



Walk

## Soaring pinnacles and secret caves

Find out how the rocky wonderland  
of Dovedale was created

**Time:** 4 to 5 hours

**Distance:** 6 ½ miles

**Landscape:** rural

Dovedale is a glorious medley of soaring limestone pinnacles, secret caves and natural arches, making it one of the most popular destinations in the Peak District.

Through its heart burbles the crystal-clear waters of the River Dove, dubbed “the princess of rivers.”

On this walk we'll find out what makes the river so regal, how this rocky wonderland was created, and how it became an inspiration for Romantic poets and painters.

### Location:

Dovedale, Peak District National Park

### Start and finish:

Dovedale car park, Thorpe,  
Derbyshire DE6 2AY

**Grid reference:** SK 14600 50900

### Keep an eye out for:

Buzzards! They are often spotted along the River Dove

### Directions to Stop 1:

From the car park, turn right and walk up the road past the water company's flow meter. Stop by the first bridge and look up at the hills on either side.

Thank you!



This walk was created by **Roly Smith**. Roly is a keen walker and the author of over 90 books on the British countryside. He has been recently described as one of Britain's most knowledgeable countryside writers.



## Route and stopping points



- 01 Thorpe Cloud and Bunster Hill
- 02 Stepping Stones
- 03 Lover's Leap
- 04 Ilam Rock
- 05 Viator's Bridge
- 06 Milldale

*This walk has two options for its return route:*

- 1. the flatter option is to retrace your steps back down Dovedale*
- 2. the higher level option is a circular route back around Ilam Tops and Bunster Hill*

*See page 6 for full details.*

## 01 Thorpe Cloud and Bunster Hill

The twin sentinels of Thorpe Cloud towering away to your right and Bunster Hill to your left guard the entrance to Dovedale. Over 50 miles from the nearest stretch of coastline you may be surprised to learn that these hills were once coral reefs! They are known as reef knolls and were formed around 350 million years ago from the compressed remains of coral reefs on the edge of a warm, tropical sea, which created the limestone plateau of the White Peak.

But look at the babbling waters of the River Dove to your side. It seems impossible that this quiet river produced such a steep-sided dale. So what happened here?

At the end of the last Ice Age, around 10,000 years ago, meltwater from glaciers swelled the Dove into a powerful torrent. Those icy waters cut down through fissures and faults in the rock like a knife through butter. The vertical crags and pinnacles we can see are harder bands of limestone that the water could not cut through so easily.

As we walk along Dovedale we'll see some examples of the other fascinating features created in the limestone.

### Directions

Follow the west bank of the River Dove beneath Bunster Hill to the famous Stepping Stones.

## 02 The Stepping Stones

This is one of the most popular places in the Peak District National Park with over a million visitors a year. The series of square-cut stones which cross the river here are not particularly ancient; they were put in around 1890 when donkeys were stationed here for hire to take you further into the dale.

The appetite for sublime landscapes, encouraged by writers like William Wordsworth, Lord Byron and Alfred Lord Tennyson and the paintings of JMW Turner, made the dramatic limestone features of places like Dovedale a "must-see" on the Victorian tourist's wish-list. Writing to a friend, Byron asked: "Was you ever in Dovedale? I assure you there are things in Derbyshire as noble as in Greece or Switzerland". The coming of the railway to Ashbourne in 1852 and the Ashbourne-Buxton line (now the Tissington Trail) in 1899 made Dovedale even more accessible.

Polished by millions of pairs of boots and shoes, the Stepping Stones were recently and somewhat controversially capped in concrete by the National Trust. So the fine patina which showed crinoid (sea lily) fossils in the local limestone is no longer visible. The Trust's action shows how many popular beauty spots such as Dovedale can be loved to death by a constant stream of visitors. They perform a difficult balancing act to protect this precious landscape while providing safe access to visitors. A warning though: you still need to watch where you are putting your feet.

### Directions

Once across the river, the path passes through a double squeezer stile and winds up on rock steps to the first major viewpoint in the dale, Lover's Leap.

## 03 Lover's Leap

Lover's Leap is another reef limestone knoll which apparently gets its name from a rejected girl who attempted suicide from this high point, but was saved by her billowing skirts! The steps up to the high point were allegedly built by Italian prisoners of war during World War Two.

This is a fine place to view the lower portion of the dale. Opposite, rising out of the ash woods, you can just

make out the rock pinnacles known as the Twelve Apostles. As we found out in Stop 1, pinnacles like these are made of harder bands of limestone that were left behind after the erosion of the last Ice Age. Over the centuries since then, they have been further shaped into craggy towers by water gradually dissolving the rock or repeatedly freezing in cracks until the rock weakens and crumbles away.

Dovedale's ash woods – now threatened by ash die-back disease – are nationally-important and also support the rare pink-flowering shrub mezereon. The limestone here produces an alkaline soil which is perfect for these plants. Again it is this humble grey rock which is responsible for the fascinating features we find in Dovedale.

The thickly-wooded nature of this part of the dale often obscures the views of the natural rocks – a relatively recent phenomenon since grazing was removed from the dale. Photos taken in the late 19th century show much more of the rock formations; the reason why a winter or spring visit to Dovedale can be so rewarding.

### **Directions**

Steps lead down through the trees from Lover's Leap past the barely visible, yew-clad needles of Tissington Spires over to your right. A few steps further on, and high up to the right can be seen the natural arch of Reynard's Cave. The more adventurous will want to scramble up the steep slope to reach it, but it is slippery and eroded, so take care.

