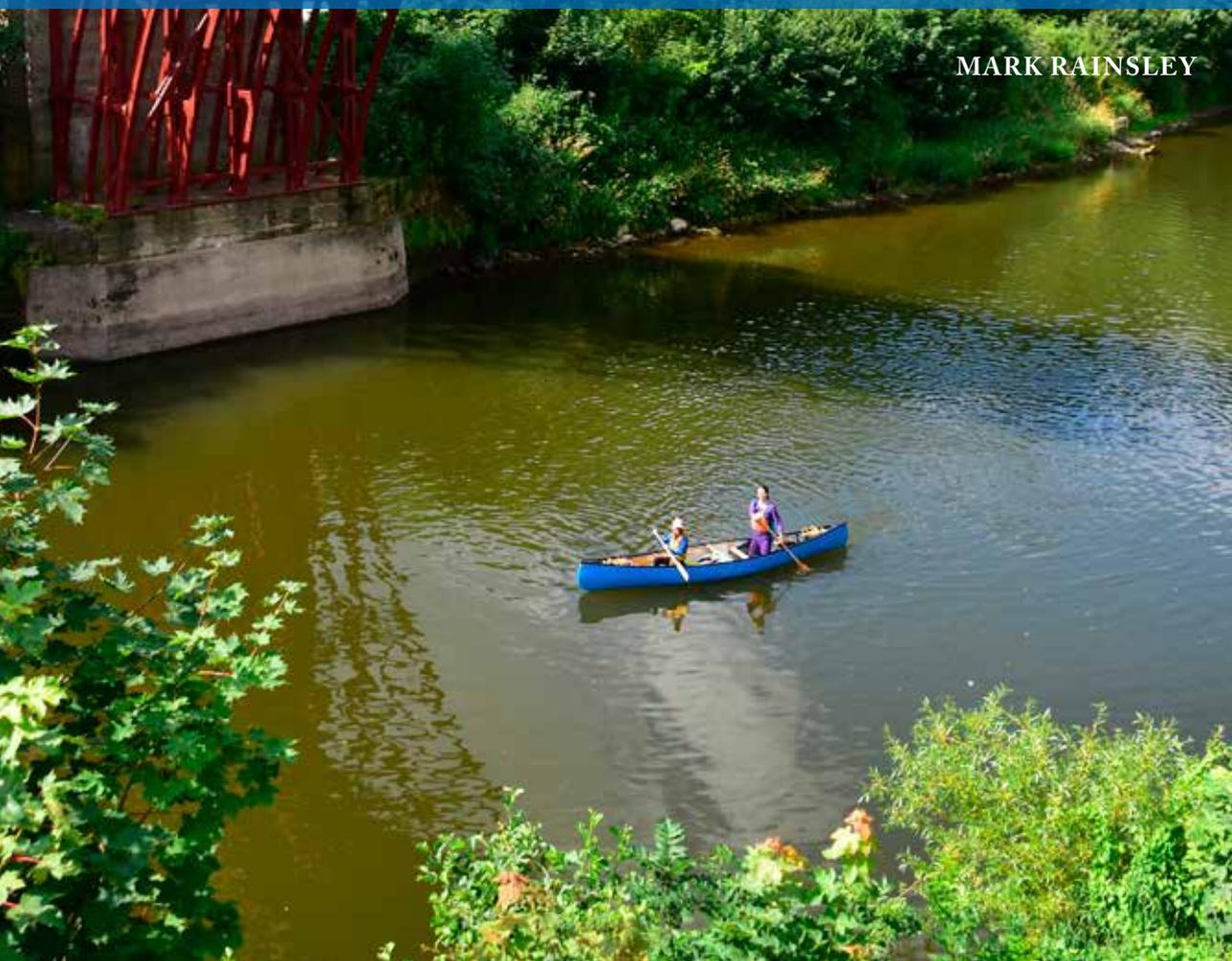




PADDLE THE SEVERN

A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS

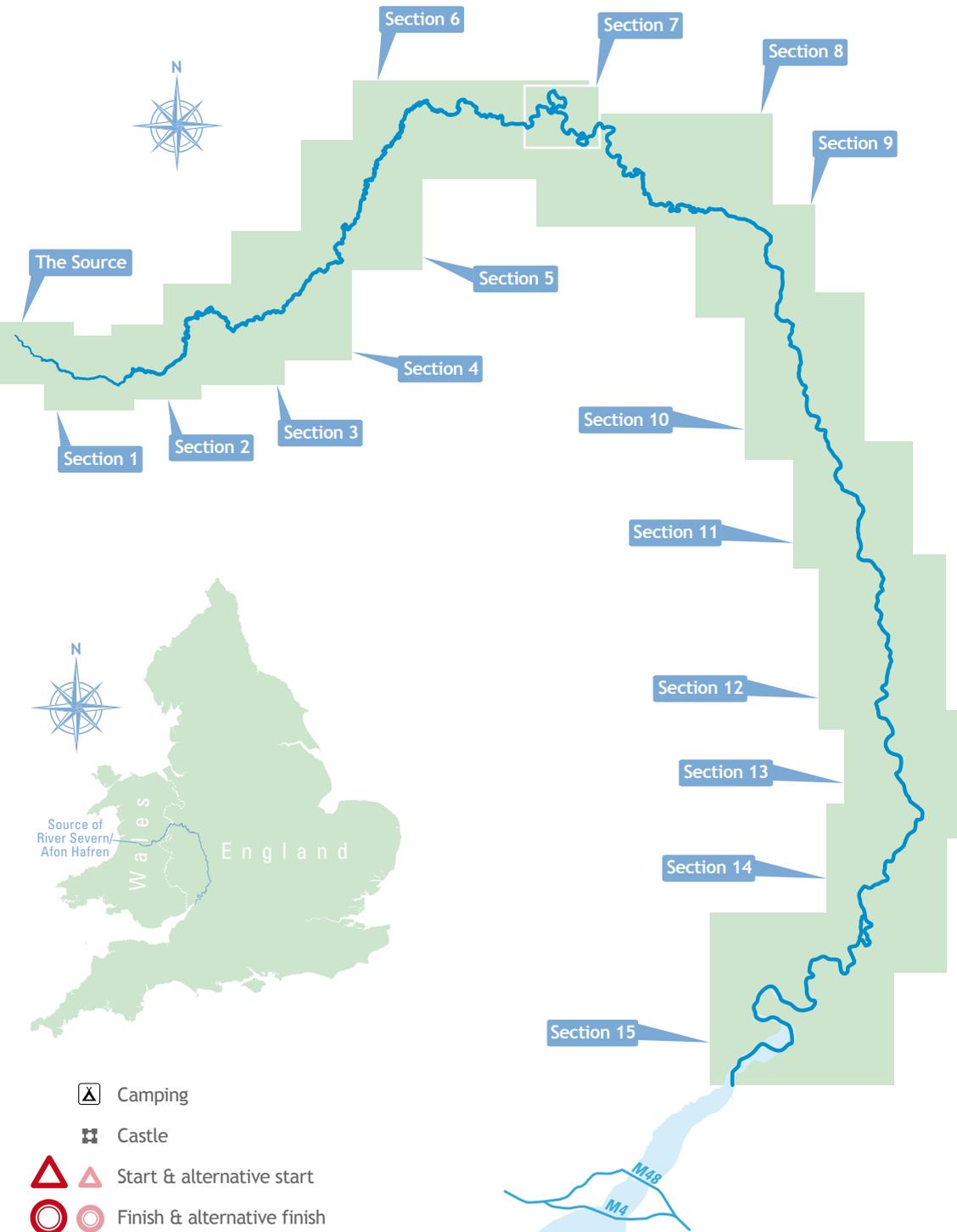
MARK RAINSLY



MARK RAINSLEY

PADDLE THE SEVERN

A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS



First published 2023

Published in Great Britain 2023 by Pesda Press

