

The Stiperstones Shuttle Commentary

From Bridges to Stiperstones

Part 1 - As we go from Bridges to Stiperstones the road rises steeply; the land drops away sharply to the right and on the left sheep graze on the gentler slopes. As the bus climbs towards the Stiperstones, going over rattley cattlegrids, look back and to the right to see the earthworks of the forts on Ratlinghope Hill. These earthworks are clearly visible for miles around and perhaps originally were used as waymarks to the ancient traveller. Looking north, to the right, in the distance is Pontesford Hill. In between is the Gatten Valley, where several ancient trackways cross, providing interesting walking country; another name for this valley is 'Hell's Gutter'. It is also the site of several small barytes mines; barytes is a barium sulphate, now used medicinally.

Part 2 - On the skyline, on a good day, the awesome jagged lines of the Stiperstones quartzite rocks are visible. Working from left to right, first is Cranberry Rock - "Cranberry Rock which was like a lesser throne for some dignitary" as Mary Webb wrote in *Golden Arrow*: then Manstone, with what looks like a pinnacle on top, the highest point on the ridge and last, the Devil's Chair. Locals say that the Devil sits in his chair when the top of the hill is hidden in cloud or mist. One legend suggests that the Devil, when carrying stones in his apron to drop on the people of Hell's Gutter, got lost in the fog. When he was at the top of the ridge the strings of his apron broke, dropping the stones on the area we know today as Stiperstones. Mary Webb and Malcolm Saville both referred to legends associated with the Devil's chair.

During the Second World War the Germans bombed these rocks thinking they were the buildings of a town with ammunition dumps. You can read an account of this in *Never on a Sunday*, memories of the Stiperstones mining communities, which is available from the Bog Centre.

As you climb towards the Stiperstones, look south, that's back and left, to see The Long Mynd stretching away towards the Craven Arms area. Nearer are The Linley Hills with a small Roman encampment on the top, near the avenue of beech trees. Beyond this, there is the glimpse of a circle of trees planted on the hillside above Linley Hall; it's locally known as Claire's ring after Lady More who lived there in the second half of the 20th century. In More church there is a Roman mosaic and a villa has been found nearby.

Part 3 - As you approach the Nature Reserve car park the first stage of the 'Back to Purple' project can be seen. This has involved the removal of large areas of conifers, most notably at Gatten Plantation and on Nipstone Rock to your left along the Ridge; the former Gatten Plantation is being restored to heathland. Natural England, who manage the national nature Reserve are heading a project in partnership with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Forest Enterprise to restore the heather uplands of the Stiperstones Ridges.

You are now crossing one of the main uplands of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. On a clear day it's not hard to see why it has been given this title. The Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or AONB, encompasses the main South Shropshire uplands including the Clun hills, Long Mynd and Stretton and Clee Hills and follows the Wenlock Edge to include the Wrekin. It is an area of distinctive landscape and geology and one of 41 protected landscapes in England and Wales. For more details of the Back to Purple Project or the AONB ask at the Bog Visitor Centre.

Part 4 - After the fourth cattle grid, the bus stops at Stiperstones car park; there are designated parking spaces and an accessible path for wheelchair users. People come from miles around just to admire the scenery from this viewpoint and The Stiperstones Stomp starts from here.

The area is famous for its whinberries, also known as bilberries. Local people have historically gathered these berries for the dye trade; to supplement their income, poor mining and farming families would sell the berries, collected with special combs, to a Whinberry "higgler" who would sell them on to the dye factories in Staffordshire and other parts of the Midlands. Whinberry pie is a local delicacy.

Stiperstones to the Bog Centre

Where the bus turns right, along the winding road, at the next T junction we are at the top of Frog's Gutter above The Bog. This area is known locally as Windy Corner.

From here on a clear day it's possible to see Plynlimon with Cader Idris and Snowdon in the far distance. Nearer, Corndon Hill, conical shaped and conifer-topped, stands on the Welsh border; Stapeley Hill, the ridge running northwards is still in Shropshire. Evidence of prehistoric and Bronze Age activity can be found in this landscape and stone Age axes from a quarry on Corndon Hill have been found all over Europe.

