Upper Teesdale is in the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Global Geopark

What is a Geopark?
The North Pennines AONB is a Global Geopark, a status endorsed by UNESCO. Geoparks are places with outstanding geology and landscape, where there are strong local efforts to make the most of Earth heritage through interpretation, education, conservation and tourism. To find out more visit www.europeangeoparks.org and www.globalgeopark.org

Moor House – Upper Teesdale National Nature Reserve (NNR)
Part of this walk, between Low Force and High Force, is within the Moor House-Upper Teesdale NNR. This large reserve stretches over parts of Co. Durham and Cumbria and contains a wide range of North Pennine upland habitats, from hay meadows and juniper woods to limestone grassland and blanket bog. For more information contact the Reserve Base on 01833 622374.

North Pennines AONB Partnership
www.northpennines.org.uk
+44 (0)1388 528801
info@northpennines.org.uk

The AONB Partnership has a Green Tourism award for its corporate office

High Force and Bowlees Geotrail

Whinstone, waders & wild flowers

The North Pennines is one of England’s most special places – a peaceful, unspoiled landscape with a rich history and vibrant natural beauty. In recognition of this it is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The area is also a Global Geopark – an accolade endorsed by UNESCO.

A lovely 4 to 5-mile (6.5 – 8km) walk, starting from Bowlees Visitor Centre or High Force car park in Upper Teesdale, exploring landscape, geology, history and wildlife.

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High Force is one of the most impressive waterfalls in England, where the River Tees spectacularly drops 21m from the Whin Sill rock into the plunge pool below.

The pretty woodland walk provides stunning views of the waterfall leading to the car park.

The car park at High Force is an excellent base from which to explore the area. There’s also a Gift Shop, open seasonally from April to October, picnic areas and toilets. Fishing and canoe permits for a section of the River Tees are also available to purchase from here. Car parking and admission charges apply.

Welcome to Upper Teesdale in the North Pennines AONB & Geopark

Rocky landscapes, produce, and wildlife

A landscape of people and wildlife

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This beautiful landscape has been shaped by millions of years of Earth processes and thousands of years of people living and working here. Part of the area is within the Moor House–Upper Teesdale National Nature Reserve, which is home to some of the UK’s rarest plants and most iconic upland birds.

This circular walk, from Bowlees Visitor Centre or High Force car park, will introduce you to some of the special features of the landscape around High Force and Low Force waterfalls. You’ll discover rocks with dramatic origins, ice age features, ancient settlements, lead mining heritage and wonderful wildlife.

Walk length/time: Approx. 4.5 miles (6.5–8km) (depending on High Force route options) with 12km of ascent, taking about 2½–3 hours.

Start/Finish: Bowlees Visitor Centre NY 907 282 or High Force car park NY 885 286

Terrain: Public rights of way and permissive paths with gates and stiles, and short stretches of minor road. This walk is mainly on paths and tracks through fields and beside the River Tees. **Please take care crossing the road and near the cliff edge just east of High Force. The route is gently undulating but with a few short, steep ascents and descents. Walking boots or strong shoes are recommended. Please keep to paths, leave gates as you find them and keep dogs under close control.**

Public transport: For timetable information call Traveline on 0871 200 2233 (www.traveline.info)

Facilities: Bowlees: visitor centre, cafe, information, toilets, parking, e-car charging point, activities (www.visitbowlees.org.uk) High Force: hotel, parking (charges apply), gift shop, toilets, path to base of High Force (www.highforcewaterfall.com)

Useful maps:

- Ordnance Survey 1:50 000 Landranger 91 Appleby-in-Westmorland
- 92 Barnard Castle & Richmond
- OL21 North Pennines

Rocky foundations

Life in the tropics

The rocks that make up most of the North Pennines are layers of limestone, sandstone and shale. They formed around 320 million years ago, when this area lay near the equator.

Limestone ooze, sand and mud in tropical seas and deltas hardened into the rocks we see today. Most of the walls and buildings you’ll see are made of sandstone.

Ancient tropical delta

Molten rock

A very different rock layer forms Teesdale’s most dramatic landscapes. This is the Whin Sill, which you’ll see at Low Force and High Force waterfalls. It formed around 295 million years ago when molten rock solidified underground to become dolerite (or whinstone). It is now exposed at the surface after millions of years of erosion.

Formation of the Whin Sill

Buried treasure

Criss-crossing the fells are veins of lead ore and other minerals. They formed around 290 million years ago, when minerals crystallised out of hot fluids deep underground. The North Pennines is famous for its minerals, which have been mined for centuries.

Ice and water

Today’s landscape has been shaped by ice and water. In the last ice age, 20,000 years ago, there would have been a mile of ice above you here! Ice scoured the land and dumped clay and boulders. Torrents of meltwater carved gorges like those at Low Force and High Force. The landscape continues to be sculpted by modern rivers.

