

JUST A PILE OF STONES by Roger Cave

We've all heard or read of people who've climbed, say, Scafell Pike, 365 times. In a Lakeland pub one Christmas I started chatting with a chap who was obsessed with



Fairfield. Apparently for several days running he had climbed Fairfield by every route known to Wainwright. In fact he claimed that on the day we met he had set out in the morning to climb another fell entirely, but, awakening as if from a trance, he had found to his bewilderment that he was once again standing on Fairfield's summit. Naturally I asked him what was the

fascination which continually propelled him to this particular top. He confessed that he had no idea, since all he found each time he arrived at the summit was "a pile of stones....just a pile of stones."

A Fairfield fetish seemed to me to be taking a love of the hills a little too far, and I have to confess to taking a somewhat mocking attitude to someone so afflicted. After all, if I was compiling a list of my favourite Lakeland fells, I could think of several others with a greater claim than Fairfield. Blencathra, with its thrilling ridges; Loughrigg because of its view, and because it was my first; Catbells, climbed on honeymoon and a few years later one of my sons' first tops; and so on....but Fairfield? Its attractions are much less obvious. Its height of 2863 feet doesn't get it into the Lakeland top ten, and, not being a rock climber, its eastern crags and faces hold no lure for me.

However, one evening recently I was whiling away the time by looking through the records I keep of my outings in the Lakeland fells. I decided to reckon up which one I had climbed most often, expecting the answer to be Helvellyn or Scafell Pike, or, maybe, High Street. To my astonishment the answer was Fairfield, which was what brought to my mind that brief encounter in the Ambleside pub. What on earth had compelled me up the fell so often?

FELL	HEIGHT	RANK
SCAFELL PIKE	3210	1
SCAFELL	3162	2
HELVELLYN	3118	3
SKIDDAW	3053	4
GREAT END	2984	5
BOWFELL	2960	6
GREAT GABLE	2949	7
PILLAR	2927	8
NETHERMOST PIKE	2920	9
CATSTYCAM	2917	10
ESK PIKE	2903	11
RAISE	2889	12
FAIRFIELD	2863	13

I began to think about my first visit to the top, and started to suspect that an impulse more powerful than mere chance might be responsible. It was a wet and windy haul round the Fairfield horseshoe, and the nearer we got to the top of Fairfield, the worse the visibility became. Eventually the sight of a cluster of bedraggled anoraks led us to the conclusion that one of the multiplicity of cairns was the top. One distinguishing feature sticks in my mind....

I understand the containers of a certain beverage originating from the USA can be found in the remotest Amazonian rain forests, the wastes of Antarctica, and even on the Moon. That day there was certainly one jammed in the rocks of the summit cairn of Fairfield. After a brief pause we started off in dense mist for Hart Crag. Wainwright warns that the top of Fairfield can be particularly confusing in mist, but we underrated his advice although the ground was new to us. On subsequent visits in clear visibility the mistake seems incredible. Somewhere, just before the steep part of the descent to the col between Fairfield and Hart Crag, a bearing was taken which was 180° out! Unknowingly we plodded on, albeit somewhat surprised that the descent and re-ascent between the tops was not as marked as anticipated. Eventually the cairns littering what was obviously the top came into view and suspicions began to arise. A pile of stones appeared which seemed horribly familiar from a damp twenty minutes before – the Coke can in the rocks confirmed it.

Over the next few years my records show several more visits to the top of Fairfield; sometimes alone, sometimes with friends; sometimes on repeats of the horseshoe walk, sometimes on Grisedale to Scandale traverses. One of these visits started out because I was engaged in the game of climbing all the 214 Wainwright summits and needed to add Stone Arthur to my collection. Whilst the walk up does give the opportunity to tread through places which would have been recognisable to Wordsworth, and the view over Grasmere is certainly memorable, there is the problem of what to do next. If the day stretches ahead another tour around the horseshoe is as good an answer as any. So I found myself by that pile of stones again. In such ways, over the years, the number of visits to the top was mounting unconsciously.

I recollected my most recent visit and the strengthening suspicion that something abnormal was at work made me shiver – it was another day when I had set out with no intention of climbing Fairfield at all. The objective had been, as I told my wife when I set out, to spend a morning pottering up the broad ridge leading from Deepdale over the intriguing peak of Gavel Pike, on over the top of St Sunday Crag, and back down to Ullswater. But once on the top of the Crag my feet were drawn irresistibly to the delights of tearing down the airy path to Deepdale Hause, and my hands to the opportunity to grasp the rock on the scramble up to Cofa Pike. Having accomplished that, short of retracing my steps there was little option but to go up on to Fairfield before returning down to Brotherswater. Which is what I did. Down in the valley my wife asked why the walk had taken longer than planned, and I explained the unscheduled detour to Fairfield. “What was it like up there?” she asked. Without thinking I replied, “It was okay, but it’s just a pile of stones.”

I keep turning the evidence over in my mind. Two visits to the top in one day, caused by a scale of navigational error committed neither before or since; an increasing number of haphazard visits over the years; the insinuation of Fairfield into walks in which it was not on the original itinerary. And each climb drawn to that unglamorous jumble of rocks that marks the highest point. I now feel a bond of kinship with that haunted fellow sufferer in the Ambleside inn. I wonder how many other frequenters of the Lakeland hills there are like us who would confess to being drawn repeatedly to the topmost cairn on Fairfield's plateau. What mysterious power does that pile of stones possess which seems to attract like the magnetic pole affects the needle of a compass? I think we should be told.

This piece was first published in Cumbria magazine in February 1992. Having recently re-read it, I turned again to my records of Lakeland ascents, and, lo and behold, guess which fell is still joint top of my list. Yes, it's Fairfield.

My most recent ascent was on an autumn day in September 2004, when the fell top conditions were more like those on a winter's day. Wind, cloud, rain, and cold. We crouched in one of the wind shelters on the summit, and contemplated the descent into the teeth of the gale as we sipped warm coffee from our flasks. Sometimes you do wonder why you do this. For a moment or two the mist cleared and we could see across the summit plateau to St Sunday Crag, and beyond to a patch of weak sunshine on the hills above Ullswater. And, in the foreground, there it was, the topmost point of Fairfield...still just a pile of stones.



Roger Cave