

Trevor

W. R. MITCHELL, MBE
18 YEALAND AVENUE
GIGGLESWICK
SETTLE, NORTH YORKS.
BD24 0AY
Tel. (01729) 822371

BESIDE THE SKIRFARE

Littondale, Feb 15, 2006



The Walkers: David, Cyril, Bill, Popsie

Weather: Heavy showers of rain forecast.

They missed us, though "t'clouds were mucky".

David, the duty chauffeur, ensured he and Bill would see clearly by squirting some metholated spirits on their specs, before giving them a brisk rub with a duster. He drove us through a grey world. The Ribble and associated becks were in lively mood after heavy rain during the night. Everyone except Bill seems to have been aware of water falling at around one o'clock as though from a celestial hosepipe.

We took the high road – from Stainforth – noticing that some of the hill sheep already had lambs (white as snow) at foot. Had the tup got out early? Penyghent and Fountains Fell were wrapped in cloud. A son of Eric Coates, of Rainscar, was driving an ATV (All Terrain Vehicle) hauling a trailer containing fodder for t'sheep. David graciously drove off-road to permit the passage of vehicles during the morning rush hour. There were two cars and two mini-buses crammed with kids. Field study course?

It had been intended to walk along the old green lane from Dale Head to Litton. This scheme was aborted (ugh) when David and Cyril recalled that on a similar sort of morning – dryish after heavy rain – it had not been possible safely or dryly to cross one of the fellside becks. So we went on to park on grass just short of Halton Gill, having seen a small flock of fieldfares, dark in the early morning gloom, windblown like fragments from a November bonfire. (Sorry – I've been wanting to use these words for ages).

As we booted up, across the beck a modern drama was being played out. A young farmer driving an ATV, plus trailer, was rounding up sheep without leaving the vehicle. She shouted to the dog, which collected a bunch of sheep from the next field and drove them (actually they were escaping from the ruddy dog) into the next field. No whistling. And not a shepherd's crook in sight to conform to tradition.

We set off walking, then stopped at a gate beside a cattle grid. On the gate was a message: "£2 a doz for new-laid eggs". Beside the gate, attached to a piece of fencing, was a box containing eggs in half-dozen cartons. And a container for t'brass. Henceforth, the footpath signs were numerous and conspicuous – except for one, which was seen floating in some floodwater. The message on it: "For Footpath Please Follow the Wall". Not ruddy likely. There was too much mud and flood between us and the wall. Two field gates were new, with signs indicating they belonged to the Dales National Park. We were reminded as we plodged through mire of Anthony Bradley, of Settle, who said: "Why do they put t'gates in t'muckiest part of t'field?" There was much newly-spread muck of the bovine variety.

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We crossed fields on which a heavy tractor with muck-spreader had wiped their feet. Apparently, the EEC insists (among its thousand daft ideas) that stored muck must not exceed a specified quantity before being spread. Which means that the stuff is being spread throughout the year. The EEC is apparently now considering ear-tagging sheep.

The sky at the dalehead was "mucky", to quote a farm lad during an art lesson, when a teacher helped out by giving his picture blue patches and fluffy white clouds. We were in a brighter zone. We saw patches big enough to mend a Dutchman's trousers (old Dales saying) and rays of sunlight that brought out the orange hue of the fellsides. David wandered off to the Skirfare and returned excitedly with two digital photos featuring river, trees and – sunlight.

So we came to Nether Hesleden Farm, which stands where Penyghent Gill merges with the dale. Here were two buildings belonging to families who periodically visited them. New wooden horse boxes and an elaborate playhouse supported by tall wooden legs were new features to Bill, who used to visit the place for *The Dalesman*. As we contemplated these features, and recalled seeing a new farmhouse on higher ground, we were joined by Alan Robinson, driving a Land Rover from his home – at the beginning of the approach lane.

Alan, recognising Bill, immediately recalled Settle dances (at the Rugby hut, he said, though Bill could not remember this). What he did recall was that Alan and the rest of the Robinson family had lived at Cowside, above Langeliffe, and that Alan's mum was Christine, daughter of the Austwick Morphets and...but you've had enough of this Dales family gossip.

