

Historic walking trails: Around St Briavels, Forest of Dean

One of Britain's most ancient woodlands, the Forest of Dean is crisscrossed by myriad small paths, and littered with old mines, tramroads and signs of early industrialisation, the legacy of hundreds of years as a working forest

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Nicholas Rudd-Jones and David Stewart
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 5 July 2011 10.06 BST
Article history



A typical Forest of Dean track, flanked with ferns and garlic. Photograph: Nicholas Rudd-Jones/David Stewart

The Forest of Dean is set apart from the rest of the country, with almost an island feel about it. Bounded by the Severn on the south and east, and the Wye to the west and north, with the city of Gloucester providing the "plug" at the top, it has a history of non-conformism. The accent is also noticeably broader than in the surrounding areas.

Pathways

Driving into the Forest of Dean, one is struck

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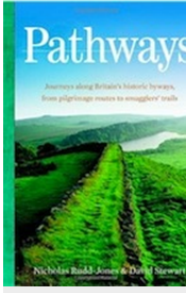
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view to the west and north, with the city of Gloucester providing the plug at the top, it has a history of non-conformism. The accent is also noticeably broader than in the surrounding areas.

Pathways
by David Stewart,
Nicholas Rudd-Jones



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Driving into the Forest of Dean, one is struck immediately by the sheer mass of trees in every direction: deciduous and coniferous, coppices and saplings, ancient woods and new plantations. Houses with views across the forest and valleys have evocative names such as Overdale and Great Gables.

Trees have always been at the heart of the Forest of Dean's livelihood. Woodland was typically more valuable than agricultural land because of all the resources that it offered, including timber, underwood, faggots and charcoal, minerals, game, wild swine, acorns and hazelnuts. Woodland areas were also hives of economic activity, attracting first craftsmen making hurdles, wheels and household goods, and subsequently charcoal burners, providing fuel for the iron-smelting furnaces that were key to the beginnings of the industrial revolution.

As England's naval strength grew, so the Forest of Dean became an important source of timber for shipbuilders. Oaks, with their short trunks and spreading branches, grew slowly on its poor soil and produced a strong, curved timber ideal for shipbuilding. By 1613 the forest was acknowledged as a "storehouse of naval timber". In fact, around the time of the Armada a few years earlier, the Spaniards were intent on destroying the Forest of Dean, regarding it as a key military asset. However the navy's demands and the production of charcoal meant that the forest was much degraded. It was the subject of a Re-Afforestation Act in 1667, probably the first of its kind anywhere in the world.

So since medieval times the Forest of Dean has been a worked landscape, rich in natural resources – trees and game above the ground, iron ore and coal beneath. The area is littered with old mines and tramroads (the forerunners of railways) designed to transport the mined materials from the steep valleys to the ports on the Severn. The complexity of the landscape and the early industrialisation set it apart from much of the British countryside.

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beneath. The area is littered with old mines and tramroads (the forerunners of railways) designed to transport the mined materials from the steep valleys to the ports on the Severn. The complexity of the landscape and the early industrialisation set it apart from much of the British countryside.

The relationship between the landowners and the common man has always been a bit different here, too. Despite the forest law laid down in the 11th century, the common man in the Forest of Dean ended up with more rights to roam and forage than his counterpart in England's agricultural heartlands. There the precedent set by the king was taken up and expanded by the landed gentry into a much more draconian set of laws and punishments for anyone caught poaching on their land: the notorious game laws. As the lawyer Sir William Blackstone commented in the 18th century: "Though the Forest Laws are now ... by degrees grown entirely obsolete, yet from this root has grown up a bastard slip, known by the name of the Game Law ..."

There is a sense in the Forest of Dean that the common man has always stood up against authority. Forest dwellers challenged Charles I's annexation of large parts of the forest for timber for warships in the 17th century. In the 18th century locals appropriated land around the edge of the forest and built houses at places such as Berry Hill, Parkend and the Hudnalls. In the early 19th century, a group organised the notorious Dean Forest Riots in an attempt to overturn the enclosure of Park Hill for navy timber. Perhaps it was another independent spirit who a few years ago reintroduced wild boars into the forest without the blessing of the Forestry Commission. They are by all accounts thriving, although there are reports of them attacking dogs during the mating season.

The result of all the different woodland activities, and the way that roughly built hamlets around the edge of the forest became established, is a complex landscape with many woods and coppices, irregular fields and smallholdings, twists and turns in the contours, and countless tiny pathways around and through the villages.

As for routes through the forest, it was always a pretty impenetrable place and often very muddy. The oldest highways were the rivers. We know that the Severn and Wye were used by Roman vessels and there is some archaeological evidence that there were trading routes even earlier, in prehistoric times. There was also a Roman road running between Ariconium (near Ross-on-Wye) to the Severn, near Lydney.

