

Monsal Dale and Ashford

A walk through pretty Monsal Dale to the viewpoint of Monsal Head, followed by a stroll through fields and along tracks to Ashford-in-the-Water and finishing with an interesting walk through Great Shacklow wood.

Walk Facts:

Start	Car park at White Lodge picnic area (SK 170 704) on the A6 three miles north of Bakewell. Note: The car park has restricted opening hours, opening around 08:30 and closing at dusk
Terrain	Good paths through dale and woodland, tracks elsewhere. One short steep climb to Monsal Head
Length	Six miles
Time	About three hours
Food/Drink	Shops, cafes and pubs at Monsal Head and Ashford
Toilets	Monsal Head and Ashford

Route

Cross the busy A6 road from the car park and pass through a stile in the wall opposite to enter Monsal Dale. Walk along the obvious path through the dale. This is a wonderful place - the busy river Wye has a good population of water birds and the dale a good population of rabbits, some of which are black rather than the usual grey. The trees also support a varied bird population, so all in all this is a place to linger and make use of binoculars.

When the dale begins to open out, a footbridge crosses the river. Ignore this and remain on the left-hand bank, soon passing a weir, the spray from which creates brilliant ice-sculptures on the adjacent trees in frosty weather. Behind this is a large reedy pool which attracts water birds. There will be various ducks, coots and moorhens here and, if you're very lucky, perhaps even a heron.

When the viaduct is approached at the end of the dale, veer left away from the river to gain access. The structure was controversial when it was built to carry the Midland Railway's Derby to Manchester line with many critics, including John Ruskin, claiming it spoiled the dale. They had a point, but the structure has long become incorporated into the scenery and nowadays the dale would look most odd without it.

The viaduct has been disused since 1968 and is now part of a walkway called the Monsal Trail which starts in Bakewell. Cross the viaduct then take the footpath which zig-zags steeply up to Monsal Head.



After admiring the view from Monsal Head (pictured right) and visiting the pub or cafe, take the footpath signposted to Ashford (ignoring those to the car park and Monsal Dale). The path runs above the dale for a while, then turns sharp left into a track between walls. The early stages of this path used to be a muddy quagmire but it has now been excellently restored.

After crossing several stiles, the path turns left again into a large field. Walk down this, keeping the wall on your right, before passing through yet another stile to enter a second walled lane. Follow this all the way into Ashford village.



Ashford is an ancient village; a settlement here was noted in the Domesday Book. It's well worth looking around the village and if you're in need of refreshment, the pub, shop and cafes should provide relief. The church is pretty and has nice stained glass windows, some of which are by William Morris.

Once you're finished in the village, cross the old 'sheepwash bridge' (pictured left). Until fairly recently, sheep were ducked in the river here to clean them before shearing. The bridge itself is on an old packhorse route; up to 300 horses crossed it every week in the seventeenth century.

More recently, the bridge was in the news after it was resurfaced with bright yellow chippings. These looked very out of place and caused an uproar, with villagers dubbing it the 'yellow brick road'. After some considerable lobbying the authorities agreed to resurface the structure again, this time with more traditional grey chippings.

Leaving Ashford, cross the A6 again and turn right. After a few hundred yards take the minor road towards Sheldon, leaving this at the first sharp left-hand bend to regain the footpath alongside the Wye. Ignore a path which heads steeply uphill, keeping to the one which initially follows the course of the river and then, after passing a bridge and ruined mill with derelict water wheels, enters Great Shacklow Wood.

The wood is fascinating, boasting a good variety of trees and flowers (especially bluebells in spring) which support varied bird life. Follow the path for over a mile as it climbs through the wood until you eventually begin to descend again and leave the trees behind. At a junction of paths, take the right-hand branch which descends through a little gorge and takes you back to White Lodge, ignoring the straight-ahead path signposted to Deepdale.

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