

WALK 8 THE INCLINE AND AB TOP*

**This isn't walked often, so you may meet no-one en route. If you're leaving word of where you're off to, no-one will know where Ab Top is, so tell them, back of Cowm Res, left and up.*

NATURE OF WALK You'll begin and end on roads, but don't be fooled. This is a tasty, adventurous little walk with two contrasting stiff climbs (and descents), a helping of wilderness, odd angles and a variety of outstanding views.

START RIVERSIDE CAR PARK

TIME Give yourself 3 hours

DISTANCE Almost 5 miles

FOOTWEAR Sensible, sturdy

Exit onto the main road and turn left. After the Halfway House (previously Bay Horse. It was the half-way rest point for the horse-drawn Rochdale-Bacup tram) take the second left, down a road blocked to traffic by large boulders. Beyond the River Spodden at the bottom steer left towards a wooden stile...but before it turn sharp right, where you'll see, rearing up in front of you, the relentlessly steep Incline with its chimney halfway up. This was erected mid-19th century to remove fumes from the quarry finishing works that existed many metres below your feet. The Incline itself was a means of getting stone down from the quarry above to the railway sidings that used to exist below. There was a loop system in operation: essentially the full wagons going down pulled the empties back up. In 1891 a terrible accident occurred: the cable broke, sending wagons hurtling, out of control, down the slope and smashing into a passenger train below. Three people were killed, and lots injured. You've now 500 metres of ascent, so pace yourself. Past the chimney, when you reach the telegraph poles, take a breather: turn round, and, yes, that's Manchester, unless the mist's down. Once at the top, walk past the houses on the left to a little wooden gate with its yellow arrow. If you're here at a weekend you may well hear motorbikes (or 4x4s) negotiating the quarries to your right. The gate opens onto a path leading round the other side of the houses. A second gate sends you left onto a grassy path, and a third onto a herringboned brick road -

and there's Manchester again and, to the left, if the visibility is good, the long line of the Pennines stretching down to Derbyshire. Go right, through a fourth gate next to a cattle grid. Turn right onto a wide quarry road. Beware lorries.

80 metres past the pylon lines, opposite the entry to Cowm Leisure, go left over a stile and down a broad path between two plantations of conifers. When you emerge into a broad field you'll have another view of Manchester. In the foreground is Cowm Reservoir, which was constructed in the 1870s to supply Rochdale with fresh water. Before the construction of the reservoir water often had to be taken into Rochdale in barrels, by horse and cart. The small hamlet of Cowclough, farms, a cotton mill and a stone polishing mill were abandoned to make way for the reservoir. In 1975 it was poisoned, when phenol seeped from a huge tyre-dump up here somewhere, so it had to be taken out of use immediately. The rivers evidently flushed the pollution from their systems quite quickly, but for the reservoir it has been a long slow process. It is now used for leisure - look out for daring water-skiers. Turn downhill following the line of the fence on your right, and when it turns sharp right so do you. Follow this narrow field along past two individual little conifers. At this point, look across the valley to spot the gap between deciduous trees to the left and the start of a triangular stand of conifers that sweeps up to the horizon further along. Later you'll be going through that gap and up the twisty valley with a solitary wind turbine just beyond its top. But you've to go a little further on this side yet. The path you're on ends at an awkward stile that is really just a slatted wooden fence. Go over, carefully. (If it feels unsafe look left, down the slope, and find another way through.) Basically you're heading for the obvious fence that will lead you diagonally down the steep slope. Pass a stone pillar gateway with two distinct saucer holes. A rushy pathway, lined on its left side by one of Whitworth's signature flagstone walls, will lead you down further. Where the wall and pathway turn left, so should you, but it's probably wise to move slightly beyond the path - the rushes are very thick here. Make your way to the corner of the field, to the left of a large, single tree on the bank of the brook, where you will find a hidden and most unusual bridge. Over you go.

