

## Exploring Historic Dean



Fourteen scenic walks in and around an ancient forest  
John Sheraton and Rod Goodman



# Walking Through Dean History

by  
John Sheraton and Rod Goodman



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## Introduction

**This book is intended as a follow-up to two earlier walk books published by the Forest of Dean Group of the Ramblers' Association in 1988 and 1993. The authors have participated in, and sometimes led, many walks with the Group over the years, and one of us has also spent many pleasant hours exploring the nooks and crannies of the Forest, searching for the locations of old mines and other historic sites. Hence, this book not only describes 14 new walks in this lovely area, but is designed to encourage people to look at the many natural and historic features which they pass on the walks. The area has a long and fascinating history, including some unique traditions. It has long been a working forest, and an important centre of coal and iron mining and stone quarrying. Indeed it played a significant part in the industrial revolution. Because much of the area is still forest and has not been built on or converted to other uses, evidence of many of the old industrial sites can still be seen. It is surprising what can be seen as you walk through the woods, although you do need to keep your eyes open. In these walks, we have tried to cover as many aspects of the history of Dean as possible, from prehistory to recent times, as well as taking in some beautiful areas of woodland, attractive villages, and spectacular viewpoints. The Forest is probably at its best in spring and autumn, but can be enjoyed at any time of year. We hope that visitors will be encouraged to come back and explore more of this beautiful area. Maybe local people will learn something new about the area they live in. However, we would be pleased if anyone can add any interesting information about the places we have described.**

All the walks are located on the Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure sheet 14: Wye Valley & Forest of Dean (1:25 000 scale). We have included some basic information for each walk: a brief description of the terrain (including the number of stiles), highlights, parking, refreshment facilities (if any), public transport, and total distance. We have not attempted to 'grade' the walks or to indicate times, as these depend so much on individual ability. Most involve some climbs and descents, but should still be suitable for people of reasonable fitness. Some parts of Walks 5 and 7 include sections of relatively flat former railway lines, now used as cycle tracks, and these can generally be accessed by wheelchair users.

A few words of caution: much of the area is a working forest, so, although the details were correct at the time of writing, some things will inevitably change. Some forest tracks are gradually becoming overgrown, whereas others may be widened or new ones constructed, particularly when areas of woodland are being harvested (please obey warning signs). Note particularly that old mines and quarries are dangerous, so keep well clear of any old shafts or quarry faces, whether fenced or not, especially if you leave the designated walk routes. Never venture underground unless guided by an experience mine explorer with local knowledge. Some parts of the forest can be muddy at any time of the year, notably during the famous 'non-summer' of 2008, so do wear appropriate footwear, preferably boots. Waterproof clothing is also advisable, and we recommend taking a compass and copy of the OL14 map. The number of stiles given is only approximate, as some can be by-passed by using an adjacent gate, and others may have been replaced by kissing

gates. We have tried to use footpaths which are reasonably clear and well-used, but a few may tend to become rather overgrown during the summer months. Any problems, such as blocked footpaths or broken stiles, on public rights of way (shown in green on the OL14 map) should be reported to the Public Rights of Way Team at the Gloucestershire County Council offices (see 'Useful Contacts'). Most of the walks can be reached by bus, although not necessarily to the starting point given. Information on local bus services is available from the Tourist Information Centre in Coleford, or by contacting the bus companies (again, see 'Useful Contacts'). The nearest main-line railway stations are at Gloucester, Lydney, and Chepstow. Refreshment facilities should only be taken as a guide, so please check opening times first if you plan to use them on a walk. Unfortunately, quite a number of pubs have closed recently. Many of the points of interest mentioned are on private land, so please only view from a public place and do not trespass.

## Acknowledgements

Most of the walks in this book are based, to some extent, on routes covered by various leaders on FoD Ramblers' Group outings, which we gratefully acknowledge. However, only one (Walk 14) is directly 'borrowed' from other leaders: thanks to Sheila and Fred Gray. We thank the following for their help, either with putting walks together or acting as 'guinea pigs' to check out the route descriptions and maps: Christine and Brian Bamber, John Bevan, Chris Bracey, Henry Burden, Rosemary Callow, Les Caton, Pete Ellis, Barbara and Alan Fisher, David Fisher, Sandy and Dougie Gentles, Fred Gray, Olive Jeanes, Paul McMahan, Phil Rawlings, Derek Sheppard, Jean Sheraton, Alec Waldie, Ronnie Walker, and Susan and Robin Warren. Martin Hillier kindly loaned some old postcards for scanning, and Peter Crow provided the LIDAR image of Welshbury Hillfort. Ian Pope allowed us to use some of his historic images, and John Norman allowed us to use photos from the Hallam Collection. Finally, we thank our wives, Jean and Marian, for their patience and support.

