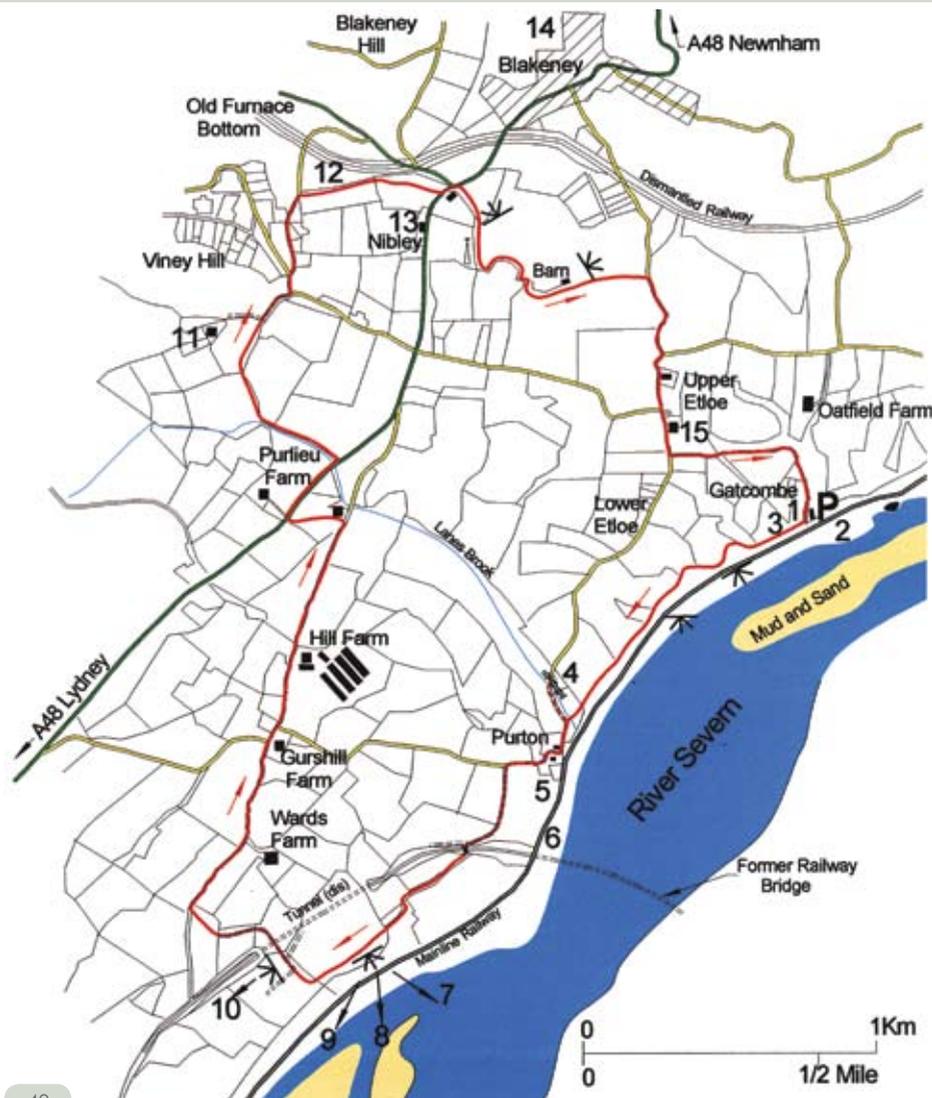


Gatcombe, Purton, and Blakeney

Good river views, historic riverside hamlets, and some interesting railway remains. A fairly hilly walk, mostly across fields (may be muddy in parts) and along lanes; 19 stiles.

START at the end of the minor road in Gatcombe, reached from the A48 Gloucester to Chepstow road in Blakeney. Please park carefully, leaving space for other cars to turn. GR SO 679054. **Refreshments:** Cock Inn, Nibley; other facilities (pub, shop) in Blakeney. **Bus:** 73 (Gloucester–Chepstow) to Nibley.



