

Living with Nature

Randolph's Spiritual Quest and Search for Meaning

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The Travels of Randolph the Wise

Randolph the Wise sat in his chair, scratched his old grey head, and thought about the very big question.

“What *really* matters?” he asked the empty room in a deep, booming voice. As usual, there were no other voices to answer him.

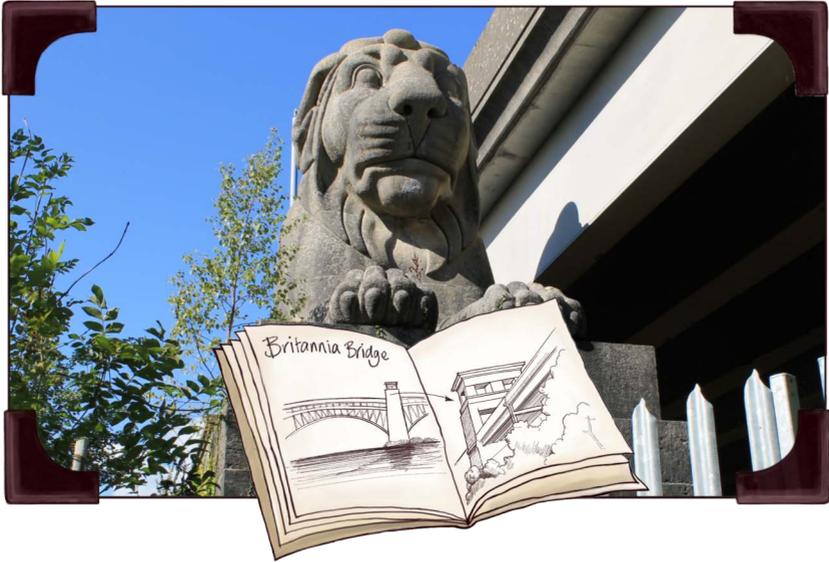
The question ‘what *really* matters?’ had been puzzling Randolph the Wise very much. He had spent many days thinking about it, but he knew that he would not find answers by staying in his room.

“I will go out into the world!” declared Randolph the Wise. “I will find and bring back here some answers from there.”

Randolph the Wise put on his coat and hat, picked up his bag, and gripped his staff. Then, turning his face towards the rising sun, he set out on his journey through Wales.

It was in this way that Randolph the Wise began his spiritual quest and search for meaning.

1 A Lion's Share



Randolph the Wise stood waiting beside a railway track behind a protective fence. A station would have been here once, in a different age. Now, when Randolph heard the train approach, he watched as it rushed on by. Where were these people going across the water, and where had they come from?

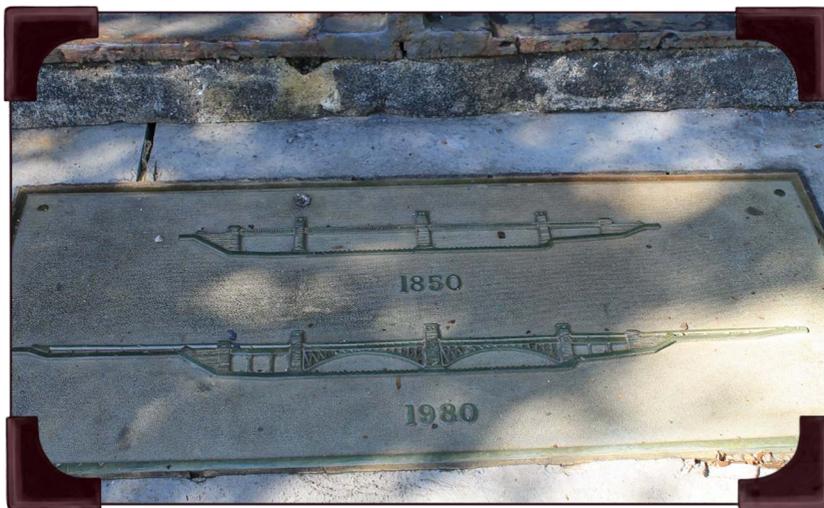
Randolph set out towards the fast-flowing Menai Strait. He could already sense the seaweed and the salt water. After a short distance, he was distracted by a small path winding upwards. Curious, Randolph followed it. It was not long before he reached the top of the slope. Here, he was surprised to find that an enormous stone lion was sitting alert but forgotten in the thick undergrowth. The traffic let out a long mechanical roar as it boomed across the bridge overhead.

“Such a magnificent lion must mark a gateway,” wrote Randolph in his notebook.

Randolph returned to the main footpath to discover more about this strange place. Soon, he arrived at a large rectangular wrought-iron structure. Standing perpendicular, it loomed far above Randolph's head. Still higher, wires of a giant pylon passed by on their way across the water. All around, the trees and the shrubs were edging closer.

