

PARK&STRIDE

with Mark Richards

on BBC Radio Cumbria

5 Westmorland Borrowdale

from Huck's Bridge

full round trip 18km/11.25 miles 6.5 hours

shorter round 14.6km/9 miles 5 hours

ascent 600m/1,960ft

PARK in the layby beside the A6, along the road to the south of Huck's Bridge, the telephone kiosk the distinguishing landmark. Huck's Bridge lies 11km/7 miles north of Kendal on the old main road to Shap and Penrith.

WALK SUMMARY: If you have little, or no sense, of the whereabouts of this enchanting valley and the special qualities of its bounding ridges – you'll not be alone. I really must encourage you to make time for a fell-roving visit: the walk is a delightful combination of scenery, gathering up a string of little summits before delving into the secretive green strath of Borrowdale, located in the Lake District's 'lost' south-eastern quarter.

MAPS: Ordnance Survey Explorer Map OL7 The English Lakes South-eastern area, Explorer Map OL19 Howgill Fells & Upper Eden Valley.

A Whin win situation

This is a golden opportunity to reflect on a watershed moment in the renewables debate, more specifically on the appropriate siting of windfarms in the British landscape. The Whinash proposal lodged on behalf of a dozen commoners on Bretherdale Common, sought to erect twenty-seven turbines - each higher than Blackpool Tower - on a prominent ridge sandwiched between the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales, located just outside the presently-defined boundaries of both National Parks. Had inspectors shown any equivocation in their decision then many exquisitely beautiful landscapes in our nation would have had no defence against the onrush of these industrial structures.

Erecting energy-gathering turbines where their power is to be used has everything to commend it, but in remote locations they are both distractive and detractive, and give nothing to the scene or the communities they dominate. In this instance there was almost universal condemnation from anyone with a Cumbrian perspective, from statutory guardians to community activists, proof positive that we all can play a part in championing the environment we hold most dear.

Westmorland Borrowdale has a bright future, thanks chiefly to the efforts of the Friends of the Lake District. This charity's ownership of High Borrowdale Farm has set in train the restoration of key heritage landscape

features; enclosure walls, farm buildings, hay meadows and native woodland. It is to be hoped that this long-term vision will influence other conservators and landscape planners to make our Cumbrian mountain landscapes glad.

When the Lake District National Park boundary was first fixed over fifty years ago, the A6 was the main motoring artery between Kendal and Penrith, with the Leyland Clock and Jungle Café well-loved landmarks. In the early 1970s along came the M6 motorway slicing through the Lune Gorge and, at a stroke, a new much firmer division was cast between two very distinct landscapes.

To the east of the M6 rise the curvaceous Howgill Fells, Wainwright, with characteristic aplomb, likened them to a herd of sleeping elephants. Their obvious unity ignored by the Yorkshire county boundary, as so often divisions reflect the high margins of upland grazing. A boundary review has been promised to rectify anomalies that seem to deny the Howgills integrity; Westmorland Borrowdale's obvious harmony with Lakeland; and includes the intention to create a new AONB in the Orton Fells, a classic mountain limestone landscape of considerable national importance.

The review has temporarily hit the buffers, not by any weakness of the local case, but as a result of a High Court ruling on the proposed extension to the New Forest National Park. The closeted wisdom decreed that "... natural beauty should be interpreted as not including landscape where man has had a significant impact". Can anyone show where such a landscape exists in Britain and what is significant? Yet more revenue for the lawyers! Indeed, it is the hand of man that dominates all our enigmatic wild landscapes, this unfortunate ruling has severely complicated the designation process.

Setting foot

From the layby follow the broad verge up to the long blind bend in the A6. With utmost care cross the road to the south end of the crash barriers on the east side. Follow the short tarmac roadway down to a gate. A track continues down towards Borrow Beck. However, bear off immediately right onto a clear path embarking on the steady climb onto Ashstead Fell. The steep grassy ascent is soon completed with lovely views over one's shoulder into upper Borrowdale above the A6. Reaching the neat square stone-built cairn at 455m/1,493ft makes the good excuse for an early pause. Young conifers adorn much of the fell, they draw close, but fortunately not up to this prominent top.

