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## You can almost hear the corks pop in these woods

**Walk Of The Month - The Forest of Dean: The historic border area has seen off yet another invasive threat, says Mark Rowe**

Sunday, 6 March 2011

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This walk was supposed to take place under a metaphorical dark cloud, but instead you could almost hear the champagne corks popping in celebration.

The Government's abrupt U-turn on its proposed sell-off of state-owned forests has, for the time being, safeguarded the future of the Forest of Dean and hundreds of other woodlands across the country.

The Forest of Dean, tucked away in the folded hinterlands where Wales and England muscle up against one another, seemed to act as the lightning rod for opposition to the plans. And when Bill Bryson and the Archbishop of Canterbury waded in with their support, you could almost see the paper aeroplane, with plans for the proposed sell-off scrawled on the back, heading for a wastepaper bin in Whitehall.

So, it was with a spring in his step that local guide Geoff Davis outlined a route that showcases the best of the Dean and goes some way to explain the whirlwind of white-knuckled anger provoked by the forestry sell-off scheme.

We started on top of an old mining spoil that had been greened over, known as New Fancy. Through the chilly mist, you could make out rolling hills that mixed conifer plantations – the Forestry Commission's historical staple – and broadleaf woodlands. As spring unfolds, you may well spot nesting goshawks weaving their way through the trees. Below the peak there is a geomap that explains the geology of the Dean, a mixture of limestone, sandstone, iron deposits and coal seams. At its peak in 1930, 1.3 million tons of coal were produced here.

The Dean has historically been an insular place. Its 17,000 acres, declared a royal hunting forest in Norman times, have always proved difficult to reach and even harder to conquer. To the south lies the River Severn; to the north and west runs the Wye, while in the east the hills fall steeply away to the no-man's-land west of Gloucester.

Back to the walk: for eight miles we threaded through the forest, leaping from ancient oaks to gloomy, shadowed canopies of yew and conifer, and avenues of beech, dotted with cherry trees. Everywhere, trees had been tied in yellow ribbons in protest against the planned sell-off. You might still spot a few as you walk around.



Press Picture

The Giant's Chair on the Forest of Dean Sculpture Trail

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From time to time we passed scattered boulders that mark former lodges where chunks of the Dean were enclosed through the centuries – actions that provoked riots then. At the Speech House Lake – all the lakes in the Dean are man made – I was surprised by the spectacle of mandarin ducks: the birds curiously nest in boxes nailed six feet above ground level.

A short stroll took us – via a charming arboretum – to the Speech House Hotel. Apart from being a good place to stop for lunch, the atmospheric 17th-century lodge is where the forest's miners came to resolve disputes and where the forest verdures once passed judgement on felons. Sheep grazed nearby – owned by commoners as they are in the New Forest – while you may spot roe and fallow deer. You might come across wild boar, too; you'll definitely see their calling cards, rooted-up turf by the roadsides throughout the forest.

Near the end of the walk, we diverted past a quarry south of Cannop Ponds to see the Monument Mine, one of the forest's unique free mines. The title of free miner is given to a Forest of Dean miner who has earned the right to work personal plots and dates back nearly 1,000 years. It's a tough job, clawing coal out by hand, and it's a spirit you sense holds true elsewhere in the forest.

"The sell-off really got people's backs up," said Geoff. "It's a tremendous privilege to grow up in this area. We've walked for miles without anyone telling us to get off their land, and without seeing a town, and the trails are well marked. The Forest of Dean was somewhere where forestry was taught. You need people who are trained professionals to manage it."

Journey's end brought us back to New Fancy. Appropriately, there is a sizeable rock here that marks the planting of two million acres of trees by the Forestry Commission.

The notion that all this could one day have been owned by a supermarket or a hedge fund seems abominable. Tree planting and the task of keeping our forests looking glorious – and open to all – is not a job for amateurs.

### **Compact Facts**

#### **How to get there**

Lydney, the nearest town to the start of this walk, is served by Arriva ([arrivatrainswales.co.uk](http://arrivatrainswales.co.uk)) and Cross Country Trains ([crosscountry.co.uk](http://crosscountry.co.uk)) via Cheltenham and Gloucester.

#### **Further information**

Forest of Dean and Wye Valley Tour Guides ([wyedeantourguides.org.uk](http://wyedeantourguides.org.uk)), Forest of Dean Tourism ([visitforestofdean.co.uk](http://visitforestofdean.co.uk)).

### **Directions**

Distance: eight miles.

Time: 4-5 hours.

OS Map: OL 14 Wye Valley and Forest of Dean.

*From New Fancy car park (grid ref: 629095) bear right along road for 200 yards. Turn left up track over gate/stile and wind uphill. Turn right at crossroads. Cross road, through gate, later forking left along Trafalgar Avenue. Later turn right along track to Speech House Lake. At T-junction, go left and sharp left along Spruce Ride. Just after gate, follow the path around the arboretum and left on B4226 to Speech House Hotel. Cross the road, following Gloucestershire Way and the blue waymarkers left through a sculpture trail. In front of a giant chair sculpture, go left downhill through the Beechenhurst visitor centre. Cross the cattle grid, then go downhill. Cross B4226 to a gate and grassy track. Turn right after a mile through a small gate and follow the path to Cannop Ponds. Follow the cycle path left. By the junction and large waymarker, turn right, following Gloucestershire Way past stone works, across road and follow the pylons. Leave pylons at gravel road, continue around bend and uphill to free mine. Return to path crossroads and head uphill on cycle track, signposted Dilke Bridge, for 1.5 miles to road. Turn left for 100 yards to New Fancy car park.*

The Independent

Mark Rowe

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> March

URL: <http://ind.pn/g0mTcd>