

WORDS AND PHOTOS HUW KINGSTON

BORDERLINE CRAZY

Take a hike along the ancient Offa's Dyke Path – a 285km track that still follows the modern England-Wales boundary in places. You'll be amazed at the landscape, the history and the characters en route.



DESPITE THE fact my mother was trying hard to get back across the border in time (it was British Rail's fault; the train was running late), I have still not forgiven my Welsh parents for the ignominy of being born in England.

It was time to answer some questions, to walk a fine line between England and Wales, sometimes with one foot in both. The 285km Offa's Dyke Path runs on or close to the current border of England and Wales, and where possible follows sections of the dyke itself.

Offa's Dyke was built about 1200 years ago. King Offa, sick of the raids the Welsh were making on his lands, consulted with his version of the Department of Homeland Security. Showing that madness in bureaucratic decision-making is not a modern affliction, they advised him to build a dyke, a mounded earthen "wall" running for some distance along the boundary between his kingdom and the ruffians of Wales. The dyke, like a green snake stretched to its full length, is still visible in many sections. It is easier to believe it was a job creation scheme during the Great Recession of the 7th century than a truly useful defence. The Welsh are renowned for being short in stature, but even their short legs could have, I'm certain, clambered over the dyke with ease.

TO START, A REUNION

The walk commences by the River Severn near Chepstow, a river with immense tidal flows. The muddy waters churn back and forth with a variation of up to 15m. I climbed high above riverside cliffs, the jingle-jangle of climbing gear reminding me of hanging off holds here 20 years ago. A couple of hours of walking later, I dropped down to the small riverside town of Tintern. In a beer garden of The Anchor, I found the Kingston cousins, the progeny of the seven Kingston brothers of whom my father was the youngest. We were getting together for the first time in many years. Unknown to us before, but soon found, was a local brewery; Kingstone Ales had a slogan we rather liked: 'Unfiltered, Uncompromising and Unashamedly Real'.

With a sore head and under grey, cold skies, Wendy and I said farewell to the cousins and set off on the first full day of the walk. We were travelling light, intending to stay in pubs and



Offa's Dyke waymark – signage along the route is excellent.

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"traditional" B&B's along the way, easing our way in with a day following the River Wye. We ambled along riverside meadows, watching canoeists head in the opposite direction.

At Redbrook, the pub had no vacancies but Margery at Tresco B&B took us in. We stepped back in time – fluffy toilet seat covers I hadn't seen since the '80s, a shower that dripped rather than ran and pictures of Charles and Di's wedding on the wall. That night we walked across a river bridge back into Wales to dine at the delightful Boat Inn.

I was up early the next morning, needing to get some work done. But Margery sprung me trying to push the breakfast settings aside to make room for my laptop. "I'd like to help, but I keep the table set for guests," she said. "But we're the only guests," I responded. The best compromise Margery could offer me was to sit, with laptop on lap, in the tiny sunroom with her husband and three dogs. We moved on...

Monmouth, a few kilometres up the river, offered not only accommodating accommodation but good coffee and the "Best Curry in Wales". The Misbah Bangladeshi Restaurant covered one side of its menu with platitudes. The early names were unknown to me – "Nigel & Sarah Cox – A wonderful curry as always", "John & Hazel



The sort of sign any trekker loves to see at the end of the day – you know you're in for a very warm welcome.



Top: Huw on the track above Newchurch. Right: Whitewashed hilltop cottage.





Left: 'bushwalking' British style, in a field of rapeseed.
Below: Don't believe those satnav systems.



Once on the ridge we were greeted by wind and rain squalls coming from Wales to pour into England. The weather and the walking were invigorating and we had views west into deep valleys overhung by the mountains of the Brecon Beacons. East, beneath rainbows, was a patchwork landscape of fields and hedges. We dodged showers as we followed the high ridge for about 15km as far as Hay Bluff. Recent track works involving huge flagstones and gravel had removed much of the opportunity for bog hopping.

From Hay Bluff we plummeted into England and the town of Hay-on-Wye. The weather improved and we had hoped to make Hay while the sun shone, but a shower soaked us on the final approach.

