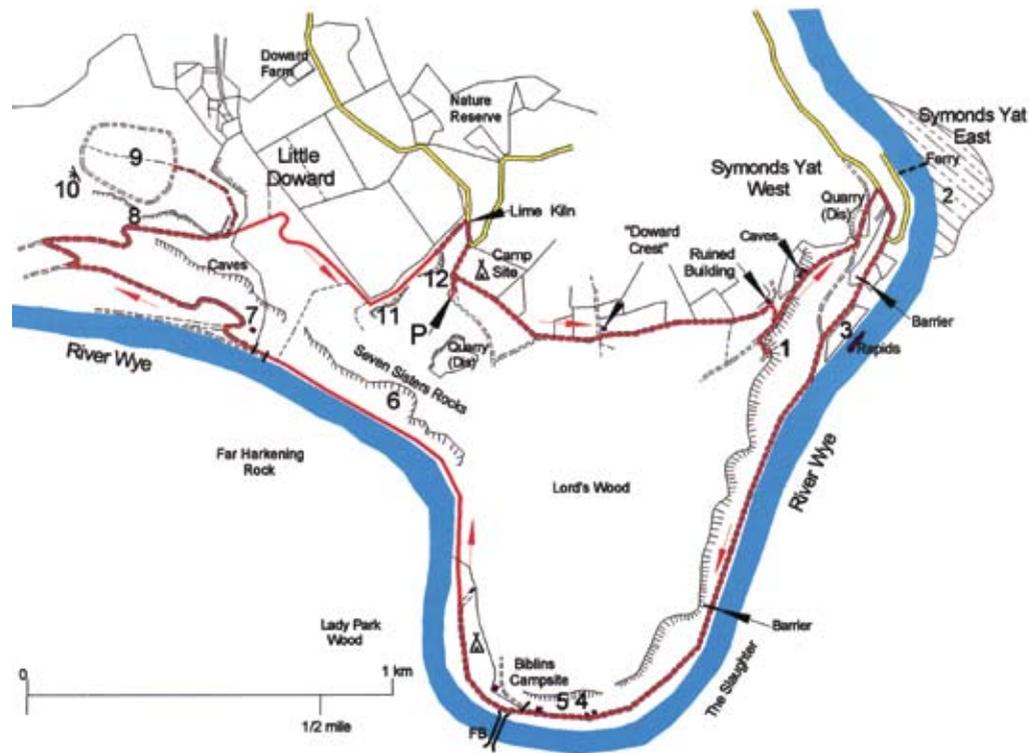


## Little Doward, Symonds Yat, and the Wye Gorge

**The Wye Gorge, Symonds Yat, superb woodland, an Iron Age hill fort, and King Arthur's Cave. A straightforward walk on good tracks and paths, with one steady descent and ascent; 2 stiles.**

START at forest car park above King Arthur's Cave, Doward. This can be reached by turning off the A40 to Crocker's Ash and taking the road through Little Doward; about 1 mile from Crocker's Ash, where the road bends sharply left, turn right past Doward Park Campsite entrance (also signed Biblins Campsite). The parking area is 200 yds along on the right: GR SO 548156. **Refreshments:** none on walk route, but pub in Symonds Yat East (accessible via ferry).



TURN LEFT OUT OF THE CAR PARK (back towards the road) for about 40 yds, then turn right onto a lane, which goes downhill at first and passes several houses.

Keep straight ahead at a track junction on the left near 'Doward Crest'. Continue along the dirt track, narrower in parts, ignoring a waymarked footpath to the right, after which

the track bends left. Turn right at the next waymarked (yellow arrow) footpath, near a ruined stone building. The path bears right and descends for about 100 yds past old iron mines to a junction with a wider rocky track. Turn right here and then bear left, following a fence to a view of more iron-ore workings (1). Retrace your steps back up to the path junction, keeping the fence on your right. Bear right here and follow the track downhill past caves on the left. Turn left at the next junction, where the Highmeadow Trail (yellow arrow) goes right. Fork right just past an old quarry, ignoring a yellow arrow to the left, and descend steeply to a tarmac road, where there are good views of the River Wye and Symonds Yat East, with its pub, hotel, and rock (2).