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Caernarfon

Gwynedd

LL55 4RN

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ISBN 9781906095895

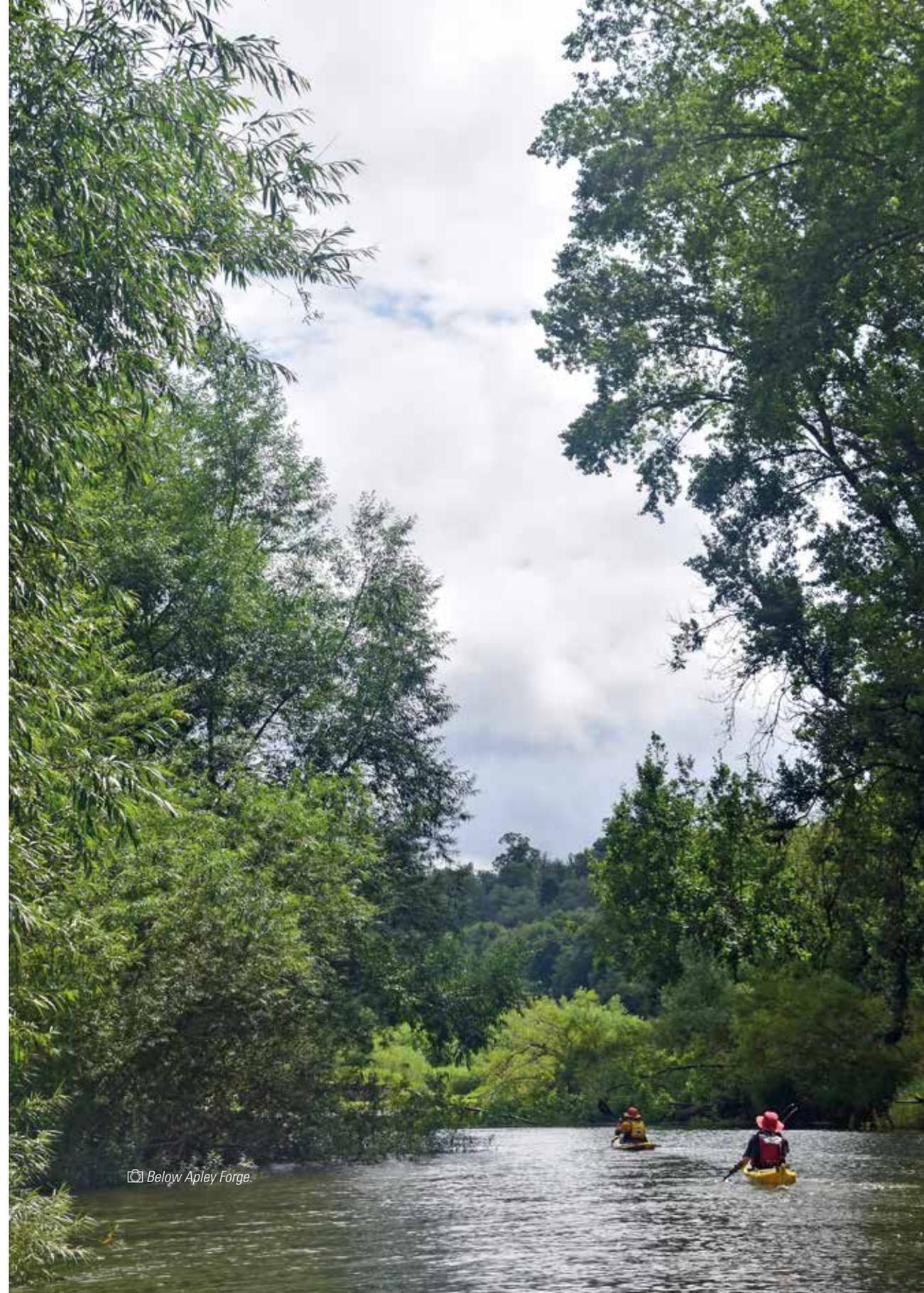
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Printed and bound in Poland, www.hussarbooks.pl



 Below Apley Forge.

