

The Bristol to Brecon Walk

via Chepstow, Usk, Abergavenny,
Crickhowell and Talybont



Blaise Castle

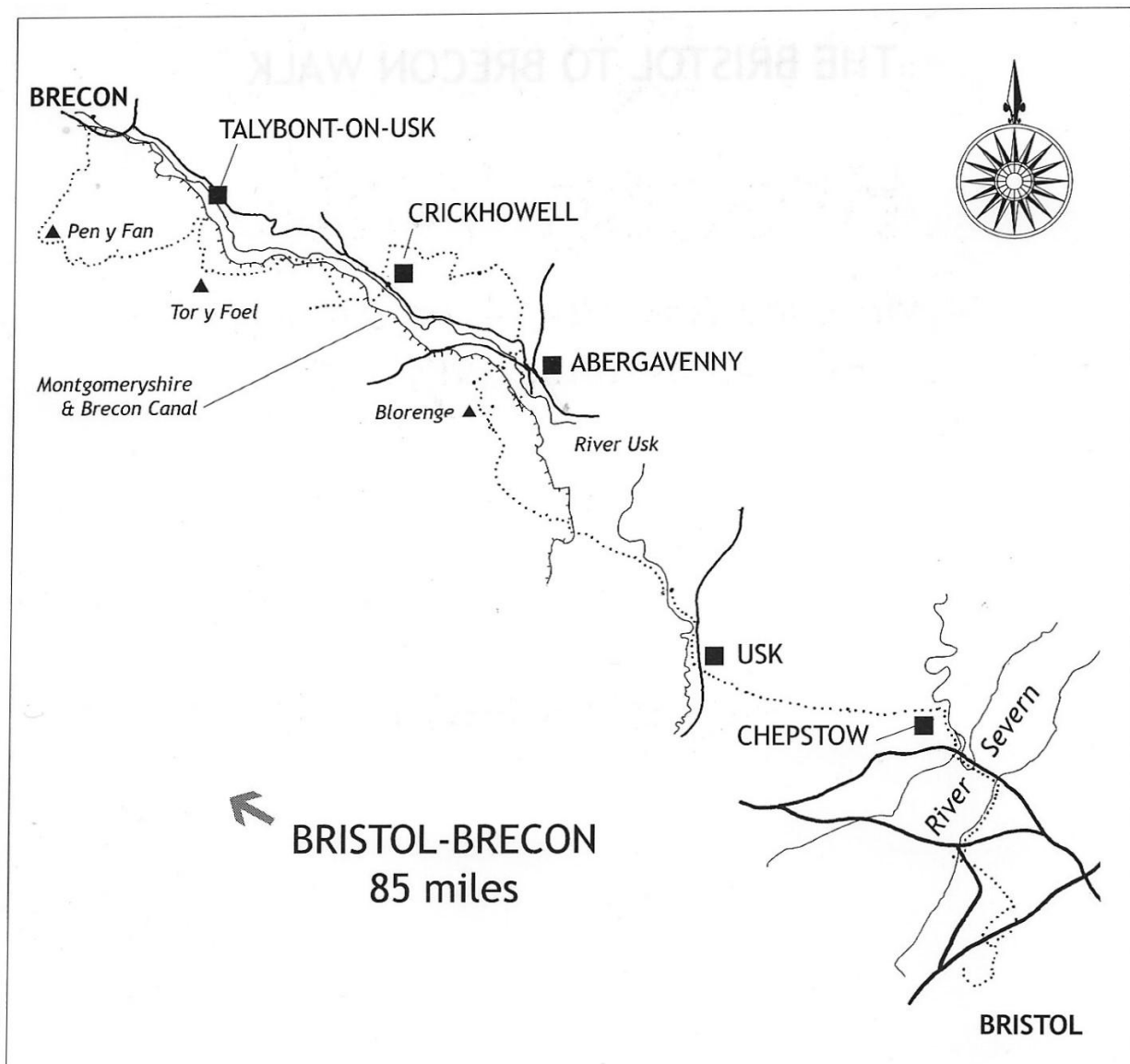


The big three - Corn Du, Pen y Fan and Cribyn

Nigel Andrews

The Bristol to Brecon Walk

The Bristol to Brecon walk is an 85 mile route devised by the author. Starting from the great city of Bristol, it leads across the Severn Bridge to Chepstow before heading for Usk and Abergavenny. It continues over Sugar Loaf and Table Mountain to Crickhowell and Talybont-on-Usk. The climax is a traverse of the magnificent Brecon Beacons before the descent to journey's end in Brecon itself. This varied and stunning walk takes in mountain tops, river valleys, a canal, historic towns and beautiful undulating countryside. It can be completed in six days or broken down into shorter sections for day walks. The book provides a detailed route description, photographs of some of the highlights of the walk, and interesting information about some of the places visited. The author is an experienced walker who has led and designed over two hundred walks for the Bristol Group of the Ramblers' Association. He lives in Bristol, not far from the start of this walk.



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I would like to thank my many friends in Bristol Ramblers for their encouragement and support and, not least, their companionship on the hill. Special thanks are due to my wife, Louise Andrews, for taking the photographs in the book with the exception of two in Day 5 courtesy of Chris Holloway. I am very grateful to Roger Jones of ELSP for the sketch-maps and for his advice and expertise during the production of this book.

DISCLAIMER

While the author has walked the route and taken reasonable care with the description, he cannot be held responsible for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or injury, however caused. Inevitably changes will occur and it would be appreciated if you will advise the author of them so that they may be incorporated into future editions.

INTRODUCTION

One fine August day I was looking down on Brecon from Pen y Fan, reflecting that I had never walked to the town from the Beacons that bear its name. A few seconds later, a more ambitious project formed in my mind. Why not walk there from my home city of Bristol, undertaking a journey on foot to the finest hill walking territory accessible from home?

My aims were to avoid slavishly following whole sections of existing long distance footpaths, to take in as much high ground as comfortably possible in a multi-day outing and to link the hills with lesser known valley routes. I also wanted to include some of the attractive and historical towns en route.

The end result is, I think, a wonderfully satisfying and challenging walk. Starting from the wooded outskirts of the great regional capital of Bristol, we cross the Severn Bridge to enjoy the historical castle and border town of Chepstow. An undulating day through less known countryside leads us to Usk and the fringes of the hills that will be our friends for the next four days. A long day to Abergavenny takes us over Blorenge to enjoy stunning views of the Black Mountains. The following day's march includes the summit of Sugar Loaf with its dramatic and distinctive summit cone, the old hill fort of Table Mountain and the small and delightful town of Crickhowell. The fifth day is immensely varied and takes us to Talybont-on-Usk by way of beautiful countryside, the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal and the outlier of Tor y Foel with its panoramic views of the Brecon Beacons. Finally the grand climax involves a strenuous traverse of the Beacons including the summit of their highest point, Pen y Fan, before we descend to Brecon, a deservedly interesting and historic destination.

The walk may be completed in six days with a total distance of some 85 miles and an aggregate ascent of some 12,900 feet. It therefore falls comfortably into a week's holiday. There is of course no reason why it should not be done in six separate instalments using public transport or more than one car. Days 1, 4, 5 and 6 have a parallel bus route although Sunday services will be hard to find. Bristol, Chepstow and Abergavenny all have railway stations.

Another way of tackling the walk is by a series of circular walks each including a section of the main route. The possibilities are endless, particularly when you reach the Brecon Beacons National Park. This is wonderful country which is worthy of detailed exploration and this walk merely scratches the surface. You may be lucky enough to know the area well, in which case the path will link many of your old favourites. On the other hand, this may be your first visit — if so I envy you the joys of seeing these magnificent mountains for the first time.

Any newly created long distance path inevitably owes its inspiration to Alfred Wainwright and his challenge to Coast to Coast walkers to devise their own routes. I have trodden the 190 miles between St Bees and Robins Hood Bay on two occasions and vowed to make my own modest contribution to the growing family of long distance walks. It may not match AW's standards but at least you'll only get your boots wet at each end of the walk if it's raining!

Maps

I strongly recommend that you equip yourself with the five Ordnance Survey 1:25,000 maps that cover the walk. Not only will they assist you with navigation but also give you an appreciation of the wider area and enable you to devise alternatives to the main route if required. The maps are all part of the Explorer series with their distinctive orange covers.

Sheet 154	Bristol West & Portishead
Sheet OL14	Wye Valley & Forest of Dean
Sheet 152	Newport & Pontypool
Sheet OL13	Brecon Beacons National Park Eastern area
Sheet OL12	Brecon Beacons National Park West & Central areas

Preparation & Equipment

The whole walk is a strenuous undertaking for fit and experienced walkers. As previously stated it can be walked in stages to suit you. It should be noted that days 4 and 6 and sections of days 3 and 5 are hill walks in sometimes remote terrain. It goes without saying that the appropriate gear and boots are essential together with a map and compass. As in all mountain areas, the weather can change very quickly and wintry conditions can sometimes occur at most times of the year.

Having said all this, there is considerable satisfaction to be derived from walking in the hills in all sorts of weather. Only you know the level of your experience and fitness and provided you stay within these limits, do get out there and enjoy this wonderful landscape. The paths on the hills are, for the most part, well defined although I have identified in the text a couple of areas where it is easy to go astray in mist.

Most people doing the whole walk will plan an expedition during the period from April to October. It is highly enjoyable throughout this time frame particularly during spring and early summer and again in late summer and autumn. During high summer, some of the lower level paths may be overgrown and navigation might be more exacting. On the hill, bracken clothes many of the slopes and, although most of our route is on well-defined paths, a few sections may require some stamina in beating back ferns.

Short winter days preclude a six day walk for all but the very fit although there is no reason why individual days should not be enjoyed as long as you are confident in your ability to complete your chosen route in good time for sunset.

Public Transport

There are four railway stations on or close to the walk. Train times are available from the National Rail Enquiry Line 0845 748 4950.

Sea Mills (on branch line Bristol Temple Meads - Severn Beach).

Severn Beach (as above)

Chepstow; Abergavenny.

Bus services in Bristol are operated by First Bus (0117 955 3231

< <https://www.firstbus.co.uk/bristol-bath-and-west>>)

The bus between Bristol and Chepstow is operated by Newport buses (Traws Cymrw T7).

<<https://www.newportbus.co.uk/services/NT0/T7>>

Note that a Diamond concessionary bus pass (issued by Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire or BANES) as well as a welsh concessionary bus pass gives free travel on this bus. The bus X43 between Abergavenny, Crickhowell, Talybont and Brecon is operated by Stagecoach Red and White www.stagecoachbus.com (01633 266336 and 01874 622859).

For those doing the whole walk you can travel from Brecon by bus to Abergavenny before completing the journey to Bristol by train, changing at Newport.

Accommodation

Accommodation details are available from the following Tourist Information Centres:

Chepstow	01291 623772
Abergavenny	01873 857588
Crickhowell	01873 812105
Brecon	01874 622485

For Bristol see <<https://visitbristol.co.uk/>>

There is a good choice of bed and breakfast accommodation at the termini of each day's walk. There are only two Youth Hostels close to the route — in Bristol City Centre (0117 922 1659) and Llwyn-y-Celin, to the west of Pen y Fan in the Brecon Beacons (01874) 624261.

Weather

An internet forecast for the Brecon Beacons can be found at
<www.meto.gov.uk> Click on UK weather and mountain weather to reach it.

Shops

There is a full range of services including banks at six of the seven starting and finishing-points. Talybont has a village shop and Post Office. Other shops en route are found at Easter Compton, and Severn Beach.

How to reach the start

The walk starts from the large car park on Kings Weston Road (GR559786). The two most convenient motorway junctions are 17 and 18 on the M5.

From Junction 17, follow the A4018 dual carriageway signposted Bristol West to the third roundabout where you see the Old Crow pub on your right. Turn right and follow Crow Lane to its end at a T junction. Turn right and follow the road ahead as it crosses a mini-roundabout and enters a narrow one way system. The road swings right as it reaches the Blaise Castle Estate and the large car park is on your left after 1/4 mile.

From Junction 18, take the first exit left at the roundabout and follow the B4054 through Shirehampton and above a golf course to turn left on to the B4057 Kings Weston Road. This road goes uphill to pass under a pedestrian footbridge and then bends tight to pass through woodland. Keep going until you pass the turning of Long Cross on your left. The car park is on the right hand side of King Weston Road shortly after this turning.

Bristol boasts two mainline railway stations and the better public transport links serve Temple Meads in the city centre. From here the number 1 bus will take you to Henbury, close to Blaise. Buses 3 and 4 run from the Centre to Blaise Castle itself. Timetables appear on www.firstgroup.com/southwest/bristol.

The best public transport link of all is to take the Severn Beach branch line train from Temple Meads and to alight at Sea Mills. A beautiful walk along the River Trym meets the main route at Stratford Mill (see text). Before continuing, I would strongly recommend the detour to Blaise Castle by reversing the directions in the main text.

Parking in the Blaise Castle car park is no longer free. One alternative would be to park at Cribbs Causeway Shopping Centre. From there the 3 and 4 buses go to Blaise Castle. If you come back from Chepstow on the T7 bus this calls into Cribbs Causeway before continuing to the centre. If you return from Wales to Bristol by train you can alight at Bristol Parkway and catch metro bus M4 from there to Cribbs Causeway. Bus details can change so always check bus times.

BRISTOL

Whole books have been written about Bristol and its history and space only permits a thumbnail sketch of this great city. It became a great wool exporting port in the 14th century and became a city and county in 1373. In 1497 John Cabot set sail from Bristol to reach North America. The city continued to flourish and Bristol became the second most important port in England. Among the commodities imported were wines, chocolate and tobacco which have all played an important part in the city's trading history. In the 19th century, Isambard Kingdom Brunel redesigned the docks, built Temple Meads station, designed the SS Great Britain steam ship and, most famously of all, was commissioned to build the Clifton Suspension Bridge.

Brunel's great achievements still feature among the city's major visitor attractions. Others include the Zoo, the Cathedral and St Mary Redcliffe Church. A stroll around the revitalised docks area is a must and should be combined with a visit to @t Bristol, a modern science and technology museum.

While most people undertake a long-distance walk to escape busy cities, it would be shame to miss out on Bristol's many attractions if you are unfamiliar with them. It's also a great place for the walker with no fewer than 568 public footpaths, many passing through green areas. Bristol Group of the Ramblers' Association has devised two routes; the Bristol Triangle (18 miles) and the South Bristol Circular (23 miles). Informative leaflets highlight the attractions of these walks. Further information is available at <www.bristolramblers.org.uk>.

THE RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION

The RA is the charity that has campaigned on walking and countryside matters for over seventy years. Anyone not already a member should consider joining to support the aims of the Association. You will receive a colourful quarterly magazine and membership of a local group. You can join any group walk in the country. For more information visit the website on <www.ramblers.org.uk>.

