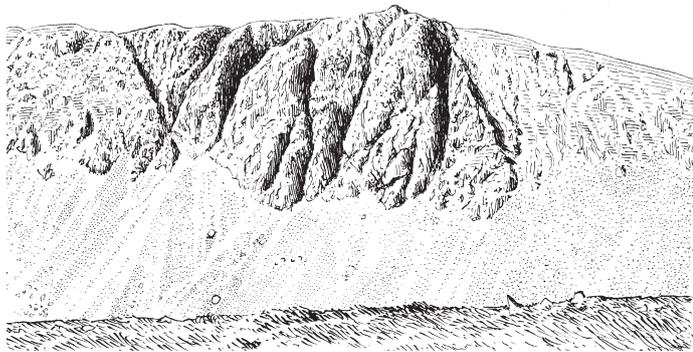


PARK&STRIDE

with Mark Richards
on BBC Radio Cumbria

2 Dow Crag from Coniston



Dow Crag from Coniston Old Man

including Goat's Water and Walna Scar
ascent 1,820ft/555 m round trip 5.5 miles/ 8.8km
ascent time 2.75 hours round trip 5 hours

PARK either at the Old Station car park in Coniston village or best of all at this time of year, drive up past the Sun Hotel following the Walna Scar Road to the fell gate.

START 740ft/225m at grid ref. 289 971 and no later than 10.30 a.m. in winter months.

Walk summary: founded upon the Walna Scar Road visiting The Cove, Goat's Water and Goat's Hause. Climb to the impressive rock bastion of Dow Crag before striding south over the subsidiary tops of Buck and Brown Pikes then descend to track down the Walna Scar Road. With time in hand, some walkers may be tempted to gather up the three tops of the continuing Walna Scar ridge, the actual summit plus White Maiden and White Pike, all three excellent viewpoints in their own right.

MAPS Ordnance Survey Explorer OL6
Harvey's Superwalker Lakeland South
and Lake District Outdoor Atlas

WINTER WALKING ADVICE essentials to wear and/or carry in your daypack: first and foremost wear comfortable boots. Then ensure you have a reliable torch and spare batteries, a map and compass, a hot drink in a sturdy flask, energy snacks (with marzipan or Kendal Mint Cake in reserve), thermal hat, gloves, cagoule and gaiters. A pair of walking poles have everything to commend themselves, especially during descent when slick ground is a probable hazard. On the clothing front layers are better than reliance on just one heavy item (jumper/fleece), being able to add and subtract to suit body comfort and conditions is an immensely sensible habit to cultivate. Unless you are practiced crampons and an ice axe are not to be used on the high ground of Dow Crag. If conditions warrant their use you should curtail your walk well before the perils of snow and ice begin.

Na tyem na place fa laekin about

Ronald Turnbull refers to Dow Crag as 'the friendly crag'. However, his audience are climbers, not your average fellwalker, the likes of you and me! In any fair season the crag offers superb rock routes, bold, impressive and hugely fulfilling, invariably culminating on the summit - which to my mind is the true purpose of a climb be it pedestrian or by a gymnastic feat of the limbs. So it may be a cliff to scale, but hardly doe-ray-me!

Early climbers were attracted to Dow Crag's gullies, horrid places by comparison with the projecting buttresses. The first climb attributed to 1886, though the first properly established route came in 1904. It was here that the Lakeland Fell and Rock Climbing Club was born, the Sun Hotel the setting of its first meet in 1907. In my mind the name most synonymous with Dow Crag is Harry Griffin. A journalist with a passion for climbing and the great outdoors, supplying The Guardian with a Country Dairy column for a staggering fifty-three years. Harry coined the terms Coniston Tigers and Cragrats for the fraternity of local climbers, many from his native Barrow-in-Furness, who pioneered routes here. Tigers derives from Nepalese sherpa's attribution of the adventurous European mountaineers for whom they portered. While cragrats referred to climbers instinct of forcing their way up thin cracks and grooves. AW called it 'second only to Scafell Crag in the magnificence of its rock architecture'. But at this time of year the 600 foot crag should be considered out-of-bounds, to be admired from a safe distance, en route to the summit by its fellside approaches.

John Ruskin, the great Victorian philanthropist and one of the first conservationists, gazed daily upon the Coniston Fells from his home of Brantwood on the eastern shores of Coniston Water. With assured wisdom he pronounced that 'mountains were the beginning and end of all natural scenery' and certainly the Coniston Fells always gladden my eyes.

I have brought this classic fell walk into focus now because at this time of year Lakeland can take on an Alpine appearance with all the wild portend that can imply. Thus walkers, with some experience of the fells, might be tempted to venture onto this or similarly exposed heights and they need to be aware of the potential high stakes. Coniston may be the home of the oldest mountain rescue team in Britain, founded in 1947, but your careless pioneering wanderings should not be a cause to wantonly bring them out!

The overwhelming majority of fellwalkers will be setting their sights on Coniston Old Man. So to venture further west means you are less likely to encounter fellow walkers. The significance of this is not conviviality, it is safety, if you get into difficulties you may be more than just lonely in time of need. Winter can bring ice and snow (cornicing on the eastern lip of the ridges) but it also can offer mist, rain and the treachery of wind. The name Goat's Water obviously refers to the wild goats that could pick perilous grazing from the cliff. Shepherds of yore were only too pleased as they may have not thought it worth putting their own lives at risk catching cragfast ewes - allowing them to starve and fall as bundles of wool onto the scree below.

But the name 'goat' like 'cove' might be thought to have its roots in pre-Anglian terminology for rather like Pen-y-ghent (Yorkshire Three Peaks) and Castell-y-gwynt (Snowdonia) it just might be adapted from these words for wind. >>

>> For the unusual south-facing corrie has a terrible trait of generating fierce gusts, winds that can whip the surface of the tarn and carry walkers, and water, high up towards the cliff... be warned! Readers of the novels of Richard Adams' will know of his books *Watership Down* and *Plague Dogs*, the latter includes a crazy chase across the fells that ends at this spot.