Foreword

My first paddling experience of the River Severn was in 2018. I spent three days on her, paddling the wrong way. I'd innocently believed a friend who had told me that I wouldn't notice the flow of the river against me. I didn't really, until each time I stopped and was swiftly whisked downstream. This was part of my Land's End to John O'Groats SUP expedition. I'd never really done any river paddling before; I was an ocean lover through and through. But for 200 miles of my 1000-mile journey from one end of the UK to the other, I chose to paddle on canals and rivers, to follow plastic's journey from our lives inland to the ocean I love so much.

I knew I had only scratched the surface and despite a lot of my three days feeling like I was walking up a 'down' escalator, I wanted to return one day and paddle the rest – in the right direction. So, in 2020, as soon as we were released from lockdown and into the wilds, I came back to get to know her better.

The UK's longest river, steeped in history and myth, begins with a humble trickle in the Welsh hills. It isn't long before, in the Hafren Forest, she's already roaring over boulders, creating immense waterfalls and supporting stunning and dense nature along her banks, from enormous trees to tiny dragonflies. She's wild from the word go.

My plan was to paddle from the first navigable section of the river out to sea over a couple of weeks. I pushed out from the banks at Crewgreen, and for days I was awed by the ever-changing scenery. Fields of livestock gave way to impressive towering red rock, and as I paddled silently through these canyons, I could have believed that I was somewhere much more exotic than Shropshire. There was evidence of our industrial history at Ironbridge, juxtaposed with untameable rapids at Jackfield. I saw my first ever kingfisher; a bright blue streak darting across in front of me, then another, and another. Squirrels climbed enormous trees on the banks and crows settled into their riverside roosts for the evening.

As the river winds her way through towns and cities, she changes again. She becomes the centre-point of life. People connecting with nature on her banks, floating downstream on boats, feet dangling in the water whilst sat with a pint on a riverside pub pontoon. One day, I had the joy of sharing my experience with some wonderful people for whom the river is a lifeline for their mental health. The passion for this body of water follows her wherever she weaves.

The estuarine section of the River Severn is different again; fast flowing and fiercely tidal. The Bristol Channel opens out and stretches ahead, reminding us of how, all along the river's length, all the water, all the wildlife, and all these people are inherently connected to the ocean.

My trip down the length of the River Severn was to highlight exactly this; that we all have a stake in the health of our rivers and ocean, and in return a responsibility and ability to look after them. But first, that drive to protect a place comes from falling in love with it. I hope you fall in love with the River Severn, just as I did. And if you're planning an A to B paddle, I highly recommend paddling downstream.

Cal Major

OCEAN ADVOCATE, FOUNDER OF THE SEAFUL CHARITY

WWW.CALMAJOR.COM

WWW.SEAFUL.ORG.UK



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Introduction

“Apart from its historic associations or from its interest purely from the canoeist’s point of view, the River Severn is one of the finest rivers in England from its source to its mouth, traversing some of the finest scenery which these islands have to offer.”

Alec R. Ellis, *The Book of Canoeing*, 1935

My dad and I launched our kayaks into the River Severn above Ironbridge; mine was a fibreglass torpedo, his was a more graceful wooden affair with a wobbly v-shaped hull. Nanoseconds later, we emerged from the Ironbridge Gorge at Coalport Bridge, wide-eyed and breathless: we hadn’t realised that the Severn was flowing high! The river flushed us through the gorge’s (seemingly) towering waves with breath-taking rapidity, but despite our inexperience had the good grace to deposit us upright and safe at the end. Nearly four decades later, we repeated the trip in a double canoe; dad boringly insisted on hopping out and walking around the main rapids.

The River Severn offers so much to canoeists, kayakers and paddleboarders. Britain’s longest river accommodates the needs of touring, competitive and expeditioning paddlers (as well as those simply ‘bimbling’), with room to spare. Paddlers can choose between the river’s diverse but always attractive and engaging surroundings; Cambrian Mountains white water, North Shropshire Plain meanders, deep Midlands valleys, broad Worcestershire flood plains, expanses of estuarine sandflats. Several things may surprise paddlers uninitiated to the Severn; it is clean, green and lush, its ecosystems healthier than they have been in centuries; it is remarkably quiet and free of traffic; and finally (perhaps most surprising of all) it is untamed and free-flowing with white water along its length, only engineered in its final freshwater stretches. The Severn’s human history has been shaped by its course through the borderlands between England and Wales, but equally by its continual importance as a trade route. Folk from prehistoric times onwards have left traces accessible to paddlers, from cathedrals and castles to quaysides and canals. Most famously, Ironbridge was ‘the cradle of the Industrial Revolution’ with its Iron Bridge proudly recalling these epochal developments. If you do nothing else on the River Severn, at least paddle beneath the bridge!