I would particularly like to mention Bristol Group of the RA. It offers an incredible range of walks for all abilities and preferences, including many in the area of the Bristol to Brecon walk. There is a monthly hill walk, a choice of two walks each Sunday as well as midweek, Saturday and, in summer, evening outings. A number of our members come from outside Bristol to walk with us and newcomers are always made very welcome. I would like to thank my many friends in the Group for their support of this walk and their assistance in its development. Please have a look at the Group's website on <www.bristolramblers.org.uk>

DAY 1
BRISTOL to CHEPSTOW
15 miles; 500 feet of ascent.

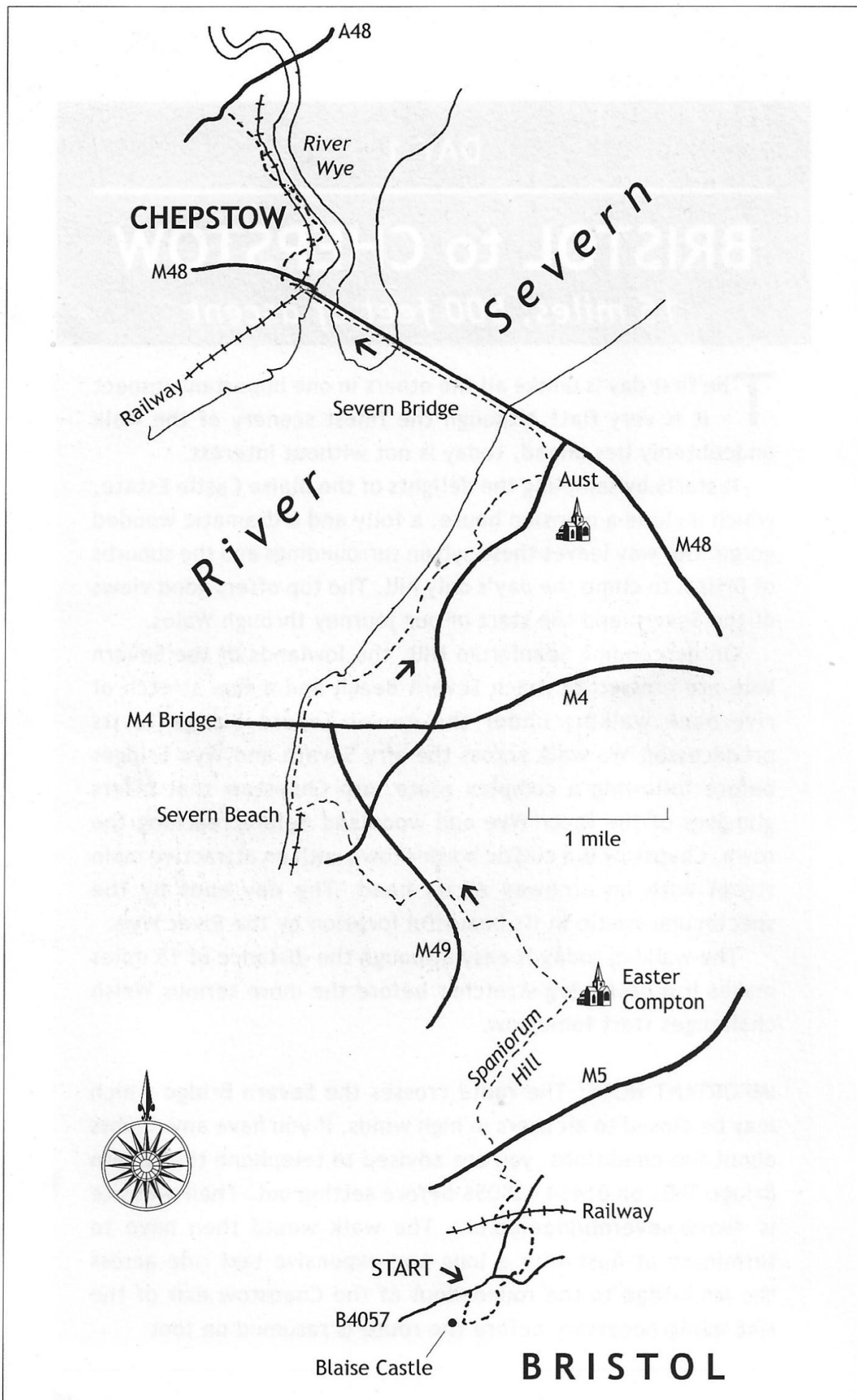
The first day is unlike all the others in one important respect - it is very flat! Although the finest scenery of the walk undoubtedly lies ahead, today is not without interest.

It starts by sampling the delights of the Blaise Castle Estate, which include a mansion house, a folly and a dramatic wooded gorge. Our way leaves these sylvan surroundings and the suburbs of Bristol to climb the day's only hill. The top offers good views of the Severn and the start of our journey through Wales.

On descending Spaniorum Hill, the lowlands of the Severn Vale are crossed to reach Severn Beach and a fine stretch of riverbank walking under the newer Severn Bridge to its predecessor. We walk across the airy Severn and Wye bridges before following a complex route into Chepstow that offers glimpses of the River Wye and woodland before reaching the town. Chepstow is a classic border town with an attractive main street with an archway at its head. The day ends by the spectacular castle in its beautiful location by the River Wye.

The walking today is easy although the distance of 15 miles makes it a useful leg stretcher before the more serious Welsh challenges start tomorrow.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The route crosses the Severn Bridge which may be closed to all users in high winds. If you have any doubts about the conditions, you are advised to telephone the Severn Bridge Tolls on 01454 635056 before setting out. Their website is <www.severnbridge.co.uk> The walk would then have to terminate at Aust with a long and expensive taxi ride across the M4 bridge to the roundabout at the Chepstow



Our route starts from the main Blaise Castle car park in Kings Weston Road. With a nod towards Wainwright's Coast to Coast we start by (deliberately) going in the wrong direction — away from Wales! Head across the grass towards the impressive woods while aiming half left and ensuring that you admire the views of the Mansion on your left.

The House, now a Folk Museum, was built in the 18th century. The Blaise Castle estate was bought by Bristol City Council for £20,000 in 1926 — possibly their best ever investment! The House was built between 1796 and 1798 for John Harford, a wealthy Bristol merchant and banker.



The wooded gorge in Blaise Castle estate

When you reach the woods, look for a gap in the trees. A path leads you into the trees and, following a right turn, climbs steadily. Follow this path; stepped in places, to the top of the climb where you reach a large clearing. Before you is Blaise Castle folly.

The folly was built in 1766 and the grounds of the estate were designed by Humphrey Repton. It is open on Sunday afternoons in the summer.



Blaise Castle

Our route takes us to the left of this architectural curiosity and heads for some railings from which spectacular views are gained of a deep wooded gorge. It is hard to remember that we are still within the city boundaries. Turning left at the railings, follow the stony path which descends gradually to the valley. Look out for a small grotto on your left as you lose height. At the bottom, turn right and follow the wider track to cross Hazel Brook by Stratford Mill.

Turn left and follow the streamside path, keeping Hazel Brook on your left. This section can be very muddy! You will reach a footbridge which you turn left to cross and then the path enters a tunnel. Readers who are as tall as the author will need to stoop as it would be a shame to suffer a head injury this early in the walk. At the end of the tunnel, steps are climbed to reach Henbury Church.

The attractive graveyard contains a new tombstone commemorating Scipio Africanus, a slave, who died at only 18 years of age. We share the Blaise Castle area with two other long distance footpaths. The Bristol Community Forest Path follows a 44 mile circuit around the city. The 18 mile Bristol Triangle path was inaugurated in 2001 by the Bristol Group of the Ramblers Association in partnership with Bristol City Council. The route showcases many of the city's historical and scenic attractions and is fully accessible by public transport. Either route would make a worthy curtain-raiser to our own walk for those with time and energy to spare.

Walk round the right hand edge of the churchyard until a walled metalled road leads you gently downhill on your right. Cross the road ahead just to this side of the ford and look out for a handsome stone stile and the waymarking for the Bristol Community Forest Path. Climb the stile and follow the narrow path through trees to reach a new footbridge over the infant River Trym. Cross this bridge and follow the path on the opposite bank, keeping the stream immediately to your left.

Cross the next footbridge and turn immediately right on grass to follow the line of the stream. On your left, a series of cul-de-sacs end as they meet the grass area. Take the last of these, Tratman Walk, bearing right into Marmion Crescent before meeting and crossing Station Road to a grassy area on the other side. On the far side of the grass is Greenlands Way, which immediately becomes Greenlands Road as it is followed leftward at first before bending right to reach a T-junction.

Go straight across and follow the footpath over a bridge that crosses the railway line. Climb the stile and turn right and keep following the right hand boundaries of four fields which abut a well maintained sports ground. You will reach a gate leading out on to a lane.

Turn left and follow the metalled lane which soon climbs through woodland. As it emerges from the trees, look right for a striking view of Filton Airfield, most famous for its associations with Concorde. The road now crosses the M5 on an elevated bridge. Immediately over the bridge and one yard after a KEEP OUT sign, turn right over the stile on your right and walk half-left across a field to a gate in the corner. If this is difficult in any way, continue along the road to take the next turning right to rejoin the main route.

Turn left for a few yards and turn right via a metal kissing gate onto another path which hugs the left-hand boundary of a large field and swings right with the field edge. Following the same line, you pass through a small area of woodland before emerging into a large field. You continue to follow the waymarks of the Bristol Community Forest Path, enjoying the extensive view opening up on your left. New kissing gates speed your progress. You should keep to the left for the best outlook. The two Severn Bridges dominate the view but our first extensive Welsh panorama serves to whet the appetite for the walk ahead.

Once the view on the left disappears, our route enters another large field. Ahead is an attractive view of woods, fields and, to the left, the village of Easter Compton. Keep to the left hand half and,

once you start to lose height, look for the exit stile at the bottom on your left. Keep to the right of the next field as it curves left and a stile leads you to another field which in turn admits you to an enclosed, waymarked path bounded by an orchard which leads you down to the lane at Compton Greenfield.

Turn right and then immediately left by a wall post-box. The path is enclosed at first but soon enters a field and heads for the tower of Easter Compton church via a second field.

Do not enter the churchyard, other than to see it (recommended) or to visit Easter Compton, but instead turn left to keep the church on your right and follow the road. Shortly after it becomes a cycle path and it should be followed for about two-thirds of a mile. As you approach the embankment of the motorway junction look out for a non-standard blue sign indicating that walkers should turn right, and follow that recommendation.

The path follows the right-hand boundary of two fields before swinging left to continue along the field boundary. You soon cross a footbridge to continue in the same direction on the other side of a small watercourse. Continue to follow the same line keeping the stream on your left, crossing further bridges, one of which has seen considerably better days.

At the end of this section you will see a small bank in front of you and a view of a road bridge to its left. A kissing gate admits you to this bank which you climb to reach the road. This short section can be very overgrown in summer.

Turn left to cross the road bridge over the M49 and continue to the roundabout at ST553835. Turn right to follow a well waymarked bridleway through a business park. Please don't worry — things do get better. The dull flat stretch is another common feature with the Coast to Coast, although ours is considerably shorter.

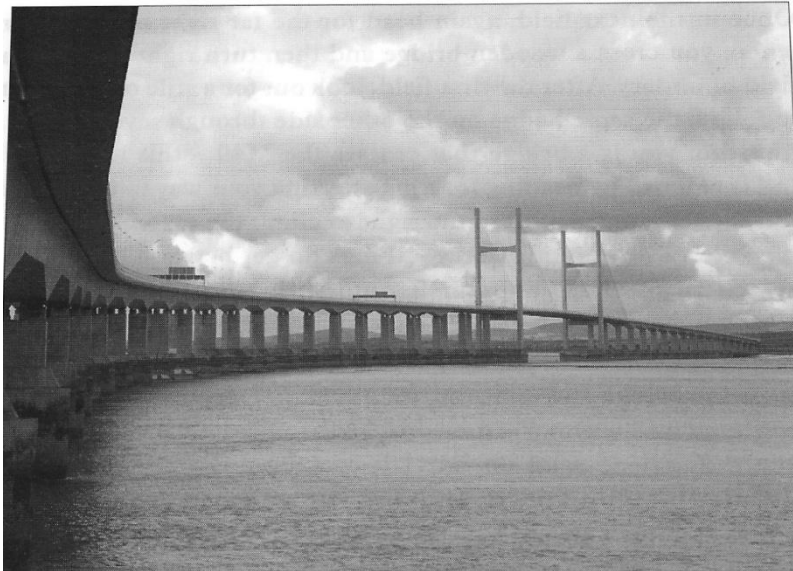
We keep the service road on our left to follow the clearly marked bridleway between trees and bushes. Although scarcely a highlight of the walk, some effort has gone into landscaping and our patience will be rewarded soon after crossing a side road when our route crosses an attractive artificial lake on a long wooden bridge. The path then turns left to cross the estate service road by a pedestrian crossing. Just over the road is another lake with ducks and bullrushes. Turn right along a green path which leads you to the light controlled crossing over the busy A403.

Follow the well maintained path ahead for half a mile before it swings left and enters Severn Beach. Turn left and follow the suburban road to a junction. Continue in the same direction (effectively left and then immediately right), passing the railway station on your left and climbing slightly to reach the walkway along the bank of the Severn Estuary.

Severn Beach was briefly a seaside resort which boasted attractions such as the Blue Lagoon swimming pool and the Beachcomber night club. Its heyday as a tourist attraction and nightspot has long passed — even the pub has gone now!

We are now at the start (or finish) of a much longer path, the Severn Way.

Also the path from here to Aust is part of the King Charles English Coast Path



The new Severn Bridge from the path

This new long distance path extends for 210 miles along Britain's longest river. It heads upstream to Gloucester, Worcester, Shrewsbury and Welshpool before reaching the wild Welsh hills where this great river rises.

Those suffering from navigation fatigue will welcome the next stretch which follows the Severn Way along a concrete path, passing under the newer Severn Bridge to reach a group of houses at New Passage.

The old Aust Ferry embarked on its crossing to Wales from here. The last sailing was in 1966 the day before the opening of the Severn Bridge. There is an iconic photograph of Bob Dylan at the ferry — had he been able to follow our route across the Severn Bridge he may well have found that his answer was blowing in the wind!

A strategically placed seat offers fine views of our next objective — the original Severn Bridge.

The Second Severn Crossing was opened in 1996 and is now used by the majority of vehicles crossing the river. While not as graceful as its predecessor, its advantages become apparent to drivers when the wind picks up! There is no pedestrian route across the bridge.

On leaving the concrete section, cross the end of the road and continue along a grass bank. The way is through the Pilning Wetlands, a partially flooded area which attracts migrant and wintering birds.

The path follows the raised grassy bank for approximately a mile and a half and the Severn Bridge appears somewhat stubborn in remaining at the same distance away! Ornithologists may make some interesting sightings on the flood meadow to the left of the path. Eventually the right hand field edge takes a discernible turn to the right and our departure from the grassy bank is indicated by Severn Way signposting. Continue to follow the right hand boundary for approximately 400 yards to a stile leading onto a narrow road.