Turn right down the road to a sharp left-hand bend, where you keep ahead onto a waymarked track, signed The Biblins. Going left down the road here takes you to the ferry across to the Saracen's Head for refreshments, if required. Wave frantically towards the pub and, unless it is the off season or the river is in spate, someone should come to fetch you. The track passes houses and a barrier, descending, with the river, former weir, and the site of a forge (3) on the left, and eventually becomes a footpath. It then widens again before entering Biblins Campsite (for youth groups). Just after the toilet block, on the right, are the 'Dropping Wells' (tufa deposits, 4) and a mine entrance (5). Continue through the camp site past Biblins Bridge, with good views of the river and Seven Sisters Rocks (6). Follow the track and then a footpath to the far end of the campsite, continuing on a waymarked path (Wye Valley Walk and, initially, Highmeadow Trail) into the woods just above the river. Follow this path, passing old quarries on the right, for about 1/2 mile (ignoring the Highmeadow Trail path on the right) to an old metal gate. 100 yds ahead is a second gate and a ruined building. Go through a kissing gate here and follow an uphill track, signed 'Little Doward', to a junction, where you turn right. After about 100 yds, where

the track bends sharp left, there are some nicely restored limekilns (7) on the right. Keep on the track as it bends left and right, and then continue for about 400 yds to the next junction (with a wooden marker post), where you turn sharp right uphill. Follow this track round to the left, ignoring the first track on the right (after 60yds), but turning sharp right at the next junction after another 100 yds or so. The track climbs steadily, passing outcrops of thinly-bedded Lower Limestone Shale. Just after where it bends sharply left and then right, the top of the Lower Limestone Shale can be seen below massive Lower Dolomite. The track continues through magnificent woodland (8) to a rock cutting (in Crease Limestone), just after which is a stile on the right where the walk continues.

However, for an optional walk to Little Doward hill fort (9), continue along the track to a junction immediately past the hill fort ramparts (more obvious on the right). You can then keep ahead (on an indistinct path) across the open hilltop to the far end of the fort, turning left on a path along the top of the upper rampart (with good views to Monmouth and beyond, 10) to return to the track junction. Alternatively, turn left to follow the rampart path to a viewpoint and then return to the junction. Retrace your steps from here to the stile, now on the left. Climb this, and a second (ladder) stile below, following the path which winds downhill through attractive woods into a small valley, with open fields on the left. At a junction, follow the path to the left, keeping a wire fence on your left. Continue uphill for a short distance to King Arthur's Cave (11), ignoring a waymarked path (Highmeadow Trail again) to the right. After looking at the cave, continue alongside the fence, which bears left just below the cave, following an uphill path past more caves and a natural arch. Keep left near an old quarry (12), going past the remains of quarry buildings to emerge at a tarmac road (with a ruined limekiln opposite). Turn right and right again past the campsite entrance and back to the car park.

### Iron Mines (1)

Old workings represented by shafts, pits, and spoil heaps, as well as natural caves, can be seen near the top of the cliffs, in or near outcrops of Crease Limestone. They include a mixture of natural (cave) and artificial (mining) features, typical of 'scowles' (see *Walk 9*). These mines seem to have been active before the 18th century, but are difficult to date. However, it has been suggested that, together with those at Wigpool, they provided ore for the important Roman iron-working settlement of Ariconium, about 7 miles to the northeast.

### Symonds Yat and the Wye Tour (2)

A 17th century Sheriff of Herefordshire, Robert Symonds, gave his name to the 'Yat', a local name for gate or pass. Most of the far side of the river, south of Symonds Yat East, is in Gloucestershire, whereas the whole of this walk is in Herefordshire. The two parts of the village are connected by an ancient ferry operated by a ferryman who pulls the boat across the river using an overhead rope. The ferry can be used to visit the 16th century Saracen's Head Inn. There is a similar ferry by the Olde Ferrie Inn, about 500 yds upstream. The 16th century Old Court Hotel, near the A40 in Symonds Yat West, was the ancestral home of the Gwillim family. Colonel Thomas Gwillim fought with General Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec in 1759. Elizabeth Gwillim married John Graves Simcoe who became the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada in 1791. The Royal Lodge,

just below the Saracen's Head, was originally built in 1876 as a Royal hunting lodge and was converted to a hotel in the 1920s. It stands near the site of Symonds Yat Station on the former Ross and Monmouth Railway. This opened on 3 August 1873 and remained independent until its absorption into the Great Western Railway on 1 January 1922. Closure to passenger services occurred on 5 January 1959, and to goods in January 1964. Part of the trackbed is now a walking and cycle path. Other popular activities in the area include canoeing and kayaking down the rapids and boat trips.



