

The Wye Valley Challenge

Two old ladies take on the challenge of 136-mile trek from Chepstow to Plynlimon

Why? Jenni just happened to say she fancied doing the Wye Valley Walk as she lives near Hay on Wye and enjoys walking that stretch. I have done 3 charity treks of various lengths walking up to 5 days continuously – Venezuela/ Cuba/ Mount Etna – but never a 15-day long walk.

I offered to organise it if she wanted to go. Bought the official guide and we met up in the New Year to decide where the overnight stops should be. Organised B&B accommodation via the internet.

January to May training: need to walk 5 miles every day. Had to change back to my boots instead of my special-fit trainers as they needed to be waterproof for our walk. The first time I wore them again after a long break (my main boots finally gave up at the end of the Mount Etna trek last year) I found all the places where blisters would start so began with the moleskin and plasters to protect little toes and backs of heels. The seam down the centre back is usually a problem so stuck a strip of padded moleskin over the seam – what a difference! We started the trek in Chepstow the night before our official start date on 8th May ready to leave by 9.30am.

Day 1: Chepstow to Llandogo



What a hard day! Started at 10.00 am with a climb and went on from there – every new page of the guide starts with “after a steep flight of steps...”.

The weather was grey and miserable, a cold north wind and regular bouts of fine rain, not too heavy but needing the wet gear. You do get very warm while walking, but also chill very quickly when you stop for a rest.

It was disappointing that it was so cold and wet when we reached Tintern Abbey. However, the woodland we walked through was magnificent. Lime trees, beech woods, traditional British forest all carpeted in a fantastic violet-blue haze of bluebells which are late this year due to the cold winter. We followed the lane down into Llandogo for our overnight stay.

Day 2: Llandogo to Monmouth.

The landlady said we looked in better nick than most by the time they got to her so we must be professional walkers! Unfortunately, this meant she sent us on the “challenging” route back up to the path. It was a hard start to the day as the climb up to the ridge felt like it was almost vertical at

times. But, once up there it was beautiful woodland, bluebells, and wild garlic everywhere and dappled light shining through.

Day 3: Monmouth to Symonds Yat East

Less mileage with more flat bits on this day so we got there quite early.

Day 4: Symonds Yat to Ross on Wye – a BAD day!

A bit late getting away, but the weather was fine. Today was all climbing with some difficult stretches, and we missed a turning along the track from Symonds Yat so did a detour of at least one mile. When we did find the correct route down through the woods, we found derelict buildings and some deer grazing, so it was a lovely part of the walk.

Another steep climb from the village but luckily the weather was dry. There is a lot more downhill here, through woods and fields, and we sat on a stile to rest before coming down onto the road at Coughton. After this, it gets really hard to climb Chase Hill after finding the track through a farmyard. You can tell how often anyone does this bit as the grass was knee high with no visible track.

All hills from now on are judged by this one! As it was 5.30pm before we started the climb, and we were very tired, it was 7.30pm before we finally got to Ross so a 9-hour day. Glad to get into bed tonight.

Day 6: Fownhope to Hereford – now done 50 miles!

This was much easier, mostly flat, including 2 pub stops on the way. In Mordiford, you can get your card stamped at the Moon Inn, then on into the cathedral city of Hereford.

Day 7: Hereford to Monnington

At Byford we stopped in the church porch to rest our feet – seems to be a good place to sit for a while and usually very cool. We did well until after Byford when we reached the apple orchards. Where the guide said the track doglegged, Bulmers cider company had planted new areas of apple trees but not put signs up to show the route through. We had to work along three options before we got onto the right path, basically following our instincts to walk in the general direction of the river.

Day 8: Monnington to Hay on Wye

Started off with another hard slog up the road beside the pub, but we could see the Point-to-Point in the fields below us as we climbed up to Merbach Common. Fantastic views over 11 counties (according to the book), a well-deserved rest for 10 minutes at the top as it was so hot and sunny by now.

Beware the “sunken lanes” as these are rocky, hard – and often muddy – steep stretches that kill the ankles and knees. At Pool Pardon village, we met a bull strolling purposefully towards us as we crossed the stile, so decided not to be brave but took a detour around the lanes to meet up with the route later. Had to avoid the cows again as we got to the golf course, and were very tired as we reached outskirts of Hay on Wye.

Day 9: Hay on Wye to Boughrood

Crossed the main road and cut through the church yard at Llowes, across the field up the steep embankment and through the woods/common before going down a further lane to meet the main road again. It was nice and sunny, very warm, especially on the climbs, but generally a pleasant walk to Glasbury.