Turn left for 200 yards to a stile on the right. Ignore a sign directing Severn Way walkers along the road — our route is kinder to the feet! After three stiles in quick succession, it follows the right-hand field boundary and more stiles before climbing a bank. Turn right at the top and then

immediately left, keeping the next field boundary on your left. Follow the same line over the next two fields, observing the tower of Aust Church ahead. A stile brings you out onto the main A403.

The footpath alternative to the Severn Way has now reopened after a period of closure. (March 2024). It is likely to be closed again for flood prevention work and I am advised that alternative routes will be indicated on the ground when this happens.

Since the publication of the book this section has come up in the world and is now part of the England Coast Path.

An interesting detour to the village of Aust is available on the road to the right of the A403. According to the sign at the entrance to the village, the third millennium started in November 2000! The shady churchyard is a good spot for a rest. Even better is the Boar's Head, a beautiful old building, which is on the left hand side further into Aust. Steps must be retraced to return to the point of departure for the detour.

Assuming you ignored the detour, turn left from the stile to follow the A403 and after 150 yards turn left on to a minor road. Take the first road on the right and follow it until you see the line of toll booths on the motorway. Our crossing is free! Do not cross the bridge over the toll booths but follow the road as it swings left to join the pedestrian and cyclists' route across the Severn and Wye Bridges, keeping the carriageway to your right. Take your mind off navigating for the next couple of miles and enjoy the views back along the English coast and forward to Wales.

The Severn Bridge was opened in September 1966 and I can remember a family walk across it the day after the opening ceremony performed by the Queen. The bridge took five years to build and is 5,240 feet long with towers 445 feet high. It is now a Grade 1 listed building.



The original Severn Bridge viewed from Chepstow

At the end of the Severn Bridge you pass over the army base at Beachley with its well maintained playing fields. You are now taking your last steps above Gloucestershire soil. Contrary to popular belief it is the Wye Bridge that crosses the boundary between England and Wales. It's a special moment for us as we anticipate the next five days walking in glorious Welsh scenery.

You reach the end of the Wye Bridge parallel to the exit signs denoting the Chepstow junction of the M48 for drivers. The path descends gradually before turning right to pass through a tunnel under the motorway.

When back out in the daylight, follow the Coast Path along the road straight ahead (Caerwent Lane). However if you're hungry or thirsty you can turn left to a roundabout on which can be found a supermarket and a chip shop. Then return to Caerwent Lane.

To our left is the residential area of Bulwark. The village was originally built to house workers at the new National Shipyard in Chepstow during the First World War.

Continue in the same direction and carry on climbing past the turning of Middle Way until you reach a T-junction. Turn left for 50 yards and then right along an unmarked footpath. After passing between two houses (number 31 and Little Gables) it widens at a garage area where there is a green open space to your right. The path continues in the same direction and becomes enclosed as you pass through a factory. It then continues to remain tightly confined — probably to our advantage as there is a very steep drop to our right. The quarry cliffs may be seen clearly during the winter.

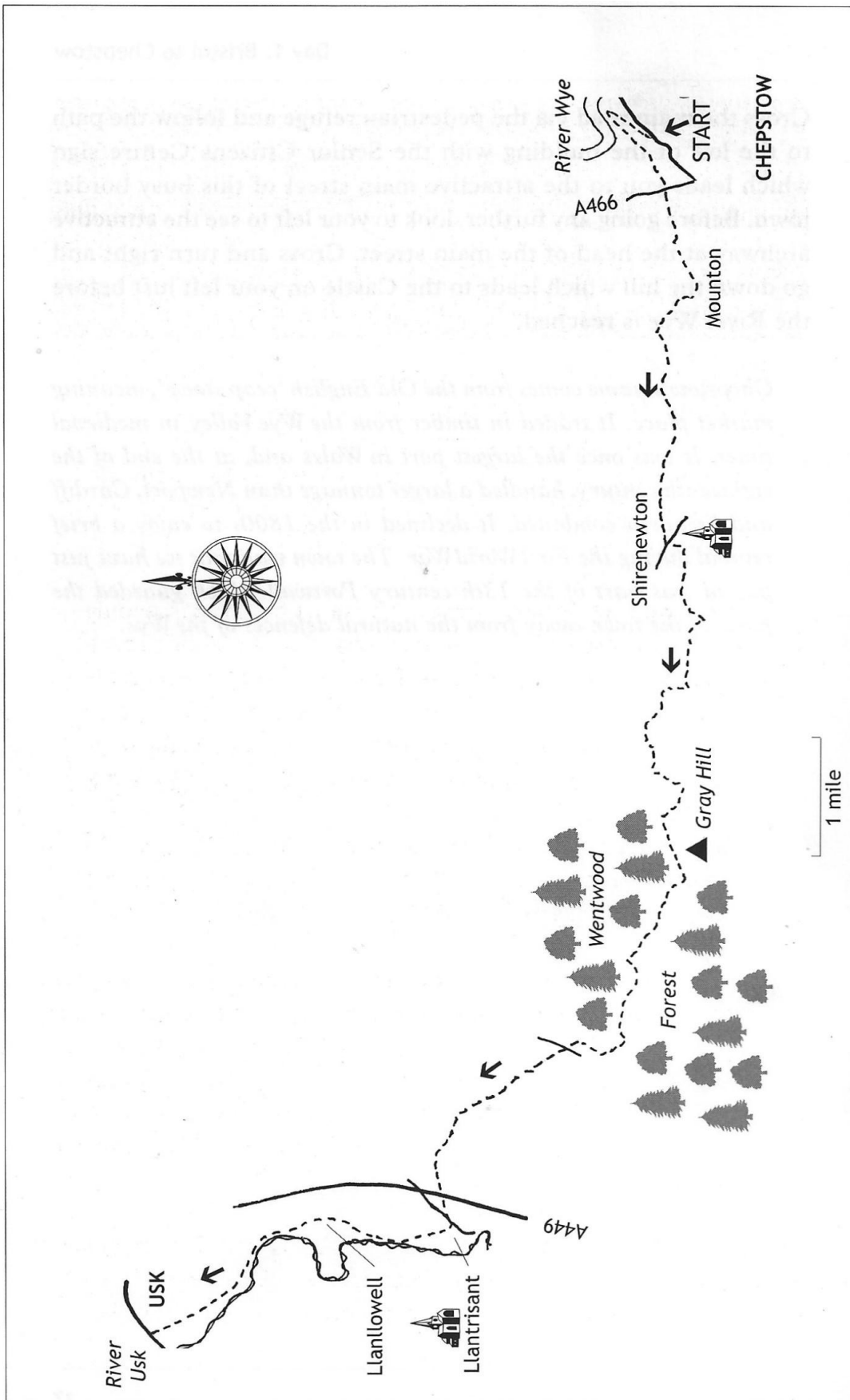
We soon emerge into woodland and follow a recently metalled path which leads into Wye Crescent. Continue to the end and turn left into Hardwick Road. Follow this road as it bends right and then left to reveal a section of the remains of Chepstow Town Walls.



Chepstow Castle at the end of Day 1

Cross the main road via the pedestrian refuge and follow the path to the left of the building with the Senior Citizens Centre sign which leads you to the attractive main street of this busy border town. Before going any further, look to your left to see the attractive archway at the head of the main street. Cross and turn right and go down the hill which leads to the Castle on your left just before the River Wye is reached.

Chepstow's name comes from the Old English 'ceap stowe', meaning market place. It traded in timber from the Wye Valley in medieval times. It was once the largest port in Wales and, at the end of the eighteenth century, handled a larger tonnage than Newport, Cardiff and Swansea combined. It declined in the 1800s to enjoy a brief revival during the First World War. The town wall that we have just passed was part of the 13th century Portwall which guarded the parts of the town away from the natural defences of the Wye.



DAY 2
CHEPSTOW to USK
15 miles; 2,000 feet of ascent

As there are no shops along this section make sure that you carry adequate provisions for the walk from Chepstow to Usk.

I strongly advise you to carry both OL 14 and Explorer 152 maps to aid navigation.

Day 2 is a varied and undulating walk that takes us ever closer to the hill country that we encounter at lunchtime tomorrow. We start by climbing from Chepstow Castle and following quiet lanes and field paths to Shirenewton. Soon our route descends into the beautiful valley of Castrogri Brook before climbing steeply on to Gray Hill, an isolated top that offers fine views back across the Severn.

Next we walk through Wentwood Forest before descending from the highest point to reach the edge of the woods and a wonderful view of the Blorenge ridge. Our route now takes us through undulating farmland and woods before descending to the Usk at Llantrisant. This section has its navigational complexities and should not be hurried. Finally we follow the river to Usk itself.

Short sections of this walk do become very overgrown in high summer and a walking pole or stick may help to carry out a little footpath clearance work!

Chepstow Castle itself was built by the Normans and has four courtyards and a 40 foot high keep. Building started in 1067 and it was massively fortified in the 12th century. During its turbulent history it changed hands many times until its last brush with action during the Civil War when it was held by the Royalists until 1645, and subsequently besieged again before falling under Parliamentary control. It ceased to be an active garrison in 1690.

Day 2 starts from the car park below the Castle and briefly makes acquaintance with another long distance route, the Wye Valley Walk. Follow the signposted route to climb a metalled path to the left of the Castle. It gently ascends through a park, 'The Dell', to reach the road.

The Wye Valley Walk links Chepstow with Plynlimon and passes through Monmouth and Hereford during its 136 mile journey. We only share about a quarter of a mile! Chepstow is a superb walking centre — across the bridge from the castle lie the splendours of the magnificent Offa's Dyke Walk and the attractive Gloucestershire Way.

Bid farewell to the Wye Valley Walk and go straight across into St Kingsmark Avenue and after 200 yards first left into Deans Hill. Look out for some steps on the right which climb to meet Meadow Lane where you turn right. You continue to climb and soon pass the Community Hospital on your right.

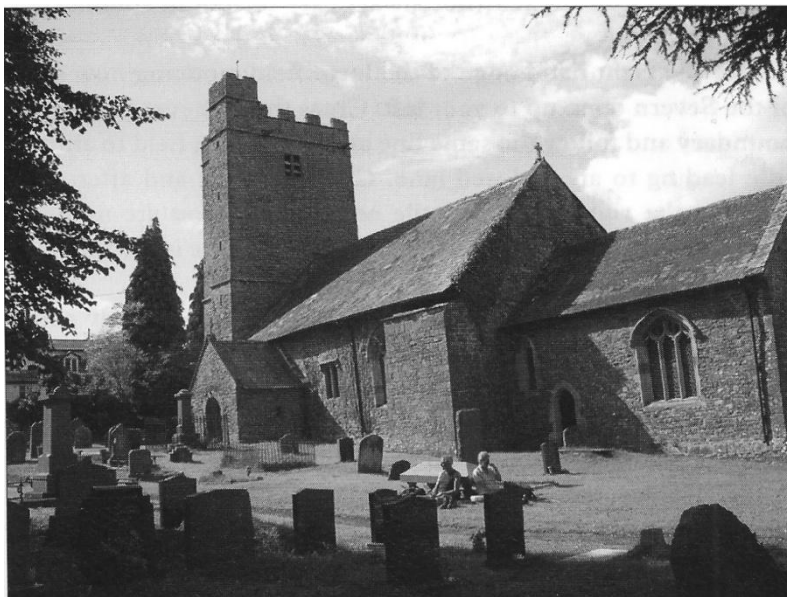
Shortly after you reach the busy A466 which should be crossed with care before following the lane opposite as it goes gradually downhill. Carry on to the point where the second turning from the left joins our road, the junction being marked by a grassy triangle. Continue for 80 yards more and two public footpaths leave the road to the right. ‘

Take the left hand one and follow it across a field to a stile slightly to the right of centre. In the next field follow the right hand boundary to a stile in the far right corner. The path now descends steeply, initially through woodland and then crosses a double stile to the right of a house. Once over the

second stile, turn left, keeping the house on your left. Cross the drive via further stiles and follow the same line up the field to a stile which leads on to a narrow lane.

Turn right for no more than 50 yards and turn right on to another lane. This bends left to join a charming valley, crosses the stream and then continues past a house set back from the road to the left. Turn left where indicated by the footpath sign for Shirenewton, immediately before the entrance to Lady Mill, and climb steadily into the woods passing the house on your left. The path swings right and joins a fence on the right which is then followed. As you near the top of the climb, the path becomes less clear. There are some farm buildings ahead and the route goes immediately to the left of them to reach another road. Turn right to commence the long but easy walk to Shirenewton on this lane.

Shirenewton was founded in around 1100 by the Sheriff of Gloucester. Its name derives from Sheriff's New Tun — the word tun meaning homestead.



Shirenewton church — a perfect place for a rest.

The village boasts two pubs, both of which are passed (or not!). Turn left to ascend a hill and head left again when the road divides to emerge opposite the churchyard. Climb the steps and enter the gate and follow the path past the main door of this attractive church to exit on the opposite side. Turn right and then immediately left. A public footpath leaves at once on the left via an awkward stile. Follow the left hand side of the field and veer slightly to the right to a stile in the bottom boundary which leads you to a lane.

Turn right on to the road and, after 300 yards, turn right where the lane divides. Follow this track for about half a mile, passing a large property, Cayo Farm, on your right followed by a modern house on the same side of the road. 200 yards past this, look out for an enclosed path leading up from the right of the road. Follow this for about 150 yards but keep your eyes peeled for a stile in the boundary on the left (not always easy to spot in summer).

Follow the right hand edge of the large field, noticing how views of the Severn open up to your left. Cross the stile just in from the boundary and follow the same line across the next field to another stile leading to an enclosed lane. Cross the lane and after a few paces to the right, take the stile on your left. You are now in a large sloping field

Pass a wind turbine which you keep on your left. Go straight across the field towards a gate in the far boundary. Do not cross the gate but instead turn left and follow the field boundary downhill for 200 yards to reach the gate which admits you to woodland. The deciduous wood is very attractive and the well-graded path is charming.

At the bottom of the path, turn right along a narrow metalled road which leads through the pretty wooded valley of Castrogi Brook. The road bends to the left and soon crosses the stream on a humpbacked bridge. Take the signposted footpath on your left. Initially head half-left to pass through a gap. Now walk half-right into what soon becomes a much bigger field. Keep following the same line as you climb steeply towards a line of trees at the top. About half way along the top boundary of the field there is a gate. Pass through it to continue the ascent until you reach a stile which you climb. Turn right and follow the right-hand edge of the field to reach another stile. This leads you into a larger field and a waymark post soon directs you to head slightly left to reach the field boundary. Continue to the top of the field to climb a stile. Now continue uphill on the right-hand side of the field to reach the edge of woodland. The gate ahead used to be the entrance of this wood but the path has been diverted. Turn left to follow the fence for about 200 yards and you will see a stone stile. Cross it and follow the obvious path in front of you.

Follow the path ahead as it continues the climb, less steeply now, through attractive woods. It comes out at a path junction where you should ignore the first path on your left. Ahead, a few yards after the first junction, a path descends by a large stone. Ignore this — we're certainly not going to waste all this effort before enjoying the fruits of our labours!

