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Listen, do you want to know a secret?

If the Golden Valley were in the Cotswolds it would be famous. Perhaps it's a good job that it isn't, thinks travel writer **Kathy Arnold**

Looking east, the sun is like a searchlight, picking out fields of emerald and deep gold, pale green and soft yellow. My husband and I are standing on the Cat's Back, a ridge above the Golden Valley, laid out below us like a watercolour landscape.

Aiming to recharge our batteries as well as to explore somewhere new, we have come to a part of the country that really has remained 'forever England'. A mere 20 minutes west of Hereford, the Golden Valley encompasses meadows dotted with sheep and cattle, and communities with names straight out of the Domesday Book. Even the hedgerows are historic. High, thick and bursting with wildlife, they date back centuries.

No one seems to agree where the Golden Valley starts and finishes. But everyone does agree that the label is no tourist board invention. 'Legend has it that when the Normans arrived 900 years ago, they misinterpreted the Welsh word *dŵr* (water) for the French *d'or* (golden), John Richardson tells us at Yew Tree House, our stylish bed-and-breakfast.

He and his wife Sue hail from Sussex, but were seduced by the area. Apart from the beautiful landscape, they rave about the produce: from bacon to sausages, eggs and black pudding, their breakfasts are truly 'local'. And, there is so much, they tell us, just in this one small part of Herefordshire: abbeys and churches, pubs and restaurants, cidermakers and art galleries. The only question is: will we have enough time to do it all?

We start in Dorstone, at the Pandy Inn. The oldest pub in Herefordshire ticks all the boxes for townies like us: low beams garlanded with hops, stone walls and local ales. According to legend, Sir Richard de Brito built a church here as a penance for his part in the murder of that 'turbulent priest', St Thomas à Becket. And, to house the labourers, the Pandy Inn was put up in 1185.



Opposite: Kathy Arnold in the Golden Valley.



A photograph of the interior of a stone building, likely a church or abbey, featuring a series of high, pointed arches supported by thick stone columns. The walls are made of rough-hewn stone, and there are some faint wall paintings. In the foreground, a woman in a red jacket and a man in a blue shirt are looking at a map or document. The man is sitting on a stone ledge, and the woman is standing next to him. The lighting is soft, coming from a window on the right side of the frame.

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But local history goes back even further. High on a hill above Dorstone is 5,000-year-old Arthur's Stone – and another legend. 'How on earth did they do that?' mutters my husband, peering at the mini-Stonehenge of nine upright stones, capped with massive granite slabs. 'They reckon that one stone alone weighs 25 tons!' Was this the great Stone Table in *The Chronicles of Narnia*? CS Lewis loved the Golden Valley, and some think that this ancient site was the inspiration for the sacrifice of the lion, Aslan. We file that thought under: 'to be discussed'.

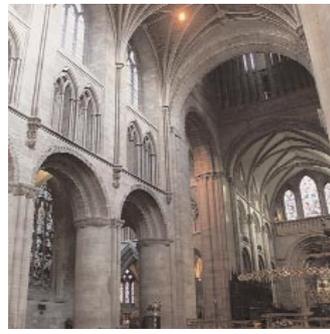
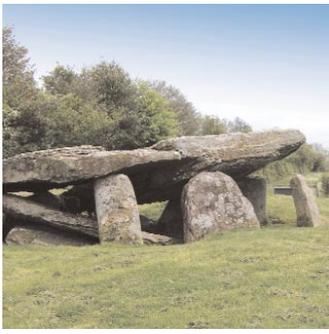
The gently rolling countryside is perfect for walkers. Some 25 miles of the 150-mile circular Herefordshire Trail meander along the Golden Valley, but there are plenty more tracks. From Yew Tree House, a footpath leads to Peterchurch, where St Peter's Well still supplies many local villagers. At Food for Thought, one of the valley's most popular restaurants, owner Steve Hardman brings us a jug of water 'straight from the spring'.

This ancient landscape reveals intriguing stories wherever we go. Take Vowchurch and Turnastone, hamlets that face one another across a humpbacked bridge. 'Two sisters decided to build a church here,' we are told. 'But they fell out. One "vowed" to build her church before her sister could "turn a stone".' Now St Bartholomew graces Vowchurch; St Mary Magdalene is in Turnastone, barely 400 yards away.

