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Trail

## Spinning a good yarn

Explore the woolly heritage of Sedbergh in the Yorkshire Dales

**Time:** 1¼ hours

**Distance:** 1¾ miles

**Landscape:** rural

Nestled at the foot of the Howgill Fells, Sedbergh is a peaceful market town on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales.

With its rolling hills and emerald coloured fields, it is no surprise that this is prime sheep country. In fact, from the end of the 16th century to the early 20th century the Yorkshire Dales was a centre for Britain's knitting industry.

This trail explores Sedbergh's woolly heritage and finds out how farmers and artisans are drawing on this legacy to create a small, boutique wool industry today.

This isn't the only innovation taking place here however; this quiet rural town has been rebranded! Let's find out how and why...

**Location:**

Sedbergh, Cumbria

**Start:**

Farfield Mill Arts and Heritage Centre,  
Garsdale Road, Sedbergh, LA10 5LW

**Finish:**

Main Street, Sedbergh

**Grid reference:**

SD 67699 91910

**Keep an eye out for:**

Curlews in springtime! They return to the area after spending the winter at the milder Morecambe Bay

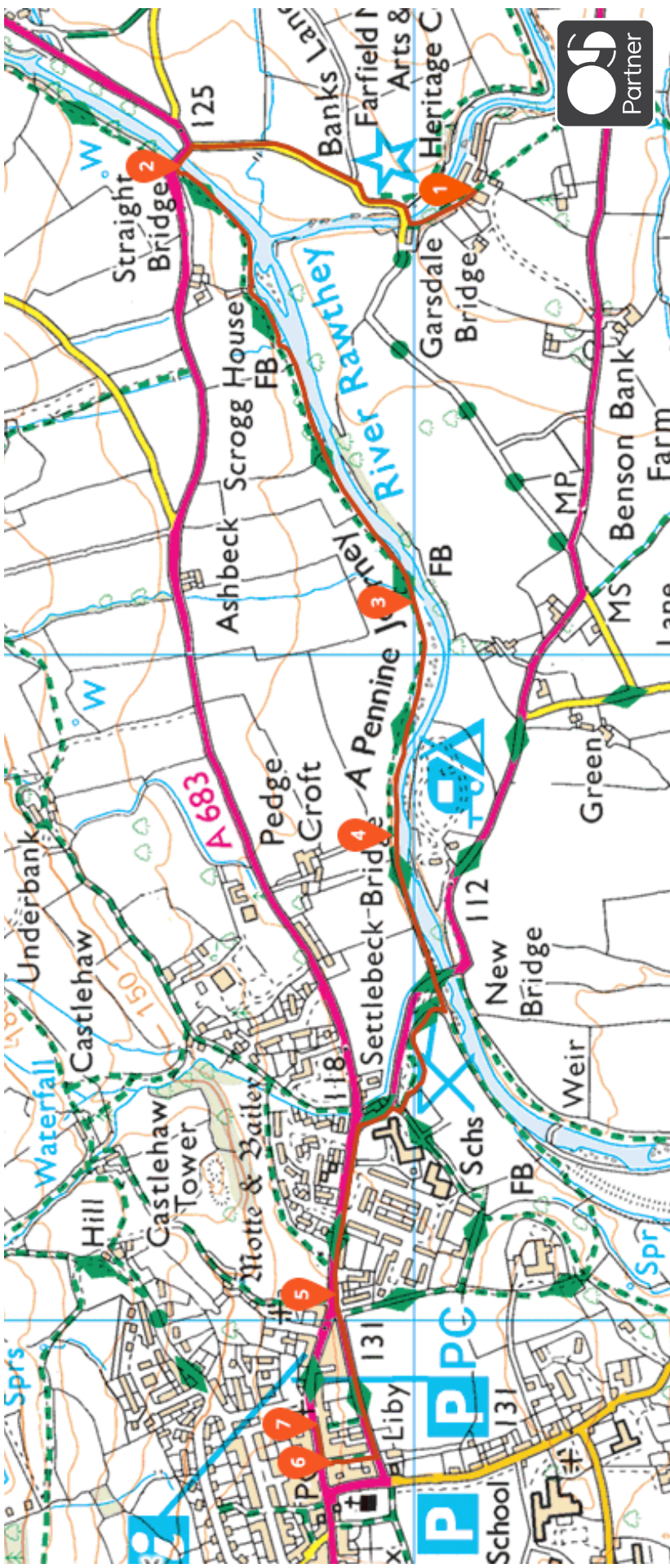
**Thank you!**



**Farfield Mill and Dent Village Museum & Heritage Centre for information on Sedbergh's woolly history and permission to use images from their collections.**



