

Hill Walking Diaries

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Volume 3 – The English Nuttalls

Being the 256 English Mountains that exceed 2000 feet.

Following John and Anne Nuttall's The Mountains of England and Wales Volume 2 England, published by Cicerone Press.

Please don't attempt to plan your routes from my text. Please purchase the guidebook.

2002

Saturday March 2nd and Kate, Alison and I are looking back to where Adrian had stood a few moments before. "It's the fath factor again," explains Alison.

Kate and I wait for Adrian to reappear, scooped up by Alison, and we all continue the walk out of Ambleside and the start of the climb up Heron Pike. We soon meet surface snow, the remains of weather forecasts that may have reduced our weekend away to board games and tearooms. But the weather is being kind and we make good progress, even though I sense I'm making a slower pace. Over North Top and Great Rig and it's clear I'm struggling. Alison and Adrian have the illusion I'm a fast walker - a hangover from when I met them on the Cuillin Ridge where adrenalin, and the fear of being left behind, had me raising my game.

But now they're seeing the true me - lagging, heavy legs and struggling with my breathing in the cold conditions.

Just before Great Rigg we rest for lunch, where Alison produces a fantastic bivi tent. A device where a group of four sit in a circle place the large sheet over heads and tuck the edges under bottoms.

Adrian elects to sit outside, gentlemanly still sitting on the edge of the sheet, while Kate, Alison and I enjoy the warmth of the interior. With my rarely used gortex, the soles on my leather ones having become a little thin, I have developed blisters on both heels. As I remove the first boot there are cries of 'pooh' as my reassurances of not having smelly feet were countenanced by overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Fortunately that was the only smell emanating from body, the strange ripping noise from my trousers was the material tearing as I sat down.

I manage to get away with taking the second one off when Kate through the smog says, "They are nice little ankle gaiters you've got."

"They were Barbara's, a relic of a failed relationship."

"But I suppose they are still snapping at your ankles," replies Alison. I can not stop laughing and we have to relay the humour to Adrian, still sat outside enjoying the views.

Continuing on we begin to lose Adrian as he insists on 'Crinkle Bagging' - A term for exploring every bump, hump and outcrop. For a man of about fifty his energy knows no bounds.

On the approach to Fairfield we begin to meet other walkers doing the horseshoe in the opposite direction. The cold requires hoods to be drawn and scarves to cover mouths. But each walker we pass smiles with their eyes, and we smile back.

Because I'm clearly struggling, the wind having now picked up to mop us with the icy weather, the others offer a quick descent from Fairfield, but I'm keen to continue so we start the return of the loop taking in Hart Crag, where we have to wait for Adrian, still intent on further exploration, and Dove Crag

While waiting for Adrian, Alison and Kate decide to build a snowman that is soon transformed into a snow penguin. Feeling the cold I just look for his beak and eyes amongst the rocks and hand over suitably shaped rocks for the inclusion in the rapidly forming Antarctic beast.

Alison and I stand admiring the work as Kate, bent over, puts the finishing touches on the snow creature, now looking ever so sweet. A group of young chaps arrive and one stands admiring the work. Kate has not registered this and after some loving final touches she looks up and with a shocked bemused voice says, "Oh hello."

"We are a bit mad," I say.

"Don't worry, we are students."

Adrian joins us to admire the fine fellow and it was decided that Penguin needs an igloo to live in. Adrian and Kate set about the task, a few false starts and rethinks but an igloo begins to form. Unfortunately, on near completion, Adrian's fist went through the essential rear wall causing the majority of the structure to collapse.

"Oh no, poor Penguin comes from a broken home" I say.

Kate pelts me with snowballs.

After a further few minutes Penguin is equipped with a 'cool pad', which he stands proudly by the entrance. He is a little oversized for his new abode but this is soon explained by it being tardis like. One of the students comes over and says, "The guy that lives in that igloo is going to have one hell of a shock when he comes out to find a giant penguin sitting outside."

Continuing on we descend, making full use of the snow to have some wonderful bottom sliding, over Little Hart Crag and, missing Red Screes, descend back to Ambleside to a relaxing evening in Kate's parents' cottage. A game of limericks ensues with Alison coming up with:

There was a young penguin from Ambleside
Who's partner refused to lie by his side
He stomped up a mountain
And cried like a fountain
'til he caught influneza and died

I suggest:

There was a young penguin down on his luck
Who's partner refused to lie down and give him a ****
He stomped up a mountain
And cried like a fountain
And now he is totally stuck.

I reflect how much I enjoyed the walk, a nine-hour roundtrip that I was more than happy to allow the others to lead and navigate. I really enjoyed that, not having the added pressure of being responsible if we got lost. Alison, Adrian and Kate's company was so good and I wonder, after having known them only nine months, how that has come about. But then being strapped to Alison and Adrian

for a week on the Cuillin Ridge did accelerate the friendship by a good few months. I've always believed that friendships are much stronger by having lived through something together.

Yes Tor Day

Having been finding work scarce for four months, an IT recession having hit the computer industry hard, and taking some extra professional exams in the meantime my mind drifts back towards hill walking.

On August 2nd I'm off to Dartmoor to climb its two two thousand foot peaks, Yes Tor and High Willhays. Of course I get lost trying to find the route to the car park at Meldon Reservoir. The local planners and sign writers conspiring on decades of games of 'guess where it is' delays my start by some hour. Once I get going I enjoy a heavenly five hour round trip of Yes Tor, High Willhays, Dinger Tor, Lints Tor, Steng-a-Tor then Shelstone Tour. On the approach to Yes Tor I'm humming the Beatles 'Yesterday' for 'Yes Tor Day'.

Totals to date: 9 out of 254

2004

On April 11th I arrive at Alison and Adrian's at one minute to nine. Alison opens the door with a bemused look. My ability to turn up spot on time is gaining humour with Alison, we'd said 0900 and I've done the three-hour drive with a minute to spare. Adrian chooses to look after their baby, Ellen for the day so Alison and I drive down into the Peak District to walk Bleaklow Head and Higher Shelf Stones- a walk of about six hours, nine miles and 1500 feet of ascent. High cloud gives us views, not superb yet views worthy of the walk. Starting at just before 1100 from Old Glossop we make our way by joining the Pennine Way (the long distant path to Scotland). In areas the peat is thick and boggy and make it tough going. Many people are out on this Easter Sunday with some very young children wondering why their parents have brought them to this wild spot.

Having brought a full pack, in practise for the upcoming cross Scotland walk (the TGO), I require more rests than normal. On the descent we sit, allowing a party to pass us, and I say 'hi' to one guy, over sixty and over weight. He turns to say return the 'hello' and promptly falls over. Fortunately Dr Alison is here to offer advice but I do feel a bit guilty.

Driving up to Derewntwater Youth Hostel on Friday November 19th I stop at The Cotswold Outdoor shop to buy new walking boots. Both the assistant and myself admire my old pair; worn through in places it's sad to finally retire them after they contributed to over 200 of my Munros, one TGO and numerous other walks.

Joining a walking club was something that I'd never considered, especially one by the name of The Over The Hill Club. However the enjoyment of the TGO and Sue Oxley's good sales pitch has had me filling in forms and attending the club AGM.

Saturday 20th brings my first walk with club. A fine winters day dawns over Derewntwater Youth Hostel. Usually one to walk solo, and nervous about my pace, I pump myself full of my Salbutamol inhaler, grab a lift with Maggie Hems and am off walking with the group at around 0945.

For once I am flying and by Cat Bells I'm heading the procession. Not even being reduced to one trekking pole (the other having become unthreaded) deters me. My usual place at the back, puffing and panting, has been promoted by

medication and the hangovers of many. That beer barrel in the Youth Hostels Members Kitchen is clearly not for show.

I take a minor tumble on ice, causing my hand and knee to smart. Picking myself up I'm pleased to be momentary out of sight. Being out in front and taking a tumble would receive some deserved smirks. But my position is a false one; I really had gone to town with the medicine. On from Cat Bells is the broad top of Maiden Moor. As my height rises the views became more stunning. There are mountains all around with a view out towards Scotland. The tops of High Spy are taken and I wait for the others as I survey the snow dusted peaks and the winter's light spreading its shadows out across the tops, cliffs and crevasses. The sun hovers low in the sky, gently warming and lighting, gently shadowing and freezing. No wind, blue sky and a light crispness of snow under foot tells me that this is my best day in the hills for many years.



Dale Head (looking west)

I set off again, dropping steeply past the water of Dalehead Tarn before the pull up Dale Head. I am slow, others quickly catching me, overtaking me. This was no race, I was not intending it to be. I was just enjoying so much the pace that I've found. Rare, to be savoured. I use my inhaler, take on food and am soon flying again. The proposed walk takes in Hindscarth, but not Robinson. I fancy both; it would help my 2000ft tally. At the summit of Dale Head a number of us congregate. Mountain stories are abound, including the strange tale of an Irish visit where a walker was discovered hauling a porcelain toilet with him. "Was there something wrong with the man?" asks somebody. "Potty, I guess," I add.

There were a few groans but then Gordon Coventry stands up for me, "no, that was very good." A nodding agreement seals my joke.

So I now have a friend and he fancies Robinson too, so off we set. We take Hindscarth in half an hour, slipping our way in the sole deep snow. On the

approach a man and woman are descending. I recognise them and assume they are other club members. He stops and points at me in some form of recognition, clearly not members. We both agree we know each other but can not think from where. Somewhere out in the hills, no doubt – Wales or Scotland.

Back tracking from Hindscarth we fly round to Robinson. The snow is starting to harden underfoot. Ice patches form and young children, being introduced to the hills, slide across and shriek with joy. From Robinson we descend back towards the cars. The light is starting to fade as the sun heads for its set. A few icy rock descents have to be negotiated before a steep grassy slope towards Scope Beck. The remaining trekking pole buckles and collapses and dumps me on my backside. I start to slide on the icy grass (I could have made this rhyme) but keeping my right foot flat I come to a halt. That would be the end of the story if only my backside stopped too. Alas not and, like a slow motion car crash, I sense what was going to happen as my body slides into the back of my boot.



Robinson and its north facing descent

After sliding the remainder of the slope I catch Gordon up and, a few octaves higher, amusingly explained the story of my collapsing trekking pole. We wonder if the figures coming off Hindscarth are members of our party or some of the many other people out on the hills today. Back at the car all is revealed. Gordon's pace, from Hindscarth quicker than mine, has got us back ahead of the others. We sit in his car and watch the others emerge from the shadows, some half an hour later.

Totals to date: 15 out of 254

Meeting TGO, Over The Hill Club (OTHC) friends and trying new technology are the thoughts when I lay keyboard, to rest, pack the car and set forth for a M6 Travel Lodge halfway between Wiltshire and the Lakes. Will the £25 altimeter watch bought from Lidl's be any good? Will the impressive Travel Lodge voice recognition booking system see me with a bed for the night or a sleepless night in a chilly car?

"No Mr S Smith on our booking list," says the Travel Lodge receptionist. My heart sinks before he adds, "There's a Mr F Smyth, is that you?" After my reasoning of "not exactly yet in the balance of all probabilities, with all things taken into consideration and given the similar sounding names and the slim likelihood of a Mr F Smyth showing up later," I'm handed my room key.

Passing the time with a M6 service station meal, a quick wander around, sleep and chipping the car free from its ice tomb I set off around 0530 on Friday 18th November. I make good progress, consume a large breakfast at a different service station (I was desperate for a change of scene), take it easy on the ice covered A592 and set foot on the hills at 0830. My first target is Red Screes, left wanting after a long walk back in March 2002. Risking an ungloved hand I set the altimeter and make good progress across frozen marshy ground that on another day would have had my feet plunging. Today I'm spared the familiar walkers treat of sunken foot, random Microsoft style pause as one waits for the wet to soak to the skin.

As I climb the altimeter does too. It kindly points out to me that I've screwed up and have ended up on Middle Dodd instead of Red Screes. The lack of trig point, much higher ground to my left were clues too but I'm pleased to see that it had hung in there. Not given into arguments, stuck to its guns and resolutely informed me that I'm not where I think I was. It would have a comrade in a GPS - perhaps even a voice recognition booking system would back it up too. Oh that reminds me, the other great thing about the voice recognition booking system was that when I made my little jokes it replied "I did not understand that. Can you repeat that again please?" The more traditional, anthropological induced method always met my jokes with silence.

From Middle Dodd I start the easy ascent to Red Screes. To my left the hills fall away into the Kirkstone Pass, only to rise again leaving the road snaking towards Ullswater on the valley floor. At the summit the mountains open out, an optimum viewpoint for a theodolite that would have once been mounted on the trig point of local stone. A crisp blue sky with low hung winter sun dances the light and shadows like an artist with a rarely used palette.



I make a quick descent back to the car, and look back to take in the mountain, living up to its name. If only I understood Gaelic then the Scottish peaks would have been more navigable. Carn Mor Dearg – big red hill, so simple if you know.

The previous weekend I walked twenty-four miles across Wiltshire downland from my home to my parents and, for my troubles, a long-term knee complaint remerged. Having hobbled for most of the week I'm pleased that it has held up on Red Screes and I decide to attempt another this afternoon. I set off for Grange, the small village at the south end of Derwentwater. After the OTHC Newlands round walk of last year I convinced myself that I missed out High Spy North Top. I wish to ascend again to be sure I've taken this in. Taking the minor road, from Keswick, to the west of the lake I twist and turn to avoid oncoming vehicles and patches of ice. Having already seen one car slid into a wall I'm being cautious.

The combination of an adverse camber, a shaded spot, a bend and a hill conspire to form sheet ice and for me an impressive zero point turn pointing me perfectly back to Keswick. I take the hint, pass through Keswick again and tackle Grange from the better road the other side of the lake.

I'm slow up the sharp incline to Narrow Moor. During the week I've spent time with a neighbour's dogs and it's probably playing my asthma up. I puff, pant and beg the altimeter for each increment that it slowly meters out. My confidence in the wrist technology increases and both my new toy and the sun touching the ridge, count me down for the unending views out towards Hindscarth and Robinson. The many shades of the blue sky contrast with the shades of green, brown and grey of the mountains. I'm grateful for the ridge, views and nearby summit of High Spy North Top with its adorning cairn. Looking back towards Grange Derwentwater sits in her full glory above the hamlet. Its islands and glistening water punctuate the mountains rolling down.

On the descent my knee starts to groan, not quite up to the levels of the tribe of pin jabbing patella fetish pygmies that had settled in during the previous weekend, but nonetheless I become aware of it.

I finally reach my car and set off for an evening at the Youth Hostel. Like my breathing shyness holds me back. I always feel bad, fearing I come across as a little aloof and rude, as people welcome me into their conversations. Being a reformed drinker the two OTHC barrels of beer, which do look tempting, can not be used for rescue. But slowly I relax, take in the surroundings, the people. Skulking put to one side and I join in.

I sleep well. Steve Wagstaff's attendance at the international snoreathon finals (this year being held in the remote reaches of the Amazon) aids my comfort. I join Big John's Scafell Pike walk along with Sue Oxley, Jacqui Hutchinson, Gordon and Gavin Coventry, Dave Skipp, George McKendry, Dave Wilkinson and Andy Sayer. I chat to Sue, we finished the 2004 TGO together on a warmer yet equally blue sky day. In front of us George slips on ice, Sue goes over on the same piece. We turn to see if Big John will fall foul of the same ice covered rock. Nobody considers shouting a warning. We just wait and watch. It's Gordon that takes the slip, a great cheer goes up and he manages a bow as part of the steadying process.

We pass up the Corridor Route, the mountains tower above us. Where the sun's fingers have touched the ground it is safe, other places are covered in ice. Sometimes it's layered like uninviting steps. It takes us three hours, with me well at the back, for the final ascent to the summit. A large summit cairn come shelter marks ones arrival. I try and recall the 1958 picture I have of my father on the same spot. Even in black and white the grey, misty day is obvious, in contrast to the glorious winter day we are blessed with.



I've been struggling, my breathing down. I'm grateful for the rest and dose up with food and inhaler. I check with John about the route off. He makes a casual comment about people could do Great End. I eye it up, along with Broad Crag and Ill Crag. I fancy them all and ask about the route off Great End. We set off and I'm flying. Something's kicked in, an extra cylinder is firing. I go over Broad Crag then take a look at Ill Crag. I try and make a quick ascent yet it's frozen in its own shadow. Feet slide around like a newborn horse. I make the summit and set off again, keeping my eye on the rest of the group, I pass them as they just start the descent to Esk Hause. I belt up Great End with the view to descend and meet the party on the path to Sprinkling Tarn. I intersect them easily. Too easily. There's been a misunderstanding about my intentions. They've waited for me and John is still waiting for me on higher ground. We'd talked about Great End but the communication had broken down somewhere. I now make a big mistake. I leave my kit with the others so I can nip back up and tell John I'm okay. It is longer and harder to reascend than I'd imagined. I'd estimated my energy reserves and now they are burnt up. I end up crawling the last hundred yards to the point where the others left John waiting. No John. I can see figures in the fading light, high on the ridge. My stupidity hits me. I've fallen into a trap. I've left my kit assuming I'll soon be collecting somebody with a map and compass. I now feel alone and wonder where John is. I can not risk going any further, looking for him. The temperature is dropping and my rucksack, packed with survival gear, is safely making its own way off the hills. I descend, pass the spot where I'd met the others and come across a junction in the paths. Bugger. Straight on or go right? I have no fix, no map, no compass. The light is fading and I'm feeling colder. In the distance I see two figures, I make my way to them and ask to take a look at their map. I think they want me to be more lost than I truly am - alarmed that I can not remember the name of the start point it takes me a few goes to claim some level of competence by remembering the grid reference of 235123. This is as good as remembering the name of Seathwaite. Once I get a look at their map I set off and catch the others up. Sue reassures me that John is very experienced, he'll turn up. Jacqui, his wife, looks unconcerned.

We reach the cars in the last of the light. Gordon and Gavin and the two Dave's are waiting for us. We discuss the situation, wondering on the best plan. Admitting we've "lost John." Gordon finds it funny; Dave and Dave express their concern with a proposed visit to an off licence. Gordon, Sue and I start back up the hills, hoping for some sign of John. Latecomers are stepping off the hills. Torches can be seen on high ground but always in groups. Not the single torch we are hoping for.

It was Sue that spots John. Friends for many years she picks out his shape in the darkness.

The hills normally let one get away with it. Today was such a day. Nobody was hurt on the ice. Nobody was lost. A misunderstanding introduced some risk but we all survived. Yet things can always turn out differently. I couldn't believe that I left my kit. Something in all my years in the hills I vowed never to do. A lesson learned.

Totals to date: 21 out of 254

2006

November 18th and we pile out of David Handley's Landrover into drizzle. Most of the peaks are hiding in cloud, those on show are covered by snow. A far cry from

the last two OTHC AGM club meets where blue skies and crisp weather made for fine winter walking days.

John Hutchinson produces a dog lead and clips me on. On the walk last year I parted company with the group to bag a few extra peaks. "I'm not taking any chances this year," he says.

"I promise not to hump any legs, sniff any butts however I can't promise to spare any handy lampposts we might find." At the sound of leg humping John unclips me. I don't think he heard the word 'not', or if he did he was not taking any risks.

Seven of us set off towards Base Brown. I feel tired. Sleep has come poor. The OTHC snoring gene has evolved in the last year and now easily penetrates wax and radio earplugs and pieces. As far back as the nineteen eighties, when canoeing and rock climbing were more my thing, I remember, at Derwentwater Youth Hostel, the mention of "You're in Room One" with dread - the scrap yard for men who are single because their snoring is beyond what any wife could take. The reputation of Room One is now becoming part of the OTHC folklore.

I'm also stiff from the drive up yesterday. I'd fancied doing a walk in the Dales but when out on the high roads I'd pulled up, wound down the window (involving pressing a button) and somebody sprayed my face with a power shower. It was not just the force and quantity of the water it was also the student halls of residence shower temperature that had me heading for an early arrival at Derwentwater Youth Hostel.

We climb west from Seathwaite, following the path, taking care of the wet and slippery conditions. Sue Oxley is nursing a knee injury and elects to keep on the main path around Base Brown whilst myself, Dave Skipp and Gavin Coventry take the rocky scramble to its summit. It's wet and slippery in places, we stick together yet give one another space on the scrambles in case of a slip. As we approach the exposed summit the hail strikes us. Sand blasting our faces we are pleased for the brief shelter of its summit. Sue and John join us, having ascended from the rear, David Handley and Dave Gothard were already heading for Green Gable. We press on, Dave Skipp hangs back for me. I'm a little slow with my breathing today and I find the tromp through fresh snow an added burden.

We all congregate at the summit of Green Gable, taking refuge in its horseshoe cairn. Wind, rain and hail join us. John and Sue decide to head down via Brandreth and Honister. I ask after her knee and the response left me in no doubt that it is rather painful.

I'm now the guy with the map and Gavin the guy with the compass. The string has come off mine and my hands are too cold to fix it. Gavin lends me his, making no fuss in having to take his pack off to retrieve it. I can loop my frozen hand through its string and check the navigation to get us to the fine summit of Great Gable. My first ascent of this classic hill, we can see nothing but each other.

As we descend towards Sty Head so does our conversation. Five men out together is the cue to practise the art of political incorrectness. The weather picks up, the wind drops (apart from that caused by the two barrels of beer drunk the night before) and we can see peaks in the distance, now sat below the cloud. Snow and the sun conspire to draw our focus. We each take it in turns to halt the party to admire the view.

Having the breath sucked out of you, your face pummelled by wind and hail, tired and achy joints can so quickly be rewarded by a fine view. Then there's the healthy glow and the hill camaraderie of the OTHC.

Totals to date: 24 out of 254

2007

Skiddaw Twice

It's the night of Halloween and my email has gone ping. Big John's on the cyber line asking if I can lead this year's main AGM walk. I'm flattered to feel trusted so I say yes straightaway then it hits me. I've never led a walk before. I've wandered into the hills around three hundred times yet never once been asked to lead.

I get out my 1:50,000 and survey the proposed line. A non-tourist route taking in Ullock Pike, Long Side, its brother Carl Side then the scree slopes to Skiddaw, the most northerly of the English three thousanders. John's description then follows the fence down to Whitewater Dash but my maps don't have a fence marked, apparently the 1:25,000 series does. My eyes drift north and spy a peak called Cockup. It's all too probable so I email John to ask for some grid references of the fence from his 1:25,000. He replies that his map is 1:63,000. I thought they were older than the hills.

Not wishing to make Sunday's news I drive to the Lake District a day early to practise the walk ahead of the Saturday. Arriving early evening in Keswick I seek out a modest hotel. I'm shown around and told breakfast is at eight thirty. I fancy extending my Friday practice walk to take in Little Man, Lonscale Fell and Sale How so ask if an eight o'clock breakfast would be possible. Well I might have well accused her of being a lady of ill repute. I hold my ground, needing the early start and get my way while being left in no doubt why the British tourist industry is struggling.

At 0900 on November 16th I set off negotiating the hardest navigational part of any walk – the bit between the car and open ground. It's where I normally get lost and lose the most time. At least I'll be able to instil an early confidence into my troupe for the next day. I take in the staircase of climbs and straights on the way to Long Side. Making it in two hours I enjoy the sun glinting on the many inlets of Bassenthwaite Lake, but perhaps not so the distant wind farm. I'm then in the mist for the deviation to Carl Side then the long pull up Skiddaw and the walk along to its trig point. Here I get chatting with two older gents. One hands me a GPS, a gift from his son, "How do I use it?"

It's the request you dread. I know with my model it takes about seven button presses to see the OS grid reference. The designers, having never set foot in the hills, do not know that all you want is the grid reference. Track logs, waypoints, memories all have to be scrolled through until you find the nugget that everybody is looking for. His model is not my model and the qualification of being younger does not help me discover how to use it. I think we both end up feeling embarrassed.

I back track and head south, picking up a fence that neatly guides me to the summit of Little Man. On route I pass four women, none of which smile back or says hello. Even their Jack Russell is trained in the art of feminism as it growls at me. The wind is quite strong here and I rue not bringing a map case as I'm in danger of losing the map clenched in my fist and undoubtedly I'd then be lost myself. Descending I pick up another fence line which acts as a handrail to the summit of Lonscale Fell. The mist briefly clears to offer a view for my efforts.

I descend to Jackson's Fold and break out into the late afternoon sun. The views to the northeast make the day worthwhile and I hope the later afternoon sun is not too late as I've quite a walk out. I make it to Sale How then descend to the remote Skiddaw House, the long Landover track out to the road and the walk in the dark back to my car.



I don't know if it was the fact I was leading or the weather that makes the walk I lead, on Saturday the 17th, a small party of myself, Big John, David Handley and Dave Goddard. It made my practise of yesterday all but redundant. The notable variations from yesterday, other than taking in less hills, is that the first summit was reached twenty five minutes earlier, likely because we were blown along by the wind, and it rained on the descent.

Totals to date: 30 out of 254

2008

AGM, Glaramara and a Dozen More

Big John has me scrabbling for books and maps. His email tells me the AGM weekend big walk is 'Glaramara'. I'm wondering if this is some foreign adventure, I'm used to the comfort of anglicised Lakeland names. But no, there it is amongst the pronounceable in my Nuttall's guide to the English 2000ft mountains. A route taking in eleven mountain summits with Glaramara sat between Looking Steads (Lookout Place) and Combe Head (Valley Summit). Glaramara translates to 'Hill with the Mountain Hut by a Chasm'. Well pardon me for not guessing that one; I can only assume that this contraction came at a time when the use of spoken words had some form of taxation levy. And believe me any computer programmer worth their salt would be proud of writing a compression algorithm that got 'Hill with the Mountain Hut by a Chasm' down to 'Glaramara'.

John's email becomes the catalyst to planning my weekend. Firstly my attention is drawn to North Wales and this is where I'd ask the non-peak baggers to look away for a moment. In May I completed the Welsh 2000ft mountains; all 190 of them taking me seven years of varying length holidays and scrambled weekends away. With that inner sense of achievement I rested my legs through the summer, casting around for the next challenge. Then on September 19th news broke that Mynydd Graig Goch had been resurveyed and was found to be sticking its head above the 2000ft contour by a full six inches. There was nothing for it, it had to be bagged.

It's the Thursday before the AGM and I'm headed to Caernarfon. I find a B&B negotiate a 0730 breakfast and at 0900 my car is becoming a distant object as I start the ascent. I need this fairly early start as North Wales to Derwentwater is still a fair drive and I attempt to buy more time by wearing light weight walking shoes instead of traditional heavy boots. The hype in TGO magazine has at least got me to give it a go, I intend to wear them for all the walking of the weekend to see if they'd be up to next May's TGO.

The walk is a gentle incline, just a wall near the summit forming the greatest challenge before a celebratory apple at the summit – after all I have just finished the Welsh 2000ft summits for the second time.

I'm in cloud so I have no view to enjoy; the weather is warm, balmy for this time of year. My outer garment, a black fleece, has turned grey under a fine layer of water. I wipe my sleeve and grey turns to black like the scene in 'The Good The Bad And The Ugly' where a line of dust covered Union soldiers are mistaken for Confederates.

I'm at my car by lunchtime and setting off for Derwentwater. The four-hour drive is rewarded by the warm welcome of other members and the YHA staff. Sheet sleeping bags have now become fitted sheets and duvet covers. At last they realise the regulation way of fitting a sheet sleeping bag is never adopted and body against duvet has been a tradition since they replaced blankets. Another change is the personal alcohol restrictions and the reduced numbers of OTHC members making this weekend meet. Although I don't drink (for a medical reason) I miss Waggy's well organised barrels of beer and listen to the complaints of the hostel prices starting from £2.75 for a bottle of beer. As ever the OTHC members are up to the challenge and like a sixth form field trip beer, wine and whisky is smuggled in, hidden in packs, under jackets or secreted in large pockets. YHA soon becomes an acronym for Your Hidden Alcohol.