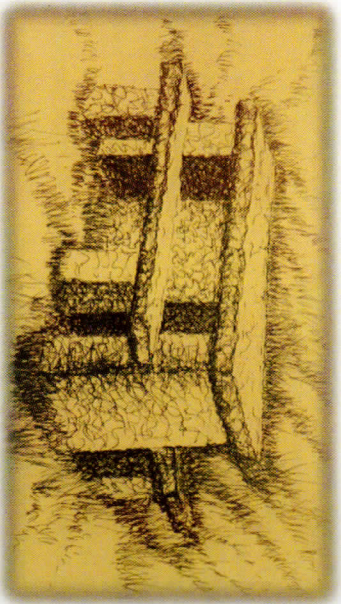
Go straight up the first field, then pass through a gap in more flags into the next one. Turn left and, if the grass isn't high and ready for mowing, head towards two and a half tall flags on the top side of the field, then go left. (If it's not appropriate to go straight across, go left along the lower field wall until you meet a broad sense of a track heading up to the gap in the trees that you spotted earlier.) Either way you'll reach a gate by a stream - you'll hear it in its channel, even if you can't see it.

It's awkward to open, but you've a second gate, even more so, just at your right elbow, to defeat! If either gate was shut when you went through, please shut it again once you're through. Take the narrow path to the left of the hillock, and swing up to the right with a wall on your left. Ahead is a lonely tree. You're aiming behind (to the right of) that. The best path is one that goes straight on at the wall-junction. Next aim to pass beneath the obvious outcrop: pick your way up whichever scramble path takes your fancy. You are now to the right of a valley bereft of anything much except jumbled stones. This area is home to badger, fox, rabbit, curlew and skylark. There are glorious foxgloves, and doubtless fossils; and innumerable paths to the head of this valley, some skirting the edge, some more conservative: some made by people, some by motorbikes, and some by sheep, but the sheep-poo adorning most of them suggests that sheep don't always follow each other like sheep, and that sheep aren't choosy! You don't have to be either, unless you've small children with you, or the wind is causing you problems. The final scree obstacle to your progress has an entertaining, hand-holdy path of sorts across it, but you can get round the back if you don't care for it.

Beyond this lies a safe path across the head of the valley to the other side, and a stile. A gently sloping path leads you down, and gradually round the hillside to the right, eventually becoming a splendid (and rarely walked) terrace of a path above Cowm Reservoir. Halfway along you should spot, up to your right, the square-edged silhouette of the "chair" that is the topmost point of the Valley of Stone Quarry Trail. If you wish to visit this, pause a moment at the stile with the "Danger Disused Quarry" sign. Don't follow the yellow arrow, because the signage from here is elegant and authoritative, but not well placed, even confusing. Cross the stile, then turn sharp right. Go along the fence about 20 metres, look left between the hillocks, and aim at that signpost. From there take the obvious, short, route to the chair. It's nice to get here, it's built elegantly, and it's an obvious place to stop for a swig or a toffee, but although the chair is a visual landmark when seen from the other side of the Whitworth valley, it lacks a proper view to the south. On a good day you can see the very top of the tallest of Manchester's towers, but there's no great sweep as there was when you emerged from Cowm Top Farm earlier.

There are lots of ways off the chair in the direction you're going (south, towards Manchester): unless you do something daft, all should lead you to a gate with an information board about the Valley of Stone Thurns Quarry. But if I were you I'd retreat the way you came to the yellow notice on the stile and now follow the little yellow arrow and the blue

