

A countess, a collie, and a walk along Offa's Dyke

Sally FitzHarris, Countess of Malmesbury, tells of an 80-mile adventure with only her dog Flora for company

HOLIDAYS, as any counsellor knows, can test a relationship. Hence my companion for a walking tour: Flora, a border collie, intelligent, affectionate, possessed of inexhaustible energy, and unquestioning of any decision I make with a map. We are bound for 80 miles of the Offa's Dyke path, from Chepstow to Knighton.

A brilliant orange, single-carriage train bearing Dylan Thomas quotations brings us into Chepstow. Leaving the town over the River Wye, with Chepstow Castle brooding at its edge, a dramatic border crossing takes us from Wales back into English Gloucestershire. For the first two days I am cautious over distance: Brockweir, followed by Redbrook; short journeys which take us up the wooded edges of the Wye. My first map-reading error brings us deep into the Lancaut Nature reserve, until, bending beneath brambles and wild buddleia, I notice Flora standing on rocks which fall sheer to sluggish brown water. I retrace my steps to find the path, which passes along the limestone cliffs some 200ft above.

Brockweir lies beyond Tintern Woods. The climb through these seems interminable. A signpost points to Devil's Pulpit, a mile distant. These are the longest miles I have ever trodden and I suspect a devious plot of the Welsh to lower English resistance. The Pulpit is a giant slab of limestone rock, at a natural viewpoint looking down upon Tintern Abbey.

In late-afternoon we find our first hostelry. Ron Peacey, our host, is still talking of the foot-and-mouth crisis. Now he keeps only 100 sheep. 'I lost heart after foot-and-mouth. I had anaemic sheep; they wanted grass; I wasn't allowed to move them. Normally you'd have me locked up for keeping animals like that.'

Talk turns to wild cats. He had lost many lambs. Then a wild cat expert came along with the skull of a three-year-old puma, and the teeth marks fitted those in the

savagely mauled corpses. Next morning at breakfast we are joined by Robert, a combine contractor, and it becomes apparent that the real spectre stalking the countryside is Tesco. He talks of village shops and petrol stations disappearing. Local farmers are getting 15p a litre for milk. 'They need 18p to break even,' he says.

Our route next day plunges us back into woodland, along a nar-

row and vertiginous path, with the slope falling away to our left, and on the right, trees tenuously rooted in crags and boulders. It feels like border country and it is not difficult to imagine ancient hostilities. Emerging at an unscheduled T-junction we meet another walker, striding towards us with a dalmatian.

Flora makes horrible faces at the dalmatian, so I turn down its owner's offer of guidance and re-route myself back towards Bigsweir Bridge. Passing a small farmhouse I am intrigued by a sign saying 'Open'. Stumbling in, we discover an art exhibition. After attempting to comment on the pictures, the need for social nicety

overwhelms both of us and we feel the urge to return to the road. Bigsweir Bridge to Quicken Tree Wood: forestry in progress and no waymarks. I keep to the edge of the woodland, failing to observe that the wood has an eastern spur. A builder working on a local barn puts me right with the familiar, 'Straight on: you can't miss it.' I seem to be progressing to Redbrook by a series

of triangles. But it is good to be out in the sunlight. I am not a purist for the Offa's Dyke path: we head downhill into a valley.

Between hesitation, deviation and the local art scene, the journey to Redbrook takes about five hours. Our destination, with its villa-type houses clinging to a steep hill, has the look of a seaside town. Reaching our accommodation we are greeted by Oscar, a standard poodle. I remember assuring our landlady that Flora loved meeting new dogs. She puts on her most fearful scowl accompanied by a low, threatening, back-of-the-throat rumble.

'Nervy,' I apologise. We are shown into a narrow bedroom

and I fall asleep before I finish counting the gnomes from my bedroom window. Supper that night is taken in Monmouthshire, as we recross the Wye to the Boat Inn, which is said to be the site of an ancient ferry crossing.

Next day, Mr Evans our host points out the old railway line as the quickest way to Monmouth. By 8.55am we are passing St Mary's Church in the centre of town, which is about to celebrate Mass. 'Catholic dog?' says a man as we enter. 'Certainly is,' I reply, suppressing Flora's Scottish Presbyterian background. A grizzled elderly Welshman fetches a bowl of water for her. She curls into a silent ball and remains that way, until going up for Communion I see a familiar sight ahead: black, wavy, white-tipped tail weaving in and out of the queue. Sorting the sheep from the goats possibly? 'Flora!' Obediently, she returns.

Leaving Monmouth via Watery Lane, which is now very dry indeed, I have resorted to 'route notes', which give comforting instructions such as: 'Turn right at far corner of field to footbridge over deep gully.' This brings us safely into and through King's Wood. The orange train might have quoted De la Mare: 'Very old are the woods...' We are now heading west, in the direction of Penrhos, crossing farmland above and below the River Trothy. It is domestic, pacific countryside, small fields bordered by enormous oaks, the Black Mountains a dim blue in the distance. There seems absolutely no movement apart from the occasional crow. Stock is huddled into the hedges or beneath trees. Flora seems to be leaping the stiles a little less gracefully and feels evidently better for a dip in the Trothy.

