

RETURN TO THE LAKE DISTRICT 2012

Saturday 31st March

Alan and I had chosen the Lake District for our honeymoon in 1971 and in a kind of lifespan reality check way, found ourselves returning 41 years later with our son Dan, his wife Paula and their two children, Willow (4 years 2 months) and Piran (1 year 11 months). From newlyweds to grandparents, just like that!

Talking of time, we attempted an 08.00 start from Pontardawe in the Swansea Valley in order to make the most of the day and managed to be only 20 minutes behind schedule. Willow opted to ride in our car, so I sat beside her in the back seat to help keep her occupied on rather a long car journey. The sky was overcast but it remained dry as we left and drove to Brecon and beyond, upwards into North Wales. Willow talked just about all the time for at least the first hour, so I can't say the journey was boring...

Our first stop after 2.5 hours was in the National Trust owned Carding Mill Valley in Shropshire, an extensive area of upland heath that includes part of the Long Mynd (Long Mountain). The scenery looked most impressive and from pictures and information in the room where we had coffee, I wasn't surprised that it was an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, with its steep valleys and Precambrian rock. Our current need for sustenance having been met, though, we had to press on towards our lunchtime destination of Chester in Cheshire.

The weather became a little drizzly as I helped to keep Willow amused for about an hour with a comic, but when we arrived at the city I've wanted to see for decades, it was dry again. As we ate sandwiches and crisps in a large car park close to the historic city walls, it was clear to see that Chester is a popular, vibrant place, with many coaches parked in a row and people walking to and from the city and along the path by the nearby river Dee.

We were allotted 1.5 hours in Chester according to Dan's schedule, so headed straight for the nearby walls, the original construction of which had been started by the Romans for obvious defensive purposes. Willow and Piran seemed happy to be let out for a walk and I was also happy to have a taster of the must-visit-later city. The section of wall we had time to explore just happened to be near the amphitheatre and I also looked down with awe on the Roman Garden with its part columns and carved building pieces from the Roman legionary fortress of Deva (although I have since learned that it was established in 1949 and was Chester's contribution to the Festival of Britain in 1951). Historic garden stoneware to die for, though...



Piran helps Granddad check out the walls

From a high point a little further on, we looked down on a thronging Chester street, very similar to the intriguing streets of York, where history mingles so delightfully with modern day

conveniences (and I'm not just talking about conveniences). As we turned around to retrace our steps, past Tudor buildings and the remains of Chester Castle, I positively longed for a more in depth Deva investigation - but a different sort of holiday was beckoning and I couldn't wait to see once again the awe inspiring beauty of the Lake District.

The next part of the journey was unfortunately along a stretch of motorway, but I didn't have much time to hate it, because Willow wanted to play a game of cards with me in the back seat - a game of cards that turned into at least 10 games. I didn't mind, though, especially when I glanced out of the window and caught sight of some distant, enigmatic mountains (enigmatic because I didn't actually know which mountains they were). The CD player had been on for most of the journey and to our surprise, Willow instantly liked Queen's *Radio Ga Ga*!

Finally we arrived at Burton in Kendal, a traditional Cumbrian village, where Wharf Cottage awaited us and where there was some welcoming blue sky. It seemed a very peaceful 200 year old detached cottage, with a canal running along the bottom of the garden that was home to some swans and other wildfowl, with a glorious view looking out to the Lakeland mountains beyond. Historic Burton Wharf is almost halfway along a 5 mile closed section of the Lancaster Canal, where throughout the forthcoming week we often saw an odd dog walker or two on the opposite bank of the canal (although some of them appeared quite ordinary).

After some quick unpacking and some slow tea drinking, we took the children for a look around outside. In a field at the back of the cottage there were some sheep with a few lambs frolicking around and several chickens from an adjacent hen house were pecking the ground. It's true that I have a bit of a bird phobia, but the chickens never bothered us and neither did the frequent trains travelling on a railway line beyond the canal - in fact, I found it quite interesting to watch the different types and colours of trains as they speedily passed by.



We think we're going to like it here!

Paula kindly concocted a pasta and tuna dish for our evening meal, which was followed by a yoghurt and some Battenberg cake - everyone was hungry, including Willow, who even had seconds. Alan and I then washed the dishes while Dan and Paula washed the children, before we settled down for our first holiday evening. By 19.35, the sun was a big orangey red orb in the sky, but Dan advised us that the weather forecast for the week ahead was going to be a little challenging, with sleet and snow arriving on Tuesday. Oo-er. This will probably curtail the plan for Dan and Alan to climb Striding Edge, Helvellyn, but hopefully the thaw will be rapid and lesser heights can be achieved.

The four of us finally turned in at around 21.45 - Alan and I have the small double bedroom on the ground floor, while the others are sleeping upstairs. It's colder here, but there are storage heaters and much to Dan's delight, a wood burning stove in the sitting room. I noticed he was already sussing the pile of logs on the hearth with a pyromaniacal glint in his eye!

