

## South of the Border

By now, everyone is probably aware of my opinion that routes that start and end at a pub make better-rounded runners of us all. This stunning six-miler begins at the much improved Ship Inn at Wincle. You can park along the road or if you tell the pub staff that you intend to return to stoke up after running, the car park awaits. As far as I'm aware, the bus doesn't reach here. This is such a great track that you should beg a car-owning friend to transport you if you don't drive.

Off we go, down the hill away from the pub (sob!) toward the River Dane, to cross the bridge and go immediately through the gate on the left on to the path to Gradbach. We are now in Staffordshire but don't panic, stories of cannibalism are probably untrue. Once in the field it's an easy trot along the river, into the next field and right to the footpath which takes us into the wood. The woodland track undulates pleasantly above the River Dane and is easy to follow. True to form, it keeps rising gently until we get to a track through sheep pasture to Back Dane. This follows the contour around the hill beside the farm buildings then drops back down to the river again, where we'll disappear into the wood and keep going along the easy rise and fall above the river bank. This is all a very gentle precursor to a few hills. Soon we'll pop out in a small clearing by a footbridge and we'll come upon a signpost. Although it seems odd, we'll double back slightly, going up the hill following the sign toward Swythamley.

This path rises inexorably through the wood for just over a quarter of a mile until we reach some rocks on the right and sign on the left which points the way to Lud's Church via another rising path going up the hill in the direction from which we just came. After about 200 yards, the gap in the rock wall on the right leads to the entrance. Lud's Church is a large crack in the hillside. In we go, taking time to look up at the forty feet or so of millstone grit which encroaches on either side to a width of about eight feet. This has been a hideout for all sort of fugitives but it's thought that the Lollards, followers of the church reformer, John Wycliffe worshipped here in the early 15th century after being declared heretics. There are also reputed associations with the mediaeval poem 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'.

On we go, through the church and out at the end to emerge on another wooded path which runs below the ridge, eventually to turn right for a knotty little climb to Roaches End where we'll turn back towards Wincle. It's all joy and easy running from here. The ridge runs north-westerly and is not flat. It is beset with loose stones that our friend, Rebecca, finds every time causing some spectacular dives into the heather. However, there are the distractions of the fantastic views of Axe Edge and Shutlingsloe on one side and the fields of Staffordshire on the other.

The path goes by some huge gritstone outcrops, the most striking of which is the next waypoint. About 2 miles from Roaches End is the Hanging Stone. Mrs Shak (a big Jane Austen fan) swears that this is where the BBC portrayed Miss Elizabeth Bennet gazing at the scenery when she visited Pemberley with her Uncle and Aunt. Look out for Mr Darcy as we descend steeply to the right of the rock and follow the path along its foot to the track to Hangingstone Farm. Beyond the entrance to the farm, we'll follow the path over the stile on the left and blast down the last few fields, past a standing stone to the little woodland track that takes us back to our starting point at Danebridge.

We've survived hills, a rocky cleft, midges and BBC film crews and now all that remains is to charge back up the hill to the Ship Inn. So to what Ship does this refer? A relative of the squire of Swythamley Hall sailed with the explorer Shackleton on one of his expeditions to the Antarctic from 1907-9. The pub sign shows the Nimrod in Antarctic ice. It's also said that the pub is named after the 'Swythamley', which was owned by a friend of the squire and sank off the Cape of Good Hope in 1862. However, it's more likely that the name comes from 'shippen', a local word for a sheep shelter. It's probably better to have a glorious, guilt-free pint and a trough full of great food in preparation for our next adventure than to dwell on a possible misnomer.