There is no pleasure like that of arrival: in the mid-afternoon we reach Grange Farm, solitary in the midst of hills. Our 80-year-old hostess tells me bed-and-breakfast is her third career: 'I was a maths teacher and then a com-



Flora, ideal travelling companion: 'affectionate, and unquestioning of any decision I make with a map'

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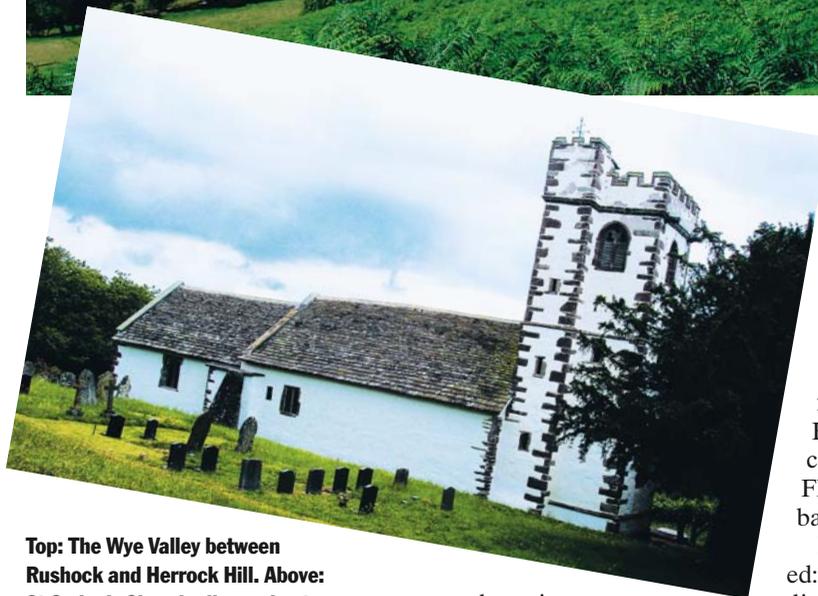
puter analyst.' The 115-acre farm, now run by her daughter, belonged to a nearby Cistercian abbey until the Dissolution, and 12th-century stone has been found among the house foundations.

Day four, and the weather has cooled. Pandy is 12 miles away, at the foot of the Hatterall Ridge, via Llantilio Crossenny. We jaunt downhill from the farm, spirits high, as the delight of this tramp lifestyle takes hold. The Sugar Loaf mountain and weirdly shaped Skirrid are before us. As a fine rain starts to fall they somewhat ominously disappear. We are criss-crossing the Trothy again, surprising a buzzard, come down to drink, and, a little farther on, see the flash of a kingfisher.

I am having cravings for a Mars Bar and assume Llantilio Crossenny might supply this. But no. The emptiness of this country is making itself felt. We eat our sandwiches beside the derelict Little Poole Farm: I wonder how many generations had lived and worked here, before giving up on the attempt to make a living. The hills are becoming steeper, recalling the Celtic blessing: 'May the wind be always at your back.' But at the top of a hill stands St Cadoc's Church, newly white-washed, one of several on the route to offer make-your-own tea, coffee and hot chocolate.

We reach the Lancaster Arms in Pandy by early afternoon. Morale is high, the weather forecast excellent, and Hay-on-Wye, 17 miles distant, seems possible the following night. I had forgotten the Royal Welsh Show, which has filled every guest house for 20 miles around. A concerned Welsh voice at the Tourist Office, carefully separating her syllables, tells me, 'I don't want to depress you, but it's the *dog* that's the problem.' Eventually, for a mere £82, Flora and I find a cancellation at the Swan-at-Hay.

Between our present hostelry and the Swan lies the Hatterall Ridge. My map-reading skills, mostly honed in the gentle country of the South West, do not extend to contours. Since the inception of this walk, the thin



Top: The Wye Valley between Rushock and Herrock Hill. Above: St Cadoc's Church, dispensing tea and hot chocolate as well as religion.

green line travelling the vertical length of my map, in country coloured-in like the Sahara, showing no dwelling within miles, has alarmed me. It is 13 miles from Pandy to Hay Bluff, the furthestmost point of the ridge.

The climb up, among bracken and foxgloves, is gentle. There is a sense of euphoria at the increasing height, mixed with merging panic at the emptiness of the place. I am still clutching my instruction booklet and marching (shades of *Treasure Island*) north-west of the four pine trees, but fail to find the hill fort said to be in my path: presumably

now only ancient bumps of grass buried among the bracken. Common sense tells me that the path has to run straight ahead, and this brings me eventually to the required trig point.

The track is visible far ahead. Over several hours' walking, the stony highway changes to turf, and then to peat. We leave sheep country for grouse moor and with a histrionic t-chkk t-chkk and much dragging and flapping of wings, a hen grouse shows her disapproval of Flora. The wind becomes increasingly strong, so that opening out the map becomes impossible. I walk fast, and keep a close eye on the mountains to our left, black and deep blue as the shadows move. To our right,

Herefordshire spreads out, serene and sunny, in hundreds of small fields and occasional farms.