This is the first paddling guidebook to the River Severn which covers the entire river in all its moods. This book aims to guide paddlers along the Severn and through its rapids, riffles and locks, whilst also highlighting the river’s natural and historical surrounds. I hope that it helps you to enjoy some great adventures on this long and lovely 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 canoe, kayak and paddleboard. 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 Thames* and *Paddle Shakespeare’s Avon*.



📷 The author.

Acknowledgements

A big thanks to the numerous paddling friends and family who joined me in exploring the length of the River Severn during 'research' for this book!

I'm hugely grateful to the following folk, who helped create this book; Cal Major was kind enough to write the foreword. Paul Robertson outlined his experiences surfing the Bore. Lotte and Peter Johns described their source-to-sea expedition. Jenna Sanders offered advice on Duke of Edinburgh Award expeditions. Bill Taylor supplied his experiences of the Severn's wildlife. Dr Lizzie Garnett offered input on geology.

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

Photographs

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



📷 *Maisemore Weir.*

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.

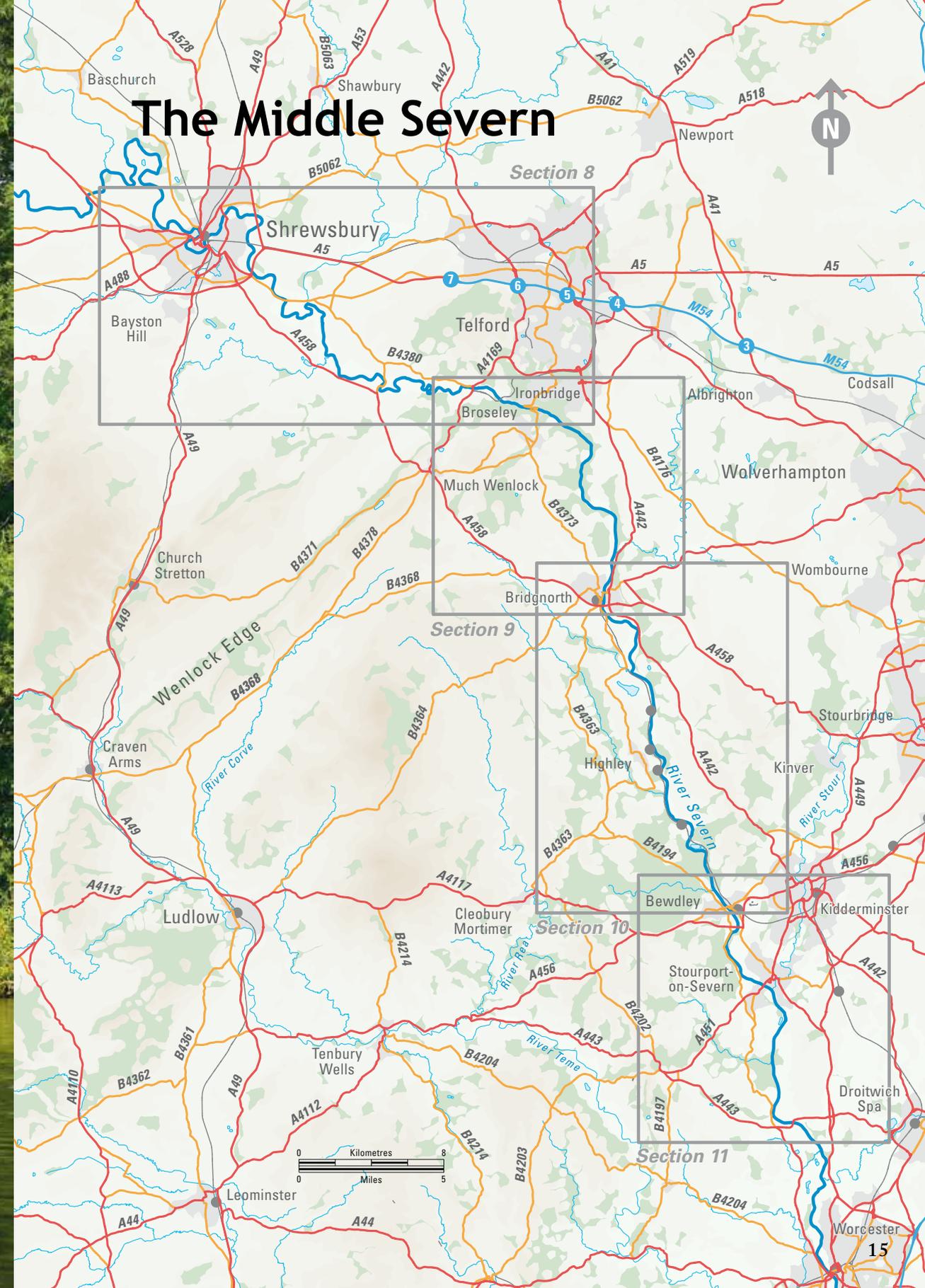
Whilst we have included a range of factors to consider, you will need to plan your own journey and within that ensure there is scope to be adaptable to local conditions; for example, weather conditions and ever-changing river hazards (especially weirs!). This requires knowing your own abilities, then applying your own risk assessment to the conditions that you may encounter. The varying environmental conditions along the Severn 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.



© Near Wroxeter.

The Middle Severn





High Rock, Bridgnorth.

Ironbridge. Photo | James Appleton.