As Randolph read the signs, parts of a story unfolded. Here, a much older bridge had crossed the Strait once. This remarkable feat of engineering carried the railway line from the mainland to Anglesey. Then, one night in May 1970, a terrible fire took hold in the bridge's wood and tar. With strong winds feeding the flames, the bridge was soon devoured. Now, Randolph stood before a piece of that historic bridge.

Suddenly, the hidden lion made sense. What had it seen over the years in this place where people and nature lived side-by-side?



2 Into the Woods



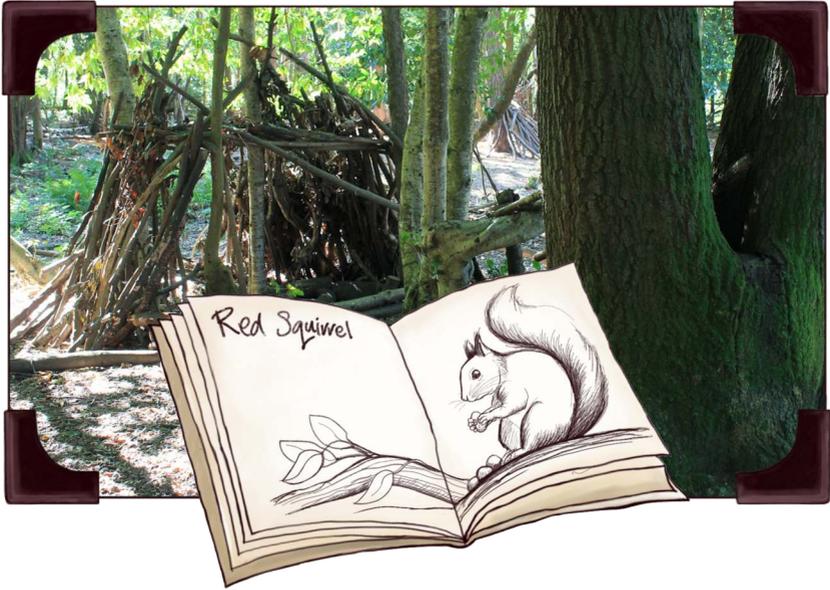
Randolph continued along the path until he was standing directly underneath the impressive bridge arch. The feet of the bridge were firmly grounded among a tangle of vegetation. He peered cautiously over the edge of a sheer drop to find the waters of the Strait still some distance below him. At low tide, the waters were looking deceptively harmless.

Then, turning his gaze back towards the path, Randolph could see a winding wooden walkway, leading into the woods beyond. Gripping his staff tighter, Randolph made his way forward towards Treborth Botanic Gardens. The sound of birds calling to one another became louder with every step. How can so many birds be so hidden, thought Randolph as he searched through the trees.

It was not long before Randolph heard another sound. This time it was the sound of breaking twigs and fast footfall behind him. Turning around, he saw a runner approach him, and pass quickly by. Not far behind, there was a man walking a dog on a long retractable lead. The dog kept stopping and sniffing and pushing its nose into the earth excitedly. Randolph looked more closely at the woodland floor to see what could be of such interest. There were many places for interesting things to hide. There were also mosses, lichens, and fungi.

A little further on, Randolph noticed a man and a woman on a wooden bench. They were sitting very still and in silence, looking up into the trees. Instinctively, Randolph immediately stopped and quietly observed. Something was moving very rapidly and noisily through the thick canopy of branches.





Suddenly, the thing paused briefly, midway up the trunk of one tall tree. With its russet fur and fine bushy tail, Randolph now recognised that this was a rare red squirrel.

When the squirrel bounded out of sight, Randolph moved further along the path. Soon, he became aware of unusual gatherings of tree branches on either side of him. These were different from the pile of neatly stacked logs that he had seen earlier. These were longer and thinner pieces of wood placed vertically against the trees to make little shelters. Randolph wondered at these constructions and who could have made them.

When Randolph saw that the runner and the man walking the dog had stopped in front of him, he approached them. "What really matters to you here?" Randolph asked them.

The runner answered Randolph's question first, saying, "I like running either in the morning or the evening. Sometimes I run on the streets near where I live. But, if I have more time, I prefer to run in the woods or by the sea. There is something special about running in the natural world. It does more than just keep me physically fit. I love running in this place."

The man walking the dog laughed and said, "And my dog loves this place too. She gets so excited exploring all the natural smells and sights. Dogs need places like this and I think that people do too."

Then, the dog gave Randolph a soggy bit of tree branch. "This is what really matters to us here. Please take this gift back with you," the man said with a smile. Placing the gift in his bag, Randolph said farewell and continued his search.