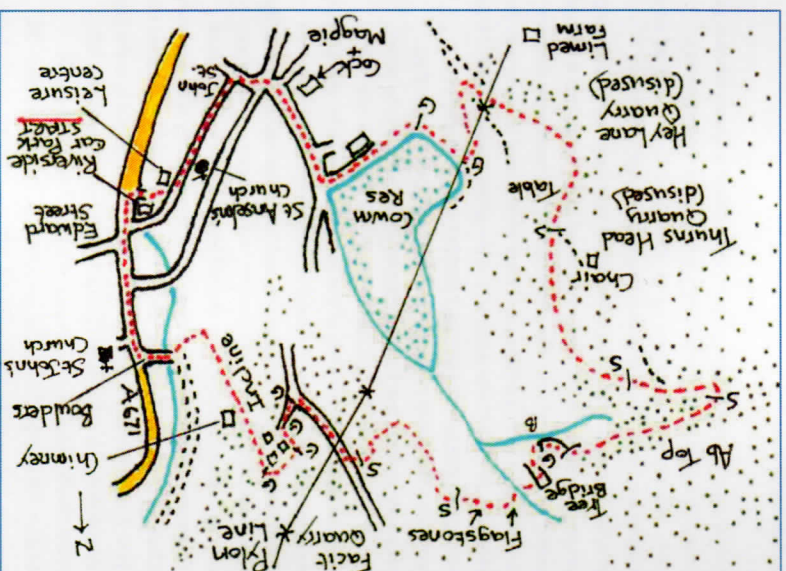
signposts. They'll take you to the same gate, but along the most delightful section of the terrace path. You could even postpone your swig or sweetie, because there's a conveniently placed stone picnic table



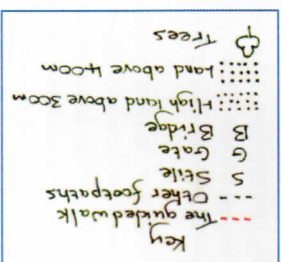
Stone table. Pen drawing by Julie Latham

from which you can look out over and beyond the eastern side of the Whitworth valley – wind farm, cemetery, Brown Wardle, M62, St Bart's church, Lobden Golf Club etc. Beyond the gate go straight on, then left at the pylon, down towards the very corner of the fence, where there's a scramble down to an old cart track. Now you've a choice. The safest is to cross the track and pass through a gate gap, then descend on a left diagonal towards a gate in the wall by Cowm Reservoir. Alternatively you can walk down the cart track – but cautiously. If there's *any* dampness, be a horse, and place your hooves carefully on the upturned stones in the centre rather than the flags (where the wheels ran). For most of this descent you might even choose the narrow path that runs at shoulder height by the wall (safer/better views)... but this rather peters out near the bottom. Once safely down turn sharp right through the big gap into the field, aiming for the gate by the reservoir.

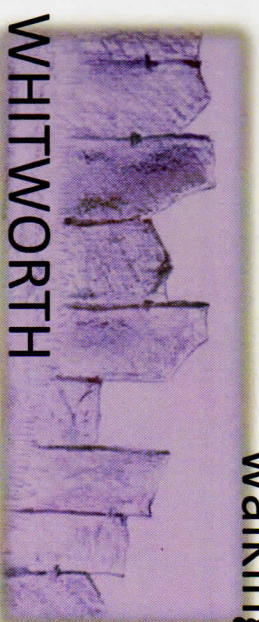
At the gate turn right and follow the reservoir path around to the water-ski centre (where you can buy ices, snacks and hot drinks, if it's open), then down the reservoir road. Where the green metal barrier ends, you might like to divert right, before the first house, to a fascinating information board 20 metres along. After which, back on the road, it's a hundred metres to the *Cock and Magpie* (where you can buy meals, if it's open). Cross Cowm Park Way carefully, going left immediately into a little back road which spits you out onto John Street. Turn left and walk along to the Leisure Centre (local gallery/snacks, if it's open), then up the steps to the Riverside car park. JF



Map by Steve Flood



walking



WHITWORTH

There are good walks in Whitworth around Cowm Res, and into Healey Dell - but how about something a *bit* more adventurous? You know there are moorland paths, but how do you get to them; are you allowed; and can you get back without retracing your steps?

Well, you could be brave and just go... or you could take one of these guides. All are circular; all start from a place where you can leave a car; all fit comfortably into a morning or afternoon; all have ups (to give you views) and downs (obviously!); and all have route instructions along with a clear, simple map and a small helping of history.

Whitworth, you'll find, has a fantastic network of paths that can be knitted together into satisfying walks. And then? Invest in OS Explorer map OL21 (South Pennines) and explore. You might even find some walks that are half as good!

WALK 8 - THE INCLINE/AB TOP

These walks are part of the Spoddan Valley Revealed eco-museum. Visit: <https://spoddanvalleyrevealed.wordpress.com/>