

Historical Journeys along 3 Welsh Rivers

1. Introduction

Questioned about the longest rivers in Wales, many would come up with the River Severn, although it is best described as Anglo-Welsh, with the larger part of its course in England. Next in most eyes would come the River Wye, 217km long, and discharging water at a mean rate of 965000 gallons per minute, (close to 100 large tanker loads per minute), and it is sensibly viewed as the longest and largest river in Wales. However, the River Wye is the subject of a number of accounts, some of which are in my bibliography, and I have not felt any desire to add to that literature. Instead I have given attention to the next 3 rivers, ordered by length, which are as follows;

1. [River Usk](#) which is 130km long and discharges water at a rate of c520000 gallons per minute (52 tanker loads per minute)
2. [River Towy](#) which is 121km long and discharges water at a mean rate of 750000 gallons per minute (76 tanker loads per minute)
3. [River Teifi](#) which is 120km long and discharges water at a mean rate of c430000 gallons per minute (43 tanker loads per minute)

The names of the rivers above serve as entry points to the separate accounts of the historical journeys made along them. Click on the name, to reach each river journey; for added ease, I have also appended links at the end of the introduction.

As with the other journeys in the series, those along Welsh rivers have been in an important sense virtual, in that I have not tramped for significant distances along any of the river banks. For the most part, I have followed the rivers on Google maps and satellite views, identified sites of interest, and pulled together information and photographs already acquired, in a coherent way. I made targeted visits to deal with omissions, after I realised that I was going to produce these accounts, though regrettably there have been some omissions. Time constraints necessitated such an economical approach as I do not live in the area, though I have made many visits both specifically to visit the sites in question, and before that, en-route to South Wales for business purposes. It is fair to say that I am more familiar with the River Usk, than the Rivers Towy and Teifi, but I have tried to do justice to all of them. Sometimes I have found no way of getting a desired view, usually because the site concerned is private, which status has been respected by doing no more than mentioning the building of interest. Where access is available occasionally or conditionally, I have sometimes used photographs taken from the internet, if possible, acknowledging their provenance. In other cases, usually near sources of rivers, points of interest were beyond my reach physically, and again I have used any photographs I have been able to find; Claytons book 'Headwaters'⁽¹⁾ has helped me to plug some of those gaps.

Otherwise, I have referred to many documents, including books, monographs, published learned papers and websites; those which have been helpful, on each of the journeys, are listed together in the reference list/bibliography which appears after this introduction, but it is right to highlight entries in the Coflein⁽²⁾ and British Listed Buildings⁽³⁾ websites which have been indispensable, and can be used to fill out many of the short accounts presented here. Maps on the Welsh National Library website⁽⁴⁾ have also been invaluable in

considering the history of bridges on the rivers, while those on the National Library of Scotland website⁽⁵⁾ have given a late 19th century baseline to my historical enquiries and have been a key tool for identifying the sites of water mills. Websites focussed on small towns and specific localities have supplied useful information, though this will have to serve as an all-embracing acknowledgement because preparing a full listing has been a task too far. Wikipedia⁽⁶⁾ has proved an easily accessible 'fact checker' and source of photographs. This is not an academic monograph, so I have identified helpful sources once as here, and do so similarly in the individual river journey accounts, but do not repeat the reference each time a statement is based on information drawn from it. There is another area in which my acknowledgement of sources may be seen as minimal, namely for the photographs I include. Many of them are my own, but others are not. Where the latter are rare on the internet, sometimes because they were obviously difficult to obtain, I give the name of the person wielding the camera in the text. Where there is a profusion of like-photographs on the internet, my choice has been fairly arbitrary, and I hope that this blanket acknowledgement of my gratitude will suffice, remembering that I will derive no pecuniary advantage from the document. If not, then any aggrieved party can contact me by way of the response mechanism on my master website⁽⁷⁾, and I shall remove the offending item, though I hope this will not be necessary.

The places described are all fairly near to the rivers in question, and although I have allowed myself the occasional detour, especially in riverside towns, I have rarely left the catchment. The aim has been to keep the rivers and their tributaries central to the narrative, rather than using them as a vehicle for a wider study of the lands around them. An ever-present temptation, when producing a document of this type, is the inclusion of too much information. I have read a few such narratives and some give details of every settlement, so that no place stands out. Here, I have tried to preserve a sense that anywhere given more than a passing reference has 'earned' it, because of some distinctive or unusual feature(s). My attitude towards historical figures associated with the rivers has been similar, with short biographies only for the most influential. I give considerable attention to water mills and old bridges, because in a special sense, they are buildings of the rivers, as opposed to just being near to them. As regards bridges, I will perhaps be forgiven for steering anyone, who wants more information than I give here, to my own compendium.

This is an appropriate place to acknowledge the help I have received from my brother, Alastair Robertson who has prepared the sketch maps which show the river courses and identify the water mills on them; these items appear at the end of each account of a river journey. The main references, apart from those already quoted are indicated here^{(8), (9), (10), (11)}. In this regard, only those mills operating in the period from the 17th to the 20th century are included, as only they can be located with confidence. Of course some mills have a longer history than that, some existing from medieval times, but they may be long-gone; those known about may be mentioned in the text, but they do not appear in the sketch maps.

