

# ENGLAND'S GREEN HEART

There are so many reasons why the Peak District National Park is a special place for so many people. Photographer *Fran Halsall* shares with us just a few of her favourite things about a place she has loved ever since childhood.



Above In late spring, flowers are just appearing in a haymeadow near Reapsmoor in North Staffordshire.

Right Derwent Moor is well-known for its rugged charm, and the Salt Cellar tor is chief among the geological features.





to know this landscape encouraged me to photograph it and develop a strong connection with it that has guided my work ever since. When I became a professional photographer in 2004, the process of documenting the area kept me busy for most of the next three years. It is said that you always take the very best photographs on your doorstep, and so I set out to cover as many nearby locations as humanly possible, throughout all the seasons and in all sorts of weather. And now, years of exploring this terrain have left a permanent impression of its iconic elements imprinted upon my mind's eye.

It is an easy part of the world to be passionate about, and I am one of many who have felt a bond with the place, but all of us who love the Peak District today should acknowledge the hard work of the early conservationists who lobbied for recognition of its importance to the public. Their efforts were finally rewarded when the area was designated as Britain's first national park in 1951. The events that led to the creation of the park have become part of the countryside's folklore. Chief among these is the Mass Trespass on Kinder Scout in 1932, when hundreds of ramblers crossed onto privately owned moors, challenging the denial of access to large areas of open country. The legacy of the movement lives on today with the creation in 2000 of the Countryside Rights of Way Act which, though not permitting unrestricted access, has succeeded in opening up large tracts of land for the public to enjoy throughout Britain.



**S**OME COME TO the Peak District for relaxation, shaking off their daily stresses while taking in the view. Others come seeking adventure by engaging in activities such as rock-climbing and caving. Altogether, a staggering 22 million people visit here every year and 38,000 people call it home, making

it one of the busiest national parks in Britain. In spite of all this, there are still many places, just a little way off the beaten track, where solitude can be found.

It was in the Peak District that I first fell in love with the British countryside. I grew up a short distance from the area, and getting

*Above* The Peter's Stone landslip never fails to impress visitors to Cressbrook Dale, notable for its limestone scenery and for flower-rich grasslands, as it clings to the steep-sided valley's upper reaches.

*Below* Kinder Scout's undulating expanse makes a dramatic backdrop to the farming settlements known collectively as Edale, which spread along the River Noe's course.

*Right* Textures in the weatherworn sandstone on Curbar Edge come to life in the early morning as the first rays of sunlight glance over them.





Although the Peak District is not the country's largest national park – it covers a modest 555 square miles of the Pennines' southern tip – the region none the less features a broad range of ecologically important habitats with diverse vegetation. This is partly because of the duality of the underlying geology, composed primarily of two types of sedimentary rock laid down in the Carboniferous period. Firstly, there is the limestone, dating from around 360 million years ago, which forms the lowland areas, referred to as the White Peak, including parts of Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Then there is the sandstone, from 320 million years ago, which forms the upland areas known as the Dark Peak, and includes parts of North Derbyshire, Greater Manchester, South and West Yorkshire. Another recently recognized area is the Southwest Peak, which includes a zone once loosely described as the Dark Peak because of its sandstone bedrock.

Because of its lower altitude, the White Peak is lush and welcoming, featuring green fields enclosed by limestone walls and picture-postcard villages. The Dark and Southwest Peaks are much rougher around the edges, and sparser, with higher, more exposed terrain, which invokes a feeling of being set apart from civilization – it is this sense of space and remoteness that appeals to me the most. In the highest places of North Derbyshire I can find peace – just me, my camera and whatever the weather throws in my direction.

The White Peak is notable for gentle hills rising above pleasant valleys, carved by often long-gone rivers. A good place to see the landscape's core structure is the dry, upper reaches of Cressbrook Dale, where the Peter's Stone landslip perches precariously on verdant slopes. This striking feature has been the subject of many of my photographs, often forming a backdrop for studies of the dale's nationally important grasslands. The effects of massive

ancient rivers are evident in the various caves found throughout the region. Thor's Cave, in North Staffordshire, is one of the more unusual in that it is located high in a crag above the current course of the River Manifold. Enter this cavernous space and you are surrounded by one of the finest examples of Karst scenery in the country. The hollowed out interior is supported by tall limestone buttresses carved into strange and brittle shapes – clues to the powerful forces that created the caverns.

Elsewhere in the White Peak, the rolling plateaux and dales have long been used for agriculture. Around Foolow, the land is divided into long and narrow plots known as strip fields, which are outlined by stone walls and hedgerows. This type of field dates from the medieval period and is associated with many of the region's villages. Few crops are grown in this part of Derbyshire where most of the land is used for raising either sheep or cattle. Superficially, this landscape



Top Ladybower Reservoir's still surface forms the perfect mirror, reflecting Derwent Edge's craggy escarpment, which looms impressively around 820ft above the shore.

Left A western-facing aperture in Thor's Cave lets the sunshine pour across the limestone boulders inside.

Above The purple blooms of Common Heather in late summer on the National Trust's Longshaw Estate.



Above **Field enclosures and hedgerows near Foolow village in Derbyshire make this a quintessential White Peak view.**

looks similar to the fields of North Staffordshire, such as those around Reapmoor, but the bedrock here is sandstone. A rare type of grassland, the haymeadow, still survives here. As the name suggests, this habitat is associated with the traditional practice of haymaking, which is very much in decline due to the intensification of modern agriculture.

The Vale of Edale marks the transition between limestone lowlands and sandstone uplands. The Kinder Scout mountain plateau looms above the farming hamlets spread along the valley floor. Both Kinder Scout and nearby Bleaklow, the area's only mountains, dominate the skyline in the northern part of the park. Although they do not conform to an idealized version of mountains that we tend to imagine, their long and primarily flat summits are the essence of this environment.

In north-east Derbyshire the sandstone geology is exposed as a line of escarpments running from Birchen Edge in the south to Derwent Edge in the north, via Curbar Edge, where deeply incised boulders are the result of unrelenting erosion. Over the years I have come to notice my preoccupation with rocks – sandstone in particular. From time to time, certain lighting reveals wonderful textures. These edges are dotted with characteristic tors such as the Salt Cellar on Derwent Edge, which appears to grow out of the moor surrounding it. Immediately below Derwent Edge is the flooded upper section of the Derwent Valley containing Ladybower Reservoir. This is just one of three large expanses of water that, although controversial when they were created, are now popular sites for recreation.

One of the year's highlights is the late summer flowering of the heather-clad Dark Peak moorlands, when the purple blooms transform the normally

neutral-coloured vegetation into a vivid display. The dry rocky soils within the Longshaw Estate are the ideal place for heather to thrive. It is staggering to think that this area was once earmarked for a housing development, prior to its acquisition by the National Trust, demonstrating just how vulnerable our natural heritage is. Without the intervention of bodies such as the Trust, working in partnership with the National Park Authority, these irreplaceable environments would be lost forever.

Our national parks are protected for the benefit of both nature and man, and offer some hope that we can provide much needed breathing space in an age defined by our desperate grab for land and resources. We damage them at our peril, as a country without a green heart is a soulless and inhospitable one. **BB**

*For more information, visit the National Park Authority's website on [www.peakdistrict.org](http://www.peakdistrict.org), or call 01629 816200.*