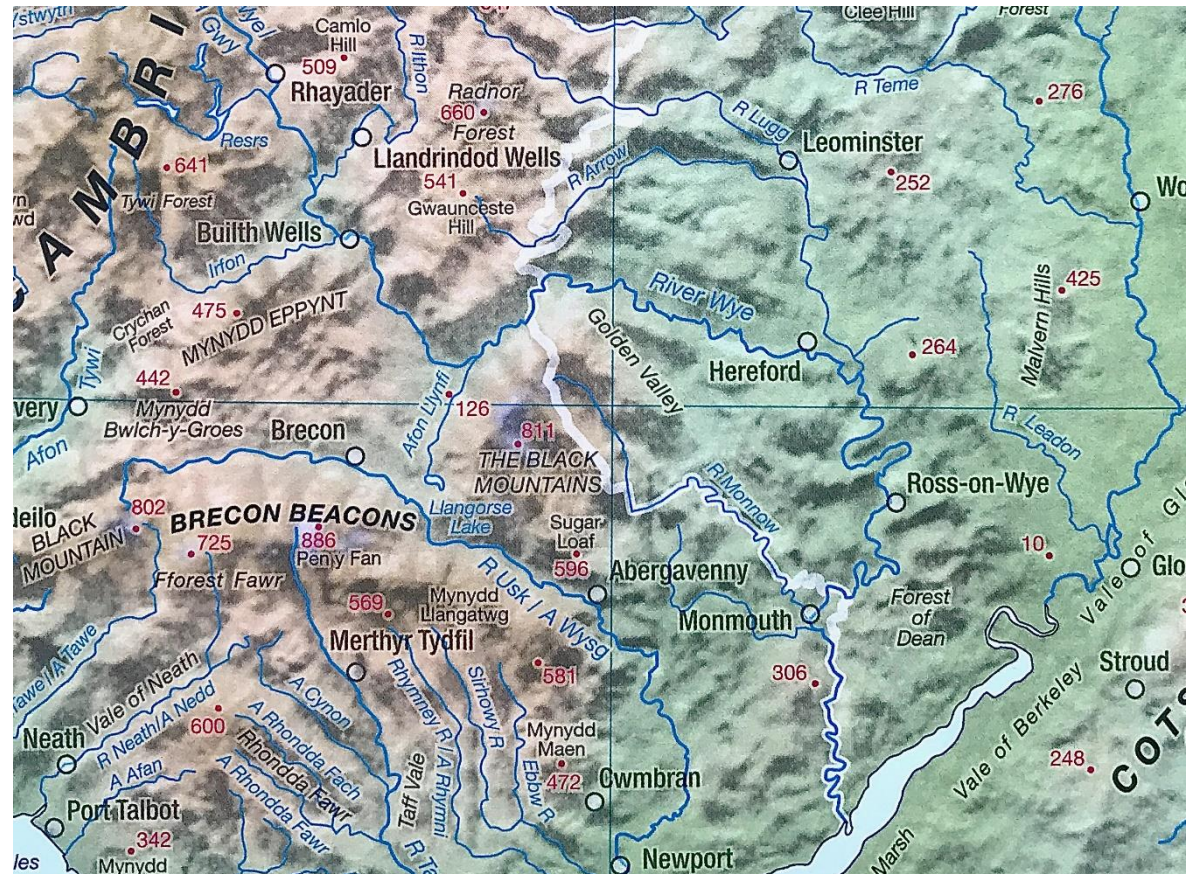


## 5.15. River Wye

### 1. Location

The Wye rises about 3.5 kilometres from Plynlimon in central Wales. The river then runs due south-east through the town of Hay-on-Wye, the city of Hereford, and Ross-on-Wye, before passing through a series of gorges to Monmouth and Chepstow, where the river and the Severn finally meet at the Bristol Channel.



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

The River Wye extends for some 250 kilometres from its source in mid-Wales to the Severn Estuary, and is the fourth longest river in the UK. The river passes through a wide range of physical environments, mountainous, open countryside and dramatic gorges, before reaching the Severn Estuary. The Wye also contains two Sites of Special Scientific Interest and the lower part is designated as an *Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty* (AONB).

