



CIDER WITH LOKI

Andrew Wasley walks his dog to Laurie Lee's local watering hole in the Cotswolds

I grew up in the Cotswolds, serving my hiking apprenticeship scrambling on limestone cliffs and steep hills. So this ten-mile circular through Slad from Painswick Beacon sang with memories as I set out on a hot summer's day, pulled along by Loki, my cocker spaniel.

My route started at the summit of Painswick Beacon, whose view belies the hill's lowly 283 metres: a great wide valley bounded by the Severn's lazy meanders, and hills chased into blue by the distance. This is a hilltop scene fit to rival any in England, and a fine prospect to start and end a hike.

After a short walk downhill, I joined the Wysis Way. There, fragments of Cotswold stone littered the path: dusty bones of the hills, stark straw-white against dark soil and thick grass. This mineral had opened my young eyes to prehistory when my father handed me a dusty lump and told me about fossils. Look closely at the stone, and you can see them in their billions – dead remnants of a vanished tropical sea.

Sea and stone sculpted the hills here, tall green tumps crowned with beech and ash.

My route took me up to Blackstable Wood, and on alongside Longridgeto Down Hill. Another wide view there, before the path bore south to a nature reserve where the hillside hummed with life: click and trill of grasshopper, warm drone of hoverfly, bumblebee and chafer. Above it all, buzzards – I counted six – wheeled high in the blue, uttering primitive cries that promised a grisly end to rodents shuffling in the tall grass.

Catswood rested coolly in green shade, offering a view to contrast with the earlier hilltop vistas: the horizonless shadow of an ancient wood, softened into silence by leaf litter and moss. Laurie Lee – another son of the Cotswolds – wrote that these trees were haunted by a talking two-headed sheep. I saw no spectre there, but in the gaunt quiet it was all too easy to imagine.

Ghost sheep or no, Laurie Lee's spirit definitely stalks these hills. You don't have to have read *Cider With Rosie* to appreciate Slad, but Lee's memoir is at its most vivid when revisited after a trip to his childhood home. I gained my first view of the village

as my route followed part of the Laurie Lee Wildlife Way, a five-mile trail that winds through woods, orchards and meadows. Vibrant mallow and willowherb bloomed wantonly by the path, tended by butterflies – peacock, comma and white.

The Woolpack looks out on those hills through a picture window in the same bar that Lee drank in after returning to live in Slad. Today the pub serves pints from local breweries in Stroud and Uley, valuable hydration for weary hikers (and water for their dogs). Tending my Budding pale ale – sweet, bitter, moreish – I met two old boys who shared stories of their drinks with the great man. His portrait gazed back at me in the snug. I crossed the road to visit his grave: 'He lies in the valley he loved.'


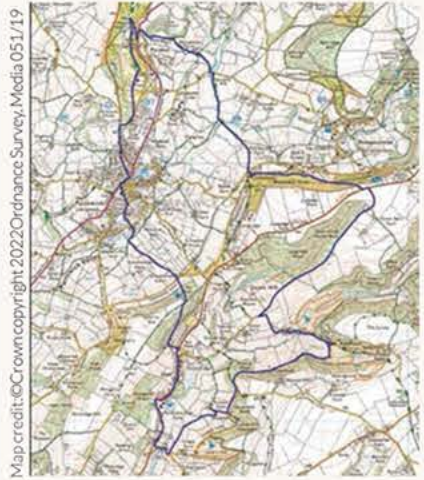
Lee's writing echoed in my mind as my path wound on through Painswick and back to the Beacon, recollections of a childhood now known to millions. Cotswold stone sculpted his world, infusing the water in his cottage with the mineral taste of the hills. It sculpted this hike, too, and my childhood. 

Photo credit: Andrew Wasley



[clockwise from above] A panoramic view from Painswick Beacon; Walking uphill in the Slad valley; The bar in Laurie Lee's local, the Woolpack; Loki 'pawses' in a patch of dappled sunlight



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

START/FINISH Painswick Beacon. Stroud is served by trains from London and the south-west. Taxis from there to the free off-road car park at Painswick Beacon cost around £17.50
Distance: 16.7km/10.5 miles
Ascent: 631m/2070ft
Time: 5 hours