

Richard Watson, 1833–1891

Lead miner, poet and entertainer



Richard Watson was born in Middleton-in-Teesdale, the son of a hard-working lead miner. From the age of six he went to the London Lead Company's school in the village. His ability with words was praised by the schoolmaster who sent him to the Rector at Middleton, the Reverend John Henry Brown, who encouraged him to write his own verse.

Richard had to leave school two years early, at the age of ten, when his father became seriously ill through toiling long hours in the unhealthy dust and dampness of the lead mines. Richard started above ground as a washer boy cleaning lead ore and was helping to support his family by the time his father died at the age of 47. He composed verses about his workmates, and when he was still a young man he had his first poem published in the local weekly newspaper, the Teesdale Mercury.

He was often called upon to compose rhymes for special occasions, such as company dinners, and on one occasion his audience numbered more than a thousand. But while other men did spare time jobs such as knitting, woodwork or dry stone walling, he was more interested in reading and writing than hard, physical work. He published a slim volume of poems in 1862 but it brought him little reward as he gave most of the books away.

In later years he became so impoverished that the Teesdale Mercury started an appeal fund to help him. Local people gave little however, feeling that he was mostly to blame for his own troubles. He died at the age of 58, leaving these lines torn from a notebook beside his bed as his own epitaph:



A poor, hard working rustic bard,
His lot indeed was crook'd and hard,
Of comforts wealth bestows, debarred;
A load of woes.
To suffering worth 'tis the reward
This world bestows.



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A 2¾-mile circular route, starting from Bowlees Visitor Centre in Upper Teesdale, exploring the life and times of Richard Watson, Victorian lead miner and poet.

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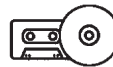


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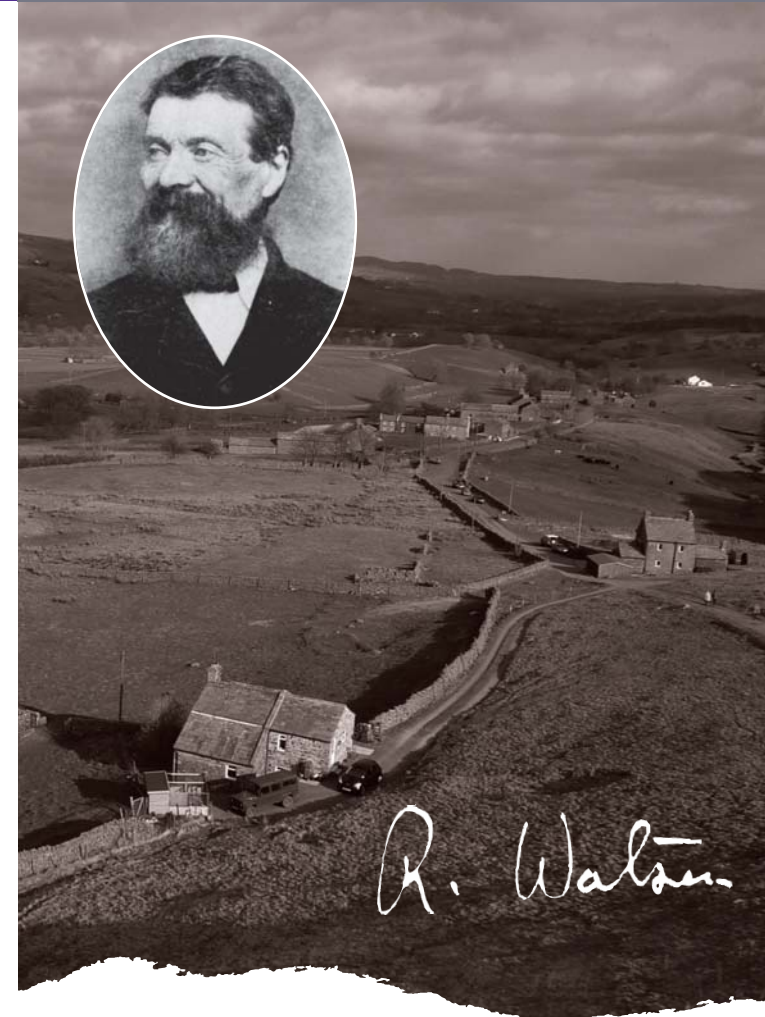
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With special thanks to Jim McTaggart, former editor of the Teesdale Mercury, for permission to quote from his biography of Richard Watson and his support in producing this leaflet.

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Richard Watson Trail

A wander from Bowlees in Teesdale



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The Richard Watson Trail



I've wandered many a weary mile
And in strange countries been,
I've dwelt in towns and on wild moors
And curious sights I've seen;
But still my heart clings to the dale,
Where Tees rolls to the sea,
Compared with what I've seen I'll say,
The Teesdale Hills for me.



The trail follows part of the route that Richard Watson and lead miners like him would have taken on their journey to work, as described in one of his most popular poems.