THE HAMLET OF GATCOMBE (1) has long been associated with the traditional fisheries of the River Severn. Start the walk by taking the footpath downstream between the railway line (2) on your left and a wooded slope on your right. Note the old wharf and the fast-decaying stop boats (3). After crossing two stiles and a small stream the path goes up steps to another stile and then into a field. Turn left to follow the field boundary to a stile on the left, which leads to a path between wire fences. There are good views of the river and the Cotswold Hills beyond, with Stinchcombe Hill being prominent. Regain the field edge via another stile, and then take the next stile on the left after 50 yds, which leads to a path descending through woodland (bluebells in spring) and over a footbridge. The path curves left and right, climbs steps up the side of the gully, and again follows the cliff edge, with views of Purton ahead. It descends to another footbridge, crosses a stile, and regains the cliff top. After about 300 yds, cross another stile in the field corner and descend to yet another footbridge, followed by a stile, to emerge onto a road.

Turn right here for 200 yds to see Purton Viaduct (4), then retrace your steps and follow the road through Purton (5), passing Old Severn Bridge House on the right and Purton Manor on the left. Some 200 yds after the latter, climb a stile on the left to follow a gravel track. Bear left under a stone bridge, which passes through the embankment of the former Severn & Wye Railway's line over the now-demolished Severn Railway Bridge (6). Go through the right-hand gate and follow the left-hand edge of a field, keeping left down a grassy track to a gate, which leads to another field. The trees to the right conceal the entrance to a tunnel on the Severn Bridge line. Go through a gate on the left, then turn right to follow a fence uphill. There are more good views of the river, with another Purton, Sharpness Docks, the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal (7), and Berkeley and Oldbury Nuclear Power Stations (8), on the other side. Ahead, beyond some cliffs, is the jetty of Lydney Docks (9).

Where the fence ends, bear slightly left across the field to go through a kissing gate in the far left-hand corner, turning right to follow the fence to another kissing gate. This leads to a dirt track, which you follow straight ahead. The spire of Lydney Church can be seen to the left, with the imposing house of Lydney Park on the hillside beyond (10). The track bends left through a gap in the hedge (with views of the Severn Bridge – see Walk 2) and follows the right-hand field edge to another gap, where you bear right across the field beyond towards a pylon, to pass through a kissing gate. Turn right on a dirt lane, which soon becomes a tarmac road. Follow the road ahead for nearly a mile, past two road junctions to left and to right. Go past Hill Farm and downhill to Lensbrook Cottage, where you turn left through a field gate. Cross the field diagonally to the far corner, where a stile leads to a main road.

Cross the road with care and turn right along the roadside footpath to the bottom of the hill. Turn left over a stile at a footpath sign and follow the left-hand field edge to another stile. Continue with the hedge on your left for 60 yds, climb a stile on the left, and turn right uphill, now with a stream and hedge on your right, to a stile near a gate in the field corner. Cross this and follow the right-hand field edge, with Hayes (11) up to the left, to another stile by a gate. This leads to a gravel/tarmac track and then to a road. Turn left, then after 50 yds turn right onto Pollards Lane. After about 350 yds, cross a stone stile on the right, opposite a red-brick house. Go down the field to a stile in the bottom left-hand corner. The stone viaduct on the left belonged to the Forest of Dean Central Railway (12). Continue to a gate and stile to the right of a house.

Beyond the stile is a main road, with the Cock Inn at Nibley (13) just to the right. However, the walk goes left for 100 yds, before crossing the road and taking a waymarked footpath up a drive to the left of Old Nibley Farmhouse. The right-of-way goes through two wooden gates and ahead on a grass path for 20 yds. Turn sharp right to head uphill to

the left of trees to a stile in the field corner. There are good views back to Viney Hill and Blakeney Hill from here. Continue, with the hedge on your right, to the top of the hill (near a mast), following the field boundary as it bends left, then right, into the next field. Follow the field edge for another 50 yds or so and cross a stile (or go through the adjacent

gap) on your right. Turn left, now with the hedge on your left. Continue past a barn, with good views of Blakeney (14), the Severn, and the Cotswolds, keeping ahead down to a road. Turn right to a T-junction, where you go right (signposted Etloe). Continue for 400 yds, passing Etloe House (15), then turn left to Gatcombe to return to the start.

