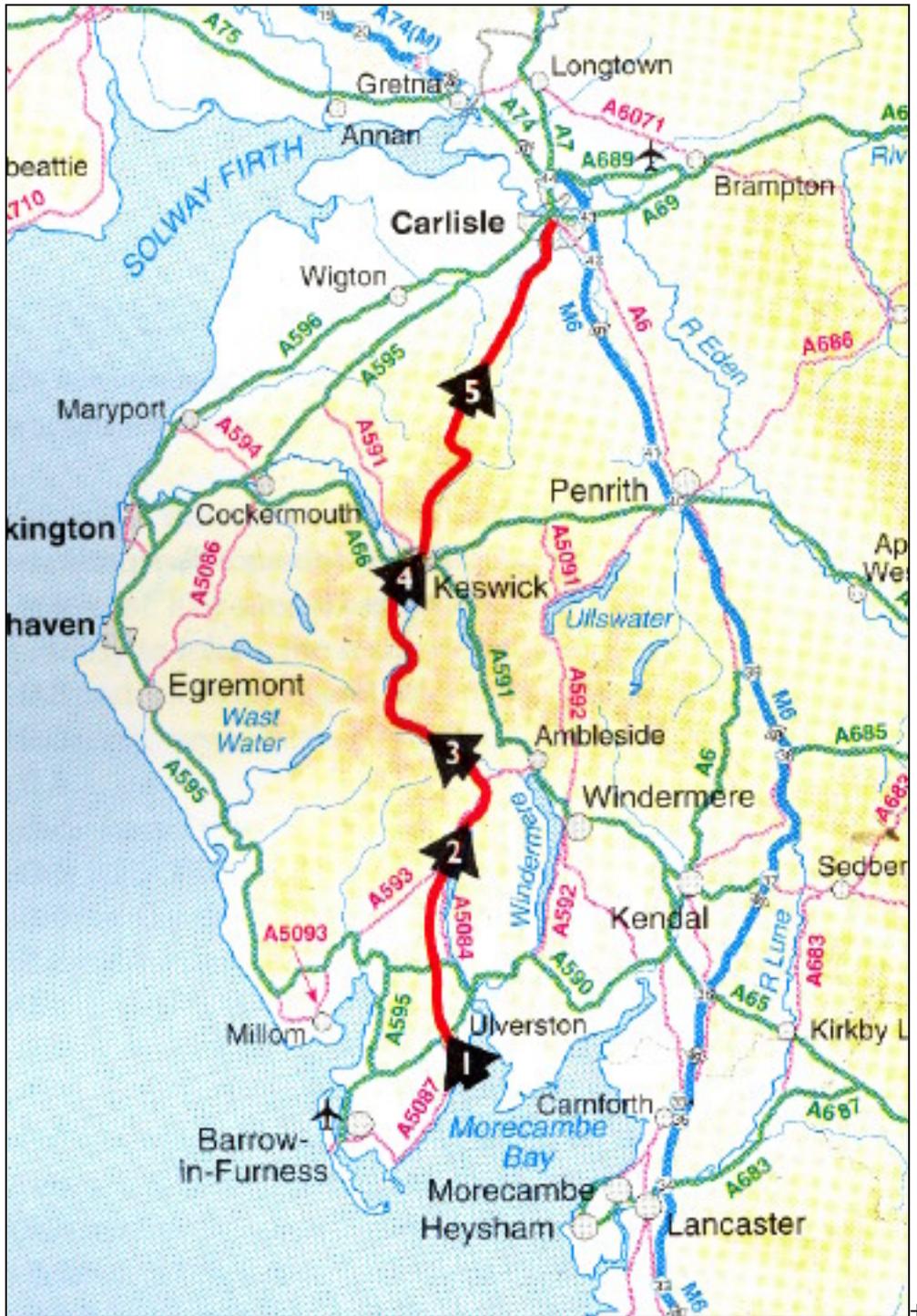


# THE CUMBRIA A WAY



Roger Cave

## INTRODUCTION

*“We have not yet determined how far it shall carry us,” said Mrs Gardiner, “but perhaps to the Lakes.”*

*No scheme could have been more agreeable to Elizabeth, and her acceptance of the invitation was most ready and grateful. “My dear, dear aunt,” she rapturously cried, “what delight, what felicity! You give me fresh life and vigour. Adieu to disappointment and spleen. What are men to rocks and mountains? Oh, what hours of transport we shall spend! And when we do return, it shall not be like other travellers, without being able to give one accurate idea of anything. We will know where we have gone – we will recollect what we have seen. Lakes, mountains, and rivers shall not be jumbled together in our imaginations; nor, when we attempt to describe any particular scene, will we begin quarrelling about its relative situation. Let our first effusions be less insupportable than those of the generality of travellers.”*

*Jane Austen  
Pride and Prejudice*

This is an impression of a journey in June 2005 along the Cumbria Way, a long distance walking route crossing the county of Cumbria from Ulverston, a market town on the shore of Morecambe Bay to the city of Carlisle close to the Scottish border and the Solway Firth.

In the middle part of the route the Way passes through the Lake District National Park, preferring to use valleys and passes rather than crossing the high fells. In fact there is only one point where the Way reaches a mountain summit at High Pike in the fells ‘back o’ Skidda’ overlooking Caldbeck. Nonetheless, the Way passes through spectacular countryside: rolling agricultural land at both ends, with moors, rivers, lakes, mountain valleys, and high passes in between.

