

OUR RAMBLE THROUGH THE FOREST OF DEAN.

TO those readers who, like the writer, pay an occasional visit to the West of England for the sake of change, the introduction of a fresh recreation-ground—a real *terra incognita* to many—may turn out a seasonable boon. A summer day's walk through sylvan scenery of a special character, ending with a prospect which is probably the widest in England, must be admitted to be profitable employment of holiday time. Whether it is worth the expense of getting there is another consideration, depending upon the reader's *locus in quo*, the length of his purse, and his own valuation of a country ramble.

The recreation-ground, then, warmly recommended from recent experience is the Forest of Dean, which forms no inconsiderable part of the fair county of Gloucester.* This is not the place to enter into any historical account of this royal forest, but it would be found scarcely less interesting than the familiar incidents of its far younger brethren, Windsor and New Forest. The mighty British navy has ever maintained an intimate connection with Dean Forest, which supplied its sturdy

* The word Gloucester itself signifies "fair city," from the Anglo-Saxon *caer* and *glowe*.



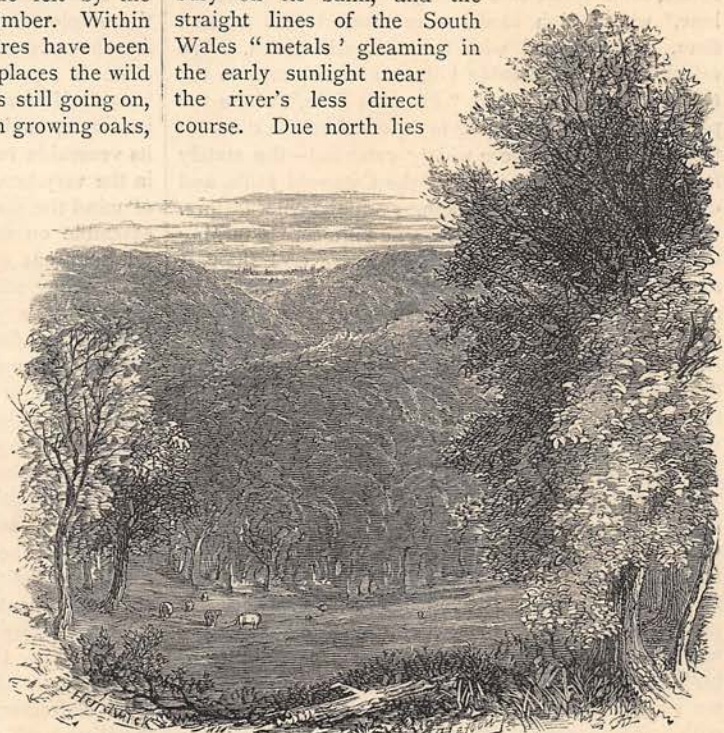
NEWNHAM.

oaks for the famous "wooden walls" once

so awe-inspiring to England's foes by sea. So widely known had the resources of the forest become that, according to Evelyn, the commanders of the Spanish Armada had orders "not to leave a tree standing in it, if they should not be able to subdue our nation." This circumstance alone should insure our sympathy with the peculiar pride felt by the Foresters in their famous nursery of timber. Within the last fifty years its mineral treasures have been so developed as to destroy in certain places the wild character of the forest; yet planting is still going on, and thousands of acres are covered with growing oaks, which for several generations will not be made to feel the axe. In the midst of these tracts the old wildness reigns supreme; the undergrowth is yet tangled luxuriance; wild fruits and flowers grow on unheeded; and "the green gloom of the wood" lies over all. Through all these scenes our walk lies, and enough and to spare is that single enjoyment.