Ferry over the Wye near the Saracen's Head at Symonds Yat.

Symonds Yat Rock (on top of the hill, directly opposite) is a well-known scenic viewpoint towering about 500 ft above the Wye, with lovely views of the river's horseshoe bend, Goodrich, Ross-on-Wye, and beyond. From here, between April and August, it is possible to see peregrine falcons nesting on the limestone cliffs of Coldwell Rocks. Other birds of prey, such as goshawks and buzzards, may also be seen. Just south (right) of the rock is the Iron Age Symonds Yat Hill Fort, a triangular promontory fort of about 6 acres. The south side is protected by a series of five banks and ditches. The discovery of iron slag and early Roman pottery suggests that iron-smelting was carried out there.

Symonds Yat Rock was one of the many scenic attractions of the Wye Tour, popular amongst the gentry in the late 18th and 19th centuries. This originated in 1745, when Dr John Egerton started taking friends on boat trips down the river from the rectory at Ross-on-Wye. However, it was the Reverend William Gilpin who really popularised the Wye Tour when his "Observations on the River Wye", arguably the first tour guide to be published in Britain, appeared in 1782. Gilpin was the pioneer of the 'picturesque', who saw the landscape as "expressive of that peculiar beauty which is agreeable in a picture". Demand grew so much that by 1808 there were eight boats in use on the Wye. Many famous poets, writers, and artists took the tour, including Pope, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Thackeray, Turner, and Thomas Gray. As well as observing the natural beauties of the river, hills, gorges, and viewpoints (Yat Rock, the Kymin, Piercefield Cliffs, etc.), they would visit the castles of Wilton, Goodrich, and Chepstow, and the romantic ruins of Tintern Abbey.

### New Weir Forge (3)

Most water-powered mills were on tributaries of the Wye (as at Lydbrook and Redbrook), because construction of weirs on the river itself was both expensive and hindered navigation. The only weir allowed to remain on the Wye below Hay under an Act of Parliament of 1695–6 was New Weir, and an efficient lock had to be maintained here. New Weir Forge (on the near bank) appears to have been built in 1684 by George White and Thomas Fletcher of Monmouth for the fining of pig iron. A leat supplied water to power a wheel. A lease was granted to John Partridge of Ross in 1753, and the works were sold to George Griffin in 1798. The forge was advertised for lease in 1811–5, when it included two hammers, three fineries, and a rolling mill, but by then it was out of use and was soon abandoned. The slag was dumped in the river and now forms the island ('Cinder Island') in the centre of the rapids. Fragments of walls and an arch are all that remain of the forge buildings.



Forge at New Weir in about 1810, by J. Powell.

### Dropping Wells (4)

The Dropping Wells are a series of tufa deposits formed where lime-rich water emerges from springs in the limestone cliffs. Tufa (a soft, porous type of limestone) is gradually deposited on moss, grass, leaves, and other vegetation, eventually forming quite thick masses, boulders of which lie below the cliff. The lime-loving moss, *Gymnostomum calcareum*, can be seen growing here. A well-known example of such a 'petrifying spring' is Mother Shipton's Cave at Knaresborough in Yorkshire, where, for centuries, people have placed various objects to be 'turned to stone'.

### Dropping Wells Mine (5)

A single entrance leads to two horizontal adits, 5 ft high and 5–6 ft wide and 100 yds and 75 yds long. They appear to have driven in an unsuccessful search for iron-ore deposits.

