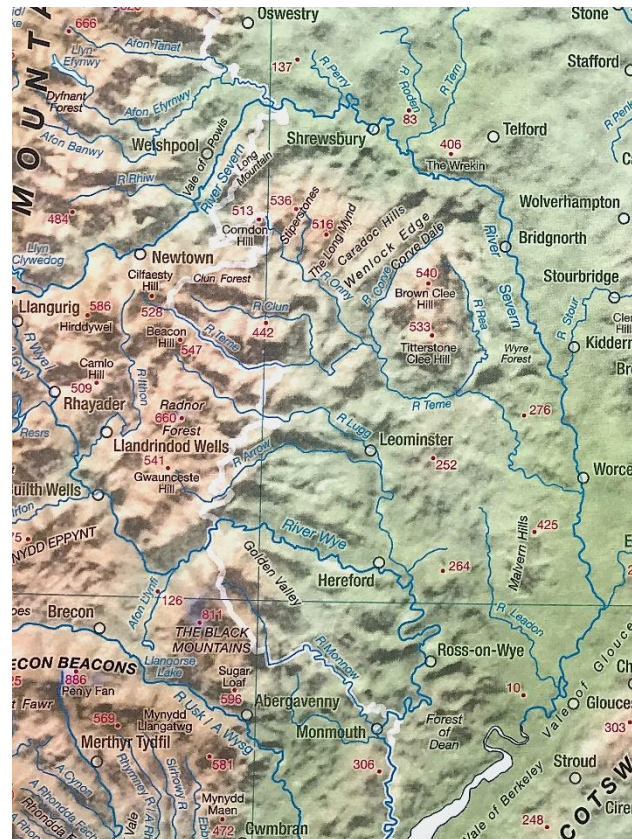


## 5.14. River Severn

### 1. Location

The River Severn originates on the north-eastern slopes of Plynlimon in Powys, Wales. It is the longest river in Great Britain, totalling 290 kilometres, from its source to where it flows into the Severn Estuary. This case study considers the length of the Severn between Shrewsbury in the north and Gloucester in the south.



### 2. Why was the Case Study Site selected?

This study site was chosen because the Severn passes through a range of typically English landscapes, which exhibit a range of interesting geomorphological features. Along its course the Severn is lined by historic towns and villages, a number of which have been prone to significant flooding events, an ongoing problem. The Severn has a rich cultural heritage and has also been well-illustrated since the early nineteenth century, allowing comparison to be made of changes occurring along its length of the river over 200 years.

### 3. Summary of the Geology, Fluvial Geomorphology and Processes

The Severn's bedrock geology consists largely of ancient Ordovician and Silurian rocks comprising of shales, mudstones and sandstones. Along the southern part of its course, it passes over mudstones and siltstones of the Triassic Period.

The Severn, with its 11,000 sq. km. drainage basin area, and its numerous tributaries, has suffered from historic flooding problems through the length of this case study, and these persist today, although strenuous efforts are being made to reduce the impacts on people and property. The river becomes tidal at Maisemore, just to the north of Gloucester. The tidal river downstream from Gloucester is sometimes referred to as the Severn Estuary, but the river is usually considered to become the estuary after the second Severn Crossing, near Severn Beach, south Gloucestershire (<http://www.severnestuary.net/sep/>).

### 4. How can the Art Imagery inform us of river change?

The images that illustrate this case study report extend from 1797 to the present day. The early images from Samuel Ireland's *Tour of the Severn* (Ireland, 1797<sup>1</sup>) are picturesque lithographs and some lack detail, but they give a general indication of the nature of the river during that period.



Only a small selection of Ireland's images are shown in this report, and these are far more extensive in the two-volume original publication.

The early twentieth century images by Harold Sutton Palmer and the postcard artist Alfred Robert Quinton, who painted particularly between 1900 and 1920 on the Severn and the Wye, provide detailed records of riverside towns, the physical nature of the river and, in some cases, the extent of riverbank defences. With the present-day photographs, which endeavour to try and replicate the locations of the earlier artworks, collectively these provide a sequence of change, or lack of change, through the course of the river. Many more images of the Severn exist on the WatercolourWorld and ArtUK websites, and can be easily accessed, as explained in the following chapter 'Analysis'.



**Figures 14.1 (above) and 14.2 (below)** shows two views of Shrewsbury and the Severn by Samuel Ireland, who made a tour of the whole length of the river from its source to the Severn Estuary. His numerous lithograph plates, such as these, are from his *Picturesque Views of the Severn* (Ireland, 1797). Although general topographical views, they do provide early insight to the character of the Severn at that time.







