

The great British weekend Wye Valley

At first I thought it was rain but then I realised it was what William Wordsworth called the "sweet inland murmur" of a waterfall. This was the sound I had come to hear, for the waterfall in question is the one that features in Wordsworth's poem, *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*. When the old Romantic came to the Wye Valley, with its ruins of a Cistercian abbey and its "steep and lofty cliffs", in the 1790s the area was already a tourist destination. It was put on the map a decade before by a book that can lay claim to being Britain's first guidebook.

Observations on the River Wye, by William Gilpin, was an instructive account of a boat journey downriver from Ross to Chepstow in which Gilpin celebrated the valley's "picturesque" landscape of crags, forests and romantic ruins. Clutching copies, Wordsworth and many others followed, and modern tourism in Britain was born.

By car, the distance from Ross to Chepstow is 20 miles. But below the road,

the river twists over a far greater distance, through three counties — Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire — and two countries. Floating on the Wye's glassy waters, hemmed in by the deep gorge, those pioneering tourists experienced a concentrated capsule of nature and history.

They started their tours by the Hope and Anchor at Ross, but for geographical convenience I started where they disembarked and completed the journey in reverse, and by road (you can't do the trip by boat as the river is no longer navigable). Parking in Chepstow Castle car park, I spotted an old acquaintance, Anne Rainsbury, and hailed her. Anne is the curator of Chepstow Museum and an expert on the Picturesque Movement popularised by Gilpin.

"We've acquired some more paintings since you were here last," she said, showing me round a room of 18th and 19th-century pictures of the Wye, including a watercolour by Thomas Rowlandson. Anne also told me about the 'Overlooking the Wye' scheme, a £3 million project to improve more than 40 historic sites within the Wye Valley AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). "Piercefield Park has really been cleaned up," she said, and pressed a booklet into my hand (one of a series available from tourist offices that includes the Wordsworth walk). So, following directions on the page, I walked from Chepstow Castle into the 18th century.

Piercefield Park was landscaped in the mid-1700s to provide views of the Wye in keeping with Picturesque principles.

The River Wye near Redbrook, Monmouthshire



These viewing points were so overgrown a few years ago that it was difficult to locate them. Now you can stand where the German Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau stood in 1797, and find yourself agreeing with him that: "The grouping of this landscape is perfect. I know of no picture more beautiful."

Back in the car, I drove north into the heart of the Wye gorge, passing what looked like a group of Pückler-Muskau's fellow countryfolk striding out for Tintern Abbey. The abbey ruins were the holy grail of the early Wye tourists, and remain so for the modern visitor.

For Gilpin, the roofless abbey was not picturesque enough. He moaned about the excessive "regularity" of the gable ends and suggested taking a mallet to

them to knock them about a bit.

Upstream at Yat Rock, a limestone crag jutting 500ft above the Wye, I saluted the union jack on its flagpole, drank in sublime views of river and hills, while waiting for glimpses of the peregrine falcons nesting on Coldwell Rocks.

That night, in my hotel room overlooking the Wye near Ross, I fell asleep to the murmur of the river, and woke up feeling poetic. Time to follow Wordsworth's lanky legs up the valley above Llandogo, through chasms of ferns and birdsong. Reaching the Bread and Cheese Stones — the setting he probably had in mind for the opening of the Tintern Abbey poem — I drew breath and heard the sound of water.

Nigel Richardson

Need to know

Where to stay and eat

Wilton Court (01989 562569, wiltoncourthotel.com) has doubles from £125 B&B, or £165 B&B with dinner. For lunch, Brockweir Village Shop (01291 689995, bandhvilageshop.co.uk) has great baguettes.

Further information

visitherefordshire.co.uk, www.visitweyvalley.com