Section 9

Ironbridge to Bridgnorth

Distance 14.3km

Start ▲ Dale End Park, Ironbridge SJ 665 036 / TF8 7DG

Finish ● Severn Park, Bridgnorth SO 719 933 / WV15 5AF

Introduction

“A winding glen ... hemmed in by lofty hills and hanging woods”

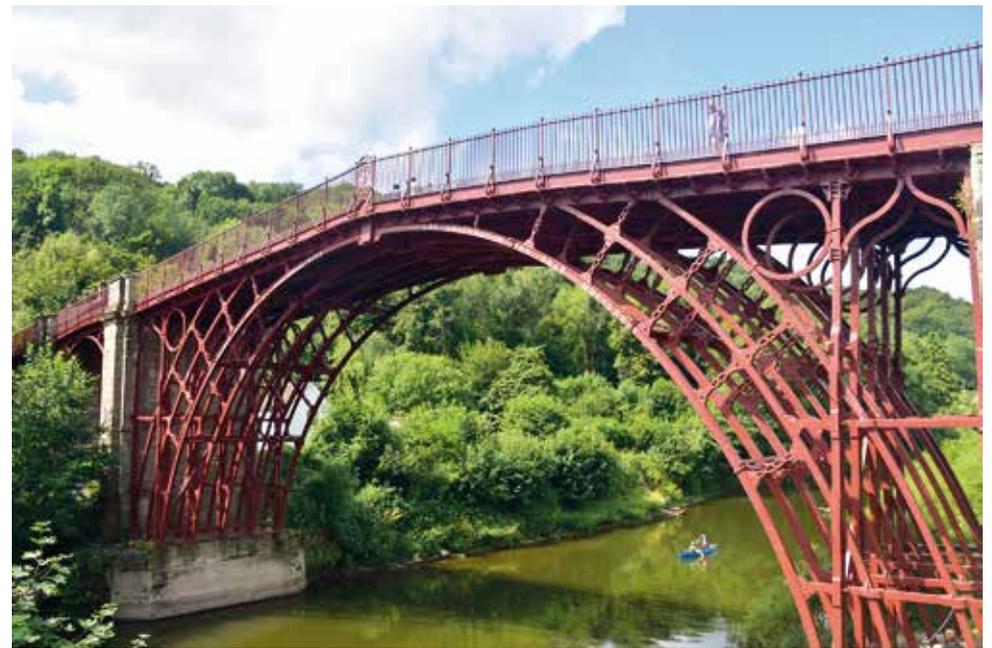
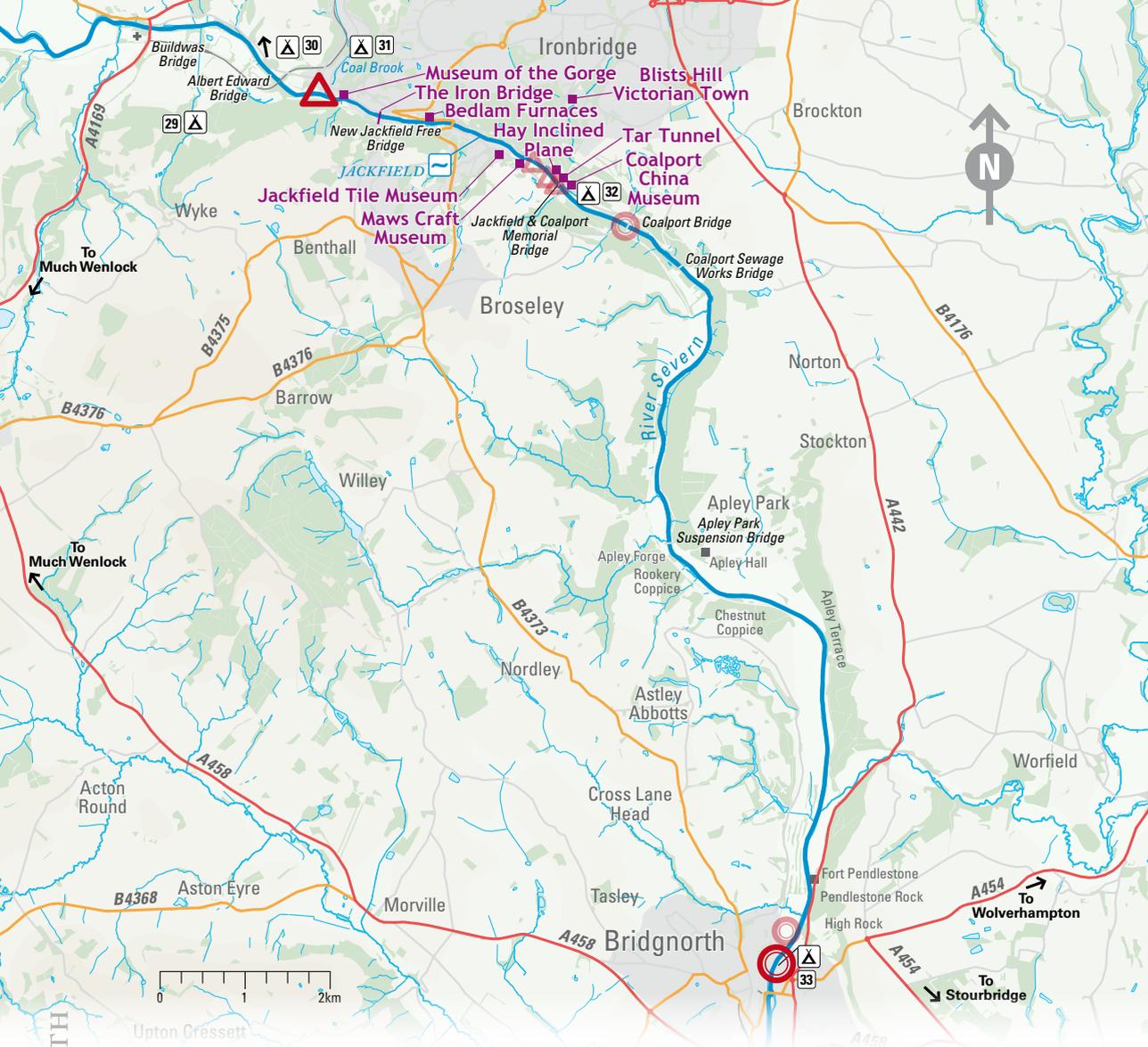
Samuel Bagshaw, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of Shropshire*, 1851

A stunning paddle through (rewilded) industrial heritage followed by a surprisingly remote deep valley, with the notable challenge of Jackfield Rapids to paddle or portage.

