

Dovedale

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Dovedale

The River Dove, named after the Old English word 'dubo' meaning dark, rises on the high moorlands of Axe Edge near Buxton. Its clear tumbling waters run southwards for 45 miles to join the River Trent at Newton Solney. The river runs through Dovedale, a three-mile long limestone gorge and one of the most famous places in the Peak District National Park [PDNP Fact Sheet].

With its tantalising curves unfolding to reveal steep wooded slopes and white rocks forming fantastic towers, caves and spires, Dovedale has attracted visitors since Victorian times. Today, hundreds of thousands of people come every year to enjoy the spectacular scenery.

Situated between Milldale to the north and Thorpe Cloud to the south, Dovedale is two miles west of the A515 Buxton to Ashbourne road and five miles south of Hartington.

Dovedale and the River Dove were made famous in The Compleat Angler, Izaak Walton's philosophical and practical

treatise on fishing. Written in the 17th century, The Compleat Angler is probably the most famous fishing manual ever published. It is still in print. The fishing lodge used by Izaak and his friend Charles Cotton still stands at the head of Beresford Dale. It is a Grade II listed building but is not open to the public.

Dovedale was proposed as a separate National Park as early as 1924 by the pioneering environmental campaigner Mr F. A. Holmes. It was eventually included within the Peak District National Park when it became Britain's first National Park [PDNPA Fact Sheet] in 1951.

Land ownership and access

Dovedale is now almost entirely owned by the **National Trust** which works in partnership with other organisations and individuals, such as the Peak District National Park Authority, **Natural England** and tenant farmers.

The main footpaths lead into Dovedale from below Thorpe Cloud at the south end, from Milldale at the north, and from Lin Dale, Hall Dale or Nabs Dale on either side. The well-used footpath through the dale follows the Derbyshire bank

beside the river, while north of Ilam Rock, about halfway along Dovedale, it is possible to walk on the Staffordshire side of the river, although this path is subject to flooding when the water level is high.

There is a car park with around 400 spaces at the south end of Dovedale plus a lay-by for six coaches. Milldale has a car park with 60 spaces, including some disabled parking spaces. The road beyond the Dovedale car park has been closed to traffic and is now suitable for wheelchairs and prams. However, Dovedale itself is not suitable for wheelchairs due to the rough terrain.

Geology

Around 360 million years ago, the whole of what is now the Peak District was covered by a shallow tropical sea, with deep lagoons fringed by coral reefs. The fossilised remains of sea creatures and corals make up the limestone rock [Rocks and Minerals Fact Sheet] which form much of what is now the Dove Valley.

Over the next 30 million years, the Peak District became part of a vast river delta. The sands and mud washed down by the river formed the gritstone and

shale rocks [Rocks and Minerals Fact Sheet] that lie under the northern part of the Dove Valley.

Movements in the Earth's crust pushed the rocks upwards and the River Dove was formed. Natural erosion gradually removed the layers of shale and gritstone leaving the limestone exposed.

At the end of each of the Ice Ages (during the last two million years), vast quantities of melt water, carrying rock debris, cut through the layers of limestone to produce the steep and craggy gorges of the dales. Water erosion formed caves (such as Dove Holes and Reynard's

Cave) that were left dry as the river cut an even deeper course into the underlying limestone.

Some of the limestone formed very hard reefs, like those round tropical islands. These were left standing as hills and peaks while the less resistant rocks around were worn down by wind and water erosion. Reef limestone can be seen in the steep, spear-like Chrome (pronounced 'Kroom') and Parkhouse Hills at the northern end of the Dove Valley; Ravens Tor, Pickering Tor and Tissington Spires in the middle; and, further south, in the shapely reef knolls of Bunster Hill and Thorpe Cloud.

Landscape features

For much of its course, the Dove's east bank is in Derbyshire and its west in Staffordshire. It follows a meandering course, past the picturesque villages of Longnor and Hartington,

and through a series of spectacular limestone gorges at Beresford Dale, Wolfscote Dale and Milldale before it reaches Dovedale.

Famous landmarks include Tissington Spires, Ilam Rock, Lovers' Leap, Reynard's Cave and the stepping stones where Dovedale meets Lin Dale. The stones were originally built by the Victorians to help tourists cross the river.

Ecology

The whole dale system in the Dove Valley was first designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1954, while Dovedale itself was declared a National Nature Reserve (NNR) in 2006. Dovedale is also part of the Peak District Dales Special Area of Conservation (SAC), making it part of a European Union network of high quality conservation sites [Conservation Fact Sheet] called Natura 2000.

North of Hartington, the River Dove follows the boundary between the limestone (on the eastern Derbyshire bank) and the shales (on the western Staffordshire bank). The underlying rock affects the vegetation, which means that different species can be found on each side of the river. The limestone dales south of Hartington support the most varied and interesting wildlife. The cuckoo flower is common on grassland areas, providing food for the caterpillars of the orange-tip butterfly. Herons often feed along the river, while trout, dippers, grey wagtails, moorhens and water voles can also be seen.