3 Along the Coastal Path



On the path ahead, Randolph spotted a small group of walkers reading a colourful sign full of information. They were also looking carefully at a map, and pointing in his direction.

Randolph waited to see what they would do next. He watched as they strode purposefully towards a huge tree where they stopped. Looking again at the map and then up at the tree, one of the walkers said, “This is it – the Lucombe Oak. It must be almost 200 years old and probably planted by Sir Joseph Paxton.”

They all stared at the impressive tree in silence. It had a serious weight about it. The silence was broken when one walker bent down and picked up something from the ground. “Look! I’ve found an acorn,” she said, and placed it carefully in her pocket.

Randolph followed the walkers as they continued along the path. After a short distance and a conversation about the best place to have lunch, the walkers stopped again by a wooden sign, which read, “Paxton’s Cascade”.

Somewhere beyond the sign, the rush of rapidly flowing water could be heard. The walkers moved forward to get a closer look. There, escaping through an old brick tunnel, the water cascaded over the edge of the steep bank down into the Strait.

Randolph wondered at the skilfully designed waterfall, and why it was here in this natural woodland.





As Randolph listened to the walkers, he understood that something else had been planned here once, a long time ago. He heard how the Chester and Holyhead Railway Company had owned this land in the 1840s. They had worked to create a pleasure garden, and a talented architect and gardener called Sir Joseph Paxton was part of this. Then, Randolph heard how a luxury hotel had also been planned here, but they ran out of money. Now, only a few signs of this ambitious enterprise remained.

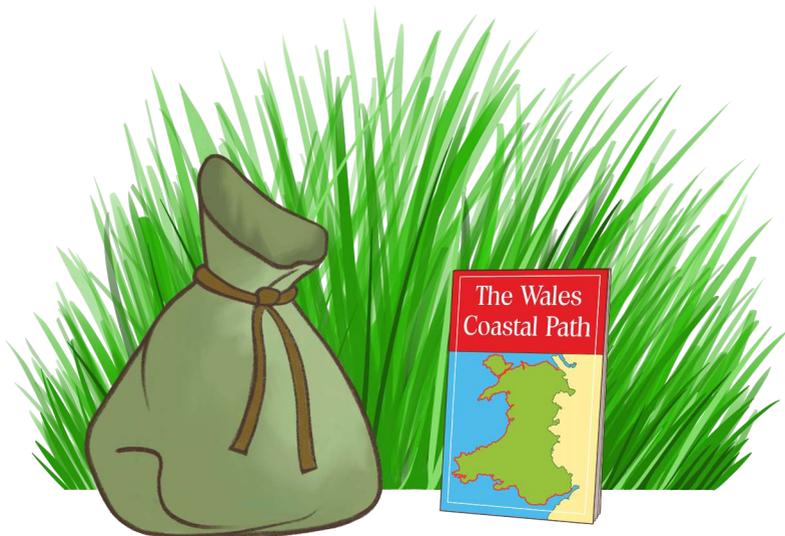
“This place would be very different now, if the building project had been successful,” said one walker, thoughtfully. “What will we find next on our walk along the Wales Coastal Path?”

When they turned to continue on their walk, Randolph made his way towards them. “What really matters to you here?” Randolph asked them.

One of the walkers said, “We come to Wales every year for a holiday. We have walked the whole of the Anglesey part of the Wales Coastal Path. Today, we are walking from Menai Bridge to Caernarfon. I really enjoy walking through this beautiful landscape and discovering something about the people and the places along the way.”

Another walker said, “I find Wales less busy than some other popular holiday places. There is still a lot unspoilt here. This is important for me, and it is the reason why I keep coming back.”

Then, they gave Randolph a map of the Wales Coastal Path. “This is what really matters to us here. Please take this gift back with you,” they said with a smile. Placing the gift in his bag, Randolph said farewell and continued his search.



4 From Meadow to Bog



Back on the main woodland path, Randolph noticed a small track veering left through the trees. At the end of the track, he was surprised to find a very different landscape. There, spread out before him, was the large open space of a wildflower meadow. The sun's warmth and light had easy access to the tall grasses gently swaying in the breeze. Randolph felt the stark contrast between this bright scene and the damp shady woodland behind him.

Seeing a mown pathway running through the grassland, Randolph left the cover of the trees. It was not long before Randolph noticed a man sitting on a bench talking with another visitor. The man was saying, "I come to the garden regularly. This meadow has been cut recently. A healthy meadow needs good management. There's a lot more going on here than just a field of grass."