Launch points

Ironbridge (Dale End Park) SJ 665 036 / TF8 7DG – river left. Dale End car park in Dale End Park. Riverside car park and slipways, off

The Wharfage. There is also Wharfage car park 100m further downstream, but at time of writing paddlers here are being challenged by a canoe / raft hire company, who claim to control access to the river; ludicrous, obviously. Jackfield (Half Moon Inn) SJ 690 028 / TF8 7LP – river right, slipway and pub car park. ‘Patrons Only’, seek permission from Half Moon Inn. Coalport (Jackfield & Coalport Memorial Bridge) SJ 693 026 / TF8 7HR – river left, just upstream of bridge. Parking area accessed by small side road leading uphill from Coalport High Street. Steep / awkward access to the river.



📷 The Iron Bridge.

Description

The stream trickling into the Severn at the put-in is Coal Brook, which gives its name to Coalbrookdale. Coalbrookdale is where the industrial breakthroughs which made the area world-famous commenced, however the district is now named and better known for the Iron Bridge, opened in 1779 to showcase these achievements; welcome to Ironbridge Gorge, a UNESCO World Heritage Site! The extraordinary thing is just how much the area has recovered from the (comparatively recent) ravages of industry and regreened with limestone woodlands. The first landmark, reached immediately on river left, is the Museum of the Gorge. This peculiar, neo-Gothic, redbrick building was formerly the Coalbrookdale Company Warehouse. A horse-drawn plateway linked the

furnaces in Coalbrookdale to the wharf here, where 60-ton trows (barges) were loaded. The road above the river left bank is still called The Wharfage and the opposite bank is Bower Yard, where shipbuilding took place; in 1756, 139 boats were owned in the gorge! The Iron Bridge is just 450m downstream. The world's first single-span, iron bridge was lauded as *"One of the wonders of the world"* by Viscount Torrington shortly after its opening, and this icon of the Industrial Revolution still has the power to awe. Take time whilst drifting beneath the high rust-red arches to marvel at the construction methods; the bridge was slotted together in kit form from nearly 1700 individual parts, using what were essentially woodworking techniques.

Jackfield (Boat Inn) SJ 693 025 / TF8 7HS – river right, just downstream of Jackfield & Coalport Memorial Bridge. Parking beside Memorial Tree. Launch spot is accessed through the pub's beer garden, seek permission.
 Coalport (Coalport Bridge) SJ 701 021 / TF8 7JA – river left, just upstream of bridge. Parking is very limited, either beside bridge itself or near private road on right just past The Brewery Inn.

Bridgnorth (Southwell Riverside) SO 720 935 / WV16 4JZ – riverside parking on Southwell Riverside, river right and upstream of Bridgnorth Bridge. Free parking for two hours only, unload and leave car in a side street.
 Bridgnorth (Severn Park) SO 719 933 / WV15 5AF – large public park with riverside parking, on river left upstream of Bridgnorth Bridge. Large slipway and other points at which the water can be accessed.

In the 1850s Matthew Webb, son of a Coalbrookdale doctor, learned to swim here and even saved his brother from drowning beneath the Iron Bridge. In 1875 he achieved world fame as the first to swim the English Channel. High on the river left end of the bridge, the tourist shops and cafes of Ironbridge are overlooked by St Luke's; this 1837 church unusually has its tower at the east end, due to the unstable ground. Although you are not far into your trip, it is possible to land at steps just upstream of the bridge and climb up to explore the town.

The Severn remains narrow and hemmed in by steep wooded banks, as the Gorge continues.

The Iron Bridge

"The bridge itself makes a light & elegant appearance tho' apparently no ways deficient in strength. In viewing it either up or down water it resembles an elegant Arch in some ancient Cathedral."

Samuel Butler, *Diary*, 1782

Abraham Darby III cast the Iron Bridge 1777-1779, from a design by Thomas Farnolls Pritchard (d1777), at a cost of £5,000. The core of the bridge is five 21m ribs, each weighing over five tonnes, supporting a carriageway of cast iron plates above a single 60m span, 15m clear of the water to allow sailing boats through. The whole structure weighs in at about 350 tonnes, and the unstable, local geology has struggled to support it. The bridge was closed to traffic from the 1930s due to buckling stresses from the shifting banks and underwent

The stretch immediately below Ironbridge is delightful, fast-flowing over rocky reefs with kingfishers commonly spotted. Well into the twentieth century, this was the domain of oval-shaped coracles which ferried people cross-river to avoid the bridge toll and were also notoriously used for poaching game by night, all the way down to Bridgnorth.

A long rapid leads towards New Jackfield Free Bridge, a striking 'asymmetric cable stay' design supported by an impressive slanting 30m steel tower. It was built in 1994 after L. G. Mouchel's 'Old' Free Bridge of 1909 became unsafe; a section of this is preserved, alongside a plaque.

major restoration and renovation in 2000.

