

The Hidden Highway

Along the Wales/England border you'll discover so much more than castles and splendid scenery *By Wendy & Rob Lindsay*



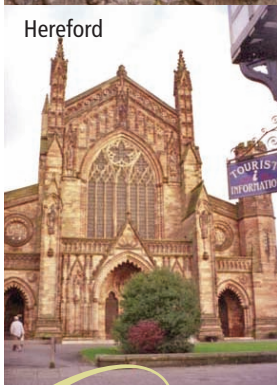
Titley, near Kington



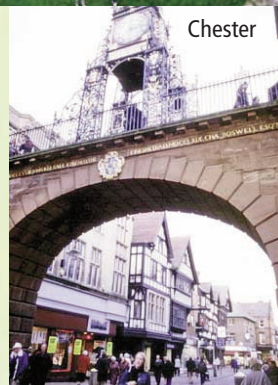
Ludlow



Eaton Constantine



Hereford



Chester



Stokesay

On a motoring holiday in England and Wales you may long to escape the hectic pace of the four-lane M5 and M6. The solution is the intriguing back road route known as The Hidden Highway.

This north-south serpentine route winds through The Marches – beautiful, unspoiled countryside situated along the borderlands of England and Wales. As history buffs know, borderlands are also the best place to find castles and fortresses. The route begins in Hereford in the south and runs north to Chester, slipping back and forth across the Welsh border as you go.

We began our drive at the ancient cathedral city of Hereford. Exploring this delightful city on the River Wye can fill a whole day. The venerable Hereford Cathedral dates from the eleventh century. Its main attraction is the Mappa Mundi, a map of the world drawn around 1290, considered the oldest global map in existence. It gives a fascinating insight into the medieval view of life, depicting the world as a circle surrounded by seas with Jerusalem at the centre of everything.

The Chained Library

The entrance fee to the Mappa Mundi vault also allows you to see the chained library, thought to be the largest collection of chained books in the world. Fastening books to the bookcase or reading table by a chain was a practice begun in the Middle Ages to keep readers from removing the valuable handwritten volumes. The bookcases are seventeenth century and the oldest volume dates to 1012.

Approved academic scholars can secure permission to research in this historic museum. The cathedral's Cloister coffee shop is worth a visit too. This coffee shop became rather notorious when it was discovered it afforded the best view of some ancient titillating carvings on wooden beams, which, in the name of history, cannot be altered.

Next is Hay-on-Wye, which straddles the Welsh/English border and is a booklovers dream. The town proclaims itself the second-hand book capital of the world, with over a million volumes available. You really have to wander the streets to believe the variety of specialty bookshops. We browsed shops with military books, art books, poetry, cooking, gardening, mystery novels, romance, history and maps. Hay Castle stands on high ground above the streets. Part of the old ruin is – you guessed it – a bookshop. A side trip over picturesque



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Hay-on-Wye, the “second-hand book capital of the world,” oodles of little shops along winding streets with over a million books to browse.

Hay Bluff, above the village, affords some spectacular views from its steep and narrow track.

We come upon the sleepy little market town of Kington next. It is a popular base for walkers hiking the remaining 64 miles (103 km) of Offa's Dyke Path. The neighbouring town of Knighton has a good visitor centre with models and explanations of historic Offa's Dyke – thought to have been a defensive earthwork built by King Offa (757-796) between his kingdom of Mercia and Powys (present day Wales.)

Nearby, the Kingswood Small Breeds Farm Park and Owl Centre, on the outskirts of Kington, allows visitors the rare opportunity to observe all British owls, as well as many spectacular species from around the world.

Ludlow Castle Ruins

The medieval town of Ludlow is dominated by an impressive and once powerful castle. It is amusing to imagine castle life as you roam the wind-swept ruins. Each summer, the spectacular castle ruins come alive with Shakespearean plays. The Town of Ludlow, notable as the home of the greatest number of Michelin approved restaurants in England, is also a collectors' haven, with many antique shops and galleries. Among the fine black-and-white timber-framed buildings is Feathers, which dates to 1619 and is reportedly the most-pho-

tographed inn in the country.

A short distance away is Craven Arms, with a thirteenth century fortified manor house Stokesay Castle; it is the most perfectly preserved of its kind in England. Although Stokesay can be viewed from the road, you can take the tour and speculate on the intrigue behind its secret stairways and peepholes in the great hall.

