

Wales Dragon's Back South – September 2021

Introduction

In 2020 I completed a nine day trek across the highest mountains of Snowdonia, walking from Machynlleth to Llandudno Junction. For 2021 I decided to do a similar trek over the highest mountains of South Wales, the Brecon Beacons, then continuing up through mid-Wales to finish at Machynlleth, thus connecting the two trek routes into one “grand tour” of the Welsh mountains.

In North Wales there's a fairly obvious ridge line to follow when heading northwards. In south Wales, the main spine of the Brecon Beacons runs east-west, so is not particularly amenable to a north-south journey. Mid-Wales is characterised by high rolling moors with few distinctive mountains. In *Hillwalking in Wales*, Peter Hermon gives an evocative description of this area: “*the scene is one of windswept grassland stretching uninterruptedly to far horizons ... [there's a] quirk of geography whereby the uplands are all of a similar height. It is as if Nature, in the act of creating one of the most extensive mountain ranges in the principality, tired of her efforts and sliced off the tops, leaving behind a vast and empty highland plateau*”. Such a landscape offers many choices of route and there are only really two significant mountains to visit in this area, Drygarn Fawr and Plynlimon.

Similar to my 2020 planning, I looked at the route of the Cambrian Way and also the Dragon's Back race, and arrived at my own route using those two as a guide. The 2021 Dragon's Back race (run from 6th to 11th September) extended from five to six days to take in Pen y Fan (the highest mountain in south Wales), finishing in Cardiff. In previous years the race finished in Llandeilo at the eastern end of the Carmarthen Fans, missing out most of the Brecon Beacons. Once I settled on a route, I marked it with a highlighter pen on Ordnance Survey 1:25 000 scale paper mapping. The line crossed seven maps, and to get the weight down I trimmed off unnecessary parts of the maps.

On previous trips to the Beacons, I've used the railway station at Merthyr Tydfil as the obvious starting point, but this time I looked further east and opted for Abergavenny station. From Abergavenny it's possible to do a two day loop to include the Black Mountains following the Cambrian Way. However this involves heading north, only to double back the same distance south, before continuing west across the Brecon Beacons. Given the large distance I had to cover to reach Machynlleth, I couldn't justify including the Black Mountains. These hills are on the border with England, don't feel as “Welsh” so to me as the rest of the Beacons.

Saturday 11th September – Abergavenny to Chartist Cave (14.5 miles)

Usually the train journey from Southampton to Abergavenny involves just one change, at Newport. However there was a replacement bus for the first leg of the journey to Salisbury. I left Southampton at 8:23am on a surprisingly packed coach. It took an hour to reach Salisbury, and by 11:30am I was in Newport.

There was a bit of a wait in Newport for the 12:07pm train, and whilst I was waiting I chatted to a couple who had a lot of outdoor kit. They were heading to an old limestone quarry to do some rock climbing and wild camping over the weekend. The train reached Abergavenny at 12:30pm. I had over 14 miles to walk today, and my first objective was to reach the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal, which would provide easy flat walking and allow me to cover the miles quickly at the start. My rucksack laden with food weighed 13 kilograms, plus 2 litres (2 kg) of water.

I followed a footpath along the banks of the River Usk, then crossed the Usk Bridge and continued on the south bank, along a private road. There was some difficulty getting to the south side of the

busy A465 dual carriageway. On my first attempt, at the underpass at Llanfoist, I didn't locate the footpath on the south side, so retraced my steps and continued along the north side to Pen-y-worlod. Here my map showed a bridge, but the bridge was nowhere to be seen. I continued parallel to the A465 on what looked to be a private driveway. Fortunately, a very friendly couple in a car drove by and explained that two old bridges over the A465 had been replaced by a new bridge further along (the latest OS map is correct!). Once over the bridge, I doubled back a short distance to join a path along an old railway.

The railway path runs parallel with the canal for about a mile. There are several ways up to the canal, and I chose the middle one on the outskirts of Govilon. Navigation was now straightforward and the only concern was jumping out the way of the numerous bicycles hurtling along the towpath. A few miles on I stopped to get a soft drink at the The Towpath Inn in Gilwern (<https://www.facebook.com/TheTowpathInn/>). On this first day I was a little concerned about the prospects of finding suitable drinking water, so this was a good opportunity to rehydrate.

Beyond Gilwern, I caught up with a stand-up paddleboarder and chatted to him for a while. He was a local man doing an "out and back" day trip from the village. I keep mulling over whether to get a stand up paddleboard for multi-day adventures. What puts me off is the possibility of falling in; the need for very good (i.e. heavy) dry bags, and the overall weight of a paddleboard being significantly heavier than my packraft (7.5kg compared to less than 2kg). A paddleboard is much faster than a packraft though.

At Llangattock I escaped the canal by ascending a flight of rock steps jutting out from the side of a bridge and clambered over a stone stile. Soon I was off the road and heading into a wooded cwm, ringed by dramatic limestone crags. At the back of the cwm, the slope reared up steeply, with the path climbing up on a diagonal traverse, initially through woodland and then through bracken, and onto the old tramway that curves around the cwm on the 350m contour (built to transport limestone from the Llangattock quarries). The steep ascent with my fully-laden pack was exhausting, and I had to pause at the top to get my breath back.

Following the tramway around to the back of the cwm I discovered a trickle of water dripping from the rock. This was better than nothing, so I used the opportunity to refill my water bottle. Just beyond the spring, I stopped to inspect a curious cleft in the rock. A woman passing by said that on some days you can feel a cool draught blowing out from the hole. She mentioned that there was a larger cave nearby, "Eglwys Faen", and asking if I was interested, she told me her husband could lead me up to it. I said "yes please", and dumping my bag, her husband led me up a steep path to the cave entrance.

I went a short way inside, taking care on the polished limestone entrance rocks, and noted that there was a space large enough and flat enough for a bivvy. The husband informed me that "Eglwys Faen" means "stone church" ("faen" is a mutation of "maen"). Below the Llangattock Escarpement and the moors of Mynydd Llangatwg, there are an estimated 400 miles of passages, formed over millennia by water trickling through the limestone. Some of Britain's longest cave systems lie concealed beneath this hill, including Ogof y Daren Cilau and Ogof Agen Allwedd. Eglwys Faen was a very welcome diversion – I wasn't aware of it previously and was lucky to have it pointed out to me.

A little further on, I abandoned the old tramway (which is a dead end) and descended back into the cwm, losing some height. The path took me up to a minor road, which I followed west for a couple of miles. It would have been nicer to walk across the moor, but the lower slopes were cloaked in dense bracken, and I was glad of some easier walking on a metalled road. At the junction with the B4560 I left the road and continued up onto the moor.

My map didn't show any paths across Mynydd Llangynidr, but fortunately I found one going exactly where I wanted! This led me reliably up to an Ordnance Survey trig pillar at 541m, painted patriotically with a crimson Welsh dragon against a white background on all four sides. From here it was just over a mile to my final destination for the day, "Chartist Cave". A path continued in the correct direction, so I followed it, hoping for the best.

The moor in this area is more-or-less flat, with some small undulations. Everything is roughly the same height as everything else, but you can't see very far. The trusty path didn't let me down and turning a corner I found the south-facing fissure of Chartist Cave (Ogof Fawr). At the entrance to the cave there's a plaque bearing the inscription:

The Chartist Caves

Pikes and possibly other weapons were secretly made and stockpiled in these caves during the summer of 1839. They were subsequently carried by Tredegar Chartists on the great march to seize Newport, 3rd-5th November 1839. This became the greatest armed clash between government and British people in the nineteenth century and resulted in over twenty deaths and the last mass treason trial in British history. This plaque was placed here by Tredegar Town Council in 1989 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the insurrection which eventually helped with democratic rights for all British people.

