

EXPLORE ENGLAND

2020

THIS ENGLAND'S GUIDE TO PLACES TO VISIT THIS YEAR

Brilliant
ideas for
breaks in
England

Take England's most
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the North York Moors

*Walk the Isle of Man
coastal path*

Discover the stunning
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THE BIRTHPLACE OF BRITISH TOURISM

Fiona Young-Brown visits Ross-on-Wye and follows in the footsteps of early adventurer William Gilpin, who wrote the very first travel guide

IF you have never navigated the Wye, you have seen nothing.” So wrote the Rev. Dr William Gilpin in 1782 in his *Observations on the River Wye*. Based upon his 1770 trip to the Wye Valley, *Observations* was the first of many memoirs about the clergyman-artist-teacher-writer’s travels around England, but it was the start of something much larger. Inspired by his words, writers and artists soon flocked to Ross-on-Wye, all keen to experience the landscape that he had described in such great detail. The first travel guide of its kind, *Observations* helped to launch the idea of tourism within England.

Ross-on-Wye and the Wye Valley continue to attract thousands of visitors to this day, and 2020 marks the 250th anniversary of Gilpin’s visit. A year-long calendar of events, launched by HRH the Prince of Wales in November 2019, is celebrating the location’s reputation as the birthplace of British tourism.

“We travel for various purposes – to explore the culture of soils, to view the curiosities of art, to survey the beauties of nature, and to learn the



William Gilpin by Henry Walton, 1781

manners of men, their different politics and modes of life,” Gilpin wrote in *Observations*.

Winding one’s way down the River Wye in a canoe, or walking through the fields that overlook vistas stretching to the Welsh border, it is perhaps difficult to imagine a time when England’s green and pleasant land was only just being discovered in terms of its artistic merit. Yet travel for the sake of leisure is a relatively new pastime in our country’s lengthy history. For centuries, people travelled

for one of only a few reasons: to go to war; to trade at nearby markets or to undertake a religious pilgrimage. By the 17th century, the wealthiest classes began to travel to the continent for educational reasons. It became fashionable to undertake the Grand Tour, spending several years in Europe visiting art galleries and viewing architecture.

Soon, the concept of the spa arose, and those who could afford it took trips within England to towns such as Bath, Tunbridge Wells or Leamington Spa. But even these trips were not considered for the purpose of pleasure, but rather for health. So what drew people to the Wye Valley?

Many might argue that Ross-on-Wye was, for a small provincial market town, remarkably progressive. This was largely thanks to local benefactor John Kyrle, otherwise known as the Man of Ross. Kyrle used his wealth to benefit the town’s people, installing a public clean water supply, providing education for the town’s children and laying out public gardens. Although he passed away in 1724, he left a legacy of a well-kept, philanthropic community that remains

Images: National Portrait Gallery London, Alamy, Shutterstock



A William Gilpin river landscape



H.R.H. The Prince of Wales launches anniversary celebrations in Ross-on-Wye



Canoeing down the River Wye, with Ross-on-Wye on the hill in the distance. "If you have never navigated the Wye, you have seen nothing," wrote William Gilpin

visible in the town to this day.

Local rector John Egerton clearly agreed that Ross-on-Wye and the surrounding valley was worth celebrating. In 1750, he started to ferry small groups along the river between Ross and Chepstow. Word spread and by 1760 other townspeople were offering competing boat trips, all following the same route. Visitors would stop for lunch at pre-arranged locations for a picnic and to admire local attractions. Today we would say that these were the first package tours: people were coming to the Wye Valley to admire its natural beauty.

That beauty is still evident today, 250 years after Gilpin's trip. The Wye is Britain's fifth-longest river and meanders for 133.5 miles from Plynlimon in the Cambrian Mountains to the Severn estuary at Chepstow. The lower part through the Wye Valley is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It was this stretch that so inspired Gilpin to set pen to paper.