Continuing, the ridge undulates attractively crossing the cairnless summit at 469m/1,539ft, then curves east above Combs Hollow. The route gives a superb view into Borrowdale focusing on Low Borrowdale Farm; then to the north, directly across the valley towards the rounded top of Whinash, with the Howgill Fells a splendid backdrop to the east. Take care as you dip south via a surprise rock step. Descend into the depression, and through a cross-ridge wall gap, rising through a broad heather break in the young conifer plantings: the peaty path is taking a pasting so tread with care. Climb onto the next summit, Mabbins Crag at 482m/1,581ft, appropriately marked with a small cairn: the fell-name derives from the Welsh

for 'baby' (the Lochmaben Stone at Gretna, vestiges of a stone circle, has the same origin). This is a fine viewpoint, well worth a further moments pause. The path now winds south-east through the light conifer growth, a draining gill competing with the path makes for damp going at times. Crossing a fence stile and subsequent ladder stile over a wall, firmer ground is ensured with a wall close right.

At the next shallow brow, the summit knoll of Castle Fell is seen across a peaty hollow left, one may ignore it, but would be missing a lovely viewpoint. There is no path on the ground en route to the summit cairn: cross the hollow, slant up the slope and cut over the line of a quad bike track. The special view is west, featuring the Lakeland skyline from Black Combe in the south to High Stile (see skyline diagram). Descend the steep, but simple, south slope to regain the wallside path. Continue via two gates then either follow the track left via a fold and gate, or proceed to Whinfell Beacon, the next summit of the ridge, easily ascended in a south-easterly direction (straight ahead). Just beyond the brow a wall-stile gives access to the prominent shelter cairn at 472m/1,549ft.

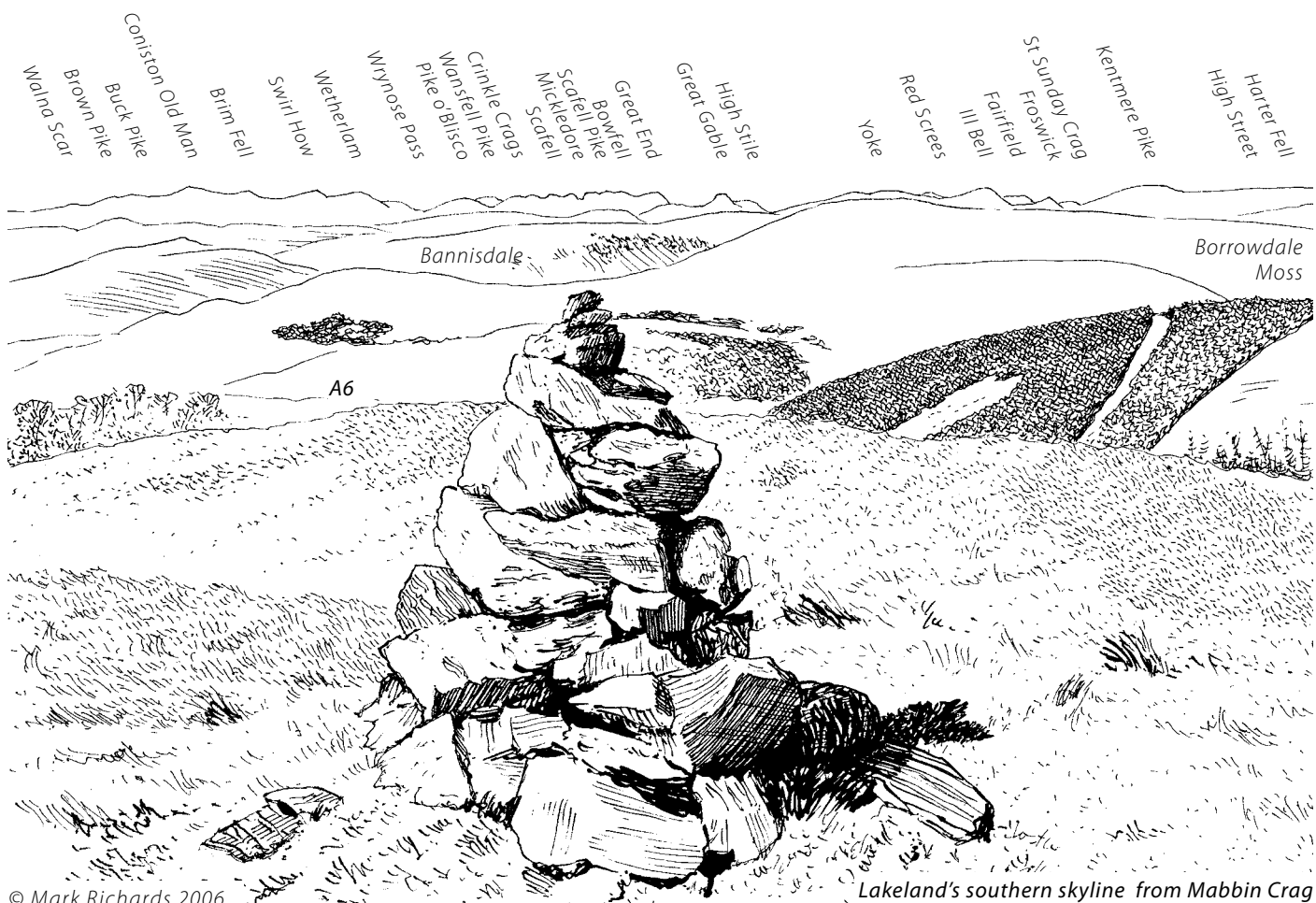
The stones roughly re-grouped probably from the remains of the old beacon, which had its own renewable reserve of timber, surviving as the small plantation set high on the exposed southern slope of the fell. This is the moment to consider the title of this walk, if you look keenly south-south-west you may spot Heysham Nuclear Power Station on the shores of Morecambe Bay, with Blackpool Tower a smidgen to its left. Now swing your head back to look north, over the recently crossed

