

Hay on Wye Town and Riverside

Distance and time 2km (including town centre), 1–1.5hrs.

Brief description of the walk, path conditions and facilities

The ancient town of Hay-on-Wye is located on the northern edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park where the Black Mountains drop down to the River Wye. The north and east outskirts of the town are in England, while the town centre is in Wales.

The town centre is dominated by the remains of Hay Castle which was largely destroyed by Owain Glyndwr in 1402. During the 17th century, a Jacobean mansion was set into the Norman Castle walls. Hay became a bustling market town where people from the surrounding countryside could come and shop for all their needs. The railway network reached Hay in 1864, and train services were withdrawn almost 100 years later.

Hay-on-Wye is now better known as the 'Town of Books'. Richard Booth, the current owner of Hay Castle, opened his first second-hand bookshop in 1961 and now there are over 30 shops selling books, with many others selling crafts, prints and antiques. The annual Hay Festival of Literature, held in May, draws thousands of visitors to the town.

This is a circular walk, leading from the town centre down to, and along, the riverside. ***This involves a moderately steep tarmac ramp (1:8 average) up into Bridge Street and a road crossing at a busy junction, with narrow pavements.*** The first part of the walk to St Mary's Church is on tarmac pavements, and then a gravel path leads down to the riverside path which is mainly flat. The last part of the walk also uses tarmac pavements and paths through the town centre. Going west from Hay, the Wye Valley Walk provides about 3.5km of accessible riverside path, without any stiles. This is a pleasant, easy stroll towards Llowes, ***along level, field edge paths, which are somewhat uneven in places.***

Please note that in wet conditions the surface of natural paths can be prone to become more uneven and difficult to negotiate.

Start point for the walk

The walk starts from the town centre pay and display car park in Oxford Road (B4348) next to the TIC and craft centre building. Public toilets are also located here, and there is a separate disabled WC facility operated by Radar key.

Relevant OS Maps

Explorer Map OL13 – Brecon Beacons National Park (Eastern area)

Outdoor Leisure Map 161 – The Black Mountains

Detailed Walk description

Leave the car park using the main entrance and turn left into Oxford Road passing the TIC and craft centre building on your left. It may be worthwhile visiting the TIC at the start of your walk. Ask for a copy of the Hay on Wye Information Guide (free) which lists local attractions and shops. It also contains a useful fold out town map inside the back cover. Continue to the junction with Church Street and turn left. Carefully cross the road and head downhill towards the Swan Hotel. Turn right just before reaching the hotel. After passing the entrance to the cattle market car park on the right, look out for the remains of a motte and bailey castle, which is said to have been built by Bernard de Newmarch in the 1100's following the Norman invasion.

Continue along this street to reach a narrow path on the right, just after a seat at the back of the pavement. If you wish to enter St Mary's Church, note that there are two steps at the entrance porch. A removable ramp is available for wheelchair users and is kept just inside the entrance. The church has an unusual first floor gallery. A £70,000 refurbishment scheme was completed in 2006 which involved structural repairs, re-roofing, re-wiring and the installation of new lighting.

Now follow the gravel path (1 metre minimum width), beside the churchyard wall downhill towards the river. After 80m you arrive at a

Y junction of paths, where you have a choice of route. Turn right if you wish to follow National Cycle Route 42 which follows the former mid-Wales railway. This route runs parallel to the riverside path, at a slightly higher level. Keep straight ahead through a short tunnel to reach the riverside footpath and then turn right.

This is a well used compacted earth path, mainly level, but with some gentle slopes (minimum width 1.2m). Having passed three seats, at 50m intervals bear right along the upper path (the lower path leads down to the waterside) and pass another seat on the right. After 80m, go through a wooden gate, to arrive beneath the concrete bridge which carries the Hay to Clyro road across the river.

At this point there are two choices.

The shortest route into the town uses the tarmac path on the right. It reaches Bridge Street after a 50 metre gradient uphill of 1:8. Then turn left to reach Broad Street in 60m, where there are drop kerbs at the junction. Turn right along Bridge Street to reach the town centre.

To avoid the short uphill path, you can follow a slightly longer alternative. Continue under the concrete road bridge and follow the riverside path, passing two more seats and then, on the left a canoe landing stage. Go through a car park (with an uneven stone surface) and turn right into Wyeford Street. This will lead you out into Newport Street, where you turn right uphill to reach Broad Street and the town centre.

The clock tower stands at the entrance to several narrow streets dotted with bookshops, cafes, galleries and antique shops. You have several choices of route back to the central car park. Perhaps one of the most convenient ways is to take the pedestrian lane which links Castle Street with Oxford Road, bringing you out directly opposite the entrance to the car park.