

About five years ago, having travelled along the western bank of the River Severn from Gloucester to Chepstow, I made an exciting discovery in a Chepstow antiquarian bookshop. This was The Book of South Wales, the Wye and the Coast (1861) by Mr. And Mrs S.C. Hall.

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The Halls travelled from Gloucester to Chepstow on the railway and this is an edited account of their journey

Leaving Gloucester (by railway 114 miles from London) we are in an island at first -- formed by two branches of the Severn -- Alney Island ... The river is crossed by two ugly railway bridges; gradually we lose sight of the graceful and beautiful cathedral tower; we may, if we please glance back at the masts of tall ships moored at distant quays, and look back on green hills that shelter the venerable city. We run over lowlands, where cows are at pasture, with little to arrest the eye except fertility -- and that is everywhere.

The rich meadows and blooming or productive orchards of Gloucestershire greet us as we proceed. On one side is the Severn, always to the left of the line; on the other are the green fields, backed by cultivated hills, with now and then, rising above the trees, the steeple of a village church, round which are gathered pleasant cottages, half-hidden by thick hedgerows, and here and there, a mansion; -- all indicating ease, comfort and prosperity, and presenting a scene such as only England can show.

And so our FIRST STATION out of Gloucester --GRANGE COURT -- is reached, a distance of seven and a half miles from the city. Here commences the SOUTH WALES RAILWAY; hitherto we have travelled by the Great Western: and we should still do so if we journeyed on to Ross and Hereford ...

We have lost the river Severn for some miles: presently it again comes into sight, affording a pleasant subject for the pencil -- of which the artist has availed himself. The distant church is that of WESTBURY. The next station reached is NEWNHAM; whence we obtain another view of the broad Severn ... Newnham is a market town, and was formerly of some note ...The church dedicated to St. Peter, though not of very remote date, occupies the site, and is partly formed from the remains of a more ancient structure; it stands on a commanding cliff that overlooks the river.

We now have the Severn always with us, until its junction with the Bristol Channel. Passing the small station of Bulloppill, at which few trains stop, and reaching that of Gatcombe, we take note of "Purton Passage," -- the old ferry across the river. There is no bridge after we leave Gloucester, the Severn soon becoming too wide and too deep; and the only way of reaching the fine, fertile tract of country -- in Gloucestershire -- we see on the opposite side, is by boats; it will be readily understood that in bad weather the passage is a voyage and not without danger. If the tide is out the eye will be constantly arrested by huge sand-banks; these are of sufficient importance to have names: -- Frampton Sand, Waveridge Sand, the Ridge Sand, Prinn Sand, Sanager Sand, Lydney Sand, Sheperdine Sands, Oldbury Sand, rapidly follow each other between Gloucester and Chepstow.

For some miles we have skirted the famous Forest of Dean: it is on our right, the Severn being on our left ... The forest contains about 30,000 acres; there are now large and flourishing towns within its boundaries; its mines of coal and iron are richly

productive; and the trees that grow there continue to furnish our dockyards. One of the chief outlets of its produce is the small town of LYDNEY -- the station we next approach.

The tall spire of the church at Lydney is seen long before the station is reached; and then the masts of vessels -- coal barges they are, and none other -- which mark the nature of the traffic in this busy district ... Lydney is now the great outlet for coal and iron from the neighbouring forest.

The station that succeeds Lydney is Woolaston: it is in no way remarkable. Between the two stations, however, there is a fine range of hills, that accompanies us all the way -- to the right; the Severn, sometimes near and sometimes distant, being on the left. As we approach Chepstow, the eye is cheered by a remarkably pretty village -- the village of Tidenham; and presently we cross the railway bridge over the Wye, leave Gloucestershire and enter Monmouthshire -- the river dividing the two counties. We have travelled twenty-seven mile and a quarter since we left Gloucester city.

Description of the inhabitants of the Forest of Dean

The inhabitants of the forest are a singularly primitive people; for centuries they were completely isolated, and had little or no intercourse with the world beyond the shadow of their trees. They are described by historians of various epochs, as "a robustic, wild people:" so indeed they are to this day; still following their old "customs," believing in witchcraft, in the evil eye, in the efficacy of charms and incantations, and of course, in apparitions. "One half of the forest population is understood to be employed at the coal works; a fourth part at those of iron; and the remainder in quarries and woods." That population, by the census of 1851, numbered upwards of thirteen thousand, having more than doubled within a century.