

Wensleydale

Wensleydale is the valley (dale) of the River Ure on the east side of the Pennines in North Yorkshire, England.

Wensleydale lies in the Yorkshire Dales National Park – one of only a few valleys in the Dales not currently named after its principal river (Wensley is a small village), but the older name, “Yoredale”, can still be seen on some maps and as the Yoredale Series of geological strata. The village name ‘Wensley’ is a derivative of Woden’s ley, or meadow of the pagan god Woden, while the valley itself takes its name from the village. It is famous for its cheese.

Wensleydale was the home of one of Yorkshire’s most famous clans, the Metcalfes, after they emigrated from Dentdale. The Metcalfe Society holds records dating back to Metcalfes living in the area during the 14th century. They were one of the most prominent families in Yorkshire for over five centuries. Sir James Metcalfe (1389–1472), who was born and lived in Wensleydale, was a captain in the army which fought with King Henry V in the battle of Agincourt in 1415. Metcalfe is still one of the most common surnames in Yorkshire.

Bolton Castle in the village of Castle Bolton is a notable local historic site. Mary, Queen of Scots, was imprisoned here. The story goes that she escaped and made her way towards Leyburn only to lose her ‘shawl’ on the way, hence the name (‘The Shawl’) to the cliff edge that runs westward out of Leyburn and is a well-known spot for easy walks with excellent views.

Wensleydale’s principal settlements are Hawes and Leyburn; Aysgarth, Bainbridge, and Middleham are well-known villages. The shortest river in England, the River Bain, links Semer Water to the River Ure, at Bainbridge, the home to an Ancient Roman fort (part of the Roman road is walkable, up Wether Fell). Hardraw Force, the highest unbroken waterfall in England, is located at Hardraw, near Hawes. Aysgarth Falls (High, Middle, Low) are rightly famous, and people come from a long way to see them – they are spectacular in their beauty (enough to feature in Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves; also Kevin Costner took a nude bath in the plunge pool of Hardraw Force) rather than their height. Other notable waterfalls are at West Burton, and Whitfield Gill Force, near Askrigg.

Wensleydale lies between Wharfedale (to the south), and the quieter Swaledale (to the north, via Buttertubs Pass). The less well-known Coverdale is a branch of Wensleydale.

Below Wensleydale, the River Ure flows east and south, becomes navigable, changes its name to the River Ouse, passes through York, becomes the Humber estuary, flows under the Humber Bridge past Hull, Immingham, and Grimsby, and meets the North Sea off Spurn Head. On the way it collects the waters of the River Swale, River Nidd, River Wharfe, River Aire, River Derwent and River Trent.

Wensleydale is a very popular destination in its own right, enhanced by its central location between two other well-known tourist dales: Wharfedale and the quieter Swaledale.

Wensleydale is a common destination for visitors who like walking on mountains, moorland, dale-sides, and valley bottoms. A high moorland lake called Semer Water is famous for boating, water-skiing and fishing. Hawes and Leyburn are popular because of their age, location and facilities (pubs, shops, teashops, and hotels). Hawes is the home of rope-makers Outhwaites, where visitors can see the manufacturing process.

The **Wensleydale Railway** operates in Wensleydale. It currently runs to between Leeming Bar, the A1 and Redmire, near Castle Bolton. The railway's long-term plan is eventually to run the whole length of the valley and connect again with the National Rail network at both ends: at Garsdale on the Settle-Carlisle Railway in the west and Northallerton on the East Coast Main Line in the east. It is hoped this may help relieve some of the current traffic congestion that the valley suffers from during the busiest months.

Some people come for the Richard III connection: he was brought up in Middleham Castle, of which sufficient ruins remain to be well worth a visit. Middleham itself is a pleasant village with pubs and horse-racing connections (several stables). In the market place stands a stone carving, believed to be a boar's head, signifying where the animal market was during the 15th century as well as representing Richard's personal standard, the white boar.