



Walk

Mining the Mendips

Discover the hidden history
of a small Mendips village

Time: 3 hours

Distance: 6 miles

Landscape: rural

Welcome to the Mendips in Somerset. This is an area of limestone escarpments and open countryside; with rich and varied scenery, magnificent views and a fascinating history.

Discover why the area's curious geology made this a centre of lead and zinc mining and find out how the lives of villagers changed during the 'boom and bust' stages of Mendip's mining past.

Rich resources need defending and this walk will take you on a journey through the past from an Iron Age hill fort to the remains of a fake decoy town designed to distract German bombers away from Bristol.

Location:

Shipham, Somerset

Start:

The Square, Shipham BS25 1TN

Finish:

Lenny's Cafe

Grid reference:

ST 44416 57477

Keep an eye out for:

Wonderful views of the Bristol Channel and its islands

Thank you!



This walk was created by Andrew Newton, a Fellow of The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)



Route and stopping points



- 01** Shipham Square
- 02** Layby on Rowberrow Lane
- 03** The Swan Inn, Rowberrow Lane
- 04** Rowberrow Church
- 05** Dolebury Warren Iron Age Hill Fort
- 06** Junction between bridleway to Burrington Combe and path to Black Down
- 07** Black Down
- 08** Starfish Control Bunker
- 09** Rowberrow Warren Conifer plantation
- 10** The Slagger's Path
- 11** Gruffy Ground
- 12** St Leonard's Church
- 13** Lenny's Café

01 Shipham Square

Welcome to the Mendips village of Shipham. Look at a map of the area and you'll notice that Shipham is one of the few villages on the top of the plateau of the Mendip Hills; the reason for this is to do with the curious local geology.

The Mendip Hills are mostly made of limestone; a porous rock which soaks up water. As a result water courses on the tops of the hills are rare, whilst multiple 'resurgent' streams erupt as springs at the foot of the hills (as in the nearby city of Wells where the water supply gave the city its name).

There are records of a community in Shipham dating back to the Anglo-Saxon period; indeed its name Shipham (or Scep-Ham) indicates its Anglo-Saxon origins and that fact that the ham (village) in that era had a strong link with scep (sheep). The earliest records are found in the Domesday Book; which shows that by the 11th Century Shipham was a farming community where most of the land was used as pasture.

Today, the countryside around Shipham is still used in very much the same way as it was at the time of the Domesday Book. It might be tempting to think that this Mendips village has enjoyed its farming traditions in a largely unaltered way, ever since then but this is very far from the truth as you will discover on this walk.

Directions

Follow the footpath alongside the main road heading in the direction signposted 'A38 Bristol'. You will pass a garage on your right and school on your left before reaching a small crossroads.

At the crossroads turn right and follow North Down Lane uphill. Keep straight on up the hill, passing two road junctions on the right. When you reach a small crossroads at the top of the hill turn left and follow Rowberrow Lane downhill. After a dip in the road you will reach a layby.

02 Layby on Rowberrow Lane

This viewpoint offers fantastic views of the North Somerset countryside and out towards the Bristol Channel. As you look over the fields, to the right hand side you get a nice view of the hill fort of Dolebury which we'll visit later.

The panoramic view ahead includes lands that were originally referred to as 'The Hundred of Winterstoke', in the Domesday Book. Although all of these villages have expanded in size since Norman times, and quite a lot of what used to be open farmland has now been developed for housing; the large expanses of green show that there is still a lot of high quality pasture land left.

Since agriculture has become more mechanised, field sizes have grown and as a result, ancient hedgerows have been lost. However local archaeological evidence suggests that the layout of these pastures does still echo the past with boundaries that are now marked by walls and fences continuing to define the edges of landholdings from medieval and earlier times.

Directions

Continue along Rowberrow Lane until you reach the Swan Inn at Rowberrow.

03 The Swan Inn, Rowberrow Lane

Rowberrow is a small village, built upon the site of an old Bronze Age barrow or burial mound. It is the barrow which probably gave the village its name as Rowbarrow means rough hill.