The various guidebooks describe the length of the Way as being between 72 and 75 miles, and, although there is no prescribed set of stages, most people take six days to complete it. Having plotted the Way on my map software it breaks down as follows:

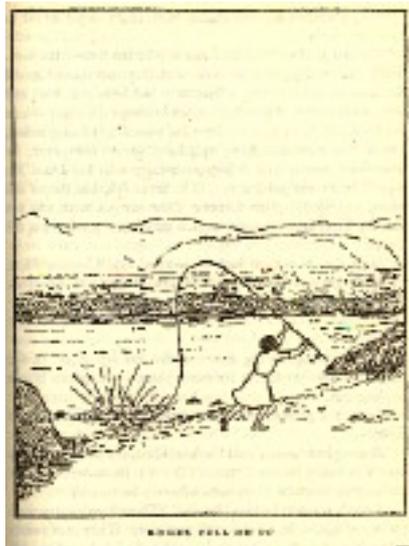
| <b>Stage</b>          | <b>Miles</b> | <b>Ascent (ft)</b> |
|-----------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Ulverston – Coniston  | 15.10        | 2228               |
| Coniston – Langdale   | 11.40        | 2448               |
| Langdale – Rosthwaite | 7.50         | 1722               |
| Rosthwaite – Keswick  | 10.26        | 1565               |
| Keswick – Caldbeck    | 14.95        | 3192               |
| Caldbeck - Carlisle   | 14.22        | 837                |
| <b>Totals</b>         | <b>73.43</b> | <b>11982</b>       |

## DAY 1: ULVERSTON TO CONISTON

*Beacon Fell ranks amongst the most delectable of the lesser heights of Lakeland. It is an epitome of all that appeals to fellwalkers. The approach is a joy: lovely and colourful terrain rich in trees and dense thickets of juniper relieved occasionally by marshy flats of myrtle and dry banks of bracken. Higher, grey rocks outcrop in haphazard array and heather and bilberry carpet the rough ground. The paths are enchanting, full of little surprises, while the streams are crystal clear. There is a tarn, too, hidden in a fold of the hills. But it is the summit, abrupt and rocky, and the far-reaching view that makes the ascent so worth while. One can recline in comfort here and almost feel sorry for youngsters who, at this moment, are toiling up Great Gable.*

*A Wainwright  
The Outlying Fells of Lakeland*

*The Way leaves Ulverston with views behind to the shimmering sands of Morecambe Bay and the Irish Sea beyond, and then the first distant views of the Lakeland fells. Farmland gradually gives way to more rugged country as the boundary of the National Park is crossed. After passing the atmospheric Beacon tarn, the Way descends to pass along the shores of Coniston Water to reach the village overlooked by the Old Man.*



*It was here “high on the top of the moor, a little lake lying in a hollow of rock and heather” that Captain Flint taught the older Swallows how to fly fish.*

**“YOU’VE not got lost yet then?”** the farmer called to me as I went through the gate beside the farm at Kiln Bank.

“No,” I replied, “the directions in the guide book seem clear enough.”

He must have guessed I was walking the first stage of the Cumbria Way because he added, “This must be the most complicated part.” I suppose he was right, because the Way had been travelling through several farms and over a variety of field paths since leaving Ulverston, and over the next few days the route through the fells could be expected to be fairly straightforward to follow.

“Are you going to Coniston today? It’s getting a bit cloudy – it might throw down a shower”. I was, it was, but it didn’t – not today at any rate.

Back in Ulverston an hour or two before I had sat on the seat beside the sign that marks the beginning of the Way. In the early morning a woman watered the flowers in the window boxes outside her cottage; another was walking her dog. Before leaving home I had looked up the well known quotation from *The Way of Lao-tzu*, written around 600 BC: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”. There was a commentary on the web site where I found it: “Although this is the popular form of this quotation, a more correct translation from the original Chinese would be ‘The journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one’s feet.’ Rather than emphasising the first step Lao-tzu regarded action as something that arises naturally from stillness. Another potential phrasing would be ‘Even the longest journey must begin where you stand’”. I didn’t have a thousand miles to go, but it was time to start and I had the first step to take. I took a picture of my walking shoes to show where I was standing, and started up the path beside the beck.

The first few miles are largely field paths, and for many miles the view behind me was dominated by the lightless lighthouse which stands on Hoad Hill outside Ulverston as a monument to Sir John Barrow, an Arctic explorer. The lighthouse retreated from view imperceptibly, which seemed to make the miles ahead of me to Coniston stretch a long way. Morecambe Bay beyond the monument disappeared into haze, and the power station at Heysham across the sands was invisible, and I was disappointed not to be able to see Blackpool Tower even further away.

However, it was necessary to look forwards, not backwards. Ahead there was a range of low hills, hopefully presaging the beginning of the Lakeland fells. Near the village of Osmotherly the church of St John’s stands in the fields “comfortably at home in its surroundings” as the guidebook puts it. As I passed a woman came out of the church door and emptied water out of a brass flower vase, no doubt preparing the church for a service on the next Sunday. It seemed unlikely that in that lonely spot there would be much of a congregation.

Beyond the farm at Kiln Bank the countryside became more like moorland, and at the next farm they were driving a large flock of sheep up the hillside and along the path I would have to follow. So as not to get in the way I sat on top of a ladder stile, watching

the dogs and men encourage the errant sheep up the path. Once they had reached the farm I followed them up a track which was now abundantly covered in droppings.

