Walking Offa’s Dyke

FOOT TRAVELLERS on the Ancient Anglo-Welsh Border - A 304 km Welsh Journey
Walking Offa’s Dyke
An Illustrated Companion Guide

Foot Travellers on Offa’s Dyke

A Welsh journey.

Almis Simans
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INTRODUCTION: Walking Offa’s Dyke: An Illustrated Companion Guide

This book is our invitation for you to set forth and explore this historic and varied trail. This companion guide will help you familiarize yourself with the background of the borderlands.

Offa’s Dyke Walk passes through some of the most attractive landscapes that either Wales or England has to offer. The Anglo-Welsh borderlands known as the Welsh Marches bear numerous scars of old battles and skirmishes. In places you can sense the old antipathy. Ruined castles, lovely valleys and old border towns contribute to the historical ambiance of the walk.

The Welsh Marches offer today’s explorer numerous natural and historic sites to visit and experience. You’ll love it!

Good Travelling!

Almis Simans
REMEMBER TO TAKE

Diary:
A most important accessory for any traveller who wants to keep a good written record of their journeys. In any single day you will experience a variety of events, weather conditions, small memorable meetings and interactions with your environment. If you write them in a diary or journal, you will develop a wealth of experiential information that may be useful in the future.

Committing your experiences to paper leaves you with a clean sheet for tomorrow’s experiences and adventures.

Camera:
Include a camera in your pack if you enjoy taking photos. They are colourful memories of your journey. Take plenty of memory cards (or film) for your camera. You will find many “photo opportunities”.

Wet Weather Gear:
So important for this trek. The weather in Wales is unpredictable (although rain is almost guaranteed) so we suggest you take gear suitable for all seasons.

Map and Compass:
Having a compass will let you to double-check your direction, and may save you from getting lost. See the Map section in Practical Walker.

Good Boots:
A pair of good boots is the most important item in your walks packing list. There are all sorts of footwear possible. See the Boots section in Foot Traveller.
DAY 1:
Starting From Chepstow:
The Plaque near Sedbury Cliffs

One of the Waymarkers on the Dyke
CHEPSTOW, Wales

PLACES TO SEE:

The Plaque near Sedbury Cliffs – The plaque, attached to a large rock, marks the beginning of the Offa's Dyke Path, a challenging 183 mile (293km) trail from Chepstow near the Severn estuary in Southern Wales to Prestatyn in the north.

Chepstow Castle – the mighty fortress of Chepstow has guarded the route from England into South Wales for more than nine centuries. Its beginnings date from immediately after the Norman conquest, when one of the Conqueror's principal lieutenants William Fitz Osbern built the earliest surviving stone keep in Britain astride a narrow ridge high above the river Wye. Chepstow Castle is unusual among British castles in that it was built largely of stone from the first instead of timber.

Chepstow Castle
DAY 1 - CHEPSTOW TO BIGSWEIR BRIDGE (NEAR ST. BRIAVEL'S)
It looked grey and drizzly outside as we ate our English breakfast in the warm dining room. A familiar couple joined us. They were the ones who had shown us the direction to the start of the Dyke. We got to talking and it turned out that they were also going to walk Offa’s Dyke.

“We’ve got 13 days to get to Prestatyn,” Roger said. Roger and his wife, Cheryl, had walked the route southwards from Prestatyn two years ago and wanted to see what it was like the other way.

Our itinerary had scheduled us for 16 walking days, only two more than the traditional 14 days. We had decided to limit each day’s walk to an average of 10 miles (16km), since the terrain was challenging and the weather reputedly capricious.

On the breakfast radio we heard about an elderly man who had gone walking on Hatterrall Ridge and was now missing. We listened to this news attentively as we would be attempting Hatterrall Ridge in a few days.

After breakfast Roger and Cheryl showed us their packs which were smaller and lighter than ours. They had the air of experienced walkers and I felt a little jealous of their undeniable energy and ability. They were packed and ready to go. We wished each other well as they left.