Wild and wonderful

The North Pennines is fantastic for wildlife and Upper Teesdale is particularly special. As well as being important for upland birds (see overleaf), this is the home of the ‘Teesdale’ Assemblage’. This uniquely rich association of plants includes rare arctic-alpine plants like the spring gentian. If you’re here in late spring and summer look out for white moths, especially along the Pennine Way between Wynch Bridge and High Force, and in hay meadows around the route.
Bird hot spot
With its mosaic of dale and moorland habitats, the North Pennines is one of the best places in England to see the birds of the uplands. In spring and early summer the calls of wading birds – curlew, oystercatcher, golden plover, snipe, redshank and lapwing – fill the air. Upper Teesdale is particularly special as it is a vital refuge and breeding ground for the rare black grouse.

Lapwings
You’ll see that many of the buildings on this side of the River Tees are white, giving a distinctive character to much of Upper Teesdale. This shows that they are part of the Raby Estate, which is owned by Lord Barnard of Raby Castle. On the other side of the river is the Strathmore Estate, owned by the Earl of Strathmore.

White-washed

What’s in a name?
Like Low Force, High Force plunges over the Whin Sill. Below the Whin Sill you can see layers of sandstone and limestone, part of the sequence of rocks that make up most of the North Pennine landscape. ‘Force’ comes from ‘for’, the Old Norse word for waterfall. This, along with other local landscape words like ‘dale’, ‘beck’ and ‘fell’, came here with Viking settlers around 1,100 years ago.

Trees from the wildwood
Approaching High Force you walk between prickly, evergreen shrubs, part of the largest juniper wood in England. Juniper is a relic of the woods that grew here after the ice age ended around 15,000 years ago. Juniper berries are famous for flavouring gin but here they provide food for mice, voles and migrating birds like fieldfares.

Buried treasure
Look at the hills ahead and you’ll see a V-shaped notch in the skyline. Known as Coldberry Gutter, this huge opencast working along a lead vein dates back to at least the mid-18th century. Miners excavated it with picks and shovels and periodically flushed it with water to clear loose material.

Flora around
The Pennine Way verges between Wynch Bridge and High Force. Here, the River Tees tumbles over the hard dolerite or ‘whinstone’ of the Whin Sill, which also forms the rocky gorge beneath the bridge. The suspension bridge dates from 1830 and replaces an earlier one which collapsed in 1802. The bridge was originally built so that lead miners from Holwick could cross the river to work in mines on the north side of Teesdale.

Hay time
In early summer many of these hay meadows are full of colourful wild flowers like yellow rattle, meadow buttercup, red clover and meadow-sweet. The North Pennines has over 40% of the UK’s upland hay meadows, which survive because many farmers practice traditional low-intensity farming methods.

The long view
From this track there are great views across Teesdale. You can see the craggy Holwick Scar which are made of the same hard whinstone you see at Low Force and High Force. On the skyline down the dale is a dark clump of trees. This is Kirkcarrie, the site of a large Bronze Age burial cairn. The rolling, grassy hillocks along the bottom of Teesdale are a legacy of the last ice age and are known as ‘drumlins’. They formed when ice flowed down Teesdale and shaped clay and boulders into smooth, streamlined mounds.

Vanished village
In the fields on your left there are the remains of a late prehistoric or Roman Period settlement. There’s little to see now but 2,000 years ago you would have seen several round houses. The people who lived here hunted in surrounding woods, fished in the river, kept livestock and grew crops.

Fantastic flowers
The Pennine Way verges between Wynch Bridge and High Force, which contain over 200 plant species. Several belong to the unique ‘Teesdale Assemblage’, for which Upper Teesdale is famous. Look out for 1 globeflower (flowering May–July), 2 shrubby cinquefoil (June–July) and 3 melancholy thistle (July–August). Please help look after these special plants by keeping to the path.

For a short extension...
There’s an easy short walk (½ hour return) from the car park to Gibson’s Cave. From the far end of the car park follow the path for 500m to the waterfall of Summerhill Force at Gibson’s Cave. Return by the same route.

From Bowlees Visitor Centre
walk to the road and High Force Hotel. From High Force Hotel walk between the hotel and gift shop and turn right along a path. Follow the footpath through the fields, past two barns, towards Dart Pit.

The long view
At Holwick Head Bridge keep straight on for 900m, then retrace your steps.

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From Bowlees Visitor Centre walk to the main road. Cross the road and follow the footpath to Wynch Bridge.

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Finishing the route
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High Force view (bottom)
Take the path which heads downhill from a wooden kiosk where you pay a small charge.

High Force view (top)
At Holwick Head Bridge keep straight on for 900m, then retrace your steps.

Carry on to High Force (and back)
or cross the bridge, turn left to go along the river and climb the steps to the road and High Force Hotel.

Cross the bridge and turn right to follow the Pennine Way. Follow the path along the river past the sandstone sheep.

Map based partly on OS mapping © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved. Durham County Council LA 00004955. 2013.

Whitewashed

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