

A weekend in... Clyro, Powys, Wales

The snow-sprinkled slopes of the Black Mountains are gorgeous, looking like icebergs sliding along a ridge beneath a crisp blue sky as we amble up a lane to the Baskerville Hall Hotel (not a car in sight). The silhouette of an eerie-looking Victorian building emerges (with no vehicles in the car park) and we enter the reception (with no receptionist around). A sign with a picture of Sherlock Holmes smoking a pipe reads: "Only drinks purchased here may be consumed here: it would be a shame to have them confiscated."

The suitably mysterious hotel, on the edge of the little village of Clyro in Powys, likes to play up its Sherlock connection, although the master sleuth would perhaps have concentrated on bigger crimes than guests sneaking in illicit booze. His creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, visited what was then Clyro Court, the home of the Baskerville family, many times — during which he came up with his title *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The author eventually set the book (published in instalments in 1901-02) in Devon, apparently because the Baskervilles wanted to "ward off tourists".

Nowadays the opposite seems to be true. As well as the prominent Sherlock-conscious hotel — spookily quiet when we passed by in February — there's the Baskerville Arms, the only pub in the village (population about 600), where a sculpture of a black dog with pointy ears sits above the entrance as though keeping evil spirits at bay. It is said that Conan Doyle was partially inspired by a local legend of hounds at nearby Hergest Court. The owner of these bloodthirsty beasts, so the story goes, would set them upon walkers.

Do not, however, let this put you off a stroll. This is prime walking territory, with footpaths, hills, ridges and moorland aplenty. Indeed, Clyro's more renowned literary connection is that it was where the Rev Francis Kilvert lived in the 1870s, writing his sharp-eyed and humorous diaries. These were published

Baskerville Hall Hotel



TAMARA HILLS

posthumously, with much vivid description of his movements by foot in the surrounding area. Recognised as a minor classic, the diaries capture daily life in and around Clyro and Hay-on-Wye, the little market town a mile to the south, with its annual literary festival now held at the end of May. Walkers and visitors of any sort are advised to pick up a copy to pinpoint spots described by Kilvert, who died from peritonitis in 1879 aged 38.

After taking a look at the charming grey-stone St Michael and All Angels' Church in Clyro, where Kilvert was a curate (a plaque marks the house in which he lodged opposite the Baskerville Arms) and where tombs are inscribed with the name Baskerville, my brother and I set forth into the green-gleaming landscape. We head in the direction of the village of Painscastle, with a diversion into the Begwyn Hills, National Trust-owned land.

Here the legend of the hound feels strong as we follow narrow tracks across windswept rolling grassland populated by sheep, and with the occasional sheep's skull by the trail. Our way leads to a little copse on a hill where a sign tells us that red kites can be seen in these parts, although we don't glimpse one. The ground is springy — "elastic turf", Kilvert said — and the views of the Brecon Beacons are awe-inspiring. We stop in Painscastle for a reviving pint of Butty Bach ale (from the Wye Valley Brewery) at the Roast Ox Inn, with its crackling fire and crooked floors, then trudge back across hills to Clyro.

Over a long weekend, our Kilvert-like perambulations include an eight-mile tramp along a muddy section of the River Wye from Llyswen through farmland and back down a steep bridleway. We shun a trail through the hills from Hay Bluff (too windy with 50mph gusts) but take on another part of the river from the village of Llowes to Clyro, then on to Hay-on-Wye.

Hay is a big reason to visit Clyro, and it's impossible for the bookish not to be stopped in their tracks. A pamphlet in the first bookshop we visit says there are 21 booksellers in town. Our perusal in muddy boots (not frowned upon by owners) uncovers obscure biographies, first editions (£35 for Graham Greene's *The Comedians* at one shop), histories, travelogues, histories, Victorian railway

books and faded novels by the skip-load. From Richard Booth's Bookshop (Booth began the self-styled "town of books" tradition in Hay in 1962), we pick up the excellent little *Blue Guide* to Hay and take it, appropriately enough, to the Blue Boar pub for another pint of "Butty's". The history of the town's pivotal position in skirmishes between the Welsh and the English and its book-dominated recent years are covered, as is the tale of the Hay Poisoner.

This was a certain five-feet-nothing

tall Herbert Rowse Armstrong, a lawyer who disposed of his domineering wife with the assistance of arsenic, which he claimed in court to be weed killer "for his dandelions". After seeming to get away with it, Armstrong was hanged in 1922, after attempting to see off a professional rival by similar means.

It's a story fit for Sherlock — and Clyro and its environs feel bursting with such intrigue. Go for a weekend. Just don't forget your walking boots.

Tom Chesshyre

Need to know

Where to stay

Baskerville Hall Hotel (01497 820033, baskervillehall.co.uk) has marvellous views and B&B doubles from £120. The Baskerville Arms (01497 820670, baskervillearms.co.uk) has simple but comfortable B&B doubles from £69. Cwmhir Court (cwmhircourt.com) offers self-catering accommodation in Clyro.

Where to eat

The Wye Knot Stop café in Llyswen (wyeknotstop.co.uk) does excellent sandwiches, cakes and teas; perfect for after a long walk. The Blue Boar on Castle Street in Hay-on-Wye, just below Hay Castle, offers good pub food at reasonable prices, with two roaring fires.

Further information

Visit Wales (visitwales.com)



St Michael and All Angels, Clyro

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