

## **Gloucester Cathedral Ramblers Walk - Saturday 12 April 2025 - Report**

### **Forest of Dean Circular Walk**

Saturday 12 April dawned bright and clear, albeit the forecast was for a gradual deterioration in the weather moving in from the west. The forecast for Cinderford at the time of the walk was good: generally cloudy, with some sun; warm, with a temperature of 16°C rising to 22°C and a humidity of 56% rising to 71%; and a light south-easterly breeze at 5 to 10 mph.

Eight of us - Bruce, Dorothy, Geoff, Helen, John, Margaret, Mike and me - met at the Bus Station and caught the No 22 Stagecoach service bus towards Coleford, alighting in Littledean, for a circular walk of about 8.5 km (5.3 miles) in the Forest of Dean, stopping for lunch at the Heritage Coffee Shop in the Dean Heritage Centre.

At Littledean, after my route and safety briefing (Photo 1), most of the group used the nearby public toilets. We then headed out of the village up Dean Hill, from where we walked along the 200-metre contour to the Blaize Bailey viewpoint overlooking Newnham, the many sweeps of the River Severn, and the Arlingham peninsular. After travelling from our homes to the Bus Station, spending 30 minutes on the bus, and having walked for a further 30 minutes, we tucked into our refreshments while taking in the view to the east and the hazy Cotswolds.

From the Blaize Bailey viewpoint, we retraced our steps for about 50 metres and joined a forest track heading south, maintaining the 200-metre contour. After about 1.75 km, we left the track and, still heading south, followed a footpath for about 600 metres, descending gradually, before turning west onto another footpath which descended steeply through Forge Grove into a valley containing Soudley Brook and Bradley House. There were a lot of bluebells and wild garlic on this part of the walk. The bluebells were still emerging and I believe that the whole area is likely to be carpeted with them, accompanied by their heady scent, in a few weeks time. On reaching Soudley Brook, with the warmth of the microclimate in the valley, we stopped for some more of our refreshments.

After our drinks stop, we headed north along a footpath near to the eastern bank of Soudley Brook. We had not gone far before a small herd of eleven deer emerged from Glastonbury Wood on our right. On seeing us, the deer retreated rapidly into the woods, only to emerge again, at speed, about 50 metres further north. The first three and the final three deer crashed through a barbed wire fence, which the middle five appeared to jump effortlessly, before disappearing into the woods around Soudley Brook. On inspecting the fence, the broken barbed wire and the hair from the deer was very evident. After that excitement, we continued north and discovered some industrial archaeology, including a railway tunnel portal (Photo 2).

I am indebted to Geoff who subsequently identified it as Haie Hill Tunnel, originally part of a horse-drawn tramway and later, the Bullo Pill Railway, to carry coal, iron and stone from the Forest of Dean to the tiny port of Bullo Pill on the River Severn. Authorised by Parliament in 1809, the 1,083-yard tunnel was the world's longest when it opened in 1810. The line became part of the South Wales Railway in 1851 and was eventually closed on 1 August 1967.

Further north, we joined a road for about 200 metres and arrived at the Heritage Coffee Shop, where we enjoyed excellent light lunches. After lunch, we continued north on a path east of Soudley Ponds for about 1.5 km before walking uphill for about 800 metres to return to Dean Hill. Helen took Photo 3 of the seven of us with the River Severn in the background. We then descended into Littledean, which we reached in sufficient time for refreshments at The Belfry before catching the No 22 Stagecoach service bus back to Gloucester.

In sum, the weather was ideal and it was a most enjoyable day, with excellent walking companions and interesting conversations. The total ascent was about 600 ft and the views to the east were splendid, if a little hazy. The spring freshness brought beauty to the Forest: the emerging bluebells were a delight and the incident with the deer was most memorable.

**Peter Barrett**

14 April 2025