

Peak Crossing Steve Hall

In April 2021 the Peak District, the UK's very first National Park, will be 70 years old. Back in 2019, I grabbed the chance to celebrate the 68th birthday, with a crossing of the Park from West to East, a long 'a to b' run possible thanks to Mrs Hall's generous offer to be support driver.

A fabulous route. Over 20 years ago I did something similar as part of the LMC's bold sponsored run from Deiniolen to Lincoln, raising funds for the hut purchase. Despite best intentions I hadn't so far repeated it.

For me the Peak District still stands out among our National Parks, despite being so familiar - partly because it is on the doorstep, but chiefly because it offers such variety of landscape. Despite its name there are of course few actual 'peaks' - the name actually comes from the Old English 'Peac' meaning knoll or hill.

After an early start, with Jill fully equipped, and Amy along as head of in car entertainment, I set off from Rushton Spencer just north of Leek in Staffordshire. This area west of Buxton feels remote and untamed, with dark building stone, narrow, winding valleys, oak woodlands and spectacular rock outcrops such as the Roaches or Ramshaw Rocks. In the early days of the industrial revolution there were many silk mills utilising the fast flowing rivers, all now gone or converted to other uses such as the Youth Hostel at Gradbach Mill

I followed the Dane Valley Way along the lovely River Dane, past the hamlet of Danebridge. There are a host of route options here and more exploring to do. Climbing through Back Forest and then to our first rendezvous at Gradbach, where Jill and Amy had to negotiate a closed road bridge or face a long detour and risk missing me. Support driving is a demanding job.



Danebridge



Leaving Gradbach

The route then began to climb steadily, past the picturesque pack horse bridge at Three Shires Head, one of two locations in the Peak where three counties meet (which counties? and what's the other location? answers please – no Googling - use a map!).



Three Shires Head

I eventually reached the day's high point on Axe Edge, a brief taste of proper gritstone moorland. Windswept and an extra layer needed. Here dramatic views opened out over the western moors, and behind, over the Cheshire plain towards Wales. A few miles to the north I could see the Cat &

Fiddle, famous as one of England's highest pubs. After several years closed and decaying, it reopened just in time to be hit by lockdown. Let's hope it emerges once again.



Axe Edge Moor.

Passing the hilltop site of Grin Low and the Victorian folly of Solomon's Temple, I could see to my right the strange science fiction location of the HSE explosives research centre at Harpur Hill. The route then dropped down through the woods into Buxton near Poole's Cavern, my next refuelling stop, where Jill and Amy were parked, laughing loudly at Gavin & Stacey on the iPad.

Heading due east out of town brought another sharp change of landscape, into the classic limestone scenery of the 'White Peak', typified by rolling green pasture and dry stone walls. Villages and farms are more numerous, and the countryside has a gentler feel, not least due to the lighter coloured limestone geology. The lower altitude also means the weather is generally milder than on the higher moorland. The route leaves Buxton under a dramatic railway viaduct which appears as if from nowhere,



and then to the village of Staden, and Staden Quarry, one of many old or active limestone quarries in the area. Buxton remains a major industrial centre for businesses such as ICI, crucial to local employment and the wider economy. Balancing the demands of these heavy industrial processes with the environmental culture of the National Park continues to be one of many challenges for the national park board. 70 years ago the park boundary was designed with a huge chunk missed out around Buxton, to minimise the conflict.

After Staden comes the elegantly named 'Cowdale' and we are here on the 'Midshires Way', I often wonder if there is a mysterious department responsible for naming long distance footpaths, or if they're claimed like rock routes by the first ascensionist.

At Cowdale church I paused to pay my respects at the War Memorial. On foot I always take the time to stop and read the names inscribed. What must it have been like a century ago, downing tools and going from these villages to the trenches of Belgium and France? A useful reminder for our own tough times.



Cowdale War Memorial

The rolling fields allowed rapid progress until the route dropped abruptly into the aptly named 'Deep Dale', a classic almost sheer sided Limestone valley just west of Chelmorton. I was following a footpath which zig zagged down into the valley then climbed up the opposite side.



Deepdale

The route was clear from the western side but once down in the valley bottom could I find it? There seemed no trace of where it began. Some frustrating searching followed, with several false starts, but finally I gained the edge, joined by a male Stonechat very close by. Back on track I followed bridleways and farm tracks into Chelmorton village.

The route then climbed gently onto the central limestone plateau of the Peak, heading south of Taddington towards Sheldon. This is historic lead mining country, and the scenery is dotted with fascinating industrial archaeology. Lead was first mined here under the Romans and continued until the recent past, along with other mineral exploitation such as fluorspar mining and lime extraction. Jill and Amy were waiting in the sunshine at Sheldon – outside the pub! But I had a long way left to go and such temptation would have to wait. After a refuelling stop, we walked up to Magpie Mine, half a mile south of the village, a dramatic preserved site with one of the only Cornish style engine houses in the Peak, and well worth a visit.



Magpie Mine, taken on a previous visit (yes that's snow!)



Leaving Sheldon –

Stanton in Peak in the distance.

I was now south east of Bakewell and pleasant rolling fields lead to Over Haddon and a steep drop down into Lathkill Dale, a national nature reserve with a superb range of flora and birdlife. From the hamlet of Alport at the end of the dale, the route climbed across country and eventually up to the village of Stanton in Peak.

The end was now in sight and there was a sharp change back to the darker Millstone Grit scenery at the eastern edge of the park. Stanton is built on a steep hillside which was a bit of a slog at this stage. The village also has the Flying Childers, an outstanding pub, seemingly untouched by the passage of time. As it was closed, I was able to resist that temptation too.



Looking west above Stanton in Peak

From the village a further climb leads out onto Stanton Moor and the Nine Ladies, a bronze age stone circle, almost four thousand years old. That might have formed an atmospheric finale to this fine route, but I decided I'd had enough fun for one day and dropped down across the fields to Rowsley and the waiting car.

This route: Rushton Spencer (Staffs) to Rowsley (Derbys) 52k (32 miles) 950m (3110 ft) climb

Map: OS Explorer OL24 'White Peak.' Online subscription (www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk) is a bargain and enables me to print specific map sections.

Downloads to GPS devices are also available of course, but a map is more reliable and has loads more to show you!

Thanks to Jill and Amy for support – gallons of drinks, sandwiches, and tea.