It's 0900 on Saturday November 15th and the intrepid high-level walkers are gathered outside the hostel, admiring the lake and high cloud; a good sign for the day ahead. In any organisation there's an unwritten rule that the chairman should have the most expensive car. The OTHC is no exception as our eyes are cast to Graham's five series BMW, unoccupied with the engine left running to warm it up for the short journey to Seathwaite. When Graham appears there is no mercy from his flock of members.

David and Ross offer me a lift, seconds later Big John chips in an offer and I explain I am already sorted. Fortunately I'm used to John's humour as an uninitiated man, straying within a hundred yards, could be killed by the scowl.

At Seathwaite we pile out of assorted cars. Graham arrives, the only occupant of the BMW. He tries to plead that nobody took up his offer of a lift, but we are not having it. We take the unwritten rule that, in the absence of any legal representation, we'll believe what we want to believe and the kangaroo court

found him unanimously guilty of the root cause of the planets greenhouse gas problems.

We set off and, with my lightweight walking shoes, I manage to keep near the front of a sizeable group of OTHC members tackling this round. I've already explained to John that I wish to deviate from his route to take in Seathwaite Fell and its south top. For I've found my new challenge – the 254 English 2000ft mountains. However, I'm in two minds as it looks quite away over these two summits and I wonder if I'd be able to meet the rest of the group at Sprinkling Tarn after they'd followed the path around Styhead Tarn. John and I peer up towards Aaron Crag and spot a number of routes. I like the look of the third and John tells me to go for it. I climb quickly and steeply, it's true that normal walking boots do weigh you down. Though the gradient gets steeper and I soon have to rest. It takes around half an hour to reach the 601m Wainwright summit, short of the elusive 2000ft marker that claims my interest. But I can see Wainwright's point of view; from here is beautiful. The cloud shadowing the reds, greys and green of the hills before me with the sun spotlighting areas as the clouds swish with the winds. There's a simple purity about the Lake District.

I carry on and bag every high point, using my GPS to confirm which are Seathwaite Fell and its south top. I realise that there is only a very short drop to Sprinkling Tarn, which means the rest of the party would have to ascend, over a longer distance, the same height as I'd just done. I mused whether I was ahead or behind the group. I decide to press on to find a good viewpoint where I can check the path both forward and astern. As I take the path through the shallows of the tarn fish break the water and dart away from my approach. In 2006 some 130,000 Vendace eggs were taken from Derwentwater to Sprinkling Tarn to establish a new habitat for this endangered breed of fish that date back to the Ice Age.

I press on and the good path soon takes me to the crossroads where a northeast branch leads to Allen Crag. I plan to wait here but it's so cold and I'm not yet convinced that I'm ahead of the rest of the group. I make the summit and can see the path to Glaramara, absent of a large party of walkers. I duck down to gain shelter from a biting cold wind. I don jacket, scarf and gloves and comfortably settle in the lee of the summit for the rest of the party. I'd gotten twenty-five minutes ahead as John peers around my hood to check it is me. He pretends he doesn't care about my whereabouts, nor that of the rest of the group but I often observe him keeping an eye out for his charges.

We all settle for lunch, having already eaten much of mine I just enjoy the views. I remark on the cute looking black faced, brown coated, sheep. I get some strange looks and sense some rapid shifting of immediate neighbours.

In all groups there comes a mutual sense of when it's time to press on. One or two packs being fastened spreads amongst the group until, without a word being uttered, we are all standing and ready to take the challenges of the cold wind. For the rest of the group next is the ascent of Glaramara but between there are the summits of High House Tarn Top, Red Beck Top and Looking Steads. These are mere bumps off the main track but for anybody hooked on doing the English 2000ft Mountains these are important deviations. I gain some humour in the group for my sudden darting off. I think I realise that really these should be referred to as the 2000ft mountain summits, not each being a mountain in its own right. One has a bit of scrambling to reach the summit and on the descent I slip and ungraciously land heavily on my bottom and slide a few feet. Fortunately the group are a distance away and my embarrassment is spared.

At Glaramara there is an amicable split in the group with half wishing for a quick return to Seathwaite and the rest, including John, wishing to make use of the good walking weather to take in Rosthwaite Fell. I'm pleased for this as if the entire group had wished to descend I'd miss out on this and the three summits in between. So off I set again, darting off up Combe Head, then following the crags to the leftmost of the two rocky and grassy knolls; Combe Door Top. I catch the group before bagging Dovenest Top and catch them again at the pass to the right of Rosthwaite Fell. I branch up it and am initially presented with what appears to be an unscaleable group of rocks that form the summit. I traverse around and find a point where I can, with a few easy rock climbing moves, scramble to its summit.

I must have lost time here as I'm now along way behind the group. I make a pace and slowly reel them in on the lower slopes. It's dusk as we return to the cars and a welcome return to the hostel where a shower and the annual dinner are very welcome.

So how did the lightweight walking shoes serve me? On the descent from my final Welsh summit I caught my left ankle on a rock and cut it. This would not have happened with full height boots; otherwise I did not miss the ankle support. I noticed my toes moved around more, which meant by the end of Saturday I was developing hot spots that would have eventually blistered. Though I am susceptible to blisters and covering the hot spots with plasters would have stopped them getting worse. On the plus side I was much quicker and the ascents much easier. In traditional boots I'd not have been able to do all the peaks in the Glaramara round and kept up with the group.

Totals to date: 41 out of 254

2009

Totals to date: 41 out of 254

2010

It's Friday November 19th and I'm battling my way through London to catch the 0930 Euston to Penrith. The automatic announcements are cajoling us to "Move right down the car", the doors are shutting and I'm regretting my thermal top, fleece and gortex jacket. Oxford Circus is a good few stops so I venture beyond the vestibule and grip one of the balls that hang from the roof by springs.

With my arm raised I recall deodorant adverts and am now pleased to be wearing my jacket. Coupled with walking trousers, trail shoes and pack I'm conspicuous amongst the suits.

The man stood next to me, smart raincoat, neatly done hair, speaks, "Your spikes are flying all over the place." I look behind me and figure this is not the time to point out that what is strapped to my pack are actually trekking poles. And if I'm not mistaken I'm detecting some irritation in his voice.

I swing my pack off, offer my apologies all round, the tube train jolts and I fly forward and smack him full in the chest.

"Sorry about that," I say, "rather looks as if I'm flying all over the place too." The quip doesn't work, or if it did he has some issue with his facial muscles, so I add, "I had to let go of the strap to take the pack off." This time I see that he is in full

control of his facial muscles. I catch the eye of a seated female passenger, she smiles and I reckon she knows what trekking poles are for.

The train lurches from station to station, people join, people leave and I'm feeling more and more trapped in the middle of the car. At Baker Street I start to wonder if I should make my way to the vestibule, by Regent's Park it's beginning to feel like a necessity and as we next start to slow I survey whether the quickest exit will be to my left or to my right. It's clearly to my right and I've clearly got to ask the man to allow me to pass.

"Excuse me, sorry," I start, "I've got to..." But he's an expert, parts the waves and I'm then edging myself closer to the doors. Like Crocodile Dundee in New York I ascertain who is getting off, who is staying on as I sidestep my way.

On the platform a waft of cool air clears my head and soothes my body. I find my way to the Victoria Line, board the waiting train and wait. And wait. An announcement comes over that there is a broken down train ahead. I check my watch. The minutes tick by. I'm sweating, plotting and finally running for the Central Line to Tottenham Court Road then the Northern Line to Euston whereupon one of my trekking poles decides to descend, catches the door lip and I fall into the carriage, just righting myself before I clatter into somebody else.

I catch my train at Euston and emerge some three hours later to Penrith basking in blue skies. The ruins of the sandstone castle perch over a neatly mown moat – the pride of any Tory MP. But it's the McDonalds restaurant that catches my eye, not because it spares me crossing the road, not because there's a crisp chill in the air but because I'm bloody starving; needs must and all that.

I enter and, being a vegetarian, I scan the menu of delicacies that do not involve the remains of bovine, ovine, porcine or piscine. Although some of it distinctly looks canine to my untrained eye. Failing dismally, and finding myself at the head of the queue, I ask the assistant (who on first impressions would appear to have sampled the entire menu, daily), "What can you do for a vegetarian?" Realising that my question has left me somewhat open I'm pleased when she points out a 'Vegetable Deluxe Burger'. I order that, chips and we then go through the charade of ordering me a drink. This is where it gets more complicated for I'm waiting, like a hand paused on a fruit machine, for her to mention something that does not contain caffeine or lots of sugar.

"You can have Fanta, Sprite, Coke, 7UP, milk shakes, a fruit shot, coffee or tea." At this point I'm looking her straight in the eye and she's fazed by my impassive face. I can see she's struggling, she's running out of options, I doubt she's ever had to get this far through the list before. I glance at the cabinet to my left and she follows my gaze. "Oh we have pure orange juice," she says.

"That'll be great," I reply and she looks more relieved than me. The meal comes and I have to admit it's rather tasty.

I take my time over the final morsels, allowing each chew to countdown to the bus departure time. I rejoin the coolness of the air and the blueness of the sky as I wander to the bus stop and check, double check and accept the safety in numbers of the correct stand.

The bus rattles to a standstill, the murmurings and stirrings of my compatriots signalled its arrival and a loose order of boarding is formed between perceived early birds, the elderly and mothers with young children. I pay my dues, perch my pack on my lap and take in the views as the bus, like an aeroplane on

automatic pilot, wanders north and south of its route, the A66, collecting and depositing people as it goes.

As we near Keswick the mountains rise from the earth until they tower above the road. I don't know their names and I pledge to walk them, to know them, to spend more time in the Lake District. I survey the russet brown of their lower slopes propping darkened upper reaches. I spy paths, routes and scrambles amongst their folds. It's a day for surveying, a day for planning and if one is lucky a day to be basking on the ridges in this cool, clear winter day.

The bus reaches the outskirts of Keswick and I ask the aged, capped head, in the seat in front of me, if he could let me know where the centre is. He turns, gives me a rundown of all possible stops, their merits for different purchases, attractions and drinking hostelrys. I notice his hands; aged tattoos of LOVE and HATE are engraved above his knuckles. I wonder if he ever glances at them, ponders at them and remembers the man he once was. But I accept the kindly old man, the man pleased to be offering advice, the man pleased to be asked.

I pick the best recommendation from many, accept his directions, thank the driver and step from the bus into the bustling hub of Keswick. I wander awhile, survey the market stalls, and make a donation to a man rattling a tin for mountain rescue. He'd spotted my poles, my pack and my jacket. "You look like a man that doesn't need rescuing," he said. The compliment worked and a sticker was added to my lapel to prove it.

It takes awhile to meander my way to the B5289, the route to Derwent Water Youth Hostel, the route to The 'Over The Hill Club AGM' weekend. There's a nice path that sits on the lake side of the road. It wanders eagerly from shore to road, through dips and rises. Down the lake the view unfolds into a plethora of mountains, light heather, trees and snow are set back in ever increasing layers of beauty.

I sit awhile, time is on my side. Mesmerising waves pound the shore until they settle into gentle laps. A brown spaniel races ahead of its owner, its nose close to the ground sniffing past me as it climbs the rise behind me. Its owner follows on as the dog stands proud from its eyrie plotting her progress.

I take my cue to follow and stroll leisurely into the Youth Hostel. As ever I'm assigned a bunk in Room 1, the resting place of all males single. Graham Gledhill announces an ability to snore so I move further into the rooms reaches where the Daves (Skipp and Wilkinson) are making up their beds.

"What are the numbers like this weekend?" I ask.

"Not good," says the Wilkinson half of the pairing, "we tried a membership drive but have attracted no young blood."

"The clue could be in the club title," I add. I quickly rue my quip as evidently this has been discussed at length on Facebook.

I slope off to enjoy the evening, the meal and to catch up with old friends.

*

I wipe away the condensation on the tall windows of Room 1, dry my hand against my fleece and peer at what was Friday's mountain glory now hidden by the low cloud of the dawning Saturday morning.

The veggie cooked breakfast cheers me and the packed lunch, a first ever purchase for me, looks substantial. I wander to the car park, I need to bag a lift and Graham Gledhill comes up trumps with his shiny new VW Touran. Peter Goodwin joins us and Sue Oxley appears and joins a variety of vehicles carrying John a Jacquie Hutchison, Ann and Alvar Thorn, Dave Handley for a rendezvous at a car park below the Grisedale Pike Horseshoe.

There's some confusion over the grid reference matching the visual description of the car park. Nobody dares to question Big John as he arrives and, after packs are sorted, boots donned and waterproofs pulled on we set off. I make a good pace, keeping up - I need to keep near the front as I'm planning a deviation to Hobcarton End. Sue and I take the lead up the cloud clad spine of Grisedale Pike and as I touch the summit we confirm mobile phone numbers and I head north for Hobcarton End. It's a steep descent in scree and I fail to find a path on what should be a popular route. I stop and survey the surroundings. Unclaimed voices of distant walkers funnel eerily onto the slopes. To my left I reckon the land falls away, to my right, in the swirling mist, I fancy I can make out a ridge spur. I clamber to it and find a path which, over undulations and detours takes me to Hobcarton End. I motor back, reclaim Grisedale Pike and follow the south westerly path, with its steep drop into the valley below, around to Hobcarton Crag. I study the map and can't understand why Hopegill Head does not count as a 2000 ft mountain. I survey further and conclude its list in another walk and, my tunnel vision of marking up a map, has let me down.

I descend to Coledale Hause and study map, compass and GPS to pick up the right path around to Crag Hill. I hear the distant sound of Sue's voice rolling off the mountain with the mist. I wait, allowing my ears to pick up closing voices and figure the rest have taken in Hopegill Head. By chance I'm now ahead of them. They are a little surprised to see me standing in the mist on a junction of paths at 2000ft.



Slopes of Grisedale Pike

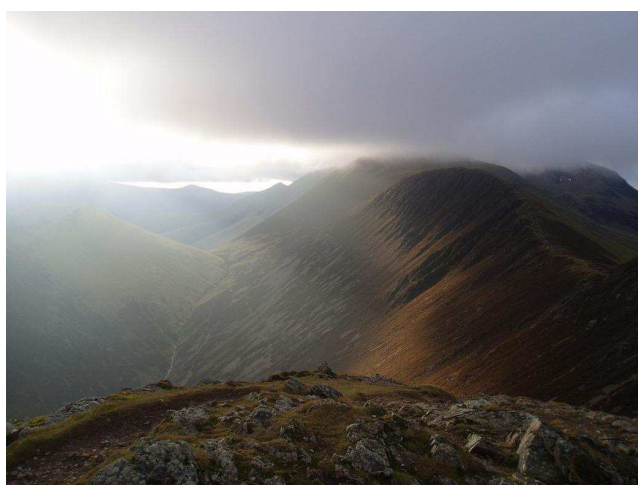
The wind has picked up and we head south until a culvert, with babbling stream, shelters us for lunch. Alvar's ankle is playing him up and a debate about route ensues. He and Ann are adamant that we should not change are plans for them and point out the many ways off they could take. I pitch in for the route over Causey Pike as it'll give me the seven peaks described in this round in the Nuttall's guide to 'The Mountains of England'.

I finish the Youth Hostel lunch, substantial and tasty, and we pull packs on, stretch legs and chat freely as we make Crag Hill. Ann and Alvar drop down into

the valley as we take in Sail. An ever decreasing number of routes off, clearing cloud and the desire to stay high take us over the decaying waveforms of Scar Crag and Causey Pike. A minor piece of scrambling, requiring hand and footholds, has us bunching up, offering advice and taking it easy as we complete our round.

We all look back, whence we came and admire the terrific views. The sun that escapes through the cloud forms layers of tone on the side of the hill, mixed with the ever changing colours of the heather and peat it forms a colour wash that only an artist can understand yet the eyes of all admirers can appreciate.

We pick up the minor roads then paths that skirt us around Braithwaite and, in the fading light, find the cars and make our way back to the hostel for the AGM meal, merriment and, thankfully, for this evening no talk of changing the name of the club. Over the hill we have been. Over the hill we will become.



View from Causey Pike

Totals to date: 48 out of 254

2011

Friday 15th April saw me visiting a customer on the outskirts of Liverpool; a carefully planned visit so my company paid the bulk of my mileage prior to a holiday in the Lake District with, hopefully, many peaks. The close proximity of four bank holidays (Easter, The Royal Wedding and the May bank holiday) means I have three weeks away for just eleven annual leave days.

Saturday the 16th dawns with promising skies and a gentle cooling breeze wafting across an M6 service station with accompanying Travel Lodge. I make my way to the service area and the hopes of a breakfast. My diet has become tiresome, no wheat, no meat, no sugar and no alcohol. Not that an alcoholic beverage was on my agenda but an M6 service station is not so prepared for no wheat, no meat and no sugar. I plump for two fried eggs, beans and tomatoes. But that's not where it stops, I now need a complex carbohydrate to go with the protein and the only option was bread, and bread contains wheat. So back in my room I devour a couple of rice cakes before the trip to bag a couple of mountains above Grasmere and to the west of Thirlmere.

The journey is little over an hour, punctuated by a number of stops to convince myself that I'd not left anything behind. I aim for a car park but they charge for it. Not that I mind paying but I have no change, so up and down the road I drive,

kerbed by the waters of Thirlmere and a rock face. Each time I spy a pull-in I also spy a no parking sign until one pull-in, with abandoned track beyond, fails to have a note of deterrent. Then it's to find a place to turn around and a delicate reverse manoeuvre, up a steep slope, to rest my tailgate against the gate with the nose of the car inches from the road.

I begin walking at 0955 through a gently rising track; grateful for its even ground and easy navigation. Trees fall away to my left and climb to my right. A stream gently gurgles below me as the sun dodges in and out of cloud as it cools and warms me. I navigate the track, drop down to a stream and pick up a path which, via a double gated break in a forest border fence, has me out onto the hillside.

The well marked path, on the map, is difficult to find and, by use of GPS and compass, I set a direct course for Low Saddle. The direct route becomes one of deviation as I navigate round knolls, streams and boggy ground. I rest often (I feel very unfit having injured my neck in January preventing me from properly exercising) but clamber the final few paces at a little after 1210. I munch on some food, eat a rice cake, sup water then make the half hour crossing to Ullscarf. This is a simple cairn, marking the highest point of its upland plateau. I return on the same route, saying hello to the same breed sheep I saw on the way up (grey or brown bodies with white faces), before dropping sharply east across Standing Crag. I make it slightly hard by having to gently lower myself down a steeply grassed and wet slope. Safely on gentler ground I slip, go flying and bum slide a few yards to the feeling of the penetrating wet across my behind and legs.

I return through the forest, following the same track as on my ascent, and return to the car four hours after I set out.

I wake in the Ambleside holiday cottage that I have taken for three weeks. It's bijou, well thought out and rather lovely. I take my time getting up, there's a Formula 1 race to watch before I head to the hills. A relaxing breakfast takes me through the build up and an exciting hour and a half sees me through the race. Then it's a packed lunch to make, maps to check and the trip round to the start of Harter Fell.

I'm soon discovering the delights of Wrynose Pass, a cycling event and a stream of cars and motorcycles. The Wrynose links to the more famous Hardknott Pass but in itself is steep, narrow, tortuous and not adverse to having your left wheels running along a very sharp drop. Lots of starting and stopping and braking have me concerned. I've just had the car overhauled for the journey and it proved to be rather expensive. All four discs and associated pads had to be replaced and the bill came with an advisory note of "Avoid heavy braking for 500 miles." When I read the note I thought of the accident claim form – "The reason I did not brake and chose to run into the back of your client was because my garage advised me to avoid heavy braking." On the Wrynose Pass I'm thinking of my prophetic thoughts even more. But fortunately everybody is being sane, allowing room for the mass of cyclists to make their way through and even the motor bikes wait patiently for their turn as.

The start of the walk, requiring a short deviation down the Seathwaite road, is from a National Trust car park. I set off walking at 1135 and, rarely for me, have guidebook in hand as I make my way across a tracked bridge and turn left onto a riverside path. This is where guidebooks can let you down for they rarely tell you to avoid branching paths and you are left hoping that you are following the thought pattern, and the footsteps, of the authors.

I pass a mentioned farm house and dutifully turn right onto the track beyond and seek out the path to the left. On it I start to climb through the remnants of a felled conifer plantation. After a kilometre I glance down at my compass and realise that I am heading due north. This is not good; in fact any navigational direction without the word 'west' in it is not a good idea at this precise moment. And at this precise moment I'm puzzling over the map and see what path I think I am compared with what path I should be on. As the plantation has been felled I strike west over rough, steep ground.

I find this slow going and rest every few paces. I'd planned yesterday and today as easier walks, wanting to build up some fitness. It's been a tough few years with my Dad's parents dying in 2008 and 2009 then my last remaining grandparent just a month ago followed by his 103 year old brother last Sunday. These things fatigue you more than you realise and I certainly feel fatigued as I tread my way in the ripening sun.

I pass through rocky crags, using them as place markers or things to aim for and then the summit appears on my horizon; a castellated array of rocky crags forming the battlements of its summit. Sheep stand and stare as I ascend the grassy slopes and tread onto the first of the rocks. I master the slabs, say hello to a group of feasting people, and climb, with a few easy moves, what looks like the summit at 1355. The views all around are magnificent, the way I came, across to the Wrynose Pass and off out to sea. I drop down and rest by the trig point before climbing one of the lesser peaks of its battlements, just for the hell of it. A fellow walker asks for the trig point, I direct him but also tell him which the true summit is.



Harter Fell

I wander between the jagged outcrops of rocks like a laird prowling the grounds of his estate. I take out map and guidebook but rule out the recommended way down. Too much planting has taken place since the route was worked out and I fear being able to find my way through the new trees.

I pick a south easterly path and navigate carefully down, wanting an easy route off with no wrong turns and extended timings. I've misjudged my water supply, have run out and don a cap to break the heat from the sun. Opposite is Seathwaite Tarn and, from this distance, I think I make out a man made dam

holding the waters back. There is loose small scree and I slip twice, slipping a few yards and jarring my body at the same time. I pick my way very carefully, feeling tired, a little wobbly and determined not to slip again.

I drop onto the track with a metaphoric thump, turn left and keep on it until I reach the car after another four hour walk.

The Langdale Pikes

Monday April 18th and my ambitions have become loftier and, with the Langdale Pikes in mind, I pack my rucksack with food and water and make the short trip to Great Langdale. Fortunately this time I have change as the parking is £6.50 for the day and few other alternatives appear to exist.

I make a slow plod up the well made path, people overtake me, people roughly keep the same pace as me but I don't get ahead of anybody. I feel tired, rest often, either perched on a slab in the path or laid out on the grass. A fast flowing stream allows me to drink back one of my one litre bottles of water then refill it. A path repair team are attempting to reposition a large boulder in the stream; a ratchet lift, metal poles and some brute force do little more than rock it on its foundations.



View down to Great Langdale on the ascent to Stickle Tarn

However, I'm grateful for the steps in the path for they lend me a pace that steep grassy slopes fail to. So instead of throwing myself to the ground for a rest, at every opportunity, I'm able to make a few minutes of progress at a time then rest awhile.

I arrive at Stickle Tarn at 1100, an hour and half into the walk. It's a lovely tarn, some 400m long and in the shadow of Pavey Ark and Harrison Stickle. A walled dam restricts its draining back toward Great Langdale, its northern shore laps against the gentle slopes of my route to Codale Head. Its western shore sits below the menacing peaks of Harrison Stickle and Pavey Ark.



Harrison Stickle from Stickle Tarn



Pavey Ark from Stickle Tarn

I stagger my way north east then north west, following the dwindling path to the rocky peak of Sergeant Mann; not being a 2000ft summit in its own right I head east to Codale Head. In the great distance is High Raise but, it's an illusion of the terrain as it takes me just twenty minutes to pace my way there. I'm pleased to be on the high ground, the steep climb is done and it looks now to be a pleasant walk around the seven summits. Despite the brilliant blue skyline the wind chills me and I don my jacket as I make my way south to Thunacar Knott



Paragliders with the hill figure bicycle

A dip and a rise and a minor scramble have me on Pavey Ark. I sit awhile, allowing the throngs of people to pass. I watch crows hover and call, seagulls call and I watch paragliders turn and swoop from Harrison Stickle. I look from whence I came, picking out Sergeant Mann, Codale Head and High Raise. Below me is a sharp drop back to Stickle Tarn, glistening blue in the afternoon light.

I try a direct route to Harrison Stickle but it has me negotiating rocky outcrops so I drop and pick up the path that leads me to its summit. This is tough going, taking me forty minutes in all.



Harrison Stickle from Pavey Ark



Stickle Tarn from Harrison Stickle

There's a cooling breeze that is welcome as I survey Stickle Tarn from yet another angle. To the west is Pike of Stickle, the route to it gets a little confusing with the best way appearing to be via a sharp descent of a rocky wall. I gingerly take easy steps before leaping the last few feet and balancing myself. It's then a good drop before the ascent of Pike of Stickle starts. At the low point a grey sheep, with a white face, blocks the path. "Hello you," I say and then realising my pun reiterate the joke. The sheep is not having it, not one twitch of a laugh or acknowledgement of my humour. It just stands there staring at me. I walk around and then start the ascent to the rocky climb that takes me to Pike of Stickle.

I rest awhile at the top, surveying the views, the late afternoon light playing off the mountains, the deep blues of the sky and the cool breeze remind me that it's only April.

I make my way back, dropping down the rock face until I meet the path and, with my lack of fitness showing, take my time to Loft Crag. From here I navigate carefully, the 2000ft view down into Great Langdale looks a long way and I don't fancy putting myself on a course that has me finding the road miles from my car. So I check compass and GPS at every twist and turn as the path takes me back to Great Langdale. It's 1740 by the time I get there, just over an eight hour round, I don't fancy cooking so pop into the Stickle Barn pub. I'm served by a monotone Scandinavian gentleman, likely Finnish by the sounds of him. As I dump my pack and trekking poles down I order jacket potato with cheese and a side order of chips.

"Will you be eating inside or outside?" he asks.

"Inside," I reply, "I'm not really the outdoorsy type."

My humour is lost.

The Three (Car) Parks Challenge

After a rest day, regrettably using up another day of glorious sun, I feel fit enough to tackle a big round. I fancy the Bowfell group of mountains but decide to walk them in the reverse order of the guide book - the plan being, if I feel fit, to also take in the ten summits to the south. But first I have to contend with the car parking in Great Langdale. Misreading the starting point I pull up in the very same car park I'd used on Monday, pay my £6.50 and set off up the track. I then discover that I'm in the wrong place as the terrain does not match my map. Back at the car I drive further up Great Langdale, unable to spot the car park at the head I turn back and park at a midway car park. My heart sinks when I see that this one is operated by the National Trust and my ticket is for a car park belonging to the Parks Authority. I put a note in my window pretending to be ignorant saying, "Sorry I bought this ticket at your other car park, hope that's okay."

I take the track to Middle Fell Farm, a gentle stroll through fields, where I find the car park that I should have been in. I consider going back but think better of it and, at 0900, take the well made and gently rising Cumbria Way track.

I find it tough going, the sun is blazing down but as I rise I'm treated to great views of the Langdale Pikes that I climbed on Monday. Unbelievably some of the high folds of the mountains ahead have snow still in them.

I rest at the junction of tracks, to my right are Black Craggs and to my left my intended route to Rossett Pike. I drink a litre of water and refill from the flowing stream.

The walk becomes a tortuous staircase of laid stone. Bags of rock, brought in by helicopter, line the edges. I look up, it's a perfect sky, the ridge lines are rock sitting below the rich blues of the sky. My cap protects me from the blazing sun; my legs feel tired and heavy. I rest often and sup water. People pass then I pass them as we migrate our way up.