From these villages, the Dore flows on down to Abbey Dore. I am no gardener, but I appreciate the skill of green-fingered types such as Charis Ward. At Abbey Dore Court Garden she has planted orchards and vegetables, created flower beds and a walk by the river, where we half-expect to meet Mole and Ratty under the willows. Her six acres, a charming mix 'n' match of formal and wild areas, walled garden and arboretum, archways and sculptures, have been a work-in-progress for over 30 years. 'My love of plants and the earth is really why it all began,' she says. 'When I started off I had no intention of opening the garden to the public.'

Nearby Dore Abbey was founded by the industrious Cistercians in the 12th century. What was once a hive of activity – they were farmers as well as religious men – now lies silent and utterly peaceful. Only a fragment of the original abbey remains, but what is now a parish church is still impressive: solid arches, soaring stained glass windows, wall paintings and the tomb of a crusader.

Abbey Dore is also home to Moorhampton Park Farm, whose range of Gwatkin ciders are 'just apples, nothing



Opposite: Core Abbey.

Far left: Arthur's Stone.
Centre: Galanthus Gallery.
Left: Hereford Cathedral.

else' as Theresa Roberts explains. 'Cider apples have natural yeast in the skin, so we don't have to add anything.' Denis Gwatkin has been making cider the traditional way for 30 years. In 2009, he not only won the gold medal in the CAMRA Cider Awards, but was also filmed with James May and Oz Clarke in *Drink to Britain*.

It would be easy to pigeonhole west Herefordshire under 'ancient history'; but it's no museum piece. Just a short hop away in the next valley there's a stunning bit of modernity: the Monnow Valley Arts Centre. Opened in 2007, the renovated old buildings now provide space for art plus an artist's studio; outside is a sculpture garden, where touching the works is expected. 'We aim to mount exhibitions by artists of international stature, the sort of shows that any city would be proud to put on,' Hanneke van der Werf explains. Add in the oh-wow view of the borderland Black Mountains, and this complex is an unexpected gem.

“What was once a sleepy market town now bustles with lively shops and cafés”

The Monnow Valley presses up tight against Wales's Black Mountains. Its hillsides are steeper and the villages more away-from-it all, but there's still plenty going on. In Longtown, Christine Hope runs a village store that doubles up as a post office, paper shop, off-licence, 'and anything else that shoppers want'. Determined to show that a community-oriented business can survive, Christine peppers her sentences with 'organic', 'recycling' and 'sustainable'. 'That's the only way that the countryside will survive,' she tells us.

At Craswall, cider is still drawn from the cask at the ancient Bull's Head pub, while Pauline Goodwin's menu at the rustic White Haywood Farm Restaurant features beef, pork and lamb produced by her farmer husband, Philip. From here, the rippling valleys look so peaceful it's easy to forget that this was once England's Wild West. The richly fertile land was prized – and fought for – by the Welsh, the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans.

West Herefordshire's other-worldly, timewarp

temperament is all the more unexpected because of its closeness to Hereford and city life. It's where we head next, stopping on the way at Wormbridge on the A465. In a cleverly converted 18th-century barn, Galanthus is an art gallery-cum-restaurant. While I ooh and ah over contemporary jewellery, bold paintings and elegant pottery, my husband buys a loaf of their homemade bread. 'Everything you see is handmade, from the crafts to the cakes and ice cream,' owner Debbie Kellett tells us. 'We also make our own cheese.' And the cheesemaker is Debbie's mum! In the tiny dairy

outside, Catherine Kellett beams as we congratulate her on a recent silver medal for her Galanthus Blue.

In Hereford, we take a walk round the centre. What was once a sleepy market town now bustles with lively shops and cafés. Overlooking the River Wye is Left Bank, a modern complex of terraced restaurants and bars overlooking a 500-year-old bridge – and a bunch of enthusiastic kayakers.

From Castle Green alongside the cathedral we duck into Church Street. Everyone has told us to check out this tiny walkway that connects the cathedral close with the main square. It offers the sort of shopping I really enjoy: one-of-a-kind stores selling everything from maps and cheese to fabric and shoes. While my husband disappears into a music shop to check out their selection of CDs, I pop into fashion boutiques that cater for trendy, as well as classic, tastes.

We compare notes over an ice cream at Shepherd's Ice Cream Parlour, a short walk away. Cardamom and lavender, or ginger? Mango and chilli, or chocolate hazelnut? Chatting to the waiter, we discover that Shepherd's is made... in the Golden Valley! 'I live in Peterchurch,' he says. 'Have you tried the cider at Gwatkin's yet?'

We nod in that knowing and slightly smug way, as only gourmets of the Golden Valley can do.