

CICERONE

WALKING

THE SEVERN WAY

215 miles from the River Severn's source
in Powys to Severn Beach near Bristol



Terry Marsh

THE SEVERN WAY

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**215 MILES FROM THE RIVER SEVERN'S SOURCE IN
POWYS TO SEVERN BEACH NEAR BRISTOL**

by Terry Marsh

CICERONE

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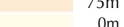


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Front cover: Poplars and field of gold, Maisemore (Stage 17)

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 route	 County/Unitary boundary
 alternative route/detour	 National boundary
 start point	 Urban area
 finish point	 National Park eg BRECON BEACONS
 route direction	 Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty eg <i>Shropshire Hills</i>
	 800m
	 200m
	 600m
	 75m
	 400m
	 0m

Acknowledgements

It is perfectly feasible to compile a guidebook such as this by simply starting at the beginning and continuing to the end, writing as you go. Logical as that might seem, logistically, such an approach can be a recipe for disaster; it's okay on middle-distance trails, but on anything longer you need teamwork and/or extensive planning; just as you would on doing the walk itself.

On the local authority side, I had the assistance of a team of officers working for the individual county councils along the route, and they offered helpful advice and kindly read the finished manuscript for their respective sections. Any errors that remain, however, are my responsibility.

From a practical point of view, writing such a guide as this is made so much easier by using a two-car approach, shuttling backwards and forward from start to day's end, but always making forward progress. It works when doing the walk, too.

My brother-in-law Jon accompanied me throughout the entire journey, while my son's car came into play once Bridgnorth was reached. To both I am grateful for the endless running about they did, even giving the appearance of enjoying it; they certainly put the real ales en route through their paces.

My wife, Vivienne, also joined us for stretches, but we both missed our faithful companion, Teal, who sadly died during the compilation of the book; she would have loved the walk, just as any dog would. So, I dedicate this book to the memory of Teal; she'll always be with us.

INTRODUCTION



The Severn from the Miners' Bridge, Highley, Shropshire



The Severn at Buildwas, Shropshire

Flowing through superb landscapes and passing appealing towns and villages, the River Sever pulls together threads of history, trade, commerce, civil war and the lives of ordinary folk to produce a tapestry that is finely woven and rich in colour. That walkers should want to trace its course, its many twists and turns, is hardly surprising, not least because of its capacity to offer countless challenges and plentiful delights.

As our pace of life has become increasingly frenetic, walking the Severn Way is a chance to get away from it all and relax without having

to resort to distant mountain regions. The Way offers a unique experience combining the simple joy of being out in the country air to the sense of well-being that comes from exploring the history and heritage of a remarkable group of counties, towns and villages.

For most of its route in close company with the river, this route is a lesson in historical geography brought vividly to life, one that builds on the concepts learned at school about a river's journey from source to sea with a demonstration of mankind's impact on the landscapes through which the river flows.

THE SEVERN: SOURCE TO SEA

The river (in Welsh: Afon Hafren, although its Latin name, Sabrina, crops up from time to time) is the longest river in the UK, at about 354km (220 miles), and the second longest in the British Isles, after Ireland's River Shannon. It rises at an altitude of 610m (2001 feet) on Plynlimon (Ceredigion), near Llanidloes (Powys), in the Cambrian Mountains of mid-Wales. It then flows through Shropshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire, with the county towns of Shrewsbury, Worcester and Gloucester on its banks. The Severn is the greatest river in terms of water flow in England and Wales.

The birthplace of a river is an imprecise location; in the case of the

Severn it is 'officially' marked by a large pole standing forlorn and often mist-shrouded amid acres of sphagnum bog. Yet it is evident that water is draining into this infant river from higher on Plynlimon's slopes. It is an eerie and lonely place, a far cry from the urban and rural pastures to come. Here, the tang of wild places and the call of upland birds sharpen the appetite for the journey.

