

Newport Outdoor Group



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Editors

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**Get
The
Outdoor
Habit!**

Sychpwll YHA Camping Barn

May 2014

By Steve Atkins

Three NOGs left Newport shortly after 8am on the 2nd May 2014 in a car bound for Llandrinio, Powys, mid-Wales. Sightseeing was high on the agenda; after all we were in no rush to get there. However, I was also concerned about catering in a somewhat remote and rural part of Wales. For some reason I never seem to travel lightly. Brian noted that I had quite a few bags in my possession as we loaded up but just as well, because when we got there the nearest pub/shop was about two miles away. Now to the journey which I would aptly describe as a meander through the Marches. Our driver, Mr Brian Turner, headed towards Pontrilas on the A465 and then through Ewyas Harold, and our first port of call was a little gem of a place called Abbey Dore. To quote the website:

'A Parish Church created from an historic Cistercian Monastery in the beautiful Golden Valley'

We took a good look around noting the very high ceiling and the worn tombstones where many feet have walked over the centuries. On making our way out of the grounds we met with a rather nervous dog but we were assured by the owner that that it did not pose a threat; it was just defending its territory. The general consensus then was that we were all in need of refreshments so we stopped off at a pub in the next village. It was homely and cosy, so we ordered some beverages. The proprietor was a Scotsman who informed us that he had spent most of his adult life outside of Scotland: a long spell abroad followed by most of the time living in England. At £5.00 per head the beverages weren't cheap, but the gentleman who served us was welcoming and we received service with a smile. We continued our journey through Hereford and we then decided to stop at Ludlow. Parking did not present too much of a problem and we managed to avoid the dreaded pay and display.

Camping Barn



The town of Ludlow is situated centrally in the Welsh Marches. There are lots of things to see and do in and around the town but as this was only a short stop we did not have the chance to visit the main sites of interest. However, we strolled around the town and we noted that there were many fine buildings to be seen. In fact, Ludlow has nearly 500 hundred listed buildings. They include some fine examples of medieval and Tudor style half-timbered buildings including the Feather's Hotel. For those of you who are interested in

paranormal activity the hotel is reportedly haunted. One thing that I have noticed about these towns in the Welsh Marches is that they still have a range of traditional shops such as butchers and delicatessens from where you can buy locally sourced produce. I went to Bromyard in Herefordshire last Autumn to the folk festival and on my return to Newport I asked myself:

'Where have all the shops gone?'

However, I shall not digress further. A pub lunch at the Rose and Crown was followed by a walk through the town. I saw some buskers and their performance wasn't bad so I gave them a few of coins for their efforts.

We continued our journey along the A49 passing close to Clun, Shropshire and re-entering Wales somewhere near Bishop's Castle. With quite a bit of time on our hands, Brian decided to stop at

Llyn Coed y Dinas, one of twenty Nature Reserves in the county of Montgomeryshire. Created from a gravel pit, quarried to provide material for the creation of the Welshpool bypass, Llyn Coed y Dinas is a fantastic home for all sorts of wildlife. We took a walk round one side of the lake to a bird hide. Among the species that I spotted there were Canadian Geese, a Reed Warbler, a couple of Oyster Catchers, a tufted duck, a Swan and quite a few Black-headed gulls.

We received a very warm welcome from our host Sandy at the Sychpwl Centre. She showed us the facilities and we did the usual unloading of the car and setting up the barn for the group. It was noted that the mattresses seemed a bit musty at first; I guess this was because they had been in storage for some time. The location of the centre is on the banks of the River Vyrnwy. Sychpwl is an eco-friendly small holding, and people come there at certain times of the year from WOOF! Willing Workers on Organic Farms. I sensed there was something unique about the place when I saw a small statue of a Buddha and demijohns of Country wine in the main communal kitchen. There was a poly tunnel as well in which there were leeks, beetroot and onions all of which had been grown organically. I thought to myself: maybe, I should give up my lifestyle here in Newport and become a willing worker on an organic farm. I liked the Camping Barn: very spacious and the facilities were good. The sliding door was a bit of a pain though. It was rather noisy particularly if you had to get up in the night to go to the loo! The owners were very friendly, although we saw more of Sandy than Peter (except at the end of our stay). Moreover, you have easy access to the surrounding countryside with a great view of Breidden Hill. The fresh air there was invigorating.

