

wye valley



Picturesque Piercefield



Walks through Piercefield Park

5 HOUR, 6 MILE WALK NEAR CHEPSTOW

Follow in the footsteps of the Wye Tourists and discover the picturesque viewpoints of Piercefield Park.



Discover the heritage of the Wye Valley through our four themes

Conserving Piercefield



As important as Downton in England and Hafod in Wales, Piercefield is one of the most outstanding examples of 18th century picturesque and sublime landscapes in Britain. It is a Grade 1 Registered Historic Park and Garden. Four of the viewpoints are scheduled monuments and Piercefield House is a listed building. Over the years many features had fallen into a serious state of disrepair and were unsafe. Some of these structures and viewpoints were conserved in 2010 as part of a Heritage Lottery Fund Landscape Partnership Scheme called Overlooking The Wye.

Conservation work on these viewpoints, perched precariously on the Piercefield cliffs, was a highly specialised task. The unique skills of a rope access team were essential. At Eagles Nest, the viewing point was about to fall off the cliff, so the team had to abseil off with buckets of mortar and tools! These conservation works, completed with considerable difficulty today, illustrate the complex issues which would have been overcome during their original construction some 250 years ago. So when you stand and stare, spare a thought for those who made it possible!

🔗 Historic graffiti alongside modern conservation techniques.

🔗 (© Thousandwordmedia.com)



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!



Valentine's Views

These walks take you across the Piercefield Estate, retracing the paths laid out in the 1750s by Valentine Morris, the owner of Piercefield.

The Wye Tour, a two day boat trip from Ross to Chepstow became the height of fashion in the later 18th century. Piercefield, where the Wye makes two enormous bends, became an unmissable attraction on the Tour. One of the first tourist guidebooks - *Observations on the River Wye*, written by William Gilpin and published in 1782, added to the appeal of Piercefield. His book promoted the fashion for picturesque tourism, travel which focused on an appreciation of scenery rather than just history or architecture. Gilpin was looking for the 'Picturesque....that kind of beauty which would look well in a picture'. The glimpses and splendid, vast vistas on Valentine's walks were famed far and wide.

It is thought that originally the route ran north to south. Some tourists, like Gilpin, alighted from their boats below the Wyndcliff and then walked the three miles to



Chepstow, passing the romantically named viewpoints such as the Lover's Leap and the Grotto. Other tourists stayed in their boats all the way to Chepstow and then walked back to the Wyndcliff, as did the increasing number of visitors from Bristol and Bath who arrived in the town on the ferry.

Some of the vistas which surprised and charmed earlier visitors have been lost, but enough of Valentine's viewpoints remain to take your breath away today.

'Let the reader imagine a continuous 'range' of walks, of more than three miles in extent, laid out with consummate skill, with breaks at convenient and judiciously planned openings among dense foliage, here and there carefully trimmed and highly cultivated, where Art has been studious, wise, and successful.... And he will have some, though limited, idea of the natural or trained diversity of this beautiful demesne....' (Hall, 1861)



- 📍 View of Chepstow from Piercefield c. 1849.
G. E. Madeley. (© Chepstow Museum)
- 📍 Front cover: Detail from Piercefield Mansion and Park,
c. 1840, G. Eyre Brooks. (© Chepstow Museum)

- 📍 View from the Wyndcliff.
(© Chepstow Museum)



Picture this....

Originally the term 'Picturesque' meant, literally, a scene which would make a painting. Over time it came to be used outside the context of art, influencing garden design, landscape fashions and ornamental walks. Designers were encouraged to think like artists when planning enhancements on country estates such as Piercefield. In time this led to the modern concepts of conservation and landscape management.

Rules for the Picturesque:

William Gilpin pioneered a set of rules defining the Picturesque. His ideas had a lasting effect on the way in which we view the landscape:

'the most perfect river-views are composed of four grand parts: the area, which is the river itself; the two side-screens, which are the opposite banks, and lead the perspective; and the front-screen, which points out the winding of the river.... They are varied by... the contrast of the screens....the folding of the side-screen over each other....the ornaments of the Wye.... ground, wood, rocks, and buildings....and colour.'

Although Gilpin wrote that, *'Mr Morris's improvements at Persfield.... are generally thought as much worth a traveller's notice, as anything on the banks of the*

Wye', he didn't feel that the views were Picturesque: *'They are either presented from too high a point, or ... they do not fall into such composition as would appear on canvas. But they are extremely romantic, and give a loose to the most pleasing riot of imagination'.*

Gilpin advocated the use of a Claude glass. This was a small black convex mirror that miniaturised the reflected scenery. Many artists and tourists used the glasses to manipulate their view of the landscape. This meant they had to stand with their back to the view, looking at it in the mirror! As Gilpin wrote, Picturesque practice always involved some 'improvement' of the landscape. A Claude glass became an essential item in the tourist's luggage.