Turn left and follow the main and distinct path as it crosses the plateau at the summit of Gray Hill for about half a mile. Ahead are the coniferous forests of Wentwood, the next stage of our route. To our left are extensive views of the Bristol Channel. The view of the two Severn Bridges reminds us how long ago it already seems since we crossed into Wales. Finally we reach the summit, at 896 feet, the highest point of the route to date. Enjoy the views down to the Wentwood reservoir. On a fine day, the summit makes a good lunch stop. We've covered half the distance for today and done most of the hard work!



Looking towards Wentwood Reservoir from the slopes of Gray Hill

When you're ready to move, there is a choice of descents. The main path heads down from the summit and gives good views of the reservoir although its grooved nature makes it more difficult to walk on. Alternatively, an obvious path descends the hill steeply to the right of the summit in a

north westerly direction with the reservoir on your left. It deflects to the left on meeting a boundary to descend through a gully which in turn joins the main path where you turn right. A track joins the path from the left at the bottom of the hill and the combined route passes a couple of large houses on the left and the edge of the large coniferous plantation on the right. After a quarter of a mile you reach the road to turn right. Opposite is the Foresters' Oaks car park which boasts picnic tables and toilets. The former should only be used by those who have not already lunched at the top of the hill!

An information board at the entrance to the car park tells you the history of the forest which now occupies some 4 square miles. It was formerly much bigger, stretching from the Usk to the Wye, but was heavily in demand for timber to help with various war efforts right up to the twentieth century. It has been replanted with softwoods as they grow faster but it is to be hoped that the woods will be used for less bellicose reasons in future. The car park is also on the site of the former gibbet, last used in 1829 to hang a sheep-stealer. The forest is apparently the home to 75 species of birds and 23 species of butterflies, not forgetting otters, dormice and bats. Alas I cannot personally confirm this diversity of wildlife!

Our arrival in Wentwood heralds some of the most challenging navigation of the whole walk. I have always maintained that forest walking is one of the hardest to successfully find your way around and this is no exception. There have been several changes since the book was published in 2008 and here is an update of the route. I cannot guarantee that it will not change again and I wish you good luck!

Follow the road for about 600 yards north as it climbs gently through the forest. Beyond Forester's House you will be walking parallel to a pull-in with picnic tables on your right. Stay on the road until you reach the Cadira Beeches car park on your right. A footpath to the left of the road can be followed for much of the way to reduce the amount of road walking.

Turn left opposite the entrance to the car park. Follow the wide track ignoring a turning to the right after about 200 yards. In just under half a mile you will see a barrier in front of you with a picnic area in a clearing behind it. Turn right before the barrier to follow the same track to a minor road. Cross the road and pass the barrier leading to a forest track.

Those wishing to visit the transmitter tower and the trig point beyond it should turn left. Really dedicated peak baggers will find a trig point some 200 yards further on in the woods on the left. The spot height of 1,015 is our highest yet. Then retrace your steps to barrier where you entered the forest. I cannot recommend this detour.

In about 50 yards you will see a narrow path on your right to descend a narrow straight path through conifers. The surface of the path is a distinctive mossy green. Go straight ahead when you meet a crossing track to continue the gentle descent to the edge of the wood where a wonderful sight awaits — tomorrow's hills! Clearly visible is the Mynydd Garn wen ridge with Bloreng on the right and notice of an impending change in character of the walk.

Turn right thereby keeping fields on your left and the forest on your right. The path eventually emerges on to a minor road. Turn left and follow the road left for 50 yards to a junction. Ahead of you a gate in the hedge leads you across a field to the road in front of Glebe Farm.

Another footpath is indicated immediately to the left of the house. Follow the right hand boundary of the field to the bottom right hand corner, admiring the distant views of the hills. A footpath is indicated to the right — ignore this and go through the gate that faces you and descend through woodland and overgrown vegetation to eventually exit on to a road. This footpath can be difficult to

follow — keep to the left and keep going down is the best plan. You should pass immediately to the right of a ruined building as you descend.

Turn left on the road. You will soon pass a turning on your right where you will see a small chapel. There is a seat in the churchyard which is the perfect place for a break and an opportunity to enjoy the view of the hills ahead. Then return to the road you were on, turn right and follow it downhill.

Turn right and walk downhill for 400 yards while enjoying views ahead of Bloreng, Sugar Loaf and Skirrid. Opposite a turning on the right are the buildings of Ysguborwen Farm. Turn left from the road to follow the enclosed track which runs between the buildings. This soon bends right and is followed until it bends sharply left.

A gate straight ahead (ignore the right-hand gate) leads you into a field where the right hand boundary is followed to a stile and, similarly, the same edge of the next field leads you to another stile. The next field leads you downhill as ever improving views of the Usk Valley open up before you. After 400 yards a stile, just before the bottom of the field, a stile in the right hand boundary is climbed and the walk is continued on the other side of the hedge to a stile facing you at the bottom of the field. A further field is descended to reach a double stile immediately to the left of a recently completed white house and to the right of a new stone building. Note the Usk Valley walk waymarking and walk between the buildings to a stile opposite you. Follow a similar line in the next field and look for a stile on the right. You descend to cross the track which services the house and follow the path opposite which leads to another stile.

You are now in a large field at the bottom of which can be seen the A449 dual carriageway. Walk half left and you will see a gate leading to a tunnel under the road embankment. Walk through it to emerge into the attractive village of Llantrisant. Its lovely church, large graveyard and lych-gate make a peaceful spot for a tea stop. Peaceful, that is, apart from the continuous hum of traffic from the main road.

Walk through the churchyard to exit by a gate at the opposite end. Walk down the road, noting the large house on your right that used to be a pub, the Royal Oak. Unfortunately “time” has been called for ever. On reaching the road junction turn right and immediately look for a stile in the opposite hedgerow indicating the Usk Valley Walk. Our route shares that of this established river path for most of the remainder of today and the first part of tomorrow.

The Usk Valley walk links Caerleon with Brecon. You can always do it another day but please stay faithful to our own journey. Its 48 mile route closely follows the river which is well known for its salmon and trout.

Follow the waymarking through parts of three fields to reach a stile which admits you to a larger field where there is a large pumping station to the left. Head for a stile in the far left corner, adjacent to the river. Our way continues straight ahead into a series of fields. Initially the Usk is immediately on our left but after half a mile or so, as the river meanders to the left, our path swings slightly to the right to follow a tributary and to eventually reach a stile before a short wooded section. A short climb ensues to another stile where you turn left to descend a track to the road.



A gentle stroll by the river near Usk

The Usk Valley Way route goes left along the road and if you're desperate to reach Usk in a hurry, this is the way to go. The downside is a sizable chunk of road walking. To avoid this, turn right for 200 yards, passing a chapel on the right. Take the next left (signposted Usk Valley Walk Flood Route!) and climb this high hedged lane. At the crest of the hill after half a mile and immediately after farm buildings, take the signposted footpath to the left. Keep to the left of the field before a short descent half- left leads you to a track descending through trees. This swings right to cross a stream and the path keeps just to the right of a hedge to meet the road.

Turn right to walk along the road for half a mile — take care this is a busy stretch. You are now reunited with those who followed the above road walking option. Look out for the Usk Valley Walk signpost at a gate on the left. This comes shortly after the road crosses a stream. A concrete farm building just inside the gate is a useful marker. Go half-right across the field and climb the embankment for an all too brief walk alongside the river.

It's such a pity that the right of way does not run along the earlier stretch of embankment as the water is particularly attractive here. Your way will soon be barred by a gate and you should descend the bank to the right and walk away from the river until you reach a stile in the boundary ahead. Cross this to reach the well- appointed Usk cricket ground.

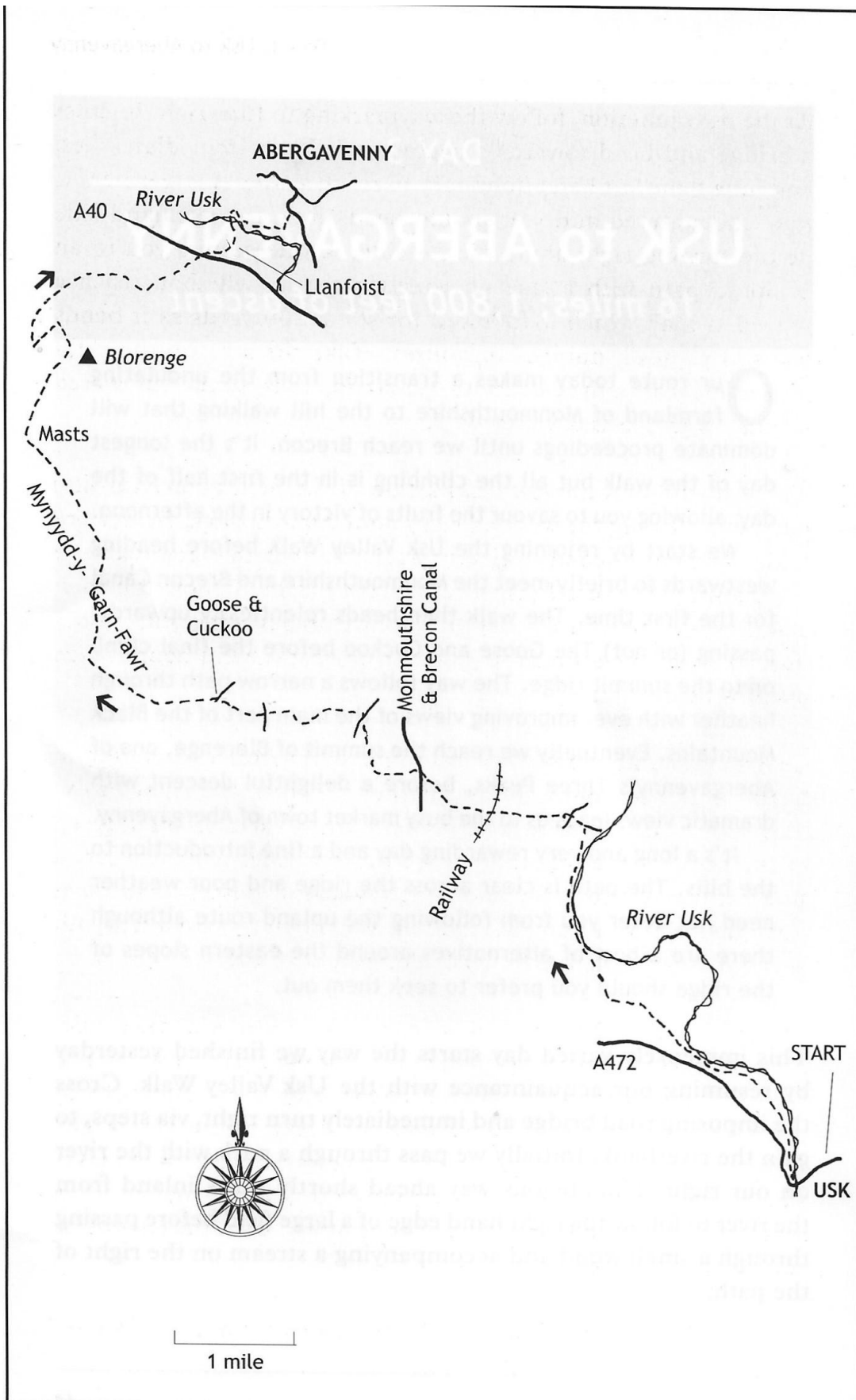
The cricket ground was unexpectedly part of a legal dispute about the status of Usk. The cricket team had reached the quarter finals of the National Village Cricket Cup when their opponents questioned their village status. The court ruled that Usk was a town and the team were removed from the competition. Make up your own mind but a road sign welcomes you to the historic market town of Usk!

Keep to the left of the field and leave in the left hand corner to join a suburban road which is followed to a junction. Turn left and then right to reach the attractive old part of Usk. Look out for the Museum of Rural Life on your right. Eventually this road brings you out right by the bridge over the Usk and the end of a very varied day.



Clock tower in Usk

Usk was the site of the former Roman legionary fort of Burrium between AD55 and 75. The 11th century castle was built by the Normans but was believed to be in ruins by the 16th century. It was purchased by the Duke of Beaufort in 1750. Usk also boasts an interesting Museum of Rural Life which is passed on the very last stretch of today's walk. Usk has excellent accommodation, food, drink and shopping opportunities and is a well-appointed overnight stop.



DAY 3
USK to ABERGAVENNY
16 miles; 1,800 feet of ascent

Our route today makes a transition from the undulating farmland of Monmouthshire to the hill walking that will dominate proceedings until we reach Brecon. It's the longest day of the walk but all the climbing is in the first half of the day, allowing you to savour the fruits of victory in the afternoon.

We start by rejoining the Usk Valley Walk before heading westwards to briefly meet the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal for the first time. The walk then heads relentlessly upwards, passing (or not) The Goose and Cuckoo before the final climb on to the summit ridge. The way follows a narrow path through heather with ever improving views of the main part of the Black Mountains. Eventually we reach the summit of Bloreng, one of Abergavenny's Three Peaks, before a delightful descent with dramatic views leads us to the busy market town of Abergavenny.

It's a long and very rewarding day and a fine introduction to the hills. The path is clear across the ridge and poor weather need not deter you from following the upland route although there are a host of alternatives around the eastern slopes of the ridge should you prefer to seek them out.

This immensely varied day starts the way we finished yesterday by resuming our acquaintance with the Usk Valley Walk. Cross the imposing road bridge and immediately turn right, via steps, to gain the riverbank. Initially we pass through a park with the river on our right. The obvious way ahead shortly turns inland from the river to follow the right hand edge of a large field before passing through a small wood and accompanying a stream on the right of the path.

At the next junction, follow the waymarking to turn right to cross a bridge and head towards a rugby pitch. Turn immediately left and follow the left hand boundary to reach a stile. A larger field is how encountered and you should head along the left hand side before turning right along the far side. A stile admits you to an enclosed path with a lake on your right. You will soon reach a gravelled road which is followed for some 200 yards as it bends left and passes a number of houses. Take the stile on the right immediately after the electricity sub-station to continue our shared journey with the Usk Valley Walk.

The track follows the right hand side of the field before turning left and following the wooded right boundary through three more fields. It then descends a grassy track to reach the lane with the large house of Great Estavarny on your right. Follow the road ahead as it climbs for a short distance before levelling out. After a quarter of a mile a finger signpost in the right hand hedge leads us into the next stage.

Cross a stile and climb half-left up the field before descending to a stile in the bottom left-hand corner. Keep to the right of the next field before entering a larger field with a small hill in it. Keep to the right of the hill and, in the bottom right-hand corner, a stile admits you to woodland. The track now descends to meet path junction by a pumping station. Follow the waymarked path ahead to enjoy a delightful walk alongside the Usk.

After just over half a mile and on leaving a wooded area via a stile, the path enters a very large field and soon veers gradually away to the left, heading towards a house. The stile by this property leads you to a minor road. Here we take our leave of the Usk Valley Walk. Just to your right is the chain bridge which carries the Usk- Abergavenny road. Resist all temptation to join it — our route is much better. Instead turn left and continue to a crossroads where you go straight over.