Communal kitchen



Day 2 Breidden Hill (Rodney's Pillar)

A group of eight NOGs left the Sychpwl YHA Centre just after 09:30 hours on the Saturday with Norman at the helm. Initially we made a right out of the Centre and followed the course of the river for about a quarter of a mile, but no access was to be found. The River Vyrnwy follows the border between England and Wales for a couple of miles and the centre is just in Wales. On leaving the centre the group headed towards Llandrinio via a farm track and for some distance along a country lane and out on to the B4393. We crossed a narrow bridge over the River Severn and following the road for about 500 metres.

At this point we left the main road and we crossed about four field boundaries, via stiles, arriving in the village of Criggion. About a 100 metres further on there is a picnic area, and we had our first break of the morning. The first two miles of the walk were relatively easy, crossing an area of low lying land which is vulnerable to flooding. From here onwards the walk was going to get a bit more demanding. You can see Rodney's Pillar from the Sychpwl Centre; it rises almost vertically from the Severn Plain. After a steep climb through woodland, traversing the odd fallen branch in places we reached an open area of trees and grassland. Some of the quicker members of the group had already passed this point and were well on their way up to the top. Norman did a head count at that point and waited for the others (Jackie and Chris) to catch up; I carried on with the rest of the group.

Breidden Hill is known locally as Rodney's Pillar, the name of the monument that stands on its summit. We continued up to the monument which was the steepest part of the walk. You could see for miles around at the top and at this point we all had our lunch. I passed the chocolate round and Norman told us about some of the geographical points of interest in the area. You get a panoramic view all around, and there is a marble-stone compass close by which tells you how far the nearest towns are. You could see Offa's Dyke and the River Seven, meandering its way down in the valley to the one side, and the Sychpwl YHA Centre from where we had walked. We returned the same way as we came up, and we stopped at a pub called the Admiral Rodney. We walked along the road for about half a mile and then Norman led us along a path which followed the direction of the river as far as the humpbacked bridge that we had crossed near the start of the walk, and back along a lane and a farm track to the Sychpwl YHA Centre. Somewhere along the path, on our return the Centre, there was a field of piglets and their mother. It came across the path and attempted to close a farm gate with its snout. I guess the pig was sending out a message telling me not to go in the field. At this point we took a break and it was truly a moment of well-earned relaxation. Although by now I felt I had walked for some considerable distance, we had still yet to hit the ten mile mark. However, by the time we got back to the Camping Barn I could honestly say that I was fairly shattered, and I would not have wanted to walk much further. Brian and Jackie took a slight detour on the way back. Where they went I do not know, but they arrived in one piece albeit about ten minutes behind the rest of the group.

In the evening all but two members of the group went to the pub for their evening meal. Steve and Somesh stayed at the Centre as they had already planned self-catering in advance.

Day 3

This involved a drive of about twenty miles to the Lake Vyrnwy nature reserve. Eight NOGs completed a 5.5 mile circular walk. The group took refreshments at a nearby café and then Jackie, Tony and myself watched the video at the Tourist Information Centre. We all then gathered together to begin our walk. It was definitely a good walk for the photographer as the scenery was incredible and the views across the lake were some of the finest I have seen in Wales. The first part of the walk involved a steady climb along forest track and through clearings; the second half of the walk was, for the most

part, down-hill through a large deciduous area and on to the road. From there we followed the road along the lake shore for about a mile or so back to the RSPB shop and Information Centre. I had a look around the craft shops while a few of the others returned to the Visitor Centre to watch the video on the history of the Lake Vyrnwy and the surrounding area.

The lake has a circumference of 11 miles with a road that goes all the way around it. Lake Vyrnwy was created for the purpose of supplying Liverpool, and the districts later designated as Merseyside, with fresh water. It's a stone built-dam, built in the 1880s, and was the first of its kind in the world. Its length is 4.75 miles and on a clear day the lake, along with many others in North Wales, can be seen from space.