Look at the end gables of the pub and from the downhill side you can clearly see the three separate roof lines. This is because the Swan Inn was created from three miner's cottages which were knocked together to form a 'cider house'.

Cider has always been associated with Somerset, largely because the local lands and climate are more suited to the growing of apple orchards than they are to arable farming; making the raw ingredients of cider cheaper and more available than those for ale. You'll still find that a draught of the local cider is more affordable than an equivalent of the local ale!

But we've stopped here to learn about the mining history that's most important to our story.

Mining has occurred in and around Shipham and Rowberrow for many centuries. It is even likely that lead was mined in here as far back as the Roman period. During the 1300s and 1400s there was a very high demand for lead to roof castles and religious buildings leading to the rapid development of a lead mining industry on the Mendip Hills.

But it was the discovery of zinc ore in the sixteenth century which turned the small settlements of Shipham and Rowberrow into a major mining centre.

In 1702, industrialist Abraham Darby opened the Baptist Mills Brassworks near Bristol and created a huge market for locally mined zinc. Along with copper, zinc is a key component in the manufacturing of brass.

Some of the brass produced in Bristol was used to make fixtures and fittings for ships, but there was another less savoury side to the brass industry. Bristol also produced brass pots and pans, locally known as guinea pots. These pots were traded for human cargoes as part of the slave trade.

In the early nineteenth century, Parliament halved the duty on imported zinc, and at a stroke mining in the Mendips became uneconomic. Over the thirty years that followed, the mines of Shipham and Rowberrow were progressively closed down.

Directions

From the Swan Inn continue downhill until you reach Rowberrow Church.

04 Rowberrow Church

This is the Parish Church of Rowberrow. Just to the left of the church door see if you can spot a round topped gravestone. The harsh life of the local miners and the risks that they took to make a living are spelt out by this ageing (and increasingly illegible) gravestone. It tells of a local miner Thomas Ven who died in 1812 "Crushed to death in a mine".

As the local mineral resources were exploited, miners were forced to start digging deeper and deeper shafts. As a result, rock falls and tunnel collapses became more and more common. This was an era when the ladders and 'pit props' were all made from timber rather than the more resilient materials that are used in mining today and accidents as befell Thomas Ven were more commonplace.

Directions

Follow the road as it bends round two corners passing the driveway to the manor house on the right hand side. After a further 130 metres you reach a gateway to a path on the right hand side. Follow the path as it descends to the bottom of the valley. Cross a small wooden footbridge to join a bridleway. Turn left and follow the bridleway to the car park at the bottom of Dolebury Hill Fort.

Directions continued

Follow the steps steeply uphill. You can either turn right and follow along the ridge of the defensive bank around to the high point of the fort or alternatively cut across on the path which runs through the fort itself leading up to the highest point.

05 Dolebury Warren Iron Age Hill Fort

From here at the top of Dolebury Warren we get fantastic views of the Mendip hills. This hill itself a natural feature but the lumps, bumps and ridges you can see are man-made.

Somewhere between the years 700 and 400 BC, during the Iron Age, Dolebury Warren was used as a hill fort. Put simply, a hill fort is a defensive settlement built on a hill to take advantage of naturally occurring high ground. There are literally thousands of hill forts in Britain from the extensive ramparts of Maiden Castle in Dorset to the two-metre high fort at Stonea Camp in the Cambridgeshire Fens.

There is much debate about why so many hill forts were built in Britain during the Iron Age. The most likely reason was that as the population grew, local tensions between tribal groups developed and it became increasingly necessary to protect livestock and populations.

The fortifications here at Dolebury consist of an extensive series of ramparts, which take full advantage of the natural topography of the area. See if you can spot these raised embankments of land running around the edge of the high ground.

If you go up to the highest point you should be rewarded with a fantastic view. If you look out to the West (towards the sea) you should be able to enjoy the view over the Western Mendips as they reach towards the Bristol Channel just south of Weston-super-Mare. On a clear day you can see the coast of Wales, the Brecon Beacons, the Black Mountains and the twin islands of Steepholm and Flatholm in the Bristol Channel.

