

# The River Severn from Source to Sea

written by Marcus | 12 November, 2021



Stood in the middle of a peat bog high above the Hafren Forest we're surrounded by pools and trickling streams. It's been raining more on than off for most of the 4 km hike up from where we left the bikes. Hardy sheep shake off the worst of the weather from their water-logged fleeces before resuming their suspicious watch of the passing walkers. Stepping over a carefully laid path of flagstones we arrive at a well weathered wooden post etched with the words "Tarddiad Afon Hafren". Plynlimon is a hill so wet that two of the longest rivers in the UK spill from its summit. The River Wye begins its life just south of where we are, but the focus for our journey is where the water at our toes will be heading. The words on the wooden post translate as "The Source of the River



Severn".



Climbing up from Llanidloes



Starting the walk to the Source



Plynlimon Hill Top





## Tarddiad Afon Hafren

The idea for this trip had been brewing for a few months. I've found that following rivers is a great premise for an adventure thanks to my brother suggesting that we run the length of the Nene, an ongoing project that we're taking on in stages (you can hear a bit about it [here](#)). Another opportunity to explore the idea came last October with a weekend in Dorset

along the River Frome (Mr Bisco made an excellent radio programme about that one). These trips had introduced the pleasure of watching a river grow as it winds its way round hills, through valleys and down to the sea and meeting all of the people and wildlife that live along its banks. The logical next step was to look for something a bit longer and without leaving this country there's nothing longer than the Severn. Over its 225 mile course it meanders through Powys, Shropshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. Some parts would be familiar while others would be new to us. All in all it looked like a beautiful route.

As we walk back down from Plynlimon, the ambling stream quickly gathers pace on the steep hillside. A series of cascading waterfalls broadens out into something that could probably be classed as a brook as it enters the Hafren Forest. Hopping back on the bikes, the descent into Llanidloes is a high speed thrill ride and we spend our first night in the first proper town on the river.





## Severn Crossing



Blaen Hafren





Through Hafren Forest



On the Way back to Llanidloes  
To get to the source in the first place we'd ridden the 30km

over from Caersws, which we'd found to be the nearest train station. It had been a road typical of the national cycle network being very quiet, very pretty and very, very hilly. We now had to head back to Caersws but this time we would be taking a much flatter option because as well as using bikes we were also carrying packrafts. These tiny inflatable boats pack down to the size of a sleeping bag but blow up to be big enough to carry a person, gear and bicycle. They introduce a whole new element to adventure planning as you can include the blue lines on a map in your route as well as the usual roads and paths. So to get from Llanidloes to Caersws we could paddle some of the stretch on the river instead of pedalling up and down the hills alongside it.



Breakfast in Llanidloes





### Slate art by the river in Llanidloes

While tucking into breakfast in the park in the morning a slightly stern looking woman approaches and asks if we were the ones camping here last night. I nod sheepishly but she smiles and asks if we need a hot drink. After porridge and coffee we inflate the rafts, stow the panniers and lash down the bikes before pushing off from the slipway. It always feels a bit unnerving trusting all our kit to what looks like an inflatable pool toy and my knot tying skills are quickly tested with a little weir just under the bridge.



Boats and bikes ready for the first paddle section





The river is now 20m wide but only a few cm deep so we wince at each bump and scrape with the rocks and gravel bed. There's

a bit of stepping out to push off but on the whole we keep moving. It's great to be on the water with the warm sun overhead and little more than the splash of our paddles to disturb the peace and quiet. That is until we reach the rapids. To an experienced paddler this section would probably be classed as trivial but to two novice packrafters the route ahead looks intimidating. The river gets channelled between a series of rocks and boulders with barely enough room for us to squeeze through. I pick a channel and give it a go but get turned on a rock and wedged across the flow. Kirsty gets dragged in after me and we're then stuck together with water pouring over the side of the boats. The bikes are also a bit tangled up but somehow we shove against each other and I'm freed only to then get tossed onto another rock. This time I'm sat high and dry but the front of the boat with its precious cargo (bike) is hanging precariously down off the rock. There's nothing for it but to step out and guide the whole thing downstream where it calms down again. We're both left a bit shaken up by what the fledgling river has managed to throw at us so soon and apprehensive about what might lay ahead. Another short rocky section causes a few difficulties but we eventually make it down to our exit point, conveniently located near to a roadside cafe. The boats are hauled out and rolled up, the bikes are reassembled and we discuss the morning's events over an egg and bacon sandwich. It's been the sternest test of our Frontier packrafts so far and it's amazing how much abuse they can put up with. Although they look flimsy and delicate they are actually incredibly tough and have managed to shrug off the bumps and scrapes with barely a mark.





