

FELLBARROW ROUND FROM LOWESWATER

We had to stop to gaze in wonder as we drove through the Vale of Lorton. We were driving into the light of a rising bright sun illuminating a haze against which the shoulders of the fells and the silhouettes of the leafless trees made the views down the

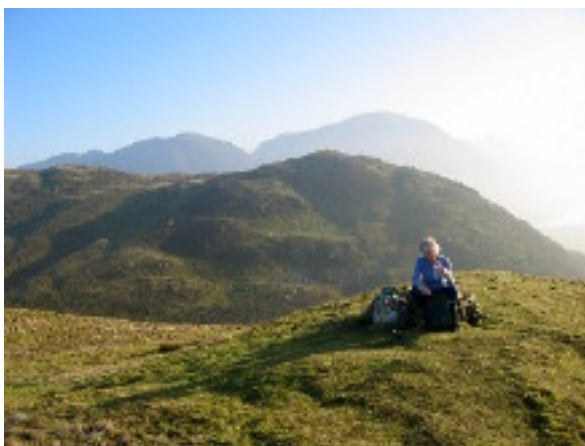


valley more like a series of watercolours in a Lakeland gallery than an actual landscape. On the horizon Mellbreak was an insubstantial wash, more a gradation of tone in the sky than a solid mass of mountain.

Our walk was to take us up from the shore of Loweswater over Low Fell and Fellbarrow. We climbed the slopes of Darling Fell, and, even though the temperature was low, the combination of effort and the sunshine, together with the absence of any breeze, made it

surprisingly hot work. Greylag geese flew over the lake below us, and Burnbank Fell and Blake Fell were purple and mauve as we peered south into the sun.

No one else seemed to be about up here – perhaps they had been put off by the gloomy weather forecast. Or maybe these unglamorous fells don't hold the attraction of the greater heights elsewhere in the north western fells. The tracks are still grassy here, and there is a pleasure to be found in striding over them for a change, instead of negotiating the eroded treadmills to be found on many of the more celebrated fells.



The descent to Crabtree Beck and the re-ascend to Low Fell were hard work but were rewarded by the subtle southward views to the fells surrounding Crummock Water and Buttermere. This wasn't a day for clarity of view. Instead the images created by the low bright sun and the unmoving haze were bands of tone rather than the frozen detail of a photograph. It was also one of days when you seem to hear the sound of silence.

It had been over twenty years since we had last been on Low Fell. Then I had carried my son on my back as a baby. Now, if he had been with us, he would have outstripped me by several inches and I might have felt inclined to ask him to carry me! We change, but the essentials of the fells and lakes do not. A day or two before he had been disappointed when, on Hopegill Head, we had turned back from the Whiteside ridge as I didn't think we would have enough light to walk along it and return to Braithwaite down Coledale Hause. "Don't worry," I said, "it'll still be there the next time you come".



Today we walked on over Sourfoot Fell and Smithy Fell. The effect of the low sun was to make mundane fences and walls appear as patterns of colour and texture against the



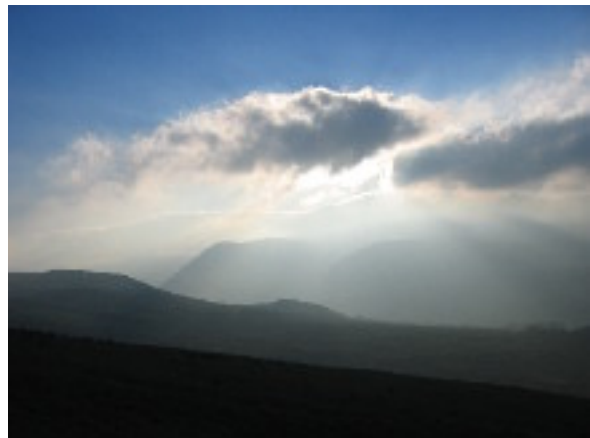
background of green and blue of turf and grass. The top of Fellbarrow was more humdrum in comparison. We ate our sandwiches, decided against detouring to Hatteringill Head, and turned west to start our descent.

We dropped down the westward flank of Fellbarrow down through the whin on Mosser Fell to where the pasture access track met the fell road. A small herd of bullocks stood on a mound. The air of unconcern with which they regarded us was the reciprocal of the concern with

which we regarded them. Already the afternoon was late and the sun was setting behind the Loweswater Fells, with its declining rays making striking patterns behind the clouds. The old fellow was standing by his 4-by-4 which he had driven up the fell.

"Have you seen any dogs?" he asked.

We had heard the hounds several times during the day. When we had started our walk from the side of the lake the pack



had been in full cry around Mellbreak and along to the woods beneath Blake Fell. Later on we had heard a few hounds on Low Fell and had had a brief glimpse of half or dozen or so as they ran in and out of the bracken across the valley trying to find a scent.

“Some one said there were eight or so over here.” He peered into the distance; he didn’t have any binoculars, but it didn’t matter as the hounds were by now well out of sight and sound.

We told him we had seen them a quarter of an hour earlier. We asked whether the hounds had caught any foxes that day. “Two” he said. “How often do they hunt?” “Three times a week in the season, from September to Easter”. “How many foxes have they caught so far this year?” “Thirty or thereabouts”. A hint of tension hung in the air; were we anti hunting, pleased that his sport was about to end, or were we supporters of the old countryside traditions?

Certainly, a couple of hours earlier, we had been delighted to see the fox, in a dip between Low Fell and Fellbarrow, magnificent as the sun made his coat glow like copper, and the bright white fur at the end of his brush look like ermine. He seemed to know that the hounds would be coming that way before long, and glanced anxiously over his shoulder as he disappeared in the direction of Thackthwaite. On the other hand, we know the depredations he and his ilk can do to the Lakeland farmers’ livestock.

“People down in London, they just want to put an end to the fellows in red coats on horses. They don’t understand it’s not like that up here. No horses. And we only kill the fit healthy ones, we let the old ones go.” We didn’t comment, we didn’t know if this was true. “They ought to let them hunt in the cities; them urban foxes are all mangy and want putting down”.



We left him still scanning the hillside, but heard no more hounds and saw no more foxes. The sun was much lower now, and the evening chill was beginning to set in.

Back by the lake, the evening was settling into the trees beside Loweswater. Waders were calling softly in the dusk but we couldn’t see them. They sounded like ghosts of oystercatchers preferring to haunt here rather than a bleaker seashore. Barely a

ripple stirred the water which reflected the branches, twilight, and the silent hills.