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Cromford Wharf to Riber Castle Circular Walk

Distance: 7 miles.
Time: 3 to 4 hours.
Difficulty: Moderate – Some steepish climbs and descents. Chance of some mud in places.
Maps: OS Explorer OL24 – The Peak District: White Peak Area.
Toilets: Cromford Canal Wharf, High Peak Junction and Matlock Bath Pavilion.

This circular walk takes in a number of interesting parts of the Cromford and Matlock bath area. It begins with the Cromford Canal, High Peak Junction and Leawood Pumphouse. From there, it heads to the world's oldest factory still in use, before heading up through woods to the hills above the valley. There, it visits one of the area's most prominent landmarks, before dropping back down into the valley to follow the road back to Cromford.

The walk begins in the car park of Cromford Canal Wharf. The buildings here are all associated with the Cromford Canal, which was opened in 1794 to link the village of Cromford with the Erewash Canal at Langley Mill, 14½ miles to the east. Most people think the canal was created to serve the pioneering cotton mills built at Cromford by inventor Sir Richard Arkwright. However, it was actually intended to serve a number of mineral businesses along the route, and Arkwright had to be persuaded of the value of the canal to his business. However, once he had been convinced, Arkwright threw his full political weight behind the project, and also provided the land for the construction of the wharf. The canal remained in use until 1944, although the collapse of Butterley Tunnel near Ripley in 1900 isolated it from the rest of the national network.

From the Canal Wharf, begin to walk along the canal towpath. As you walk, the ground falls away to the left, giving good views across Cromford Meadows to the hills on the far side of the valley. Although little trace now remains, the part of Cromford Meadows closest to the road was actually the original site of the village of Cromford. However, Arkwright moved it to its current site on the hillside so that it wouldn't spoil the views from Willersley castle, the grand stately home he was building with the huge profits from his mills.

After a short while, the trees close in on both sides of the canal. As you walk, you will hear the sound of running water. Look to your left through the trees and you may spot water flowing through a small archway in the railway embankment as it crosses the canal. The water you can see here is actually that which has flowed through the Cromford Mill site, and was once used to power the machinery there. It flows into the river at this point because it is only here that the river is below the level of the waterwheels at the Mill, allowing the water to effectively drain away from them.

Continue walking along the canal and you will soon arrive at the buildings of High Peak Junction. This is located at the southern end of the High Peak Trail, which follows the route of the old Cromford and High Peak Railway across the high plateau of the Peak District to near Buxton. Built in the 1830s, this was one of the earliest railways in the world, and was designed to provide a shortcut from Cromford to the main cotton-producing areas of Manchester and Lancashire. The line was unusual in that it was built more like a canal, with long flat sections

linked by steep rope-worked inclines, and its summit at almost 1,200ft was higher than the highest point on the current British railway network. In the 1850s, the line was linked into the main railway network via a junction with the main Derby to Manchester line, but was only ever a secondary route. After a slow decline, it finally closed to all traffic in 1967.

Remaining on the left-hand towpath, continue along the canal past the old goods shed on the far side of the canal and the tall chimney of Leawood Pumphouse. This was built in the late 1840s to raise water from the River Derwent into the canal to help maintain its level following the loss of one of its main sources of water at the Cromford end. The Pumphouse stands at one end of the aqueduct that carries the canal over the River Derwent. At the far end of the aqueduct, turn left to follow what is variously known as the Leawood Arm or Nightingale Arm of the canal. This was a slightly later addition to the canal, built by Peter Nightingale to serve a lead mill at Lea Bridge. Peter Nightingale, the great-uncle of the far more famous Florence, was a one-time associate of Arkwright's, until he stole the secrets of Arkwright's machines and set up his own mill in partnership with a man named John Smedley. In the trees on the far side of the canal junction, you can see an overgrown ruined building. This is the remains of Aqueduct Cottage, which was the home of the lengthsman for the Nightingale Arm.

Follow the towpath and footpath past Wharf Cottage and Hatter's Mill, taking the left-hand fork by Lea Hurst Lodge as you approach the road. As you join the road, you will see in front of you the knitwear factory of John Smedley Ltd. This sits on the same site as used by Peter Nightingale and John Smedley for their original cotton mill, and is the world's oldest factory still in production.

Cross the road, turn left across the bridge over Lea Brook and, just after the garages on the right, take the signed footpath through the squeeze stile into Bow Wood. Through the stile, head to the right, so as to pass to the left of the buildings of the John Smedley factory. Take the left fork in the path by the buildings, and fork left again a short distance further on at SK317565.

