

## Castle Eden Dene

National Nature Reserve



## Welcome to Castle Eden Dene National Nature Reserve

Located on the edge of Durham's urban fringe, Castle Eden Dene is a special place; it is the largest area of natural woodland in north-east England and renowned for its yew trees. This tangled landscape is a survivor of the 'wildwood' which once covered much of Britain. Natural England helps it stay as near natural as possible.

Enter a world where oak, ash and elm have created complex ecosystems for many woodland plants and animals. Where living and dying trees are home to fungi and insects, which in turn feed many of our woodland birds. In autumn the plentiful berries provide a feast for small mammals and for many of our migrant and wintering birds.

The Dene is home to an extraordinary variety of birds, more than 450 species of plants, and some of our favourite mammals; 10,000 years of growth in a deep limestone gorge has created a place you can explore again and again.



© Natural England / Joe Davies

### Byelaws are in force

Byelaws are in force to protect the wildlife of Castle Eden Dene, a full list is available in the main carpark at Oakerside Dene Lodge and include:

- Dogs should be kept on a lead - to prevent worrying and disturbing wildlife.
- Leave your bike behind - cycling here is dangerous to you and other visitors.
- Don't camp or light fires - this can damage the site and harm delicate woodland plants and insects.
- No firearms of any sort - this is an offence punishable by law.
- Uprooting plants or removal of wood is prohibited - in such a special place it is important to leave everything as you find it.
- Take all litter home - it can damage or kill wildlife and spoils the site for other visitors.
- Dog control orders are enforced - school children use this site, please clear up after your dog.

## The Dene

The Dene is a magical place full of myths and folklore, which have fascinated people for thousands of years. Legends of the Devil have tried to explain its strange rocks and mysterious atmosphere. The reserve covers 221 hectares of woodland and lowland grassland and the steep gorge of the Dene was carved by post-glacial meltwaters dissolving the soft magnesian limestone, creating some spectacular limestone cliffs and features. Often, no water flows at the bottom of the Dene, as the stream has created an underground channel.

The Dene is 3.5 miles (5.6km) long and is the largest of a series of valleys which run down to the coast between Sunderland and Hartlepool, reaching the sea at Denemouth.

Saxons called this area Yoden, meaning Yew Dene, from which we get Eden today. The Burdon family, owners of the land from 1757 until the mid-20th century, built a large stately home on the edge of the Dene, known as The Castle. They created many of the paths that still cross the Reserve today.

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### For further information please contact the NNR team:

Castle Eden Dene National Nature Reserve  
Natural England  
Oakerside Dene Lodge, 2 Stanhope Chase  
Peterlee SR8 1NJ

Find out more at [www.gov.uk/natural-england](http://www.gov.uk/natural-england) or by calling **0191 5860004**.

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Front cover image: Castle Eden Dene  
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Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

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### Activities

Every year a varied programme of events is held at all of our National Nature Reserves (NNRs), including Castle Eden Dene. These include family activities and a wide range of guided walks, which are often the best way to see the special features of the Dene without disturbing the wildlife.

Every Thursday there is a guided walk at the reserve, starting at 10.30am, and help is always welcomed in our wildlife garden.

A variety of voluntary opportunities are available at Castle Eden Dene; you can become a Volunteer Warden and help to patrol the 12 miles (20km) of footpaths. We also have weekly practical volunteer tasks such as scrub clearance, wildlife surveys, habitat management, and much more! To find out what volunteering opportunities we have to offer across our suite of NNRs please speak to a member of the team.

The reserve also has its own education programme offering a wide range of curriculum linked activities covering all aspects of woodland life. Contact the reserve base on **0191 5860004** for full details about these activities.

### Walking the Dene

Castle Eden Dene is Britain's largest and best preserved gorge woodland on Magnesian Limestone and is protected as a National Nature Reserve.

Due to its comparative inaccessibility and the steep, in places vertical, wooded valley sides, it escaped clearance for agriculture, leaving it as a precious remnant of semi-natural ancient woodland.

The Dene is a wild world of constant change, where severe weather can cause landslips and falling trees. It is therefore not advisable to visit during bad weather.

There are some very steep drops, so please keep to the footpaths. Paths can sometimes be slippery, therefore sturdy, sensible footwear is essential.

