

wye valley



Head for the Hillforts



A circular walk from Symonds Yat Rock to Little Doward
5-6 HOURS, 7 MILE WALK (or shorter sections)

Follow in the footsteps of the Wye Tourists down to the Wye. Cross the river at the Biblins visiting Little Doward Hillfort, King Arthur's Cave and New Weir Forge. Return on the hand ferry at Symonds Yat West.



Butterflies and Birds

Look out for rare birds and butterflies along the walk. Peregrine falcons can be seen at Yat Rock from early spring. The Forestry Commission work in partnership with the RSPB staff and volunteers to help you get the best views of these amazing birds of prey. Through the season they can be seen sitting on the nest, returning with food and later teaching the young falcons to fly and hunt.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries The Doward was well known amongst butterfly collectors, who arrived at Symonds Yat on special excursion trains. Local boys caught Purple Emperors and other rare butterflies and sold them to the visitors. In 1911 an alien species from Europe, the Map Butterfly, was reported on The Doward. The great butterfly collector Albert Brydges Farn decided to retire here. An expert in British insects and their delicate relationships with plants, he believed that no alien fauna or flora should be introduced to the British Isles. Secretly he destroyed the whole colony of alien invaders! Lindsay Heyes who runs the Wye Valley Butterfly Zoo, (20) located in the shadow of The Doward, has a continuing programme of research into the life of Farn and his studies brought this intriguing story to light.

Today there are around 30 indigenous species of butterfly on The Doward hills including colonies of Wood White, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Small Heath, Silver-washed Fritillary, Grizzled Skipper and Dingy Skipper. The rare Purple Emperor Butterfly is found very occasionally.

👉 Peregrine falcon at Symonds Yat. (© Linda Wright)

Discover the heritage of the Wye Valley through our four themes



Hillforts

The brooding presence of massive hillforts built by Iron Age tribes, commanding wide vistas high above the Wye, reinforces the feeling that this area has been border country for millennia.



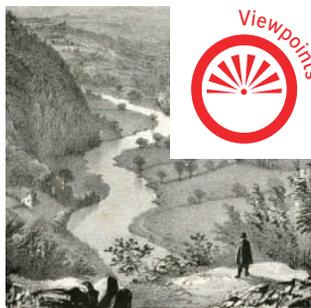
Hidden industry

With fiery furnaces belching out fumes and smoke the Wye Valley was one of the earliest places in the UK to industrialise. Today the woodland and water which powered this industry provide a picturesque backdrop for this hidden industrial heritage.



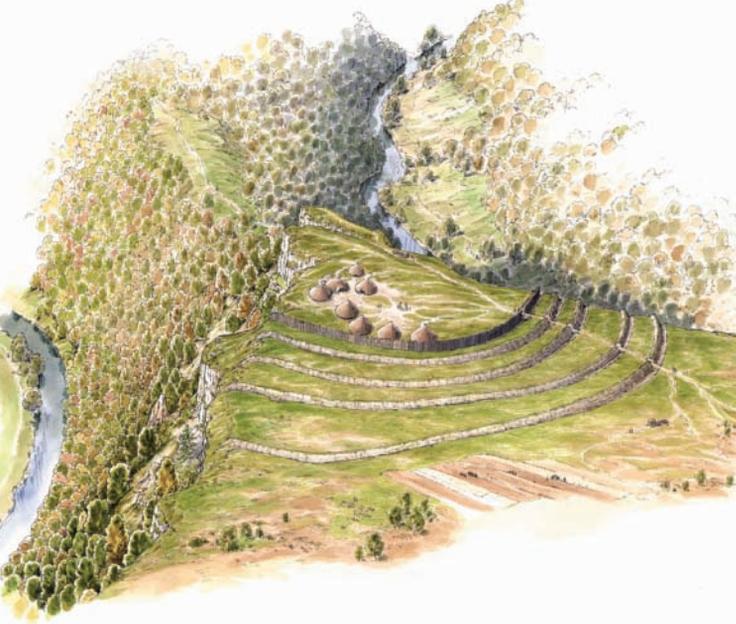
River connections

Think of the Wye as a watery highway linking the riverside villages with the wider world and you'll begin to understand its importance in earlier times when boatmen navigated trows laden with cargo between the Wyeside wharves.



