

PARK&STRIDE

with Mark Richards on BBC Radio Cumbria

6 High Street from Haweswater

distance: 10.3km/6.4 miles *time:* 5.5 hours
ascent: 760m/2,490ft *grade:* quite strenuous

PARK in the road-end car park (GR 469 107) at the head of Haweswater, located six miles from Bampton, four miles on from the dam, two miles on from Haweswater Hotel. Typically this free parking can reach capacity by 9:30 in good weather, so an early start is always to be recommended.

WALK SUMMARY: A sensational skyline circuit embracing the great amphitheatre of Riggindale. Climbing the wonderfully revealing Rough Crag/Long Stile ridge onto High Street before following the ridge wall down via the Straits of Riggindale to visit the summits of Rampsgill Head and Kidsty Pike. The tour concludes in the company of Wainwright's Coast to Coast Walk down the eastern slopes via Kidsty Howes thereby linking back to the valley path and regaining the dalehead car park.

MAPS: Ordnance Survey Explorer Map OL5 The English Lakes, North Eastern area; Harvey Lake District Outdoor Atlas and/or their new plastic Mountain Map.

High Street from the Straits of Riggindale



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Keeping an eagle eye

Haweswater is synonymous with Lakeland's most enigmatic bird of prey, the golden eagle. The return of this magnificent bird to its ancient breeding ground in the late 1950s was headline news. Since first nesting in 1969 three males have held tenure of this wild corner of the Cumbrian mountains producing 16 young, though the female has changed several times over the period. The latest female some 28 years old, successfully reared nine young, but sadly went missing this spring; the RSPB are quietly confident that a new female will arrive soon to fill the breach.



On the last count 420 pairs inhabit the collective British eyrie, Riggindale being their only clawhold in England.

The water catchment land owned by United Utilities includes a partnership with the RSPB to manage specific habitat issues, the golden eagle is pre-eminent. Every year the RSPB carry out a round-the-clock guard on the eagles and organises public viewing of the birds from a viewpoint sited at a safe distance in Riggindale valley, open during the breeding season April to August between 11am to 4pm.

Ornithologists are encouraged to show due deference when observing the bird in the hope that nature will reward the solitary male's vigil. Intriguingly there are two crags on the shadowed north face of Rough Crag named on OS maps as Eagle Crag and Heron Crag, the latter derives from the Norse term 'erne' identifying the sea eagle, as distinct from the golden eagle implied by the former!

Anyone who has wandered in the verdant pastures of Kentmere or Longsleddale will know just how beautiful the valleys of the Far Eastern Fells can be. The product of generations of farming; the stewardship of nature and man. But step north over Nan Bield or Gatesgarth Passes and witness an austerity that only municipal water extraction can bestow. Mardale, prior to the building of the dam in 1937, must have been equally as enchanting. Thus 'the valley of the mere', derivation of the name Mardale, became Manchester's second Lake District dale drowning, supplementing Thirlmere.

The tiny farming community of Mardale Green had exist at the foot of Riggindale, centred on its church and pub. The Dun Bull Hotel evidently taking its name from the droving of dun-coloured Shorthorn cattle through the valley. It might be noted that the reservoir was the second challenge to the valley's integrity. Prior to this railway engineers had eyed the narrow valleys of Longsleddale and Mardale as a prime route for the west coast main line, tunnelling under the Gatesgarth Pass. In hindsight this would have saved the valley from drowning... heads or tails which would have been better?

Making strides

Leave the car park via the kissing-gate and, as the path makes a three-way fork, bear right with the wall. Descend via a further kissing gate and two footbridges, the larger spanning Mardale Beck, infused by the out flowing becks from Blea Water and Small Water. Draw round the head of the reservoir and along the popular roughly made path leading above The Rigg conifer plantation to reach and cross a broken wall, descending off the Rough Crag ridge. Bear immediately left following this wall as it mounts the ridge, initially pleasingly adorned with birch, but soon the path threads through the wall as the ridge makes a sudden rise. With handsome views to the head wall of Harter Fell and down upon the lake head car park, pass casual cairns in climbing back up to the ridge-top, now keeping the wall to the right.