## Route and stopping points



01 Farfield Mill Arts and Heritage Centre

02 Field beside Straight Bridge

03 Wooden footbridge over Ashbeck Gill

04 Near Pedge Croft

05 Westwood Books

06 Weavers Yard

07 Weavers Studio

## 01 Farfield Mill Arts and Heritage Centre

Where better to start a story about wool than at a former woollen mill? Farfield Mill was built in 1837 for spinning and weaving wool from farms in the surrounding dales. It was one of five water-powered textile mills operating around Sedbergh in the 19th century, making this area a hub of the woollen industry

Standing at the entrance we can see the large windows that provided the workers with plenty of light. Also notice how the mill is built into the slope so it sits right alongside the River Clough. This was so the river waters could drive the waterwheel that powered the machinery.

But this mill wasn't where Sedbergh's woolly story started. A domestic knitting industry flourished here from the end of the 16th century. Men, women and children worked in their homes spinning and knitting by hand to earn a living. Many squeezed in knitting at home around their other work, sitting up late into the night by the light of a peat fire, to supplement their income.

By the 18th century much of the industry was run by hosiers, people who bought fleece from merchants and gave it to locals to work on. Socks, mittens, caps and jackets produced in Sedbergh were gathered up and sold to coal miners in North East England and elsewhere.

It is estimated that by the 19th century everyone in Sedbergh was involved in the industry somehow! This part of the Dales became renowned for knitting, including the 'Terrible [amazing] knitters of Dent', workers in a nearby town who were famed for their speed and dexterity.

As the industry became mechanised, spinning and weaving moved into the mills where it could be produced on a larger scale. In the aftermath of the First World War, the Yorkshire textile industry began to struggle. Cheaper imports from abroad, particularly India, meant the mills couldn't compete. In the 1940s synthetic fibres reduced the demand for natural yarn and cloth, and by the 1950s Farfield was in decline.

That isn't the end of the story though. In the 1990s this building was restored by a group of locals and enthusiasts who wanted to preserve the industrial heritage and keep alive the traditional textile skills. Now run an arts and heritage centre, Farfield Mill has become a focal point of a boutique textile industry. Highly-skilled crafts people create handmade high-end products, blending tradition and new techniques. Inside are exhibitions on the industry and live demonstrations by artists at work.

### Directions

Face the entrance to Farfield Mill and take the footpath to the left of it that leads around the bank. It is signed as no access for vehicles. (Don't head down towards the café/river and don't take the little road that leads back to the A684). Follow the footpath until you reach a row of cottages and turn right onto a small bridge crossing over the River Clough.

Follow the small tarmacked road until you join a main road (the A683). Turn left onto the A683 and cross over the River Rawthey via Straight Bridge. Immediately after Straight Bridge take the footpath on your left signposted New Bridge  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile. This leads into a grassy field beside the River Rawthey. Stop here to read Stop 2.

## 02 Field beside Straight Bridge

We began this trail on the River Clough and have now reached the River Rawthey. Pause and listen for the gentle burble of water just below us. Water is an important part of Sedbergh's woolly story.

Sedburgh is at the confluence of four rivers (the Rawthey, Lune, Dee and Clough), which made it a great location for the textile industry. The rivers provided water for washing and preparing the wool, and for powering the machinery to spin yarn. The area's steep fell (hill)-sides and plenty of rain also meant there was a reliable supply of fast-flowing water to keep waterwheels and machinery turning.

At the last stop we saw how Farfield Mill sits on the banks of the Clough. Originally a small channel (a 'mill race'), diverted the river into the building to turn a large waterwheel. In 1896 the waterwheel was replaced by a water turbine. This meant the mill could operate with a much smaller flow of water, making it more reliable when the river's flow seasonally reduced. In 1911 a steam engine was bought in to provide the mill with extra power.

Today this stretch of the River Rawthey makes a pleasant companion for the short amble through the fields to Sedbergh....

### Directions

Walk through the grassy field on the footpath that hugs the fence, with the river down below to your left. The path takes you up a little bank through a gate and into the next field. Follow the footpath and cross over a small wooden bridge over a (dry) stream. Continue to follow the path through several more fields and little gates until you reach a gate that leads directly onto a second wooden bridge crossing over a stream –Ashbeck Gill (again it may well be dry). On the other side of this bridge stop in the field and read Stop 3.

You will know you are in the right place as there is a sign immediately after the bridge saying 'For footpath keep to riverside'.

## 03 Wooden footbridge over Ashbeck Gill

Look around. It's likely you will be sharing this field with sheep, the critical element of the wool industry!

Farmers in the Yorkshire Dales have bred sheep for milk and wool since the Viking settlement in the 10th century. Over the last couple of centuries the most common breeds in the northern Dales were Black-faced or Heath sheep. It is their descendants we see around Sedbergh today, particularly the Rough Fell and the Dalesbred breeds.

