

A MINERAL VALLEYS PROJECT WALK

# St John's Chapel

farming, mining and Methodism



A NETWORK OF WALKS OFF THE WEARDALE WAY

Outer route: 7 miles/11km  
Each village loop approximately  
3 miles/5km

Starting from  
St John's Chapel  
or Ireshopeburn

# The Forest of Weardale

Our walks take us through the 'forest' of Weardale, an area set aside by the Prince Bishops of Durham in the early Norman period for the hunting of roe and red deer and boar. It was an uncultivated wilderness of open fell on the uplands with wooded valley sides and floor and very little, if any, settlement.

Apart from the steep sided tributary denes there is little sign today of the medieval woodland.

Deforestation began from mid 13th century when the Bishop created a walled deer park further down the valley, allowing land in upper Weardale to be leased out for cattle farming and mining.

Initially the valley floor land was leased out to stockmen who cleared the woodland to create meadow and pasture for cattle, deer and sheep.

Place names such as Daddry Shield, Hunshieldsford and Saugh Shield remind us that these were summer only farms or 'shielings'.

## The First Farms

From time to time attempts have been made to grow root crops and grain in upper Weardale but the cool wet upland climate severely limits the growing season and today's farming activities are still dominated by the rearing of beef cattle and sheep together with the growing of hay as winter feed.

## Hay Meadows

Traditional farming methods, including the late cutting of hay and use of manure helped to preserve Upper Weardale hay meadows, which are now regarded as an important landscape feature supporting many species of wild flowers and upland breeding birds.

These leaflets are available upon request. Tel: 01388 528801



red deer



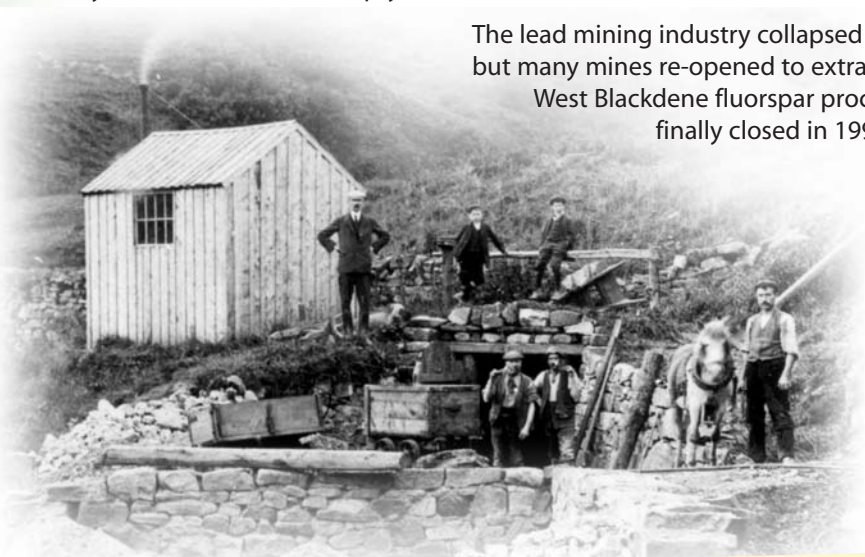
# Miner-farmers

Although lead mining has ceased in Upper Weardale, it was a vital part of the economy for over 600 years providing a rich living for the Bishops of Durham, the Rectors of Stanhope and the Moor Masters.

The miners themselves barely lived above subsistence level and relied heavily on the produce from their tiny farms which can be seen scattered along the hillside.

The terraced villages of Daddry Shield, St John's Chapel and Ireshopeburn are the product of a population explosion in the early nineteenth century. In good times the villages bustled with life and services but, without a farm to fall back on, in hard times many of the houses were empty.

The lead mining industry collapsed in 1882 but many mines re-opened to extract fluorspar. West Blackdene fluorspar processing plant finally closed in 1996.



Around 1700 Walter Blackett, the Moor Master who administered lead mining in Weardale, built a magnificent headquarters known as Newhouse for his agent.

