Above: mining in Teesdale – action shots from Richard's time.

Richard Watson, Victorian lead miner and poet.

Richard Watson was born in Middleton-in-Teesdale, the son of a hard-working lead miner. From the age of six he went to the London Lead Company's school in the village. His ability with words was praised by the schoolmaster who sent him to the Rector at Middleton, the Reverend John Henry Brown, who encouraged him to write his own verse.

Richard had to leave school two years early, at the age of ten, when his father became seriously ill through toiling long hours in the unhealthy dust and dampness of the lead mines. Richard started above ground as a washer boy cleaning lead ore and was helping to support his family by the time his father died at the age of 47. He composed verses about his workmates, and when he was still a young man he had his first poem published in the local weekly newspaper, the Teesdale Mercury.

He was often called upon to compose rhymes for special occasions, such as company dinners, and on one occasion his audience numbered more than a thousand. But while other men did spare time jobs such as knitting, woodworking or dry stone walling, he was more interested in reading and writing than hard, physical work. He published a slim volume of poems in 1862 but it brought him little reward as he gave most of the books away.

In later years he became so impoverished that the Teesdale Mercury started an appeal fund to help him. Local people gave little however, feeling that he was mostly to blame for his own troubles. He died at the age of 58, leaving these lines torn from a notebook beside his bed as his own epitaph:

"A poor, hard working rustic bard, His lot indeed was crook’d and hard, Of comforts wealth bestows, debarred; A load of woes, To suffering worth 'tis the reward This world bestows."

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The Richard Watson Trail

I've wandered many a weary mile
And in strange countries been,
I've dwelt in towns and on wild moors
And curious sights I've seen.

And in strange countries been,
I've wandered many a weary mile
Where Tees rolls to the sea,
And in strange countries been,
I've wandered many a weary mile.

The life and times of a Victorian lead miner

Large rubbish heaps along the hill side show
The vast extent of hollow ground below.

In Richard Watson's time the North Pennines was Britain's most productive lead mining area. Lead was in huge demand for a wide range of uses, from roofing and plumbing, to the manufacture of paint, shot, pewter mugs and plates, lead crystal glass and even toys like lead soldiers.

The production of lead involved three main processes:

- **Mining:** A network of shafts and tunnels was dug to reach the lead ore (the mineral galena) which is found in vertical wall-like mineral veins underground.
- **Washing:** Water, gravity and simple tools were used to separate the heavier lead ore from the rock and other minerals.
- **Smelting:** The lead ore was heated in a furnace with peat or coal to extract metallic lead. This process required great skill and was a trade passed down from father to son.

In Teesdale the London Lead Company leased most of the mining rights and dominated the industry. From its headquarters in Middleton it ran over 20 mines and employed over a thousand men and boys. While the company provided schools, reading rooms and encouraged church attendance on Sundays, the miners had to buy their own candles, gunpowder and tools from the company stores. They worked in teams or ‘partnerships’, typically of 4-6 men, and were only paid for the lead ore they produced; even the cost of cleaning lead ore and was helping to support his family by long hours in the unhealthy dust and dampness of the schoolroom. The work was tough but rewarding. Richard was known as “the lead miner, poet and entertainer” and was the son of a hard-working lead miner. From the age of six he went to the local school for nine years, cleaning lead ore and was helping to support his family by long hours in the unhealthy dust and dampness of the schoolroom. Richard had to leave school two years early, at the age of 14, to work in the mines. From the age of 16, he became a miner. He composed his first poem at the age of 16, and his first published work was a poem called ‘Ten Row’, a terrace of cottages in Middleton, in memory of his grandfather. Richard was known as “the lead miner, poet and entertainer” and was the son of a hard-working lead miner. From the age of six he went to the local school for nine years, cleaning lead ore and was helping to support his family by long hours in the unhealthy dust and dampness of the schoolroom. Richard had to leave school two years early, at the age of 14, to work in the mines. From the age of 16, he became a miner. He composed his first poem at the age of 16, and his first published work was a poem called ‘Ten Row’, a terrace of cottages in Middleton, in memory of his grandfather.

Richard's birthplace

Richard was born in Middleton in 'Ten Row', a terrace of cottages in Middlemass Place. They were built by the London Lead Company for its more hard-working, reliable and sober workers, with long gardens stretching down to the River Tees for growing vegetables.

Strathmore Arms

Richard lived for a time with his wife Ann (known by everyone as Nancy) and daughter Mary almost forgotten in St Mary's Church in Middleton. In later years he became so impoverished that the Teesdale Mercury started an appeal fund to help him. Local people donated £60 and Richard was able to move into the best lodging house in Middleton, where he spent his last years. His final resting place is in St Mary's Church.
My Journey to Work

This trail follows some of the route described in one of Richard Watson’s poems. His 7-mile ‘commute’ from Holwick took him across the River Tees to Newbiggin, and then over Hardberry Hill to the mines at Little Eggleshope a further 4 miles away.

As lead miners often lived some distance from the mines, they would usually walk to and from ‘lodging shops’ (or ‘mineshops’) during the week. The mineshops were overcrowded (sleeping 3 or 4 to a bed) and filthy, stinking (or ‘mineshops’) during the week. The mineshops were set in. He was sent to Edinburgh for treatment but he died there, with his long-suffering wife Nancy by his side.

