



Explore Lower Wensleydale

History and archaeology of Lower Wensleydale

The valley east of Bainbridge becomes broader and flatter with rich, sheltered farmland. Glaciation has left its mark in the form of extensive drumlins which are hillocks of stone, gravel and clay, deposited as glaciers melt. The area includes Bishopdale, once the site of a post-glacial lake and the narrow valley of Coverdale. All three carried important medieval and later routeways. The discovery of a polished stone axe from the Lake District in Lower Wensleydale shows that goods were being moved up that valley from Neolithic times.

The earliest people in the area came to hunt the herds of deer that roamed the post-glacial uplands. A Palaeolithic flint point is evidence for their presence. Mesolithic hunter gatherers followed and then the farmers of the Neolithic who built one of their enigmatic henges on a spot overlooking the valley. By the Bronze Age the area was being farmed extensively and there is considerable evidence for life in that period including settlements and burials. The Romans left few remains although aerial photography has revealed the presence of a ploughed out Roman fort near Wensley.

Anglo-Saxons moved in once the Roman army had left and Tor Dyke at the western entrance to Coverdale may indicate a boundary between native and Anglo-Saxon territories. Both the Anglo-Saxons and the Anglo-Scandinavians who followed left evidence in the form of burials and carved stones.

The Norman Conquest in 1066 led to considerable changes in the landscape. Many pre-Conquest settlements may have been abandoned following the Harrying of the North and in the period that followed, Norman landowners established new, planned villages on their northern estates. West Burton and West Witton are examples. The villages of the dale all looked outside the National Park boundary to Middleham and Leyburn for their main markets and administration.

The Norman lords of Middleham established several deer parks in the lower dale. The aristocratic pursuits of hunting, racing and shooting were to remain important in the area for centuries and still are today. In the medieval era, Bolton Castle was built. It protected its owners from Scottish raiders as well as being a considerable status symbol. Several less noble families took the same course, with the Metcalfe's building the fortified farmhouse at Nappa Hall for instance. Medieval farmers grew corn on a wide scale. The medieval field systems around Bolton Castle are important survival of this period. Monastic houses also made their mark on the dale. Coverham Abbey owned extensive estates in Coverdale while the Knights Templar had a preceptory at Penhill.

Having been on the wrong side during the Civil War, Bolton Castle was abandoned by its owners who built a far superior and more comfortable residence, Bolton Hall, further down the valley. They also created enormous parklands and pleasure grounds just as their ancestors had around the castle. By the 18th century, wealthy landowners were responsible for the building of several large country houses in the lower dale. Estate owners in the 18th century became wealthy as much from their mineral rights as from their tenant farmers. Bolton Park Lead Mine was one such venture for the Bolton estate. The owners of Braithwaite Hall, built in 1655, had similar enterprises operating on their estate.

The building of the Lancaster to Richmond turnpike down Wensleydale in 1751 opened the valley up to wheeled traffic. Before then, goods were mostly moved by packhorse along ancient trackways often over treacherously steep ground. Wheeled vehicles had to take their chances along poorly maintained valley bottom highways, often impassable in the winter with mud. The railway followed in the mid-19th century and with it came tourists to such beauty spots as Aysgarth Falls and Freeholders' Wood. Early conservationists managed to prevent the building of a railway viaduct over the falls but they were powerless to prevent the influx of visitors. In the 20th century, the motor car brought even more people to enjoy the beauties of the dale.

Things to see and do in Lower Wensleydale

- Palaeolithic flint point - on display at the Dales Countryside Museum, Hawes. For opening times see the [Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority website](#)
- Castle Dykes henge
- Stoney Raise cairn - Bronze Age burial cairn
- Tor Dyke
- West Witton carved stones - Anglo-Scandinavian period carved stones at the parish church. For visitor information search the [Yorkshire Churches website](#)
- Anglian artefacts, Fleets Farm - Anglo-Saxon artefacts from burials. On display at the Dales Countryside Museum, Hawes
- Capple Bank Park - remains of the medieval deer pale or enclosure wall can still be seen
- Bolton Castle - for opening times see the [Bolton Castle website](#)
- Nappa Hall (not open to the public)
- Medieval field systems, Bolton Castle
- Coverham Abbey (not open to the public)
- Preceptory of the Knights Templar, Penhill
- Swinithwaite Hall (not open to the public)
- Belvedere, Swinithwaite Hall (not open to the public)
- Sorrel Sykes Follies
- Bolton Park Mine - informative interpretation panels can be found on this site
- Braithwaite Hall - owned by the National Trust. Limited opening. For details see the [National Trust website](#)
- Aysgarth Falls and Freeholders' Wood - a popular beauty spot. Aysgarth Falls National Park Centre has an exhibition about the geology and history of the area. For opening times see the [Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority website](#) or e-mail them at aysgarth@yorkshiredales.org.uk
- AA box, Aysgarth - evidence for early motoring in the dale

For more information visit www.outofoblivion.org.uk