A further important reason for selecting the Wye as a case study was that it was here that the concept of *English landscape painting* first developed in the 1770s, when the Reverend William Gilpin made his Wye Tour in 1770, leading to the publication of his book in 1783 *Observations on the River Wye and Several Parts of South Wales Relative to Picturesque Beauty made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (Gilpin, 1783<sup>1</sup>; Mitchell, 2010<sup>2</sup>). The writings of Gilpin were hugely influential and encouraged artists to appreciate the British landscape in its own right almost for the first time. Prior to this, aristocratic patrons only wanted paintings of continental landscapes following taking the Grand Tour; however, this option was unavailable as a result of the ongoing French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Following Gilpin's Tour, almost all the leading artists of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries followed in his footsteps, resulting in a huge range of artworks continuing through until the early twentieth century.

One of the most important publications on the Wye was *The Wye* by A. G. Bradley, and illustrated by the famous river watercolour artist, Harold Sutton Palmer, who produced twenty-four highly-detailed watercolours for this book (Bradley & Sutton Palmer, 1910<sup>3</sup>). They follow the course of the Wye almost from source down to the Severn, and are accompanied in this case study by watercolour artworks produced by the postcard artist, Alfred Robert Quinton, who painted this area in the first two decades of the twentieth century. For these reasons, the case study was selected and, in particular, because of the way the artists depict the river setting in its wider landscape, offering the opportunity for environment scientists and countryside managers to make comparisons of change within the wider landscape over the intervening period.

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

Through almost all of its course the Wye has cut its way through rocks of the Silurian Period, which were deposited over 420 million years ago. They comprise mudstones, siltstones and sandstones with some limestones.

The river itself flows steeply, with a fall on average of 0.36 metres per kilometre, between the River Severn and Monmouth. The tidal section of the river experiences a dramatic tidal range of up to 15 metres on some Spring Tides. Since as early as the eleventh century, efforts were made to improve the navigability of the river, which has provided, over the centuries, a vital link for transportation of materials and goods along this important route into the hinterland. Some of these expensive engineering ventures prove to be unsuccessful and were subsequently abandoned. Despite this, coal and other raw materials such as lime, were transported up and down the river during the eighteenth century. However, the extension of the railway network during the second half of the nineteenth century meant that the river became less important for commercial purposes, compared to recreation and leisure uses.

The Environment Agency is the navigation authority for the river, alongside its supervisory role for flood and coastal erosion risk management. In February 2020, Wales and parts of England suffered extremely heavy rainfall from Storm Dennis, followed by Storm Ciara. The central part of South Wales was particularly badly affected, with the Wye overtopping its banks and causing flooding in several locations, including Hay-on-Wye, Hereford, Ross-on-Wye, and Monmouth. Much of Hereford was flooded, with many homes being inundated. Further flooding was experienced along the Wye in January 2021, as a result of Storm Christophe.

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

Alongside the numerous artworks provided within this case study, easy access to hundreds of further images of the Wye can be found on the ArtUK and WatercolourWorld websites, and from other sources. The focus on this case study has been to illustrate the natural landscape of the Wye, in particular the river within its varied geomorphological setting. The images are likely to be of interest to environmental scientists and geomorphologists, as well as naturalists on account of the very detailed way that Sutton Palmer and Quinton have depicted their scenes. This case study is just one example of a site where it is possible to follow along the course of a river from source to river mouth, through the works of one or two important artists, allowing an overall comparison to be made of the river compared with the present-day conditions; this can be particularly valuable when preparing landscape assessments, in the context of climate change.





**Figure 15.1 (above):** This watercolour by Harold Sutton Palmer, c.1910, shows the mountain scenery above Builth in mid-Wales, near the source of the Wye on Plynlimon. Sutton Palmer painted with great topographical accuracy and attention and over seventy of his works illustrate *The Rivers and Streams of England* published in 1909.

**Figure 15.2 (below)** shows another of his detailed river valley scenes, this time near Rhayder in mid-Wales. His works illustrate the grandeur of the Wye in its upper reaches.







**Figures 15.3-15.5** shows views of the Wye near Rhayder, together with two views of the nearby Elan Valley dams constructed from 1897 to supply water to Birmingham. The views by A.R. Quinton were painted for colour picture postcards in c.1910. they show Quinton's attention to detail in terms of both the landscape and engineering detail they provide. Courtesy: Salmon's.

