

2: From Ludlow to Bath

The fifth day of my journey begins with a cool, thick mist hanging over everything; I guess that it must be a heat haze. I pack up my things after breakfast and push the bike through Broad Gate and up the street towards the town centre, now bustling with people. I am glad that I have seen it yesterday when it was quiet. I enter a bookshop and buy a map of Wales and the West Midlands, and a postcard depicting the wonderful Feathers Hotel. I walk with the bike to the elegant Butter Cross building, sit on the steps and write to my parents on the new postcard. I then open the map and work out today's route.

I finally start my journey, but stop briefly to post the card and change into my shorts. My hunch about the mist is correct: the sun burns it away and up goes the temperature. I continue westwards and uphill towards Leintwardine and stop again to change into my tee shirt. Leintwardine is pleasant but rather unremarkable. I turn southwards for Burrington, a tiny hamlet with nothing but an old church and a handful of dwellings that are half houses, half barns. The countryside is quite pretty hereabouts. I cross a valley to Leinthall Starks and return to the southbound main road at Wigmore, and begin my journey to the Wye valley. I stop for lunch in Martimer Cross.

I next make my way south-westwards, along country lanes that bring me through tranquil farmland; just beyond Staunton-on-Arrow I cross a stone bridge and notice cows wading in the river. On my other side is a red-bricked country house nestled between trees. On I go, passing through the picturesque villages of Lyonshall and Almeley, where I stop to ask for directions from a man who is decorating his house. His radio is playing classical music at top volume, which he is humming and conducting. Next comes Eardisley and Whitney. The houses in this locality are constructed using plain grey stone blocks, or oak and plaster, or oak and brick. A mixture of styles can be seen around here on the Welsh border; I have a hunch that the plainer dwellings are Welsh. Yet, in true English style, everything is neat and tidy and the front gardens are bright with flowers.

I now find myself on the uninteresting main road to Clyro, skirting the River Wye. I am now approaching what is known as Kilvert country, which I am interested to see, having read the published extracts from the diary of the Reverend Francis Kilvert (1840–1879) in its recent Penguin edition. My father had bought the book, which he and I had read with great interest; later he lent it to a friend and it was never returned. At home, we had watched a BBC dramatized version of the book, entitled *Kilvert's Diary*.

Unusually for a clergyman, Kilvert was fond of public bathing in the nude. He became curate of Clyro in 1865; some years later he fell in love with a young lady, whose father (the vicar of nearby Llanigon) refused him permission to marry her. However, he eventually did marry, but sadly died of peritonitis shortly after his honeymoon, aged only 38.

I now think to myself that, in all probability, the reverend gentleman would not have been at all impressed by the motorway on which I am now travelling: what I see around me conflicts with the unspoiled countryside that he so lovingly described in his diaries. Just as I expect, modern-day Clyro with its modern houses, road works

and traffic, fails to please me. I pass a church, in which I guess Kilvert must have officiated, and I think that I recognize the school building that was used in the television series.

I now cross the river to the pretty little town of Haye-on-Wye, now a cultural centre and a great attraction for visitors. Realizing that I can no longer see or experience anything that might have been familiar to the Reverend Kilvert, I content myself by admiring the attractive old buildings and book shops, and do a little shopping. The staff in the two small grocery shops are pleasantly friendly and chatty. Indeed, most of the people that I have met so far in this part of England, far from the capital, are warm, friendly, and helpful.

Back on the bike, I head off for the tiny village of Clifford, from where I telephone the nearby youth hostel in Staunton-on-Wye. I am told that there will be no problem staying there this evening. Avoiding the toll bridge for the main road, I take a hilly country lane that brings me to a pretty 'B' road on the other side of the river. I am discovering that these remote byways have far more charm than the acclaimed highlights recommended in the guide books. I stop briefly to photograph the winding river in its beautiful valley; in the soft evening light it looks very enticing. I halt again to admire a magnificent thatched Tudor cottage, but as the sun is behind it, I am unable to photograph it now.



The Wye Valley

At last I arrive at Bredwardine, turn off for some narrow country lanes and finally reach Staunton-on-Wye. The village, strung along a narrow road, is quite pretty, but the hostel (which is difficult to find) is certainly not. It is a converted school or hall bristling with pitched roofs and chimneys. I check in, leave my things in the dormitory and eat a simple meal in the kitchen with a crowd of noisy girls who have been canoeing on the river. Afterwards I chat with the two men in charge of the girls; they speak rapidly in thick country accents, which I find difficult to understand.