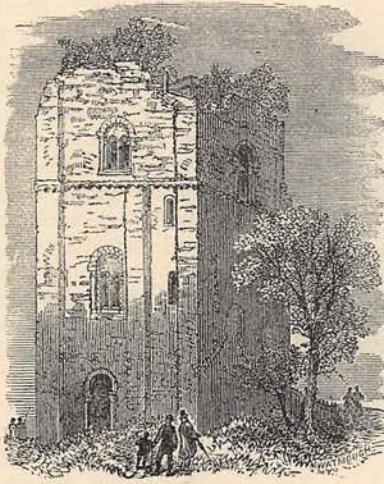
The starting-point of excursion, or rather incursion, is Newnham-on-Severn, a station on the South Wales Railway. Londoners can reach the town by an evening train in less than four hours, and this is advisable in order to secure an early morning start. "Through the wood" must begin while the dew is on the grass, and the birds are chirping their first notes. Having arranged so much, it is wise to provide oneself with the Ordnance

Survey sheet, and be independent of inquiry as to route—taking the precaution to get the latest corrections with the map, as alterations in the physical geography of the forest are made from time to time, by clearances here, by plantations there. Should the reader desire to see the best of the scenery, he can hardly do better than adopt the following course, carefully planned and lately carried out by the writer and a companion. Noticing one day in September last a remarkable clearness in the atmosphere, which enabled one to see very distant hills with distinctness, and that the weather appeared settled, we resolved to give up the following day to our projected walk, which had only been awaiting the aforesaid clearness. Accordingly, soon after sunrise, a sally from Newnham was made, over the railway bridge by the station, across two rising fields to the left; and at the top of the second field before joining the road we paused and turned for a retrospect. A first taste of the forest scenery, yet not sylvan. The broad river Severn—half sands at this hour of low water—makes a gigantic horse-shoe, with Newnham at the apex, showing the broad, shingled spire of Westbury on its bank, and the straight lines of the South Wales "metals" gleaming in the early sunlight near the river's less direct course. Due north lies



VIEW FROM THE SPEECH HOUSE.

the peculiar round eminence known throughout Gloucestershire, by the single clump of firs which



THE KEEP OF GOODRICH CASTLE.

serves it for a crown, as May Hill, or Yartlebury Hill—from time immemorial the scene of morris-dancers' exploits. To the west, below our feet, are charming dingles; the Stears—an old farmhouse full of oak floors, ceilings, and wainscots, befitting a yeoman's abode on the border of Dean Forest—lies close by. Having feasted the eyes by thus "taking our bearings," we plunged along the road, down over a little brook, then uphill and through "a bit of Devonshire lane," whose high banks were covered with autumn flora, and crowned with trees all still green. We attacked this formidable hill, and at the top, on the right of the road, found "Pleasant Stile," where the prospect gained at starting is repeated from a different point of view, and more widely extended—the stately Severn, backed by the line of the Cotswold Hills, and dotted with fishing-boats, being again the chief feature. On we went for a short distance, and into a road turning sharply back to the left, from which we took the first turning to the right, and down-hill again, pausing to admire the picturesque situation of Little Dean—a small town, whose houses are scattered over a hill-ridge on our right hand. No sooner are we at the bottom of the "pitch" (the true local expression) than the rough by-road rises and plunges into woods for some distance, till, passing a small water-reservoir, we jump to the conclusion that "works" are near; and we are right, for Cinderford's many big chimneys are immediately seen, "contributing colouring matter to the clouds," as one of us phrased it. Crossing a tramway, and the common which fringes this mid-forest town, we see for the first time Dean Forest proper. As far as the eye can reach—though we are on high ground—to the front and left, nothing is to be seen but woods and woods; and we stop to take in the reality of the scene, recalling with some amusement the cynical remark of one who knows not Dean Forest, that "there is no forest at all

now; it is all cleared away for collieries and iron-works." Beyond the railway rises a broad white road, which loses itself in the forest, and which we know by instinct to be our route towards the Speech House and our goal, Monmouth. There is something peculiarly impressive in diving into a leafy wilderness like this, though the timber be not here at its greatest, and the road be wide and smooth. We stand—to borrow Tennyson's words—

"In the first shallow shade of a deep wood,
Before a gloom of stubborn-shafted oaks;"