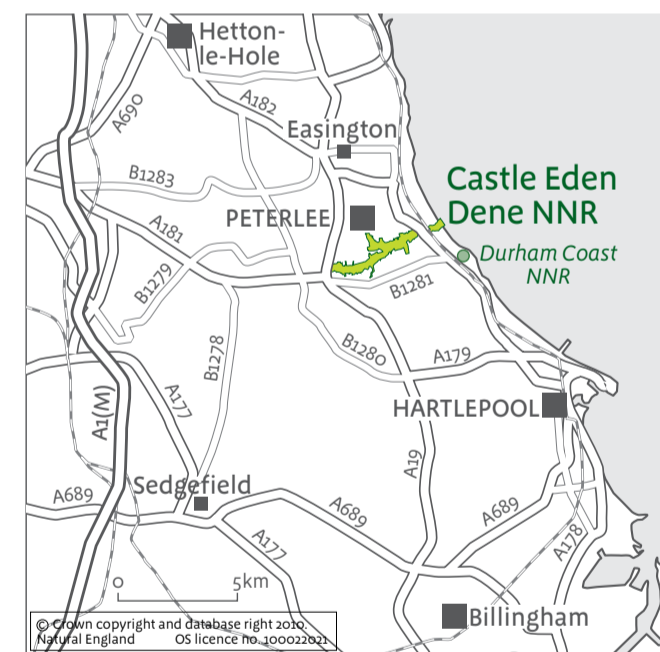
Although the Dene itself it is not suitable for wheelchairs, Natural England has opened a new, short, easy access path that leaves from the main car park near Oakerside Dene Lodge.



© Dorothy Salmon

Community engagement

Walking group



**By car:** Castle Eden Dene is signposted from the A19 and from Peterlee town centre.

**By bus:** Walk from Peterlee bus station and cross at the pelican crossing. Follow the tarmac footpath through the pine trees to the right of the Peterlee Lodge Hotel. Follow the footpath for approximately 1.5 miles (2.4km) keeping the Dene on your left. Take care crossing the road into Stanhope Chase to the lodge.

**By bike:** There are bike racks at Oakerside Dene Lodge. No bikes are allowed in the Dene, where the steep paths are dangerous for cycling.

The Reserve is near Route 1 (Peterlee Link) of the Sustrans National Cycle Network.



## Nature Walks

### Walk 1: Yew tree trail

Distance: 3.5 kilometres (2 miles)

Walking time: 2–2 ½ hours



Follow the Yew markers.

From the car park at Oakerside Dene Lodge, pass through the kissing gate and follow the broad path down the hill. At the foot of the hill, turn left, leaving Castle Bridge behind you and continue through woodland that was planted as part of the great estate.

After a path joins from the left, the woodland becomes more natural, with descendants of the oaks, yews, ash and wych elms which arrived here after the last Ice Age. Many of the skeletal trees that lie rotting on the woodland floor are the victims of Dutch elm disease, which has destroyed many of England's great elms.

The path crosses a bridge and a little further on across the valley, you can see at first-hand how soft magnesian limestone rock is continually breaking away from the cliff face, causing landslips.



Devil's Lapstones

You will by now have joined the upper path known as Miss Mary's Walk, which was named after one of the daughters of the Burdon family. This is also one of the best places to see roe deer, the Dene's largest mammal. The best time to catch a glimpse of these shy animals is early morning.

Follow the first path as it drops down to the right, passing more groves of yew. Some trees which are very old or are particularly important for wildlife have been left to grow across the path, so walkers may have to clamber over, or duck under, a few.

Throughout the forest there is plenty of dead wood. In fact, in a natural woodland, up to a quarter of the trees may be dead and rotting. Both living and dying trees are home to fungi and insects which provide food for many woodland birds. In autumn, toadstools spread across the deadwood, while in the spring the woodland reverberates with the familiar drumming of woodpeckers. The cavities and holes in old trees are also a great place for the Dene's resident bats to roost.

Eventually you meet another path; turn right at the next junction until you cross Castle Bridge. Finally, turn left up the broad path back to Oakerside Dene Lodge.



Exposed Magnesian Limestone



Kissing Frogs stones

The huge Devil's Lapstone stands on the left of the path. Legend tells how the Devil offered to help build Durham Cathedral. He planned to make foundations of rock so crumbly than when thousands of people crowded into the Cathedral for its opening, the building would collapse, killing everyone inside.

As he flew up the Dene, a strap of his leather apron snapped and his favourite stone fell. He grabbed at it again and again, leaving scratch marks which you can still see. His last attempt ripped a nail from his finger - look closely and you can still see the blood stains. After passing two large stones known locally as 'The Kissing Frogs', turn right, just before the Garden of Eden Bridge - if you carry straight on here, you'll eventually reach the coast. In spring, this is a great spot for snowdrops.

