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Belper to Cromford via Alport Stone

Distance: 9.5 miles.
Time: 4 to 5 hours.
Difficulty: Easy moderate – A couple of steeper climbs/descents.
Maps: OS Explorer 259 – Derby.
OS Explorer OL24 – The Peak District: White Peak Area.
Toilets: Belper River Gardens, Black Rocks and Cromford.

This walk begins in the centre of Belper, and makes its way cross-country to Cromford. On the way, it visits two of the highest points in the area at Alport Heights and Barrel Edge. Although it reaches heights of over 1,000 feet above sea level, the climbs are all fairly gentle with the exception of a couple of short steeper gradients. Although the first part of the walk goes cross-country along footpaths, the later part of it mainly sticks to roads, with just one diversion away from them to reach the viewpoints of Barrel Edge and Black Rocks. None of the terrain involved is particularly challenging, making this walk suitable for most people. Many of the roads used lack pavements or substantial grass verges, so please take care along these sections of the route and take all reasonable steps to ensure your safety.

The start point for this walk is by the traffic lights at the bottom of King Street. With the shops of King Street to your back, turn right and walk along Bridge Street past the Lion Hotel. Originally called the Red Lion, this was one of two coaching inns in the town, the other being the George and Dragon a little further on along Bridge Street.

As you walk along Bridge Street, you will see ahead of you the towering structure of the East Mill. Built in 1912, this replaced a number of older mill buildings constructed by the Strutt family. Founded by Jedediah Strutt, a business partner of inventor Richard Arkwright, the first mills at Belper were based on the pioneering design of Arkwright's mills at Cromford, and were some of the earliest cotton mills of the Industrial Revolution.

When you reach the traffic lights at The Triangle, in the shadow of the East Mill, cross the road onto The Triangle, where an information board on a stone plinth explains the story of the mills at Belper. From the information board, cross the road to the same side as the East Mill, turn left, and walk towards the three arches of the footbridge over the road. This covered stone footbridge was built by Jedediah Strutt to link his mills on either side of the road. Notice the two small recesses in the bridge, one on either side of the road. These were openings from where members of Strutt's private militia could fire muskets to protect the mills from mobs of machine-breakers angry at their jobs being stolen by the new spinning machines.

Continue under the footbridge to the bridge over the river. This is a good spot to view two of Belper's important features. The first of these is the Horseshoe Weir on the river, built by the Strutts to provide power for their West Mill on the opposite side of the road (where the modern factory building now stands). Although built in the 1790s, it still provides power today as it now supplies water to a small hydroelectric power station below the mills. The other important feature is the smaller building standing in the shadow of the East Mill. This is the North Mill, built in 1805 by Jedediah Strutt's son William using a pioneering iron-framed construction method he had developed. This iron-framed structure made the North Mill the world's first fireproof cotton mill. This construction method was later adopted for the very first skyscrapers,

making the North Mill the great-grandfather of the modern high-rise building. For this reason, it is Belper's only Grade I listed building.

Having crossed the river, continue along the road to the junction by the Talbot Hotel. Here, while the main road swings around to the left, continue straight ahead and then turn right into Wyver Lane. Follow the road past the houses and around the left-hand bend. Continue to follow Wyver Lane as it becomes a narrow tree-lined lane. Soon, you will see to your right the large pool of the Wyver Lane Nature Reserve. At this point, the lane widens to create a small parking and turning area for cars.

When you reach this turning area, go through the farm gate to the left, following the public footpath sign. Follow the trackway, keeping close to the wall on your left, to the buildings of Wyver farm. The footpath at this point passes through the farmyard and to the left of the large shed, before disappearing into the trees beyond.

Having passed through Wyver Farm, continue to follow the trackway between the trees as it curves around to the left. Eventually, this will bring you out onto Belper Lane close to Belper Lane End. As you join the road, turn right and walk down towards the Bull's Head public house.

At the junction by the Bull's Head, turn left onto Dalley Lane and then, after a short distance, turn right into Jesses Lane following the footpath sign. At the end of Jesses Lane, continue to follow the footpath up the slope and across the field towards the wood beyond. The footpath then leads through the wood onto Longwalls Lane.

