

# Ilkley

Here is the Wikipedia summary for Ilkley, our “home away from home” when we visit England:

*Ilkley is a spa town and civil parish in West Yorkshire, in Northern England. Historically part of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Ilkley civil parish includes the adjacent village of Ben Rhydding and is a ward within the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council. Approximately 12 miles north of Bradford and 17 miles northwest of Leeds, the town lies mainly on the south bank of the River Wharfe in Wharfedale, one of the Yorkshire Dales.*

*Ilkley's spa town heritage and surrounding countryside make tourism an important local industry. The town center is characterized by Victorian architecture, wide streets and floral displays. Ilkley Moor, to the south of the town, is the subject of a folk song, often described as the unofficial anthem of Yorkshire, "On Ilkla Moor Baht 'at". The song's words are written in Yorkshire dialect, its title translated as "On Ilkley Moor without a hat."*

That's a pretty good summary and puts Ilkley “on the map” near the old industrial towns of Leeds and Bradford from which it derived much of its wealth. The woolen industry – which was important to both towns and paramount in Bradford – is all but vanished now and alternative businesses have replaced the mills. Leeds is now a major financial center, second only to London, while Bradford has fared less well, although is somewhat of a tourist destination since becoming the first UNESCO City of Film.

But it was the industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that created the wealth that in turn created the town of Ilkley as we know it today. The mill owners needed somewhere cleaner and prettier to live and the Victorian elite were keen to take advantage of the waters that emanated from springs in the area and were thought to provide therapeutic benefit for both body and spirit. The completion of railway lines from the industrial cities and beyond made this small town accessible – and rich.

However, Ilkley and the surrounding area pre-date the Victorian era by millennia. Flint arrowheads dating to the Mesolithic Period (18,000BC) have been found. It is believed that the area has been continuously settled since the Bronze Age (1800BC) and a Druids' Circle dating from 2000 years ago is still very much in evidence on the moor. There was a Roman fort here and All Saints Church has been a center of Christian worship since the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. So, this town with a population of only 15,000 has a long history and some fine (mostly Victorian) architecture. It also sits in some of the most beautiful countryside in Britain. We feel very fortunate to be able to spend time here

on a frequent basis and always enjoy our stays, whatever the season.

Almost every day I walk from “our” apartment on the edge of Ilkley Moor to enjoy the streets of the town and the beauty of the hills and river valley. The apartment sits at an elevation of 540 feet, the river is at 250 feet and the top of the moor is 1320 feet above sea level. No big numbers in relative or absolute terms and not that much different to elevations seen in Southwestern Ohio – except here, all points are within a couple of miles of one another as the crow flies. Which makes for some very steep climbs no matter the direction I follow; add to that some rocky and/or muddy terrain and you have the makings of some challenging treks and some stunning scenery.

On occasion I take my camera along on these walks in an attempt to capture the fine architecture of the town, the serenity of the river valley and the raw beauty of the hills. Whether the walk is for three or ten miles, often there will be significant changes in weather conditions as I wander, especially as I climb to the top of the moor and experience the much stronger winds that even this modest elevation change brings. The following narrative is based upon a number of walks which I have taken over the years but hopefully paints a picture of the town and its surroundings.

We begin at Wells House, our home. Originally built as a Hydropathic Establishment in 1859 (Charles Darwin stayed here for treatment), it became a Girls’ College in the post-World War II era (although I visited Ilkley during my youth, I never got into the college!) and was finally converted into luxury apartments at the beginning of this century. A late 19<sup>th</sup> Century photograph shows how little the exterior of the building has changed in over 150 years.



*Apartment 21*

*Wells House*

*Ilkley*

Directly across the road from Wells House is the northern edge of Ilkley Moor and about 1/4 mile up the hillside stands White Wells, another former hydrotherapy establishment. This one pre-dates the Victorian era by quite a bit, however, having been built around 1700. As mentioned in the inset, the bath may still be used but the building today has its primary use as a café serving hot drinks and cakes for those rambling on the moors. It should be noted, however, that the café is open only when flags are flying on the building; don't make the trek for tea if not!



*There has been bathing at White Wells since 1703 when there was a bath to the rear of the premises. This was replaced in 1791 by two baths, one of which is on display today. Although the water has no significant mineral content it is the coldness of the water which stimulates the circulation.*

*Modern day visitors can still use the plunge bath. New Year's Day is the most popular day for this activity, with usually over a hundred plungers throughout the day. However, we can usually open the bath gate should visitors wish to plunge at other times of the year too.*



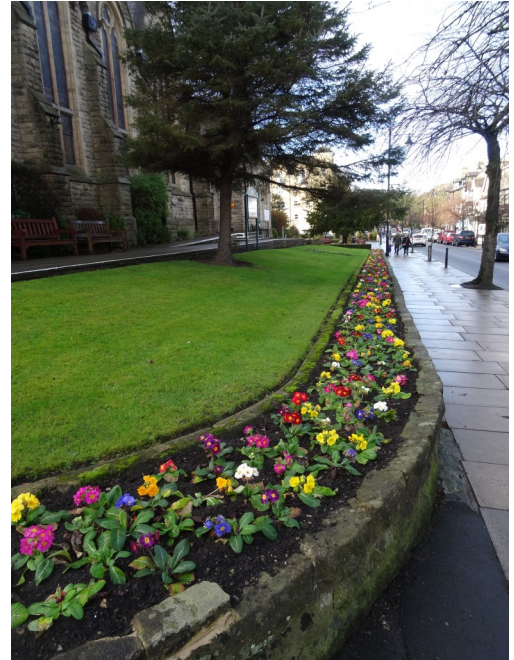
*Plungers must supply their own bathing costumes and towels and the activity is undertaken at the plunger's own risk! There is no charge for plunging, but bathers can buy a certificate to mark the occasion, throw some loose change into the bath and of course support the White Wells by buying hot drinks and snacks afterwards.*



Rather than take tea—or a bath—we'll leave the moor for later and continue our walk down Wells Road into Ilkley so that we can see some of the fine Victorian architecture and capture a feeling for the town itself.



