

# In The Wye Valley A Meeting of River and People



*My first touch of the river. A moorhen, startled, sends complaints to the air. The river is gentle today, rain behind us, sheep in the field. I stand and watch birds among the tangled branches of a willow. The tree is turning its leaves to gold. There are too many birds to count - long tailed tits and petit, pale birds, warblers of some kind - all flitting, singing, pecking. When the next downpour arrives, they fly, all together, across the river to denser tree cover.*

*notes, on leaving Ballingham Court, September 24, 2020*



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This booklet has been produced by Harriet and Rob Fraser of *somewhere nowhere*, a collaborative arts and research practice focusing on issues of environment and place.

The Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is one of the UK's designated and protected national landscapes and one of the finest lowland landscapes in Britain.

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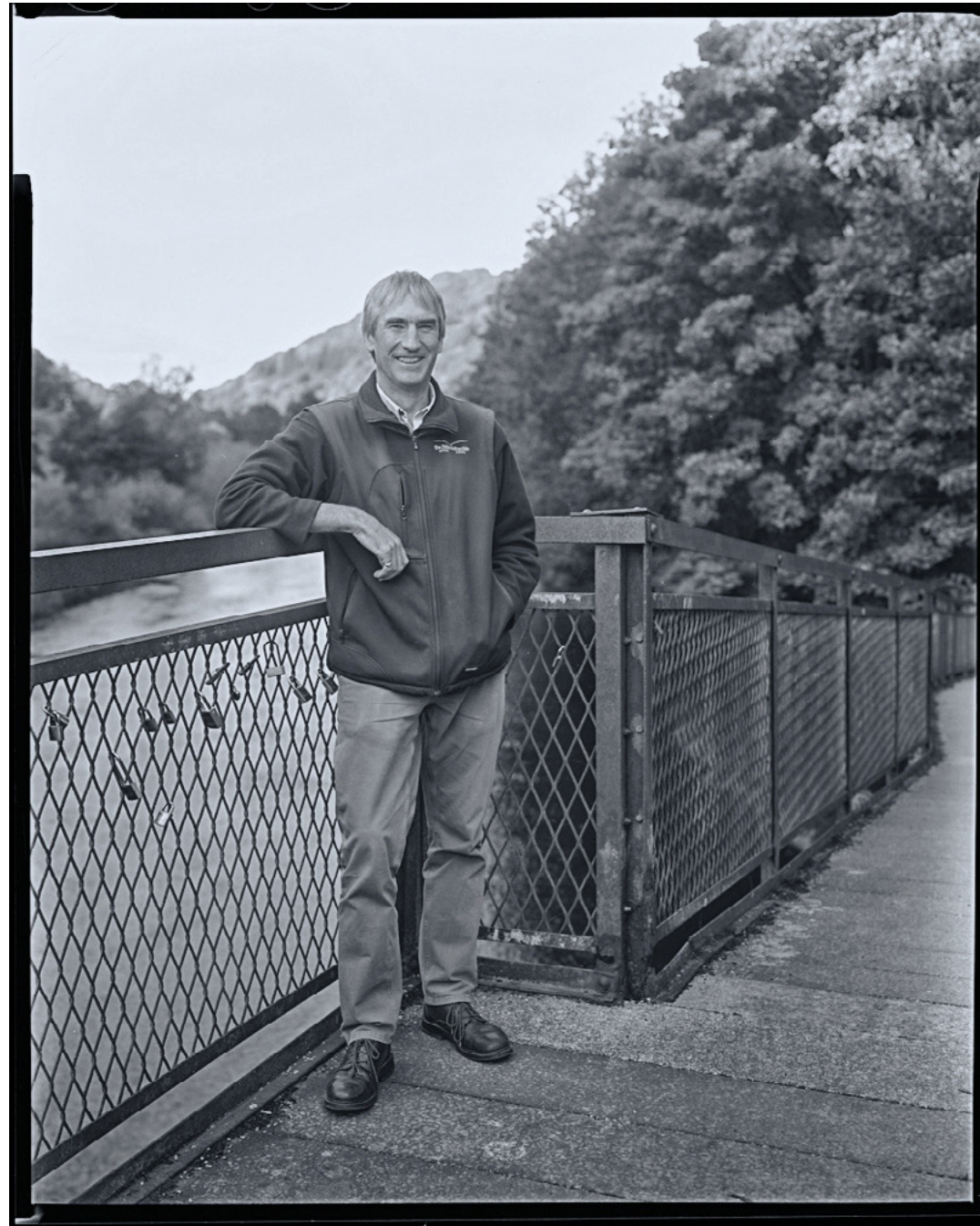
*sun and rain on trees  
the heady aroma of earth  
sky framed by water  
and always  
the sound of the river*

