



## Explore Upper Wensleydale

### History and archaeology of Upper Wensleydale

The natural lake of Semerwater and open upland grazing above Wensleydale proved to be a draw for both animals and hunters alike from the very earliest times. Mesolithic flint weapons and tools have been found in many places on the moorlands above the dale, particularly near springs. The valley itself is broad with fertile soils. Once farming was established as a way of life, people started to exploit this resource both for grazing cattle and sheep and growing crops. The narrower side valleys like Sleddale, Widdale and Cotterdale, with their lack of cultivable land by contrast have remained relatively undeveloped. In the Bronze Age someone was wealthy enough to make an offering of a finely made bronze spearhead into Semerwater. At this time, they also buried their important dead in elaborate stone cairns such as the one on Addleborough with its carved stones. The Roman conquest saw a permanent garrison placed at a fort at a crossing over the River Bain at Bainbridge. There was also an arrow straight, carefully engineered road leading to it across Cam Fell.

After the Romans had left, first Anglo-Saxons, then Anglo-Scandinavians settled here. There is evidence for Norse settlers taking advantage of the rich pastureland of the upper dale from the typical pattern of isolated dispersed farmsteads along with several villages having Norse names,

such as Burtersett and Appersett. Following the Norman Conquest, a large part of the upper dale became hunting forest for the lords of Middleham and was administered from a forest lodge at Bainbridge. Jervaulx Abbey also had extensive property here, as evidenced by the names of the two parishes, High and Low Abbotside. They had large sheep pastures for instance in Raydale above Semerwater. They also established important routeways and bridges.

It was cattle not sheep that were eventually to form the foundation of the wealth of farmers in the post-medieval period. As towns grew to the north and east of the dale, demand for meat on the hoof and also dairy products such as cheese and butter also grew. By the 17th century farmers and landowners were able to rebuild earlier timber homes in stone and several of these fine houses still survive. Other businesses also thrived. By the late 18th century the upper dale had silk and cotton mills, an important cheese making industry, small collieries and stone quarries to name but a few. The cotton mills had mostly gone out of business by the early 19th century but they were converted to other uses such as spinning wool for the flourishing knitting industry.

Alongside this increasing industrialisation grew non-conformist religions. The Quakers were the first but others followed including such exotic faiths as Sandemanianism. The latter faith is long gone, but the Quakers still hold regular meetings in local villages as do the Methodists.

The coming to Hawes of the Richmond to Lancaster turnpike road in the late 18th century, followed by the railway in 1878 led to that town becoming the dominant economic focus for the upper dale as it still is today. The railway allowed local businesses such as stone slate quarries to expand. It also meant that milk from the farm could be sent to towns direct instead of having to be turned into butter or cheese first. The train also brought the first mass tourism. Various beauty spots were eagerly sought out and often became overwhelmed at peak times.

## Things to see and do in Upper Wensleydale

- **Dales Countryside Museum**, Hawes - The National Park Authority's museum has displays of Mesolithic and Neolithic stone weapons and tools. The Semerwater Bronze Age spearhead is on show here along with a model of Bainbridge Roman fort. In other galleries there are displays about the dairy and knitting industries.
- Carved stones, Addleborough - part of a Bronze Age burial cairn
- Bainbridge Roman fort (not open to the public)
- Roman Road (Cam High Road) - remains of a Roman Road
- Old Gayle Lane earthworks - remains of an Anglo-Saxon period farmstead
- Raydale medieval sheepfold and washdub complex - ruins of a sheep farming operation belonging to Jervaulx Abbey
- Bow Bridge, near Askrigg - medieval bridge possibly built by Jervaulx Abbey

- Old Hall, Gayle - stone house built in 1695 (not open to the public)
- Coleby Hall, Low Abbotside - one of the finest houses in Wensleydale, built 1655 (not open to the public)
- Countersett silk mill - unusual early mill spinning waste silk (not open to the public)
- Gayle Mill - finalist in the 2004 BBC Restoration programme. For progress on the restoration of this building and dates of open days see the [Gayle Mill website](#)
- Churn stand, Burtersett - evidence for the decline of cheesemaking and the rise of milk sales in the early 20th century
- Storth Colliery
- Burtersett Quarries - produced stone roof slates, many of which can be seen on houses and barns throughout the dale
- Quaker Meeting House, Countersett
- Quaker graveyard, Hawes
- Sandemanian Chapel (Village Institute), Gayle
- Hawes Station - now part of the Dales Countryside Museum
- Wensleydale Creamery - includes a visitor centre where cheese making can be seen. For more information visit the [Wensleydale Creamery website](#)
- The Ropemakers, Hawes - traditional ropeworks, with visitor access. Visit the [Ropemakers website](#) for more information
- Hardraw Force pleasure grounds - popular 19th century tourist attraction, now being restored

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