Viewpoints

Tourists discovered the beauty of the Wye in the 18th century when it became fashionable to take the Wye Tour and find inspiration in the picturesque viewpoints. The views have changed as woods and farmland are managed differently today, but you'll still find inspiration here!



Hillforts above the Wye

The commanding view and cliff top location which makes Symonds Yat such a popular tourist destination was also valued by much earlier people. The hillfort here is one of at least nine prehistoric hilltop enclosures dotted along the lower Wye Valley. This walk links with the closest of these hillforts, across the Wye on the Little Doward.

Constructed in the Iron Age (around 700BC-43AD) these dramatic earthwork monuments are one of the few remaining visible links to our prehistoric past – an evocative reminder of the people who once gathered here.

Most Iron Age people lived in small farmsteads. They also constructed hillforts which overlooked the river and were visible from the surrounding countryside. The size of the encircling banks and ditches, which define these sites, conjure up images of warrior defenders and places of refuge during tribal unrest. Although the ramparts were defensive they were also a statement about the prestige of the inhabitants. We may call them hillforts, but it is likely they were much more than places to retreat to in times of trouble. They were probably the local focus for politics, religion and trade.

Symonds Yat Hillfort

The Symonds Yat hillfort was defended on two sides by steep cliffs and on the third by five concentric ramparts, each a substantial bank with a ditch alongside. It fell out of use around or before the time the Romans invaded Britain – 50 BC to AD 43 – at the end of the Iron Age.

Little Doward Hillfort

The hillfort at Little Doward has two parts, now divided by a sunken trackway running across the site. A single massive rampart surrounds the upper enclosure. These banks and ditches survive as a prominent feature in the landscape today. The lower enclosure does not have a rampart, but has steep cliffs on three sides. Excavations here suggest that this smaller enclosure was the earliest. There is evidence of metalworking, around 360BC. Finds from the archaeological excavations include Iron Age pottery and large quantities of bone from cattle, sheep and pigs. The bone has survived particularly well here because the soil is very alkaline as a result of the underlying limestone. Burnt grain was also found showing that crops were cultivated and processed.

START

Symonds Yat Rock Log Cabin
OS Grid Reference: 564162

(Numbers in the text also appear on the map.)

1

The Log Cabin

Did you notice the ramparts of the Iron Age Hillfort on either side of the footpath as you walked from the car park to the cabin?



- The log cabin cafe, built by the Forestry Commission in 1956. (© Dean Heritage Museum Trust)

Once you have taken in the views from Yat Rock, take the steep footpath, near the cabin, down the steps, following the Forest Footpath waymarkers through beech woods to the car park beside the river.

This track was the old miners' route to Symonds Yat, down which coal was carried by mules. In the 18th century a boat tour down the Wye from Ross to Chepstow was the height of fashion. Special tour boats were constructed – commodious conveyances – with cushioned seats, a table at which to sketch, write and paint, and a canopy to protect the travellers from the sun or rain. These tourists left their boats below Coldwell Rocks and climbed up to the viewpoint at Yat Rock, before descending down this track to rejoin their boats at New Weir.



- View over the railway and river towards New Weir and the old limestone quarry and kilns on the Doward. (© Dean Heritage Museum Trust)



- The elegance of Edwardian Symonds Yat station. (© Dean Heritage Museum Trust)

2

'New Weir for Symonds Yat' Railway Station

Can you hear the steam trains and smell the sooty smoke? This car park was a station on the Ross and Monmouth Railway. Five passenger trains a day in each direction ran through here, plus summer excursion traffic. In the 1930s a camping coach (a specially converted old coach) was installed for weekly hire. Much earlier, passengers alighting here were accosted by a 'mob of shirt-sleeved gondoliers', who would take them by boat to their final destination! Before the railway most visitors arrived here by boat.