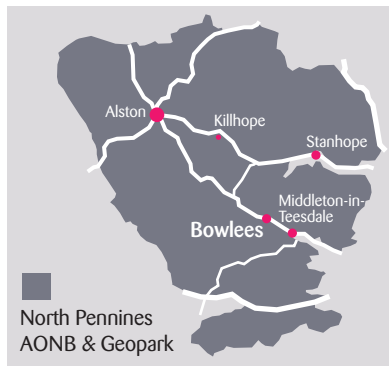
Look for the **Start** on the map overleaf, and follow in Richard Watson's footsteps...



Walk length/time: 2¼ miles (4.3 km), taking about 1½–2 hours

Start/finish: Bowlees car park.
Grid reference NY 908 282

Terrain: The route follows public footpaths (and short stretches of minor roads) on grassy tracks and paths, with some gentle climbs. Strong shoes or walking boots are recommended as the ground can be uneven and boggy in places.



Public transport: Buses sometimes run to Bowlees from Middleton-in-Teesdale. For latest information call Traveline on 0871 200 22 33 (www.traveline.info).

Facilities: Bowlees Visitor Centre offers refreshments, information, toilets, accessible parking and activities (find out more at www.visitbowlees.org.uk). Middleton-in-Teesdale, 3 miles from Bowlees, has shops, pubs, cafés and public toilets.

Useful map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 31 North Pennines Teesdale & Weardale.

Discover: For more on the life and work of North Pennine lead miners, visit Killhope, the North of England Lead Mining Museum, in Weardale (www.killhope.org.uk).

The life and times of a Victorian lead miner



Large rubbish heaps along the hill side show
The vast extent of hollow ground below.



In Richard Watson's time the North Pennines was Britain's most productive lead mining area. Lead was in huge demand for a wide range of uses, from roofing and plumbing, to the manufacture of paint, shot, pewter mugs and plates, lead crystal glass and even toys like lead soldiers.

The production of lead involved three main processes:

- **Mining** A network of shafts and tunnels was dug to reach the lead ore (the mineral galena) which is found in vertical wall-like mineral veins underground.
- **Washing** Water, gravity and simple tools were used to separate the heavier lead ore from the rock and other minerals. The work of crushing, grading and washing was mostly done out of doors, in all weathers, by young boys on the 'washing floor'.
- **Smelting** The lead ore was heated in a furnace with peat or coal to extract metallic lead. This process required great skill and was a trade passed down from father to son.

In Teesdale the London Lead Company leased most of the mining rights and dominated the industry. From its headquarters in Middleton it ran over 20 mines and employed over a thousand men and boys. While the company provided schools, reading rooms and encouraged church attendance on Sundays, the miners had to buy their own candles, gunpowder and tools from the company stores.

They worked in teams or 'partnerships', typically of 4–6 men, and were only paid for the lead ore they produced; even the cost of washing the ore was taken from their pay. By the turn of the 20th century, facing increasingly stiff competition from abroad, lead mining had practically ceased in Teesdale.

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Above: Lead mining in Teesdale – horse-drawn tubs at Wiregill

Other places to visit in Teesdale linked to Richard Watson's life and times



Richard's birthplace

Richard was born in Middleton in 'Ten Row', a terrace of cottages in Masterman Place. They were built by the London Lead Company for its more hard working, reliable and sober workers, with long gardens stretching down to the River Tees for growing vegetables.



Strathmore Arms

Richard lived for a time with his wife and five daughters in the single storey section on the right of the house. Now the Strathmore Arms, a welcoming pub offering food and accommodation in Holwick, it was at that time a private house (www.strathmoregold.co.uk).



His final resting place

Richard lies with his wife Ann (known by everyone as Nancy) and daughter Mary almost forgotten in a shady corner of the graveyard of St Mary's Church in Middleton. *'Enough the record of his name, his songs perpetuate his fame.'*



In memory

On the wishes of his granddaughter, a stained glass memorial window was installed inside St Mary's in 1998. Against a backdrop of a lead mining scene, Richard is depicted scribbling these lines: *'From nature's self my muse doth spring'.*

My Journey to Work

This trail follows some of the route described in one of Richard Watson's poems. His 7-mile 'commute' from Holwick took him across the River Tees to Newbiggin, and then over Hardberry Hill to the mines at Little Egglesthope a further 4 miles away.

As lead miners often lived some distance from the mines, they would usually walk to work and stay in 'lodging shops' (or 'mineshops') during the week. The mineshops were overcrowded (sleeping 3 or 4 to a bed) and filthy, stinking and verminous. Conditions were so bad that more men were killed by tuberculosis than died in mining accidents.



Above: Great Egglesthope Mine washing floor Richard started out as a washer boy nearby at Wiregill Mine on 6d a day.



Richard Watson trail
His 'Journey to Work' as described in the poem
 (Scoberry Bridge, which would have shortened his journey, wasn't built till later)

After a meal and a short rest, I find
 Myself refreshed, and more for work inclined;
 Then down the stony burn my footsteps wend,
 And reach my cabin at my journey's end.

To return to the start, keep to the path through two meadows, to the main road at Bowlees. Turn right, then left to follow the footpath to the right of the old chapel, and cross the footbridge over Bow Lee Beck back to the car park.