My original plan was to sleep in this cave, but the floor was strewn with larger immovable boulders, and the few flat places were damp with water dripping from the ceiling. There was a dry spot at the back, but it would have needed a lot of time to arrange the smaller rocks into a suitable sleeping area. It was less than an hour until nightfall, so instead I erected my tent on the grassy lawn at the cave entrance. I hadn't seen any water on the moor, so decided to go on a recce in the remaining daylight. I aimed south towards Llyn y Garn-faw, but didn't have to walk far to find a tiny trickle running into a shake hole. I used this for cooking my evening meal and for porridge for breakfast, relying on boiling to treat the water.

Sunday 12th September – Pen y Fan, Cribyn and Corn Du (13.8 miles)

Overnight the skies were clear and by morning a heavy dew had settled on my tent and across the moor. I woke briefly at dawn and witnessed a beautiful sunrise, but I was still tired and my tent was dew soaked, so I went back to sleep. When I finally woke, I went to collect more drinking water from the tiny trickle, treating it this time with iodine. As I was taking my tent down, a mountain biker arrived. I chatted to him for a while, and just after he left, a father and daughter arrived, and they also wanted to chat.

I finally set off at 9:30am, confidently following the beaten path that had served me so well the previous day. However, I neglected to check the compass and ended up meeting the road some distance south of where I'd intended to emerge. The road is a dead end and leads to the old limestone quarries at Cefn y Ystrad. There were a lot of cars driving up here and parking in the quarry for a Sunday morning stroll. Incidentally on the Cefn yr Ystrad mountain, above the quarry, there are remains of a Wellington bomber that crashed in December 1940. The crew thought they were descending on low ground in East Anglia after a successful bombing mission in Bordeaux. All six died and the ground is still marked from the fierce fire that followed the crash.

As the road turns into the quarry I stopped to read the plaque on a memorial to Nye Bevan, the founder of NHS:

Aneurin Bevan Heritage Trail. 12. Duffryn Cwannon

Bevan was always welcomed on his visits to the quarrying village of Trefil, the northern tip of his consistency. He loved its lonely moorland, walking with his friends like Archie Lush, his confidant and Agent, and Oliver Jones, a local historian. The ashes of both Aneurin Bevan (1960) and Jennie

Lee (1988) were scattered on these upland slopes. "What the nation mourned was the tragedy which mixed with the brilliance and the genius, and what it did in expiation was to acknowledge his unique place in our history." Michael Foot

Just before the car park, I turned onto a bridleway contouring around the head of Dyffryn Cwannon. This appeared to be another old tramway, and I followed it around to the waterfall at the back of the cwm. Here I entered a maze of small sheep fields, and it took some time to find all the exit gates and escape on the far side. Once I got my bearings back, I navigated across a narrow neck of moorland that's hemmed in by encroaching forestry plantations on both sides. I worked around the head of Cwm Callan, aimed for the 565m trig pillar on Pant y Creigiau, and from there descended to a 439m pass at a minor road.

Once over the road, I was now on the slopes that rise up to the highest peaks in the Beacons, crowned by Pen y Fan (886m). A short diagonal traverse took me across a pair of streams, where I paused to collect water. Although this was near a road and a main path, the stream tumbles from an unfrequented ridge, so I drank the water untreated. I hydrated as much as possible and carried a litre for the remainder of the day. Incidentally just to the east of here, beyond a conifer plantation, there's a stream with a series of waterfalls at Blaen-y-glyn, a beauty spot recommended by Peter Hermon.

Now the going really got steep, with a slog up Craig y Fan Ddu. Once at the top, I picked a nice lunch spot with views over the vast hollow of Cerrig Edmwnnt. The next section of path took a curious dog-leg up to the main escarpment. This route seems inexplicable when marked on the map, but it's clear on the ground that an area of peat hags and bogs block the direct line. The second half of the dog-leg crosses an unusual pavement of exposed red sandstone bedrock, which leads up to the main Beacons ridge.

I considered visiting the summit of Fan y Bîg, but it would have involved a steep descent on the far side, and instead I opted for a traversing diagonally descent down to the Roman Road at 599m. On the way down, I encountered a group of young fell runners (in their late teens or early twenties) who asked me directions for the Beacons Way – they were using a smart phone app that had a very unclear display. I'd just come that way so could give some clear directions. They might not have coped so well in poor visibility!

I was rather dreading this next section of route over Cribyn, Pen y Fan and Corn Du, having seen stories in the news about queues for the summit and overcrowding on the Storey Arms path (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-wales-48016093>). Thankfully it was now late afternoon and the worst of the crowds had subsided. Still there was an unwelcome minority of people who clearly didn't know how to behave in the mountains, making a lot of noise, playing music on their phones, chasing sheep to take photos etc., and I did my best to give them a wide berth!

After an initial steep slog, the angle relented and I continued to the summit of Cribyn (795m). Looking south, I was surprised to see the Upper Neuadd Reservoir almost dried up, with grass growing on what should be the lake bed! Hopefully this will refill when there's higher rainfall over the autumn and winter months.

Beyond Cribyn, I dropped down to 665m before the final steep climb up to Pen y Fan (886m). The summit here was dotted with the pointless stacks of stones that some people these days like to

construct on hills and beaches. I was also dismayed to see graffiti on some of the summit cairn stones, scribbled in black permanent marker. It's like a dog marking its territory! Whatever happened to "leave nothing but footprints"?

Beyond Pen y Fan, I stopped briefly to send a text message at 4:15pm, then there was a short ascent over Corn Du, really just a satellite summit, before the long gentle descent to the Storey Arms. In certain places attempts have been made here to protect the exposed ground from further erosion, with metal grids. I crossed the busy A4059 at the Storey Arms and entered the vast tract of land known as Fforest Fawr. This area is much less frequented than Pen y Fan, so I was rather glad to find a path, which I followed around the side of Fan Fawr. I collected some drinking water from the Nant y Gerdinen, then climbed a little further to find a level spot to camp. My legs were really tired after a long day with multiple steep ascents, and I really couldn't have walked much further.

I'd been warned that rain was coming this evening, and it arrived just as I was putting up my tent. On this trip I'd been aiming to camp in an interesting or scenic location every night – this camp on the side of Fan Fawr was the one exception. Although I was still quite close to the A4059, fortunately I was out of sight of it, and out of earshot from the traffic noise.

Monday 13th September – Fforest Fawr and Mynydd Du (13.2 miles)

All night there was light rainfall, but thankfully it stopped at dawn. It was a grey day, with sullen clouds hanging over the highest peaks. My 550m camp was clear of cloud and the onward route for the first part of the day looked like it would be below the cloud. I was glad of this since the terrain of Fforest Fawr is rounded, rather featureless, and navigation on the intermittent paths is not easy.

Fforest Fawr is the least popular area of the the Brecon Beacons, lacking the dramatic rocky escarpments of the adjacent ranges. Here the best scenery is not in the high mountains, but on the lower slopes to the south of Ystradfellte. In an area known as "Waterfall Country", the Afon Mellte, Nedd Fechan and Afon Pyrddin have carved deep into the rock, creating a spectacular series of waterfalls.

It would have been possible to climb Fan Fawr, Fan Dringarth and Fan Llia, as I've done on a previous trek, but there was little incentive to do so today with the summits veiled in cloud. Instead I took a short cut across the head of the valley between Fan Fawr and Fan Dringarth, with only a small loss of height. I stopped to fill up on water from the Nant y Gwair in the valley. The well defined path continued up towards Fan Dringarth, but inexplicably vanished as it reached the spine of the ridge.

I continued heading west on a compass bearing, boots now soaked from the wet grass (I should have brought gaiters). Once over the hump of the ridge. I oriented the map against landmarks now visible on the far side, with the aim of reaching a minor road. The route went over Bryn Melyn (yellow hillside) which it was indeed covered in yellowish vegetation, suggesting the name was descriptive in origin. Just before Bryn Melyn, I stopped at the Nant Ystwyth to collect some more water.

