

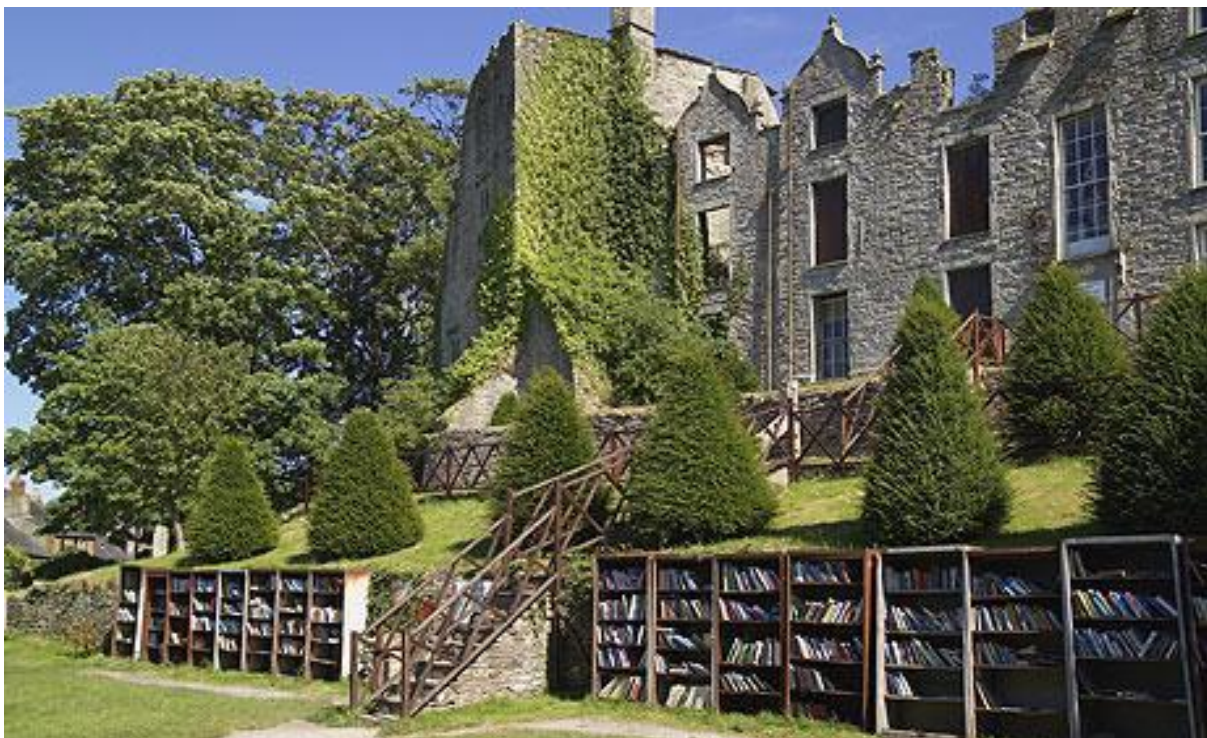
Wye Bother?

*“Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. – Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky”.*

When William Wordsworth wrote these lines in 1798 (“Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” published in Lyrical Ballads) the River Wye was already a must-see destination for European travellers. In 1782 the artist and vicar William Gilpin had published “Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty Made in the Summer of the Year 1770”. This elaborately entitled book passed through five editions before the end of the century and was translated into French, inspiring travellers from all over Europe to visit the Wye valley. The Wye may also claim to have inspired the modern “package tour” after the Rev’d Egerton began to take his guests down the river in the 1740s on guided tours. Eight pleasure boats are recorded on the river in 1808 and Admiral Lord Nelson took the tour in 1802.

Today the River and its hinterland continues to inspire writers, painters and composers, and provide a venue for cultural and spiritual activity. It hosts literary, poetry and music festivals and river pageants, poetry and music competitions. As the website to the internationally famous Hay Festival (at Hay-on-Wye) states:

“step off site and you can walk, swim, ride, paraglide and enjoy the most beautiful countryside in Britain.”



