

**Golden Valley Dorstone Arthurs Stone Peterchurch Vowchurch Dore
Abbey Ewyas Harold**

**A day trip to view the churches of Herefordshire's magnificent Golden
Valley**



I must confess I hadn't heard of Golden Valley, at the foot of the Black Mountains in the Welsh Border area, until I saw the DVD of [Shadowlands](#). The film is about [C.S. Lewis's](#) tragic romance with American poet and writer [Joy Gresham](#) (also known as Joy Davidman) who is dying of bone cancer. A picture of the Golden Valley hangs on the wall of Lewis's house in Oxford (it's actually of the River Wye at Symonds Yat - the movie makers took some liberties!) and Joy asks Lewis to drive her there in the final stages of her illness (another liberty- Lewis never learnt to drive!). They stay at a hotel built in black and white vernacular style; and in the final touching scene of the film Lewis is seen after her death, playing with Joy's son in the valley.



The first church I visited was [St. Faith's in Dorstone](#) which lies just off the main road. There have been four churches here since it was first mentioned in the 6th century. The most famous one, a chapel, was built by [Richard de Brito's](#) relatives in 1256 – de Brito was one of the knights who murdered Thomas a Becket (he is said to have broken his sword chopping off Becket's head) and they built the chapel to atone for his crime. The present church was built in 1889 in the early English style and the most notable feature is the elaborate wooden entrance portico.



Arthur's Stone

In contrast, my next port of call was the Neolithic site called [Arthur's Stone](#), built between 3700 to 2700 BC. Legend has it that King Arthur slayed a giant here. An atmospheric burial chamber, it is made of great stone slabs high in the hills above the Golden Valley. It can be found north of Dorstone off the main road and up a steep hill (Arthur's Stone Lane) - little more than a mud-covered farm track. There was poor signage again here – so don't lose faith half way up, you're on the right road.



Peterchurch

Next on the route is Peterchurch, named after [St.Peter's](#) Church which was founded in the 8th century, possibly by King Offa of Mercia. Fragments of Saxon stonework can be found in the sanctuary. The church we see today is Norman in origin, but it was heavily restored in the Victorian period. The most unusual feature is the spire, which was built in fibreglass in 1972 to

replace an unsafe 14th century structure. It sits on top of a tower whose walls are 7 feet thick, to withstand attacks by Welsh raiders.



[St. Bartholomew's Vowchurch](#) is another gem in the valley. Once again this has a most beautiful entrance portico and a small but very distinctive half-timbered wooden tower. Tradition has it that several centuries ago two

pious ladies disagreed where to build a church to serve the two local parishes. 'I vow I will build my church before you turn a stone of yours': hence the neighbouring churches of Vowchurch and Turnastone. St Bartholomew's bell turret dates from 1522. Inside, the 17th century roof covers chancel and nave and is supported by huge carved oak pillars. The Jacobean screen has dragon carvings and the font is Norman. The Rev. Skeffington Hume Dodgson, brother of Lewis Carroll, is buried here. By far the most stunning aspect, however, is its peaceful location by a roadbridge over River Dore, one of the most tranquil settings I have ever encountered.



Further along my route along the Dore's course was Abbey Dore. It is the location of [Dore Abbey](#), a parish church created from a former Cistercian Abbey founded in 1147 by French monks. The abbey was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1537 and the abbey sold to Lord John Scudamore. He largely dismantled it and used the stone for other purposes. His great-great-grandson John Viscount Scudamore's sons all died soon after childbirth and in atonement for his ancestor's sins in profiting from the Dissolution, it was suggested by Archbishop Laud that he should restore the remains of the abbey and build a church on the site. It was re-consecrated in 1634, and his wife subsequently gave birth to a child who survived.



The final church I visited on the route was that of [St. Michael and All Angels](#) in the beautiful village of [Ewyas Harold](#) near the Monmouthshire border. Its massive 13th century tower was originally detached suggests it was built with the need for a secure refuge in troubled times along the English-Welsh border.



The valley from Arthur's Stone near Dorstone

At the end of my trip I chose to return via the M50 near Ross-on-Wye and onto the M5, rather than retrace my steps or turn north returning via Hereford.

The area demands far more attention than this cursory, whistle-stop tour. I visited in January and while it was starkly beautiful then, I pondered how glorious it would be in midsummer with the trees and immaculately kept hedgerows in leaf.

I covered six sites (including Arthur's Stone) in around three hours and alas didn't go into the churches themselves, as they were all closed. It was valuable reconnaissance however, and a short break in this idyllic landscape is definitely on my agenda – it would be advantageous to ring in advance to find out times when the churches are open to the public.

Martin Jones

How to get there:

I decided to take a familiar route to Herefordshire: from Sedgley to Wall Heath, taking the A449 to Kidderminster, then the A456 in the Ludlow direction to Woofferton, turning left towards Leominster on the A49. From Leominster I followed the A44 in the direction of Rhyader, turning south west onto the A4112, then the 41111 and then on the A438 to Hay-on-Wye. From Hay I followed the Dore valley road A4348/A4357 along the Golden Valley to Pontrilas, south of Hereford. It's very easy to get lost on this route as the signage is pretty poor – and I duly did!