After washing myself and some clothes, I sit in the kitchen, which by now is quiet, and finish the day by writing my diary.

As I wake early, I am able to have breakfast in peace before the girls descend, amid much shouting and laughing. Although the day looks as though it will be hot, it is quite chilly when I leave and I must put on a jumper. It then clouds over and remains overcast for the rest of the day. Reluctantly I take the main road to Hereford, where there is little to be seen apart from the fine Norman cathedral. Inside, I am handed a leaflet by a stony-faced minister who stands threateningly beside a collection box. I

look around the place as quickly as I can, mindful of the fact that I've left my bike outside unlocked. The most important treasure in the cathedral is the famous Mappa Mundi, a medieval map of the world created in about 1300. I stop to examine it and a few of the ancient books from the library, which are displayed in a glass case, chained to their places. I leave, jump on my bike and escape from the noise and traffic of the city as quickly as I can. However, I find myself going in the wrong direction and have to turn back in order to take the correct road for Hampton Bishop and then Mordiford, from where I can turn on to a minor road and pass through charming little villages and pleasant scenery.

I stop at Hoarwithy feeling tired, a little dispirited and hungry, and go into a picturesque pub for a welcome and wholesome lunch. Fed and relaxed, I study my map and decide to visit Tewkesbury, even though it is not on my way to Bath.

Travelling eastwards, I run into a headwind, but again my route brings me through delightful scenery and little villages. At Kings Caple I stop, mystified by a gate and cattle grid. Have I gone wrong? No, somebody tells me; go through the gate and onwards. I cross a field and at the other end I find myself at a magnificent Tudor building surrounded by a virtual cornucopia of brightly-coloured flowers. Beside it is a village pond with ducks swimming lazily in the water. It is the very essence of picture-postcard rural England. Next comes the little village of How Caple and then apple-growing countryside, leading me to Much Marcle, where cider is made. I pass farms and farm buildings, and the sun obligingly appears to brighten this little section of paradise.

For some silly reason I do not stop at Much Marcle to sample some of the local cider (which I regret later), but continue my journey to Tewkesbury along country roads and lanes, passing through Redmarley, Pendock and other quaint hamlets with village ponds and wooden fences.

I finally reach Tewkesbury at around five, having been slowed down by the wind, and immediately head for the tourist information centre. I reach it just as a man is about to lock up. As I am too tired to go looking for a youth hostel, I ask him about B&Bs and he gives me a list. I try one in nearby Church Street: the house has a Georgian façade but a modern interior. The lady, whose manner is rather abrupt, informs me that she has a small room for just £4. I park my bike in the back garden and bring my luggage upstairs.

Refreshed after a quick wash, I leave to explore the town and find something to eat. While it is a fine place, with old buildings here and there, the heavy traffic in the streets makes it noisy. Tired by now, and finding either expensive restaurants or ones that will not open until seven o'clock, I trudge back towards the guesthouse and collapse into a cheap café, where I eat a tasteless cheese and tomato sandwich, washed down with strong tea. Afterwards, I manage to stagger up to the abbey church of St Mary the Virgin for a brief look at the exterior. Famous for being the finest example of Norman architecture in Britain, it was once a Benedictine monastery. I then return to my lodgings. I finish the day by writing my diary in the sitting room, with the unceasing traffic roaring past outside.

Before I leave Tewkesbury this morning, I take a proper look at St Mary the Virgin, which is quite splendid inside. A particularly impressive feature is the vaulting of the roof. Ticking loudly on a wall is an elegant bracket clock.

I set off at full speed along main roads for Bath for it is a gloomy, overcast day – unsuitable for sightseeing. To while away the time, I sing and talk to myself. I bypass Cheltenham, resisting the temptation to stop and look around; I take a never-ending

ring road around Gloucester (it would have been quicker and more interesting to go through the city centre, I realize later) and then continue southwards to Bristol, with the wind behind me. At the village of Falfield I turn off the main road and head eastwards for Chipping Sodbury, now battling against wind and hills. I stop in the picturesque town, which is on the outskirts of Yale, and eat some lunch in the bar of a hotel.