Gatcombe (1)

Gatcombe stands on a pill (tidal inlet) at the end of a wooded valley. By 1583 it was a hamlet of six or seven houses, similar to the present day. Nevertheless, it has long been a centre for the river trade, fishing, and even ship building. Drake's House, on the eastern side of the pill, is so-called from an unconfirmed tradition that Sir Francis Drake stayed here, possibly while visiting Sir William Wynter (see 9). It certainly dates back to the 16th century and was formerly an inn, originally called the Gatcombe Boat and later the Sloop, which closed in the late 1800s. The Court House, across the pill, incorporates an early 17th-century range. In the early 19th century it was the Ship inn, later becoming the Court House where the manor court met. Just up the valley is the early 17th century Oatfield Farm, the home of the Hooper family until the 18th century, later passing to the Hagloe estate. Gatcombe was an important port by the 15th century, when it was one of Gloucester's chief trade outlets as many larger vessels would not venture further upstream. Much trade continued to pass through Gatcombe in the 18th century, with copper and maltsters' coal from South Wales becoming particularly important. Iron from Blakeney furnace and Forest coal were exported. There was trade with Ireland, mainly oak bark and cider. Gatcombe was a centre of the timber trade in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. During the Napoleonic Wars it was one of the main shipping points for oak timber from the Forest to the naval dockyards. Shipbuilding was established by 1608, and vessels of up to 600 tons are said to have been built here in the 18th century. However, construction of the South Wales Railway along the foreshore in about 1850 would have prevented the building of all but very small craft and also obstructed access to the timber yards. In any case, much trade would have already been lost to Bullo Pill and Lydney, which had better facilities, including tramroad access to the centre of the Forest since about 1810.

South Wales Railway (2)

The main line of the South Wales Railway (SWR) ran from Grange Court Junction, north of Westbury, to Neyland in Pembrokeshire, via Cardiff and Swansea. It opened in stages between 1850 and 1856, with the section between Grange Court and Chepstow East opening on 19 September 1851. However, the tubular suspension bridge over the River Wye at Chepstow, designed by I.K. Brunel and built by Edward Finch of Liverpool

and later Chepstow, was not completed until the following July. The Gloucester and Dean Forest Railway, from Gloucester to Grange Court Junction, also opened on 19 September 1851, and a line from the latter to Hereford (the Hereford, Ross and Gloucester Railway) opened between 1853 and 1855. All these lines were later amalgamated with the Great Western Railway, the SWR itself on 1 August 1863. The SWR was built to broad gauge, but converted to standard gauge over a single weekend in 1872 (how long would the job take today?). At various times there were stations (or halts) at Grange Court, Newnham, Ruddle Road (Bullo), Awre Junction, Gatcombe (actually at Purton, and closed when Awre Junction opened), Lydney Junction, and Woolaston. Today the former SWR is the only surviving railway in the area (other than the preserved Dean Forest Railway), being part of the busy main line from Gloucester and the Midlands to South Wales. The only station still open between Gloucester and Chepstow is Lydney Junction, to which the DFR also operates.

Severn Fisheries (3)

Fishing has been carried out in the Severn for millennia, probably since at least the Mesolithic. Remains of fish weirs and wicker fish baskets, the latter dated to about 900 AD, have been found further downstream. Salmon has long been the most sought-after fish, and the first recorded attempt to prevent over-fishing dates back to 1285, when Edward I introduced closed seasons. Several distinct methods of fishing have traditionally been used. Stopping nets were deployed from stop boats, sturdy flat-bottomed boats about 23 x 8 ft, up to six of which would be attached to a fixed anchor cable tied to the bank. The boats were broadside on to the tide, and the net was spread between two poles in the form of a V, the point of which was propped up in the boat, the wide part being in the water. When a fish was detected, the fisherman would kick the prop away, thus allowing the counterbalanced net, hopefully with fish, to rise out of the water. A stop net fishery was operated by the Morse family at Gatcombe for nearly a century, until rising costs and dwindling salmon stocks forced them to give up in 1986. Another fixed fishery method used putts and putchers, conical wicker baskets tied to frameworks of wooden poles near the river bank. Putts were up to 14 ft long and made in three sections, whereas putchers were smaller (about 5–6 ft long); they generally faced upstream to fish the ebb tide. There were once thousands of putcher ranks on the river, mostly downstream of Awre. The remains of the some of the frameworks can still be seen between Gatcombe and Purton. Long nets were about 90 yards long and 12 ft deep; they were suspended beneath cork floats. They were paid out in a semicircle into the river using a

Decaying stop boats and salmon putchers at Gatcombe.