### Seven Sisters Rocks (6)

Bibbins Bridge is a good place to look at the geology of the Lower Wye Gorge. The steep sides of the gorge, including the prominent Seven Sisters Rocks, consist of Lower Dolomite, part of the Carboniferous Limestone Series. This is overlain by the Crease Limestone, host to the iron-ore deposits, as seen earlier in the walk. A short distance downstream, the river has cut down into the underlying Devonian rocks of the Old Red Sandstone (Tintern Sandstone Group, Quartz Conglomerate, and Brownstones), and the valley becomes less steep-sided. The Wye Gorge is unusual because the river meanders into and out of the more resistant Carboniferous rocks on the edge of the Forest of Dean, rather than following a course around them as might be expected. During Tertiary times, more than 20 million years ago, the Wye meandered through a gently-rolling landscape of Mesozoic (Jurassic–Cretaceous) rocks. Falling sea level, uplift of the land, or both then resulted in the removal by erosion of these younger rocks, and the original meander pattern of the river was preserved as it started to cut down into the more resistant rocks below. During the Ice Age, further down-cutting at times of low sea level resulted in formation of the present Wye Gorge.



Wye Gorge below Symonds Yat.

Across the bridge, on the slopes beyond the old railway trackbed, is Lady Park Wood National Nature Reserve. The reserve (not open to the public) is an example of unmanaged woodland, considered to be one of Britain's most important areas for woodland conservation. The main tree species here (and elsewhere along the valley) are beech, oak, ash, small- and large-leaved lime, wych elm, and birch. Other trees include maple, aspen, cherry, yew, whitebeam, alder, and willow. The most abundant and widespread shrub is hazel, but dogwood, spindle, hawthorn, privet, and holly are also present. Ground plants are dominated by dog's mercury and bramble, but plants of interest include wood barley, fingered sedge, wild madder, bird's-nest orchid, toothwort, and lily-of-the-valley. There is a rich breeding bird community, which includes all three woodpecker species, redstart, wood warbler, tawny owl, pied flycatcher, tree creeper, blackcap, chiffchaff, and marsh tit.

There are several caves and old iron mines, one of which (The Stalactite Cave) was a show cave from 1880 to 1910, in the woods, and a variety of rare bats have been recorded, notably greater and lesser horseshoe bats. Animals include fallow deer, most likely to be seen in the early morning or at dusk, badgers, and foxes. Otters have been sighted on nearby stretches of the River Wye. Grass snakes and adders can occasionally be seen basking in the sunlit clearings. There is also a rich assemblage of invertebrates, including the uncommon wood white, pearl bordered fritillary, and white admiral butterflies. A short distance upstream on the opposite bank is an area known as The Slaughter, said to be the site of an ancient battle, although who was involved and when it took place are unclear. Nearby is a major resurgence, where water from a large area of the limestone to the east emerges. Using dye tests, cavers have shown a connection with Slaughter Stream Cave, which can be entered through Wet Sink near Joyford, about 2 miles away. Here, they have discovered over 8 miles of passages, as well as the skeleton of an unfortunate dog which had become trapped. There was a short-lived tramroad from Highmeadow Colliery about here in the late 19th century, and apparently another which brought iron ore from Staunton down the Whippington Brook valley to the river.

### Lime Kilns (7)

Much of the valley side here has been quarried for limestone (the Lower Limestone Shale and Lower Dolomite of Lower Carboniferous age). The old quarries are now favourable habitats for ferns and other flora. These nicely restored stone limekilns were loaded from the top and the burnt lime raked out of the draw-holes at the base (*see Walk 9*).

### Woodland (8)

The Little Doward supports a wide range of woodland and habitat types. Historical management as pasture woodland, first as common land and later partly as a deer park, resulted in the development of an open woodland structure on the southern slopes, with the retention of many magnificent ancient trees (notably beech) which represent a continuity



of habitat extending back through centuries. Parts of the woodland have been replanted with conifer blocks and non-native broadleaves, but much is ancient and semi-natural. Areas of calcareous grassland are associated with some of the limestone outcrops. Beech, oak, ash, and lime are prominent in the woodlands, together with field maple, whitebeam, and guelder rose. Secondary woodland of ash and silver birch has developed through regeneration over formerly cleared areas (e.g., near King Arthur's Cave). The positions of old stone walls are now marked by lines of beech trees. Bluebells, primroses, and wood anemones carpet the ground in spring, and orchids may be found. Heavily shaded rock exposures, including some of the old quarry faces, have been colonised by ivy and shade-loving ferns, such as hart's tongue, common spleenwort, and, locally, maidenhair fern. Both greater and lesser horseshoe bats roost in limestone caves in the area.