A relaxing paddle



An exciting paddle





Packed up packrafts.

We've got used to keeping our plans fairly loose and flexible when we're out on the bikes. On a road or trail you can stop where you like and take any turn that takes your fancy safe in the knowledge that, provided your map is up to date then there will almost always be a way to get the bikes through. But on the water there needs to be a bit more planning. You can only get in and out at certain points (made even more tricky when you need to get a loaded bike to a road too). There are some obstacles that can be navigated such as small weirs or the rapids we'd encountered. But larger weirs, raging rapids or fallen trees might not be packraft friendly. Luckily the paddling community are a nice bunch and share useful information to help others plan their trips. I'd used the Go Paddling website to try and work out which bits of the Severn would work for us and it proved invaluable.





### Meanders near Caersws

Safely on dry land we continue our journey through Wales back to Caersws then on to Newtown to pick up a trail following the now abandoned Montgomery Canal. In its heyday 'The Monty' would have been a busy thoroughfare with boats carrying limestone, coal, timber and slate between Llanymynech and Newtown. The section we're on now has largely been reclaimed by nature and apparently the wildlife is thriving with reports of water voles and otters. We're not lucky enough to spot any of those but through the trees and undergrowth we can see our constant companion, the Severn gently following our path. Resupplying in Welshpool we eventually end the day camping behind the Green Dragon pub close to the Offa's Dyke path with a clear, starlit sky over the tent and slightly-too-close railway line.



Newtown



Abandoned Lock on 'The Monty Canal





Home is where the Hilleberg is

After a wake up call by the 6:25 from Shrewsbury we're back on the road early. Although the Dyke marks the traditional border with England we stay in Wales for a few more km in the morning. The Shropshire hills fill our view to the east and the river runs alongside us to the west. Each time we cross the river it changes slightly, either a bit wider or a bit faster. In some places, unseen rock formations have twisted it into tight meanders across the valley floor then further down it flows arrow straight and unhindered. A few Welsh flags before the bridge at Crewgreen signal not only another crossing of the river but also the border into England. Shortly after we spot a couple of cyclists wrestling with a back wheel and so we pull over to see if we can help. One of the men admits that the bike is new and he's not sure how to get the wheel off to fix a puncture. It's a new-fangled through axle so I tell him how it works and he's relieved to finally get the thing off. Both of them are veteran cyclists and both of them are on electric bikes. "I suppose you think we're cheating?" one of them suggests but in actual fact it's

the opposite. Forget gravel bikes, disc brakes and bluetooth shifters; e-bikes are getting more people into or back into cycling than ever before and for that they have to be the greatest innovation in cycling for decades. One of them is recovering from a stroke but today he'll be riding 40km thanks to a bit of assistance which can only be a good thing. With a strong Welsh accent one of them confirms that we're now in England "Can't you tell from the air that you're not in God's Country now?".



Busy road and big hills





### The Bridge Crossing to England

Pedalling on into Shrewsbury a wide, riverside path gives us an easy passage through the town and out the other side. Before long we part company with National Cycle Route 81 that had largely steered our route up to this point. It's also the point where the river begins to turn south for the first time. There's a theory that the Severn used to continue north into Cheshire to discharge into the Irish Sea but a big lump of ice during the Ice Age blocked the way and sent it round to form the Ironbridge Gorge. The river has now been joined by the River Vyrnwy and has swelled in volume but gets channeled into this narrow, steep sided gorge. However it was formed, this is a section I've been looking forward to. It's time to unroll the boat again.