Just below Angle Tarn I branch off right and ascend Rossett Pike at 1150. I stand and admire the panoramic views with peaks dipping and undulating, great ridges connecting them. Some tops are great battlements with unclimbable faces spewing scree to the valley floor below.

I press on, pass the dark Angle Tarn and follow the track around to Esk Hause. Here I rest, couples sit and chat, families share a picnic, and a man fusses over his two dogs. It could be a city centre park on a mid-summer's day, apart from the 2500ft views and the cool breeze of the mountain air now gently cooling me.

Pressing on I stagger my way up Esk Pike, through its boulder field until I pull myself onto its summit. A bit of cloud has formed in the sky, high, white and no danger. A distant paraglider catches my eye before two RAF trainer aircraft blast down the valley. They are single piston engine and propeller driven. Decorated in shiny black with yellow markings they make a beautiful sight and a lovely sound as their engines drone into the distance. Like with trains steam has a romance over diesel as propeller planes have the romance over jet.

I follow another boulder field and inadvertently come up between the two Bowfell mountains. I turn back to take in Bowfell North Top, the final leg being on crunchy dry grass, before the leg draining clamber to Bowfell, at 902m the highest point of the day. I survey, from a higher vantage point, my Monday's walk before dropping south east to pick up the track back to Great Langdale. I help out a woman with a searing headache by giving her a couple of Ibuprofen. The descent is steep, tough on the legs and I take a good three hours over it. The last 2000ft is over the sharp nose of 'The Band' where the ground falls away so steeply, to the valley floor below, I'm glad of the path.

At the foot I get chatting to a couple of women, one of their husband's has gone for their car and they offer me a lift to my car park. I gratefully accept, the sun is so hot and the heat is wafting from the tarmac. They drop me off, I'm grateful for not having received a parking fine. I then set off and realise I'm only a hundred or so yards from the first car park of the day. I could have just gone back there and saved the worry.

Due to my tiredness the 21st becomes another rest day where I ambled in Ambelside, bought some DVDs, food and generally relaxed.

The 22nd becomes my third trip down Great Langdale since Monday. This time I have the parking sussed and am walking at around 0915 for a day doing the ten tops of the Crinkle Crag round. The first peak entails a road walk and then a branch at a stream following a well trodden path. The weather is clear and the sun steadily warms me as I gain height. I carry 2kg of water but at every opportunity stop, drink a litre and refill from the flowing stream. I'm wondering if my struggles this week have partly been due to dehydration.

The first top is Pike of Bilsco, which I reach in two hours, where many people are gathered for its fine views. I then head for Great Knott but it's not at great knots I'm travelling. The summit is a rise to the north of the path; here I'm alone as, unless you are setting out to bag every 2000ft top, the temptation is to head straight for Crinkle Crag. However, my path now deviates via Cold Pike, its west top and its far west top. Again the views are fantastic, the walk of Monday fully on view again and part of Wednesday's appearing on the skyline. The extremity of the day is Little Stand where I use my GPS to confirm I have gone far enough.

It's now a yomp across open ground, followed by a sharp rise, to the south top of Crinkle Crag. The wind is still until I reach the ridge and its many cairned summits. I climb them all and use GPS to confirm when I'm sat on Crinkle Crag, Shelter Crag then its north top; each time sitting on my map case to save it from the strong warm breeze. I'm tired and rest often, my legs a little shaky and

my heart pounding in protest. I drop rapidly to the track I took off on Wednesday and make better going, reaching my car at 1740.

I visit the same pub that I visited on Monday and Wednesday and order the same food – jacket potato, cheese and chips with two pints of orange juice and lemonade. The same, head shaven, Czech Republic girl is serving as on Wednesday. Her colleague, the humourless Finn, takes my order – I don't risk any jokes this time.



Views of Crinkle Craggs from Cold Pike

Saturday 23rd I wake early, feeling fit enough to string two days into a row. A visit to the bathroom proves otherwise – my feet ache where the ball of the foot meets the arch. I return to bed, doze, wake, breakfast and inspect my trail shoes. They'd both cracked across my pain line so I wander into Ambelside to look for new ones.

I'm never a good shopper, need to feel good about a shop even before going in. Then when I'm in the simplest of things can put me off, have me heading for the door. I look in a few windows, wander in a few shops, wander out. Then I find Millets, the vibe is good, I wander in. Footwear upstairs. The assistant is helping a chap. I feel all the shoes for weight, turning the lightest towards me as placeholders. She finishes with him, smiles cheerily and asks how she can help. "Well size ten or eleven in any of these." I'd picked a price range of £28.99, £64.99 and £104.99.

Only the £64.99 and £104.99 were in stock and then only at size eleven. I try them both and, would you believe it, only the £104.99 ones fit properly.

In the evening I go to the cinema and see the very funny 'Submarine'; though I'm equally amused by the screen advertising. The first advert is for the Advertising Standards Authority – saying if you see an advert that is not accurate you should complain. A later advert is for 'Visit Scotland' which says 'You will get a warm welcome, a very warm welcome.' Well not if you are a single English bloke you won't – frequently downright hostile I'd say.

Sunday 24th (Easter Sunday) dawns as beautiful as any day this week. I manage to get myself out of bed early as I fancy the Conistone Fells and, at 11.5 miles 4400 feet of ascent, I'm set for a big day.

I get to Consiton around 0730, the guidebook saying I need to find the Old Station car park. I find Station Road but there's no sign of an old station let alone an accompanying car park. I decide that guidebook writers are the estate agents of the walking fraternity! They are necessary, never give you the full detail that you want, miss things out and you are handing them power that you feel quite uncomfortable about. One thing, I believe, where guidebook writers go wrong is not to get walks independently tested.

Anyhow I set off at 0750 after finding parking on the road to the Copper Mines and Youth Hostel. My new walking shoes are a nice fit, I'm feeling fit and I make good progress towards Wetherlam. The disused mines and the Youth Hostel come into view but I branch north west and take the path through the curves and undulations. I hear voices below and my gaze spots them as a group of wild campers; their voices carrying high up the mountain. A sheep with its newborn black lamb blocks my path. It's the first lamb I've seen this year. I pause until it moves, the wobbly legged youngster keeping close to its mum. A fell runner passes me before I make Wetherlam at 1015. Coniston Water glitters in the morning sun and I recall its dark history, Donald Campbell and his Bluebird boat. Opposite is The Old Man of Coniston – a peak for later in the day.

The visibility is excellent, there's little haze and much of my walk, around the twisting ridges and their peaks, is on show.



The view towards Coniston Water from Wetherlam

I make the easy walk to Black Sails, arriving at 1045, then, via a rocky scramble, the summit of Swirl How at 1135. Here I chat to a woman, only the fifth person I've met so far, who started from Keswick a few days ago with backpack, tent and faithful collie called Pluto.

The walk round to Great Carrs is simple but tinged with sadness as I come across a cairn built around the remains of the undercarriage of a Halifax Bomber. It marks the site of the crash on October 22nd 1944. I survey the area and see that there are the remains of molten metal where it caught fires and, tragically, that the aircraft would have only needed to be a few meters higher to have made it over the ridge.



I take in Great Carrs, the drop off is steep into the valley below. A cool breeze cools me as I take in the surrounding mountain vista.

I take the drop and ascent to Grey Friar where I stop for lunch, relaxing with my back to a rock and surveying the sweeping mountainside, the sharp fall away, round to The Old Man of Conistoun.

I retrace my steps then take the contour like path around to Brim Fell (with its ancient cairn) before the long pull up The Old Man. Here I'm on the beaten track and there is quite a crowd at the summit. The views over Conistoun and its water are just so beautiful, sail boats are out as birds gently swoop for tourist titbits. Many from here will head straight back down but for me I have the walk around to Dow Crag, Walna Scar and White Maiden.



The view from The Old Man

Dow Crag, at 1445, has an unnerving exposed scramble to its summit. I pause only briefly, patting the summit, then return to safety.

The pull over to Walna Scar and White Maiden feels like a remote corner of this walk. I'm glad for the stunning weather as, if in wind, rain or mist, I could imagine being uncertain about such a spur from the beaten track. Even with the good visibility I make a navigational error and find myself having overshot onto the lesser summit of White Pike. Either side there are views into the valleys below.

My legs feel very tired, I feel very drained, as I retrace my steps to meet the path between Walna Scar and Dow Crag. Here I turn right and drop quickly on the good path. As I get closer to Conistoun four mountain bikes shriek by and I notice how many cars have driven up the track for their occupants to free camp.

A woman opens a gate to allow her partners BMW 3 series cabriolet through.
"Thanks for opening the gate for me," I quip.
"Would you like a ride into Coniston?"

I grab the opportunity, a ride in an open top car on a lovely day and the saving of about a mile road walking.

The 25th brings a cooler, cloudier start to the day but I wake feeling fit enough for another walk. I start to look slightly further a field and fancy Great Dodd and its surrounding hills.

After finding the minor road to cut me across to the A592 I park at High Row and am off walking at 0815. Firstly it's a walk down a metalled road to the farm at Dowthwaitehead and a chat with a farmer about the pleasures of the day. Then it's an embarrassing root around his farmyard while I look for the path onto the hills. Path found, and my eyes averted from any checking by the farmer, I make my way across the heavy, boggy grass slopes. I miss the paths of the last few days as my legs feel heavy and tired. I make a navigational error and have to correct myself to find the stone wall that climbs near to the top of Birket Fell. This is not a true 2000ft summit but it's a nice perch, although blustery, from which to rest. I check for phone signal, put on my fleece, and call my parents, it rings awhile but I assume 1000 is not too early. Mum answers.

"Hello."

"Hi Mum it's me."

"Where are you?"

"Birkett Fell."

"Birkett Bell?" she replies (Mum is known for her mis-hearing).

"No, Firket Bell," I correct her (I'm known for mixing the first letters of successive words), then correct myself with, "No, I mean Birket Fell," while thanking my lucky stars it's not called 'Hirkett Fell'.

I cross to the true peak of Hart Side then drop to the col and climb the beckoning Green Side before the short sharp ascent of Stybarrow Dodd. I note fell runners around, I get chatting to one (while I inspect the footings of an ancient derelict wall). They are on an Easter egg trail, running from peak to peak seeking out clues.

I have a good wander around, taking in all the cairns before the grand sweep and rise round to Great Dodd. I rest at Watson's Dodd at 1150 and take an early lunch to have some energy before the end of the day.

I arrive on Great Dodd at 1230, it feels like a real mountain, there are drop offs all round with accompanying views. There's also an ancient shelter.

I drop, on the ridge, to Calthow Pike before the quick pull up to Clough Head and its trig point made of local stone. There are great views of the higher mountains to the north west and the long and winding 'Old Coach Road' (my return route to High Row) snakes through the valley floor below.

I drop rapidly, making my own zig zag path, before climbing over an ancient wire fence and picking up the coach road. A mountain bike approaches; it, and its rider, are both heavily laden. I comment on this, the reply is a pure Glaswegian accent so consequently I don't understand a word of it.

It's now a route march back to the car with an undulating track, and tired legs, to keep me company. I arrive back at 1455.

Helvellyn (by accident)

As I drive over "The Struggle" from Ambleside to Glenridding I notice the lower temperature and how low the cloud is hanging. I'm second to arrive at the car park and part with £7 to park for the day. I collect my ticket and the credit card receipt for the previous payee – being a good citizen I tuck it under their wiper.

I'm off walking at 0805 but it's 'same old, same old' with the guide book as I look for the ladder style with 'Helvellyn via Greenside Mine and Red Tarn'. What's confusing is that this requires some other 'Helvellyn vias' to be taken first but, as the guidebook mentions only 'Helvellyn via Greenside Mine and Red Tarn' I'm left thinking that I am on the wrong track. Only pouring over the map and checking GPS give me the confidence to pick my way through until I eventually do find a sign saying 'Helvellyn via Greenside Mine and Red Tarn'. A guidebook really needs to mention all the signposts you are likely to come across and tell you which way to go at each; otherwise it's just educated guessing.

I take the good track towards Red Tarn, steadily climbing and, in low mist, turn up the dinosaur like, spine ridge to Catseye Cam. I don fleece, bandana around my ears and gloves to take away the sting of the cold.

As I approach the top I keep away from the sharp drop off to the right. I make the summit at 1030, feeling very healthy. Through the swirling mist I can make out Red Tarn and the path to Helvellyn Lower Man. I drop down to the col before climbing the path through the rocks which appears to hang like a rickety cartoon staircase. I climb carefully, the drop to the left being a steep fall off. I place foot and hands carefully until I reach a steep grassy slope which has a series of useful footholds which lead me to the summit plateau. Before me is a trig point and I realise that I've inadvertently strayed onto the summit of Helvellyn (which was due to be part of another round connecting the mountains to the south). I tag the trig point and stroll the short distance to the summit cairn. The cloud has lifted and the views are a stunning array of encircling peaks with criss-cross paths stretching between each.

I walk around to Helvellyn Lower Man and appreciate what a fine, conical, mountain Catseye Cam is. From the Lower Man I drop towards the col. I briefly chat with a chap before the most piercing freezing wind hits from the east. Despite my fleece it rips the heat out of me so I'm grateful to make the col where the wind is gentle. I ascend White Side where I fancy breaking for lunch. However the summit is adorned with some human waste so I press on to Raise and its impressive cairn. It's now 1210 and I'm very pleased with my progress so I duck below the cairn, out of the wind, and eat my lunch.

I line up Sheffield Pike by compass bearing. It involves a drop to Sticks Pass then an easterly turn. Here I note the optimistic ski lift on the north side of Raise. I wonder how many people make the walk out to it as this would be a remote spot on a winter's day.

Sheffield Pike requires a detour from the main path and a sharp pull across an energy sapping grassed slope. After briefly speaking with a family tackling the Wainwrights I make the summit at 1340.

The path from the top is a steep easterly descent and I backtrack a few times as I find paths that I do not fancy. Eventually I manage to pick my way down, keeping my nerve against the sharp drops and returning to the car at 1450.

A Milestone

April the 27th, dawning without a cloud in the sky, has me aiming to complete the Scafell group of mountains. It's a bit of a hike over, requiring travel across the Wrynose and Hardknott passes. I take much in first gear as the bonnet rises above my nose or sinks beneath my knees. As my sat nav constantly revises my arrival time the temperature gauge remains rock solid. I'm thankful for modern cars and imagine the scene in the 1960s with overheating cars parked up on each bend.

At a shade before 0900 I'm parked at the top of Wast Water, grateful for one of the last remaining free parking spaces, and am off walking. The day follows the regular pattern as I guess the bits the guidebook writers ignored. After one backtrack I'm climbing the steep slopes towards Lingmell.

From high up Wast Water glistens behind me, I hear the cattle grid rattle with each new vehicle coming up the valley and watch as the final free parking place is swallowed up.



Wast Water (and the sea beyond) from the slopes of Lingmell

In the hot weather I find it very tough going, taking me an hour and a half to conquer the steepest part of the path before two distinct raises become part of the trail. As I sit, studying the view in surreal still and quietness, I ponder my pace; yesterday I was so fast in cool weather and rock and slab paths. But on grass or scree, combined with the sun, I slow right down.

I long for some wind to cool me, sometimes he's your friend, sometimes your enemy, right now I want a gentle breeze to cool me. My prayer is answered on the higher slopes where, on slipping off my pack and map case, the soft wind cools my dripping wet torso.

I make the summit at a little after 1115, a few people are already there, a few people join me. Great End and Great Gable stand proud either side of a valley. Birds dive from their tops and hang still in the air as they study the ground below. For me I study the map, and set the compass for the next one. However, I can't see the one beyond so drop to the col where I see that what I thought to be the next is actually the one after, my next summit having been out of sight from Lingmell.

Middleboot Knotts and Round How are really knolls nestled, with the prerequisite height and drops, amongst the grander mountains adorning the main ridge. I pass over the sharp falling stream of Piers Gill before dropping and ascending the two. On Round How, which was a heavy legged, energy sapping sharp pull to attain, I stop and eat lunch and survey the view in the peace of my own company.

I drop to the Corridor Route and join the masses heading to Scafell Pike; too many people for pleasantries as everybody passes with barely an acknowledgement. I'm pretty sure I climbed it from this route in 1990 when I found it equally tough going. I rest often, sitting on the polished rocks, as people pass. A multitude of cairns claim the way before the boulder strewn summit appears and, after careful steps, I make the summit for the third time.

Next are Symonds Knott and Sca Fell. A daunting rock face appears to block the path, I check the guidebook and it advises almost getting to the face then descending three hundred feet before a rock strewn gully climb through the stream of Foxes Gill. As I approach the rock face it all feels very serious, I see climbers working their way up as others discuss the best routes. For me I'm following the guidebook, actually it's now my best friend as I descend through the steep scree to the route up. I chat with a few people, everybody is taking it steady as eerie echoes and clatters fill the scree ridden cauldron.

The pull up the gully is thick with fallen boulders, trickling water and ringing wet moss. I take a few steps at a time, careful not to dislodge anything to the path below and listening carefully should anybody be dislodging anything on to me. I rest and study the guidebook; Symonds Knott and Sca Fell are both above 3000ft. I flick through and work out that these are the last two English 3000ft mountains I've left to do. It takes me just a second to realise that I'm about to complete all the 3000ft mountains of Great Britain (308 in all). This gives me a new spring as I clamber over, squeeze beside or avoid large boulders. At Foxes Tarn, no more than a puddle, I turn right to the pull to the ridge. I take in Symonds Knot. A few people are already there, peacefully surveying the view. It feels so different to Scafell Pike where the tourists sat, chattered and made endless mobile phone calls. Here is more serious.

The views are outstanding, back across to the Pike, the valleys and mountains behind and the sea out to the west. I cross to Sca Fell and have a private celebration of my sudden 3000ft achievement. I then explain to a couple so they know why I want my photo taken.



On Sca Fell having just completed all the 308 3000ft summits of Great Britain

The day becomes longer than I ever anticipated. The walk back to the car is on gruesome scree and steep slopes. It takes me until 1745 and I mess up my navigation on the drive back, not arriving back in Ambleside until way after 2000.

April 28th brings another day of continuous sunshine and it begins to dawn on me how lucky I am seeing the mountains of the lakes, and their waters, in the bright sunshine of an English spring. With thoughts like those I do my usual trick of badly navigating my way across to Swindale to take in the not oft visited Sleddale Fells.

At 0905 I have to start further back than the guidebook recommendation as a 'no parking beyond this point' blocks my way. The sun catches the back of my neck as I walk the undulating tar sealed road to Swindale Head and branch right up the gruesomely steep twisting path. On a frequent rest I conclude that air temperature, gradient and terrain can conspire to all but bring me to a halt and this, without exception, is such an occasion – studying the map I see it's called 'The Old Corpse Road' so I quip to myself that it could soon become 'The New Corpse Road.' The sun is brutal, right on me as I try to swing my way around to Selside Pike.

I make the top and sink into its summit shelter, releasing what feels like a heavy pack and raising my tired legs onto a rock. I rest awhile before the brief descent and ascent of Branstree North East Top before a drop down to a rather spectacular pillar – which, according to the guide book, was used for surveying.



The surveying pillar between the Branstree summits.

Branstree is gained by following a fence, with its predecessor at its feet lying dead in the grass, to a fine wall. Here I cross the fence and make my way to a small cairn (the least impressive summit cairn I've ever seen) and a more interesting ground level circular structure that has the hallmarks of Ordnance Survey about it. Shortly to the north east are two more impressive cairns but, below the summit line, I wonder what the motives were for building them.

It's 1155 and, after taking in the fine views down to Haweswater I park myself on the south side of the wall and eat my now familiar lunch of cold jacket potato and cheese. An older chap has followed the fence up from the south east and clearly wants to chat; I'm a man that clearly does not want to chat. I answer his questions, am friendly but ask him none in return. He moves on and I'm grateful for the peace.

At 1410 I make the fourth summit of the day, Tarn Crag, which is adorned by another of the interesting pillars, standing proud over the valley below. Next to it is a peaty bog where sawn timber, likely from the structure, is being preserved as bog wood.

I make my way over to Grey Crag and turn north east to Harrop Pike. This is a remote corner and I touch the summit, cross the fence and admire the cairn - a stack sitting on a level rock.

I drop back drop and cross a ridge and descend to the bothy of Mosedale Cottage, taking in the views of my walk from earlier in the day. I find it a depressing place and all my thoughts of having, perhaps, found a bothy I'd like to revisit for a few days are ended.

At Swindale Head I get lost amongst the farm buildings, navigating myself amongst farm vehicles and gates a dog calls my presence. I'm glad to be back on the road for the plod back to the car. Arriving at 1640 I set off back, getting very lost on the myriad of lanes until I eventually find my way back to the main road.

Getting lost is the theme of my Saturday April 30th trip round to Kentmere to meet with Sue Oxley. We plan to do the Kentmere Fells, starting at 0800, and I just make the trip, which should have taken just half an hour, in just under an hour.

It's a warm day but a stiff breeze in the air has me setting off wearing my fleece and bandana wrapped about my neck. Sue and her dog, Molly, are in fine walking form and I'm glad for the pace as we shoot up Yoke. I think to myself 'This is great, we'll have these seven hills ticked off in no time.'

Towards the top of Yoke the blustery wind, under a perfect blue sky, turns to a persistent wind attack. We fight to stay on the path, Sue fights to keep one trekking pole on the ground as she clutches Molly's lead in the other hand. I brace myself with two trekking poles.

A man wheeling a mountain bike passes us and, after we pass over Ill Bell and Froswick, he struggles his way up Thornthwaite Crag as his mountain bike takes off as he holds it parallel to the ground.

I push on and catch up with Sue in the col before the ascent. We can barely stand up in the 75mph winds. Sue had previously mentioned a drop into the valley to the west. As I catch her I ask if she wants to take it.

"It's not going to get any better," I say.

"Are you sure that's okay?" she asks.

"Yes, this is supposed to be a holiday," I reply.

It's a long drop before the wind abates. We meet two older chaps, one with a blister. We sort him out with some Compeed I'm carrying. They want to press on for an ambitious day as Sue and I drop to the more settled confines of the valley floor.

We rest behind a wall to eat before the tough re-ascent, well south and lower than Yoke, to return to Kentmere.

May Day brings a rest day and a catch up with Kate Wilson, her family and friends. It's almost ten years (July 2001) since I met Kate when she came along as a 'friend of a friend' to climb my last Munro with me.

May 2nd and I'm back to the hills with the plan to do the Hartsop (or heart stop as I call it) horseshoe and two of the hills that were abandoned on Saturday.

The drive over 'The Struggle' from Ambelside to Hartsop village is stunning in the early morning light. The radio is playing out the news of the deaths of Henry Cooper and Osama Bin Laden. Again there's not a cloud in sight and when I've parked I'm glad for the cooling breeze but am concerned what it'll be like on the summits.

I make an early navigational error and find myself too far up Pasture Beck. I cut steeply, across rough ground, north west to regain the steep path up Hartsop Dodd. Wind catches me and I worry it's going to be like Saturday but as I reach the path it abates.

I find it a hard pull, resting often but I'm glad for the cooler conditions as, although I'm slow, I'm not ground to a virtual standstill. The sun is directly in my eyes which gives a morale boost by stopping me from directly viewing the ascent. To the north I'm able to view the Kirkstone Pass and Ulswater in the distance – a rich blue that snuggles into the lower contours of the hills.

At the summit I chat to a husband and wife pair who clearly are avid hill goers – as fellow Munroists we chat about mountains climbed and those to be climbed.

I let them set off first then follow on to Stony Cove Pike then north east, on steep path and scree, to the impressive summit beacon of Thornthwaite Crag. Here I am on the same ridge that Sue and I turned back from on Saturday. Again the wind hits hard and I duck below the wall to rest.

I break from the guidebook to take in the previously abandoned High Street. High Street is both the name of the summit and the Roman road that graces this ridge. It's an easy walk and the wind, although very blustery, is manageable. Like many other people out today I use the confines of the wall, leading to the summit, to eat my lunch. From here I branch to the furthest point in the day by dropping around 240 metres before the simple rise to Rough Crag. The drop is through a twisting entertaining ridge path with rock, grass, steps and fantastic views. To my right is the tarn of Blea Water, rippling in the wind. Ahead of me the waters of Haweswater Reservoir have dropped leaving a white ring that defines the shore like a contour on a map.



Haweswater Reservoir

I'm pleased to find the re-ascent to High Street easier than expected - the twisting ridge allowing me natural points at which to catch my breath. I head back to Thornthwaite Crag before taking the long north ridge spur to Gray Crag.

The wind is now bashing me hard but I notice as I drop below the High Street ridge line I am protected and the wind dies down.

It feels along way out before I reach the summit. I stand and survey the views, the walk of the morning and the steep descent ahead of me. I make my way down, trying to be gentle on my painful knees before arriving back at the car at 1610 – eight hours since I started.

Another Incomplete Day

Tuesday May 3rd and I wake early but very tired. I lie in for an hour then drag myself up, breakfast, pack lunch, pack gear and a drive round to Patterdale to take in Place Fell, High Rise and five other surrounding peaks. I'm following a walk described in the guidebook but elect to start it from Rooking instead of the recommended Martindale Church.

I start at 0825 following first a delightful walled track with sun glimmering through the trees then a river bank with birds chirping in the fine weather.

The ascent is long and tough as I begin the lower flanks of Place Fell. I have my usual thoughts of 'why am I doing this' and 'why not turn back if it hurts this much'. It's really tempting and I'm sure one day I will and that'll be it. But, for now, as ever I push on, stumble and rest, press on until I make the summit at 1020; just under two hours, a typical timing for my Lakeland ascents.

I survey the walk ahead, it looks massive. The walk over to Rest Dodd looks far enough but the swing round to Loadpot Hill looks a very long way.

It's a sharp drop then another climb until, at 1150, I get to very pretty Angle Tarn with its little islands, with trees away from the sheep, peninsulas and coves.

I drop to a slow pace to work my way up Rest Dodd. Slowly I place one foot in front of the other and only look at the ground on which I tread. I feel tired, slow and annoyed. I look back and see the snaking path that drops from Place Fell and pick out my route past Angle Tarn until my eyes run up to where I stand.

It's 1250 by the time I get to the summit where I eat my lunch before tackling a cruel drop and a 600ft ascent to Rampsgill Head. This takes an hour and as I survey the six mile round trip to Loadpot Head I realise that it and Wether Hill will have to be for another day. I find relief with that decision made and it makes the closer summits of Kidsty Pike (at 1400) and High Raise more achievable. Pressing on beyond would take me into a late evening to finish and spoil any enjoyment – ten years ago I'd have done it.

At High Raise I hear the distant voices of other hill going folk being carried by the wind. I make out the odd word, the odd phrase but seldom does a conversation hold across the open ground.

It's a route march back, mainly descent but the odd rise in the path has my legs complaining. I pass Angle Tarn at 1510 where Canada Geese protest my intrusion as they swim across the tarn. From there I take the direct paths to Patterdale with my chatterbox mind annoying me about every topic it can think of. It's about 1730 when I wearily reach the car, dump my pack and head to the local Inn for food and orange juice.

Finishing off a Walk

I wake early on May 4th feeling very tired and it's 1000 before I'm navigating the car through the muddle of single track roads and farm tracks to Hallow Bank, north east of Kentmere. My plan is to finish the final two of the horseshoe that Sue Oxley and I tackled, and were driven off by the high winds, on Saturday.

I make steady progress until just after 1100 I sink into the grass and survey the view below. The flatlands of the valley floors, either side of the ridge, are a rich green of walled fields; a wall runs the line of the ridge before me like a resin beaded trouser crease. The mountains rise either side of the fields, the lush green merging into army camouflage before rocky outcrops steer the eye to their ridges and summits. In the distance is the sea, glimmering through the light haze of a lovely spring day.

