

# **Conisbrough Circular Walk**

*'Castles and Crossings'*



**Walk summary:** A short walk around Conisbrough, taking in the myths and legends of the area. With excellent views of the castle, follow in the footsteps of the painter JMW Turner who painted and sketched local scenes including the Walker family's canon boring works

**Distance:** 1.5 miles / 2.35 kilometres

**Duration:** approximately 45 minutes not including stops

**Terrain:** Riverside and urban walking, with slopes up to the castle

**Nearest Car Park:** Conisbrough Train Station, DN12 3DQ

## ***1. Conisbrough Train Station***

**From the train station head up the road towards Conisbrough. Turn left onto Doncaster Road and immediately left again to follow the footpath between the modern houses and the railway track.**

The name Conisbrough is derived from the Anglo-Saxon Cyningesburh, "the defended burh of the King" suggesting that the area belonged to an Anglo-Saxon king before the Norman Conquest. Archaeological remains suggest that there has been a settlement in the Wellgate area since at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

**The railway will be replaced by the River Don after passing down steps and Conisbrough Castle will come into view on your right.**

**Continue following the path and after 5-10 minutes you will reach a derelict building on the right, complete with a red brick chimney.**

## 2. *Ferry Farm*

Ferry Farm has traditionally been owned by the controller of the ferryboat that crossed the Don here. The first record of there being a ferryboat present was in 1319 when ferry was operated by a man known as Henry the ferryman. At this time the ferry was known as Kings Ferry and featured on maps. The ferry operated until 1940 when it was closed during the war for fears that should Germany invade they would be able to use it to cross the Don and advance towards Sheffield. After the war the ferry was not opened again as road bridges were opened to make the crossing of the Don easier.

Behind Ferry Farm there was a weir, now no longer visible, that provided water for the mills at this site. In an attempt to make a route around the weir a channel was created to allow shipping to pass up river.

**Join the tarmac road ahead.**

## 3. *Burcroft Hill*

**Turn right onto the tarmac road.**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century this was an industrial area, beginning with the Walker brothers in 1779. The Walkers were from Grenoside in Sheffield but because the river wasn't navigable as far as Sheffield they had to move to take advantage of being able to use the canal for movement of goods and materials. By 1754 it was possible to travel along the River Don from Rotherham to the ports along the Humber Estuary. The family opened a canon boring works in this area of Conisbrough making the famous Walker cannons that saw action in the Napoleonic wars, the American war of independence and not least on board Nelson's HMS Victory. They also built London's Southwark Bridge amongst others. JMW Turner visited the area in 1797 and made sketches and paintings of Walkers foundry and mill which are now held in the Tate Collection

**Keep walking and veer right onto Burcroft Hill.**

The canon boring works became Sickle Manufacturing Works in 1821 and was operated for 20 years by brothers, Thomas and John Mullins. The brothers had a falling out resulting in one of them emigrating to America and so the factory was bought by William Linley who owned it until 1861 when Thomas Booth, one of Linley's managers took over and created the company Thomas Booth and Sons. As well as manufacturing sickles they also operated as timber and coal merchants and wood turners. Thomas Booth died in 1869 and the business was split between his sons with Thomas junior taking over as coal and timber merchant and George taking over the sickle works. In 1950 Thomas Staniforth and Sons acquired the sickle works before becoming part of Spear and Jackson in 1967. The factory was finally closed down in 1976.

**Pause on Burcroft Hill where it veers left onto Minneymoore Hill.**

#### ***4. Minneymoore Hill***

**Cross the small bridge over the brook and turn right past The Castle Mill. Shortly after, turn right along the footpath to follow Kearsley Brook.** The Brook rises from a spring near Brookside in Conisbrough and runs for 1.2km before joining the River Don. Up until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the brook was full of watercress and trout could be seen in water.

You can cross the brook if you choose. Both paths will bring you to castle mill pond at the top of this path.

The castle mill pond is as old Conisbrough castle, which will soon come into view. Both are mentioned in the doomsday book. Its original purpose was to provide a fresh source of fish for the inhabitants of the castle but this changed over time. Around 1838 William Wilson constructed a stone mill on the pond which produced, amongst other things bed knobs and bobbins, using water power from the brook. The mill has since been demolished and the dam has been allowed to drain but the pond is still visible.

**Pass to the right hand side of the mill pond, cross over Low Road.**

## 5. Coronation Park

**Turn left. Don't go up the no entry road. Instead take the path soon after on the right to reach the War Memorial.**

Conisbrough was home to World War One Victoria Cross winner Laurence Calvert. Page | 4  
The Victoria Cross is the highest decoration awarded for valour and bravery to members of the Commonwealth armed forces. Calvert was born in Leeds, after finishing school he and his family moved to Cadeby, but he moved to Maltby after finding work at the colliery there. Soon after the Cadeby mining disaster he returned and found work as a haulage hand.