GWR Castle class loco on a steam special passing Gatcombe, with 'Drake's House' on the left.



this method could be hazardous, even to someone with intimate knowledge of the river. The Severn salmon fishery is now almost, but not quite, extinct, owing largely to over-fishing in the adult feeding grounds off Newfoundland and Greenland, although it is to be hoped that conservation attempts will be successful. For now, a few fishermen, mostly using lave nets, still maintain the tradition, notably at Black Rock, near the Welsh end of the new Severn Bridge. At the time of writing putchers were still in use at Woolaston, albeit using non-traditional materials. One other fishery which should be mentioned is that of elevering, the use of hand-held fine-mesh nets to catch elvers, young eels which arrive from their breeding grounds in the Sargasso Sea each spring. Again, elver numbers have dwindled alarmingly in recent years.



Purton Viaduct (4)

This three-arch red sandstone viaduct over the Etloe to Purton Road was built in about 1832 for the proposed Purton Steam Carriage Road from Purton Pill to a new colliery at Foxes Bridge, between Speech House and Cinderford. Planned at about the time that the Stockton and Darlington Railway first ran, it failed to obtain an Act of Parliament and was never completed. However, it did have a considerable effect on local politics at the time, and the Forest of Dean Central Railway

was eventually built near much of the proposed route (*see 12 below*). The finance was to come from a prominent ironmaster, Charles Mathias of Lamphey Court, Pembrokeshire, and Moses Teague was a prominent supporter. The viaduct is an important survival of a scheme which would have involved the first crossing of the Severn on a moveable bridge.

Purton (5)

Like Gatcombe, the small hamlet of Purton was once a port that exported Forest timber for the Royal Navy, as well as other products. It was also the location of a ferry, which was in existence by 1282 when it was operated by “Hamelin the Ferryman”. By the 18th century it was known as the Purton Passage Ferry; in 1798 James Inman charged 3d per person, 9d (about 4p) per horse, 3d or 6d per calf, and 2/9d (about 14p) for 20 sheep or pigs. The ferry remained in operation until the late 19th century, and the stone quay and slipway can still be seen. Purton’s existence as a port came to an end in 1850 with the construction of the South Wales Railway. Purton Manor, on high ground at the southern end of the hamlet, is a 16th century stone house which retains many of its original features. The early 19th century Old Severn Bridge House was until recently the Severn Bridge Hotel. There was also a Purton Passage Inn here in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Severn Railway Bridge (6)

An 1872 Act of Parliament authorized the building of the Severn Bridge Railway. This was to run from Lydney Junction, on the former South Wales Railway (by then GWR), to a bridge over the Severn between Purton and Sharpness, where it would join the Midland

Railway’s proposed Sharpness Branch from Berkeley Road on their Bristol–Gloucester main line. The bridge, designed by G.W. Keeling and G.W. Owen, was begun in 1875 and completed in 1879. It was formed of a series of bowstring girders on tubular piers and had a pair of wide central spans and 19 lesser spans. The total length was 4162 ft, and there was a swing bridge over the canal at Sharpness. Severn Bridge Station (a modest affair of two platforms with wooden



From an old postcard.