Only a short way from its sluggish start, the Severn has gathered force and bustles through the greenness of the Hafren Forest and the confining valleys below before spreading out and slowing its pace as it passes through the agricultural pastures of mid-Wales. In the Powys stages of the Way, especially after Llanidloes, the river is frequently viewed at a

distance rather than close up, as will be the case later on. For the walker, this is the most demanding part of the route and the most varied, with many trying ups and downs.

By the time the route enters Shropshire (and England) at Crew Green, the river has grown into a meandering watercourse that cuts through the county's floodplains, chiselling steep banks lined with alder and willow. On the approach to Ironbridge, the character change is quite noticeable as the river bullies its way through the gorge before easing southwards through well-wooded landscapes that lead on to Bewdley, Stourport and Worcester.

Now the river takes on another character, busy with boats and anglers, as it presses southwards to Tewkesbury

and Gloucester. But it has not altogether lost its force, as the distinctive cliffs at Wainlode demonstrate. Once beyond Gloucester, the river becomes tidal, and has the second highest tidal range in the world. Originally, the Severn was tidal as far as Worcester, and capable of being navigated, with some difficulty, as far as Welshpool.

Around the Arlingham loop it becomes clear that large areas of sand are exposed at low tide, especially west of Frampton-on-Severn, which increasingly are favoured by waders and wildfowl. The grazing meadows near Slimbridge are hugely popular with passage and wintering waders, and the winter grounds for large numbers of white-fronted geese.

Onward now the river is noticeably widening and there is a keen



The boggy landscape near the source of the Severn, Powys



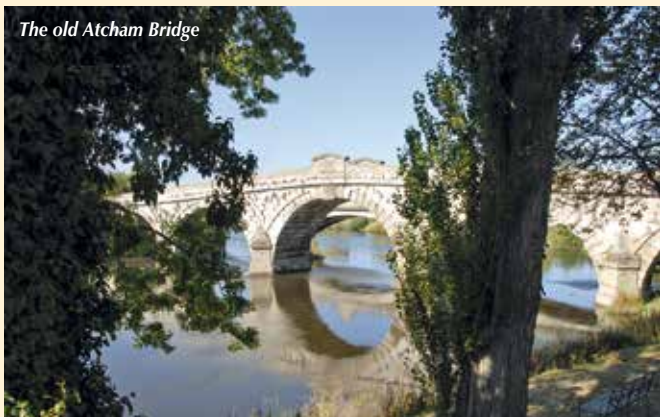
View across the Severn at Upper Framilode, Gloucestershire

sense that the end of the Way is not far distant, an end that is signalled by two massive bridges that taunt the weary walker. Officially, the

Severn Way ends at Severn Beach, a significant moment for those who have come such a long way from the bleak heights of Plynlimon.

THE BRIDGES OF THE SEVERN

The old Atcham Bridge



Throughout its length, the Severn is crossed by numerous bridges, many having replaced ancient ferries. Many of the bridges are notable in their own right, with several designed and built by the engineer Thomas Telford. Among these is the famous Iron Bridge at Ironbridge, the world's first iron arch bridge, while at the far end of the Way stand the two road bridges linking Wales with the southern counties of England: the Severn Bridge, opened in 1966 and carrying what is now the M48, and the Second Severn Crossing, opened in 1996 and carrying the M4 motorway. Before the first bridge in 1966, the channel was crossed by the Aust Ferry.