The walk from Hay to Kington was a stunner. Once we'd pushed our way through a field chest-deep in a crop of rape, the path followed a contrasting mix of quiet valleys interlinked by moorland stretches. Clear streams were spots to soothe tired feet. The church in the hamlet of Newchurch offered tea/coffee and biscuits, laid on with a donation box. With a cuppa in hand, we lunched in the graveyard with a Swiss couple who we'd met a few days earlier.

We stopped for a late afternoon shandy in the pub at Gladestry, encouraged to bang on the door by the sign: "The Bad News – We have things to do so are closed before noon and between 3-7pm. The Good News – If we are in and you can get our attention we will still serve you." Fortified, we traversed the Hergest Ridge in warm sun and down to England and a sign welcoming us to "Kington – The Centre for Walking".

But it was time to go for a ride.

Ashton – This restaurant is an oasis at the end of an arid week". Then, further down, some more familiar names: "REM – Stupendously good curry", "Lord David Steel, House of Commons – Great Lamb Passanda", "Black Sabbath – Always come back to Misbah – it rocks!" And finally a long list of names – 'Julian Lennon-The Corrs-The Spice Girls-Bob Geldof-Coldplay-Donna Summer-Oasis...' The dinner we had was unremarkable.

Hotel. Inside, it charged much but delivered less, with cheap decor and staff who seemed surprised that customers actually existed. Other Offa's Dyke walkers had been tempted in and trapped. We shared a drink and stories of the track before being called to dinner. The barmaid described the soup as "thick vegetable", only to have the chef call out "No, it is tomato with other stuff in it". Later, the barmaid described the sole dessert as "Apple crumble or something like that with apples in it".

CLASSIC COUNTRYSIDE

Our walk along the border of England and Wales had started slowly, but from Monmouth, work done, we got into our stride. Heading north-west for 25km across undulating country fields and streams, classic British countryside, we could see the ridge of the Black Mountains rising up. Our destination was Pandy, where the only vacancy was the grand-looking (from the outside) Park

MAKING HAY-ON-WYE

It was refreshing the following morning to be climbing high onto the Black Mountains. We'd stopped off at a shop in Pandy to buy supplies for lunch. The headline on the local Abergavenny Chronicle billboard shouted out "Boy Battles Bull". I wondered who won.



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BIKES AND BARROWS

We'd timed our arrival in Kington to take part in a mountain bike event – The Torq Roughride. But we had a day or so up our sleeves. That Thursday night was spent at a Kington pub conversing with more fellow Offa's Dyke walkers: a group of four men from London who had a common interest in morris dancing and a pub landlord from Lancashire, walking the track alone.

On the Friday we walked north to south on the Offa's Dyke path. Geoff, the owner of our B&B, gave us a lift to Knighton so we could walk the track back to Kington. It was a tough day of walking, made easier by our light packs. The track followed long sections of the dyke, often traversing along the top of the mound. Badgers' lairs and rabbit warrens might have penetrated the dyke's defences, but it was incredible to think that we were walking upon a structure hand-built over a millennium before.

We descended to our accommodation to find Geoff and his mate busily constructing a homage to ABBA. What we hadn't realised was that it was also the weekend of the annual Kington Wheelbarrow Race. The theme of the wheelbarrow race in 2011 was Europe and they took it to mean Eurovision. While they fiddled with Benny's bike, old friends of mine arrived

with a bike for me to borrow for the Roughride.

As bikes poured into Kington, barrows were prepared. The streets were closed off and spectators lined a course consisting of seven pubs, a half pint to be drunk at each en route.

The barrows barrelled around the corner. Bodies were flung out of trays, men in barrows careered down the street as their pusher let go to claim a beer, wheels came off, barrows crumpled. Topically, Welsh footballer Ryan Giggs had Miss Wales as a companion, the Vikings invaded, leprechauns launched into dance and ABBA rode gracefully down the main street, Dancing Queen blaring. Geoff, our mild guest-house proprietor, was transformed into a blonde-wigged, platform-heeled, silver apparition of Agnetha. He seemed to love it.