Looking north from Stapeley, the hill with a prominent crown of trees is known as Bromlow Callow. It's believed that there have always been trees on the top of this hill to act as a landmark for sheep and cattle drovers.

The main building remaining of the mining village at The Bog is the school; the village was demolished in the 1970's. The school was built of sparkly Stiperstones quartzite stone in 1839; it closed in 1968 before electricity came to the area. The building is now used as a Field Centre. A group of local volunteers run an information point here providing refreshments for visitors during the school holidays.

The Bog

Why is the area called The Bog? Until mining for lead, and afterwards barytes, developed the area was extremely wet. The rocks, known as Mytton Flags, don't let water seep through, so it collects - hence the name The Bog.

A century ago the area between The Bog and Corndon Hill was known as the Land of Dereliction because of the mining activities and a very dirty, noisy place it was, quite different from the peaceful scene today. However, several old mines can be found if you walk around here.

From the Bog to Stiperstones Village

The Old Miner's Arms was kept by a Mrs Sandalls, a name used by Malcolm Saville for the landlady of the Hope Anchor Inn. Malcolm Saville's Seven White Gates Farm is situated beyond Nipstone Rock but the description is not of any particular farm in the area. The Lone Piners, the children who feature in these adventures, are pictured on the front of one of the books in a bucket on an aerial ropeway. There were two of these ropeways in the area, one near Habberley and the other at The Bog.

The seams of ore run from The Bog towards Pennerley. To allow mining to take place in these mines, without flooding, a drainage channel was cut in 1797, more than 100 metres deep; it was known as The Boat level and drains out of the hillside near Stiperstones village. If this ever became blocked the area would soon return to a bog.

As you travel along the side of the ridge between The Bog and Snailbeach there are remains of mines almost every mile. The rocks of the Stiperstones ridge are tilted in such a way that the minerals are not far from the surface. You can catch glimpses of tall brick chimneys and large brick and stone buildings, which housed Cornish beam engines - steam engines used for drainage of the mines; examples of these can be seen near the Pottery at Tankerville and also at Snailbeach; both are Heritage sites. If you visit either of these places please respect the privacy of the people who live in the area.

Remains of these small mines are every where. You can often spot an old barytes refuse tip because the normal natural vegetation is replaced by some unusual plants including orchids. To

give you some idea of what it was like to live at the time of the mining here's a quote from Golden Arrow. It describes the wise woman, Nancy Corra, who lived in a hamlet called Clays – Pennerley in reality.

Huge heaps of lead refuse rose in unwholesome whiteness, like mounds of rather dirty sugar round the deserted mines. Her small cottage stood among the white mounds with a strip of garden where she grow her 'yarbs'. She would plod up into the larch woods with an old bucket and shovel and bring back leaf mould. Her plants survived but their leaves were often strangely spotted

Stiperstones Village

Stiperstones School, a traditional late Victorian stone building with a slate roof can be seen on the right. Further on, also on the right, is the Stiperstones inn, the shop and post office.

Small mines were working a century ago in the two valleys which come close together in Stiperstones village. These valleys are called Perkins Beach and Mytton Beach – beach from an old English word meaning a pebbly river, or stream valley. Greystone and Black Dingles described by Malcolm Saville are perhaps based on these two valleys or even Crowsnest which is along your route.

Snailbeach Mines

In all these valleys and particularly on the top of the hill, over to your right, at Blakemoorgate, remains of miner's squatter cottages are visible. These were built on 'common land'; reputedly, if a chimney could be built overnight and a fire lit by dawn, the family could build a cottage and claim a small acreage around it. Some of these old sites are important meadows with interesting species of plants such as mountain pansy growing amongst the grass.

