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“A helping of Roseberry Topping”

David Shirt

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The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

A helping of Roseberry Topping

David Shirt



CJH

Roseberry Topping with visits organiser, John Davies, in the foreground

Whitby is one of our favourite places, so my wife Sandy and I jumped at the chance of joining the CCS social weekend there on 5-7 October 2007. We were accommodated very comfortably in Larpool Hall, a large country house run by HF Holidays, on the south side of the town.

Whitby itself, however, was not the main item on the menu for this weekend, though Roseberry Topping was. You might imagine, as we did, that this is a version of the famous 'summer pudding', but we were soon to be put right. On our first evening we were treated to a presentation by David Taylor and David W Taylor of the Great Ayton Community Archaeological Project. It might well have been named the Roseberry Topping Project, because that was the subject of their activities – and it showed just how effective it can be when all effort is channelled into a single area of research.

Roseberry Topping, it turns out, is the name of a prominent hill on the northern edge of the North York Moors, close to the village of Great Ayton. It is

an outlier of Jurassic sandstone, with a height of 320m and a distinctive profile that makes it a landmark for many miles around. It has had a long and fascinating history of mineral exploitation, the principal targets being ironstone and alum. For most of its history the hill had a conical shape that was likened to the traditional ‘sugarloaf’, but a major collapse in 1914 – probably caused by mine subsidence – reduced it to a distinctive half-cone with a craggy vertical cliff.

I cannot resist an aside here (wearing my etymologist’s hat), because the name of the place is so odd that it demands an explanation, and for that we have to thank the Vikings who settled here in the Dark Ages. It seems that the name Roseberry began life as an Old Norse name *Óðins bjarg*, meaning ‘Odin’s rock or crag’, making it one of the very few pagan placenames in England. (The route by which this became transmuted to Roseberry is too long and tortuous to explain here.) The second element, Topping, is from an Old Norse word *toppen* or ‘hill’.

We were thus well prepared for the weekend’s main excursion to Roseberry Topping on the Saturday, led by the two David Taylors along with Dr Ian Pearce. Parking by Aireyholme Farm, the childhood home of Captain James Cook, we set off in fine weather on what proved to be a bracing but not over-strenuous walk. The unique shape of the Topping quickly came into view and we could see that the slopes were heavily pockmarked by former mining activities. On closer inspection the remains of more recent industrial activity were visible, and a number of pits, holes, and tunnels were concealed among the bracken. From the summit the views were spectacular, as was the vertiginous cliff left by the 1914 collapse. We eventually came back down the hill and gathered at the ‘summer-house’, an enigmatic stone structure on the lower slopes that is reminiscent of an eighteenth-century folly. A splendid picnic lunch was kindly provided for us there by the members of the Great Ayton Project, and we thank them warmly for giving us such an interesting day and for looking after us so well.

For the afternoon the party split up and we went our various ways. A number of people went to see the (supposed) Roman Road on Wheeldale Moor, and the Beck Hole Incline on the Whitby to Pickering railway. (This is George Stevenson’s original line of 1836, which was later superseded by what is now the North Yorkshire Moors Railway.) Accompanied by Richard Oliver, Sandy and I paid a visit to Rosedale in the centre of the Moors to see yet more industrial archaeology. Here again the quarry was ironstone (if you’ll pardon the pun) and we walked along the route of the former railway that took away the ore. The most obvious remains there were the massive kilns used for ‘calcining’ the ironstone to reduce its weight prior to transport. Many thanks to Richard for showing us around.

[Another etymological aside: the ‘ironstone’ we are talking about here is iron-rich sandstone. We live in Hook Norton in North Oxfordshire, which grew rich on its former ironstone industry, but in our case the ‘ironstone’ is an attractive brown limestone that is widely used locally for building.]

Altogether an excellent day out, and the perfect way to work up an appetite for dinner. This was followed by an evening of stimulating conversation in the bar.

There were no planned communal activities on the Sunday so we went into Whitby to explore some of its hidden corners, followed by a long but relaxed drive home. Warm thanks to John Davies for organizing such a pleasurable weekend.

The Great Ayton Community Archaeological Project has published a 208-page hardback, Roseberry Topping, edited by Ian Pearce and lavishly illustrated by landscape photographer Joe Cornish, who lives locally. The book is currently out of print, but well worth snapping up if you can find a copy.