Into Stride

Drive up from Coniston via Station Road passing the Sun Hotel. The steep lane eases then bends left, there is a more gradual rise to the fell gate; one mile distant from the village (with ample informal car parking). Immediately the tarred road gives way to a rough track heading south-east along the natural line of transition between the Borrowdale volcanic rocks of the Old Man and the lower lying Silurian shales of Banishead Moor.

Winter gives some chance of locating the Bronze Age Stone Circle set below Boo Tarn. The tarn, nothing more than rushes, coming just after the barred access track climbing right to Bursting Stone Quarry. Pass through two rock cuttings: quarrymen from the slate quarry above Blind Tarn enlarging the ancient cross-ridge way. Arriving at a large cairn, leave the track turning right, where the path up from Torver via Banishead Quarry crosses the Walna Scar Road. The path, well used, being pitched at various points, rises up the open bowl of The Cove. No you're not in Cornwall, coves are a vestige British pre-9th century name, and even occur in Scotland (I watched Cove Rangers lose to Gretna only a month ago in the Scottish Cup).

A rock band intervenes, though easily overcome, the path strides on towards the outflow of Goat's Water. Keep to the eastern shore: a place of awe and decision. If the cliff above is in full view, and the path not too icy, then continue heading on a pitched trod to the broad saddle of Goat's Hause, if not, now's a good point to retreat. The main cliff of Dow Crag, pronounced 'doe', is composed of five projecting buttresses and six gullies, Easy Gully, to the left of Great Gully, being in the realm of rock climbers.

On calm mild days, walkers, with red blood racing through their veins, may be tempted to ford the outflow and follow one of the inevitably loose, steep scree paths from the shelter boulders to the blue mountain rescue first aid box. From there trend left, along the base of the cliffs to ascend South Rake, a name coined by AW. It's a superb simple scramble gaining an intimate perspective on this famous climbing ground, but in mischievous mist or if the elements are bitter, steer clear.

Goat's Hause provides the first view north-west, beyond Grey Friar to the Scafells. Turn left, curving steadily up to the rock bastion crowning Dow Crag: among the top tier of Lakeland summits, it has no need for a cairn. Having witnessed Dow Crag from below, now stand at its apex, a sensation quite without rival. If the rocks are the least bit icy, tread warily. Coniston Old Man looks nothing from this side, the Duddon and the distant Scafells amply compensate, but the main intent will be on the cliff's edge and rightly so!

The ridge path runs on south beside the broken wall, built to dissuade sheep from venturing onto the cliff, now they stray down from ledge to perilous ledge often accompanied by their offspring - quite alarming to watch. The views over the cliff continue to invite attention.

A small cairn marks the next rise of Buck Pike, the name a second link with this lost territory of goats. Blind Tarn catches the eye below, the glacial dam at its lip such that water percolates rather than pours. Small populations of char and trout linger in the tarn established by quarrymen for sustenance. The ridge path dips to Brown Pike then sweeps down to the summit of the Walna Scar Road.

The 2,000 foot contour is maintained south via three quite minor tops, each worth including in your walk if you have the time, reaching White Pike - with its far ranging view beyond Caw down to Duddon Sands. At this time of year it is necessary to backtrack to the pass. In summer walkers can wander pathless off White Maiden to regain the ancient road lower down. Botanists finding the Ash Gill locality attractive, as the band of Coniston Limestone here provides habitats for lime-tolerant plants, rare in mountain Lakeland.

Should Seathwaite, down in the Duddon, be considered, keep to the old road, for on the western slopes of Walna Scar there is the most enormous slate quarry, the unprotected edge perilous in mist (see photo).

Descending the rough road from the pass watch for the tiny drystone alcove shelter, it has replicas on the Nan Bield Pass between Mardale and Kentmere. It's a bit tight, but in bad weather must have been a welcome refuge. A matter of yards below, with time to spare, one might traverse left on the quarry trod to inspect the old slate quarry and venture down into the perfect corrie hollow to the shores of Blind Tarn, retreating by the lower broad greenway. The Walna Scar Road weaves down over Cove Bridge, spanning Torver Beck, to reach the fell gate - in failing light the whole way down never in doubt.

After walk refreshment

Coniston is well served with places to eat and drink, even in these winter months, this is, after all, a well-rounded community not just a summer tourist haven. The Black Bull has the attraction of its own micro-brewery, the Coniston Brewery producing the ever-popular Bluebird Bitter, affirming the village's affectionate link with Donald Campbell. The Ruskin Museum is a must visit too. Listeners with broadband should check the Coniston Webcams both in the village and a new one in the process of installation on Coniston Old Man.

Mark's picture gallery and guides

There are twenty-five colour images from this walk posted on the Radio Cumbria website. However, they are all summer scenes, winter turns the fells into mountains.

Mark is the author of the Collins fellwalking guide series LAKELAND FELLRANGER with four titles currently available: Central Fells, Mid-Western Fells, Near Eastern Fells and Southern Fells - Dow Crag features prominently in the Southern Fells. In the December PARK&STRIDE feature I set listeners the challenge of sending a .jpeg photo of the Westmorland Cairn on Great Gable. Well, we have a winner, the lucky recipient of the signed copy of the Southern Fells guide is Paddy Dillon of Ulverston - his glamorous image can be seen in the picture gallery.

Listen in for news of the February PARK&STRIDE location, which provisionally is set to be a walk onto the Dodds from Threlkeld, but that depends on the weather leading up to the broadcast for my seasonal research.