Near the road there's a well known standing stone called Maen Llia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maen_Llia), perched on the southern edge of a marsh. However, I decided to take a short cut on the north side of the marsh since I'd already visited the stone on a previous trek. On that trek I'd also climbed Fan Nedd, but since it was covered in cloud this time, I decided to bypass it on the north side, following a fence. The slope here is so steep that it doesn't look like a viable route would be possible. However, as you follow it, the route is gradually revealed, with the fence threading its way between steep crags, both above and below.

Once beyond the steep slopes, I aimed for Bwlch y Duwynt, where in the distance I spotted a group of soldiers out on a training exercise. From this pass I climbed a short way uphill to reach a substantial quarry track, quite incongruous in the otherwise wild landscape. I followed the track for half a mile until a cairn marked the turning point for Fan Gyhirych. This was the only mountain in Fforest Fawr that I decided go over rather than around! The summit was covered in cloud, so I wasn't rewarded with a view.

I found the summit trig pillar at 725m, painted with a slogan "Cofiwch Dryweryn" (Remember Tryweryn). It turns out that these words were originally painted onto the wall of a ruined cottage in the early 1960s, in protest against the decision by Liverpool City Council to flood the Tryweryn Valley and create the Llyn Celyn reservoir (north of Bala Lake). The phrase has become a prominent political slogan for Welsh nationalism (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cofiwch_Dryweryn). The trig on Fan Gyhirych is in a rather poor condition, with the concrete crumbling at the base, and surrounded by a moat of water.

The direct descent from Fan Gyhirych to the west is rather steep, so I headed south for a short way, before curving back around to the north. Once the angle relented I paused for lunch, with excellent views across the valley to the path on the far side. Whilst I was stopped, the clouds vanished and the sun came out, a surprisingly quick transition from the grey overcast morning.

After lunch there was a steep descent to Bwlch Bryn-rhudd, where I crossed the A4067 and began another climb. In the field by the road here, there's a large tower built from blocks of sandstone. There doesn't seem to be any information online about the purpose of this tower, but it's presumably a monument related to the quarrying that took place historically in this area. I now had to cross an intervening ridge of no-man's-land between Fforest Fawr and the next range of hills Mynydd Du. Fortunately there was a good path all the way, although very narrow and obscured by long grass on the far side.

The path lead down to the road where there's a delightful spot with a small lay-by and space for just one car. Here the Afon Tawe cascades over rocky shelves, running parallel and adjacent to the road. The Nant y Llyn tumbles down from the hills via a series of waterfalls to meet the Tawe. Nearby, on the far side of the stream, is the Maen Mawr stone circle and a pair of stone rows leading up to it, quite an elaborate megalithic site, on a site perhaps chosen for the significant confluence of waters. <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=347>
<https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=4439>
<https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=1817>

My route headed uphill, parallel to the Nant y Llyn. The steep-sided gorge was a riot of colour, with yellow gorse, purple heather and red rowan berries. I stopped at one of the waterfalls to fill up on water and was very tempted to have a dip in the enticing pool. However, there was more rain forecast for this evening and I was keen to get across Mynydd Du before it arrived.

I made good progress on the ascent and soon reached Llyn y Fan Fawr. The going now got steeper, with an ascent of stone steps to Bwlch Giedd on the Mynydd Du escarpment. On a previous trek I've followed the entire escarpment over Fan Hir to reach this point. There was now a short easy climb to reach Fan Brycheiniog (802m), with a summit trig daubed with another nationalist slogan "Yes Cymru" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YesCymru>).

I continued skirting the clifftops around to the promontory at Tŵr y Fan Foel (802m), where I was suprised to see a squirrel. The nearest woods are over a mile from here and it's remarkable to spot a squirrel so high in the mountains. It must have been tempted by people leaving scraps of food (and

perhaps by the autumn bilberries on the moors). The next summit was Fan Foel (781m) where I followed a new gravel path and a little further on an excavated trench awaiting filling with gravel. It's a shame that the path restorers haven't used native red sandstone to repair the path erosion here.

Continuing along the escarpment, I now had to lose some height down to Bwlch Blaen-Twrch. In this area there are dramatic views of Picws Du, the next mountain on the far side of the bwlch. Picws Du's steep rocky wedge and elegant fluted fans of partially vegetated pinkish scree is really one of the natural wonders of Wales. It's more impressive than the scenery around Pen y Fan, yet it only attracts a fraction of the visitors.

At the bwlch it began to drizzle, so I stopped to put on waterproofs before continuing over Picws Du (749 m). There were now less than two miles along the remainder of the Bannau Sir Gaer escarpment and down to Llyn y Fan Fach. At the lake, there's a 'Rescue Shelter' which I intended to use as a bothy for the night (<https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/2569543>). I made good progress, with the weather closing in on the higher slopes, and reached the shelter just as the heavy rain commenced. A few people coming off the mountain poked their head around the door, but soon I was left alone for the night.

Llyn y Fan Fach is actually a reservoir and the shelter was presumably originally used as part of the construction and management of the reservoir. There are numerous Welsh Water signs in the vicinity with all kinds of dire warnings about Leptospirosis (Weil's disease), Blue Green Algae, hidden currents and dangerous underwater machinery. There was some algae growing in places around the lake shore, but I found a clear area and collected some water. Some I used directly for cooking, while the rest I treated with iodine. In retrospect I could have walked a few hundred metres to a leat transferring water into the reservoir (flowing water is generally better for drinking).

The shelter is rather basic, with two wooden benches and a crumbling fireplace. The walls are plastered with graffiti, include nationalist slogans, with mentions of the Free Wales Army (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Wales_Army). In the shelter there were mouse droppings, so I hung my food in a bag from the rafters. I also hung up my tent out to dry. There were small shards of glass on the concrete floor, which needed carefully clearing away before inflating my sleeping mat. The wooden door didn't close properly, so I used some paracord to tie it up and stop the wind blowing it open, keeping the rain out overnight.

Tuesday 14th September – To Llandoverly (14.2 miles)

Throughout the night heavy rain drummed on the roof and the wind roared around the eaves. I felt lucky to be tucked up warm inside. By the morning, the storm had passed and the skies were clear with Picws Du once again free of cloud. This was a significant moment in the trek, as I'd completed the east-west traverse of the Brecon Beacons and was now finally heading north to Machynlleth. Today would be an easier day, with moorland to cross in the morning and minor roads to Llandoverly in the afternoon.

I started descending the reservoir track and paused after less than a mile to fill up with water. At the car park at the bottom, I turned to follow a path ascending back up onto the moor, following the Sychnant valley to a stone circle (<https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=3038>). The onward route involved crossing a pathless section of moor through long grass, soaking my boots. The path marked on the map didn't seem to exist or perhaps I just missed it. After after a mile I joined a path just before a ford, then at a second ford by the Nant Tŷ-bach, I stopped to rehydrate and refill my water bottle. This looked to be the the last viable drinking water before Llandoverly.

Somehow I took a wrong turning, perhaps confused by the proliferating quad bike tracks, which didn't correspond with the paths marked on my map. I also saw a couple of groups of soldiers on training exercises, and wrongly assumed that they'd come from where I was heading. However, it didn't take long to get down to a minor road, and I could follow the road for a short way to regain my route.

The next few miles were on a good path leading across moors and up onto the ridge of Mynydd Myddfai. On the way I spotted a squirrel dashing across the moor (what is it with the squirrels in this area?). Mynydd Myddfai has a long ditch and bank earthwork running along its spine, which appears to be of Roman origin (nearby there's a Roman camp, fort and road). Navigation was easy, following the earthworks, and I stopped for lunch at Pen y Bylchau, at a point where bridleways intersect.