The climb up to Beacon Tarn felt steep, as it was the first, and only real climb of the day. I sat by the edge of the tarn and ate my lunch, but the air was still and the midges didn't encourage me to take long about it. A couple passed me as I sat, and I caught a snatch of their conversation:

"He's gone to the Pyrenees. He's going to cycle from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean going over all the passes they use in Tour de France."

"I wouldn't fancy that."

"Neither would I"

"You won't believe it...he's 64, no 65."

Descending from the tarn towards Coniston Water, Dow Crag and the Old Man shimmering in the heat haze, I remembered that the last time I had been here had been in midwinter. The tarn had been frozen over, and the ground covered in snow. Today the sun came out and it became very warm. Parents and children were out clambering up Beacon Fell, I passed a large walking party, and in the woods a cuckoo called, its voice breaking, 'changing its tune' just as the old rhyme says it should in June. The heat was uncomfortable at this stage of the walk; I would have enjoyed the sunshine more if I had known what weather was to come in the next few days.

The path goes up and down through the trees beside Coniston Water over rocks and tree roots. A young couple came towards me hauling a mountain bike and looking exhausted.

"How far is it to the main road?" he asked. I said that it would take them twenty minutes or so, and off they went. I wondered who was going to ride the bike back to Coniston and who was going to walk.

On the lake the launch went past, followed a few minutes later by the steam gondola. There was a solitary wind surfer and a few sailing boats. Here I always wonder whether the Swallows and Amazons are just out of sight behind Peel Island somewhere.

Approaching the campsite at Coniston Hall I approached a gate. Standing by it was a gentleman in a tweed jacket accompanied by an elderly lady.

"Allow me to open it for you – there'll be no charge," he said.

I asked him if he wanted a tip, but he said "No, as I was leaning on it, so you couldn't open it yourself."

The camp site was full of hundreds of tents, but hardly anyone was about. It was like a deserted village, a canvas and fabric Marie Celeste. Where were all the people, and what were they doing? In Coniston village there were crowds outside the various inns, so perhaps that's where they were.

I ate at the Black Bull Inn and drank a pint or two of Bluebird bitter, brewed just behind the pub. I noted that they don't seem to make the XB bitter any more. Afterwards I walked to the head of the lake at Monk Coniston. From here the lake seems to stretch southwards into infinite distances, and the view is probably my favourite in the whole of the district. An old man sat sketching the view, lambs bleated in the fields behind us, and blue tits and pied wagtails flew and settled close by, and a variety of waterfowl bobbed on the lake. The Old Man was silhouetted against a cloud tinted red by the setting sun. Far away down the lake a solitary sailboat flitted to and fro – perhaps the Swallows were out after all!



**The View from Monk Coniston**

*Picture by Tony Richards [www.lakelandcam.co.uk](http://www.lakelandcam.co.uk)*

## DAY 2: CONISTON TO LANGDALE

*...very soon there were signs everywhere urging me to go to Tarn Hows, so I decided to follow them. It's a very famous place in the Lake District...but I'd never been and, shame to say, I wasn't quite sure what it (or they) is (or are)...It's a beauty spot, that's what it is. And as beauty spots go it looks it. I have to restrain myself from being snotty and superior about it, which is what snotty and superior people usually are about Tarn Hows. You have to shield your eyes from the glare on a good day, as it looks as if it's jumped straight off a chocolate box. It's so beautiful it doesn't look real...*

*Hunter Davies  
A Walk Around the Lakes*

*This stage is characterised by many ups and downs and a wide variety of scenery. Leaving Coniston the Way passes through woodland to reach the picturesque Tarn Hows. It then descends past the waterfalls at Colwith Force and Skelwith Force (both spectacular in spate) to reach the small lake at Elterwater. The route then enters the dramatic landscape of Great Langdale dominated by views of the Langdale Pikes and the high fells of the Bowfell/Crinkle Crags range.*

**I DIDN'T KNOW IT, of course, at the time,** but this was the first of five successive lunches I would eat in the rain. The downpour had started as I entered Rob Rash Wood, between Skelwith Bridge and Elterwater, but it was only a few drops at first, so I sat on a bench I came to after leaving the wood until eventually the rain was too heavy to sit there any longer. I went a few yards further on and found another seat under the trees beside the Brathay. I put all my waterproofs on and waited to see if it would stop. On the path behind me Sunday afternoon walkers hurried back to their cars and the dry. I still had the length of Great Langdale to walk to the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel, and was rather hoping I wouldn't have to do it all in torrential rain.

Although it had been cloudy when I had started out from Coniston, the sun had broken out for a few minutes as I walked through the fields and woods of the Monk Coniston estate towards Tarn Hows. The village had been almost deserted when I left – just one dog walker – and although there was no one about on the path, there was plenty of birds to see, particularly jays and woodpeckers. A red squirrel scurried over a wall ahead of me.

In the sunshine there were eye-catching views over Holme Fell and the Tilberthwaite Fells, and then, as I gained distance, towards Wetherlam, and Lingmoor beyond Little Langdale. I kept looking for a first glimpse of the Langdale Pikes, at the foot of which my destination for the day lay, but they were hidden by Lingmoor. Perhaps this was just as well, as the course of the Way was tending away from the head of Langdale for the time being, and it might have been just a little discouraging to see the day's destination receding rather than becoming closer.