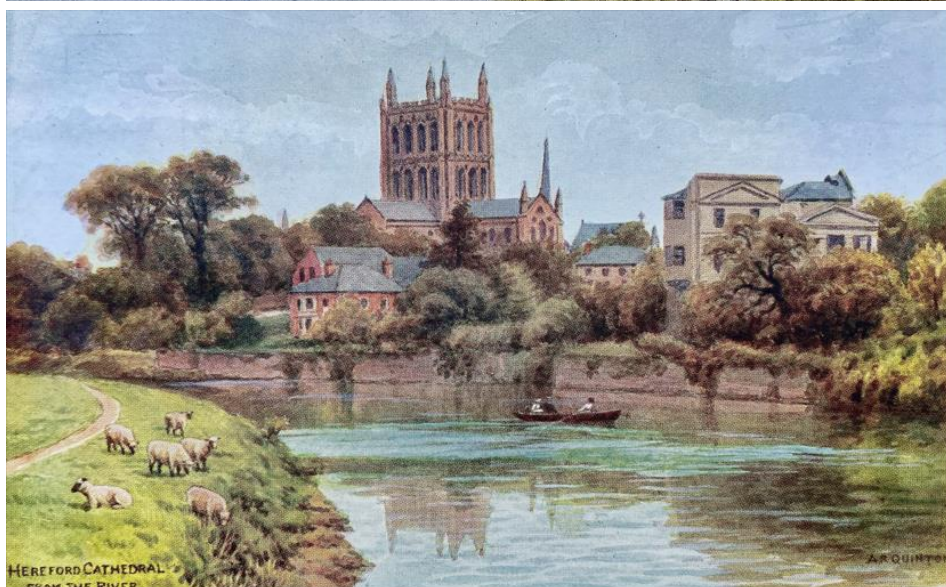




**Figures 15.6-15.8** show views of the city of Hereford on the Wye. The two watercolours, also by A.R. Quinton, were painted c.1920 and show the Wye Bridge and the cathedral.

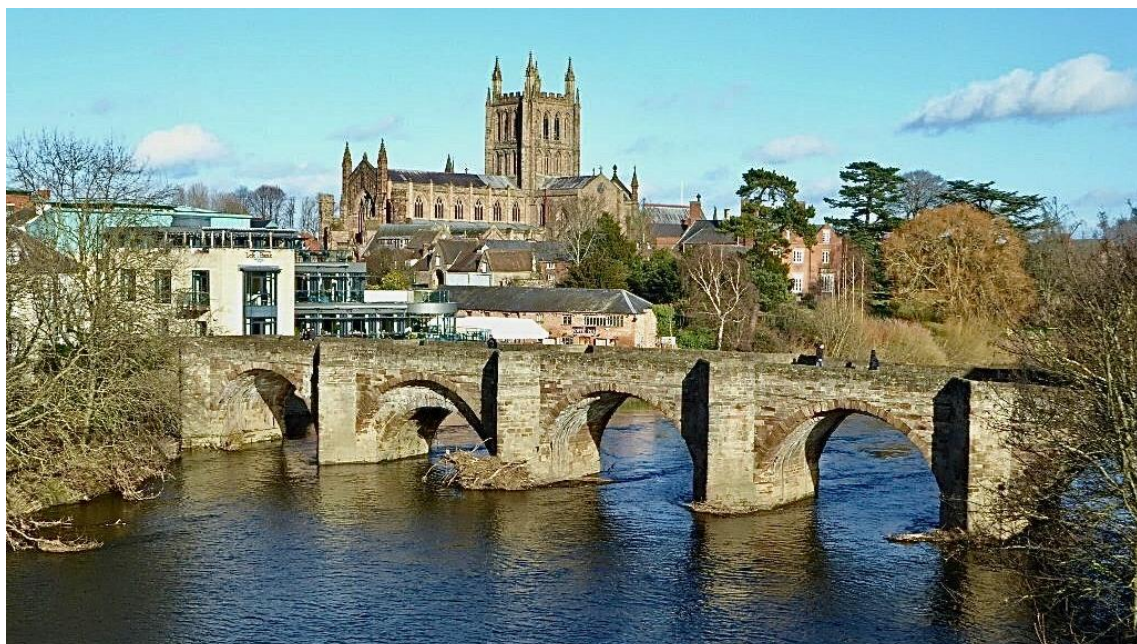
In 2020, after Storms Dennis and Ciara, the river overtopped its banks and much of Hereford was flooded with homes inundated, as indeed in other towns along the Wye.

Courtesy: Figure 15.6 and 15.7 – Salmon's.