When the footpath meets Longwalls Lane, turn right and follow the lane as it heads north. Longwalls Lane is a very ancient routeway, parts of which have recently been badly damaged by irresponsible 4x4 owners. As you follow Longwalls Lane, it provides some fine views to the right, looking across the Derwent Valley just to the north of Belper.

After about a third of a mile, Longwalls Lane reaches the junction with Wilderbrook Lane. Turn left at the junction, and follow the road along for a short distance until you reach the signed footpath on the right, which forms part of the Midshires Way. Follow this footpath across the first field to a point approximately halfway along the boundary wall with the next field. Having entered this second field, turn left and follow the wall towards the corner of the field.

Continue to follow the marked path (Midshires Way) across the fields until you reach the junction of paths at grid reference SK317507. Here, the Midshires Way turns right towards Alderwasley, but you should continue straight ahead towards the small wood, which you should pass the right-hand side of as you join Palerow Lane.

Joining Palerow Lane, take the marked footpath almost immediately opposite (slightly to the left) across the fields, passing to the left of the scrubby ground of Coneygrave Hillock on a farm track. Continue along this footpath across the fields, ignoring the path branching to the left towards Coneygrave Farm, until it reaches Peat Lane at grid reference SK308516. It is very easy to check that you are heading in the right direction as you cross the fields, as you should be able to see the many masts atop Alport Heights clearly ahead of you.

The path joins the road just by the junction of Peat Lane and Back Lane. As you join Peat Lane, turn right to the junction, and then left along Back Lane, taking care of traffic as the road is very narrow and lacks pavements or significant verges. Again, the masts on Alport Heights should be ahead of you to the left as you walk along Back Lane.

Continue along Back Lane to the crossroads with Alport Lane and Malinscommon Lane. Turn left here and, again taking care of traffic, follow the road along until you reach the paved trackway on the left that leads up towards the masts. Follow this up to the car parking area, which provides fine views out across the Ecclesbourne Valley.

Alport Heights was one of the first National Trust acquisitions in Derbyshire, and is the most southerly hill over 1,000ft high in the county. From here, if conditions are right, it is possible to

see far beyond Derby to the Malvern Hills around 70 miles away. Derbyshire Constabulary uses many of the radio masts on the summit of the hill, but some are part of the national air traffic control network. Below the car park stands the towering Alport Stone. This is not a natural feature, but is actually the remains of gritstone quarrying in the area, having been left by the quarrymen to show just how much material has been removed.

Having taken time to enjoy the views from Alport Heights, return to the road and turn right to return to the crossroads of Alport lane and Back Lane. At the junction, continue straight ahead along Alport Lane (which soon becomes Hay Lane). At times, the road gives more fine views to the left across the Ecclesbourne Valley.

After about a mile, you will reach a small hamlet where the road begins to descend into the valley below. Here, take the minor road that forks off to the right, signposted for Breamfield. This road again provides some good views to the left across the town of Wirksworth below.

Follow this road for approximately three-quarters of a mile to a T-junction, where you should turn left, following the road sign for Wirksworth. After a short distance, you will reach another road junction, where you should continue straight ahead, and then take the next road on the right (Oakerthorpe Road) to pass by the right-hand side of the Malt Shovel public house.

Follow Oakerthorpe Road for approximately three-quarters of a mile to the outskirts of the hamlet of Bolehill. As you do, the road gives more good views out across Wirksworth to the disused workings of Middlepeak Quarry on the far side of the valley.

A short distance past the Bolehill sign, just before the sharp left-hand bend, go through the stile to the right and follow the marked path up the steps towards the woods on Barrel Edge. This is a steepish climb, so make sure to pace yourself as you go. The woods on Barrel Edge and the adjacent Big Plantation belong to the Forestry Commission and are open access land, but it is easiest for this walk if you stick to the defined paths. However, if you are feeling a little more adventurous, feel free to go exploring – just don't get side-tracked too much!

Entering the woods, bear left along the main path, which remains close to the edge of the wood. Follow this path along to the Triangulation Point at grid reference SK293553, from where you can enjoy some outstanding views across the surrounding area, although these can be dependant upon how many of the surrounding trees have been harvested recently by the Forestry Commission. With a height above sea level of 1,056ft, this is one of the highest points in the area, and can (trees permitting) provide views across to a number of other prominent local landmarks.