Tarn Hows are higher up the fell side than you think it is going to be, and the final stretch up to it was along a few hundred yards of road, and the tarmac made the ascent more tedious than it ought to be. By now the clouds had crept imperceptibly over the sky. What with this, and the atmosphere created by the debris from recent tree-felling operations which the National Trust had recently carried out around the tarns, Tarn Hows today seemed somewhat bereft of its usual picturesque qualities. A gaggle of greylag geese mooched rather aimlessly about, and a black headed gull ferociously saw off a crow that was annoying it for some reason. It was difficult to find any views which would make good pictures, and I had to resort to going out to a rocky promontory and trying to take some images with the grey water framed by the twisted boughs of a dead pine tree.

The next mile or two were downhill, and, crossing the main road at High Park, I had to stand aside as three trail bike riders went down the lane. I could hear their bikes for a while as they went around the woods before eventually roaring back past me up to the road. Their bikes had numbers on their front mudguards, which I hoped did not mean that there was a pack or riders out on some event or other to disturb the calm of the Sunday morning.

Although we have stayed several times in Little Langdale I had never before seen Colwith Force. Arriving at the fall from High Oxenfell is a surprise – one moment you are walking through woods next to the river, the next the path drops away in front of you as the water plunges over the force, which is just as spectacular as the better known falls a mile or two away at Skelwith.

Leaving the force I was reminded that it was a Sunday by the frequency with which groups of day walkers passed me, no doubt encouraged out by the bright start to the day. Perhaps because the Way largely sticks to the valleys almost all the day trippers I passed were middle-aged or senior citizens – if there were any young people out today presumably they were heading for the tops.

The Way dropped down to cross the Brathay at Skelwith Bridge, and there was accordingly a brief intrusion into ‘grockledom’ amid the relative bustle of the cafe, the hotel, and the craft shop. The last time I had been here the picnic tables beside the river had been under water! Today there were groups of people having an early lunch. The Way turns a corner here, and, beyond the force, across the fields, beside Elterwater, there were at last views of the Langdale Pikes ahead. The only trouble was that the views were increasingly becoming concealed by what was, depressingly and obviously, a veil of rain.

I sat on the seat beside the river, and contemplated the prospect of a wet trudge up the valley. A few more groups of walkers scurried past, but eventually they all disappeared, and there was no point in delaying any further, I would have to go. Elterwater village can be a pleasant spot, but today the rain teemed down heavier than before. The famous maple looked very green in the heavily overcast light, more like that at the end of a wet day than of a midsummer’s afternoon. But, nevertheless, there were some people sitting outside the Britannia Inn enjoying a pint and a late lunch under the canopies.

I splashed past Wainwrights Inn (named after the local wagon makers, not the author), the time share village, and Chapel Stile. Beyond the village, for the first time in my journey along the Way, the guidebook was not totally clear as to which fork in the path I

should take. In consequence I had to crouch beside a wall trying to protect my map from the wind and rain as I clarified which way I should go.

As I crossed the fields beyond Chapel Stile I reached a farm gate just ahead of a tractor pulling a muck spreader. The farmer gave me a cheery wave as I opened the gate for him, which meant that he didn't have to get out of his cab into the rain to open it for himself. Perhaps this good turn on my part was rewarded as I approached the lonely cottage at Oak Howe on the northern slopes of Lingmoor as finally the rain began to ease off and slowly turned to drizzle.

The path climbed up to the cottage and its adjacent barn. Outside the barn a young man was furiously hand-sawing his way through a large pile of logs stacked up against his trestle. He seemed utterly absorbed in this task, but the manner in which he was going about it suggested an air of desperation to get the job finished before the rain started again, or the fire inside went out, or next winter arrived, or something. At any event he didn't speak or acknowledge my presence as I passed, and, as I stopped once more to check the route at a fork in the path, he didn't offer to point out the way I should go.

Just before the path dropped down to the New Dungeon Ghyll Hotel I decided that as the rain was now light enough, and that as I was sufficiently near to the end of the walk, to risk taking off my over trousers. It was now past mid afternoon and there were crowds of walkers pouring the paths which come down from Stickle Tarn.

I sat on a rock just before reaching the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel and ate an apple. Ahead of me, Mickleden, up which I would be going tomorrow, was hidden in another burst of rain. Later that evening, after my meal in the hotel, there was a burst of evening sunshine, and, even later, a glimpse of stars in the black sky, but I slept a deep sleep in the lovely old hotel where, no doubt, generations of visitors to the hills had done before me.



**The Langdale Pikes**

Picture by Roger Cave [www.bluetiger.org.uk](http://www.bluetiger.org.uk)

### DAY 3: LANGDALE TO ROSTHWAITE

*Here we entered Westmoreland, a country eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England...*

*Daniel Defoe  
A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*

*The Way leaves Langdale by the glaciated valley of Mickleden past the Stone Age axe factory on the slopes of Pike of Stickle. It reaches the foot of Stake Pass where begins the steepest ascent on the Way, 1000 feet to the top of the Pass. There are views in all directions to the highest Lakeland fells, followed by an equally long descent to the Langstrath valley, and down to the villages of Stonethwaite and Rosthwaite in Borrowdale.*

**“YOU MUST be as mad as we are!”** I was sitting on a rock, one of the many scattered along the path along the bottom of Mickleden, the glaciated valley which runs from Langdale alongside the Pikes up to the fells around Esk Hause. The rain was becoming heavier, the wind was getting up, and I had had to accept that I was going to have to wear full waterproof gear again. The middle-aged couple passed me as I was struggling to get my over-trousers over my boots, and with that cheery greeting they disappeared into the murk towards the path which goes up to Rossett Gill.