### Little Doward Hill Fort (9)

The Iron Age hill fort above Ganarew overlooks the Wye and consists of an oval enclosure of about 12 acres, surrounded by a double bank with a medial ditch. There is a rectangular annex on the southeastern side, defended by natural rock outcrops on three sides. The site includes round barrows and a well (now filled in). The hill fort is one of several candidates for 'Caer Guorthigirn' (City or Fortress of Vortigern). Vortigern seems to have been High King of Britain in the mid-5th century, and it was he who invited Saxon mercenaries under Hengist into Britain to help fight the invading Scots and Picts. His authority eventually waned, however, and power was assumed by Ambrosius Aurelianus, who pursued Vortigern into Wales. Legend has it that he died when a wooden castle on the old hill fort of Caer Guorthigirn was struck by lightning.

### View of Monmouth (10)

The view from here takes in the River Wye flowing towards Monmouth, with the A40 trunk road on its right bank, and the trackbed of the Ross and Monmouth Railway on its left. Monmouth's Wye Bridge dates from 1617, but was widened in 1879. It is still the main link between the town and the Forest of Dean. Monmouth is an important market town, and one of the main shopping and trading centres in the area. More details are given in Walk 13. The large house with prominent chimneys across the fields on the left of the river is Hadnock Court, and the wooded hill beyond is the site of the Kymin (*see Walk 13*).

### King Arthur's Cave (11)

The cave is situated at the foot of a low cliff of Crease Limestone at the northwestern end of Lord's Wood. It consists of a broad entrance platform, a double interconnected entrance, and two main chambers. A skeleton, said to be of gigantic proportions and since lost, was discovered in 1695 and was thought by some to be the bones of King Arthur, hence the cave's name. There is a possible, if tenuous, connection with Arthur's predecessors, Vortigern and Ambrosius Aurelianus, at nearby Little Doward Hill Fort (9). The cave was partly excavated in 1871 by the Revd W.S. Symonds, and by others in the 1920s. The remains of mammoth, hyena, woolly rhino, cave lion, cave and brown bear, wild ox, reindeer, Irish Elk, horse, hare, and lemming, a typical Late Pleistocene fauna, were found. Many of the bones had been gnawed by hyenas. A variety of flint implements, ranging from Upper Palaeolithic (Aurignacian) to Neolithic in age, as well as coarse pottery of Neolithic type, was also recovered. The cave was one of the richest and most clearly stratified sites in Britain, but unfortunately the haphazard nature of the early excavations resulted in much valuable information being lost forever. The small cave



openings and rock overhangs in the low cliff by the path up to the road have produced little of archaeological interest, other than a small scatter of medieval pottery. They are, however, of considerable geological interest. They show evidence for smoothing by water over a considerable period of time, and seem to be older than the formation of the Wye Gorge in late Tertiary times (see 6 above). The caves appear to follow the base of the gently-dipping Crease Limestone, rather than some essentially horizontal shoreline or river bank, consistent with them pre-dating the folding of the rocks. This point is significant, because the iron-ores of Dean are thought to have been deposited in such ancient cave systems in Permo-Triassic times (*see Walk 9*).

### Quarry (12)

Rocks of the Carboniferous Limestone Series (Lower Dolomite, Crease Limestone, and Whitehead Limestone) have been extensively quarried around the Doward. By the early 20th century, this area was essentially an industrial site. A large limestone crusher stood by the side of the track up to the road, and two nearby buildings, probably dating from the 1920-30s, housed the engine that powered the crushers before electricity was installed, together with a manager's office and workers' canteen. The crusher took limestone from the quarry just down the track, and also from Lord's Wood Quarry nearby. When quarrying ceased, the machinery was dismantled, but the foundations for the crusher still remain, together with the office building. There is also a thick bank of crushed lime on the west side of the track. Many of these old quarries are now nature reserves.