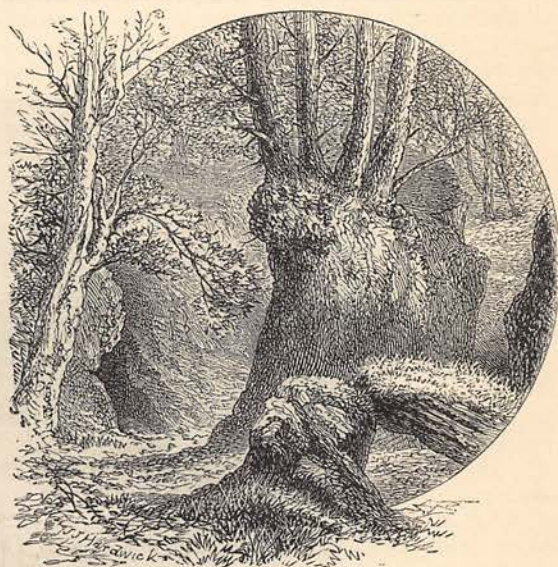
and we find the initial trees "stubborn-shafted" indeed, but young; planted probably at the end of the last century, when extensive additions were made to the growing timber. We cross two or three railways for mineral traffic, and see very large colliery works on the left of the road; and then comes Yew-tree Brake, a cottage on whose face appears a stone tablet, informing travellers that in 1811 the Brake consisted of 280 acres. But we have no means of ascertaining the present extent of the Brake, so we can make no comparisons, and a source of possible interest is lost. From this spot can be seen the roof of the Speech House—once seen, never forgotten, with its peculiar eaves. Pressing forward, we come to a clearance, marked in the Ordnance map as Foxe's Bridge, and, in fact, possessing a small brook over which the road is carried, and a round tower of rough masonry, possibly connected with defunct colliery operations. Once over this brook, the patriarchal oaks begin to appear; and *here*, we say, is real forest. The turf is closely mixed with mosses and wood-sorrel; foxgloves are abundant; holly-trees form a sombre contrast to the staple foliage; and the road becomes narrower, for the trees leave it no green margin now, but close in upon it and darken it. Before long the Speech House is reached. Every "Forester" knows its name, and nearly all have probably been under its venerable roof. The Speech House is an hostelry in the very heart and centre of Dean Forest, time out of mind the meeting-place for Foresters, where they assemble on social occasions, where they have united for hundreds of years to defend the peculiar rights which they still possess in the waste lands of the forest. The house itself, although pierced with modern windows, and unhappily credited as an "hotel," has many interesting structural features. Its ancient roof, or at all events the form of it, is retained, and its quaintly-sloped eaves remain to give character to the building; while the large room within, hung round with about fifty stags' heads and antlers, and lined with polished oak wainscoting, and railed gallery with stairs, continues to be the in-door place of meeting for the "jovial Foresters," as they call themselves in their own song. Outside are the usual accompaniments of a picnicking resort—rustic seats, a swing, a bowling-green. There is a charming little view, restricted though it be, from the front door, extending over the soft outlines of wooded slopes of Wye character, and in fact reaching the banks of the Wye itself (at Lydbrook), though the river is invisible. Leaving this important place, after discussing

a second and more substantial edition of breakfast within its historic walls, we jogged contentedly downhill on our road, noting with appreciation the fine masses of woods on both sides of us, all oak, and turning slightly brown. So three miles of the road brought the two pedestrians into Coleford, the metropolis of the forest—an old-fashioned market town, only just provided with railway access. Passing straight through the town—we are still in quest of Nature—we join the direct road from London (formerly the mail coach route) at the fourth mile-stone from Monmouth. A hundred yards beyond this may be found, just over the roadside hedge, in a small plantation, a curious upright stone. It is called in some maps *Maen-hîr*, and the literal translation of those Welsh words is positively inscribed in red paint on the back of the relic—"the long stone"—a sacrilegious concession to the modern tourist's lazy ignorance. Setting it down in our own minds to Druidical origin, we proceed on our journey. Stanton Church is the next object; and very picturesque it is, and very welcome, because we know that our *bonne-bouche*, the prospect, is in the parish of Stanton.