The way to the highest point of the ridge is marked by an interminable number of small cairns. Then we drop down sharply until the final trig point is visible at Hay Bluff ahead. Time for a celebratory cheese sandwich: Flora flops down beside me, a bank of heather at our back.

Hay Bluff is positively crowded: picnickers and couples have climbed up from the car park below. A few yards beyond the stone marker, the ground falls sheer: the Wye valley lies at our feet and, beyond, a dizzying circle of Welsh and English counties.

I make an unbalanced descent, envying Flora her agility. Ahead of us is the seeming metropolis of Hay-on-Wye, a shining band of river visible to its north. It is good to be back with fields and stiles. We walk the last mile on the road. In the comfortable hotel reception area, I remove an enormous tick from Flora's neck. We are both ready for the glories of The Swan.

The following morning Flora breakfasts on salmon (saved) and sausages (specially cooked).

'We commit a minor felony, entering the back door to tap and sink, and helping ourselves'

Our relationship has progressed to the point where we are sharing my comb, immersed in boiling water as it travels from her to me. I am looking more bedraggled while she is increasing in sheepdog chic.

Leaving Hay, the countryside seems immeasurably rich: fields of ripe wheat and glossy clover line the shaded banks of the Wye. The first climb is through the romantically named Bettws Dingle, in reality an excessively gloomy path through a sinister fir plantation. We are glad to return to sheep country: harebells in yellowing downland pasture, a sudden expanse of grass and sky.

Our next stop, Gladestry, is straight from my Fifties childhood: village street bounded by a stream, church, pub and post office, the latter distinguished only by its sign and post box. The heart of the village evidently beats in the bus shelter. 'Youth Activities' are advertised, led by Bronwen. Can there be youth in this somnolent and secure little place? Apparently, and Bronwen is teaching them 'Dreamcatching'.

It has been what passes for a social day: I have met and spoken with two other walkers in a churchyard, and that evening we have supper together and discuss strategy for the final 18 miles to Knighton.

Flora and I start at 7.45am. She is fortified by a tagliatelle breakfast, scooped from the supper leftovers of our new friends. I am resolved to think not of miles but only the litany of names: Hergest Moor, Kington, Bradnor Hill, Rushock Hill, Herrock Hill, Burfa Bank, Granner Wood ... until the final Hawthorn Hill before our descent.

For the first time, many of the miles are walked alongside Offa's Dyke. There is something strangely emotive about this crumbled earthwork, sometimes a grassy bank covered with scabious and knapweed, sometimes the base of a hedge, thick with oak or thorn.

The original Dyke, according to my Anglo-Saxon encyclopaedia, was 64 miles long, begin-



Top: Chepstow Castle, on the River Wye. Above: Abandoned Little Poole Farm, where the Countess and Flora stopped to eat sandwiches.

ning at Rushock Hill, and consisted of a 30ft wide bank, with a ditch 6ft deep and 12ft wide. It probably had a military purpose, but would also have made it difficult for the Welsh to drive stolen livestock back into their territory.

Walking through these empty swathes of land, one can only marvel at how Offa, King of the Mercians in the second half of the eighth century, found the workforce, slave or otherwise, to create it. Perhaps this attests to the breadth of his kingdom, thought now to comprise 'the greater part of midland England'.

The heat has returned, and

initiates a stopping-is-as-great-a-pleasure-as-travelling policy. Sandwiches are eaten and consciousness lost, under an oak tree, high up on the edge of Granner Wood. When we start again I think about water rations, and follow a Camping sign towards a farmyard. Various dogs on chains become apoplectic at the sight of Flora. No sign of camping facilities, nor of the farmer. We commit a minor felony, entering the back door to tap and sink, and helping ourselves.

Refuelled, we keep going until the River Lugg, just short of Dolley Green and the final 6½ miles. There I enjoy a Mars Bar and Flora has a beef-flavoured

Schmacko. The water chugs and gurgles round a bend, and a trout rises upstream. Neither of us is in a hurry to move on.

Furrow Hill is a long climb. Nearby, a little more than 600 years ago, at the Battle of Pilleth, an army of Herefordshire men led by Edmund Mortimer were slaughtered at the hands of the Welsh, and by their own archers, who switched sides during the battle. Mortimer was taken prisoner and survived: he married his enemy Owain Glyndwr's daughter and threw in his lot with the Welsh. Mass graves may lie on the opposite hill: the place now is utterly tranquil.

From Hawthorn Hill to Frydd Wood—and the joy of travelling downhill. There is little to grab the senses in Knighton: but the straight, downward path leads to the sustaining comforts of the Horse and Jockey. I have failed to book a room, so we go 50 yards up the road to the expensive-looking Knighton Hotel where I invite their views on doggy guests. The kindly manageress explains policy: 'Well, we think dogs are family, and you could hardly have a nice holiday and leave your family behind, could you?' □