In September, we took some lengthy walks following the course of the River Wye. As we began planning our routes, a phrase cropped up in conversation: 'who the river meets'. That got us thinking about the river as a constant, ancient living being, that through history has been encountering people along its banks. The river meets them as it passes, and in turn, each person meets the river in the contexts of their own lives.

Wanting to know more about the river and the Wye valley, we spoke to several people by phone. Some of these we were able to meet in person, with the river as our backdrop. We learned a lot from them and as we walked downstream, facing different weathers and vistas, we carried their insights and the many questions that our meetings had provoked. This helped to bring the valley to life for us, and we're deeply grateful to everyone for giving us their time. In addition to the people featured here, we'd like to thank Sarah Sawyer at Wye Valley AONB, woodland ecologist George Peterken, and geological specialists Nic Howes and Moira Jenkins.

These conversations were interludes during a series of walks. On one day, we walked from Ballingham to Ross, via Hoarwithy, Sellack and Foy, just under eight hours of semi-wet wandering. The next day, which was dry and even sunny at times, we walked from Symonds Yat Rock, making our way down to the river and tracing its course to Monmouth. On other days, we wandered along the banks of the river around Redbrook, Bigsweir, Brockweir and Tintern. For the most part, our gaze was focused on the river; the poems in this booklet reflect that and are a dedication to the Wye and the people who love it.

Harriet Fraser & Rob Fraser, 2020  
*somewhere-nowhere*



*.... this place is a rich tapestry, centred around a glorious river ...*

I have a close personal connection with moving water. And I just love the Wye - it's the most beautiful river in so many respects. There's a story of three sisters: three rivers that rise on Plynlimon, a mountain in Mid Wales. The Rheidol, which goes straight to the sea at Aberystwyth, is the excited, exuberant sister. Then there's the River Severn, the vainglorious one who took a long circuitous route to gain as much attention as possible and went through as many cities as she could. Then there's the Wye. She's the really beautiful one but doesn't realise her own beauty and just skips through lovely countryside.

And here she is, beside us now and we're in a place that was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1971. What makes the Wye Valley so special? It's an assemblage of things, including grasslands and woods - some have been here since the last Ice Age - as well as the river. And the heritage is part of it too: railway bridges, industrial heritage, hill forts. People were living here twelve thousand years ago. This place is a rich tapestry, a palimpsest landscape, centred around a glorious river. I love it.

The Wye was one of the first rivers to be designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its whole length, and it's now also a Special Area of Conservation. Partly this is for its fish, particularly salmon, twaite shad, allis shad and lamprey; and there are eels and otters, and crayfish in some places further upstream. It's a bit murky today. It can run red with Herefordshire top soil. It can run brown with algae. And it can run crystal clear sometimes.

The river is suffering, though, with phosphate pollution. But that is reversible. I hope that in five to ten years we can turn that around and the river will recover. And if farming practices shift, which I think they need to, the impact on the river would be less. And of course, we are in the midst of a wider ecological, environmental emergency. We're not escaping that any better than anywhere else. What we can do through the AONB is to get people together and say: How can we solve this? How can we move things forward? How can we do it together?

There's a huge amount of good will towards the Wye. It has been a tourism destination for 250 years, since Gilpin travelled down it and waxed lyrical about the picturesque. But you know, people already felt this: right back to the Cistercian monks who built Tintern Abbey, and the people who built the hill forts. They realised this was a special place.

