The History and Archaeology of the Yorkshire Dales

A landscape through time

The Yorkshire Dales is aptly named. Whilst its peaks rise to over 700m above sea level — and there are large areas over 600m — the word 'dales' is Norse for valleys, which dissect the 'moors' or 'fells'. The rocks which dominate this landscape were laid down as marine sediments about 350 million years ago.

The Ice Age

The effects of the glaciation which began some 80,000 years ago are most apparent in the Dales where, except for some of the higher peaks, the land was entirely covered with ice. Existing river valleys provided easy routes for massive ice sheets which spread from the north and west. Glaciers deepened valleys into characteristic U-shaped form, as seen at Kilnsey Crag. Water from surface streams sometimes disappears into sinkholes, the best-known example of which is Gaping Gill, south of Ingleborough, where Fell Beck plunges down a deep open shaft into a massive underground chamber. 15km of caves and passages linked to this cavern have been mapped by geologists and cavers.

Palaeolithic

Only a precious few fragments of archaeology have been left by the earliest inhabitants of the Dales. Any trace of even earlier people has been lost through the action of the glaciers. By the time of the last maximum cold point around 18,000 years ago, most of northern Europe would have been deserted.

Mesolithic

Once the ice sheets had melted and the climate began to warm, the landscape of the Dales gradually changed from open tundra to dense woodland. With up to 90% of the land covered in woodland, the hunter-gatherers needed all the open ground they could find to hunt animals like deer using flint tipped bows and arrows. Land around upland natural water sources such as Malham Tarn and Semerwater was ideal.

Neolithic

By the Neolithic, rising sea levels meant that Britain had finally become an island. A far more dramatic change however was the arrival of the first farmers sometime after 5,000 BC. Tree species, particularly elm begin to decline as the early farmers opened up the ancient forests, grazing their animals and sowing the first cereals.

Bronze Age

In the Bronze Age people continued to farm, clear forest and use stone tools. They also continued to hunt in upland areas as discoveries of barbed and flint arrowheads show. Only gradually did metal tools and weapons become adopted. In the Dales most of these may have been dropped and lost, but some, like the bronze spearhead found on the bottom of Semerwater, may actually have been ritual deposits.

Iron Age

Woodland clearance, in the Dales, began to accelerate with the coming of iron technology. We see the rise of defensive structures and with an increasing population and a worsening climate, a powerful ruling class appears, capable of defending farmers from outside threats in return for a share in the produce from the land. There are also a handful of hill top sites where people are assumed to have lived, for example the one on the top of Ingleborough.

Roman Britain

The Roman invasion of AD 43 brought profound changes to the economy and society of large parts of Britain. For 400 years the archaeological record shows us the extraordinary wealth of material culture the Roman legions and administrators introduced native inhabitants to. The first evidence of Roman occupation in the Dales is the temporary marching camp on Malham Moor, which may well date to AD 69. And there is evidence of an almost permanent fort in Bainbridge and a ring of forts along the main communication routes running around the area.

Dark Ages

The last Roman legions withdrew in AD 410 and the subsequent period is known as the Dark Ages because of the lack of historical and archaeological evidence caused by this collapse of civic authority. Evidence from Swaledale shows the regrowth of woodland was likely to reflect farmers not having to grow a taxable surplus anymore. At this time the first waves of Anglian migrants arrived from what is now Denmark. A series of dykes were built near Grinton apparently to mark the boundary between native land to the west and Anglian territory to the east, and again at Tor Dyke between Wharfedale and Coverdale.

Anglo-Scandinavian

Viking warrior-farmers started arriving from the late 8th century. Those originating in Denmark, came via York, others, originally Norwegian, came from Scotland, Ireland and northwest England. An example of an Anglo-Scandinavian farmstead has been excavated near Ribblehead, consisting of a small collection of buildings on what is now almost bare limestone pavement. Evidence of the mixing of cultures in this period comes from a group of carved stone crosses and tombs found in Burnsall, centre of an Anglo-Scandinavian estate. Free standing crosses like the Burnsall examples date to the 10th century and their style is a combination of Anglian and Danish Viking, showing how these cultures were learning to live with each other.

Norman

The defeat of the English King Harold at Hastings by the Norman Duke William ended the domination of the Anglo-Scandinavian and Anglian lords over Yorkshire. In order to maintain control over their new territories, William's landlords built castles. Castlehaw is an early one, dating to the late 11th century and the remains of the earthwork motte and bailey castle can be seen overlooking the River Rawthey, near

Sedbergh. Stone castles followed such as those at Skipton, Middleham and Richmond. The Norman lords gradually began to hand their least profitable lands to the church and great monastic houses like Fountains and Bolton Priory came to own three-quarters of the land defined by the modern boundary of the National Park.

