

HISTORY NOTES FOR SILSDEN STROLL 7

This is a pastoral walk through farmland. It circles through the richer pastureland of the gentle slopes immediately above Silsden and passes a number of historic farmhouses. To understand how this agricultural landscape evolved, read through these notes and study the map extract provided before setting off.

During mediaeval times Silsden's farms were clustered in the village centre and livestock was driven out along the lanes on to open common land. The walls or fences that enclosed such lanes opened out in a funnel shape giving access to the moors. These funnels were called rakes or raikes and helped the stockmen to funnel the animals off the moorland pastures back into the village. The Bradley road out of the village would have been the narrow end of one such raik. You can see this if you study the map extract with your walk notes. Notice the position of Raikes Hill and Raikes Head farm. They were positioned at the 'head' of one such raik, which would then have opened out into the moor.

Lanes such as Hole Lane and Horn Lane, both clearly marked on the map, are very ancient routes. Hole Lane leads to Bradley and Horn Lane strikes out in the direction of Skipton. Horn Lane is the start of an ancient route, which can be traced on a more extensive map as first lanes, and later footpaths, passing the appropriately named Moorgate Farm on its way to Skipton. It followed a fairly direct route to the market town, but over the high moor – a route no longer used. Lanes like these only become roads as we understand the term in the last two hundred years and were only tarmacked in the twentieth century. Before that they were merely rutted tracks, sometimes just footpaths, frequently mired in mud and often impassable for wheeled vehicles. They connected settlements and were largely unwall.

When the open moorland fringing the mediaeval village started to be enclosed from the 1500s onwards, new farms, each with a small number of nucleated, walled or fenced fields, began to appear. The farmsteads were often built in the centre of their new fields rather than on the sides of the old routes and so access tracks had to be created to connect them to the existing network of lanes. The farm houses of Hay Hills, Lower Heights and Low Bracken Hill farms are excellent examples of such positioning within their fields, needing to have their own accesses off the ancient lanes.

A network of new footpaths also began to be developed, connecting the new farmsteads to each other. It is these footpaths that you will be using as you walk from farm to farm. It is why the present day footpaths frequently take you right up to the farms and often through the farmyards.

Many of the farmhouses that you will pass on this walk were established as the mediaeval common fields and rough pastures were being enclosed in the sixteenth century, but their present appearance dates from their being refaced and extended in stone in the following centuries.

Several of the farms have colourful names. Hay Hills and Bracken Hill are very descriptive of their original settings. Tar Topping, however, must seem a bit of a puzzle. It is, in fact, a nineteenth century cartographer's error. It was originally known as Far Topping, the house being on a rise with extensive views, at some distance from the village. This now ruined building was once a one-bedroomed farmhouse with barn under the same roof, abandoned in the 1950s.

Following are some brief architectural notes on particular farmhouses of interest that you will pass nearby on this walk:

Low Bracken Hill farmhouse has a 1636 date stone to be found on the Tudor-style arched lintel over the door. The house has chamfered mullioned windows typical of the seventeenth century. (over page)

Hole Farm Barn is a mid-eighteenth century barn. It is a detached barn a short distance to the south-west of the farmhouse. It is a traditional Georgian three-bayed barn with central cart-entry and a stone slate roof.

Raikes Head farmhouse has features of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The oldest part of the house is the central part. The addition to the left is of eighteenth century origin. The extension to the right is a two-celled cottage added in the nineteenth century. It has 4-paned sash windows to either side of the door, typical of the century. A first-floor doorway approached up a flight of stone steps led to a former wool-comber's workshop.