*Andrew Blake is the manager of Wye Valley AONB.  
Photographed on Penallt Viaduct, which crosses the River Wye at Redbrook,  
straddling the England Wales border.*





## Downstream

see -

the single leaf  
let loose from slender bough

falls  
to the river's liquid lap

drifts beneath the quick blue  
of kingfishers, the curt calls of coots  
and the slap of oars

a comma in a story  
written with fluid tongue  
that mirrors trees, skies, birds,  
takes its colour from light  
and the interruptions of soil,  
counts its age in aeons

this living artery  
conducts the ebb and swell  
of melancholy and hope  
repeats voices  
reflects choices

carries all our yesterdays  
towards tomorrow





*.... our soil is our most important asset ...*

I was born here, and have never been away for more than a couple of weeks at a time. My dad came to live here with his uncle and aunty when he was young, so he could catch the train to Ross Grammar School. I'm the fourth generation of my family to farm here, and I run the farm with my husband, Henry, whose family still farms at Sellack. And our children have all got a big heart for this place. When you're moving stock along the road it's fantastic having lots of kids to stand in all the gateways. My children think that's why I had four - we counted our gateways between here and our furthest field! If there was a problem, we had a birthday party!

Our son Monty will be the fifth generation of our family to take on the farm. Our daughter has a glamping site here - Nature's Nest. It was a really successful first season, then Coronavirus hit. But when she has been open, she's been really busy. It's such a beautiful area.

Herefordshire is a progressive farming area. We're in the lee of the Welsh hills so you don't get extreme weather - mostly. You can grow most things. Potatoes, soft fruit, apples, cattle, sheep. And you'll find a lot of renewable energy. We grow maize for our anaerobic digester. The maize goes into a huge air-tight container along with chicken muck and cattle muck. As the bacteria break it down, it produces methane, which is collected and burned to make electricity and heat. The digestate at the end is fantastic: you've taken the muck from your cattle and stored it for 40 days, collected methane, then put it on the field. And we've got solar panels, and a firewood business.

Each year we try to get as much of the apple harvests done before the clocks change - and the weather with them. But in the last two winters, rain has come earlier, and lots of it. We have a few floods every year, which we've just got used to, but last year was particularly bad.

And in 2020 the floods in February were extensive across the whole valley. We're used to coping, though, and do what we can to get through them. One thing we've done is plant trees and a hedgerow by the river. We don't have livestock by the river during the winter, and we don't grow crops on the flood plain. Our soil is our most important asset and we don't want it washing down the river. We have grassland by the river; and keeping a green cover, and grazing with livestock, holds onto our soil and prevents run-off. As a farm, we've got a lot of different enterprises, but each one has got to make sense, and give back.

*Esther Rudge heads the family-run farm, Ballingham Court in Herefordshire. The farm has won awards for its suckler herds, and has been Wye Valley AONB Farm of the Year three times.*