Alongside the river in Shrewsbury



NCN Route 81 between Shrewsbury and Upton Magna





River at Atcham

From the water the Ironbridge Gorge is even more impressive but it's the bridge itself that takes centre stage. Gently paddling up to the towering structure it's amazing to think

this was built over 240 years ago. Kirsty has decided to stay on her bike for this bit and waves at me from the bridge as I float underneath. The town recedes behind me and I'm back in the tranquility of the river. There's a flash of blue and orange as a kingfisher darts in front of me. Moss covered rocks line the banks and the water is flat calm but moving me along at a useful pace. Rounding a corner the scene changes quickly as the noise of rushing water fills the air and the river is being churned up into swirling eddies, and boiling waves. I've arrived at the Jackfields Rapids, a 200m stretch that local paddlers love to come and play on. There are several lines and I chose the right side between a ridge of angry waves and the rocky bank. The boat shoots down and I just manage to keep it running straight as the bow gets pulled by various colliding flows. That was a lot of fun and it's tempting to go back up and have another go but the day is quickly running out. I find a beach further downstream to meet back up with Kirsty and after transitioning back to cycling mode we're back rolling towards Bridgnorth. We're now on NCN route 45 which turns from a smooth road into a bumpy track on the bed of the old Severn Valley Railway. We'd hoped to find somewhere to pitch the tent along here but all we find are muddy fields grazed by sheep. A golf course further along looks much more inviting but we push on to the town and find a large park on the east bank of the river that is just what we're after.





Ironbridge



Boat under Ironbridge





Bike on Ironbridge



Paddling the Ironbridge Gorge



Jackfields Rapids

I'd originally pitched the idea for this trip to Kirsty back



in June after running a section of the Severn Way near Bewdley. Running along the river bank with the Severn Valley steam train racing past on the other side made my mind wonder what it would be like to be on the water instead. In the middle of summer the whole thing sounded very appealing so Kirsty agreed that we should definitely do it. But somehow that illusive 5 day window that we needed never quite got booked into the diary and the summer ran away from us. I was sure there was still time to do it before the year ended though and in fact the beauty of the changing colours of the trees and the crisp morning air make autumn an invigorating time to be outdoors. We found a week in October and Kirsty reserved judgement until a few days before we started but when the forecast promised mild and largely dry weather we knew we had to go for it.



Bridgnorth





### Unfriendly bike barriers

Leaving Bridgnorth, NCN 45 takes on a slightly more adventurous nature as it steers us into some woods onto leaf strewn bridleways. In modern parlance this would probably be called gravel riding. The result is a drop in average speed and I nervously check my watch at every junction because I've got a train to catch this morning, or more accurately: a train

to spot. The path gets steeper both upwards and downwards and eventually Kirsty sends me off ahead. She's been feeling under par for the last few days and wants to take her time on this tricky section. We arrange to meet up again in Bewdley. I then push on to Arley to find the slipway and quickly inflate my boat and leave Kirsty's boat with some friendly fishermen to pick up when she arrives. Taking to the water while scattering the crowds of ducks, geese and small children feeding them I paddle hard downstream for a couple of km. Rounding a corner another impressive bridge comes into view. This is the Victoria Bridge that carries the Severn Valley Railway and I'd wanted to arrive in time to watch the steam train crossing. I can hear the train blowing its whistle at the station just up the track so there's just enough time to get lined up and set up my camera. The steam clouds billow over the treetops as the train chuffs along towards the bridge. I raise the lens to my eye just as it appears and then the camera beeps three times and shuts down. The battery has died! I fumble to find a spare but by the time it's locked and loaded the last carriage is rolling off the bridge. At least I got to see it even if I didn't manage to capture the photo.





Victoria Bridge (train not shown)

I continue paddling down past the Wyre Forest which is resplendent in its early autumn colours. This is the stretch I'd run alongside 5 months earlier and it's just as pretty as I'd hoped with a few fast flowing sections to keep things interesting. I check my phone to make sure Kirsty is OK and pick up a message asking me where I am. When I call her back I ask her if she'd found her boat? "You're joking aren't you?" comes the reply "Are you meaning to tell me my boat is at the bottom of this bloody great steep hill I've just ridden up??" It turns out the patchy phone reception meant that she didn't get my message to go and see the fishermen and she'd ridden straight through Arly and out the other side. "sorry" is as much as I can muster. I quietly continue paddling and pull up at Bewdley Rowing Club before being reunited with Kirsty (and her boat) and finding a cafe for a consolatary lunch.



