



Explore Swaledale

History and archaeology of Swaledale

Swaledale is one of the wilder and narrower of the main Yorkshire Dales' valleys. Its tributary Arkengarthdale can seem even more remote. The River Swale dominates the valley. Its unpredictable nature and tendency to flash flood has led to many tragedies over the centuries. Safe crossing points have always been important and there are relatively few in the dale. Grinton had an important one and it became the centre of a huge parish from medieval times under the wing of Bridlington Priory.

The harsh climate, steep valley sides and lack of much valley bottom land good enough for crop growing has meant that both dales were sparsely populated up until at least the 18th century and that good land was always at a premium. In the Bronze Age, work began clearing fields of stones, leaving stone cairns that can still be seen. During the Iron Age, more important family groups seem to have needed to defend themselves and their land from small hilltop enclosures spaced along the length of the dale. Others lived in small settlements in amongst their farmland. They clearly exploited the valley from top to bottom as shown by the boundaries of co-axial field systems that run up the valley sides right onto the moorland above. The Romans appear to have left the native population well alone, but in the years following the withdrawal of the Roman

army, Swaledale seems to have become a stronghold for native peoples resisting Anglo-Saxon invaders. All land became property of the Norman king following the Conquest in 1066, and he divided it up amongst his lords. Widely spaced cattle farms or vaccaries were established in Swaledale while around them grew the hunting forests of the Norman lords based at Richmond and Middleham. In the medieval period, small village settlements grew from some of these farms while the remnants of the forest became an important managed resource called wood pasture where stock could be grazed while still producing useful woodland products. Medieval monastic houses were not as influential here as they were elsewhere in the Yorkshire Dales, but two small nunneries were established at the east end of the Swaledale where the land and climate was a little easier for farming.

In spite of the harsh conditions, farming continued as an important part of Swaledale's economy from medieval times onwards. From the late 17th century, demand from the growing towns of the north east for cattle and dairy goods like cheese allowed the most successful farmers to replace earlier timber framed homes with rather grander stone houses. By the 18th century, nearly all managed to make improvements to their farming methods. Lime kilns were built to produce lime to sweeten pasture land. The system of overwintering cattle in stone built field barns where their winter fodder was also stored became commonplace. Cows could now be milked all year round if needed. In the 19th century, sheep farmers also built hogg houses where young sheep could shelter and feed during the worst of the winter weather thus improving survival rates.

The 18th century saw another economic development, the mining of lead on a commercial scale. The hills of Swaledale and Arkengarthdale have rich veins of lead ore and these were exploited from at least Roman times onward. The 18th and 19th centuries saw a large-scale industry established and the population of the area surged. Medieval wood pastures in Swaledale survived because the lead industry needed wood to burn in its smelt mills. Extra income from lead mining combined with partible inheritance where farms were divided equally amongst sons, led to the characteristically dense pattern of small fields and field barns that still survives in Swaledale today. Lead mining also directly changed the landscape with its sprawling spoil heaps and remains of smelt mills and ore processing areas. This is even more apparent on the road between Langthwaite in Arkengarthdale and Low Row in Swaledale. Here vast scars caused by washing out lead veins using dammed sources of water (hushing) can be seen.

Reeth at the meeting point of Arkengarthdale with Swaledale, became the economic hub of the lead industry and grew enormously. The wealth from lead mining and other industries such as coal mining on Tan Hill also allowed several aristocratic families to flourish. Those that weren't absentee landlords displayed their wealth in building beautiful new country houses with fashionable gardens and parkland around them in the dale. The late 19th century saw another influx of wealthy landowners, this time lured by the attraction of grouse shooting on the heather moorlands above the valley. They built well-appointed shooting lodges and could travel up from their estates in the south by train along Wensleydale in relative comfort.

The train also brought tourists of more modest means, but it was not really until the motor car became popular from the 1950s onward, that tourists managed to get to Swaledale in any numbers. They brought with them tourist accommodation, tea shops, garages and petrol pumps.

Things to see and do in Swaledale

- Grinton Bridge - early crossing point of the River Swale
- St Andrew's Church, Grinton - early parish church, once belonging to Bridlington Priory. For visitor information search the [Yorkshire Churches website](#)
- Maiden Castle cairn field - Group of stone clearance cairns, probably dating to the Bronze Age
- Grinton 'hillfort' - hilltop enclosure of probable Iron Age date
- Maiden Castle - unusual Iron Age enclosure, possibly for rituals rather than a settlement
- Thwaite prehistoric enclosure - hilltop enclosure, probably Iron Age
- Co-axial field boundaries, Swaledale - Long field boundaries running in parallel lines up the valley sides. Probably used for farming cattle and sheep during the Iron Age
- Grinton-Fremington Dyke System - systems of earth banks and ditches marking a political boundary across Swaledale. Of 5th, 6th or early 7th century AD date
- Ellerton Priory - ruins of a medieval nunnery (not open to the public)
- Marrick Priory - remains of a medieval nunnery, now an outdoor centre. See the [Marrick Priory website](#) for courses and accommodation details
- Oxnop Hall - 17th century house (not open to the public)
- Downholme lime kiln - ruins of a large lime kiln in its quarry
- Field barn on Occupation Road, Muker - recently restored early 19th century field barn
- Harker's Hogg House - a 19th century shelter for young sheep still being used today
- Gunnerside smithy - working smithy with displays about the role of the smith in the lead industry and local community
- Gunnerside Gill lead mines - large lead mining area with remains of smelt mills, peat stores and ore processing areas. There are a number of informative interpretation panels
- Hushes, Langthwaite - good examples of this lead working method can be seen on the road between Low Row in Swaledale and Langthwaite in Arkengarthdale
- Tan Hill coal field - lies immediately south of the Tan Hill Inn. Worked from medieval times
- Marske Hall - rebuilt and extended in classical style in 1730 (not open to the public)
- Ellerton Abbey - Regency villa, built around 1830 for the Erle-Drax family of Dorset as a

shooting lodge. On the site of Ellerton Priory (not open to the public)

- Grinton Lodge - Victorian shooting lodge, now a Youth Hostel. For residents, there are interpretive displays about the history of the house and local area. For accommodation details see the [YHA website](#)
- Petrol pumps, Langthwaite - early petrol pumps. Now disused
- Reeth National Park Centre - for opening times see the [Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority website](#) or e-mail them at reeth@yorkshiredales.org.uk

For more information visit www.outofoblivion.org.uk