## Kingfisher

willows hang riverward  
as if to taste its tune  
washed banks ask for sun

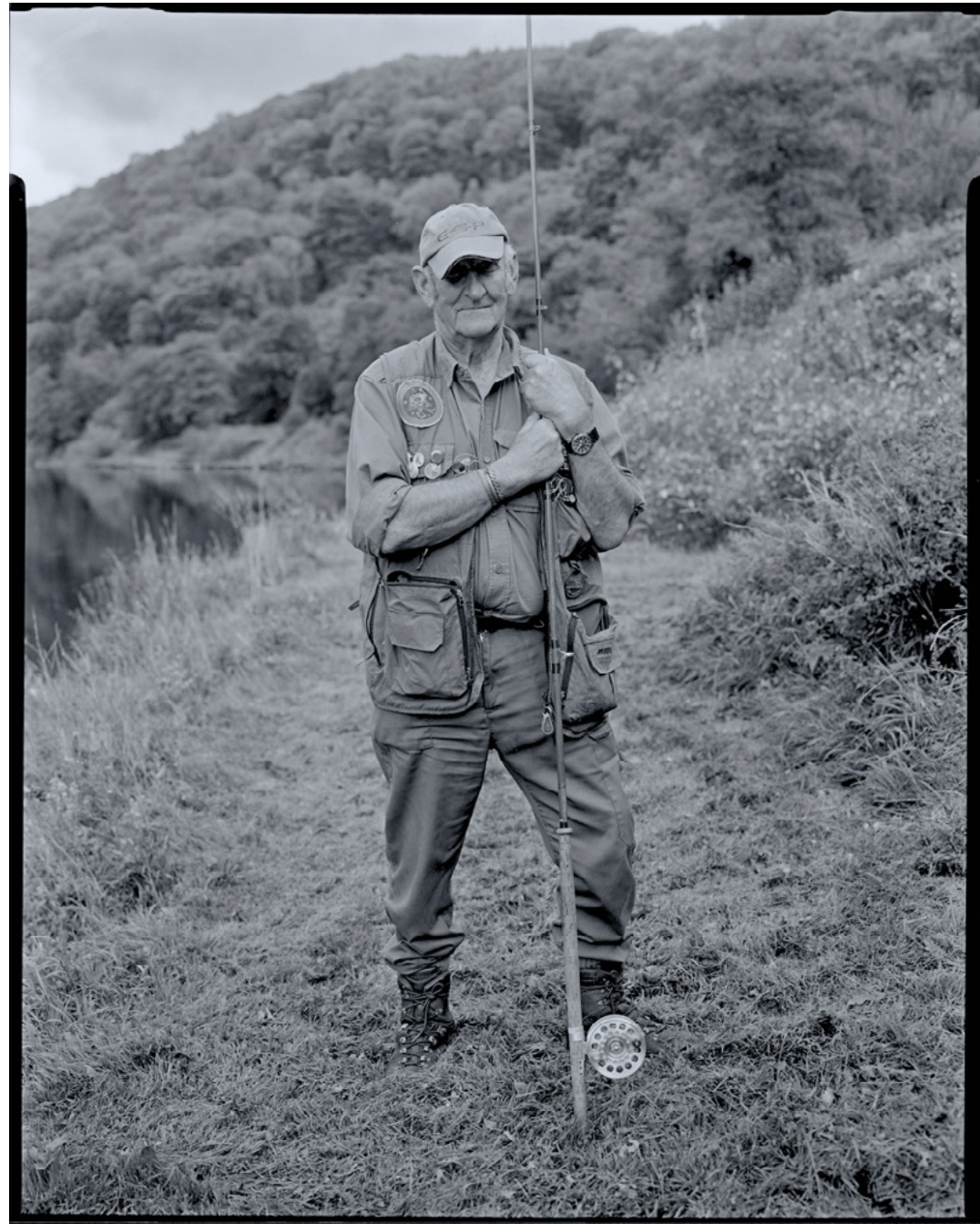
I stand, quite still, lost  
in a hypnosis of ripples  
listen to the river

and then: a sudden dart  
scribes a long delightful moment  
viridian over water  
a slice of fire between greys

this flash of blue  
the certainty of beak  
the reassurance of wild

is all I could wish for  
this one rainy day





*.... a river without wildlife, it's just water, isn't it? ...*

The Wye Valley has so many different characters, from the ruggedness of Radnorshire down to where it empties into the Severn estuary at Chepstow. I look at it running below the rocks at Symonds Yat many a time and think this has very likely not altered since the last Ice Age. It reminds me of Arthur Conan's lost world - I half expect to see a Pterodactyl!

I've seen the river deteriorate. A lot of our agriculture has altered dramatically. When I first came here there was no soft fruit growing. Now this region is one of the biggest soft fruit growers, all close to the river, all with big polytunnels, all with run-offs - not necessarily into the river but into ditches that flow into the river. You get a storm or heavy rain for a day or two, and the river will go a Hereford red colour. Twenty, thirty years ago that would run off in a day or two, but it takes days to clear now. And maize is being planted; it is intolerant to any weed so you've got keep spraying, and that all runs off. Where there's no underlying grass or weed structure on the soil, when you get heavy rain the soil runs off.

Nature is a great recoverer, isn't it? But I think that if the algae problem continues, the river will find it hard to recover. Think about ranunculus, which is declining. Without it, there won't be the invertebrate life that depends on it, for fish to feed on. An awful lot of the aquatic life spends its time there - little fellas like the grannom or caddis flies, and the assorted mayflies - what's feeding on those in the summer? Swallows, martins, swifts, pied wagtails, grey wagtails, chaffinches; without the flies, they're not going to be there. I think it's a great pity. We should have everything from a little tiny amoeba right up to big Atlantic salmon - it's all part of a chain. But a river without wildlife, it's just water, isn't it?