I pass the summit cairn and trig point of Kentmere Pike before the easy ridge walk out to Harter Fell, arriving at 1215. I sit with my back to the iron fence post spiked summit cairn and survey the vista before me – the familiar Haweswater Reservoir glimmering and High Street (with the dots of moving walkers) to my left. I rest until my back feels uncomfortable against the rocks, I say hello to a few passing walkers then set off back to my car, returning at 1400.

The Dog and the Chimney

The weather forecast proves correct and the end of the unprecedented sunny, dry weather is at an end. I fancy taking in the Helvellyn circuit which includes the notorious Striding Edge.

I set off, from Patterdale, at 0820 with an overcast sky, a few dots of rain in the air, and the welcome result of only having to carry one litre of water instead of the two required for hot weather. The first peak is Birkhouse Moor and I miss the track and, after inspecting the map, realise I can keep on this track and break from it at 490m back onto the one I wanted. By 510m I've not found the branching path, look back and see it. I descend, picking up the right path, cross a wall which I follow to near the summit. I branch off to visit the non-summit cairn before backtracking and crossing over the real summit.

I survey the bowl around which the summits of Striding Edge and Helvellyn sit. Before me sits the ridge that connects Striding Edge to Helvellyn; a series of humpbacks with, reportedly, steep drops to either side. I make my way up, pack away my trekking poles, and elect to take the easier path to the right of the ridge. However, curiosity gets the better of me and part way through I get onto the ridge. It is exposed but nothing like what I've experienced in Scotland.

There are two separate couples and a middle aged lady and her student aged son also on the ridge. We pass each other, they re-pass as we call encouragement and find a comradeship in the shared objective. The final part, before the steep scramble to the summit, requires the descent of a chimney. I lower myself down and try and give guidance to a couple.

"We've got two dogs with us," they say. I'd not noticed this before.

"Can I help?" I ask (comradeship feeling rather high).

"Yes, can you take one?"

So I take my pack off and clamber half way up the chimney. I'm then passed Lotte, a small cute wee thing who is lowered towards me with her four paws dangling below her and a look of sheer terror in her small black eyes. I take her close to my chest, offer words of comfort, stroke her as I make my way down to safe ground. She struggles a little and I hush her reassurances as I rub her back.

On safe ground I make a fuss of her before returning for the second dog. By now the lady of the partnership is able to pass her man and the other dog is lowered to her, saving me from a repeat experience of things being a 'little hairy' on the ridge.

The next section is a steep scramble to the summit of Helvellyn. A multitude of paths and scree have been created and the group of us work our way up taking it easy not to dislodge anything. I take it in short bursts, resting often. Lotte takes it gingerly, a couple of times refusing her owner's preferred route and instead making her way across to me.

"She's made a friend," laughs her owners.

I follow the woman with her son, she complains that all the bending means her bottom is sticking out. Fine by me I can assure you.

Finally we meet the summit ridge, its shelter, memorials, cairn and a cold, chill biting wind. It's noon, my second visit and I sit in the windbreak shelter and eat my lunch before the easy walks to the plateau of Nethermost Pike and Dollywaggon Pike. I can't get one of my trekking poles to re-engage, the shaft turns endlessly with nothing to bite against. It's a considerable drop and a demoralising re-ascent to take in Seat Sandal and my knees complain with just the one pole to support them. I'm now overlooking Grisedale Tarn and study the map hard to ensure that I don't accidentally climb Fairfield. This is a 2000ft peak but is included in another round. The Nuttall's guidebook does allocate the peaks into well thought out day walks but it means that, when in the vicinity of other peaks, not to be tempted by them.

I make the drop to just above the tarn before the path that takes a glancing blow up the side of St Sunday Crag. I rest in a hollow, surveying what I've done and keeping out the wind. I manage to get the second trekking pole to bite so I can extend and lock it. I now make better progress across the series of false summits to make the top of St Sunday Crag.

I lose height again before the trek across Birks and a sharp drop, in persistent drizzle, back to Patterdale. At 1710 I'm sat in my car as the rains close in.

Friday dawns with persistent rain so I bring my walking holiday to an end and make use of the day updating my diaries, washing and taking it easy before the drive back on the Saturday.

Over The Hill Club AGM Weekend

With the annual Over The Hill Club AGM approaching, the traditional email from Big John Hutchison arrives with details of the club walk for Saturday November 19th. I reach for my Nuttall's guide to the mountains of England; thumb the pages in the proximity of the walk and see what else I can take in.

Thursday 17th I drop a friend in Manchester for the weekend and seek out the Travel Lodge at Kendal. I love its anonymity, nobody I've never met before to make polite conversation with, no problem parking and no fuss about the room. I spread my kit out, load my pack for tomorrow including one of the three packed lunches I'd prepared for the weekend, lie on the bed, enjoy the memories of egg and chips at an M6 service station and click on the TV.

Having managed without a telly for the last year this feels like a new experience; TV, for me, now has been relegated to Crimewatch and Formula 1 on iPlayer. I flick up to the radio channels. It's grim, no Radio 4 and I begin to wonder if I fall

into the target market for this establishment. I flick around looking for something that is not pop culture, dodgy or sensationalist news. I finally plump for an ancient repeat of 'On The Buses'. Memories of the 1970s come flooding back. Did we really find this funny? Still it was on ITV in its heyday and I recall my mother's shock when, returning from babysitting for a neighbour, she announced she'd discovered the most dreadful piece of information about them – the ITV button was pressed in on their TV set. Believe me, that kept neighbourhood tittle-tattle going for quite awhile; what went on behind the net curtains of 1970s suburbia was nobody's business.

The Friday dawns and I make a slow start. Breakfast is peanuts and rice bread, the drink is my own Rooibos and I again wonder if I fall in the category of the Travel Lodge target market; they clearly think I do judging by the succession of emails they send throughout the year offering cheap weekend breaks.

I head for Outhgill to take in the four fells that lie to its east. Navigation proves a problem before I even get out of the car. My cunning plan, of locating the nearest post code and using my Sat Nav to get me there, is a dismal failure as I end up at some hotel to the north. I use cunning and stealth and drive at five miles per hour, annoying everybody behind me, until I spot Outhgill. In true determined tradition I try to drive as far as I can up the hill I'm about to climb. This peters out after two hundred yards at a narrow dead end and farm gate. Now farm gates don't move, narrow lanes don't get wider and ditches do not suddenly fill themselves in. And steep gradients are not for reversing down. I ponder my stupidity while holding the handbrake with all my might. To my left is a bungalow with a large gravel frontage and a big shiny RAC van. I imagine the conversation (no really, I do imagine this):

"Hello RAC?"

"I'm stuck."

"Where are you?"

"Erm well."

"Do you have a post code, sir?"

"Well yes, but well no, well not exactly."

"Do you have a post code yes or no?"

"No," and I hang up, knock the bungalow's door, explain I am a member, explain my predicament and the RAC man, in true sarcastic tones, agrees that I truly am a member.

I give up on the idea and gingerly edge the car around with as much anonymity that a noisy power steering pump will allow.

I roll the car down to the village, park on a little green area, swing the pack through my arms, extend the trekking poles and ascend the track I'd just rolled down. I cross open ground, follow a stream before the steep terrain through Mallerstang Edge, through boggy ground to the highest summit of the day, High Seat.

It's 1135 and I survey the view – absolutely bugger all; the mist is down, good and thick.

I close navigate to Archy Styrigg, making use of the GPS to avoid following a path that descends the mountain. It's a windswept plateau which the wind is still busy sweeping. I drop my pack to rest at its summit, munch on some peanuts and yelp as I swing the pack back onto my shoulders; a trapped nerve in my upper left arm is the new ailment of middle-age. It recently gave me maximum

embarrassment when I had to ask my eldest friend, at the age of 78, to help me on with my coat.

I follow fences, bogs, bits of cairns across Hugh Seat to Little Fell, arriving at 1330. I am dry but my feet are soaked so, coupled with not wishing to still be high at dusk, the lofty ideas of retracing my route are abandoned. I take the quickest route off the mountains and pick up the B road for a lengthy, boring walk back to Outhgill.

At 1545 I'm driving to Dufton, it takes about an hour but I take considerably longer with a spot of navigation problems. It's a beautiful village with the Youth Hostel bordering the upper slope of the village green and an idyllic pub, with farm buildings behind, adorning the lower slope.

I make my way to the village hall and meet with friends from the club, make my way back, check in and am pleased to be put in a room with just two others. I can start to put Derewentwater Youth Hostel, with its infamous, spacious and snorer ridden Room 1 behind me.

Supper is served in the Youth Hostel, very tasty and I elect not to attend the annual club slide show and make my way to bed. I drift off and barely hear Sam Hackett and Dave Handley come in to bed. Until the snoring starts that is. But, now realising I snore too, I'm more understanding, switch my radio on and put in the ear pieces. When the snoring outdoes the radio I turn up the volume, if the volume outdoes my ability to sleep I turn it down until the point at which the snoring bothers me.

In the early hours I roll over, the radio comes adrift from the ear piece lead; falls down the gap between the bed and wall and clobbers Sam in the bunk below. I peer over the edge and an arm hands the radio back.

The morning comes and with it the hostel breakfast. There is confusion after the round of juice, cereal and fruit. Is there a cooked breakfast? Somebody is sent to investigate. All doors are locked and we wonder how long we should remain in the dining area with eyes full of hope.

Watches are inspected, stomachs rumble and eyes gaze to the day outside. The odd non-resident club member can be seen in the car park, nobody wants to miss a cooked breakfast; nobody wants to look a fool. Our patience is rewarded with the clanking wheels of a mobile cafeteria. The smells waft our way, it's a full-English and in true English style nobody wants to be first in the queue. Apart from me whose stomach overrides all social graces.

The food is lovely, so much so I, encouraged by fellow diners, and feeling a bit shy, in true Olive Twist fashion ask for some more. My tail drops between my legs as the server thinks not everybody is down yet. I return to the table, plate empty and sit it out. I am rewarded when I'm called across for seconds.

Dave Skipp gives a few of us a lift round to Kirkland where a party of twenty four, in various cars, gather for the walk up Cross Fell. I start, at 1000, with Big John and Sue Oxley, keep their pace for about forty-five minutes before dropping successively back until I'm walking and chatting with those at the rear.

The sky is a rich winter blue and the hills are their greens, greys and russet browns. The path and its crocodile of walkers winds its way into the mist and crosses stone flagged paths and boggy ground. I sink below my right knee in bog and, instinctively, throw my left knee to the ground to protect myself which in

turn flicks a large lump of mud into my left eye. I extract myself as the creature from the bog. Immediate concern from my fellow walkers switches quickly to gentle mickey taking.

A boulder field takes us to the summit of Cross Fell, we pause at its windbreak shelter and trig point. I, for some reason that completely baffles me, am entrusted with taking the compass bearing to pick up the Pennine Way track to Little Dun Fell. In the distance Great Dun Fell, with its bizarre arrangement of communications equipment, is literally topped by the most enormous looking golf ball.

The path is well defined, well made and we make Great Dun Fell in steady time. With our backs to its barbed wire fences, and our eyes from its view, we look into the valley below.

A short excursion onto its newly metalled access road takes us to the track leading up Knock Fell. By now my legs are tired and I feel chilled in the winter air. The ascent is easy and we gather at the summit for a group photo.



On Knock Fell. I'm in the bright red jacket with poles. Note the golf ball on top of Great Dun Fell in the distance. (Photo John Hutchison)

It's now a long walk back to the Youth Hostel, descending amongst streams, rocks and gullies. It's easier to chat without gasping for the air of ascent. Years are caught up with; plans for 2012 discussed and the evening meal looked forward to.

We cross through a particularly boggy farmyard where we cling to its outer reaches to avoid the preverbal mess that cows make. Our boots and shoes are covered in it and we employ ingenious counter methods in long grass, puddles and shallow streams to rid ourselves.

We get into Dufton at 1630, dusk has descended. Villagers walk their dogs for the final stroll of the day; the lights of the pub and hostel beckon us through our final few hundred yards.

I shower and relax in the lounge. I chat to fellow club members as Sam Hackett limps in in a sorry condition. He's strained his knee and ankle on a solo walk in

the hills. He starts to slip into some form of shock; an ambulance is called, its blue light flashes ghostly shadows through the glass frontage of the hostel. He's taken off amongst concerned looks of his compatriots.

The evening meal is a grand affair, organised, cooked and prepared by Ann and Alvar Thorn. They sacrificed a day in the hills for us and it was an amazing evening.

Tiredness prevents me from the later revelries and I slip out of the classic village hall into the night air of Dufton. There's a good fire raging behind the pub. I think it's a bit late for bonfire night but this is up north, clearly they do things differently here. As I approach I start to think that it's a bit ambitious for a Guy Fawkes Night affair. And all the crackling, fizzing and popping and aren't those flames higher than the pub? I remember the farm buildings behind the pub and the old farmers saying of "Red sky at night, barns on fire."

Indeed it is; a group of villagers and I gather. The fire brigade have been called and we can hear distant sirens as the engines steer their way across the twisting and undulating roads.

Discussions are had about where the farmer might be. Cows bellow in distress as the wind steers the flames in a rotating dance above the roof of the pub.

We stay and watch until the brigade arrives. It's a big job, they empty one tender; another arrives as the first shoots off to the nearest hydrant.

Come morning the fire is still smouldering, the brigade are still in attendance and the talk over breakfast is of nothing else as I slip myself an extra egg and veggie sausage.

My trip home is interrupted by a walk up Great Knoutberry Hill where, after emptying my trail shoes of yesterday's mud and, through thick fog, following an easy walk from my car, I'm treated to a temperature inversion and fantastic views.



View from Great Knoutberry Hill

Totals to date: 137 out of 254

2012

It's Sunday April 1st and I'm laid up in a holiday cottage in Cockermouth with the tail end of a cold. It'd dragged on for nearly two weeks with flu like symptoms, sciatica, a sore throat and a heavily congested nose. The drive up yesterday flicks into my mind as three distinct phases. I remember setting off, I remember sleeping at a service station for a couple of hours and I remember turning off the M6 at Penrith. But that's about it. I was glad to arrive and the cottage is lovely, full of old world knickknacks, a steep staircase, thick walls and a DVD player – I've come prepared with a stack of DVDs from my "to be watched" pile.

April 2nd and I buck myself up, cold or no cold the fells await. I take the short journey through Lamplugh and I pull up at the deserted car park at Ennerdale Water. I check the guidebook, back track quarter of a mile and park. I set off, just before 0900, up the steep path which leads to Great Borne. My dubious navigation soon has me going through an amicable divorce with the guidebook as I cut up too soon through a shingle clad face.

The fine drizzle of the start clears up; woodpeckers drill into the nearby forest as other birds tweet and call. As I leave the shingle I slip and put my right hand down to steady myself, plumb into a gorse bush. I pull it back, yelp and extract the spines from the side of my nails and watch the blood erupt in minute mole hills. It stings, irritates and I cuss.

I feel tired and rest often as I skirt my way around and look down to the path that I should be on. As the slope gets steeper I'm down to walking a few paces between rests which, coupled with feelings of being unwell and laziness, makes for a slow ascent onto the broad ridge. Here the mist is clagged in as I make the

silent, rough walk to the stone trig point of Great Borne. At two and a half hours I realise my lofty ideas of anything beyond Starling Dodd need to be curtailed.

Starling Dodd in itself looks a beast but by the time I'd dropped and started the ascent it becomes manageable. From its summit I cut east towards Little Dodd but head south too soon and hit Ennerdale Forest where a beck breaks its boundaries. I traverse east to the forest corner then head south to pick up the forestry tracks and the muscle sapping walk back to my car, arriving at 1500.

I return to the cottage, accessed through an alleyway, cloaked in double black doors and wide enough for a horse and cart. Mr Snowden, the owner, is chopping wood and I stop for a chat. The cottage dates from the 1820s, he shows me how far the river rose in 2009, how close the cottage came to being flooded. It's a mix of buildings that tower about the alleyway, once a hotel and now divided up.

I wake in the early hours, my right hand throbs and I turn on the light. I count over fifty punctures from the gorse bush and resist the temptation to scratch it to oblivion. I pick up the book I'm reading, one from the many that reside in every nook and cranny of the cottage. It's a return to my childhood, "Five Go Adventuring Again." The antics of Julian, Dick, George, Anne and of course Timmy the dog. I read them all when I was young and this is a welcome return. Alas I'm a stickler for continuity and, as a young child, I'd lain out my entire collection and, by taking into account Christmas, Easter and summer holidays, I'd calculated that, by the time of their last adventure, Julian would have been twenty-nine and Timmy would have to have been stuffed and towed around on wheels.

The book was written in innocent times, their sinister tutor's only claim to such a character flaw appears to be his beard (I must shave soon) and there are lashings of the word "queer" along with "spanking" and the phrase "I'll be bound". I've not yet reached any further references to Uncle Quentin's raving homosexuality (as observed by the Comic Strip's 'Five Go Mad In Dorset') but there's time. Words clearly meant different things back in the 1930s and 1940s and people took them at face value – well Neville Chamberlain certainly did.

I wonder if Enid Blyton felt constrained by her times or whether her mind was simply pure. In the scene where Timmy the dog is hidden under the table, away from the evil tutor, Mr Roland, the pooch gives his presence away by sighing and scratching. Each time the children hide the noise by sighing and scratching themselves. Now my experience of dogs is they give their presence away by means of foul smells, the ones where concern is expressed for the ability of the wallpaper to remain bonded to the walls and people have to leave the room. But old Enid missed that one.

I wake again, rain is ramming against the roof, I don't feel that fit and I elect for a rest day.

Steve Goes Adventuring Again

Wednesday the 4th brings a cold start with the short walk, from cottage to car, interspersed with passing cars that have clearly been de-iced. I feel as if I'm in for a cold day and, knowing post cold I'm far from fit, I have broken one of the suggested routes, from the Nuttall's guide, into three. My starting point is the top of the Honister Pass a few miles beyond Buttermere.

As I wind the car down the B roads I notice the temperature is down to 2 degrees. I imagine it being subzero at the top of the pass and look forward to

adding that as an act of hardship to my write up. A kilometre short of the top of the pass the weather gods have a surprise in store. On a steep sheltered section, fortunately devoid of an open gully to slide into, my car loses traction, the wheels spin and I have this strange sensation of going backwards. I pull up the handbrake, no use for my car is hooked on returning from whence it came.

I manage to hold it on the footbrake but this is not a satisfactory state of affairs for any action requires one to remove ones foot. Going forward is not an option and the elements, coupled with gravity, are quite keen on a reverse descent.

I select reverse, for some semblance of control, and ease myself back down to a point where the handbrake will hold. I take another go at it and keep to the right of the road. No joy. I get the owners manual out and read up on the mysterious ESP button on the dashboard. I can't make sense of it but give it a try and keep to the left; again no joy. There's nowhere to turn and I gingerly reverse for about a quarter of a mile, my neck aching and the car weaving as I fail to find a rhythm.

Another black golf appears behind me, takes one look at my situation and starts to reverse. Fortunately I see him finding a turning place which I then use.

I catch up with them at a small parking place and they ask me how bad it is. I point out the similarities between our vehicles and described the ice encrusted road.

I check my map for alternative walks and choose the four tops to the southwest of Buttermere. I park at Gatesgarth, pay the £3 fee and set off a little after 0930.

I'm slow, it's cold and, at this level, there's a fair wind. I meet a group descending and ask what the wind is like on top.

"Manageable," she says, "but you'll need to cling onto somebody."

"Unfortunately I'm walking alone," I add.

"There's people behind you," she says.

"Do you think I should introduce myself," I ask. The conversation is getting a little weird so I press on.

The path takes me east of High Crag before cutting up to the ridge. I meet the fellow golf driver, and his companion, heading back down.

"Too windy," they say.

This puts me in a dilemma. After all they'd taken my advice on the Honister Impassable and now I'm set to ignore theirs. You can tell a man that something is hot but it's not until he's scolded his own fingers will he let the subject rest. Also I'm aware of my middle-age. Some men fear losing their hair, some their virility for me I fear losing my tenacity. I'm not one to give up through discomfort so I continue on and meet the main ridge. The wind blasts me and I have to brace myself to drop away from its icy fingers.

On a nice day the pull up to the summit would be rather lovely. Indeed today is blue sky but cold and very windy. A young Swedish woman passes me and we exchange commiserations about the weather as I keep my mind on my tenacity.

The top of High Crag is a flat plateau and my face is pummelled by the wind. I must look like one of those TV presenters that have a go in a wind tunnel, my mouth is forced open and I feel my left cheek vibrating. The wind sucks mucus from my nose and I consider sending the idea to Mr Dyson as a revolutionary new

handkerchief. I cling my map to my chest and make for the highpoint of the day, High Stile at 806m. There's a series of cairns and I tag them all.

I drop a little, things ease and I get chatting to a couple with their dog. I ask if he's used to the mountains.

"That's not our dog," says the lady half of the couple, "he's been following us from Buttermere." I wonder if it's a seventy five year old Timmy the dog having a last sniff around.

I drop and ascend Red Pike where the wind is waiting again and I have trouble making it to the summit as the wind is hell bent on batting me away at each attempt. I make it and retreat and duck down below some rocks for shelter. I take a compass bearing for the route down. Unfortunately into the wind again, this time so fierce that the neck piece of my jacket is rammed with such strength into my mouth that my head tips back. I try to straighten my neck but there's no go, the mouth piece of my jacket feels like a nightclub bouncer has his hand on my face and is pushing me backwards. My neck felt the strain in the long reverse down the Honister Pass, now it's straining to even keep my head tilted back.

I rapidly descend on a rough red eroded path. I keep moving until the wind is manageable and I can get my neck straight. The final summit, Dodd, is a gentle little bump at the end of the ridge spur. I take in the views, the northern flanks of High Stile are well defended and all the peaks look to have been dusted in chalk.

From Dodd there's a good path which takes me to Buttermere where a shoreline path has me passing families out for a gentle stroll. I return to the car at 1530.

Thursday April 5th brings clear skies and a car to be de-iced. Not wishing to chance the Honister Pass again I elect for the hour long trip round to Wasdale Head to tackle Kirk Fell, its east top and Looking Stead. My route is 'off guidebook' as I've previously done Great Gable and Looking Stead, taken from the Pillar round, means I can leave Pillar (and its infamous rock) to a day in itself with the rest of its round, above Mosedale, for another day too.



Kirk Fell

I start walking a little after 1005, get some guidance from a farmer to the start of the route and set forth for the steep south westerly face. I'm very slow but the weather is warm and I walk minus a hat to allow the tan to form on my (recently shaven) head. When I say 'recently shaven' I refer to a number two cut to tidy up my balding locks. I'm just concentrating on the tenacity, though I have to admit that since this session on the hairdresser's razor I note I'm soliciting a few more looks from women. Probably pity.

An hour and half into the walk there's a brief levelling of the terrain where I take one of my many rests. The lake, below Wasdale Head, glistens a rich blue, the sky is faultless and the sea shimmers in the distance.

Three hours in I meet a man descending. We stop for a chat; he'd passed me on the way up and I now set out at 1140. It hits home how slow I am, he'd been up and back in over an hour and a half less than it's taken me so far. To make matters worse he tells me this is the day of his retirement (he's a National Parks employee). At least he did not have a beard; otherwise I'd have marked him down as being a trifle sinister.

The going becomes a mixture of scree and boulder fields. I tread carefully as many a rock tips as I put my weight on it. My calf muscles ache and I can walk for no more than a few seconds between rests.

I make the summit at 1340 at a poor ascent rate of 225m per hour. There are some comforting wind shelters where I eat and take compass bearings to the east top and Looking Stead. Great Gable stands as a proud edifice amongst its neighbours and the blue sky. Ravens soar, catching the thermals they glide majestically with no visible effort.



Great Gable

The east top is an easy stroll before the steep north westerly descent. I pick my way amongst scree and grass, cross a stream of ice riddled boulders before I start to ascend to Looking Stead. I do a little better, rest not so often and arrive at 1540. From here I make it back to the car at a little after 1700.

I arrive back at the cottage after 1800 and it feels a long wait for food if I put a jacket spud in the oven. I'd spotted a Chinese takeaway in town so I wander down to have a look at their menu. Mushroom foo yung and chips looks good. It arrives quickly and not bad at £5.80.

Back at the cottage my hopes of a yummy meal are dashed, the mushroom foo yung has no mushrooms and instead various bits of meat. I recognise prawns but am unsure of what the grey and white meat might be. I feel too tired to go back so pick the meat out but I can't escape the taste of the tainted meal. I retire to bed with aching calf muscles and a tummy that feels as if it would like to file a massive complaint.

I wake at 0600, I feel okay but the house stinks of the meat. I drink some water, fall back to sleep and wake at 0800 with calf muscles that have pulled tight. I hobble to the bathroom then downstairs to breakfast and pack for the day.

The weather is warmer and I give the Honister Pass another try. This time it's really easy and I discover just how close to the summit I was when I had my adventures of the other day.

The car park at the top has a little surprise for me - £5.90 to park for the day. That's more than a dodgy Chinese takeaway. I pay, I grumble, I pack and I walk.

It's 1000 and I pass the Honister Mine visitor centre before ascending the mine tracks, passing earth movers and diggers, all silent on the Good Friday.

Cloud is clagged in and there's drizzle in the air but the track is an excellent gradient and when I leave it the terrain remains manageable for my lungs. I don't have to rest and make Honister Crag then Fleetwith Pike in just an hour and a quarter. My early timing has me surveying the map. Previously I'd thought that to do Grey Knotts and Brandreth would require a drop back to the car. Now the obvious strikes me, I can maintain much of the height by cutting across open ground. I worry about my aging mind by not having thought of that sooner.

I cut down, cross rough ground before picking up a path that heads directly south. In mist and drizzle I stop and check my compass bearing, it disagrees with what I think is Brandreth and, assuming there's no iron in the rock I adopt the old adage that the compass never lies. So into the mist I head and reach the flat topped Brandreth at 1230 then take a bearing to Grey Knotts where I climb every tor and tag every cairn to ensure I have bagged it.

The rain picks up and I take the, hard on my calf muscles, descent and am glad when the visitor centre comes into view through the mist. I fancy lunch but there's nothing I can eat (not even a dodgy Chinese) so I get back to the car at 1345 and tuck into my packed lunch.

I'd planned Saturday April 7th as a rest day but with a gloomy weather forecast for Sunday onwards I decide to, despite my very taut calf muscles, to walk today. I head towards Buttermere with a plan to do half of the Grasmoor round, splitting the ambitions of the guidebook into two.

At Buttermere I'm faced with parking charges again. I previously paid £3 at Gatesgarth, £5.90 at Honister and today's request is for a whopping £6.20. I'd want mushrooms for that I can tell you. I turn back and park, for free, a shade north of Rannerdale.

It's 0900 and I set off and survey the steep scree slopes of Grasmoor. It's tough going though I sense I'm quicker than yesterday. I pass across greenery before hauling myself into a cauldron of red heather, rock and scree. From here on my pace is awful. The scree gives way with each step and the heather drags at my heels until I'm pausing at every few steps.



Looking down the scree and boulder field on the way up Grasmoor

At 1030, having covered 400m of ascent, I take a long rest. I look back, my car is visible as a dot and the scree and boulder field falls away towards it. A couple with a dog, that passed me earlier, are off to my left. Their voices carry and it sounds as if their path is no easier than mine.

At around 1150, and at 800m altitude, with the couple and their dog well out of sight, it levels out into swirling cloud. The distant views back to Crummock Water and Buttermere highlight how far I've come as I catch my breath; allow my heart to stop racking and my calf muscles to relax.

I make the summit shelter of Grasmoor at 1210, the cloud is moving around giving a moving window onto the scenery below. Many people are around, some pass, some settle to eat, some say hello, some say goodbye, some say nothing.