## A Brief History of Dean

**The Forest of Dean, situated between the Wye and the Severn, has long been a somewhat isolated, mysterious place. To an extent it still is, which only adds to its attraction. It is impossible to summarise the history (both natural and human) of this beautiful area adequately in only a few pages, so we will just try to provide a brief outline in order to put the walks into some sort of context.**

### Geology

The Forest of Dean may be a largely upland area, but the underlying rocks are in the form of a large basin or syncline. This consists of sandstones and mudstones of the Devonian Old Red Sandstone around the edge of the Forest, overlain by Carboniferous Limestone and Upper Carboniferous Coal Measures in the middle (*see section and map opposite*). The Carboniferous rocks have been economically important since Roman times, yielding iron ore, coal, and building stone, as well as limestone for burning. Much of the area to the west and north of the Forest consists of Lower Old Red Sandstone, although there are older (Silurian) sandstones, shales, and limestones around May Hill and Woolhope, and the Malvern Hills are made up of even older Precambrian igneous rocks (mainly granite and diorite). To the east, the wide floodplain of the River Severn is formed in Triassic mudstones belonging to the Mercia Mudstone Group (Keuper Marl). These are overlain by the clays and thin limestones of the Lower Jurassic Lias Group, which, in turn, is overlain by the Middle Jurassic Inferior and Great Oolite Groups, the cream-coloured limestones so characteristic of the Cotswold Hills. However, much of the Severn Vale is covered by deposits of sand, gravel and clay deposited during repeated glaciations over the last 2 million years of the Ice Age or Quaternary.

Apart from the Silurian rocks of the Longhope–May Hill area, the oldest rocks in Dean are the Raglan Mudstone and St Maughan's Groups and the Brownstones, all belonging to the Lower Old Red Sandstone (Upper Silurian and Lower Devonian), which form the rim of the basin. These are overlain by the Upper Devonian Quartz Conglomerate, which contains large numbers of pebbles, mainly quartz, and was widely used for making millstones, and the Tintern Sandstone Group. The Devonian rocks represent continental deposits laid down on a wide, arid coastal plain over which large rivers meandered. In early Carboniferous times, the sea spread over the whole area, and the Lower Limestone Shale was deposited relatively close to land. As the sea became deeper, purer limestones were formed: the Lower Dolomite and Crease

Quartz Conglomerate.



Limestone (which contains most of the iron ore), and, after an intervening period of uplift and erosion, the Whitehead Limestone. The sea then became shallower, and the sandstones and grits of the Drybrook Sandstone Group were deposited. A long period of uplift and erosion followed and a shallow nearshore-intertidal basin was formed, into which rivers discharged from higher ground to the north. Extensive swamp forests grew up, and rotting vegetation formed thick beds of peat, now compressed into coal seams. The Upper Carboniferous Coal Measures consists of the Trenchard and Pennant Groups (sandstones and minor mudstones), separated by the important Coleford High Delf Seam, and the Supra-Pennant Group (mainly mudstones, with some sandstones). There are around 15 workable coal seams. The end of the Carboniferous was another period of uplift and folding during the Variscan orogeny (an episode of mountain building caused by compression of the crust). The Forest of Dean basin was formed at this time. The Triassic Mercia Mudstone Group (mudstones, sandstones, and thin layers of gypsum and rock salt), which occurs in a down-faulted basin just to the east of the Forest (e.g., around

Newnham), reflects a return to arid conditions. It probably represents wind-blown dust, deposited in shallow salt-lakes and sun-baked mudflats. However, the overlying shales, sandstones, and limestones of the Penarth Group (seen near Westbury) record the inundation of the Triassic desert by a shallow sea. Finally, the Jurassic Liassic shales and limestones, world-famous for their fossils, were formed under marine conditions. Something of the geology of the area is seen on most of the walks, but particularly Walks 1, 3, and 10-13. The formation of the Lower Wye Gorge is explained on Walks 1 and 6. The 'Geomap' at New Fancy picnic site, is a large-scale stone geological map of Dean, which shows the relationships between the mining and quarrying industries and the underlying rocks. A visit is highly recommended.

