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Belper and The Chevin

Distance: 6 miles.
Time: 3 to 3½ hours.
Difficulty: Easy – One short steep climb and some other hills.
Maps: OS Explorer 259 – Derby, Uttoxeter, Ashbourne & Cheadle.
Toilets: Belper River Gardens.

This walk begins in the heart of the former historic mill town of Belper, before heading out across the riverside fields to the west of the town and on to the nearby village of Milford. It then climbs up onto the ridge of The Chevin, which gives broad views across the valley below. On the way, it passes an enigmatic stone tower from the early days of the railways, and follows one of the earliest routes in the area. It returns to Belper via two of the farms built by the Strutt family to provide food for their mill workers.

This walk starts at the car park of Belper River Gardens, just off the A6 Matlock Road. From the car park, walk up the ramp back onto the A6 Matlock Road and turn right. At the road junction, use the crossing ahead of you to cross to the triangular tree-lined area opposite. This is known as The Triangle, and offers the best view of the large red brick bulk of the East Mill. Almost certainly Belper's best-known landmark, this was built in 1912 to replace a number of older mill buildings. Jedediah Strutt built the first Belper Mill in 1776/7, based on the pioneering cotton mills built at Cromford in 1771 by his business partner Richard Arkwright. Arkwright's two mills at Cromford were the first in the world, and pioneered many of the principles of factory working. Strutt's mill at Belper was only the third to be built anywhere, making Belper one of the birthplaces of the Industrial Revolution.

From The Triangle, walk along the road towards the arched bridge over the road, keeping the low modern building to your left. The bridge over the road is a covered footbridge, built by the Strutts in the 1790s to link their mills on either side of the road. One interesting feature of the bridge is the square recesses in and to the sides of the bridge. These are actually firing ports for muskets, installed so that the Strutt family's private militia could fire on any mob that tried to attack the mills and burn the machinery.

Cross the bridge over the river and immediately turn left down a lane to follow the course of the river. Eventually, this will lead to a squeeze stile at the bottom of the lane, just to the right of a small brick building. Go through this stile and, keeping the hedge to your left, cross two fields, then head down the next field to join the path along the riverbank. *(Some parts of this section of the route can be very muddy.)*

Continue to follow the riverside path until it passes below a large steel bridge leading to a water treatment plant to your right. *(On a warm day, you may well smell the plant before you see it!)* Soon after this, the path swings to the right, away from the river, and joins up with the access road to the water treatment plant. At the end of the access road, turn left along Chevin Road to head towards Milford. Despite only being a narrow lane, this can be quite a busy road and, as it lacks pavements for part of the way, care is needed along this section of the route. For some of the way, the road is also in heavy shade from the trees on both sides, making it quite dark in places even on a bright day. For this reason, it is suggested that you take steps to make yourself as visible as possible to passing drivers via light or reflective clothing.

On the edge of Milford, the road passes over the main Derby to Sheffield railway line. The bridge here provides a good view of the northern portal of Milford Tunnel, built by none other than George Stephenson and featuring an unusual Saxon-style arch designed by the North Midland Railway's chief architect, Francis Thompson.

Continue to follow the road into Milford and past the school to the bottom of Sunny Hill, just before the road joins the A6. To your left at this point stands the tall chimney and surviving buildings of Milford Mill, another Strutt-built cotton mill. One of the early apprentices here and at Belper Mill was a young Belper man named Samuel Slater. Having learned the secrets of the Arkwright method of cotton spinning, Slater then took them to America in defiance of a government ban on the export of the highly lucrative technology. Known in America as "the father of the American Industrial Revolution", he is remembered less fondly in the Belper area, where his act of betrayal has earned him the nickname "Slater the traitor".

Turn right up the steep climb of Sunny Hill, which is lined by a mix of old and new stone cottages, many built by the Strutts for the workers at Milford Mill. At the top, the road bends 45-degrees right into North Lane. At this point, ahead of you, you will see the mysterious stone tower that stands on the top of the ridge directly above Milford Tunnel. Local legend has it that this tower was built during construction of the tunnel to house a rotating telescope, so that both ends of the tunnel could be correctly aligned. The truth, however, is that it is actually the remains of one of the first railway signal boxes to be built, and housed a semaphore signalling system used to control access to the tunnel below.

At this point, the lane begins to pass through the course of the Chevin Golf Club, so care is needed to avoid any stray golf balls that may come your way. Once you are clear of the golf course, look out on the right for the target wall and other remains of the old firing range at grid reference SK338459. This was built around 1800 for the Strutt militia, and used until replaced by a more modern firing range on Wyver Lane, close to the mills. North Lane itself follows the line of an ancient prehistoric route known as the Portway, which was used by the Romans to transport lead from north Derbyshire to the fort at Derby, so at this point you are walking in very ancient footsteps indeed.