Sunday 1st April

We have a noisy duvet and pillows - I suspect they are filled with feathers, but I'm determined not to dwell on this, as my bird phobia ridiculously includes feathers. There were other noises

and bumps in the night too, a couple of them attributed to poor little Willow, who fell out of her unaccustomed bed (but I believe Dan and Paula have pushed her bed against the wall to avoid future repetition). Apart from this, the bed was cosy enough and we slept quite well.

I noticed it was a beautiful morning as I tactically washed at 06.30 while the bathroom was free and the upstairs occupants hadn't yet descended. It must have been a cold night, as there was quite a heavy frost on the roof of the cars, but our bedroom had been warm - a bit too warm, to be honest, but I soon cooled down in the chilly bathroom.

After a familial breakfast, we were ready to set off in our frosted cars at a rather impressive 08.45. There were a surprising number of people already out and about as we passed by lots of signposts displaying deliciously Lakey names, with a definite preponderance of *thwaite*, which is derived from the old Norse word *thveit* meaning cleared from a forest. The mountains are locally known as fells, from the Norse word *fjall* for hill. Big hills!

We drove through Kendal and along some narrow roads with tantalising views of the big hills underneath a very blue sky. In fact, the road wound precariously uphill and was single track in places, so not exactly for the faint hearted driver - or passenger. Willow was riding with us again and Alan turned on the Queen CD for her favourite song, *Radio Ga Ga*, but it seemed that falling out of bed had understandably left her rather tired and not quite as reasonable as the day before. Dan was right to have encouraged us to leave early, though, because when we arrived at Blea Tarn, the pay and display car park already contained a number of cars (and by midday was at full capacity).

Although we met a few people during our walk, it was still very uplifting to be in such an essentially wild, beautiful place. I understand that it took over 500 million years to create the Lake District, with the major rock groups forming in the first 100 million years. These were then uplifted into the Caledonian mountain range, of which the eroded remains form the present landscape. Apparently, all the land higher than 3000ft above sea level in England lies within the Lake District National Park, which also contains England's deepest, longest lakes.

Back to the present day, we set out on our walk in cold air (the lowest temperature while in the car had been 3.5C) but in the sun it was much warmer. At an altitude of 600ft, the tarn is 23ft deep and apparently contains brown trout, perch and pike. Its shores were surrounded by picturesque groups of trees, but I found my eyes were constantly focusing on the distant fells. When Willow and I surprisingly found ourselves ahead of the rest, though, my attention was focused on discouraging her from running even further ahead - so we sat on a rock in the sun and waited for the others - then sat on another rock with them for a mid morning banana.



Catch me if you can!

Piran had been mostly amenable to walking at first, but when he finally objected and Willow saw him being carried, she suddenly became afflicted with great tiredness and took to voicing her discontent! However, we made it to a high point that gave us a great view of the Langdale Pikes, so stood and stared appreciably for a while (as well as making sure that Willow or Piran didn't go tumbling over the side of the hill, of course).



Mummy, I'm tired now...

On the way back to the car park, Piran walked for quite a while between Alan and me, holding onto our hands. He seemed to be in a different zone, plodding along happily without much thought of what he was actually doing - until he caught sight of Paula up ahead, who had turned around to see what was happening, whereupon he suddenly refused point blank to walk with us any more!



Peaceful Blea Tarn

Back at the car park it was only 11.45, but we sat in our cars and ate cheese sandwiches anyway, watching as a couple of cars attempted to park with no available spaces. After a spot of indecision about what to do next, Dan decided to try Ambleside, but it was positively heaving with cars and people. There was no chance of parking, so he led us onwards and upwards to the Kirkstone Pass on the A592, which reaches an altitude of 1,489ft (454m) and connects Ambleside to Patterdale in the Ullswater Valley.

This stretch of road is known locally as The Struggle, but our main struggle remained one of parking. When we approached the top of the pass and reached the Kirkstone Pass Inn (formerly a strategic coaching inn and the third highest pub in England), there was a wonderful view but a complete lack of parking spaces. This confirms my opinion that there are too many cars in the world today. Incidentally, the name Kirkstone derives from a stone standing a short distance away from the roadside on the A592 with a silhouette that apparently resembles the steeple of a church, or kirk. I wouldn't know, I don't think I saw it...

Undaunted, Dan led us on to Red Pit Car Park further along the descent into Patterdale, which allowed us a picturesque view of Brothers Water in the distance, as well as a pleasing choice of parking spaces. We wandered around for a while on the slightly sodden, mossy ground, gazing at the hills that rose dramatically and steeply either side of the road, creating a palpable atmospheric presence. William Wordsworth had obviously thought so too, as he'd written in his poem *The Pass of Kirkstone*: "...Most potent when mists veil the sky, Mists that distort and magnify...". Thankfully, the pass couldn't have been at full potency, since there didn't seem to be any distortion or magnification to speak of.