The eminence which commands the prospect is the "Buckstone." The atmosphere is marvellously clear, and from the top of the Buckstone is unfolded to our eyes the panorama of which this paper is intended to give some very faint notion. The hill upon which it is poised "between heaven and earth" is not a high one—at least, the rise from the village of Stanton cannot be more than 300 feet—yet what an extent of country the eye can reach! We look into the very heart of Wales from a spot on the Gloucestershire side of the Wye. We can sweep the whole circle of the horizon by merely turning our heads, and these are the things we see:—

In the far distance to the east lies the complete range of the Cotswold Hills, which separate Gloucestershire from end to end into the Parliamentary divisions of "East" and "West." Lying between them and us are the successive slopes, richly wooded, of the Dean Forest hills, through which our walk has led us. To the north-east is the compact little chain of peaks known as the Malvern Hills, rising to nearly 1,500 feet—the very model of an Alpine range. The forest hills again separate us, bearing a land-mark of beauty in the elegant spire of Littledean Church, while looking farther to the left we see the famous mass of rocks called Symond's Yat (or gate), which overlooks the Wye between Ross and Monmouth; and behind that is the opposing hill of Huntsham, over whose broad shoulders are peeping the "heav'n-directed spires" of Goodrich and Ross. At Goodrich, by the way, stands a fine old ruined castle, and the modern Goodrich Court, where reposes the unequalled collection of armour recently on loan to the South Kensington Museum by Sir Samuel Meyrick. Far beyond all this lie the Herefordshire hills, soft and undulating; points readily identified being Aconbury and Dinedor Hills, both near Hereford itself. Nearer to our feet, but on the other (or Monmouthshire) side of the Wye—whose invisible course, however, we can only trace by known

points—rise up the Great Doward and the Little Doward; the one hill remarkable for a hyæna-den called "King Arthur's Cave," and the other rendered conspicuous by the extensive British camp on its summit. Examples of Shropshire reveal themselves behind the Little Doward in the shape of the Clee Hills, which attain a height of nearly 1,800 feet, by Ludlow; and, further west, Clun Forest; while in front of that, starting from Wyebank to the very spot on which we stand, stretches a great mantle of thick woods, the chief part of which is known as "Bewdley" Woods, a native corruption of Beaulieu. Turning to the north-west—we are gradually taking the circuit of the view from right to left—we see the hills which bound the east side of the vale of the river Monnow, whose confluence with the Wye near Monmouth gives that town its name. These hills we know well—the Buckholt, Craig Llewellyn (Monmouthshire was once a Welsh county), and the Garway; and, on the other side of Monnow Vale, the long ridge called Craig Serrethin—truly a "craig" on its steep side, overlooking Grosmont and its ruined castle. Behind the Garway looms the group of Radnorshire mountains known as Radnor Forest, rising to nearly 2,200 feet. They are not very distinct, but sufficient outline is shown to enable us to identify them in their position. In the immediate foreground—looking in the same direction—the Kymin Hill confronts us, surmounted with a decrepit monument in memory of Nelson and other naval heroes of the last century. A sombre background to the Kymin is furnished by the Hattarel Hills, which form the Herefordshire part of the Black Mountain group; the "Blacks"



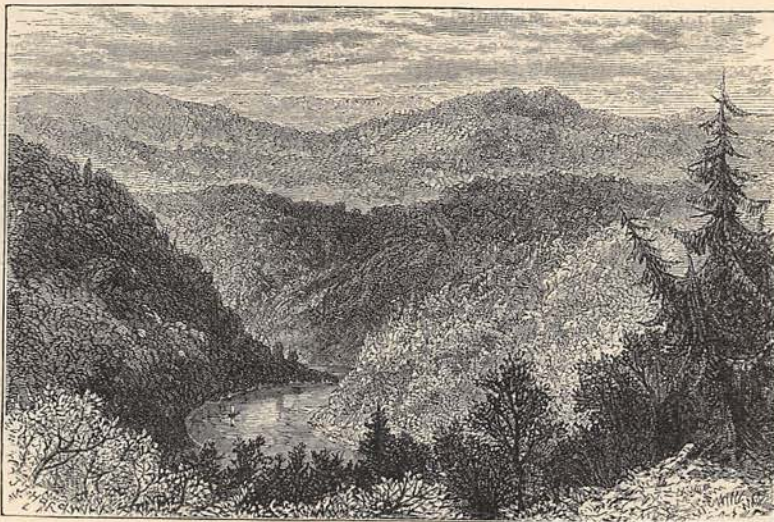
BREAM SOWLES.

