

Hay-on-Wye

So colourful was Hay's early history that it doesn't just make do with one castle. It has two. All that's left of the original is a well-preserved motte overlooking a gorge and stream near St Mary's Church.

The keep of the second fortress at Castle Street may date from the onslaught of William Fitz Osbern in 1070 – so it could be the oldest Norman tower in Wales. Over the centuries the castle passed through the hands of various ruthless Norman barons while various Welsh princes, including Owain Glyndwr, tried to burn it down.

By the 1660s, a certain James Boyle of Hereford built a new mansion on the north side and demolished most of the curtain wall, though fortunately not the magnificent carved gateway, to improve his view.

Those who know and love Hay won't be surprised to learn that this mansion now has another use – as a second-hand bookstore.

Because the biggest of all Hay's big ideas came in 1961 when bookseller and marketing genius Richard Booth opened his first shop. He declared Hay-on-Wye an independent kingdom with himself as King – and his horse as Prime Minister.

The oxygen of publicity provided by Booth's many stunts helped Hay grow into the largest second-hand and antiquarian book-selling centre in the world. Today there are still about 30 book shops scattered through the narrow winding streets – and every year 500,000 visitors come to browse more than a million books.

Eighty thousand of them arrive over 10 days from May to June when the Hay Festival welcomes authors including Martin Amis, Mark Haddon, Hilary Mantel, Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie.

The big idea hatched by Norman and Peter Florence over their kitchen table in 1998 has become “the most important literary festival in the Western world”, according to the New York Times. Bill Clinton calls it simply “the Woodstock of the mind”.

But the Hay Festival doesn't just talk about books. It lays on concerts and film previews too. Nor is it just for grown-ups. The kids have their very own festival called Hay Fever. And as you might expect from a town that's twinned with Timbuktu in Mali, they're not content with it all happening in Mid Wales.

There are sister festivals in places such as Nairobi, Dhaka, The Maldives, Beirut and Segovia. Not to mention Bridgend.

It's not the only festival in Hay either. It's merely the most famous. There's also a bike festival in April, a food festival and an arts and crafts festival in June, a walking festival in October and a winter food festival in November.

You can't pigeonhole Hay. It may be the “Town of Books” but far from every shop is a bookseller. There are galleries, gift shops and antique dealers – 26 in Hay Antique Market alone.

And it's as packed with great places to eat as you'd imagine in a town with two food festivals. The ice cream parlour run by Shepherds of Hay-on-Wye, for instance. They make their ice cream with sheep's milk so it tastes better and contains far less fat.

That's because sheep's milk doesn't need cream, butter or eggs adding to it. Just fresh flavours from local strawberries, tayberries, blackcurrants and damsons.

You'll find stalls groaning with equally gorgeous fruit and veg, cakes and pies, fish, game and home-made preserves at Thursday's market in Memorial Square and inside the Butter Market. Thanks to nearly £300,000 of lottery funding the Victorian Cheese Market is also being reborn as a trading space.

So Hay remains a traditional market town. But it's also a Transition Town. It's responding to the challenge of peak oil and climate change with a range of schemes covering hydro energy, eco building and permaculture.

Ideas don't get much bigger. The town even has an entire building dedicated to brain power. The Globe at Hay is home to the Institute of Art and Ideas – a charity founded to promote free thinking, creativity and debate.

There's always something going on: live music, fashion shows, poetry readings, philosophical talks, children's workshops, arthouse films, video art and comedy. Anything just as long as it pushes a boundary.

Fittingly, the Town of Big Ideas is surrounded by big country. Two iconic walks meet in Hay – Offa's Dyke Path National Trail and the Wye Valley Walk. The village of Clyro across the river is the heart of "Kilvert Country" with its network of quiet paths loved by the Victorian diarist Francis Kilvert.

The cycling is on a pretty large scale too. In fact Wales's flagship long-distance route, Lôn Las Cymru, passes through Hay-on-Wye. All around are waymarked cycle trails designed by the Brecon Beacons National Park – including the Talgarth Black Killer Loop that's every bit as uncompromising as the name suggests.

My Way

"In my mind the Hay Festival has replaced Christmas."

Tony Benn