After lunch, there was less than a mile to reach the minor road at Cwm y Cadno. I generally try to avoid extended sections of road walking, but on a long trek it's actually quite pleasant to have a hard surface to walk on every-so-often. It gives an opportunity to make fast progress and for wet boots to dry off! I followed minor roads all the way to Llandovery, only leaving the road at one point to cut a corner off on a footpath which was very overgrown and not worth the effort!

There's a railway station in Llandovery and this was an opportunity to bail out, but I was still feeling strong. The station would allow the route to be split into two logical sections, one for the Brecon Beacons and one for Mid Wales, for those who don't want to tackle the route as a single trek. I arrived in Llandovery around 3pm and spent some time investigating the shops, takeaways and pubs around the town centre. On a long trek it's impossible to carry all the food necessary to replenish the energy being burnt, so it's advisable to take advantage of any opportunity to supplement rations. Being mid-afternoon, nowhere was serving food, and it would be a couple of hours before the fish & chip shop opened at 5pm (<https://threehorseshoesltd.com/order-now>).

I climbed up onto the ruins of Llandovery Castle to take a break (<https://www.breconbeacons.org/poi/castles-llandovery-castle>). Next to the castle there's a statue of an armour clad figure, a rather sinister apparition, with no head inside its helmet, reminiscent of a ring wraith (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Llywelyn_ap_Gruffydd_Fychan). The statue is of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd Fycha, a wealthy landowner who was executed in Llandovery by King Henry IV in punishment for his support of Owain Glyndŵr's Welsh rebellion.

Sitting amongst the castle ruins, I had a conundrum to solve regarding drinking water. For the rest of today and most of tomorrow, I'd be on lower-lying farmland, without any suitable places to collect unpolluted water. The first viable source of water looked to be the following day around lunchtime, just below the outflow from Llyn Brienne. I only had water bottles to carry two litres, which limited what I could take from Llandovery.

I decided to check out the public toilets to see if I could fill water bottles there, then head to the Bear Inn in the Market Square (<https://www.facebook.com/thebearllandovery/>) and hydrate as much as possible before getting fish & chips at 5pm. The toilets were of the fancy modern kind, with a machine dispensing hot water and soap, so were no good. The pub was delightful, with an outdoor seating area, surrounded by bee friendly flowers in hanging baskets and tubs. The pub is popular with the locals, being dog friendly, and seems to be a magnet for old hippies.

I ordered a couple of soft drinks and managed to sneak into the pub toilets to refill my bottles. Just after 5pm I walked to the fish & chip shop, and on to a picnic bench on the Market Square to eat my meal. The batter was rather greasy, but I didn't mind too much, it was good to get some proper food

after three nights of camping food! It was rather a heavy meal, so I had to wait for it to go down, before setting off.

Another conundrum for this evening was finding a suitable place to camp. Llandovery does have a couple of campsites, but they're more geared towards caravans, and I wanted to preserve the purity of the trek by finding a suitable wild camping spot. I'd done some research in advance and found the Poor Man's Wood nature reserve on the outskirts of Llandovery, where a forum showed someone hammock camping next to a wooden hut:

<https://www.lifeinthewilderness.uk/threads/poormans-wood-llandovery.157965/>.

The nature reserve was a mile and a half walk from the centre of Llandovery and the sun was low in the sky by the time I arrived. These woods were donated to Llandovery in the 16th by Vicar Pritchard, on condition that the townsfolk of Llandovery could enter the property, on foot only, for the purpose of taking dead wood for fuel – but no more than they could carry out on their backs. Later on in the 19th century some lead mining also took place here. The woods are now managed by the South and West Wales Wildlife Trust.

The wood is on a steep hillside, and ideally I wanted to find the wooden hut shown in the photo on the forum. Unfortunately, I neglected to print out a map that shows the footpaths in the nature reserve, so I just took the first path, climbing on a rising diagonal traverse. The path was rather overgrown with brambles and it was clear that the wood doesn't get much footfall, which was good news for me wild camping!

I didn't find the wooden shelter, but near the top of the wood I found a completely flat spot, perhaps the level for an old lead mine. Brambles needed clearing and after putting my tent up I realised that there were some holly leaves on the ground that were piercing through the groundsheet into the floor of my tent. This was no good for my air mattress, so I carefully cleared the spiky leaves, protecting the delicate air mattress with whatever spare items of kit were available. It was a relief to get set up, and I now had a chance to appreciate the beauty of these native woods. The setting sun refracting through the trees and casting golden light onto the autumnal bracken was beautiful.

Wednesday 15th September – Tywi Valley, Llynn Brianne and Abergwesyn (19.2 miles)

I was a little concerned about being disturbed by road noise from the nearby A483, but the traffic quietened down overnight and didn't wake me up in the early morning. I had a really good night's sleep cradled in this ancient woodland and awoke feeling refreshed. Once packed, I continued following the bramble-choked path up to the top corner of the woods. Here the path descended and doubled back to the south to meet the right of way running along the bottom of the woods. I never did find the wooden hut, but if it's still there, it must be on the middle path that I didn't explore (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.510663572335814.1073741833.141204025948439&type=3>).

There were several fallen trees to clamber around, and I was rather glad to escape from these tangled and neglected woods into open fields. The grass was soaked with dew and autumnal mist hung over the valley. I walked up to the A483 and crossed the road bridge over the Afon Brân. For the next few miles I had to traverse some low hills to reach the Dyffryn Tywi /the Towy Valley.

The first part was on a minor road, where the hedgerows were a veritable buffet of wild food, festooned with ripe blackberries and the steep banks sprouting with sorrel. The next section was an "other route with public access" (shown with green dots on the OS map) then a "byway open to all traffic" (shown with green crosses on the OS map). Halfway along this byway was a particularly deep muddy puddle that was unavoidable, and I only just managed to wade across without the water

spilling over the top of my boots! The byway emerged onto a minor road, which took me steeply downhill, across a road, and onto the well-concealed start of another byway.

I'd intended to follow this byway parallel to the river, but I missed the turning and continued downhill on a footpath. Shortly, I reached a confusing T-junction with a footpath going one way and a "permissive path" going the other. This didn't correspond with my map, but fortunately some walkers came up the permissive path and confirmed that it went down to the riverbank and on to a campsite. Just before the river, there was an intriguing open-sided wooden shelter with a roof covered with a plastic sheet. In front of the shelter there was a firepit lined with river pebbles, and inside the shelter there were several bags of wood. There was no sign saying "private", so perhaps this is a designated wild camping area for Cambrian Way walkers.

After a mile following the riverbank, I reached the campsite, then crossed a road bridge to the west bank of the Tywi. My map showed the footpath continuing on this side for half a mile, but I had to leave it prematurely on a diversion up to the road, supposedly "due to erosion". Continuing on the road to where the path was meant to emerge, there was still a right of way sign, but the gate said "private fishing"!

There was now a mile of road walking, past Seion Chapel, a Welsh Baptist chapel built in 1827 (<https://www.rhandirmwyn.org/rhandirmwyns-places-of-worship/seion/>) and past the Towy Bridge Inn. I hoped to stay on the west side of the Tywi as far as possible, but it was not clear from the map whether this was a right of way. I crossed a road bridge over the river Gwenffrwd, then followed a track through woods. There were no "private" signs, so I continued. The track became a little overgrown, but thankfully emerged with no obstructions at the house at Gallt-y-bere. I quietly let myself out and observed that there were no "private" signs on the gate either. Presumably this means that the owner doesn't mind people using the route, but doesn't want it to become established as an official right of way.

Here there was no choice but to cross the Towy and follow the busier road on the east side. After a mile, I turned off into RSPB Gwenffrwd-Dinas Nature Reserve. This is a curious 331m high steep-sided inselberg (island mountain), clad in ancient oak and alder woodland. The Tywi runs around the west side of this hill to a confluence with the Afon Doethie. Maybe at some point in the past the Tywi flowed around the east side of the hill, or perhaps the hill was formed by glacial action.