The river is there for us all. Whether you want to fish, canoe, walk, watch birds or just sit and watch the river go by. It's there for us to enjoy and it's for us all to look after, isn't it? We all should be guardians of our countryside. Somebody looked after it so as we could enjoy it, so I think that we should look after it for future generations.

It becomes part of your life, it does. The river Wye runs through my bones. You can own the river bank and the bed, but nobody actually owns the water of the river. I see it as my river. Does that make sense? I get up in the morning and I look at the river. I see it in all its moods, from the bare bones of summer to roaring torrents in winter. People you meet as well, they're all part of the river. It might not belong to me, but there it is and I feel it's mine. I get very upset when people start making a mess of it.

*George Woodward, photographed by a boat house on the banks of the Wye near Redbrook, is a keen fisherman and for many years was a Water Bailiff in the Wye Valley.*





## Each Bridge Tells a Story

the Balfour Beatty man, high-vis jacket,  
heavy boots and a knowing smile, says

*it can tell you a lot, a bridge like this  
especially when it's windy*

we listen to what the bridge has to say  
through its oak boards and the swing of itself  
floods that have licked it, the touch of frosts and rains

the Balfour Beatty man  
is a tuning fork for health

under his feet  
Sellack Bridge becomes a xylophone  
each purposeful stomp  
sends a woody note  
across the Wye

clot clot clot  
clot clot clot

he takes out a spray can  
and marks slats that need renewing  
10, 35, 56, 80, 112

when the Hereford Thursday walking group arrives -  
ten over-seventies joyous with the day's rainbows and rain -  
two women brace themselves, one at either end of the bridge,  
eight men between them, bend knees,  
then jump, jump, jump

the Wye echoes with laughter  
and the clot clot clot  
of wood

*There are 720 bridges in the county of Herefordshire. Each one is monitored  
every 3 months and inspected closely every 2 years.*





*.... I guess it has a rhythm - it ebbs and flows ...*

I cross the river every day and it's always different because of the tide. One day it will be going one way, the next it will be going the other, and it might have a lot of driftwood in it. I look for otters or seals as I slow down with the kids in the car. The river represents the crossing of countries as well. We're in England here and just over there is Wales - that's my work area.

We swim in the river as a family and with friends, we canoe and paddle board. The really special section, I feel, is from here to Chepstow: you travel down a deeper part of the valley with steeper cliff sides. You can't hear the road, you can see ancient woods, and as you come around a corner you suddenly see Tintern Abbey and then several miles further down, Chepstow castle sits high atop the cliffs - both look amazing from the river. Here, around Brockweir, you can see how the settlements spread gradually from the river. There's a network of houses, hidden away, with rich wildflower meadows interspersed with gorgeous ancient woodland.

Yet year on year there are more and more intensive poultry units appearing upstream and more pollution entering the river. The units house hundreds of thousands of birds, predominantly for meat. It is incredibly intensive farming. I think there's an underlying disconnection from the environment. For instance, the drive for more chicken reflects a market for cheap meat and fast food. It's not just the chicken farms. There are also intensive dairy farms, with huge amounts of slurry washing into the river. And potato farming, with sediment added to the river as soil is constantly washed away in heavy rain.

The Wildlife Trusts are advocating for new Agricultural reforms that prioritise nature. We want people to realise the vital services that the natural environment provides for everybody, and for farmers to be paid for supporting and enhancing those services. The government really needs to put the environment at the forefront of everything we do. In Wales, there is the Future Generations Act, and the Trusts have been campaigning hard; we do have hope. The Wildlife Trusts in Wales have just been awarded significant funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for work around Climate Change and climate action. It's going to be youth-led and should be really interesting and provide a voice and avenue for real youth-led action.

Thinking about what we can learn from the river, well, I guess it has a rhythm, especially here. It ebbs and flows, it changes a lot because of the tide. And the power in it is incredible - seeing the floods in February we just couldn't believe how high the river got, or its speed as it rushed off the catchment. It was taking huge trees with it. It was a reminder of the power of water. You should never take it for granted, the river.

