

The Don Gorge

A Landscape reclaimed by nature



Walk summary: A walk taking in historical and natural features of the Don Gorge, including Sprotbrough weir and fish pass, the lost village of Levitt Hagg, stunning views from Conisbrough viaduct and the wildlife of Sprotbrough Flash.

Distance: 4.5 miles / 7 kilometres

Duration: approximately 1.5 hours not including stops

Terrain: Take care on the steep section between the railway bridge and Conisbrough Viaduct - paths will be muddy and rutted after rainfall.

Nearest Car Park: 0.5 miles to the south of Sprotbrough village, public car parking is available next to the toll house on Nursery Lane.

1. Boat Inn

Starting at The Boat Inn, walk along the path towards the bridge. Please be careful where there is no footpath.

Opposite the car park, on the island was the site of a water powered flour mill. The first found reference to this is in 1279 when Sir William Fitzwilliam let a corn mill to a Henry Carpenter. It was still a working mill right up until 1934 when it was demolished to enable the canal to be widened to allow larger commercial vessels through. Several cottages occupied the present car park site and the Miller lived in one of them.

On the corner to your right is the old toll house, built in 1849 for Sir Joseph Copley and used to collect payment for crossing Sprotbrough Bridge. The bridge was originally constructed in the mid 19th century with the central span being replaced in 1897 in ironwork by Newton Chambers of Sheffield.

Cross the road, turn right and use the bridges to cross the canal and river.

Follow the road around to the right. On the corner of the next hairpin bend you will see a turquoise sign directing you to the fish pass and a further one directing you to the right approximately 100 yards along the track.

2. Fish Pass

The weir as seen today is not a natural feature of the river. It was originally built to provide water power for a fulling mill where cloth was prepared and was situated on the land near the fish pass. This mill was later recorded as a flint mill, and would have supplied material for the pottery industry in Swinton.

Although weirs gave a steady supply of water to power the mills, they eventually led to the disappearance of Salmon and other migratory fish in the river, along with Industrial pollution along the length of the river from Sheffield. As the height of the weir was raised again with the removal of Conisbrough Lock, fish could not swim or leap over the height of the weir unless the river was in high flood. After an absence of about 150 years, organisations are now aiding the recovery of fish in the river by building fish passes. Here you can see both a fish pass and an eel pass. This allows fish to bypass the weir on their journey upriver.

Retrace your steps back to the last fish pass sign you passed. Turn right and follow the river away from the bridge, until just before reaching the large boulders that narrow the path.

3. Magnesian Limestone

Off the path to the left you can see the faces of the Magnesian limestone cliffs that form the sides of the gorge. The limestone in the Don Gorge forms part of a seam that runs from Teeside to Nottinghamshire. Limestone from the gorge was used in many local buildings, including Conisbrough Castle and Brodsworth Hall, as well as further afield such as York Minster, Bolsover Castle and the Houses of Parliament.

The Don Gorge has evidence of occupation reaching back into prehistory. In the 19th century labourers digging out footings for the railway found what they believed were woolly mammoth and rhinoceros bones with evidence of being gnawed by hyena, which dated them between 60,000 – 25,000 years old.

Flint tools from the mid to late Mesolithic period have been found, suggesting temporary camps ahead of more formal domestic settlements throughout the Iron Age and Roman periods.

The Magnesian Limestone formed in a shallow sea 260 million years ago, at a time when the British Isles were in the tropics, and part of a giant “supercontinent” that stretched from North Pole to South Pole.

To the left was a village called Levitt Hagg that grew around the limestone quarrying and processing industry from the mid-18th century. The village cottages dating from the 1800s were finally cleared away in the 1950s, but the area would have looked, sounded and smelled very different when the quarry and kilns were in operation during the 19th century.

Continue along the path until you reach a large stone-faced brick building on your left. You will pass through a metal gate along the way.

4. Levitt Hagg

As well as quarrying the stone for building materials, people were also processing and burning limestone on site to make quick lime. Quick lime had many uses including fertiliser for the surrounding agricultural land. It was also an important part of the steel making process used to remove impurities from metal, and being on the River Don meant that products could easily be transported to Sheffield by barge, with coal being brought in to fire the kilns from local collieries.