### Prehistory

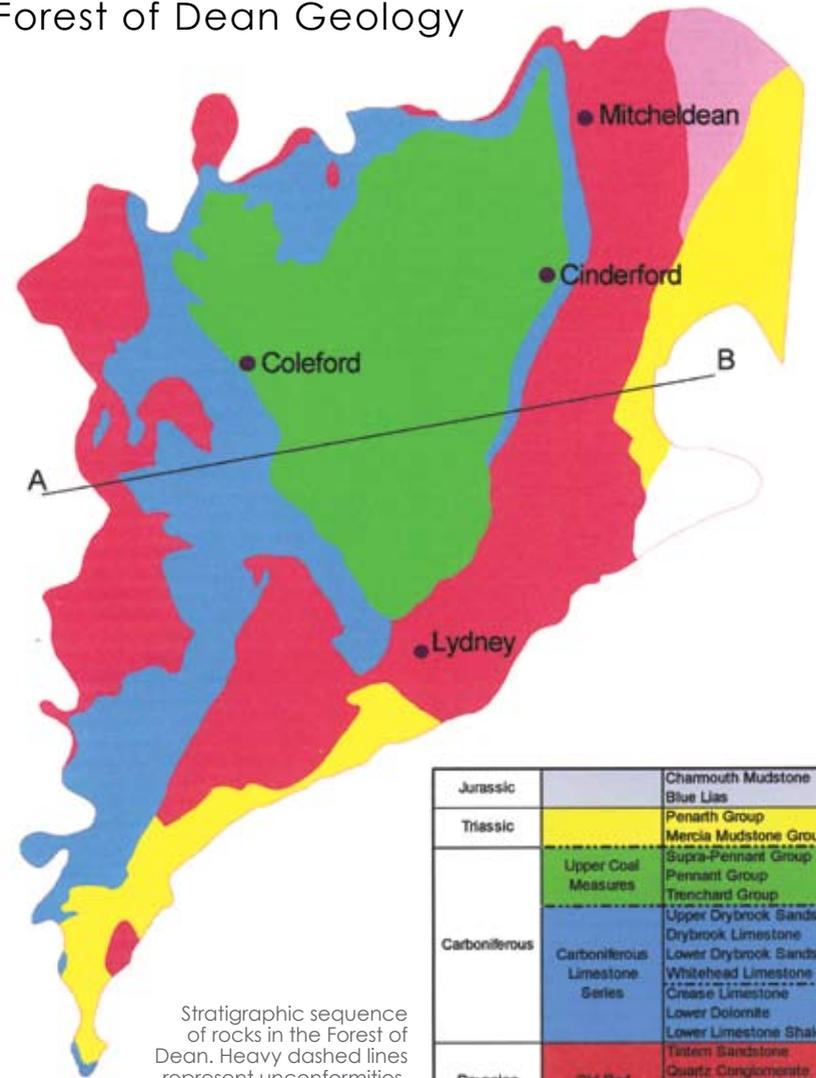
Dean does not have anything like the number of known prehistoric sites of places like the Wiltshire Downs, but this is hardly surprising in view of the largely forested nature of the area. Nevertheless, concentrations of



This large stone geological map shows the main stone quarries, iron mines, and collieries, as well as coal seams (black) and railways (white).

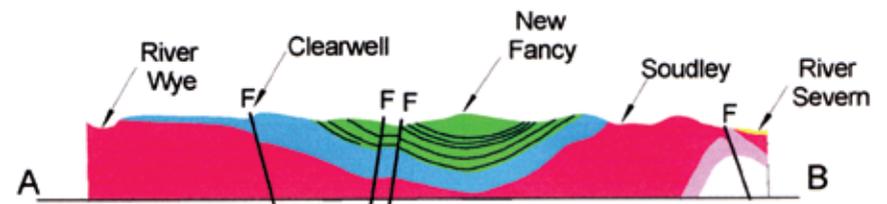


## Forest of Dean Geology



Jurassic	Charnouth Mudstone Blue Lias	200 my
Triassic	Penarth Group Mercia Mudstone Group	241 my
Carboniferous	Supra-Pennant Group Pennant Group Trenchard Group	310 my
	Upper Drybrook Sandstone Drybrook Limestone Lower Drybrook Sandstone	360 my
	Whitehead Limestone Crass Limestone Lower Dolomite	
	Lower Limestone Shale	
	Devonian	Tiden Sandstone Quartz Conglomerate Borestones Old Red Sandstone
Silurian	St Maughart's Group Ruglan Marl Group Ludlow Series Wenlock Series Llandovery Series	443 my

Stratigraphic sequence of rocks in the Forest of Dean. Heavy dashed lines represent unconformities, periods of uplift and erosion which are also time gaps. Ages in millions of years of the bases of the main rock units are shown.