Since the B&B was located in a secluded area away from the Path, our hostess showed us the shortest way to rejoin it. We hoisted our packs and walked out into the drizzling rain. The rain did not dampen our enthusiasm and we were keen to see what lay ahead of us on this journey through the ancient borderlands.

Nearby was a major road which required quick and careful crossing due to it being positioned on a blind corner. On the other side, a laneway led to a junction of paths.
A steep climb down to the Wye River brought us to a bridge across the Wye River. On the far bank lay Wales and Chepstow (Welsh = Cas-gwent).

Here, the Wye was still tidal and the exposed muddy banks of the river looked messy. The swirling opaque waters of the river flowed below, while across the Wye, stood the menacing Norman castle of Striguil, “like a huge fist of grey rock at the very gate of Wales,” wrote Jan Morris.

**Chepstow Castle** was on our itinerary. Many of the Welsh historical monuments and buildings are supervised by CADW, the Welsh version of the National Trust.

![Chepstow Castle from the English side](image)

The rain stopped. We entered the barbican (fortified gateway) and walked into an enclosed area known as the lower bailey. The Normans had begun building the castle in 1067, the year after their invasion of England.
Welsh History - The Normans

William the Conqueror swept across England and reached the border territory at Offa’s Dyke. He granted the lands of the “Marches” to the Barons based at Hereford, Shrewsbury and Chester.

The Normans implanted dynasties of their own amongst the native Welsh – the Laceys, Mortimers and Baskervilles. They brutalised the Welsh, but nevertheless many alliances were struck. To some of the Welsh, the broader Norman vision showed them a world beyond the Dyke.

Resistance to the Norman overlords never ended and guerilla warfare was incessant. Two of the greatest Welsh resistance leaders were Llewelyn the Great and Llewelyn the Last.
Welsh History - Gerald of Wales

Giraldus Cambrensis (Latin) – Gerallt Gymro (Welsh) was born in Manorbier, South Wales in 1146. He was the great-grandson of Rhys ap Tewdwr a Prince of South Wales.

One of Gerald’s uncles was made a Bishop of St. David’s in 1148, an event which was to strongly colour Gerald’s future endeavours and provide him with his life’s goal – to become a bishop. He made a number of journeys to Rome to obtain the Bishopric, but was ultimately unsuccessful.

He was well connected to those in power, both in Wales and in England and took the opportunities granted to him to serve at the highest levels of twelfth century society.

Gerald of Wales
DAY 3:

Bigsweir Bridge - Monmouth: (Tref y nwy)

12 km - The Kymin

A textile postcard of Geoffrey of Monmouth
Monmouth

Monmouth sits at the confluence of the Wye and Monnow rivers. In Wales, being a country criss-crossed with valleys and hundreds of rivers, the bridge has always been a potent symbol of the crossing, between life and death of the known and unknown.

Monmouth Bridge

Monmouth as an organised settlement, dates back to the times of the Roman occupation of Britain and the conquest of Celtic Wales. The Romans called it Blestium, and it was part of a network of Roman forts covering the region.
The town appears in the Domesday Book, and during the 11th and 12th centuries the town and surrounding areas were ruled by Norman French lords after the conquest of England by **William the Conqueror** in 1066.

Monmouth Castle was built, in 1067 under William Fitz-Osbern of Breteuil, Normandy, a significant castle builder. It has commanding views over the surrounding area from a sound defensive site.

In 1387, **Henry V** was born in Monmouth Castle in the Queen's Chamber within the gatehouse. The castle became a favourite residence of the House of Lancaster.

Henry won the **Battle of Agincourt in 1415**. Many parts of Monmouth, including the town's main square, are named after this battle.

We found Geoffrey of Monmouth’s famous window, the one he was supposed to have written his historia from, but the sign made it clear that the window was only added 300 years after his death.
The rain eased off, but we had become wary of its capricious moods and kept well covered up. I recalled Bruce Chatwin’s book, “On the Black Mountain” and thought that he should have renamed it, “Beneath the Black Cloud”, such was our experience today. We drew closer to the ruined abbey and saw quite a few horses in the adjoining fields.