At the point where an old wall arrives from the left Eagle Crag lurks under the eastern edge, unseen and unseeable from the ridge. Nonetheless, from here on it is smart to keep an keen eye out to spot the solitary male soaring from his eyrie and wheeling in the sky. The resident ravens frequently pestering him to make

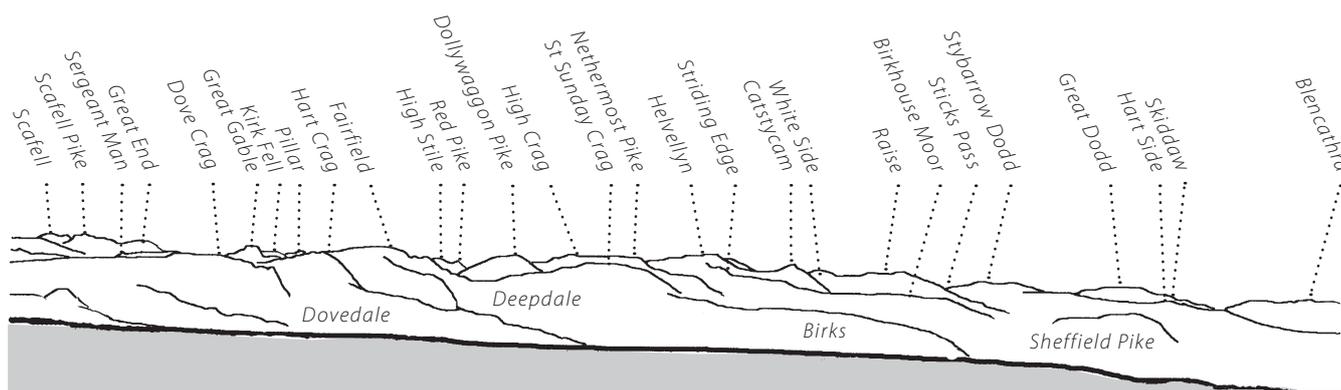
evasive sweeps across Riggindale, a stirring sight as I witnessed on my own visit (see the image in the gallery, backed by the reservoir and the Cross Fell range across the Eden valley).

An utter joy to stride the ridge is consistently scenic and should not be hurried. The path eases until the wall breaks right whereupon it steps up again towards the crest of Rough Crag. Blea Water is prominent surrounded by the rim of broken cliffs forming Mardale Ill Bell and High Street. Crossing the top of Rough Crag 628m/2,060ft, marked by a small stone man (cairn), the ridge descends to the damp depression of Caspel Gate passing above a long tarn. The path next meets up with the dale path rising from Bleawater Beck, at a small cairn, as the ridge steepens onto Long Stile buttressing High Street. Climbing up the middle of the ridge with progressively better views down onto the blue sky reflecting waters of the tarn, as might be guessed, this is the meaning of the tarn-name.

The plateau is reached at the inevitably bedraggled cairn. An obvious path leads south-west latterly accompanying the ridge wall to the Ordnance Survey pillar at 828m/2,717ft; one of several old triangulation columns identified as part of the Survey's National GPS Network. New horizons to the west into the heart of Lakeland draw most attention (see diagram below), Scafell and Great Gable will catch the eye, though the Helvellyn range is the more impressive mountainscape.

To get the best views one should stride on due west down to the Roman Road, from which the fell derives its name (see image with biker). The Roman 'street' connected forts at Brougham (Brocavvm) and Ambleside (Galava) and probably was a far more ancient ridgeway thoroughfare. Medieval charters refer to it as Brettestrete 'the way of the Britons', adding further credence to the notion. Until 1935 the fell-top was a meeting place for inter-dale rivalry with the Mardale Meet each November, combining the foothounds and shepherds' gathering. Hence the alternative name Racecourse Hill, traditional sports such as Cumberland & Westmorland wrestling and football will have been played too. Huge quantities of ale were notoriously consumed, with inevitably much merry-making down in the Dun Bull.