8. Low Force
 After admiring the Tees...
 Foaming and dashing in its rapid course,
 O'er the rough grey whin rock named Little Force,
 ...follow the path up through the pine trees to a squeeze stile in the wall.

7. Wynch Bridge
 So o'er the creaking chain-bridge
 take my way...
 The original suspension bridge was built so miners like Richard could cross the Tees to get to the lead mines in the hills to the north.
 Cross the bridge to the north side of the river.

6. Holwick Lodge
 The original 'shooting box' was built by Cosmo Bonsor, an MP and director of the Bank of England, who had leased the adjoining grouse moors from the Earl of Strathmore. Stone from Dunhouse Quarry, near Barnard Castle, was brought by rail to Middleton and then taken by horse and cart to Holwick. For Richard and other workmen, a passing cartload as they were walking to work in the morning meant a welcome lift.

Left: Shooting lodge
 It was while working here as a labourer helping to build the mansion in 1891 that Richard suffered the injury that was to lead to his death. A block of stone fell on his foot, which had to be amputated when gangrene set in. He was sent to Edinburgh for treatment but he died there, with his long-suffering wife Nancy by his side.

At the cattle grid, where the road veers left to Holwick Lodge (private), follow a footpath straight ahead through meadows down to Wynch Bridge.

Start

1. Bowlees

A small former miner-farmer community with a solidly built Primitive Methodist chapel (now the Visitor Centre), dating from 1845.
 From the car park, follow the public footpath through the gate (with the 'Summery Hill Farm' sign), leading to a track curving uphill round to the right. After 100m, leave the track as it curves left. Follow the footpath to a gate and stile between trees. Continue on down to Hood Gill, noting the 'rubbish heaps' on the horizon.

2. Hood Gill

It may have been in a small barn, like the one passed on the left here, that Richard stopped on his journey to work to bitterly compose his lines 'On seeing a blackbird lying frozen and dead in the snow'...

Poor sable-feathered warbler sweet!
 No more thy songs shalt thou repeat,
 Within the budding grove to greet
 The welcome Spring;
 Thou liest, stricken, at my feet –
 A lifeless thing!
 Old England, country of my birth.
 The greatest nation on the earth –
 What heroes have from thee sprung forth,
 Of sword and pen!
 Yet, what is all thy glory worth
 To starving men?
 Carry on diagonally uphill across two fields to a road. Turn right and follow this down to Newbiggin, passing the former blacksmith's shop on your right just after you cross the beck.

Above: Mineshop at Coldberry
 In the appalling conditions of the mineshop, Richard wrote many of his poems in the evenings while other miners slept, cooked, talked or rested after a long day's work.

5. Holwick

With my week's wallet o'er my shoulder flung,
 Down the green sloping meads I jog along
 A well-known path from Holwick to Bowlees,
 Where Wynch Bridge spans the verdant banks of Tees.

His 'wallet', a bag like a long pillow case, would hold food for his week's stay at the mineshop – hard cheese, bacon and a loaf of bread baked by his wife Nancy before he set off early on Monday morning. Apart from a few potatoes there would probably not be many vegetables since, unlike other miners, he preferred to spend his time writing rather than helping to feed his family by tending an allotment garden.



Continue along the road, with Holwick Scars on your left, following it round to the right after West Farm as Holwick Lodge comes into view.

3. Newbiggin

In the village we pick up for the first time the route of Richard's journey to work. It was here that, according to the poem, he would stop and catch up with the news...

Newbiggin's reached, where miners often stop
 To light their pipes at Willie Gibson's shop.
 A blacksmith Willie is, of well-tryed skill.
 Whom we find hard at work call when we will;
 Where'er we meet he greets me with a smile,
 Enquires the news, and bids me rest awhile.

Turn right down a narrow lane. Newbiggin Chapel is on your left and is well worth a visit. If it is not open, a list of local keyholders is on the noticeboard outside.



Left: Newbiggin Chapel
 Opened in 1760, it was built by local lead miners at a cost of £61 13s 5d (to build the original chapel today would cost well over £50,000). It lays claim to being 'the oldest Methodist chapel in the world in continuous use'.

Follow the lane towards the Old Post Office with the two tall monkey puzzle trees in its back garden. At the main road, turn right and then left 200m past the village hall, to cross fields and Bow Lee Beck and head towards the river.

4. The River Tees

Richard describes the majestic view of the river from the top of Hardberry Hill where he stopped, his 'weary limbs to ease', on his journey to work:

Like a huge serpent, down the dale, is seen
 The Tees, all glistening like silver sheen.
 Oft curving round some hill, 'tis hidden quite,
 Anon appearing in the broad sun light.
 And such is life, our brightest visions fade,
 Sometimes 'tis bright, anon we're in the shade;
 At times we smoothly glide, at others grope
 Our gloomy way, with nothing left but hope.

Once over the river, climb the bank, cross a stile into a field and bear right to a gate in the wall. Turn left and continue through fields up towards the hamlet of Holwick. As the farm track curves to the right, keep straight ahead and go through a small gated stile next to the Old School House. Turn right along the road.



Left: Blue plaque at Cross House Cottage. This was where Richard lived when he wrote 'My Journey to Work'.