

Hergest Ridge, Herefordshire – a Lenten journey



Mike Oldfield's second album 'Hergest Ridge', released in 1974, features a bird's eye view of the Ridge on the cover; his 1975 album 'Ommadawn' was recorded at his house, The Beacon, which overlooks Hergest Ridge.

Hergest Ridge is a place I've been aware of most of my life through its musical associations with Mike Oldfield, the composer of Tubular Bells - but until this year (2011) I had never visited it. Oldfield, who shot to fame in 1973 with his album 'Tubular Bells', named his follow-up album after the Ridge; and while living at The Beacon he recorded his third album, Ommadawn. A track on that album 'On Horseback' recalls the times when he and his friends rode over the Hergest Hills.



Martin on Hergest Ridge, Ash Wednesday, 2011.

Hergest Ridge is in **Herefordshire**, on the border with **Radnorshire** in Wales. Apart from the nearby town of **Kington** (where Revd Stephen Buckley of All Saints' used to have a holiday cottage), the area around is mainly agricultural and the ridge was indeed cultivated during the Second World War to assist in food production. Later returned to its former status as common land, it is treeless, covered with heather and bracken. Around two miles wide and traversed by the Offa's Dyke footpath that runs 174 miles from North to South Wales along the English-Welsh border, it has always been popular with walkers.

The day of my visit was 9th March 2011, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, and I attended the **Morning Holy Communion service with imposition of ashes at All Saints' Church in Sedgley**. It was with a heightened sense of Lenten spirituality and memories of the glorious ambience engendered by Mike Oldfield's sublime music that I decided to explore an area that has long been associated with solitude and quiet reflection.



St Michael and All Angels, Lyonshall.

From Sedgley I drove through Kidderminster to Bewdley and then on towards Tenbury and Ludlow, eventually turning left to Leominster. From Leominster I took the A44 towards Rhyader. Just before reaching Kington I spotted a beautiful church (**St Michael and All Angels**) on a hillside above the road in Lyonshall, and stopped briefly to take photos. It had the distinctive black and white entrance porch, a characteristic of many Herefordshire country churches. In the churchyard there were some beautiful arrays of snowdrops and daffodils.



Signpost to the Hergests.

I passed through Kington, following the signs to Upper and Lower Hergest. It was here that a certain local ambivalence towards earthly matters manifested itself: Hergest Ridge is not marked locally as a tourist destination and one is left to guess where it lies. I drove past the turn, which is only marked by a 'dead end' sign, and carried on for around a mile past my desired destination.



Information board on Hergest Ridge Common.

Eventually figuring out that the dead end was the correct turn, I turned back, drove up the hill and was greeted by a sign announcing 'Hergest Common'. The road was narrow: inevitably I met a tractor and plough heading in the opposite direction and had to reverse about 750 yards back down to allow it through. The track terminated in a remote farm half way up the hill and I merely left my car parked half on, half off the road as there was no designated parking area.



Panoramic view of Herefordshire from the top of Hergest Ridge.

From then on the (unmarked) walking path to the top of the ridge was very steep and I had to pause several times to regain my breath. The wind on this early March day was especially relentless and biting and I could feel my face becoming numb with cold. I turned around and took some shots of the stunning **panoramic view on the Herefordshire** side of the Ridge. Heading on towards the top of the ridge I crossed two walkers' pathways and eagerly continued upwards in search of my first sight of Wales.



Offa's Dyke path, which traverses the Ridge. In the 19th century there was even a racecourse on the Ridge!

Probably because of the time of year, there wasn't a soul on the Ridge so the feeling of remoteness and solitude was immense. On reaching the summit, the vast panorama of Wales spread out before me. The Welsh side is in fact somewhat scarred in places with quarrying activity, yet nonetheless presents a magnificent view. Once again I took a series of photos.



The view of Wales from the top of the Ridge.

Partly due to the high wind and cold, I didn't wander laterally across the ridge making use of the walkers' paths, opting simply to return to **Kington** in search of a late lunch.



Sally's Pantry, Bakery and Tea Room in Kington.



Inside Sally's Pantry bakery in Kington - so tempting!

I had spotted 'hotpot' on a local bakery/tea room signboard on the way in, and headed back there.

I ordered soup and roll, expecting nothing outstanding, yet I was very pleasantly surprised at the minestrone I was presented with, full of delicious vegetables and toppings and a large slice of granary bread. The bakery alone is well worth a visit, selling a variety of home-baked breads and local cheeses.

My first encounter with Kington and Hergest Ridge was entirely favourable and positive. It is very accessible for a day out from Sedgley and has a distinctive other-worldly feel to it that makes it memorable. It is little surprise that Kington brands itself as a 'centre for walking' and I have resolved to return soon to explore the paths on the ridge and to visit the gardens at Hergest Croft that I saw signposted while I was there.

Martin Jones, March 2011

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