As you climb Craggy Bank, listen out for the clear, sharp 'twit' of nuthatches as they walk head first down trees searching for food. You may also hear the high-pitched call of goldcrests up in the tree tops.

The great yews that soar upwards give the Dene an increasingly mysterious atmosphere. For hundreds of years these trees were believed to have magical powers and are now known to live for several thousand years. Please remember yew trees are poisonous, so make sure that children don't eat the berries and dogs don't chew the sticks.

### Walk 2: The squirrel trail

Distance: 3 kilometres (1.8 miles)

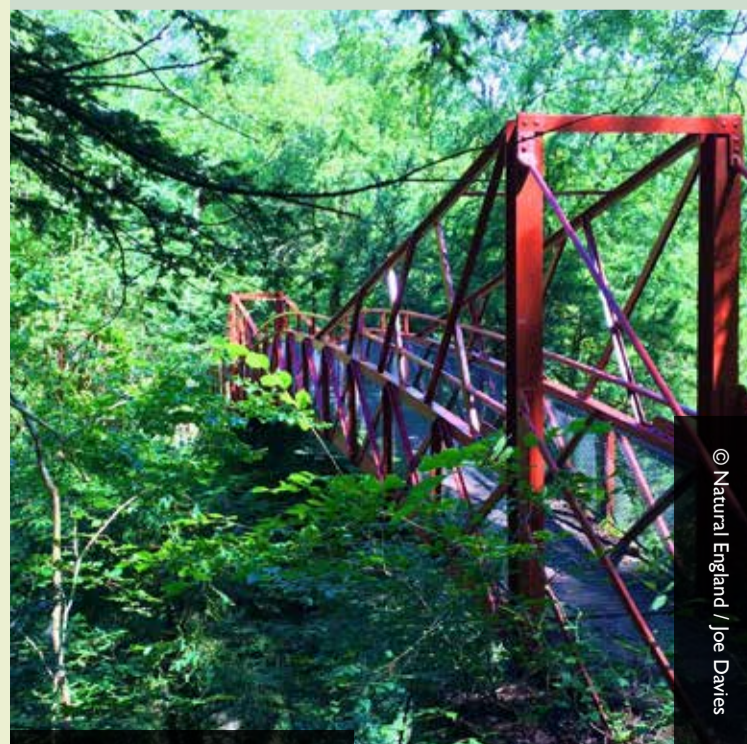
Walking time: 1- 2 hours



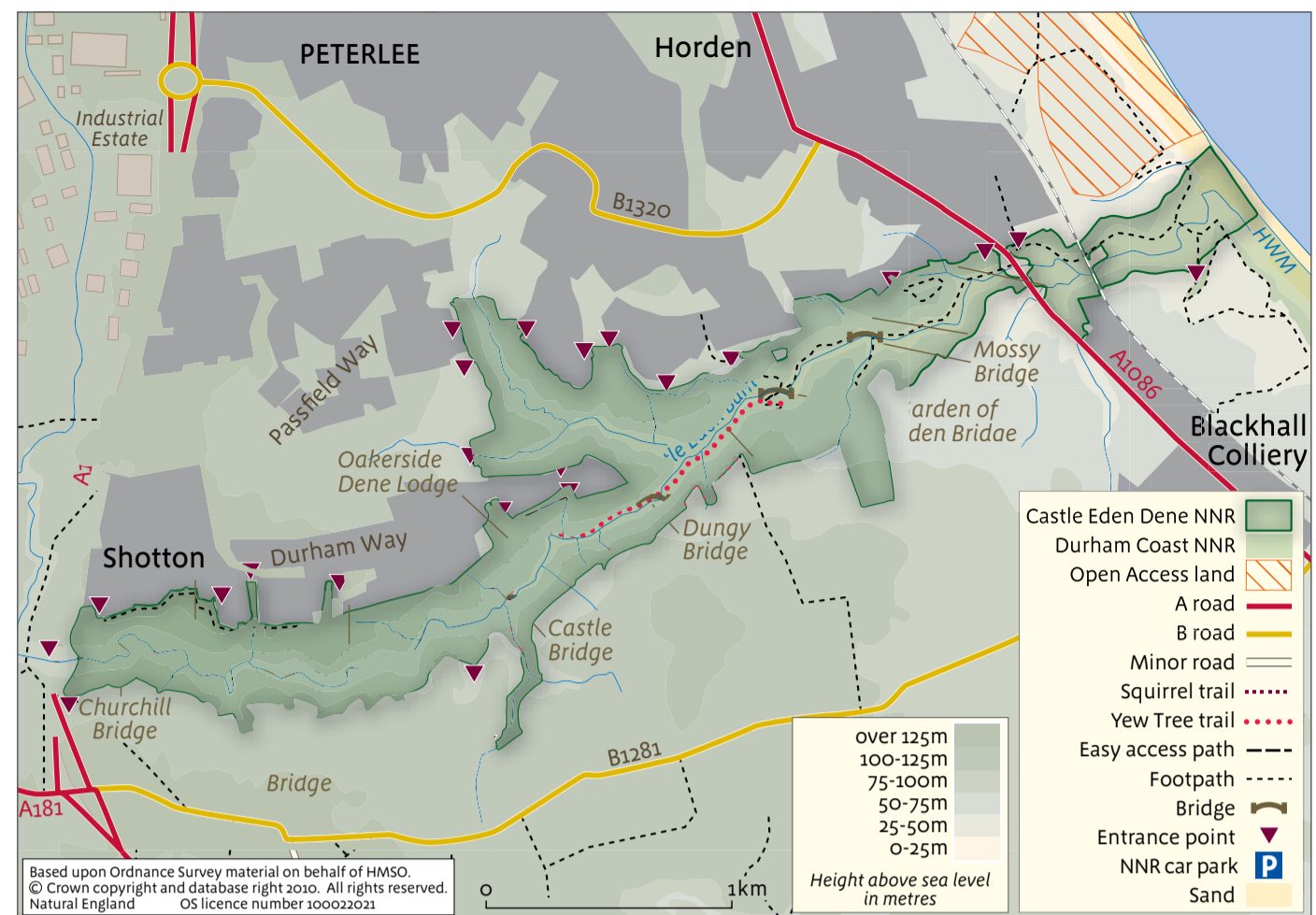
Follow the Squirrel markers.