Other notable bridges include:

- Buttington Bridge, built in 1872
- Montford Bridge, Telford's first ever bridge design, built between 1790 and 1792
- Welsh Bridge in the centre of Shrewsbury, built in 1795
- English Bridge, also in Shrewsbury, designed and completed in 1774 by John Gwynn

- Atcham Bridges, the old one built in 1774, the newer, carrying the B4380, in 1929
- Albert Edward Bridge in Coalbrookdale, a rail bridge opened in 1864
- Coalport Bridge, like that in Ironbridge, made of cast iron, and built in 1818
- Bewdley Bridge, another designed by Telford, completed in 1798
- Holt Fleet Bridge in Worcestershire, also from the engineering genius of Thomas Telford, opened in 1828
- Upton town bridge, built as recently as 1940, and the only bridge to cross between Worcester and Tewkesbury
- Queenshill Viaduct, which carries the M50 between Junctions 1 and 2
- Mythe Bridge, north of Tewkesbury, another Telford bridge, opened in April 1826
- Haw Bridge, a steel beam bridge, south of Tewkesbury
- Maisemore Bridge north of Gloucester, which carries the A417 and is a single masonry arch, dating to 1230
- Over Bridge, a single masonry arch built by Telford
- Over Rail Bridge, the last bridge before the Old Severn Crossing, 30 miles downstream

ABOUT THE ROUTE

Over the years there have been a number of small changes to the route of the Way that affect the overall distance. Recently, the latest mapping technology has been used to measure distances and height changes far more accurately.

From the source to Severn Beach, the distance is 344km (215 miles), and, perhaps surprisingly for a route that follows a river downwards, involves 2740m (8985ft) of ascent (much of it in small undulations), as well as the expected quantity of descent (3340m/11,000ft). In addition, there is the walk up to the source, which involves a further

5.5km (3½ miles) along with 340m (1120ft) of ascent, and 65m (210ft) of descent.

An alternative start has been introduced from Eisteddfa Gurig,





The 'new' line of the Way, near Clifton, Gloucestershire

which may be of interest to strong walkers. This is not part of the Severn Way, and is not waymarked, but its purpose is twofold: to avoid repeating the route between Rhyd-y-benwch and the source; and to acknowledge Plynlimon Fawr and its massif not only as the source of the river about to be followed, but as the source of a number of other rivers of regional and national importance. This addition measures 8.9km (5½ miles), with ascent of 420m (1380ft) and descent of 250m (815ft). That takes the route only as far as the source, with a good measure of walking still remaining to get down to Llanidloes.

This information has been arrived at by a combination of methods which means that, although the distances cited are accurate, the figures for ascent and descent are not as precise. In fact, although there are a number of places where uphill work

is necessary, in the main, once the first three days are completed, then the general characteristic is of level walking.

WEATHER AND WHEN TO GO

Choosing the best time to tackle the Severn Way is never going to be easy, for reasons that affect few other long-distance routes. Notably, the river has a propensity to flood, something that causes significant damage to adjoining properties – the sight of large caravans on stilts is a regular if slightly bizarre feature along the route. In 1947, the Severn reached its highest recorded levels, and flooding cost the towns along the river over £12 million. Shrewsbury was completely cut off from the rest of the world, truly 'islanded in Severn stream', as the poet AE Housman put it. Shops and businesses were affected and people

had to walk over wooden boards to cross the flooded area. At a number of places along the Way there are signs indicating the flood levels in certain years; it's a sobering thought to realise that the river level at times can be three feet over your head.

For the walker, once the floods have subsided and for some time afterwards, there can be a residue of slippery, glutinous mud studded with tree branches and river debris, which makes some stretches very tiring, especially north and south of Worcester.

Overall, the best months are those between May and September, but an intensely cold snap at any time of year, one that freezes the ground, may warrant a few days' skirmish with the route, if not with the entire walk.

The early stages of the walk experience mountain weather, which steadily eases as the river is followed southwards. But what is not instantly obvious is that the general trend of the route is directly into the prevailing winds and this, too, can be another tiring factor. In hot conditions, there are many days when there is very little shelter from the sun.

You can get some indication of conditions by checking the weather forecast both the day before you go and again on the morning you intend to walk. There are reliable sources of weather information on the internet, notably:

- www.bbc.co.uk/weather: this site allows you to set your favourite

locations, in order to obtain a more specific forecast

- www.metoffice.gov.uk (the Met Office's own website)

These sites are also available as a free apps for use on iPhones, iPads and other smartphones.

