

Builth Wells

Builth Wells is the town of the bull. In fact the word Builth, or “Buallt” in Welsh, is thought to mean “the wild ox of the wooded slope”.

The town’s emblem is one of the ancient White Park cattle that roamed the area in post-Roman times. A magnificent bronze statue of a Welsh Black bull sits in lovely Groe park beside the River Wye. Even the local rugby team are nicknamed The Bulls.

And last July a living, breathing Charolais bull by the name of Barnsford Ferry became the most celebrated beast in Britain in front of a roaring crowd of thousands.

Because Builth Wells is the home of the Royal Welsh Show – the biggest and best agricultural show in Europe. In 2013 this four-day event celebrated 50 years at the Llanelwedd showground by breaking all records.

Nearly a quarter of million visitors came to taste the finest food Wales has to offer and see 7,000 magnificent livestock, including 43 breeds of sheep alone. Not to mention the supreme champion bull.

Don’t worry too much if you miss the big one. The showground hosts a quirky mix of other events starting in February and running right through the year to the Royal Welsh Agricultural Winter Fair in December.

It’s not all dog shows, ram sales and beekeepers’ conventions. After all most of us don’t have room for a Beulah Speckled Face or a Welsh Mountain Pony. But you can always pick up a bargain at one of the International Antiques and Collectors Fair.

Head back into town and you’ll understand the “glamour and enchantment” felt by Victorian diarist Francis Kilvert when he saw “the shining slate roofs of Builth and the bridge”.

Much of today’s town, and even its name, is a reminder of its Victorian and Edwardian heyday as a spa resort. From the 1830s a major tourist industry built up around the “healing” properties of the local saline and sulphur water springs.

By the time the railway arrived in 1860, thousands of visitors from all over England and Wales were pouring in every year to “take the waters” – and many handsome hotels, guests houses and shops were built to serve them. The word “Wells” was added to Builth to advertise its status as a boom town of the spa craze.

But the turbulent history of Builth goes back much further. To the days of the Normans, in fact, when baron Phillip de Braose built a motte and bailey castle overlooking an ancient crossing of the River Wye.

In 1277 Edward I took one look at it and thought he’d better rebuild it – in stone. Just five years later, it famously refused entry to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd after he’d been ambushed and separated from his troops.

So the last native-born Prince of Wales ended up on the run. He rode first to the village of Erwood, where an enterprising blacksmith turned the shoes of Llywelyn's horse the wrong way round to leave a false trail in the snow.

The prince spent the night shivering in a cave in Aberedw rocks – and was slaughtered the next day at Cilmeri as he tried to rejoin his men.

Today people still make a pilgrimage to the memorial stone that marks the spot where he died. They visit his final resting place at Abbey Cwm Hir near Llandrindod Wells, once the largest abbey in Wales and now an atmospheric ruin.

Or they simply wander past the many thriving independent shops in the centre of Builth Wells to stand and stare at the 1,000 square feet mural by artist Ronald Swanwick depicting key scenes from his final days.

Suitably inspired you might head for the Wyeside Arts Centre on Castle Street, right opposite the castle mound itself. This former grand 19th century market hall and assembly rooms is now a bustling entertainment space with a theatre, gallery and the longest-running cinema in Wales.

It's also home to the Window on the Wye, a new platform with a stunning view over Britain's loveliest river where people can sit and watch, create an artwork – or just have a bit of a think. "We want," say the Wyeside, "to stir the imagination of artists, photographers and maybe poets and philosophers as well."

Let's not forget the anglers. Because they simply won't be able to watch those rushing waters and whirling eddies without wanting to cast a fly into them. The Wye is one of the best salmon rivers in England and Wales.

The wild brown trout fishing is just as good. The autumn sport for grayling is spectacular. And the river is packed with big barbel and huge shoals of chub and dace.

In Builth you can fish two miles of the Wye and a mile on its tributary the Irfon thanks to the Groe Park and Irfon Angling Club. Environmental charity the Wye and Usk Foundation controls the small matter of 180 miles of riverbank plus some wild fishing in remote tributaries.

And in case you prefer to pedal past the Wye rather than dipping a line in it, Lôn Las Cymru (Cycle Route 8) traces the river all the way from Builth Wells to Glasbury and on to Chepstow or Cardiff. Just leave room for a fresh trout or two in your saddlebag.

My Way

"It's particularly special to be here at the Royal Welsh. This is my seventh visit – can you believe it – in nearly 50 years. That's probably why I've become a grandfather."

HRH Prince Charles