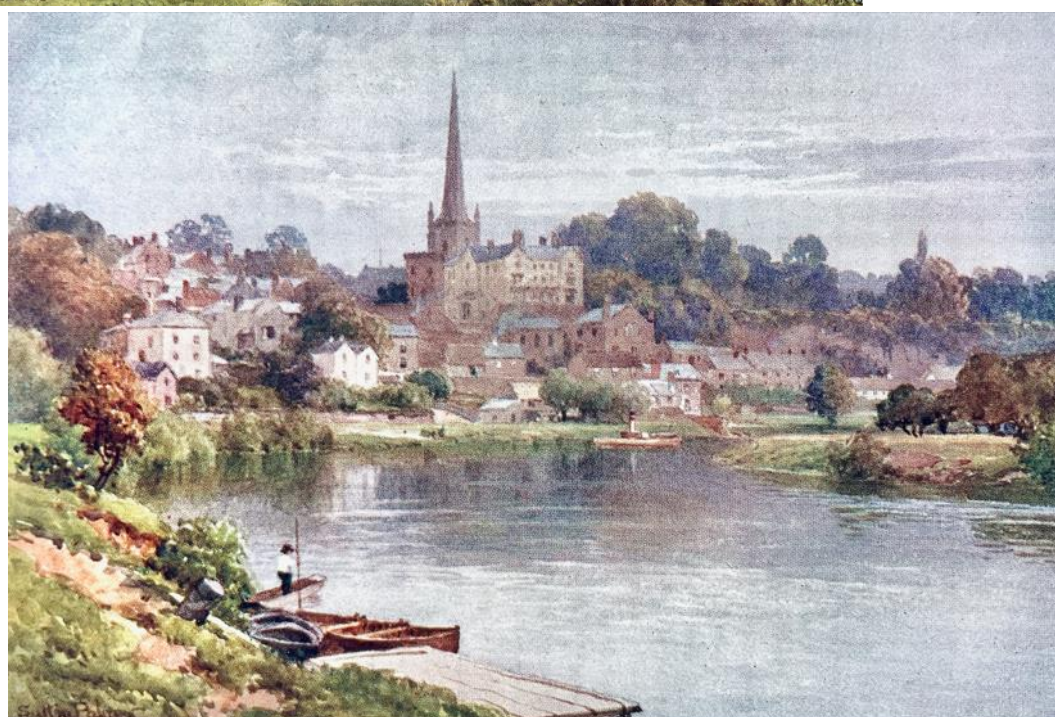
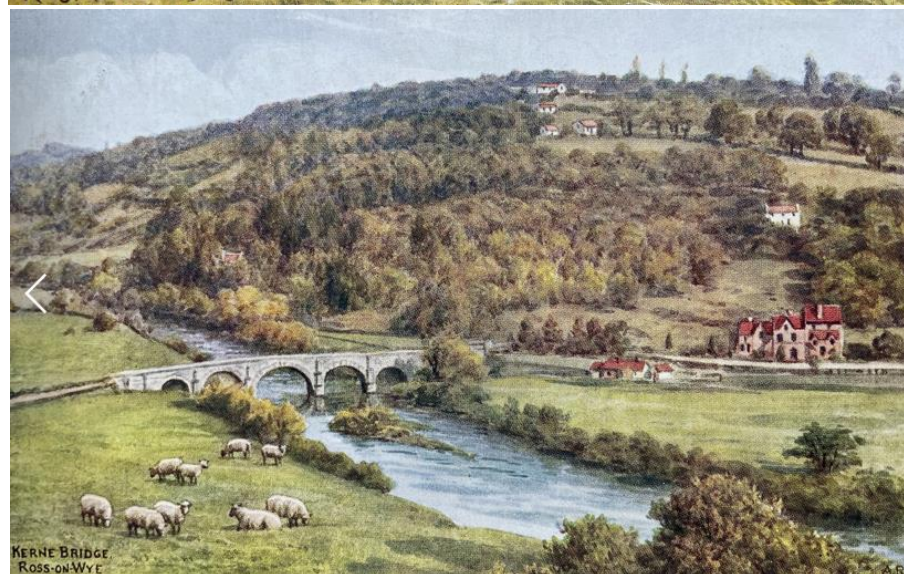
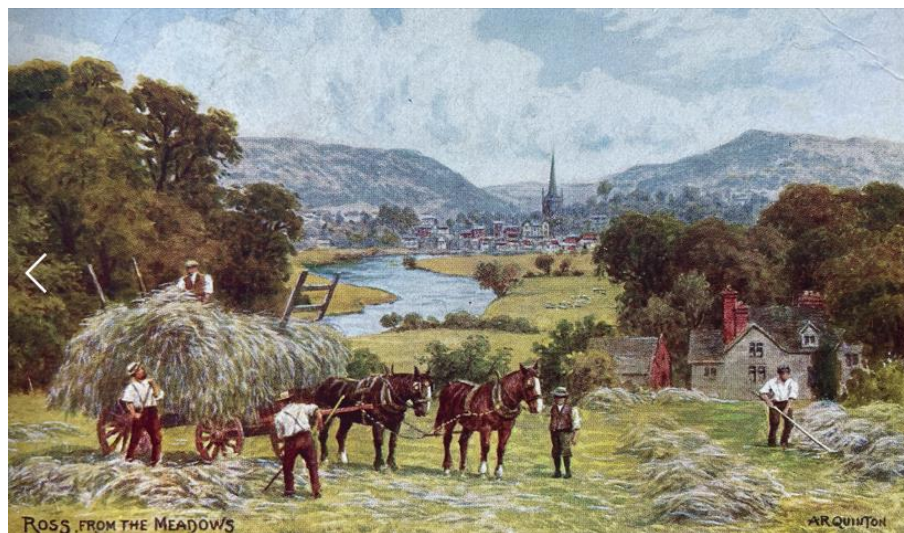