proper are claimed partly by Breconshire and partly by the county of Monmouth. In form like a pimple, the highest point of this range rises with unmistakable

distinctness ; Pen-y-Cader-fawr is its name, meaning "the Head of the Great Chair;" and a fine top it is to climb upon, as the writer can testify: its height is 2,630 feet. Two mountains, named Mynydd Llangorse and Mynydd Troed, rise near the south end of the Black Mountains, forming one boundary of Llangorse Lake (Llyn Safaddu), the largest lake in South Wales, which nestles unseen on the other side of them. This "pool"—the *Clamosum* of the Welsh historian, Giraldus—is three miles long, and in some places more than a mile broad. We turn round a little more, so as to look nearly due west, and the Abergavenny hills appear. Most conspicuous of these is the "Sugar Loaf," Pen-y-Val, a miniature Vesuvius, of less than 2,000 feet altitude; and somewhat nearer we recognise the "Holy Mountain" (Skyrriid-fawr), a very wild and rugged mass, upon which is a fissure, evidently a landslip, but asserted by the superstitious to have been caused at the Crucifixion, when the "rocks were rent." Further south, the hills open charmingly to afford a grand view of the Brecon Beacons—the hill-kings of South Wales—whose summit, Pen-y-Van (which attains to 2,910 feet, only 600 feet lower than Snowdon itself), we can descry and claim as a personal acquaintance. More mountains further south: the remaining Abergavenny hills—Skyrriid-fach ("the Little Skyrriid"), and the Bloreng, meaning "Grey Ridge;" Mynydd Llangynider and Fan Gihirach, satellites of the great Beacons; a range running north and south, from Glamorgan into Monmouth, and ending near Blaenavon, a South Welsh region of collieries and ironworks, behind which lies Pontypool; other ranges of Monmouthshire hills, running parallel to each other in a similar direction, furnishing iron and coal in abund-

ance, and forming valleys which are utilised for the mineral railways to Nantyglo, Blaina, Brynmawr, Tredegar, Rhymney, Merthyr, &c.—industrial centres which reveal their existence by columns and clouds of black smoke. Turning from these, we sight in the far distance outlines which are pronounced, after due discussion, to be Somersetshire hills, on the opposite coast of the Bristol Channel; and then our gaze meets the end of the Cotswold chain once more, and we stand with our faces in the direction which they took on starting for the panorama. A real panorama it is, too: we see everything—that is, as far as the eye can reach—and a little reflection tells us that we have sighted *nine counties* by means of undoubted and familiar landmarks. The "magic nine" are these: Gloucester, Worcester, Hereford, Salop, Radnor, Monmouth, Brecon, Glamorgan, and Somerset. We feel that we have drunk our fill of mountain and vale, and descend, first from the Buckstone, on whose broad top we have reclined, and then from the hill through a thick wood, overgrown with bracken and bramble, to the turnpike road which we quitted at Stanton Church. A delightful down-hill stroll of two miles leads into Monmouth town—the *goal*. The walk from Newnham-on-Severn to Monmouth (on the Wye) has taken us through Her Majesty's Forest of Dean—in at one end, and out at the other.

The railways at Monmouth offer two return routes—either by way of Ross, following the banks of the Wye, or southwards through Chepstow, also a Wye-valley line. Either of these picturesque towns will serve, if need be, for a halting-place. We trust those of our readers who have chosen the same route for their summer trip, will find in it the same enjoyment that we did.



RIDGING STANTON.