Dovedale holds some of the best examples of ravine woodlands in Europe, where the predominant tree is ash. Ancient woodlands like these have much more wildlife value than plantations or other new woodland. Rocks and scree slopes (formed by the effect of frost on the cliffs above) have developed specialised flora with mosses, lichens and flowers such as herb robert. If movement stops, screes eventually become flower rich grasslands with a great variety of attractive flowers. The flowers encourage a range of insects including butterflies and moths.

History

Caves in the Dove Valley were used as shelters by Neolithic hunters during the last Ice Age, about 14,000 years ago. Humans have used the valley continuously since then. Around 4,500–5,000 years ago, early farmers buried their dead in caves such as Reynard's Cave. By Roman times, the caves were again in use, probably as temporary shelters for shepherds. Place names like Thorpe, from the Old Norse for 'farm' or 'small village', reflect Scandinavian influence in the area before

the Norman Conquest, with Thorpe mentioned in the Domesday Book in 1086.

The remains of Pilsbury Castle, built by the de Ferrers family in the late 11th or early 12th century, stand above the valley to the north of Hartington.

During medieval times, packhorses bringing goods across the country followed a route which crossed Viator's Bridge at Milldale. The bridge, with its low parapets to accommodate packhorse panniers, is just wide enough for laden horses to cross in single file.

Enclosure of the land around the beginning of the 19th century led to more intensive farming [Farming Fact Sheet], particularly sheep farming. About 100 years ago there was a reduction in the intensity of sheep grazing as dairy farming became more important with the coming of the railways taking fresh milk and dairy produce to the cities. In the last 25 years the dairy industry has declined and sheep farming has once again taken over.

Many of the weirs across the river were built to increase the feeding area for trout and so improve the fishing. From early medieval times until the early 20th century the river also powered several mills.

Land use

For many centuries the Dove Valley was a farmed landscape, usually for sheep. Ancient woodland survives where grazing pressure was low. Farming declined in the valley during the 20th century as farmland on the surrounding plateau was

improved. At the same time, the conservation value of the valley began to be recognised leading, in 1937, to the transfer of some land in Dovedale to the National Trust.

The whole of Dovedale, and much of Wolfscote Dale, are now in National Trust ownership, making up part of its South Peak Estate. The land is managed primarily for public access and conservation [Conservation Fact Sheet] purposes, in conjunction with farming and fishing where these activities are compatible with conservation.

Recreation and tourism

In the 18th century, a popular summer activity with visiting gentry was to visit the beauty spots of Dovedale and Ilam. As road transport improved and the arrival of the railways made travel easier, Dovedale continued to grow in popularity with visitors [Tourism Fact Sheet].

Nowadays, visitors come to marvel at the scenery, walk, or simply relax. The most popular walk is along the river bank between the car parks at Dovedale and Milldale.

Fishing is another popular activity and the fishing rights on the Staffordshire bank of the River Dove are owned by the Izaak Walton Hotel.

The enormous popularity of the Dovedale area, and the pressure brought by many thousands of pairs of feet, has caused serious problems of congestion and erosion.

Management and conservation

As the landowner, the National Trust is responsible for the management and conservation of Dovedale.

In 1976 a plan was drawn up to try and identify the main problems and do something about them. Much has been achieved since then through co-operation between various parties including the Peak District National Park Authority.

The main car park at Dovedale has been landscaped and an overflow car park provided,

along with a new car park at Milldale. Parking arrangements at Thorpe, Ilam and Blore Pastures have been improved.

Between 1981 and 1991 the footpath along the river from the stepping stones to Hartington was resurfaced to provide an all-weather and durable surface at a total cost of £250,000.

By 1991 toilets at Dovedale were improved and facilities provided for the disabled. A footpath from the coach lay-by to the car park was constructed so that people could avoid having to walk along the road. The National Trust's policy is to keep features such as litter

bins and seats to an absolute minimum, and there is no overt promotion of Dovedale as a tourist attraction.

The Peak District National Park Ranger Service works alongside the National Trust Warden Service, which based at Ilam. Part of their role is to provide help and advice to visitors. There is also a National Trust information centre and shop at Ilam Hall and a National Trust information shelter in Milldale. The National Trust leases Ilam Hall to the Youth Hostel Association. The Hall is very popular with school groups, as well as with walkers and families who can stay on a residential basis.

Further information

- The Compleat Angler, Izaak Walton, first published 1653
- **National Trust**
- **Ilam Hall Youth Hostel**, Ilam, Ashbourne,
Derbyshire DE6 2AZ, 0845 371 9023, ilam@yha.org.uk
- **Hartington Youth Hostel**, Hall Bank, Hartington,
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