Alan poured out a torrent of local news, mainly involving livestock, their quality and how much they were worth. He had been to the Perth sales and bought a beef Shorthorn bull for £3,000, thereby reintroducing the Shorthorn breed to the dale where it once flourished, to be succeeded by Friesians, known to one farmer because of their prodigious yield of milk as "watter-cans". Bill asked him what type of suckler cow was being kept. The reply: "Mongrel cross – all breeds." The Swaledale sheep were special. On the farmer were the daughters of a Swaledale tup (not locally owned) that had exchanged hands at £101,000. Whew!

It was time for Elevenses. Cyril had the traditional (and much appreciated) offering of Coffee and Fruit Cake, which we ate in the lee of a wall, overlooking a meadow spread with you-know-what. Popsie rolled on its back. David was relieved to see that it had kept clear of the brown stuff. We walked along a green lane between walls. Further on, where the lane resumed near a cluster of farm buildings, we stepped to one side to allow a large tractor and Fraser Muck-Master (laden) to pass.

Ignoring Litton, we kept on a path that would, if we had the time, energy and inclination, have led us to Arncliffe. David pointed out a cripple-oil [which, as is generally known, is a small opening at the bottom of wall to permit passage of sheep]. This cripple-oil had fire-ash spread in it, presumably to stop it getting soggy.

On our way down the dale, we had seen white water flowing down a limestone staircase on the dale side, the local becks and runnels dealing with the recent heavy rainfall. Now we came across a place where we were likely to have water up to our shins. Then bill, following a small path, rounded a bush and saw – a bridge formed of a single big piece of stone. We passed a farm to a chorus of barks from a small terrier and a geriatric collie, the last-named backing all the time it barked aggressively.

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Now we found ourselves walking along a riverside path with lots of obstructions – tree roots and boulders - to avoid or negotiate with care. The path brought us to a parting of the ways. Should we follow the course we had set and go through Skoska Wood to Arncliffe or cross a range of stepping stones, where the river boiled and bubbled, and head for the fleshpots of Litton? We decided on braving the stepping stones, which we did, reaching the other bank dryshod. Part of our path now consisted of a new cobbled strip beside the river.

The gloomy sky darkened. The wind rose and for a brief spell was howling like a Dervish. Suspecting the onset of rain, we scuttered into a barn for a major booty stop, sitting in an area covered with bales of sweet-smelling hay. Luvly. The barn was of the old Craven type, with barn. It was also air-conditioned, the meeting place of draughts.

Bill conducted the usual census of sandwiches: Cyril – cheese rolls; David – sardines and crisps; Bill – tuna and mayonaisee; Popsie – dog biscuits, crunches, tuna in sunflower oil (and whatever it could scrounge from the others).

We continued our walk, along what had been a green lane but was now so eroded, in part by flooding, that from the pedestrian point of view it had shrunk to a narrow path. We followed a well-worn path across the middle of a field (and approached from the wrong side a notice asking people to use a path at the wall-side). We encountered, at the road near Litton, another sign, which we could only read when passing it – “Ford and Footpath: Often impassable after heavy rainfall.”

At 1-40, we reached the Queen’s Arms, where booted patrons were not permitted to enter. David produced two green canvas overshoes and went in to collect our drinks. We were left reading the many notices on the front of the inn, one indicating that “Litton ale is Brewed Here.” Pre-Christmas visits to this pub under the leadership of the late lamented Roy Gudgeon were recalled. The car had been left at Halton Gill, from which we climbed Horsehead Pass, leaving it to make a moorland crossing that descended to the Queen’s Arms for rabbit pie and chips; thence on the field path we were now about to reacquaint ourselves.

We plodded along the familiar path, noticing that some willow by the river were festooned with catkins. We returned to Nether Hesleden, this time meeting Joan Robinson (wife of the aforementioned Alan) who told us of her herdwick sheep, now in lamb. She had bought a distinctive breed so that if she won any prizes with the stock none of the menfolk could share in the glory. Bill said he would present her with a copy of his latest book, about Lakeland Farm Life, in which the herdwick is prominently mentioned.

We walked into a steady wind, under a blackened sky that (thankfully) did not part with any rain. David and Cyril photographed a passing Chinook helicopter. We reached the car in time for David to buy the last remaining half dozen eggs – free range eggs, laid yesterday!