The Longstone near Staunton.

Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age, c. 8000–4000 BC) flint tools in much of the more open country are probably the sites of hunters' camps. Many are on relatively high ground (e.g., near St Briavels and English Bicknor), but others (Taynton and Newent) are low-lying. Finds of Neolithic stone and flint axes and other tools have a generally similar distribution. This is thought to be a time when hunter-gatherer communities began to give way to farming settlements, although there is little direct evidence for this in Dean. One of the most important archaeological sites in Dean is King Arthur's Cave (*Walk 1*), where a variety of Upper Palaeolithic to Neolithic flint implements, as well as coarse pottery of Neolithic type, have been recovered. During the Bronze Age (c.2000–7th century BC), concentrations of artefacts, including copper and bronze, suggest the sites of settlements, probably of circular thatched timber huts. A number of round barrows (burial mounds) are known, but only one (on Tidenham Chase) has been excavated (*Walk 14*). Several large standing stones probably date from about this time, the best known being the Longstone, by the main road about ½ mile southeast of Staunton.

During the Iron Age which followed, iron-smelting techniques were introduced, so that the iron-ore deposits of Dean would have become a valuable resource. This was also the time when impressive hill forts were built. Three of these are seen on walks, Little Doward (*Walk 1*), Welshbury (*Walk 10*), and Soudley (*Walk 3*), and there are others at Symonds Yat and Lydney Park. Their purpose is uncertain, but they may well have been tribal and/or religious centres, and could have been used for storage of produce and defence in time of war; some (Lydney Park, Symonds Yat) seem to have been used for iron working. Associated settlements are difficult to find, but the newly developed LIDAR aerial survey technique may help to discover any that do exist (*Walk 10*). Excavations have yielded a variety of pottery, metalwork (brooches, weapons, etc.). A late Iron Age ('Celtic') warrior burial, found near Coleford in 1987, included an iron sword and shield boss, and three bronze rings.

## History

British recorded history begins with the Romans, but most of the evidence for Roman activity in Dean is archaeological. Dean was probably the most important iron-mining centre in Britain between the mid-3rd and mid-4th centuries, and coal was also mined here, e.g., north of Coleford. There were major iron-smelting settlements at Ariconium, near Ross-on-Wye, and Monmouth (Blestium), and smaller ones elsewhere. A Roman road ran from Ariconium to the Severn, near Lydney (*Walk 2*). A large temple complex dedicated to Nodens was built near Lydney, where it clearly post-dates iron workings, in the 4th century, and there is a temple to Sabrina at Dean Hall (*Walk 12*). Unfortunately, neither is generally open to the public, but that at Lydney Park can be seen when the gardens are open for a limited season in the spring. Roman villas are more modest than those of the Cotswolds, many being involved with iron making. There are examples at Clearwell, St Briavels, Lydney Park, Boughspring and Chesters, near Woolaston, the last being close to a contemporary port. The most important early medieval earthwork is Offa's Dyke, built by King Offa of Mercia in the late 8th century as a boundary

marker, which stretches for about 80 miles near the present English–Welsh border (*Walks 6 and 14*). The circular churchyard at Hewelsfield suggests a Saxon origin (*Walk 14*), and St Dubricius may have founded a church at Welsh Bicknor in the 5th or 6th century (*Walk 8*). Some of the ridge and furrow field-strips still evident in places near the Severn may date from Saxon times.

