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Halifax and the Shibden Valley

An old packhorse track, a superb half-timbered hall and a hidden valley - all just a short walk from Halifax.

Distance 4.5 miles (7.2km)

Minimum time 2hrs 30min

Ascent/gradient 410ft (125m)

Level of difficulty Easy

Paths Old packhorse tracks and field paths, no stiles

Landscape Surprisingly rural, considering the proximity to Halifax

Suggested map aqua3 OS Explorer 288 Bradford & Huddersfield

Start/finish SE 095254

Dog friendliness Keep on lead crossing busy roads

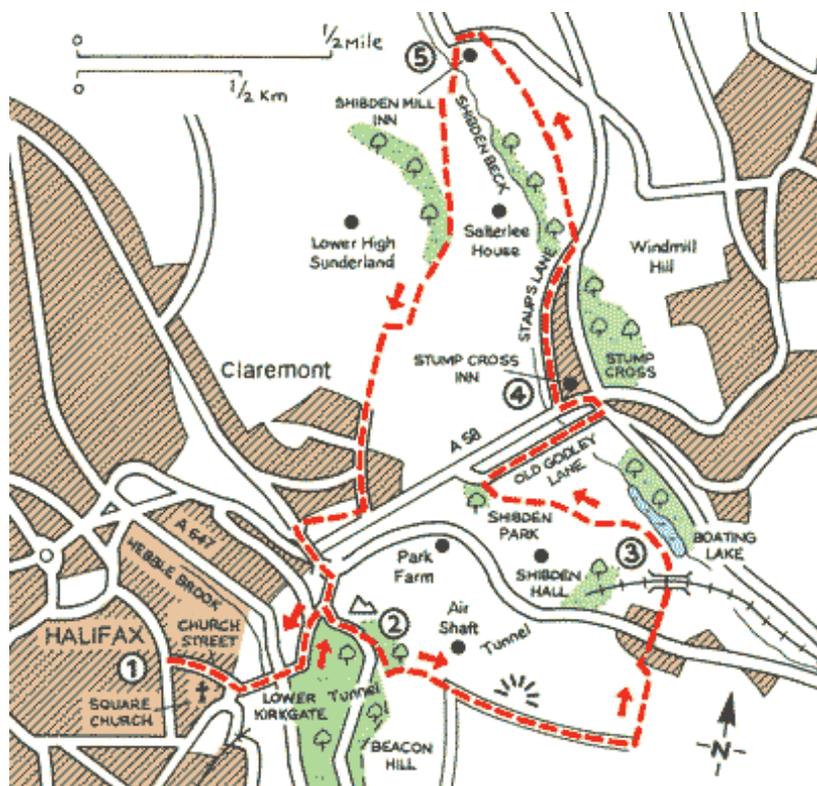
Parking In Halifax

Public toilets Halifax (near bus station)

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1 Walk downhill, past a tall spire that once belonged to Square Church, and down Church Street, passing the smoke-blackened parish church. Bear left on to Lower Kirkgate, then right on to Bank Bottom. Cross Hebble Brook and walk uphill; where the road bears sharp left, keep straight ahead up a steep cobbled lane. When you meet a road, go right for about 200yds (183m). Just after the entrance to a warehouse (Aquaspersion), take a cobbled path on the left that makes a steep ascent up Beacon Hill.

2 This old packhorse track - known as the Magna Via - joins another path and continues uphill to a large retaining wall, where you have a choice of tracks. Keep left on a cinder track, slightly downhill, as views open up of the surprisingly rural Shibden Valley. Keep left when the track forks again; after a further 100yds (91m) take a walled path on the left (signed to Stump Cross). Follow a hedgerow downhill through a little estate of new houses to a road. Cross here and take a gated path immediately to the right of a farm entrance, which takes you downhill, under the railway line and into Shibden Park, close to the boating lake.

3 Follow a drive uphill. Near the top of the hill you will find a footpath on the left, giving access to the Elizabethan splendour of Shibden Hall itself. Otherwise, continue uphill; just before you meet the main A58 road, bear right, down Old Godley Lane. Pass houses and take steps up to the main road at the busy junction of Stump Cross.

