St John's Chapel
farming, mining and Methodism

A network of walks off the Weardale Way

Outer route: 7 miles/11km
Each village loop approximately
3 miles/5km

Starting from
St John's Chapel
or Ireshopeburn
Initially the valley floor land was leased out to stockmen who cleared the woodland to create meadow and pasture for cattle, deer and sheep. Place names such as Daddry Shield, Hunshieldford and Saugh Shield remind us that these were summer only farms or 'shielings'.

Apart from the steep sided tributary denes there is little sign today of the medieval woodland. Deforestation began from mid 13th century when the Bishop created a walled deer park further down the valley, allowing land in upper Weardale to be leased out for cattle farming and mining.

From time to time attempts have been made to grow root crops and grain in upper Weardale but the cool wet upland climate severely limits the growing season and today's farming activities are still dominated by the rearing of beef cattle and sheep together with the growing of hay as winter feed.

Traditional farming methods, including the late cutting of hay and use of manure helped to preserve Upper Weardale hay meadows, which are now regarded as an important landscape feature supporting many species of wild flowers and upland breeding birds.

These leaflets are available upon request. Tel: 01388 528801
Although lead mining has ceased in Upper Weardale, it was a vital part of the economy for over 600 years providing a rich living for the Bishops of Durham, the Rectors of Stanhope and the Moor Masters.

The miners themselves barely lived above subsistence level and relied heavily on the produce from their tiny farms which can be seen scattered along the hillside.

The terraced villages of Daddry Shield, St John’s Chapel and Ireshopeburn are the product of a population explosion in the early nineteenth century. In good times the villages bustled with life and services but, without a farm to fall back on, in hard times many of the houses were empty.

The lead mining industry collapsed in 1882 but many mines re-opened to extract fluorspar. West Blackdene fluorspar processing plant finally closed in 1996.

Around 1700 Walter Blackett, the Moor Master who administered lead mining in Weardale, built a magnificent headquarters known as Newhouse for his agent.

Behind the house is a gazebo with a square tower and hipped roof, where once the miners bought their candles. The complex also contained workshops for blacksmiths and millwrights.
The Newhouse School, now the Weardale Inn, was built in 1854 for the education of miners’ children. Contributions to pay for the school were received from Wentworth Blackett Beaumont (lead mines proprietor), his agent and the miners themselves. A large stone tablet in the grounds commemorates its opening.

The village of St John’s Chapel derives its name from the 1465 church dedicated to Jesus our Saviour and St John the Baptist. In 1752 the church was rebuilt, Walter Blackett (lead mines proprietor) giving £100 and Edmund Keene, Rector of Stanhope and Bishop of Chester, giving £25.

While the Church of England enjoyed the spoils of their hunting, farming and mining interests in the High Forest they were, for the main part, absentee landlords. Here the fires of Methodism took hold, preventing many of the miners from turning to the Presbyterian church in Ireshopeburn.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, first visited in 1752 and he returned a further 12 times to see his ‘beloved society’ in Ireshopeburn, often staying with the Watson family at Ling Riggs. The beautiful High House Chapel in Ireshopeburn is now the oldest purpose built Methodist Chapel to have held continuous weekly services since its foundation in 1760. Additional to Sunday Morning services, the chapel is open for visits during museum hours.
The landscape of the dale has been created over thousands of years, it remains for us to see today only because of continued farming. Miner/farmers had all but disappeared by 1890s, and during the 20th century hill farming continued with farms amalgamating and many relying on subsidies to stay viable. Many of the old farm buildings became derelict, as people moved away to find work or did not return to the dale after the world wars. Most of the shops in Ireshopeburn and St John's Chapel closed but the facades are still visible along Hood Street giving the impression of a once busy village.

What has remained through both good times and hard times is the sense of community and independence. In the 19th century nearly all miners would have a garden or smallholding keeping a few chickens and a pig. This kept the miners and their families relatively healthy for the times. A pig killing was a major event and often the meat was shared out between neighbours and then the favour returned.

As we move into the 21st century the dale remains a beautiful place and retains this sense of community. Many of the buildings left to decay are now being renovated and people move into the dale to enjoy the lifestyle.

Along the walk instead of passing the cottages of miner/farmers we encounter the homes of people who commute to work and increasingly those who can work from home via the internet.
Even when the price of lead was high and when miners were in work they had difficulty keeping the family well fed. There were times when there was no work and miners were forced to emigrate and sometimes break the law. One such time was 1818, soon after Waterloo, when miners in St John’s Chapel took to poaching and were arrested and imprisoned at Stanhope by the Bishop’s bailiffs. A dramatic rescue took place which was often retold as the Ballad of the Bonny Moor Hen. The following is a short extract.

The Ballad of the Bonny Moor Hen

You brave lads of Weardale, I pray lend an ear,  
The account of a battle you quickly shall hear,  
That was fought by the miners, so well you may ken,  
By claiming a right to their bonny moor hen.

Now, the times being hard and provisions being dear,  
The miners were starving almost we do hear;  
They had nought to depend on, so well you may ken,  
But to make what they could of the bonny moor hen.

There’s the fat man of Oakland, and Durham the same,  
Lay claim to the moors, likewise to the game;  
They sent word to the miners they’d have them to ken  
They would stop them from shooting the bonny moor hen.

Oh, these words they were carried to Weardale with speed,  
Which made the poor miners to hang down their heads;  
But sent them answer, they would have them to ken  
They would fight till they died for their bonny moor hen.

Oh, this battle was fought all in Stanhope town,  
When the chimneys did reek and the soot it fell down;  
Such a battle was ne’er fought in Stanhope before,  
And I hope such a battle will ne’er be fought more.

Oh, this bonny moor hen, she has feathers anew,  
She has many fine colours, but none of them blue;  
Oh, the miners of Weardale, they are all valiant men,  
They will fight till they die for the bonny moor hen.

Anon.
As part of your walk drop in to the Weardale Museum. Run entirely by volunteers, this small folk museum is a real gem, packed with information about the countryside, its history, the people who shaped the landscape and the features you will see on your walk.

Walkers are welcome and by appointment groups can enjoy a talk from one of the guides.

Open 2pm – 5pm
Easter and Bank Holidays
May to September - Wednesday to Sunday
August – daily

Groups at any time by appointment
Tel 01388 537417 or 517433 www.weardalemuseum.co.uk
**Walking Information**

- Tell someone where you are going and your expected time of return
- This walk starts in a valley and climbs to high ridges. Use an OS map to judge gradients, wear appropriate clothing and footwear (the longer route covers very uneven ground and crosses boggy land).
- Keep dogs under control
- Leave gates and property as you find them

**Amenities**

Parking, toilets, shops and refreshments at St John’s Chapel
Parking, refreshments and accommodation at the Weardale Inn, Ireshopeburn. Tel: 01388 537764
Tel: 01388 537505
Tourist Information, The Dales Centre, Stanhope
Tel: 01388 527650

This walk lies within the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
www.northpennines.org.uk

This walk is brought to you by The Mineral Valleys Project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and led by Natural England, tel: 0191 2295500. Implemented by local communities in conjunction with Durham County Council, tel: 0191 3833239

Wildlife photographs: Darin Smith www.wildstock.co.uk  Illustrations: Jason Lowes

If you need this information summarised in another language or format such as Braille or talking tape, please call: 0191 383 3239