wall stile, to gaze at the open ridge across Borrowdale featuring the hilltops of Wintersceugh and Whinash. Just take a moment or two to reflect on the proposed siting of seventy-seven Blackpool Towers on that exposed ridge! Doesn't bear thinking about does it?

Trend east on a tangible path leading down to the fence-fold and pass through the track gate. Bear off the green track, following the quad-track along the ridge. Maintain the easterly course to a light stile, thereafter winding on to meet the tarmac communication station access road at a bridleyway sign. Despite the wooden arm pointing across the road, the bridleyway is the road so follow it up to the bend beside the O₂ mast compound entrance.

The shorter route leaves the roadway here. Taking the old OS benchmark on the adjacent rock as cue to veer off onto an emerging greenway, descend a shallow combe to a gate. Thereafter descend by a fence, a damp track winds down through the wind-torn pine arboretum to a gate (do not go through), but veer left down the continuing open track to meet the valley road turn left.

With time and only a modicum of extra effort the continuing ridge thoroughly merits your efforts, as it opens an unrivalled view of the Lune Gorge, transcending the rightly famous views known to motorway travellers. Follow the tarmac strip up to the second, taller, mast compound, veer off to the right at the entrance gate, traipse the short distance to the cross-ridge wall, finding a through-stone wall stile. The ridge path continues right with some rocky ground, but disappears as it descends into a broad hollow. Aim up the facing open fellside due east to reach the stone-built OS pillar, marking the top



of Grayrigg Common at 494m/1,621ft (Grayrigg derives its name from a belt of grey limestone above the village of Grayrigg due south). The broad top may not impress as a viewpoint, a failing soon to be rectified. Continue east to find a wicket gate in the cross-ridge wall, cross the depression over the undulating ground dotted with pools to reach a prominent cairned top at the crest of the steep ridge separating Little and Great Coum. Though this spot carries no name this is a prized moment: peer down on Low Borrow Bridge to see the Roman Fort perched above the confluence of Borrowdale Beck with the River Lune, the valley-name Borrowdale means 'fort stream': the Roman fort name is not known, though the river-name was adopted by them for their major fort at Lancaster 'Aluna'. Note the congestion of river, rail, road and rock-cut motorway, and more pleasingly across the valley spot the enigmatic heart plantation, and glory in the sleek lines of the Howgills.