The rain had been fairly light to start with as I left the Old Dungeon Ghyll, with jackdaws calling in the trees around the hotel, and gulls and rooks mobbing each other as I entered Mickleden. The weather prospects were not good, but to my left beyond The Band a patch of watery sun appeared, and silhouetted against it were two buzzards circling high above the fell.

By the time I reached the circular sheepfold where the path up Stake Pass begins it was pouring. I took a picture of the desolate scene, or what there was of it among the clouds which had now descended almost to the valley floor. I remembered what the guidebook said about what now confronted me:

“The track climbs up beside the dashing beck, zig-zagging ever more extravagantly as the climb steepens. This is the most severe test of the Cumbria Way, a thousand foot climb up a rough, steep path, but the effort is more than amply rewarded. The view back down Great Langdale is sensational and one soon begins to see the distant prospects beyond the immediate summits.”

Not today one didn't. All I could see was the inside of the hood of my anorak, the raindrops falling off it, and the small patch of path beneath my boots. It was very, very wet, and the higher I got the more the temperature fell. It must have been very near freezing, and this was supposedly 'flaming June'!

“The top of the pass represents a quite amazing landscape,” the guidebook continues, “with hummocks looking more like ancient burial mounds than natural features,

interspersed with areas of peaty bog. The clear path continues straight on until it reaches the other side of the combe, and here another breath-stopping landscape unfolds, as you find yourself perched on the brim of the wild deep valley of Langstrath....”

The reader has probably gathered that I am having to include these quotations as I saw next to nothing of this. I stopped at the summit of the pass. There was what, at first, seemed to be a brief lightening in the sky over Pike O’Stickle, but in reality this was no more than a patch of cloud that was less dense than the rest.

The rain continued to pile down I started the descent towards the valley. The falls in Stake Beck were, unsurprisingly in the conditions, full of water bouncing its way down the steep hillside, and I took a few pictures, more as mementos than in any hope they would prove to be worthwhile images. As I did this to my surprise a party of four walkers emerged from the mists above me – I really hadn’t expected to find anyone else out on such a foul day.

Where the path reaches the floor of Langstrath there is a footbridge over the beck, and a lone tree a couple of hundred yards away. On a fine day it must be a beautiful spot, and a photographer should be able to conjure up some evocative images. It was unlikely to be possible to do that today. Nonetheless, I stopped just before the bridge to take a picture, and this pause enabled the four walkers to catch me up. They turned out to be two couples, probably all in their sixties.

“It’s a bit damp,” I said with rather unsubtle irony.

“You could say that!” one replied.

“Do you think it’ll clear up?” I asked, more for the sake of passing a pleasantry than in hope of an optimistic response.

“The forecast says it might do, let’s hope so”

It didn’t.

They moved towards the solitary tree, but one of them remained looking over the bridge. I took some photographs and went up to the bridge myself, and took a picture of the tree. The man called out. “Are you decent, dear?” as his wife emerged in some embarrassment from the other side of the tree, the only shelter for miles for preserving one’s modesty whilst answering the call of nature.

I thought I had better let them get some distance ahead of me in case anyone else needed a comfort break. There was nowhere to get out of the rain so I just sat on a small boulder and ate a soggy lunch. There was no one in sight by the time I started the dismal trudge down the valley. Just where Langstrath beck swings north west to go down past Stonethwaite to join the Derwent in Borrowdale there is a break of birch trees. Some respite from the rain at last, so I stood beneath the trees for a while watching the banks of cloud roll past Greenup Edge. A young woman walker accompanied by a Labrador came towards me, heading up the valley. I wondered why on earth she would be setting out up there at that time in the afternoon in such filthy weather. I felt constrained to explain why I was standing there.

“I’m only sheltering for a bit”, I said, somewhat lamely, as she passed.

“Not much point really,” she said, heading off in a very determined fashion up the valley as blasts of even heavier rain came down between the intervals of steady drizzle.

So it was a distinctly miserable arrival at Stonethwaite. I just wanted to get out of the incessant rain and my sodden clothes. Just before the village on the far bank of the beck there were a few tents standing forlornly on the National Trust campsite. The only people there were hurriedly taking down their tent and packing their car. In the woods beside me a cuckoo suddenly called.

At the Langstrath Inn the hotelier was rushing around supervising the influx of a group of dripping walkers. A party of people, mostly American, who had just completed the second day of the Coast-to-Coast Walk had arrived simultaneously with me. Most of them were not, shall we say, as slender as UK hill walkers, and I couldn't help but wonder what sort of day they had of it. Still, they seemed to have survived.

After my evening meal I sat in the comfortable quiet of the inn's residents lounge, only broken by the chiming of the mantelpiece clock. I read the morning's paper, and looked for the weather forecast for the next day. “It will be damp and breezy in the north.” Great! I could do with it being only “damp and breezy” after today!



**Langstrath Beck**

Picture by Ann Bowker [www.keswick.u-net.com](http://www.keswick.u-net.com)

#### DAY 4: ROSTHWAITE TO KESWICK

*The two extremities of the lake afford most discordant prospects: the southern is a composition of all that is horrible; an immense chasm opens in the midst, whose entrance is divided by a rude conic hill, once topped with a castle, the habitation of the tyrant of the rocks; beyond, a series of broken mountainous crags, now patched with snow, soar one above the other, overshadowing the dark winding deeps of Borrowdale...But the opposite or northern view is in all respects a strong and beautiful contrast: Skiddaw shows its vast base, and bounding all that part of the vale, rises gently to a height that sinks the neighbouring hills; opens a pleasing front, smooth and verdant, smiling over the country like a gentle generous lord, while the fells of Borrowdale frown on it like a hardened tyrant.*

*Thomas Pennant  
A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides in 1772*

*The shortest stage precedes the longest. The Way follows the western shore of Derwentwater below the slopes of High Spy and Catbells, and curves round past the outlet of the lake to reach Keswick.*

**THE READER will have noticed** that several times in the preceding accounts of my journey along the Cumbria Way I have mentioned that I paused to take photographs of the scenes around me. And yet I have not used any of these pictures to illustrate my narrative. Is there a reason for this? Well....