It would be dishonest to say that we have found Welsh place names easy to deal with, and I am indeed thankful that I will not have to read aloud my own text. Inevitably the documents contain a mixture of Welsh and English. The 3 main rivers are all named throughout in English, but the tributaries are 'Afons', 'Nants', 'Cwms', etc. The English version is given for places and artefacts well-known by that name, but for the great majority, and practically all the watermills, the Welsh name is used. I am sure that this approach will cause irritation to some, and I can only hope that it does not detract from any enjoyment that the documents may provide

It is wise at the outset to consider the hoped-for audience for a piece of work like this. I have visited at least some of the area regularly over the past 40 years and viewed most of the towns, villages, mansions, ruins and other artefacts described, but in a largely unstructured way. As a result, I have missed seeing things which would have been of considerable interest and have certainly not followed an optimal path. So, apart from reflecting an abiding interest in rivers, and everything physically associated with them, the document uses the courses of the rivers to provide a logical and coherent way of viewing points of interest near to them. I would hope to assist visitors and local residents, who might like to trace a stretch of river and view features and artefacts there. I suspect that I have less to say to those with real knowledge and expertise about the areas, but some may be like me in wishing to read critically anything dealing with a topic of interest. Even though it is a negative note to end on, I should make it clear that there are aspects of the rivers which are hardly touched on in the document. Although I do try to identify nature reserves and areas of special scientific interest, I have virtually nothing to say about the plant and animal life in and around the rivers, nor do I have much to say about fishing. There is nothing in the document to aid the navigation by any canoeist or boating enthusiast, and that includes finding hostelry, though I would hope that my account might enhance the enjoyment of any journeys they make along the rivers concerned, by identifying artefacts they might see in passing and by suggesting stopping-off points. These interests seem to be well catered for on specialist websites nowadays, in truth rather better than some of the topics which I consider. Finally I make the point that I have made little effort to produce folksy accounts, sparing little space to local worthies, or amusing incidents, which have become parts of the folklore of places, albeit that I occasionally stray into those realms, and provide a few personal reminiscences of little general import. Rightly or wrongly I see the document as serious and fact-based, but hopefully none the less interesting for that. My reference/list bibliography follows after the links.

Links:

[River Usk](#)

[River Towy](#)

[River Teifi](#)

References & Bibliography

I have pulled together the references for the accounts of the journeys along all 3 rivers into one table. I only make a single reference to each item; I wish to identify helpful sources, rather than to validate individual statements as in an academic paper or monograph. In addition, I list a few documents of interest which are not specifically referenced in the accounts. I should add that I read with interest many websites and parts thereof, without drawing on their contents other than generally; to have included them would have enormously expanded this list, and risked losing track of the references that had real impact on what I have written. * Indicates item of interest not referred to in the accounts.

Ref. No.	Source Type	Title	Author	Meta-data, e.g., publication details, website address	Comments
1	Book	Headwaters, Walking to British River Sources	Clayton P.	Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2012	Information about river sources, hard to access
2	Website	Coflein		coflein.gov.uk	Historical artefacts described
3	Website	British Listed Buildings		britishlistedbuildings.co.uk	Historic buildings described
4	Website	National Library of Wales		www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/maps-1/county-maps	Digitised old maps
5	Website	National Library of Scotland		nls.uk	Digitised old OS maps
6	Website	Wikipedia		https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki	Fact checker
7	Website	Dr Tom's Books		drtomsbooks.com	Information on old bridges, castles, abbeys
8	Website	Mills and Waterpower in Glamorgan and Gwent		http://orapweb.rcahms.gov.uk/coflein//6/630488.PDF	Lists of watermills + data
9	Website	Mills Archive		https://catalogue.millsarchive.org/watermill-survey	Lists of watermills + data
10	Website	Welsh Mills Society		http://welshmills.org/	Watermills references
11	Website	Medieval and Early Post-Medieval Mills		http://www.dyfedarchaeology.org.uk/projects/medievalmills2012-14.pdf	List of watermills in Dyfed
12	Website	Engineering Timelines		engineering-timelines.com	Details of bridges & reservoirs
13	Website	National River Flow Archive		nrfa.ceh.ac.uk/	River flow rates
14	Website	Usk Valley Industrial Archaeology		www.industrialgwent.co.uk/f21-rural/index.htm	Photographs of 18/19 th C industrial relics
15	Book	The Ancient Bridges of Wales & Western England	Jervoise E.	EP Publishing Ltd., 1976 (1936)	Incomparable survey of old bridges
*	Book	Wye	Hayman R.	Logaston Press, 2016	Account of the River Wye
*	Book	The River Wye – A Pictorial History	Jeremiah J.	Phillimore & Co., 2004	As in Title
*	Book	The River Wye	Kissack K.	Terence Dalton, 1985	Account of the River Wye
*	Book	Rivers of Britain – Estuaries, Tideways, etc.	Fisher S.	Adlard Coles Nautical, 2012	Describes estuaries of River Towy & Afon Taf
*	Book	The Teifi – Scenery & Antiquities of a Welsh River	Colyer R. J.	Gomer Press, 1978	As in Title
*	Website	River Towy – From Source to Sea		https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4YvU-8EaTk	Drone film