Behind the house is a gazebo with a square tower and hipped roof, where once the miners bought their candles. The complex also contained workshops for blacksmiths and millwrights.

## The Newhouse Complex



## The School

The Newhouse School, now the Weardale Inn, was built in 1854 for the education of miners' children. Contributions to pay for the school were received from Wentworth Blackett Beaumont (lead mines proprietor), his agent and the miners themselves. A large stone tablet in the grounds commemorates its opening.



## Church and Chapel

The village of St John's Chapel derives its name from the 1465 church dedicated to Jesus our Saviour and St John the Baptist. In 1752 the church was rebuilt, Walter Blackett (lead mines proprietor) giving £100 and Edmund Keene, Rector of Stanhope and Bishop of Chester, giving £25.

While the Church of England enjoyed the spoils of their hunting, farming and mining interests in the High Forest they were, for the main part, absentee landlords. Here the fires of Methodism took hold, preventing many of the miners from turning to the Presbyterian church in Ireshopeburn.



John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, first visited in 1752 and he returned a further 12 times to see his 'beloved society' in Ireshopeburn, often staying with the Watson family at Ling Riggs. The beautiful High House Chapel in Ireshopeburn is now the oldest purpose built Methodist Chapel to have held continuous weekly services since its foundation in 1760. Additional to Sunday Morning services, the chapel is open for visits during museum hours.



# The Living Dale

The landscape of the dale has been created over thousands of years, it remains for us to see today only because of continued farming. Miner/farmers had all but disappeared by 1890s, and during the 20th century hill farming continued with farms amalgamating and many relying on subsidies to stay viable. Many of the old farm buildings became derelict, as people moved away to find work or did not return to the dale after the world wars. Most of the shops in Ireshopeburn and St John's Chapel closed but the facades are still visible along Hood Street giving the impression of a once busy village.

What has remained through both good times and hard times is the sense of community and independence. In the 19th century nearly all miners would have a garden or smallholding keeping a few chickens and a pig. This kept the miners and their families relatively healthy for the times. A pig killing was a major event and often the meat was shared out between neighbours and then the favour returned.

As we move into the 21st century the dale remains a beautiful place and retains this sense of community. Many of the buildings left to decay are now being renovated and people move into the dale to enjoy the lifestyle.

Along the walk instead of passing the cottages of miner/farmers we encounter the homes of people who commute to work and increasingly those who can work from home via the internet.



Even when the price of lead was high and when miners were in work they had difficulty keeping the family well fed. There were times when there was no work and miners were forced to emigrate and sometimes break the law. One such time was 1818, soon after Waterloo, when miners in St John's Chapel took to poaching and were arrested and imprisoned at Stanhope by the Bishop's bailiffs. A dramatic rescue took place which was often retold as the Ballad of the Bonny Moor Hen. The following is a short extract.

## The Ballad of the Bonny Moor Hen

You brave lads of Weardale, I pray lend an ear,  
The account of a battle you quickly shall hear,  
That was fought by the miners, so well you may ken,  
By claiming a right to their bonny moor hen.

Now, the times being hard and provisions being dear,  
The miners were starving almost we do hear;  
They had nought to depend on, so well you may ken,  
But to make what they could of the bonny moor hen.

There's the fat man of Oakland, and Durham the same,  
Lay claim to the moors, likewise to the game;  
They sent word to the miners they'd have them to ken  
They would stop them from shooting the bonny moor hen.

Oh, these words they were carried to Weardale with speed,  
Which made the poor miners to hang down their heads;  
But sent them answer, they would have them to ken  
They would fight till they died for their bonny moor hen.

Oh, this battle was fought all in Stanhope town,  
When the chimneys did reek and the soot it fell down;  
Such a battle was ne'er fought in Stanhope before,  
And I hope such a battle will ne'er be fought more.

Oh, this bonny moor hen, she has feathers anew,  
She has many fine colours, but none of them blue;  
Oh, the miners of Weardale, they are all valiant men,  
They will fight till they die for the bonny moor hen.