Soon after the Norman conquest of 1066, stone castles were built at Chepstow and Monmouth, followed in the next few decades

by those at Goodrich and St Briavels. There were other fortifications at English Bicknor, Littledean, Stowe, and Lydney Park. St Briavels Castle was the administrative and judicial centre of the Forest of Dean, which became a Royal hunting forest. It was the official residence of the Constable of St Briavels and Warden of the Forest, who looked after the King's interests (*Walk 6*). For centuries it was used for sittings of the Verderers' and Miners' Courts; verderers are responsible for preserving the vert (trees) and venison of the Forest, and gavellers are responsible for leasing 'gales' (areas of ground) to 'Free Miners' to work for iron, coal, or stone, on behalf of the Crown (*Walks 5 and 7*). The Cistercian Flaxley and Tintern Abbeys were both founded in the mid-12th century, and made fortunes from sheep farming. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII in 1536–40, part of Flaxley became a (much modified) private house (*Walk 10*) and Tintern fell into ruin (*Walk 14*). Many of the churches in villages outside the Forest boundaries (English Bicknor, Littledean, Mitcheldean, Newland, Ruardean, St Briavels, Staunton, etc.) were founded in, or soon after, Norman times, and are surrounded by a core of ancient (mostly late medieval) buildings (*Walks 6, 9, and 13*). A number of large 16th century houses, some originally manor houses, can be seen (*Walks 2 and 4*), but the oldest and most interesting survival is Dean Hall (unfortunately not open to the public), which, although partly early 17th century, includes substantial remains of a Saxon or early Norman hall and later medieval additions (*Walk 12*). Mansions built for the landed gentry or newly-rich industrialists, mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries, include Flaxley Abbey, Clearwell



Roman temple of Nodens in Lydney Park. Underneath are Roman iron mines.



Dean Hall



The 17th century former New Inn is in the oldest part of the large village of Bream.

Castle, Bigsweir House, The Haie, Lydney Park, and Oaklands Park (*Walks 6, 9, 10, and 12*).

Many villages and towns on the boundary of, or within, the Forest (Bream, Cinderford, Coleford, Drybrook, Lydbrook, Parkend, etc.) were little more than hamlets until after the expansion of the mining and related industries which began in the 17th century and peaked in the 19th and early 20th centuries (see below) (*Walks 7–9 and 11*). The Civil War saw only a few skirmishes in Dean (*Walk 9*), although, as a Royalist in a largely Parliamentary area,

Sir John Wintour, who owned timber and mineral rights to much of the Forest, was forced to flee to France. After the restoration he re-established control of much of the Forest, but due to his excessive tree clearance he was forced to relinquish his rights. The resultant Dean Forest (Reafforestation) Act of 1668 allowed the enclosure of 11 000 acres, divided into six Walks, each with a lodge and keeper. The first of these was King's Lodge or Speech House (*Walk 5*). Further problems throughout the 18th century led to a new Enclosure Act in 1808, which allowed construction of 24 more lodges (*Walks 3 and 7*). The 17th to the early 20th centuries was the 'industrial period' when iron and later coal mining reached their peaks, only to fall into decline and virtual extinction (see below). Other heavy industries have also come and gone, but stone is still being quarried, and forestry is still of major importance. Today, tourism is a major industry, the Forest woodlands and Wye Valley AONB attracting visitors for a range of outdoor pursuits, such as walking, cycling, horse riding, and canoeing. The towns and villages now provide the services needed by visitors and locals alike. The Forest still has its unique customs and traditions. A few Free Miners still mine for coal or iron (*Walks 7 and 9*), 'sheep badgers' allow their flocks to roam freely (pigs were also allowed to forage in the Forest, termed pannage), and wood can still be collected from the Hudnalls by residents of St Briavels, which includes one of the authors (*Walk 6*).

## Industry and Transport

The Forest of Dean has been an industrial centre for centuries, and the extractive industries (iron, coal, and stone) have been particularly important. Unsurprisingly, timber has also long been, and still is, a major product, for building, firewood, and, in particular, for naval ships until iron replaced wood. Related industries included charcoal production (*Walk 6*) and tanning, which used oak bark (*Walk 9*). The area played a significant, if little-recognised, part in the Industrial Revolution. David and Robert Mushet's experimental work led to methods for producing high-quality iron and steel products (*Walks 7 and 9*). An early 19th century tramroad here included one of longest tunnels in the world at that time (*Walk 3*), and a very early attempt to build a major subaqueous tunnel (under the River Severn) was well advanced before being defeated by water ingress (*Walk 12*). Several local families made their fortunes as coal owners, iron masters, or other industrialists during this period. One example is the Teague family of Ruardean, who rose from being humble miners to powerful businessmen (coal, iron,

railways, etc.) in a single generation (*Walks 4, 7, 8, and 11*). Another prominent industrialist was Edward Protheroe (died 1856), a West Indies merchant and Whig MP for Bristol, who acquired interests in many collieries, iron mines and ironworks, and became chairman of both the Severn and Wye Railway (*Walk 7*) and the Forest of Dean Railway (*Walk 3*). The area was in some respects at the forefront of technology. For example, Trafalgar Colliery (*Walk 5*) was unique in Dean in being lit by gas, and electric pumps were installed underground in 1882, the first recorded use of electric power in a mine.

