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WATER CRAG IN THE DROUGHT

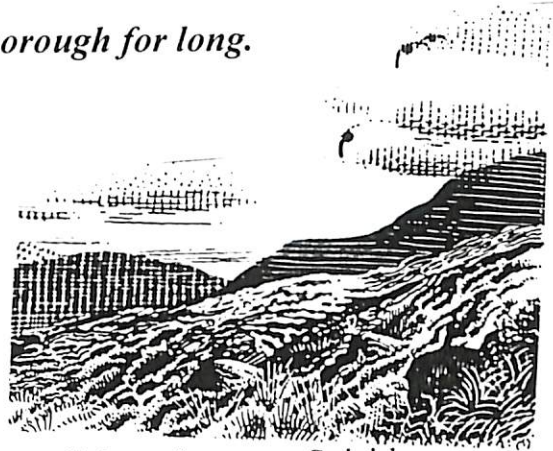
9.4.2003.

The Adventurers: Roy, Cyril, Trevor, Bill.

Weather: Bright dawn after cold night. Orange glow as sun peeps into North Ribblesdale. Cyril forecasts sunny, with some cloud. Actual weather conditions: ditto. With some dramatic cloud formations, shimmering tarns and blue-grey hills.

Surprise of the Day: We did not lose sight of Ingleborough for long.

Duty chauffeur: Trevor.



A quick passage to Swaledale. Sunlit vistas. Partridge wall-hopping near Selside. Lapwings in tumbling flight at Ribblehead. First sighting of red grouse on Buttertubs Pass. Swaledale, burnished by sunlight, lived up to the postcard images of the place. We drew into a near-empty car park at Keld and beheld a row of doors in an outbuilding. They were named respectively (and respectfully): Washing Up, Ladies, Toilet, Gents, Shower.

Roy recited the names of the summits we were to tackle. The first would be Rogan's Seat (Mr Rogan's summer pasture), Wham Bottom (Cyril thought it droll to name a hill "bottom"), Water Crag (from which it is claimed that once a century, with conditions perfect, an observer might observe the North and Irish Seas). Roy, who likes a challenge, had decided to climb 230 two-thousand footers this year. He had already achieved 102 – with three to add should be manage to stay the course today.

We descended steeply from Keld to the gorge through which the infant Swale flows – and realised that our ten-mile walk would end with a steep climb back to the village. A wooded bridge spanned the river. Though the gorge was in shadow, a sheer limestone cliff had lost none of its drama. Pheasants called (croakily, as though they had sore throats).

Having ~~regain~~^{ed} elevation (though by no means our operational height) we walked buoyantly towards Swinnergill. Soon the spoil heaps betokening old-time lead mining came into view. Then we were in sight of Crackpot Hall, a former

(2)



farmhouse, what remained having been consolidated. Roy, on all fours, tried to read a plaque with black lettering on dark metal. Bill spoke of old time territorial differences – in the underworld – and a punch-up that took place between two groups of miners.

We examined the ruins and Bill showed his fellow walkers the rusty, bottomless bath in which last week Colin Pomfret mimed having a bath before a rusty and long disused fireplace. Higher up was a building which was in part a house and in major part a blacksmith's shop. The forge was extant.

Rounding a bend in the track we found ourselves viewing Swinnergill, a broad, deep gash in the landscape with many reminders of lead-mining days. We saw a ruined smelt mill and a single-span bridge across a gorge (which, following many rainless weeks, was devoid of water). Bill heard a ring ouzel calling and located the "mountain blackbird", high up, going from sight beyond a crag. We flushed a pair of grouse, which did not fly, or even call, but strutted away between cushions of coarse grass.

There was time to look into the smelt mill, which was not difficult, this being a roofless ruin. We began the climb out of Swinnergill wryly observing there was almost as much water on the path and in the beck. Up, up, up we went. We were welcomed near the top by a wren – a lile bird – in vehement song. The sound came from a bank of out-of-season heather. Before we cleared the gorge, Bill (the last one) looked back to see a cock grouse strutting across the narrow path. It stood on a rock for as long as Bill had time to use his camcorder.

Into view came one of the brave new moorland roads – a broad track, relatively smooth, covered with grit to enable the Range Rovers of visiting "guns" in August to reach the butts without having to exert themselves. We took a diagonal track (the old right of way) over soggy peat and between patches of ling. We noticed that wires on a fence had small metal plates attached at intervals – a warning of the obstruction to any grouse in headlong flight. A curlew trilled distantly. We had a glimpse of Gunnerside Gill before turning left to use a private track (permission secured from the gamekeeper by Roy). A few jet aircraft, sounding like aerial vacuum cleaners, criss-crossed the azure sky. Cyril said to Bill: "By the time you hear the noise – they've gone." One was loud enough to shake the bubble out of a spirit level.

Trevor pointed to No 3 butt and to a cock grouse in silhouette on a boulder about 15 yards beyond the butt. He suggested that the bird's favourite perch was so close to the shooters it felt confident it would be missed. Cyril stalked the grouse, camera at the ready, for two paces before the bird took flight. We were disappointed that, having got permission to visit this very private part of a grouse moor no gamekeeper

had appeared to check on us. Near a shooting lodge, the track ran between mini-cliffs that were banded with heather and peat on a deep bed of slate.

We found that the summit of Rogan's Seat (2,203 ft) was an island of heather-thatched peat on an area scraped flat for the benefit of grouse-shooting. The ground round about was littered with grouse droppings. We found a boulder against which we could shelter from a chilly easterly breeze and have a minor snack, preparing the stomach for the banquet to come.

We continued our steady walk (average of 1.33 miles an hour) on moorland, beside a wire fence, heading for the oddly-named Wham Bottom (2,150 ft) and Water Crag (2,188 ft). Few grouse were seen but the heather was littered with moulted grouse feathers, some of which must have been wind-blown to come to rest near the fence.

Roy was delighted with the views. His previous two visits to Water Crag were in thick mist. Cyril was happy because he was about to complete his conquest of the Great Shunner group of fells. Bill was happy to be going to Water Crag for the first time. Trevor was happy to be out and about, with glorious panoramic views. He would have been happier if a bacon-buttie vendor had appeared. And he was keen to know the meaning of Water Crag.

We settled down in a windbreak near the trig point on Water Crag and dined and supped. Bill, using his mobile phone, found he had a strong signal and established telephonic contact with Freda in Giggleswick. The return was through what had become familiar territory. The ever-changing lighting conditions enthralled us. Bill used his camcorder to record shapely clouds.

Back on the main track (part of the Coast to Coast Walk) we saw a cock grouse taking in grit. This enters its gizzard and enables it to eat the fibrous heather that forms the major part of its diet. The bird was joined by another hen bird. They picked up grit, side by side, until a second hen bird appeared – and was pursued into the heather and driven off.

So we walked through a succession of attractive solitudes until at the smelt mill in Swinnergill we saw two figures – not gamekeepers but elderly lady and young woman, champing sandwiches. We had a second stop for drink and food outside the smithy building at Crackpot, then walked briskly along a good, level path before we had the final descent and ascent near Keld. Trevor and Roy, being ahead of Cyril and Bill, established themselves at an outside table before a farmhouse. Trevor treat us to tea and toasted teacake. Every mouthful was observed by the local house sparrows.