**Figure 15.8:** Wye Bridge and Hereford Cathedral 2018.

Courtesy: © Philip Halling/Creative Commons Licence.







**Figures 15.9-15.10** shows two watercolours of Ross-on-Wye. Figures 15.9 and 15.10 were painted by A.R. Quinton in c.1920 and show Ross and the Wye from the meadows and Kerne Bridge. This attractive riverside town was also painted in watercolour by Harold S. Palmer in c.1909 (**Figure 15.11 bottom**).

The three images clearly depict the course of the Wye at this point and the natural, undefended riverbanks at that time.

Courtesy: Figures 15.9 and 15.10 Salmon's.

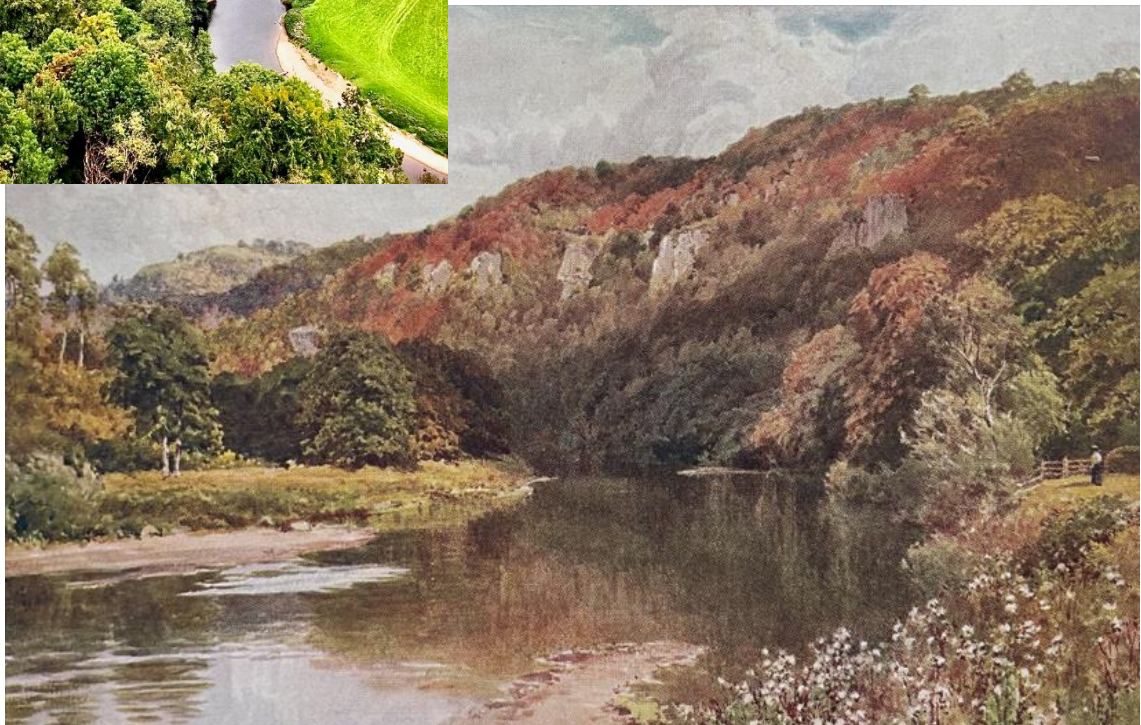




**Figures 15.12-15.14** illustrate the river environment of the Wye at *Huntsman's Loop* (top) and *The Seven Sisters* (bottom) as the river flows through a deep valley near the village of Symond's Yat to the north-east of Monmouth. The present-day view can be seen in the photograph, Figure 15.13 (left).

The beauty and detail of the wider river landscape of the Wye is provided in Palmer's watercolours, c.1909.

