DISCOVERING BRITAIN

Royal Geographical Society with IBG

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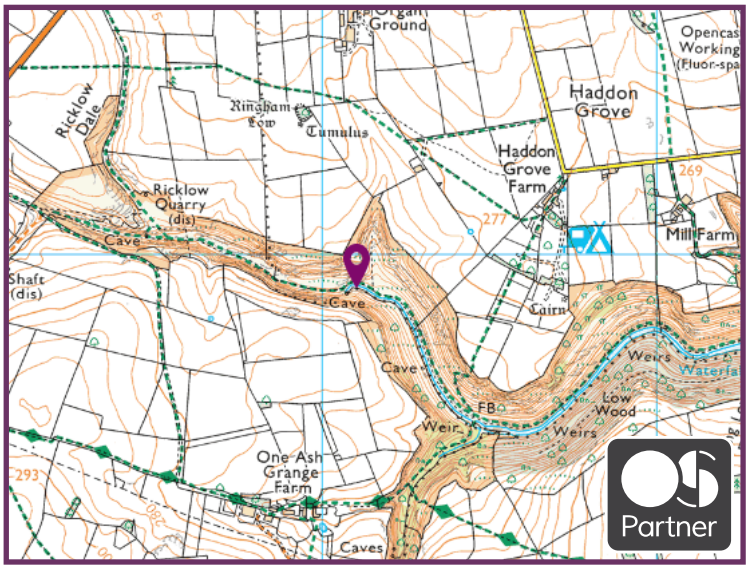
Viewpoint

Vanishing act

Time: **15 mins** Region: **East Midlands** Landscape: **rural**



Stand and listen for a moment. You can probably hear the wind in the few rowan, elder and buckthorn trees that find a foothold among the rocks; but is there another, more distant sound?

Far below, to the right, the River Lathkill emerges dramatically from the subterranean gloom of Head Cave. At the very least you should be able to trace the river's rocky course, bounded by a drystone wall, but only during rainy seasons will you hear its tumbling progress.

From here atop Parson's Tor, you're looking down into a deep gorge. So how did that tiny, intermittent stream below carve out Lathkill's massive form?

Location: Lathkill Dale, Monyash, Derbyshire DE45 1JJ

Grid reference: SK 14972 66630

Getting there: From the Jack Mere car park in Monyash go through the wooden gate and head down the start of Lathkill Dale on the footpath. After the third gate take the path up the dale-side, to your left, marked with low, square, wooden posts and green footpath plaques. Over the hill, this leads you through another gate and a right turn into Ricklow Quarry. Follow the path through this and over a stile. Now simply follow one of the well-worn paths along the rim of Lathkill Dale, via another very small quarry to reach the viewpoint, where a short arm of the dale joins from the left, creating a sharp turn. Proceed very carefully here towards the rocky promontory of Parson's Tor.

Did the tiny River Lathkill really shape this vast gorge?

Turn to your left and look all the way to the head of the small side-dale to find a clue. It is not hard to picture that low cliff, its broken lip and polished, undercut face with a great cascade flowing over it. This is a fossil waterfall – not a drop ever flows there now.

It was the end of the last Ice Age, around 10,000 years ago, which created Lathkill. Meltwater from retreating ice sheets came thundering through this area of the Peak District carving out its narrow dales, exploiting the limestone's cracks and fissures. Imagine the power of that extinct, prehistoric river!

Like the Mendips in Somerset, this limestone landscape is porous, riddled with holes and caverns, quickly draining the surrounding plateau.

Three hundred million years further back, far hotter forces had allowed molten lead-ore into those same weaknesses. Looking at the north side of the dale, can you see a diagonal scar running through the grass from top to bottom, punctuated with a few shrubs?

This marks a succession of old, small-scale mine workings and is best avoided on foot, as it is dotted with poorly covered pits where generations of miners followed that seam of valuable ore. You may notice a complete lack of arable farming all about; thin, rocky soils make the land fit only to graze meagre flocks of sheep and cattle; lead mining and quarrying became important sources of income for local farmers.

Since Roman times the lead miners' knowledge of rock and water had gone hand in hand. A mile-and-a-half from here is Magpie Mine. To get water out of this deep pit a drain was dug, leading northwards to the River Wye; this in turn deprived the River Lathkill of a secondary spring which used to flow through the dale.

This story of vanishing water means the river can be a poor habitat for wildlife. Dippers often start to breed here, but then abandon their nests in late Spring; fish have to be moved downstream in special operations.

Plans are being hatched to block one of the old drains serving an abandoned lead mine lower down the dale. This might mean there is once again at least a trickle of water running here all year round. In turn this may increase the flow of visitors to this spectacular landscape, formed by nature, modified by man, where tourism has long since overtaken mining as the principal source of wealth.

Parson's Tor at sunrise © Simon Corble

Head Cave in winter flow © Simon Corble

Viewpoint created and photographed by Simon Corble. Simon, a theatre director, playwright and actor based in Derbyshire's Peak District, is passionate about the countryside and discovering the hidden secrets of the natural world.