4 Cross over the road and take Staups Lane, to the left of the Stump Cross Inn. Walk up the lane, which soon becomes cobbled, to meet another surfaced road. Bear left here, down a metalled track, through a gate, to join a straight, double-paved track into Shibden Dale. When the paving ends, continue via a gate and through open pasture. Turn left, at the next gate, walking down a lane that soon leads you to the Shibden Mill Inn.

5 Walk to the far end of the pub's car park, to join a track that crosses Shibden Beck. Beyond a brick-built house, the track narrows to a walled path. You emerge from countryside, to walk past the houses of Claremont and cross the main A58 road, as it goes through the steep-sided Godley Cutting, on a bridge. Take a set of steps immediately after the bridge and walk left along the road. From here you can retrace your route of earlier in the day, back into Halifax.

Set amongst the Pennine hills, Halifax was a town in the vanguard of the Industrial Revolution. Its splendid civic buildings and huge mills are a good indication of the town's prosperity, won from the woollen trade. Ironically, the most splendid building of all came close to being demolished. The Piece Hall, built in 1779, predates the industrial era. Here, in a total of 315 rooms on three collonaded floors, the hand-weavers of the district would offer their wares (known as 'pieces') for sale to cloth merchants. The collonades surround a massive square. Your first reaction on walking into the square may be surprise, for this is a building that would not look out of place in Renaissance Italy.

The mechanisation of the weaving process left the Piece Hall largely redundant. In the intervening years it has served a variety of purposes, including as a venue for political oration and as a wholesale market. During the 1970s, having narrowly escaped the wrecking ball, the Piece Hall was spruced up and given a new lease of life. Now it houses a museum, tourist information centre and a number of small shops and businesses. But the buildings full potential as a tourist attraction has yet to be realised.

The cobbled thoroughfare that climbs so steeply up Beacon Hill is known as the Magna Via. Until 1741, when a turnpike road was built, this was the only practicable approach to Halifax from the east, for both foot and packhorse traffic.

Also known as Wakefield Gate, the Magna Via linked up with the Long Causeway, the old high level road to Burnley. That intrepid 18th-century traveller, Daniel Defoe, was one of those who struggled up this hill. 'We quitted Halifax not without some astonishment at its situation, being so surrounded with hills, and those so high as makes the coming in and going out of it exceedingly troublesome'. The route was superseded in the 1820s by the turnpike constructed through Godley Cutting. Today the Magna Via, too steep to be adopted for modern motor vehicles, remains a fascinating relic of the past.

Situated on a hill above Halifax, this magnificent half-timbered house is set in 90 acres (36ha) of beautiful, rolling parkland. Dating from 1420, the hall has been owned by prominent local families - the Oates, Saviles, Waterhouses and, latterly, the Listers. All these families left their mark on the fabric of the house, but, the core of the original house remains intact. The rooms are furnished in period style, to show how they might have looked over almost six centuries. The oak furniture and panelling has that patina of age that antique forgers try in vain to emulate. Barns and other outbuildings have been converted into a folk museum, with displays of old vehicles, tools and farm machinery.

When Emily Brontë created Thrushcross Grange in her only novel *Wuthering Heights*, she may have had Shibden Hall in mind. It certainly proved a suitable location in 1991 for a new film version of the famous story, which starred Ralph Fiennes as Heathcliff and Juliette Binoche as Cathy.

While you're there

As well as the Piece Hall, which houses an art gallery and several craft shops, you should acquire a child and visit Eureka!, the ultimate in hands-on discovery museums. It is designed specifically for children up to the age of 12, with over 400 interactive exhibits exploring science, nature and the world around you.

Where to eat and drink

At the half-way point of this walk you have the good fortune to start the return leg from Shibden Mill Inn. Tucked away in a leafy corner of Shibden Dale, yet close to the centre of Halifax, this picturesque inn enjoys the best of both worlds. A sympathetic reworking of an old mill, this is the place for good food and, when the weather is kind, a drink in the beer garden.

What to look for

The birds-eye view of Halifax from Beacon Hill is well worth the effort of climbing it. A century ago this view would have looked very different: most people's idea of William Blake's 'dark satanic mills' were here in unhealthy profusion, casting a dense pall of sulphurous smoke over the valley.



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