I take a compass bearing to Wandope, it's not where I expect it to be. I double check, trust the compass and set off. I soon face Crag Hill, previously bagged and bear right to the easy slopes of Wandope. The morning exertion now feels worthwhile as the terrain on this high level plateau is straightforward. I have a cut off point for a level of gradient where I can take no more than a few paces between rests. On easier gradients I can walk and breathe without pause.

There's a sheer drop off from Wandope, certainly not a place to wander aimlessly in thick mist. I take another bearing to Whiteless Pike. The guidebook says the meaning of its name is unknown. Unless, of course, the ancients, found it so bland that they decided to name it after an attribute that it did not have. Or perhaps, in this mountainous region, all possible names had been used up and a new scheme was started to use non-relevant names and tack a 'less' on the end. Its subsidiary spur is called Whiteless Breast which gives me a chuckle or two.

I look back to a steep scree face to the south of Grasmoor. Grass dons its summit like a green cloth laid across a head with the sheer slopes able to hold only the grey shingle.

The cloud now lifts and as I head for Whiteless Pike I'm treated to lovely views of Crummock water and Buttermere. These hold as I pass over Whiteless Pike, navigate down towards its 'breast' and swing northwest back to my car, arriving at 1500.

Having taken Easter Sunday as a rest day, to give my calf muscles a chance to relax, my next venture is Easter Monday. Amidst rain and a bad forecast I take the short trip to Hopebeck and seek out the minor road to pick up the track that runs to the east of Swinside to Hopegill Head. Passing through two sets of gates, requiring stopping, opening, pulling forwards then shutting, I then fail to find the said track. I turnaround, with squeaking windscreen wipers and noisy power steering, and pass back through both sets of gates before noticing, on the map, a path between the two gates. So back through the first set of gates I go, I find a place to pull off the road and don my full waterproofs.

The rain pummelling the roof and the warm cab does nothing to urge me out of the car. But around 1000 I summon the enthusiasm and set out across a splashy field and pick my way round to the path that leads up the stream of Hope Gill. Initially I make good progress but soon the gradient tussles with my asthma and I settle back into the traditional rest per minute as I make slow progress.

Around noon, with gloves ringing and trail shoes feeling the weight of the water, I hit a path that passes east west. I check my GPS and work out I'm just north of Hopegill Head. I take a bearing for Ladyside Pike but am unsure that I'm on the right path until, that is, I notice I've marked it 300m too far to the east on my map. With bearing corrected I walk out to it, backtrack and make my way up the ridges of Hopegill Head. Given the cloud clagged conditions I take a bearing to Sand Hill and head off. I see another walker, also in a red jacket. We stop for a quick chat and discuss nothing but the weather.

The rain is still tapping its fingers on my hood as I reach Sand Hill and retreat to Hopegill Head before the ridge walk, with steep drops to my left, towards Whiteside East Top and Whiteside. At nearly 2KM it feels a long walk across the blustery ridge before I can cut north and traverse around to pick up a path below the southern flank of Dodd. From here I spot my car and make a welcome walk back, arriving at 1430 where I unburden myself of dripping pack and jacket before a final pass through the gates.

I wake on Tuesday the 10th and decide it's not a day for the hills. I feel tired, the weather forecast is poor and rain is drumming on the roof of the cottage. I do a few chores during the day, such as shaving off the sinister looking beard and extracting gorse thorns from my right hand.

On the 11th I wake at 0600, take a couple of puffs of my Salamol inhaler and, with a weather forecast of sunshine and showers, lever myself out of bed, breakfast and pack.

I park at Scales, on the A66 east of Keswick, and set off at 0805. Within a few seconds I realise I've left my trekking poles in the car and, with keys in my backpack, decide to do without them for a day. Two minutes later, after a short uphill section, I'm heading back to the car for them.

I get going for proper at 0810 and, as per usual, there are more paths than the guidebook, or map, detail so I close navigate, for what the guidebook describes as a 'good mile' that takes me 50 minutes. I peer at the map, trying to measure the distance but, like my hair, my eyesight is starting to go. But I reckon on it being considerably longer than a mile.

I strike north up Hall's Fell, leaving the barking Blencathra hunting dogs behind, and make good pace. In twenty four minutes I rest and look back. The A66 rumbles on below, the hills opposite have their heads in the clouds and there's an odd spot of rain in the air.

The upper reaches are a cat's spine of exposed rock, which in drizzle and settled snow, make for some entertaining moments. It becomes a scramble (employing both hands) and one section is across an exposed gully where I have to kick into the snow and take great care while holding my nerve.

The summit has the remains of a trig point, blustery wind and I reckon I've ascended at around 330m per hour – a great improvement on the 225m per hour that I recorded earlier on this trip.

There's a few people to say hello to (or 'How Do' as the local phrase goes) as I head, across patchy snow, from Blencathra to Gategill Fell Top.



Gategill Fell Top

It's then a rough stroll out to Atkinson Pike then beyond towards Bowscale Fell. By now I'm feeling hungry, tired and cold but push on to Bowscale Fell where, at 1230, I settle down, amongst a hail storm blowing in, to munch through a cold jacket potato and a piece of cheese.

The hail gets worse as I work my way back then strike south east, alongside sheer cliffs, to Bannerdale Craggs. I tag the summit then backtrack, with the hail now directly in my face, to pick up the long path back to Scales. I arrive at 1425, very pleased with my pace.

Having gone to bed with a bad back I wake with a sore throat. Fortunately, for such an event, I have the ingredients for my favourite concoction with me – cyder vinegar and honey. I swear by it - usually when I take the first sip.

I make the drive round to Mosedale then the delightful minor road that runs alongside the River Caldew which glints in the morning sun as its waters tumble over the rocks of the riverbed. I park where the road peters out at the Cumbria Way and it's 0820 as I start the round of seven hills to the north of yesterday's walk.

I find it tough going, I feel tired and, although I took my inhaler early, I'm slow. I think the long walk in yesterday, before the ascent, is perhaps what opened up my airways. It's something I've noticed before and, perhaps, explains why for other walks my afternoon pace always feels better than my morning's.

At 0915 I rest, boiling in my thermal base layer, fleece and jacket. I survey back to the fells of yesterday, their tops dancing with the cloud that steams from their summits. Carrock Fell, the first peak of today, looks a daunting distant but I arrive at 0952 where I remove my middle layer, the fleece. I check my watch altimeter – 652m, the map says 661m. I check the GPS altimeter and it reckons on the number of the beast - 666m.

There's a fort marked on the map but to my eye I see no evidence. I head west, crossing Milton Hill then, as I meet a ridge, head north east for High Pike, arriving at 1052. There's a cairn, a trig point (with a range finder mounted on its surface) and a slate seat in memorial of sixteen year-old Mick Lewis who lost his life on 8th May 1944.

I sit for ten minutes and take advantage of the tops being out of the cloud and set my compass for each in turn so I can spy them on their horizons. One, Knott, I am unsure of and murmur to myself "That's probably Knott" before realising that alone the joke is lost.

I head south west to the third peak, Hare Stones. I cut off the path a bit early for it and, given its plateau like summit, have to hunt around for the summit. I head west, drop some height, and look back to spy the highest point. It's a few stones as I check the time, 1120, altimeters and GPS to confirm I have truly found it.

I reach Great Linghy Hill at 1137, deviating from the recommended route which crosses a rather boggy stream. Instead I keep to a path for as long as I could before striking north east to find the summit.

I now head for Knott but first rest at the 609m top, which at 1998ft just misses out on being classified as a 2000ft summit.

Towards Knott I pass a confluence of dramatic gullies which run the water north off the hills before the rather peaty and boggy early slopes of Knott.

At 1253, in beautiful sunshine, I make the summit. The views are superb, birds chirp and the mountains are elegant in the afternoon light and the shadows of the clouds. I look out towards the sea, windfarms dot the view and a large mast sits tall inland.

At 1347, feeling drained, I take in the two summit bumps, both marked by rocks, of Little Calva. I check my altimeter, its spot on and has been all day. This implies the weather is settled, over the previous few days it could vary by up to 20m per summit. As soon as I realise this the wind picks up and there's spots of rain in the air.

The second summit bump involves straddling over a fence which also takes me around to the start of the sharp pull up Great Calva. I find this tough going; I've hit a wall with my energy reserves. I make the summit at 1415 and feel shaky with tiredness.

I head to the end of the fence then take the steep south east path back to meet the Cumbria Way. As I do so a RAF propeller trainer plane roars up the valley with its familiar fluttering piston engine.

The Cumbria Way is a welcome reunion as I take its easy footings back to the car, arriving 1535.

Friday April 13th dawns bright on my last day of this holiday. I plan to do Wether Hill and Loadpot Hill, two that I missed out on last year.

The sun smacks my eyes as I take the A66, passing the sign for Penruddock (reminding me of the film, 'The Thirty Nine Steps' where Robert Donat tells Madeleine Carroll of his murderous Great Uncle Penruddock) before taking a network of minor roads, and a few hairpins, before parking at The Old Church of St Martin.

It's a fine church, hall shaped with one of those bells that reminds me of a 19th century American school house. There's a still cool breeze as the crows call and other birds swoop and rise.

I set off at 0825 and make slow progress towards some woods. I miss the track that bypasses them and have to make a sharp climb, by a wall, to regain the path. The valley floor below is a mix of lush fields, stone walls and stone buildings.

At 0920 I remove my middle layer and, like on the A66, the sun smacks my eyes. As I ascend higher, and admire the westerly views, I notice the distant ridges are capped with such a thin line of continuous snow that it could be mistake for a seam of quartz. Ulswater glistens and shimmers below.

It's then a final pull onto the plateau which the Roman road of High Street passes along. From here the summit is easily found and, at just before 1100, I'm on my way to Loadpot Hill, arriving at 1122. I rest my back against its trig point and eat my lunch.

From here I have to navigate carefully to find the zig zag path, beyond Brock Crag, that will lead me to Ulswater. It takes a few goes, and a bit of dead reckoning, before I find the path and carefully make my way. I take the chance to sit and admire Ulswater and think through my holiday. I'm pleased with my efforts - I've done seven of the ten walks I had left in the Lakes complete in nine days of walking. Given my health and the, at times, poor weather I feel it's a good effort.

From the valley floor I find the path that curves round to Martindale then beyond to the Old Church of St Martin where I arrive (getting to the church on time) at 1310.

Kinder Scout and North Yorkshire

It's June 1st and I'm at Kate Wilson's wonderful wedding reception in a country house a few miles from Sheffield. Kate entered my diaries in 2001 when she accompanied me in a group to the top of my final Munro. In the last few years she's met Paul, had two children with him and, at the wedding, I'm catching up with her family and friends. This includes a fellow Steve who, sat at my table, is making full use of the ample servings of wine. It gets to the point where all of us, on what we note is the 'singles table', get to chatting about what tomorrow will bring. I mention I'll be walking Kinder Scout then heading up to a holiday cottage just south of Kirby Stephen. The conversation then moves on to how each of us knows either Kate or Paul.

"Hill walking, I met her on a walk in Scotland." I say.

"By chance?" asks a table mate.

"No, via Alison and Adrian who I already knew."

"Are you a keen hill walker then?"

"I do quite a bit," I reply.

"Any Munros?"

"Well," I begin, "it was actually my final Munro that Kate joined me on."

My ratings as a table mate shoot up.

Later Steve (who is now nothing short of out of his head), engages me in conversation. He stands very close, as the inebriated are inclined to do, to the point I feel that I'm propping him up.

"I can't believe you've done all the Munros. That's amazing."

We'd had the same conversation some twenty minutes earlier but I'm happy to go through it again.

"It's something I just set out to do."

"How did you get into it?"

I explain it was a chance conversation with a work colleague some twenty four years earlier.

"You could like, do Everest."

"Well, I think that'd be beyond me. One in six die on their summit bids."

"But you'd know when to turn back."

"There's summit fever, you enter the death zone and it plays tricks with your judgement."

"I'd press on, I know," he replies, "whereas you'd know when to pull out."

"That's very kind," I add, "but I think I'd get summit fever too."

"Nah, you'd know when to stop, whereas I'd go on and die."

"I think," I add, "my caution is not to go there in the first place, that's my judgement because I don't trust myself when I'm there."

"And you're going up Kinder tomorrow."

"Well, I was planning to," I reply, "but it's getting late. I need to be at the cottage between four and six and I need a lie in."

"That's not the spirit of the Munros," he says.

"I know, but I'm a lot older now, I know when to rest."

Twenty minutes later we have the conversation again.

As it happens I wake at 0915 and leisurely boil an egg in the Travel Lodge room kettle before gathering my things. At gone eleven I'm pulled up at Barber Booth, studying the maps and looking at my watch. I'm minded to blow it out; it'll make

me against the clock later. Then I remember Steve's words from the night before, I remember my former self, my spirit, my drive and, at 1117, I set off.

It's tarmac to Upper Booth before following the Crowden Brook. I pass a large group, say hello and head further. I'm forcing a pace, I don't want to be late and put out the owner of the cottage who'd written to me with precise instructions to arrive between 1600 and 1800.

I crisscross the stream, motoring fast until the ground rises sharply, my legs turn to jelly and I slump down on a large rock. The large group pass me, slowly and we chat. They are good humoured and are on a "Military Fitness" regime; not actually in the forces.

I walk amongst them as the ground rises. Two ladies start to chat to me (it must be the new haircut). They note my map, compass and GPS and declare me an experienced walker. Again unsolicited praise comes and they ask me about my scariest moments on the hills. There's been many which I tell them of. When we congregate at the head of the brook, just past the steepest section, my antics are relayed to the rest of the group.

From here we part company and I set off, through a corridor of surreal weather sculpted rocks, to Pym Chair. On route I rest and encounter a couple in radio contact with a larger party. One has sprained his ankle and the couple are attempting to ascertain how bad it is. I listen and get the gist they don't have much first aid. I rustle through my pack, produce a bandage and Ibuprofen and offer it. They radio back that they are on their way with supplies.

I then head off, completely overshoot Pym Chair (where in olden days Pym, a minister, would preach – or was it Chair the minister would drink Pym's – I can't remember) and find myself hacking through peat hags to the summit cairn. With GPS, map and compass, I head on bearings. Climb down peat gulleys, back up, back down until I'm fed up.

A Mum, Dad and daughter are doing the same, towards me. The girl is young, in tears with the depressing effort of these peat gulleys. I understand her upset, you feel cheated, sapped and distraught. Her parents applaud her but it's to no avail, no amount of praise cheers her up.

I find the summit cairn, a depressing pile of rocks on a depressing flat landscape riddled with peat and bogs. I wonder if it's the top, a walker heads towards me and confirms, to his mind, that it is.

"Look it's in a direct line with Pym's Chair," he says.

He's a short chap, with balding ginger hair and short trousers. I imagine him bouncing up between the peat hags in true Monty Python fashion and, feeling guilty for my thoughts, I don't have the heart to mention that any two points are in a straight line. He leaves the scene and it allows me to sweep the area for other cairns before I conclude I must have reached the summit – at least my GPS is onside.

I head to Pym's Chair, motor down as fast I can and am at my car, in heavy drizzle, at 1452. I set off, trying to maintain pace without speeding. My car GPS falls off the window, the bracket has broken. I stop and tape it to the screen and it tells me I'll be lucky to do it by 1800. I stop for diesel and cheese (one thing I could not bring without a fridge) - lots of cheese and the assistant comments on my large purchase.

"And a cheese sandwich too!" he says and I wonder if I'm being mocked.

I arrive at 1740, having played catch up as best I can. There's a couple of signs at the bottom of the drive informing the best way of tackling the two pronged entrance. Then there's a sign saying what gear I should be in to negotiate the drive (we're talking gearbox here, not Gortex jackets or anything like that).

I press the door bell (there's a note not to use the knocker) and I think that friendliness is the best approach.

"Tony?" I ask as the door opens.

"Mr Smith," he replies.

I hope I've not transgressed with the over familiarity but he looks friendly enough. He takes me up to the apartment and shows me around (though there are quite a few notes about the place to assist me). When he leaves I use the loo and observe that, being a single male, must make me the ideal tenant (given the list of items that a note informs me should not be flushed down the loo). The cottage is actually an upstairs flat. Well laid out, I think I'll be happy for the week.

Sunday the 3rd and I struggle to get out of bed. The "graduates dream" had struck during the night – that's the one where it's the day of your finals and you've done no revision. Everybody I've mentioned it to has experienced the same thing.

I take the long trip round to the high point of the unclassified road between Thwaite and Hawes. As I climb the frost warning pings on my car and the wind is there to clip my ear as I emerge from the car. It's 1115 and I set my compass for the crossing of the boggy moor to reach Great Shunner Fell.

The gradient is forgiving, I keep apace but am tired, I feel tired to the core but I plod, and plod, over humps, across marshy ground, a deep gulley, cross fences, stiles and walk alongside stone walls. But nothing shifts the tiredness, the will to be back in bed, dreams or no dreams.

I make the summit in over an hour. It's a cross of two short stone walls, one with a terminating trig point, to form a quadrangular shelter, each with two benches. I choose the one best out of the wind and eat my lunch – cheese, rice cakes and peanuts. The views sit below the low cloud, good but dull. I look back to where I've come, then up to the next peak, Lovely Seat, that requires crossing the road where I'm parked.

I head down, recalling place markers from the way up and slump on a rock, drink water and yawn and yawn. I cross the bogs to reach the road and set my compass for Lovely Seat. It's nearer, the gradient is good and I find a pace, resting occasionally. The summit is easily found and as I look back Great Shunner Fell now has her head in the cloud.

I can see my car and aim roughly for it, as I near it's approaching 1425. Only three hours. I recall the younger Steve, the Steve of old and those long days of the Munros, those 'bloody' Munros taking eight to twelve hours a walk. I wonder is it age, unfitness or mental determination that feels as if it's now lacking. I just couldn't imagine doing one now, let alone all 284 of them.

The weather forecast promises Monday the 4th as the best day of the week. I wake, feel fitter than when I retired but not yet up to the biggest round of the week – the Howgills. Instead I elect for the Water Crag and Rogan's seat. The guidebook suggests an extensive route that would pad out a day. I'm more into the easiest route possible and at first decide to park halfway up the minor road

between Keld and Tan-Hill and cut east to Rogan's Seat. Further observation of the map shows a slightly longer route, starting from the Tan-Hill Inn, that has paths most of the way to the summit.

I find the Tan-Hill Inn but do not find the path. Things start well with a nice looking track that heads from the Inn but whatever I do with the compass it's not the right one. So across heather and peat I set, grumbling and moaning and wondering just how the heck the OS ever spotted a path.

The heather drags at my feet like a terrier, peat bogs have to be circumnavigated and the only rest bites are the moments of mown heather, forming rings around areas that have been burnt off.

I send up grouse and their young, calling of my danger as they bat their wings close to the ground then lift and glide. One chick brushes my ankle as it gets airborne, literally a touching moment. Yesterday I saw a sign explaining how the moorland habitat is being revived for the grouse, a mile or so on I saw the hides from which gunmen execute them.

I slink into the heather for a rest, the cloud is chopped and the breeze is cool and the views are good if a little dull as no sunlight is there to pick out the distant features.

I pass a deep mineshaft, covered by a metal box grill. I peer into its unknown depths, the moss covered stones of its lining fall into the abyss where water drips and sends its eerie echoes skywards.

At 1215 I make the summit of Water Crag after around two hours, a brick wall, followed by a trig point and then a stone shelter where I rest. Rogan's Seat is an easy navigation along the line of a fence where I pick up a track for a brief descent before a two mile slog over heather, peat and a stream gully.

Again the heather catches my feet, drags my pace. I'm aiming for the track that I could not use from Tan-Hill. As nice as I imagine it the chance of hitting its head, after crossing miles of moorland, is small. I aim to its southwest with the plan to turn north and strike it side on. This dumps me in a long peat crevasse which is like wading through chocolate cake.

Back at Tan-Hill the place is a buzz with motorbikes, barking dogs and the noisy generator. It's 1445 and I fancy a drink. The bar is five deep so I retreat. I look at the outside, the sign advertising it as Britain's highest pub. I admire the wooden sash windows and amuse myself in the thought that Ted Moulton's Windows (You only fit double glazing once, fit the best fit Everest) did not last.

Tuesday 5th of June brings another sleep in. Showing my patriotism I'd stayed up and watched the concert from Buckingham Palace and concluded that Paul McCartney wore a very nice jacket indeed.

For the third day running I head north from the cottage and take the B6270 that rises, as a single track road, over open moorland. I pass gypsy caravans, which have been quite a presence over the last few days. Where Cumbria peters out and North Yorkshire begins I park, survey the ground, map and set my compass. It's 1040 and there's a path marked a few hundred meters and, after yesterday's experiences, I take no notice of it and head directly across country into a squidgy mire that feels like I'm walking on a water bed the size of a football pitch. I learn to detect the texture of the grass that will take my weight and spring like a demented hare trapped by the lights of a car.

I begin to ascend, circumnavigating large depressions in the ground, sheep and the quagmire of peat trenches. It's a gentle incline and my pace is reasonable. I check the GPS for a fix, set my compass and break onto the ridge some half a mile to the southeast of the summit. Having thought I was on a bearing directly to the summit I check again and the new bearing is northwest. I conclude I must have misread the reading when I set the compass before.

I pass a fingerboard, indicating, for those on the coast to coast, which route, depending on the time of year, to take. I look about me; a lot of people are about with heavily laden packs. I've clearly butted in on something and, as I turn towards the trig point of Nine Standards Rigg, I'm faced with saying hello to a succession of people.

I make the summit at 1215 and am stopped by an Aussie.

"Is this the way to Keld?" he asks (I think he might have added 'mate' but I'm not sure).

I check my map and confirm that it is.

"Have you got a compass you can set?" I ask.

"No, nor a map. My mate's got them. Say if you see him tell him to phone me. He's wearing a white top."

I assure him I will and press on to take a look at the stone edifices that form the Nine Standards. Some are neatly stacked, like a mathematician did them, others are just stacks like a pile of stones in a back yard. I walk amongst them before setting my compass. It points directly to a path which leads me back to the road, picked out from a distance by the tall black, white and red poles that mark its path when snowed in. I reach the car at 1320 making a note to always at least look for the path before I set off.



Nine Standards from Nine Standards Rigg

I get to bed early and wake early with the idea of doing the Howgills. The weather does not look too good, the forecast does not look too good so I choose to do the four to the northwest of Garsdale Head.

I park near Uldale and watch as the chasing columns of rain sweep across. I sit tight for awhile, wondering whether to abandon the day or wait for it to clear. I think back to what I'd have done in the days of Munro bagging. I remind myself that this weather is 'nothing' so prepare and set off, at 0900, on the long gentle pull to Wild Boar Fell. The visibility is very poor and I use the GPS and my altimeter to refix my location and set a new compass bearing. It reminds me of the Munros where I used no GPS (apart from a brief spell of using a fairly inaccurate one) and no altimeter. Then it was down to close navigation and a fair bit of frustration as I forever needed to correct mistakes by close examination of the lie of the land and prayers that the mist would lift for long enough so I could get clues as to my whereabouts.

I'm aiming for Sand Tarn but at the 600m level set my compass for due east and break onto the wide summit plateau. Here I head north and am relieved to see the OS trig point come into view at the 708m mark. It's 1045, I'm doing well but I decide that the four hills are too much for the day and, if I now take in Swarth Fell, the recommended route is neatly split into two days.

I descend southwest and then southeast until I pick up the boundary wall which I follow. The rain still patters against me, my thin cotton gloves are sodden and my feet squelch as if they've become one with the peat below them.

I navigate by my altimeter, aiming for the 681m mark. At Wild Boar Fell it was over reading by 9m so I ascend hoping for 690m to arrive soon. I'm not sure what the summit looks like, I find a large stone with an 18th century inscription and flip my pack off, rummage for the guidebook and read that I'm looking for a large cairn. The ground rises in front of me and, as I make the ascent, the ghostly image of the cairn comes into view.

It's 1140 when I tap its top with a trekking pole then head the short distance to the wall. I follow it down, turning left with it until it plots the fall of a stream. I have to cross it a few times; it crosses my mind that it would be easy to slip on the rocks of the streambed. I climb the gulley a bit for an easier route. As I'm about to tread on a large flat stone it crosses my mind that I'm lucky it's not icy. Whether this is a premonition or whether such thoughts are always there but only remembered when there is occasion to I don't know. But my foot slips off and I fall downhill landing on my left hand and forearm. The weight of my pack and lower body pivots me on my arm as they fly over my head taking me off down the slope on my right hip. I slide for around twenty feet until I'm forced onto my back and my pack acts as a brake. Waterproof clothing is smooth to allow the water to run off, it does not act as a brake.

I stand up, my right hip; lower back, left forearm and left hand all ache. I pick my way to the stream and follow its safer confines.

As other streams join and the gulley deepens, I ascend the opposite bank, away from the stream and its fearsome slopes and edge my way round a forest's edge to pick up the track, which becomes the road where my car is parked. It's 1300, I'm dripping wet and sore.

Thursday the 7th and the weather looks as doubtful as yesterday. The long round of the Howgill Fells have been beckoning all week but a wet day is not the day for them and, with a check of the guidebook against the map, I'd prefer to split them

into one long day and one modest day. Yorkshire, not being as steep and as high as the Lakes, has the guidebook writer filling a day by connecting walks that could be done separately. Although helpful it usually means that, mid walk, there is a sharp decline followed by having to ascend the same kind of height as at the start of the day. This also applies to the day I cut short yesterday so today I choose to do Knoutberry Haw and Baugh Fell to complete it.

I pass the various gypsy encampments on route, with their attendant litter strewn over the open countryside. I pass by the stone barns that are familiar to this district. Something tells me that Wiltshire, my home, has the edge. Wiltshire is only hilly, no mountains, but the chalk downs roll and sweep in their own way.

I park up Uldale and am walking at 0950. First it's on a steep private road that switches between concrete and tarmac as frequently as it has been repaired. I fork right through the woods and cross the River Rawthey. Its burbling over the rocks is accompanied by a deep rhythmic thump of passing water which sounds like a distant engine.

The weather is not good as I briefly ascend the riverbank before cutting sharply south. It hits me quickly that I'm very slow and today is going to be tiresome. The rain drills against me and the wind shakes the left sleeve of my jacket in an unknown harmonic.

The visibility is down to fifty feet and, as the ground levels, I pass a small tarn. There are various cairns and it feels a remote spot as I pass the larger West Baugh Fell Tarn.

As I press on it's very wet underfoot but the rain stops and the weather clears until I can see Knoutberry Haw in the distance. I walk from cairn to cairn until I reach the trig point and the summit at 1250.

I climb the wall behind it that joins with a wall running up from the southwest. I tuck down on the sheltered corner, eat my lunch and get a text from Kate thanking me for the wedding present.

I now follow the wall, navigating past bog, to Baugh Fell (also known as Tarn Rigg Hill). Here I planned to cut down the streambed that feeds the river of my start. It feels a remote, long way back the way I came but, recalling my slip of yesterday, I feel I've had enough of streambeds.

The way back is a gentle decline until I pass West Baugh Fell Tarn. Here I check my compass and head north. I veer into a plateau of bog so check my GPS. I've wandered too far to the west so set another bearing and hit the river bed, then the track back to my car where I arrive at 1540 very wet.

I'm asleep by 2000 and wake at just gone 0600. I pack, breakfast and watch the weather forecast. It's poor and I feel tired, six days on the trot has me continually yawning and I feel achy. The Howgills will have to wait.

Saturday brings my departure; I pack and carry my kit and a bag of rubbish down the flight of steps. At the bins there's the final note of the week – explaining not to over fill the bins. The thing that worries me about all these notes, more than anything else, is that, if I ran the place, I'd do the same.