Fed and watered, I now set off southwards for Bath. I remember reading that at one time Bath and Dublin were considered to be the two most elegant cities in the British Isles. As Bath is situated in a deep valley, the approach to it is dramatic and exhilarating, especially on a bicycle – I immediately realize that leaving the city will be considerably slower. I arrive at three o'clock, which amazes me, and seeing a sign for the youth hostel, I head straight for it, up the very steep Bestwick Hill. I meet a young Mexican lad who, like me, intends to stay here, and we arrive together. Unsurprisingly, the hostel (a fine old building in grounds of its own) is closed at this hour, so I leave my bike in a shed and my bags in the 'left luggage' garage. Afterwards, I walk down to the town centre and begin my peregrinations around the elegant streets.

Bath, of course, is well known as a spa town, founded by the Romans in around AD 60, when they built baths and a temple in the valley of the River Avon (though hot springs were known about before this period). The Romans called the town Aquae Sulis, the Waters of Sul. Bath Abbey, founded in the 7th century, became a religious centre and the abbey was rebuilt twice, in the 12th and 16th centuries. In the 17th century, claims were made for the curative properties of the waters and Bath became a popular spa town in the Georgian era. Many of the streets and squares, featuring fine Georgian architecture, were laid out by the architect John Wood the Elder. In the 18th century the town became very fashionable and, as a result, the population increased. One of the best known residents was the author Jane Austen, who, in her books, famously parodied the pompous inhabitants and their social conventions.



Bath Abbey

My initial feeling on arriving in this wonderful city, the largest in Somerset, was that my short stay would be a memorable one. I started my walking tour by visiting Bath Abbey, the great Norman church built in the 1500s. Although full of tourists, I spent some time inside observing the magnificent Gothic architecture, especially the intricate vaulting of the roof. The nave was impressively high and outside were stabilizing flying buttresses.



Pump Room and Baths

Also outside was the square in front of the famous Pump Room and the Roman Baths, which could be visited for an admission fee. The elegant Pump Room (and the Lower Assembly Rooms) had been built in the local golden-coloured stone by the architect Thomas Baldwin. Surrounded now by beautiful architecture, I made my way through the streets to the famous Royal Crescent, but stopped at the Guildhall to admire the breathtaking banqueting room and other fine apartments. The staircase was particularly impressive.

By the time I reached George Street, it was five o'clock and so I stopped to telephone the youth hostel. Unfortunately, the young lady I spoke to regretted that she could not reserve a bed for me – I would have to present myself in person. I was therefore obliged to foot it back to the hostel and join a long queue outside. Eventually I signed in and paid up; by six o'clock I was installed and able to grab a quick meal in the cafeteria.

An hour later I went whizzing down the hill on my bike and returned to George Street. I walked to the beautiful Circus: three long curved terraces, designed by John Wood the Elder, which formed a circular space or theatre for civic functions and games. From here I made my way to the magnificent Royal Crescent, Bath's most spectacular terrace, built between 1767 and 1774 by John Wood the Younger. This was the ideal time to see the city, now that it was quiet and almost empty of people. By now the sky had cleared and the rich golden-coloured stone of the Georgian houses glowed in the early evening light. However, I had noticed that in some of the less important streets, the stone had turned pitch black – no doubt due to pollution over the years.

Overall, the city had a magical atmosphere; the combination of the fine buildings, the trees that complemented the classical precision of the architecture, and the general air of exclusivity simply took my breath away. I ambled around, completely in my element, with no desire to leave. St James Square, Margaret's Buildings, Rivers Street, the Assembly Rooms... everything was just so beautiful. Now and then I

stopped to take photographs with a new roll of film that I had purchased during the afternoon.

Wandering up one street and down another, I worked my way back to Bath Abbey, where I found some quiet little streets and squares adjacent to it and the Pump Room. As darkness slowly engulfed the city and the lights were illuminated, I was able to peep into people's rooms, many of which contained fine antique furniture. When I had seen enough, I collapsed onto a bench in the square by the Abbey to relax and enjoy my surroundings, despite the presence of some noisy Spanish children and the antics of a scruffy group of punks. I finally left and made my way back to the hostel, where I wrote my diary while everything was still fresh in my memory, then scribbled a message on a postcard.

