

Small Pilgrim Places Stage 6: Hedd Wen Peace Place, Abergavenny

Lent and Easter being a busy season for me, I couldn't find three consecutive days free to do the next planned leg of my journey around Small Pilgrim Places. But with a run of sunny, dry days in early April, and a Saturday free of commitments, a spontaneous opportunity presented itself: a visit to Hedd Wen Peace Place near Abergavenny, South Wales.

For the first time I took a human walking companion, and started at Govilon by the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal. The parish church here sits on the lower slopes of the Bloreng, which rises 550m above the old coal valleys to the south, and the River Usk and rich farmland to the north. Heading east along the towpath, we were aware of how the surrounding landscape still bears the story of its industrial past. The canal transported pig iron, coal and stone taken from these valley to Newport and beyond. As we walked we could see relics of the old tramroads and planeways descending from the hills to the canal wharfs. On the hillsides are the ruins of mills and forges, warehouses and tunnels, bearing witness to the intense, noisome activities here some 200 years ago. But on this still spring morning the loudest sounds were of birds singing lustily as they found mates and fed fledglings.



Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal

Turning downhill off the canal, we entered the village of Llanfoist and headed for a whitewashed house on a narrow road. This was the home of Hospitaller Gill Branch, who greeted us and took us through to the Peace Place which she had planned and created. It is a small, secluded garden adjoined by an old building refurbished as a meeting room.



Statue of Sadako Sasaki in the Peace Place

A striking feature of the garden is the central statue of a little girl holding an origami crane. This represents Sadako Sasaki, a child who died as a result of the bombing of Hiroshima, and who inspired the making of "Peace Cranes". The meeting room was adorned with many of these origami birds, made by a visiting Japanese Buddhist nun. The space is used for workshops, mindfulness classes, quiet days and so on, and cared for by the local Quaker group. Upstairs is a comfortably furnished flat offering delightful place for a self-catering retreat.

As we enjoyed a cup of tea in the garden, a red kite glided overhead. It was good to see that this bird, once persecuted almost to extinction, is now thriving in these valleys.

For our return journey we walked along the now-disused railway, which had once carried the steam locomotives that superseded the horse-drawn barges. But now the railway is a path for walkers and cyclists, as peaceful, green and pleasant as the nearby canal towpath.

Ali Green