From the car park at the lodge, pass through the kissing gate and follow the broad path down the hill. As the path bears left downhill, continue straight on, bearing slightly right and rising gently uphill. This is a good spot to see spectacular patches of giant horsetail, an incredible plant that's changed little since prehistoric times.

As you follow the main path, look out for primrose, wild garlic and wood anemone in spring. In early summer you may see bluebells, while in late summer and autumn it's time to admire the glowing red berries of wild arum, also known as Lords and Ladies.



Gunner's Pool Bridge



### Please follow the Countryside Code

- Be safe, plan ahead and follow any signs.
- Leave gates and property as you find them.
- Protect plants and animals and take your litter home.
- Keep dogs under close control.
- Consider other people.

### Facilities

Café and toilet facilities are available at the Reserve's car park next to Oakerside Dene Lodge. There are also information boards and a wildlife garden for you to enjoy. Contact the Lodge for details of opening times on 0191 586 0004 or message us through social media.

Sycamore and rhododendron, beautiful in the gardens of stately homes, are invaders here. They make it hard for native species to grow, and Natural England is committed to clearing them from the woodland.

At the fork in the path, keep left.

If you're lucky you may see a sparrowhawk swooping through the trees hunting for prey, while woodcocks enjoy the protection of the undergrowth. During the winter, look out for great spotted woodpeckers, and in the early spring, when the leaves are back on the trees, listen out for their drumming.

After ¾ mile (1 km), turn sharp left and follow the path as it drops steeply to Gunner's Pool Bridge. Look out for the speckled wood butterfly along any of the path sides. The male has wings spotted with orange, the female with yellow, and both love feeding on brambles.

From the bridge, look down into the dramatic gorge and Gunner's Pool, where there's more evidence of the Devil's work! According to legend, the Devil promised he would follow a man called Gunner up the Dene, gathering stone to build Durham Cathedral as he went. But Gunner was forbidden from looking back. However, when Gunner heard a sound as if the sea were about to crash over him, he turned round. The Devil was furious and hurled a rock at him, and he's said to still lie beneath the great rock which stands by the pool today.

At the bottom of the Dene, where conditions are always damp and moist, mosses, liverworts and ferns thrive. Look out too for the smooth green fronds of hart's tongue fern.



Hart's tongue fern

At the far side of the bridge, turn left, staying well clear of the cliff edge. Continue over two small bridges and enjoy the view out across the tree tops of the Dene. In October and November, thousands of thrushes, blackbirds and redwings feed on the berries here, many having undergone long sea crossings from northern Europe.

The path winds left, with the castle to the right, then continue downhill, back over Castle Bridge, and uphill back to the lodge.

Details of our Geology Trail are available at [www.gov.uk/natural-england](http://www.gov.uk/natural-england)