

The Backbone Of England: Life And Landscape On The Pennine Watershed

In recent years, the word 'iconic' has become so debased, applied to anything from a pair of shoes to a politician, that its true power has been diminished, but nothing else approaches ng justice to the Pennine watershed. It is iconic through its grandeur, its sheer scale, its ever-changing moods and the rich biodiversity that - with careful management - continues to thrive.

Yet there is a melancholy beauty in this landscape, too. The ridges are scarred in places by the functional but ugly buildings of grouse moors; some of the valleys have been flooded to create reservoirs that provide drinking water for millions; and from the upper slopes of Pen-y-ghent, the highest of the Yorkshire Three Peaks, you can spot the cooling towers of the two power stations that dominate the skyline to the north.

To the casual eye, the landscape here might seem barren and inhospitable. But to the walker - or anyone else who takes time to observe it properly - this is a world of endless fascination. It is a land of extremes - of intense cold and raging storms; of dazzling light and brooding mist; of wind and rain, sun and snow. It is a place where you might see harriers hunting over rough grasslands at dawn, curlews calling forlornly from a distant bog, and skylarks singing with defiant optimism high overhead.

The Backbone of England: Life and Landscape on the Pennine Watershed by Andrew Bibby

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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In these sometimes harsh, always demanding surroundings, local traditions and customs have evolved over centuries. The annual burning of the heather occurs on the moors, a practice that is essential to prevent the land becoming overwhelmed by scrub and rank grasses that would ultimately destroy the heather moorland, one of the UK's most important habitats. Up here on the watershed, the practice of sheep farming dates back to the Bronze Age, and you may still see flocks attended by sheepdogs, and shepherds in traditional clothing, on the high fells.

Much of the land hereabouts belongs to the National Trust or the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. It was in 1928 that the National Trust acquired Malham Tarn, the 'jewel in the crown' of the Yorkshire Dales, with its distinctive limestone pavement, towering limestone cliffs, and 26-acre lake. It's a favourite spot for day-trippers and walkers, many of whom make the short but picturesque walk from the village of Malham to the tarn's beautiful waterfall.

Further upstream, the Malham Beck produces Gordale Scar, a truly dramatic gorge with sheer walls of limestone that rise to more than 300 feet. The area is a remarkable 'limestone laboratory', with potholes, caves, sinkholes and waterfalls providing a unique natural history spectacle. To the south, and again under the watchful eye of the National Trust, is the

Ingleborough Estate - in all, some 10,000 acres of high moorland, limestone crags, upland hay meadows, and ancient woodland.

This lovely and diverse landscape incorporates the Ingleborough-Clapham-Settle Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a region of hills, dales and caves with a rich archaeological heritage, including burial chambers, stone circles, and prehistoric rock art. One of the most rewarding ways to explore this upland world is the Pennine Way itself, which crosses the Yorkshire Dales National Park between Malham and Hawes, passing some of the most beautiful and dramatic scenery in the north of England.

Of course, there are many more short walks and hikes in the area to suit all ages and abilities. There are up-hill challenges, such as the aptly-named The Calf nearby Malham. Or there are more relaxing riverside walks alongside the Wharfe or the Ribble. Other sections of the Pennine Way also make for superb walking - for example, on the high ground between Hawes and Tan Hill Inn, the highest pub in the country.

Alternatively, the Ribbleshead Viaduct, one of the most famous and photographed structures in the Yorkshire Dales, deserves to be your destination in its own right. This magnificent 40-arch Victorian viaduct carries the Settle-Carlisle Railway over the gorge of the River Ribble. It's also the starting point for a challenging ascent of Wharfedale, the highest of the Yorkshire Three Peaks.

However you choose to appreciate the Pennine watershed, it will linger in the memory for a long time to come. It's one of those rare places where the more you explore, the more you discover, and the more you yearn to return.

Image 1 - Malham Tarn, a beauty spot in the Yorkshire Dales National Park
Image 2 - Upper Wharfedale, a stunning valley in the Yorkshire Dales
Image 3 - The ribbleshead Viaduct, A famous 40-arch Victorian viaduct
Image 4 - Gordale Scar, a dramatic gorge with sheer walls of limestone
Image 5 - A stone circle on the Ingleborough Estate



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