On an industrial level, as well as lead and copper mining, a lot of slate mining had taken place in the area - but Kirkstone Quarries near the top of the Pass, established since 1949 and renowned for its stone and slate products, had sadly ceased trading less than a month ago - another instance of the Recession taking its regrettable toll.

Meanwhile at ground level, I was still pondering (on the state of my feet as it happened) when I noticed that Dan must have suddenly decided to test his fitness by making a quick ascent part way up one of the grass covered rocky slopes. I'd like to say he was as sure footed as a mountain goat, but I was at the time rather distracted and wet footed, due to a failure to change into my proper walking shoes. I soon wasn't the only wet footed one, I have to say, as Piran was playing in a stream and despite wearing a snazzy pair of wellies, also ended up with wet feet - he'd had fun, though. Dan was OK, too!

After that interlude, we continued downwards into Patterdale and encountered the car parking problem once again, but thankfully managed to find a big enough space along the roadside. The sun was shining and it almost felt like a sunny Sunday afternoon in summer - so much so that we walked to The Patterdale Hotel and sat in the garden there underneath a sunshade, sipping drinks and eating ice cream. OK, so it became quite cold, Piran began to shiver and we had to put the sunshade down, but just for a while it was idyllic.

Everyone was tiring rapidly, so we decided to head back to Wharf Cottage. There was an impromptu stop by a grassy verge for Willow to do what Willow needed to do, plus a planned stop at the garage down the road for some petrol and milk, but then we could chill out somewhat, although the cottage was reasonably warm.

After baked potato and baked beans, yoghurt and Battenberg cake, Dan could contain himself no longer and set about lighting the wood burning stove. It was certainly very cheery and a brilliant form of heating, as we sat there comfortably with a glass of wine and looked out at the clouds rolling in, bringing what weather conditions I couldn't help but wonder.

Monday 2nd April

The clouds had just assembled en masse and the sky was completely overcast as I arose at 06.30 again to wash in peace and quiet before the general mêlée of the day began at around 07.00. The day's plan was to accompany D, P, W and P to meet Paula's friend Hazel at the train station at Skipton in North Yorkshire and from there to visit Bolton Abbey.

It was a good plan and we left at 09.00 with Willow in our car, driving for about an hour under a dry, but relentlessly cloudy sky - *Radio Ga Ga* was again employed for distraction. The plan included a stop at Skipton's Tesco to buy lunchtime sandwiches, but it was here that we learned the plan had failed. Hazel was unable to meet us because her train had been delayed due to broken signals, which must have been very disappointing for both her and Paula - and a big thumbs down for the train service.

However, it seemed sensible to carry on with the Bolton Abbey plan, which we did, arriving there at 11.15 on a decidedly cold morning. The abbey (technically a priory because it was run by a prior) was founded in the 12th century on land gifted by Lady Alice de Rumilly, owner of the nearby Skipton Castle. Canons of the Order of St Augustine had led a life of worship and service there for 400 years, until the infamous Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. The ruins of the abbey cum priory were very impressive and as I wandered around, I couldn't help wondering what would have happened if there had been no Dissolution ... but my thoughts just disintegrated into nothing.

Behind the abbey were some ancient graves and nearby a picturesque graveyard, with daffodils and some unusual headstones. I find it of macabre interest that many graveyards have a character of their own, with regional trends and similar style graves - although some of these were quite arty and original. Talking of character, there is allegedly a man named the Black Canon in his late 60s with a heavily lined face and grey stubble on his chin, who discarnately roams the abbey wearing a black cloak, black cassock and black hat. I thought I caught a glimpse of him once between the gravestones, but it turned out to be Alan.



I'd like to think children played at my grave...

After a spot of graveyard conversation and an attempt to read some headstones, we wended our way towards the river Wharfe, where some fishermen stood hopefully at the river's edge. Some of them had even cast a fishing line. Of more personal interest to me, however, was the sight of 57 stepping stones featured in Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon's *The Trip*, when Steve Coogan made a mad dash across and spent a few minutes floundering in the river.



A mere 19 of those famous stepping stones

Dan had also achieved the crossing on a previous visit to Bolton Abbey - without any floundering, I hasten to add (although he did say how weird it had felt to stand there balancing and suddenly realise you were in the middle of a large expanse of water). In centuries gone by, the stepping stones had been the only way to cross the river, but for the non risk taker, a safe, dry wooden bridge is now available. While we were there, quite a few people chose the stepping stone option, but nobody fell in...

Midday had approached and departed, so we walked back to the cars and ate our lunchtime sandwiches. Our next stop was at the village of Malham that probably dates back to the 7th or 8th century, during Anglo Saxon times. From here there was about a half hour walk to Malham Cove along a well defined path that we followed at varying paces, due mainly to the walking vagaries of Willow and Piran (plus a few stops for photo taking). The North Yorkshire hills rolled into the distance magnificently, laced with their prolific dry stone walls. All around were archaeological remains of early farms and their field systems, where farmers often terraced the sloping land, leaving the animals to graze on the upper pastures.

