

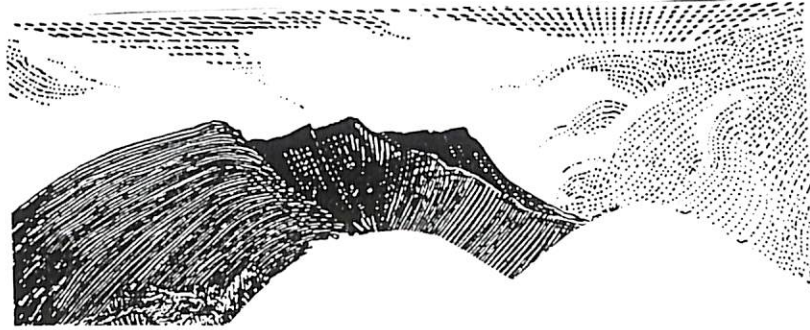
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NORTH-WEST FRONTIER

**Explored by Cyril, David, Trevor, Bill, with the help of Popsie.
Weather, as forecast by Cyril: Fair to good.**



Until 1974, the West Riding extended to a gill on the north-western flank of the Howgill Fells. Emissaries attended Council meetings in distant Wakefield, which was the county town. The situation has calmed down since Yorkshirefolk lived cheek-by-jowl with Westmerians this upper valley of the Lune. Now the whole of the hill range is occupied by a tribe called Cumbrians. No warlike signs were detected, though we were spied on by jet aircraft travelling at what used to be known as zero feet.

On our excursion, we did not meet any of the natives but saw much traffic through the Lune Gorge. We found this strange, remote land populated by a people who were still using horse-drawn wagons – the wagons being brightly painted and apparently with sleeping accommodation.

Duty chauffeur: Trevor. The journey to the Fair Mile, from which we intended to climb the Howgills, took place at a time when the countryside had a thousand bright shades of green, a lingering array of May blossom on the thorns and fields that looked golden from buttercups in full flower.

Happily, we were travelling in the same direction as travellers heading for the New Fair at Appleby, so overtaking at an early hour was easily possible. The travelling folk were camping in a recess near Harden Bridge. A horse cropped the road verge. A horse-drawn vardo was seen in motion near Cowan Bridge. Travellers, also known as gypsies, were in lay-byes and on road verges in the upper Lune. A big concentration was parked near a hostelry known as The Head.

Page Two

There was some little doubt about the road to take from Sedbergh to the Fair Mile. Several narrow, hedge-bordered roads feed into a ditto that makes its rambling way for miles from the old town to the start of the Fair Mile. Trevor dealt with the system manfully, while confessing he had a stiff neck and reversing (in the event of meeting something) would be painful. The road, not much wider than the steam-roller that laid the original surface, was flanked by cow parsley, also known (according to Trevor) as hedge parsley. The road contrasted with the six-laned M6. A redundant redstone railway viaduct at Lowgill testified to a slower, though more gracious form of transport.

We crossed a cattle-grid, which yielded a nerve-shattering rattle, avoided several small rabbits and came to rest on an expanse of stone chippings in view of some of the big, treeless, wall-less fells of the Howgill range. We marvelled that such a stupendous feature was named after a modest, tree-shaded hamlet. Booting up, at 9-24 precisely we headed – hesitantly – to high ground. There were at least three theories as to which route to take, Cyril and Trevor opting for a path in a gill where they were eventually joined by David and Bill, who had been tip-toeing through a mini-jungle of young bracken fronds.

Soon we had left the last of the drystone walls for a wilderness of coarse grass, ling, bilberry, tormentil, coppery-looking beetles and a grass track – not an eroded trail – leading us to Fell End. Above the noise of traffic on the M6 we heard a skylark warbling. A dark cloud rested for a while on the Howgills but all around the landscape features were distinct. Glancing towards the western rim we saw the silhouettes of familiar fells – Black Combe, the Coniston Fells, Great and Green Gable, Langdale Pikes.

On the protracted, exhausting upward climb (with several false summits) we saw three dark ponies beyond a cluster of the local breed of sheep – namely Rough Fells. They are adapted for life on dry, slatey hills. More skylarks were heard (David said a couple of birds were either fighting or going through a mating routine). Fell Head was bleak, with a modest heap of stones at 2,050 ft. A cool wind was blowing from the east. There had been an implication that at Fell Head the serious climbing was over.

It was, until the ground dipped, then rose steeply with the verve of a Big Dipper, topping out as Bush Howe and making another (less serious) undulation before we stood at the highest point, The Calf, 2,220 ft. The trig point was whitewashed. David scanned the horizon and picked out the radomes (which he called “golf balls”) on Great Dun Fell, just short of Cross Fell, the attic of the Pennines. A straddle of noisy rooks flew by. A swift, possibly from Sedbergh, flicked its way across the tops, looking for insect fare.

Page Three

It was decided to have our snack meal on White Fell. We left the track for a grass-lagged area overlooking one of the deep gills, and here the usual review was made of the contents of the various lunch-boxes. Trevor – ham and beetroot (both home-cooked), Bill – tuna and mayonnaise. David – crisps and a tin of sardines. Cyril – ham rolls with mustard.

The afternoon was notable for the wind dropping and military jets coming out to play. They swept up the Lune Valley, above the heads of (possibly startled) motorists. Look towards the sound and you missed them; they were well ahead of the sound. Cyril, observing their use of the line of the valley and the motorway, said: "At least they knew where they were going."

We had a halt for drinks at Fell End (sharing the drinks with numerous black flies) then began our descent to what was now the tropical zone – sunny and hot. We took another route and consequently had a view of the Lune Gorge from a different angle and in spectacular weather conditions. The gorge was sun-lit; some of the fells were in shadow. A hang-glider waited for a wind before launching himself from a high knoll. As he did, to fly backwards and forwards, Popsie was galvanised into action, dashing across the ground in the vain hope of catching the aeronaut.

The jets returned, screamingly, dashing through the gorge at a height of about 500 ft. One of them was much lower. The companion of the hang-glider had an altimeter that fixed the height as 127 ft (local limit – 250 ft). We were fortunate as we left the parking area in having a grey car ahead of us. The driver of that car had the nerve-wracking experience of leading the way along that narrow, winding road. We turned off to cross the river on a narrow bridge when we seriously entertained having to fold back the rear view ^{mirrors} windows to avoid stroking the parapets. We passed under one of the graceful arches of Lowgill railway viaduct and headed towards Sedbergh, then down the dale, seeing yet more of the travellers on their horse-drawn vardo's.

Liquid refreshment was enjoyed at Thornton-in-Lonsdale.



