



<http://www.theaa.com/walks/fairburn-ings-and-ledsham-421268>

Fairburn Ings and Ledsham

A visit to West Yorkshire's very own 'Lake District', now a bird reserve of national importance.

Distance 5 miles (8km)

Minimum time 2hrs 30min

Ascent/gradient 131ft (40m)

Level of difficulty Easy

Paths Good paths and tracks (some newly-created from spoil heaps), 7 stiles

Landscape Lakes, riverside and reclaimed colliery spoil heaps

Suggested map aqua3 OS Explorer 289 Leeds

Start/finish SE 472278

Dog friendliness Keep on lead around main lake, due to wildfowl

Parking Free parking in Cut Road, Fairburn. From A1, drive into village, turn left 100yds (91m) past Three Horseshoes pub,

Public toilets Fairburn Ings visitor centre

The coalfields of West Yorkshire were most concentrated in the borough of Wakefield. Towns and villages grew up around the mines, and came to represent the epitome of northern industrial life. Mining was always a dangerous and dirty occupation, and it changed the landscape dramatically. Opencast mines swallowed up huge tracts of land, and the extensive spoil heaps were all-too-visible evidence of industry.

For the men of these communities, mining was almost the only work available. So when the industry went into decline, these communities were hit especially hard. Historians will look back at the mining industry and be amazed at the speed of this decline. Mines that were earmarked for expansion could be closed down a year or two later. To politicians of the left, the miners were sacrificial lambs; to those of the right, the miners exerted too much power. For good or ill the mining industry was decimated, and thousands of miners lost their livelihoods.

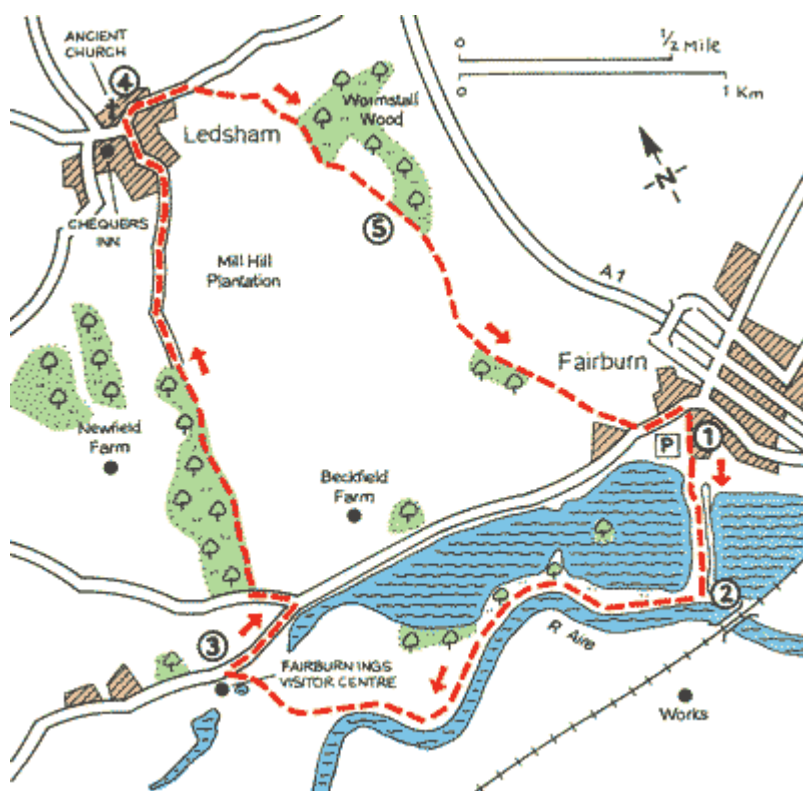
The death of the industry was emphasised by the closing down of Caphouse Colliery and its subsequent conversion into the National Coal Mining Museum for England. The spoil heaps that scarred the landscape are going back to nature, a process hastened by tree planting and other reclamation schemes. Opencast workings are being transformed into lakes and wetlands - valuable havens for wildfowl and migrating birds. Within a single generation West and South Yorkshire may have a network of lakes to rival the Norfolk Broads. In the meantime, these industrial wastelands are still rather scruffy. Not that the birds seem to mind...

Fairburn Ings, now under the stewardship of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), was one of the earliest examples of colliery reclamation - being designated a Local Nature Reserve in 1957. The result is arguably the most important nature reserve in West Yorkshire. The site seems rather unpromising; it's hemmed in by the A1, the conurbation of Castleford, the River Aire, a railway and old spoil heaps. Nevertheless, the stark outlines of

the spoil heaps are now softened by banks of silver birches, and mining subsidence has created a broad expanse of water near the village of Fairburn, as well as smaller pools and flashes.

There are plenty of birds to be seen at all times of the year, though the numbers of ducks, geese, swans and gulls are at their highest during the winter months. The 600 acres (243ha) of wetlands are a magnet for birds during the spring and autumn migration. In summer there are many species of wildlife nesting on the scrapes and islands - including terns and a large, noisy colony of black-headed gulls. The best places from which to view all this activity are the public hides that overlook the lake.

Hidden away from the traffic hammering up and down the nearby A1, the estate village of Ledsham is a tranquil little backwater. Behind the Saxon church - one of the oldest in West Yorkshire - is a row of picturesque almshouses. The Chequers Inn is an old and characterful country pub with, unusually, a six-day licence. Some 170 years ago, so the story goes, the one-time lady of the manor was on her way to church, when she saw some of her farm-hands in a drunken state. To avoid this happening in future, she decreed that Sundays in Ledsham should be 'dry'.



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1 Walk down Cut Road as it narrows to a track. Soon you have the main lake to your right, and a smaller stretch of water to your left. When the track forks, keep right (unless you want to visit the first of the bird hides, in which case detour to the left). The path finishes at the end of the lake, on approaching the River Aire.

2 Go right here, to join a path along the top of a ridge (actually an old spoil heap), with the river to your left and the lake right. Look out for a couple of other bird hides, before you lose sight of the lake. The path crosses a broader expanse of spoil heap, through scrubland, following the river in a broad arc to the right, before descending to a stile above another small mere. Bear right on a broad track and drop down into the car park of the Fairburn Ings visitor centre.

3 Meet a road. Go right for 100yds (91m), then go left (signed 'Ledston and Kippax') for just 100yds (91m), and pick up a path on your right that hugs the right-hand fringe of a wood. Beyond the wood, take a path between fields; it broadens to a track as you approach the village of Ledsham. At a new estate of houses, turn right, along Manor Garth.

4 You arrive in the village by the ancient church. Walk right, along the road (or, for refreshments, go left to the Chequers Inn). Beyond the village, where the road bears left, take a gate on the right, giving access to a good track uphill. Where the main track goes right, into fields, continue along a track ahead, into woodland. Leave the wood by a stile, crossing pasture on a grassy track. Two stiles take you across a narrow spur of woodland.

5 Head slightly left, uphill, across the next field, to follow a fence and hedgerow. Continue - soon on a better track - across a stile. Beyond the next stile the track bears left, towards farm buildings: but you keep straight on, with a fence on your right, along the field path. Through a metal gate, join an access track downhill. Go left, when you meet the road, and back into the village of Fairburn.