Ahead of us, it was easy to see that the main attraction was a huge carved limestone cliff at the head of a valley, with an expanse of limestone pavement at the top. Originally, a huge waterfall 80m (260ft) high and over 300m (1000ft) wide had flowed over the cove as a glacier melted above it. However, underlying cave systems now absorb any water before it reaches the fall and the last record of any substantial water flowing over it was in the early 19th century. Recent investigations in the caves behind the cliff have indicated that Malham Cove may have formed 50,000 years ago, earlier than previously thought.

The valley we were standing in had been formed at the end of the last Ice Age when the ground had been frozen solid and meltwater from the ice sheet had flowed in a river over the surface of the ground, eroding the valley. As the ground had thawed when the climate warmed about 12,000 years ago, the river had disappeared underground, leaving the valley fortuitously dry for visitors such as us to pick our way across the dry river bed and gaze up at the result of the awesome force of nature.



Malham waterfall (without the water)

It was a pity the sky was so overcast, but the sight of the huge limestone cliff ahead was most unusual and even I could imagine a colossal volume of water crashing over it. There were some climbers halfway up (or down) the limestone cliff face, but way down below, the rest of us were puzzling over what seems to be a strange northern custom of hitting coins into big old logs left lying around. We presumed it was some sort of superstition or wishing exercise, but it seemed relatively modern, as all the coins appeared to be post decimalisation.

Having had our fill of gazing (although I couldn't help wishing we'd had time and energy to see the limestone pavement at the top) we returned along the path and back to Malham village. After a quick snack in the car to revitalise, the return journey began. Dan deliberately chose a route to take us past Malham Tarn, just over a mile away on desolate looking moorland.

Apparently, the remnant of a stream that once fell over the waterfall now flows out of Malham Tarn - but just Dan, Alan and I trudged across the slightly boggy ground underneath a lowering sky and against an insistent keen wind to look at the somewhat uninspiring water in question. It was too cold and we were too tired to hang around, but at least we'd seen it.

At first the roads back were the kind that Dan seems to like, narrow and undulating across an unrelentingly bleak landscape, but we soon approached Lakeland and drove through pretty, interesting villages with a significant number of visitors for a cold, windy afternoon at the beginning of April. I don't know what the significant number was, but it doesn't matter.

In our car, Willow had fallen asleep and I felt a little mean waking her up - especially since Dan had a spot of bother opening the front door. He tried three times, but to no avail and so there was nothing for it but to ring the contact number he'd been given. A friendly, capable woman soon turned up and opened the damn door just like that - but she did kindly say that other visitors had experienced similar problems.

Everyone was exhausted and glad to make do with tomato soup and a roll, followed by other items from our food supply. We were soon gathered in front of the wood burning stove, which Dan had coaxed into producing some jolly fine flames to lift the spirits as well as to warm the bodies. The weather forecast was frankly disturbing though, with snow being almost certain...

Tuesday 3rd April

No snow on awaking, just drizzly rain and a grey, misty outlook. I awoke early, due mainly to various noises and the fact that because of the forthcoming cold weather, Alan had turned up the storage heater in our room rather too high and it was so stuffy that I just about had a headache. My head soon cleared after I ventured into the large, cold, airy bathroom though!

Breakfast time followed and in view of the unsettled weather, we decided to visit Ambleside for coffee and a spot of outdoor clothes shopping (although the outdoor clothes would presumably be indoors). The weather wasn't too bad as we left the cottage at 09.30 and approached Windermere, driving alongside the vast expanse of water for a while until we came to Ambleside. Once again, I was mildly surprised at the number of people already out and about.

After a very civilised coffee stop at Costa Coffee, it was time to hit the shops. Dan was looking for a replacement hat and Alan was looking for a replacement wet weather jacket. I was actually looking for postcards, but couldn't find any for ages. After four or five shops, Alan located a decent wet weather jacket and I found some postcards in the local Post Office, so we were sorted. We even went inside a rock and mineral shop and made a couple of purchases.

However, I think it would be safe to say that Willow finds shopping a little boring, as she wasn't at all happy and in the end, Alan and I took her and Piran back to the car so that Dan and Paula could shop in peace. It had begun to pour with rain and we all became more than a little un-dry and more than a little frazzled, but soon Dan and Paula returned, with Dan the owner of a fine new hat - success!

Following a rain sodden trip to the car park toilet (such is the glamour of holidays) we then drove on to a more scenic car park at White Moss, between Rydal and Grasmere, where we consumed lunchtime sandwiches. The rain had ceased and the area looked interesting, so we followed a path that led on to a kind of forest trail. Willow seemed to be much happier out in the open air, even though she became slightly alarmed when she look upwards and saw some tall spindly trees swaying alarmingly in the wind that had sprung up quite suddenly, causing the tree tops to bend over back and forth high above her.

