

LONG WALK TO HIGH PIKE

Ahead of me the surfaced track went up to the abandoned mine and then petered out alongside the gill which came bounding down from the heights. The rain cascaded from a uniformly grey sky and in the mists on the skyline the dark shape of Lingy Hut repeatedly appeared and disappeared from view. A solitary walker came down the track towards me. He looked like he was in his early 60s, and, like me, was in full, drenched, wet weather gear.

“Excuse me”, he said, “are you looking for mines or are you a fell walker?”

I hadn’t expected to be greeted in this way, and the question took me aback. “A fell walker” I replied; why else would I be out in this filthy weather?

He pointed up the hill to the spoil heaps. “I’ve got a book on the mine, but the adits are harder to find than I thought they would be.” He was disappointed that I wasn’t going to be able to help him. “Where are you going? The path up to the hut isn’t so bad. I went up there this morning, went in the hut, and had a cup of tea. Had a look out, and it were like the inside of a snowball, so I came down. It’s the worst week for weather me and the wife have known in fifteen years of coming to the Lakes.” Evidently his wife had decided against venturing out on such a wet day.

I explained what I was doing out there. “I’ve done the Coast to Coast,” he said, “and the West Highland Way, the Dales Way, but not the Cumbria Way. I thought of it, but reckoned I’d do the long ones first. Do you wear bifocals? It’s not easy to see out of them when they’re wet.” And off he went. I sat on a rock surrounded by quartz chippings and ate my lunch. The rain formed little puddles on the top of my rucksack. It was, in a word, wet.

What I was doing out there was the fifth leg of a walk along the Cumbria Way, from Keswick to Caldbeck, and for the fourth day in a row it was raining heavily. It had only been very cloudy when I had left Keswick with the jackdaws calling loudly in the trees in Fitz Park, and, from the path which goes around the back of Latrigg, the views across the Vale of Keswick to the Derwentwater fells were tones of green and grey.



The lowering clouds made it quite certain that it was shortly to become another wet day.



The route diverged from the tourist track to Skiddaw to contour below Lonscale Pike. A middle aged fell runner overtook me and disappeared into the mists. To the south a patch of something that might have been watery sunlight passed over the slopes of Clough Head, on to High Rigg, and dissolved into the murk over Derwentwater.



It's a long way to Skiddaw House this way. The house was originally a shepherd's home in the hills. More recently it has been a youth hostel, but this has now closed, and the house is empty, although a room at one end can be used as a bothy. Somewhere along the path to it the clouds came down and with them the rain, so that by the time Skiddaw House came into view, it had become a very bleak house indeed.

This is a point of decision when walking the Cumbria Way. You either take a longer, western alternative, which does not go over the hills, but goes down past Whitewater Dash, over the fields to Orthwaite, and along farm tracks to Caldbeck. Or you can take a shorter route, but which, after walking the Caldew valley, climbs up over High Pike before dropping down to Caldbeck. The westerly route is recommended in bad weather, but it makes a 16 mile day. I was already wet, had been up High Pike before, so thought I knew the ground, and it was two miles shorter. I chose the latter.



It was a long wet way to the mine road below Carrock Fell. Occasionally some features would emerge from the mist to break the monotony – footbridges across the streams which were feeding the young Caldew River....



....circular sheepfolds....



....and damp sheep.



Finally I reached the surfaced track. Just before the road there were two young girls with surveying poles and theodolites.

“Are you surveying for a new motorway?” I asked.

“No, we’re doing the geology”

Round the next bend there were some more of their colleagues, also apparently ‘doing the geology’, and a mini bus with a disconsolate driver waiting for them to finish and wondering why he had got the job to drive them out to this desolate spot on such a miserable day.

After I had met the frustrated adit seeker, I went up the sketchy path beside the beck. He had said that it wasn’t too bad, but it wasn’t too good either, what with the pouring rain, the steady climb, having to jump across the confluence where the stream called ‘Arm o’ Grain’ joined the main beck, and the path disappearing among the wet rocks, greasy grass, and frequent quagmires. It was hard work, certainly much more arduous than the crossing of Stake Pass between Langdale and Langstrath which I had made, also in the rain, a couple of days earlier.



At long last the Lingy Hut appeared, and, just as it did, back down in the valley the mists



began to roll back, and there were hints of what might be sunshine appearing. Inside the hut I looked at the visitors book. Two people had slept there the night before. Many visitors recorded that they were walking the Cumbria Way. Quite a few mentioned appalling weather. A recent visitor recorded that the ascent to the hut had been “a killer”, an assessment with which I was inclined to agree. Some people had stayed overnight on Christmas Day 2004; for their dinner they had had Beef

Bourguignon, and noted that they wouldn't have rather been anywhere else. One overnighter expressed his regrets that the National Park Planning Board, who maintain the hut, had not alerted prospective visitors to the possible presence of a ghost, and another complained that there were no implements to deal with rats, claiming that he had had to strangle one with his bare hands during the night.

Leaving the hut the wide grassy track wended its way towards the top of High Pike. Two groups of young people passed me, carrying heavy packs, and looking like they were on Duke of Edinburgh's expeditions. I overheard snatches of conversation.

“Are you going to drink beer tomorrow night?”

“No, if I drink beer I shall puke”

Somewhat different, one assumes, from the conversations between William and Dorothy Wordsworth when they were walking the fells.

On the final slope to the summit of High Pike, at 2157 feet the highest point on the Cumbria Way, the sun came out, and for a moment or two it seemed that after all the rain of the previous days at least for this moment I would be blessed with its rays. No chance, it clouded over again just before I reached the top some what disappointed that Chris Bonington, who apparently climbs this hill regularly when he is at home in Caldbeck, wasn't there to greet me.



The previous day I had eaten a damp lunch in the rain on the shore of Derwentwater. My



apple had rolled out of my rucksack and bounced down among the rocks towards the water. It was bruised and grazed and I hadn't felt like eating it and it was still in my rucksack. I got it out and left it on the slate seat on the top of the fell, as a propitiation to the presiding spirits of the Cumbria Way hoping for better weather on the final leg tomorrow. I needn't have bothered – it was to rain even more heavily. But for now the sun reappeared as I went down the long grassy slopes towards Caldbeck.

Later, as the sun dipped down over the Solway plain and swifts wheeled overhead, Morris dancers skipped and jigged outside the inn. A perfect English June evening dispelled the memories of a wet walk.



Roger Cave
June 2005