On the following morning, which was a little dull, I walked to the town centre, stopping at the post office to send off my first film and the postcard. My first port of call was the Pump Room and Roman Baths; a £2 ticket allowed me to visit both them and the Assembly Rooms. I was impressed by the beautiful interior of the Pump Room building and the museum of Roman excavations underneath, though the pleasure of being there was marred by the presence of so many noisy American tourists. In the Roman Baths I dipped my hand into the tepid water and watched the steam rise from the surface. Unfortunately, the enclosure containing the King's Bath was spoilt by ugly sheets of corrugated iron that had been placed around the statues above – undoubtedly they were undergoing restoration. Morning coffee was being served in the magnificent pump room when I entered it; at one end stood a large, but not particularly handsome Tompion longcase clock, which I duly examined. Musicians entered and began to tune their instruments just as I was leaving. I promised myself afternoon tea here, just for the enjoyment of the experience.

I then made my way to the Assembly Room, via the Circus, and had a look inside. Although the interior was classical, it was rather stark. I chatted to a lady seated at a desk, who tried to persuade me to join the National Trust, but I could not make up my mind. I went downstairs to the Museum of Costume and looked at some of the exhibits; I found the eighteenth-century models the most interesting.



The Royal Crescent

I next walked to the Royal Crescent. By now the sun had come out and the city sparkled in the mid-morning light. A horse and carriage, carrying a group of tourists, suddenly appeared and rattled past. I entered No. 1, the first house of the crescent, and bought a student ticket to see the interior, which had been restored in a sympathetic

manner. As expected, it was magnificent inside, with the furniture and décor just as it would have been in the Georgian era. In each room was a lady who explained everything in detail. Of particular interest to me was the thin paintwork in the library, which deliberately left the pattern of the brushstrokes visible. In the upstairs drawing room was an eighteenth-century wooden-framed fortepiano, also of great interest to me. Although the house was a museum, it nonetheless had a genuine lived-in feel about it. Loath to leave, I lingered inside, chatting to the friendly lady guides. By now I realized that I would not be leaving Bath by lunchtime, as I had originally planned. I finally and reluctantly left the wonderful house and went off in search of some lunch.

Nearby I found a delicatessen, where I could hear music on BBC Radio 3 playing in the background, and where I was able to buy two large cheese and salad sandwiches, an apple and a soft drink for just 65p. From here I repaired to the Royal Victoria Park, with its fine view of the Royal Crescent, and ate my picnic lunch sitting on the grass. Several other people were taking the opportunity to relax in the sun. It was one of those moments when I felt very happy to be alive.

Refreshed after the food and rest, I made my way uphill to Somerset Place and Lansdown Crescent, where I took more photos of the elegant buildings. One had to be fit in this city, with so many hills to climb! Nevertheless, I had noticed quite a number of elderly people hobbling about with walking sticks.

I next approached the town centre, turned off to see Camden Crescent (which was not too interesting) and made my way to the Carriage Museum. As there was an entrance fee, and as I was not very enthusiastic about seeing carriages, I decided to carry on. I stopped to look into several antique shops, which, I discovered, had little of interest for sale. Unsurprisingly, the prices displayed were rather high. At Bridge Street I went into the Guildhall building and had a brief look around the small Victoria Art Gallery, which contained some excellent paintings by artists that I had never heard of before. There was also a good collection of works by continental painters.



Pulteney Bridge, Bath

Because I now had to return to the hostel at five o'clock to book in for another night, I was tied to time and realized that I would have to skip afternoon tea in the Pump Room, which was a pity. As I was tired and thirsty by now, I made my way down to the river bank, where I bought an ice cream and sat down to eat it while gazing at Pulteney Bridge. Later I moved off, walked to the end of Pulteney Street and visited the elegant Holburne and Menstrie Museum. Again, I managed to pass myself off as a student, and spent a pleasant half hour looking around the period house. In the hall was a fine longcase clock by the seventeenth-century maker Daniel Quare, decorated with marquetry, and some magnificent chests of drawers. Upstairs, in the two main exhibition galleries, were impressive collections of porcelain, jewellery, glass and silverware, along with items of furniture and fine paintings. Although I realized that the standard was very high, I was unable to take it all in properly, as I had tried to see far too much in one day!

I left at half past four and once again struggled up the damned hill to the hostel. Making sure that I was one of the first in, I managed to secure my bed in the same little room. Afterwards, I made a welcome pot of tea, bought a meal and sat down to demolish it. I finished with a pot of yogurt and went off to take a much-needed shower. Later I went out to the garden, where it was quiet, and sat down to write my diary. As I was by now too exhausted to do anything else, I spent the remainder of the evening in the warm common room, reading. I eventually climbed into bed at 10.30; happy that I had spent such an enjoyable time in such a wonderful city, I quickly fell into a deep sleep.