



Explore Cumbria

History and archaeology of Cumbria

The Cumbria area of the Yorkshire Dales National Park is the only part not to be in the county of North Yorkshire although before boundary changes in 1974 it was part of the old West Riding of Yorkshire. It comprises of the dales of Dentdale, Garsdale and the market town of Sedbergh at the foot of the Howgill Fells. These hills are also different to the rest of the National Park because they are made of much older Silurian mudstones, separated from the limestone of Craven by the Dent Fault.

The wet, harsh winters of the Howgill Fells have meant that farming has been mostly pastoral from the earliest times although Dentdale had several corn mills in the Medieval period. Evidence for early farmers comes in the form of Bronze Age burial sites and Iron Age settlements. From Norman times, and probably earlier, farmers took their cattle up to the higher pastures for the summer months only and family members lived with them in so-called shieling sites. The Normans saw Sedbergh as an important strategic site and built a motte and bailey castle there overlooking various river crossing points. Roman conquerors before them also saw the strategic nature of the area and built an important north-south road.

From place name evidence, it seems that both Dentdale and Garsdale were settled by Anglo-Scandinavian farmers. The settlement pattern of isolated farms strung out along spring lines on the valley sides is still apparent in Dentdale, although partible inheritance has led to infilling and an increasingly dense pattern of isolated farms. From the evidence of house platforms around present farmsteads it seems that such sites have been continuously occupied for centuries. The relatively high farming population, many of them owner-occupiers led to a great deal of diversification. The whole area was famous for its hand knitting industry in the 18th and 19th centuries. There was enough wealth in the area to endow at least two grammar schools in the 16th century, one of which, Sedbergh, has gone on to become a leading public school. The independently minded people of the area took gladly to non-conformist faiths such as Quakerism and an early Quaker Meeting House can be found at Brigflatts just outside Sedbergh.

Sedbergh was the economic focus for a large area and knitted goods were brought here to be fulled and dyed before being sold. Several woollen mills were established around the town where yarn for hand knitters was spun as well as woollen cloth being woven. The town continued to grow in the 19th century with its cattle mart and even a covered market hall courtesy of a generous benefactor connected to Sedbergh School.

Access has always been difficult into Dentdale. Packhorses were the only method of bulk transport for centuries since they could travel higher routes less susceptible to becoming quagmires in the winter. Few industrial enterprises were attempted here. Poor quality coal was mined around Lousegill in the 18th and 19th century and carried out on the Old Coal Road. The quarrying and carving of Dent marble, a fossiliferous black limestone probably proved more lucrative. The arrival of the Settle-Carlisle Railway allowed this industry to flourish, producing fireplaces and other ornaments for the fashionable Victorian home.

Sedbergh is still a busy market town, with plans afoot to turn it into a 'book town' in the near future. Dentdale on the other hand is protected by its narrow entrance roads and so its pretty cobbled streets are a welcome haven of peace and quiet.

Things to see and do in Cumbria

- Sedgwick Trail – a leaflet about 18th century Dent-born geologist Adam Sedgewick is available from National Park Centres. It also contains a geology trail based at Longstone Common on the Garsdale road out of Sedbergh where there is also an interpretation panel. Here the Dent Fault can be seen in rocks beside the river
- Cautley Barrow - Bronze Age burial site
- Cautley Iron Age settlement - there is an interpretation panel at the site
- Shielling sites - there are many of these summer farming camps in the Howgills. An early one, probably of 12th century date, was excavated at Crosedale and nearby is a good example of another. A medieval example can be seen on Garsdale Common

- Castlehaw motte and bailey - the National Park Authority have an access agreement to this site and there is an interpretation panel there for visitors
- Fairmile Road - a well-preserved Roman Road lies underneath and in places beside this north-south route from Ribchester Roman fort to Tebay
- The Dales Countryside Museum has interesting displays about the knitting industry of the Yorkshire Dales. See the [The Dales Countryside Museum website](#) for opening times and other visitor information.
- Sedbergh School library - built in the 18th century as school classrooms (open by appointment only). Contact details on the [Sedbergh School website](#)
- Friend's Meeting House, Brigflatts - open to the public daily.
- Farfield Mill - lovingly restored by the Sedbergh and District Building Preservation Trust. Now an Arts and Heritage Centre. Opening times and visitor details on the [Farfield Mill website](#)
- Sedbergh Reading Room and Market Hall - now houses Sedbergh Library. Opening times on the [Cumbria Library Service website](#)
- Road from Sedbergh to Dent - it follows the course of the modern road and is notable for a fine series of early stone milestones
- Galloway Gate and Driving Road - packhorse and droving road from Garsdale to the top of Dentdale
- Dent Marble Works - several buildings associated with this business survive, including Stonehouse where the quarry owner lived and the remains of stone cutting and polishing mills Low Mill and High Mill (none open to the public). Dent Head carries the Settle-Carlisle Railway over the quarry itself and is built from Dent marble
- Red Gill Washfold - an art work by Andy Goldsworthy sited above Cautley Spout

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