GETTING THERE AND TRANSPORT

To access the beginning of the Severn Way, Rhyd-y-benwch car park and picnic site is 9.7km (6 miles) west of Llanidloes. It can also be reached from the northern end of Llyn Clywedog on minor roads. The nearest railway station is at Caersws, from where it is about a 20-minute bus ride to Llanidloes.

On reaching the end of the Way at Severn Beach, the quickest way to Bristol is by train. If you have more time on your hands, the Severn Way Bristol Link takes you there on foot, switching the Severn for the Avon (see Bristol Link: Severn Beach to Bristol at the end of the main route description). From the main railway station at Bristol Temple Meads there are direct services available to London, Scotland, Wales, Manchester and Birmingham. National Express coach services (www.nationalexpress.com) operate from the Bristol bus station to cities across the UK. Megabus (www.uk.megabus.com) operates coaches from Bristol to London and Cwmbran, and Greyhound



Distance views across the Plynlimon moorland to Pen Plynlimon

To undertake a walk that has its starting point high on the peaty uplands of Plynlimon means adding to the journey before it begins because of the need to first trek to the source of the river.

The nearest point to the source accessible by road is the picnic area and car park at Rhyd-y-benwch in Hafren Forest. Later in this section, a variant start is given from Eisteddfa Gurig on the A44 between Ponterwyd and Llangurig in the Wye valley, which takes in the summit of Plynlimon Fawr (Pumlumon Fawr). This route is not part of the Severn Way; it is not waymarked, and should not be considered in poor visibility, although there are fences across the summit plateau. It makes an interesting variant start for those who don't relish ending Day 1 exactly where it started...in Llanidloes.

Undoubtedly, the greatest charm of the Plynlimon massif is a geographical one, for the mountain's peaty folds give rise to several watercourses, including three significant rivers, the Wye, the Severn and the Rheidol, and two others, the Ystwyth and the Clywedog. Each explores enchanting countryside on its journey to the sea, and the greatest of these is the Severn, the longest river in Britain.

The wild summits, rolling moorlands and deep valleys that flank Plynlimon have for centuries acted as a redoubtable barrier, making this one of the least-known parts of Wales. Today, it is this remote and peaceful atmosphere that is the area's greatest asset, and the great river that flows from it provides an unparalleled opportunity to enjoy a fascinating source-to-sea walk.

STAGE 1

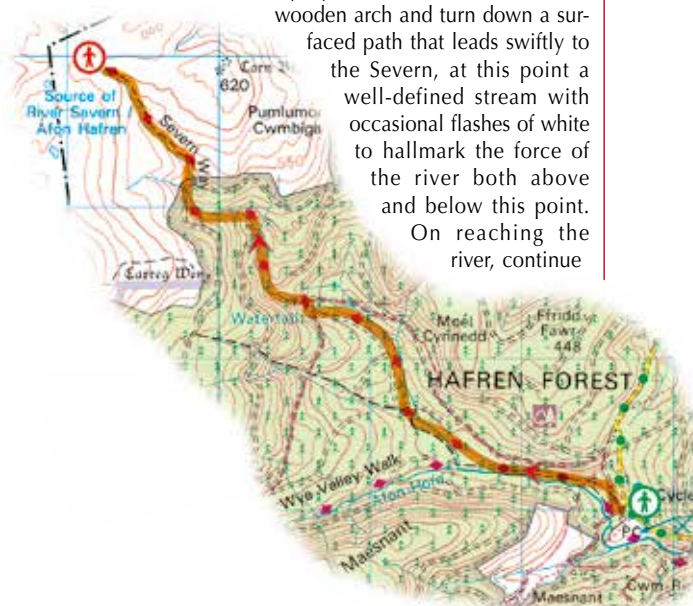
Rhyd-y-benwch to the source

Start	Rhyd-y-benwch
Finish	The source
Distance	5.5km (3½ miles)
Ascent	340m (1120ft)
Descent	65m (210ft)

With the exception of the final 1km (½ mile), the walk from Rhyd-y-benwch to the source of the river and back is almost entirely within the confines of the Hafren Forest; perfect on a fine day, not so good in the rain.