Randolph listened as the man talked about the meadow. The man spoke about the wild flowers, insects and animals living here. He said that wildflower meadows had been disappearing since the 1930s. The land had been used for building properties and for different kinds of farming. Now, there were very few proper wildflower meadows left. “So, this is a special place,” the man concluded.

Then, the man pointed to an area on the far side of the meadow, saying, “Before you leave, it is worth visiting a very different kind of place. Beyond the bamboos, you will find a bog garden.” The man shared the story of how he discovered the bog garden on one cold winter’s day. “Like the meadow,” he said, “there is a lot more going on there than just a patch of swampy ground.”





The man described how he had walked over a small stream, and then through some tall bamboos to find a giant tree fern, standing at the head of the bog. Other ferns were growing vigorously all around him. “Ferns are very ancient plants and they can tell you a lot about what’s going on in a place,” the man said.

Then, the man shared the story of the giant tree fern. He said, “That giant fern is not a local fern. It comes from New Zealand originally. Its leaf is an important symbol for the Maori people. You can find the fern leaf on many things in New Zealand.”

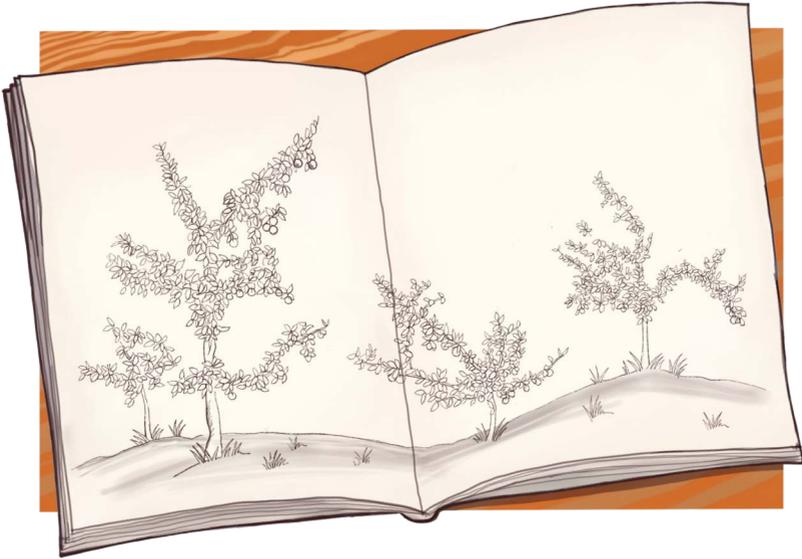
Randolph remembered the ferns that he had seen during his woodland walk. He wondered at the power of plants to become symbols to people all around the world. When the man had finished talking, Randolph approached him. “What really matters to you here?” Randolph asked him.

The man thought for a while before answering Randolph's question. "I come here because I like the variety. In one small botanic garden you can see so many types of land. There are the meadows, the bog, and the woodland. So much is happening in each one of these places. It is well managed and cared for. Some important scientific research happens here."

Then, the man gave Randolph a large fern frond. "This is what really matters to me here. Please take this gift back with you," he said with a smile. Placing the gift in his bag, Randolph said farewell and continued his search.



5 The Orchard



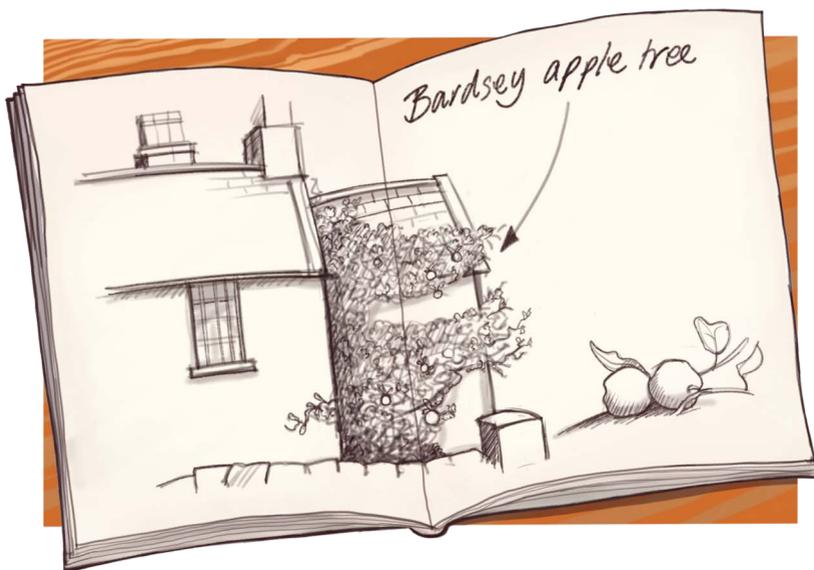
When Randolph had finished walking around the meadows, he made his way along the woodland perimeter. From time to time, he stopped to record something of interest in his notebook. While Randolph was absorbed watching butterflies in a carefully crafted flowering border, he overheard a conversation nearby.