After about another half a mile of level road walking, a track goes off to the left as the road bends right. Follow this to the entrance of Mill Farm, ignoring the first path on your left. Take the path that leads you to the left of the farm buildings and keep them immediately on your right and head for a stile straight ahead. Continue across the next field to an amazing bridge stile — its design is best admired in profile. Keep to the right to a double scenic highlight — a sewage farm on your right and a railway bridge. Once under the bridge, leave the track to follow a field path to a stile in the far right hand corner which leads you on to a road. Cross the road and turn right for 30 yards and take the footpath on your left which leads into a wood.

The next section requires careful attention. The first path shortly reaches a T-junction where you turn left. After only 25 yards turn right on to a narrow but distinct path. This new path soon reaches a clearing in the trees. The path widens and has a stony surface. 120 yards after this clearing, a thin straight path between particularly tall trees is followed diagonally to your right. Follow this as it proceeds in a straight line to the edge of the plantation. Cross the stile and follow the same line to the next field. Head for the stile in the boundary that abuts the main road, about 100 yards from the right hand corner. The bus shelter on the road provides a useful marker.

Take care crossing the busy main road and climb the stile on the other side. Continue on the same line through the next field to head for a gate where you turn left along a lane. Almost immediately a small parking area and picnic site is met on the right and you turn right into the attractive forest. The obvious path leads you to the right of the plantation, passing some impressive redwoods, and all too soon a gate leads you out on to a track to your right. Turn left and follow this obvious path, eventually going through a gate and reaching the foot of the canal embankment. Turn right just before the track continues under the canal and climb a short incline.

The canal was built between 1797 and 1812 to provide a link between Brecon and the Bristol Channel. Stone and processed lime were sent by barge to Newport. The canal has acquired a new lease of life due to leisure and holiday barges. It also forms the boundary of the 519 square mile Brecon Beacons National Park (Bannau Brycheiniog). With the exception of a short section through Abergavenny we remain within the Park's borders for the next three and a half days. Across the canal can be seen the Goytre canal centre and the whole stretch of water is populated by enthusiasts messing around on barges.



The Monmouthshire & Brecon canal at Goytre Wharf

Our first meeting with the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal is a very colourful one as there are usually many brightly painted boats moored here. Across the canal is a marina and this stretch can be buzzing with activity. We continue along the right hand bank of the canal for about 400 yards before crossing a stone bridge, number 75.

Once over, take the stile immediately on your right to follow a field path which runs close to the canal, this time the water being on your right. The path heads through a small gap between some farm buildings and the canal. In the next field, climb half-left to a stile in the top hedge just to the left of some houses. Climb this and turn right to follow the lane for 30 yards to a T-junction.

Turn left and follow the narrow, hedged lane as it gradually climbs for the next half mile. At the next junction turn right and climb sharply on the road. A 'Goose' sign directs drivers to the pub. After 400 yards of this road, look out for the footpath sign 'Goose and Cuckoo' on your left. The quoted 1km distance to the pub must be the most optimistic signpost in South Wales! Prepare yourself for hard work. A steep field path follows the left hand boundary for the first two fields.



Skirrid viewed from the climb to the Goose and Cuckoo

At the top of the second field, swing right and follow the top hedge without leaving this field. A waymark arrow on a post indicates the way left and the next field's steep gradient is climbed slightly to the left to reach the corner of land belonging to the house ahead. Do not be tempted by the stile slightly to the left of this corner which is private but instead turn right and keep to the right of the fence to reach a stile which admits you on to a sunken track.

Turn left to climb for 50 yards before taking a footpath on your right which climbs on the left of a field to reach woodland. The gradient now steepens as the same line is followed through the trees to a junction with a major track. Turn right and follow the undulating track all the way to its junction with a metalled road. Turn left and see if you can resist the temptation of a stop at the wonderful Goose and Cuckoo. This charming pub is the perfect lunchtime halt and enjoys extensive views over a beautiful valley.



The Goose & Cuckoo — can you resist a stop?

Once you've torn yourself away, continue the climb to the road ahead. A gate ahead of you leads you on to a rough ascending track. Ignore the right hand path from the end of the road. Continue to climb until you reach a major junction with broad forest tracks.

Go straight across the path junction and continue the climb on a stony path. You will eventually reach a wall and access to the open hill. Continue in the same direction to meet a crossing path on to which you turn right. Keep the woodland on your right and you will pass close to the 425 and 404 spot heights. You will reach a road.

Turn left on to the road and climb gently for 500 yards. As the road bends to the left and starts to descend, a signposted path on the right is followed. From this point on clear days can be seen the Brecon Beacons. You may not want to reflect that they are still three days away! The narrow but clear path leads across the plateau of Mynydd y Garn-Fawr for about two miles, steadily but almost imperceptibly gaining height. There are numerous waymark posts to reassure you. The path can be muddy and peaty in places, and is in need of improvement, but will lead you unerringly to a transmitter by the side of another unenclosed road. After the complexities of the earlier navigation you may welcome a stretch where there should be no need to refer to map or book!

Cross the minor road and pick up an obvious broad track. Before you head for the summit of Bloreng, go through the car park on your left and follow the path for 100 yards to see the memorial to Foxhunter. This show jumping horse was ridden to a gold medal at the 1952 Olympics at Helsinki by Colonel Harry Llewellyn. Then cut across to the right to join the path to the summit.

In conditions of poor visibility you may prefer to turn left along the road, turning right along the verge of the main road between Blaenavon and Abergavenny. Take the next right to reach the old forge pond. Keep to the left of the pond to join a grassy path contouring with the summit of Bloreng on your right. A finger-post indicates a path descending diagonally to the left — this picks up the main route from the point that the sharp right turn is described below.

The track leads you directly to the summit of Bloreng, one of Abergavenny's three peaks and the highest point of the walk so far at 1883 feet. The first of the two summits is marginally the higher. The views are extensive, particularly to the north where Sugar Loaf and tomorrow's walk are much in evidence. On a clear day, a glance to the west will reveal the summit of Pen y fan and the climax of our great adventure.



Sugar Loaf from the summit of Bloreng

Dispel all thoughts of the future as we have some more complex navigation to accomplish. From the summit head northwest to descend over rough ground to reach a contouring track. In the bracken season it is easiest to follow a faint trod that descends from the summit to meet the contouring path. Turn left but keep your eyes peeled for a narrower path on the right which turns back on you. A post bearing a white arrow onwards is your marker and you turn right at an acute angle to your original line. It is about 450 yards from the point where the trod joins the path. This is the point where users of the alternative route rejoin the main walk. This is followed for half a mile to its junction with another contouring path. It is a beautiful descent with panoramic views of Sugar Loaf, the Crickhowell Horseshoe and the Usk Valley. A useful navigational marker is a plantation ahead which turns out to be by the next path junction.

All too soon the crossing path is reached where you turn right and then almost immediately left (within 25 yards) and follow a path 49 The Bristol to Brecon Walk which follows the bottom of the open ground, keeping the woods immediately to your left. A stile is crossed and the path follows the same line to a second fence. Our route now heads across the middle of a field, passing a clump of trees. For much of the year this is an easy path to follow but things are more difficult when the bracken is much in evidence.

Keep following the left hand boundary to descend gently through deciduous woodland for a short distance before another stile admits us into a long field. Follow the path that contours through this field for a further 400 yards where bracken can again be an obstacle to progress. At the next stile, turn right and follow a field path just above the far field boundary, admiring the beautiful views on your left.

Another stile is reached and we keep to the left of the next field, starting to lose height, to reach the top of our steep descent through woods. A signpost indicates the way to Llanfoist. The way down is obvious, steep and attractive and continues to follow the same line after crossing a muddy track. A steep sided valley brings us down to a gate and a view of the canal. It already seems a long time since we followed a stretch of it this morning!

The bed of the canal was once graced by cannon balls and shot. The ammunition was lowered down the slopes by tram and loaded on to barges during the Napoleonic wars. Not all the ammunition made it to the front line and met a watery end in the canal.

In case you're wondering how we're going to cross the canal, the answer is straight ahead in the form of a tunnel, the entrance of which is under the house in front of you. Do be careful, it's rough underfoot and there's not too much headroom. It may also take your eyes time to adjust to the darkness on a bright day. You emerge into the open alongside a stream and continue your descent along the good track. The stream on your right provides a good boot cleaning opportunity. After a quarter of a mile you reach Llanfoist church.

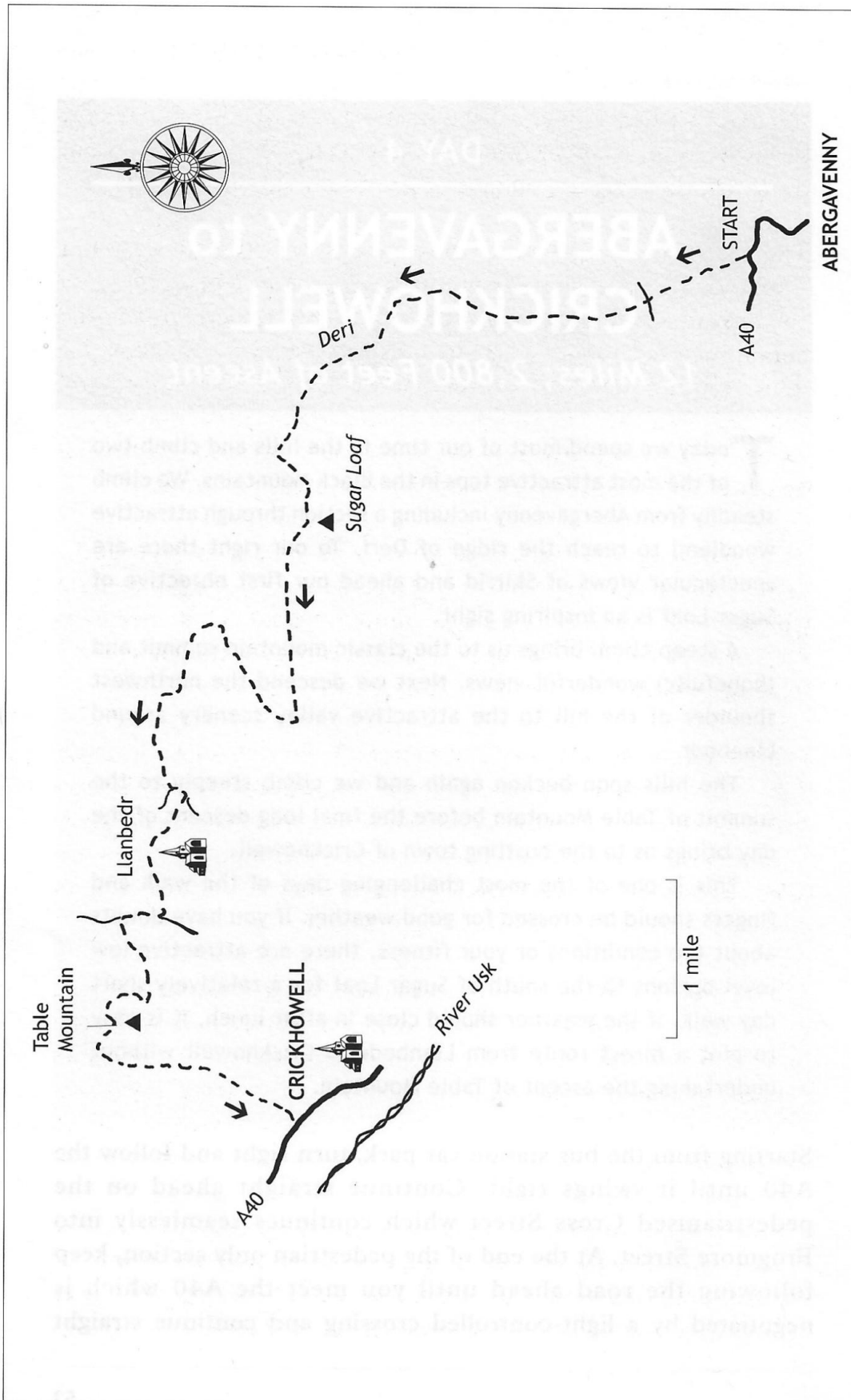
Keep the churchyard to your right as you descend to carefully cross a road and follow the path straight ahead. It passes a garden centre, continues under the main road* and, at the top of a short climb, swings right to pass a large cemetery on the right. The path is now a metalled road which descends to pass the main entrance to the cemetery to come out on the main road opposite the Bridge Inn. Cross the road with extreme care and turn left to cross the Usk and enter Abergavenny.

Immediately across the bridge turn right and follow the path alongside the Usk. To your left is the popular open space of Castle Meadows. Follow this path for about half a mile before a main path heads off on your left, heading for the castle.

Today you can only see the ruins of a 12th century castle. Fortunately Abergavenny is now a much more hospitable place than it was then. The Marcher Lord William de Braose invited Welsh Chieftain Sitsyllt Ap Dwfnwal to a feast at which the guests were murdered, having been tricked into leaving their weapons in the guardhouse.

Keep the castle immediately on your left as you follow a minor road to its junction with the main A40. Turn right on to follow the A40 to the bus station on your left with its adjacent car park. All you have to do now is to find your accommodation or transport and relax while you recall this long and hopefully rewarding day.

Abergavenny's origins date back to Roman times with the fort of Gobannium which was occupied between AD57 and 400. The Norman castle, the third of our walk, was built in 1087. It was destroyed in 1645 on the orders of King Charles I to prevent Cromwell's troops from using it. The town's fortunes not surprisingly suffered during the Black Death but revived in the 16th and 17th centuries as tanning and weaving flourished. Later links were established with the emerging iron and coal industries in South Wales. It is a bustling centre today and boasts a large cattle market every Tuesday. It also hosts a noted food festival every September.



DAY 4
ABERGAVENNY to CRICKHOWELL
12 Miles; 2,800 Feet of Ascent

Today we spend most of our time in the hills and climb two of the most attractive tops in the Black Mountains. We climb steadily from Abergavenny including a section through attractive woodland to reach the ridge of Deri. To our right there are spectacular views of Skirrid and ahead our first objective of Sugar Loaf is an inspiring sight.

A steep climb brings us to the classic mountain summit and (hopefully) wonderful views. Next we descend the northwest shoulder of the hill to the attractive valley scenery around Llanbedr.

The hills soon beckon again and we climb steeply to the summit of Table Mountain before the final long descent of the day brings us to the bustling town of Crickhowell.

This is one of the most challenging days of the walk and fingers should be crossed for good weather. If you have doubts about the conditions or your fitness, there are attractive low level options to the south of Sugar Loaf for a relatively short day walk. If the weather should close in after lunch, it is easy to plot a direct route from Llanbedr to Crickhowell without undertaking the ascent of Table Mountain.

Starting from the bus station car park, turn right and follow the A40 until it swings right. Continue straight ahead on the pedestrianised Cross Street which continues seamlessly into Frogmore Street. At the end of the pedestrian only section, keep following the road ahead until you meet the A40 which is negotiated by a light-controlled crossing and continue straight 53: Day 4: Abergavenny to Crickhowell ahead into Pen y Pound. At the next set of traffic lights, take the second turning and continue to follow Pen y Pound in the same direction, ignoring the turning of Avenue Road on your left.

