

# Mexborough Circular Walk

## *Sappers, Poets and Pirates*



**Walk summary:** A historical walk through Mexborough and along the River Don. The walk explores the evolution of Mexborough from its origins as a small iron-age settlement to an age of industry, to the creation of the canals and building of the railways.

**Distance:** 3.4 miles / 5.4 kilometres

**Duration:** approximately 2 hours not including stops

**Terrain:** Flat, mostly on pavement and involving some road crossings. Part of the walk is on unpaved public foot-paths and tow-paths.

**Nearest Car Park:** Mexborough train station or on-road parking closer to starting point.

### **1. The Ferry Boat Inn**

**Start at the top of Ferry boat lane by The Ferry Boat pub.**

This is Mexborough's oldest pub, dating back to 1442 and would have offered a resting place for weary travelers that had crossed over the river on the ferry. Public houses in Mexborough were important for people to meet with other workmen, and throughout Mexborough the public houses take their names from these different occupations. Butchers met in the "Bull's Head" and soldiers in "The George and Dragon". The pub was later a drinking spot of Mexborough's famous poet laureate, Ted Hughes, rated as one of the best poets of his generation and one of the twentieth century's greatest writers. Hughes lived in Mexborough in an era of heavy industry, he later described the polluted River Don as *"more or less solid chemicals – bubbling, fuming, multi-coloured"*.

**Turn right onto Church Street. Carry on walking down Church St until you reach Doncaster Road. Turn left on to Doncaster Road until you come to Castle Hills Park on the left.**

## 2. Castle Hills Park

In the park you'll find the Mexborough war memorial, look for Sapper W. Hackett. As soon as it was made known that Sapper Hackett was to be awarded the Victoria Cross a fund was initiated in order to create a monument in his honour. The main donors appear to have been the local Collieries of Manvers, Denaby, and Wath Main, with subscriptions amounting to around £140.

The monument was erected to the right of the main doors to Mexborough Council Rooms and Market Hall. Towards the end of the twentieth century the Market Hall was sold and the memorial was transferred to Castle Hills Park where a re-dedication service took place in 1997.

The park was once the location of Mexborough castle, a medieval Motte and Bailey castle which is a good surviving example of this type of monument. Motte and bailey castles were introduced by the Normans. They comprised a large conical mound of earth or rubble, the motte, surmounted by a palisade and a stone or timber tower. In a majority of examples an embanked enclosure containing additional buildings, the bailey, adjoined the motte. These kind of castles acted as garrison forts during offensive military operations, as strongholds, and, in many cases as aristocratic residences and as centres of local or royal administration. They generally occupied strategic positions dominating the locality and, as a result, are the most visually impressive monuments of the early post-Conquest period surviving in the modern landscape. Although many were occupied for only a short period of time, motte castles continued to be built and occupied from the 11th to the 13th centuries, after which they were superseded by other types of castle.

The motte and bailey castle at Castle Hills, Mexborough, with its substantial earthworks, is a good surviving example of this type of monument. Situated on the north bank of the River Don, the site commands the ancient ford at Strafforth Sands. At this time in the Don's history, few parts of the river were passable and these fords were heavily defended to protect settlements along the river. In the 11th century it was a manor of Roger de Busli, lord of Tickhill.

**Walk through the park until you reach the main Doncaster Road and turn left.**

### **3. Doncaster Road**

Mexborough would have been an ideal spot for early settlers. The River Don offered clean drinking water and a plentiful supply of fish to eat. The surrounding land was ideal for grazing and provided clay for pots as well as wood and stone for building. After the Roman departure, Mexborough was later discovered by the Saxons, from whence it derives its name. 'Mex', from the name of the Saxon chieftain 'Meoc', and 'borough' which describes a fortification. The town's name thus describes 'Meoc's fort', which is thought to have once stood on the site at Castle Hills Park.