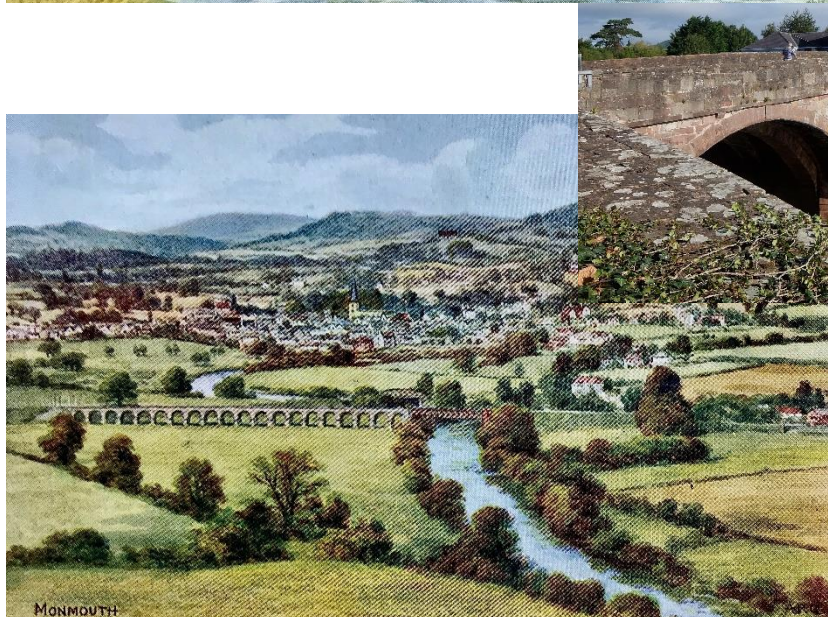
Courtesy: Figure 15.13 – Mat Fascione, © Creative Commons Licence.







Figures 15.15-15.18 illustrate the historic Monnow Bridge in Monmouth and a wider landscape showing the setting of the town with the Wye and the railway viaduct, both painted in c.1920.



Whilst the Monnow Bridge is in a good state of repair, the stone arched railway bridge is now a ruin.

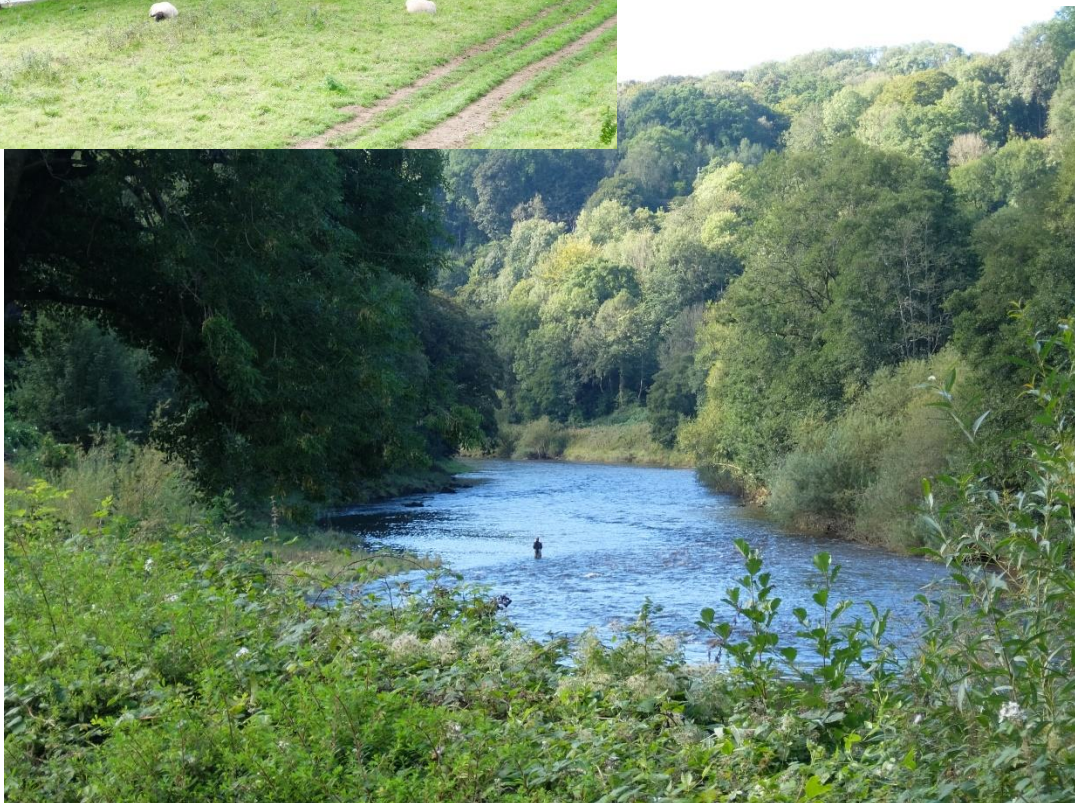
Courtesy: Figure 15.15 (top) and 15.17 (middle) Salmon's.