shelters) was built on the approach to the bridge near Purton and the station at Lydney Junction was replaced by another at the start of the new line. The railway opened on 17 October 1879 as the Severn and Wye and Severn Bridge Railway, having been amalgamated with the Severn and Wye Railway. In 1894 this became the Severn and Wye Joint Railway (Great Western and Midland Railways), which incorporated the MR’s Sharpness Branch (opened in 1875) from Berkeley Road. There were about six services each way between Berkeley Road and Lydney in 1900, many of these going to or from Lydbrook Junction. Although the S&W’s passenger services north of Lydney Town were withdrawn in 1929, the Berkeley Road to Lydney Town service lasted until 1960. Then, on the foggy evening of October 25th 1960, two fuel barges (Arkendale and Wastdale) missed the entrance to Sharpness Docks and collided with the bridge, demolishing one of the upright columns and causing two spans to fall onto them. The impact caused the barges’ cargo of around 5000 gallons of petrol to ignite, setting the Severn on fire around the bridge. A 12-inch gas main which crossed the bridge was also severed, adding to the blaze. Five men lost their lives, but it could have been much worse, as maintenance workers on the bridge had taken a break in the signal box at Severn Bridge Station to listen to a radio broadcast of a boxing match involving Henry Cooper. In spite of proposals, the bridge was never repaired and was finally dismantled in the late 1960s. Thus was lost, not only the local passenger and freight services, but also a useful diversionary route in the event of the Severn Tunnel being closed. The foundations of the bridge piers can still be seen at low tide, as can the remains of the two barges a little way upstream. The stone piers of the canal swing bridge on the opposite bank also survive.

Gloucester and Sharpness Canal. (7)

The original plan for a ship canal between Gloucester and Berkeley was authorised by an Act of Parliament in 1793. The aim was to bypass the narrow winding stretch of the River Severn below Gloucester, but the Company ran out of money when only one third of the canal had been completed. Work eventually started again on a route to Sharpness, which was seen to be better placed for access from the River Severn, and the canal was completed in 1827. At first there were no facilities for cargo handling at Sharpness and ships (of up to 600 tons) travelled up the canal to discharge in the basin at Gloucester Docks, where wharves and warehouses were built to accommodate the increasing traffic. Many of the imports were carried onwards by boats on the Severn or canal network, and later by rail.

A new dock and tidal basin were built at Sharpness in the 1870s to accommodate larger vessels unable to pass up the canal, the original canal entrance eventually being closed. Warehouses were built beside the new dock, principally to accommodate imported grain, and barges and lighters towed by tugs gradually took over much of the canal traffic. Railway lines connected to both the Midland and (via the Severn Bridge) Great Western main lines could also be used for goods traffic. Commercial traffic on the canal had virtually ceased by the 1980s due to competition from pipelines and road transport. However, Sharpness still handles bulk cargoes, such as cement, fertilizer, and scrap metal, while the canal is much used by pleasure craft. A mile north of Sharpness, at Purton (not to be confused with the hamlet on the Dean side of the river), the canal runs very close to the river bank, and a large number (over 50) of boat hulks was placed between river and canal to prevent erosion. They included a variety of barges, trows, and other vessels, many of which can still be seen, albeit gradually rotting away.

Berkeley and Oldbury Nuclear Power Stations (8)

Berkeley had two Magnox reactors producing 276 MW and was the first commercial nuclear power station in the United Kingdom. After 27 years of successful operation, generating enough electricity on a typical day to serve an urban area the size of Bristol, it was also the first in the country to be decommissioned following closure in 1989. Further downstream is Oldbury Power Station, construction of which started in 1962. Since it was opened in 1968, it has produced electricity around the clock, supplying 435MW on a typical day. The station has two reactor vessels, each containing 26 400 fuel elements, and draws unlimited supplies of cooling water from the River Severn. It was to have ceased operations at the end of 2008, but is now expected to continue running for several more years. After closure, fuel will be progressively removed from the reactors and sent to Sellafield for treatment. This is expected to take about three years, after which decommissioning can begin. There were two other nuclear power stations near the mouth of the River Severn in Somerset: Hinkley Point A (closed in 2000) and B (due to close in 2011).



built in about 1790), and the upper 1.5 miles of this remained in use for some years transporting coal and iron from nearby pits and forges down, via a tramroad connection,

Lydney Docks (9)

