

WETTON MILL

ALONG THE CENTRAL VALLEY

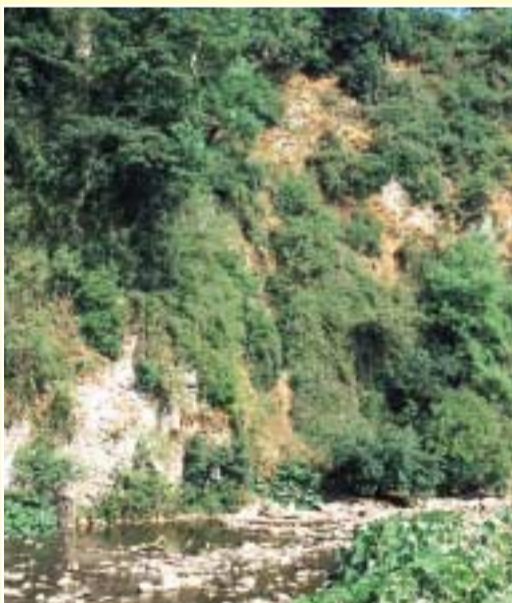
Cave dwellers, a disappearing river, strange fish and an eccentric landowner vie for attention with spectacular scenery and woodland centred on a corn mill dating back to the middle ages.

Corn & Copper

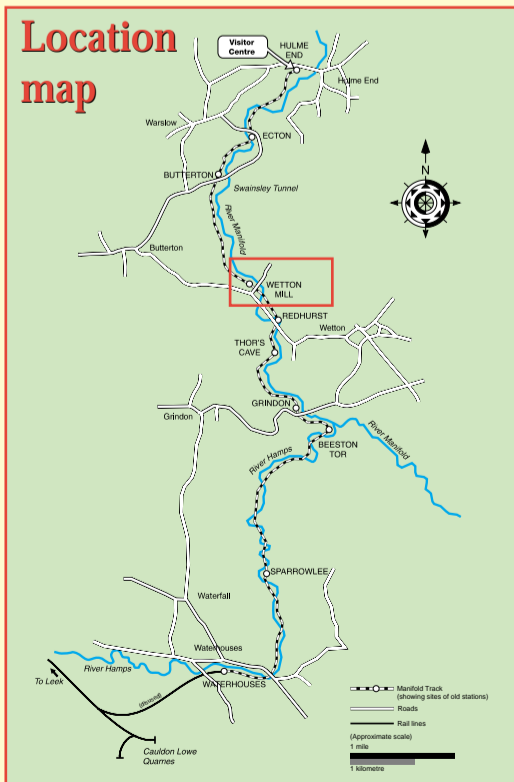
The river itself served as a millpond at Wetton Mill, the water driving the millstones until closure in 1857. The villages on the plateau provided the business, the lack of running water on the higher ground precluding the building of watermills there. The bridge was rebuilt for the Duke of Devonshire in 1807 at a cost of £184; it was on the busy packhorse route from his Ecton Mines to the smelters at Whiston.

Blind fish

The Manifold sinks beneath the surface at a series of natural holes (swallets) just below Wetton Mill Bridge, flowing underground 5 miles along an unknown course to re-emerge in the grounds of Ilam Hall. Cave explorers in the 1920s found an underground lake well beneath the surface, large enough to allow launching a boat and home to a species of blind fish; divers exploring the boil holes at Ilam in 1995 found similar fish in the underground passageways there.



Water sinking below ground at Wetton Bridge.



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Wetton Mill Station c.1904.

Chewing the Cud

A century ago sheep farming was the main agricultural activity. The animals roamed free even on the steep dale sides, cropping the grass and preventing the regrowth of shrubs and trees. Changing fortunes saw dairying replace sheep farming, the cattle being kept away from the dales. The result has been a flourishing of secondary woodland. If man ceased to farm the area the whole landscape would be entirely different to that seen today, ashwoods quickly recolonising the dales and much of the plateau.

Wardle's Follies

Sir Thomas Wardle, a wealthy industrialist from Leek's silk industry and director of the railway, lived at Swainsley Hall, between Ecton and Wetton Mill. Keen to see the railway succeed he was even more keen on preserving his privacy, causing the railway to be tunnelled beneath the hill rather than follow the gentler meanders of the river - this would have spoiled his view. Just to the north of the tunnel was Butterton Station, virtually a private halt for Sir Thomas as Butterton village is nearer to the station at Wetton Mill.

Water Music

To improve fishing prospects, and believing that tourists preferred seeing running water, Wardle concreted over the swallowts below Wetton Mill, hoping to keep the river flowing above ground. Air pressure consistently blew out or cracked the plugs and sheets of concrete. Wardle then tried relieving this pressure by sinking pipes deep into the river bed to vent the underground passages, but this, too, failed. Some remain in situ between Redhurst and Weags Bridges, looking like pipes emerging from a subterranean organ.



The same view of the site of Wetton Mill Station as it looks today.

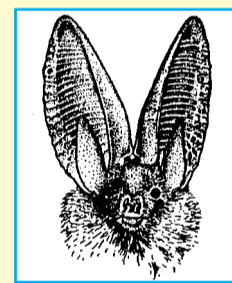
Ash Woods

The magnificent ash woods of the lower Hamps and Manifold valleys are amongst the finest in Britain. In the north and midlands the Ash replaces the Beech as the dominant "climax" vegetation on limestone soils. Oak trees also form part of the canopy, towering above the shrub layer of Field Maple, Elder and Bird Cherry and the flower-rich herbaceous layer.



Cave Dwellers

Many of the valley's caves and mine adits are home to bats. Five species live in the area, most common is



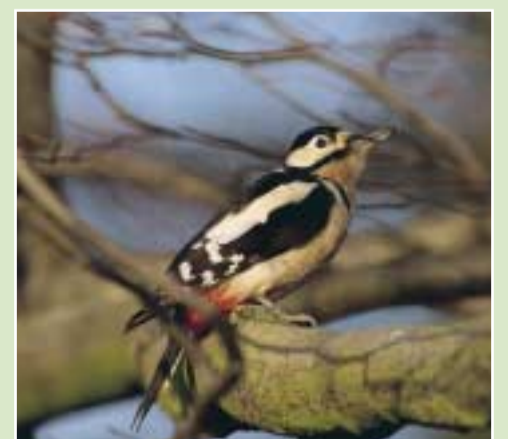
The Brown Long-eared Bat.

Daubenton's Bat, often seen skimming the water surface on summer evenings - its nickname is the Water Bat.

Please note that most caves enjoy official protection because of their archaeological and wildlife interest. Do not enter them, many caves are dangerous and also contain old mine workings.

WOODLAND BIRDS

Light-dappled ashwoods are ideal for birds which take insects on the wing. Amongst these are the Spotted Flycatcher and the rarer Pied Flycatcher, with its distinctive black and white plumage. It often nests in nest-boxes provided by the National Trust, specifically placed there to encourage the species to breed. Both are migrants, arriving in April or May and staying until October. All-year residents include the Nuthatch, the only British bird which can climb down tree trunks as well as up, Great Spotted and Green (listen out for its manicured laugh of a call) Woodpeckers.



The Great Spotted Woodpecker.



MANIFOLD VALLEY

VISITOR CENTRE



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