Nearly half an hour later, we arrived at an expanse of water that I later realised was the lake at Grasmere - if only I'd known, I could have stood there and indulged in Wordsworth type thoughts while I surveyed the distant vista for a daffodil or two. Talking of daffodils, there have been plenty along roadside verges and in people's gardens, but sadly no swathes of fluttering and dancing wild ones. It was still perversely good, though, to stand there taking photos as the drizzle began and find out that both Dan and Alan had forgotten their cameras...



Grasmere

The drizzle increased as we left Grasmere and by the time we arrived back at the cars, we were dripping wet. It seemed a good idea to take off Willow's wet coat and wrap the emergency blanket kept in the boot around her. It was a new soft fleecy blanket that she found very cosy and fell asleep under for a while (after listening to *Radio Ga Ga*, of course). As we neared Wharf Cottage, the wind became stronger and the rain turned into horizontal sleet.

It appeared we chose to return at the right time, because the wind turned into a severe gale and Dan was forced - yes, absolutely forced - to light the wood burning stove early. Paula produced a much enjoyed evening meal of salmon, mashed potato and swede while the rapidly ageing grandparents kept her energetic children amused. The usual evening pursuits followed while the wind outside (fortunately) was sounding horrible, the temperature dropped alarmingly, we heard thunder and there were light snow flurries. As darkness fell, I began to wonder just what we'd wake up to ... presuming we'd be able to fall asleep in the first place.

Wednesday 4th April

If it hadn't been for what was discovered in the morning to be a clattering metal dustbin lid rolling around on the ground right outside our room, we might have slept a bit better - in fact the wind had been so high with such strong gusts, that in the neurotic dark recesses of the night, I was half afraid our car would blow over into the canal alongside!

However, there was excitement (from Dan, anyway) to see that snow had fallen on the distant fells, which were looking very picturesque. The wind was still high and the temperature wasn't much above freezing, but it was a dry day with sunny intervals and so after breakfast we ventured forth with hats, scarves, gloves and cameras. There were stories of trees down and the Kirkstone Pass was closed, but a trip to the shores of Coniston Water seemed a good bet.

Willow had opted to ride with Dan, Paula and Piran - possibly because I'd mentioned that Dan used to have Queen CDs and might have *Radio Ga Ga*, or possibly because she was tired of Alan and me! It was therefore a quiet drive to the shores of Coniston Water, where we parked the cars in one of the many strategic lakeside car parks to be found in the district of the lakes and kitted ourselves for the coldness outside.

It was freezing! The wind chill factor must have been contributing a lot, but when I stood on Coniston's shore and gazed at the snow covered fells beyond, it was such an inspiring sight. From the relative shelter of some trees, I watched the wind making waves upon the water and thought how The Old Man of Coniston looked very dignified and handsome with his snowy coat. I may even have waxed poetical as I walked along the shoreline with Willow, until we came across the skeleton of a dead sheep. Life in the raw! I was glad we had winter clothing on, though, as we finally returned to the cars for some warmth.



Snowy peaks beyond Coniston

After another short drive, we stopped at a further small car park to enjoy a slightly different angle of the same view. Incredibly and somewhat disappointingly, the snow on the peaks seemed to be melting quickly. I walked along the shoreline with Willow and this time we came across a fairly recently dead bird - probably a crow. Willow was highly interested, but a croaked crow was beyond my comfort zone, so I diverted her back the way we'd come (whereupon she coerced her mother to go back with her for a closer look!)

A further drive took us towards the head of Coniston Water, passing by a sign for Brantwood, where John Ruskin once lived in the 19th century. He was a prolific writer on many subjects, but in all his writing he emphasised the link between nature, art and society. Retrospectively,

Brantwood itself seems to be a place I would very much love to visit, as the house is a museum dedicated to Ruskin and the mountainside gardens sound delightful. Next time...

For the moment, though, we chose to visit Tarn Hows situated within the Monk Coniston Estate, the lands of which once belonged to the monks of Furness Abbey. It is now owned by the National Trust thanks to Beatrix Potter, who was a keen conservationist. It was just about lunchtime, so after another delightful sandwich interval within the warmer confines of our cars, we set out for a walk around the lake.

As we started off up a hill, it was so windy and cold that I could hardly breathe, but fortunately we then walked downwards where it was more pleasantly sheltered. Piran had been packaged into the child carrying rucksack, but although Willow started off walking with Alan and me, she kept complaining of tiredness and ended up circumnavigating the lake with Paula, who kept her admirably occupied. I was somewhat amazed at the large number of people out on such a cold day, but I guess it was school Easter holiday and there were some almost hot moments when happily the sun shone down fully upon us. We came across another money log or two on our travels, not to mention cows, ducks and some flattened daffodils...