Follow the footpath up the hill into Coumbs Wood and follow either of the footpaths through the wood to join the trackway of Hearthstone Lane at SK311572. Follow this through Hearthstone Farm and continue along it until you reach the T-junction with Riber Road. Turn right at this junction and walk along Riber Road, taking care as it is a narrow lane with no pavements. As you walk along, you will begin to see glimpses of Riber Castle through the trees to the left. Soon, you will also pass the original ornamental gates to Riber Castle and the square castellated lodge building, opposite the junction with Carr Lane.

Also known as Smedley's Folly, Riber Castle was built in the mid-19th century by John Smedley (1803 – 1874), the son of the John Smedley who had been the business partner of Peter Nightingale. After it ceased to be the family home, it was used as a boy's school and later as a wildlife park, with the building itself becoming derelict. Since the closure of the wildlife park in September 2000, the building has been restored and converted into luxury apartments.

Continue along Riber Road past the early-17th century buildings of Riber Hall Farm until you reach another T-junction, where you should turn left up the slope. Follow the lane past the right hand side of Riber Castle and take the signed footpath for Matlock through the trees and down the open slopes to the junction of paths at SK303591. *(Do NOT take the path to the left by the small cottage on the right at SK305591!)* Here, take the left-hand path across the slope to join Riber Road at the apex of the sharp uphill bend. Walk down the steep slope of Riber Road to the junction with Starkholmes Road and turn left. *(You can take a slight shortcut by taking the short path from the apex of the next hairpin bend, turning left at the end of this.)* Take care along Starkholmes Road, as there are no pavements in places, and in others the "pavement" is simply a painted line on the road.

At the bus stop by the White Lion, take the marked footpath to the right and follow this down the hill towards the cable car base station. From there, follow the footpath to Matlock Bath Railway Station. The station buildings at Matlock Bath are somewhat unusual, being built in the style of a Swiss chalet. This is the result of the area being known as "Little Switzerland" in the

19th century due to its steeply wooded rocky valley. Cross the railway line here, taking care to make sure there are no trains coming, and walk through the car park and down to the A6 North Parade by the Midland Hotel.

Turn left at the Midland Hotel and follow the A6 North Parade and South Parade through Matlock Bath. Alternatively, if you want to escape the traffic a little, you can cross the river via Jubilee Bridge and use the wooded Lover's Walks to follow the river. You can then re-cross the river on the other footbridge at the far end of the Walks, walking back towards the Pavilion and up the ramp to rejoin the A6 on Derby Road, turning left along the road to continue the walk.

Following the A6 Derby Road takes you past the New Bath Hotel on the far side of the road, and you will soon see the tall chimney and imposing red brick buildings of Masson Mill ahead of you. This was built in 1784 by Sir Richard Arkwright as his showpiece mill, and was built in brick to demonstrate his huge wealth – At this time, building in brick was about five times as expensive as building in stone. (*Don't be misled by the 1769 date on the building, as that was actually the date of the awarding of Arkwright's patent for his spinning machines.*) Masson Mill continued in use as a cotton mill until 1991, when it became the last place in the Derwent Valley where cotton was spun. It now houses a shopping centre and a small working textile museum.

Continuing on past Masson Mill soon brings you to the traffic lights of Cromford Crossroads. To the left, just before the lights, is a pair of large iron gates. Go through these and follow the trackway along down the slope. Through the trees to the left, you will see the River Derwent flowing past. If you are lucky, you will also see glimpses of Willersley Castle, the grand house built by Sir Richard Arkwright but that he never got to enjoy as he died before it was completed.

As you reach the bottom of the slope, the trees open out and you will get a fine view ahead of St Mary's Church. This was built by Sir Richard Arkwright as part of the Willersley Castle estate, and is where he and many other members of his family are buried.

Pass the church on the right and go through the gateway onto the road. Turn right, walk a short distance up the road, and you will see the entrance to the Cromford Wharf car park on the opposite side of the road. Before returning to the start point of the walk, you may wish to visit Cromford Mill itself, which is undergoing a long-term restoration by the Arkwright Society and houses a museum and a number of retail businesses.

Useful Information:

Pay-and-display car parking is available at Cromford Canal Wharf, next door on Cromford Meadows, and across the road at Cromford Mill. The postcode for finding all three via sat-nav is DE4 3RQ.

Cromford is very easy to reach via public transport, with hourly trains from Derby and Matlock (every two hours on Sundays), and regular bus services from Derby, Belper, Ripley, Matlock, Buxton and Manchester. Most buses drop off in the village, about five minutes walk from the Canal Wharf. Cromford Station is also about five minutes walk away in the opposite direction. Information on public transport can be found online at www.travelineeastmidlands.co.uk/.

There are no banks or free cashpoints in Cromford. The closest cashpoint to Cromford is at Matlock Bath Pavilion.

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