Hay-on-Wye is endearingly known as the town of books.

But the Wye is much, much more than a tourist destination or even a source of cultural inspiration. Gilpin's book also records the industrial landscape that was made possible by the power of the river. He is honest enough to comment on the *"poverty and wretchedness of the inhabitants"* associated with the *"great iron-works at Tintern"*. Tintern today is a ruined Abbey and a tourist destination, but for over three hundred years this part of the Angidy Valley (a tributary of the Wye) was one of the foremost iron works in the country producing thousands of tons of wire. The furnaces at Tintern dated from the 1590s and pioneered the use of charcoal blast furnaces, which preceded the coke furnaces of the industrial revolution. It was water power from the Wye which powered the bellows that created the blast into the furnace chamber, charcoal was provided from local woodland and iron ore was mined in the vicinity. Although other parts of the river did not replicate the scale of smelting at Tintern, there were many other locations at which industry was made possible because of the river.



Edward Dayes, artist; Francis Jukes, engraver The View of Tintern Abbey on the River Wye, 1799.

The Wye was also essential for transporting the finished products and wire was shipped as far away as Turkey and the Barbary Coast. This great river was the transport corridor of the region inspiring its own type of river boat, the Trow, a shallow-draft barge used on the Severn and Wye to transport goods. Tidal as far as Brockweir near Chepstow, above that navigation requires sufficient water to float the barges and unobstructed rivers. The earliest record of Wye navigation is a reference to Edward the Confessor (d 1066) demanding from Gloucester *"36 dicres of iron and 100 rods"* for the King's ships which were thought to be transported via the river. In 1171 the Pipe Rolls indicate that horse shoes and nails from the region supplied Henry II's army for his invasion of Ireland and a common right of navigation was recorded by the time of Edward I (1271-1307). However, mills and weirs began to appear (rivers have always needed to balance competing demands) and navigation became more difficult until 1662 when Sir William Sandys of Ombersley Court was granted permission to make the river navigable again as far as Hereford.



The Wye Trow was built for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee based on the design of a barge that carried cargo along the river for centuries.

The notes of the Committee for Improving the Navigation of the River Wye record the scale of its commerce. Cheese, coal, ironmongery, tea, pottery, hemp, tiles, glass, bottles, wines and spirits totally 15,700 tons a year were taken to Hereford. From Hereford 27,500 tons of products (corn, meal, cider, timber and bark) were shipped to Gloucester and 9,000 tons of corn and meal and 2,000 tons of cider to Bristol. More than 500 men were employed to haul goods because although the barges were sailed as far as practicable they were then drawn by teams of men (a horse towing path was only added in 1808).

The railways may have replaced the river as the principle transport corridor in the 1850s, but it remains as an essential corridor for both recreational purposes and wildlife. Along the 134 miles of this remarkable river which rises in the Plynlimon Hills and exits into the Bristol Channel are some of the most important wildlife habitats in northern Europe. Internationally designated as a "Special Area of Conservation" it includes more than 30 species of fish including salmon, rare birds, mammals and bats. Significant lengths of the river lie within the Wye Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), testimony to the contribution the river makes to the landscape. Its Welsh name (*Afon Gwy*) may derive from the crooked meandering hills that it has helped to carve out of the rock.

Oh, and let's not forget that it is also a political river; straddling the English-Welsh border. For a stretch of sixteen miles between Redbrook and Chepstow it is the English-Welsh border. The litany of towns and villages along its banks are replete with the history of this turbulent landscape. As Gilpin observed:

"Castles and abbeys have different situations, agreeable to their respective uses. The castle, meant for defence, stands boldly on the hill; the abbey, intended for meditation, is hid in the sequestered vale..."

So is it worth conserving - this historical, cultural, spiritual, economically significant, environmentally vital and most beautiful river? We think so, we hope that you do as well.

Rvd Nick Read
The Bulmer Foundation