Increasing appreciation of Britain's landscapes helped make Gilpin's book an instant success, bringing many artists, writers and poets to the Wye Valley. They left inspiring records of their trips in paintings, poetry and prose. By 1850 dozens of guidebooks had been published, establishing the Wye Valley as the birthplace of modern British tourism. Today at Chepstow Museum you can not only see their paintings but virtually experience the Wye Tour and explore Piercefield's rich history.

START

Chepstow Castle (1) The walk follows the route of the Wye Valley Walk for three miles north of Chepstow. Follow the leaping salmon way markers. An optional route leads to The Lover's Leap (16).

There are some steep drops along sections of this walk.

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

ALTERNATE START

Chepstow Leisure Centre (Closest map point 2)

Lower Wyndcliff car park (10)

Upper Wyndcliff car park (11)

Why not take the No. 69 bus to the Piercefield Inn, St Arvans or go on to Lower Wyndcliff / Moss Cottage (request stop) and walk back to Chepstow through the Piercefield Estate?

1

Chepstow Castle

The romantic ruins of Chepstow Castle delighted visitors at the end of the Wye Tour.

Follow the Wye Valley Walk to Chepstow Leisure Centre, where the route leaves the back of the car park and runs beside the school. Then walk through a gap in the wall.

2

The Piercefield Estate

This stone wall encloses the Piercefield estate on three sides, whilst the river Wye forms the eastern boundary. It was constructed after 1794 by one of the park's later owners, Mark Wood. There were several entrances to the park, including the Temple Doors (17) and the Lion's Lodge (20), which in the 19th century became the main entrance. Louisa Anne Twamley in 1839 described how, *'At a little distance from the Lodge, we met a small boy, who walked with us to a tall tree, and catching at a rope hanging from it, rang such a sonorous peal on a great bell hidden among the branches....This startling summons... brought the guide to our assistance, we were conducted to the Alcove, the first view-point, and then in succession to the eight others.'*

Turn right and continue down the path and steps.



↗ Lion's Lodge entrance to Piercefield Estate.
(© Chepstow Museum)

3

The Alcove

This was the first of the viewpoints constructed around 1750. A small building with an arched opening stood where the stonework remains. Why not sit on the bench and ponder Arthur Young's words written in 1768.

'.....The town and castle of Chepstow appear from one part of the bench, rising from the romantic steps of wood, in a manner too beautiful to express.'



↗ Although little remains of The Alcove building the view of Chepstow Castle still delights. This watercolour is by one of the children of Nathaniel Wells, who owned Piercefield 1802-1852.
(By kind permission of a private collection)



📍 View from the Alcove, Ralph Lucas.
(© Chepstow Museum)

Continue along the Wye Valley Walk through shady woods, following in the footsteps of countless visitors to Piercefield.

4 The Platform

Where has the *'beautiful and inexpressible view'* gone? At one time you could see Chepstow Castle and Lancaut cliffs from this purpose built viewing platform. Today these woods are internationally important for their nature conservation value and The Platform is a romantic remnant of a past landscape when the view was more highly valued.

Continue on the Wye Valley Walk, keeping right at the fork, eventually passing the remains of an Iron Age Hillfort on the left, before reaching The Grotto.

5 The Grotto

It was the height of fashion to have a grotto. This one was lined with quartz crystals, iron cinders and copper. You may spot a few surviving pieces. Laurel hedges and two lime trees framed the view, Although there is only a hint of it today, 200 years ago this was a spectacular view of grand distances, taking in much of Gloucestershire beyond the Severn.

Continue on the Wye Valley Walk past an upright stone, before walking along a ridge, with a steep drop to the Wye on your right.

Look left for the remains of an elevated viewing platform above you. With views to both the Severn and Wye, it became known as The Double View.

6 The Double View

'Such varied beauty uniting in the same scene is probably unique in this kingdom', wrote Charles Heath of the Double View in 1793. Today the view to the Wye is largely obscured by trees.

When the path splits keep right. Continue until reaching a standing stone in the track.

7 The Druid's Temple

These stones are all that remain of an amphitheatre called the Druid's Temple.

