ALVELEY: the rocks beneath your feet

Exercise your body and your mind on a healthy walk around old Alveley village and the restored landscape of 20th century coal mining. This walk will help towards your daily exercise routine. At the same time think about how the landscape has come to look like it does, because of the rocks on which it is built, and the natural processes that have shaped the area.

The most noticeable scenic feature of the area today is the valley of the River Severn, cut into a broad valley immediately west of the village. But rather than descending gradually to the river, the valley side clearly has a broad central step in it. 25,000 years ago this step was the flood plain of a young River Severn. The river had been following this course for only a few thousand years, since the melt-water from glaciers over the Shropshire Plain carved a new gorge through the hills at Ironbridge... As the river flowed cleaner and faster it cut its way down to a lower level earlier flood plains leaving them abandoned as terraces on the valley sides.

Only 70 years ago the main terrace provided a level platform from which to exploit a much older geological feature, but one totally hidden from view: the coal seams of the Higley and Alveley Collieries. From 1936 to 1969 the colliery waste from the workings east of the river was piled up on this terrace. In the 1980s, the considerable amount of remaining spoil that had not been removed for use as aggregate elsewhere, was worked into the smoothly rounded contours that we see today. Much of it was used to grassland, some areas were planted with trees, and the larger hollows were filled with loose earth to create the varied habitats of the Severn Valley Country Park.

Keep fit along the Geopark Way

This is one of four circular Health Walks that have been devised from localities on the Geopark Way, a 110 mile long-distance footpath from Bridgnorth to Gloucester. It runs down the length of the Abberley and Malvern Hills European Geopark. www.geopark.org.uk

This “Walk for Health” has been researched and written by Herefordshire & Worcestershire Earth Heritage Trust. © 2008. For further information- telephone 01905 855184 or see: www.earthheritagetrust.org

Features along the route

As you follow this walk you will find there are many features related to the rocks and landscape that you can literally “take in your stride”. Letters correspond to locations of features on the map overleaf.

A. Downstream from the Visitor Centre (see front cover) notice how the valley narrows as the harder Highley Sandstone crops out on the valley side. It was quarried at Stanley Quarry, the area now housing the Severn Valley Railway Museum. Stone from here went up and down the Sever for many stone buildings since medieval times, including Worcester Cathedral and Bridgnorth bridge. But in the last century the main product from here was aggregate for local use as roadstone.

B. You cross the first of a number of streams that are fed by springs a short distance to the east and follow a fairly direct course to the river. In the storms of July 2007 these streams became rushing torrents.

C. This field has been undisturbed for years and the sandy soil is clearly well suited as a home for ants. Lift the lid carefully on the sectioned ants’ nest to see the occupants at work.

D. The steep valley side here is stepped as it falls over alternating layers of hard sandstones and thinner beds of soft impervious clays. The latter cause springs to flow out and also ‘ lubricate’ land slips. But in part the sandstones themselves have been removed by quarrying. Millstones were an important product of Alveley sandstone quarries (see front cover). This gives a rather chaotic appearance to the valley side, suitable only for woodland. The trees have been coppiced here over the centuries. The woodland skills related to this management technique, which involves cutting down the main stems every few years and allowing the stumps to re-grow, are demonstrated on occasions in the area by the path.

E. Before the Country Park was created this was the area of greatest desolation with mounds of colliery spoil (right) stretching up the hillside. This was partly reused elsewhere and partly re-shaped to give the even slopes we see today.

F. The bridge is a new structure replacing the old ‘Miners’ Bridge’ a clue to the history of the area and the rocks below the surface. The bridge connected the Alveley Colliery to the sidings on the Severn Valley Railway for taking away the coal mined east of the river. Around the footings of the bridge the ground has been made-up from colliery spoil and reveals the typical mixture of the Coal Measures sequence of rock: sticky grey clays, black shales and occasional fragments of coal, brown nodules of ironstone.

G. The main operation of Alveley Colliery, working between 1936 and 1969 was on the broad terrace about half way up the valley side. Some of the typical 1930s colliery buildings remain here, now part of the Industrial Estate. The mine was an early extension of the older Highley Colliery, opened in 1870 west of the river. The Alveley shaft went down over 300 metres to the seams of coal (see front cover) that dipped gently from west to east.

In theory by working on eastwards the mine would have joined up underground with the workings of Baggeridge Colliery, but this was frustrated by geological faulting which made following the seams uneconomic.

H. Look out over the fields to appreciate the expanding terrace of the Severn upstream towards Bridgnorth.

I. The Church of St Mary the Virgin (see front cover) was started in 1140 and is largely of local stone, but from different sources at different times since, giving rise to a very mottled appearance. The red sandstone probably came from the quarry in the woods across the field to the north west (photo above). The creamy sandstone is more likely from just downstream.

J. The stone cottages down the old village street show a relationship between Highley and Alveley shafts and the main Brooch Coal Terrace of the Severn upstream towards Bridgnorth. But in the last century the main product from here was aggregate for use as local roadstone.

K. The viewpoint shows clearly how the River Severn has cut down into a more ancient landscape that rises steadily to the Clee Hills and Wyre Forest. The ditch around it is cut into waste with a high coal content (right).
A Healthy Lifestyle

Regular exercise of at least 30 minutes five times a week is recommended. This walk can be part of your routine. Before significantly increasing your normal physical activity it is recommended that you seek your doctor’s advice.

Walking the Way to Health is a joint initiative between Natural England and the British Heart Foundation to encourage people to take short walks in their local area as part of a healthy lifestyle. For more information see the web-site www.whi.org.uk

Disclaimer

This Walk is suggested activity to add interest to a publicly accessible route. Herefordshire & Worcestershire Earth Heritage Trust is not responsible for the state of any path or paths used. Walkers follow the routes entirely at their own risk and should take due care at all times.

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