The Romans are reputed to have extracted lead and small amounts of silver between Shelve and Hope in an area now known as Roman Gravels. Lead 'pigs' or ingots have been found in this area stamped with Emperor Hadrian's mark. Henry the Second derived part of his income from this area but most of the mining activity took place during the 1800's.

The road winds down into Snailbeach village and as it rises up again on the left, behind a high stone wall, is Snailbeach Methodist Chapel, a handsome stone building in a style typical of the borders.

You can explore the whole of the Snail Beach site following well marked footpaths. There is a small exhibition and other information explaining the history of the mines and the people who lived and worked in them. There are toilets at the village hall.

Where the path leads to the Snailbeach mine buildings, there were large white refuse tips of barytes. These have been reworked and planted whilst the mine buildings and shallow workings have been stabilised in an award-winning scheme. A tall brick chimney, among the complex of buildings, has the date 1881 on it. The lead mines ceased work in 1911 but barytes was mined here until 1947.

Beyond the Snailbeach mines the road climbs Lord's Hill - Mary Webb's God's Little Mountain - to Lord's Hill Chapel which features in Mary Webb's *Gone to Earth*. Many local people appeared in the film of this book made in 1949 with the film star, Jennifer Jones, taking the lead. In the graveyard you can still see where the film makers built a baptismal pool. One tombstone there tells of the tragic death of Arthur Wardman in the mining disaster of George's shaft in 1895, when the cable holding the miners cradle snapped dropping the unfortunate miners to their deaths.

From Snailbeach to Minsterley

Originally coal was brought to the mines from Minsterley and Pontesbury by horse and cart and the ore removed the same way until a small railway line was built. You can see traces of the track bed as you leave Snailbeach and between Minsterley and Habberley.

You will also pass St Luke's church on your left, a pretty stone church of the early 20th Century, reflecting the need for new churches with the rise in population from the industrial activity of that period.

The route from Snailbeach to Minsterley descends into more pastoral scenery with lush hedges and fields with clumps of stately oaks. It passes through the village of Ploxgreen before arriving in Minsterley, a large village with many old buildings interspersed with new ones.

Minsterley

The red brick church houses a remarkable collection of Maiden's Garlands. They date back some 200 years and although made from paper, are well preserved; there are seven on display. These garlands were placed on coffins of unwed ladies - hence the name maiden's garlands. On the outside of the church, have a look at the ornate west door with its rusticated stonework and carved skulls and bones.

Minsterley is a point on your route where the shuttle bus meets the bus from Shrewsbury to Bishop's Castle.

Please note the next sections are subject to changes in the Shuttle bus routes, and may not always be the route taken.

Minsterley to Pontesbury

Having passed the modern industry of Minsterley the road runs parallel to the old railway line, the Shrewsbury & Minsterley branch of London North Western & Great Western joint railway.

The buildings on the left are the site of Malehurst Mill where mineral ore was crushed and processed before being transported away on the railway. People still living in the area remember, when travelling to Shrewsbury by bus, the noise of the overhead ropeway transporting buckets of ore to Malehurst and coal in the other direction.

On the right there just as you approach Pontesbury is an entrance to Callow Quarry. A castle was constructed on the site of an Iron-age hill fort on Callow hill. This castle, probably of stone, was disused by 1264 but today little remains of the castle and the two hamlets at the foot of the hill. The word callow which appears in Mary Webb's "Gone to Earth" is widely used in this area of Shropshire for a hill.

As you approach Pontesbury it is difficult to believe that the village dates back to Saxon and Roman times. The church is not mentioned in Domesday but the thirteenth century chancel is built on Saxon foundations. The rest of the church was rebuilt in 1829. It does contain a Norman font. Just before Christmas every year a Festival of Christmas trees is held in the church. Over 40 trees are decorated by local people belonging to community groups and businesses.

The housing estate behind the church is built on the site of Pontesbury Castle mound. Excavations have shown that the castle dated to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with a large tower to the side. This was reputed to be standing until the sixteenth century.

Stroll round the village and see a mix of different periods of architecture. You can walk up Pontesbury hill to Poles Coppice and continue to Habberley. Sometimes you can see Buzzards soaring overhead.