Friday 16th of November sees me setting off for the Over The Hill Club AGM weekend with my new hill walking accessory – Hugo the campervan. The purchase came after years of inaction, deliberation and procrastination. I've christened him Hugo because of his number plate. He sports heating, a loo, two beds, a table, hob, grill, sink and fridge.



The bean counting side of my brain has concluded that, over a twenty year period, I can recoup the entire purchase price on the savings I'll make on my annual spend on holiday cottages. Furthermore I've calculated that I can save on motorway service station meals by cooking in the car park. This latter scheme lasts until I'm hungry, pull off the M6, follow the ever confusing blue circle signs (which allegedly point you to the car park), pull up and decide I can't be bothered to cook so go in hunt of food.

There's an array of outlets in the service station but only two do hot food. The first has one of those A4 self standing photo frame kind of things, stood proudly on the counter, declaring today's "Today's Delicious Vegetarian Meal." The snag is there is no staff around. I wait, wait and wait a bit more. Somebody mopping the floor glances my way, then carries on mopping. She eventually wrings out the mop, pats her hands on her uniform and comes round behind the counter.

"What can I get you?" she asks.

"I'll have this vegetarian option," I say as I helpfully point to the display.

"I'll just see if we've got any left."

She disappears and, to give her her due, she's less than five minutes. She returns, shaking her head, explaining they've sold out.

"What else would you like then?" she asks, pointing at the variety of meat riddled meals currently being incinerated under powerful lamps.

I pick up the A4 self standing photo frame kind of thing (proudly declaring today's "Today's Delicious Vegetarian Meal") and hand it to her. "Best take this down I guess."

I wander off, annoyed as ever. What did I expect? This is Britain after all - poor service and ignorance all at top prices. When I traded in my VW Golf for the campervan, the offer I got was low but (knowing there would be some money to spend to sell it privately with a clear conscience) I accepted their offer. A few days after picking Hugo up, and saying goodbye to the Golf, the salesman got in touch asking if I'd send them £100 as "they've found that a bearing on the alternator pulley needs replacing". Victor Meldrew was misunderstood I tell you. A fictional character maybe but the fellow deserves a knighthood for all his suffering.

Anyhow I advance to Burger King, buy the preverbal bag of bean burger and chips and pocket as many little tubs of milk that my pockets can muster. I suppose technically this is stealing (I hadn't bought a hot drink) but somehow I vindicate myself because they'll be useful for the campervan.

I press on with the drive, wondering if such a long trip is worth it for a weekend. I question my membership of the club; it's a long way to go. I ponder whether I should quietly let my membership lapse.

I pull off the M6 and take the B roads across to Dufton. It's dusk and the headlights pick out the road snaking through the open moorland, I feel tired and am grateful when I reach the hostel, find a spot to park and make my entrance to the common room.

I'm greeted warmly as an old friend, a comfy chair is offered and I sit in a daze. I'm included in the conversation, Graham Gledhill comes and sits next to me and we discuss our years to date. I tell him about the campervan, he asks about my trips so far.

"South Wales, mainly," I explain.

"Have you been to the Brecons?" he asks.

"Yes," I reply and within moments a map is produced and we are looking at suitable walks for the Club's April meet. Moments later I find I've promised to attend the meet and organise the walk. Thoughts of leaving the club have well and truly ended.

Dave Handley arrives; his opening gambit is "I'm joining you in having a vegetarian this evening."

"Do we know the young lady?" I reply.

"Not that I'm aware," he adds.

He then announces a prospective new member, David Milton, is in the same dorm as us and that he has been enjoying reading my blog. I bask in the limelight but play it down with a nonchalant rising of my forehead.

"Been away much?" he asks.

"The Lakes, Yorkshire and Devon."

"Where did you go in Devon?"

"Oh," I reply guardedly, "it was a writing course."

"How is the writing going?" he asks.

"How do you mean?" I reply, feeling defensive.

"Well the course, what was it about?"

"Novel writing," I reply hoping to draw this conversation to a rapid close.

"Are you writing a novel then?" he asks.

"Having a dabble," I add.

"What's it about?"

Oh for Christ's sake my head is screaming and wishing the ground would open up to remove me from my embarrassment. I give a brief plot synopsis, hoping that'll end the conversation.

"You ought to have a word with my wife," he says, "she's been writing a novel for a few years now."

"What's it about?" I ask.

"Haven't got a bloody clue," he replies.

Over dinner, and joined by Ron Reynolds, we get to discussing Waggy (aka Steve Wagstaff). Apparently he's already been spotted in the village hall with his famous beer barrels, one for him and the other for general consumption. The meal is delicious; as are the seconds and the fruit salad tops it off nicely. Dave is

ploughing through a bottle of red wine that he generously offers around, including surrounding tables.

"Have you had any further thoughts about my wife?" asks Dave.

The novel writing conversation is a couple of hours behind us now and this sweeping offer takes me somewhat by surprise. And to be honest it puts me a little on edge. Wondering what I might be letting myself in for I reply with a simple, "Erm."

"The writing, have you thought about speaking with her to share your writing experiences?"

"Oh," I start (trying to avoid the evident relief in my voice), "well you can pass on my email address."

I wander up to the village hall, two barrels fill the entrance lobby along with a sheet complete with names and the number of beers consumed so far. I check Waggy's total – seven and it's only 2030. I reckon he might still be pliable to a conversation.

"Hi Steve," I start.

"I don't know who in the fuck you are," he replies.

"Steve," I reply, "we speak every year."

He swaggers, shakes my hand (which I fear is a ploy to steady himself) and asks me how I am.

"Good, and you?" I ask hoping his immediate condition would be overlooked.

"I'm dying," he replies, "I'm in a downward spiral," as he highlights the effect by moving his hands above his head then pressing down on the air either side of his body. "There you are, I could do something about it but I can't."

I must confess to not being able to recall this verbatim. There were words tripped over, pauses, swaggering and alcoholic fumes to contend with.

"Oh," and rather lost for words I add, "Sorry to hear that."

"I could do something about it but I can't," he adds. A true writer does not repeat himself but as Waggy appeared to be emphasising the point I thought I'd continue with the gist of the conversation.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Well, right this moment I'm feeling a bit bloody awkward to be honest," I reply then retire to the campervan.

Breakfast is a fine continental 'help yourself' spread. I ensure I consume enough to make only a light lunch necessary. Big John congratulates me for taking on the mantle of organising the walk for the April meet in the Brecon Beacons. I haven't even filled out the booking form yet.

A few cars make their way to Murton where we disembark amidst an army checkpoint. They did not appear bothered by our presence and nor did we by the youthful young men and their machine guns.

We pull up the track, it's steady going and my recent forays into the Welsh hills pays dividends as I find my pace good. At the path off to Murton Pike I separate from the main group and, with new member David Milton continue up the track to Murton Fell, a summit of over 2000ft. With grid reference in hand we take a good half hour, amongst peat bogs, surveying the area until we set upon a small stone as the summit. Neither of us is 100% convinced.

We cut across the bog ridden, mist clad, terrain until we spy the others approaching the dramatic High Cup Nick. We meet, Big John takes the mick at my deviation, and we swing around this inland gorge, protected by natural stone escarpment walls, which fall away into a wide open valley. It's dramatic and we all stop to admire the view. We climb up Narrowgate Beacon where our orderly

line of walkers spreads out to an individual series of zigzag ascents with chance meetings where one person's zig meets another's zag.

Then it's around Backstone Edge to the trig point which, akin to this area, is built away from the true summit. Again David Milton joins me for the slight deviation – funnily enough everybody else in the group is perfectly content with the fine view from the trig point and not the obscured version on the blip of a rise some 200 meters from the edge.



Myself and Dave Milton on the true summit of Backston Edge

We then drop past Dufton Pike (it appears a village is only a village up here if it has a pike), where some people deviate for the fine view, before Dufton itself is reached in an outing of five and a half hours.

Back in my van I study the grid reference for Murton Fell and realise I'd completely messed it up. The true point is some 600 meters to the northwest. I slip off to tell Big John in the hope I'll be excused leading the Brecon Beacons walk.

"Don't worry lad, don't worry," he says. Looks like I'm leading the Brecons walk then.

I alternate between the campervan (where people drop by to admire my purchase) and the hostel until the evening meal at 7PM. The meal is a fine spread, organised and cooked by Ann and Alvar. I sit next to Ron Reynolds, opposite Bernie and Penny Roberts who sit next to Tim Wood. Tim and Ron are both 77, Tim, in memory of his wife Kate, has recently walked the El camino de Santiago and Ron, a great grandfather, still runs marathons.

I sleep well, snug and wake refreshed, but not inclined for a big walk. It's Sunday morning and the day of the club AGM, I breakfast then head back to my campervan and, while arranging kit, there's a knock on the door. Les and Issy Silkowski greet me with a copy of the Link magazine. I'd only casually mentioned to another club member that I intend to skip the AGM and word has been passed to the magazine editors to bring me a copy of the magazine before I leave. That's incredible service, I wonder if they could pass on their skills to campervan dealerships and the management of motorway service stations?

The sky is a rich blue and the late autumn light lifts the spirits. I drive to Murton, say hello again to the soldiers of the Black Watch. I climb steadily, using the Landrover track. Murton Pike hangs on my left shoulder. In under an hour I break onto mist clad rough ground and find the same small lake of yesterday. I head northeast, discover an unconvincing cairn, plod on and find the summit cairn described in the guidebook then break off to the real summit. The mist lifts and Murton Pike becomes a navigation beacon back to the Landrover track. I meet a chap, studying his map. He's heading for Murton Fell and I impart my newfound knowledge of the whereabouts of the summit – I fail to mention my adventures of yesterday.

2013

The evening of May 31st sees me setting off from Darlington after two harrowing days of work for a client. They bought a system from the company I work for, agreed the specification and, when on site, it became clear they'd not properly checked the requirement with their working practises. After two days of regular "How do we do this with it?" and my answer "If only you told us you wanted that" I was fit to explode. Things came to a head for me whilst training their operators only for their manager to interrupt and ask how they proposed to get their normal days work done while being distracted by my training.

So, taking some deep breaths, I head north with the plan to start a fortnights holiday with the Cheviot Hills as my starting point. With one of my favourite bands, The Zombies, blaring out of my CD player I point Hugo, my campervan, onto the A1 and follow my Sat Nav's instructions until I find myself on minor roads. I don't know if the Sat Nav has an option to avoid fords but if it does I'd clearly not set it. In front of me the tarmac descends deeply and water is pouring over the road. I stop (rather rapidly) and go for an inspection. Whatever the possibilities I decide to backup and ignore the Sat Nav's continued advice to make a U turn.

I make my way through Wooler and find the roads to take me to just short of Langleeford. There's no ford, no cars at all, just me. I park up, turn on the heating, lie down and spend an hour deep in thought about this, that and whatever. When I feel like some entertainment I hook up a portable DVD player and watch Hitchcock's "The Thirty Nine Steps". The atmospheric Scottish backdrops work well with the mountainous view from Hugo's windows.

I wake, rested, breakfast on porridge and set off at 0900. The mist is down and there is rain in the air. The weather forecast for Britain today is for a brilliant, sunny day. That is bar the North East of England where cloud and rain is expected.

It's a long pull up to the minor Scald Hill before the steep ascent to The Cheviot. Arriving at the trip point I check my watch – 1140. I scoff peanuts, sup water and chat to a group of three sheltering the other side of the trig point then set off. The weather improves for the walk out to Cairn Hill. It's a well laid stone slab path but I'm slow, tiredness is my companion and I'm glad to get to the end of the ridge. I check the bearing and a brand new sign post tells me I've just walked a section of the Pennine Way – hence the fantastic path.

I take the line of the fence to the top of Harthope Burn before the tiresome pull up Comb Fell through peat bogs. I arrive at 1340 and view the next object, Hedgehope Hill. It looks steep but, although being slow, I manage it with ample rests. At 1500 I enjoy its views before the descent back to the campervan after a seven and a half hour roundtrip.

I'm greeted by a couple that had passed me on the castellated outcrop of Long Crag. They are impressed by the van, are thinking of buying one. The man takes a particular interest, there's clearly some encouragement required regarding his wife.

On inspecting the narrow rear door he says, "Though I'm not sure the door will be wide enough." I detect a twitch from his wife who I could not help but notice was no stranger to the biscuit tin.

"I'm not that big," she says.

"I mean for the kayak," he replies.

Good answer.

We chat for about ten minutes about the merits of camping, hostels, B&B, holiday cottages and campervans.

The evening is clear skies with a gentle breeze. I sit with the rear door open and, with binoculars, survey the sun tipped hills. Around 2100 I doze off and have good sleep.

I wake, June the 2nd, with an achy body and figure the three remaining hills of the Cheviot Mountains will, despite the guidebooks recommendation, have to be split into two days.

I top up Hugo's water tank from the stream, set the Sat Nav to the nearest place to which the OS map and it would likely tally. Fortunately the route does not take me near the ford so I can follow the Sat Nav to the letter. When passed the set destination the road dwindles to a single track and I frequently pull up to allow sheep to wander out of my path while the Sat Nav displays "U Turn Ahead".

I'm walking at 1150, in a warm blue sky day, on well made farm tracks that, after frequent rests and sips of water, have me at the summit of Windy Gyle in two hours. The hills roll, duck and re-emerge like an amplified version of the southern downs of England. Small patches of forest sit amongst their folds while patchwork hill farms allow my eyes to tread a staircase across the views.

The summit is adorned by a large cairn, trig point and people. A finger board informs me this is another section of the Pennine Way. I step slightly north, into Scotland – my first visit since 2010. I rest awhile, my body catches up and I descend back to Hugo in just over an hour.



The View into Scotland from Windy Gyle

I wake at 0700 on June 3rd raring to go. After breakfasting and sorting my pack I'm walking at 0800. Having decided to stay put, and not move to the guidebooks recommended starting place, the first part of the walk is the same as yesterday.

I pass through the same farms and am soon walking on a gravel graded track on route to the farm at Uswayford. A hare lollops towards me. Not put off by my presence it gets within thirty feet and stops to wash its face with its front paws. I remain still and watch as he comes nearer, to within ten feet. He knows I am there and we survey each other. The pointed face, long back legs and short forearms have me feeling that he's some antipodean cross between a rabbit and a deer. It takes a final wide berth and scurries through the grass to pass me.

I press on, in clear skies and the morning light, to Uswayford where some interesting route finding has me walking amongst the sheep and chickens that grace the farmyard. From here I'm unsure of the path so head east before angling across the energy sapping, squidgy, heather clad ground to the first summit of the day, Bloodybush Edge. It's 1100 and I'm pleased by my pace but Cushat Law looks a great distance off and quite a descent between. A farmer appears on a quad bike as I stretch my legs out on a railway sleeper that abuts the summit trig point.

Thankfully the view is deceptive and, after dropping, following fences and squelching through bog I reach Cushat Law at 1230, an hour and ten minutes after leaving the luxury of the railway sleeper. From here I look across to The Cheviot and the high ground of the day before last.

The walk back to Bloodybush Edge takes the same time before the feet bashing tracks get me to the camper at 1605.

June the 4th, and the 2000ft mountains of the North East complete, I head towards the North Pennines. The dead straight Roman road takes me parallel to Hadrian's Wall and the trail of occasional walkers treading its path.

In need of some supplies I stop at a village shop, pleased to be able to spend money in a privately run business. I have a mental shopping list which I use to fill the basket. Flapjack eludes me so I ask the middle aged woman at the till.

"All the cakes are in that isle," she replies briskly pointing to where I should look. As statements go she was perfectly correct but no flapjack. I wander to a distant alcove and find them amongst the bread.

At the till I debate whether to mention their whereabouts. Having six in my basket might lead her to think her directions were accurate, clear and somehow she could bask in the glory of guiding me so accurately.

I decided not to risk it. "The flapjacks were with the bread," I say. She harrumphs for a fraction of a second before scanning my basket at an impressive rate of knots. So quick in fact that, like the till's display, I have great trouble in keeping up.

"That's twenty pounds and eighty four pence," she says. No time for a "please" then I think. At that moment the till flicks down the price to £19.84 (she'd outdone the till with the multi-buy discounts).

"It says nineteen pounds and eighty four pence," I reply.

"Yes, that's what I said nineteen pounds and eighty four pence."

My next stop is a garage to fill up Hugo with diesel. They have a welcome loo (I'm trying to not have to empty the chemi-loo too often). Hugo is everything I hoped for but I have had to learn about housekeeping. It's easy to use up too much water, easy to fill the loo too quickly. So it's strictly a pee on the grass during the night (which last night gave me a lovely view of Orion and The Plough in the blue tinged sky) and the use of public facilities wherever possible.

I get to Hallbankgate and manage to find my way to the start of the walk up Cold Fell. It's anything but cold with a warm gentle breeze that accompanies me, at 1050, up a track, past a small cottage then to where a Miner's track begins. I follow the OS map and soon find myself ankle deep in tough grass on an open hillside. It's hard going and I zigzag my way, legs aching and breathing not doing too well in keeping up.

I keep hoping to find the track but have no joy so fight my way through the grass and heather until I reach the cairn, and viewpoint, at 547 meters. From here I take a bearing and have another slog across to the summit of Cold Fell, three hours from the start. It's a trig point between two cairns, one an impressive beehive structure. The views are immense, across into Scotland and over to the Lake District. The sky is a rich blue and bird calls surround me.

On the descent it takes me awhile to meet with the Miner's track that eluded me on the ascent. I'm glad when I do for it is green and soft and gentle on my feet. At its start I realise it did not quite match what's on the OS map. Or if it does the angle of bearing is so close that I realise how I made the mistake.

I get back to Hugo at 1450. As there is no local water supply to replenish with I wash with wet wipes and stretch out a clothesline for my things to air.

The Tale of Three Trig Points

After a restful sleep I drive around to the Hartside Café viewpoint. It's a fantastic spot with wide open views to the Lakes and Scotland, and at, 1903 feet a good starting point for some 2000ft plus mountains. I'm walking at 0845 with the aim to take in Black Fell, the top above Tom Smith's Stone, Grey Nag then a walk across to the newly discovered peak of Thack Moor. I harbour lofty ideas of finishing these in no time and taking in the two peaks south of the café.



A great starting point for tired legs! With Hugo and the Lake District beyond.

The pull up to Hartside Height, and the fence and wall leads me to Black Fell's trig point in 55 minutes. The timing tells me that I'm looking at a late afternoon finish so those lofty ambitions are consigned to another day. From the top the views are gorgeous, sat below a light blue sky with the warm wind running around my body.

As I depart the phone rings. It's buried in my pack and by the time I extract it it's hung up. I recognise the number, a Wiltshire Newspaper. I run a rail user group and they want some details for an article. I enjoy giving the interview from an elevated position. I pack the phone away and set off and immediately it rings again. I guess what's happened; she left a message when I did not answer in time. Familiar with this confounded phone I know it will continue to bug me until I listen to the message. Taking the pack on and off is always a little tiresome but I'm forced into it. When I get to the phone the signal drops so I can't delete the message. Knowing as soon as the signal returns it'll not be satisfied until it's run the battery dry I remove the battery, bury it in the bottom of my pack and look forward to an undisturbed day.

The going gets a little tough with peat bogs and water logged ground to contend with. I follow fence and wall until I arrive at what I believe to be the top above Tom Smith's stone at 1120, distant gunfire greets me as does, amongst a rendezvous of walls, an unmarked trig point. After some pondering I realise I'm actually on the third summit, Grey Nag and have walked over the top above Tom Smith's stone without realising.

Some cloud is now about; the wind has cooled and cools the sweat on my torso. I backtrack to ensure that I have bagged the top before I drop to Tom Smith's stone and take a bearing across to Thack Moor. It looks distant and I have to line up carefully so not to wander onto the fells to its north.

It's nothing short of a route march. Initially I drop then gain height to meet the wide ridge to Watch Hill. Hidden summits tease me as I press on. A descending walker, my only 'companion' of the day remarks how crowded it is. A few stiles and walls later and, at 1345, I'm at the trig point summit of Thack Moor.

As mentioned before this is a newly discovered peak. Of course it was known about but a recent resurvey, by very accurate GPS, has it no more than an inch or so over 2000ft. On the map it is marked as 609m, 2000ft is 609.6m. I set my GPS on what I reckon, after a climb over a wall, is the highest point. It initially comes in at 608m, then a tantalising 609m before getting carried away with 610m, 611m, 612m and finally 613m. My GPS is the everyman variety and this is probably the best I can hope for.

The walk back looks a staggering distance. I break it down into sections, taking a compass bearing to each. In all it takes me two hours at a route march pace. I'm hoping to get to the café before it closes. I arrive at 1600, it's open. I enter and ask if they are still serving food.

"I'll have to check with the kitchen, what is it you are wanting?"
"Egg and chips," I reply.

She disappears off then comes back informing me how lucky I am that the chef is prepared to cook me egg and chips.

The evening camper van life evolves into snoozing and enjoying the view. This means I'm awake at five and, after a good lie in and a slow breakfast I'm walking at 0730.

The views of the mountainous Lake District are obscured by cloud and haze. Before me stretches open heather land to the nearby summit of Fiend's Fell. A grassy track bends off to the right; I ignore the compass bearing and take it. In twenty minutes it bends neatly back round to the summit. I set my compass bearing for the minor bump of Little Knapside Hill. There's a faint path that drops me through a peat gully before a pull up, via a couple of stiles. From Little Knapside Hill I head for Knapside Hill, where an impressive cairn arrangement adorns its summit, then onto Melmerby Fell, the second peak of the day. It's only 0855, the weather brightens up, birds chirp, sheep wander away and a cool breeze airs my body.

I backtrack across the same ground, arriving back to Hartside Café at 1025. I take my time sorting out a few things in the van and getting washed. Like last night people pull up for a few minutes and produce cigarettes, mobile phone or camera (for the stunning views). Rarely does anybody just stop to look.

I make my way to the café and order egg and chips again. It's gone up by sixty pence since last night, I negotiate it back down. The food is lovely and I replenish with a chocolate milkshake too.

As I'm walking back to the van a medium sized Peugeot motor home pulls up. A large, aged male descends. I admire the vehicle and he's pleased to chat about it. I have him down as the archetypal couch potato who's bought himself a camper so he can see the countryside between greasy fry ups at cafes.

"That's a neat vehicle, your Romahome," he says.

"Thanks, I love it," I reply.

"Is it a porta-poti or a proper loo?"

"Porta-poti," I reply while thinking that, like two dogs sniffing one another's privates, that this is a secret code of communication between camper van owners.

"When you get to my age you can't get down to a porta-poti, you need something higher."

"Right," I say decidedly not looking forward to the latter stages of my life. But then if I keep myself fit then perhaps I might be spared, unlike Mr Potato here.

"We were cycle tourists in our day," he says. "We used to go all over. The wife used to compete on velodromes as far away as Paris."

I look to his camper and his elderly wife is easing herself down the step on two crutches.

Ashamed of myself, and wishing to move away from the traffic heading to the Appleby Horse Fair, I set off for Alston, buy a few provisions, then onto Nenthead. Here I take the minor road to the 591 meter point. It's a former mining area and it has that ghostly depressing tinge that I always feel in such areas. I don't know if it's the grassed over spoil heaps, the simple, grey cottages or the ghost of what has gone by, never to be returned to, but a melancholic unease descends upon me. I get out of the camper and, with just daps on my feet, make my way about a third of a mile across a field to Flinty Fell – by definition a 2000ft mountain. I have to hand it to the guidebook writers for offering a more interesting approach but the roads go so near the tops in this area I prefer to save my legs and bag them in the most straightforward way.

The evening sees me parking at Black Hill and, with camper rear door open, I enjoy the views while reading. In the evening a few cyclists pass, a lone middle-aged man stops. He's interested in my camper, a bit too interested for my liking. He mentions that just eight weeks before the road was impassable due to snow. He fills the void of the door while extending his arm in to check out the quality of the product. If I'd been a rabbit in my cage I'd have given him a good nip.

After he leaves a powerful, skirt clad, motor-tricycle appears with a leading open backed micro car. A cameraman films from the back while the female driver, with L plates, leads the way. As surreal images go this does quite well.

Alone I manage to sleep, waking with the plan to break the guidebooks recommended day into three. This starts with 'The Dodd' which sits just over a mile from where I'm parked. At 0830, in fair heat, I set off and, following a new fence then wall through peat soaked bog. At a bench like stone structure I bear off to find the conical shaped cairn, arriving at 0900. From here there are beautiful views with just a few powder puff clouds.

I make it back down in twenty five minutes before a short drive round to the highpoint on the road between Coalcleugh and Allenheads. I set off from Killhope Law, at first following a track then tuft littered ground while I battle heat and tiredness. At the top it feels more like a mountain, compared with the slight rise in the ground for The Dodd, with panoramic views from this high ground. The summit is marked by a tall wooden pole, a trig point a cairn and an annoying number of flies who feel it's their obligation to bounce off me as regularly as they are able.

I'm back at Hugo in an hour (thirty five minutes out, twenty five minutes back) where I drive round to Allenheads. I'm hoping to find a shop, and perhaps lunch, and some life. Sadly it lacks a little so I look for the signs to the next village, Cowshill. I soon find one but some local wags have used black tape to change the two ells to instead direct me to 'Cowshitt'. Such is local rivalry amongst these villages. On route I take in Middlehope Moor.

Cowshill has a shop but very little I fancy so I drive onto Alston where I lunch and manage to shop and browse around.

The Woman Who Knew No Boundaries

I wake on the 8th after a high 'camp' just south of Slate Hill on the A689 between Nenthead and Cowshill. I shiver when I emerge from the van and start my walk, at 0740, towards Dead Stones via Knoutberry Hill. At first the track is covered in plastic matting, an unusual attempt to control the erosion that walkers cause. It soon ends and I'm following wall and fence, through peat bog, grass tufts and heather, reaching the summit at 0855. Below me is a stone shelter which I explore. It's unusual as it has a roof and the remnants of a small fireplace. Alas there is no door and barely enough room to sit down.

My next target is Burnthope Seat. Unlike yesterday, where I divided a walk into three to shorten it, today I'm dividing a walk in to two to lengthen it. The rationale being I felt the walk too long to do in a single day. Thus today I'm tackling three of the five peaks from the north and the remaining two will be for another day.

Over similar terrain, with the distant golf ball hilltop radar station dipping in and out of view, I reach the trig point of Burnthouse Seat at 0955. The guidebook

says this is the top but a short distance west the map shows a spot height one meter higher. I wander over and find a small cairn marking it.

I get to the final peak of the day, Harwood Common, in around forty-minutes before the two and a half hour slog back to Hugo. By now the sun is up and it's a baking day and my approach is rung in by the sounds of motor bikes racing over the pass. After nearly six hours I'm glad for the shade of the confines of the campervan.

I take my time before moving off to Swinhope Head. A number of cars pull up where the occupants lunch or just admire the view. I note a family (man, woman and two young boys) where the woman, map in hand, is walking up and down looking out across the open moorland. She approaches the open back door of the camper, "Do you know where the start of the path to Killhope Law."

I know the answer to this, there isn't one but also know how she has been fooled. "That's not the path on your map," I say, "The black dashes and dots denote the county boundaries. Don't worry we've all slipped up on that one from time to time."

The county boundaries tend to cross the highest points (based on some ancient carving up) and the markings on the maps do make it look like a very convenient place. In fact some walls and fences follow the county boundaries but rarely do they form a well trodden path.

I drive over to Swinhope Head which is a very quiet spot. I have a lazy evening with two to three hours passing between cars.