- The railway line running towards the station and New Weir. (© Private collection)

It is advisable to check that the hand ferry at the Saracens Head is running if you intend to use it later for your return. Alternatively you could take the ferry now, and follow the walk in reverse, returning via the Biblins bridge across the river.



- 📍 This detail from Samuel Ireland's picture of 1797 shows horses towing a trow into the lock on the left. The Forge is on the right. (© Chepstow Museum)

Walk to your left through the car park and stay on the track along the riverbank. The route follows the old railway line.

3 New Weir

...The barges passing in the locks, afford some amusement to the minds of those who are not in the habit of witnessing such scenes.

(Charles Heath, 1799.)

The weir diverted water to power the ironworks on the other side of the river at New Weir Forge. The Wye was an important trade route and the weir here formed an obstacle to boats navigating the river. The Earl of Kent, who owned the forge, had to provide a lock so that boats could pass the weir, and a house for the lock-keeper. The weir was taken away in 1814, removing the last obstruction to free navigation on the Wye.

The flat-bottomed river boats which carried cargo up and down the river were called trows. With a single square sail and open hull, they could sit on the riverbank and be loaded and unloaded whatever the depth of the water. Below Llandogo some trows were sturdier with a closable deck and more sails so they could venture across the treacherous waters of the Bristol Channel. By the end of the 19th century, after the railway arrived, the smallest trows disappeared from the river. The sea going trows survived for longer.

4

Route of Towpath and Railway

It is only recently that the trees have been left to grow at the water's edge, now obscuring much of the view. The riverbank had to be unobstructed to allow the trows to be hauled through the shallows by men called bow hauliers. They were attached to the boats by a rope which they wore on a type of harness. Horses replaced men in the 19th century when a horse towing path was constructed. When steam trains arrived the risk of fire made it even more important to keep the vegetation clear. Operating between 1873 and 1959, countless passengers enjoyed the picturesque views from the train along this stretch of the Ross and Monmouth Railway.



- 📍 Bow hauliers on the Wye near Symonds Yat. (© Monmouth Museum)

Continue on this path until you reach a footbridge on your right where you cross the river.



- 👉 Early campers at the Biblins.
(© Neil Parkhouse Collection)

5 The Biblins

This suspension bridge was built by the Forestry Commission in 1957. The Biblins, which is managed by the Forestry Commission, opened as a youth campsite in the early 1940s.

Turn left here and follow the Wye Valley Walk alongside the river. Keep on this path until reaching the second of a pair of cast iron gates, with stone walls on the right. Go through the wooden kissing gate, turn left and follow the path uphill and round to the right, keeping right at the fork, which leads to the limekilns. (Don't carry on along the Wye Valley Walk by the river.)

6 Limekilns

Limestone quarries litter this area and there are many limekilns which were built to process the lime.

Retrace your route and go through the kissing gate heading back towards the Biblins.

When you reach the second metal gate look at the stone gate posts, which are made of Quartz Conglomerate. This is sandstone with white or glassy quartz pebbles. This rock is an example of the red sandstones formed here 400 million years ago as rivers flowed over a hot dry landscape and deposited sediments. These rocks outcrop on the lower west side of Little Doward near Wyastone Leys.

After a very short distance take the next footpath on your left up a steep path into a gully which takes you uphill to the Little Doward.



- 👉 This print from 1861 shows donkeys and pack horses carrying charcoal up to the New Weir limekilns, where the limestone was burnt to make lime.
(© Private collection)

As you climb you will walk over two small flat areas with black soil underfoot; these are probably charcoal 'hearths' upon which charcoal was burned.