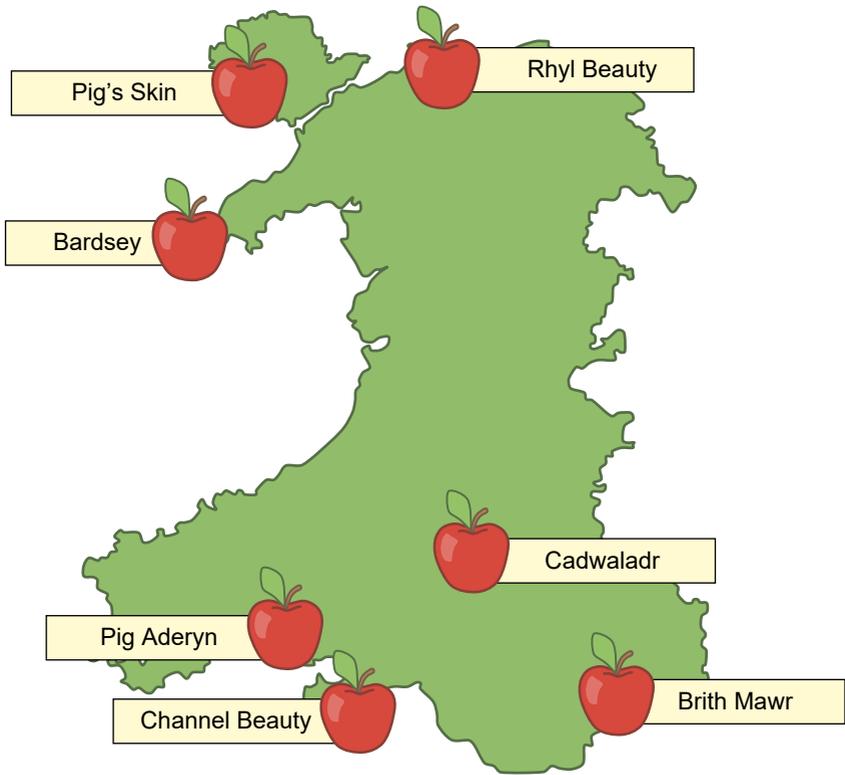
“Look at these apple trees,” a voice said. “They are all Welsh and rare. I’ve heard of the Bardsey Apple but I don’t recognise any of the others. Have you heard of the St Cecilia’s Apple or the Anglesey Pigs Snout Apple or the Morgan Sweet Apple?”

Randolph turned towards the owner of the voice and saw two women standing by a small orchard of young trees. The woman’s friend nodded and replied, “Each one of these apple trees is special with its own story and place in Wales.”

Randolph stopped what he was doing and listened as the woman's friend talked about the unusual apple trees.

Randolph heard how the ancient Bardsey Apple had been discovered growing near the ruins of a 13th century abbey on the island of Bardsey. The one tree is all that is left of the monks' orchard. It is said that both the tree and its apples are disease free. He heard how the 18th century Morgan Sweet Apple had been a favourite of miners in the coal pits of South Wales. He heard how St Cecilia's Apple had been grown first in Monmouthshire and it tasted best on Saint Cecilia's Day. Then, he heard how the 17th century Anglesey Pigs Snout Apple had been popular with farm workers and its name describes its shape.





The woman's friend continued, saying, "And these are only a few of the old rare apples that come from Wales. You don't find them in many shops." Randolph took a closer look at the apple trees and wondered about all the other kinds of apples in Wales and what made them special.

When the two women were about to move on, Randolph approached them. "What really matters to you here?" Randolph asked them.

One woman said, “Old Welsh apples could disappear easily. Today, only a few kinds of apple are sold, and these are mass-produced. It was not always like this. To lose these local apples is like losing part of ourselves.”

The woman’s friend added, “Apples say a lot about living with nature. Apple trees are not often grown from seed. Instead, you graft a twig from the tree you want onto the rootstock of another tree. Growing healthy trees and tasty apples is a real skill.”

Then, they gave Randolph an apple from a local farmers’ market. “This is what really matters to us here. Please take this gift back with you,” they said with a smile. Placing the gift in his bag, Randolph said farewell.

Randolph then frowned and pondered. He could see that living with nature really mattered. He knew that this was part of his spiritual quest and search for meaning. “But what do other people in different places say about this?” asked Randolph.