“A Shropshire Lad”

Clun is close to the halfway point on the Hidden Highway. This is hiking country with many trails and splendid views. It is also the countryside immortalized by A.E.Housman in his narrative poem “A Shropshire Lad”. The scenery is an ever-changing patchwork of fields and meadows, stretching over verdant undulating hills. For dinner that night, we enjoyed a good meal and jovial local company at the Jolly Frog Country Pub and Restaurant in the village of Leintwardine.

The charming market town of Church Stretton lies at the foot of a mountain-like hill called The Long Mynd. We'd been told that, from its summit, there is a wonderful panoramic view looking west to the lush landscape of Wales and east out over the rolling Shropshire hills.

Ready for adventure, we followed local directions to Carding Mill Valley from whence you can drive to the top of the Mynd. However, you need a

gutsy vehicle and a driver not timid of heights, grazing sheep, or backing up to the last lay-bye on a narrow mountain road. Later at the Buck's Head pub the locals told us we could have caught a National Trust van that carries hikers to the top and leaves them to hike down.

Wenlock Edge is one of the best examples of an escarpment in Britain. It runs from Much Wenlock to Craven Arms. There are hiking and bridle trails and also narrow country roads. We detoured off the main route between Bridgenorth and Craven Arms to venture along B4371, and headed toward Hughly just to enjoy the dramatic scenery. Here you feel as though you're the only living soul for miles. Until, around the next corner, you meet a farm tractor with a loaded wagon and you have to backup to the last lay-bye. It is all good fun when you are not in a hurry.

Another recommended circuit off the Hidden Highway is a loop through Ironbridge where the Industrial Revolution began. One could spend a whole day exploring the open air and indoor museums. Drive on to Shrewsbury, considered England's finest Tudor town.

Brother Cadfael's Homeland

Shrewsbury is packed with history from its 1160's castle, narrow winding streets, medieval market square, half-timbered buildings, and many fine churches. The most notable is the Church of St Peter and Paul with the little silver footprint imbedded in the sidewalk. This is the setting of Ellis Peters' fictional medieval detective, Brother Cadfael. All 20 of her Cadfael murder mysteries are set in the area around Shrewsbury, or in Brother Cadfael's homeland of Wales.

Back on the Hidden Highway, you come to the Welsh market town of Oswestry, and just beyond it Chirk



Charming Welsh mountain village of Llangollen, offering music, craft shops, a steam train, canal boats and the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct (the highest in Britain.)

Castle. A unique example of a Welsh border fortress, this castle (circa 1595) saw action during the English Civil War. Chirk Castle offers something for everyone, from climbing rough stone stairs spiralling up to the tower, or descending to the former dungeon, or wandering through elegant state-rooms filled with fine tapestries, portraits and furniture.

The final side trip is to the lovely mountain village of Llangollen. In addition to a wonderful array of Celtic craft shops, it has a spectacular aqueduct (the largest in Britain and one of the Seven Wonders of Wales), which crosses the river Dee some 126 feet above the valley floor.

The Men of Harlech

Canal boats cruise the river and hikers walk along the towpath. Llangollen is also famed for its steam railway and the annual Eisteddfod International Music Festival, which attracts participants from more than 30 countries. Music and Wales are synonymous. One of our favourite memories is sitting in on a rehearsal of a Welsh male choir. We'll long remember how the music rose and swelled around us as the power of male voices joined in The Men of Harlech, one of the best loved and perhaps the unofficial anthem of Wales.

Our final destination, and the end

of the Hidden Highway, is the city of Chester. Its heritage extends back 2,000 years and today is one of Britain's showpieces of history and architecture. It is the shopping centre for most of the surrounding countryside, with some of the most interesting shops and pubs at The Rows. These are balconied black-and-white half-timbered buildings of two or three storeys, unique to Chester.

Medieval Architecture

Hundreds of years before the modern shopping centre, The Rows offered shops and streets on two levels. You can get a feel for the city by walking around the top of the old city wall to see the river, much of the old town and some of the old Roman ruins. The Chester Cathedral is one of the most visited in England. Built between 1093 and 1537, it incorporates all the major styles of English medieval architecture. Make certain to see the humorous details on hand-carved choir stalls from 1380. Apparently the carver was depicting an elephant from the description given him, although he had very obviously never seen one himself.

And thus after market towns, historic castles, country pubs, lush rolling hills, beautiful valleys, and over 173 miles (280 km), we end the Hidden Highway as we began – at another venerable cathedral. ■