7 Seven Sisters

As you climb the Little Doward you are walking through 50 million years of geological time. Towering above the river to your right are seven bluffs of limestone known as the Seven Sisters. This limestone is formed from the shell fragments of millions of dead sea creatures deposited on the floor of a warm shallow sea some 350 million years ago. Over a long period of time as successive layers form, those underneath become buried and compacted. Here they formed the spectacular limestone cliffs we can see today. These inaccessible cliffs and the surrounding woodland provide feeding, nesting and breeding areas for many spectacular birds of prey including Goshawks, Peregrine Falcons and Buzzards. These woodlands also form one of the most important areas for woodland conservation in Britain. Some of the rarest native tree species we have, such as large-leaved lime and whitebeams are found here, alongside sessile oak stands on the limestone.

Keep on the steep track uphill until you reach a fence with fields beyond. Take the track to the left and follow this path zig zagging uphill through the Woodland Trust woods, ignoring a right fork as you near the top. Go over a step stile and another stile with a rockface in front of you.



📍 Richard Blakemore's home – Wyastone Leys.
(© Private collection)

8 The Wyastone Estate

The substantial stone wall behind you marks the boundary of the Wyastone Estate. In the 19th century this area was owned by Richard Blakemore, a wealthy Victorian ironmaster who moved to the Little Doward in 1820; the cast iron gates by which you reached the limekilns are likely to have been made at his ironworks in South Wales. Having rebuilt the house at Wyastone Leys (12) he set about creating a new picturesque landscape on his estate. To achieve this Blakemore demolished many of the cottages which dotted the Doward. He constructed walks and carriage drives which cut straight through the ramparts of an Iron Age hillfort. He built a hermitage and other points of interest along the paths. He constructed high stone walls to keep deer enclosed inside his park. He even blasted through the cliffs to form a picturesque chasm here. Look closely to the left of the rock face in front of you and you can still see the holes that were drilled for explosive charges. As the local vicar reported, Blakemore was *'entirely unacquainted with the antiquarian interest attached to his property'*.

Turn right and follow the drive up to the open area on the Little Doward

9 Limestone Pavement

As the path levels out you may be able to spot on the left (during the winter months when the vegetation dies back) an area of limestone pavement, formed where water dissolved the limestone along the lines of natural cracks in the rock. These cracks now provide important habitats for lime-loving plants and animals.

Continue uphill along the gently winding main drive until reaching a junction of paths.

10 Iron Age Hillfort

Towering 724 feet above the River Wye, with steep cliffs on three sides and extensive views across the surrounding area, the Little Doward provided the ideal site for a large Iron Age hillfort, improved only by the construction of a single massive rampart around the enclosure. The hillfort has two parts: an upper and a lower enclosure. You are now standing on the boundary between the two enclosures.

Recent archaeological exploration has found that people here lived in circular platform houses. They worked animal bones, making items like toggles and dice, items which were found during a dig here in 2009.



📍 Because of the limestone bedrock on the site bone is well preserved here, such as this decorated toggle. Made from deer antler it may be 2000 years old and was probably used just like a duffle coat toggle to fasten clothing or bags.

Take the second path on the right which takes a semi-circular route around the edge of the ancient hillfort. Blakemore created a carriage ride along this route cutting straight through the ramparts as you can see, about 100 metres ahead. The ditch and bank are very clear a little way further along on the right. Follow this track around in a big curve which levels out at the top and sweeps around to the left. Look out for the Ordnance Survey's concrete 'trig point' above you on your left as the track makes a bend to the right. Your track soon merges with another coming in from the right. Continue ahead for about 100 metres to a path junction beside a large beech tree with a huge base. Blakemore's folly stood at the far end of the raised causeway along which you look.



- 📍 Blakemore's Folly! (© Monmouth Museum)
- The ramparts of Little Doward Hillfort.

