey. The Abbey was founded in 702 AD on the site where Eove, the shepherd who gave the town its name, saw a vision of the Virgin Mary. It saw various collapses and rebuilds until the Bell Tower was completed in 1539, squeezed alongside the spire and tower respectively of All Saints and St Lawrence's parish churches. Only a year after the tower was completed, Henry VIII's commissioners came along to dissolve the abbey and the townsfolk raised £100 to keep the tower. A stone memorial in front of it marks the original burial place of Simon de Montfort. Abbey Bridge is fairly new (2014), replacing a 1928 concrete structure. Viaduct Meadow car park is on river right, directly after it.

 Workman Bridge, Evesham.



📷 Front Cover – Workman Bridge, Evesham.
📷 Back Cover – Lucy's Mill Weir, Stratford-upon-Avon.



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