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A SOGGY WAY TO WHELPSTONE CRAG



The Adventurers: David, Cyril, Trevor, Bill – and Popsie
Weather: Torrential rain, then a bright spell, with occasional sunshine.

2/11/05

We had a late start, 11-30 a.m. from the new hall at Tosside. During the journey from Settle there was so much mist and rain it was hard to tell where the earth ended and the sky began. At least, we were able to boot-up in dry conditions. Then seeking out a sheltered area at front of the hall where, normally, old men can sit on benches and dream dreams while the womenfolk do the tidying up inside the building, we quaffed coffee distributed by Cyril. A smiling cleaning-lady, when leaving the place, said there was also an outside toilet.

We passed the *Dog and Partridge*, noticing a new sign featuring the head of a black, setter-like dog with a partridge standing on its head. As we walked, the celestial hosepipe was switched off and a bright period developed. On the unmetalled road leading to Gisburn Forest, we zig-zagged between puddles and watched a man reverse a vehicle and trailer, then backing up to a gigantic heap of wood with a load of holly prunings. At a local timber yard, there was the rasping sound of metal against wood as felled trees were cut into into workable pieces.

Now, to our left, was a mass of sitka spruce which had grown almost with the speed of rhubarb under grey Bowland skies. Trees on our right had toppled over, presenting to view mats composed of roots, thin soil and big stones. David consulted a map of Gisburn Forest he had got from a local tourist centre. It showed, simply, colourfully, the main forest roads and footpaths. We were soon aware that regular updates of an area like the Forest would be necessary to cope with the growth of self-sown species of sitka spruce and lodge pole pine.

We turned off what Bill had always thought of as the main route and followed a byroad to an outbuilding which was festooned with unblinking CCTV cameras. We smartened ourselves up and waved at the cameras before walking on to an impressive house – built so recently the final details were still to be added ~~and yet~~ in the local vernacular style, with sloping roof,
It was

porch and mullion windows. And yet more cameras. We walked on – under the gaze of another clutch of cameras, some of which followed our progress. Or was this our imagination, based on many hi fi films on tv?

We came to a stable block, a northward-facing greenhouse (complete with plants) and two affable workmen, from whom we discovered that the owner of the enterprise was a man who worked in IT [Information technology] and also had something to do with oil-rigs. (He presumably worked on one). A new stretch of track – and some new signs, these being the yellow arrows indicating footpaths – ~~through~~^{led} us into confusion. David and Trevor applied a compass to map and felt that our chosen route was not along the way indicated but through a boggy and tangled area which David now proceeded to explore, negotiating a fence and moving hesitantly – as well he might – through waist-high vegetation.

In the end, we set off along the broad new track and in a short distance found a T junction. The yellow arrow we now saw ignored the new tracks going left and right, directing us into what appeared at first glance to be an unexplored tangle of trees, vegetation, a crumbling wall and bog. David led us along a track so faint it might have been made by deer. There was a whoop of delight from Trevor when, at the base of the wall, a cluster of “matchstick lichen” – short stalks, bright red caps – was found.

Moving at a quarter of a mile an hour, we eventually broke tree cover, seeing signs of civilisation, such as a few young trees that had been provided with plastic corsets – and a broad unmetalled track! By this time delirium had set in. We had fanciful ideas – of a café just round the next corner. We could even smell bacon butties. Red and green markers indicated a cycle route. Our progress was now more confident, until we realised that as the track rose and bore right we had almost completed a circle – and signs of activity at the new buildings we had seen some time before were just across the moor.

After consulting the simple map, and then looking for a turn off to the left – our direct route to Whelpstone Crag – we gave it up and followed the main track. At a point where David thought our path should be, he broke through a belt of self-sown spruce but could see no prospects. A buzzard made a big circle in the sky, as though keeping its eye on us as we made a left turn into yet another boggy, tussocky area between massed trees. It now became clear that we should follow what remained of a wall. We did this awkwardly for a while, then found a ridge on which progress was swifter. The dominant sound was the squelch of boots on soggy ground.

We emerged, sploshily, from the forest with a splendid view of Whelpstone, rising above a gritstone ridge. We mocked a “right to roam” sign before using an inconspicuous stile to follow a route to the big hill – a route that was a cross between a footpath and an irrigation channel. We were under the unblinking stare of sheep as we climbed to the summit of

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Whelpstone, marked by a trig point at an elevation of around 1,100 ft. David pronounced (after looking at the map) that we were at a height of 371m. The sky had blue patches. A clearing mist revealed the outlines of Ingleborough, Penyghent, Pendle Hill and also part of Stocks Reservoir.

Photographs were taken where huge gritstone boulders looked like a row of massive teeth on a gum of green. We settled down to eat. Bill carried out his usual census of sandwiches and other edibles. Trevor – potted meat and cucumber (“though I forgot to put in the cucumber”). Cyril – ham rolls and mustard. David – packed of crisps, tin of sardines and “various healthy, chewy cereal bars”. Bill – tuna and mayonnaise. Popsie – plain biscuits (“because it had a full breakfast”). Popsie also hoovered up any discarded food, leaving the skyline tidy.

The return journey was now planned and, eventually, we descended to a gate and followed a path between areas of rank vegetation to the track system of the Forest. A pheasant appeared, then disappeared among trees. Popsie – ditto. Pheasant emerged and flew off. Popsie appeared in a different area and ran down the road for a short distance before returning to its most popular game, the “prop” for which is the handiest piece of wood, which is dropped, then retrieved if, hopefully, someone finds the energy to throw it away.

The low-slung sun created a fantasy of sunlight and shadow between big trees. We were in Arcady – until we heard a roaring sound, as though a lonely woodman was felling trees. It was actually a lad from the village, practising his motor bike skills by riding up a gushing watercourse, then surmounting steep banks to go between trees. He did this in a tight circuit several times. We admired his skill but not the way he was violating the peace of a hitherto unscarred area. He cheekily emerged, drove round us, possibly expecting us to comment or even denounce him. We kept a dignified, reproving silence. He rode off.

On our way from the forest we passed a trashed mini car, complete with large boulder on dented roof. When we met Percy Tilbury, driving home in his ancient Range Rover with a noisy exhaust, he said that two cars had been used for racing. When he stopped that unofficial game, one car was left in its present sad condition and would have to be removed.

So we emerged from the Forest, after a sunny, breezy period that was now ending with yet more rain.