**Figures 15.19-15.21** shows present-day views of the River Wye south of Monmouth between Redbrook and Llandogo. Since the Wye was painted by Sutton Palmer and Quinton in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tree growth has obscured some of the open vistas shown in the artworks. The Wye is protected by two Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

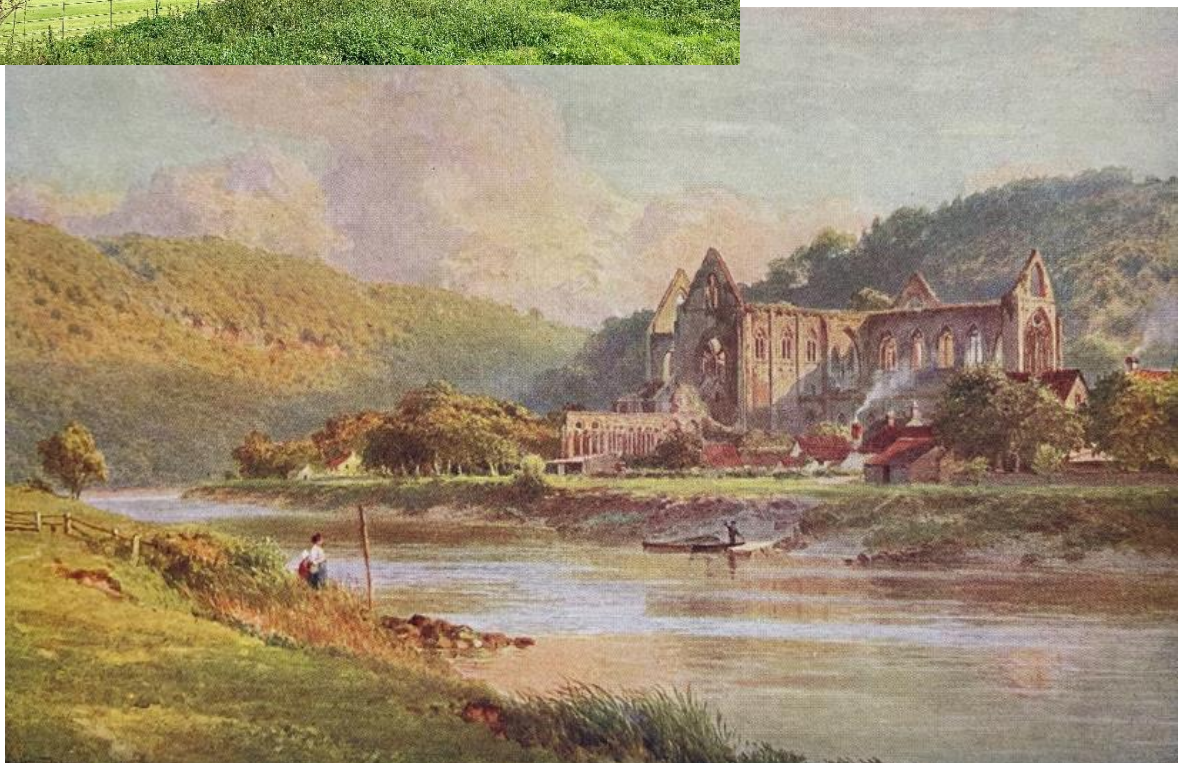




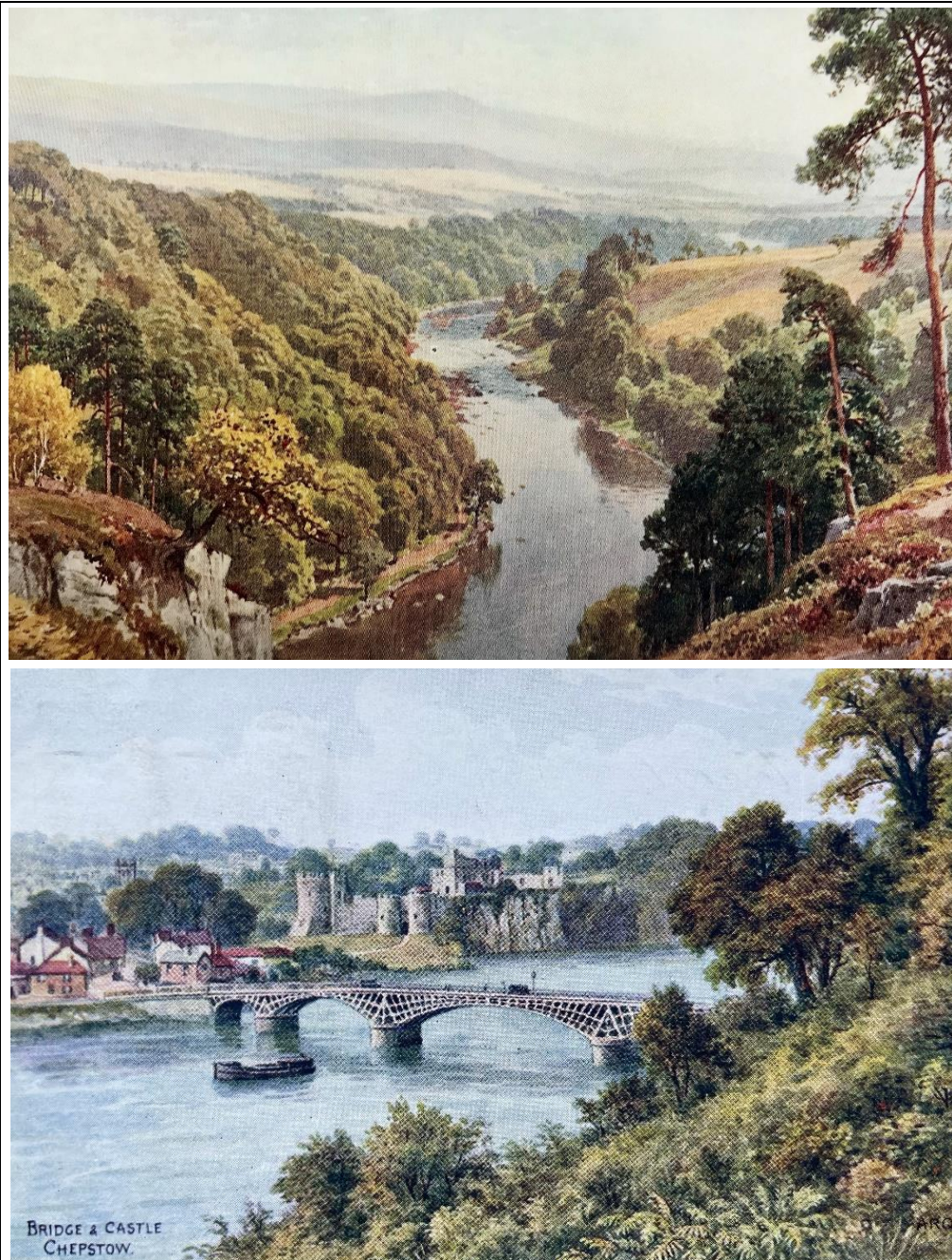


**Figures 15.22-15.24** show views of the ruins of Tintern Abbey alongside the Wye. The watercolour (top) was painted by A.R. Quinton (c.1920) and by H.S. Palmer (bottom) in c.1809. Almost all of Britain's greatest painters came here and captured the view of this magnificent ruin. Again, the works by both these artists show their ability to capture the scene in great detail.

Courtesy: Figure 15.20 – Salmon's.







**Figure 15.25 (left)** taken from *Above the Windcliff* by H.S. Palmer, c.1900, shows in the distance the junction of the Wye and the Severn.

**Figures 15.26 (bottom)** by A.R. Quinton, shows the Wye at or near to Chepstow, painted in c.1910.

Courtesy: Salmon's.

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

First, that it is possible to view the whole length of a river holistically; in this case providing an overview of the physical and natural environments. Second, such artworks also can fulfil a useful role in terms of public engagement when explaining physical problems such as fluvial flooding and how large quantities of river water can impact on towns and villages along the course of the Wye, taking account of its extensive catchment, extending far back into the mountains of mid-Wales.

## 6. References

1. Gilpin, W. 1783. *Observations ion the River Wye Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of 1770.* R. Blamire. London.
2. Mitchell, J. 2010. *The Wye Tour and its Artists.* Logaston Press. ISBN: 978 1906663 32 2.
3. Bradley, A.G. & Sutton Palmer, H. 1910. *The Wye.* A. & C. Black. London.