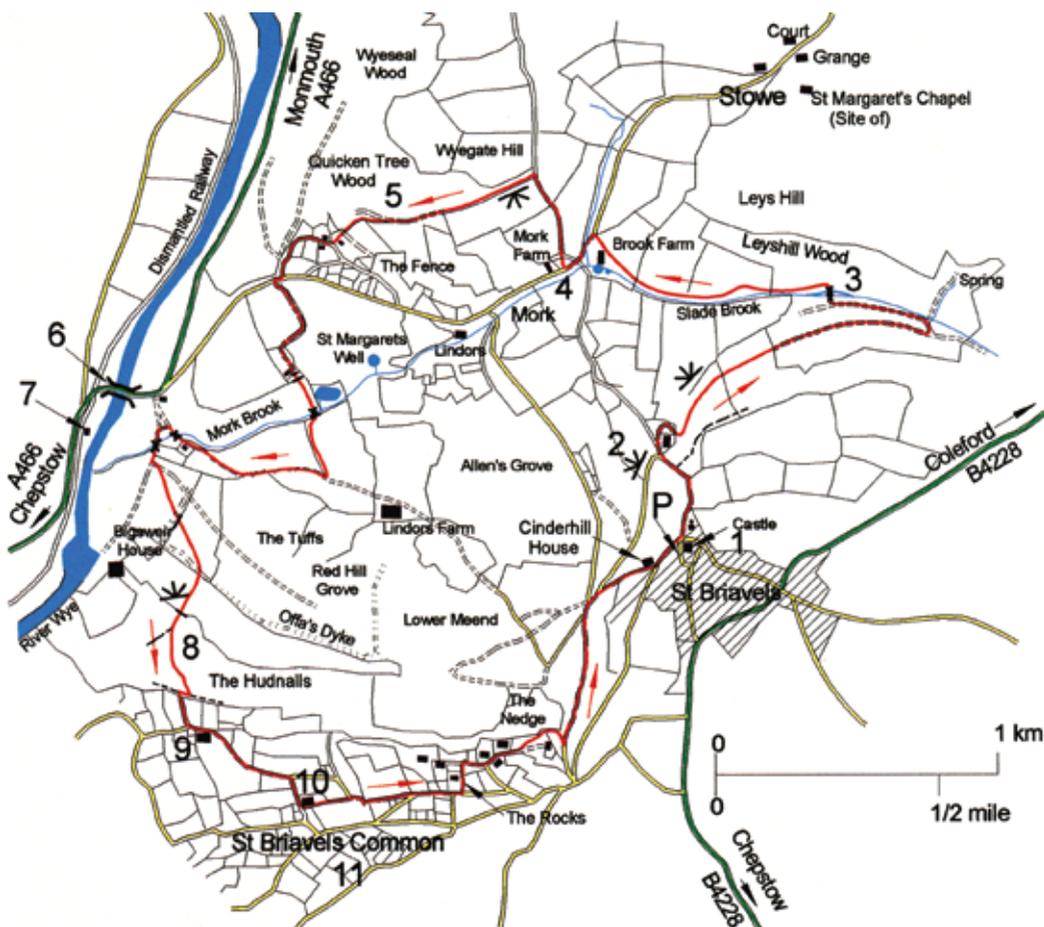


St Briavels, Mork, and Hudnalls Wood

A Norman castle and church, natural dams, ancient woodland, and Wye Valley views. A hilly walk, mostly on field and woodland paths, with some steep ascents and descents; 9 stiles.

Park on side of road on Wye Valley side of St Briavels Castle: GR SO 558045.

Refreshments: pubs in St Briavels. **Bus:** 69 (Chepstow–Monmouth) to Bigsweir Bridge.