6 A Christian Graveyard



Randolph trekked north and then south, east and then west. His search led him by mountains and valleys, through cities and towns, around coasts and lakes. Then, when he arrived at a churchyard, he finally stopped. On the other side of the churchyard wall, bees were buzzing and bobbing among the wild flowers. Randolph strode through the arch of the lychgate to get a closer look.

Randolph stooped to smell the daisies and cornflowers. He ran his fingers through the tall grass. He followed a robin, flitting from place to place. Suddenly, Randolph stood very still. Was there someone kneeling in front of that grave?

As Randolph moved nearer, he could clearly see a crouching figure, and he pondered, "I wonder what a Christian can tell me about living with nature?"

Watching carefully, Randolph saw that a woman was trimming back grass from the face of a headstone. Now uncovered, the stone's inscription was visible. The words were engraved alongside an overhanging tree, and read,

“Always again we lie,
Among flowers, face to face with the sky”.

Again, Randolph's attention was drawn to all the wild flowers of different kinds and colours around him. There were yellows and whites, pinks and blues, creams and purples. Randolph wondered at this headstone surrounded by flowers, and the stories that lay behind them.

When the woman had finished, she gathered together the grass cuttings and placed them in a compost bin. Then, Randolph walked towards her and asked, “What might a Christian say about living with nature?”





The woman moved to a bench not far from the grave, and said, “When Jesus taught people, he often pointed out things found in nature. This helps us to understand some important truths about life. I really like the one about the birds and the flowers.”

Randolph and the woman watched as the robin swooped past their heads and landed nearby. She said, “Jesus told his disciples to think about the natural world, which God has made. It is beautiful and complex. Everything needed is here. See the birds. They don’t build storehouses or barns, and yet God feeds them. See the flowers. They don’t toil or spin, and yet God dresses them. Even the most richly dressed king is less stunning than a flower. All our worrying about our material needs makes us forget about what matters. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes?”

The woman continued, saying, “So, you see, living with nature is important for Christians too. The natural world teaches us some basic things about ourselves. It challenges us to ask questions about who we are and how we live our human lives. When we come face-to-face with a part of the natural world, there are always some hard lessons to learn. I enjoy visiting this churchyard. Here, we take special care to make this a place for wildlife too.”

The woman then gave Randolph a small Rowan tree sapling from the churchyard. “Please, take this back with you,” she said with a smile. Placing the gift in his bag, Randolph said farewell and continued on his journey.



7 A Sikh Garden



Randolph trekked on and on, braving the sun and the rain, then the gales and the snow. He did not stop until he arrived at a row of allotment gardens at the edge of a large town.

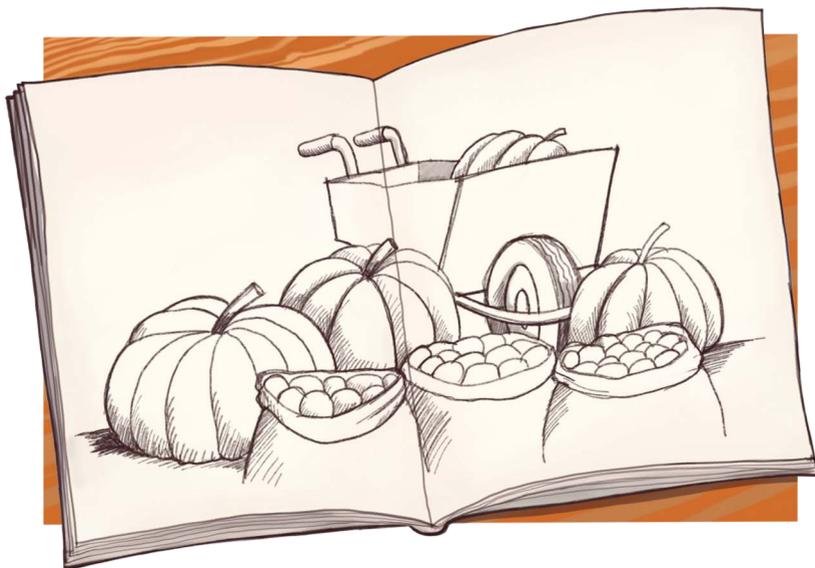
Here, he walked past each allotment garden in turn, peering over the gates. Randolph was curious to see so many gardens together, sitting side-by-side. Vegetables and fruit were growing in most of the gardens. Some gardens also had herbs and flowers. One garden was so overgrown that it did not look like a garden at all. Then, in one of the gardens, Randolph saw a woman wearing a Sikh kara bracelet. She was helping her grandson plant some flower bulbs.

As Randolph walked towards the woman and the boy, he muttered, "I wonder what a Sikh can tell me about living with nature?"

