

AONB UNIT & PARTNER REPORTS

Purpose

To advise members of activity of the Wye Valley National Landscape Team and other partners.

FOR INFORMATION

Below and attached are update reports on the following National Landscape Team & partner initiatives: -

- a. AONB Partnership Study Tour 2024 feedback
- b. Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Strategy, Action Plan & Steering Group
- c. Wye Valley Walk
- d. Off Road Wheeling weekend
- e. Volunteer activity
- f. Young Adventurers

a. AONB Partnership Study Tour 2024 feedback

The Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership Annual Tour was held on Friday 20th September. The programme focused on projects supported through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme and land management issues in the Herefordshire part of the National Landscape. The Tour included visits to: Kilforge Farm, Bolstone, looking at the free-range egg production enterprise and FiPL maize undersowing & Natural Flood Management (NFM) projects; Ballingham Court Farm, Ballingham, looking at FiPL projects and other enterprises including agroforestry, orchards, solar panels, beef & arable production, anaerobic digester, barn restoration & glamping and; DEFRA Access for All projects & Willow Walk at Ross Riverside with Ross Walkers are Welcome, looking at new disabled parking & new bridges by the Rowing Club. A total of 34 people attended the Tour with a good spread of representation from throughout the National Landscape. Feedback from attendees has been extremely positive and the time and dedication of the speakers and hosts was greatly appreciated.

b. Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Strategy, Action Plan & Steering Group

The first Steering Group meeting has been held, to discuss and plan initial actions for implementing the Lower Wye Tracks and Trails Strategy in the Monmouthshire part of the Wye Valley National Landscape. The Steering Group is constituted as a sub-group of the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum. Celyn Davies has taken over the role as Lower Wye Projects Officer and is leading on co-ordinating Action Plan proposals where appropriate. The Group discussed focusing on two initial projects: improving signage and conducting route surveys. Signage efforts will target high-conflict areas like Tintern and Whitebrook to clarify legal usage. Surveys will assess route conditions, surrounding landscape features, and maintenance needs.

A site visit is planned for late November to view issues first-hand and consider potential survey methods. It was recognised that proper signage is the first step to enable both understanding and enforcement. Education and behaviour change efforts with both users and residents are needed but are a longer-term goal.

c. Wye Valley Walk Update: 50 years of the Wye Valley Walk 1975 - 2025

2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the Wye Valley Walk an iconic long-distance recreational walking route, which follows the Wye for 138 miles of river and hill walking, from the rugged uplands and mountains of mid Wales to Chepstow near the mouth with the River Severn.

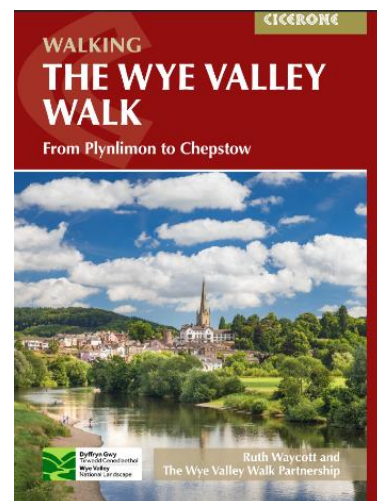


History of the walk

It is more than 50 years since the Wye Valley National Landscape was designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty. Around the same time the idea of creating a long distance walk following the River Wye was mooted and, in 1975, the first 14 mile section of the Wye Valley Walk was opened between St Arvans and Monmouth. Over the next 30 years stretches were added to reach Chepstow, Ross-on-Wye, Hereford, Hay-on-Wye and Rhayader. The final section was completed in 2002, taking the path within viewing distance of the source of the Wye on Plynlimon, with the walk finishing at Rhyd-y-benwch in Hafren Forest. This was made possible with the support and enthusiasm of the four local authorities through which the Walk passes – Monmouthshire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Powys – who came together to form the Wye Valley Walk Partnership, with the Wye Valley National Landscape (previously Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) taking on the role of lead partner.

New Source-to-Sea Official Guide

As the route grew incrementally upstream, various editions of the Official Route Guide started the Walk from Cheptow. In 2008 the Wye Valley Walk Partnership began working with leading walking guide publisher Cicerone, to produce a new edition of the official Wye Valley Walk route guide, running from Chepstow to the source on Plynlimon. Since then thousands of walkers have completed the route and claimed their Wye Valley Walk certificate and badge, including plenty of octogenarians and the many dogs. Following multiple requests for the walk to become a Source-to-Sea route, the decision was taken to produce a new Cicerone guide for the 50th anniversary, with directions running from Plynlimon down to Chepstow. This guide is now published and will be launched in November.

