

Trevor

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FROSTED DENTDALE



David, Trevor, Bill have a bad attack of end-of-the-year-it is, venturing into an Arctic landscape on 31st December, 2003. To Popsie, to whom the calendar means nothing, it's just an enjoyable romp. (Six miles in four hours).

Weather: Bright, cold. The meteorological service, suffering from post-Fish caution, hinted at raging wind and flurrying snow. Having as companions two potential snow-pushers if the weather worsened was a consolation to Trevor, duty chauffeur. He met David and Bill at the top of Yealand Avenue five minutes after two gruff-voiced ravens had passed at a considerable height. There was no sign of the cock pheasant and heron that appear spasmodically.

On the way to Dentdale, David mentioned a recent ascent of Skiddaw when he and the rest of the party walked on snow and ice. The end-of-the-excursion drive down a slippery road from Lattrigg car park gave a new meaning to the local pronunciation for the mountain – Skid-der. The road to Dent had been salted, as evidenced by a dark, damp surface and dollops of rock salt near Gearstones.

We saw an abandoned car near Studfold and, near Ribblehead, a pick-up^{Van}, with caution light flashing. All but Trevor turned heads to see a James Herriot scene – that of a grizzle-grey Dales farmer, bag of animal food over his shoulder, collie at heel, descending from where a group of prize Swaledale yows were guzzling. A long white cloud extended over the northern fells. Wold Fell was white-capped.

We had good luck on the narrow road in Cowgill parish (upper Dentdale), meeting vehicles on stretches with space for two vehicles to pass. Where the road lay beside the beck, we actually looked downwards on a heron that risked getting a bad cold by standing knee-keep in icy water. At Dent we were ambushed by a van but managed to get by. Our teeth rattled like castanets on the cobbled street. The car park was surprisingly well-used for an out-of-season day.

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We gained our operational height after a slog up Flintergill (more precisely, beside the gill). As we left the village we ~~had~~ noticed that Zion Chapel 1834 had become, of all things, the Dent Meditation Centre. All our attention was now focussed on our feet as we picked a safe way beside an ice sheet of such extent it might almost have been glacial. On one side the beck tripped down a staircase of dark rock. On the other, a tractor drew a spreader full of muck, depositing it (the muck) on a white surface. (It was, indeed, muck-spreading time after a long rainy spell. The sinus-clearing tang was almost enough to put us off our sandwiches).

Bill raised more than a titter by telling the story of a transport café. A lorry driver entered and ordered bacon, egg, beans, which were served on a large plate. Into the café came a party of zestful young motor-cyclists, one of whom – seeking what such youngsters regard as fun – poured a full bottle of tomato sauce on the food and ruffled the driver's ^{hair} head. He said nothing, rose, paid for his fare and left the building. Said the lad to the man behind the counter: "He was not much of a man." The man behind the counter replied: "He's not much of a driver. He's just run over six motor-bikes."

We saw evidence of old-time hedge-laying in the various large, moss-covered trees edging the gill. From a "laid" section, several branches had grown up like mini-trees. Erosion left them standing on a horizontal branch of great thickness. We negotiated a gate. The rough path up Flintergill now levelled out. A post with three fingers indicated bridleways to High Moss (4 miles), Dent (1 mile) and Keldishaw (1 ½ miles). We turned right, on the latter. We were now on an occupation road, with extensive views of fell-country, especially the lofty fell above Barbondale. Popsie was now well into its tricks with sticks, tempting us to pick them up, collecting them when our fingers were inches away from them. While we picked our way cautiously between ice sheet, Popsie crossed them with all the assurance of a critter with four clawed feet.

We met other walkers, one couple anxious that Popsie should be restrained; their collie didn't like having its bottom sniffed. They ^{couple} gazed fixedly at Popsie, ~~as~~ though genetically it had no relationship to the dogs owned by Princess Anne. We glanced ahead to see the Howgills, with Cautley Crag deep in shadow. At the end of the bridleway were several vehicles, one of them having attached to it a trailer for transporting motor bikes. (Two such bikes were later seen in noisy progress back to where the cars had been left). Another sign, indicating Dent (2), Nun House (3), High Moss (5). We strode along the Barbondale road, between limestone walls, noticing the remnants of what must have been an extensive outcrop of limestone before chunks of

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it were quarried for wall-building and lime-burning (several ruined kilns were inspected).

Our route left to Underwood (1 ½). We passed through a gate under the unblinking stare of a large party of Swaledale ewes that bore, in green or red-tinted rumps, evidence of recent sexual activity. Two young men were gazing intently at the fell-top. One of them had a pair of binoculars. He thought he had seen a golden eagle. Bill suggested that if he only thought he had seen an eagle he had almost certainly observed a buzzard. The path we followed became a ledge cut from the fellside. On either side were scrawky old thorns. We descended to a group of old, decrepit buildings – what remained of the farmstead of Coombes Haws. The most impressive feature was a porch with accommodation for doves indicated by rows of holes above the door. The path now descended to Tofts, protected from invaders by a deep gill. The footpath had been diverted, descended to beck level, crossing it by means of two gatestoops, laid side by side, ~~and had~~ a new flight of steps on the other side ^{to give a} carefree ascent to the farm.

We needed some advanced gymnastics to negotiate a gate which had become bedded in debris washed down from above; Popsie crossed it adroitly, making full use of its four legs. We passed the ruined Raw Banks and descended to civilisation, as indicated by a house that was complete with children, also a sight of a party of ramblers, in bright anoraks, moving along the river bank beyond. We eventually reached the river. Terry reported finding a dandelion in bloom on this late December day. A dipper – er – dipped. We discussed the growth of bureaucracy. David pointed out how a burst in a pipe had created some splendid ice sculpture on a wire fence.

At Dent, we went to the nearest watering-hole, the Sun Inn. Then, feeling like a change from the narrow winding road of the upper dale, ^{Trevor} ~~Terry~~ took us on a scenic route to Sedbergh, thence to Kirkby Lonsdale. (At Middleton, Bill pointed out a Roman milestone in a field – a milestone which recently fascinated Alan Bennett. But that, as they say, is another story...). The day ended with a round of “happy new years”.