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/gwenffrwd-dinas/>
https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/images/reserves/gwenffrwd-dinas/gwenffrwd-dinasrspbreserveaerial_1023632-free.jpg

A footpath circles the base of Dinas, with the longer section running around on the west side. I still had many miles to walk today, but decided to add in a diversion to fully explore the nature reserve, since it's a special place, and I probably wouldn't be passing this way again. I stopped briefly for lunch, perched on a log, before setting off down the path.

The route started off easy, but as it ran parallel with the river, there was some easy scrambling over rocks and tangled tree roots. In places the RSPB has engineered the route with steps, handrails and grooves cut into rocks to make them less slippery. I passed quite a few people coming the other way, some of them twitchers, brandishing binoculars.

Some 100m above the river, on the rocky hillside, is Twm Siôn Cati's Cave. Twm Siôn Cati (c1530-1609), who's real name was Thomas Jones, is commonly characterised as 'The Welsh Robin Hood'. He was of noble descent, a poet and a heraldic bard of renown. Legend has it that he hid in the cave to avoid the wrath of people who he'd tricked, but recent research suggests that he was escaping

religious persecution. The cave once attracted thousands of visitors annually, and dozens of names have been carved in the rock, the earliest dating from the beginning of the eighteenth century (<https://www.rhandirmwyn.net/twmsioncati.html>).

I decided to make a quick diversion to visit the cave, and hid my rucksack behind a rock, then climbed the wooden steps, scrambling over rocks to reach the entrance. There was a short narrow passage up angled polished rock, emerging into a large chamber with steep walls, but with daylight streaming in from above. Twm Siôn Cati wouldn't have stayed very dry sheltering here!

I retraced steps back to the main path, retrieved my rucksack, and continued working around steep slopes above the river, with more RSPB path engineering allowing easier passage. Gradually the terrain eased to reach a flat grassy meadow, between the woodland and the river. Here I was able to access the water to refill my bottle. I was quite dehydrated at this point, so drank as much as possible. The final section of the nature reserve path was over a boardwalk to reach a car park. The RSPB must have spent thousands on path engineering here!

Just around the corner from the car park is St. Paulinus Church, Ystradffin, established in 1117. Documents from 1339 record it as belonging to Strata Florida Abbey. By 1810, the earlier chapel was derelict and had to be rebuilt, reopening in 1821. The building was restored in 1900 and repaired in 1984 (<https://www.rhandirmwyn.org/rhandirmwyns-places-of-worship/st-paulinus-church-ystradffin/>). Unfortunately on my visit, the church was closed "due to Covid" (an all too common excuse these days). In my opinion, a church should always be open to all as a place of refuge, and that's particularly important during a pandemic. At least I got to visit the 500 year old yew tree in the churchyard.

I now rejoined the road and decided to stick to it, rather than take a steep forestry track cutting off a corner. However at the next corner, I used a bridleway as a shortcut, possibly the original course of the road before construction of the Llyn Brienne reservoir. There was another mile of road walking and on the way I stopped to chat to an English couple riding electric bikes. They'd retired to this area and kept telling me to "keep quiet" about what a special place it is!

I decided to cut off another corner, this time walking cross-country over Access Land. Here there was a brief glimpse of Llyn Brienne, with the water level remarkably low, exposing an ugly ring around the perimeter. After this, I rejoined the road for one final mile, with another glimpse of the reservoir, before turning off to follow a bridleway up the Nant Gwrach. The path was good up to a 380m pass, but on the far side it disappeared into a sea of bracken. With some careful route-finding I managed to stick to the path, and was very glad that it wasn't tick season! Lower down there was some unpleasantly boggy ground.

It was a relief to emerge from the bracken at the Nant y Craf, where I paused to drink some water. A mile across farmland brought me to the mansion at Llwynderw, and then down to the road. In just over half a mile I reached the tiny village of Abergwesyn. As I walked along the road, I chatted to a man out walking his dog. He'd retired here from Kent and commented that living in this area took a lot of getting used to. He said that it's a long drive to any town and the towns are not well endowed with amenities.

I passed some public toilets (closed "due to Covid") and just after the man stopped at his house, which he referred to as "the pad"! I soon left the road on a bridleway, following the Afon Gwesyn upstream, then zigzagged up to the lonely cottage of Trysgol, before traversing around to enter Cwm Gwesyn. I was completely exhausted after walking over nineteen miles in hot weather, so was very happy to find a perfect camping spot, a pleasant grassy pasture on the banks of the Afon Gwesyn, next to a waterfall.

I was now on the National Trust property of Abergwesyn Common, a vast area of wild largely pathless moorland, sometimes called the “roof of Wales”. The National Trust web page for Abergwesyn Common amusingly declares: “*Important notice - We are open. We may be busy, so we encourage you to visit at quieter times to help us keep everyone safe*”. It seems unlikely that this area will ever be busy!

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/abergwesyn-common>

Thursday 16th September – Drygarn Fawr, Elan Valley and Lluest-cwm-bach Bothy (15.8 miles)

After five days walking in warm weather, I was in desperate need of a wash, so decided to have a dip in the river. It was refreshingly cool and helped wake me up. Autumnal mist hung over the valley, but it was expected to clear, and another fine day was forecast. The first objective for today was Drygarn Fawr (645m), the highest hill in this area.

Drygarn Fawr is a notoriously difficult summit to reach, being surrounded on all sides by pathless moorland and tussock grass (purple moor grass). I decided to follow Cwm Gwesyn for ease of navigation, because it leads directly to Drygarn Fawr. The first mile was good going, with a reasonable path leading up to the Sgwd y Ffrwd waterfall. Beyond the waterfall, the path vanished and for the next mile I did battle with the tussocks! What makes this terrain so difficult is the tussocks are liable to collapse if you step on them, yet in between the ground is frequently sodden with pools of water concealed by the long grass.

Progress through the tussock land was extremely slow, and my boots were thoroughly soaked by the time I escaped the valley onto higher terrain. As I crossed the drier ground towards Drygarn Fawr, I met a path coming in from the south. I retrospect I should have left the valley at the Sgwd y Ffrwd waterfall and cast around for a path starting there. As I climbed towards Drygarn Fawr, the ground got rockier and soon I was standing by the summit trig pillar and beside one of the pair of ancient beehive cairns that give this mountain its name (“Drygarn” means “two cairns”).

I followed the ridge to the second (easterly) beehive cairn and was pleased to find a good path going in the right direction (the OS map shows this area as entirely pathless). The path led reliably down to Cwm Paradwys and past the entrance to Cwm Rhiwnant. The landscape in this area is really quite sublime, with steep-sided hills clad in native woodland. In *Hillwalking in Wales*, Peter Hermon says “*Cwm Rhiwnant is a joy; an enchanting finger of crag-hung slopes and tiny gorges, swathed in bracken and heather, dotted with rowan trees and soothed by the music of a tumbling brook. Intimate and secluded, it burrows to the very heart of the empty grassland bordering Drygarn Fawr, yet is a world unto itself; an enclave of fertility and peace amidst the barren yellows of the surrounding fells.*”

My trek was now entering the Elan Valley, an area sometimes called the “Welsh Lake District”. Here there’s a chain of reservoirs which were created by damming the Elan and Claerwen rivers. The reservoirs were built by the Birmingham Corporation Water Department to provide clean drinking water for Birmingham. There are five main lakes: Craig-goch, Pen-y-garreg, Garreg-ddu and Caban-coch, constructed along the Elan Valley from 1893–1904, with Claerwen constructed later in an adjacent valley from 1946–1952. Water from these reservoirs is carried entirely by gravity to Frankley Reservoir in Birmingham. The aqueduct, built from 1896–1906, crosses several valleys and features numerous brick tunnels, pipelines, and valve houses.