Be aware that the trails through Hafren Forest are permissive and not public rights of way. Motorsport events and harvesting operations in the forest may affect the use of certain trails. Phone 0300 068 0300 or visit www.ccw.gov.uk for more details.

From Rhyd-y-benwch, head beneath a wooden arch and turn down a surfaced path that leads swiftly to the Severn, at this point a well-defined stream with occasional flashes of white to hallmark the force of the river both above and below this point. On reaching the river, continue



along a raised boardwalk. A waterfall of no great stature towards the end of the boardwalk was used by generations of shepherds for washing sheep. Here, rise onto a pleasant forest path that soon reaches a flume station used to measure the river discharge of the Severn. Beyond, an on-going path runs parallel to the river, and at a waymark, shortly after a picnic shelter and at the confluence of the Severn and the **Afon Hore**, turns into the mature forest and soon reaches a footbridge.

HAFREN FOREST



Heathered pathway near the top of Hafren Forest

The 2842ha (7022 acres) of Hafren Forest are located in the south-west corner of the historic county of Montgomeryshire (now part of Powys), among the rolling hills of the mid-Wales Cambrian Mountain range. The ancient county is named after Roger de Montgomerie, the 1st Earl of Shrewsbury and one of William the Conqueror's main counsellors. The topography of the forest covers gently rounded hill tops and steep valley sides, dissected by many kilometres of streams and rivers. Surrounding the forest are thousands of acres of grassland, traditionally used for grazing sheep. A large proportion of the forest borders the Plynlimon Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Development of the forest aims to provide an attractive place for people to enjoy, including walkers, cyclists and motorsport enthusiasts, and it is especially encouraging to see that the forest's rich wildlife, historical features

and water quality are being managed sensitively, consistent with the need to supply a range of sustainable timber products.

The ancient Celts saw this region as magical, and this certainly holds true in ecological terms, with waterside forests being rich and valuable habitats – a home to organisms of woodland and water. Riparian woodlands, as they are known, are those on the banks of natural bodies of water and particularly rivers.

Rivers are the lifeblood of the forest ecosystems, and their health is crucial to the health of the forest as a whole. The physical presence of trees on the river's edge, such as the deep-rooted alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), helps to prevent the banks from eroding. Riparian zones are important sources and storage sites for nutrients and energy, since trees naturally alter the chemical balance of the water by taking up minerals from the soil and releasing them into the water, so improving the biological health of the river. The riparian corridors enhance connectivity, creating links within and between forest patches, and in doing so provide routes along which animals can disperse, as well as certain plant seeds, which may be carried by mammals, birds, or even water.

Hafren is also an important location for research into climate change, and water and air quality. The Centre of Ecology and Hydrology has carried out work in this area for over 40 years. At a commercial level Hafren produces 26,300 tonnes of timber annually. This is approved felling and independently assessed by the FSC (Forestry Stewardship Council) as sustainably produced certificated timber.

After the footbridge, the path continues pleasantly along the true right bank of the river, before crossing it again near another flume station, just after which bear right, following a route waymarked by blue-and-white banded poles. The path climbs steadily, eventually intercepting a broad forest trail. Bear right briefly, passing the **Blaen Hafren Falls**, and then swing left once more climbing into forest.

Approaching the top of the forest, clear-felling is evident, but this serves only to open up the vistas of distant hills in the heart of Powys. Here, a seat for one to the right of the path offers a brief respite and a fabulous retrospective view eastwards. The path continues to climb steadily and, near the top edge of the forest, joins another broad trail. Turn right on this, once more briefly, and then

leave it for a constructed path that leads up to the source of the Severn.