I wake at 0500 on Sunday June 9th to the gentle sound of rain on Hugo's roof. I roll over and sleep through until 0900. A leisurely breakfast follows while I peep out of the windows to find myself deep in cloud. I set off at 1020 and follow a combination of wall and fence to the summit trig point of Fendrith Hill. The visibility ranges from between ten and forty feet, the ghostly head of the ski tows define the sharp decline into Swinhope Moor. I enjoy the comparative cool day and reach the summit at 1100

The walk out to Chappelfell Top follows a convenient fence. However, the top is more elusive. I read the guidebook and, as I'm doing these in reverse order, I have to unscramble detailed instructions (consisting of one hundred and fifty yards in one direction and forty in another) until I find the few stones, which mark the summit.

I backtrack and reach Hugo at 1245, have a quick lunch and set off at 1255 reaching the summit of Westernhope Moor (a trig point that is starting to crumble from the top) via fence, bog and rotten wooden paths at 1345. The descent is easy, less than an hour with the cloud beginning to lift.

I rest awhile before driving over Harthope Moor and taking on a resupply of water from Langdon Beck. I struggle to find a suitable place for an overnight stop so tuck in between two farms on a minor road.

I wake early on the 10th and drive the short distance to a highpoint on the Alston road. Parked with a front wheel partially in a ditch I'm off at 0735 along a track that has been recently covered in loose gravel and small stone. This makes the going touch as my feet keep slipping for purchase. I pass two silver camper vans, barely visible in the thick cloud, before a short detour climb to the summit of

Great Stony Hill. I then follow the fence back to the track and set a bearing for the pathless walk, across peat ridden ground, to the summit of Three Pikes.

With no visibility I take another bearing direct back to the van. However, I fall short and walk the last half mile on the road, arriving back after two and a half hours out.

I drive into Alston, use the internet in the library and seek out a hearty portion of egg and chips. I then drive via the lovely village of Garrigill and on to the single track road to Tynehead where I set up 'camp'. The weather improves and I dry my socks by hanging them off the windscreen wipers while my trail shoes bask in the sun.



The view from Hugo's rear door

I wake early on the 11th and am walking at 0630. It's a bigger day ahead with far more ascent than the last few days. I walk a few yards up the track before climbing in a south westerly direction. I adopt a very slow pace, just positioning one foot in front of the other. This is something I have tried in the past but always had trouble sticking to. The technique is to keep my blood oxygenated. With my restricted windpipe any kind of uphill pace requires frequent rests as the lactic acid builds up. It works today and I get to the top of Round Hill at 0750.

From here I climb a stone wall and walk through the ankle deep heather. I come across a regular feature of the last few days – broken Grouse eggs where the clutch has hatched. Further on I disturb a Grouse mother who scurries off (a technique to lead the predator away from her chicks) revealing a gorgeous encampment of tiny chicks.

The visibility is good with a brisk breeze. I take a bearing across to a track that leads off to Garrigill. Here there are signs of newly laid track, silent earth movers and piles of rock. I set another bearing and drop, cross a stream before the pull up Bullman Hills.

I get to Bullman Hills at 0925 which are a collection of isolated lumps in a windswept moor. The only company are sheep who scuttle off leaving me to cling onto the contents of my pack as I search for my water bottle.

The final peak is Long Man Hill which requires a backtrack then a north easterly climb from the junction of the tracks. However, I cut due east and cross the stream lower down. Here it is gushing well over its bed of rocks. Though one section is about forty foot of solid rock; layers of compressed sediment that have tilted upwards to form a toast rack of rock lines which the water tumbles over.

I climb through the uneven peat landscape to arrive at Long Man Hill at 1025. It's a flat top hill with many a tussock a contender for the highest point.

I debate whether to take the track to Garrigill or backtrack via the shorter, yet requiring re-ascent, route. I opt for the latter arriving back at 1205.

I spend the afternoon back in the lovely village of Alston before heading to the parking area at Cow Green Reservoir. I wish to tackle Viewing Hill and Bellbeaver Rigg tomorrow. It is possible to start these from a higher point but this requires a night parked on the uninviting B6277.

It rains during the night so I set off, on the 12th, at 0805 in full wet weather gear. I follow a north westerly track, passing disused mine workings, before taking a bearing to Viewing Hill. Typical of this area I plough through peat and ankle length tufts of grass which, now wet, drag me down. The summit is flat and my sense of direction poor. The cloud is down and there is rain in the air. I repeatedly take GPS readings, set the compass until I find the summit cairn.

I take a direct bearing to Bellbeaver Rigg but my sense of direction is lost. What feels like north is actually south and what feels like south is actually north. Therefore walking on a bearing becomes a fight and I have to continually check my location and set the bearing again. After a few false ascents, cut backs and diagonal corrections I find a mist laden summit cairn. It does not tie with the GPS reading so I set my compass, peer into the mist and see the ghostly image of the correct top.

The route out is tiresome. I make mistake after mistake and make little progress until I feel trapped like the preverbal telephone call where the other end won't let you go. I check my GPS and the progress is wearisome. I'm aiming for the track I walked in on and it takes an age to appear. I feel drained and head south east. The reservoir appears but the car park is elusive. When I make it, after five hours out, I collapse inside the van and feel glad the day is over.

I wake on Thursday 13th with rain drumming on the roof, I've slept with the light on and the battery is low. The tap is showing signs that the water tank is low and, despite being parked right by a reservoir, I'm not feeling the rush to replenish stocks. Something is telling me that I want to cut the trip short by two days. It also occurs to me that the headline, "Man arrested for stealing water from a reservoir," might be a tad embarrassing.

The rain stops and I drop the blind to look out. It's not too bad and, given I've positioned myself for including Meldon Hill, I set out at 0800.

At first I follow road, track and road again to the dam. I manage to cross the very top of it before the pull up Meldon Hill. I take a slow pace and drop in and out a series of tiresome fissures carved through the peat. Nearing the summit I find one that heads in my direction and I welcome not having to climb in and out of peat ridden bog.

I rest near the summit and the day, which has up to now been clear, transcends as cloud blows in and separates me from the view. I make the remains of the trig

point around 1030 without the use of GPS. I check it anyhow and find the grid reference does not quite tally. The cloud blows through for a moment and I see an alternative top which I make my way over too. It is formed by a series of bevelled out rocks, all holding water, and what looks to be the remains of a low level shelter.

I head back on the reverse of the bearing I ascended on. I drop out of the cloud and reckon it will be easier to drop to the north end of the reservoir. I descend, then catch sight of the dam and have a change of heart.

The going is boggy, windy with frequent rain in the air. I'm pleased to make the dam and get back to Hugo around 1215 whereupon I decide to head home via a call at my friend Jeanette's house in South Normanton. Jeanette has been ill for some years and has recently moved, with her mother, to live with her sister and brother-in-law. There's no signal on my phone, to warn of my proposed arrival, so I drive to where I'd spied a phone box. Like most BT payphones it no longer takes coins. I get my credit card out and follow the instructions. "1. Lift Receiver. 2. Swipe your credit or debit card in the card reader." Instruction 2 is where they got me (instruction 1 I managed) – there's no card reader, the coin slot is barred over but the LCD display is working and there is a dial tone. Outfoxed I drive on and pull up at the next phone box. Before opening the door I peer through the side window. The LCD display is active, there's a sign showing no coins accepted and the familiar story of how to swipe one's credit card in the non-existent card reader. Also of note are the knee high stinging nettles that have grown up inside the phone box. Nobody has been this way for awhile. I know BT are apt at stinging you and there's the old phrase "to grasp the nettle" that springs to mind, but this is overdoing it a bit.

Outdone, and with still no signal on my mobile, I drive to Jeanette's to be welcomed by her family and amply fed. I make it home at just before midnight.

Sweating it out on an Otter Day

It's the evening of Saturday 28th September and I'm parked up on the streets of Bakewell feeling decidedly grotty. A sore throat has neatly progressed to a cold and a cricked neck is rounding the proceedings off quite neatly. I had been aiming for Kettlewell but, after a visit to my friend Jeanette (poorly with cancer) in South Normanton, I took the shortest route into the Peak District and stopped. I cheer myself with fruit, Uncle Bens Long Grain Rice, paracetamol, vitamin C and the Likely Lads complete box set collection of DVDs to play on my camper van's DVD player.

The BBC euphemistically describes them as "Surviving Episodes" for which can be read, "the ones they did not wipe because they needed the video tape for something else". And they go on to state that due to the archive nature of the material it might not be in the best of nick. For which can be read, "episodes that people had recorded at home on early video tape machines".

When I grew up I was led to believe that the BBC was a great, revered, institution not prone to mistakes and ITV was only something that people in what we'll describe as the poorer areas of town watched. Having an interest in 1960s TV I'm finding the stuff shown on ITV has survived in much better condition than the BBC's. The BBC has even lost eleven minutes of the second half of the 1966 World Cup Final. I kid you not – I've had my stopwatch out. Either that or the referee made a horrendous mistake. Of course our German cousins would say that he did make a horrendous mistake in that final but there again with 20 million war dead that Russian Linesman's flag was only going in one direction.

I wake on the Sunday morning feeling well enough to drive but not well enough to do the walk I'd planned from Kettlewell. Instead I take a very leisurely drive on to the Lake District parking up at Greendale with a plan to do the mountains to its north. I have a guide booked to do Pillar and its confounded rock on Tuesday. Originally scheduled for Wednesday the guide, on checking the weather forecast brought this forward a day. This leaves me in a quandary – I'm not well but there might only be two days of good weather this week and I have three walks left in the Lake District to complete all its 2000ft mountains.

I wake on the Monday morning, dry mouthed, runny nosed and a bit achy. I get myself going, take paracetamol, a decongestant and vitamin C and top that off with an orange, an apple and a bowl of porridge. This had me feeling well enough for making a start, at 0815, up the path to Greendale Tarn. The weather is good, a bit of cloud but lots of blue sky. I'm wearing a thermal top, fleece and waterproof and I'm sweating out this cold. I soon meet the descending stream and catch a sight I've never seen before. Between a series of rock pools, which the water gushes over, an otter slinks its way. Head, body, tail, head, body, tail as its shiny brown coat, cute face and whiskers slips between the pools. By the time I've extracted my camera it had gone but a wonderful memory nonetheless.

At the tarn I head northwest for the steep incline to Seatallan's back where I take the easier ascent to its summit. I check the guidebook and it suggests if you can see Haycock head straight for it. This does not appear great advice as that looks a very steep angle. On closer inspection it gives a more detailed route by its eastern flank. I drop to the saddle and start my ascent and start to feel quite poorly. I pop in more pills, drink more water and press on. I reach the summit at 1230, a reasonable timing to take in the final three. I follow the stone wall, in a cool wind, that graces the ridge first taking in Little Lower Gowder Crag then Caw Fell (where I'm on the wrong side of the wall for the summit cairn and have a body challenging climb over it). Then it's Iron Crag, stretching out in the distance on a north-westerly spur which involves a steep drop. The pull-up is painful; I'm shaking and staggering like a drunk. The wall is my guide then becomes my nemesis as I have to climb it again to tag the summit cairn.

I slip down and rest. The views are wonderful but I feel grot and am at the farthest point of the day. I'm now bucketing sweat and reduce my torso clothing to just thermal top and waterproof. I follow the wall back to where it turns sharply towards Haycock. Fortunately there is a stile here and I'm soon on the other side looking at the descent into Blengdale valley. I take a bearing to what I think will be free from the bog of the floor of its valley. With compass paraded in front of me its needle swings violently, not at all directing me to what I can visually see as the route. I round it down to my mobile phone in my breast pocket, lower it to my trouser pocket and head off.

The descent is rugged but easy and I cross the beck and start on the path to take me around to the road and the short walk back to Hugo (my campervan). However, after about an hour of ascent, with no letup to the uphill ahead, I start to wonder what's wrong. I check my GPS and find I'm ascending towards Buckbarrow which although above my campervan would offer no way to descend. So I have to backtrack, in a sorry state, ill, angry and frustrated with myself to find the path which sweeps me around to the road.

The road is narrow, single tracked and quiet. One car passes me, a Suzuki Jeep. I don't hear it and it whistles by me just centimetres from my left hip. If I'd staggered at that point the driver would probably have been looking at a prison sentence.

I arrive back at the campervan after ten hours and put myself into recovery mode. I'd not peed all day. I take on liquids, wash, eat porridge and fruit and take a restless night.

In the morning I move on to Wasdale Head, meeting Iain Gallagher at 0900 to climb Pillar Rock. Iain, a paid guide, has been recommended to me by John Hutchinson (both former members of the Patterdale Mountain Rescue). There are a few forms to fill in before we share out the equipment.

"Do you want to carry the rope or the metalwork?" he asks. I pick up both sets, announcing the cold and asthma I explain I'm weighing up both sets to find the lightest. He sounds okay about it but does say that if I'd wanted him to carry everything there might have needed to have been a rethink.

We set off, I'm blatantly slow. I can't find a pace and need frequent rests as my body complains at what I'm doing to it. The wind is blustery and we both hope that Pillar Rock will be sheltered enough for an ascent. Iain soon realises that I'm struggling and takes the rope off me with no reference to his earlier point about carrying everything. This does help but I still need frequent rests as we take the path until Robinson's Cairn comes into view. Here we rest for lunch before the terrain gets more entertaining. The cairn takes an hour then another hour around to Pillar Rock. It looks daunting. A protruded blade with a deep split making the summit look even more exposed. We kit up (or in fact Iain kits me up) and I'm instructed on how to extract the protection, and clip it to my harness, as I follow him up on the rope. The wind whistles through the helmet and I soon take it off, add a headscarf before clipping it back into place.

Iain gives me three instructions – never stand on the rope, always do exactly what he tells me and not to drop any of the metalwork. The latter is easily dealt with as I casually say I'll pay for anything I lose. He gives me a glance, "Thanks, I appreciate that."

So we set off, a simple walk around to the first bit of ascent. Iain goes ahead and ropes up, I climb to meet him. We are then on what is known as 'the slab'. This is one of the most dangerous parts as a slip here will likely do more damage than a Suzuki Jeep. Then it's another climb, a bit of level, a climb around a ledge before the main vertical ascent to the summit.

I have done rock climbing before and I've always hovered between fear and exhilaration. Well, petrified and demented euphoria might be a better description. But this time I feel very little, I don't once feel fear and the steep drops to the ground far below do not register as anything other than a view. I think the fact Iain talks me through every step, explains what is going on keeps my composure. The hardest part was removing what are called the 'nuts' that Iain slots into various cracks to clip the rope into.



Ascending Pillar Rock

Iain shakes my hand at the top and takes a photo. We descend, Iain remaining above me so I just have to get myself to various platforms and await his descent. It crosses my mind that for £150 a day he's free climbing on my behalf. Somehow it doesn't feel fair; I'm getting the better deal.

As I am lowered back to the slab the harness catches me in a place that any fellow male would appreciate as a little uncomfortable. With my full body weight resting on a testicle I ruefully recall that extracting the nuts on the way up was a darned sight easier.

Back at the packs we stow the equipment, swing them onto our backs and make the way to the summit of Pillar itself. The descent, though long, is the easiest part of the day.

Iain tells me of a previous partner who, upon buying a house together, refused to allow him to have any of his things about the place. Coincidentally this was the very theme of an episode of *The Likely Lads* I'd watched the night before.

Back at the car park, after an eight hour round trip, we say our goodbyes and I head off to the nearby Inn for a good feed up, two pints of orange juice, and a reflection on all the worry I'd had about Pillar Rock and now done it felt like a walk in the park. Alone I'd have freaked.

I have a rough nights sleep, the weather changes and a storm blows in, rocking the van as the rain batters the roof. I sleep on and off and finally wake at just gone 0600. Only one other vehicle is in the car park; a Mazda Bongo camper which much have arrived after I'd shut up for the night. It's parked alongside me and with music now blaring I wonder, just wonder in this vast car park why parking alongside me was necessary.

I watch another Likely Lads episode then charge my laptop. Not having been able to purchase a 12 volt charging lead I have bought a small inverter which converts 12 volts from the cigarette lighter up to 240 mains AC. I reflect that somewhere in the Middle East crude oil is extracted from the ground (Mr Bongo has now moved on so I can think), piped to the coast then shipped to Britain where it is refined into diesel and, in a railway tanker, taken to a fuel depot. From here it is road tankered to a filling station where I fill up. I then trundle around with the fuel in my tank, running the engine, driving the alternator which charges the van's battery. This I then convert into 240v AC which feeds the power supply for my laptop, which promptly drops it down to 19v DC and charges the internal battery which I then use to run the laptop. Somewhere oh somewhere that must be inefficient.

I ponder some more until a school mini-bus, failing to spot the vastness of the car park, pulls alongside me and spills its contents of noisy kids who promptly surround my van as they don coats and bags and shout and scream as their teacher's voices boom loud above them. Can't a chap get a bit of peace?

I move along to the foot of Yewbarrow, hiding the "No Overnight Parking" sign as I pull up, with the plan to walk it and the mountains behind tomorrow and thus complete the 2000ft mountains of the Lake District. I wake to rain thumping on the roof, thick low cloud and a recurrence of feeling grotty. Another ten hour walk is not very appealing and, having a pass from the military to walk Mickle Fell, in the Pennines, on Saturday, perhaps foolhardy.

I take my time, set the Sat Nav for the general vicinity of where I need to head for and set off. I pay scant attention to the bigger picture and follow the narrow roads, discovering that a tall white van has the advantage of being spotted from miles off and drivers are already pulled in to passing places as I go by. This advantage lasts not long for I curse as I find myself on the Hardknott Pass. Well what I mean is parked on a steep angled bend gripping the handbrake for dear life as four cars edge past me as my traction control free camper van spins its front wheels, has me glance down at the Sat Nav that proudly displays the words "Hardknott Pass". I realise it is back heavy, the weight is off the front wheels and I'm going nowhere. I contemplate bailing out the chemi-kazi in an attempt to achieve better weight distribution but in the end I manage a three-point turn and cover old ground

After a stop for lunch in a pub, which mistakes my salad order to include "no tomatoes" as "add extra tomatoes" I'm looking, in thick mist, for a place to park on the B6276. This is not only for Mickle Fell on Saturday but also for Bink Moss tomorrow. I drive back and forth, contemplating the best farm gate pull-ins where I could leave room for the farmers and military and not be disturbed. In all it's five hours since I left Wasdale Head, I'm fed up, full of cold, tired and knowing I have to go back to The Lakes to finish off doesn't help my mood.

I finally find a wide enough gate, batten down the hatches (i.e. pull all screens and blinds) and while away the evening, with reading and The Likely Lads, while the rain batters the roof.

I manage to sleep well and come round to an old school friend giving a radio interview. I recall his first, back in 1981 when we were studying for our 'O' Levels, he phoned into a BBC Radio Bristol programme about school revision.

The radio weather forecast promises that the rain will pass. At just after 1100 I decide to wait no longer and drive the short distance to the track that leads part way up Bink Moss. The gateway is narrow and I pull in close to the edge so farm

vehicles can get through. The front wheels start to spin, no transaction-control. Instead of seeing how stuck I am I decide that this is parked enough and set off at 1135.

It's a trudge up the track of loose stone. The rain is persistent, I feel damp and absent of enjoyment. The track has been extended so after about an hour I break onto wet, heather clad ground on a compass bearing in thick mist. There are a number of candidates for the summit and I walk them all and then break off to the corner of a fence. If I'd followed the guidebook I'd have approached from the north and from here I follow its instructions of a hundred yards on a bearing. I reach one of the humps I'd already visited which involves a pair of old wellington boots with one slipped over a post.

Once off the heather the track is an easy walk to the campervan. I open the gate to give me room to launch myself out of the rut. With a few spins and glides I get through and sort myself out.

I drive to Brough and find a nice café for an omelette. They get the order spot on, no tomato. The place has a religious flavour and advertises a Christian Motorcycling Association. Judging by how some motorcyclists ride on these moorland roads the club could certainly bring one closer to God.

I wake early on Saturday October 5th and phone the guardroom at the local barracks. I have a permit to walk onto military land to ascend Mickel Fell. The guard room checks my permit number, contact phone numbers, car number and wishes me well. No British inefficiency in this neck of the woods.



I drive along to the county boundary, between Durham and Cumbria, park up and am walking at around 0720. The ground is sodden and little trodden. I follow a fence (precise military instructions – which includes not standing on anything that looks like it might explode) in mist that burns through to reveal Mickel Fell. There are streams to cross and marshy ground to circumnavigate. I pass Little Fell which I failed to get permission to do. It'll have to wait for another day.

As I make the final approach the mist sweeps in and I have to take a compass bearing to find the summit. In all it takes three hours, the route back takes about the same - a descent on wet pathless, terrain turns out to be no quicker than the

ascent. Though I did follow the wrong fence at one stage – being a choice of two at a junction I naturally took the wrong one and wandered off course. Fortunately I sorted myself out before being spotted by any military. Back at the campervan I wash, change and drive to get a signal to phone the guardroom and tell them I'm clear before heading home.

Totals to date: 223 out of 254

2014

July the 4th and I'm laid in the back of Hugo at 473m on the Cumbria, Yorkshire border. I'm attempting to get things dry and reflecting on the last few days. I've just listened to France getting knocked out of the World Cup by the Germans, noting a Wimbledon final will not feature Andy Murray and saddened by the actions of a childhood idol, Rolf Harris, who today has been sentenced to a fairly lenient five years and nine months in prison. A series of negatives shows my frame of mind, I could have said Germany have won through to the semi-finals, Federer has reached his ninth Wimbledon final and justice has been done in that a paedophile, who hid behind his celebratory status, had justly been brought to justice.

Things started on Wednesday with packing Hugo (my campervan) and discovering that my compass, last used on my cross-Scotland walk in May, was nowhere to be found. I felt lost without it (pun intended) and after pulling many things apart I have brought my well worn Munro-bagging compass for its first run out in thirteen years. Another sense of loss is a shaven head, admittedly this did not take long, but I figure a bald head with a tan may be preferable to the uneven growth that nature has left me with.

Yesterday, Thursday, I set off from home and, with a last minute change of plan, decided to head for the Lake District instead of Yorkshire. With just one Lakeland walk left I'd have spent the week debating when to drive over to do it so instead I decided to get it out of the way. I set off at around 0700 and by the time I reached the M5 I was fit for not much more than a sleep in a motorway service station. What with fines for staying more than two hours I set an alarm and slept for just over an hour. I took the rest of the trip at a gentle pace. Cumbria was overcast yet pleasant but the number of closed down filling stations, joining the long list of former pubs, was very notable. I arrived at Wasdale Head in the late afternoon, parked up and slept for three hours, before moving to park where I'd stopped last year but abandoned the walk due to a heavy cold.

It rained during the night and I set off at 0720 in a downpour. Visibility was poor and shielded me from the steep view I'd surveyed yesterday. I made Yewbarrow and then its North Top in less than two hours before dropping, in howling, wild wet conditions, to the col before Red Pike. My jacket let water and my over trousers were far from doing a good job. I wore a hat and had my hood up, so much for trying to get a tan on the old onion. I clambered through some boulders, slipped and jabbed my left knee hard against a rock. Yelping with pain I staggered to a halt. After a suitable amount of jumping around and cursing I pressed on, the rain pummelling against my jacket hood as the wind ripped the warmth from me. I stopped to try and put gloves on but my hands were so wet and numb that the lining buckled against them.

I made the desolate tops of Red Pike, Scoat Fell and close navigated, in worsening conditions, to Steeple. Here, with the rain in my face, I back tracked for Black Crag. The visibility was akin to peering down a milk bottle and the rain smacked my eye, stinging like grains of sand being shot blasted against me. The

only saving grace was that I felt fit, a cross Scotland walk in May has at least prepared my body and made my day pack feel light.

I find the descent point into Mosedale via the aptly named Wind Gap. Everything was now wet; I'm soaked through to the skin. Water has got into my map case and penetrated the acetate covering on my map. I watched the ink blur and run and pressed on as the map disappeared as fast as I could cover the ground it portrayed.

Rounding a boulder the wind smacked me so hard I was thrown back. My hands sunk into pools of water as I righted myself and carried on the trudge through the scree running wild with water.

I got to the Wasdale Head around 1500. I made use of the hand dryer in the loo but still managed to flood out the area in which I sat. I enjoyed a welcome cauliflower cheese bake and chips before braving the weather once more for the two miles back to Hugo. Half a mile short a transit van pulled up, I protest my sodden condition but I was literally dragged aboard as an Irish family took pity on me. At the campervan I changed into dryer things, arranged essential wet gear in the foot well, turned on the heater full blast and, with the window down an inch, drove over to Yorkshire with a smarting left eye.

So I'm laid in the back of Hugo at 473m on the Cumbria, Yorkshire border and I hope to finish the 2000ft mountains of England on the trip. A guided walk awaits on the 12th to bag Little Fell, the last on military land, so it's down to me how many of the remainder I can finish by then.

Saturday the 5th has me waking to the sounds of easing rain then silence. I lower the blinds and look out onto low cloud that has the hint of lifting. I turn on my radio and listen to a promising forecast and the news that the Tour de France is due to begin in Yorkshire this morning.

I get walking at 0830, backtracking a few hundred meters before following the handy track towards Blea Gills. I stop short and head east to meet the ridge then the summit of Great Coum at 1030. The cloud is lifting and I enjoy good views towards the Howgills. I backtrack and follow the ridge south taking in Green Hill before the boggy crossing to Gragareth where I touch the trig point and the fledgling summit cairn on what appears to be higher ground. I take a sharp north-easterly descent back towards the road. It's tough going with an escarpments and gullies to negotiate.

I reach Hugo at 1350, make myself lunch and do essential housekeeping, such as hanging my sodden underpants, from yesterday, over the door mirror to dry.

I'm back walking again at 1415, looking for the path which leads to Whernside. It's a little elusive and not as enthusiastic as the cartographer's pen. With use of my GPS I locate it and press on up, passing grazing sheep and stone walls until I reach a cairn where the ground levels out taking me to the summit trig point. I'm wearing my jacket from Friday to try and dry it off as I sit in a damp horseshoe open shelter where bits of dried food and rubbish do little for the ambience. Standing up I enjoy the views to Ingleborough and the Ribbleshead Viaduct on the railway between Dent and Ribbleshead.

Closer at hand is a path which, in hill walking terms is a motorway connecting the Yorkshire Three Peaks. The descent takes around an hour with my right knee deciding to make some serious protests. Bemused sheep gaze upon me as I roll up my trousers and adjust my strapping.

I wake on Sunday the 6th to a dry day. I'd planned my remaining walks yesterday evening; working out the routes and the roads between to cover the least ground by foot and campervan.

I set off from the high parking space and, after stopping to take on water from a stream, take the B road to Capel-le-Dale and am walking at 0845 for the classic summit of Ingleborough. I struggle across the well laid path and figure it's possibly the heat. I was quicker in the downpour of the Lake District. A sharp pull onto the summit ridge and the well worn summit, at 1055, has the sense that this is a special place for many. Others are around and it's one of those few mountains that feel like a pilgrimage. A quadrangle summit shelter, with a plaque celebrating the Queen's coronation, adorns the top.

I rest awhile, take in the views before heading east for the lesser top of Simon Fell which I reach at 1155 before an easy hour and a quarter walk back to the campervan where I survey the maps and, with the bit between my teeth, I figure to take in Drumaldrace and Dodd Fell Hill. A tricky U turn later and I'm heading towards Hawes, passing signs warning of delays due to the Tour de France which passed through yesterday. In Hawes there's signs for "TDF Parking".

A high climb, for Hugo not me, has me parked for the short stroll up Drumaldrace where the view is broken by paragliders and a large chalk bicycle carved into the hills opposite. Wiltshire has its white horses, Dorset the Cerne Giant with Yorkshire now more up to date with a bicycle carved into the hill. Which county will be the first to carve a motor car I wonder?

Back at Hugo I drive for a kilometre and park at the gated road to Cam Houses. I could drive on but the road looks very narrow and I worry that there might not be a place to turn. I walk the mile to the second gate and turn north west across boggy ground for a leg gruelling pull to the summit of Dodd Fell Hill where the views are extensive, the wind blustery, warm and the clouds sit motionless in the sky.

