



Skipwith Common NNR

Waymarked Trails

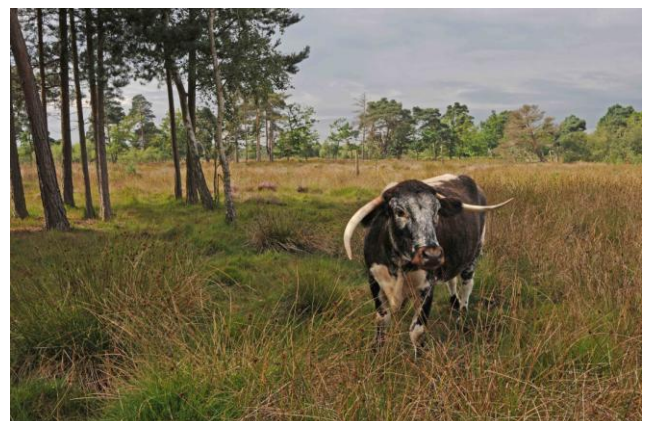
Hidden Archaeology

A circular walk on the Common, marked by blue markers, which encompasses some of the older archaeological features of the site. Some of this route is on unmade paths, and much of it has uneven surfaces. Parking at Sandy Lane, the route is 2.6 miles (4.2 km) taking an hour to complete.

Following the blue markers, this route takes in what is now the more wooded part of the site. Starting from the Sandy Lane car park, the route travels along the lane across the Common, with heathland, ponds and mires to either side. When ice finally started to recede from the last Ice Age, 15,000 years ago, meltwater filled the rivers and drained into the Vale of York. These gradually filled the area creating wetland and bringing with it large quantities of eroded materials known as glacial till. The bare underlying rocks scraped clean by the glacier were overlain by these materials including the sandy deposits which are a feature of Skipwith Common. Extraction of this good-quality sand would have been a thriving industry in Victorian times.

Once you reach the junction with the main track turn left, following this for a short distance before

the route diverts off following the boundary of the Common. As you are walking along this section you will cross a small footbridge and pass by many of the hidden archaeological features of the site. At least one Iron Age enclosure stood on the site 2000 years ago which would have been a safe haven for a small family and their livestock, in the event of raiders trying to take their valuable animals. This is a square feature, ditched on all four sides, and would have had a high stockade type wooden fence around it. When the vegetation dies down in winter it can still be just made out when you know where to look! Alongside the enclosure is a defensive bank and ditch system, another deterrent to invaders. The livestock in the enclosure are likely to have included cattle, sheep and geese. Today we still use Longhorn cattle, wild and hardy Hebridean sheep and Exmoor ponies to graze the Common and help to prevent silver birch regeneration. You may well come across some of these on your walk. These are assisted by wild Fallow and Roe Deer which roam freely in the area.



The woodland you pass through here has a thick understorey of bracken which blankets many of the historic features of the site. This woodland has been at various times, cleared of trees, enclosed and farmed and heavily grazed by livestock. It has only been in fairly modern times that trees started to feature on the Common again, and shortly prior to the First World War, the Common was almost treeless. The tree cover over much of the Common was once again removed when the Common was host to RAF Riccall (learn more about this on the [red](#) waymarked trail).

Once you meet the main junction, you separate from the [yellow](#) route and follow the [blue](#) markers to turn left into the Common and travel along the left hand side of a ditch which helps manage the water levels on the site. Skipwith Common is situated on top of the Selby Coalfield, providing more than 3,500 jobs at its busiest, creating 124 miles of underground roadways and at its peak (1993-4) it produced 12 million tonnes of coal a year. The pit finally closed in October 2004, but the work led to subsidence not just on the Common, but on the adjoining farmland, and as part of a programme of drainage works there is now a pumping station and a series of ditches.

Once you have reached the main track, turn left again and follow the [blue](#) waymarkers, past Sandy Lane, to near the notice board. Take the left hand track which doubles back and follows the northern boundary of the site. This gives you a lovely view of Skipwith church seen from over the fields (learn more about this on the longer [yellow](#) trail). Less easy to see is an example of a Bronze Age burial mound which is amongst the oldest of the archaeological features found on, or near Skipwith Common. Characteristically, these are round and shaped like a shallow dome, these have a ditch around the outside and while 4000 plus years of erosion have worn away at the mounds and filled in the ditches, these are still quite impressive features. A piece of Bronze Age Beaker pottery was unearthed by a Victorian on the Common.

Presumably man maintained usage of Skipwith Common as we have also found evidence from the next period, the Iron Age, in the form of a series of

burial mounds and a multiple-bank system which runs roughly North South across the Common and links with an Iron Age settlement.

The route then turns away from the village and heads along the boundary fence through the woodland passing examples of Ridge and Furrow ploughing. These could date from the Middle Saxon period (around 800AD) right through to the Late Medieval (around 1500AD). The large, heavy ploughs used at this time caused deep furrows and high ridges to form, while they also usually leave a broad 'headland' at the top and bottom of a field, where the large team of oxen needed would have had to turn around. As the Common has always been pretty poor farming land throughout its life, this appears to have been an experiment which failed, as the ploughed land is now 'enclosed' within the boundaries of the Common.

The route then rejoins the main track through the site momentarily before you head back to the right onto Sandy Lane.

It is of note that while there are no toilets on the Common, the Drovers Arms in Skipwith village provides a welcome break for the weary! The nearest accessible toilets for those with a RADAR key can be found at the National Nature Reserve Office, Church Lane, Wheldrake.

Contact

National Nature Reserve Office, Bank Island, Carr Lane, Wheldrake, York YO19 6AS

Skipwith Common is owned by Escrick Park Estate and is managed in partnership with Natural England.

For more information about the history, wildlife and events on the site, please contact the Friends of Skipwith Common via <http://friendsofskipwithcommon.org.uk> or visit www.naturalengland.org.uk or by calling 0300 060 4348.