Ross-on-Wye is the only town within the AONB boundaries and, as such, it is the starting point for many a visitor. The spire of St Mary's Parish Church stretches high above the town and makes for an impressive vista,

especially combined with the view of the river. Nevertheless, Gilpin had a rather mixed reaction to the town:

"Ross stands high, and commands many distant views; but that from the churchyard is most admired, and is indeed very amusing. It consists of an easy sweep of the Wye, and of an extensive country beyond it. But it is not picturesque. It is marked by no characteristic objects: it is broken into too many parts; and it is seen from too high a point. The spire of the church . . . tapers beautifully."

Today many would disagree that the scene is not picturesque. However, Gilpin was responsible for the birth of the picturesque movement, a school of art that focused on the natural beauty of the landscape. Beauty was to be found not in manicured gardens with their straight lines and carefully spaced shrubs; rather it was defined by informality, by textures, soil colours, irregular lines, and contrasts.

At the same time, this school of thought was not without its paradoxes – many travellers, Gilpin included, opted to use a Claude Glass when viewing the landscape. This tinted piece of curved glass blurred out some objects, thus rendering a view that

was more like a picture and therefore considered more pleasing than the nature itself. So on the one hand, it was about admiring nature; on the other, about shaping nature into what "it should be".

But back to the River Wye.

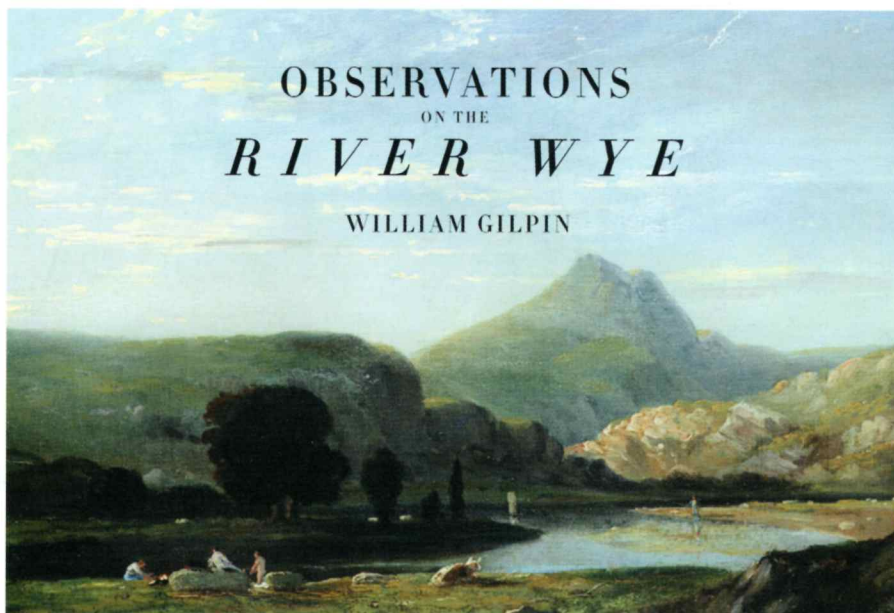
The tours were planned in terms of where to stop for walks, for picnic lunches, for overnight stays and for visiting local landmarks. After embarking at Ross-on-Wye, and cruising past the remains of Wilton Castle (now privately owned), the first point of interest where visitors might disembark was Goodrich Castle. Like Wilton, Goodrich took heavy damage during the Civil War. It is now managed by English Heritage and is the home of Roaring Meg, the only remaining Civil War mortar.

Other historical reminders are on display, including a pile of recovered cannon balls, two magnificent stained-glass windows that commemorate the local community, and one of the few surviving portcullis chambers, complete with evidence of opening mechanisms.

In the 18th century, some visitors complained about the steepness of the slopes which made it difficult for

OBSERVATIONS ON THE RIVER WYE

WILLIAM GILPIN



William Gilpin's book is still in print today, published by Pallas Athene

> ladies to climb, while others bemoaned the trees that blocked the view of the castle. Sadly, rain obscured many of the views during this first part of Gilpin's trip, although he did concede that even the rain gave a gloomy grandeur to many scenes.

