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Walking in Britain: spring in your step

Now is the time, says Nigel Richardson, to rediscover the pleasure of walking in Britain's wild places.



The Forest of Dean, England's first National Forest Park. Photo: PHOTOLIBRARY






By **Nigel Richardson** 8:00AM GMT 05 Mar 2011

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In late January of this year a group of loosely associated adults and children descended on a spot in the Forest of Dean to celebrate something. A birthday, in the first instance – it was Catherine's 50th. But more generally, we gathered to mark a connection with the land by putting it beneath our booted feet. Ten miles of it to be precise, with a pub lunch at the halfway point.

From England and Wales we came, from country and city, office and classroom and surgery, and from lives with daytime horizons usually defined by the tops of our computer screens. Friends and strangers, we all agreed that the world in 2011 had never seemed less certain. Then we pulled our laces tight in the eyes of our boots and turned our backs on such cares.

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On the face of it, it wasn't a great time to go walking – so early in the year that even the snowdrops were still tucked in bed and so cold that the leaf mould beneath the bare trees was glazed with frost at midday. But it became one of those days you remember. We all need to stand outside our lives – perhaps never more so than at present – and walking in wild places is the way to do it.

Few inhabited places in Britain feel more wild and remote than the Forest of Dean in deepest Gloucestershire. Its most famous son, the playwright Dennis Potter, described it as "a heart-shaped place between two rivers [he meant the Wye and the Severn], somehow slightly cut off from them".

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In fact, man has had a big hand in shaping the landscape we walked and talked through. For hundreds of years trees were felled to produce charcoal for iron forges and oak for naval ships, and the forest floor was crisscrossed with tramroads – we stumbled on one – along which horses pulled wagons of coal, stone and timber.

In 1938, the Forest of Dean became the first National Forest Park in England and is now managed by the Forestry Commission. Signs nailed to tree trunks reminded us that we should not take this arrangement for granted.

"HOOF," said the signs: "Hands Off Our Forest" – a message to the Government to rethink its plans to sell off England's publicly owned forests. That danger has now been headed off and, as Joanne O'Connor illustrates overleaf, our small and crowded island remains rich in great places in which to walk back to a kind of sanity.

The days are getting longer, the snowdrops are giving way to daffodils. Now is the time to do it and celebrate the truth of the words of the American naturalist John Muir: "I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out until sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in."

Essentials

Forest of Dean and Wye Valley Tour Guides (www.ftg.org.uk) offers guided walks for £23 per hour for groups of up to 15.

Where to stay

The Speech House Hotel (01594 822807; www.thespeechhouse.co.uk) in the heart of the Forest has double b&b from £72 to £179.

Further information

www.visitforestofdean.co.uk, www.wyevalleytourism.co.uk.

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