The lake



After about twenty minutes the group reunited at the café to take refreshments. I took one last look at the famous dam. Indeed, I took a couple of pictures, and thereafter we made our way back to the car park to get ready to return to the YHA centre. In the evening most of the group apart from Somesh and Brian went to the pub. I had a drink with Norman and Jackie and I talked to Norman about my involvement in Youth Hostelling in my twenties and how I came, via the South Gwent Ramblers, to be involved with Newport Outdoor Group. Norman mentioned that he had been in the group for forty years and said that is how he met Jackie. He went on to say that eighteen couples had met and got married in this time! I discussed the merits and failures of the YHA over the last twenty five years, and how I had seen it change as an organisation in that time. It's certainly not the same as it was, but that is another story. One sad piece of news is that I recently learned that YHA Epping Forest has now closed. My friend, who very sadly passed away in 2007, was once the Warden of this hostel and I used to visit him regularly during his tenure. I remember hearing the drone of the traffic as it trundled along the nearby M25 and passing Loughton camp, an Iron Age Hill fort that we used to walk past on our way to the town of Loughton.

By the dam



Gothic architecture



When we got back to the Sychpwl Centre I spoke briefly to Sandy. Brian was eagerly helping out with some gardening. I spoke to Jackie about the tranquillity of the place, and I said that I am tempted to give up my life in Newport and come and live on an organic farm. I immediately thought of the BBC television series, "The Good Life", first broadcast in the seventies. The weekend made me think of the two different worlds explored in this series: the Country and the City. I know for certain where I would prefer to be. After all, not all of us can be bankers! Other topics for discussion during the weekend included love and romance, the arrest of Gerry Adams, the sentencing of Max Clifford to eight years in prison for sexual offences, and British overseas aid. There was an interesting article in the Guardian which explored this topic showing luxury hotels and shopping malls in Africa, all of which had been built using money donated by leading charities based in the UK. This therefore begs the question: where does all our money go? Hmmm I wonder. On a lighter and more positive note, the Sychpwl Centre and Camping Barn have much to offer: Peace and quiet for a start, and great views over the surrounding countryside. It is a spiritual retreat and place of contemplation, and I sensed this upon seeing the statuette of the Buddha as I entered the straw bale camping kitchen. So if you want tranquil time out from a hectic work schedule then this place is soothing to the soul. Also the centre operates 'a leave no trace and recycle properly policy'. Green ideas and environmentally friendly practices are at the heart of the Centre.

Day 4

The highest mountain within the Breidden Hills is Moel-y-Golfa at 403 metres, with commanding fine views from the summit especially out to the west. The Breidden Hills are of considerable interest in particular to the geologist. They are a conspicuous group of upland that were created by volcanic eruptions some 450 million years ago. The other two main summits in this range are that of Breidden Hill at a shorter height of 365 metres, and the summit of Middletown Hill at 367 metres that sits in the middle. All three of these hills are the remnants of volcanic activity which took place a very long time ago! These three summits together form an impressive cluster of hills grouped in a saddleback.

The walk on day 4 started in Middletown. We parked the cars opposite a local garage and then walked a short distance along the footpath at the side of the road. We then crossed the A458 and walked up a slight incline and over a stile, into a field continuing along the path over at least one more stile, and then past a farm skirting the edge of the wood. The path got a little steeper from there onwards. Brian, Somesh and Jackie were the last to come up this incline, and I waited for them at the base of the quarry. We continued to ascend and we passed through some attractive woodland, beech trees if I remember rightly, and Dai walked on further ahead to see if he could locate a path to the summit. He was ushered back and we continued up and along a path to the summit. As you get closer to the top it gets considerably steeper, and the ridge undulates in the form of a whaleback as you get closer to the monument at the top. Therefore, the last section involved some scrambling, but our efforts we were rewarded with fine views of the Severn Valley below. After lunch we descended quickly through forestry zigzagging in places. Norman, in the meantime, was looking for a connecting path up to the second peak Middletown Hill but to no avail. When we arrived back at the cars in the early afternoon, the thought of another significant ascent to the second peak was too much for everyone, except Norman and Jackie. The rest of the group enjoyed the welcoming beverages at the local pub/Chinese restaurant, and reflected on a memorable weekend away.

Moel y Golfa



The Gypsy King monument on Moel y Golfa looking south west

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