Directions

Turn your back on the sea and follow the broad path that leads away from the hill fort along the hill crest. After a short descent you will reach a gate and a stile. Go across the stile and continue to follow the broad track as it rises slightly uphill to a group of trees. Follow the path through the gap in the middle of the trees. On exiting the small wood take the path to the right marked with a Dolebury Warren butterfly marker.

After about 100 metres you will reach another marker post, the path bears to the left and heads on downhill towards another gate and stile. Go over the stile and continue to follow the broad grassy track to the line of trees at the end of the enclosed field area and an information board about the nature reserve.

Cross over the stile and turn right along the rough walled lane. After about 100 metres, you will reach a track junction, turn to the left and follow the public bridleway (signposted Limestone Link). Ignore the path which turns off to the right. The bridleway heads gently uphill.

After a few minutes you will reach a gateway; go straight through and continue to follow the bridleway. Ignore the turn to the right immediately after the gate (unless you wish to make a short detour to Read's Cavern which can be found in the wooded dip which lies immediately to the right of the gateway).

Directions continued

The bridleway continues to pass through woods with a fence on the left hand side, where the bridleway bends round to the left you will find an obvious path junction (There is a small wooden post marking the junction, although in the summer this often has bracken partly obscuring it).

06 Path junction between bridleway to Burrington Combe and path to Black Down

This spot is a good point from which to fully appreciate the geology of the area and understand a little more about what makes the Mendip Hills so distinctive.

The Mendip Hills are created from sedimentary rocks like limestone. These rocks are formed from sand, mud and decaying shells and sea creatures that lived in the ancient tropical seas which once covered much of Britain. Over time these were compressed and hardened into rocks like limestone and sandstone.

The Mendips are rightly famous for having some of the best and most stunning limestone countryside (also known as karst scenery) in the whole of the United Kingdom. Take a look at the map and you'll see places like Read's Cavern, Aveline's hole, Bos Swallet and Burrington Combe. Like a giant swiss cheese the Mendips are dotted with caves, holes and combes.

Karst landscapes are characterized by underground drainage systems with sinkholes and systems of caves. And it's down to the properties of the locally occurring rock – limestone, that we get this underground world. The limestone is a weak, soluble rock which over time is gradually dissolved by rainwater leaving behind caves, holes and strange rock formations.

Subterranean drainage systems often limit the amount of surface water so that there are usually very few rivers or lakes. In turn this has a major effect on what grows here. Compare the green pastures here with the brown of the hill rising up before you.

Directions

Continue along the footpath which branches off the bridleway to the right. You will have a nice row of silver birch trees on your left hand side and relatively open hillside on your right. After just over a hundred metres the path will cross a couple of muddy depressions. Make your way across or around these and continue to follow the path as it goes through a small group of trees.

As you leave the trees, the landscape will open up in front of you offering you splendid views of the limestone formations at the top end of Burrington Combe. After just over 100 metres you will reach a very obvious path intersection. Turn to the right and head steeply uphill following the path to the ridge of Black Down.

07 Black Down

This is Black Down and at 325 metres above sea level it's the highest hill on the Mendips. As you survey the peaceful landscape around you, it is hard to believe that this was once a landscape of war.

It was feared that the Germans might invade Britain by landing on the sandy bays around Weston-super-Mare a few miles to the West of here and the upland slopes of Black Down would have made ideal landing grounds for advanced assault troops. As a result, Black Down became a major part of the South West's defences against a German invasion.

It's hard to see from here on the ground, but you might be able to make out humpy ground amongst the bracken. An extensive series of hills were dug (called tumps) to deny easy landing conditions.

During the war years, the summit of Black Down was closed off to the public as the operations there were regarded as being highly secret in nature. As we continue the walk we'll find out more about the secret history of Black Down.

Directions

Just short of the hillcrest of Black Down, the path meets and crosses the bridleway which runs along Blackdown. Our route takes us straight across continuing uphill to cross over the skyline directly ahead of us. Having crossed the bridleway, the well defined path continues directly ahead crossing the crest of the ridge. Continue directly ahead, the path will start to drop slightly just before you reach a gateway. Immediately before the gateway, to your right hand side, is a large grass covered bunker.