Minsterley to Habberley

Our route now rises along narrow roads with high hedges and tall old trees on either side. It passes through an area where an aerial ropeway, similar to the ropeway at The Bog, brought ore down from Huglith mine to Malehurst - between Minsterley & Pontesbury. This is where the ore was processed before being transported away to other parts of the country by rail. Signs of the base supports of this ropeway can be seen on the edge of Poles Coppice and in the valley leading away from Habberley. We also have tales of youngsters hitching a ride on the buckets on the ropeway, and tipping out coal when they went over their cottages.

Poles Coppice to Habberley

You can get off at Poles Coppice Nature Reserve and explore this ancient woodland where at certain times of the year you can see an interesting variety of wildflowers and birdlife. The area has historical associations with mining, quarrying and tanning.

The outlines of a hill fort on top of Earl's Hill can be clearly seen. This is the site of the legend of The Golden Arrow, which Mary Webb used as the title of her first novel. One version of the legend suggests that a golden arrow was lost in a battle on the hill in the seventh century. Lovers through the ages have sought the Golden Arrow, in the hope of eternal happiness, but without success. Whilst Mary Webb lived between Habberley and Pontesbury she wrote *Gone to Earth*. She used to walk up the valley towards Cothercott and Thresholds passing Huglith mine which was known locally as 'The Widow maker'. This mine was one of the first to use pneumatic drills which made the mine very dusty, causing lung problems for the miners.

Earl's Hill is a wonderful place for butterflies and wildlife and very popular with walkers with excellent panoramic views from the summit.

After rising up to Poles Coppice, we descend into Habberley, an attractive village with several black and white half-timbered houses; the most notable is Habberley Hall which dates back to the 16th century and was owned by the Mytton family. The Regency rake, mad Jack Mytton, is reputed to have driven a coach and four horses from Habberley over The Stiperstones ridge, down Mytton's Dingle to Stiperstones Inn. Mytton's Dingle is very steep so if the story is true, he most probably drove down Perkins Beach where a reasonable track still exists. It is doubtful whether he actually lived at the Hall at all though he certainly visited it. You won't be surprised to hear that the pub is called the Mytton Arms.

Walkers getting on the bus here may have enjoyed the spectacular walk, the Stiperstones Stomp, over the Stiperstones ridge from the nature reserve car park. Please ask the driver for a leaflet about it.

Habberley has its origins in Saxon times; the church is built on a mound with an ancient yew tree in the church yard. Although it was largely rebuilt in 19th century, the church shows signs of earlier work in the two large buttresses at each end. The one on the east end was probably put up in 1678 when the building was reported to be 'in decay'.

In the churchyard is the tombstone of Harry Tuffins who died in 1871; his name lives on in the well known hypermarkets of the area.

Marsley Farm up the valley towards Huglith Mine was where the Saxon king, Ethelred the Unready, had a hunting lodge in the forest. The present woods around Habberley are full of trails suitable for mountain bikes.

Habberley to Pulverbatch

Between Habberley and Pulverbatch there are again signs of mining for barytes and copper; the minerals on the Long Mynd side of The Stiperstones tend to be copper rather than lead.

The miners who worked here tell tales of the strange sounds heard underground: tapping noises, perhaps made by the ghosts of Romans, leading them to new seams of ore deep in the mines or the horsemen of Wild Edric, a Saxon lord who owned much of the area. He and his men fought the Normans but they were eventually defeated. He is reputed to be sleeping in the hills and will appear when England needs him; he was supposedly seen on the eve of the Crimean War, World War One and the Falklands War.

Look on the banks and hedges enclosing the road for foxgloves, honeysuckle, willow herb and other wild flowers. Also listen out for some of the many varieties of birds that can be found here – notably the raven and the buzzard.

We are now approaching Castle Pulverbatch. Remember the word ‘beach’ for a pebbly river valley? Well, on this east side of the Stiperstones the word batch is used whereas beach is used to the west.