**Figure 14.3 (above)** shows Ireland's view of the famous Iron Bridge near Coalbrookdale in 1797. The banks of the river remain undefended at this point today, as shown in **Figure 14.4 below**.

Courtesy: Christine Matthews/Creative Commons Licence.







**Figure 14.5 (above)** shows Samuel Ireland's 1797 view of Bridgnorth looking down river. Scenically located on the banks of the Severn, Bridgnorth was a favoured subject for artists, both within its setting of the river valley and also the busy waterfront, as illustrated in Sir Edward John Poyner's finely detailed painting *By Severnside* in **Figure 14.6 below**.

Image: Wikimedia Commons.







**Figures 14.7 (above) and 14.8 (below)** are two fine watercolours of Bridgnorth by Harold Sutton Palmer, c.1908, and Alfred Heaton Cooper, c.1910 respectively. Sutton Palmer's view clearly illustrate the town within its wider landscape setting the river flowing through the beautiful and dramatic Shropshire countryside. Quinton's view provides a closer insight of the river, town bridge and unprotected riverbanks.

Figure 14.8 Courtesy: Salmon's.







**Figure 14.9 (above)** shows a further view of picturesque Bridgnorth by Quinton (c.1910) with the houses lining the waterfront, which is undefended as in the present-day view in **Figure 14.10 (left)**. **Figure 14.11 (below)** shows a close view of the town from the river and compares with Quinton's view in Figure 14.7 on the previous page.

Courtesy: Figure 14.9 – Salmon's; Figure 14.10 – © Annette Randle/Creative Commons Licence; Figure 14.11 – Commons Wikimedia/Gnesener1900.







**Figures 14.12-14.14** show the town of Stourport on the Severn with its elegant bridge. This was replaced since Ireland made his view (top) in 1797. Quinton's watercolour (middle) shows the handsome bridge that allowed improved navigation.

Like most Severn-side towns, the river at Stourport has burst its banks causing extensive flooding, as in 2020 (bottom).

Courtesy: Figure 14.13 (centre) Salmon's; Figure 14.14 (bottom) © P.L. Chadwick/Geograph Images.





**Figures 14.15 and 14.16** shows views of the city of Worcester, dominated by its magnificent cathedral. In 1920, A.R. Quinton painted the cathedral from the river (top). The present-day waterfront can be seen (below). The city experienced flooding in both 2020 and 2022.

Courtesy: Figure 14.15 – Salmon's; Figure 14.6 – Philip Halling/Creative Commons Licence.







**Figures 14.17-14.19** show three views of Tewkesbury in 1797, 1920 and the present-day. The view by Samuel Ireland appears to show some formal riverbank defences on the right bank.

Quinton chose to paint the historic King John's Bridge and The Old Bear Inn. This is one of several handsome bridges that span the Sever along the length of this case study.

The present-day view shows Tewkesbury Abbey and the flooded Sever Ham. The town has experienced severe floods following the series of Atlantic storms and accompanying rainfall events in recent years; the Cotswolds Hills can be seen in the distance.

Courtesy: Figure 14.18 (centre) – Salmon's; Figure 14.17 (bottom) – Philip Halling/Creative Commons Licence.





**Figures 14.20-14.22** show three views of Gloucester located at the southern end of the Severn. The view by Ireland, produced in 1797 (top), and the highly detailed oil painting by James Webb (1878, centre) show the low-lying nature of the countryside surrounding the river as it passes through the city. The photograph (left) shows extensive flooding after the river burst its banks in 2007.

Courtesy: Figure 14.21 – Sotheby's; Figure 14.22 – P.J. Photography/Shutterstock Images.





**Figure 14.23:** *The Severn near Bewdley* by Robert Mann, c.1880, shows a tranquil scene as the river flows south near Bewdley.

Courtesy: Bridgeman Images/Torre Abbey Historic House and Gallery.

### **5. What are the key issues that can be learnt from this Study Area?**

Like the Thames case study, this review of the Severn provides an artistic record of another of England's major rivers. It demonstrates how art imagery may be able to support river planning and management, as well as being of wider interest to environmental scientists, nature conservation organisations, those interested in cultural heritage, town planning and conservation area designation and management, and, in particular, flood risk management.

### **6. References**

1. Ireland, S. 1797. *Tour of the Severn*. London