There are steep drops to the right along the next section. Pass the entrance to a small cave on the left. Soon after when the track forks take the right hand fork downhill.

8 The Giant's Cave

The Giant's Cave is one of the most dramatic features on the walk, with a viewing platform built into the rockface by the entrance to the cave. The cave is not natural, but was hewn out of the rock.

Opposite the cave are bow railings with a seat, which if we may compare the works of nature with those of art, may be called a front box, of one of the completest theatres in the universe. (Stebbing Shaw, 1788)



🕒 Giant's Cave, Cumberland, 1784. (© NLW)

Imagine arriving from the other direction, emerging from the cave to this view. Engineered to surprise, it was all part of the Piercefield experience. A visitor in 1781 advised to, *'Carry some gunpowder and leave it with Mr Morris's gardener in order to fire some small cannon on the Rock as you pass by. The reverberating echo of which you will find has a wonderful effect.'* At one time a stone giant stood above the cave entrance. He held a huge boulder over his head, as if about to hurl it on the walkers below. The giant and his boulder suffered from frost damage and slowly crumbled away.

Walk through the cave and keep right along the Wye Valley Walk. Continue for some distance until crossing a small stream.

9

The Cold Bath

'In this charming and sequestered spot is a cold bath supplied by a copious and transparent rill, which springs at the foot of the winding cliff, and ripples down the side of the declivity.'

Can you spot the remains of the buildings in this sheltered hollow to the left? They include a plunge pool, where a few white ceramic tiles remain on the walls, and what is thought to have been the dressing room which is now a pile of rubble.

Keep on the Wye Valley Walk through oak and beech woods and up a number of steps until you arrive at:

10

Lower Wyndcliff

In the 18th century Wye tourists alighted from their boats in Martridge Meadow and walked up to the Wyndcliff. William Gilpin wrote that, *'...the tide being at ebb, we landed with some difficulty on an oozy beach. One of our bargemen, who knew the place, served as a guide; and under his conduct we climbed the steep by an easy regular zig-zag.'*



🕒 James Dobbs' coach at Wyndcliff. Dobbs conveyed visitors in style to the delights of Piercefield, Moss Cottage and Tintern. (© Chepstow Museum)

In the 1820s the new turnpike road made it easier for visitors to arrive by carriage from Chepstow, rather than by boat from Ross. With the introduction of regular steam packet services from Bristol to Chepstow the number of visitors increased dramatically. Before long a romantic thatched cottage (15) opened to provide refreshments for the travellers: *'a fanciful little habitation, called the Moss Cottage..... built by the Duke of Beaufort, for the accommodation of parties visiting Wyndcliff, to the summit of which eminence, several paths lead through the rocks and underwood'.*

Cross the main road with care and pass the metal barrier to a level area in front of the quarried cliff. Take the path to your left (not to the right which leads up the very steep 365 steps). Take the first turning right up to the Upper Wyndcliff car park (11).



- ☛ Visitors enjoyed the Wyndcliff views without any handrails or formal viewing points until 1828 when The Eagle's Nest was created. Detail from The Wyndcliff, Piercefield, c. 1840. (© Chepstow Museum)
- ☛ View from the Wyndcliff. (© Detail from engraving in Chepstow Museum.)

11 Upper Wyndcliff car park

NOTE: You can also access the Eagle's Nest by parking at the Upper Wyndcliff car park, reached via a lane off the A466, 1/2 mile north of St Arvans. The car park is on the right after about 1/2 mile. There is a very short path on the right of the car park which leads to a bench with limited views over the river.

Take the footpath on the left of the car park uphill. Continue uphill to the second bench. After 100m take the next path on the right which leads down some steps to the Eagle's Nest (13).

12 The Wyndcliff

The Wyndcliff was the highest point on the Piercefield walk with the grandest view:

'The grouping of this landscape is perfect. I know of no picture more beautiful.'
(Prince Puckler-Muskau, 1797)



13 The Eagle's Nest

The Eagle's Nest was a double decker viewing platform perched on the edge of the cliff. This site was restored in 2010 and access to the lower deck removed as it had become unsafe. Much of the stonework has been reused in the restoration of the upper deck. Can you spot the Victorian graffiti?

'This cliff is the last grand scene of the Piercefield drama. It is not only magnificent, but so novel, that it excites an involuntary start of astonishment; and so sublime, that it elevates the mind into instantaneous rapture.'



- ☛ The view from Piercefield. (© NLW)

Retrace your route up the steps. Turn left and walk as far as the bench on the left. Take the track on the left which leads down the 365 steps. Take care as you descend.