We bypassed the abbey to find the main road and followed it to the Half Moon Hotel. It appeared neglected and needed some sprucing up. Tony, the owner welcomed us and showed us the drying room for our wet gear.

After a wet and tiring day Carol and I would have loved more luxurious lodgings, but we would have to stay here as there was no realistic alternative.
Tony indicated that Tuesday was usually his day off, but that if we did want something to eat he would open up the bar. After cleaning up and changing into dry clothes we cheered up. Since we weren’t keen on eating here we discussed an alternative.

“Let’s have a great night out at the Abbey Hotel. I saw on their sign that they had a 12th century bar,” I suggested. “Sounds good to me,” Carol quickly agreed.

We put on our goretex coats and walked along the wet road to the Abbey Hotel. As luck would have it, the hotel was closed and our dreams of a luxurious dinner dissipated. We walked back to the Half Moon Hotel, realising that our only remaining option was to have a meal there.

Tony didn’t seem put out at being second choice and was quite happy to open the bar and take our orders for two vegetarian lasagnas. He enjoyed chatting and told how in his younger days he and his friends in Llanthony on this side of the border would cross over Hatterall Ridge to stoush with the lads from English Longtown.

As the meals were being prepared, David and Judy, a couple holidaying on a farm nearby, called in for a drink. Over pints of ale and cider the five of us enjoyably spent some time together. Judy had a lovely speaking voice reminiscent of Miranda Richardson’s character “Queenie” in the TV series “Blackadder”.

Later, Hugh, a daywalker, arrived and ordered a pot of tea. He had driven to Llanthony to camp out and do some short walks but the heavy rains had forced him indoors. He said if the poor weather persisted he would have to pack up and go home.

The next morning the weather looked ominous. It wasn’t raining – yet, but the thick cover of dark cloud over the ridge suggested we seek an alternative to climbing the ridge and following the path to our next destination at Hay-on-Wye.
“We won’t see a thing up there today,” Carol said.
“It’s a long climb back to the top,” I added.
We discussed our concerns with Tony who agreed that the conditions on top of the ridge today would make for quite difficult walking.
“Can you give us a lift some of the way to Hay?” I asked.
“I’ll take you to where the Gospel Pass road meets Offa’s Path,” showing us the point on the map.

It would give us an easier day which was much appreciated after yesterday’s hard walk. Now we had time to visit the abbey. We were evolving from being walkers to “Foot Travellers”, people who had a number of options for getting from A to B.

Tucking our cameras beneath our goretex coats, we walked back to the abbey. In the wet morning the towering ruins of the abbey had a pleasant feeling about them, especially standing in the sparkling rain. Next to the abbey was St. David’s Church which had been inextricably related to the abbey. Inside the church it was quite mysterious and calming.

Gerald of Wales -

“It is an extraordinary circumstance, indeed, I have always felt it to be a miracle, concerning this place Llanthony, that although the lofty mountain-tops which shut it in on all sides are formed, not of stones and rocks, but rather of soft earth covered with grass, blocks of marble are frequently to be found here.”
Tradition had it that St. David had come to this valley and lived here for a time. Llanthony is a corruption of the Welsh *Llan-ddewi-nant-honddu*, meaning the Llan of St. David on the River Honddu.

St David converted Wales to Christianity in the sixth century. He persuaded the local soldiers to wear leeks in their headgear to distinguish them from the Saxons during a battle.