ST BRIAVELS AND ITS CASTLE (1) have a long history, which is intimately associated with that of the Forest of Dean. Starting with your back to the castle gatehouse, go down

Mork Road, just to the left of the church, passing Church Farm on your left. Where the road bends sharp left near a mast, bear right onto Mork Lane. There is a lovely view

of the Wye Valley (2) from here. After 60 yds, turn right at a footpath sign along a driveway, and onto a grass track. Keep right of wooden posts to a stile at the top of a field. Descend diagonally left across the field, keeping to the right of an overgrown hedge and then contouring around to the right to reach a stile in the wire fence ahead. (Take care not to descend too far to the left here.) There is a nice view of the Slade Brook Valley, Mork, and Wyegate Hill beyond. Keep ahead across the next field to a stile about half way down the edge of woodland. Enter the woods and follow a grassy track for about 600 yds to a junction, where you go sharp left, then left again after about 60 yds onto a track which goes down the valley a little to the left of a stream. About 400 yds from the junction, look out for a narrow footpath leading down to a footbridge on the right. Cross Slade Brook over two footbridges, from which can be seen some of the travertine dams over which the stream flows (3). The path then goes left, keeping near the stream, to a stile at the edge of the woods.

Continue just above the stream over three more stiles to emerge onto a road at Mork (4). Turn left, past 'Sladbrook', to a byway sign on the right. This leads steeply up past Mork Farm, through a gate to a tarmac lane. Continue uphill on the lane (Coxbury and Wyegate Lane, an 18th century turnpike road), which soon becomes a grassy and then a stony, sunken track. Turn sharp left over a stile by metal railings and take the footpath beyond this, which follows a wire fence. There are nice views of St Briavels and Hudnalls Wood from here. Continue on a wider path through woods (5), then fork left onto a narrow waymarked downhill path beside a fence. Cross a gravel track beside houses and take a path ahead by a low wall, between more houses, onto a tarmac lane at The Fence. Turn right, following the lane to a road.

Take the footpath gate opposite and follow the gravel track to the left around the edge of a field. Turn left in front of a converted barn, and go down to a metal gate. Continue through a second gate, and along

the left-hand side of a field to another gate. Turn right and follow the field boundary up to a dirt track, where you go right. About 100 yds past a bungalow, just beyond a small bridge, turn left and left again onto another dirt track. Bigsweir Bridge (6) can be seen on the right, with St Briavels Station building (7) in the trees directly across the river to its left. Recross the stream and, just past an Offa's Dyke Path sign, bear left onto a grass track. After 20 yds a narrow footpath forks right across a field to a gate on the far side. Continue in the same direction, aiming for a gap near the top of the right-hand field boundary, by a waymarked stile. Note the low earthwork of Offa's Dyke (see Walk 14) on your right. Go through the gap and a line of ancient sweet chestnut trees, and continue straight ahead across the next field (avoid going too far to the left) to a gate, which soon comes into view on the edge of woodland. The view back to the River Wye, Bigsweir Bridge, The Fence, Wyegate Hill, Staunton and the Kymin hill (Walk 13) is superb. Enter Hudnalls Wood (8), taking the left fork to follow the Offa's Dyke Path as it winds steeply uphill. This section of path may not be too obvious, so keep a good lookout for yellow arrows painted on trees and rocks. It may also be muddy and slippery after rain, so take care. Turn right near the top at a T-junction of paths in front of a ruined stone wall, and then left after 20 yds, between walls to a tarmac road.

Turn left past Birchfield House (9), with more good views of the Wye Valley, and follow the road for about 500 yds to a restricted byway sign. Go right here, turn left onto another byway just past the Gideon Chapel (10), and then turn right onto the tarmac road. This area is part of St Briavels Common (11). Continue along the road, turning left at a T-junction, and taking the next road on the left (The Rocks). Take the first right and turn left down a tarmac driveway (The Nedge) opposite a stone barn. Turn right along a grass track in front of Overdale, then, after 200 yds, bear left on a grass path (waymark on tree), just past two wooden sheds. Follow the path over a stone

stile, and then keep right down to a stream, which is followed up to a footbridge. Cross, go up steps onto a dirt track, and turn left to reach a tarmac road. Bear left, with views to the left of the Black Mountains on a clear day, to a junction. Take the right-hand of

the three roads ahead, going uphill. There is a final good view of Llandogo and the Wye Valley on the left before you pass Cinderhill House (which dates, in part, back to the 14th century) and the well. The castle and starting point are just beyond.



