

This week's cover feature

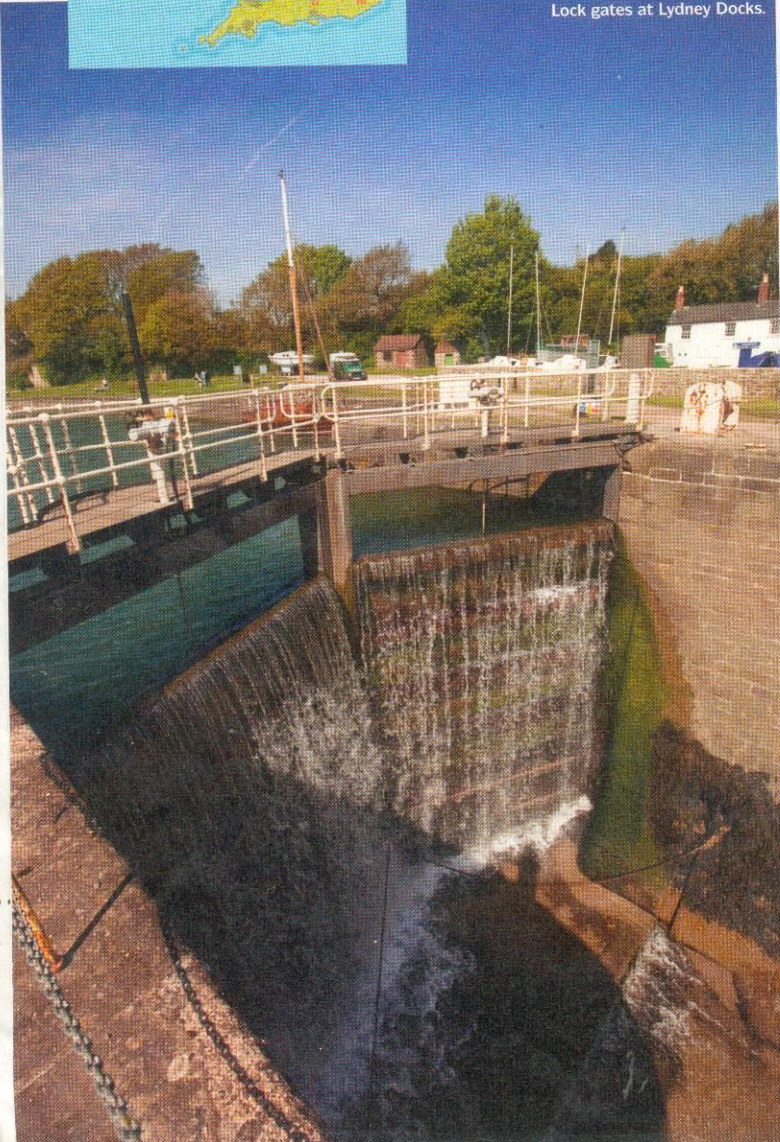
Neil McAllister
in the Forest of Dean



England's Best-kept Secret?

Neil McAllister delves into the Forest of Dean . . .

Lock gates at Lydney Docks.



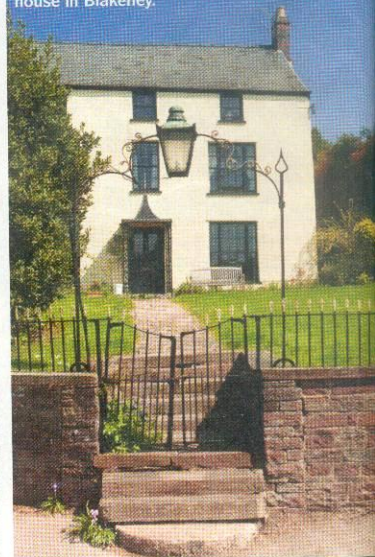
THE Forest of Dean is an idyllic little bit of countryside which geography and road builders have conspired to isolate from the modern age. These days, the once-busy A48 is little more than a broad by-way, as it passes through sleepy villages towards Lydney. Whilst the town centre hosts a thriving commercial community, the ancient docks, where the River Lyd flows into the Severn, are a glorious place to while away a leisurely hour.

Huge lock gates hold back the Lyd's waters to create a harbour protected from the extreme tidal range, which can extend to almost fifty feet, but it was the Romans who first realised Lydney's usefulness as a port.

After the Romans left, the forest's resources of coal, charcoal and iron were shipped from Lydney Harbour, but trade declined steadily until 1960, when the last cargo of coal passed out of the lock gates.

In 2005, however, the area was restored and revitalised into a place to enjoy the industrial heritage, tinker with boats or just

Swan House — the oldest house in Blakeney.



sit and enjoy panoramic views across the river to Somerset.

A scenic route is well signposted, but to be honest, every lane within the Forest of Dean falls firmly within that category.

"I can't understand why we have never visited before," Hazel said, as we explored Blakeney's narrow streets. Whitewashed cottages sit next to pretty stone-built homes and, near the tiny church, we admired Swan House. The village's oldest dwelling, this striking roadside property once served as a pub but now stands behind an elegant iron gate.

