A Peek at the Peaks
Off to Mam Tor

Ian M Packham

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Sheffield

Service no. 272 | Journey time 50 to 70mins

OS Landranger 110. Hourly every day.
Operator: First South Yorkshire, TM Travel, Hulleys of Baslow.

Castleton

I have a choice of three bus operators on this short route. There is something contrary about taking the off-white First South Yorkshire double-decker into the Peak District. It gives a definite sense of energetic Sheffield washing over the city boundary into a rural hinterland. I prefer the **double-deckers** for that very contrariness, though the other two companies playing the route, TM Travel and Hulleys, use single-deckers that are perhaps a little more luxurious, relaxed and friendly; country buses entering the city rather than a city bus in the country.

The **centre of Sheffield** lies just five miles from the border with Britain's first national park, and only 16 miles from my destination of Castleton. Yet every year the majority of the ten million plus visitors use their cars, creating increasing problems with congestion and pollution for the national park authority and Peak District inhabitants. It's unusual to see more than a handful of tourists on the 272. The bus is used primarily by residents of the scatter of **Derbyshire villages** that lie on the route.

The journey starts at Sheffield Transport Interchange, positioned between the train station and the city centre's galleries, winter garden and shopping district. This is the heart of Sheffield and one of the city's most diverse areas. Gallery-goers mingle with

HIGH, LOW, WHITE OR DARK PEAK?

The term White Peak comes from the colour of the area's limestone bedrock. The area is also called the Low Peak to distinguish it from the High Peak region of the national park. The High Peak area is formed from a **high moorland plateau** of dark stone. It is recognised as the highest and wildest part of the Peak District. In contrast to the White Peak, the limestone beneath the heather of the High Peak is covered by a cap of **millstone grit**, a coarse-grained sandstone. This ensures the soil above it is continuously wet through the winter months, creating a dark soil that gives the High Peak its alternative name of the **Dark Peak**.

after-school skateboarders; and busy shoppers with cloth-capped elderly gentlemen. The Interchange gives no sense of the feeling of freedom to come, the uninspiring glazed structures trapping the diesel fumes of waiting buses.

INTO SUBURBIA

From the heart of the city, the 272 tracks southwest towards the leafy, green parks and ancient woodlands that dot the commuter belt of suburban housing along **Ecclesall Road**. A key artery for the city's inhabitants, the road is an excellent area in which to get a sense of Sheffield's welcoming atmosphere. Despite being Britain's fifth-largest city, Sheffield is proud of its reputation as a friendly city and of having the highest proportion of trees to people of any city in Europe. I'm frequently told the city 'is the largest village in England' –it certainly feels like it.

My bus continues along Ecclesall Road for more than three miles. The change from side roads of suburban housing and narrow shop-fronts to larger industrial premises records my departure from the city centre.

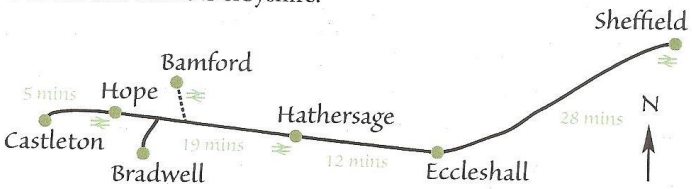
The route kisses ancient woodlands before edging past **Dore**, one of the wealthiest suburbs of the city. Now part of Sheffield,

Dore was once a town of neighbouring Derbyshire. Before that, it was the boundary between Anglo-Saxon Northumbria and Mercia, and the site where Wessex's King Ecgbert became the first 'Overlord of all England' in AD829. Following a twist in the road to face west on passing Dore, a small cluster of fields becomes visible. The bus cuts a stolid figure between the farmland that separates the Sheffield conurbation from the wilds of the moorland.

The route continues with few true turns though the road it follows changes name several times, marking its progress from village to village. Now **Hathersage Road**, it loses its pavements to verdant verges and hedgerows outside settlements. The cream stones of Sheffield are swapped for the greens, browns, and purples of the Peak District.