14 The 365 Steps

These steps, one for each day of the year were constructed by the Duke of Beaufort in the 1820s. At the bottom stood the rustic Moss Cottage.



☛ Moss Cottage. (© Chepstow Museum)

15

Moss Cottage

Visitors crossed a rustic bridge and took tea at a table made from a huge slab of walnut tree which had once grown at Chepstow Castle. *'The little rooms, seats, chandeliers of this cottage are all daintily covered with moss, and the cottage is hidden from the road by a thicket of laurels; here parties may picnic at their leisure'*, wrote William Makepeace Thackeray in 1842. The original Moss Cottage was demolished in the 1950s.



☛ Moss Cottage, George Rowe. (© Chepstow Museum)

Continue down to the road and the car park (10), from where you can catch the bus back to Chepstow. (The stop is 'Moss Cottage'. Text gwemamw to 84268 to send next departures from this stop to your mobile by text message.) To return on foot take the Wye Valley Walk on the far right of the car park and retrace your tracks to the Giant's Cave (8). After the cave turn right uphill. Continue with the racecourse on the left to the Lover's Leap viewpoint on the right.

16

Lover's Leap

The railings here guard a sheer drop of 180 feet, *'where the Wyndcliff is seen towering above the river in all its height and beauty, and below yawns a deep and wooded abyss.'* (Coxe, 1801) Valentine Morris, whilst surveying his walk, reputedly fell off here and was saved by the branches of a tree!



☛ View from The Lover's Leap, c. 1849, G. E. Madeley. (© Chepstow Museum)

A short walk past The Lover's Leap brings you to Temple Doors.

17

Temple Doors

Before the turnpike road was opened most visitors would have arrived from the Wyndcliff through these gates. There was an octagonal structure and viewpoint called the Temple here, demolished around 1800.

To return by bus from St Arvans (No 69) take the footpath to the left of Temple Doors through the kissing gate onto the racecourse fields. (Do not go through Temple Doors onto the main road.) Follow this downhill skirting the trees and stone wall on your right. Go through a kissing gate on the right, and keep straight on, coming out onto the main road. Cross the road and walk to the left on the roadside footpath to the bus stop at the Piercefield Inn. Alternatively, to return on foot from Temple Doors retrace your route back towards Chepstow, with the racecourse on your right.

Coxe described this section of the route in 1801; *'From the Lover's Leap the walk is carried through a thick mantle of forests, with occasional openings, which seem not the result of art or design, but the effect of chance or nature, and seats placed where the spectator may repose and view at leisure the scenery above, beneath, and around.'*

Back at the junction with the main path turn right (Giant's Cave is to your left). Continue along the main path past the stones of the Druid's Temple (7) until reaching a marker post at a junction on the right. Take this path, go over a stile and turn right following the fence, emerging into the Capability Brown parkland setting of Piercefield Park.



📍 Piercefield Mansion and Park, G. Eyre Brooks
c. 1840. (© Chepstow Museum)

18 Piercefield House

'The view from the house is soft, rich, and beautifully picturesque: Not one rock enters into the composition: the whole view consists of an elegant arrangement of lawn, wood, and water.'
(The Times, 1798)



📍 Piercefield House, Stockdale. (© Chepstow Museum)

This house dates from after Valentine's death. George Smith commissioned one of the leading architects of the day, Sir John Soane, to redesign Piercefield. A later owner of Piercefield, Mark Wood, added a curving portico (now lost) and the flanking pavilions, designed by Joseph Bonomi.

19 Old stables

Walk in front of the house, which has been in ruins since the 1920's, and then head diagonally left passing the old stables to the right.

These were the stables for Piercefield House. During the Second World War the racecourse was requisitioned. Lancaster bombers were assembled here and parked under the trees, before being flown to Bristol. Despite stretching from St Arvans to the Lion's Lodge the grass runway was too short; aircraft were stripped to the essentials with only enough fuel to get across the Severn to Filton!

What remained of Piercefield House was used for training prior to the D Day landings. Look closely and you might just spot some bullet holes in this proud ruin.

Turn left and keep the racecourse to your right. Go through a kissing gate and stay on the track. Keep the wall to your left then fork left, passing through a stone arch to the road. Lion's Lodge (20) is a short walk downhill to your right. Turn left and take the first left back to the school / leisure centre, or continue back to Chepstow Castle (1).

