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the Secret

Alison Alderton takes to the waters of the upper river Severn in a canoe to explore a fascinating stretch that cannot yet be navigated in an ordinary canal boat... yet!

The River Severn and the town of Bridgnorth viewed from High Rock.

The River Severn is Britain's longest river covering 220 miles from its source to the sea. As it passes through some of this country's most beautiful landscapes it has much to offer the visitor seeking rest and relaxation and it seems hard to imagine that once this river was a thriving trade route.

Today the upper reaches are unnavigable to most craft however evidence of the once bustling wharves and inland ports remain to captivate those who have a passion for our industrial heritage. Despite plans and appeals to reopen the route to boaters little has been achieved and in order to explore this former navigation you will either have to do so on foot or by canoe. So it was whilst holidaying in the delightful county of Shropshire that my husband, Roger and I, accompanied by *Buster* our Beagle booked a day out in a Canadian Canoe to explore a section of this stunning river valley.

Neither of us had ever set foot in a canoe before so it was with nervous trepidation that we meet our guides for the first time on a warm summer's day at Severn Park just outside of the pretty town of Bridgnorth. The trip we chose was a 10.5 mile downstream paddle from Bridgnorth to Arley with a lunch stop at Hampton Loade. This was to be followed by a steam train ride back to our starting point on the lovingly restored Severn Valley Railway.

Setting off

After a warm welcome we were fitted out with buoyancy aids, had our valuables sealed in a waterproof container which accompanied us and had a short safety talk before our canoe was gently pushed out onto the gloriously clear waters of the Severn for a brief practice session. *Buster* was allowed to come along following prior arrangements with the company but it is worth bearing in mind that dogs are only permitted at the owner's risk so if you have a boisterous pouch you may want to rethink your plans. Being boaters we already had a life jacket for our dog which really is an essential on any water-based activity. After a few wobbles *Buster* settled down and before long looked as if he had been canoeing all his life!

After the tuition we were given the low down on the section ahead and told of our rendezvous point then we were away leaving the green open spaces of Severn Park behind us. Bridgnorth is a historical,

Upper Arley, the terminus point of our canoe trip viewed from the footbridge which links the town with the Severn Valley Railway.

Buster found the canoe trip a little exhausting so decided to take a nap whilst we continued to glide downstream.

Roger and Buster enjoying the gentle downriver paddle from Bridgnorth to Arley.

The beautifully nostalgic Arley Station on the Severn Valley Railway.

Several sections of the River Severn are bordered by beautiful red sandstone cliffs.

bustling market town constructed on two levels, which are linked by a unique cliff railway. For many years the river has played an important part in the development of the town and it was once a lively river port. In its heyday the town owned some 75 barges and was a popular boat building centre with many sea-going craft being constructed here. Goods, mainly coal bound for High Town, lying some 200ft above the river on a sandstone cliff, were transported from the quay by donkeys rigged with wicker panniers. They then climbed the narrow flights of steps linking the two areas together and which still remain today along with some stunning original warehouse buildings and the barges iron mooring rings set into the former quay wall.

Feeling special!

Sweeping beneath the town's bridge you couldn't help feel a little special as passers-by stopped to watch us glide past. The last barge to travel downriver from Ironbridge to Bridgnorth was in 1895 but it unfortunately never made it to the quay as it sank after hitting one of the bridge piers! Luckily for us there was no such drama however we did find that the water levels were surprisingly low and it was immediately obvious that if the river was ever to be opened for navigation purposes in the future that some serious engineering works would have to be carried out. In several places we gently scrapped the pebbly river bed despite drawing only a few inches but we ran into no difficulties and were soon relaxed enjoying the scenery and experience of canoeing.

An ornate cast iron bridge carries the River Severn towpath across Mor Brook.

It is a 6 mile paddle to the small picturesque hamlet of Hampton Loade, a popular watering hole where you can enjoy refreshments overlooking the historic and now privately-

Alison and Buster at Quatford Turn, a peaceful bend in the river surrounded by woodlands and a small mobile home site.

owned pedestrian cable ferry which regularly plys back and forth between hamlet and inn. This small craft made from Larch and Oak was built by local craftsmen at the Blists Hill Museum, Ironbridge to an original design and can carry up to 12 passengers at a time. This is sadly one of only a few left on the waterway which was once traversed by many and is believed to have been a ferry crossing site for almost 400 years. After re-grouping with our guide and a pleasant lunch stop, you can enjoy a meal at the local inn or bring your own picnic, we re-launched the canoe and headed off to negotiate the final 4.5 miles of river to Arley.

Silent running

Downriver from Hampton Loade the banks become steeper and the river is enclosed in several places by stunning red sandstone cliffs. One of the most amazing things we discovered about canoeing is the total silence of the craft, which allowed us to get up close and personal with some of the rivers wild fowl including some inquisitive Mute Swan cygnets. On the west bank you are accompanied by the Severn Valley Railway and if you are fortunate you may catch a fleeting glimpse of one of these amazing engines as it steams by. The original towpath is also on this side and has been made into a long distance path known as the Severn Way.