St Briavels (1)

The village of St Briavels (pronounced Brevels) is sometimes said to have been named after the 5th century Celtic (Welsh) Saint Briec (or Brioc), although recent studies suggest that St Briavel was an 8th century Welsh prince, born at Cleddon, who spread Christianity in the area and founded several churches. However, until the 12th century the village was known as 'Ledeneia Parva' (Little Lydney). It is situated in a commanding position above the River Wye, and is close to Offa's Dyke (see *Walk 14*). The centre of the village is dominated by the Norman Castle, said to have been built (of local red sandstone) by Milo Fitz Walter, Earl of Gloucester in

about 1130, to guard the Welsh border during the reign of Henry I. Milo became the first Constable of St Briavels and Warden of the Forest, guarding the King's rights and collecting taxes. He was killed in 1143 by an arrow whilst hunting in the Vale of Castiard (Flaxley Valley). The castle and the Forest of Dean were taken over by Henry II in 1160, and the castle was used as a royal hunting lodge by succeeding monarchs, notably King John (1199–1216), whose visits are remembered in the rhyme:

*St Briavels water and Whyral's wheat
Are the best bread and water King John ever eat.*

The much modified hall range (royal apartments) date from this time, and the imposing gatehouse and a chapel were added about the end of the 13th century. St Briavels Hundred was created, probably in the early 12th century, to provide an administrative structure for the Forest of Dean. A 'hundred' is said to have been the area that could supply a hundred fighting men when called upon by the King. The history of the hundred and of the Forest remained closely entwined. St Briavels Castle was the administrative and judicial centre of the Forest of Dean, being the official residence of the Constable and Warden of the Forest (hence the Constable's horn on top of the chimney).

For centuries it was used for sittings of the Verderers', Miners', and Manor Courts (see *Walk 5*), and the gatehouse was also used as a prison. Graffiti on one of the walls of the latter include the inscription: Robin Belcher The day will come that thou shalt answer for it for thou hast sworn against me 1671. During much of the 13th century, the castle was a major production centre for quarrels — the iron bolts fired from crossbows. As many as a million may have

been manufactured here. There is a 'Quarrel Field' south of the village, on the edge of the common, and part of the Hudnalls Wood (see *8*) was probably cut down to make charcoal for the forges. The castle had largely fallen into a state of disrepair by the 18th century, when the keep collapsed, but parts were later used a school and a private house. After restoration it is now used as a Youth Hostel, and the grounds may be visited in the afternoon.

Opposite the castle is the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin. The original Norman sandstone church (late 11th/early 12th century) was much enlarged in the late 12th and 13th centuries by the addition of the north aisle, north and south transepts, tower, and chancel. The tower was replaced by a south porch tower in about 1830 as the original had become unsafe. The Norman font has an unusual 16-lobed shelf, and there are some interesting tombs, including one to Robert, Abbot of Lire, who died here in 1272, and that of William Warren, his wife Mariana, and their four children (late 16th century). The ancient custom of distributing small pieces of bread and cheese among the congregation after the evening service (which includes the sermon for the Whittington Purse) on Whit Sunday is thought to date back to the 12th century, when villagers successfully defended their rights to pasture animals and cut timber in nearby Hudnalls Wood (*8*). Each person who claimed the 'dole' had to pay a penny to the Earl of Hereford (this was Milo Fitz Walter from 1141–3). There are a number of attractive late 18th and early 19th century houses facing the castle walls and moat (now filled in). St Mary's Chantry is now a dwelling, but incorporates parts of a 16th century chantry chapel. Church Farmhouse dates from the 16th century, but has since been much modified. Below the castle, by Cinderhill (a reference to the former industrial activity here) is St Bride's Well; the present well head is probably 19th century, but the well is ancient. There are two pubs: the 16th century George and the Crown. Unfortunately, the village shop, post office, and tea rooms have all recently closed, although there is still a primary school, Congregational Chapel, craft shop, Assembly Rooms, and sports pavillion. The areas of Upper Meend and Lower Meend (meend refers to common land) are situated on the slopes leading down towards the Wye Valley. The population of the village has increased only gradually over the last 150 years or so, in spite of a significant amount of new housing being constructed in the 20th century; 1331 people lived here in 1991. Interestingly, a recent aerial survey has shown evidence for extensive, probably medieval, earthworks beyond the current built-up area, suggesting that significant contraction has occurred at some stage of its history. Did this result from one of the Great Plagues (1348 or 1665) or from depopulation caused by conversion of common lands to sheep pastures?