Willow inspects the money log

By the time we arrived back at the beginning, it was only 14.00, but everyone was tired and the democratic decision was to return to Wharf Cottage. We did stop at another small car park by Esthwaite Water, between Coniston and Windermere, where Dan, Alan and I nipped out to take a photo of yet another lovely view that looked towards Hawkshead. Although a fair amount of snow had melted, there was still enough decorating the peaks to create a sense of wonder at the intrinsic beauty of the Lake District. If only the wind would cease to howl...



Esthwaite Water

Actually, it did stop at some time during the evening, after we'd occupied the time drinking, eating and playing Extreme Uno. Willow and Piran really enjoyed the game, especially pressing the card dispensing button. Needless to say, Dan had bonded with the wood burning stove not long after we'd returned - for which I was grateful, as it was still cold. This entailed him going outside to the pile of wood and undertaking a certain amount of chopping, in order to produce small pieces of kindling and the right size logs. His logs were fine, he did well!

Thursday 5th April

We awoke on a beautiful morning after a night with no rogue dustbin lid noises. The day's plan was for Alan and me to go with Dan on a 'proper walk' while Paula took the children out to visit somewhere more suited to them. At 08.15 therefore, the three of us departed for what Dan termed "a nice little walk" - but with a suspicious twinkle in his eye. I felt as if I knew what to expect, as I had previously experienced quite a few of Dan's "short walks".

It was a calm, bright, fresh morning, which felt wonderful after the meteorological shenanigans of the past two days. It had been another cold night and the car roofs were heavily frosted again, as well as areas of grass we drove alongside. Dan said that he and Paula seemed to have developed head colds, but they were feeling OK. I couldn't help wondering how OK we'd all be feeling by the end of the day!

Alan drove us to the Kirkstone Pass (reopened later yesterday) where on the higher stretches we saw mounds of snow banked against the edge of the road and bands of snow still on the fell peaks. Descending again into Patterdale, we had our choice of parking spaces in the car park that had been full to overflowing on Sunday. Mind you, it was still only 09.15...

The walk commenced and at first we followed a path that wound around the side of Ullswater. It was such a tranquil scene, with a bright blue sky, frosted grass and a boat awaiting passengers on the still lake that reflected the snowy peaks rising behind the water. It made complete sense just to keep our cameras out and ready for action all the time! The air was very cold at first, but as we walked along, it became quite warm while we were in the sun.



Blue Ullswater

After a while, we reached an open area of moorland and sat down on a rock for a small snack (half a banana) and to gaze at the lakeside beauty below. Dan had warned us that if we didn't keep eating and drinking, we'd feel horrible, which was basically more evidence of what this nice little walk was going to be - I'd asked how long we'd be walking and the answer was definitely very vague, so I prepared myself mentally for the challenge.

It was a pity I hadn't prepared myself physically as much as I should have done, as the climbing started soon afterwards. We'd seen a couple of other walkers so far and a few more appeared as the walk progressed. Why is it that you always seem to meet another party coming from the other direction at the top of a climb, who stand and wait for you to ascend, so that you feel you have to put a spurt on and nearly kill yourself in the process? Obviously that's a slight exaggeration, but if they saw the after effects, there's a good chance they'd see me standing still with a red face, intermittently gasping and sipping some lifesaving water.

The upward direction continued and it became so warm that we stopped to take off clothing, as you do. We also applied sunscreen and ate a small Kit Kat, but not at the same time. At this point, Dan consulted his map and we veered away from the path around Ullswater to climb steeply up the hillside as a short cut. This may have been High Dodd, although I have never been able to read maps either properly or improperly. The ground was grassy and soft, but I found it very steep and had to stop several times to stand and stare ostentatiously at the vista below. It was fantastic, though, well worth the compromised calf muscles.

There was a lot more upward walking to contend with and as it gradually became rockier, we began to come across patches of ice and small traces of snow. It was a real slog for me as we just went on up, up, up, until we arrived at a small, disused slate quarry, where we thankfully sat in the sun to eat our sandwiches and crisps for lunch. Those slate quarry employees must have been exceptionally fit...

It wasn't over yet, though, as after this brief respite, we soon had to gird our proverbial loins and continue upwards. My thigh muscles decided to join in the protest and my legs started to feel as if they didn't particularly want to belong to me any more. I couldn't say I blamed them.

There were several more patches of snow appearing here and there and in places it had clearly been quite deep. Alan seemed to have found a good rhythm and was often way ahead, while Dan loitered behind to encourage the maternal straggler - or perhaps I mean the eternal struggler, they sound similar! We met several other small groups of walkers, all who seemed to be striding it out far better than I was. Every time I stopped, though, I turned around to gaze back down at the amazing view, as it was quite surprising (not to mention extremely gratifying) to realise how far up we'd actually climbed.



A view to feel like I might die for!