*Ilkley  
In  
January*







Of course there is a band stand (concerts every Saturday and Sunday throughout the summer, usually raising money for charitable causes) and a War Memorial set in a lovely little park. The River Wharfe flows through Ilkley and gives its name to this particular Yorkshire Dale. This is the Old Bridge (not to be confused with the new bridge half a mile away built in 1899) and dates from the 16th Century. The Old



Bridge also marks the beginning of the Dales Way, most of which I walked in 2010 and the southern end of which features a lot in my daily walks around Ilkley.

***The Dales Way runs for 80 miles from Ilkley in West Yorkshire to Bowness-on-Windermere in Cumbria, following mostly riverside paths and passing through the heart of the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the gentle foothills of southern Lakeland to the shore of England's grandest lake***

In fact, we cover a few miles of this historic path as we head west to the vil-



lage of Addingham, where these idyllic scenes are set.



In addition to the well-used Dales Way, there is usually a public footpath to follow here, as in almost anywhere in England. These paths and other “Rights of Way” take many forms, from well-paved roads or sidewalks to a barely worn sliver across a field. Farmers often provide rights of way across their land to allow walkers to cross; usually they ad-

here to the spirit of open public access but there have been instances where a few bulls have been left to pasture just to provide a little excitement for the unsuspecting walker.



We’ll have more to say about footpaths as we tackle the moors but now we continue our walk on paved roads to take in some of the beautiful countryside and more of the natural and man-made scenes—still within easy walking distance of Ilkley.





Dry stone walls (like the one shown on the left) are a feature of the British Countryside. There are estimated to be over 5,000 miles of these mortar-less walls in the Yorkshire Dales alone, some dating back over 600 years. Typically they are a "double" wall and are constructed by placing two rows of large stones and filling the gap with smaller stones and rubble.

In addition to moorland (where we are headed) and river valley walks, I will often take an easy stroll on the canal bank. The Leeds-Liverpool canal passes only a few miles from Ilkley and, as well as providing a flat path for walking (the original towpath), it is a masterpiece of 18th Century engineering. It was built to take the products of the Industrial Revolution from the mills of West Yorkshire to the docks of Liverpool, opening the whole world for its goods. It is 127 miles long and has a total of 91 locks as it crosses the Pennine Hills between Yorkshire and Lancashire, the most famous of which are the Bingley Five Rise locks—a place very familiar to me in my youth when the waterway was an integral part of my Sea Scout days as well as my earliest dating!

The advent of the railways and the inter-city road system brought about the demise of the canals as a commercial enterprise and the extensive network in Britain was in danger of total collapse when we left in the mid-sixties. However, in the past forty years or so there has been a major resurgence of use of canals (including the Leeds-Liverpool) for pleasure craft and a whole new vacation business in the "narrow boats".



The canal as a popular leisure waterway also provides an easy and extremely pleasant walking path—an ideal contrast to the moorland treks.

So, finally, we are now to visit our home-away-from-home's most famous attraction, Ilkley Moor. As we said earlier, it affords some amazing views across the Wharfe and Aire Valleys but has a natural beauty of its own as an almost barren landscape with only low-growing grasses, heather and bracken—and almost no trees. It is a walker's paradise with literally hundreds of paths crisscrossing an area of 30 square miles. On a weekday in winter I have walked five miles without seeing another person. I may have seen a few dozen sheep and scared a couple of ground-nesting birds but otherwise I was completely alone. On a warm Sunday in June, on that same journey I could see literally hundreds of other walkers. As one who walked almost every Sunday on these same moors in my youth, I find it comforting that many of my fellow walkers today are teens and families with young children—all enjoying this same small patch of unspoiled countryside.

When I walk at home in Ohio, I usually average about 3mph on the level sidewalks and in the nearby parks. Walking in and around Ilkley brings that average to less than 2 1/2mph, and when I walk on the Moor I am lucky to cover two miles in an hour; even less if I take some of the steeper paths. As I have noted, there is always a path! It may be a broad, stone covered route, even paved with large flat stones at times, but more often it is simply a well-trodden patch across otherwise virgin land. Hopefully the series of pictures from a recent walk will illustrate the variety and ever-changing consistency of these pathways.





Walls are no problem—when a stile has been built.  
And a sign can sometimes be useful!







A gate can take the place of a stile and boot prints can be your only path. The route may be steep or a little muddy.....



But a convenient rest stop and magnificent views will always lift the spirits.



That's a walk over Ilkley Moor just a few days ago but I have walked this land dozens (hundreds?) of times in all seasons. And, yes, it does snow in England and conditions can be brutal sometimes.....







As I said, all of the area covered is a relatively short walk from Ilkley but, if the legs should weaken, it's usually not far to a convenient bus stop (every 30 minutes on most routes)—and home.



So, back to Wells House and the warmth of Apartment 21. I hope you will agree that Ilkley has a lot to offer in the way of scenery and can appreciate, as we do, the changes that each season can bring. Even the views from “our” living room –facing north and east—provide us with spectacular valley and moorland scenes.

