

Would you want to live on the Mendip Plateau? #mendipplateau

The second in our series focusing on the Special Qualities of the Mendip Hills looks at the unique plateau.

You know when you've reached the plateau as you'll have had a steep, winding journey to get there up the combes or gorges. But when you emerge into this distinctive landscape what are you actually looking at?

The open and windswept plateau is such a contrast to the surrounding area; with 'karst' limestone features including depressions, swallets, caves and hidden river systems and historic monuments all tied together by the drystone walls. Karst means a landscape formed by water erosion.

Crudely speaking, a limestone layer was formed on top of a sandstone layer, both of these layers were pushed up to form a mountain range and then the top was eroded

exposing outcrops of sandstone. The Mendip Hills is a limestone landscape but it's the interaction between the two rocks that characterise the area. The limestone lets the water through and the sandstone doesn't. You find the cave systems starting around the junction between the two types of rocks. To



really dig into the exact rock formations an amazing website is the British Geological Survey's Foundations of Mendip <https://www.bgs.ac.uk/mendips/home.htm>

The biggest change to the landscape you see today came in the 1750's with the Enclosure Acts. Before this time there would have been relatively few boundaries and only around large areas like parishes and manor's. The landscape would have been wide open spaces of common land for locals to graze sheep, much like Black Down today. The Enclosure Acts were aimed at bringing 'waste' or common land into cultivation to produce more food. On the plateau the easiest way to quickly establish a boundary was to use the freely available stone littering the fields. A large survey of

the walls that looked at how many, where and what state they're in plus ecological surveys and artistic output formed the Lifelines project in 2008. To find out more visit [\[link to Lifelines book\]](#). Some of the best examples of field systems created through the Enclosures can still be seen around Priddy.

Not many people live on the plateau and the population is widely dispersed in small farms and hamlets. The largest village on the plateau is Priddy, which had a population of 624 people at the time of the last census in 2011 with the smaller hamlet of Charterhouse. Priddy's layout is reminiscent of the plateau itself with a widely spaced settlement pattern and the distinctive muted colours of the limestone. Some may describe it as bleak!

The plateau has been shaped by lots of other types of human activity; farming through grazing herds and modern forestry led to the plantations at East Harptree, Stockhill and Rowberrow but also industrial activity like the lead mining resulting in gruffy ground around Priddy and Charterhouse. We may have shaped the what happens on the surface but it's the underlying geology of Mendip that drives this activity.