

PARK&STRIDE

with Mark Richards
on BBC Radio Cumbria

4 Pike o'Stickle from New Dungeon Ghyll

ascent 2,000ft/610 m round trip 5.8 miles/ 9.3km
ascent time 2.5 hours round trip 5 hours

PARK either in the National Park Great Langdale car park grid ref 296064 or The National Trust Stickle Ghyll car park grid ref. 295064 (both pay&display) located 8 miles from Ambleside.

START no later than 11:00 am in early Spring.

WALK SUMMARY An exhilarating climb via Dungeon Ghyll onto Loft Crag culminating on the majestic rock stack summit of Pike o'Stickle. Descending via Martcrag Moor and Langdale Combe to join the Cumbria Way's steep zig zag descent into Mickleden; Completing the trek with ease along the flat-bottomed valley passing the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel.

MAPS Ordnance Survey Explorer OL6
Harvey's Superwalker Lakeland Central

RIDE&STRIDE with the 516 bus

From late April to late October Stagecoach run the 'Langdale Rambler' bus service six times a day (five times on Sunday) up and down the valley from Ambleside to the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel, so you really can leave your car at home.

A steady grind up to an old axe factory

For as long as man has gazed upon the Langdale Pikes

they must have been revered. Viewed from the road as one emerges from Chapel Stile, there is no finer prospect of Lakeland majesty. Each beetling fell, like the 'Fab Four', characters in their own right, but together greater than the sum of their considerable parts. They are truly a special part of our mountain heritage; a scenic catalyst at once captivating and compelling. From that instant adoration comes a desire for a 'must do' ascent... so why delay?

Perhaps it was this magnetism that drew neolithic people to quest high across these rugged slopes in search for suitable rock to manufacture their everyday tools. For them stone held more than practical purpose, it was held in reverence. Hence the hard volcanic tuff they discovered in this area, when fashioned into axes took on a status above and beyond mere utilitarian worth. Greenstone axes from this area have been discovered all over England, Wales and Northern Ireland, many polished and pristine suggesting they were used ceremonially. Perhaps status symbols treasured by elders and chiefs as signs of their authority and wealth.

There are several so called 'axe factory' sites, from Harrison Stickle to Scafell Pike, but the most enigmatic lies high up the South Screes gully of Pike o'Stickle. The gully is excessively steep and wildly unstable, a near vertical fall of loose jagged stone. Indeed, it is quite ill-suited for walkers of any persuasion, consider it an irreverence to the archaeology and the physical order of the site to venture up or down. And for good measure not healthy for your bodily parts either!

Situated a quarter-of-a-mile west of Chapel Stile, the Copt How erratics, known to rock climbers as the Langdale Boulders, are of principal interest in the axe-factory story. Quite literally smothered in cup-and-ring marks. This rock art, only identified in 1999, is thought to be contemporary with the axe-factory workings of some 4,000 years ago. Amazingly the bouldering of generations of rock climbers has little effected their imprint (*refer also to the end of this feature*).

Pike o'Stickle from Loft Crag



The ascent of earlier man must have been similar to our own course. Indeed the path that climbs from the vicinity of the New Dungeon Ghyll Hotel has a name that just might add fuel to the thought, it's called Mark Gate. Our objective, the eye-catching rock stack of Pike o'Stickle is hidden for most of the ascent. The term stickle means 'steep place' and who can doubt the application, whether for the peak or the gill (alternatively called of Mill Beck, hence the farm-name).

A webcam, sponsored by The Sticklebarn tavern, points up Stickle Ghyll to Pavey Ark, frequently, all that it shows home-based observers is a blanket of mist. Visit the www.LangdaleWeb.co.uk site to confirm the early morning state for your day. Cannily the website focuses attention on the tavern for accommodation and refreshment, though both the Old and New Dungeon Ghyll Hotels merit their share of the spoils. While visitors preferring the outdoor life can take their pitch at the adjacent Langdale Campsite run by The National Trust.

Decades in the fellwalking limelight has resulted in heavy wear to the fell-paths around this valley-head. Concerted remedial work has concentrated resources in the locality. Stickle Ghyll continues to receive attention, the lure of Stickle Tarn as a way to the tops is unabated. Currently some of the western slopes of Blea Rigg, beneath Tarn Crag, are out-of-bounds for helicopter landing, during the hauling process.

