

## Teesdale U3A – Shorter Walks Group. A circular walk around Cockfield Fell – 25<sup>th</sup> July 2022

A small group met at Hollymoor car park to start our 3.4 mile circular walk around Cockfield Fell.

Cockfield Fell is England's largest scheduled ancient monument – almost 350 hectares in size. The fell has a rich historic past, which includes Pre-Roman settlements and industrial evidence that dates back to the fourteenth century. In 1869 the fell became a regulated pasture, managed by the Fell Reeves. This gives local stockholders the right to graze their animals on the land after paying a small yearly rent.

The whole area is strewn with earth workings, evidence of the fell's coal mining history. Mining first started on the fell in the fourteenth century. This was possible due to coal seams being very near to the surface in this part of west Durham.



We passed over a stile onto the Fell and after admiring a magnificent sunlit view stretching from Woodland to Toft Hill, negotiated gorse bushes and the remains of disused deep bell pits to find the route of the NER's 1863 Bishop Auckland – Barnard Castle railway and Cockfield station.

Continuing steeply and sideways downhill we found the floor of the Gaunless Valley at The Slack and the remains of another railway; this time the 1830 Haggerleases extension of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. This we followed downstream crossing an early example of a skew arch bridge and spotted some ancient 'beehive' coke ovens in the foliage. The old route, closed when mines ceased in the late 1960's is reverting to nature and its industrial origins are now harder to find.

More obvious are the remains of the 1862 Lands or Gaunless viaduct, a once impressive 4-span structure, engineered by Sir Thomas Bouch who later went on to design the ill-fated Tay Bridge as well as the Tees Viaduct in Barnard Castle and most other structures on the long-closed line across Stainmore.

Not far east of the last remaining pier of the bridge we crossed the Gaunless to climb back onto the Fell, parallel to the old Gordon House Colliery tramway, emerging at Fell Houses and soon afterwards finding ourselves in a downpour.



With waterproofs donned we recommenced our very wet westerly walk on the most exposed part of the fell, across the top of the infilled former Whinstone quarry, known as Cleveland Dyke.

At the remains of a now disused flare stack, we turned left up the track of an old tramway to find numerous pigeon lofts, some pea hens and suddenly gained a following of very animated hens which we imagined thought we had food for them.

By now the rain had stopped and we could see a splendid collection of sheds on the skyline which marked the boundary of Cockfield village. Looking back east we could see the storm clouds which had drenched us now over Bishop Auckland whilst we were once more bathed in sunshine and quickly drying off! Yet more sheep, cows, horses, hens and a cockerel strayed onto our path back to the main road and the car park.