The Way passes through a beautiful landscape of peaty mounds and heather banks that in September especially are a joy. Climbing very gradually, the path becomes paved and leads directly to a large post placed in marshy ground at the official **source of the River Severn**, although it is clear that there is flowing water a little higher still.

There is no need now to do anything other than to turn about and start the descent. But on a clear day there is much merit in following the flagged path a little further, to the **Ceredigion and Powys county boundary**, and crossing a stile in a fence to walk up to a boundary stone and cairn with an outstanding view of the distant Tarren Hills above Machynlleth, the Cadair Idris massif and the Arans – Fawddwy and Benllyn. This modest extension is well worth the effort and the nearby lake something of a pleasant surprise. Nearby, a fence runs up onto Pumlumon Arwystli, beyond which rises the peak of Plynlimon Fawr, at 752m (2467ft) the highest point of the landscape hereabouts.

Cairn above the Ceredigion and Powys county boundary; it's all downhill from here



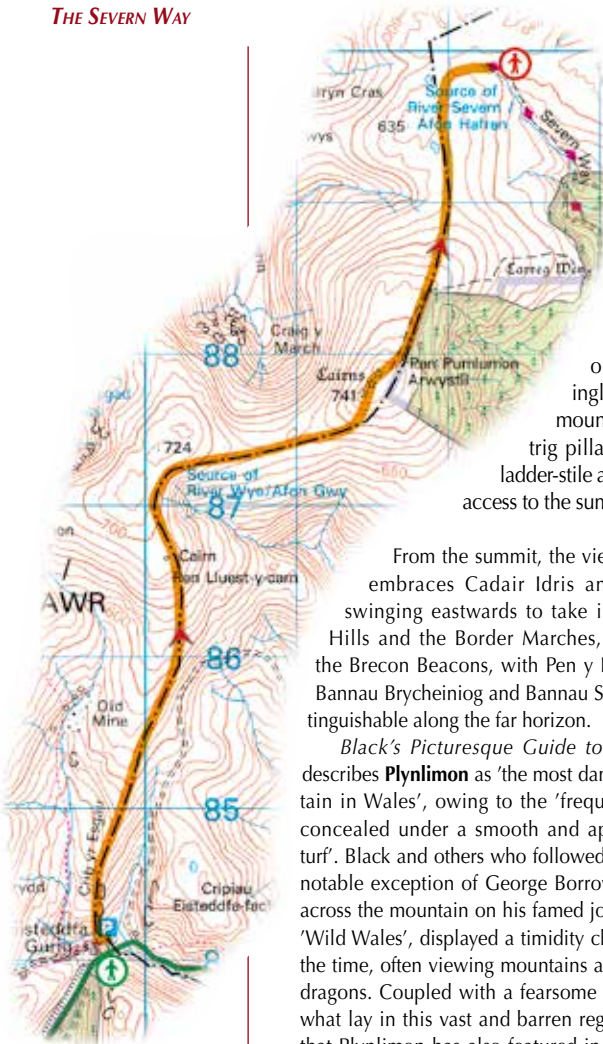
VARIANT START: EISTEDDFA GURIG TO THE SOURCE VIA PLYNLIMON

Start	Eisteddfa Gurig
Finish	The source
Distance	8.9km (5½ miles)
Ascent	420m (1380ft)
Descent	250m (815ft)

Not everyone will want to make the ascent from Rhyd-y-benwch; there is a certain inevitability and repetitiveness about it. But this can be avoided by starting at Eisteddfa Gurig, to the south of Plynlimon Fawr, and taking a perfectly valid, if a little more difficult, route to the source. The route, straightforward in itself, climbs first to Plynlimon, the highest summit of the massif that spawns the Severn, and arguably more than justified on that account. Instead of starting at the source of the river, you start at the top of the mountain that hosts the course.