Rough Fell sheep have horns and patchy black faces with a distinctive white nose. They are well adapted to the landscape and climate. They are big-boned for hill sheep, which makes them hardy and happy roaming the fells. They also have particularly thick coats to keep them cosy in harsh weather on exposed hillsides. The fells around Sedbergh, Kendal and Tebay are still the heartland for the Rough Fell, though there are now some as far away as Australia, since these tough animals cope well in difficult climates.

The wool from these sheep is hard-wearing. During the height of the home knitting industry (late 18th to 19th centuries) it was used to create hats, socks and mittens for workers. A thick, greasy yarn called 'bump' was even used to produce caps for slaves in the plantations of the West Indies.

It is fascinating to imagine the journey the wool would have made from the back of a sheep, via the hands of a Dales knitter, to the head of a slave in the Caribbean. It is a reminder of the patterns of trade and communication that have long connected seemingly disparate parts of the globe.

Today the coarse wool is used to make carpets and rugs. You may have spotted the artisans in Farfield Mill making some earlier. Many combine this traditional material with bold colours and designs, to create unique and desirable products.

The wool industry today is relatively small and specialised. To survive as a town, the people of Sedbergh have had to look for other sources of income too. Look up and you'll see the Howgill Fells rolling along above us. Sedbergh businesses have marketed the town's location as a haven for walkers seeking to explore the Howgills, the Dales and the Lake District, with its cosy pubs, cafes and holiday homes.

### Directions

Continue along the grassy footpath beside the river (the fence separating you and the river now disappears and you are level with the river here rather than up above it). Keep following the footpath and as you approach the town of Sedbergh you will see some static homes and cabins on the other side of the river. Stop where the footpath meets a stile and you can see a farm up to your right (Pedge Croft Farm).

## 04 Near Pedge Croft

Facing in the direction we have been walking (towards Sedbergh), look up to your right and you will see the buildings of Pedge Croft Farmhouse. This is a timely reminder to look at the bigger picture and some of the threats to local industries and livelihoods. After the decline of the wool industry, people have made a living in the area from farming, textiles and tourism. It has not always been smooth sailing.

Few of us will forget the horrific scenes of burning animal carcasses during the Foot and Mouth outbreak in 2001. The county of Cumbria bore the brunt, with 44 percent of all confirmed cases. The Cumbrian farming industry lost £200 million, whilst tourism lost £400 million. Sedbergh was badly hit. Farmers lost livestock and income, and as paths were closed to prevent the disease spreading, tourists stayed away...

The people of Sedbergh could not risk such great losses again. Walking-based tourism is also a seasonal business, with most money made in the summer. A cunning plan was needed to diversify local income and make the town less vulnerable. The townspeople thought creatively about the problem and came up with an innovative idea. See if you can spot any clues as we continue...

### Directions

Cross over the stile and the footpath takes you alongside a dry stone wall until you reach New Bridge which takes the A684 over River Rawthey. Leave the footpath and cross over the A684 at New Bridge, keeping on the northern/same bank of the river. Immediately after the bridge on the left, as you head towards Sedbergh, you will see a footpath signpost 'public footpath. Back Lane ½ mile, Dent Road ½ mile, Sedbergh ½ mile avoiding road'. Take this footpath through a gate into a small picnic area. Double back on yourself to the right to take the small gravel path leading along the back of a school playing field. (Don't follow the footpath along the riverside).

As you approach the tennis courts the path emerges into a small car park. Follow the path to the left of a stone totem (with the river and a mill carved on it) and up towards Settlebeck School. When you hit tarmac turn right and walk to join the main road (A684). Turn left onto the main road and walk up to the junction where you go left again towards the centre of Sedbergh. Walk up Long Lane towards Sedbergh. Pass the 'Welcome to Sedbergh' sign Cross over the pedestrian crossing, walk past the fire station and gently uphill towards the centre of town. Just before the no entry signs of the one way street you will see Westwood Books (with its painted grey wall).

## 05 Westwood Books

We are now standing outside Westwood Books, the largest bookshop in Sedbergh. On the way here, did you spot the 'Welcome to Sedbergh' sign? It includes the solution the locals came up with to make the town less economically vulnerable. Sedbergh is 'England's Book Town'.

The first Book Town was set up in 1961 in Hay-on-Wye by Richard Booth, the self-styled 'King of Hay'. There are now over 20 such towns around the world. The International Organisation of Book Towns website defines them as: *"a small rural town or village in which second-hand and antiquarian bookshops are concentrated. Most Book Towns have developed in villages of historic interest or of scenic beauty"*

The idea is that the bookshops attract visitors and provide a boost for other businesses (cafes, pubs, hotels, gift shops). The town can then show visitors its other cultural, natural or historic attractions to build a sustainable little industry.