There are remains of several kilns visible just off the path to the left. The large stone faced brick building adjacent to the path on your left is also a kiln and one of the largest structures still remaining on site. You can see the ventilation holes in the front side of the kiln, which ensured a continuous supply of oxygen into the kiln. It would have taken about a week to load the coal, fire the lime and then unload the kiln.

When they were being fired the tops of the lime kilns glowed and became known as a Levitt Hagg lighthouse.

Finished goods and raw materials were moved around the site by means of tram ways pulled by donkeys. When the railway arrived in 1849, the track cut through the site, and the various tunnels you will see along the path were a means for people, and the tram ways, to cut under the train track. Page | 4

Levitt Hagg formed part of the estate that belonged to the Battie – Wrightson family. It was leased out to a company who built the kilns, but the family remained involved with the village. In 1878 when there was a population of about 100 and enough people for a congregation, they gave land so that a Mission Hall could be built.

Apart from quarrying and limestone processing Levitt Hagg was also a location for boat building from 1868 to 1901, building the local keel barges that were well suited for the journey along the River Don.

Continue following the river southwards until you reach the next fence.

5. Dolomite Quarry

The road to the left leads to one of the modern day dolomite quarries. As modern methods began to be used for cutting limestone and making quick lime the population of Levitt Hagg started to decline because not as many labourers were needed. Eventually the remaining houses were condemned because they were classed as unsanitary, owing to the fact they had no modern services and were prone to flooding.

Levitt Hagg had long been known as a local tourist spot and received many visitors – there are reports of some local residents serving tea from their houses. Even though the occupants objected to the clearance, claiming that they were renowned for living to old age, the final houses were cleared in the 1950s and Levitt Hagg as a village no longer existed.

Head through the gate on your right hand side and follow the riverside path to reach Rainbow Bridge, which carries the railway line above.

6. Rainbow Bridge

The Don Gorge is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The fragments of ancient woodland, along with marshland and areas of open water create an important mosaic of habitats for invertebrates and birds.

Continue ahead into Farcliffe Woods.

As you approach the viaduct - your next destination - you will pass through Nearcliffe Woods. Species of tree include wych elm, ash, sycamore, field maple, silver birch, yew, pedunculated oak, crab-apple, wild cherry and small leaved lime trees.

Keep left at the waymarked fork in the path.

Look out for the sloping path up the gorge; take care on your way up! At the top of the slope continue right until you reach the viaduct.

7. Conisbrough Viaduct

Conisbrough viaduct was opened in 1906, having been built by Henry Lovatt Ltd to carry trains over the gorge and River Don and connect lines from the Hull & Barnsley Railway and the Great Northern & Eastern Railway.

The viaduct is 1,584 feet (483 metres) long with 14 arches to the north and 7 to the south. It was constructed using 15 million bricks and carried the train track 116 feet (35 metres) above the river. It carried passenger trains until 1951, and finally closed in 1966. From the viaduct you can see Conisbrough Castle to your left, with views back along the gorge towards Doncaster on your right.

Cross over the viaduct and then turn right and right again to head down to the river.

8. Pot Ridings Wood

Carrying on along the riverside path you will pass by another of the ancient woodlands, which are protected by the gorge's status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest – Pot Ridings Wood, which melts into Sprotbrough Plantation. This area was owned by the Copley Estate.

Turn left to follow the riverside path heading northwards. After walking below Rainbow Bridge again and passing a quarry on your left you will reach a gate and interpretation panel on the left hand side of the path.

9. Sprotbrough Flash Nature Reserve

You may like to take a short detour here to take a look at the Limestone faces of the gorge.

When you are ready, continue along the riverside path.

On your left is Sprotbrough Flash Nature Reserve. In 1924 mining subsidence caused this area of land to collapse and subsequent flooding allowed wildlife to flourish on the open wetland. The reserve opened in 1984 as a joint venture between Doncaster Council and Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. It is fitting that a consequence of the heavy industry that changed the gorge throughout the industrial revolution has now made the area into a sanctuary for wildlife. Short paths to your left lead to several hides, where you can watch wildlife on the Flash.

Follow the path back to the Boat Inn to complete the walk.

The Boat Inn was built as part of the Copley Estate and has had various lives as a coaching inn, farm and public house. It is reputed that Walter Scott wrote part of his novel 'Ivanhoe' whilst staying there. When the lord of the manor died in 1924, followed by his wife within the same week, double death duties forced the family to sell the inn along with the whole of the Sprotbrough estate.