



Chemical coast

Why did the remote location and rocks under your feet mean boom then bust for Ravenscar?

Time: 1 hr 20 mins

Distance: 2 miles

Landscape: coastal

Welcome to Ravenscar; a coastal village right on the edge of the North York Moors National Park, just south of the seaside towns of Robin Hood's Bay and Whitby.

Like many places its fortunes have changed over the centuries and it has experienced times of boom and bust.

This trail explores how Ravenscar's remote location has been both a help and hindrance to the village's fortunes.

Location:

Ravenscar, North Yorkshire, YO13 0NE

Start:

Ravenscar Visitor Centre, Ravenscar, North Yorkshire, YO13 0NE

Finish:

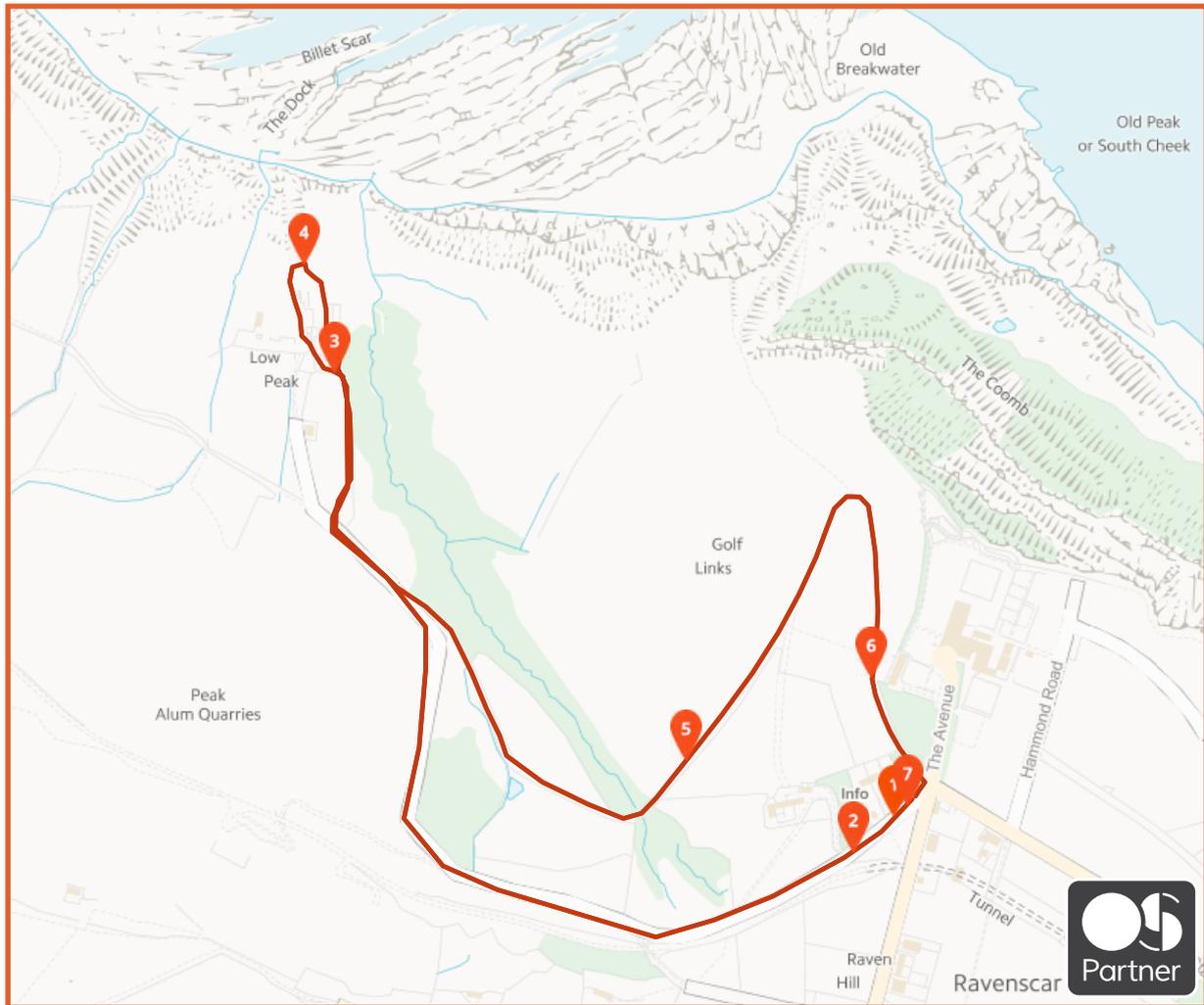
Ravenscar Visitor Centre, Ravenscar, North Yorkshire, YO13 0NE

Grid reference:

NZ 98009 01594



Route and stopping points



- 01 National Trust visitor centre
- 02 Wooden carving
- 03 Peak Alum Works
- 04 Grinding stone
- 05 Golf course
- 06 Stone bench
- 07 National Trust visitor centre

01 National Trust visitor centre

Welcome to Ravenscar. This coastal village lies right on the edge of the North York Moors National Park, just south of the seaside towns of Robin Hood's Bay and Whitby.