The road passes the ground of the wonderfully named Abergavenny Thursdays FC and starts to climb. At the top of Pen y Pound we emerge into open country. Go straight over at the crossroads and obtain relief from the tarmac by crossing the stile and follow the right hand boundary of two fields. The road is immediately on your right but this way should be kinder to your feet! You have to return to the road which bends to the right and then to the left before climbing attractively with woodland to your right.

The road head is reached at a property called Sunny View and a gate by the National Trust sign 'Deri' leads to an obvious path which leads steadily through deciduous woodland. It becomes sunken in places. Follow the path all the way up until you emerge from the woods near the summit of Deri.

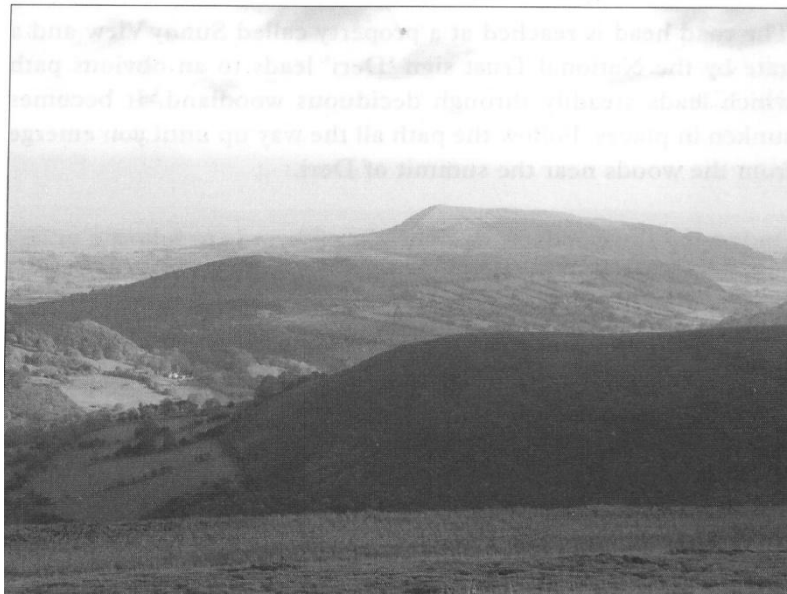
On leaving the woods, turn right after 50 yards to follow a grassy path which leads to the main ridge. A magnificent view of Skirrid appears before you. Turn left and follow the ridge path northwards. The walking is effortless on this grassy path and the views are magnificent. To your right are Skirrid and Bryn Arw, two outliers which are worthy of exploration another day.

After a mile or so of magnificent walking, the path reaches a double gate with the woodland of Parc Lodge on your left. Keep to the right to follow the clear path keeping the fence on your left. The summit of Sugar Loaf can be seen ahead — assuming good conditions! At the next path junction turn right to start the climb to the summit.

The path starts to climb steeply through bracken until it joins the main path coming up from the right as the last steep section of the 'cone' of Sugar Loaf is reached. The obvious path now becomes

rockier in character and climbs sharply through a series of zigzags to gain the exposed ridge of the summit. A short walk leads to the trig point and hopefully outstanding views.

Sugar Loaf is the popular name for Mynydd Pen-y-fal and is owned by the National Trust. Its summit at 1955 feet would not qualify it for mountain status in most people's eyes but its shape certainly does as it resembles a brooding volcanic dome. The views take in the Black Mountains to the north, the Brecon Beacons to the west, the Cotswolds and the Malverns to the east and the Bristol Channel to the south. The trig point has been adopted by the Longtown Mountain Rescue Team who play such an important part in the recreational life of the Black Mountains.



View from Sugar Loaf towards Bryn Arw & Skirrid

When you can tear yourself away from such a magical spot, take the clear path heading off the northwest shoulder of the mountain. This involves leaving the summit just below the trig point on the left hand side of your line of approach. Your descent starts with the summit immediately on your right. Ignore the more direct descent that heads off immediately on your left and keep the summit plateau on your right. When the slope on your right eases, a grassy path beckons you down the north western shoulder of the mountain before you.

About two-thirds of the way down, about a mile from the summit, the path splits and we follow the right-hand path. A further path junction is reached and again the right-hand option should be followed. Follow this until you reach a broad crossing track a little above the boundary wall.

Turn right along this path which is followed for about a mile, keeping the boundary close by on your left at first before this falls away. The path undulates before the boundary rejoins it on the left. Look out for a waymarked stile on your left, cross it, and take the left hand path to descend for 400 yards to a stile on the left at the bottom of the field in a corner formed by the boundaries. This can be difficult to spot so keep looking for it carefully.

Once over the stile, the path heads down through woods to another stile. Cross it and turn right and make your way round the edge of a large sloping field. At a point roughly opposite where you entered the field, a stile leads on to a descending path which brings you to a path junction.

You should now follow the waymark to take the track ahead as it climbs to reach a field before looking out for a stile on the right. The path descends a steep woodland bank before turning left to

follow an enclosed route around the edge of a field. At the end of this field you reach a bridge over a stream which is crossed. Take the field path opposite and head left initially. Then climb to a stile at the head of the field which leads you on to a hedged lane.

Turn left and follow this pleasant road for half a mile until you reach a junction. Ahead of you is a fine view of Table Mountain, your objective for the afternoon. Where the road splits, take the turning on the right which rises slightly to reach farm buildings on your right. Opposite the farm, on the left of the road, follow an enclosed footpath. This swings right and starts to descend to the rushing waters of Grwyne Fechan. We continue along the river for about a quarter of a mile until we cross a beautiful old stone bridge on the left. A steep-banked path leads up the other side of the valley and swings to the left before entering the delightful small village of Llanbedr.



Grwyne Fechan near Llanbedr

An old churchyard to the right is a pleasant place to eat sandwiches and the Red Lion, a few yards further on the right, will appeal to those whose thirsts need slaking.

Continue along the same road you left to visit the church and pub. It leaves the village and after 600 yards climbs gently to a T-junction. Turn right and follow the road for another 400 yards to pass Ty Mawr on your right. Turn left at the signposted footpath at the entrance to Pen Pia and a metalled track leads up to houses at the top of a large, steeply sloping field. This is a sharp pull so soon after lunch and you can justify rest stops by turning to admire the ever improving views,

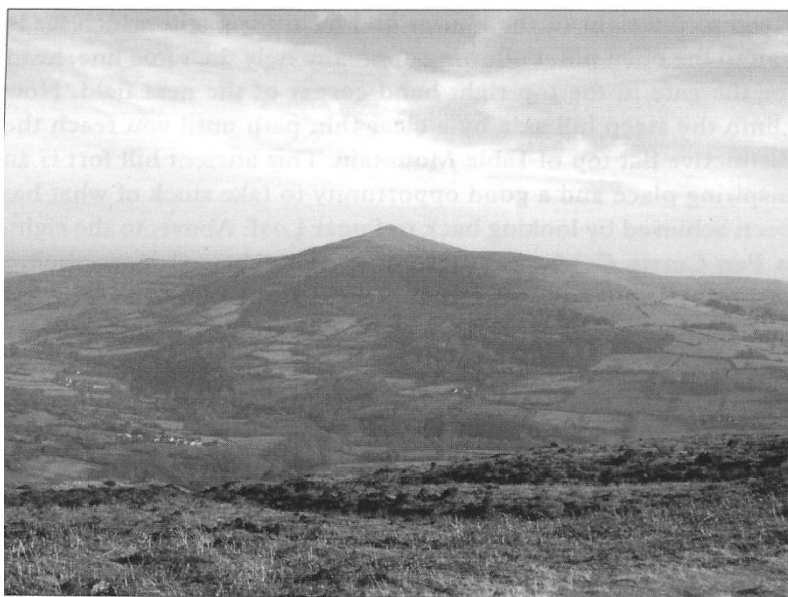
Keep to the right of the houses and head for a stile which leads you to the open hill. Following approximately the same line, head for the gate in the top right hand corner of the next field. Now climb the steep hill side by a clear thin path until you reach the distinctive flat top of Table Mountain. This ancient hill fort is an inspiring place and a good opportunity to take stock of what has been achieved by looking back to Sugar Loaf. Above, to the right, is Pen Cerrig Calch, the route of the Crickhowell Horseshoe, a magnificent 17 mile walk best started from Llanbedr. Promise yourself that you'll come back and do it another day and read on.

Facing in the direction of Pen Cerrig Calch, clamber down the ramparts of the hill fort in a north westerly direction, heading half-left to reach a wall. Follow this for about two-thirds of a mile, keeping the valley on your left and the high ground on your right. All too quickly the path bends left to start a steeper descent. As the wall bends right, a sheepfold is seen on the left.

Turn left and follow the path through the sheepfold. The route swings right via a green lane and a stream bed before descending a field to the bottom left hand corner to reach the narrow wooded valley of Cwm Cumbeth. The stream is crossed and followed on your right on a long descent until a stile in front of you leads you into fields which slope downhill to farm buildings. The right hand boundaries of the fields are followed before the farmyard is entered. Swing left through the yard to climb a stile to the right of the gate and descend steps to the lane.

Turn right and follow the lane steeply down to the main A40 where you turn left to walk for about half a mile into the centre of Crickhowell. Your day ends in the heart of this busy market town near the historic Bear Hotel, formerly a coaching inn. You may well feel that your own journey from Abergavenny merits a celebratory drink in one of Crickhowell's hostelrys. Cheers!

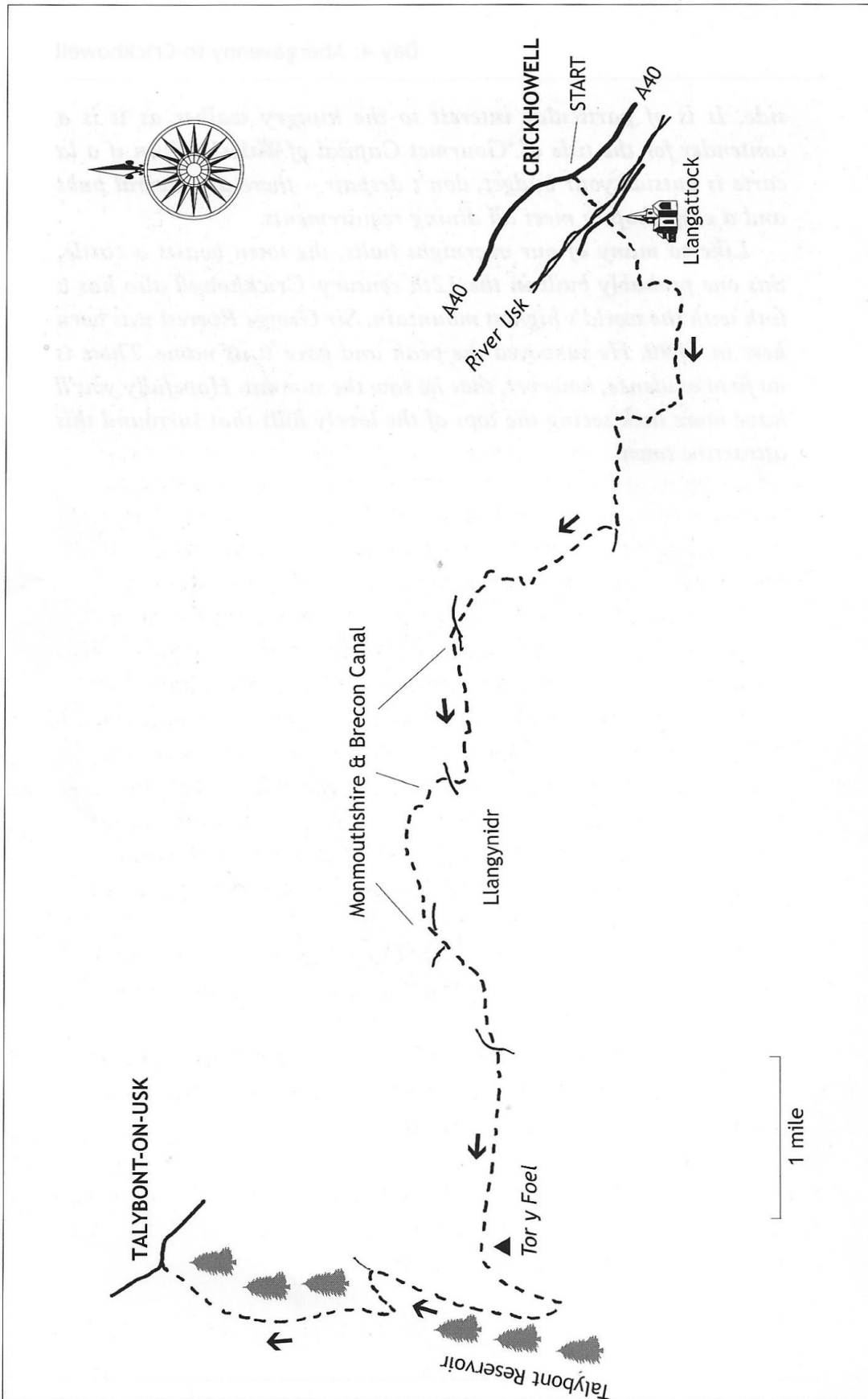
Crickhowell is a busy market town with a population of about 2,000. It is beautifully set in the Usk Valley with imposing hills on either side. It is of particular interest to the hungry walker as it is a contender for the title of 'Gourmet Capital of Wales'. Even if a la carte is outside your budget, don't despair — there are several pubs and a chip shop to meet all dining requirements. Like so many of our overnight halts, the town boasts a castle, this one probably built in the 12th century. Crickhowell also has a link with the world's highest mountain. Sir George Everest was born here in 1790. He surveyed the peak and gave it its name. There is no firm evidence, however, that he saw the summit. Hopefully you'll have more luck seeing the tops of the lovely hills that surround this attractive town.



Sugar Loaf from Table Mountain



Looking towards Pen Cerrig Calch from Table Mountain



DAY 5
CRICKHOWELL to TALYBONT
13 miles; 2,200 feet of ascent

The most diverse day of the six offers an immense variety of scenery and a number of points of interest including three sections alongside the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal, sensational views from the summit of Tor y Foel and a brief encounter with a disused railway line at the end of the day.

