

Royal Forest Route

This circuit through the heart of the Forest of Dean has been divided into two halves. The first section, from the Dean Heritage Centre to Clearwell Caves, is the best route and starting point for visitors arriving from Gloucester and the East. For those joining the Royal Forest Route from the West (Wye Valley and Severn Bridge) we recommend that you join at Clearwell Caves and start with the section between Clearwell Caves and the Dean Heritage Centre.

Remember that the route is only 20 miles long. There is plenty of time to stop, visit the attractions and enjoy the beauty spots. Plan your own diversions as well – to visit the Dean Forest Railway, Symonds Yat, nearby Newent...there are many other options. On the website you'll find details of attractions and guides to help you plan.

Start at Dean Heritage Centre if arriving from the East

Dean Heritage Centre - Cannop Ponds - Speech House - Coleford - Clearwell Caves

1. The Dean Heritage Centre

The Dean Heritage Centre is an essential introduction to the Forest of Dean. Based around five galleries, it tells the story of Dean's unique culture and environment. Woodland walks, a rooftop terrace cafe and a picnic and barbecue area complement special exhibitions and craft demonstrations throughout the year.

- From the Dean Heritage Centre car park, turn left: You are heading for the heart of the Forest of Dean!
- Immediately on your right you will pass Soudley Ponds Nature Reserve, a pleasant spot for a picnic or walk.
- At the next junction follow the brown and white 'Scenic Route' signs for one and a half miles to Ruspidge.
- At Ruspidge you could stop and take the 'Blue Rock Trail' (on your right) a pleasant walk and picnic site or turn off to the Rainforest Collection (a collection of paintings and sculptures) marked by a Brown and White signpost.
- Follow the road to the T-junction at the end, opposite you will see the White Hart Inn. To continue on the Royal Forest Route turn left and follow signs for the Speech House (B4226).
- Shortly after, on the right you will pass Brown and White signs leading to Winners Cycle Hire (100 yards down from the White Hart Inn).
- Stay on route for two and a half miles. You will notice picnic sites on either side of this road. Each site provides picnic benches and some provide barbecues. Shortly before the Speech House, on the left-hand side of the road opposite the Speech House Woodland you will find the signposted Cyril Hart Arboretum. Ernest Wilson, known as 'Chinese Wilson' as a result of his collecting trips to the East started this fine collection of trees in 1916. There is a picnic site and parking. A trail for the visually impaired is provided.
- Further along the road (300 yards) on the left hand side is the Speech House Hotel.

2. The Speech House Hotel

The Speech House Hotel is a forest landmark. Built in 1676 as a hunting lodge for Charles II (his Arms can still be seen in the hotel's stonework). The building became the administrative centre of the forest, with the largest room being the Verderers' Court.

- Opposite the hotel you will find a stone monument that marks the centre of the Forest.
- Continuing past The Speech House Hotel you will soon see Beechenhurst Lodge signposted on the right.

3. Beechenhurst Lodge Visitor Centre

Beechenhurst has paid parking for cars and coaches (be sure to have some change ready). It also has toilets and an excellent cafeteria. Around the lodge are barbecue hearths, suitable for both small and large groups of people. This is the starting point for the Sculpture Trail, you can buy a guide at the lodge. Sculptures such as the 'Giant's Chair' and 'Cathedral' add highlights to a gentle and picturesque two-mile route.

- To rejoin the Royal Forest Route, turn right out of Beechenhurst and follow the road down the hill.
- Just before the crossroads on the left you will find the entrance to Cannop Ponds.

4. Cannop Ponds

Cannop Ponds is another popular wooded picnic spot overlooking a pond. It's an ideal spot for lunch with the family, with a woodland stream that holds a fascination over younger children.

- Leaving Cannop Ponds the way you came in turn left and continue straight over the crossroads along the Royal Forest Route signposted for Coleford B4226.
- At this point you can seek out Pedalabikeaway (Forest Cycle Centre) by turning right at the crossroads. Follow Brown and White signposts. From Pedalabikeaway there are marked cycle routes through the forest.
- Back on the Royal Forest Route you will see Brown and White signs for Hopewell Colliery, a reminder of the coal mining tradition in the Forest.
- Turn right off the main road into Hopewell Colliery, or continue straight on for Coleford Town Centre.

5. Hopewell Colliery

An ideal location to go underground and see a Forest of Dean coal mine, with mine workings dating back to the 1820's. The attraction is open everyday during the main season and has a cafe.

- * A little further on from Hopewell Colliery you can turn right at the next crossroads for Symonds Yat Rock viewpoint (B4432).
- To continue along the route go straight over the crossroads and follow the road downhill towards Coleford (B4226). Turn left at the end of the road, towards Coleford.
- Coleford is a busy working town with a long history: you can follow the Coleford Town Walk which highlights historic buildings. It was here in the 1800's that Robert Mushet invented the process of making steel. The Coleford Tourist Information

Centre offers advice, information and accommodation bookings.