Speech House has played a vital part in the area's history since the 1600s, when Charles II built it as a hunting lodge. As well as standing at the forest's geographical centre, for many years it has also been its administrative hub. Now a very comfortable, ideally located hotel, it still functions as the Verderers' Court, as testified by the royal arms in the huge function room.

Since the 1100s every Royal Forest has employed four Verderers, charged with protecting the trees and venison on behalf of the King. This was a vitally important job, not just to keep the King's dining-table stocked, but also to ensure the Navy's shipyards had a supply of oak. Every forty days a Verderers' Court is held at Speech House, where anyone with a grievance or problem can make a speech — hence its name.

This is a splendid place to stay. People in the know travel from afar to enjoy the superb food, and we found it marvellously convenient, being right in the heart of the area. We slept very soundly in our huge four-poster bed and this was despite knowing that the death penalty can still be passed for stealing royal deer. Fortunately, the ancient gibbet on which the sentence must be carried out has been mislaid!

The royal connection is evident from the Pansanger oak over the road, planted by Prince Albert in 1861. Our Queen and Prince Philip planted the two adjacent oaks a few years after the coronation.

"It is like living in the 1960s, but don't tell anyone," a chap walking his dog told us, as we chatted at New Fancy View. "I moved here a few years ago from the Midlands and just love it. It isn't a wealthy



Beech woodland in Upper Soudley in springtime.

area — one look at the number of old cars on the road will tell you that — but this is a wonderful, welcoming community."

LYDNEY, Coleford and Cinderford are small towns serving the community's commercial and social needs, but we found the forest's delightful villages and hamlets fascinating. Some we discovered by chance, by taking unintentional diversions, but others are better known, like Soudley, where the Dean Heritage Centre occupies an old mill.

This is a good place to start a visit, not only because its interactive displays bring the forest's history to life, but also because the nearby ponds offer popular woodland walks. We were surprised to discover that the signed "scenic route" bypasses one of Britain's prettiest roads.

Locally known as the Roman Road, or golden mile, the stretch of tarmac between Blackpool Bridge and Upper Soudley is spectacular in spring when it is carpeted on both sides with swathes of bluebells.

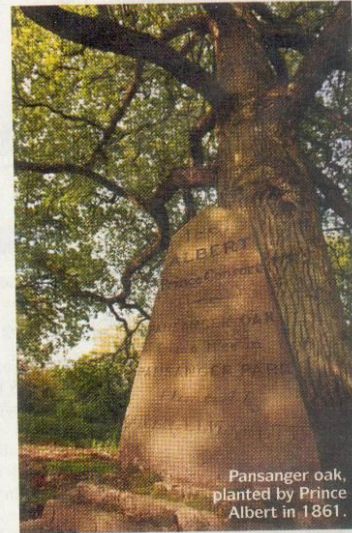
The autumnal spectacle along this lane rivals anything New England can offer.

Freeminers' rights were granted by King Edward I to men *born and abiding within the Hundred of St Briavels, who shall have worked for a year and a day in a coal or iron ore mine or stone quarry within the Hundred.*

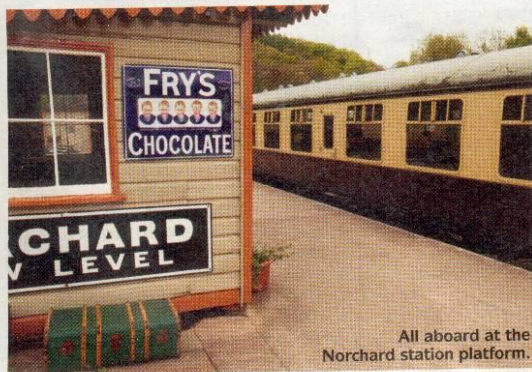
Dave Harvey is one such freeminer, although he could perhaps be better

known as the bard of the boughs. Dave's poems, like "Oh Lord Please Listen To My Prayer", sung by the Dean Male Voice Choir, have been broadcast and recorded on CD. Dave brings the term diversification to new levels, for in addition to his mining and poetry, he is also a sculptor, wielding a

Continued on page 6.



Pansanger oak, planted by Prince Albert in 1861.



All aboard at the Norchard station platform.



Puzzlewood lives up to its name!

chainsaw to great effect.

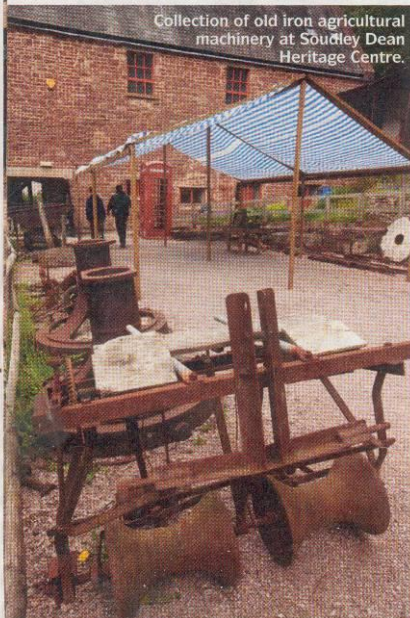
At Clearwell on the other side of the forest, freemining father and son Ray and Jonathan Wright have opened their subterranean network of caves from which iron ore and ochre have been extracted for over 4,000 years. This popular attraction first opened to tourists in the 1960s, and now, in addition to their guided tours, the caverns host wedding receptions and even underground musical concerts.