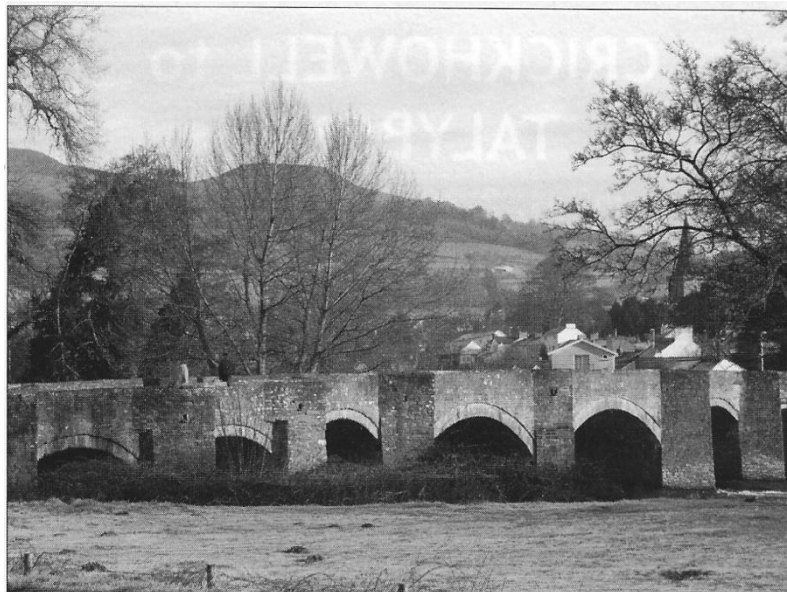
The walk starts by crossing the beautiful bridge over the Usk at Crickhowell and heading for Llangattock. A complex but attractive section enjoys fine undulating rural scenery and views of the main Black Mountains massif. After some exacting navigation, there's a chance to relax for a while with easy progress along the canal towpath to Llangynidr, a fine lunch stop. Don't over indulge though, as the long climb up Tor y Foel awaits as does a breathtaking view of the Brecon Beacons, tomorrow's ultimate challenge. Our descent offers magnificent views of the Talybont reservoir.

The last lap offers a fine woodland excursion before an easy journey into Talybont using the Taff Trail, a disused railway line.

Hopefully it will not be necessary for you to consider missing Tor y Foel but, if you absolutely must, there are alternative routes both to the north and south of the hill.

From the main A40 turn left into High Street and follow this attractive road before turning right into Bridge Street, the name of which reflects its imminent destination.

The bridge originally dates from the 16th century but was rebuilt in 1706. It has thirteen arches — a quickly viewed optical illusion gives the impression that it only has twelve on one side.



The bridge over the Usk at Crickhowell

We cross the Usk on a distinctive narrow road bridge and go straight over the road on the far bank to join a footpath heading across a field towards a church. At the end of the second field, turn right to cross a bridge and follow an enclosed path to enter the churchyard and on to the road in the village of Llangattock.

Llangattock was formerly a weavers' village. The church of St Catwg has some fearsome reminders of former punishments inside — stocks and a whipping post!

On your best behaviour turn right to follow the road signposted for Ffawyddog and you will soon pass the entrance to The Rectory, a large country house hotel. Shortly after, take the field path that heads diagonally right as it climbs the right hand edge of the meadow. A stile leads on to the canal towpath.

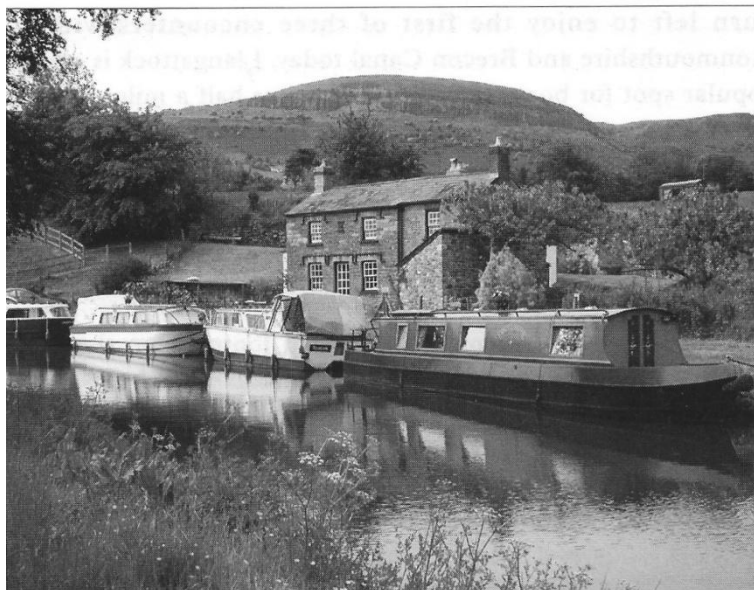
Turn left to enjoy the first of three encounters with the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal today. Llangattock is another popular spot for boats to be moored. After half a mile, a second road bridge crosses the canal. A slope on the far side of the bridge leads up to the road. Cross the bridge and turn right to join the other bank of the canal and head back in the same direction as you have just walked for about 200 yards. An information board tells the interesting story of Llangattock Wharf.

As the path verge widens, a signposted footpath on the left is followed and leads through deciduous woodland and crosses two further stiles. The path divides 120 yards after the second stile and the right fork is followed as it climbs gently to leave the wood. On emerging into farmland, you keep close to the left hand boundary to reach a stile from where a line in the centre of the next field is followed to reach a small water course. A path junction is now reached with two stiles.

Climb the stile ahead of you to continue in the same direction towards woodland. Continue through the woods, initially losing height, before emerging at the bottom of a large sloping field. Climb this, heading slightly left as you do so. Eventually you will see another wooded area at the top of the field where you need to locate a post displaying waymarks. Continue straight ahead into a small wood and keep on the clear path until you emerge from the opposite side after 100 yards.

Gently climb the field ahead towards some farm buildings. The views on your right are opening up to provide a lovely retrospective prospect of Table Mountain and Sugar Loaf. A stile to the right of the farm and a shed gives you access to the farm road along which you turn right and continue to the junction with the public highway —an attractive hedged lane.

Behind you are impressive views of the Llangattock escarpment. This is the result of a quarry which was developed after the opening of the canal. A tram link carried the stone to the barges.



Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal near Laangattock

Turn left and follow this tranquil road for almost three-quarters of a mile. Just before the road divides and a large house appears before you, turn right on to the signposted footpath. Follow the

right hand field edge initially until the corner is reached and then turn left to follow (but not cross) the top boundary. Next, enter a sheepfold and leave by the far gate into a larger field. The views across the Usk Valley to the main Black Mountains massif are beautiful and you could do worse than to stop here and take it all in.

The way is then followed half-right across the next field where a stile is crossed before turning right down a rough track. This passes ruined buildings before curving gently to the right and reaching Llwynon Farm.

Turn left after passing a barn and follow the farm road to the left, away from the buildings. This emerges on to a public road where you turn right. The road then bends to the left as it heads downhill and you should then look out for a stile in the left-hand hedge.

Follow the Usk Valley Walk waymarks as the path heads half-left to join a farm road. Turn left and walk to the farm, Pen-y-Bryn. A fine view of Tor y Foel appears on your left. A stile to the left of the buildings is climbed and head half-right across a large field to another stile. Follow the same line across the next field to descend to a stile which admits you to the road. Cross the road and a bridge to join the towpath on the far side of the canal.

Turn left and relax! After the challenges and travails of the navigation so far today, it is a relief to know that this towpath is followed for about a mile and a half to the bridge by the Coach and Horses in Llangynidr.

Take the opportunity to get your head out of the book and map to look around you. To the left is the bulky outlier of Tor y Foel, our afternoon climb. Enjoy the easy and leafy canal stretch while contemplating the challenges of the route ahead — there's nothing quite as effortless as this until we have come off the northern escarpment of the Brecon Beacons tomorrow.

This section of the canal is part of a 32 mile navigable stretch between Brecon and Pontypool. The canal originally transported coal, limestone and iron ore to Newport where it could be transferred to sea-going ships. The canal fell into disuse in the 1930s but was re-opened to the public in 1970 and is now a much-loved leisure facility.

On arrival at the road bridge by the Coach and Horses there are some conveniently situated seats by the canal for the consumption of sandwiches. The pub itself boasts a large bar area and an attractive garden. With the exception of our overnight stop in Talybont, these are the last licensed premises we pass until we reach Brecon.

After the refreshments of your choice, continue along the same bank of the canal until, after 200 yards, a bridge on your left leads across a lock. The way then enters woodland via a stile and a clear path is followed as it climbs gently to reach an open field. Follow the same line across the field to a stile where you start the long climb by heading right up the next field to a stile in the top right hand corner. In the next field follow the left hand hedge to the top left corner.

A narrow road is crossed and the stile opposite leads us into a continuation of our ascent. Follow the right hand boundary of the first field to a stile where a large field is entered. Follow the right-hand boundary to continue the climb until a waymarked gate on the right is used to reach the next field. Here, head for the houses to your left where a metalled track is followed uphill to a T-junction with a narrow road.

Cross the road and continue the ascent on a path that is initially enclosed. Eventually it is necessary to leave this sunken path to the left and continue the climb just above, following the right hand

boundary. The way ahead is obvious and long but the climb should be interrupted by frequent stops to admire the wonderful retrospective views. Our old friend Sugar Loaf is still much in evidence.

The path continues on the same line through rougher vegetation and a number of false summits give unjustified hope that the hard work will soon be over. It is not until the gradients lessen that our summit will be seen ahead. The top of Tor y Foel is approximately a mile and a quarter from the narrow road we crossed and is a steady climb all the way.

Arrival at the top of Tor y Foel is one of the most special moments of the entire walk. Ahead is our first real sighting of the Brecon Beacons and tomorrow's classic climax. Below, to the left, is Talybont reservoir and more imposing hills at its head. Behind, an expansive panorama brings the memories of our journey here flooding back.

Talybont reservoir was finished in 1938 and has a capacity of 2,567 million gallons. The dam is 97 feet high. The reservoir is the haunt of ducks and waders — species that can be seen include pochards, tufted ducks, mallards, teal and widgeon. Waders such as curlews, redshanks, sandpipers and greenshanks are also frequent visitors. It is also a popular haunt of trout fishermen.



Descending Tor y Foel towards Talybont reservoir

Head down the hill by turning half-left from the summit and following the broad path as it heads southwest towards the reservoir. Follow this route all the way to its junction with an unenclosed road. Turn right on to it and follow it to keep coniferous woods on your left and the steep slopes of Tor y Foel on your right.

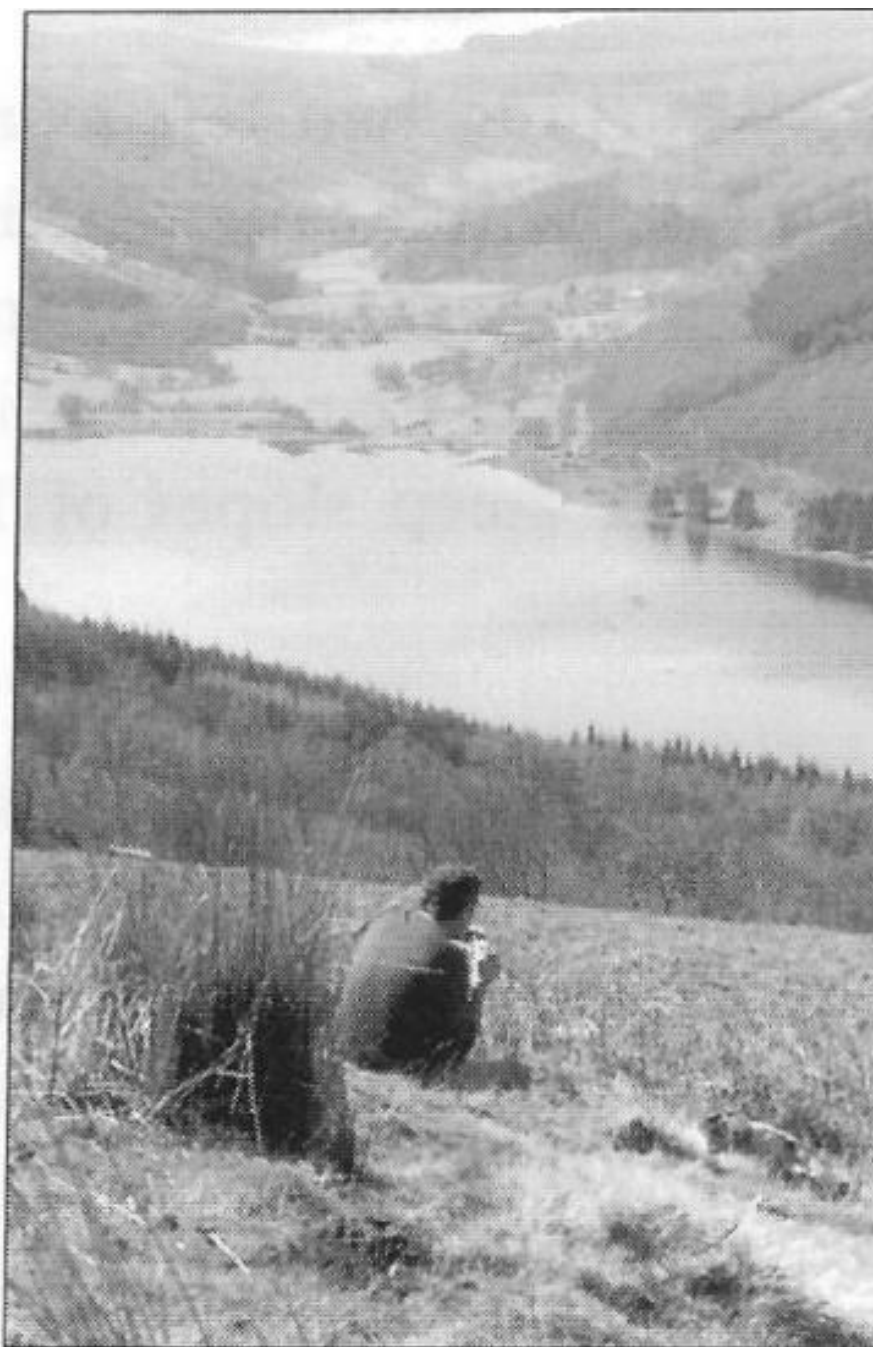
After two-thirds of a mile a cattle grid is reached. Turn left to cross a stile and head half-left across a field. Ahead of you is a view of the ascent of Carn Pica — our big climb tomorrow. A gate leads us into a second field which is crossed half-right to a stile in the bottom right hand corner. Turn right on to a stony, level path sheltered by trees. This is signposted as the Brinore Tram Road. Continue to a path junction and follow the lower of the two paths ahead.

We are now on the Taff Trail, a long distance path and cycle track which uses old railway lines, canals and forestry paths to link Cardiff Bay and Brecon. The 55 miles include Pontypridd and

Merthyr Tydfil. The Brinore Tram Road itself was operational between 1815 and 1865, and linked the Tredegar Iron works and the Trefil limestone quarries with the canal.

