

# The dying roads

Micklefield's "corpse road" is today, avoided. It's a pathway paved with the dead, the central point for stories of wraiths and ghosts. Centuries of superstition cling to what are now just old routes with dark names in the remote British countryside. The dead can't build, but they have a history of building paths of fear in England. In lattergone toadays, if a dead body was carried across your land on its way from the place of death to the place of burial then that path became a "corpse road" and anybody may use it: it became a public right of way. Looking back on it, this is a very strange concept and a grey area in the law. It is estimated there are up to 800 such roads in England. The roads have existed for hundreds of years, even pre-dating the doomsday book, — whenever there has been death there have been corpse roads. They were created and preserved by the community.

In medieval times the dead were feared, as were their corpse roads. But these paths are now far more about life than death, with walks along them, perhaps bizarrely, becoming a regular family outing. The uncertainty of death may have led to many people blocking out stories of such places, no matter how enlightening and hopeful they may be. Despite the macabre overtones, there is a beauty to the community corpse roads represent: in the area it was common to see entire villages care so much about the loss of one man to each take a turn at carrying the coffin to its final resting place, this is unfortunately no longer the case.

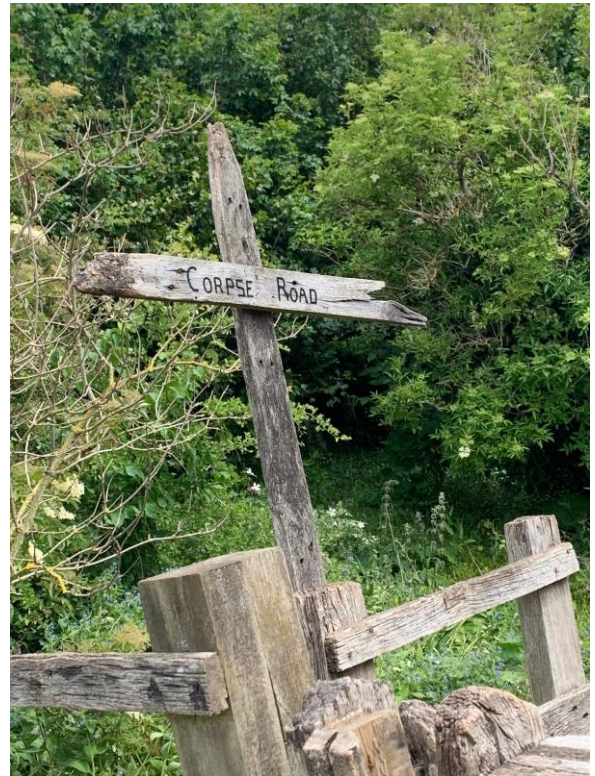
The town of Micklefield is listed in a Royal Charter of 963 A.D, making it part of a very special set of Yorkshire townships with a recorded history older than the Domesday "Great Survey" of 1086. Micklefield was a chapelry within the parish of Sherburn in Elmet until 1886.

This was primarily the reason for the creation of the corpse road — as a functional route to carry the dead from surrounding villages to the consecrated land in Sherburn where their "mother church" was located. Before the expansion of Micklefield in the 1880's with the industrial revolution and a spike in mining the population in this area was low with most people making a living from agriculture.

The green heart of this community is the Iron Age wood which lies to the South East of the village. The wood is home to a field settlement around one and a half thousand years old. Despite there being few trees remaining from these times, those that survived from the Iron Age settlements reach three metres or more in height and often bear signs of axe or adze on their surfaces.

*A photo of the Corpse road sign to the North West of the village*

Elizabeth Reed



One of the most fascinating landmarks in the area is the *corpse stone* located towards the bottom of the wood. According to Karen, a local resident, and protector of the field system, the villagers decided long ago that the dead should get one last glimpse of their home before they leave it for good. This is why the stone was located there, a slab of grey amongst the trees facing back to the village. While the reason for its location is local folk law, there is something charming about the connection to the land that the stone signifies. “In the past, death wasn’t feared in this village as you might expect,” She hinted this might have something to do with the rich mining history in the area that made “death an everyday ordeal”.

*Photo to show the corpse stone*



*Photo to show the corpse road to the South of the village*

The coal mining pit came into operation in the 1870s and was the location of an enormous explosion on 30 April 1896, in which 63 of the 300 workers (men and boys) died. Twenty died from the explosion, the rest from afterdamp. Ninety children were rendered fatherless in the disaster, which was a big issue as these men were all the main breadwinners for their families. This tragedy wasn’t the first in Micklefields history, but it was the first disaster to be properly recorded. Even before the mining industry took off, life was hard in the “grim North” for everyone with the average age being around 32 up until the 1950s, according to parish records. The huge increase in death was the catalyst for the building of Micklefield church: it simply

became impossible to carry so many corpses down the corpse road.

The future of the ancient road is in some jeopardy as the village grows and blossoms into a commuter town inundated by young families and businessmen.

“The character of the village and the close community is breaking apart,” laments Karen. Vandalism has spiked, which she feels may be as a result of the introduction of features such as the off-road motorbike racing track. While some of the track’s proponents argue that it’s an important part of entertaining young people, and consequently reducing crime, the track fringes the Iron Age wood. Since it was built in 2000, there have been two cars stolen and set ablaze in the wood as well as countless “ghost” parties where teens brave the scariest parts of the wood at night. There is a typical insider-outsider conflict here.

The original residents of the village feel *topophilia* —a love of place, as written on extensively by Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan — for the Iron Age wood and the corpse road as it reflects a part of their identity.

After all, place is a huge part of who we are and how we identify, as Tuan concluded. The change to the physical space as well as how it is now treated has been a hard pill for some to swallow; destruction is often the dark side of development.



*Photo to show the corpse road passing through the wood*

Going forwards Karen hopes that “there will be some boundaries put in place to protect the iron age wood and the corpse road as both are part of the village’s identity”. It will be interesting to see if it is possible to preserve such a dark but fascinating part of this mining village's history, while also allowing it to blossom and develop.

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