Wye Valley Gorge (2)

In this part of the Lower Wye Gorge, the river has cut its way down through the Devonian Upper Old Red Sandstone rocks (Tintern Sandstone and Quartz Conglomerate) into the Lower Old Red Sandstone Brownstones (see *Walk 1*). The valley profile here is somewhat less steep than the sheer cliffs which characterise the gorge in areas of Carboniferous Limestone, such as around Symonds Yat. The low-lying cultivated ground below the viewpoint was once within a meander of the Wye (the Bigsweir Meander), abandoned when the river cut down through the neck of the meander. The fields are underlain by river terrace gravels, and to the right of these is the unusually named hamlet of The Fence. There is another, even more spectacular, abandoned meander a couple of miles upstream, between Redbrook and Newland. The Wye was once the main means of transport in the area, being navigable at least as far up as Hereford. Llandogo, the village seen on the Welsh side, was once, like Brockweir (*Walk 14*), a boat-building centre and an important port for small sailing vessels, which worked to South Wales, Bristol, and elsewhere. The importance of the river trade is indicated by the 36-vessel fleet of ships and trows owned by James Hodges of Llandogo in the early 1800s. These conveyed timber and bark, much of it to Ireland, with the return cargo being iron ore from Furness, Lancashire.

The Sloop Inn, which was built as a cider house and mill in 1707, is a reminder of these times. In the latter part of the 19th century, it was owned by Alfred Williams, a master mariner and barge owner. The Bristol connection is shown by a pub in that city called the Llandoger Trow, originally a mid-17th century timber-framed merchant's house. A trow (rhymes with 'crow') was a flat-bottomed sailing barge used on the Severn and the Wye. A typical example is the 'Hannah Louisa', built at Llandogo in 1868, which was 71 ft 2 in. long, with a beam of 12 ft 7 in., a draught of 6 ft 2 in., and a weight of 56 tons. The last surviving trow is the 'Spry', now on display at the Blist's Hill Museum at Ironbridge in Shropshire. The bell of 'The William and Sarah', one of the last Chepstow barges to trade on the river, can be found in the bell tower of Llandogo's St Oudoceus church, which was built in 1860. Until the turnpike road between Monmouth and Chepstow (now the A466), which crossed the river at Bigsweir Bridge, was opened in 1828, the main overland route was over the hills through Trellech, a short distance away on the Welsh side. It is hard to believe that this quiet village was once one of the most important towns in Medieval Wales: in the late 13th century it was larger than Cardiff or Chepstow. The opening of the Wye Valley Railway in 1876 (see *Walk 13*) continued the use of the Wye Valley as a major transport route, but was one of the final nails in the coffin of the up-river trade (see also *Walk 14*). Just above Llandogo are the waterfalls called Cleddon Shoots (near which St Briavel may have been born), best seen after heavy rain.



Slade Brook Travertine Dams (3)

This remarkable series of dams (at least 60) occurs over nearly half a mile of Slade Brook. They completely dam the stream, which is from 3 to 30 ft wide, and range from about 1 to 18 inches in height, with an average of about a foot. Such dams are formed when spring water, near-saturated in lime, runs over obstructions in the stream bed, when loss of dissolved carbon dioxide results in deposition of travertine (a porous, friable type of limestone). Development of dams may well have been initiated by water running over accumulations of twigs and branches across the stream. The dams are colonised by various species of moss and algae, which become encrusted by travertine as the dams build up, and they have considerable conservation value. Most of the water in the stream is discharged from a large spring, which emerges from the Carboniferous Limestone bedrock near the head of the valley. The Slade Brook dams are possibly the best example of such structures in the country. On no account should they be touched, as they are easily damaged.

Mork (4)

The hamlet of Mork has some interesting listed buildings. White-painted Sladbrook dates from the late 18th or early 19th century, and once included a watermill. It was also used as a smithy, but is now a private dwelling. At the back of the cottage the roof is swept down and the building is partly over Mork Stream. Mork Farmhouse was built in the 16th or 17th century of local sandstone, with a Welsh slate roof. The hamlet of Stowe, about half a mile up the road towards Clearwell, includes the 16th century (with 19th century additions) Stowe Grange farmhouse,

reputed to date from 1563. Nearby are the sparse remains of the Medieval Chapel of St Margaret, now part of a group of farm buildings which includes a large 18th century sandstone rubble field barn. Stowe Court is a large detached house dating from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, with an adjoining walled garden enclosure. There is evidence for much older human activity near here: a concentration of flint artefacts on the hill just north of Slade Brook suggests a Mesolithic camp site. Neolithic stone axes have also been found, and there is a particular concentration of Neolithic flints on the Barse, between St Briavels and Bream, indicating that the area was being settled by that time. Bronze Age flints have also been found in the latter area, and there was once a large standing stone, the Broadstone of probable similar age, nearby.

