

“THE TOP OF ULLSCARF IS A CHEERLESS PLACE”

Even in Lakeland there are some walks which always seem to have a bad press. Probably the recipient of the worst press of the lot is the trek to the summit of Ullscarf from the north along the spine of the central fells. Wainwright describes this as “one of the wettest walks in Lakeland, and not one to be undertaken for pleasure”; Bill Birkett says that “wet feet are guaranteed...grit the teeth along the flat and boggy watershed.” And in an article in a recent edition of *Cumbria* magazine Tom Bowker recorded that “watershed is a misnomer here because it appears to retain more than it sheds. Peak-bagging apart, Ullscarf’s top appears hardly worth the effort of getting there.”

It was already an effort walking up through the pines alongside Fisher Gill on the path that climbs to High Tove from the Armboth car park beside Thirlmere. It was hot and airless, and we had had to make sure to park the car in the shade of the beeches. Eventually we broke out on to the moor close to a boulder which had the air of having been negligently left there by a glacier hurrying to retreat before the onset of an earlier round of global warming.



Looking back, the long ridge of the Dodds and the Helvellyn range silently sunbathed across the gulf in which lay Thirlmere.

Two walkers passed us going downhill. They looked dubiously at us in our short sleeved shirts, shorts, and walking shoes. “It’s bloody wet up there,” said one. “Look at me, I’m soaked through up to the knees.” He was too, with mud and mire plastering his trousers and his boots that had clearly sunk into several bogs. Down they went, glancing back at us and obviously considering that we were somewhat ill prepared for the morass ahead of us.



Wainwright must have had a bad time up here. He says that the top of High Tove “has pretensions to beauty only when the heather is in bloom; for most of the year it is a dreary place, with no feature of interest. A big cairn offers a seat to travellers who wish to pour the

water out of their boots. Nearby, in the old fence, there is a stile, now used by short sighted hikers only.” Okay, it was wet getting up here, but we watched where we were putting our feet and were able to keep them dry. It was special being up there that day: the September sunshine had a golden glow to it which suffused the grasses, water, stones, fence posts, and the sky. And right around us all the hills of Lakeland.

The three miles from here to Ullscarf are three of the longest miles in Lakeland true enough – “squelch, squelch, squelch all the way” as Wainwright says - but today they were transformed into a sequence of technicoloured images.



First, the areas of mire were interrupted by kaleidoscopic patterns of purple heather, white rock, yellow lichens, and blue sky.

Then, the “line of forlorn fence posts running both ways to the horizon” became a series of tableaux redolent of relics left by the Vikings who had once roamed these fells, the groups of posts standing out against the sky like timbers washed up from longboats, or like the last remnants of some ancient wooded stockade.



We went on up past Blea Tarn and Standing Crag, its face in dark shadow from the noon sun and shading us on the steep bit of the climb beside the crag. Across the valley wisps of high cloud hung above Helvellyn and Fairfield.



It seemed further than it ought to be over the featureless plateau to the top of the hill those Vikings had named the 'Wolf's Pass'. If there was a wolf today it was in sheep's clothing.



“The top of Ullscarf is a cheerless place” says Wainwright, but today we lolled in the sunshine and admired the views towards the highest ground in England.



Our return route revealed more treasures: a jewel of a pool below Standing Crag....



.....and a peacock butterfly settling for a few seconds on the rocks below the shepherd's cairn on Armboth Fell.



What passes for a summit cairn on Armboth Fell stands on a whaleback of rock standing clear of the marsh. There were strange markings on the rocks which seemed rather like prehistoric carvings than more modern graffiti. We went over to see the view of Thirlmere from Fishers Crag and for the first and only time that day my boot went into the quagmire deep enough to fill it with muddy water. A forestry track, surprisingly not mentioned in any of our guidebooks, led us back down to Armboth and back by the lake it had clouded over promising rain for the next day to replenish what the ridge had lost in evaporation today.



“Ordinary words are inadequate” to describe this walk, wrote Wainwright. We would agree – but for the opposite reason for the one he had in mind!

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