Iron mining dates back to Iron Age/Roman times. The earliest, near-surface, workings, known as 'scowles', closely follow the outcrop of the Crease Limestone, the main host to the iron-ore deposits (see *Walks 1, 3, and 9*). The presence of iron ore at the surface would have attracted the first miners to the area. For many centuries iron was produced in small bloomery furnaces, the resultant impure iron bloom requiring hammering by a blacksmith before it could be used. Iron mining only really began to expand after the introduction of charcoal blast furnaces in the early 17th century, and, more particularly, with the development of coke blast furnaces at the end of the 18th century. The Dean Forest (Mines) Act of 1838 formally defined the rights of miners (of iron, coal, and stone), and the 1841 Awards of Mines and Quarries listed those persons entitled to work 'gales' (mining licence areas). The latter give an invaluable snapshot of the industries at that time. Iron mining peaked in the second half of the 19th century, but increasing difficulty of extraction and cheap imports of Spanish ore led to a rapid decline (*Walks 3 and 9–11*).

Coal has been mined in Deansince Roman times, initially largely for heating and lime burning. The earliest workings were shallow pits close to where the seams reach the surface (outcrop workings). Areas of more-or-less circular depressions, known as 'delves', can still be seen (e.g., near Brierley), but are not easy to spot. Mines then became deeper, working the seams via tunnels (drifts or adits) and shafts (*Walks 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8*). Demand only began to increase significantly after coke blast furnaces, and later steam railways, were introduced. Output peaked towards the middle of the 20th century, 1.35 million tons being produced in 1938, but output steadily declined until closure of the last deep mine (Northern United) on Christmas Eve 1965. Six major collieries (Arthur & Edward, Cannop, Eastern United,



Scowles near Bream.

Morses Level, near Mallards Pike, dates from about 1832.





Remains of New Bowson Colliery, near Cinderford.

Capped shaft at New Fancy Colliery, now a picnic area and site of the Geomap.



Norchard, Northern United, and Princess Royal) had survived to be taken over by the National Coal Board on 1 January 1947. The difficulties in working relatively thin seams, combined with the expense of pumping water from the workings (the Forest pits were notoriously wet, if relatively free of gas), were major factors in the decline of the coalfield, which was one of the first to virtually cease production in Britain. Some opencast mining took place during the 1970s (*Walk 5*), but only a handful of 'Free Miners' now maintains the coal-mining tradition (*Walk 7*). Three small mines, all working the Yorkley Seam, were still operating at the time of writing. There are more than 2500 known mine entrances (most now blocked) in Dean.

Stone quarrying has been carried out for many centuries, and there are said to be thousands of old quarries in Dean. In 1860 there were 360 working quarries in Parkend and Worcester Walks alone. Many quarries were small,

typically 40 x 60 ft, and probably had only short working lives as a source of stone for local buildings or walls. Others worked limestone, which was burnt to produce lime for agricultural use. The remains of old lime kilns can be found near many of these (*Walks 1, 9, 10, and 14*). There was a great demand for Forest stone in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and it was exported for use in Avonmouth Docks and Cardiff Castle, among many other places. Several major quarries have worked, or still work, the Carboniferous Limestone Series, mainly for aggregate (*Walks 3, 9, 10, and 14*). Quartz conglomerate was once in demand for the manufacture of millstones, and was quarried along much of its outcrop (*Walks 6 and 13*). Sandstone quarries in Coal Measures (*Walk 7*) and Old Red Sandstone rocks continue to produce building and decorative stone, with 15 small free-miner quarries still operating today.