Today Ravenscar is a quiet village, and the population of the whole parish (including a neighbouring village) is only 319! However, 370 years ago, it was a busy industrial town and a key location in the birth of the British chemical industry.

Directions

Facing the National Trust Visitor Centre, take the pathway leading downhill to your left. A few metres along this path you will find a large wooden carving on the left (approx 8 feet high), stop here.

02 Wooden carving

This wooden carving gives us a clue about how people have made a living here. In fact, the industry it symbolises caused the biggest boom this village ever experienced. But before we discover more, let's find out a little more about our location.

Ravenscar is on the eastern edge of the North York Moors, 10 miles north of Scarborough and 9 miles south of Whitby. Think about your journey here today. You probably drove over the moors, spending the last 2 miles on small country roads because the A-road doesn't come this far. A railway station opened here in 1885 but it was closed 80 years later as part of the Beeching cuts. Before trains and cars imagine how isolated the village must have felt. It was a hard day's walk over the moors or along the hilly coastline to the nearest towns.

The lack of transport routes and hilly, exposed moors make Ravenscar a pretty remote spot. Limited connections to other places mean that, apart from a little tourism, there are few businesses and no industries here. It is perhaps not surprising that only a couple of hundred people live here today.

It would be easy to believe the village has always been like this, but in 1640 a discovery was made that transformed Ravenscar from a sleepy village into an industrial town. That discovery was a chemical called alum. So let's find out what alum is and why it was so important.

Directions

Follow the sign pointing downhill to the Alum Works. The path soon enters a wooded area, and after a while it forks again. Take the right hand branch leading downhill. Drop down the hillside and emerge out of the trees.

The footpath meets a larger track (with concrete strips for vehicles), signed 'The Cleveland Way'. Turn left onto this and follow it for 500metres until you see a smaller track leading off to the right. This is signed 'The Cleveland Way, Public Footpath, Alum Works'. Follow the track towards the coastline until you reach the remains of the Peak Alum Works.

Instead of walking straight ahead into the ruins, take the grassy path up to the left (by the fencing) so you can look down on them by an information board.

03 Peak Alum Works

We are now looking at the remains of an alum factory. Today the air is crisp and salty; 350 years ago it would have been thick with smoke and the smell of urine! (We'll find out why at the next stop).

Alum is a compound found in certain types of rocks. From the 16th century it became essential to the textile industry where it was used to fix dyes to cloth. The first alum works in Britain were in Guisborough, 35 miles to the north, but in 1640 alum was discovered at Ravenscar. A geological feature called the Peak Fault meant the alum was easier to mine here so a quarry and factory were soon set up.

The Peak Fault is a fracture through the local rocks. The rocks are mostly 'sedimentary', which means that they formed in layers. They were made from compressed mud and shell fragments laid down 200 million years ago, and one of the middle layers contains alum.

About 35 million years ago the landmasses of Europe collided, sending great shocks through the earth. At Ravenscar the rocks were folded upwards until a fracture appeared. The fracture exposed the alum-rich rocks, making it easy to mine.

Look inland and you can see where the rock was quarried – the rolling hill is suddenly interrupted by exposed rock. The bumpy ground in front, now covered in trees, is where unwanted soil and rocks were dumped afterwards.

Thanks to the local geology Ravenscar could support a booming industry. Its remote setting was an advantage as it meant there was plenty of land for quarrying, and space to build the factory and workers' houses.

Take a look at the National Trust information boards to find out more about the alum works.

Directions

Continue along the grassy path, by the fence, and away from where you entered the site. Follow the path through the ruins and down towards the cliff edge to the remains of the winding house (signed). Take a look, then walk round to the left of it and towards the cliff edge where you will find a large circular stone.

04 Grinding stone

This circular stone was used for grinding the alum crystals into powder. A second stone would have sat on top and the crystals would be ground smooth between them in much the same way corn is turned into flour.

Notice how the stone is perched right on the cliff edge. Before 1640 Ravenscar might have felt like this stone: clinging onto the margins of Britain, the last stop before the rough expanses of the North Sea. But with the discovery of alum, the village turned its face to the waves and embraced the opportunities the sea provided for materials, transport and communications.

Extracting alum from rock and turning it into crystals required two vital ingredients; potassium and ammonia. The sea helped provide both of these. Potassium came from seaweed and ammonia was brought in by boat.

Remember the urine smell? Well, human urine was the source of the ammonia! Urine was collected in big cities like London and Newcastle and shipped by the barrel-load to Ravenscar. Barrels of ammonia were winched directly from the ship's decks to the cliff top using the Winding House we just saw. Coal to power the factory also came in this way.