"Just one more big push," said Dan to me encouragingly at one point, as we almost reached the top. I brushed aside the sudden sense of *déjà vu* and focused on the sight of the trig point ahead, which looked rather unprepossessingly practical against the natural beauty all around. Then suddenly we'd made it to our destination of Hart Crag at a slightly disappointing altitude of 822m (2,697ft).

To be honest, we didn't climb up to the top of the small rise where the trig point stood, but I didn't particularly care, as I'd actually made it and was still alive and functioning reasonably well as a bonus. Dan talked about Hart Crag not being as high as his local mountain, Pen y Fan in the Brecon Beacons at an altitude of 886m (2,906ft) but we were above the tree line and looking down on other peaks for heaven's sake!

We sat for a while and ate some chocolate as a sort of practical celebration, before wandering around to look at the scenery. It was very beautiful there and utterly silent, except now and again for some birdsong and the intermittent sound of cameras. A partly icy tarn added to the atmosphere of other worldly peace, looking out towards a ridge of distant peaks. I was reluctant for those precious moments in that wonderful place to end, but knew that there was a steep descent coming and my rebelling legs needed to keep going for a while yet.



Dan tests the snow

As it was a circular walk, the views on the way down were different, including a bird's eye view of Patterdale way below. I found it necessary to concentrate on my feet, though, because after negotiating some steps fashioned from large pieces of rock, we had to manage a slightly tortuous steep shale path. My knees had joined forces with my calf and thigh muscles, with the result that my legs had begun to tremble over the difficult bits. Not only that, but my back was beginning to ache and the sun seemed to be beating down mercilessly. In actual fact, it was a glorious day, but by then I knew I was at my limits.

Gradually the view of Patterdale became closer and closer until finally we were at valley level, but I was so tired that even walking on level ground was an act of dogged concentration and yes, we did come across several dogs. It felt such a relief to arrive back at the car, although I could hardly bend over to change my shoes. We finally left the car park at 16.00, which was six and three quarter hours after setting out - yes, six and three quarter hours!

Alan drove us back to Wharf Cottage in just less than an hour, whereupon I tried not to fall inside the front door in a gibbering heap. In reality, I'd managed to recuperate somewhat during the drive back and a mug of tea contributed to a sense of exhausted wellbeing. Paula and the children had spent several hours at an animal park and had enjoyed their day, so everyone seemed happy.

After salmon, mashed potato and vegetables to revive the wilting parts, followed by dessert and dish washing, we all played a few games of Extreme Uno, as requested by Willow. The wood burning stove was lit, the children went to bed and all was well with the world. Except perhaps my legs, of course, but they've been around for a while and they can cope...

Friday 6th April

It rained in the night and we awoke to a bit of a grey, mizzly morning, but I think exhaustion helped us to sleep quite well. Dan and Paula didn't seem to be suffering too badly with their colds and my legs were in reasonable working order, but Piran seemed strangely grizzly - was it going to be a mizzly, grizzly day? It was our last day anyway and we were unsure what to do, but Dan and Paula suggested trying the forest trails of Grizedale, east of Coniston Water.

Willow travelled with Dan, Paula and Piran again, despite the fact that there was no *Radio Ga Ga* on their music system - I think I almost missed her incessant questions. Almost. One of her most interesting questions had been when she'd noticed specks of dust dancing in a shaft of sunlight and had asked first of all what the dust was and then why it didn't fall on the ground.

After driving past the usual villages with their displays of wet, slightly bent over daffodils, we arrived at Grizedale at about 10.30. Alan and Paula went to the Information Centre to assess what was on offer and decided it was a good place for a walk, with the added attraction of some forest sculptures. Some interesting Grizedale history concerns the 40-roomed mansion of Grizedale Hall, demolished in 1957. During WWII, it was commandeered by the War Office and became a prisoner of war camp for German officers. Many of these were sunken U-boat survivors and it became known locally as *The U-Boat Hotel*.

However, today it was most evidently a thriving outdoor attraction managed by the Forestry Commission, offering forest trails of various distances, mountain biking, an aerial assault course, a hostel, a children's outdoor play area, a café and a shop. The sky was still overcast as we started on the red trail, 3 miles long, but walking generated a certain amount of heat and it even seemed slightly humid at times.

The idea of a forest walk had produced fond imaginings of a soft, pine needle strewn level path among some pleasant trees, but I really should have known better! There was quite a lot of up and down rockiness as we ascended to a high point, which was really hard on the poor old knackered legs (not to mention the rest of the body) and I was flagging almost as soon as I started. Still, there were those forest sculptures to look out for...



Willow finds a forest sculpture

Quite a few cyclists and dog walkers were out enjoying some exercise, but many of the sculptures were somewhat hard to locate and others were most definitely underwhelming. Still, it was good to be out and Willow seemed to be enjoying the walk, chatting away to whoever she was walking with. At about midday we'd reached the highest point of the trail, so sat down in the lee of a big boulder to eat lunch. The main view was overlooking lots of trees below us, with Morecambe Bay out in the distance.