Many other industries in Dean developed along the tributary streams of the Severn and Wye, where a ready supply of water power was available. Hence, there were once many water-powered corn mills, whereas windmills were rare. Early charcoal blast furnaces were also powered by water wheels, and the valleys of Lydbrook, the Lyd (Lydney), Redbrook, and Westbury Brook all had their furnaces and forges by the 17th century (*Walks 1, 8, 10, and 13*). In contrast, later coke furnaces commonly used steam engines to provide the blast (*Walks 3, 7, and 9*). Many of the valleys were associated with other metal industries, such as copper smelting at Redbrook,

tinplate works at Lydbrook, Lydney, and Redbrook, and wire making at Tintern (*Walks 2, 8, 13, and 14*). Other mills produced paper (*Walks 3 and 10*). Many towns and even villages once had their own breweries (*Walks 10 and 13*). There was a glassworks at Newnham in the 17th century (*Walk 12*). Since World War Two a diverse range of light industries has replaced most of the extractive and 'heavy' industries of earlier centuries, although the decline of the latter caused considerable unemployment. Nevertheless, stoneworks (*Walk 7*), brickworks, and sawmills still operate. Many of the works are now concentrated on industrial estates around the main towns of Coleford, Cinderford, Lydney and Mitcheldean. However, many people must commute to places like Gloucester, Bristol, and Cardiff.

The oldest 'highways' were the Rivers Severn and Wye, which were certainly used by Roman vessels and most likely by prehistoric peoples. Fishing has long been important, but the traditional fisheries are now virtually extinct, due to the dramatic decline in stocks of salmon and other fish (*Walk 4*). There are records of a river trade on the Severn by the 13th century, the 'pills' (small inlets) at Newnham, Bullo, Gatcombe, Purton, and Lydney being used as ports. Many also had shipbuilding yards. Once the first tramroads were built in the early 19th century, most of the river traffic was concentrated on Bullo and Lydney, with the latter, which had the better facilities, surviving as a port into the 1970s (*Walks 4 and 12*). Coal, pig iron, bark, timber, and stone were all important exports, with most trade being around the Bristol Channel and to Ireland. The Wye was once navigable up to Hereford and beyond, although goods had to be transferred between sea-going and river craft at places like Brockweir and Llandogo. These villages were once thriving ports, and many shallow-draught sailing vessels (including the famous trows) were built there until the mid-19th century (*Walks 6 and 14*). The canal-building mania of



Abandoned millstones by the River Wye, south of Redbrook.  
Parkend Ironworks engine house, now a field studies centre.





Unloading grain at Brockweir Wharf. Brockweir Local History Group/Hallam Collection.

near Ross, to the Severn near Lydney (*Walk 2*). In medieval times, roads were little better than muddy tracks. Many of the old holloways (sunken tracks) are very old, although not easy to date. Part of the burial path near Newland is a typical example (*Walk 9*). It was only with the coming of the turnpike trusts in the 18th and 19th centuries that things began to improve. A good example

is the route between Monmouth and Chepstow, via Redbrook, St Briavels, and Tidenham Chase, first turnpiked in 1755. In part, it followed Duffield's Lane (*Walk 13*) and Coxbury and Wyegate Lane (*Walk 6*). A much better route along the Wye Valley was opened in 1828 when Bigsweir Bridge, complete with toll house, was built (*Walk 6*). Today we have a vastly improved (and vastly busier!) road network, which includes the first Severn road bridge, itself now a listed historic monument.



Railways, in the form of horse-drawn tramroads, came early to the Forest of Dean, and indeed were instrumental in allowing the expansion of the mining and quarrying industries during the early 19th century. The first major tramroads (there were others), the Severn & Wye, Bullo Pill (later Forest of Dean), and Monmouth Railways, all provided outlets for the mineral and other products of Dean to wharves on the Severn or the Wye, although only the first two companies enjoyed much success (*Walks 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, and 13*). A tramroad, incidentally, differs from the railways we know today in that the wagon wheels were flangeless and ran on L-section iron rails or plates, usually mounted on stone blocks. All these lines were converted to standard-gauge (some initially to broad-gauge) lines in the mid-1800s, although some branch tramroads survived in use into the 20th century (*Walk 7*). Two other standard-gauge railways, the Forest of Dean Central and Mitcheldean Road & Forest of Dean Junction Railways

the 18th and early 19th centuries had little effect in Dean, only the short Piddock's Canal being built at Lydney (*Walk 4*). However, the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal provided better access to Gloucester than the difficult voyage up the Severn (*Walk 4*).

Ancient roads or trackways have also been used since prehistoric times. One probable route goes from the Severn, near Stroat, to Brockweir (*Walk 14*). The Romans built their own network of roads, including one from the iron-working centre of Ariconium,

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(*Walks 4 and 11*), were built in the Forest at about this time, but neither was successful, and the latter was never operated throughout. Four lines were built near the periphery of the Forest in the same period (1850–80): the Wye Valley, Ross & Monmouth, Hereford, Ross & Gloucester, and South Wales Railways (*Walks 1, 4, 6, 12, and 13*), all of which later became part of the Great Western Railway. Connections were made to the previously-mentioned lines from the Forest. Most of the lines had closed by the 1960s, only the former South Wales Railway surviving today as the busy main line between Gloucester and South Wales.