“No, no.....damn, damn, damn, s\*\*t, b\*\*\*\*\*r it”

I was standing - in the rain as was by now usual – by the beck below Stonethwaite, and swearing loudly and profusely and looking down at my camera.

“Memory Card Error” read the LCD screen.

Whether the incessant rain had got into the camera, or the memory card was faulty I didn't know, but, either way, the camera had failed and the error had wiped out all my photographs. I could have wept. Okay, most of those taken in the dire conditions of the last two days were not exactly works of art, but they were images of where I had been and what it had been like. I thought back over what I had lost – the swans gliding over Elterwater forming a perfect foreground to the Langdale Pikes, Wetherlam basking in the early morning sunshine over Tilberthwaite, the scenes of Ulverston on a lovely summer's evening, and, most of all, the never to be repeated pictures of a stunning sunset at Monk Coniston. All gone. And it was raining just as heavily as the day before.

I had woken that morning and looked around my bedroom curtain. Outside it was very dull and damp, but I felt certain that I couldn't detect any drizzle in the air. The puddles I could see in the lane below my window didn't show any splashes. Perhaps it wouldn't rain today, just be “damp and breezy”. I looked out of the window again after I had come back up after breakfast. The puddles were full of splashes. The rain was falling straight

down, it wasn't even breezy. That damn cuckoo was still calling from the woods as I left the village.

On a bend in the track that leads to Rosthwaite a man was walking towards me.

"Not so good," he said.

"Not so bad as yesterday," I replied. At that moment the rain was not quite as torrential as it had been for most of the day before, and there was no wind. In fact it was surprisingly humid after the cold of the previous day.

"Terrible yesterday," he said. "We got lost up there – you couldn't see a thing. We started at Ennerdale Bridge and went down to Wasdale by mistake. We should have been down here. A chap gave us a lift to Rosthwaite."

"You're doing the Coast-to Coast then," I guessed.

"Aye". His companion came into sight around the bend, blowing hard although there was no incline of any sort by the side of the beck. I couldn't help but wonder if they would make it to Robin Hood's Bay despite their lack of navigational skills and physical fitness. Perhaps they would meet up with the Americans for mutual support.

On I went through the village, passing Yew Tree Cottage, famous for once having had the Prince of Wales stay for bed and breakfast. He wasn't there today, he was at Royal Ascot (at York), where I hoped the weather would be better for the carriage drive than it was here in Cumbria for walking.

The path goes through the woods below Castle Crag towards Grange, and alongside the river. There were people walking there with their dogs which kept rushing into the water, although they couldn't have got any wetter staying out of it. There was a group of teenagers with some instructors launching canoes out from the riverbank. The canoes were joined together and lashed to oil drums, the whole arrangement making a cumbersome raft. Someone walked past me and asked me if he was on the riverside path!

The route went round above Grange and dropped down to the shore of Derwentwater. It is amazing how even such a lovely place can look unattractive on such a miserable day. The deep leadenness of the lake, the grey of the low clouds over the fells beyond the water, and the incessant rain, all melded with my disappointment at the loss of my pictures to make it a depressing morning.

One of the Keswick launches went by on its circuit around the lake. It did not call at the jetty at Brandelhow Bay as there didn't seem to be any passengers waiting. The boat itself seemed empty. However, just by the jetty there was a party of young schoolchildren. They were being told a story by an entertainer as their parents and teachers stood with an air of embarrassment at the rear.

Eventually I came to a bench under the trees in Manesty Wood, which meant that only a few drops of rain were able to fall on me as I, once again, ate a damp lunch. I carefully extracted my apple from the depths of my rucksack so as not to drop it. I placed on the top of the sack from which it promptly rolled off and bounced down towards the lake. This just about summed up the day so far. I decided to retrieve the apple, but it wasn't fit to eat now. I put it back into my rucksack, from where it was to play a part in the next day's walk!

Then I went on through the succession of woods and clearings beside the lake. There were lots of rhododendrons, a large timber sculpture celebrating the centenary of the National Trust, squirrels (only greys), and what, on other days, would have been striking views of Catbells. From time to time I could see beyond the foot of the lake past Keswick, to where Skiddaw would have been if it had not been completely shrouded in cloud.

I passed a man who was taking photographs of the view towards the head of the lake and the Jaws of Borrowdale. His camera was on a tripod and he was taking great care to frame his picture to his satisfaction and get the focus just right. As I passed I came into direct line behind him and his subject. It was just dull grey water and a group of dirty green pines. I couldn't see why he was bothering. I wished I could take pictures, though.

Eventually I emerged into Portinscale. It was early afternoon, but there was hardly anyone about. Then it was over the suspension bridge (which wobbled just as the guidebook said it would) and along the path over the fields into Keswick. People were going in and out of the shops in the marketplace around the Moot Hall, probably more intent on dodging the continual showers than on making purchases of yet more walking gear. I went into George Fisher's and bought a spare pair of socks as my others were still not dry from the journey over Sticks Pass the day before.

