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NORTH-WEST FRONTIER

To the old County Stone on Great Coum
St Patrick's Day -17.3.04.

Frontiersmen: Cyril, David, Trevor, Bill.
Frontiersdog: Popsie (not forgetting his stick).

Weather: We expected it to be fair. While Giggleswick basked in sunshine, we collected a wind tan under cloud.



David was duty chauffeur. Bill walked to his house, in the front garden of which a jackdaw was collecting nesting material while its mate watched from the house roof. Bill presumed that the busy bird was the female being supervised by the male. At Leck, David drove slowly while overtaking a horse and his consideration was acknowledged by the smartly-dressed lady rider. (If he had gone by the horse he would have driven faster; a pampered horse can become skittish). ^{manual} ~~book~~ ✓

A kestrel hovered over a field near the village. We began to climb to a parking space near the farm on the flanks of Gragareth, passing gorse (some of it in flower), a black moor (tracts had been burnt or swiddened to encourage the growth of new shoots, food for sheep and grouse). The farm had a windmill to generate electricity. For what? A curlew, on lower ground, gave a springtime aria.

We booted up, had coffee and cake from Cyril, ensured that Popsie had one of the sticks we had brought with us and set off up the side of the hill, over coarse vegetation, patches of sphagnum moss and screes composed of king-side pieces of gritstone. Bog, rush-bobs, scree marked the upward route to the first of the man-made items – a tall cairn and a windbreak with a roof, made of native stone. David christened it The Igloo.

We traversed the fellside to the main feature – The Three Men of Gragareth. Bill and others remember when they were five. David, duty model, posed for photos, extending his arms to touch two of the cairns. Within easy view was a third display

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of human arrogance in what was otherwise a fine natural setting, this time two cairns, each topped by a single stone set vertically as though providing a deterrent for parachutists.

We continued our ramble uphill, over *Nardus* tussocks, rushes and peaty bogs, A skylark managed to hold its own against a stiff, cold breeze as it sang, hoping that the females had already arrived, but no other larks were seen. We alarmed, then roused, five newly-arrived golden plover. The shrill double-whistles drew attention to them, then they were airborne, travelling fast, still calling. We saw their slender bodies, angled wings, against scudding clouds.

The summit of Gragareth, at c2,060 ft, was reached at 10-43, just an hour after we had left the car. The trig point stood in a man-made tarn – water that had gathered where the boots of visiting walkers had eroded the land round about. The trig point was numbered S5404. By this time, Popsie was well into phase one of its games with a stick. She broke off and made a token chase when a red grouse shot noisily aloft, hovered briefly at the near horizon, then glided to the ground, chunteringly. We now encountered bogland on the grand scale. Water that had been locked up for weeks by frost was now fluid. One of David's boots sprang a leak. Another cock skylark, climbing heavenwards, warbled.

A new stretch of wall was admired. What at first glance appeared to be a blue tent containing a sleeping person or a body turned out to be a plastic sack which had presumably been used to airlift material for the wall. Another grouse went wall-hopping. It being Cyril's turn to throw Popsie the stick, he was surprised when it caught the wind and returned with a boomerang effect, giving Trevor a light glancing blow. He mock-limped.

We crossed the wall at a damaged part, then tussled with some barbed wire before reaching an area where swallow-holes contained black peat. Soon we had reached The County Stone, marking the pre-1974 border between three counties – West Riding, Westmorland, Lancashire. The Stone lay at a wall junction. A strand of rusting wire that extended over the top had tufts of sheep wool, which fluttered in the breeze like Tibetan prayer flags. When sheep were in this area – and we saw none – they had no difficulty in switching counties by scrambling over the edge of the stone.

A tall gritstone wall gave us respite from the cruel wind. The footpath was sloppy; the stiles broken and hard to negotiate. Trevor recalled that on a previous occasion, when the party had wives in attendance, this was the point at which he and Doris wondered if the front door of their house had been locked. (On their return, it was wide open and keys reposed on a hall table – yet nothing was disturbed).

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So we reached a modest cairn which marked the summit of Great Coum (c2,300 ft). The time – 12-35. The wind howled, the air was chill but there was life other than ourselves. A vole was seen scampering for cover. We elected to delay lunch until we had reached Crag Hill and, having attained a trig point (S5661) enjoyed the fine views (I'm trying to avoid using the hoary word "panoramic"). We settled down for our mid-day snack in the lee of a wall, through cracks in which the wind played a shrill tune. Sandwich census: Trevor – Wensleydale cheese and cucumber. Cyril – Edam cheese without cucumber. David – sardines in tomato and corned beef butties. Bill – Tuna and mayonnaise.

There now began an epic^s journey across trackless terrain – from Crag Hill to a wall, high up Gragareth – a wall that was faintly visible. In places the *Nardus stricta* (which the Squire of Clapham calls "sheep-resistant grass") was so tall, so soft, so dense it was like walking on a duvet. The landscape was patterned by post-war grips (machine-made drainage ditches) which had eroded so badly some of them were mini-canyons, with dark peat rather than rock. In one place, a section where water had run underground had collapsed and the vegetation lay in great chunks, waiting for the next big storm to wash them away.

We did manage to cross the main beck, which had cut a deep, V-shaped notch, but some of the eroded grips presented water and high banks of peat. A sort of fellside Becher's Brook. We occasionally humbled ourselves, arriving at the top of a bank on our knees.

Among the sterile wildness, there was life. Sphagnum moss, of course, obscured by rushes. Also what was described as "matchstick lichen", a diminutive cushion, the fruiting part being red, on stems, rather like what Trevor quaintly described as Lucifers. Trevor almost tripped over another vole. We slogged over tousled terrain, climbing gradually, crossing yet more screes composed of gritstone slabs, heading for the corner of a wall, beyond which we confidently expected to find^d the track that would lead us back to the car.

It was further than we expected, but attain it we did, cheered by the prospect to the west of the silvery Lune and the gleam of Morecambe Bay. (We tried to ignore the ominous concrete blocks at the atomic power station of Heysham). The last feature of natural history interest was the accumulation of freshly-laid frog/toad spawn in a trackside puddle. Back at the car, we assessed we had covered 8 ½ gruelling miles and deserved the liquid refreshments we enjoyed at the Marton Arms, Thornton-in-Lonsdale.