<https://www.elanvalley.org.uk/>

<https://www.visitmidwales.co.uk/destination/elan-valley.aspx>

The 1892 Birmingham Corporation Water Act, allowed compulsory purchase of the total water catchment area of the Elan and Claerwen valleys (approximately 180 km², 69 square miles). Boundary stones placed across the moorland can still be seen today marking the watershed of this catchment. The Act also gave powers to displace more than 100 people living in the Elan Valley. All the buildings were demolished and only the landowners were given compensation.

No expense was spared in the construction of the dams, bridges and towers. Facing stone was imported from quarries in south and mid-Wales and ornate copper domes were created to cap the towers. This architectural style is sometimes jokingly referred to as “Birmingham Baroque”! The lowest dam, Caban-coch, was designed to look like a waterfall when the reservoir overflows. Perhaps this expense was to mollify the local people, or maybe it was just a Victorian trait of valuing architectural beauty as much as function. No doubt it was only possible with cheap labour with few health & safety considerations at the time, but even so the project went way over budget. When the Claerwen dam was constructed in the 1940s the architectural style was replicated, with Italian stonemasons drafted in to decorate the façade in finely dressed stone.

I followed the end of the Afon Claerwen for a short way as it flowed into the small Dolymynach Reservoir and then onwards into the Caban-coch Reservoir. For the next four miles I'd be following the waters of Caban-coch down to its outflow at Elan Village. The path involved some ascent, and just before the top of the climb, I paused for lunch at the Nant y Postau.

After lunch, at the next stream along, the Nant y Gro, I collected more water, then began descending to the shore of the reservoir. Here I passed the remains of the Nant y Gro dam. This dam was built to provide water for the navvies' (workers') village during the construction of the Elan Valley reservoirs. Later, in 1942, it was used to prove the theory that an underwater explosion was sufficiently powerful to collapse a dam wall. The test proved successful with a significant breach in the middle of the dam created by a charge at its base. This led to the development of bouncing bombs, which were used in the 1943 Dam Busters raid when RAF Bomber Command breached and damaged several dams in the Ruhr Valley in Germany.

I followed a footpath around the shore of the reservoir through a copse of native woodland, discovering the best crop of bilberries yet! I passed the Caban-coch dam, then descended to a road bridge over the River Elan. Welsh Water (Dŵr Cymru) operate a visitor centre here, and they've spent a considerable sum promoting the Elan Valley for recreation; developing an excellent network of footpaths and cycle paths around the reservoirs.

Ascending the other side of the valley, I followed a cycle path past the water treatment works to reach Elan Village. Incidentally, this cycle path runs all the way from Rhayader to the upper dam at Craig Goch. During the construction of the Elan Valley dams, the navvies lived at Elan Village in wooden huts, in a settlement strictly controlled to maintain order and protect the health of the navvies.

From the village I followed a steep path, zigzagging behind the water treatment works and onto the open moorland. The sun was out and it was impossible to walk uphill without overheating. The footpath shown on the map here has been officially diverted away from farmland and more directly up to the moor. There was a good path to follow past Moelfryn Mawr (504m) and up to the trig pillar on Crugyn Ci (533m).

I now had a couple more miles to walk to reach Llest-cwm-bach Bothy. This was a diversion from the Dragon's Back route, so added a few miles to my original plan, but I couldn't resist a night in a bothy. I followed vague sheep paths across the moor to the next hill at Esgair Perfedd, then took a bridleway heading west, before walking cross-country over marshy ground. Once I reached the

edge of the plateau, landmarks on the far side of the Craig Goch Reservoir came into view and the route down to the bothy was straightforward.

<https://www.mountainbothies.org.uk/bothies/wales/lluest-cwmbach/>

Lluest-cwm-bach was empty when I arrived. The building is a former shepherd's cottage, and was restored in 2013 by the Elan Valley Trust (<https://www.elanvalley.org.uk/about/elan-valley-trust>) in partnership with the Mountain Bothies Association. I'm familiar with this bothy having stayed here on a previous trek.

I decided to use the last of the sunshine to head down to the reservoir for a quick swim. With the water level so low, there was a rocky beach around the shore and muddy sediment on the lake bed. The water was surprisingly warm, the warmest I bathed in on the trek. Walking back up to the bothy, I realised that the stream behind the bothy had dried up over the summer. So I used some water from a water butt for cooking, and treated another litre with iodine for drinking.

After the sun went down, I lit some candles in the bothy, which made it feel cosier. Outside the skies were clear and I got a good view of the nearly full moon. Later, I blew out the candles out and lay down to sleep. However, every time I nearly fell asleep, I heard the scuttle of a mouse, waking me up again. Although all my food was hung safely out of reach, it's very difficult to fall asleep when mice are running around! Unfortunately, this is a consequence of people leaving food in the bothy.

Friday 17th September – Nant Rhys Bothy and Nant Syddion Bothy (15.6 miles)

By the morning, the skies were grey and the forecast signalled the days of fine weather had come to an end, with rain predicted by evening. Today I intended to at least to get as far as Nant Rhys Bothy. If the weather held and I had enough energy, then I hoped go on further and make a two mile diversion from the Dragon's Back route to reach Nant Syddion Bothy. Before leaving Lluest-cwm-bach I filled up my water from the water butt and treated it with iodine. I also used the bothy toilet, which is flushed using a bucket of water.

The first objective was to get back onto the Dragon's Back route by taking a rising traverse around the steep slopes above Waun Geufron. Sheep paths made for easy passage and after crossing the minor road at Sarn Geufron, I set off on the chain of rounded hills that forms the east side of the upper Elan Valley. The first half mile was pathless, but I soon joined a good path leading up to Cerrig Llwydion (500m).

The path continued past a couple of ancient cairns, then on to the highest summit on the broad ridge, Gwar y Tŷ (534m). The next section was navigationally straightforward with a narrow path to follow, then I lost the path for short time crossing a boggy area, before picking it up again on a subsidiary ridge descending to the road.

On the way down I was quite surprised to meet someone coming the other way – these hills don't attract casual walkers, so I was intrigued about his reasons for walking here! It turned out he was doing the Dragon's Back as a race, unsupported, and had started from Conwy. He was following the five-day 2019 route, sticking to the stages, covering over 40 miles a day! He'd said some of the terrain he'd just covered was really challenging, with no path. I was able to assure him that his onward route around the Elan Valley should be easier. His rucksack was much smaller than mine, so I assumed that he was staying in pre-booked accommodation.

The next mile was road walking alongside the bog that forms the headwaters of both the Afon Elan and the Afon Ystwyth (which flows to Aberystwyth). I left the road as it turned a sharp corner at the

head of Cwm Ystwyth. Here, I found the first running water of the day and took the opportunity to rehydrate. I now had to follow a bridleway over an intervening ridge to access the valley leading up to Nant Rhys Bothy.

Once over this ridge, I got the first close up views of Cefn Croes Wind Farm, the largest onshore wind project in the UK. The construction of this wind farm commenced in February 2004, and was completed in the spring of 2005 when the 39 wind turbines started producing electricity. The turbines are sadly visible in the landscape for miles around, and have marred the view from Drygarn Fawr and from Plynlimon. A campaign group fought hard to prevent Cefn Croes from being built. In my view the environmental damage and ecological cost of such schemes far outweighs the rather meagre amount of weather-dependent energy they are able to generate. The money would be far better spent investing in small modular nuclear reactors and tidal power.

The bridleway was hard to trace on the ground, but after casting around, I picked it up as it descended into the valley by an empty cattle shed, and on to the terminus of a dead end road. This road isn't quite a dead end, since there's an extension marked on the map as an "other route with public access" connecting with Cwm Ystwyth. As I approached, a couple of motorbikers came up the off-road section.