Directly ahead you may also glimpse the hill fort of Caer Caradoc on the summit of the hill of the same name overlooking the town of Church Stretton. This is one of the reputed last stands of Caractacus who led the dogged resistance of the British against the Romans.

The village of Church Pulverbatch, whose church has a handsome tower of 1773, is about a mile away. If you want to take a break in the Pulverbatchs, there are pubs serving meals.

Along a track to your right is a castle mound, one of two in the immediate area. This castle, dating from 1205, is one of a chain of similar settlements around the north side of the Long Mynd. The old coaching road to Bishop’s Castle can still be followed past this Norman motte and bailey castle to the top of Cothercott Hill. However, you may catch a glimpse of this mound from the new road that the bus takes up the hill.

Pulverbatch to Ratlinghope

We are now on the stretch from Pulverbatch to Cothercott Hill and to both the left and right of the road there are traces of barytes mines on Cothercott and Wilderley Hills. The field on the right is known as ‘The Desert’, probably because it was covered with refuse from the mines early last century.

The bus stop just over Cothercott Hill is where the ore from the barytes mines on the hillside was brought to the road and put onto lorries. These mines were still working until the 1940’s, with recent test drilling taking place to see if it was possible to economically extract medicinal quality ore. Immediately over the fence above the workings is the tumulus near Thresholds Farm, where many footpaths and tracks meet.

At the road junction the old coaching roads to Bishop’s Castle from Habberley and Pulverbatch meet the present road.

We are now on the section from Cothercott Hill to Ratlinghope. Ancient drover’s tracks cross the road near New Leasowes Farm and the hamlet of Stitt. The latter is mentioned in the Domesday Book and, in medieval times, consisted of several cottages, small farms and a hermitage chapel. There’s a music festival every summer at Leasowes Bank and jazz is very much part of the programme. Leasowes, by the way, is an old English word for a pasture.

Ratlinghope

We are now approaching Ratlinghope Post office, a large brick and stone house on the right, which until recently was the local Post office. It built as a rectory in 1865 and is surrounded by splendid tall beech, lime and chestnut trees. When Mary Webb knew Ratlinghope, the Post office was opposite the Rectory and the school where the Youth Hostel is today.

Ratlinghope Church was made famous in the story 'A Night in the Snow' which describes how the Reverend Donald Carr was lost in the snow in 1865. He was returning to Woolstaston, on the other side of The Long Mynd, after taking a service at Ratlinghope. The boots worn by the Reverend Carr can be seen in Shrewsbury Museum. After his ordeal, permission was granted to build a rectory so that the clergy wouldn't have to travel so far to take Sunday services.

Take a hint from the story of the Reverend Carr and if you are walking, please be careful! The weather can change very quickly in these hills and people still easily lose their way. Tragedies are documented over several centuries even to the present day.

The church was once an Augustinian Priory although there's no sign of the monastic buildings today. The churchyard is part of the "Caring for Gods Acre" - a Churchyard wildlife conservation scheme and contains some very ancient yew trees which are thought to be more than a thousand years old.

The stone built church is well worth a visit; it lies under the hill and its weather-boarded belfry is a local landmark. The Church is open to visitors every day and the building has work dating over at least four centuries.

As you approach the main door, on the left, is the grave of the last sin eater. (The name of the person on the grave is Munslow). Sin eating was a Welsh Borderland custom, where someone takes on the sins of the deceased person. In some areas this was done by eating bread which had been placed on the coffin. This perhaps was an inspiration to Mary Webb who used this folklore in her famous novel Precious Bane. Ratlinghope is in fact the village of Slepe in her first novel Golden Arrow.

"... the small huddled village of Slepe. The church tower – grey, square, knowing all winds, all rains, all snows and regarding them but as the beating of small birds against its massive walls – rose out of a tall rookery. A farm or two, the vicarage, the school where Deborah and Joe learnt all their less useful knowledge, the post office and a few cottages- these were all the human outposts between the empty valley and the lonely hills."

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