My luggage was waiting for me at the guest house where I was staying for the night. Dry clothes! Also there was the spare memory card for my camera – I put it in and was relieved that the camera was now working. After the trip I sent the failed card off to a lab which specialises in retrieving data from failed hard drives and storage devices, but they couldn't do it anything for it as it was 'digitally and electrically dead.'

After dinner the rain had stopped and I wandered down towards the end of Friars Crag beside the lake, hoping against hope that the evening sun might come out to compensate for my lost pictures of Monk Coniston. No such luck. It got darker and darker and the rain began to fall yet again.



**Wet Evening at Friars Crag**

Picture by Roger Cave [www.bluetiger.org.uk](http://www.bluetiger.org.uk)

## DAY 5: KESWICK TO CALDBECK

*[There is] a generally accepted view...that there is nothing 'back o'Skidda' worth exploring. I want to go and find out. There is a big tract of country here, wild and desolate; but this is immortal ground, the John Peel country, and I rely further on a centuries-old saying that "Caldbeck fells are worth all England else." A land with promise surely!*

*A Wainwright  
A Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells*

*This arduous stage is the crux of the Way. From Keswick the route skirts the lower slopes of Skiddaw before turning north into the gap between Lonscale Pike and Blencathra to reach the lonely buildings at Skiddaw House, a former shepherd's home and youth hostel. Here there is a choice: the western alternative, passing the falls at Whitewater Dash and crossing country lanes and tracks east of Bassenthwaite, is longer but better in bad weather; the eastern alternative crosses remote country ascending to the top of High Pike at 658m before dropping down to Caldbeck.*

**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 overnigher 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.



**Solway Morris at The Oddfellows Arms Caldbeck**

Picture by Roger Cave [www.bluetiger.org.uk](http://www.bluetiger.org.uk)

## DAY 6: CALDBECK TO CARLISLE

*An old mill stands by an immense weir, and the path now continues on the river bank by a strip of parkland separating it from the houses. The riverside path soon comes to an end, and with it the Cumbria Way. But most walkers will not want to be stranded there on the outskirts, so, to reach the city centre, take the road past the gas holders....*

*Anthony Burton  
The Cumbria Way*

*A long but easy walking stage with which to finish. The Way leaves the National Park and crosses agricultural land and is accompanied for most the stage by the River Caldew, alongside which it finally enters the city of Carlisle which comes as rather a culture shock after the days spent in the countryside.*

**IF YOU'VE HAD ENOUGH of reading about rain,** rain, and more rain, then stop here.

Actually the day had dawned cloudy but dry. I had been staying out at Whelpo, and so had a mile or so of road walking to return to Caldbeck and on to the route of the Way. However, the lady at the B&B told me about a permissive footpath which followed the Cald Beck down to the village. This turned out to be an improvement on the road walk, since it took me to the Howk, a deep, narrow gorge through which the beck tore and tumbled. If this was in a more well known spot it would be just as well visited as many of the forces in the Lake District. As it was there was no one about. Just as I was thinking that it was the sort of spot where you might be lucky enough to see a dipper, then, lo and behold, there was one!

The path then went on past a ruined bobbin mill on the outskirts of the village. Some restoration work has been carried on, and an information board is helpful in explaining the role played by the various buildings. The mill's waterwheel was apparently the biggest anywhere in the country. It was difficult to imagine how such a quiet spot today could once have been a hive of industry.

The church at Caldbeck is dedicated to St Kentigern, who was also known as St Mungo. In the churchyard are the graves of John Peel, the huntsman, and Mary Robinson, also known as Mary of Buttermere. I could see the former easily enough, but didn't think I had time to search for the latter. I was interested to see from the notice board that the Rector was away on a sponsored trip along the Coast to Coast Walk to raise money for the church funds. St Kentigern's Well proved to be a rather unprepossessing pool on the banks of the beck below a wall beside the church.

The guidebook had promised me that the next stretch would be a very muddy walk along a path through the woods alongside the Cald Beck and so it proved to be. I passed by two huge wind turbines, which had been prominent in the views northwards yesterday from High Pike. Only one of the turbines was working; the other was clearly in disrepair with one of its sails broken – is the technology not able to cope with the strength of the wind hereabouts?

There were curlews and lapwings calling in the fields as the path began to turn northwards towards the still distant Carlisle. I turned to look at the fells which now all lay behind me. High Pike was a dull green line on the horizon – was my apple still up there? – and further away I could make out Carrock Fell. But, as the weather began to close in and I dropped down into the valley of the Caldew, I had to say goodbye to the hills for this trip.

Not long before Sebergham the first drops began to fall, and before long it was pouring. Yet again I had to don the pesky waterproofs. By the time I approached St Mary's Church it was an utter downpour. The churchyard had a lych-gate, which provided the only bit of shelter I could see, so I went and stood under it in the forlorn hope that the rain would at least ease off.

The muddy lane up which I would have to walk stretched ahead of me as I stood there, and after a while an old pick-up came along it, and the farmer got out to open the gate.

“It's terrible, isn't it,” he said. “We haven't had a summer at all. Still, they say it might clear up later.”

I'd heard that before, and it was to be no more accurate this time than previously.

“Where've you come from this morning? There were a couple of blokes stood here yesterday morning too. But they were from Carlisle. Got to get on.” And off he drove.