You might continue further to reach the small cairn marking Grayrigg Pike, again enjoying new angles on this great gulf, the real divide between two major National Parks. Retrace your approach to the depression but now bear right, keep close to the wall as it hugs the scarp edge above Little Coum. The wall descends over Birk Knott then falls to a wall junction, currently a roll of pig-netting acting as an impromptu hand gate at the junction gap. Keep the wall close right, follow alongside until an obvious gill cuts through, step over the pipe rails, walk diagonally down the rough pasture crossing a small gill en route to the wall gate at the foot of the pine wood (mentioned earlier). Go through the gate, follow the track down to the valley road.

Navigation hereon could not be easier, the views are equally relaxing and joyous. The unenclosed road crosses Borrowdale Beck via a cattle grid, the beck at this point a delightful sequence of rock pools both upstream and down. The farm road winds on via further cattle grids to pass through the farmyard gates at Low Borrowdale Farm. As I passed through, the farmer, Mr Clarke, was busy dipping his Swaledale sheep, his sons Luke and Sean watching from a safe distance. I enjoyed several minutes delightful conversation with the family before heading on past the grand old farmhouse and along the gated beech-bowered lane.

The next gate brings the secured and part-renovated barns of High Borrowdale Farm close. The farmhouse has no roof but was inhabited up to the late 1960s, though ruinous in 1971 when Alfred Wainwright passed and penned the opening chapter of his 'Walks on the Howgill Fells'. Continue by gates, noting the sheathed native tree plantings and lush herb meadow, an abundance of molehills beside the track suggesting a healthy soil. Cross the gated track-bridge continuing to join the Breasthigh Road at its ford, fencing guiding the track up left to regain the out-route at the gate and A6 road barriers.

After walk refreshment

There are no immediate parlours, during normal opening hours you may find The Plough Inn at Selside (3 miles down the A6 towards Kendal) an agreeable objective for refreshment. If closed then you may as well complete the journey into town, where there are parlours a'plenty!

Mark's picture gallery and guides

There are forty colour images accompanying this description reflecting the wintery conditions prevailing in early April. LAKELAND FELLRANGER has not reached this furthest outpost of the Lakeland, but you may be interested to track the series down in your local bookshop or library. Four titles are currently available: Central Fells, Mid-Western Fells, Near Eastern Fells and Southern Fells. This summer is set to be an energetic encounter with the highest and most exciting of Lakeland's fells, as I begin work on a major mountain guide for Cicerone Press, I'll keep you posted on progress.

Your all-time favourite Cumbrian fell book

And now a plug on behalf of the Friends of The Lake District for the Flora of the Fells Book Festival, to be held in Sedbergh from 2nd– 4th June.

Forget the Booker Prize, have you ever thought about which is your most loved book on Cumbria's fells? Well, a new competition is seeking to do just that. Throughout April nominations are being sought from the public, so join in – name your favourite book about the mountain landscapes of the county: books can be from any genre - prose, poetry, photography, guidebook or fiction - and written at any time. They should encapsulate something of the character, and sense of place of the landscape and culture of the fells and dales of the Lake District or the North Pennines. The top six nominated books will form the shortlist, and will be discussed at a special event as part of the Flora of the Fells Book Festival on June 4th. Six authors will act as advocates for the short-listed books and the winner will be decided by an audience vote on the night.

As well as the competition, there will be talks, and walks with authors, throughout the Book Festival weekend. The weekend opens with an hour in my company where I will be sharing an insight into my Lakeland and Hadrian's Wall guides. The Flora of the Fells Project Officer, Martin Varley hopes the idea of a favourite fells book will not only inspire people to read, but also promote a greater understanding of the value of Cumbria's fell landscapes: "Many people may view our mountain landscapes as simply places to enjoy, but they have also touched people at a deeper level and this is reflected in the wealth of literature that has grown up related to the fells. By linking literature with landscape we hope that, as well recognising great writing, it will give new meaning to the mountains."

This weekend, run jointly by The Flora of the Fells Project and Sedbergh Book Town, is part of a summer long Flora of the Fells Festival - a programme of more than 160 events celebrating what is so special about Cumbria's mountain landscapes - funded by Friends of the Lake District, English Nature and Defra.

Cumbria's libraries are supporting the competition by providing displays of local fell books. Nominations can be made using forms at local libraries, participating bookshops and tourist information centres, or online at www.floraofthefells.com or www.sedberghbooktown.co.uk