08 Starfish Control Bunker

Hidden behind this artificial hill was one of the control rooms built as part of the Second World War decoy defences. The inside is now gated off, but you can still see the entrance and also the large brick wall put in place to protect the occupants of the bunker from bomb blasts.

As well as the 'tumps' designed to stop enemy troops landing, Black Down was also chosen as a site for extensive decoy city built to attract enemy bombing raids away from nearby Bristol.

The decoy city consisted of a highly complex series of illuminated constructions, which resembled both the topography and the nocturnal activities of Bristol. When seen from the air at night it would attract the attentions of enemy pathfinder squadrons and hopefully preserve the real dockyards and industries from German bombing raids. It included amongst other features, a reconstruction of Bristol Temple Meads Railway Station complete with orange lights to simulate the glow that would have come from the coal boxes of steam trains!

During their bombing raids the German Luftwaffe used squadrons of 'pathfinder' aircraft to drop incendiary devices onto well chosen sites to identify them as targets for the bombers. Black Down was designed to include a series of these 'special fires' designed to simulate these incendiary devices. The military code SF (standing for special fire) soon evolved into the code name Starfish which then became the general term for all of the decoys that were built as part of this programme.

The Starfish control sites were manned by small teams of home guard and other military staff, working for long periods of time. Their shift would have involved controlling the site overnight and refreshing and replacing the flares and pyrotechnics during the day. The site was highly classified, so the whole area was closed off and staff were even banned from talking to their families about where they were on duty and what they were doing.

Directions

Pass through the gateway to the clearly defined bridleway towards Tynings Farm. Just before you reach the road, the bridleway joins the small gravel covered farm road. Turn to the right along this (with the farm house buildings on your left and a series of barns on your right). Go through the small parking area next to the riding stables and continue gently downhill on the gravel and stone covered track. You will pass some farm outbuildings on your left and then another house before entering a small wooded copse containing a stream. The path can quite often be quite muddy in this area. Stop when you reach a Forestry Commission sign for Rowberrow Warren.

09 Rowberrow Warren Conifer plantation

Look up to the forest of trees on the hill to your right. Does anything strike you about them? They are all conifer trees and noticeable for their long straight trunks.

This is one of three plantations on the Mendips planted by the Forestry Commission as a timber crop. The rich hillsides of the Mendips are too exposed for growing arable crops but do favour the farming of conifer trees. Timber production plays an important role in the local economy.

Timber from these woodlands is mostly used by local industries producing building and roofing timbers, fence panels and garden buildings. As a by-product of these industries there is also a thriving local company which re-processes the timber which is unsuitable for use in the building trade and turns it into wood shavings for animal and pet care and bark chippings for horticulture.

Directions

After a further 100 metres you will reach a track junction. Go directly across taking the middle one of the three routes that lie ahead. Follow this bridleway to descend into the valley. When the track reaches a junction, take the path to the left which drops steeply into the valley. Follow the path downhill to a stream running on your left hand side. Cross the stream and pick up the pathway on the opposite bank. With the stream now immediately to your right, continue along the path; you will pass a small fenced off enclosure of trees on your right which contains a water monitoring station. With your back to the Bristol Waterworks gate, take the small path which heads steeply uphill.

10 The Slagger's Path

This obvious sunken path that you are about to climb back towards Shipham is known locally as the Slagger's Path. Slag is another name for mining waste and leftovers.

In the mid 1800s, the 'Mendip Hills Mining Company' established a large lead slagging works at Charterhouse just a few miles away. Their aim was to re-work the old Roman spoil heaps around the lead mines to extract more lead from these 'spoils'.

This industry enjoyed a short lived, but highly profitable boom from the mid 1840s until the early 1880s (when falling lead prices made it unprofitable). The lead slagging boom happened at just the right time for Shipham and Rowberrow. It provided much needed employment for the miners many of whom were out of work as a result of the widespread zinc mine closures.

Every morning these paths would have been filled with the men folk of the villages, carrying their working tools up to the old mines at Charterhouse for their day's work.