11 Blakemore's Folly

To enjoy the views Blakemore built a 70 foot iron tower here. Visitors were allowed to climb the steps running up through the middle of the tower on Sunday evenings. The folly stood high above Wyastone House with views towards Monmouth, but the view today without the tower is obscured by the trees. You may be able to spot the stone remains of its base if you take a detour to the far end of the causeway. The tower was dismantled around 1920.

12 Wyastone Leys

Richard Blakemore's home, Wyastone Leys, overlooks the river. The census of 1851 shows that despite being a bachelor he had a large household – a housekeeper, two butlers, four servants, a coachman and a footman. Blakemore's Victorian 'improvements' to this ancient landscape may seem like vandalism today, but his picturesque enhancements added yet another layer of human activity on the Little Doward. A catalogue detailing Wyastone when it was for sale in 1861 describes 'walks on the Doward Hill formed with great taste'.

From the beech tree take the track on the left which leads up to a cutting in the rampart. Tucked away in the bank just to the right is a small stone structure.

13 The Hermitage

These stones are the remains of a hermitage or rustic shepherd's hut, another of the structures built by Blakemore to add interest to his estate.

As you walk through the ramparts, you can't help but marvel at the scale of this hillfort, which forms a huge oval shape. Follow the track straight down through the middle until reaching the junction of paths at (10).

14 Lower Hillfort

This is the lower part of the hillfort known as the annex. Flattened areas on top of the cliffs are thought to have been platforms for Iron Age buildings. This is probably the oldest section of the hillfort.

Turn right here and walk for a short distance along the shallow ditch feature of the hillfort. Take the first path off on the left which leads downhill, just beyond a small fenced enclosure on the right.

15 Ancient Trees and Woodland Pasture

Little Doward has many ancient trees and woodland of European significance. Known as *Old Growth Woods* they are special places full of rare species. Here the coppiced trees and charcoal platforms reveal the past importance of this woodland to local trade and industry, as well as its role as wood pasture for grazing livestock. Have you seen the hardy cattle, which help to manage this site? In 2008 a conifer plantation was removed to protect the hillfort and the ancient woodland habitat.

Continue downhill keeping the limestone cliffs on your left with the end of a ruined wall on your right. This was another of Blakemore's scenic paths, cut into the hillside to impress visitors with the best views. Keep left.

Walk through the chasm and then take the stile on the right downhill, and over the ladder stile. Follow this path down until reaching the edge of the wood and a field boundary on your left, meeting a track joining from the right. Keep left beside the fence and walk up to the cave.

16

King Arthur's Cave

Victorian and Edwardian naturalists were fascinated by the Doward Hills. This large limestone cave, known as King Arthur's Cave, held a particular draw. Excavations here reveal that people have used this cave for 20,000 years. Prehistoric animal bones – of hyena, rhinoceros, bison, lion, bear, reindeer, horse and giant deer – were discovered 11 feet below the cave's present floor.



Early diggers at King Arthur's Cave
(© Monmouth Museum)

Go to the right of the cave and take the path which leads up behind the cave, with the cave to your left. Keep on this path up hill through the trees until reaching a car park. At the car park turn right down the forestry track which leads to The Biblins (5). When you reach the log cabin keep left on the track through the campsite. The track becomes a footpath beside the river and then rises as it skirts around the site of New Weir Forge. Keep straight on, ignoring a path going off on the right at the bottom of the rise and then bear right downhill at the next fork.