Day 10: Boughrood to Erwood Station

This was an easy short day for a change, following the river path from Boughrood. As before, we crossed the main road to Trericket Mill. It looked closed but as we wanted our card stamped, we knocked the door. A very pleasant chap at the Mill made us coffee and biscuits and we sat in the garden. He then pointed out the box with the stamp/ink pad nailed to a post for when they are closed – oops!

We crossed Llanstephan Bridge, interesting with rickety old wooden slats, the oldest in Wales apparently, joining an old railway track past the nature reserve to Erwood Station craft centre.

Day 11: Erwood Station to Builth Wells

Starting from Erwood station, we crossed the dreaded main road again and went up the steep lane opposite to Twmpath Common. It is high and clear up here, great views then on to cross the open slope diagonally. Follow the lane for a long time to reach the next common. We were so grateful for the fine weather, especially as “2 small streams” were dry and hard to find. You would not want to cross the common in poor weather with limited visibility.

Once we crossed the river at Dolfach Cottage there was another very steep climb up the lane, but we eventually got to our overnight stop in Builth Wells.

Day 1: Builth Wells to Newbridge on Wye

A pleasant start to the day with the walk alongside the river – very pretty – although we did lose the track in the woods and had to double back until we found it again.

As there is nowhere to stay at Newbridge, we caught the bus as planned to get into Llandrindod Wells by mid-afternoon.

Day 13: Newbridge to Rhayader (getting closer now!!)

Most of this section was high up on the ridge and we could see across the main road to our right. The walk itself is not too bad now although it is mainly road. At Llanwrthwl village, we sat in the porch of the church for lunch and to rest the feet again leaving the village by the old track. Crossing the Elan bridge, we went the farm and onto the lane into Rhayader for the night.

Day 14: Rhayader to Llangurig – a long 12 miles

Apparently, the hottest days for May in years – oh good. It was a steady climb to start, through some woodland then a further climb along the lane past a farm. We stopped for a rest at the top, then found we had to keep climbing through fields and open hillside, but what fantastic views.

The diagonal path down to the Gilfach centre is so steep! There were cows feeding their calves on the last stretch of the path itself, so we had to be brave to shoo them away. The visitor centre was

closed, but the Long House (and toilets) were open for use. We followed the Nature Trail alongside Afon Marteg – what a beautiful river, definitely worth another visit.

Following another old railway track, we came out at the A470 (for the umpteenth time) and crossed to the lay-by opposite. After a less strenuous final stretch, it was good to see Llangurig!

Day 15: LAST DAY to Plynlimon 12 miles

Yes, it starts with another climb. Although the path was not clear to start with, we continued our climb to reach the transmitter towers then across the top ridge. It was nice to get down by the river again, but still had more climbing to do. As we passed the old ruined barn, we chatted with a man who told us about the donkey near Hendre. As the man said, the donkey plonked himself alongside the stile so that we had to lean on him to get over it.

After the “4 fields”, we stopped for a rest and decided that as it was so hot, and we were already half-way up the slope, we would take the higher woodland option. It is a bit of a steep climb to get to the forestry track, but a good option as it is much cooler in the woods.

Following through woodland closer to the river now, we crossed the A44 for the Sweet Lamb Rally centre. This was all dry, dusty, open track with no shelter on THE hottest day (in the 80s). Lots of climbs again, all of them very heavy going. We stopped several times to rest and apply more sunscreen. The man who owns the complex put the marker stones in place at the start and end of the walk, the final stone at the car park near the Severn Way rather than the source of the Wye, as he didn't want all those people driving through his land. Still climbing along the winding track to reach the forest, we agreed the official guide-book changes scale around this point as it must surely be more than 12 miles by now.

After a long track through the forest, we followed a “stony” path alongside the smaller river downstream. Painfully hard underfoot, and seeming to go on forever, we finally reached the River Severn, walked 200 yards along one side to get to the bridge to cross it, 200 yards the other side. We were now walking the Severn Way for at least another 45 minutes before reaching the end of the trek.

What have we learned?

- Add padded moleskin to the inside of the boots against uncomfortable seams
- If new boots still give you grief after a week of buying them, ditch them and get some more – they should be comfy from day 1
- Padded socks work better if worn inside out and without liner socks
- Talcum powder is a must for all sorts of bits when walking!
- A rucksack that is shaped so that the weight sits mainly on the hips is better
- Regularly check that rucksack straps are evenly balanced to avoid uneven pressure – they seem to move slightly, especially if you always swing it from one side to put it on your back
- When it gets really bad, just count the steps – 1000 steps is about half a mile!