

The Limestone Connection

It's possible when walking from Bournemouth to Swanage and then on to St. Aldhelm's Head to walk over two hundred million years of geological history, from the sands of Studland Bay to the limestone of the Purbeck cliffs. All this in a distance of some six or seven miles, or a few hours walking. Interestingly, much the same series of rocks underlies Bedfordshire. An equivalent walk, however, to cover the same period of geological history, but in the reverse direction, would take much longer, starting from Turvey on the Oolitic limestone and ending just beyond Luton on the Upper Chalk and on the tiny bit of the Reading Beds in Bedfordshire which equate to the sands of Wareham and Studland – a distance of some twenty-five miles and a good day's walk. This difference in time and distance reveals the more violent upending of the different strata which has taken place in Dorset and the more violent weathering which has produced a stunning coastline. We may have to wait sometime for this to happen here but we don't have to wait to make the limestone connection - it's obvious in the beautiful stone buildings of Turvey: not quite Portland stone but Oolitic limestone nonetheless. This belt of limestone can be traced from Dorset all the way through to Whitby in North Yorkshire, as can, of course, the limestone buildings it gives rise to. Now, there's a walk worth considering, a distance of some three hundred miles or some twelve days solid walking. The only drawback being that one remains within the same geological timeframe, the Jurassic, famous for the marvellous array of animal remains in Dorset, where ammonites, for example, abound, but not so impressive in the Inferior Oolite of the Midlands. This still gives us sixty-five million years to play with, however, and the fascinating prospect of not only tracking the changes in 300 miles of limestone architecture but in 300 miles of limestone loving plants and insects too. Which brings us back to Bedfordshire and our relative lack of limestone specialities due to the glacial deposits of clay – which makes our limestone walls all the more important. Look after them, or rather, mostly leave them alone, they are home to a wonderful array of ferns, mosses and lichens, as well as plants such as Stonecrops, House Leeks and Rue-leaved saxifrage, and all their attendant fauna including such moths as the Muslim Footman. One spray: all gone.

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