This variant start is not part of the Severn Way, and is not waymarked at any point. It is straightforward as far as the summit of Plynlimon Fawr. But the onward stretch from there, over Pen Pumlumon Arwystli and along the county boundary to the source of the Severn is mostly trackless, extremely demanding and boggy, and should be contemplated only by strong and experienced walkers/navigators and, preferably, in clear weather conditions. Nor is it advised after prolonged periods of rain.

The variant begins at a private parking area adjoining the farmhouse at Eisteddfa Gurig. From the parking area cross a surfaced yard in a north-westerly direction to a gate, and then pass between farm buildings and the garden wall of the farmhouse before turning right past dog kennels and left to join a track. Turn right here and follow the track to a gate with a sign 'All Walks'. Beyond the gate, the track swings round to follow the course of the Afon Tarennig, and climbs steadily. After another gate, the track levels and starts to descend briefly, climbing again towards **old mine workings**. Here, at a waymark post, branch left onto a stony path that suddenly comes to an end.



A generally clear grassy path now carries the route on, teasing a way upwards, and, higher up, meeting a more pronounced and cairned path that guides the route onto the surprisingly rocky top of the mountain, marked by a trig pillar and a shelter. A ladder-stile across a fence gives access to the summit of **Plynlimon**.

From the summit, the view northwards embraces Cadair Idris and the Arans, swinging eastwards to take in the Berwyn Hills and the Border Marches, and south to the Brecon Beacons, with Pen y Fan, Corn Du, Bannau Brycheiniog and Bannau Sir Gaer all distinguishable along the far horizon.

Black's Picturesque Guide to North Wales describes **Plynlimon** as 'the most dangerous mountain in Wales', owing to the 'frequency of bogs, concealed under a smooth and apparently firm turf'. Black and others who followed him, with the notable exception of George Borrow, who strode across the mountain on his famed journey through 'Wild Wales', displayed a timidity characteristic of the time, often viewing mountains as the abode of dragons. Coupled with a fearsome uncertainty of what lay in this vast and barren region is the fact that Plynlimon has also featured in Welsh history as a place of turmoil and bloodshed. Its morasses – few in reality – have witnessed many a struggle. It was on the slopes of Plynlimon that in 1401 Owain



The 'official' source of the Severn

Glyndwr gave renewed impetus to his rebellion against the English with an important military victory, before going on to sack Montgomery, burn Welshpool and destroy the abbey of Cwmhir.

► The continuation to the source of the Severn sets off by following the ridge fenceline in a west-north-westerly direction to cross **Pen Pumlumon Arwystli** – site of Bronze Age stone cairns – and then descending beside a fence to intercept the path rising from the source of the Severn. Here, by a stile, turn right, and follow a paved route through low peat mounds of bracken and heather to the **source**.

Paddy Dillon's guide to *Glyndwr's Way* follows the National Trail named in his honour which loops from Knighton to Welshpool, via this historic site.

STAGE 2

Source of the Severn to Llanidloes

Start	Source of the Severn
Finish	Llanidloes
Distance	18.3km (11½ miles)
Ascent	295m (960ft)
Descent	730m (2390ft)



- 215 miles (344km) from Plynlimon plateau to Severn Beach
- superb landscapes of Powys, Shropshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire including Hafren Forest



This guide describes the official route of the Severn Way as it follows the natural course of the river, through peaceful landscapes packed with historical and geographical interest.

- the main trail is divided into 22 short stages, allowing for many options according to ability
- with a variant start over Plynlimon and an onward 'Bristol Link' route, from Severn Beach to Bristol city centre
- unspoilt scenery and plentiful historic interest

The River Severn, the UK's longest river, begins in the heights of Plynlimon in mid-Wales and flows down to the Bristol Channel at Severn Beach, through the historic counties of Shropshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire.

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