

Medieval Trail – An Ancient Way Between Two Churches

Walk summary: Follow an ancient pilgrim's route between two churches, Saint Peter's Church in Conisbrough and St John the Baptist in Mexborough. Following tracks through the Crag's ancient woodlands, spot hidden heritage, and discover remarkable landmarks along the way. This is a linear route.

Distance: approx. 3.3 miles / 5.4 Kilometres

Duration: approx. 1 hour

Terrain: Public footpaths with some rural and urban walking, including slight elevations.

Nearest Car Park: On street parking is available on Wellgate, Conisbrough and Church Street, Mexborough.

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1. Totem A - Churches

The coming of Christianity saw the building of churches. One of the earliest and most important churches was the Minster Church of St Peter at Conisbrough, said to have been built around 750AD, but some believe it may date from as early as 680AD. The church of St John the Baptist in Mexborough was built in the 12th century, but the remains of a wooden church dating from the period after the Norman conquest have been found.

These two churches would have been linked by a pathway across the Crag's, which passed via Wellgate in Conisbrough to Denaby Woods, and thence to a ferry across the River Don. The earliest record of a ferry there is 1370, though other far earlier ferries may have existed.

2. Totem B - Cadeby Colliery

The sinking of Cadeby Colliery began in 1889, and coal production followed from 1893. By far the darkest event in the history of Conisbrough and Denaby occurred in July



1912, with the Cadeby Colliery disaster, which following two catastrophic explosions led eventually to the deaths of 91 members of its workforce.

Cadeby Colliery closed on Christmas Eve 1986 after 93 years of coal production. In that time over 200 miners lost their lives.

3. Totem B – The Stone Railway

During the period between 1745 and 1760, when work on the Northcliffe Quarry began, a stone railway was constructed leading down from the quarry toward lime kilns which stood at the bottom of the hill. Once the limestone had been baked in the kilns, the powder was taken by carts to a wharf by the River Don or by road to the markets.

The Stone Railway, parts of which still remain, is one of only two to have been built and operated in Great Britain. The other is in South Devon between Bovey Tracey and Tynmouth and runs for a distance of 13 miles. As work in the Northcliffe Quarry ceased in 1901, so ended the usage of the Stone Railway, and it has lain largely forgotten since that time, that is, until the formation of the Friends of the Craggs Group in 2019.

4. Totem C – Lady's Valley, Northcliffe Quarry

Sometime between 1745 and 1760, work began on extracting limestone from what became Northcliffe Quarry, which later would be known as Lady's Valley. At the same time a stone railway was constructed leading down from the quarry towards lime kilns which stood at the bottom of the hill.

Carts then took the lime by road or river to the markets. Work on the Northcliffe Quarry ceased in 1901, ending forever the usage of the stone railway. The quarry had been worked for around 150 years.

In 1902, the quarry then passed into the hands of the Denabyian District Miniature Rifle Club. At first, it had a hut and a range, but in 1907, a pavilion was built. The rifle club continued until 1922, when it was taken over by the Territorial Army.

By 1936 the quarry had fallen into disuse, and on one occasion in that year a great bonfire party was held there as part of celebrations upon the accession of the new King. We are still unsure as to which king it was as in 1936 there were two, King Edward VIII and King George VI. Probably since 1927, when the Craggs had been made accessible to local people with the creation of footpaths, the quarry gained the nickname Lady's Valley, for it was here that the young men of the locality took their lady friends for romantic interludes.



During the early part of the 1950s the Lady's Valley was the scene of illegal gambling in the form of tossing rings or tossing schools. In this popular and simple form of gambling bets were placed on the outcomes of tossing two pennies in the air. These events were usually curtailed by the arrival of the police, which saw the crowds of gamblers and onlookers quickly disperse down the Craggs.

Perhaps the last large gatherings in Lady's Valley came in the 1990s when raves or dance parties were held there through the warm summer and autumn nights. The accompaniment was to DJs playing loud electronic dance music, so the Lady's Valley was a perfect venue as the ravers could not be accused of breach of the peace.

5. Totem D – Denaby Main Colliery

The sinking of the two shafts of the colliery began in 1863, but due to faults and flooding coal production did not begin until 1868. In its century as a working pit, for the most part, the coal was hand-got, and coal was brought out without conveyor belts.