ENTER THE ROUGHRIDERS

The Roughride had a reputation for always being ridden in the sun. For its ninth edition, the heavens opened to give me a "classic" British MTB day. Riding to the start, I bumped into Mark, an old mate, now living in Barcelona, hidden by waterproofs and hood. About 700 people had entered, about half turned up on the start line. Conditions were atrocious. At about the 25km mark the route split – left for the 40km ride,

right for the 75km. Ninety percent went left. Alan and I turned right and from then on didn't see another rider for three hours. It was just like a couple of mates out for a Sunday ride. The terrain and tracks were awesome, but harder to enjoy as the rain came sideways and the wheels threw up cold showers. Finally, after seven hours we rolled into Kington to tales of hypothermia and broken bones. It had been a rough ride, indeed.

CROSSING OVER

ABBA had moved on and we needed to. At breakfast the following morning a couple in their 70s joined us. They were walking the track as far as Knighton. They wanted to go further, but Take That had reformed and were performing that night in Cardiff. This couple loved Robbie Williams and they weren't missing that concert.

The dyke was our companion for much of the distance over the next few days. I celebrated a fine birthday on the track in Wales; some compensation for not actually having been born there. At Welshpool we rejoined the Severn River and followed it north, then walked alongside the disused and rather beautiful Montgomery Canal with its old locks and bridges as far as Llanymynech. Here the border cuts down the main street. The west side is Wales, the east



The penultimate day's walk on the Offa's Dyke Trail was heavenly – a long traverse of the Clwydian Hills

Left: Disused lock on Montgomery Canal speaks of an earlier, more prosperous time. Below: Dipping more than a toe in the water at the end of the walk, Prestatyn. Opposite page: Heading toward the distant Black Mountains.

England. In the days when pubs were not allowed to open on a Sunday in Wales, one pub, with a back door in England, opened that to patrons on the Sabbath.

After sleeping in England, breakfasting in Wales and shopping for lunch supplies back in England, we were on our way. Moorland sections were interspersed with more gentle, rural settings and fine villages. Hundreds of stiles were crossed or passed through. One old timber structure had lost its accompanying fence and hung lonely on the moor, a gateway to nothing.

Not too far from Llangollen, we finally came across Kingston (after Kingstone and Kington). We supped a pint or two of Kingston Flyer. It's brewed in nearby Oswestry by a guy from Melbourne who came to the UK to drink good beer and ended up marrying a Welsh girl and brewing his own. It was a fine brew.

At Llangollen we walked across one of the world's engineering marvels, Thomas Telford's 300m-long aqueduct carrying the Llangollen Canal high above the River Dee. We passed a pub called the Aussie Rooster and walked beneath magnificent limestone cliffs to Worlds End, fortunately finding it did continue on the other side. The path climbed onto the moors and passed through a well-developed forest mountain bike centre to Llandegla. There was no room at the inn for us in Llandegla, but a few phone calls later Colin picked us up and took us to his mum's B&B in the village of Llanarmon-Yn-Ial. Dorothy was away, but she had instructed Colin on what to

do. He couldn't do enough to help, checking the minutest details of our breakfast order and asking if we had everything we needed, interspersed with questions about our religious interests.

It was a relief to get to the local pub for dinner and even better to hear the story of The Raven. The pub had been closed years earlier but the community banded together and opened it as a community-owned pub. All the staff were volunteers except some youngsters gaining work experience; it was fitting that, on a packed night, the most popular tap beer was Volunteer Ale.

A SEASIDE FAREWELL

Colin drove us back to the start of the track the next morning and tried to give us a copy of St John's Gospel. The penultimate day's walk on the Offa's Dyke Trail was heavenly – a long traverse of the Clwydian Hills. Ever changing, expansive views took in the mountains of Snowdonia, the highest in Wales, the Irish Sea to our north and the Vale of Clwyd beneath us.

At Bodfari, we slept our last night in a B&B, a rambling, old place. The final 18km, all in Wales, led out of the hills and down to the seaside resort of Prestatyn, where the waters of the Dee and Mersey estuaries mixed into the Irish Sea. A wind farm rose out of the sea, turbines slicing the air in the strong nor'easter. With my short Welsh legs dipped in the cool waters, I looked west along the North Wales coastline. Then, unseen, a wave sent from England soaked me from behind. Bloody Poms.