Anon.

red grouse



# The Weardale Museum



As part of your walk drop in to the Weardale Museum. Run entirely by volunteers, this small folk museum is a real gem, packed with information about the countryside, its history, the people who shaped the landscape and the features you will see on your walk.

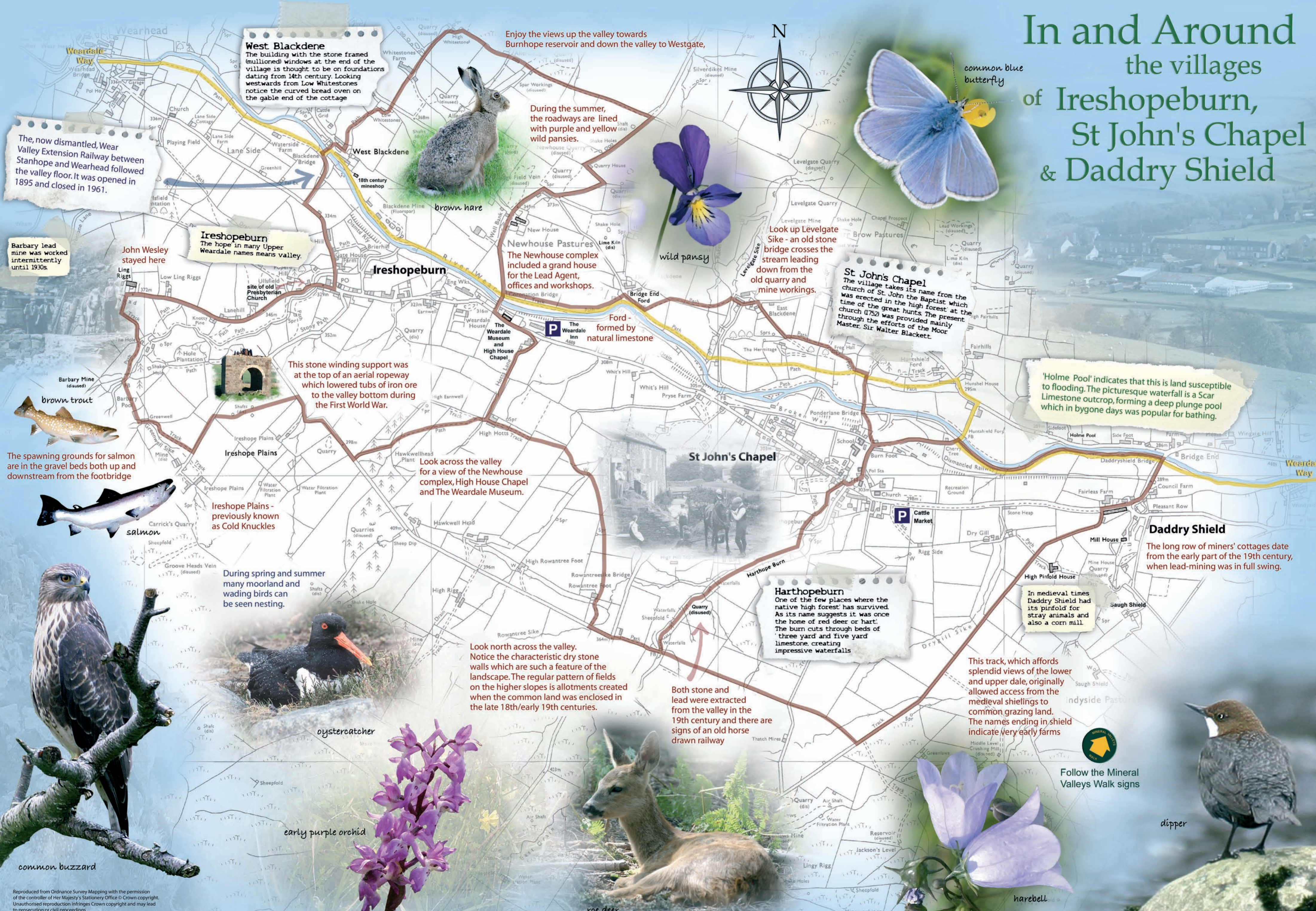
Walkers are welcome and by appointment groups can enjoy a talk from one of the guides.