Bigsweir Wood (5)

The Lower Wye Valley's native woodlands form some of the best examples of ravine woodlands remaining in Europe. They occur on nutrient-rich soils on the valley sides and bottoms, along about 18 miles of the Lower Wye Valley AONB. The woodland is dominated by ash, beech, and yew, with an intimate mix of other native woodland trees, including small-leaved lime and oak, although there are also commercial conifer plantations. There are nationally important populations of plant and animal species, such as Tintern spurge, narrow-leaved bittercress, greater and lesser horseshoe bats, dormouse, and white admiral butterfly. As such the Wye Valley is one of the most important areas for woodland conservation in Britain. However, the survival of these woods is threatened by the decline of traditional woodland management techniques, like coppicing, and by overgrazing by wild fallow deer, which prevents regeneration. Fortunately, these issues are now being addressed. Much of the woodland on the eastern side of the Wye Valley between here and Redbrook is owned by the Woodland Trust. Bigsweir Wood is dominated by oak, small-leaved lime, and beech, but elsewhere there are large areas of conifers. The latter will gradually be restored to native woodland, as some of the original woodland trees (oaks, yews, and limes) and herbs persist in parts of the wood, while the seeds of other plants are lying dormant in the soil. The conifers will initially be thinned to give space to the surviving broad-leaved trees and to allow light to penetrate to the forest floor and stimulate the re-growth of woodland flora. The remaining conifers will eventually be harvested and replaced with the original forest species.

Evidence of former industrial activity can still be seen in the woods. Because timber holds too much water to produce the very high temperatures needed for smelting operations, it was necessary to first convert it to charcoal. This was produced by piling dried wood on a platform (a flat area of ground), covering it with a layer of turf, and then igniting it, so that only partial combustion occurred. Thin sections of wood, commonly oak, were obtained by coppicing to ensure a constant supply. The sites of these charcoal platforms can still be seen, the product being used in forges at places like Redbrook and Tintern. Towards the top of the valley side are a number of small quarries, where Quartz Conglomerate was obtained for making millstones, which were then lowered down to the Wye for transport. Unfinished or damaged millstones can still be found amongst the boulders which litter the hillside on both sides of the valley between Brockweir and Redbrook, and others can be seen in the river when the water is low, presumably having been lost when being transported downhill or during loading onto boats. Although not easy to pick out on the ground, the late 8th century earthwork of Offa's Dyke (see *Walk 14*) passes through Bigsweir Wood. Its course has recently been confirmed by a lidar survey (see *Walk 10*).

Bigsweir Bridge (6)

Bigsweir Bridge formed part of a toll road along the Wye Valley between Monmouth and Chepstow, which was authorised in 1824. The road replaced earlier routes over the hills on each side of the Wye, via Redbrook, St Briavels and Tidenham Chase, and via Trellech and Tintern Cross. It was opened in 1828 and incorporates a stone toll house at the western (Welsh) end. The



bridge was designed by Charles Hollis and the ironwork was cast at Merthyr Tydfil. It consists of a single cast iron arch of 164 ft span with four ribs of dumbbell section; the spandrels have N-pattern bracing. The arch is supported on circular stone piers and is surmounted by a cast iron balustrade. In the mid 19th century, two masonry flood arches were added at each end, bringing the overall length to 321 ft. In 1876 the Wye Valley Railway opened, and St Briavels station was built near the western end of the bridge. The

bridge now carries considerable traffic on the A466 between Chepstow and Monmouth, but its restricted width (12 ft) necessitates one-way traffic controlled by lights. It was named after Bigs Weir, about 600 yds downstream, near which there was once a wharf. Just above the weir (on the English side) is Bigsweir House, a large mid-18th century country house, once the seat of the Rooke family. The house is built of cut sandstone blocks, with a Welsh slate roof, and the front entrance has a Roman Doric portico with pediment, approached by steps.