Derelict bridge near Bewdley



Pulling in at Bewdley





Kimmy Loves Cake, and so do we

We're back in our home county of Worcestershire now and the surroundings are beginning to look a bit more familiar. Into Stourport we pick up the towpath of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal which is a stretch of water I'd pedalled a water bike along a few years ago while collecting litter. Rubbish in the waterways is an ongoing problem with plastic waste in particular being a common sight bobbing around in the river. For another trip we'll have to pack our litter picking equipment as the packrafts would be a great way to help doing some cleaning up.

After Ombersley we soon approach the outskirts of Worcester. Kirsty hasn't been feeling much better and being a few miles from a warm bed she makes the sensible decision to head home. There's a bit of kit swapping and a wave goodbye and then I'm on my way again but it's a great shame not to be able to finish this together. I end the day in Tewkesbury and find a picnic spot right by the river to spend my last night. In the fading light the dark water silently flows past a few metres

from my tent as I tuck into the staple meal for a cycle tourist: pasta and tomato sauce.



### Worcester Cathedral

The sound of a strong wind in the trees wakes me early but I head straight out onto the water. This is the last paddle on the last day and I want to enjoy it in the golden morning light. Since our last encounter the river has been joined by the Teme and I'm launching at the confluence with the Warwickshire Avon so in places it's swelled to nearly 100m wide. Out in the middle a brisk headwind is whipping up white horses so I try to stick to the bank where it's more sheltered. Packrafts are not very fast and not particularly manoeuvrable so are susceptible to getting blown about in strong winds. It's a great morning to be out on the water though with the air filled with migrating geese, herons patrolling the banks and the occasional kingfisher catching my eye. For long sections the high banks hide any signs of human activity and it feels like I'm the only person for miles around. This is what makes the difference compared to being on



the bike as these boats allow us to gain a completely different perspective during our journey. I sit for a few moments with a contented smile.



A morning paddle south of Tewkesbury



Making friends on the river



Transition back to bike at Haw Bridge  
Eventually Haw Bridge comes into view and I pull in at a



pontoon. For the last time the boat gets deflated and stowed away in a pannier and I'm back onto two wheels. Continuing along NCN 45 takes me down to Gloucester and the point where the river becomes tidal. In the middle of the city the docks still display their industrial heritage with dormant cranes alongside towering warehouses all now converted into flats and gyms and restaurants. Moving south I join the Sharpness Canal then swing closer to the Severn again at Epney. On the right day and at the right time this is a good spot to watch one of this country's great natural phenomena: The Severn Bore. Some very strong coffee at a friend's house in Slimbridge sets me up nicely for the last stretch which again gains some familiarity from our days of cycling when we lived in Bristol (and the LVIS audax). The river is now a source of great power with wind turbines spinning wildly from the banks and two huge nuclear power stations drawing water up to their reactors. The tide is on its way out revealing vast expanses of mud flats that are teeming with life and I watch wading birds pick out tasty morsels from the sludge.



A road side stall





Looking across to the Cotswolds from Hartpury



Gloucester Docks



Crossing the Sharpness Canal



The river at Epney





### Mud flats near Oldbury

It's hard to define where a river becomes an estuary and where that estuary becomes the sea but for the purposes of this trip I'd decided the Severn Bridge would serve as a fitting finish line. It's the last point on the river where I can get to the middle (safely) under my own steam so that is where I aim for now. For the last 10km the sky clouds over and it begins to rain. This is the first time the weather has turned since that day on the top of Plynlimon and it feels entirely appropriate. Battered by the weather I roll out onto the huge suspension bridge with the brown water of the River Severn swirling far below me. It's now 3km wide and the River Wye is pouring into it on the other side of the bridge, the rivers finally meeting after taking very different paths to get here. I stop in the centre of the bridge for a photo as the traffic on the motorway behind me roars past. It's been a fascinating journey following this mighty river over the course of the last 200 miles, watching it grow in stature and carve out the landscape around it. The combination of bikes and boats has worked really well to allow us to see the river at various angles and

at various speeds.

As I look down off the bridge I can't help but wonder if any of the water below has been accompanying me all the way from that soggy peat bog in mid wales.



Holding on for dear life on the Severn Bridge