



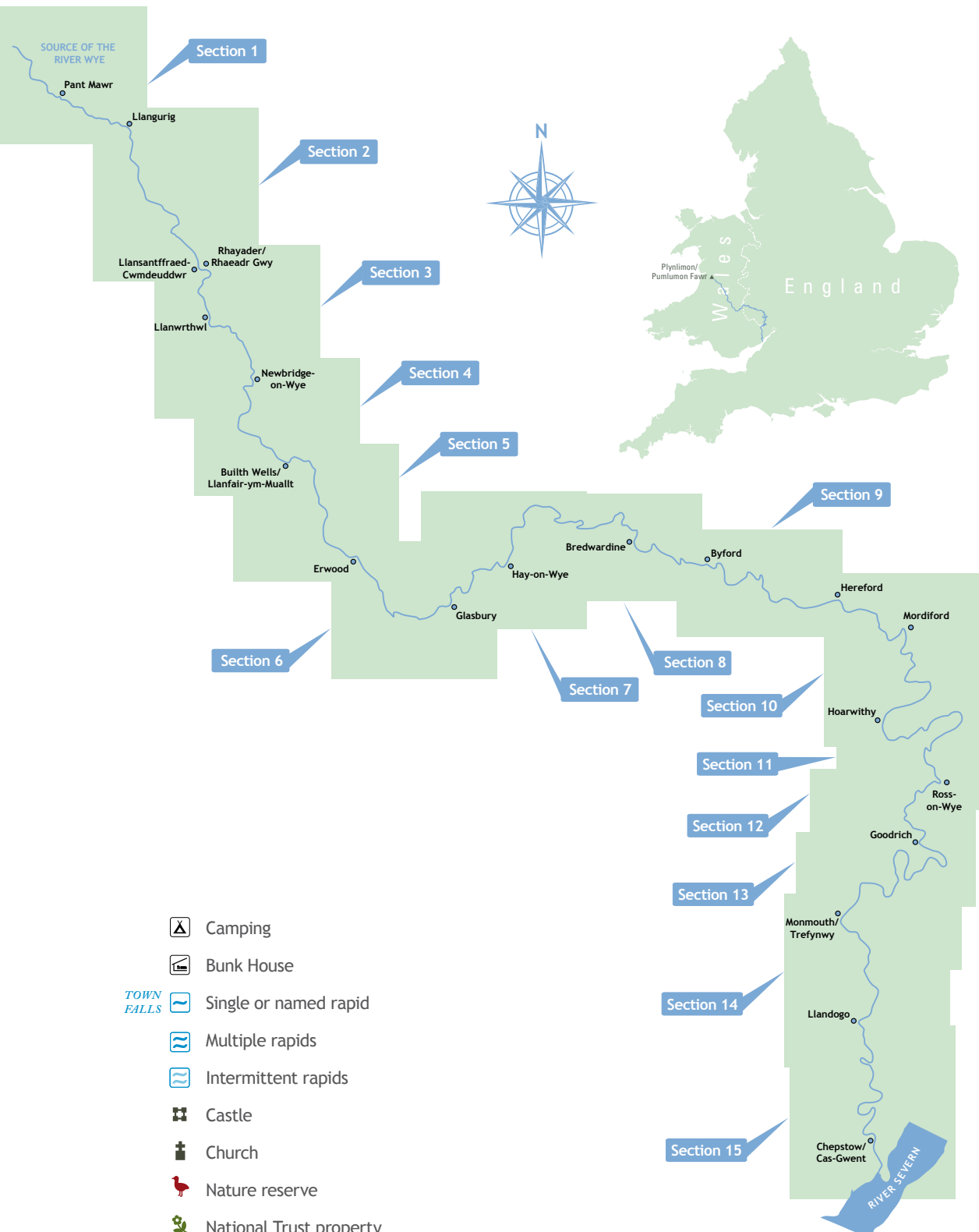
# PADDLE THE WYE

A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS



MARK RAINSLEY

2ND EDITION



**MARK RAINSLEY**

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A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS

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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 paddlesport 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), and easy to encounter from your paddlecraft.