Lydney Pill has probably been used as a port since Roman times, and there is a record of a river trade by 1270, but it was the development of tramroads which really made improved dock facilities essential. Lydney Docks were built in 1810–3 by the Severn and Wye Railway and Canal Co., whose horse tramroad from Lydney to Lydbrook had opened in 1810. A one-mile length of canal connected Lydney with the harbour (tidal basin). There was an earlier a narrow tub-boat canal from Middle Forge to Lydney Pill (Pidcock's Canal,

to the wharves. The outer harbour was not completed until 1821 and the tramroad was then extended along the north bank of the canal, with a branch over a swing bridge to coal tips on the south side of the basin. The entrance to the docks was via a tidal basin to the lower and upper basins of the canal. The tramroad was converted to a broad-gauge locomotive railway in about 1868, and new mechanical coal tips replaced the old wooden ones. However, like the South Wales Railway, the Severn and Wye's line was soon converted to standard gauge. The importance of Lydney as a market town with better communications with the heart of the Forest, and the much superior facilities at Lydney Docks meant that trade was soon diverted from smaller ports like Gatcombe and Purton. The docks were very busy throughout the 19th century and in 1867 handled about 200 000 tons of trade, mainly coal, pig iron, bark, timber, and stone. 244 200 tons of coal were shipped in 1881–2, mainly to Bridgwater and Bristol, but also to 29 other ports, including some in South Wales and Ireland. Trade began to decline after the Severn Bridge opened in 1879, allowing Forest coal and other products to be exported via the new Sharpness Docks, which could handle larger vessels. The ailing company was taken over to become the Severn and Wye Joint Railway (Great Western and Midland Railways) in 1894. Sail was giving way to steam ships by this time, but sailing vessels continued to call at Lydney well into the 20th century. The final export of coal from the harbour was in 1960, although logs for use in plywood manufacture were imported until the 1970s. However, things are looking up, as the docks have recently (2005) been refurbished with new lock gates to create a marina and harbour area for sea-going yachts and motor boats, with further improvements planned. The Lydney Yacht Club is based here and the MV Balmoral occasionally calls on its pleasure cruises in the Bristol Channel. The cliffs upstream of the docks (and north to Gatcombe) consist of Lower Devonian Old Red Sandstone rocks of the Raglan Marl Group (marl, sandstone, and shale). At the base is a thin layer of 'Fish Conglomerate', which includes numerous fragments of primitive fish.

Lydney (10)

Lydney (est. pop. 9160 in 2006) is one of the most important towns in Dean, being situated on an ancient route between Gloucester and South Wales. The area around the Iron Age hill fort in Lydney Park was taken over by the Romans, who mined for iron there and in the 4th century built a large temple complex dedicated to Nodens. Iron mining and smelting continued to be important and Lydney became a market town in 1268. In 1588 Admiral Sir William Wynter (Wintour), Vice-admiral of the Fleet, was granted the manor of Lydney by Elizabeth I in recognition of his services against the Spanish Armada. His grandson John became an important figure in Forest history (*see Walk 5*). The Wintour estate passed to the Bathurst family, who still own it, in 1723.

Naas House.



The present Lydney Park house was designed by C.H. Howell. It was built in 1877 of coursed limestone, with a tile roof and multiple chimney stacks. Most of the present town dates from the 19th and 20th centuries, as new industries and facilities were introduced and houses were built. However, the fine church dates mainly from the 13th century, albeit heavily restored in Victorian times. Near the docks is Naas House, an early 17th century house, fortified by Parliamentarian forces laying siege to Whitecross Manor, home of Sir John Wintour, during the Civil War. Herbert Howells (1892–1983), the composer, was born in Lydney.

Hayes (11)

The Hayes was the manor house of Blakeney, and dates from around the late 16th century. Originally timber-framed, it was much modified in the 17th and 19th centuries. The house stands at the eastern end of a terraced area which was formerly partly walled and suggests a formal garden of the late 17th or early 18th century. More unusual is the grade II listed privy, which can be seen at the bottom of the garden. This is constructed of finely-coursed stone rubble, has a tile roof with gabled ends, and probably dates from the 17th century. It is a very rare survival of an early privy. The house belonged to the Barrow family by the late 16th century, but had passed through the female line to George Savage by the late 18th century. Sir Thomas Crawley-Boevey of Flaxley owned it in 1794, and the Hayes was bought by William Ambrose, owner of the Hagloe estate, in 1820. It apparently belonged to J. Mathias in 1879, but by the early 20th century the Hayes was the farmhouse of a small farm owned by the Hayman family.