*Ecologist Gemma Bodé is Head of Conservation with Gwent Wildlife Trust.  
Photographed beside the Wye, close to Brockweir.*



## From Sellack to Foy

I turn my back on the memory of blue  
where the kingfisher traced its bright self against grey  
and walk into a veil of hail.

the day is a shifting of rains. it is as if the sky  
wants to wrap itself around us. we climb  
away from the river, high onto a ridge.  
in the distance, rainbows play above a wooded land.

around us fields are ploughed, soft  
in their readiness for autumn. we wander  
their edges among nettles and chamomile,  
bracken and blackberries, scratching our boots  
and find ourselves held

in the pause of a single oak  
a sad and glorious arboreal king  
bright beneath a troubled sky  
and the squabble of crows





*.... it's an unfolding wonder, it just opens up more and more ...*

What lights me up more than anything is ancient semi-natural woodland like this. It's so rich in wildlife - all year round. There's always something to engage with. It's like stepping into another world. There's an energy about it, a time way beyond my time.

I can't really express it, but your heart, your mind and your spirit are fully alive when you walk into these places. I haven't been here for a while, but coming back I immediately feel this uplift of energy, joy, love.

You might think that after twenty years of drawing and painting in landscapes like this - and being here in this very wood for a year - I might get tired of it. But the more I know, the more I learn and the more I spend time in these places, I realise I know nothing actually! I'm a beginner as an artist and as a person. I'm always being surprised. Every time I come into a place like this something fresh takes my attention - something I notice, something I hear. Every visit opens up more and more, an unfolding wonder.

These places are sacred - everything I see has evolved since the last ice age. The power of nature is way beyond our imaginings. When I watch programmes like David Attenborough's 'Extinction' I want to weep, but I hang on to what nature has already done, over many millennia, and I have hope. That's really important to me. You've got to come back to local, to your own community, and get involved in what your local community is doing to help restore and expand the natural habitats on your doorstep.

And it's about joining things up. One of the great things about the Wye Valley that I am coming to understand more and more is the vital importance of connectivity between habitats. All the way from Hereford, where my studio is, right down to Chepstow, there is good work happening to care for and connect the many pockets of fabulous woodland - beech wood, yew wood, oak wood, hazel coppice - along with hedgerows, wildflower meadows, even bits of moorland, and lots of scrubby areas that are fabulous for wildlife. They aren't all entirely connected, but compared with many areas in Britain we've got a fighting chance now of addressing the problems and making this special area better and better.

*Richard Bavin is artist in residence with the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, beginning in 2016 with a year in Lea & Paget's Wood, where this image was taken. Since 2019 he has turned his attention to North Wood at Queenswood, Bodenham Lake, & Birches Farm Nature Reserves.*





*In 1944, Lady Park Wood, close to Bilblins Bridge, was set aside by the Forestry Commission to be left, indefinitely, without human intervention and to be observed as an ecological study. Woodland Ecologist George Peterken has been observing the wood for more than 50 years.*

## The Will of a Wood

*‘As a forester, you see a tree change as a result of what you’ve done.  
In Lady Park Wood, the change is due to nature.’ George Peterken*

here, in Lady Park Wood, trees can pause,  
pass themselves off as saplings for decades  
waiting for the time to grow

here, trees can lie down, release their life force  
as a long-time gift  
to soil and birds

here, trees can push up  
in a slow grab for light and wind  
to sway in a million-leafed sky

how common it is to marvel at a tree  
and overlook the will of the wood

here, there is a degree  
of what a person might call disorder -  
you must bend, weave  
hurdle your way through

you can watch trees fall  
even on a windless day

here, the unseen force is freedom

how rare, in a small island  
so manicured and managed,  
for trees to be left to find their own way

there are questions:  
is this ‘good’ or ‘bad’?  
what happens to trees, soil, birds  
when we step back?

do we need answers, or can we, simply, observe,  
not needing to know what we are looking for?