The hinterland remained extremely inaccessible until the arrival of the toll roads in the 18th century. The route between Monmouth and Chepstow, passing St Briavels, was turnpiked in 1755. In the early 19th century, several tramroads

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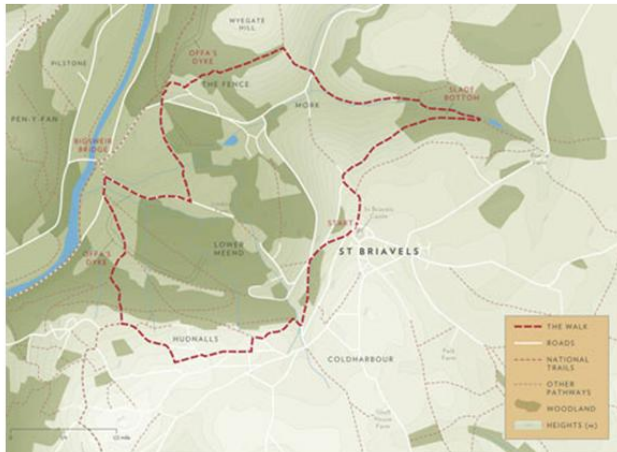
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The combination of impenetrability and complexity has led to myriad smaller paths, especially at the edges of the main forest. Describing routes to other walkers is therefore much trickier than in parts of the country where the choices are limited. It seems likely also that fewer paths were blocked or closed by landowners, as there was limited enclosure for farming and fewer large estates. In the royal forests throughout the south of England there is a sense that, even if you can't quite roam at will, at least there's a path that can take you wherever you want to go.

THE ROUTE



Forest of Dean map Photograph: Darren Bennett

Nicholas Rudd-Jones sets out with his old school friend Oliver Quick to explore an area neither has visited properly before

We begin our seven-mile walk at St Briavels, a moated Norman castle, on a fabulous June morning. Peering inside before we set out, we discover it's now a youth hostel. A gaggle of walkers are just tying up their boots and getting ready for the off. It brought alive a comment I had read recently by a local author: "The Forest has changed over the centuries from a playground for kings to a playground for the masses."

Heading north out of St Briavels, we almost immediately get great views up the Wye Valley. The path turns east into Slade Bottom, and we walk along a typical

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author. "The Forest has changed over the centuries from a playground for kings to a playground for the masses."

Heading north out of St Briavels, we almost immediately get great views up the Wye Valley. The path turns east into Slade Bottom, and we walk along a typical forest track down which trees can easily be lugged by tractor. Heading back down Slade Brook and a much narrower path, we come across the remarkable Travertine Dams. It looks as if a zealous Victorian garden designer has been busy at work, but these are natural dams formed when spring water, saturated in lime, runs over an obstruction in the stream bed, resulting in the deposition of travertine, a porous, crumbly limestone. They are beautiful and mysterious, especially in the dappled morning light coming through the trees.

As we cross the road and start climbing again, we find ourselves on the broad Weygate Lane, which was part of the original 1755 toll road from Monmouth to Chepstow, superseded in 1828 by a lower, valley route.

Heading east again, we enter Bigsweir Woods, a beautiful mixture of ash, beech, lime and oak. The path runs along the edge of the wood. This would have been the route that the charcoal burners took as they travelled with their charcoal to the furnaces. The sites of charcoal platforms can still be seen in these woods, although we find them hard to distinguish from badger setts, which are also remarkably flat where the earth has been thrown up.

Bigsweir Bridge formed part of the toll road along the Wye valley between Monmouth and Chepstow, and was opened in 1828, incorporating a toll house at the western (Welsh) end. In 1876 the Wye Valley railway opened, and St Briavels station was built near the western edge of the bridge, nearly two miles from the village that it served – and in another country! The line closed in 1964.





Forest of Dean mushroom Photograph: Nicholas Rudd-Jones/David Stewart

Moving away from the fast-flowing river and uphill again, we cross the impressive earthworks of Offa's Dyke and a delightful row of ancient sweet chestnut trees. This would be a great place to hide. Hudnalls Wood, which we reach next, is an ancient semi-natural wood, which since the 13th century has been recorded as a place where the men of St Briavels are allowed to cut wood by right. The Hudnalls enjoys some of the oldest commoners' rights in England, dating back to the 12th century, granting the men of St Briavels the right to take wood (estovers), graze animals (herbage) and turn out pigs for acorns (pannage).

We pick a path up through the trees in much the same way that gatherers of firewood and forest delicacies did hundreds of years ago. It's steep and slippery; it must have been tricky carrying a bundle of wood at the same time.

Coming out at the top of the woods, we arrive on St Briavels Common. In medieval times, most of the flatter uplands seem to have been relatively open woodlands, with grassy clearings used as pasture. Much of this was settled and enclosed by squatters between about 1750 and 1810. If a squatter was able to keep the chimney of his new cottage smoking from sunset to sunrise, his claim was thought to become legitimate. The result is a patchwork quilt of smallholdings, small fields, coppices, streams, winding lanes and footpaths, more recently peppered with newer houses and bungalows.

In 1296, during the Scottish wars of independence, Edward I used miners from the St Briavels Hundred to undermine Berwick-on-Tweed's defences and regain it from the Scots. As a result, the king granted them and their descendants free mining rights within the forest.

Many of the old forest rights remain in force today. True "Foresters" are those born "within the hundred of St Briavels" – an ancient administrative area taking in most of what is now considered the Forest of Dean. According to the statute, males who are over 21 and have worked in a mine for a year and a day can register as a "freeminer" and dig for minerals. In October 2010, a woman successfully claimed the right to be a freeminer. Residents of the hundred who are over 18 can also graze sheep in the forest, under an agreement between the Commoners' Association and the Forestry Commission. The sheep keepers, known locally as "sheep badgers", simply turn their flocks out to graze.

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We shortly get back to St Briavels and repair immediately to the George pub beside the castle, where we enjoy a hearty Sunday lunch. It is one of those pubs that still has a vibrant local feel about it, and is packed with true Foresters enjoying their independence. But no sign of a riot!

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