- This trow is moored in the channel that fed the forge pond that in turn fed the waterwheels which powered the bellows and hammers at the forge. New Weir, Michael Angelo Rooker c. 1783.
(© Monmouth Museum)



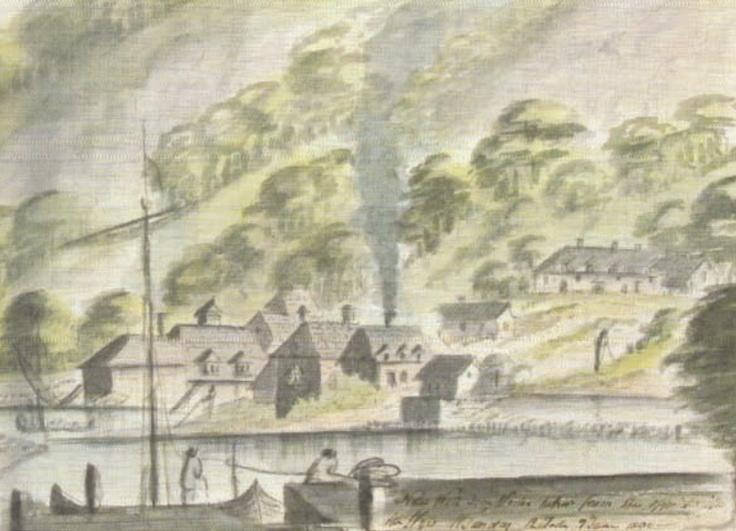
17

New Weir Forge

The path skirts the former orchard and garden of Mr Partridge, who lived here and ran the ironworks in the 18th century. These ironworks date from 1570 and worked until 1798. They were powered by water diverted from the river by the weir. Timber from the local woods was used to make the heavy hammer beam used here. Four bull hides were bought to make bellows for the forge in May 1590! The works included a slitting mill, for making wire nails and a rolling mill powered by waterwheels.

New Weir was just one of the impressive metal working sites along the banks of the Wye that fascinated tourists on the Wye tour:

In the midst of all this gloom is an iron forge, covered with a black cloud of smook, and surrounded with half burned ore, with coal, and with cinders; the fuel for it is brought down a path, worn into steps narrow and steep, and winding among precipices; and near it is an open space of barren moor, about which are scattered the huts of the workmen. It stands close to the cascade of the Weir....and the sullen sound, at stated intervals from the strokes of the great hammers of the forge, deadens the roar of the water-fall. (Whately, 1770)



- Worker's cottages stood on the hillside above New Weir Forge. Wathen, 1800. (© Herefordshire Archive Service)

What remains of New Weir Forge provides a glimpse back in time to an age when the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley were nationally important iron making centres.

From the ironworks continue along the path above the site, towards Symonds Yat. On the left above the track are the remains of old cottages, built to house around 30 families. Keep straight on passing some houses and at the junction with the road turn right downhill. Continue past the sign for the Hand Ferry for a short distance until reaching the limekilns on the left.

18

Symonds Yat Limekilns

With the abundance of limestone in the surrounding cliffs many limekilns were built here to process the limestone. The photo above from about 1880 shows at least three banks of limekilns higher up the Doward, as well as the scars of limestone quarries. Some of the quarried lime was crushed whilst the rest was burnt in limekilns like these. It was then used for spreading on the fields, or as mortar for building work and even for improving the road surface. Lime was quite dangerous – it would burn your skin, and could explode unexpectedly. In 1803 Charles Heath, a local writer, moaned about the *disagreeable effluvia* from the limekilns along the river, which spoil the view!

Now return to the Hand Ferry, going left down the steps, signposted for Symonds Yat East (Ferry).



- The Great Doward Hill soon rose in all its grandeur on the right, galleried throughout by quarries, and rendered wildly beautiful by the misty smoke from its numerous kilns and cottages, which are sprinkled all over its fantastic heights, wherever a tiny cabin can find room to perch itself. Gilpin, 1783. (© Neil Parkhouse Collection)

19

Rope Ferry at Symonds Yat

A rope or hand ferry across the river joins Symonds Yat East and West, operating so long as the water levels are suitable. Ferries like this were vital in the past, linking communities on both sides of the river. Many ferries took horses, livestock and other cargoes.



- Rowing boats were moored all along the riverbank and there was much competition amongst the boatmen to win passengers. (© Dean Heritage Museum Trust)

Take the ferry to the other side of the river and alighting turn right and walk back towards the New Weir car park.