- On reaching Coleford, turn left at the traffic lights to continue on the Royal Forest Route, following the B4228 and Brown and White signposts for 'Clearwell Caves', Perrygrove, Puzzlewood' (or for Coleford Town Centre and the Tourist Information Kiosk, go straight ahead at the traffic lights).
- On the Royal Forest Route following the B4228 go straight over at the next set of traffic lights and head out of town. Perrygrove Railway is half a mile further on, on the left.

6. Perrygrove Railway

Here you can travel for 11/2 miles on a unique 15" gauge estate steam railway and follow an all weather treasure hunt. An ideal attraction for children.

- 400 yards further along the B4228 is Puzzlewood on the right hand side. This is an extraordinary visitor attraction that defies easy description.

7. Puzzlewood

Puzzlewood is a former (pre-Roman) open cast ore mine, although its popularity today is really due to the extraordinary landscape that the grown-over ore workings have created. A maze of paths with seats and bridges disorientate and surprise at every turn and it has been used as a filming location for many BBC productions, which include 'Merlin' and 'Doctor Who'.

- The Royal Forest Route continues from Puzzlewood to Clearwell Caves. Come out of Puzzlewood and turn right towards the Caves, follow the Brown and White signposts. Take the next right turn off the main road after about 400 yards up the road and follow the road down the hill. The caves are about 400 yards down the hill on the left-hand side of the road.

Start at Clearwell Caves if arriving from the West

Clearwell Caves - Clearwell - Newland - Nags Head - Mallards Pike

8. Clearwell Caves

The caves are a unique part of Britain's heritage. Iron ore has been mined here for nearly 3000 years to form an incredible system of underground tunnels and chambers, of which 8 large caverns are now open to the public. Originally a natural cave system, it is partially filled with iron ore, which has been mined extensively since the beginning of the Iron Age. Today, there is a fashionable demand for Clearwell Ochre, an oxide pigment mined underground. Reds, yellows, purples and browns are used for colourings, from watercolours to interior decoration.

- Leave Clearwell Caves and turn left, downhill to continue on the Royal Forest Route.
Just down the road from here is Clearwell, an attractive village with several good pubs and inns. This section of the Royal Forest Route includes some of the scenic highlights of the Forest, and some excellent picnic spots.
- In Clearwell there is a monument in the centre of the village, opposite The Wyndham Arms. Turn left at the monument to continue along route signposted for Clearwell Castle (not open to the public), that you will soon pass on your right.
- Continue on the Royal Forest Route past the Castle until you see signs for Coleford on the left.
- On the bend turn left, signposted towards Coleford.
- Continue along this road for 300 yards to the T-Junction. Turn left signposted Coleford (B4228).
- You will pass the Orepool Inn on your right. Continue along the road through Sling and before the Miner's Arms turn right signposted to Parkend.
- * You can visit the old mine at Ellwood which is on the route just before the next T-junction. Here in 1850, the first steel in the world was manufactured. Enter the car park off the road at the top of the hill on the left. Walk down to the site.
- At the T-junction, turn right signposted for Blakeney. On this road you will pass a sign for the Gloucestershire Way and also the Mary Rose Young Pottery shop, both on your left. Further along on your left (1.5 miles) is the Nags Head Nature Reserve (RSPB).

9. Nags Head Nature Reserve

This reserve is mostly oak woodland and is a great place for bird spotting with about 2,000 nest boxes on the site. Here in the summer months you can see such rarities as the Pied Flycatcher, the Redstart or the Wood Warbler. There's an information centre for more details on birds and other animals in the area.

- Come out of the Reserve and turn left and continue to follow signs for Blakeney. Bear left round the corner where you will find the Woodman Pub on your left.
- Continue straight along this road following signposts for Blakeney.
- To visit New Fancy View, a popular bird-viewing site, turn left off the route following signposts for Cinderford and The Speech House. New Fancy View is on the right (300 Yards) and is signposted.
- Back on the Royal Forest Route after half a mile you will find Mallards Pike signposted on your left.

10. Mallards Pike

This lake and picnic area (with loos) offers gentle walking and wonderful views. At the lake you can see a sculpture of the frog and the mermaid. The name refers to a tollhouse that once stood there.

Turn left out of Mallards Pike and continue along the road. ñ`

- Take the first left turning after about a mile (under a former railway bridge). If you want to stop at Wenchford Picnic Site it's on the right just before the bridge and is clearly signposted.
- Pass under the bridge and you will now be on the road known by the locals as 'The Roman Road'. It is also the road we like to callThe Golden Mile.
Everyone will have their own favourite area of the Forest, but in autumn, the route between Wenchford Picnic Site and the return route to The Dean Heritage Centre is spectacular. The Golden Mile is, we think, the 'must see' part of the Forest for the autumn months when the whole area is a riot of colour.
- Turn right at the T-junction to return to the Dean Heritage Centre.
This will take you back to the start of the route. For those who started the route at Clearwell Caves turn right to visit the Dean Heritage Centre and then follow directions for the route from this point.