Randolph watched the woman and the boy as they worked together and talked. "When these bulbs sprout and flower next spring, this garden will become like the Court of Guru Har Rai Ji!" she exclaimed. Laughing, the boy gently covered the bulbs with soil and watered them.

When they had finished planting the bulbs, they went to check the pumpkins and the potato beds. Filling one sack with potatoes and another sack with pumpkins, they loaded them onto a wheelbarrow. "We will take some home to eat tonight and we will give the rest to the kitchen in our gurdwara," the woman said. "It is good that we are able to share this fresh food with others."

When the woman and the boy stopped for a break, Randolph approached them and asked the question, "What might a Sikh say about living with nature?"





The woman brushed the soil from her hands, and said, “The whole earth is sacred to me as a Sikh. Everything comes from God, and God can be found in everything. So, I try to respect and have compassion for all nature, as well as other people.”

The woman then told Randolph about the seventh Guru Har Rai, who had a great love for nature. When Har Rai was a child, he returned from a horse ride to see his grandfather, Guru Hargobind, meditating in a flower garden. Filled with joy, Har Rai ran to greet him. But, as he rushed, he trampled on a flower and damaged it. Har Rai was deeply hurt by the harm he had caused. So, from that day onwards, he took more care of his actions. Har Rai became known for his beautiful gardens where plants, animals and people lived well together as part of one community.

The woman continued, saying, “So you see, living with nature is important to me as a Sikh too. This means trying to live in harmony with nature and serving others. All this is not easy. It is even harder today because so many people’s lives have become disconnected from nature that they forget about it.”

The woman looked at her grandson and Randolph, saying, “My grandmother loved to help plants grow. When I was a child, she taught me many things in her garden. In this small allotment garden, my grandson and I are doing that too.”

The woman then gave Randolph some potatoes from the allotment garden shed. “Please, take these back with you,” she said with a smile. Placing the gifts in his bag, Randolph said farewell and continued on his journey.



Can you help Randolph?

Randolph the Wise has been given many gifts on his travels. He has also made many notes in his notebook. But the quest is not yet over. There is still space in his bag for more things to help him reflect on 'living with nature' as something that really matters.

Randolph needs your help.

What other places could Randolph visit to find out about living with nature?

Who could he ask in those places?

Do you think that living with nature is something that really matters?

How do you live with nature?

What gift would you give Randolph to take back with him?



Randolph the Wise Returns Home

As the sun set, a weary Randolph the Wise returned to his room, where he carefully unpacked his bag. One by one, he placed in front of him *all* that he had collected on his journey through Wales.

Then, Randolph the Wise sat in his chair, scratched his old grey head, and thought about the very big question.

“What *really* matters?” he asked again in a deep, booming voice. This time, *all* that he had collected on his journey answered him.

Randolph the Wise listened carefully and smiled.

“This is an essential part of my spiritual quest and search for meaning!” he said. “People and nature really need each other in different ways. Living with nature is something that *really* matters.”





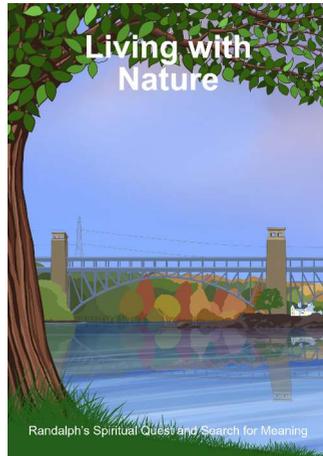
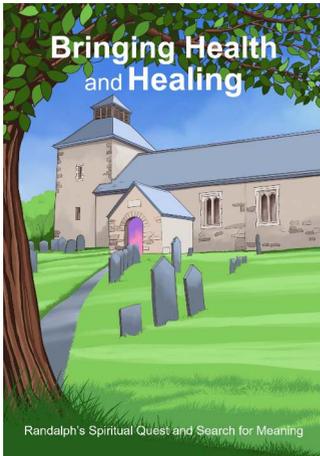
The Wales Coastal Path