➤ Crossing by ferry at the Saracens Head around 1906. (© Neil Parkhouse Collection)

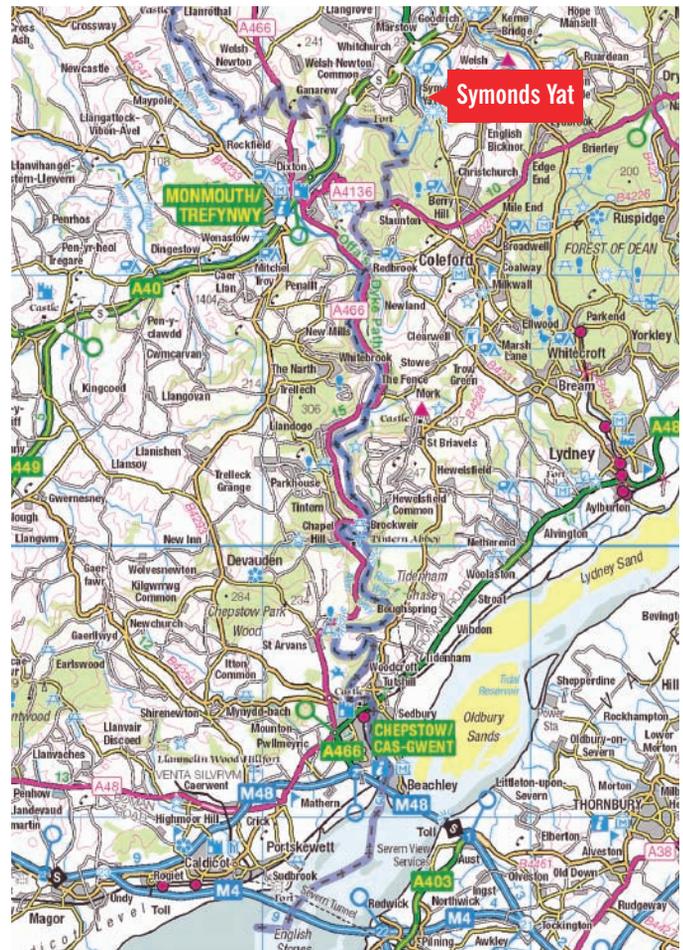


➤ A boatman and rowing boat below the Seven Sisters. (© Chepstow Museum)



Excursions in rowing boats were extremely popular and at one point there were 25 boatmen, plying their trade. The largest rowing boat, the Delphine, seated 21 people and loading the passengers was a delicate art in balance! After World War II the first motor boats arrived, but they couldn't go downstream over the rapids. In the 1970s the first waterbus from Amsterdam arrived.

Before you get to the car park, take the footpath on the left between the two hotels (signposted Yat Rock 1/2 m) which leads up the hill following the Forest waymarker signs until you emerge at the top beside the log cabin at Symonds Yat Rock.