Looking over the rooftops of Bridgnorth to the River Severn and High Rock beyond.

One of the most interesting places on this section of river are the disused colliery sites of Highley and Alveley, which are marked by a modern looking concrete bridge. As the sites were situated on either side of the river the bridge was constructed to link the collieries together and to make transportation of the mined coal to the nearby railway sidings easier. This whole area once had a prosperous coal industry and Highley employed up to 500 men in its heyday. In the late 1960's production ceased here and in the 1980's the sites were reclaimed to form part of the Severn Valley Country Park. This 180 acre space made up from woodland, meadow and wetland is open from dawn to dusk and if time allows you can stop to visit the park on the return train journey.

Upper Arley

The end of our canoe trip came all too soon at the delightful village of Upper Arley. The river here is wide and is crossed by a footbridge which was constructed in 1971. Before that time a ferry operated here carrying both passengers and vehicles. From the riverside it is a short uphill stroll to Arley Station which, along with the village has in the past been a popular film location starring in many period dramas. Armed with our train tickets we bid our hosts a fond farewell and as they set about loading our faithful canoe on its trailer we set off on foot to catch our train.

The Severn Valley Railway is a standard-gauge line which runs steam hauled passenger trains between Kidderminster and Bridgnorth, a total of 16 miles. It was the coming of this railway which led to the downfall of trade on the River Severn and when faced with one of these huge giants of steam it is easy to see why their pulling power was so unstoppable. For most of its route the railway follows alongside the River Severn until finally crossing it via the Victoria Bridge. Designed by John

Fowler and cast in iron by the Coalbrookdale Company this impressive 200-foot single span viaduct, when completed in 1861 had the longest clear span in the world. If you have some spare time before your train arrives you can make the short walk downstream to view this beautiful structure.

The train ride back to Bridgnorth was relaxing and enabled us to view the river from yet another angle. The railway is run by volunteers and it is a real credit to them, we found they were very happy to pass the time talking to us about both the railway and the river. This was Buster's first train ride and he behaved impeccably, probably because he was so exhausted from all the fresh air and activity of being on the river!

Bridgnorth

Back at Bridgnorth there is plenty to do and see however you may be feeling a little weary by now but don't worry as it is just a short ten minute walk back to the meeting place and the car park at Severn Park. You don't have to take the steep steps down to Low Town either, you can add a descent on the Cliff Railway to your day's adventure.

We thoroughly enjoyed our day trip and would highly recommend it. We have no canoeing experience and found that it wasn't necessary, as after the short tuition we felt confident about setting out on this charming river. Surprisingly neither of us had aches or pains the next day and I imagine this was due to flowing along with the current which kept paddling minimal. However, I would recommend wearing light clothing and it may be worth purchasing a disposable waterproof camera for the trip, which are inexpensive and saves the worry of water damage to your regular camera. If you are interested in our industrial past this is a fascinating area of our country to visit and this trip gave us a glimpse both into the river's trading past and the steam trains, which bought it to an abrupt end.

Other canoe trips are available and for those who wish to spend more time on the River Severn then weekend breaks with a choice of overnight stays in local B&B's or riverside camping are available. If you plan to stay longer in the area there is an abundance of things to do and places to see many associated with the history of our waterways and industrial past such as the spectacular Iron Bridge, the world's first iron bridge built over the Severn between 1777-9 and the very informative Ironbridge Gorge Museums.

The Bridgnorth Cliff Railway linking Low and High Town together.

Bridgnorth Wharf and Bridge with the Cliff Railway just visible above the Severn Arms Hotel as it makes the steep climb to High Town.

The stunning Ironbridge Gorge is situated upriver from Bridgnorth. Often described as the "Birthplace of the Industrial Revoloution" the site attracts visitors from far and wide who come to view the vast range of historical centres and museums.

Our ride home – Great Western Railway locomotive 7802 entering Arley Station.

WAY TO GO!
Fact file on this cruise

RESOURCES

We went canoeing with:
Sun Valley Canoeing Co, 65 Friar's Street, Bridgnorth, Shropshire WV16 4BJ. Tel: 07774 907 326.
Website: www.canoeuk.com
e-mail: sunvalleycanoeing@calder.com

The Bridgnorth-Arley Canadian Canoe Day Trip cost:
Adults - £23.00
Child - £15.00
Dogs – FOC at owners risk
Price includes all equipment, tuition, a guide, which if there are more than eight of you will accompany you on the water and the return ticket on the Severn Valley Steam Railway.

The Severn Valley Railway, The Railway Station, Bewdley, Worcestershire DY12 1BG. Tel: 01299 403816.
Website: www.svr.co.uk

Bridgnorth Tourist Information Centre, The Library, Listley Street, Bridgnorth, Shropshire WV16 4AW
Tel: 01746 763257.
Website: www.bridgnorth.tourism@shropshire-cc.gov.uk