From the Triangulation Point, continue along the main path towards Black Rocks, passing through a gate and skirting the disused workings of Barreledge Quarry. Black Rocks is a distinctive gritstone outcrop that is also a popular climbing location offering fine views from the top. However, you don't need to be a climber to enjoy them, as the top can be accessed via a clearly defined path up the rear of the outcrop, although this is a bit of a scramble up between boulders, so maybe not for everyone.

Follow the path to the left of Black Rocks as it descends to an information board at the side of the High Peak Trail close to the car park. The scree slope leading down from the outcrop is actually spoil from the old Cromfordmoor lead mine close to the site, and is now home to a number of interesting lead-tolerant plants. If you need to use the toilets here, they are located between the Trail and the car park.

From the High Peak Trail, walk though the car park and follow the trackway out onto the road. Turn right, and follow the road down to join the main road at the top of Cromford Hill. Turn right at the junction, and follow the road down the steep descent into the village of Cromford. Many of the houses along the road here were built by the Arkwrights for their mill workers.

By the Bell Inn, turn right into North Street. The houses here were the very first built by Arkwright for his workers, and are some of the very earliest planned industrial houses,

providing the prototype for mill and factory terraces all over the world. At the end of North Street, by the school, turn left and go through the stile on the left by the large tree.

Follow the pathway through the allotments and past the old stone pigsty on the right, both provided by Arkwright for his workers, to the large pit on the right. Locally known as "The Bearpit", this was used by Arkwright to control the water that powered his mills. The water that now flows through the pit is all that remains of the once-powerful Cromford Sough, the drain from the old Cromfordmoor mine. In Arkwright's day, around 72 tons of water would have thundered through the pit every minute on the way down to the mills. However, when Cromfordmoor Mine moved down onto a lower level of workings, the miners built a new sough to drain those workings. This diverted most of the water away from Cromford Sough and robbed the mills of the bulk of their water supply, which eventually led to their closure in 1846.

Continue to follow the path between the houses and back out onto Cromford Hill. Turn right, and follow the road the short distance down to the traffic lights at the junction with the A6. Cross the road here, and follow Mill Road opposite down to the entrance to Cromford Mill. Built from 1771 by Richard Arkwright, this is perhaps the most important historic site in the whole of Derbyshire, as it was here that Arkwright pioneered the factory working methods that were key in the development of the Industrial Revolution. It is for this reason that Cromford has sometimes been called the true birthplace of the Industrial Revolution.

Now owned and operated by The Arkwright Society, Cromford Mill marks the end point of this walk. Having completed the walk, you can either take a short guided tour of the mill, simply wander around on your own, or maybe just have a cup of tea in the excellent on-site café to reward yourself for completing the walk.

Useful Information:

The most convenient car parks in Belper for this walk are the large pay-and-display car park on Field Lane, or the free car park at the bottom end of Derwent Street. Due to the short time limits in place, do not be tempted to park in the car parks at Morrison's, B&M or the Co-op.

Belper is easy to reach from the surrounding area by public transport. There are regular buses from Derby, running every 15 minutes, with various buses then going on to either Ripley or Matlock and Bakewell. These services are operated by Trent Barton under the "Sixes" banner, with some buses calling at Belper Bus Station, while others call in King Street. There is also an hourly High Peak Buses "Transpeak" service between Derby and Buxton, via Matlock and Bakewell, which calls at Belper Bus Station, with some buses extended beyond Buxton to Manchester. Belper is also served by hourly train services on the Derwent Valley Line between Derby and Matlock (these run every two hours on Sundays). Information on public transport can be found online at www.travelineeastmidlands.co.uk/.

At the end of the walk, you can return to Belper via either the Trent Barton 6.1 service from Cromford Market Place, the High Peak "Transpeak" service from on the A6, or the train from Cromford Station, which is about five minutes walk from the Mill. If travelling home directly from Cromford, both the Trent Barton 6.1 service and the northbound "Transpeak" serve Matlock and Bakewell, with the "Transpeak" continuing to Buxton and Manchester. Again, information on public transport can be found online at www.travelineeastmidlands.co.uk/.

Public toilets can be found at Belper River Gardens (by the East Mill), at Black Rocks (by the car park), or there are three sets in Cromford (by the A6 next to the Community Centre, in the yard at Cromford Mill, or on Cromford Wharf by the canal).

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