Directions

Follow this path very steeply uphill for about 300 metres to reach a roadway. Just before you reach the roadway you will pass a West Mendip Way sign indicating Shipham 1¼ miles on your left hand side. Go onto the road and head straight downhill with Hollow End House immediately on your left hand side.

When you reach the first house on the right hand side (called Lyppiatt) turn sharply to your left and follow up the rocky track way indicated with a partially obscured public footpath sign. You will reach a junction where the track splits; take the right hand of the two forks to reach a gateway after just over 100 metres. Pass through the gateway and walk into the hummocky green field.

11 Gruffy Ground

This bumpy uneven ground is more than just a set of comfortable cushions for picnickers. It's a monument to the miners who toiled this earth.

Known locally as gruffy ground these bumps and dips are the scars of open cast mining. Here on the hillside the mineral containing veins of rock come very close to the surface so miners could simply dig the lead and zinc out. The hollows are where they dug out and hillocks where the spoils of earth were piled.

Further towards the centre of the village the mineral containing veins are much deeper underground and mine shafts (up to 70 feet deep) were needed to reach the ore deposits.

Look across the village and try to imagine how it would have looked at the height of its industrial success; this contemporary account from 1791 may help you imagine the scene:

"The number of houses which comprise this parish is seventy-three; the inhabitants thereof being about 380, almost all of them miners.

There are upwards of one hundred of these mines now working, many of which are in the street, in the yards and some in the very homes.

Directions

At the far end of the gruffy ground, bear slightly to your left but do not go up the steep bank at the top of the hill. At the bottom of the bank and with a group of trees and blackberry bushes to your right, you will find a path. Follow this as it goes up into a wooded area directly ahead. The path will quickly broaden out and become more defined. After a couple of gentle ups and downs through the wood you will reach a kissing gate; go through this and continue directly along the path across the wooded hillside.

You will shortly reach another wooden gate with a West Mendip Way signpost beside it. Go through this gate as it leads onto a beautiful grassy path beside somebody's garden; this in turn leads onto a tarmac roadway. Follow the tarmac roadway straight downhill. At the bottom of the hill you will pass the small grassy area with a public bench on it; immediately after this (and just before you join the road) you can turn to your right along the grassy verge. Stay off the road and follow the verge slightly uphill where it becomes an elevated footpath passing beside and above the roadway. Follow this footpath downhill to St Leonard's Church.

12 St Leonard's Church

"Amongst the most wretched {communities} were Shipham and Rowberrow, two mining villages at the top of Mendip. The people are savage and depraved ... brutal in their natures and ferocious in their manners".

The diary of Hannah Moore written in 1859 gives us a stark insight into what life was like in the mining villages of Shipham and Rowberrow. A staunch abolitionist who worked with William Wilberforce to repeal slavery, Hannah Moore came to Shipham in 1790 to set up a Sunday school for the children of impoverished miners. One of the church's stained glass windows is dedicated to her.

Just across the road from the church is a house known locally as The Court House. It used to be the old mining court which settled disputes over mining rights and mine ownership.

In one of the fields behind it you can still find the entrance to the mellifluous sounding Singing River Mine, one of the deepest and most extensive of the mine shafts. Access to the head of the shaft is across private land, although this is one mine that can still be visited by caving club groups.

Directions

Continue on the road to Shipham Square and Lenny's Café.

13 Lenny's Café

Lenny's Café is one of the smallest in Britain. This not for profit café is run by a team of local volunteers, and serves as a useful focus for this rural community. If you look through the café windows (or go inside if it is open) you will see old meat racks on the ceiling from when it used to be the smallest butchers shop in Britain!

The café marks the end of our route. In the course of the walk you have found out how the land has been used over the centuries and learned something of the cycle of mining boom and bust. The fact that the industrial deprivation of the 1700s and 1800s (as so eloquently described by Hannah Moore) has been replaced by a prosperous and thriving rural community is reassuring when we consider the fate of parts of our country still affected by the ravages of industrialisation.

We learnt too that the riches of the Mendip landscape are determined by the underlying geology of the hills and the porous nature of the underlying limestone in turn determines how the land has been used and exploited. The passage of water through the limestone rocks over millennia also led to the deposition of the minerals lead and zinc which created a mining boom.