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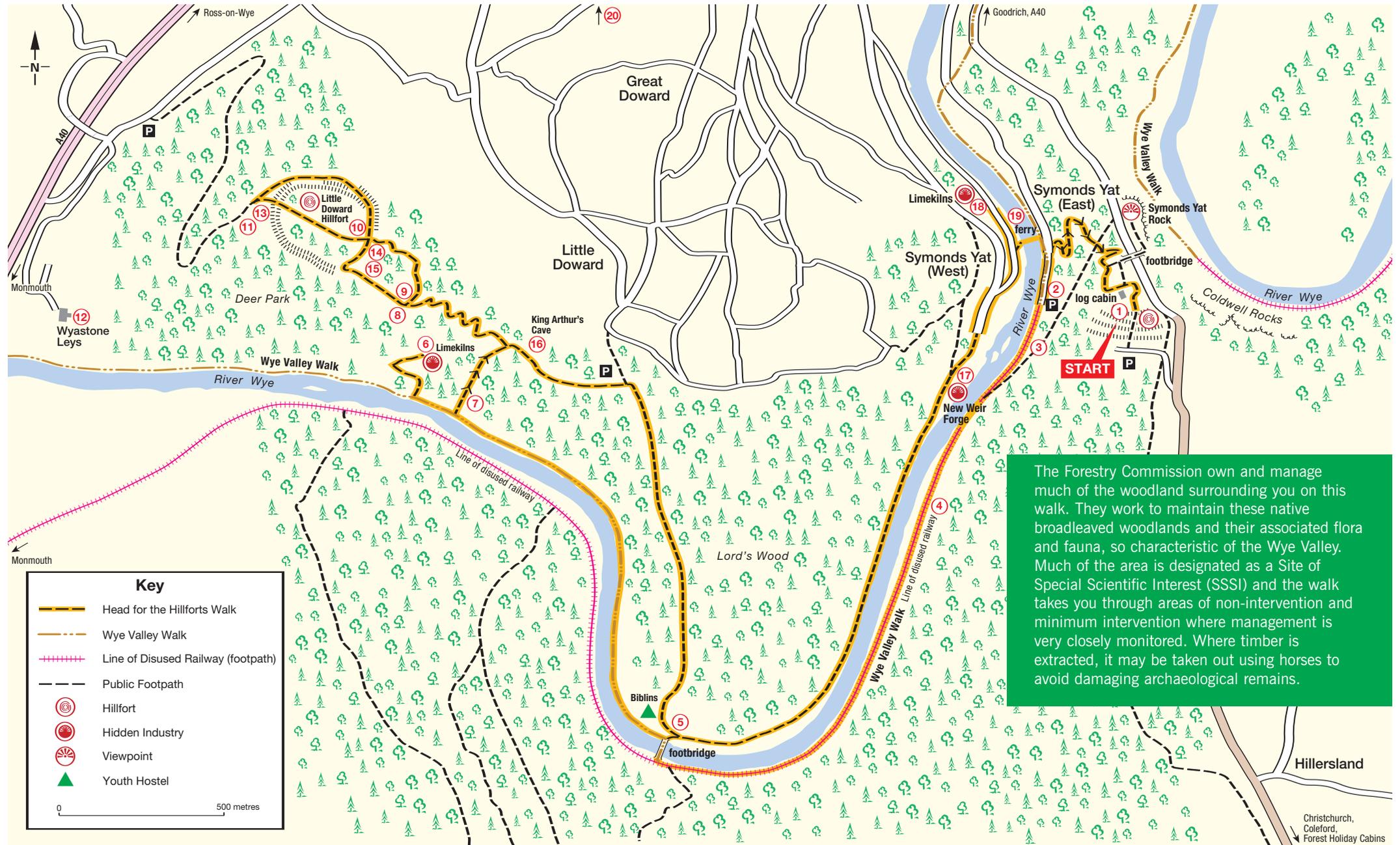
Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB): An internationally important protected landscape, straddling the England-Wales border for 58 miles of the River Wye. The AONB Partnership works to conserve and enhance the beauty of this living, working landscape for present and future generations.

Whilst all due care was taken in the preparation of the information contained in this leaflet, the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership does not accept any responsibility for any inaccuracies which might occur.



Head for the Hillforts walk

A circular walk from Symonds Yat Rock to Little Doward
5-6 HOUR, 7 MILE WALK (or shorter sections)



The Forestry Commission own and manage much of the woodland surrounding you on this walk. They work to maintain these native broadleaved woodlands and their associated flora and fauna, so characteristic of the Wye Valley. Much of the area is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the walk takes you through areas of non-intervention and minimum intervention where management is very closely monitored. Where timber is extracted, it may be taken out using horses to avoid damaging archaeological remains.

If you want to avoid the steepest section between Symonds Yat Rock and Symonds Yat East why not start at New Weir car park at Symonds Yat East?