

4-6 mile Walking Group – Report by Ian Royston

Slitt Woods- Tuesday 13th June

Seven brave souls braved the heat, sun and trespassing into 'the other dale' for our walk on Tuesday 13th June.

Starting at the village of Westgate, its name coming from the west gate of the Prince Bishops' Weardale hunting ground, our walk headed up alongside Middlehope Beck past a series of waterfalls, where the burn flows over step-like features in the rocks. The landscape is made up of repeated layers of limestone, sandstone and shale, known by geologists as 'cyclothems'. These rocks wear away at different rates resulting in the step-like profile of many hillsides and the waterfalls along the streams. The beck is crossed multiple times by well-maintained bridges, the lower parts seemingly popular with dog walkers.

The water and canopy of trees provided a cooling respite from the sun until we passed into a more open area, a former 'washing floor' around the 'bousesteems', the remains of buildings used to store the lead ore prior to washing. This is the first obvious evidence of lead mining which ensured Weardale's prosperity.

We continued north but, on our way, noticed two frogs, or were they toads? (no-one was quite sure) leaping alongside our path. Eventually the woods ended and the vista opened up to high fells and plenty of evidence of the industrial past with spoil heaps and the embankments of wagonways of the Rookhope and Middlehope system. Here in open meadows, we found Northern Marsh Orchids and Wild Pansies lining our route. For entertainment we watched a convoy of ducklings being led by mum across the heath, she seemed wary of our presence.

We left the beck via a short and steepish climb onto a well-used track passing Shield Close, a derelict house not long ago on 'Rightmove' associated with century-old quarries and mines which surround the high road.

Our steady descent back into Weardale turned our attention skyward, initially by curlews, latterly by a Royal Navy helicopter, flying at very low level a long way from the sea. Unfortunately, difficult stiles and nettles (six of us were in shorts) forced us onto the main road before we crossed the Wear to its south bank, behind Westgate village as it were. Though the ford looking inviting for a paddle to cool our feet we crossed a narrow footbridge to back where we had all parked. OS tells us we'd done (once translated) 5¾ miles. We'll call it 6!