**Take a right onto Hall Gate road.**

**Take the first left onto Cross Gate Road to reach number 49 on the left hand side**

### **4. Cross Gate Road**

This was once home to Sapper William Hackett a veteran who received the Victoria Cross for gallantry during World War I. The Victoria Cross is the highest decoration awarded for valour and bravery to members of the Commonwealth armed forces. Experienced miners, called 'sappers' were in high demand during the war to tunnel under the enemy lines. Hackett went out to the front line in 1915 after being placed with the 254<sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Company. During the Battle of Givenchy in the summer of 1916, Hackett refused to leave his comrade and died in the collapsing tunnel they were working in, after saving three others. A memorial for Sapper William Hackett over his last resting place in Givenchy, France, was unveiled in 2010.

**Follow road to the left, back on to the Doncaster Road.**

**Turn right onto Doncaster Road and at the roundabout turn right onto Adwick Road, taking the opportunity to cross over the road via the pedestrian crossing. Continue uphill until you reach College Road.**

### **5. College Road**

**Turn left along College Road, walking past the old College.** These buildings date from 1910. Ted Hughes was a pupil at this school in the 1940s where he was first introduced to poetry. It was here that Hughes wrote his first poems and stories, which he published in The Don & Dearne, the school's magazine. To the right of the

building you can see the entrance to the school Ted would have used, marked “Boys”.

**Turn left at end of road and walk along the full length of Hampden Road.**

## **6. Dolcliffe Road**

**Turn left onto Dolcliffe Road.** On the right hand side of the junction with Bank Street is a dark green box. The box is the last remaining intact Street Lighting Junction Box, of its type in existence. It was installed in the early 1920s and the plaque on it is a dedication to the Mexborough ‘Electric Man’, William Blount. William left school in 1918 and went to work for Yorkshire Electrical Power laying cables for Mexborough Urban District Council to provide the shops and homes of Mexborough with electricity. Shortly after this he studied to become one of the first qualified electricians in the town. He was asked if, as part of his job, he would turn the street lighting on and off. This was done by illuminating every light individually and as the amount of street lighting increased the company had to buy him a bicycle. Shortly after this junction boxes were installed. William Blount also carried out many other jobs in the town, including erecting Mexborough’s extensive Christmas lights. Opposite the junction stands the old Library building.

## **7. Bank Street**

**Turn right onto Bank Street** where you will have views of Mexborough’s neighbouring town, Swinton.

Walking along Bank Street look out for the Primitive Methodist Chapel on your right. It once housed miners from Conisborough and Cadeby who had been evicted during the 1902 Bag Muck miners’ strike. The strike began after a dispute between the Denaby miners and the mining company, who refused to pay miners for their work removing a layer of hard, uneven rock that lay over the coal. The mining company not only owned the pit, but also the village the miners lived in and as the dispute continued, they evicted the striking miners and their families from their homes. The Mexborough community acted to provide food and shelter for the 2,000 people evicted, although many were left for many months in terrible conditions.

Opposite the church is the old site of the Mexborough Cottage hospital that opened in 1890 to deliver health care to the Mexborough community. The Cottage hospital

movement began in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century with the aim to provide health-care to rural areas, at a time when hospitals could only be found in large towns. Mexborough soon out-grew the cottage hospital, leading to the opening of a larger hospital for the town on Adwick Road in 1905. The building between the cottage hospital and the bank, the Labour Exchange, was used as a recruitment office for World War I.

Further along the road you will spot the old Market Hall, built in 1880 and now used as a pub. The Montagu Arms can be found a little further along the street. Go in and have a look for the boxing mitt of famous boxer Iron Hague, a Mexborough resident who trained and fought in the Montagu Arms and became a heavyweight champion in 1909.

**Bear left along the full length of the pedestrianised high street.** Walk along the high street, and past the new market halls. Where the high street crosses with Station road is a corner house with a plaque dedicated to the Formula One Driver, John Michael Hawthorn, who became the UK's first Formula One World Champion driver in 1958 and was born in Mexborough.

## **8. Main Street**

**Bear right at the end of the High Street on to Main Street.** Pass the Falcon Brewery on the right which has a plaque depicting the pubs history as an old malt kiln and a corn mill.