The building of homes for the colliers and their families began in 1867 until 1700 homes were built in an industrial pattern grid of streets. Relationships between the owners and the workforce were rarely good, particularly in the early life of the colliery, and strikes occurred in 1869, 1877, 1885 and 1902-3. Company policy was to evict the family if the breadwinner lost his life in the pit. Strikers were often evicted. Perhaps the worst case was in 1902-3 in the infamous Bagmuck strike, when all the families were evicted in wintertime. Some lived in tents in the Craggs and received food from soup kitchens.

Denaby Main Colliery closed in 1968. In its 100-year history, 203 miners lost their lives.

6. Totem D - Providence Glass Works

In 1863 Caleb Kilner of Thornhill Lees near Dewsbury founded the Providence Works in New Conisbrough. It occupied an 11-acre site and eventually employed over 400 people in the production of bottles for beer and mineral water, as well as pharmaceutical bottles and the world-famous Kilner Jar.

The company built 76 houses to begin with in streets named after family members and which lay beside the railway track. These were George Street, William Street and John Street. The others were named after the place of origin of the family, and were Thornhill Street and Lees Terrace.

Many other homes were built in the Burcroft area of Conisbrough. More than 300,000 bottles were produced every year and Kilner Brothers became an international company



with its biggest markets being in South Africa and India. They had a large warehouse in Blundell Street near King's Cross in London.

The firm closed in 1937 due to growing competition in glass production and a failure to keep up with production developments. The TV personality Jeremy Clarkson is of the Kilner family.

7. Totem E - Mammoth Bones

In 1878, workmen laying water pipes between Thrybergh Reservoir and Warmsworth unearthed prehistoric animal remains on the Craggs. These remains were the tibia of a mammoth, the femur, radius and shaft of the humerus of a woolly rhinoceros and the metacarpal of a wild horse.

The archaeological team brought in ascertained that these bones had been gnawed by hyenas. More finds of this kind were found in the cliffs by the Don Gorge in 1906.

8. Totem E - Roman Lookout Post and Beacon

The conquest of Britain by the Romans from 43AD entailed the building of forts, lookout towers and beacons at strategic places. One such lookout tower, with probably a beacon, was situated at the top of the Craggs near the end of Copley Avenue.

It overlooked the ford on the River Don, which the Romans called the Stratford, street ford. A beacon would have alerted the Roman forces at Danum, Doncaster, of any impending attack. The Romans were famous road builders, and an ancient trackway, which ran from the south midlands to the northeast of the country, crossed the Craggs and became part of the now-renamed Rykneld Street.

In recent times, significant Roman remains have been found about the Craggs and Denaby Woods.

9. Totem F – Bell Pits

Coal mining predates the 19th century when it flourished in the locality, and in South Yorkshire and in many other counties. One of the oldest forms of coal mining required the sinking of bell pits, which were sometimes called stair pits.

These were mostly relatively shallow when compared with later deep mines such as Cadeby Colliery, which reached depths of more than a mile. Some bell pits were only 10 metres deep. The name bell pit derives from the shape, which was a narrow shaft like a well hollowed out at the bottom where the coal seam was located.



Bell pits were abandoned once they began to collapse and so became dangerous. No props were used in them. The bell pit miners then simply dug a further bell pit in line with the coal seam they had previously worked.

Women and children worked in these pits and were used in some to carry coal to the surface via stairs. Such bell pits existed in the fields close to Denaby Wood and in the wood itself. They are recorded as far back as 1487.

10. Totem F – Powder Works

The Powder Works, sometimes called the Denaby Main Factory, situated by Denaby Wood, was opened in 1889. It traded under seven names during the seventy-four years of its existence, and these included The Flameless Explosive Works, British Westfalite Limited, and Imperial Chemical Industries Limited. The powder works made electronic detonators, explosives and, during World War I, trench bombs. During World War II, William Joyce, also known as Lord Haw-Haw, in a radio broadcast mentioned the powder works by Denaby Woods as a potential target for the Luftwaffe. The powder works closed on September 27th 1963, and at the time it had 251 employees.

If you want any information about the Friends of the Craggs if you go to www.thecraggs.net, you'll find information and activities.