After about a mile and a half, at grid reference SK336468, North Lane bends sharply to the left by a house. Just before this, take the signed path to the right, leading down through two fields back onto to Chevin Road. As you descend the hillside, take care to keep close to the wall on the left, but also take time to enjoy the view across the valley.

On joining Chevin Road, turn left to follow the road along to the junction with Farnah Green Road. Turn right here, and follow the road through the dip and over the bridge across Black Brook to the junction with the A517 Ashbourne Road. Again, care is needed along this section of the route due to the lack of pavements and the amount and speed of traffic encountered.

Turn right at the junction with the A517 Ashbourne Road and follow the road towards Belper. To the right of the junction stand the buildings of Crossroads Farm. This is one of a number of farms built around Belper by the Strutt family to grow food for their mill workers. All of the farms are architecturally interesting in that they incorporate some of the fireproofing features developed by William Strutt, son of Jedediah, to help protect the family's mills from the fires that destroyed so many early cotton mills. At Crossroads Farm, the farmhouse uses iron beams, rather than wooden ones, to support the first floor, which is formed of stone slabs in place of conventional wooden floorboards.

Just beyond Crossroads Farm, on the opposite side of the road, stands Dalley Farm. This is said to stand on the site of a 16th century shepherd's cottage, and some of the buildings may have been an old stocking factory back in the 18th century. The Strutt family built the current farm in the early 19th century and some of the outbuildings feature elements of their fireproof construction methods, such as the use of iron pillars supporting masonry vaults to carry the upper floor.

Continue along the road up the hill and around the left-hand bend. The road now begins to make the fairly steep descent down Bridge Hill. To the right stand a number of modern brick houses and an older stone building. This is the old West Lodge to Bridge Hill House. Now long demolished and replaced by modern housing, Bridge Hill House used to stand on the opposite side of the road to the West Lodge, and was the main Belper home of the Strutt family for many years.

As you descend Bridge Hill, it gives a good view to the right, looking across the mills and the town beyond. From here, it is possible to pick out a number of notable local landmarks in addition to the East Mill, including the tower of St Peter's Church, the spire of the nearby Congregational Church, and the white tower of the old windmill on Windmill Lane.

At the base of Bridge Hill stands the Talbot Hotel, which was built in three stages during the 18th and 19th centuries. Remaining on the left-hand side of the road, cross the bottom of Belper Lane and continue to head along the road towards the East Mill. The row of ivy-covered cottages to your left at this point are the former buildings of the old Belper Cottage Hospital, which was funded by the Strutt family and run by a Sister from the Convent of St Laurence.

Continuing on past the old Cottage Hospital will bring you out onto Belper Bridge, which you crossed on the other side of the road at the start of the walk. Crossing the bridge on this side of the road gives you the best view of another of Belper's best-known landmarks, the Horseshoe Weir on the River Derwent. Built in the 1790s to replace an earlier weir a little way upstream, this provided the power for all of the mills at Belper. Although no longer used to power the mills, it is still earning its keep today by supplying water to a hydroelectric power station located beneath the mills.

On the far side of the bridge, standing in the shadow of the much larger East Mill, is the five-storey North Mill. Built in 1804 by William Strutt to replace an earlier mill built by his father Jedediah, the North Mill is Belper's most important building. This is because – along with Charles Bage's flax mill in Shrewsbury, which was built at the same time – it is the earliest example of a completely iron-framed building in the world. The use of an iron frame, with the stone floors supported by shallow brick arches between iron beams, allowed William Strutt to completely eliminate wood from the structure and made it the first truly fireproof mill. This pioneering construction method was also used for many early high-rise buildings, making this apparently quite ordinary five-storey mill the great-grandfather of the modern skyscraper. These same fireproofing techniques were also used by the Strutts in the construction of Crossroads and Dalley Farms, which you passed earlier in the walk.

Turning right into the car park by the North Mill, you have the opportunity to visit the Derwent Valley Visitor Centre in the North Mill, where you can see displays relating to the area's textile producing past. Following the path to the left of the low modern building, passing between it and the river, you will return to the start point of the walk in the River Gardens.

Useful Information:

Belper is very easy to reach by public transport, with regular bus services from Derby, Buxton and Manchester, and hourly trains from Derby and Matlock. Belper Railway Station is about 10 minutes walk from the River Gardens. Most buses drop off either at Belper Bus Station or on King Street, also both about 10 minutes walk from the River Gardens. Information on public transport to and from Belper can be found online at www.travelineeastmidlands.co.uk/.

Pay-and-display parking is available at the River Gardens. For sat-navs, use the postcode DE56 1BJ. Other pay-and-display parking is available five minutes walk away on Field Lane (DE56 1DE).

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