**Continue along Main Street, straight over the mini-roundabout and past the Working Men's Club.**

Look out for 75 Main Street, the childhood home of Ted Hughes. There is a blue plaque commemorating him at the first floor level of the building. Hughes lived in Mexborough from the age of 7, when the family moved from Mytholmroyd to run the newsagents and tobacconists on Main Street. During his time in Mexborough he explored Manor Farm at Old Denaby, which he said he would come to know "*better than any place on earth*". His earliest poem "The Thought Fox", and earliest story "The Rain Horse" were recollections of the area. It was during his time in Mexborough where he developed a passion for fishing which influenced his poetry throughout his life.

## 9. Wath Road

**Continue onto Wath road, cross at the pedestrian crossing and turn left down Whitelea Road into Swinton.**

During the industrial era wheels and axles for steam trains were manufactured on Whitelea road. Throughout the 1800s thousands of people came to Mexborough to find work in mines, brickyards and quarries, on the railways and in the many steel, glass and pottery factories. The population of the town grew dramatically from 401 in 1811 to 10,430 in 1901.

Walk over the railway bridge and you will see an ornate stone building with domed windows. This is the Hattersley building, a former factory owned by the Hattersley Brothers which once employed hundreds of people, producing stoves and grates. The factory dates from 1869 and is built of hand-made bricks that were created on site. **Bear left and walk the full length of Marriott Road.**

## 10. Talbot Road

**Cross over to Talbot road and walk its full length.** As you cross over the bridge you will see both the railway and South Yorkshire navigation. The Don was used to transport goods, such as stone for building as early as the 14th-15th century, although only parts of the river were easily navigated. As industry developed, the need to quickly, cheaply and safely transport manufactured goods led to the construction of the canal system which flows through Mexborough, in 1834. It was a short time after, in 1840, that the first railway to pass through Swinton was opened, connecting Yorkshire to London by rail. Mexborough was an important railway junction for industry, linking the towns of Doncaster, Sheffield and Barnsley.

As more and more lines were opened, railways became increasingly useful to manufacturers transporting goods and quickly replaced the canals. The bridge you are using to cross the canal and railway was opened in 1986 by the Duchess of Kent.

## 11. Meadow Way

**Turn left onto Meadow Way and immediately right along the footpath. This soon becomes a grassy pathway that merges alongside the River Don.** In the early 1800s, before the industrial revolution and the creation of the canals, small boats navigated this section of the river, using it to transport valuable goods from Sheffield, such as silk and silver. The journey had to be made in one day, as if moored up at night, the watermen would risk being targeted by ‘river pirates’ who would kill the crew and steal the cargo. The stretch of the river you are walking up was particularly dangerous, with shallow waters that boats often ran aground on.

## 12. River Don

**Join the tarmac footpath through the tunnel below the railway tracks to enter the station car park.**

**Turn right to join a footpath and follow it to the canal. Keep going until you reach a fork in the path.**

## 13. South Yorkshire Navigation

**Follow the towpath to the right and follow the canal below the footbridge ahead.** Walking along the tow-path you’ll notice the Don Roller Mills, a flour mill that once harnessed the power of the river Don to grind flour, in view on the left of the canal. Before the canals were cut, many mills were built along the River Don, powered by its waters to manufacture steel and iron. Many mills were closed after the building of the canals, which although made the river navigable, took away the strong force of water that powered the mills. The building of the canal allowed large barges to navigate through Mexborough. The tow-paths allowed horses to pull the barges along the canal, when low bridges or poor weather prevented the mast and sails from being used.

As you carry along the tow-path you will notice St John Baptist Church on the other side of the canal which holds a memorial to those that drowned in the Sheffield floods of 1864. 250 people drowned in the floods and one witness of the flooding in Mexborough described that “the River Don and Canal were as one, and the flood waters extended to Ferry Boat Lane on both sides of the river. Dozens of pitiful

household items floated by, and the bodies of a man, woman, and child were found after the water subsided.”

As you walk under the footbridge you can see the old stone way marker for the ferry boat crossing. The hand-pulled ferryboat cost a penny for each trip and allowed people to cross the river from Old Denaby into Mexborough. It wasn't until 1963 that a foot-bridge was built for people to cross the river. Page | 8

**Cross over the foot bridge to cross the canal and head up Ferry boat lane to complete your walk.**



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