In guidebook terms I've just rolled two days into one and, with, at the latest, having to return home a week today, I have a small chance of finishing the English 2000ft mountains on this trip.

The evening is spent relaxing in Hugo and I watch, bemused, as a gathering of cows take more interest in the campervan than I feel healthy. When it came to licking the bonnet I banged the wall and they duly departed. Until, that is, around 0400 when they decide it's a bright idea to lean against the van while brushing along its side. Another bang on the side and they move on and I lay awake as a shower blows in.

I get going, on July 7th, around 0900, avoiding the present one of the cows has deposited by Hugo's rear door, and drive around to Yockenthwaite. The walk up the hill, to Yockenthwaite Moor, looks menacing as the grey skies cast their gloom, and drop their rain, across the hillside. I drive on and take a different approach from the B6160 after first admiring the road based graffiti willing Chris Froome on then wondering, given the gradient, where the encouragement for Hugo was coming from.

I'm walking at a shade before 0950 noting that my starts are getting later by the hour by the day. Ground nesting birds take off and complain at my presence. It's an easy pull up a sun baked track followed by a cold westerly trudge across ankle grabbing heather and squelchy ground. I reach the summit cairn and slump with

my back to it and admire the views. The return walk is equally as tough, not helped by wandering too far north and having to correct on a compass bearing. In all it takes four hours and I figure that's enough for today. I could push on for another but there's a danger of getting very tired.



The Yorkshire spirit



Support for Chris Froome

I drive to Buckden, admiring the road graffiti again and the entrepreneurship of a local farmer attempting to charge £30 per day to park in his field, in the hope of a pub lunch. Bunting is being removed and one has the sense that the passing "Le Tour" will be remembered for many years to come. I object to the £2.50 charge at the car park and try a lane for size, no parking and a stream of traffic takes up a frustrating few minutes. Back at Buckden I find a pub car park and wander into the adjoining pub.

"Are you still serving food?" I ask.

"We stopped five minutes ago," says the barmaid.

The landlady, spotting that perhaps I'd not spent all my money parking in a farmer's field, interrupts saying they are sure they can do something for me.

"Anything vegetarian?" I ask.

This causes a multitude of confusion. Normally the declaration of vegetarian simplifies things to just one or two menu options. But I sense this has really put a spanner in the works.

"Well, we could do you a cheese and onion sandwich."

"With chips?" I know how to push my luck. A glance between barmaid and landlady confirms that this is within the realms of possibility.

So I eat outside and watch the confines of a small village with its tight parking and too many people in a small space. My friend Rona recently lent me a book on introverts (she has me sussed). I found it very validating, we just like to be alone and pop out when we feel like it and when everything then does not go quite to plan it's quite frustrating. Actually I think Rona had me sussed from my late teenage years as her and our mutual friend Peter Wanless (who I incidentally heard on the radio this morning with his NSPCC hat on), named a fish after me in our local pub. This fish was a shy sort; whilst all the other fish would be out and about this little chap hid behind things and just once in awhile came out and had a swim around. So "Steve the fish" it was christened in honour of the fact they'd not see me in the pub for ages then just once in awhile I'd show up, enjoy the evening then disappear again for weeks on end.

I leave Buckden behind and head south hoping for a nice parking space. I reach Kettlewell so decide to drive high up on the moor where I find an empty view point, with ample parking, where I can be alone. Bliss. Well that is until 1900 when a herd of cows and bulls descend upon me. These buggers have horns and notably bigger than last night's. One horns the edge of the van, I sound my horn and a few momentarily leap back. One flattens my passenger door mirror (now devoid of underpants) against the bodywork and sets about giving himself a head massage against. Another goes for the flannel drying on my driver's side windscreen wiper while the socks on the other has another fondly extending its tongue towards. I try the washers, forgetting this activates the wipers so I watch my socks and flannel being wetted and whizzed from side to side. At the rear door another pokes his head in, held back by his horns. I grab for my walking shoes, sunning themselves by his feet, while his neighbours give a low call; presumably to summon some more of the bastards. I've had enough and clamber into the driver's seat, start the engine and drive off. Cyclists approach from the opposite direction and survey, with some bewilderment, a man driving a white campervan with socks and flannel attached to the windscreen wipers. Thank God it wasn't my undies otherwise I might have been mistaken for a Frenchman having lost his way on the Tour de France.



I park about a mile from the incident and continue to read my book. After about an hour and a half I hear the low call of a cow. Up the road one of them is trotting towards me. I suspect the low call is cow-speak for "Found the bugger" for in no time I am surrounded again with this time one licking my tax disc through the windscreen. I set off back to my original parking place and get an hour's rest bite before they gather around me again. They are more determined this time and decide the grass is greener under the van. With horns bashing the underside they begin to munch. I pull forward a hundred yards and clear a cattle grid. They stand and stare with astonished looks of "Is it something we said?" across their faces.

I wake early on the 8th and set off walking at 0700 and, in calm refreshing weather, reach the summit trig point of Great Whernside at 0815. My knees are behaving but my right hernia is very painful. From here I look back towards Hugo and pick my route beyond to the distant Buckden Pike. I start the walk back, top up with water at Hugo then start the ascent to Buckden Pike, first over Tor Mere

Top then on past the memorial to five Polish airmen who were killed on this spot on 31/11/1942.



The Polish war memorial

The heavens now open and the walk to the summit is business like with a quick pat of the trig point and the cairn before heading back. Fortunately the wind is calm so the rain falls on me instead of being blasted at me. A few claps of thunder have me tucked in close to the wall that traces my descent. At Hugo I am drenched to the skin again, instead of changing I drive to Kettlewell and have a pub lunch in the hope I can dry out. It's still early, the walk so far having taken around five hours. With time on my side I drive round to Litton and, at 1415 in the dry, take the bridleway onto the high ground of Birks Fell. The trig point at the southeast end of the ridge is slightly lower than the rise at the northwest end. I follow the wall to it, admiring as I do a high sided open stone structure, presumably giving cover for grouse shooters. A female grouse leads me away from her chicks, I try to say I'm not her predator but alas she is not taking chances. I make the summit at 1615 before the easy descent back to Litton.

I drive round to where the Pennine Way crosses the minor road west of Litton where I park up, watch lambs master the art of crossing a cattle grid, watch a proud mother grouse out with her brood and listen to Germany thrash Brazil by seven goals to one.

I wake early to a couple of sheep head butting Hugo. A bang on the window does nothing to deter them and only by opening the rear door and having a quiet word do they move on.

I'm on the go at 0725 climbing up part of the Pennine Way in a fresh breeze with clouds gliding across the sky. With extensive views I take in Fountain Fell and its south top. My right hernia becomes very painful and I walk with my right hand tucked into my underpants holding the whole affair at bay. I find if I hold it in for a few minutes I get about half an hour of relief.

With a weak mobile signal I email work and ask for the weather forecast for the Horton in Ribblesdale area. I'm in two minds whether to do another hill or two this afternoon or instead rest up and complete this area tomorrow before taking in the Howgills on Friday and the final peak, Little Fell, on Saturday. With the email sent I drop and follow the walls to the summit of trig point summit of Darnbrook Fell at 0955. With years of erosion the foundations of the trig point are exposed to a depth of about a meter.



Darnbrook Fell

I back track and pick up the promising weather forecast at the junction with the Pennine Way before the descent back to Hugo and an afternoon of lazing around, enjoying the sun and reading. I note that those doing the Pennine Way file through within an hours window, the rest of the day I have the place to myself.

I wake early on the 10th, the temperature has dropped and I switch on the heater as I make slow progress with getting ready for the day ahead. Dropping the

blinds I find the sky a perfect, cloudless deep rich blue with. I drive for about a mile and am walking, on another section of the Pennine Way at 0705. It's a good track then path across fields before the rocky, sharp ascent of Pen-y-ghent.



Pen-y-ghent

I make the top at 0810 and get chatting to three guys walking the Yorkshire Three Peaks. I press on to Plover Hill and, at 0845, find myself fiddling around amongst the walls and stiles before I locate a small pile of stones which mark the summit. The views are extensive, the day is warming up fast, and I enjoy looks across to Ingleborough and Whernside.

On my way back I meet a multitude of people on the Pennine Way or the Three Peaks. The rock begins to throw back the baking heat and I'm pleased for my early start in the cooler weather. I'm back at Hugo at 1050, wash and set off leaving this beautiful area behind. I find 'A' Road parking near the start of the Howgills and miss the solitude of the last few days.

The highlight of the afternoon involves helping the landlady of the nearby Cross Keys rescue a sheep that has strayed onto the road. I enquire about the sign for food and am told, in a manner I take as a hint, that "One needs to book."

I call my parents in the evening. Dad answers.

"Hi Dad, it's Steve."

"Who?"

"Steve, your son."

"I still don't recognise you."

"It's Steve, your son."

"Oh, Steve."

Lord help me.

I wake at 0500 on the 11th of July with an upset stomach. Undeterred for my penultimate walk I'm off walking at 0620 for the seven peaks of the Howgills. I cross the narrow footbridge over the River Rawthey and take the attractive path that sweeps around below the Cautley Spout, a waterfall. It now becomes a steady climb with a branch off to Yarlside, my first peak of the day. It's good progress, 0805 and the sun is beginning to bake. I'm carrying two litres of water which I begin to eek out as I survey the panoramic views which include the Lake District in the distance.

I pass over Kensgriff before the drop then very hot ascent to Randygill Top. It's 0930 and I can see a stream I'll be crossing in the floor of the valley so, as I descend, I drink all my water followed by another litre at the stream before refilling my bottles.

It's now a long gentle climb, on an excellent path, towards the trig point of The Calf. It's 1145, I'm probably only half way and I've taken well over five hours. I head out towards Bush Howe and Fell Head at 1300, it's still warm but some cloud cover has taken the baking element away from the day. The views, in the warm breeze, from here are stunning and best summed up by a recording I make from the summit.

There's the M6 and these are the hills that make their dramatic appearance overshadowing it. I've travelled that road many times and have admired these hills and now I'm actually on them. Over there is the Lake District in all its glory and where a week ago today I got drenched. It's a beautiful day. There are many parts to the English mountains but this is the crowded area and I've got three left to do. Two today and one tomorrow. So really this day is so beautiful I've been gifted this to have a good look around to see what I've done and what I've achieved and I might well not be back. I want to go on and do all the 2000ft mountains of the British Isles which means there is going to be very little time to revisit any of these hills. So I doubt I'll be back on this spot so it's good to have a look around. Really good.

I retrace to The Calf then head out on its south easterly spur taking in Bram Rigg Top, by deviating from the path, then Calders at 1450. From here I follow the fence before the unnervingly steep descent back towards the stream feeding the River Rawthey. I arrive back at Hugo at 1650, ten and a half hours out and I'm very hot, sticky and tired. I wash then drive over to Hilton for the chance to do Little Fell tomorrow.

As Little Fell is on military land I have booked on a guided walk, organised by Simon Wilson of the North Pennines AONB Partnership. A group of eighteen of us gather, including myself and chap called Ian who is about to complete his 2000ft English mountains. I'm here to complete them but have also already done the Welsh. As it's military land there's a safety briefing.

"And," says Simon bringing matters to a close, "as it's a non-firing day there won't be any bangs."

"Unless one treads on something," I add.

It gets a laugh.

The land is seldom trod so the pull up to Little Fell is heavy with vegetation and in blazing heat. We are a mix of ages so progress is slow, something I appreciate as I feel the effects of the Howgills of yesterday. I'd wound myself up about them, a

dauntingly long walk. However, I'm pleased to have pressed on and done them and pleased to have doubled up some days during the week to allow this day, where I don't have to worry about map and compass, to be enjoyed with companions.

We make the trig point, two meters short of the summit where we rest for lunch. Then it's compass and GPS, supplied by Simon's colleague Alistair, to find the true summit. We are each asked to collect a rock to build a small cairn to mark it. I watch a line of people each add their rock.

"It's like a Jewish funeral," I quip.

Ian asks me to take a photograph, after much lining up, using his sophisticated camera, I press the button.

"Memory card full," I exclaim.

It gets a good laugh. The rest of us then add our rocks and as I add mine that's it. I've completed all the mountains of England. Or so I thought...



The summit of Little Fell



Totals to date: 254 out of 254

2018

It's March 2018 and, after just returning from a walking trip to New Zealand, I start to plan my summer trip to continue to bag the Scottish 2000ft to 3000ft mountains – my new project since completing the Nuttalls.

A chance look at the Nuttalls website informs me that, since completing, Long Fell, Tinside Rigg and Calf Top have been promoted and Bram Rigg Top demoted.

Totals to date: 253 out of 256

It's now May the 26th and I'm on my way home from Scotland after a successful three week trip bagging Corbetts, Grahams and Donalds. I've just done ten consecutive days and am feeling fit. I've slept on the edges of the Warcop military ranges (and been kept company by rifle fire, shells and machine guns). It's now 0610 and the military website promises me there's no firing today.

I follow the track, noting the signs to keep to the rights of way. There's also a sign saying that there might be the odd bit of ordnance around that might kill me. I make a note to go careful.

The track starts out well but, due to the lack of access days, soon dwindles to a faint path. The more often trod sheep paths fool me and I find myself rather confused and on land that is technically out of bounds. In fact technically out of bounds is the order of the day because Long Fell and Tinside Rigg are off path and really should not be visited. However, given the early hour I doubt there will be many MOD Police about.

It's a very windy day, but there's enough blue sky to make it warm and sunny as I wend my way back onto a track that's marked on my map. This is the final pull towards Long Fell. A fence, with a red and white 'Out of Bounds' sign, sings in the wind.

I reach the summit of Long Fell at 0850. My GPS is spot on at NY768192 and 2047ft. I compass off to Tinside Rigg, arriving 0905. There are a few remnants of exploded shells to keep me company, other than a few sheep I'm on my own.

I make better navigation for the descent, admiring the craggy lines of rock and deep gullies that guide me, via a few tree plantations, back to the busy A66.

It's now 1050 and I was planning to do Calf Top tomorrow, starting from Barbon. It looks to be a long walk on an easy gradient. I drive down and look for a decent phone signal (to call Margaret, my partner) and a good Radio Five Live signal to listen to this evening's Champions League Final between Liverpool and Real Madrid.

I take the minor road up Barbondale and get reasonable radio reception but no phone signal. From the highpoint of the road I look at the OS Map then look at the terrain. For two and a half mile walk, up a very steep gradient, I can bag this peak.

I take minimum kit, no water, food or pack. Instead I eat and drink plenty and set off at 1430 at a blistering pace, in very windy conditions, following a drystone wall. I ascend 380m in fifty minutes – probably near to my record.

I meet a path on the ridge for a final pull to the trig point and, at 1525, I am treated to some fine views. There's a man and a dog to greet me. I don't mention that I've just finished the English 2000ft mountains – today's mountains feel more like a formality than anything to celebrate.



Self portrait from Calf Top

I descend back the same way, arriving at the campervan at 1605. I check the road GPS, I can be back home by 2200. I set off, have a clear journey, enjoy listening to the Champions League final and surprise Margaret at 2300.

Totals to date: 256 out of 256

Appendix 1: The Walks & Mountains

Mountain	Height	Date
Allen Crag	2575ft	15/11/2008
Archy Styrigg	2280ft	18/11/2011
Atkinson Pike	2772ft	11/04/2012
Backstone Edge	2293ft	17/11/2012
Bannerdale Crag	2241ft	11/04/2012
Base Brown	2119ft	18/11/2006
Baugh Fell	2224ft	07/06/2012
Bellbeaver Rigg	2034ft	12/06/2013
Bink Moss	2031ft	04/10/2013
Birkhouse Moor	2356ft	05/05/2011
Birks	2041ft	05/05/2011
Birks Fell	2001ft	08/07/2014
Black Crag	2717ft	04/07/2014
Black Fell	2178ft	05/06/2013
Black Sails	2444ft	24/04/2011
Bleaklow Head	2077ft	11/04/2004
Blencathra	2848ft	11/04/2012
Bloodybush Edge	2001ft	03/06/2013
Bowfell	2959ft	20/04/2011
Bowfell North Top	2841ft	20/04/2011
Bowscale Fell	2303ft	11/04/2012
Bram Rigg Top (i)	2205ft	11/07/2014
Brandreth	2346ft	06/04/2012
Branstree	2339ft	28/04/2011
Branstree North East Top	2208ft	28/04/2011
Brim Fell	2612ft	24/04/2011
Broad Crag	3064ft	19/11/2005
Buckden Pike	2303ft	08/07/2014
Bullman Hills	2001ft	11/06/2013
Burnhope Seat	2450ft	08/06/2013
Bush Howe	2044ft	11/07/2014
Calders	2211ft	11/07/2014
Calf (The)	2218ft	11/07/2014
Calf Top	2000ft	26/05/2018
Carl Side	2447ft	16/11/2007
Carrock Fell	2165ft	12/04/2012
Catstye Cam	2920ft	26/04/2011
Causey Pike	2090ft	20/11/2010
Caw Fell	2264ft	30/09/2013
Chapelfell Top	2306ft	09/06/2013
Cheviot (The)	2674ft	01/06/2013
Clough Head	2382ft	25/04/2011
Codale Head	2395ft	18/04/2011
Cold Fell	2037ft	04/06/2013
Cold Pike	2300ft	22/04/2011
Cold Pike Far West Top	2198ft	22/04/2011
Cold Pike West Top	2241ft	22/04/2011
Comb Fell	2139ft	01/06/2013
Combe Door Top	2218ft	15/11/2008
Combe Head	2411ft	15/11/2008
Coniston Old Man	2634ft	24/04/2011

Crag Hill	2753ft	20/11/2010
Crinkle Crags	2818ft	22/04/2011
Crinkle Crags South Top	2736ft	22/04/2011
Cross Fell	2930ft	19/11/2011
Cushat Law	2018ft	03/06/2013
Dale Head	2470ft	20/11/2004
Darnbrook Fell	2047ft	09/07/2014
Dead Stones	2329ft	08/06/2013
Dodd (Buttermere)	2103ft	04/04/2012
Dodd (The) (Nenthead)	2014ft	07/06/2013
Dodd Fell Hill	2192ft	06/07/2014
Dollywaggon Pike	2815ft	05/05/2011
Dove Crag	2598ft	02/03/2002
Dovenest Top	2073ft	15/11/2008
Dow Crag	2552ft	24/04/2011
Drumaldrace	2014ft	06/07/2014
Esk Pike	2904ft	20/04/2011
Fairfield	2864ft	02/03/2002
Fell Head	2100ft	11/07/2014
Fendrith Hill	2283ft	09/06/2013
Fiend's Fell	2080ft	06/06/2013
Fleetwith Pike	2126ft	06/04/2012
Flinty Fell	2014ft	06/06/2013
Fountains Fell	2192ft	09/07/2014
Fountains Fell South Top	2172ft	09/07/2014
Froswick	2362ft	30/04/2011
Gategill Fell Top	2792ft	11/04/2012
Glamara	2569ft	15/11/2008
Gragareth	2057ft	05/07/2014
Grasmoor	2795ft	07/04/2012
Gray Crag (Hartsop)	2293ft	02/05/2011
Great Borne	2021ft	02/04/2012
Great Calva	2264ft	12/04/2012
Great Carrs	2575ft	24/04/2011
Great Coum	2254ft	05/07/2014
Great Dodd	2812ft	25/04/2011
Great Dun Fell	2782ft	19/11/2011
Great End	2986ft	19/11/2005
Great Gable	2949ft	18/11/2006
Great Knott	2283ft	22/04/2011
Great Knoutberry Hill	2205ft	20/11/2011
Great Lingy Hill	2021ft	12/04/2012
Great Rigg	2513ft	02/03/2002
Great Shunner Fell	2349ft	03/06/2012
Great Stony Hill	2323ft	10/06/2013
Great Whernside	2310ft	08/07/2014
Green Gable	2628ft	18/11/2006
Green Hill	2060ft	05/07/2014
Green Side	2608ft	25/04/2011
Grey Crag (Sleddale)	2093ft	28/04/2011
Grey Friar	2526ft	24/04/2011
Grey Knotts	2287ft	06/04/2012
Grey Nag	2152ft	05/06/2013
Grisedale Pike	2595ft	20/11/2010
Hare Stones	2057ft	12/04/2012

Harrison Stickle	2415ft	18/04/2011
Harrop Pike	2090ft	28/04/2011
Hart Crag	2697ft	02/03/2002
Hart Side	2480ft	25/04/2011
Harter Fell (Duddon)	2142ft	17/04/2011
Harter Fell (Kentmere)	2552ft	04/05/2011
Hartsop Dodd	2028ft	02/05/2011
Harwood Common	2356ft	08/06/2013
Haycock	2615ft	30/09/2013
Hedgehope Hill	2342ft	01/06/2013
Helvellyn	3117ft	26/04/2011
Helvellyn Lower Man	3035ft	26/04/2011
Heron Pike	2008ft	02/03/2002
Heron Pike North Top	2037ft	02/03/2002
High Crag	2441ft	04/04/2012
High House Tarn Top	2244ft	15/11/2008
High Pike	2159ft	12/04/2012
High Raise (High Street)	2631ft	18/04/2011
High Raise (Langdale)	2500ft	03/05/2011
High Seat	2326ft	18/11/2011
High Spy	2142ft	20/11/2004
High Spy North Top	2080ft	18/11/2005
High Stile	2648ft	04/04/2012
High Street	2717ft	02/05/2011
High Willhays	2037ft	02/08/2002
Higher Shelf Stones	2037ft	11/04/2004
Hindscarth	2385ft	20/11/2004
Hobcarton Crag	2425ft	20/11/2010
Hobcarton End	2080ft	20/11/2010
Honister Crag	2067ft	06/04/2012
Hopegill Head	2526ft	09/04/2012
Hugh Seat	2260ft	18/11/2011
Ill Bell	2484ft	30/04/2011
Ill Crag	3068ft	19/11/2005
Ingleborough	2372ft	06/07/2014
Iron Crag	2100ft	30/09/2013
Kentmere Pike	2395ft	04/05/2011
Kidsty Pike	2559ft	03/05/2011
Killhope Law	2208ft	07/06/2013
Kinder Scout	2087ft	02/06/2012
Kirk Fell	2631ft	05/04/2012
Kirk Fell East Top	2582ft	05/04/2012
Knock Fell	2605ft	19/11/2011
Knott	2329ft	12/04/2012
Knoutberry Haw	2218ft	07/06/2012
Ladyside Pike	2306ft	09/04/2012
Lingmell	2625ft	27/04/2012
Little Calva	2106ft	12/04/2012
Little Dun Fell	2762ft	19/11/2011
Little Fell (Mallerstang)	2188ft	18/11/2011
Little Fell (Mickle Fell)	2454ft	12/07/2014
Little Gowder Crag	2405ft	30/09/2013
Little Hart Crag	2090ft	02/03/2002
Little Stand	2428ft	22/04/2011
Loadpot Hill	2201ft	13/04/2012

Loft Crag	2198ft	18/04/2011
Long Fell	2046ft	26/05/2018
Long Man Hill	2159ft	11/06/2013
Long Side	2408ft	16/11/2007
Lonscale Fell	2346ft	16/11/2007
Looking Stead (Pillar)	2057ft	05/04/2012
Looking Steads (Glaramar)	2543ft	15/11/2008
Lovely Seat	2215ft	03/06/2012
Low Saddle	2152ft	16/04/2011
Meldon Hill	2516ft	13/06/2013
Melmerby Fell	2326ft	06/06/2013
Mickle Fell	2585ft	05/10/2013
Middleboot Knotts	2306ft	27/04/2012
Middlehope Moor	2008ft	07/06/2013
Murton Fell	2215ft	18/11/2012
Nethermost Pike	2923ft	05/05/2011
Nine Standards Rigg	2172ft	05/06/2012
Pavey Ark	2297ft	18/04/2011
Pen-y-ghent	2277ft	10/07/2014
Pike of Blisco	2313ft	22/04/2011
Pike of Stickle	2326ft	18/04/2011
Pillar	2926ft	01/10/2013
Pillar Rock	2559ft	01/10/2013
Place Fell	2155ft	03/05/2011
Plover Hill	2231ft	10/07/2014
Raise	2897ft	26/04/2011
Rampsgill Head	2598ft	03/05/2011
Randygill Top	2051ft	11/07/2014
Red Beck Top	2365ft	15/11/2008
Red Pike (Buttermere)	2477ft	04/04/2012
Red Pike (Wasdale)	2710ft	04/07/2014
Red Screes	2546ft	02/03/2002
Rest Dodd	2283ft	03/05/2011
Robinson	2418ft	20/11/2004
Rogan's Seat	2205ft	04/06/2012
Rossett Pike	2136ft	20/04/2011
Rosthwaite Fell	2008ft	15/11/2008
Rough Crag	2060ft	02/05/2011
Round Hill	2251ft	11/06/2013
Round How	2431ft	27/04/2012
Sail	2536ft	20/11/2010
Sale How	2185ft	16/11/2007
Sand Hill	2480ft	09/04/2012
Sca Fell	3163ft	27/04/2011
Scafell Pike	3209ft	19/11/2005
Scar Crag	2205ft	20/11/2010
Scoat Fell	2759ft	04/07/2014
Seat Sandal	2415ft	05/05/2011
Seatallan	2274ft	30/09/2013
Seathwaite Fell	2073ft	15/11/2008
Seathwaite Fell South Top	2070ft	15/11/2008
Selside Pike	2149ft	28/04/2011
Sheffield Pike	2215ft	26/04/2011
Shelter Crag	2674ft	22/04/2011
Shelter Crag North Top	2543ft	22/04/2011

Simon Fell	2133ft	06/07/2014
Skiddaw	3054ft	16/11/2007
Skiddaw Little Man	2838ft	16/11/2007
St Sunday Crag	2759ft	05/05/2011
Starling Dodd	2077ft	02/04/2012
Steeple	2687ft	04/07/2014
Stony Cove Pike	2503ft	02/05/2011
Striding Edge	2821ft	05/05/2011
Stybarrow Dodd	2766ft	25/04/2011
Swarth Fell	2234ft	06/06/2012
Swirl How	2631ft	24/04/2011
Symonds Knott	3146ft	27/04/2011
Tarn Crag	2178ft	28/04/2011
Thack Moor	2000ft	05/06/2013
Thornthwaite Crag	2572ft	02/05/2011
Three Pikes	2136ft	10/06/2013
Thunacar Knott	2372ft	18/04/2011
Tinside Rigg	2047ft	26/05/2018
Tom Smith's Stone Top	2090ft	05/06/2013
Ullscarf	2382ft	16/04/2011
Viewing Hill	2129ft	12/06/2013
Walna Scar	2037ft	24/04/2011
Wandope	2533ft	07/04/2012
Water Crag	2192ft	04/06/2012
Westernhope Moor	2215ft	09/06/2013
Wether Hill	2198ft	13/04/2012
Wetherlam	2503ft	24/04/2011
Whernside	2415ft	05/07/2014
White Maiden	2001ft	24/04/2011
White Side (Helvellyn)	2831ft	26/04/2011
Whiteless Pike	2165ft	07/04/2012
Whiteside (Crummock)	2320ft	09/04/2012
Whiteside East Top	2359ft	09/04/2012
Wild Boar Fell	2323ft	06/06/2012
Windy Gyle	2031ft	02/06/2013
Yarlside	2096ft	11/07/2014
Yes Tor	2031ft	02/08/2002
Yewbarrow	2060ft	04/07/2014
Yewbarrow North Top	2021ft	04/07/2014
Yockenthwaite Moor	2110ft	07/07/2014
Yoke	2316ft	30/04/2011

Notes:

- (i) 12/11/2016 Bram Rigg Top demoted.