The *Shrine of St David* (Dewi Sant) in Tyddewi was so famous that pope Calixtus II put the Tyddewi pilgrimage (in search of St David) on the same footing as that of the pilgrimage to Rome (in search of the Apostles). The little Welsh town was on a par with Santiago de Compostela in Spain.
The Street of Book Shops
DAY 8:

GLADESTRY to DISCOED

21 km – The Hound of the Baskervilles

Hergest Croft Gardens
On Rushock Hill we came upon another section of the Dyke and followed it along until the path swerved off near an adjoining hill. It felt unusual to be walking on the remains of this ancient earthwork, now diminished by centuries of weathering. I imagined the Saxon workers and slaves as they laboured, digging and heaping the soil to create the huge, long earthwork that ultimately delineated the border between Saxon Mercia and the ancient Britons or Wealch as the Saxons called them.

“All praise then to King Offa and those who built this mighty earthwork – long since dead. His name lives on in hearts and minds of those Who once again in Offa’s footsteps tread.”


We were fairly high up here, around 340m (1200ft) and as we rounded Rushock Hill, a pass between it and Herrock Hill allowed a magnificent view over a valley with the buildings of
Lots of MUD!
Finally at the small village of Trefonen we began the day’s walk, leaving Cedric to deliver our bags to Pentre. As we walked across the fields, I found the landscape to be rather non-descript and I felt unusually light without my pack. The path rejoined the Dyke which we followed till it reached the edge of Candy Wood.
The weather appeared undecided this morning, but at least it was sunny. Cloud Hill was close to the A5 and there was only a short distance to walk (along the Dyke) till we reached the towpath of the Llangollen Canal. The sky grew overcast, so we put on our goretex coats in anticipation of rain.

The canal seemed devoid of life until around a corner a collection of canal boats, neatly moored against the opposite bank, showed that there was some activity here.

The rain came. The pitter patter of the raindrops on the canal waters was a reminder of how bleak life on the canal could be. Continuing along the tow path we came to the famous Pont Cysyllte Aqueduct, the magnificent structure built by Thomas Telford in 1795 to carry canal boats high above the Dee River 120 feet below.
A very confusing morning. The plan was to have our packs taken to the next B&B near Llandegla, but we hadn’t written down the phone number of the B&B. It’s important for the taxi driver to confirm whether the owners will be there to accept the baggage, otherwise he can’t deliver it. Eventually we found the number, confirmed delivery, and all was OK.

Buying a salad roll for lunch, we found our way to the canal and followed it. The wind was brisk and the sun was out. I found the whole area around Llangollen confusing and we lost our way after leaving the canal. Checking the map, we had walked too far along the canal, so decided to follow the road instead. Our first destination was Vale Crucis Abbey and the Pillar of Eliseg.

The well preserved ruins of the abbey came into view surrounded by a sea of caravans. It rather spoilt the effect. The next stop was the Pillar of Eliseg. However, I took a wrong turn, thinking it was the way to the ancient monument, instead ending up a kilometer away.

I was disappointed at this and decided that it was part of the confusing morning, so missed out on seeing the monument.
DAY 17:

BODFARI to PRESTATYN

18 km – Will we make it?
AFTER THE WALK:

CHESTER

Roman Legionary Fortress of DEVA
THE FOOT TRAVELLER

If you too have been inspired to journey through the history of the Welsh Marches, the following pages will answer some of those questions about the doing of it.

Timing:
The thing about travel is that any time is the right time. It’s just that you will have different experiences. We began our walk in early May, which is mid-late spring in England. The most popular time is summer, from June to August. However during summer, the numbers of walkers can add accommodation problems adding further challenges to the walk.

Starting from Chepstow:
From Australia we flew to London and travelled to Cardiff in Wales. From Cardiff, there are frequent trains to Chepstow.

Returning from Prestatyn:
We took a train to Chester. From there, train or hire car to London.

Distances:
We averaged around 13km a day. That’s about 3-4km per hour. Your body will let you know the distances suitable for it. Don’t overdo it, especially the first 3 days of your journey. If you think you will need more time for your walk, you need to plan for it. We took 17 days whereas others have taken as little as 12 days. We found that even 17 days did not provide us with enough time to fully appreciate the landscapes or the ancient border towns.

What to take:
Light as possible is better than little as possible. A well-fitted backpack and a small day pack for touring city sights. Walking