### Natural History

The area covered by this book includes part of the Wye Valley AONB, the high ground of the Forest of Dean proper, together with the mainly limestone plateau to the south (St Briavels Common, Tidenham Chase, etc.), and the lower country of the Severn Vale. It includes a wide variety of landscape and vegetation types, including large areas of woodland and farmland (both arable and pasture), together with smaller areas of permanent grassland, heathland, field boundaries (hedges, ditches, and walls), and wetland (rivers, streams, bogs, ponds, and small lakes). Each of these has its own distinctive flora and fauna. The Forest itself covers 35 square miles. The introduction of commercial conifer plantations during the 20th century means there is now a mosaic of mature deciduous trees (especially oak and beech) and younger conifers (spruce, larch, Douglas fir, Scots pine, etc.), divided by forest roads and rides. There are also extensive woods along the Lower Wye Gorge, much being ancient semi-natural woodland, historically managed through coppicing and timber growing. They are dominated by beech, oak, and ash, together with lime, yew, birch, chestnut, whitebeam, alder, and others. Shrubs include hazel, dogwood, spindle, hawthorn, privet, and holly. There is also a wide variety of ground plants, including rare species. Much of the forest floor is carpeted with flowers, notably



Tunnel on tramroad branch from Point sandstone quarry under the trackbed of the standard-gauge railway which replaced it (the Coleford Branch of the Severn & Wye Railway).

Blackpool Brook in Wenchford picnic area.



snowdrops, bluebells, wild garlic, wood anemones, primroses, and, in some places, wild daffodils, in the spring; orchids may be found. Heavily shaded rock exposures, like old quarry faces, are habitats for ivy and shade-loving ferns. Dean has many veteran trees, unusually large examples of native or long-established species, which are important for wildlife and for their cultural and landscape value. They harbour a unique array of wildlife, including rare fungi, lichens, mosses, liverworts, and invertebrates, and provide habitats for woodpeckers, owls, and bats. Most of the walks include woods, but Walks 1, 3, 6, and 13 include some particularly attractive sections, perhaps at their best in the spring and autumn. Walk 3 passes through what must be some of the best bluebell woods in the country if you time it right. Local people have started a project in the Wye Valley to encourage the restoration of grassland as flower meadows (*Walk 14*). Heathland habitats can be seen on Walks 11 and 14.

If you are lucky you might see deer in the woods, particularly in the early morning or evening. There are currently about 300 in the Forest, mostly fallow deer, but including a few red deer and, increasingly, roe deer and muntjac. There is also a breeding population of boar, descended from dumped and escaped animals. Badgers are common, but rarely seen in daylight. The area is particularly important for bats, notably greater and lesser horseshoe bats, which hibernate in the many caves and old mines and railway tunnels. Otter and polecat numbers have been increasing in recent decades, and the dormouse population is of national significance. Many bird species have been recorded, far too many to list here. However, Dean is an important area for bird conservation, with the RSPB having a nature reserve at Nagshead (*Walk 7*). Some of the more significant species from a conservation point of view include birds of farmland (grey partridge, linnets, tree sparrow, barn owl, and lapwing), deciduous woodland (hawfinch, nightingale, redstart, pied flycatcher, wood warbler, and lesser spotted woodpecker), coniferous woodland (firecrest, crossbill, and siskin), heathland and other open areas (nightjar, tree pipit, and woodlark), and rivers and streams (cormorant, goosander, kingfisher, sand martin, grey wagtail, and dipper). Birds of prey include kestrel, buzzard, sparrowhawk, and goshawk. Limestone cliffs along the Lower



Cannop Ponds in winter.

Wye are important breeding sites for peregrine and raven; the RSPB has a viewing post at Symonds Yat Rock. Waterbirds can be seen on the many ponds and lakes in the Forest, which are also important habitats for newts, frogs, and invertebrates, such as dragonflies (*Walks 3, 7, and 11*). All three British snakes (adder, grass, and slow worm) and several species of lizard live in the area. More than 30 species of fish, including the rare allis and twaite shad (members of the herring family), have been recorded in the Wye, making it one of the most important river systems in northern Europe.

### Walk Location Map