Not everyone shared the Piercefield mania. Thomas Roscoe who toured in the early 1800s wrote:

Grottos fabricated where grottos could not naturally exist, with dilapidated giants in stone over their entrance and inscriptions, not of the highest order of composition, are very well calculated to make the unlearned stare, as sure as to make the judicious grieve.'



From sugar and slavery to racecourse and a ruin

Built on the wealth of Caribbean sugar cane, Piercefield's history is inextricably tied to slavery. When Valentine Morris owned Piercefield he also owned slaves in the Caribbean, including ones named Piercefield, Beaufort and Chepstow.

Who was Valentine Morris?

Valentine, born in 1727, was the son of a wealthy sugar plantation owner from Antigua. His father purchased Piercefield in 1740 for £8,250, but died 3 years later. Valentine, who owned hundreds of acres of agricultural land, embraced new agricultural practices and took a lead in developing the turnpike roads in Monmouthshire. He owned at least one ship, the *Morris*, which traded to the Caribbean from Bristol.

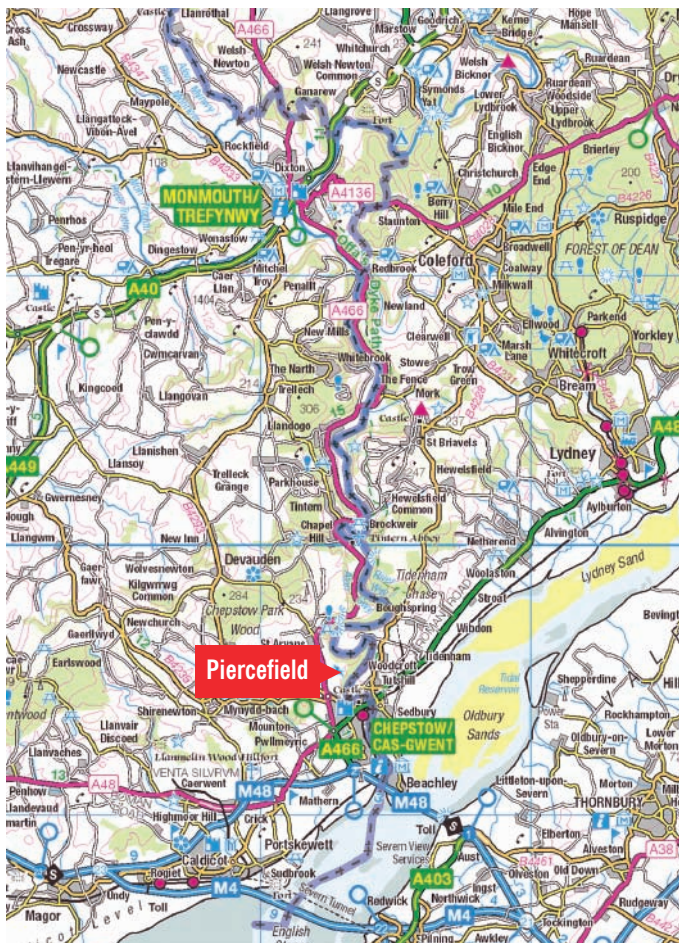
In 1771 he spent £6,000 standing for Parliament – unsuccessfully. He entertained visitors to Piercefield with legendary extravagance. He also lost money gambling. With rising debts he returned to his estates in the West Indies in 1772.

He was appointed Governor of St Vincent and used his own funds to help defend the island against the French, but on his return to Britain in 1782 he was imprisoned for debt. To secure his freedom he sold Piercefield in 1784. He died in 1789.

In 1802, Nathaniel Wells bought Piercefield. It is said he also purchased the Lancaut peninsular to ensure the views from Piercefield could not be changed. Wells was the son of a plantation owner. His mother was a black slave. Sent to Britain to be educated, he became a respected member of Monmouthshire society, a magistrate and in 1818 High Sheriff of the county.

The Clay family owned Piercefield from 1861 until 1921. They built a small racecourse on the estate. The Chepstow Racecourse Company purchased the property and opened a new racecourse in 1926. By this time the house was empty and beginning to fall into disrepair.

🕒 Portrait of Valentine Morris, wearing a blue coat with gold facings and white cravat. From a miniature by John Smart signed and dated 1765. (From a photograph in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery)



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Produced by the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) unit as part of the Overlooking the Wye scheme.
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Cysylltwch â: www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk.

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.

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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Picturesque Piercefield

Walks through Piercefield Park
5 HOUR, 6 MILE WALK NEAR CHEPSTOW

Take in the views from Eagle's Nest to the Alcove

