



Explore Lower Wharfedale

History and archaeology of Lower Wharfedale

Limestone gives way to gritstone down this dale and this substantially alters the character of the historic landscape one end from the other. As in other parts of the National Park, the open limestone uplands of the northern part of the area have been utilized from very early times. Neolithic and Bronze Age flints have been collected over the years on ground above Grassington and there are also several Bronze Age burial cairns along with extensive Iron Age field systems in the same area. The farmland of Lower Wharfedale becomes increasingly productive the further south it gets, ending up with the Bolton Abbey estate, once centre of a huge Medieval monastic estate, now belonging to the Duke of Devonshire. Bolton Priory came to own the Norman hunting forest of Barden. Here large cattle farms or vaccaries began to develop during the Medieval period, based on the original forest lodges from which the Norman hunting forest was administered. Elsewhere in the valley, both monastic granges and feudal estates established in Norman and even pre-Norman times, grew into small villages or remained as isolated farms. Their residents grew crops on land that today is almost exclusively given over to sheep and cattle. This has helped fossilize the Medieval field systems on the valley sides with their characteristic terraced strip lynchets.

By the 17th century, cattle had become more important than arable crops and farmers and landowners grew wealthy supplying meat on the hoof to the towns of Craven and beyond. They rebuilt their homes in stone and educated their sons in newly endowed grammar schools. Spare money also went to built bridges and almshouses for the benefit of whole communities.

The gritstone uplands above Grassington and Hebden were far less productive agriculturally, but they made up for this with the discovery of lead ore. There was lead working at nearby Greenhow from Roman times and the Medieval monastic estates took their share, but the industry really took off in the 18th and 19th centuries when large numbers of people were employed in the mines, smelt mills and dressing floors at Yarnbury and on Grassington Moor. The mineral rights here were held by the Duke of Devonshire, and he provided the capital investment that allowed the mines to flourish, building a large smelt mill and providing vital drainage systems for the deep mines.

Other 18th and 19th century businessmen invested in cotton mills in the villages of Lower Wharfedale employing at times even more people than worked in the lead mines. Villages close to industrial towns like Skipton became even more industrialised themselves. Embsay for instance had several cotton mills one of which became a large tannery in the early 20th century. The high rainfall on the hills has been harnessed by industrial towns even further south such as Bradford who had reservoirs built on Barden Moor in the late 19th century.

By the time the railway arrived at Threshfield in 1909 the lead industry had finished and nearly all the cotton mills were in terminal decline. Instead, the railway brought the economic benefit of both commuters and tourists. Grassington and the whole of Lower Wharfedale became a much loved holiday destination with special facilities being provided in every village. The 20th century also saw new homes built for the wealthy eager to live in such a picturesque setting, Parcevall Hall and its gardens are an outstanding example. With more and more people wanting to live in the area, house prices are now far beyond the means of the local population and there is constant development pressure on land and farm buildings in villages.

Things to see and do in Lower Wharfedale

- The Craven Museum holds collections of flints from the Lower Wharfedale area. Some are usually on display. For opening times see [Craven Museum website](#)
- Lea Green cairn - Bronze Age burial cairn. Finds from this and other cairns in the area can be seen at the Craven Museum including a Bronze Age Beaker
- High Close field systems - extensive area of Iron Age fields
- Burnsall carved stones - evidence for a 9th and 10th century AD Anglo-Scandinavian estate at Burnsall. A small exhibition featuring the stones is at Burnsall church. For visitor information visit the [Yorkshire Churches website](#)
- Medieval field systems, Lower Wharfedale

- High Green field walls, Hebden - Medieval field walls
- Church House, Grassington - 17th century stone farmhouse, now a community building often open on Saturday mornings
- Burnsall Grammar School - endowed by a local man who made his fortune in London in the 17th century (not open to the public)
- Fountaine's Hospital - endowed by a local man in 1721 for the use of local poor people. Still houses local elderly people. The chapel is open to the public - for visitor information search on the [Yorkshire Churches website](#)
- Yarnbury shallow shafts - evidence for 17th and 18th century lead mining. There is an informative leadmining trail with interpretation panels starting at Yarnbury and continuing onto Grassington Moor
- Cupola Smelt Mill - built by the Duke of Devonshire in 1792
- Parcevall Hall gardens - for opening times see the [Parcevall Hall Gardens website](#)
- Grassington National Park Centre - contains a small exhibition about the history of the area. For opening times see the [Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority website](#) or e-mail grassington@yorkshiredales.org.uk

For more information visit www.outofoblivion.org.uk