St Briavels Station (7)

The Wye Valley Railway from Wye Valley Junction, near Chepstow, to Wyesham Junction, near Monmouth, was opened on 1 November 1876 (*see Walk 13*). Passenger services ceased in January 1959, and the line finally closed to goods in January 1964. St Briavels station was actually situated in Wales, and was nearly 2 miles by road from the village it served (a long way uphill to carry your shopping). Originally named Bigsweir, it was renamed St Briavels and Llandogo in May 1909, before becoming simply St Briavels on 1 February 1927, prior to the opening of Llandogo Halt. The small stone station building and single platform were on



the western (up) side of the line, and there was a signal box adjacent to the level crossing on the A466 road. There was a loop and sidings in a small goods yard, which had a goods shed and storage shed, as well as 30 cwt and 5 ton cranes. The station closed to both passenger and goods traffic on 5 January 1959. The station building is one of only two on the line to survive (the other is Tintern), and is now used by a fishing club. The goods shed also survives, but in a derelict condition.

The Hudnalls (8)

The earliest reference was in 1282, when the Forest Eyre recorded that “The Hudnalls wood is a desmesne wood of the Lord King and is cut down by the men of St Briavels, who claim the liberty of taking from there at will and have always taken from there in this way”. It was part of the Royal Manor of St Briavels, and hence extraparochial, until 1842, when most was incorporated into St Briavels Parish, the rest going to Hewelsfield. Most of the flatter land on the plateau was settled and enclosed in the late 18th/early 19th centuries (*see 11 below*), but the steeply sloping hillsides above the River Wye and Lindors Brook survived as an important example of ancient semi-natural woodland. The section above the Wye has recently been bought by English Nature as a National Nature Reserve. The woods consist mainly of beech, pendunculate and sessile oaks, ash, and small-leaved lime, with hazel, holly, and yew in the underwood; there are also a few wych elm and field maple. Birch, cherry, and rare aspen are found in disturbed areas, and alder on wet ground. The beech- and oak-dominated areas have been much coppiced in the past. Fallow deer are often seen in the woods and nearby fields. A number of small streams flow down boulder-filled gullies, and evidence for human activity includes a few ruined buildings, broken-down stone walls, and abandoned millstones. The Hudnalls is the subject of some of the oldest commoners’ rights in England, where men of St Briavels have long been permitted to take wood (estovers), graze animals (herbage), and run pigs for acorns and beech mast (pannage). These rights are thought to date back at least to the time of Milo Fitz Walter, builder of St Briavels Castle, who seems to have granted them on the urging of his daughter, Margaret. However, it is quite likely that Milo was merely confirming rights which were already old, and that he was acting on behalf of King Henry I. Interestingly, there are several references to a Margaret in the area, notably St Margaret’s Chapel at Stowe (*see 4*), and St Margaret’s Well, near The Fence. The rights in the Hudnalls are intimately associated with the Bread and Cheese Dole, described above (*1*). Whatever their origin, these unique rights still exist, being registered in 1977 under the 1965 Commons Act, although they are now rarely exercised.

Birchfield House (9)

This unusual house, which has two narrow, but lofty front gables, was built in 1908. It appears to have been an extension to a late 18th century building, the rather plain block set against the gable wall. The latter was used until recently as a Child Development Centre. There is a lovely view up the Wye Valley towards Monmouth from in front of the house, which can be seen from afar.

Gideon Chapel (10)

This originated as a school in 1852. It seems to have been used as a chapel by 1908, when the Congregational Church at St. Briavels had an outlying mission there. In recent years the Gideon Chapel has been used mainly as a youth centre by young members of the St. Briavels congregation and by visiting groups from other churches.

St Briavels Common (11)

Together with the adjoining Hewelsfield Common, St Briavels Common was originally part of the woodland of the Hudnalls, a tract of extraparochial common land. In medieval times, most of the flatter uplands seem to have been relatively open woodland, with grassy clearings used as pasture. Much of this was settled and enclosed by squatters between about 1750 and 1810, leaving only the steeper slopes above the Wye as woodland (*see 8*). The result was an unusual landscape of small fields, isolated cottages, and small patches of woodland, separated by narrow winding lanes and footpaths (*see Walk 14*).