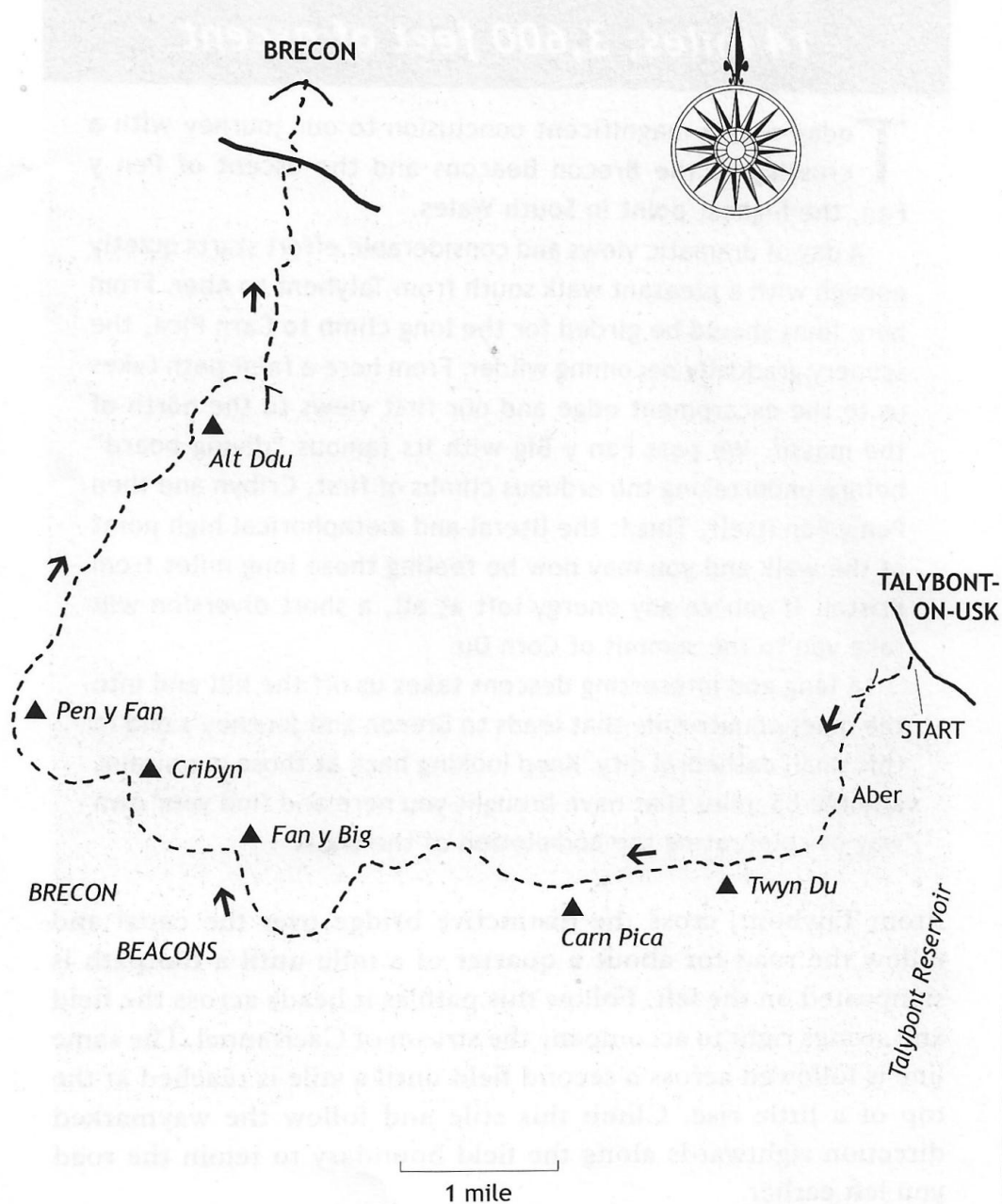
Easy walking follows for a mile until the path swings left to cross a bridge and then turns right to descend to Talybont. The track crosses a bridge over the canal. Those seeking the twin amenities of a pub and public toilets will find them by continuing the descent for another thirty seconds. Otherwise, turn left to follow the canal towpath for a final time until a distinctive road bridge is reached and with it the end of a memorable day.

Talybont boasts no fewer than four pubs so it's a particularly enjoyable overnight stop. There is a good post office and general stores. The village is linked to the outside world by the Abergavenny-Brecon bus.



Tea break overlooking Talybont Reservoir

TALYBONT to BRECON



DAY 6
TALYBONT to BRECON
14 miles; 3,600 feet of ascent

Today sees a magnificent conclusion to our journey with a crossing of the Brecon Beacons and the ascent of Pen y Fan, the highest point in South Wales.

A day of dramatic views and considerable effort starts quietly enough with a pleasant walk south from Talybont to Aber. From here loins should be girded for the long climb to Carn Pica, the scenery gradually becoming wilder. From here a faint path takes us to the escarpment edge and our first views to the north of the massif. We pass Fan y Big with its famous “diving board” before undertaking the arduous climbs of first, Cribyn and then Pen y Fan itself. This is the literal and metaphorical high point of the walk and you may now be feeling those long miles from Bristol. If you’ve any energy left at all, a short diversion will take you to the summit of Corn Du.

A long and interesting descent takes us off the hill and into the quiet countryside that leads to Brecon and journey’s end in this small cathedral city. Keep looking back at those mountains and the 85 miles that have brought you here and find your own way of celebrating the completion of the walk.

From Talybont, cross the distinctive bridge over the canal and follow the road for about a quarter of a mile until a footpath is signposted on the left. Follow this path as it heads across the field and swings right to accompany the stream of Caerfannel. The same line is followed across a second field until a stile is reached at the top of a little rise. Climb this stile and follow the waymarked direction rightwards along the field boundary to rejoin the road you left earlier.

Turn left and walk into the charming hamlet of Aber, the last habitation of the walk until Brecon is reached this evening. Stay on the road for about 1/4 mile after the village is left and a footpath is indicated on your right. Follow this as it starts to climb from the road and then swings left. When the metalled track swings right, carry straight ahead on a narrower, enclosed footpath which in turn heads right to start the ascent proper. A signpost “To The Hill” leaves you in no doubt of its intentions.

A small depression is followed until a gate gives access to open country. Pass through it and follow the left hand boundary until you see a thin path heading up the hillside. This can be difficult to follow when the bracken is high. A tree in the middle of the slope is a useful guide. Follow the path as closely as you can as the climb continues in earnest. The view behind steadily improves as height is gained and a retrospective panorama of Tor y Foel brings back happy memories of yesterday afternoon.



Tor y Foel from Twyn Du

At the top of the initial climb is Twyn Du, a small outcrop on the shoulder of the larger hill. Continue to follow the clear path as it levels out for a while. Our objective of Carn Pica is now clearly visible ahead and, to the left, there are good views of Craig y Fan du. Keep going until you reach the foot of the final steep climb to the summit of Carn Pica.

The last section of the climb always seems to take longer than estimated and it can be hard going in places if you follow a direct line over the eroded part of the hill. A little easy scrambling may be necessary. It's probably best to keep to the left of this section where a narrow grassy trod will ease the climb in places, if not the gradient.

At last the cairn of Carn Pica is reached. Hopefully conditions will be suitable for you to relax for a few minutes to enjoy the view — you've certainly earned it! The good news is that you've done the hard work for the day — although there are sharp climbs up both Cribyn and Pen y Fan, they're not nearly as long as the one you've just done from Aber.



The big three — Corn Du, Pen y Fan and Cribyn.

When you have recovered your breath, follow the often peaty path in the same direction as you've just climbed. The next section crosses a featureless plateau to the edge of the main escarpment

while the path varies in width and character while following the same direction. If visibility is good, you will see striking views of the geometric shapes of the Brecon Beacons ahead of you, now tangibly close. Towards the end of this section, some peat hags have to be crossed before another special moment of the walk is reached.

The arrival at the main edge path gives you dramatic views of the incredibly steep-sided walls of the escarpments. The valley of Cwm Oergym is 1,400 feet below and the next ridge of Cefn Cyff is straight ahead. The walking is now exciting but navigationally simple. Turn left and stride out along the wide and sometimes stony path. The main interest is to the right with vertiginous drops to the valley.

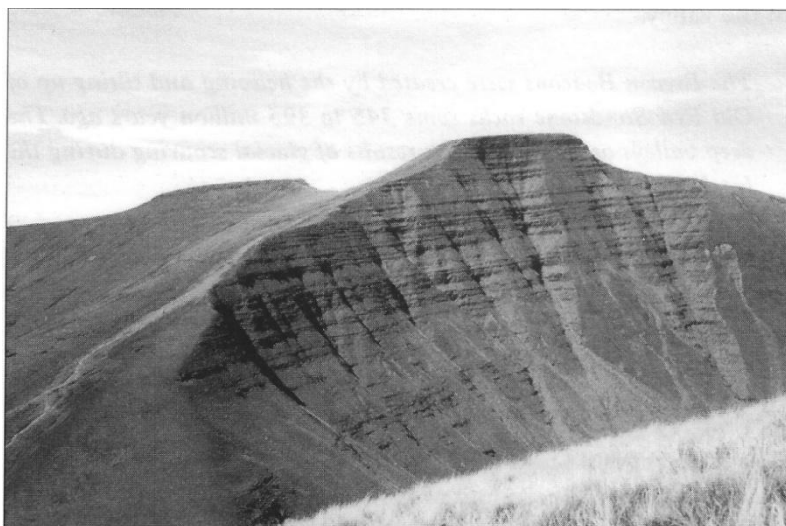
The Brecon Beacons were created by the heaving and tilting up of Old Red Sandstone rocks some 345 to 395 million years ago. The deep valleys or cwms were the results of glacial scouring during the Ice Age.

The next section takes us round the head of the valley of Cwm Oergwm. The path starts by swinging to the right before a sharper turn to the left. After another half a mile, the path swings right again until a path junction is reached, some two miles from the point where the escarpment path was joined.

Take the right hand fork (the left-hand alternative heads downhill) to climb gently to the summit of Fan y Big (1,961 feet). The summit is right at the edge of two sides of the escarpment and a ridge path leads north east down the shoulder of Cefn Cyff. This would be a reasonable escape route should one be needed. No visit to the summit of Fan y Big is complete without inspecting the famous diving board, a slab of rock which overhangs the valley below. The extremely brave may choose to stand on it but I do not encourage or recommend it. Our descent is considerably better for your health!

Leave the summit westwards (to the left of the line of approach) and follow the well worn path down to the pass of Bwlch ar y Fann. Opposite you a steep and obvious path leads to Cribyn, a tough climb which always seems to last longer than anticipated. The summit (2,608 feet) is another spectacular viewpoint and again there is a north easterly escape route down the shoulder of Bryn Teg.

It would be a shame to miss Cribyn but there is an option to avoid it should weather or physical fitness be an issue. From the saddle to which you descend from Fan y Big, a clear path to the left of the direct ascent will take you easily round to the left of the hill to rejoin the main route by the foot of Pen y Fan.



The last big ascent — to Pen y Fan

If you're feeling out of breath by now, you may like to reflect that we are sharing this part of the route with that of a much tougher path — the 274 mile epic from Cardiff to Conway known as the Cambrian Way. This coast to coast route also includes Cader Idris and Snowdonia so the going for northbound walkers will get tougher yet!

A steep descent to the left takes us down to the pass before the final challenge of Pen y Fan. The re-ascent to gain this objective is more than 700 feet although the path is clear throughout. It is relentlessly steep throughout and becomes rougher and steeper as the summit plateau is neared although there are no technical difficulties.

At last you step on to the plateau and head another 200 yards or so to reach the cairn. At 2907 feet, this is the summit of not only our own route but of all of South and Central Wales. There are usually plenty of people about, many of whom will have come up the direct route from Storey Arms to the west on the A470. Immediately to the left is the summit of Corn Du, and those with exceptional energy may wish to detour to 'bag' this impressive summit

Both Pen y Fan and the neighbouring Corn Du are capped by a hard band of rock called plateau beds. This is more resistant to weathering than the sandstone of the other summits. Buzzards and ravens nest here — a good friend of mine says that no day in the hills is complete without the sight and the distinctive cronking sound of a raven.

Once you've enjoyed the summit of Pen y Fan, there is a temptation to think it's all over. The fat lady may be clearing her throat but her singing voice is a few miles away yet! From the summit of Pen y Fan, scramble down the rocky path on the north side of the mountain, a few yards from the summit cairn. After an exacting first section, it soon becomes easier and a glorious walk leads us down the shoulder of Cefn Cwm Llŵch. The crest of the declining ridge is followed all the way to a path junction, approximately a mile and a quarter from the summit.

Look carefully for a path leaving the main route to the right. The exact point is difficult to describe — GPS users will have the advantage in knowing that the grid reference is 019233. In good visibility you will see a rounded grassy hill ahead of you on the right. After another 200 yards or so (020234), another path strikes off to the right. It continues to descend before the grassy hill on your right, Allt Ddu is then climbed to reach a cairn by a hollow. Continue the descent in the same, north easterly direction, steeply at first over grassy slopes before reaching more level ground. A green path swings to the left from the bottom of the steeper slope to reach a stile in the boundary ahead.

This admits you to an enclosed path from which you turn left after another 200 yards to follow another track to join a narrow road.

Don't worry if you miss the path junction on the main ridge. Just keep heading down and you will reach the car park at Cwm Gwdi. From here, continue down the road, take the first turning right and you will meet up with the main route.

Turn right along this road, the first we've walked on since leaving Aber this morning. Continue until you reach a T junction where you turn left. Do keep looking back at the mountains as there are some good retrospective views during this section.

A further stretch of road walking of about three-quarters of a mile now ensues. About 250 yards after a road joins ours from the right and opposite a lay-by, turn right to follow a footpath which follows the right hand edge of a large, flat field. Take the stile into the next pasture where you head half-left to a further stile. Keep going to the far left corner of the third field and follow the right hand edge of the next before a stile admits you on to a track.

Cross the track and take the signposted path opposite to follow the left hedge. A further stile brings us into a sloping field with a wood on the left. Again follow the left hand boundary by the edge of the wood before our way steeply descends. The sight and sound of the A40 Brecon by-pass is now apparent. At the bottom of the field turn right to follow the boundary all the way along to the corner. A stile is climbed to reach a lane. Turn left and follow the lane over a wide bridge high above the main road.

Once over the bridge turn right at the path junction to follow a wide path to the right of the playing fields of Brecon School. Christ College was founded in 1541 and became a public school in 1853. You will eventually reach a gatehouse and a short section of metalled road is followed to reach the road. You're nearly there!

Turn right and follow the road across a wide bridge over our old friend the River Usk to enter the main part of Brecon. The cruellest climb of all, Ship Street, rises from the bridge and any remaining momentum may be lost while waiting to cross side turnings. Use the pedestrian crossing to cross the main road and head on to Bulwark and the end of the walk by St Mary's Church. Congratulations! You have walked from Bristol to Brecon.



Journey's end at Brecon. Now where's the pub?

Brecon is a special place to finish a long distance walk, with excellent amenities and attractive streets with a number of Georgian facades. Its mountain associations are still clearly visible to the south. The town received its charter in 1246 in the same century as St John's Church was started. It was subsequently dedicated as a cathedral in 1923. The town has a proud military history and regimental barracks are still in evidence to the east of the town centre. French prisoners of war were held in the town during the Napoleonic Wars. The town is also the terminus of our old friend the Brecon and Monmouthshire Canal. In August Brecon stages a noted jazz festival although your feet may now be too tired for any serious toe-tapping!