Forest of Dean Central Railway (12)

The Forest of Dean Central Railway gained its Act of Parliament in July 1856 for a line from Awre Junction, on the South Wales Railway (SWR), to Howbeech (or Howbeach), with branches to Foxes Bridge and New Fancy Collieries, and to a dock on the Severn at Brimspill. Financial problems delayed construction and the line, as far as Howbeech, was not opened until 29 May 1868. The branches to Foxes Bridge and Brimspill were never completed. Worked by the Great Western Railway from the start, and absorbed into that company in 1923, the line was laid to broad gauge, but converted to standard gauge at the same time as the SWR in 1872. Traffic was disappointing, and even that from New Fancy was soon lost to the Severn and Wye Railway when its mineral loop was opened in 1872. Howbeech Colliery closed in 1895, although there seems to have some production in the 1920s. With little or no goods traffic by then (there was never a passenger service), the section of line beyond Blakeney was officially closed in 1932, leaving only a service to the goods station (opened in about 1870) there. The last train to Blakeney ran on 29 July 1949, after which the line closed for good. West of the viaduct, the line climbed up Old Furnace Bottom, between Viney and Blakeney Hills. Interesting buildings here include the former Malt Shovel Inn, Old Tump House (another former inn), a mill (now cottages), and the 17th century farmhouse.

Cock Inn, Nibley (13)

The Cock Inn dates from the 18th century, and in 1822 it was a staging post for a South Wales coach. But why does the inn sign show a horse rather than a bird? A cock horse was a spare horse which was kept ready to assist another horse with a heavy load up a hill. "Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross" refers to the fact that children would do just that when the horse returned to its station at the bottom of the hill. The term was apparently also applied to the extra steam locomotives used on steep sections of a railway, although 'banker' came to be more generally used. Old Nibley Farmhouse, on the opposite side of the road, was recorded from 1678, but was rebuilt in about 1800. Two other old farmhouses nearby, at Upper Viney and Lower Viney, date from the 17th century and 1741, respectively.

Blakeney (14)

Blakeney grew up on the Gloucester–Chepstow road near the junction of the Soudley and Blackpool Brooks, which powered a number of mills. The village had become a trading and industrial centre by the late 13th century. Corn-milling, tanning, grindstone manufacture, nail-making, and weaving were all of some importance, and many of these industries continued into the 19th century. The tanners used oak bark from the Forest, which also provided timber for various uses. The oldest part of the village is probably around Church Square, which today is surrounded by attractive, mostly 18th and 19th century buildings, nearly all of them listed. The oldest is the 16th century timber-framed Swan House, formerly the Swan Inn. The Yew Tree (currently closed) dates from the early 19th century, and the nearby King's Head is late 18th century. The early 18th century All Saints Church was rebuilt in about 1820 by Samuel Hewlett, and the sanctuary was added in 1907. The late 18th and 19th centuries were the time of Blakeney's greatest prosperity, with tradesmen and shopkeepers serving the growing settlements on the hillsides above, as well as traffic on the turnpike road. Over 40 different trades were represented in 1851. A brewery was opened before 1870 and operated until about 1915. There were still 20 shopkeepers and 15 other tradesmen and small businessmen in 1931, but trade declined as Lydney grew into an important business and shopping centre.

Etloe House (15)

An estate based on Etloe House was built up by the A Deane family, which was recorded at Etloe from the early 16th century and owned it until the late 19th century. The present Etloe House is a three-storey sandstone building with dormer windows and a Welsh slate roof. It is dated 1730, and has a listed 18th century five-bay stone barn adjacent. However, the original Etloe House Farmhouse is much older: 16th century or earlier, built mainly of coursed rubble-stone, but with a rendered and timber framed east gable. It is further along the road to Purton, about 200 yds past where the walk route turns left to return to Gatcombe.



Furnace Valley, with the Forest of Dean Central Railway's viaduct prominent. From an old postcard.