*.... if it could talk, the river would tell wonderful stories ...*

*Aidan* I'm with the Youth Rangers now. It's been different during lockdown but still good. Every two weeks you go somewhere - they give you a grid reference - and find what they've hidden, something with a number on it. There were about 4 or 5 of those. You put them together and it makes a phone number - you phone that and find out what to do next. We've been using a WhatsApp group too, and trying different challenges, like finding five flowers you don't know. After Covid we'll do things together again.

The river has always been part of my life. I like kayaking, coming when I can, with other people. I can't imagine, what it would be like without it.

*Iona* I was with the Youth Rangers in 2014 and 2015. We fished, we got in the river, kayaked, did drystone walling, got involved in the River Festival - a whole range of different things. You wouldn't normally go out and learn about deer, say, at a young age, with a group of strangers, but while I might not use that skill again that confidence to try new things will stay with me. And getting involved like that, looking at small bugs, creatures, fish, and learning about pollution, and how people on the banks can affect the river, you appreciate it's a whole ecosystem.

How might I describe the river in just a few words? That's a tough one! Tranquillity - because it's soothing. And Adventure is a good word for the Wye. We've paddled most of the area between Hereford and Monmouth and explored along the way; you can just stop off, get out a Kelly kettle, have some snacks. It can be scary when it's flooded though - then the word for it then is Dangerous. Best don't come down here when it's like that. Keep a safe distance!

*Holly* Having grown up here, walking the dog every day, I'm quite into the wildlife. And in the summer, the river is just the place you go. It's our little seaside. When I was in the Youth Rangers there was a mix of knowledge; not everyone lived close to the river like I do, and some people knew nothing about wildlife. It was about getting everybody involved in different projects - drystone walling, hedgerow maintenance, say, then we learnt how to collect wood and store it, and we built dens. Everyone in it together, as a team, no ability groups, no tests, no written assignments! I remember a campout at Biblins Bridge - we slept out in hammocks. We had this massive pot and chucked vegetables in. It was amazing.

If it could talk, I think the river would tell wonderful stories. We just see snippets of what the river sees - little camp fires we've set up here, little adventures, people coming down on canoes, kayaks, swimmers. It's such an amazing place.

*Aidan, Holly and Iona Collinson, pictured here where the Wye passes beneath Sellack Bridge, have grown up with the river, and have all taken part in the AONB Youth Rangers programme.*





## The Naming of Things

first there is rock, splitting in the boiling air, and the heaving  
of land, and then the soft touch: water finding its way

drip  
drip  
flow

then the grip of ice and a slow sculpting of liquid intent,  
sibilance through earth, the stroking of stone

the river writes itself, brings gossip from the mountains,  
presents itself to the sea so that clouds meet salt  
and fish drink both

millennia pass before there is a naming of things:  
words are conjured from noise and light and the feeling  
of rock and air and rain on skin

imagine hearing the sound of the river  
above the crackle of a constant fire in your cave,  
twelve thousand years ago, with birds and sunslant as clocks  
and clouds as guides

how your tongue might have curled  
around the echo of water, how your body might have quivered  
as the river trusted you with all its gifts, with the mirroring of sky,  
with the secret of its name:

guoy  
vaga  
Gwy  
Wye

a name passed on from mother to daughter, father to son,  
and gifts taken way beyond need, repaid with the slippage of soil,  
poisons and greed

today, as the ailing river flows through a depleted land  
listen - you might hear it speak its name,  
again, and again, and again

Wye  
Wye  
Wye





*The sound of the A40 begins to dominate. The river flows into the bustle of human noise and busyness. Sun is finally breaking through the dark clouds. There's a rumble of thunder but rain stays away and we walk beneath the dual carriageway. The slow meander of the river, a polished blue in this bright afternoon, is framed by hanging willows and the solid arched bridge that's topped by speeding lorries and cars. Through the bridge there are two views: one of the river, and one of Ross, with its huddles of houses and the church spire glowing in sunshine.*

*notes, approaching Ross from the north, September 24, 2020*



*cow parsley wears its autumn gold / memories of summer crystalised with frost  
earlier, mist lay over the river / the last of the night's dreams / motionless  
in this breezeless morning / we listened to water and to birds  
before the first of the cars / before the fishermen and photographers  
padded out through wet grass / and sent their voices upstream*

*notes made just south of Bigsweir Bridge, September 26, 2020*



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2021