Let the show begin

From the National Park car park follow the lane leading to, and between, the New Dungeon Ghyll Hotel and The Sticklebarn, passing through the gate beyond. Or, from The National Trust car park, start from the interpretative shelter. Walkers unversed in mountain formation and shaping will find the panels intriguing with their exciting references to the action of fire and ice. Follow the confined path through, via a hand-gate, into the small paddock meeting up with the former path. Pass the Trust's Stickle Ghyll estate emblem sign and after going through the coppice gap bear left. The part-pitched path rises quite roughly to a hand-gate at the top of the initial rise, go right, beside the wall. As the innocent-looking gill is seen close left, clamber over the tall stile.

Bear abruptly down left to rock-hop over the gill. Under normal damp conditions no hazard. But this tame gill is about to get tough, it's Dungeon Ghyll after all and the dungeon is imminent. You may enter the dark chasm but a timorous retreat is inevitable as there is no way through. A giant chock-stone a notable feature, as too a fuming fall, the defile environment a haven of ferns and mosses revelling in the tumultuous permanently shady hydro-sanctuary. Backtrack and step back onto the pitched path from where the chasm is hidden and only intimated by sprigs of birch and holly. The second phase of Dungeon Ghyll leads to a beautiful waterfall, that can be admired from the pitched path, though camera-touting walkers will be tempted to draw across the steep slope to get a closer angle.

Walkers with zest can choose to follow the gill rather than the lower section of Mark Gate. This requires the gill to be crossed, scrambling up the steep bracken bank (next to no path) to follow into the gill by a rocky shelf path above this fall. Thereon a natural line, involving some boulder hopping, leads to a terminating fall. Quite the most graceful of the suite of falls associated with this tremendous watercourse, the sense of being within the bosom of the mountain most profound. An apparent baulk to progress, but a damp rocky gully to the

left gives an easy scrambling escape onto the broad grassy shelf where the cairns of Mark Gate is met. Faithful followers of Mark Gate will find their progress constructively pitch stepped and cairned, an occasional pause giving the excuse to peer down on the pastures of the curving line of Great Langdale.

On gaining the alp pasture, Harrison Stickle comes striking into view above the upper portion of Dungeon Ghyll. Mark Gate drifts left, passing a small ragged cairn, indicating the start of the climbers' traverse to Gimmer Crag. Pitching resumes, well bedded-in in this section, an excellent example of the craft; this locally-imported stone, precisely set to encourage walkers to stick resolutely to the path. At last the higher ground is reached overlooking the peat hollow of Harrison Combe. Paths fork, keep left.

While a steady path continues on the flank of Loft Crag it is more fun to reach the summit, so take to the rake left, loose stones a minor inconvenience at the start. The 2,270ft/692m summit of Loft Crag, marked with a modest cairn, commands a lovely view of Harrison Stickle, the father-figure of the Langdale Pikes. From this spot the most stunning component of Loft Crag, Gimmer Crag, is unseen – location of some of the sternest, and to climber, most compelling, rock climbs in Lakeland. The best view of the crag is to be had from Pike o'Stickle. But walkers with a head of heights can descend cautiously down the south ridge to reach the col at the top of the crag, this exciting narrow neck between South-east and Junipal Gullies provides a superb vantage for Pike o'Stickle. Clamber back to continue.

Pike o'Blisco from the top of South Screes



Follow the ridge to reach the top of South Screes, the incredible drop towards Mickleden no inducement for scree-running. Indeed, for the protection of the neolithic archaeology this is just as well. Pitched steps guide on to the north side of the striking rock stack with several late choices for the mild scramble to the 2,323ft/708m top. Pike o'Stickle, a contraction of the Pike of Harrison Stickle, is a real mountain summit, for all the moorland slopes run away to the north towards Thunacar Knott and High Raise.

The view commands the great amphitheatre at the head of Great Langdale, Pike o'Blisco backed by the Coniston Fells, Crinkle Crags and Bowfell, can be seen tip to toe. Westwards spot Great Gable and Glaramara, with the summit of Scafell Pike only showing between Bowfell and Esk Pike, while northwards eyes are led to Skiddaw.

During my most recent visit, a late February Saturday, there was a stream of walkers making their way to the top. I sat and had a snack perched a rock covered with a sheet of ice with father and son, Ian and Martin Sumner, up for the day from Warrington, as the son Martin said 'on a bonding mission!' For all I love to wander alone it is these chance meetings that are so brilliant for giving insight into other people's very different outlooks and lives. Ian is a high-tech electrician working on Airbus in Hawarden, while his son is a furniture-maker with a love of the outdoors nurtured by scouting, they both were on a high and it was really good to see.