The simplicity of the bus route allows me to examine the open landscapes that surround the vehicle. My seat on the top deck gives a unique, even unusual, perspective on rolling heathlands and the limestone outcrops of **Hope Valley**. It's a name that lingers in my thoughts like the aromas of a warm pint of ale washing over my tongue. On the road verge is a simple round stone on a rectangular plinth that marks our entry into the national park. Farms and woodland continue on the left, moorland of a mysterious almost sinister purple in the spring light to my right.

After the Fox House Inn in **Longshaw**, the bus follows the road's tight twists first right then left, passing over Padley Gorge. The farmland disappears, the untamed wilderness mixing with woods before the stone buildings of **Hathersage** come into view and the bus enters Derbyshire.



The dotted line indicates that the route is only used on certain journey
Bradwell to Castleton takes 10 mins.

The route beyond Hathersage sees the fields return, their boundaries dotted with deciduous trees. The road straightens out as it continues its passage further westward, now paralleling the Hope Valley railway line. Crossing the Pennines to link Sheffield and Manchester, the line was completed in 1894.

Near Bamford railway station, the next stop along the Hope Valley line, the buses operated by Hulley's make a short detour from the main road, turning north to serve Bamford, a village of 1,400 residents. The village, less than a mile off the main road, is home to the Touchstone Sculpture Trail, created to commemorate the millennium. The five-mile trail is a good place to stretch stiffening legs. The modern monolithic sculptures were designed by local families and created by resident artist Jenny Mather. They depict the four elements of earth, wind, fire, and water, and are also combined in a fifth sculpture in the centre of **Bamford**.

From green pastures to white quarries

A second diversion, made by most buses on this route, takes us down to **Bradwell**, a village of stone-built cottages. It seems a traditional sort of place, but the view is not quite the rural idyll one might expect. A cement factory and adjoining quarry give a bold splash of grey-white, offsetting the rich green of surrounding farmland.

The cement factory at Bradwell is a foretaste of what is to come. **Hope** has an even larger cement works, a strange cuboid structure beside an even taller, slender round smokestack. Mercifully, this eyesore is largely hidden from the village, which has a fine location at the point where **Peakshole Water** joins the River Noe.

It is just a few minutes to the final stop. Castleton is an easy village to navigate. **Peveril Castle** stands proudly on a vantage point to the south of the town centre; the four limestone show caverns of Treak Cliff, Blue John, Peak, and Speedwell are all a short walk to the west. It was in these caves that minerals like semi-precious Blue John used to be mined.

THE CASTLE THAT NAMED A TOWN

The English Heritage-owned **Peveril Castle** (☎ 01433 620613; open Apr–Oct 10.00–16.00 daily, Nov–Feb 10.00–16.00 Sat & Sun) right in the heart of Castleton is an excellent place to get to grips with the history of the High Peak. With a keep occupying the southern corner dating back to 1176 and the reign of Henry II, the ruined castle has a great position overlooking the town from a steep hillside. Already recorded in the Domesday Book, the roughly **triangular Norman fortress** has sheer drops on all but one side. A breathy winding path leads up the remaining side, giving superb views across **Hope Valley**. It's possible to enter several rooms in the keep, including a Norman-era toilet.

Mam Tor threatens the village with shade to the northwest, a great rounded mound looking like a benign green boil on the skin of the earth. It is threatened in return by the sheer number of visitors that wrestle with its steep flanks each high season in the High Peak.

At 1,696 feet, **Mam Tor** is the spiritual focus not only of Castleton, but of my whole journey on the 272 from Sheffield. For much of the route I have followed Hope Valley, which ends in the shadow of Mam Tor. The source of Peakshole Water lies below the hill too, before running beside cottages and paths so narrow it is difficult to pass the postman and his large red shoulder bag.

Mam Tor's summit provides views of the castle, and the cement works at Hope. For me the contrasting vertical structures, old and new, demonstrate the enduring struggle we have in this crowded country between maintaining our open spaces and providing the jobs and materials we need for our cities. It's this very clash between the countryside around **Castleton** and the city of Sheffield that the 272 helps to highlight. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IAN M PACKHAM is a scientist, adventurer and speaker. He enjoys off-beat, off-season travel, preferably by public transport, and is developing a career in writing.