Willow and Grandad sneak a snuggle

There was a very cold breeze at the top and the air temperature had dropped a lot, so it was no surprise when it began to drizzle. We therefore didn't hang around after lunch, but started to walk downwards (which re-started my thigh muscles aching!) It soon stopped drizzling and became quite warm again as we descended, but I must confess I was still rather glad when we reached the bottom and the end of the circular trail where we'd started.

It seemed a good idea to stop at the café for a drink, even though it was very full at about 14.15, but there was a table free and we all enjoyed a Lakeland ice cream along with a drink. Paula took Willow outside to the play area for a short time, while Piran investigated some toys in the children's area indoors. We finally left Grizedale at about 15.00 and took about an hour to drive back to Burton in Kendal.

Dan made us a mug of tea and we passed the rest of the day in various pursuits, some of them unfortunately packing. After a meal of pasta, tuna and vegetables, plus other edible odds and ends, Dan lit the wood burning stove for the last time and we played a few games of Extreme Uno before it was bath and bed time for Willow and Piran. The rest of us then watched a DVD until we too said goodnight for the final time at Wharf Cottage - unless we ever stay there again, of course, which I wouldn't mind at all. I'd enjoyed looking out at distant Lakeland fells, trains and wildfowl. Not sure about the chickens, though. Goodnight!

Saturday 7th April

I arose at 06.40 on another overcast morning to wash and dress before the inevitable chaos of packing began, but I don't suppose it's a much liked part of anybody's holiday. Amazingly, we were ready to leave at just gone 08.30, ready to embark on the worst part of the day's drive, an hour or so on the motorway. I didn't enjoy it at all, especially with no Willow to distract me as she'd done on the way there!

The road was less frightening for the next hour and a half, until we made our first scheduled stop at Haughmond Abbey in Shrewsbury. The weather was dull and threatening to drizzle, but not allowing a spot or two of rain to deter us, we paid the entrance fee to a very friendly man and perused the small introductory exhibition.

An Augustinian priory had been founded in the 1130s after a small religious community had settled there at the end of the 11th century. It was raised to abbey status in 1155 and by the end of the 12th century, housed around 24 canons. It appeared to have been a prosperous, thriving community with royal patronage, but unfortunately went the way of all abbeys, thanks to Henry VIII. It had then been converted into a private residence with a formal garden, until the Civil War (1642-1651). After being turned into a farm, the ruins were then placed in the care of the Office of Works in 1933, currently managed by English Heritage.

The aforementioned ruins were surprisingly large and safe enough for Willow to run around in and expend some energy. Piran was less impressed and stayed with Paula, while Dan, Alan and I took out our cameras. I found the late 12th century chapter house most interesting, not least because from the information board there I learned that in the chapter house, the canons would meet to discuss the running of the abbey with the abbot, after reading a chapter from the Bible or their Augustinian rule book (although I would have thought that something like *The Name of the Rose* or *The Canterbury Tales* would have been more interesting).



Today's chapter is from *Cadfael's Chronicles*...

There was also a stone coffin, a few stone coffin lids and an octagonal font to catch my photographic eye, so it was really a pity when the rain started to fall. Surprisingly, we weren't

the only visitors - I suppose it was Easter Saturday and people wanted to visit places. After wandering around for a while longer with hoods up, it seemed time to move on. Fortunately, before I moved on out of the abbey, Dan and Paula alerted me to some fine mediaeval decorated ceramic floor tiles that were gleaming wetly in the rain. Somehow, original floor tiles always bring a place to life for me, imagining the ancient feet that once walked upon them.



Mediaeval shabby chic?

However, it was time to let my own ancient feet take me out of the abbey and into the car to eat our last holiday packed lunch, after which we continued our journey. Another two and a half hours and more of driving followed and true to style, as we entered Wales it began to rain much harder - but the Brecon Beacon peaks still had a light covering of snow and managed to look wild and picturesque at the same time. Our final holiday visit was very fittingly to the popular Brecon Beacons Mountain Centre, where we enjoyed some of their excellent fare.

The final stage of the journey on the road sweeping through the moorland with hills and peaks either side was soon accomplished and we were back in Pontardawe, where Willow was obviously pleased to be home, but Piran was clearly delighted! Alan and I were stopping overnight, so were able to spend a happy homecoming hour with them both while Dan and Paula nipped out for supplies from their local Tesco.

It had been a week to remember for many reasons and I was only sorry that it had flashed by with what felt like a brief reacquaintance with an exceptional part of the country. I was also pleased to update a somewhat hazy memory of 41 years with some fresh input, together with some priceless additional family memories. What stands out for me, though, despite being pushed to my limits, was the wonder of standing on top of Hart Crag and gazing all around at the awesome natural beauty of planet Earth. No pain, no gain!



Photographic evidence of the maternal straggler!