We have discovered how the meltwater carved out this valley, leaving behind pinnacles and knolls (little hills), but why are there so many arches and caves?

Limestone has many joints and cracks. When acidic rainwater trickles into these joints, it dissolves and widens them into underground drainage systems, including tunnels, caves and caverns. As the river cut down through the limestone it intercepted some of these secret tunnels and caves, opening them up for the first time.

Reynard's Cave is the remnant of just such an old cavern, exposed as the Dove cut down through the limestone. The cave behind the arch is known as Reynard's Kitchen, and it was the home of some of our prehistoric ancestors. A hoard of late Iron Age and pre-Conquest Roman coins, said to be the most significant find of its kind in Britain, was found here in 2014. The cave is thought to have been named either after a local brigand who made it his refuge, or for its use by foxes as a den.

### **Directions**

Now the dale narrows to the section known as The Straits. Here the footpath has been raised on wooden duckboards above the level of the river, which is often subject to flooding at this point. The path passes directly under the Lion's Head Rock and then the dale opens out slightly where a footbridge crosses to Ilam Rock.

## **04 Ilam Rock and Pickering Tor**

These delicate fingers of rock on opposite banks of the Dove are one of the scenic highlights of the dale. Amazingly, the 25m high leaning finger of Ilam Rock has several rock climbing routes up its precipitous sides, while Pickering Tor has a gaping cave at its foot.

Both were left stranded as free-standing pillars of hard reef limestone when the softer rock was eaten away by the glacial meltwaters of the last Ice Age. Turner captured Ilam Rock in a painting, which undoubtedly contributed to our view of this as a sublime landscape and reinforced it as a place of interest to visiting tourists over the years.

### Directions

The path now swings east opposite Hall Dale to pass the impressively-yawning water-worn cavities known as Dove Holes. Beyond here, the riverside path passes a number of weirs before running under the impressive vertical cliff of Raven's Tor. A gentle meadowland path, rich in lime-loving flowers such as rockrose and thyme, now takes you into the hamlet of Milldale, which is reached by crossing the narrow Viator's Bridge.

## 05 Viator's Bridge

This former packhorse bridge now known as Viator's Bridge, gets its name from a passage in the classic book *The Compleat Angler*. First published in 1653, and never out of print since, it was written by Izaak Walton and his friend, local squire Charles Cotton.

As they cross this bridge, Viator (Walton) asks of his companion, Piscator (Cotton): "What's here the sign of a Bridge? Do you use to Travel with wheel-barrows in this country? ...why a mouse can hardly go over it: 'Tis not two fingers broad."

In the book, the Dove is much praised for its qualities as a pristine fishing river. It is the fact that the Dove flows on limestone for much of its life, which gives it its unparalleled purity, making it an ideal habitat for trout and other aquatic wildlife. As you walk along the banks of the Dove, now part of a National Nature Reserve, you may also see glimpses of dipper, grey wagtail and kingfisher, with rainbow and brown trout, lamprey and freshwater crayfish finding their home in its clean, crystal-clear waters.

The corn mill which gave Milldale its name is long gone, and most of the traffic in this remote little spot now consists of walkers. A small barn near the bridge serves as a National Trust information point, telling the story of their Dovedale estate.

### Directions

Cross Viator's Bridge and follow the road into Milldale.

## 06 Milldale

Limestone is the architect and dominant feature of Dovedale. This pearly grey, 350 million-year-old rock dictates the tone for the whole of this glorious landscape. It was this apparently intractable rock, carved over the millennia by wind, rain, frost and glacial meltwater into the soaring pinnacles, secret caves and free-standing arches we come to see and admire in the gorge today.

These rocky features have provided refuge for our ancient ancestors and the source of inspiration for writers and painters. And it is the limestone which produces the soil that supports rare flora and filters the water to make the river the perfect habitat for trout and other wildlife.

Dovedale is one of the major honeypots of the Peak District National Park, visited by over a million people every year. Visiting on a crisp winter's day, it's strange to think that this was all once part of an ancient tropical coral reef.

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

## Directions

You now have a choice of routes to return to your starting point. You can return the way you came to get an entirely different view of the dale, or you can take a high level route above the dale to the west.

If that is your choice, walk up the road from the bridge, turning left up a narrow lane to reach the stile at the top. This leads across the fields through more stiles to reach the lane leading to Stanshope Pasture on the left. Turn left after a few steps, and descend to the head of Hall Dale which is crossed by a stile. Keep straight ahead alongside a wall to a ladder stile and follow a series of stiles to reach the metalled Ilam Moor Lane, where you turn left.

Ilam Moor Lane is followed for about half a mile, enjoying extensive views across the Lower Manifold Valley to the right, while Dovedale remains hidden by the rounded hills of Ilam Tops to the left. The unfenced road to Ilam Tops soon appears on the left, and you cross a cattle grid and then branch immediately right, keeping above an old quarry, dropping down to a stile at the eastern end of Moor Plantation.

The path now traverses the lower slopes of Bunster Hill. The estate village of Ilam appears below ahead and to the right, but you continue to contour around the slopes of Bunster Hill to a saddle, where you descend to a stile.

Two more stiles lead around the back of the Izaak Walton Hotel, from where you bear left to emerge at a stile opposite your starting point at the Dovedale car park.