Continuing up the valley, I entered Forestry Commission land, and paused for lunch, topping up on water at the Diliw-fechan. Most of the conifers in this area have now been felled, and it looks like the ground around the wind turbines is being allowed to re-wild, since it's now cloaked in dense scrub and birch trees. A good track led up the Afon Diliw valley and a side turning left took me up to Nant Rhys. The bothy is in a small clearing within a copse of conifers, presumably left to screen the view of the wind turbines. Unfortunately the low hum of the turbines is within earshot of the bothy, rather spoiling the wildness. <https://www.mountainbothies.org.uk/bothies/wales/nant-rhys/>

The bothy was originally a two storey house and is now split into two rooms: a dining area accessed from the porch, and an adjacent snug with a woodburning stove. I had a quick look in the bothy logbook and noted that two people had stayed the previous night (Dave and Amden) and were heading on to Nant Syddion Bothy today. It was still early in the afternoon and the rain was holding off, so I decided to continue. As I departed, I had a quick walk around the outside of the building, and spotted that there was a composting toilet in an outhouse.

The next few miles of walking was perhaps the most unpleasant of the trip, along wind farm tracks, past one group of turbines, then underneath another group of turbines. Somehow walking under them made me feel physically quite nauseous and dizzy. Rather than follow the forestry tracks for the last section, I cut off a corner over rough ground, still on the Dragon's Back route. In this area I collected more drinking water from the Nant Felan, and also was pleased to find a good crop of sorrel to munch on.

Beyond the rough ground, I crossed the wind farm track under a final group of turbines, then began the descent into the Nant Syddion valley. On the way down I startled two walkers who'd stopped for a rest. Guessing they'd stayed in Nant Rhys the previous evening, I addressed them by their first names, Dave and Amden! My guess was correct, the previous night had been their first ever stay in a bothy, and tonight would be their second. They'd gone to university in Aberystwyth and had decided to stay there after finishing their degrees. They'd discovered bothies by accident by stumbling across Nant Syddion on a walk and Googling it! They recommended that I take a short diversion to explore the ruined farmhouse at Blaen Myherin on the way down (<https://www.welshruins.co.uk/blaen-myherin-devils-bridge-credigion>).

I continued on ahead and at the bottom of the steep descent, jumped a fence to reach the ruins. This house was occupied until the late 1960s. Now the roof has collapsed and the walls are crumbling. At the back, an old rusting cooker and bathtub can be seen. After exploring Blaen Myherin, I followed a forestry track along the floor of the valley for two miles to reach the bothy. Delicious plump blackberries were growing beside the track which I picked along the way.

A mile before the bothy, I stopped at the Nant y Creuau to get two litres of water for the evening. I generally like to collect drinking water away from bothies, to avoid having to treat it. Incidentally the area next to the stream is the “Lluest Nantycreuau Deserted Rural Settlement” a Scheduled Ancient Monument. There are remains of a single drystone dwelling with field or garden plots around it. The settlement is thought to have enjoyed a long period of occupation, possibly beginning in the medieval period (<https://ancientmonuments.uk/130332-lluest-nantycreuau-deserted-rural-settlement-blaenrheidol>).

I reached the bothy just before Dave and Amden, and was very impressed. It has two storeys, with two large rooms downstairs and three bedrooms upstairs with wooden floorboards. In terms of floorspace, I think it's the largest bothy I've ever stayed in! The ground around the bothy is free of trees, but the steep valley sides in front and behind are lined with conifers, giving the place a secluded feel. The only blemish on an otherwise perfect view is a couple of wind turbines visible at the head of the valley, quite baffling that they were allowed to be positioned here and spoil the view from such an historic building. <https://www.mountainbothies.org.uk/bothies/wales/nant-syddion/>

I decided to investigate the Afon Myherin below the bothy, and was happy to find a beautiful clear stream tumbling over rocks into a deep pool. There was a small pebble beach hidden below a bank, so I was able to access the water for a dip in complete privacy. The water was the coldest I experienced on the trip, but I soon warmed up after getting out.

Back at the bothy, a couple more people had arrived, Ben and Fi from London (Ben originally from Italy). They were not a couple, but lived together in a communal house. They got a fire going in a ring of stones outside and Ben generously shared a bottle of red wine. For my evening meal I cooked up two pasta meals together (since I had one spare after the fish & chips in Llandovery). Later in the evening I sang a couple of songs a capella, and Ben lent me his guitar so I could sing a few more.

Well after dark, there was one final arrival at the bothy, a guy who rode in on a heavily laden mountain bike. His name was Vaughan and he'd cycled over 100 miles off-road from Abergavenny in a single day! He was planning to head on to Bala Lake the following day, then Manchester the day after. All three bedrooms were taken, so Vaughan took one of the downstairs rooms. It was a wonderful evening, spent with like-minded people, and I was really happy to have diverted my route to stay at Nant Syddion, the grandest of the Welsh bothies!

Saturday 18th September – Plynlimon and Glaslyn (14.6 miles)

The expected rain finally arrived overnight, but it didn't amount to very much, and by the time I got up it had stopped. Clouds initially obscured the head of the valley, but as they cleared, the turbines appeared, like giant triffid invaders from the outside world. The air was so still that the blades weren't even turning!

I had a rather slow start. Vaughan headed off first since he had a long ride today. I got distracted running an impromptu sorrel identification class (sorrel was growing abundantly in the field below the bothy). Ben and Fi set off for a day walk, and I set off soon after, around 9:30am, saying goodbye to Dave and Amden.

The first couple of miles was just retracing steps, with a brief stop to collect more water at the Nant y Creuau on the way. Near Blaen Myherin, I took a left fork, following a forest track, then a vague unmarked trail steeply up the valley side, through the pines. Near the top, the ground was wetter and the path got muddier, presumably trampled out by the Dragon's Back race the previous week. It was so steep that I had to grapple onto trees and roots to make the ascent!

I emerged into an area of tussock land, with a rotting lichen-encrusted footpath sign rather optimistically pointed the way! After a few hundred metres, the long grass overhanging the rough path had completely soaked my boots. After a small lake, the ground became drier, and soon I joined a well-constructed track zigzagging down to a farm, a continuing left to reach the busy A44. I crossed the road and picked up a footpath heading directly for Plynlimon, across three miles of largely gentle ascent.

After a brief stop for lunch, the first part of the ascent, was through grassy fields. One field was covered in a chalky white substance, which accumulated on my boots and trousers. I assume this is some kind of fertilizer and was a bit concerned that it might be toxic. On the next section I climbed the steep valley side and skirted the perimeter of a conifer plantation over boggy ground. I was hoping to find suitable drinking water here, but the Nant Nog marked on the map was just stagnant bog. Beyond the conifers the path struck out onto open hillside, picking up a broad ridge up to Plynlimon.

Gradually the skies had been darkening and it was evident that some rain was on the way. At least I'd avoided overheating on the ascent before having to put waterproofs on. I didn't linger long on Pen Pumlumon Fawr (752m) and turned immediately east, following high ground for the next two miles towards Pumlumon Arwystli (741m).

Plynlimon is famous for being the source of two of Wales' major rivers, the Wye and the Severn (there's a third major river, the Afon Rheidol, that also starts here). Remarkably the Wye and the Severn start within a couple of miles of each other, but they take dramatically different courses. The Wye carves out a course through the Welsh hills, while the Severn heads for England and keeps mainly to the lowlands. Eventually the Severn wins out, with its huge estuary, and the River Wye meets it as a mere tributary. Halfway to Pumlumon Arwystli, I passed the headwaters of the Wye, but didn't venture off the ridge to investigate, since the weather looked rather unsettled, and I didn't want to linger too long on the high ground.

Reaching the summit of Pumlumon Arwystli, I looked back and clouds were already beginning to envelope Pumlumon Fawr. Leaving this summit, I continued on the ridge, now heading north. After just over a mile I passed the headwaters of the Severn, but again didn't stop to investigate. The Severn Way long distance route starts here, with a gravel path appearing abruptly in the middle of nowhere!