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 over 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 and rivers by canoe and kayak. He is a prolific contributor to paddlesport magazines and other media. Mark has authored numerous other Pesda Press guidebooks including *South West Sea Kayaking*, *Paddle Shakespeare's Avon*, *Paddle the Severn* and *Paddle the Thames*.

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

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.







📷 Below Glasbury.





## Section 7

# Glasbury to Whitney Bridge

<b>Distance</b>	16.7km
<b>Start</b>	Glasbury SO 179 392 / HR3 5NW
<b>Finish</b>	Whitney Bridge SO 259 475 / HR3 6EW
<b>Difficulty</b>	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 / HR3 5NW – a small car park outside the scout hut, upstream of the bridge on river left. The river is reached

through a gate. Launching here was temporarily banned in 2021, see boxed text on page 65 for details.

Hay-on-Wye SO 229 427 / HR3 5BJ – a small car park with steps to the river, on river right downstream of Hay Bridge.

Whitney Bridge SO 259 475 / HR3 6EW – steps lead to the water from the river left bank, upstream of the bridge. A fee is payable to the toll bridge owners.



## Nearby attractions

The bookshops of Hay-on-Wye are well worth a browse! 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: Digeddi Wildlife Camping, Racquety Farm, The Pound (behind the Boat Inn, Whitney), Whitney Toll Bridge. The following campsites

are nearby: Radnors End Campsite, Ashbrook Caravans and Camping, Black Mountain View. There is a 'posh bunkhouse' belonging to Wye Valley Canoes at Glasbury, and Baskerville Hall Hotel offers camping and 'dorm' accommodation. B&B and hotel information can be obtained from the tourist information centre in Brecon on 01874 622485, and Hay-on-Wye Tourist Information Bureau on 01497 820144.



## 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 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.



📷 Crowded craft at Hay-on-Wye.

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 river left bank, after 2km.

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 Wyecliff. This pebble weir is quite harmless (and indeed washes out to become indiscernible in high water), usually being paddled via the exhilarating chute alongside the river 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 Glyndwr, 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 cattle during their journey from Mid Wales to market in London, and is sometimes called the 'first house in England'.

Whitney Bridge is unmistakeable. 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

📷 *Black Mountains from below Glasbury.*



📷 *Lunch stop below Glasbury.*





📷 Boatside Weir above Hay.

toll bridges left in the country. You might also spot the site of another bridge just upstream, which carried a now-dismantled tramway.



📷 Playing on Boatside Weir

## 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 20 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 was held, and this is now a major international event running for ten days each May.







## Section 8

# Whitney Bridge to Bycross

<b>Distance</b>	20.7km
<b>Start</b>	Whitney Bridge SO 259 475 / HR3 6EW
<b>Finish</b>	Byecross Farm SO 376 426 / HR2 9LJ
<b>Difficulty</b>	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 Bridge SO 259 475 / HR3 6EW – 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 / HR3 6EH - Steps on river left leading to car park beside the

Boat Inn. Landing generally welcomed, to customers. Launching only with prior permission from the Boat Inn – park and launch beside the Boat Inn on the river left bank.

Bredwardine Bridge SO 336 447 / HR3 6BT – Very limited parking in a layby on river left. Access the river from the footpath on river right, follow it downstream until the bank isn't too steep.

Byecross Farm SO 376 426 / HR2 9LJ – steps and a canoe ramp lead up to the campsite entrance.



📷 Front Cover – Wintour's Leap.  
📷 Back Cover – Below Kerne Bridge.



# PADDLE THE WYE

## A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS

SOURCE OF THE  
RIVER WYE



The Wye is one of Britain's finest paddlesport touring rivers, and offers something for every kind of paddler. This guide provides the information and advice you need to plan your own Wye journey, whether it's single or multi-day, whitewater or sedate cruising.

The author, Mark Rainsley, has divided the river into 15 sections, which are described in detail with distances, grades, access points and campsites. These sections can be paddled as single day trips, or combined into multi-day adventures, and there are 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.

**2ND EDITION**

(First published as *River Wye Canoe and Kayak Guide*.)



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