Ravenscar was transformed from a secluded village to a busy town. Over 100 people were employed at the factory and quarry. The sea connected it to other parts of Yorkshire, the Midlands, and even London, overcoming the challenge of the moors.

Alum became so important that Ravenscar grew rich and Dutch, Spanish and French pirates were known to make raids on the town. The place had gone from being a quiet backwater to the centre of attention. The alum industry boomed for 250 years but sadly for Ravenscar, it could not last. After synthetic dyes were invented alum was no longer needed in textiles, and in 1862 the factory closed.

Directions

From the grinding stone, turn your back to the sea, bear left, and head inland through the section of the ruins you missed before. Retrace your steps down the track you came in on and then turn left onto the larger path.

Walk uphill along the larger path and ignore the track off to the right where we joined it before. Follow the larger path uphill as it bends to the left and crosses a small stream and a cattle grid. After a few hundred metres you will be able to see a golf green to your left, stop here.

05 Golf course

Have you spotted the battlements standing proudly on the cliff top? This is not the remains of a castle, but the legacy of a man with rather grand ideas in landscaping! The battlements are part of a house owned by Reverend Francis Willis. Willis was one of the doctors who tried to cure King George III of his 'madness'. In 1820 Willis used his doctor's fee to commission a fancy new garden, with mock battlements built in stone from the alum quarry. Perhaps the majesty of the King's palaces inspired him!

The house did not remain a private residence for long. In 1895 the Ravenscar Estate Company bought it and turned it into a hotel. The railway had come to Ravenscar a decade earlier and this enterprising company realised there was a potential to develop the town as a tourist resort.

Standing right on the coast, with stunning views and plenty of space to grow, Ravenscar had the potential to become the next big thing. This had already happened in Whitby and Scarborough, spearheaded by the arrival of the railways which allowed more people to travel to the seaside. The same Company created the golf course we are standing beside as another way to lure day trippers and holidaymakers to this new destination.

Unfortunately, although some tourists came, Ravenscar never really challenged more fashionable resorts like Scarborough, which boasted a spa, a cliff tram and a promenade. The Ravenscar hotel was exposed to North Sea gales and had a 400 foot drop down to the beach. Although the railway made the town better connected, it couldn't shake off its feeling of remoteness.

Directions

Follow the path uphill and through a hairpin turn to the right alongside the battlements. Continue uphill until you find a stone bench on the right, and then stop for a breather.

06 Stone bench

Sitting in this quiet spot the only sounds you will hear are the wind, waves and seagulls. If things had gone differently though, you could be sitting in a busy town centre!

When the Ravenscar Estate Company purchased the private house, they also bought a large plot of land here for just £10,000. They intended to create a whole new town! 300 men were employed to build roads, lay drains and create gardens. Plots were offered for sale at auctions, with special trains laid on to bring in prospective buyers from the Midlands and West Riding.

Sadly, very few people were tempted to buy. Perhaps the expanse of sea on one side, and moors on the other, with the lack of existing development put people off. It didn't help that the shelters on the new promenade were blown away in a gale. Once again the village's remote location became a hindrance and the new town failed to get off the ground. In 1913 the company went into liquidation, and with it any hopes for economic renewal.

Ravenscar has changed over the years from a rural hamlet, to an industrial town. When the chemical industry declined it attempted to reinvent itself as a tourist resort. On the whole, it has returned to being a quiet village again. Only the traces left on the landscape give us clues about past glories and disappointments.

Directions

Continue on up path until you reach the road by Raven Hall Hotel. Turn right to reach the National Trust Centre where we started this trail.

07 National Trust visitor centre

Compared to the bustle of Whitby or Scarborough, Ravenscar feels more secluded from the rest of the world. Today the village economy is kept afloat by a small number of holiday-makers and golfers seeking a serene spot on the coast.

Ravenscar is also popular with walkers as the Cleveland Way (a National Trail) passes through and the Lyke Wake Walk finishes here. As you travel onwards through the village keep a look out for some of the teashops and B&Bs that have opened to take advantage of these visitors.

So what does the future hold for Ravenscar? Is change on the horizon once more?

In June 2015 a minerals firm was granted permission to build a £1.7 billion potash mine in a little place called Sneatonthorpe, less than 10 miles away. Potash is a mineral that works as a fertiliser and has huge potential for the farming industry. Although Sneatonthorpe is within the National Park, its quiet location and the promise of 1,000 new jobs persuaded the authorities that the development would be good for the area.

The new mine could well provide jobs for Ravenscar residents, bring more people to the area and boost the local economy. If the mine is successful, it is not impossible that Ravenscar could become a home to industry again. Could the remote location provide another ideal site for mining and might we see history repeat itself?

 **Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**