My onward route continued, now over pathless ground, to the ancient cairn at Carn fawr, then downhill to cross the Afon Hengwm, amongst a patch of marshy ground. By this point I was getting rather thirsty, having not found any suitable drinking water since the morning, so it was a relief to find a reliable water source. The river was wider than I was expecting and I had to scout around for a suitable crossing place. I found a spot with a gravel island in the middle of the river, and jumping down I paused to fill up my water bottle. Unfortunately, while clambering out on the far side, the entire turf riverbank collapsed and my feet plunged into the water! Luckily it wasn't too deep and water only came over the top of one boot, but it was an unpleasant shock late in the day.

Looking back one last time, more cloud had gathered over Plynlimon, so I was glad that I didn't linger there. Once across the marsh I joined a good track that would lead in two miles to a lake, Glaslyn, where I intended to camp for the night. The track initially passed another lake, Bugeilyn, that had a small boathouse and a large cattle shed at its far end. A brief climb brought me into view of Glaslyn, and turning off the track I followed a short path to the shore. Glaslyn is Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust's biggest nature reserve, but late in the evening there was not a soul around.

<https://www.montwt.co.uk/nature-reserves/glaslyn>

<https://www.montwt.co.uk/audio-trail-glaslyn-bugeilyn>

There's a rough path ringing the lake, across a shingle beach and through rough uneven vegetation. There weren't any immediately obvious places to camp, but fortunately I found an area set back from the shore, behind a fence, where the shingle was partially vegetated. I was only a mile from a minor road, but this place was hidden from the track by higher ground, so I hoped I wouldn't be disturbed. There was no flowing water in the vicinity, so I collected some water from the lake, treating it with iodine for drinking and leaving some untreated for cooking.

Once set up, I decided to have a dip in the lake. It very shallow, so I had to wade out a considerable distance before the water was deep enough to get completely covered. It was a very dramatic spot for a dip, with water and moorland expanding out on all sides! Soon it got chilly, so I headed back to the shore. No sooner had I dried off and clambered into my tent, the heavens opened with a heavy shower. I had to cook my evening meal inside, opening the flap to allow the steam to escape.

Sunday 19th September – To Machynlleth (9 miles)

Today was the last day of the trek and I had to return to Southampton by the evening. The train journey from Machynlleth would be seven hours, and since I didn't want to be getting back too late, I decided to make an early start, waking at 5:15am. I had nine miles to cover to reach Machynlleth, with the first possible train at 11am, another option at 12 noon and the last train at 4pm.

I set off around 6am, just as it got light enough to walk without a torch. The skies were wonderfully clear, painted in violet and gold as the sun came up. Walking before dawn is always memorable, experiencing the world at a time of a day when most people are still in bed.

The first part of today's walk were along Glyndŵr's Way National Trail. This route does go to Machynlleth, but takes a convoluted route over higher ground, with a lot of ascent and descent. I opted for what appeared on paper to be an easier route, descending to lower ground in the valley of the Afon Dulas. After half a mile across the moorland plateau, the track zigzagged downhill, passing the steeply incised cliffs at the head of the Afon Dulas. The angle soon relented and I followed a grassy track to a farm and onto a minor road.

I had to regain some height up the minor road, before turning off onto a bridleway. I left Glyndŵr's Way thinking I'd found a better route that avoided some road walking. This was alright to begin with, however beyond the ruins at Bryn-Tudur, I struck out in the wrong direction, losing some height, before realising my mistake and having to climb back uphill. There was no evidence of the bridleway on the ground, and I had to hop a fence, then wade through wet scrub to reach a grassy pasture between trees. There was a vague track out of the woods, then a field of wet grass to reach the road at Dyffryn-Dulas farm. At the farm there was an outside tap, so I cheekily filled up my water bottle, tipping away the remaining iodine-treated lake water.

After half a mile along the road, I took a side turning to a farm, then continued on an "other route with public access". This was an old sunken lane, hemmed in with parallel mossy stone walls, but

clearly was not in regular use. Some trees had been felled across the path, then further on there were some naturally toppled, and the last section was overgrown with bracken, to reach a minor road.

After half a mile on twisting minor roads, I decided to try my luck with another right of way, this one a “restricted byway”. This was good up to the ruins at Henllan-uchaf, however it soon deteriorated into pathless wet grass. The morning’s fine weather didn’t hold and I had to stop and put on waterproofs as the drizzle intensified. After more wet grass, I emerged at another minor road, which I followed to the tiny village of Forge.

There was a possible off road route cutting off a corner from here, but by this point I’d had enough of the rights of way in this area, and opted to continue on the road to Machynlleth. There was initially no pavement, then the road cut across a golf course, and I could simply walk on the neatly clipped grass to reach the outskirts of Machynlleth. Since I was arriving on a Sunday, my expectations of finding anywhere serving hot food in the town were low. The cafés and takeaways on the high street were all shut, so I headed straight for the railway, arriving around 10:30am.

The lady serving in the ticket office was really friendly and searched for the best possible route back to Southampton. The cheapest route would have been the “Heart of Wales” line, but that had a replacement bus service, so instead the recommended route was via Birmingham and Bristol Temple Meads. She sounded quite embarrassed when telling me it would cost £80, but I didn’t mind, having enjoyed a very cheap holiday over the past nine days! She kindly printed out an itinerary for me with all the changes with arrival and departure times.

The train departed on time at 11:05am heading initially to Shrewsbury (announced as Amwythig, the old Welsh name for this town before it was occupied by the English). I was expecting to change trains in Shrewsbury at 12:20pm, but it turned out that the train would actually be continuing on to Birmingham New Street.

The train arrived in Birmingham New Street at 1:33pm and I had 30 minutes to find something for lunch. This station has been redeveloped in recent years and has been inexplicably split into a number of different zones (red, green, blue) with unnecessary ticket barriers between each zone. The food retailers are spread across all three zones, so to investigate out all the food options I had to keep going through the various ticket barriers! I decided on a four cheese hot pasty, supplemented by a meal deal from Marks and Spencer (salmon pasta salad, crisps and a fruit smoothie).

The train departed at 2:12pm reaching Bristol Temple Meads at 3:36pm. The final connection was meant to be at 4:15pm reaching Southampton at 6:04pm, but it departed around twenty minutes late and didn’t catch that time up during the journey. For the final leg I took a bus home, rather than a taxi, since it wasn’t too late in the evening.

Conclusions

Combined with the Snowdonia route that I did the previous year, it was very satisfying to complete the full traverse of the Welsh mountains. The northern half is definitely more of a classic mountain trek, but the southern half certainly has its charms. Aside from the honeypot of Pen y Fan in the Brecon Beacons, there are vastly fewer people, giving the trek much more of a wilderness feel. Navigating across moorland rather than well-defined ridges is a challenge, requiring skill in locating even the tiniest traces of path, which are preferable to no path at all.

There’s also a lot of diversity in the landscape, in particular the limestone terrain around Chartist Cave, the “Celtic rainforest” remnants around Llandovery, the tussocklands of the Abergwesyn Common and the landscaped reservoirs of the Elan Valley. Lastly, the overnight stays at the Llyn y

Fan Fach shelter, Lluest-cwm-bach Bothy and Nant Syddion Bothy added variety, and in the latter case, also good company.

Route Statistics

Day	Distance (miles)	Ascent (metres)	Descent (metres)
Day 1. Abergavenny to Chartist Cave	14.5	664	191
Day 2. Pen y Fan	13.8	1056	1042
Day 3. Fforest Fawr and Mynydd Ddu	13.2	1115	1177
Day 4. To Llandovery	14.2	461	814
Day 5. Tywi Valley, Llynn Brianne and Abergwesyn	19.2	853	663
Day 6. Drygarn Fawr, Elan Valley and Lluest Cwm Bach Bothy	15.8	869	852
Day 7. Nant Rhys Bothy and Nant Syddion Bothy	15.6	682	724
Day 8. Plynlimmon and Glaslyn	14.6	905	736
Day 9. To Machynlleth	9.0	264	730
Totals	129.8	6869	6929