Medieval

During this period, peasant farmers across the Dales continued to raise cattle and sheep and plough their lord's land. Large estates were also being created to raise income and food for monastic houses. By the 14th century, large upland areas of the Dales were given over to monastic granges. Here, sheep were farmed intensively for their wool and milk and religious houses such as Bolton Priory and Fountains became hugely wealthy on the proceeds of their sale. Tower houses were built as defensive structures at a time when raiders from Scotland were a common problem here. Nappa Hall, built in 1459, started life as one as did Ingmire Hall. High status Bolton Castle was built on a much grander scale.

Tudor

One of the greatest changes to take place in the countryside came about after 1539 with the Dissolution of the monasteries. When Henry VIII seized and then sold this land off, huge monastic granges were broken up and a new class of tenant came to be established. Only a few examples of the houses and farm buildings of Tudor tenant farmers survive. The Great Tythe Barn at Bolton Abbey is rarity in the north of England. It was originally built for the monks of Bolton Priory but survived the Dissolution and continued in use on the estate as a farm building.

Stuart

During the 17th century, the yeomen farmers of the Yorkshire Dales increased their fortunes and land holdings. Further wealth plus work for the poor, was created through the manufacture of knitted textiles and exploitation of mineral resources, such as lead and coal. Cattle rearing for the droving trade became increasingly important in the second half of the 17th century sometimes at the expense of sheep. Butter and cheese was also produced for sale to towns outside the Dales. This prosperity is reflected in what has become known as the 'Great Rebuilding' where timber frame farmhouses and barns were gradually replaced with stone structures. Some of the earliest examples are found in Bishopdale, including the appropriately named 'New House'. A stone over the door records the initials of its owners Christopher and Elizabeth Clough and the date 1635.

Georgian

During the eighteenth century the Industrial Revolution swept through the Dales and communities were transformed by the arrival of cotton and wool processing mills. The primary textile industry was the manufacture of woollen goods, either woven or knitted at home. 1780 saw the first cotton spinning mills in Yorkshire and Gayle Mill is an early purpose-built example. Wealthy landowners made sure the latest innovations were taken up by their tenants, in particular the spreading of lime on

upland pasture to improve the grazing. Subsequently hundreds of field kilns were built all over the Dales.

Victorian

The nineteenth century saw large industrial enterprises develop that have left lasting impressions. Lead mining and processing is perhaps the most dominant. The Gunnerside Gill lead mining complex in Swaledale left huge spoil heaps and scars on the valley sides, and the remains of crushing floors and a smelt mill on the valley bottom. The Settle-Carlisle Railway built toward the end of the Victorian railway construction era was an extraordinary feat of civil engineering. The Ribblehead Viaduct is a great monument to the men who built the railway and who lived around it in camps. The wealthy also had their own forms of entertainment and the building of railways allowed city-based estate owners to develop grouse shooting moors. Grinton Lodge is one of several lodges used to host shooting parties in style.

20th century

By the early years of the 20th century, both the lead and the coal industries were nearing their end along with nearly all the textile mills. Farming continued as the backbone of the Dales' economy, but the early 1900s saw the beginnings of tourism. Then, rambling was a popular leisure activity. Urban workers yearned for the peace and quiet of the hills and far-sighted people ensured they could get there cheaply. The Dales was an obvious destination for workers in Leeds and Bradford and new organisations set up holiday destinations for them. One such was the Co-operative Holidays' Association who built a timber guest house in Hebden in 1909. The Youth Hostel Association was founded in 1930, and the John Dower Memorial Youth Hostel in Malham is named after one of the prime movers in the foundation of the National Park movement in England and Wales. That movement led directly to the designation of the Yorkshire Dales National Park in 1954.

21st century

The Yorkshire Dales continues to evolve to meet the challenges of a changing society, whilst retaining its most important historical and natural heritage. Tourism now plays a central role in the economy, with visitors drawn to the scenic beauty, rich archaeology, and cultural heritage. Farming remains vital – both economically and environmentally. But farmers are increasingly having to adapt and diversify their operations to futureproof their farm business and support nature recovery. The extensive areas of moorland are mostly managed as grouse moors. Efforts to combat climate change have included restoration of huge areas of moorland peat that were previously drained. Modern infrastructure, including improved broadband and mobile phone coverage, is more prevalent and is connecting remote communities to wider opportunities. The balance between preserving the Dales' tranquillity and meeting the changing needs of its residents, visitors, and wider society continues to shape debates about the future of this cherished landscape.

Discover more on about the history and archaeology of the Yorkshire Dales on our dedicated website, here.