Just before the outbreak of the war in April 1914 he joined the Denaby Company of the Doncaster Territorials, the gallant 1st /5th Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. He was with his battalion in Whitby when war broke out and he was mobilised. He arrived in France in 1915 and he first saw action at the second Battle of Ypres. In September 1915 he was hit in the arm by a bullet and sent back to Brighton to recover. He recovered quickly and was back in the trenches by 1916.

On 12<sup>th</sup> September 1918 Sgt Calvert won his VC, aged 26 for the following deed taken from his VC citation:

*“For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty in attack when the success of the operation was rendered doubtful owing, to severe enfilade machine-gun fire. Alone and single-handed Sjt. Calvert, rushing forward against the machine-gun team, bayoneted three and shot four. His valour and determination in capturing single-handed two machine guns and killing the crews thereof enabled the ultimate objective to be won. His personal gallantry inspired all ranks.”*

Calvert survived the war and returned to Conisbrough. He died in 1964 in Essex aged 72.

**Continue through Coronation Park and re-join Low Road. Immediately turn right and head up Castle Hill to reach the main entrance to Conisbrough Castle.**

## 6. Conisbrough Castle

The castle occupies a strategic position on a large knoll at the north-east end of Conisbrough. An original castle was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by William De Warrene Earl of Surrey shortly after the Norman Conquest in 1066. In the late 12<sup>th</sup> century Hamelin Plantagenet the illegitimate son of King Henry II acquired ownership of the castle. Hamelin and his son William set about rebuilding the castle in stone which is the structure you can see today. The keep can be seen for miles on the approach to Conisbrough. It was designed and built by Hamelin and is an impressive 92ft tall with 5 storeys. It is the oldest part of the structure being built around 1180 from local magnesian limestone and is one of the finest examples of an ashlar faced structure in the country. The six buttresses are sited in a circular design which makes this keep unique as the only circular keep in the country. The curtain wall built around 1210 was paramount to the defence of the castle by being an impenetrable barrier for attackers to scale whilst providing defenders a safe spot to observe what was happening. Within the curtain wall there were many buildings including a great hall on the scale of Edinburgh castle's that was used for hosting guests and feasting, a chapel, a guardhouse, chamber-rooms and a kitchen and service rooms. Unfortunately all that remains of these buildings today are footings and stumps of walls. The castle changed hands several times until it was owned by the crown again in 1495. By the time of Henry VIII's reign the castle has fallen into disrepair and was said to be nearer a ruin than a castle by royal surveyors. When Elizabeth I came to the throne she bequeathed it to Henry Casey 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Hunsdon. The castle passed to the Coke family before being acquired by the Duke of Leeds in 1737. In 1859 Sackville Lane Fox purchased the castle and it remained in his family until English Heritage bought it in 1949. English heritage have restored parts of the castle such as installing a new roof on the keep in 1993. The castle became famous in Victorian Britain after Walter Scott used Conisbrough castle as the basis for Coningsburg Castle in his romantic novel 'Ivanhoe' and became a popular tourist destination because of the book. You may like to pause and make a visit.

**With the castle entrance at your back go straight on to Castle Street – take care as there is no path for a short distance – and stop on the left hand corner.**

## 7. Church Street

The building with the 1883 date stone on the left hand side is the old police station. It was built on the site of an old vicarage tithe barn after it burnt down in 1865. The current building still houses its prison cells with walls 9 inches thick and a flag stone ceiling.

**Follow Church Street towards the church.** St Peter's church is believed to be the oldest building in South Yorkshire circa 750AD. Possibly endowed by King Oswy of Northumbria who constructed 12 minsters after his conversion to Christianity and victory of the Mercian King Penda. The church has since been extended in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the again by the Victorians. It is well worth exploring inside. Look out for the Roman relief carving on the porch, medieval tomb chest, leper's splint and Robert Thompson's famous carved church mice. Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson was a British furniture maker. He lived in Kilburn, North Yorkshire, where he set up business manufacturing oak furniture, which featured a carved mouse on almost every piece. It is claimed that the mouse motif came about accidentally in 1919 following a conversation about "being as poor as a church mouse", which took place between Thompson and one of his colleagues during the carving of a cornice for a screen. This chance remark led to him carving a mouse and this remained part of his work from this point onwards.

**From Church Street make your way to the junction with Wellgate**

## 8. Wellgate

Turn right onto Wellgate. This is the oldest part of the village where you can see the stone capped village well house. There is a legend that tells of a time when all the wells and streams dried up and the area was in the grip of a great drought. A slow, painful death awaited the parched villagers when a holy man appeared amongst them. He cut a willow wand from a copse nearby and led the villagers to the place where, striking the ground with his willow wand, fresh water burst forth. This place became known as Wellgate and was the site of the village well until water mains were laid in 1903.

**At the t-junction turn right and head downhill. Turn left at the bottom of this road to return back to the station.**

## References

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