The original suspension bridge was built so miners could cross to the miners in the hills to the north.

Richard describes the majestic view of the river from the top of Hardberry Hill where he stopped, his ‘weary limbs shortened his journey, wasn’t built till later)

To return to the start, keep to the path through two meadows, to the main road at Bowlees. Turn right, then left to follow the footpath to the right of the old chapel, and cross the footbridge over Bow Lee Beck back to the car park.

Bow Lee Beck bridge over the ridge of the old Bridge and peel, a sight of the old charm that was to lead to his death. Richard suffered the injury that was to lead to his death.

A block of stone fell on his foot, which had to be amputated when gangrene set in. He was sent to Edinburgh for treatment but he died there, with his long-suffering wife Nancy by his side.

At the cattle grid, where the road veers left to Holwick Lodge (private), follow a footpath straight ahead through meadows down to Wynch Bridge.

With my week’s wallet o’er my shoulder flung, Down the green sloping meads I log along A well-known path from Holwick to Bowlees, Where Wynch Bridge spans the verdant banks of Tees.

His ‘wallet’, a bag like a long pillow case, would hold food for his week’s stay at the mineshop – hard cheese, bacon and a loaf of bread baked by his wife Nancy before he set off early on Monday morning. Apart from a few potatoes there would probably not be many vegetables since, unlike other miners, he preferred to spend his time writing rather than helping to feed his family by tending an allotment garden.

Follow the lane towards the Old Post Office with the two tall monkey puzzle trees in its back garden. At the main road, turn right and then left 100m past the village hall, to cross fields and Bow Lee Beck and head towards the river.

Richard describes the majestic view of the river from the top of Hardberry Hill where he stopped, his ‘weary limbs to ease’, on his journey to work:

As a huge monster, down the dale, is seen
The Tees, all listening like silver sheen.
Oft curving round some hill, ’tis hidden quite, Anon appearing in the broad sun light.

And such is life, our brightest visions fade,
Sometimes ’tis bright, anon we’re in the shade;
At times we smartly glide, at others grope
Our gloomy way, with nothing left but hope.

Over the river, climb the bank, cross a stile into a field and bear right to a gate in the wall. Turn left and continue through fields up towards the hamlet of Holwick. As the farm track curves to the right, keep straight ahead and go through a small gated stile next to the Old School House. Turn right along the road.  

In the village we pick up for the first time the route of Richard’s journey to work. It was here that, according to the poem, he would stop and catch up with the news.

Newbiggin’s reached, where miners often stop To light their pipes at Willie Gibson’s shop. A blacksmith, Willie is, of well-earned skill.

Whom we find had work at well when we will; Whene’er we meet he greets me with a smile, Enquires the news, and bids me rest awhile.

Turn right down a narrow lane. Newbiggin Chapel is on your left and is well worth a visit. If it is not open, a list of localkeyholders is on the noticeboard outside.

The greatest nation on the earth –
Yet, what is all thy glory worth
Poor sable-feathered warbler sweet!
A lifeless thing!

Sometimes ‘tis bright, anon we’re in the shade;
At times we smartly glide, at others grope
Our gloomy way, with nothing left but hope.

It may have been in a small barn, like the one passed on the left here, that Richard stopped on his journey to work to bitterly compose his lines ‘On seeing a blackbird lying frozen and dead in the snow’...

Poor sable-feathered warbler sweet! No more thy songs shalt thou repeat, Within the budding grove to greet The welcome Spring; Thou liest, stricken, at my feet – A lifeless thing!

Old England, country of my birth. The greatest nation on the earth –
What heroes have from thee sprung forth, Of sword and pen! Yet, what is all thy glory worth To starving men?

Carry on diagonally uphill across two fields to a road. Turn right and follow this down to Newbiggin, passing the former blacksmith’s shop on your right just after you cross the beck.

Richard Watson trail
His ‘Journey to Work’ as described in the poem
(Scruberri Bridge, which would have shortened his journey, wasn’t built till later)

After a meal and a short rest, I find
Myself refreshed, and more for work inclined; Then down the stormy burn my footsteps wend,
And reach my cabin at my journey’s end.

After admiring the... Foaming and dashing in its rapid course, O’er the rough grey whin rock named Little Force,...follow the path up through the pine trees to a squeeze stile in the wall.

So o’er the creaking chain-bridge take my way...
The original suspension bridge was built so miners like Richard could cross the Tees to get to the lead mines in the hills to the north.

Cross the bridge to the north side of the river.

Richard’s ‘Journey to Work’ continues via Coldberry.

Above: Great Eggleshope Mine washing floor Richard started out as a washer boy nearly at W iregill Mine on a day.

Above: Great Eggleshope Mine washing floor Richard started out as a washer boy nearly at W iregill Mine on a day.

Above: Mineshop at Coldberry in the appalling conditions of the mineshop. Richard wrote many of his poems in the evenings while other miners slept, cooked, talked or rested after a long day’s work.

Left: Blue plaque at Cross House Cottage. This was where Richard lived when he wrote ‘My Journey to Work’.

Left: Shooting lodge It was while working here as a labourer helping to build the mansion in 1891 that Richard suffered the injury that was to lead to his death. A block of stone fell on his foot, which had to be amputated when gangrene set in.

At the cattle grid, where the road veers left to Holwick Lodge (private), follow a footpath straight ahead through meadows down to Wynch Bridge.