And off I walked. There seemed no point in waiting for a clearance which obviously wasn't going to happen and Carlisle was still a long way away. Before long the Way came alongside the River Caldew which was to be my companion for all the miles which lay ahead to Carlisle. On a sunny day this is probably a pleasant riverside walk, but in this weather it promised to be tedious. A difference today compared to previous wet days was that I had to walk through long grass in the fields. This grass was very wet, and so the water increasingly transferred itself to my socks which rapidly wicked it down into my shoes. Before too long the squelching coming from my feet told me that I was walking in two pools of water.

Suddenly, by a bend in the river, there was a loud screeching, and a bird flew fast and low towards me and circled round and round calling loudly. The deep orange carrot like bill gave it away at once – it was an oystercatcher, and it was soon joined by its mate. They were obviously protecting a nest somewhere, and were mobbing me to make me

move away quicker. I hadn't known before that oystercatchers would nest so far away from the sea.

I had to climb a stile to cross into another field. By now I knew it was no good, I would have to do something about the amount of water in my shoes. I sat on the stile and took them off. First of all I wrung the water out of my socks which were completely sodden. Then I tipped puddles of water out of each walking shoe in turn. It took several minutes before the pools stopped forming in the heel of each shoe as the water drained out of them. I groaned as I realised that, not only would I have to put the wet socks back on, but the amount of rain which was falling would mean that I would be bound to have to repeat this operation several more times before I reached Carlisle.

On I plodded. By the river there were several more oystercatchers and also occasional flocks of sand martins nesting in holes in sandbanks beside the river. Near Rose Castle the route on the ground and that described in the guidebook seemed to diverge, but I didn't really care by now, providing I was getting nearer to Carlisle.

I was getting hungry and wanted to find somewhere I could sit down with at least a modicum of shelter. There seemed to be nowhere. Just beyond Lime Park School there was a rise, "a little hill which gives a suitable viewpoint for enjoying the parkland", according to the guidebook. At the top of the hill were a gate, a barbed wire fence, and a solitary tree. It would have to do.

There was a lamb running up and down bleating piteously beside the fence. It had somehow got through and didn't seem to be able to find its way back to its mother in the next field. The rain was teeming down; it was cold; the views, such as they were, were bleak; the rock I was sitting on was far from comfortable; I had to sit in a crouch to avoid catching my anorak on the barbed wire; and, worst of all, I had to wring out my socks and bale out my shoes again. I couldn't be bothered, or didn't dare, to get out my map and see how far away Carlisle was. This was definitely the low point of my six days on the Cumbria Way.

But after this things got a bit better for a while. It stopped pouring, and it was almost pleasant to be walking through a mild drizzle. I passed through the village of Buckabank and on into Dalston. The path from here to the outskirts of Carlisle goes through the river meadows with the Caldew away to the right, and a railway line close by on the left. The distance involved is two to three miles, and the track has been surfaced all the way, probably to form a cycle way. As a cycle way it is probably a good ride, but to walk the hard surface, particularly through the drizzle, is interminable. The route leaves Dalston past a cemetery, by a school where afternoon games sessions were taking place, the teacher evidently having trouble in encouraging the less keen pupils to participate, and then past the industrial complex of a Nestlé factory. Then it is the railway for company – but no trains passed – and the river, which was sometimes out of sight beyond the meadows and at others was closer to the path. There was another sand martin colony.

Eventually I met an elderly dog walker going the other way, the first person I had seen since leaving Dalston, and the outskirts of the city came into view. The path crossed the river and, as I went over the bridge, a curlew suddenly flew low overhead calling with its evocative cry, its long beak spearing out into the grey sky.

It was a strange feeling to be nearing the end of the walk, but any premature feelings of accomplishment were thwarted by the path suddenly becoming a very narrow grassy trod between a wire fence and the trees and bushes of the riverbank. With the rain having slowed to a drizzle over the last few miles my wet shoes had become marginally less sodden. Now the long grass made them rapidly fill with just as much water as before.

The end of the Cumbria Way is an anticlimax. At the beginning at Ulverston there is a commemorative obelisk, a plaque on the wall at the start of the path, and the area is very pleasant, with the beck tumbling under the bridge and the window boxes outside the cottages. In contrast at the Carlisle end there path becomes a muddy cart track, the river falls menacingly over a large weir, and there is a stretch of dreary factory buildings on the far bank. Suddenly the track emerges on a road besides some dreary housing, and that's it, you've finished. No signs, no one around, but "okay, you did it", you say to yourself.

If "even the longest journey must begin where you stand," then, similarly, it must end where you stand, so, as at Ulverston, I looked down at my feet and took a picture. You might say it summed up most of the walk....



**Wet Wet Wet**

Picture by Roger Cave [www.bluetiger.org.uk](http://www.bluetiger.org.uk)



The obelisk at the start of the Cumbria Way in Ulverston. It contains samples of rocks from the various examples of geology to be found along the route.

Picture from [www.ulverston.net](http://www.ulverston.net)

The nondescript end of the Cumbria Way by the River Caldew on the outskirts of Carlisle. Even the 'Public Footpath' signpost doesn't mention the Way!

Picture by Roger Cave [www.bluetiger.org.uk](http://www.bluetiger.org.uk)



*I walked the Cumbria Way from 11 - 16 June 2005. My accommodation and luggage transfer were arranged by Mickledore Travel ([www.mickledore.co.uk](http://www.mickledore.co.uk)). The following week was the hottest and driest of the year so far in the UK. I have bought a new memory card and not had any more problems with my camera. My shoes have now dried out.*

**Roger Cave  
October 2005.**