What was it for? It obviously connected the districts of Coalbrookdale and Broseley (albeit charging a toll) but the real reason for Darby III's extravagant creation was to show off the Darby dynasty's achievements in iron-making and the potential of their product. The Iron Bridge was a large, brash, unmissable advert, "*a stupendous specimen of the powers of mechanism*" (John Pinkerton, *A General Collection of Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World*, 1808). It was a success in this sense, drawing visitors (and customers) from around the globe and transforming Coalbrookdale into 'Ironbridge', promoted in 1876 as, "*the Brighton of the Midland counties*" by a local hotelier.

Careful now, as things happen fast; Jackfield Rapids are a short distance downstream of the bridge. By the time you spot the garden of the Black Swan pub on river right, you're almost committed to running them! If you are unfamiliar with the rapids you need to quickly land on the rocky river left bank and use the paths along the shore to inspect.

"These are the most serious, the only serious, falls on the Severn, and in low water can be very awkward."

William Bliss, *Canoeing*, 1934

Jackfield is indeed a 'proper' white water rapid, unlike anything else along the English Severn's course (except, possibly, Folly Point Rapids in Section 10). Large boulders channel jets of water, forming waves and small stoppers, with a noticeable drop in height: grade 3. The

rapids were formed by landslips and waste dumped down the banks, and have changed many times over the years; for example, a 1952 landslide devastated part of Jackfield village and narrowed the river by fifteen metres. The banks were stabilised in 2014 and rocks have been shifted to engineer a decent white water training and slalom site, lined by eddies. In very low flows, a central rock diverts the flow, in high flows all is submerged and you just encounter bouncy waves.

"If you lack confidence in your ability to manage the rapids you can always carry around."

W.G. Luscombe and L.J. Bird,

Canoeing, 1948

Portaging is simple enough following the river left paths down to the beach at the rapids' end, however there is no simple exit point

📷 Jackfield Rapids.



upstream of the rapids and a rope may prove helpful to lift your paddlecraft up the large boulders stabilising the bank. Incidentally, the rapids have existed for centuries; they were known as 'The Coals' by bargemen.

Jackfield itself, lining the river right bank, was formerly a riverport, exporting coal, earthenware pottery and tiles. This was the site of the largest encaustic tile works in the world, today recalled by Jackfield Tile Museum and Maws Craft Centre. Paddlers scanning the beaches downstream to Bridgnorth will find that they are largely comprised of tile remnants ('wasters'), often decorated!

The Jackfield and Coalport Memorial Footbridge was built in 1922, funded by public subscription to commemorate the fallen of the First World War. It connects the Boat Inn in Jackfield to the Shakespeare Inn in Coalport (river left), on the site of the Coalport ferry. In 1799, this capsized and 28 people drowned: *"It was a dark night, the boat was crowded ... with a strong tide running, it was drawn under."* (John Randall, *The Clay Industries*, 1877). Coalport was a key component of the Ironbridge Gorge industries, being *"... very advantageously situated, having the river, the canal, and two railways adjoining"* (John Randall, *Handbook of the Severn Valley Railway*, 1863). The remarkable Hay Inclined Plane lifted floating tubs (filled with coal or iron) out of the lower canal alongside the Memorial Bridge, up a 1 in 3 gradient and into the Shropshire Canal (built 1788–92), 63m above. This and the Tar Tunnel, a 910m tunnel bored into the hillside to extract bitumen and now part of



Coalport Bridge.

the Coalport China Museum, can be visited by landing upstream of the Memorial Bridge.

Coalport Bridge is an attractive cast iron span between supporting pillars, built in 1818 to replace a wooden bridge destroyed by ice floes in the epic flood of 1795. The bridge marks the end of Ironbridge Gorge, and the Severn leaves the World Heritage Site just downstream of the Woodbridge Inn which sits on river right.

The valley remains steep-sided and heavily wooded, with the Severn bubbling over frequent small rapids. After the unprepossessing Coalport Sewage Works Bridge is passed, the only outside intrusion comes from the river right shores; anglers, and the occasional walker or cyclist following the Severn Way / National Cycle Route 45 along the former course of the railway. The river left bank is frequently choked with fallen or trailing trees. Geoffrey Boumphrey appreciated this stretch: *"The six miles to Bridgnorth are through wonderful country; from the left banks woods rise without a break almost two hundred feet above the river; on the other side a quiet meadow or two throw open the view to even higher but more gently sloping hills to the west"* (*Down River*, 1936).



Apley Forge.

Apley Park Suspension Bridge (AKA Linley Bridge) is reached after four kilometres, a graceful, white-painted footbridge built in 1905 by David Rowell & Co. The Severn Valley Railway had to install the bridge as a condition of acquiring the land for Linley Station, uphill on river right; reputedly the owner of Apley Park wanted it to extend his fox hunts across the river. Apley Park sprawls along a hundred hectares of the river left valley side, around Apley Hall (not easily seen from the river, but dominating the view from the Severn Way footpath on the river right bank). Built in 1811 for Thomas Whitmore MP, this castellated, Gothic, stately pile was the largest and most expensive country house ever built in England. P.G. Wodehouse stayed here, and it was the inspiration for Blandings Castle, the location of his 'Jeeves and Wooster' stories. *"I do not think there can be a finer park in England, between an avenue of great horse-chestnut trees whose blossoms as we came down it that May noon were being blown upon the sunny water."*

William Bliss,
The Heart of England by Waterway, 1933

Apley Park was open to the public in Victorian times, but is now private and Apley Hall has been converted into apartments (probably not in the 'affordable housing' category).

Directly below the bridge is Apley Forge, a few isolated cottages on river right which (as the name implies) was the site of two forges on Linley Brook, fuelled by wood coppiced from Rookery Coppice behind. Rookery Coppice leads into Chestnut Coppice, where the trees hide rock houses cut into sandstone cliffs, before the river flows beneath the soaring heights of Apley Terrace, 100m above the river left bank. The sandstone extends into the river as a series of shallow slabs forming mild rapids. This steep and densely wooded scarp follows the Severn into Bridgnorth, the trees occasionally parting to reveal the cliffs beneath.