Open 2pm – 5pm  
Easter and Bank Holidays  
May to September - Wednesday to Sunday  
August – daily

Groups at any time by appointment  
Tel 01388 537417 or 517433 [www.weardalemuseum.co.uk](http://www.weardalemuseum.co.uk)



# In and Around the villages of Ireshopeburn, St John's Chapel & Daddry Shield



**West Blackdene**  
The building with the stone framed (mullioned) windows at the end of the village is thought to be on foundations dating from 14th century. Looking westwards from Low Whitestones notice the curved bread oven on the gable end of the cottage

Enjoy the views up the valley towards Burnhope reservoir and down the valley to Westgate,

The now dismantled, Wear Valley Extension Railway between Stanhope and Weardale followed the valley floor. It was opened in 1895 and closed in 1961.

Barbary lead mine was worked intermittently until 1930s.

**Ireshopeburn**  
The hope in many Upper Weardale names means valley.

During the summer, the roadways are lined with purple and yellow wild pansies.

Look up Levelgate Sike - an old stone bridge crosses the stream leading down from the old quarry and mine workings.

**St John's Chapel**  
The village takes its name from the church of St John the Baptist which was erected in the high forest at the time of the great hunts. The present church (1752) was provided mainly through the efforts of the Moor Master, Sir Walter Blackett.

The spawning grounds for salmon are in the gravel beds both up and downstream from the footbridge

This stone winding support was at the top of an aerial ropeway which lowered tubs of iron ore to the valley bottom during the First World War.

Look across the valley for a view of the Newhouse complex, High House Chapel and The Weardale Museum.

'Holme Pool' indicates that this is land susceptible to flooding. The picturesque waterfall is a Scar Limestone outcrop, forming a deep plunge pool which in bygone days was popular for bathing.

**Daddry Shield**  
The long row of miners' cottages date from the early part of the 19th century, when lead-mining was in full swing.

**Harthopeburn**  
One of the few places where the native high forest has survived. As its name suggests it was once the home of red deer or hart. The burn cuts through beds of 'three yard and five yard' limestone, creating impressive waterfalls

In medieval times Daddry Shield had its pinfold for stray animals and also a corn mill.

Look north across the valley. Notice the characteristic dry stone walls which are such a feature of the landscape. The regular pattern of fields on the higher slopes is allotments created when the common land was enclosed in the late 18th/early 19th centuries.

Both stone and lead were extracted from the valley in the 19th century and there are signs of an old horse drawn railway

This track, which affords splendid views of the lower and upper dale, originally allowed access from the medieval shielings to common grazing land. The names ending in shield indicate very early farms

Follow the Mineral Valleys Walk signs

common buzzard

early purple orchid

roe deer

harebell

dipper

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## Walking Information

- P** the Cattle Mart car park, St John's Chapel or the eastern end of the Weardale Inn car park
- Tell someone where you are going and your expected time of return
  - This walk starts in a valley and climbs to high ridges. Use an OS map to judge gradients, wear appropriate clothing and footwear (the longer route covers very uneven ground and crosses boggy land).
  - Keep dogs under control
  - Leave gates and property as you find them



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## Amenities

- Parking, toilets, shops and refreshments at St John's Chapel
- Parking, refreshments and accommodation at the Weardale Inn, Ireshopeburn. Tel: 01388 537764
- Killhope, The North of England Lead Mining Museum. Tel: 01388 537505
- Tourist Information, The Dales Centre, Stanhope Tel: 01388 527650



This walk lies within the  
North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty  
[www.northpennines.org.uk](http://www.northpennines.org.uk)

This walk is brought to you by The Mineral Valleys Project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and led by Natural England, tel: 0191 2295500. Implemented by local communities in conjunction with Durham County Council, tel: 0191 3833239



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If you need this information summarised in another language or format such as Braille or talking tape, please call: 0191 383 3239