Retrace your scramble north to resume your walk, all other directions lead to awful calamity! The path north-north-west leads steadily down the fell, crossing a patch of exposed peat, the erosion eased by stepping stones. As the moorland levels one may bear left and follow a path that zig-zags down the west side of Troughton Beck, but the more natural circuit should include Martcrag Moor and the Stake Pass path.

As the marshy moor swells, break left off the obvious path to thread a way through the pools and marshy ground to reach the distinctive bouldery crest of Martcrag Moor. The 1961 edition of the Ordnance Survey One Inch Tourist Map of Lake District captioned this Martcrag Moo, it was a trick they frequently played at that time to catch out illicit use of their maps. I find this spot quite magical, commanding a grand view down the lower zig-zags of the Stake Pass path to the moraine beneath Rossett Gill, while high above rises Bowfell with Bowfell Buttress, Cambridge and Flat Crags prominent.

The mingle of large boulders on this scarp edge gives scope for temporary semi-shelter in hostile weather, one can envisage this a place enjoyed by neolithic axe-hunters too. The brink cairn the shrine of modern visitors, one wonders - did the neolithic visitor see fit to mark this spot too? Walk north either back to the ridge path to accompany it to Stake Pass, or better still turn left after some 150 yards. The thinnest trace of a path descends the pasture slope, largely over grass interspersed with boulders, this joins the Stake Pass path at the lower edge of the pillow moraine of Langdale Combe.

Joining the Cumbria Way, an inevitably popular trod, go left fording Stake Gill. As is so often the case, the pass-name is applied to the watercourses flowing on either side, the one flowing north is distinguished as Stake Beck. The path must have a long history forging a natural north/south link from Borrowdale with Great Langdale. Lakeland has six such passes of which only Dunmail Raise and Kirkstone are suitable for motor traffic - the other four are Sty Head, Nan Bield and Gatesgarth... perhaps we could include Shap?

Old and new pitching is evident on the many twists and turns of this descent. The cascades of Stake Gill can be exciting to see, though the two are separated in the lower stages. Passing a fold and slate sign distinguishing the paths to Esk Hause and Stake Pass, cross the wooden bridge and set forth on the level track, a welcome contrast to the steep ground of recent adventure.

Mountain rescue vehicles use this track as a means of getting closer to the mountain heart of the district. As one strides with a new zip in one's step, rubberneck attention will include frequent glances up to the left towards Pike o'Stickle and later Gimmer Crag. Mickleden, which means the 'big green valley', is a classic product of glacier erosion, with hanging valleys and incredibly steep valley sides.

Eventually walled enclosures come close and a gated gathering fold passed through, en route the drove lane that leads to the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel. Keep left and above the hotel grounds following the hand-gated walled drove lane to complete the walk.

The Copt How erratics: As a further dimension on this story a new book 'Guidestones to the Great Langdale Axe Factories' by Gabriel Blamires, has recently been published. It gives a fascinating explanation of ancient ways marked by megaliths. Who set them in the landscape, how did they move such huge pieces of rock and where do these signposts lead us? Priced at £10.99 this small paperback certainly asks questions that open one's mind to new perspectives on this marvellous mountain environment. There is far more antiquarian interest on the steep fellsides than you might guess too; much of which has yet to be properly identified and certainly understood, enough for a lifetime's worth of Time Team research into neolithic and Bronze Age fell life.

After walk refreshment

The popularity of the valley-head has ensured walkers are almost spoilt for choice. The Sticklebarn tavern beside The National Trust car park, the Old and New Dungeon Ghyll Hotels, all offer fine food and liquid fayre... that's fair!

Mark's picture gallery and guides

There are thirty-nine colour images from this energetic walk posted on the Radio Cumbria website. The majority captured during the research of the Central Fells guide back in the summer of 2002. A handful coming from the recent memory-refresher walk for this piece, the cloud loomed all day, but even these images carry a certain magic.

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 - today's walk is drawn from the Loft Crag and Pike o'Stickle chapters in the first volume.

Anyone thinking of walking in the Hadrian's Wall area this Spring will surely be interested in **THE ROMAN RING** - Mark's latest innovative guide to be published in mid-April. It describes two new linear routes either side of the Roman frontier and straddling the Cumbria/Northumbria border. To obtain a copy @£9.99 visit : www.shepherdswalks.co.uk