"If there is a finer river view than this anywhere in England – or indeed in Europe – I do not know it."

William Bliss, *The Heart of England by Waterway*, 1933

Paddlers pass beneath two successive sandstone crags in the final kilometre to Bridgnorth,

The Trial

Apley Forge was the site where in 1787, to the accompaniment of cannon fire, John 'Iron-mad' Wilkinson launched the world's first iron boat *Trial*. In a letter he noted, *"Yesterday week my iron boat was launched; it answers all my expectations, and has convinced the unbelievers who were 999 in a 1,000."*



📷 Arrival at Bridgnorth.

Pendlestone Rock and High Rock. The first looms above peculiar Fort Pendlestone, a forbidding, grey building which served as an ironworks for Abraham Darby III, was later a carpet factory and is now a private residence. High Rock (which is higher) rears right from the river and makes for a pretty grand entrance to the town.

The slipway at Severn Park is quickly reached on river left. Whatever else you do in Bridgnorth, take the funicular railway up the cliffs to High Town, for a tremendous view back along the stretch you just paddled.

Variations

If you just want to paddle and explore Ironbridge Gorge, it is probably easiest to launch at Dale End Park and simply paddle up- and downstream from this spot. If the river is flowing high however, it may be difficult to make progress back upstream. If you want to paddle Jackfield Rapids, there are a number of potential spots at which to egress below the rapids; these are outlined above, but check them out beforehand as none are straightforward.



📷 The Museum of the Gorge.

Sights to see

Apart from the bridge itself, there are no end of industrial heritage sites to explore around Ironbridge. A simple and free start point is the Bedlam Furnaces (SJ 678 033 / TF8 7AA), the remains of huge, brick, blast furnaces constructed in 1757, close to the river beside the B4373. The Ironbridge Gorge Museums are a series of sites dotted around the area, all with their own individual character and perspective on Ironbridge's past. Consider getting a ticket for them all, but you might need a week to absorb them in full! The Ironbridge Gorge Museums include the Museum of the Gorge (the former Coalbrookdale Company Warehouse, beside The Wharfage car park at the start of Section 9), Coalbrookdale Museum of Iron, Coalport China Museum, Jackfield Tile Museum, Hay Inclined Plane and the Tar Tunnel and Blists Hill Victorian Town. The latter is great for children; an open-air museum recreating the town's industrial heyday, complete with costumed actors!

"The most extraordinary district in the world": the Ironbridge World Heritage Site

"From Coalport to Ironbridge, two miles, the river passes through the most extraordinary district in the world: the banks on each side are elevated from a height of from 3 to 400 feet, studded with ironworks, brickworks, Boat Building Establishments, Retail Stores, Inns and Houses, perhaps 150 vessels on the river, actively employed or waiting for cargo; while hundreds and hundreds of busy mortals are assiduously engaged, melting with the heat of the roaring furnace."

Charles Hulbert, *The History and Description of the County of Salop*, 1836
Some sense of Ironbridge's industrial heritage can be gained from paddling through the Gorge, but paddlers are recommended to put aside a day or so ashore to explore and enjoy the area.

Ironbridge Gorge was primed to become the 'cradle of the Industrial Revolution' due to the raw materials available locally: wood, coal, iron ore, limestone and clay. It was however the Darby family's achievements which sparked revolutionary change. In 1708 Abraham Darby I moved from Bristol to take over the Coalbrookdale ironworks. In 1709 he pioneered smelting iron using coke (baked coal) instead of charcoal. This cheaper, faster process triggered an extraordinary expansion of activity in the gorge; by the mid-eighteenth century, iron production (literally) burned through 100,000 tonnes of coal a year, mined at

Madeley and Broseley. The iron was carried by horse-drawn plateway to wharves beside the Severn and loaded onto trows for the journey downriver; a fleet of 139 boats was owned in the gorge, supplied by the shipbuilders at Bower Yard. Other major industries included the manufacture of tiles, bricks, pottery and clay pipes.

Abraham Darby II built upon his father's innovations by developing iron cylinders for Thomas Newcomen's steam engines (cheaper than the brass previously used) and in 1779, Abraham Darby III unveiled the Iron Bridge which quite literally put 'Ironbridge' on the map.

By 1873, there were 232 furnaces around Coalbrookdale. Floating amongst today's idyllic greenery, it's hard to visualise the environmental devastation wrought by all this industry, which denuded the hillsides, generated vast heaps of waste spoil and polluted the river*. Composer Charles Dibdin, visiting in 1787, was horrified; *"Coalbrookdale wants nothing but Cerberus to give you an idea of the heathen hell. The Severn may pass for the Styx... the men and women might easily be mistaken for devils and furies"*.

* Not to mention the effects on the climate, evident with three centuries of hindsight, of switching from charcoal (a sustainable and carbon-neutral resource) to coal (a non-renewable fossil fuel).



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Britain's longest river offers so much to canoeists, kayakers and paddleboarders. Paddlers can choose between the river's diverse but always attractive and engaging surroundings; Cambrian Mountains white water, North Shropshire Plain meanders, deep Midlands valleys, broad Worcestershire floodplains, expanses of estuarine sandflats.

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This is the first paddling guidebook to the River Severn which covers the entire river in all its moods. This book aims to guide paddlers along the Severn and through its rapids, riffles and locks, whilst also highlighting the river's natural and historical surrounds.

MARK RAINSLY