Britain was finally declared free of Foot and Mouth disease in January 2002. The people of Sedbergh started their project the following year. The town encouraged book sellers to lease shops. It created festivals and events, formed a partnership with Durham University and generally began to market itself as a haven for book lovers.

Success was never going to come overnight and the town had to work hard to build a reputation and attract visitors. In 2005 Parliament officially recognised Sedbergh as England's Book Town, joining Hay-on-Wye in Wales and Wigtown in Scotland.

Sedbergh currently has eight independent bookshops, which may not sound like a lot, but is pretty impressive considering the number of second-hand bookshops in Britain has halved over the last decade due to cheaper products available online.

The Westwood family actually moved here from Hay-on-Wye in 2005, taking over an old cinema building and breathing new life into this end of town. They now stock over 70,000 titles.

#### Directions

Don't follow the one way street to Main Street and the centre of Sedbergh, but take instead Back Lane which branches off to the left. Walk down Back Lane until you reach Lupton House (belonging to Sedbergh School). Just beyond it there is a little alleyway leading off to the right which takes you into Weaver's Yard. Stop in the courtyard to read Stop 6.

## 06 Weaver's Yard

At the previous stop we heard how the town is re-branding itself. Sedbergh's past is never far away, however, and the people are proud of their woolly heritage. Look at the cottages huddling around this little cobbled yard. This place gives us a glimpse back in time.

This is Weaver's Yard, where the first weaving looms were set up in the 18th century. Carts pulled up directly outside the weavers' cottages to deliver the 'bump' and returned to be loaded with knitted goods. At that time, yards off Sedbergh's high street crammed with houses were commonplace.

Look to your left and note the steps leading up to the front door of the first cottage. In the 18th century the upper storeys of the cottages often had wooden balconies called 'spinning galleries' so workers could get as much light as possible. The lower floors tended to be used as stables, stores and workshops.

The building straight ahead was probably built as a town house in the 15th century. During the 18th century it was used for weaving. Look closely along its side and you can see the large bricked-up windows.

Continue along the narrow alleyway and look at the front of this building. It is a good example of how buildings are continually adapted for new uses. It is now one of Sedbergh's independent bookshops. Its name, 'The Sleepy Elephant', is a lovely literary reference to the writer and walker Alfred Wainwright. He noted that the Howgill Fells were often likened to a herd of squatting elephants (the shop owners felt 'sleepy' sounded nicer!):

*"In appearance the Howgill Fells are quite unlike the craggy mountains of Lakeland to the west or the rolling Yorkshire moors to the east; they are particularly distinctive. They are sleek and smooth, looking, from a distance, like velvet curtains in sunlight, like silken drapes at sunset; they are steep-sided but gently domed, and beautiful in a way that few hilly areas are. The compactness of the group is emphasised by a remarkable concentration of summits, often likened to a huddle of squatting elephants"*

### Directions

From Weaver's Yard emerge onto Main Street (by the Sleepy Elephant bookshop) and turn right. Walk along Main Street until you reach a shop called Weavers' Studio on your right. Notice the looms inside and if the shop is open go in for a chat.

## 07 Weavers Studio

As you walked down Main Street you may have noticed the range of mostly independent shops, companies, including cafes, a craft shop, an antiques shop and of course bookshops. It is good to see so many small businesses thriving after the difficult years of Foot and Mouth and the recession.

On this trail we have learned about the traditional industries of farming and weaving, which shaped the town of Sedbergh and the surrounding landscape. When the textile industry declined, farming and tourism provided livelihoods for people living here, although the 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak showed just how vulnerable rural towns can be when they are so dependent on the land.

To develop a robust economy the town's people looked for other sources of income and came up with the clever idea of marketing themselves as England's Book Town. It is still relatively early days but this seems to be paying off, with a charming high street, frequently filled with visitors, a busy holiday rental market and bustling cafes.

Although books are a new focus, the people of Sedbergh do not wish to forget their past nor lose the skills that once made the town part of the weaving centre of England. Weaving infrastructure has been restored and is used to teach about the past, like at Farfield Mill. Traditional equipment and skills are being used to produce high-end artisan woollen products. Just take a look through the window in front of you (or even better, go inside). We are standing in front of a co-operative studio where a number of artists work and sell their creations.

As some industries have declined, new alternatives have been sought out. Old buildings and skills have been adapted and reused to create new opportunities and offerings. It is this sort of flexibility and innovation that enables Sedbergh to flourish as a town to this today. From wool to words; this quiet market town is spinning a good yarn for itself.

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