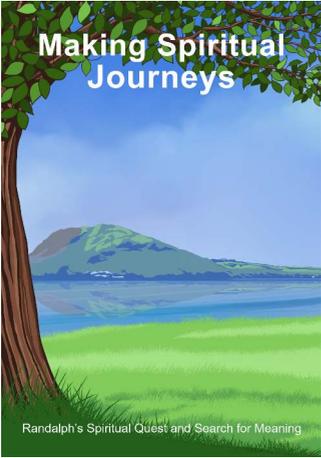
My gift to Randolph

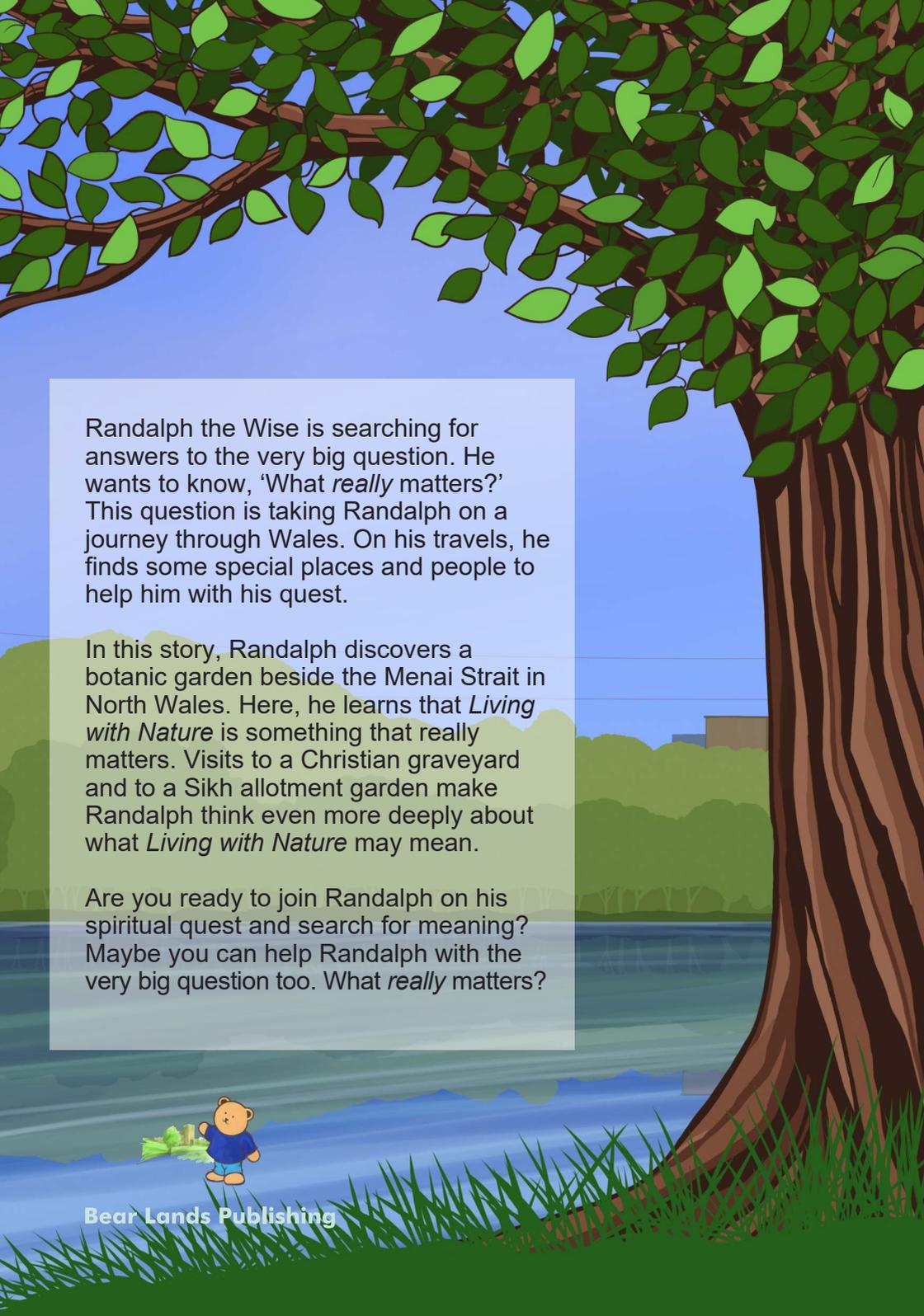
Read more...

Join Randolph the Wise on some of his other travels around Wales.

All storybooks are published in both Welsh and English. Open access copies are available on the Welsh Government 'Hwb' website (hwb.gov.wales) and on the St Mary's Centre website (st-marys-centre.org.uk). Teachers' guidance material, films and music are also provided.







Randolph the Wise is searching for answers to the very big question. He wants to know, 'What *really* matters?' This question is taking Randolph on a journey through Wales. On his travels, he finds some special places and people to help him with his quest.

In this story, Randolph discovers a botanic garden beside the Menai Strait in North Wales. Here, he learns that *Living with Nature* is something that really matters. Visits to a Christian graveyard and to a Sikh allotment garden make Randolph think even more deeply about what *Living with Nature* may mean.

Are you ready to join Randolph on his spiritual quest and search for meaning? Maybe you can help Randolph with the very big question too. What *really* matters?

