



The Pilgrim Hotel, above, and its stunning views, below. Left, Hereford Cathedral and the River Wye



FACTFILE

■ Tim Davey was a guest of the Pilgrim Country House Hotel in Much Birch, near Ross-on-Wye in Herefordshire. It is an ideal base for walkers and has stunning views; the renowned Wye Valley Walk is a short distance away and the Herefordshire Trail passes within a few feet of the hotel.

■ A special two-night midweek walking break costs from £119 pp (two sharing) which includes two nights' B&B, welcome drink and bar meal on the first evening, a picnic lunch and a three-course dinner on the second day and a snack and a drink for the walk on day three.

■ A 'Laid Back Sunday' stay costs from just £4450 pp (two sharing) which includes a home-made cream tea on arrival, three-course candlelit dinner and B&B in a valley view or four-poster room, with views of the Black Mountains. Call 01981 540 742 (www.pilgrimhotel.co.uk).

■ Check out Hereford Cathedral's Mappa Mundi and Magna Carta exhibitions on its website www.herefordcathedral.org The Violette Szabo Museum is at 'Cartref', Tump Lane, Wormelow, Herefordshire, HR2 8HN. Tel: 01891 540777. Open every Wednesday, April to September.

A relaxing pilgrimage to the Wye Valley



Tim Davey discovers stunning scenery, excellent walking trails and historic towns and villages, when he takes a break at the Pilgrim Country House Hotel near Ross-on-Wye

Some years back, Steve Boyle played rugby for Gloucester, England and the British Lions. These days he's swapped the muck and mud of the rugby pitch for a career as an hotelier not too far from the historic town of Hereford.

His hotel is The Pilgrim, which is set well back from the road in the village of Much Birch between Hereford and Ross-on-Wye.

Turning into the vast car park, you can see that the core of the hotel boasts some history. New wings have been added in more recent times, but the central part has roots as a rectory.

So the building's frontage is pretty wide as country hotels go, but once we were shown to our en suite room-with-a-view, we quickly realised the facade helps conceal The Pilgrim's

secret: out back is a vast area of grassland which offers guests some smashing vistas across Herefordshire and the surrounding hills and mountains – all of which makes The Pilgrim an ideal place to stay if it's walking you enjoy.

Steve was soon explaining a route to us which began, literally, just across the road from his hotel. It was one of a number of such walking suggestions, details of which are conveniently placed in your room.

We liked what we heard and were soon stepping out to find an Iron Age fort nestling atop one of the wooded hillsides owned by Prince Charles's Duchy of Cornwall estate.

It was well worth the effort. The fort, a circular earth ditch, is vast, but you can see why it was built here since the view it affords is tremendous.

When we weren't clad in our walking gear we took the car to both Hereford and, in the other direction from the hotel, Ross-on-Wye.

The latter is a charming place, with a great riverside walk. We parked there – for no charge – and walked along the banks of the Wye and then up into the town. There's a good outlet store on the edge of town, too.

We liked Hereford so much we visited twice. We thought it had a lovely, bustling atmosphere and some fabulous buildings within its central conservation area.

All this is topped off by the cathedral, which dominates the skyline and houses the famous medieval map of the world, Mappa Mundi. That's not all, since important Magna Carta items are kept here, too. The Hereford Magna Carta is said to be "the finest surviving 1217 charter".

We especially liked the black and white timber-framed 17th-century dwelling, The Old House, in the heart of Hereford. Once home to a wealthy butcher and his family, it is now a museum showing how the family would have lived. Best of all, it's absolutely free to visit.

It was also particularly nice to visit a city that that's not overwhelmed by the same old high street chain stores.

If you want to travel further, then Hay-on-Wye, home of the celebrated literary festival, and Abergavenny, are within easy striking distance, along with Monmouth.

Meanwhile, much closer to the hotel you will find the intriguing museum, housed within a private house, dedicated to the memory of Violette Szabo. This a mum-of-one was a wartime British agent, who parachuted into France a number of times and was eventually caught and executed by the Nazis. She was the first woman to receive the George Cross. The house is where she came to rest and recuperate between her daring missions.

Back at The Pilgrim, you can choose to eat in either the bar or the adjoining restaurant. We split the difference, taking some pre-dinner drinks and post-meal coffees in the bar and our meal in the restaurant, which overlooked that previously mentioned vast garden – and countryside beyond.

The food was lovely on both evenings. Our main course choices on our first night at The Pilgrim were pheasant breast and a mixed grill. Both dishes were exceedingly generous and the plate bearing my mixed grill positively groaned under an array of sausages, steak, lamb, gammon and bacon.

The following evening's dinner was just as good. We both tucked into one of the specials, a local rib-eye steak smothered with cheese and mushrooms.

The Pilgrim is also rather renowned for staging some hugely popular murder mystery weekends at various times during the year, where guests dine and decide whodunnit.

For us, though, as we bade farewell to this hotel, we both agreed there was no real mystery about why it's so popular. It's welcoming and wonderfully located, that's why.