Beyond Clearwell's tall Cross, which provides a historic traffic island, Newland is a fascinating village, whose churchyard is bounded by the Haberdashers' almshouses — *for eight men and eight women*, a historic old school and a small terrace of cottages for whom the sacred ground is their garden.

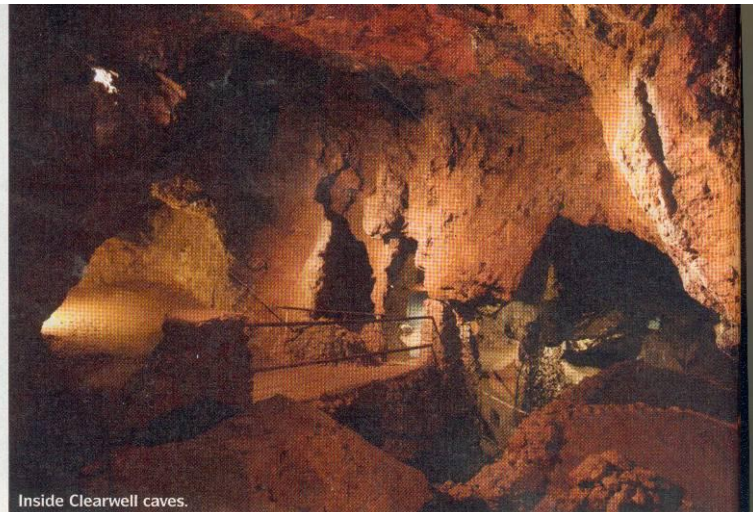
Inside the church, a tiny brass depicts a miner at work. With a candle in his mouth, this ancient figure is shown holding a pick and hod and has been adopted as the forest's emblem.

As its name suggests, Puzzlewood is a mysterious, magical place, where a unique landscape has been formed from mossy rocks framing twisted woodland. The author Tolkien was a visitor to this ancient area just south of Coleford, so it is no surprise to learn that this geological curiosity inspired his imagination. The forests of Middle Earth seem quite tame compared with Puzzlewood's real landscape.

A drive on this side of the forest isn't complete without visiting St Briavels, an ancient settlement gathered around the landmark castle, which for many years has served as a Youth Hostel. On Whit Sunday, people gather outside the church to get their "dole" — pieces of bread and cheese which are thrown into the crowd. Recipients once paid a penny, which



Collection of old iron agricultural machinery at Soudley Dean Heritage Centre.



Inside Clearwell caves.

entitled them to cut wood from the nearby woods.

Inside the church we discovered a pair of unusual effigies, William Warren and his wife Mariana, who have leaned up on one elbow since 1573, which doesn't seem the most comfortable position in which to spend eternity!

These days a car is our preferred transport, but cyclists love the forest's empty roads and sylvan forest rides. We found a small group outside the Speech House gathering their breath having pedalled up the steep hill from Cannop.

"Most of the forest is flat, but that was an effort," one lady said, her red cheeks testament to her exertion.

WITH a little planning, we were able to make short walks, like the very pleasant stroll to the sculpture trail. The full trail takes in much of New Beechenhurst Inclosure, but we walked a flat section to find Kevin Atherton's "Cathedral" — a stained glass window suspended in the woodland canopy. A little deeper in the woods, we stumbled on Annie Cattrell's wonderful "Echo" which, as its name suggests, echoes the quarry wall in which it is situated.

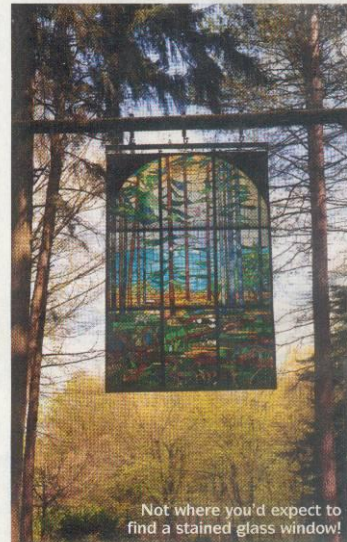
Using the forest as a base, visitors can explore the beautiful Wye Valley to the east or spectacular Symonds Yat near Monmouth. After a delightful long weekend, we meandered north on our way home.

After enjoying the scenery above Lydbrook, we followed the River Wye to the appealing hamlet of English Bicknor, whose church holds many historic delights, including a splendid Norman arch and collection of effigies, one of whom seems to be holding a huge egg!

Following the road past Goodrich Castle, Hazel mused on how we had managed not to visit such a beautiful area until now.

"The Forest of Dean has to be Britain's best-kept secret. No wonder that chap wanted us to keep quiet!" ●

Next week:
Ken Murrill is in
Walter Scott country!



Not where you'd expect to find a stained glass window!

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