Symonds Yat was Gilpin's next "grand scene" and it was here that passengers would typically stop for refreshment. They would then climb the rocks to take in extensive views of Herefordshire and Monmouthshire before descending to the other side, where the boats would meet them. Then it was on to their overnight rest stop of Monmouth.

Upon arrival at Monmouth, Gilpin mused about the changing nature of time on the landscape: "Monmouth Castle was formerly the palace of a king, and birth-place of a mighty prince; it is now converted into a yard for fattening ducks." The castle was devastated during the Civil War, but its ruins remind visitors of the strategic position the river held as the border between England and Wales.

The stretch of the Lower Wye from Monmouth to Chepstow would, in Gilpin's time, have passed by various villages and hamlets. With no road, the river was the key means of transportation and trade; these villages played an important role in the regional economy, with iron and tin works as well as boat builders. Although we might not think of industry as picturesque, Gilpin thought otherwise, remarking that the activity and noise added to the natural surroundings, while still retaining the

landscape's grandeur and tranquillity.

Tintern Abbey, another stop on Gilpin's trip, inspired many visitors. Wordsworth composed poems about it and Gainsborough and Turner are just two of the many masters who have painted the ruined Cistercian abbey.

After leaving Tintern, several more stops would allow vantage points back across the abbey and the river, and then eventually the boats would pass alongside the Piercefield Estate before arriving in Chepstow. From there, one might return along the same route to Ross-on-Wye, or travel by boat or stagecoach to Bristol.

The river tours along the Wye were in their heyday until the 1830s, especially after the introduction of steamboats between Bristol and Chepstow in the 1820s. The arrival of trains on the newly constructed Wye Valley Railway in the 1870s brought a new influx of visitors to the area, all keen to enjoy the local scenery.

Walkers still flock here today. Ross is a "Walkers Are Welcome" town, with a host of resources and events for those who enjoy the great outdoors. The annual walking festival (held every October) provides an extensive schedule of guided walks covering the history and wildlife of the valley.

As for Gilpin, he drew attention to the Wye Valley in a way that has had a lasting beneficial effect. He pioneered a passion for the beauty of the natural landscape and, in turn, the importance of preserving that landscape for all to enjoy. In 1971, the Wye Valley was officially designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Ross-on-Wye WHERE TO STAY

The Royal Hotel

On the site of a former Bishop's Palace, The Royal boasts views that stretch across the valley into Wales.

Royal Parade, Ross-on-Wye
HR9 5HZ. 01989 565105;
greenekinginns.co.uk/hotels/royal-hotel-ross-on-wye

The Old Court House B&B

This small 17th-century guesthouse is within easy walking distance of the river, restaurants, and shops.

53 High Street, Ross-on-Wye
HR9 5HH. 01989 762275;
theoldcourthousebandb.co.uk

The King's Head Hotel

Once a small coaching inn, The King's Head has modernised guest rooms while the bar still has oak beams and a fireplace.

8 High Street, Ross-on-Wye
HR9 5HL. 0800 801098;
kingshead.co.uk

WHERE TO EAT

Truffles Delicatessen

Either pick up a picnic lunch here or enjoy a coffee in their secret courtyard.

46 High Street, Ross-on-Wye
HR9 5HG. 01989 762336;
facebook.com/trufflesdeli

The Man of Ross

This pub offers a fine selection of locally brewed beers, as well as a diverse fish menu.

Wye St, Ross-on-Wye HR9 7BS.
01989 763111; manofrossinn.co.uk

WHAT TO DO

Made in Ross

Ross-on-Wye's community of craftspeople showcase their work here above the Historic Market House Building, and you will often find a local artist at work.

Market Place, Ross-on-Wye
HR9 5NX. 01989 769398;
madeinross.co.uk

Wye Canoe

If you prefer to explore by river, Wye Canoe offers canoe and kayak hire, as well as guided trips along the river to Symonds Yat.

07789 895082; wyecanoes.com