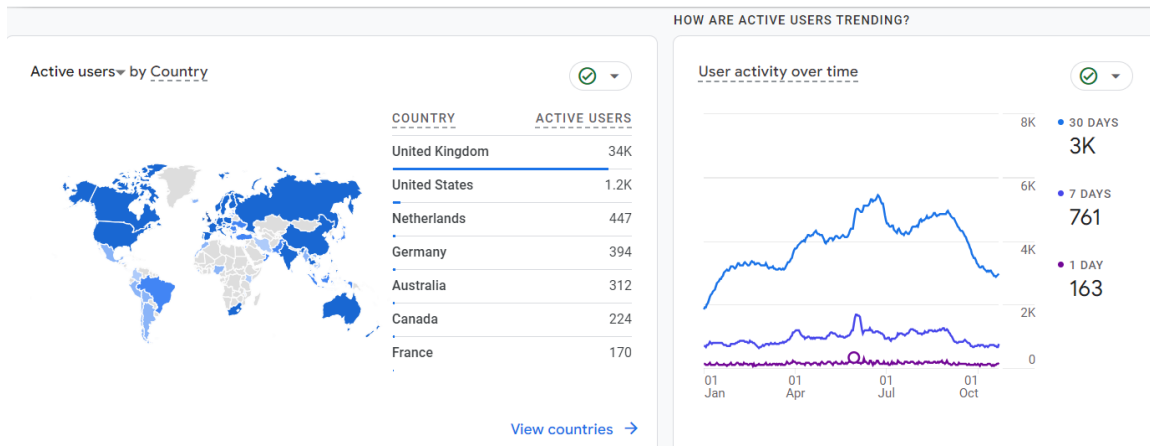


Wyevalleywalk.org

The new guidebook complements the Wye Valley Walk website <https://www.wyevalleywalk.org/> which has had so far in 2024 38,000 visits with worldwide interest.

Economic Impact

Walkers travel from around the world to enjoy the outstanding natural beauty along the trail, with at least six walking holiday operators offering Wye Valley Walk itineraries.



It is estimated more than 10,000 people use the Wye Valley Walk each year, supporting jobs in the tourism industry and benefitting the rural economy. There are several luggage transfer and taxi drop off services, as well as specialist walkers' accommodation servicing the growing market for walking holidays.

Infrastructure and interpretation

Waymarking, which was installed over 20 years ago in some places, is desperately in need of upgrading. We have been working with the Wye Valley Walk Partnership Rights of Way Officers to audit and replace waymarking. Ross Walkers are Welcome have undertaken a fantastic survey of the route from Hereford to the Monmouthshire border and in partnership with local Parish Footpaths Officers are replacing waymarkers. Staffing and budget constraints have limited work in Powys and parts of Herefordshire, but we hope to have a much better waymarked route for the start of the walking season next spring.



Along the route walkers pass places with amazing historical and cultural stories, but much of the interpretation along the route is past its prime. To bring stories to life and enhance the visitor experience, it is planned to introduce 'Wye-lights' interpretation on waymarker posts, using a mix of traditional and QR code interpretation to tell key stories.



It is also planned to install a few Wye Valley Walk benches to mark the 50th anniversary.



Events

A programme of guided walks covering each of the 17 sections of the path between Hafren Forest and Chepstow, is being organised between April and October 2025, led by local walking groups, walking holiday company staff and Wye Valley National Landscape staff.

Promotional Activity

On behalf of the Wye Valley Walk Partnership, the Wye Valley National Landscape Information Officer will be liaising with journalists and walking personalities to encourage them to try out the walk and write features for the walking press throughout 2025, including Trail magazine which will kick start the anniversary year with a feature this December.

It is planned to launch on-line activity on Christmas Day evening /Boxing Day as we know from previous years we get a big surge of hits on the website at this time. There will be content-rich social campaign running throughout the year on Instagram and Twitter.

The partnership with Cicerone is on-going with them creating two new articles for their website in January, and then featuring the Wye Valley Walk in their April/ May customer newsletter and on their social channels through the year.

Research from walkers who have completed the route shows that they are very much 'Independent Explorers' looking for freedom, a challenge, an experience away from the crowds and that they feel refreshed and relaxed after completing the Walk.

- d. Off Road Wheeling weekend** – see attached report
- e. Volunteer activity** – see attached report
- f. Young Adventurers** – see attached report