Go right, descending with the Roman Road - you might also go north directly from the OS pillar beside the ridge wall to the same effect, thereby gaining the eastern edge via the top of Short Stile with its superb views into Riggindale.



Lakeland's western skyline from the O.S. pillar on High Street

The name Riggindale derives from the Middle English 'rigging', hence the term rigging for the ropework harnessing a ship's sails. The term was also used to describe the traditional timber-framed long-house roof, so one might have thought the Rough Crags/Long Stile ridge would have been called Rigin.

The popular ridge road slips through the wall where the spine of the ridge constricts, a place known as the Straits of Riggindale, ascend by the wall until a clear path breaks right. This is where Alfred Wainwright's Coast to Coast Walk is joined - arriving here from Patterdale. Follow this edge path either directly over Twopenny Crag (see line drawing) to Kidsty Pike, or branch half-left to the summit of Rampsgill Head at 792m/2,598ft. On the lovely day I wandered this way skylarks were hovering overhead singing an unending rhapsody, making life a sweet, sweet thing.

The northward trending Ramps Gill valley draining into beautiful land-locked Martindale, is every bit as grand as Riggindale, and is renowned for its considerable population of red deer. Of special note is the bold arete to be seen just below the summit, well worth a cautious closer view. Some walkers, keen on adding summits to their personal tally will also add High Raise to their day's bag at 802m/2,631ft, again easily knocked-off along the open ridge just a twelve-minute walk to the north-east.

Backtrack and head east to reach Kidsty Pike. The fell-name translates as 'the steep path where young goats were reared'. Once upon a time wild goats commonly inhabited the district's craggy ledges, hence Goat's Crag and Gatesgarth Pass both associated with Longsleddale. In fact they will have been encouraged, as a means of grazing the cliffs and dissuading sheep from neck-breaking situations. Kidsty Pike may seem a secondary shoulder, the term 'pike' shows this, but it contrives to hold greater than merited attention. It is a real landmark when viewed from the M6 for instance, and too during the approach around the scarp rim via Twopenny Crag, gives it further credibility as a summit.

A platform beside the cairn at 780m/2,560ft is a regular gathering point for Coast-to-Coasters, it being the effective end of their mountain Lakeland experience, ahead they have a 38-mile trek via the Orton Fells and Kirkby Stephen for their next big pull over the Pennine ridge in traversing Nine Standards Rigg into Swaledale.

A simple path leads easily eastwards down the comparatively gentle slopes to the next small knot in the ridge, Kidsty Howes. Traditionally walkers tended to veer half-left to follow the southern bank of Randale Beck to a footbridge at the foot. Oddly OS maps and the more recent habit of trail-walkers contrive a path dipping off the edge directly south-eastwards.

A recent cloudburst further adversely damaging the state of this path at the top making progress quite dismal. Be advised, ignore the modern 'trail sheep' and trace Randale Beck downstream, it's far more comfortable and much better for the ecology.

The prominent craggy top opposite is known as Castle Crag, where the Kendal Archers famously led by Capt Whelter ambushed Scottish raiders and buried them in the hollow below.

Joining the valley path next cross Riggindale Beck at Bowderthwaite Bridge and note the curious paired stones defining and confining the path, they pre-date the reservoir and would appear to have been set by the farmer at the lost Riggindale Farm. Passing over a wall spot traces of rig and furrow cultivation under the path as it crosses a pasture, probably oats were regularly grown here, a further reminder of the active agriculture practised before the waters consumed the valley. The path rises to regain the outward leg of the walk at The Rigg wall-crossing. The eye-catching peninsula plantation is destined to be felled along with most other softwoods around the reservoir to be replaced by native hardwoods. One might note that in their own native countries conifers are hardwoods, as they grow much slower and are thus more dense.

Haweswater receives the catchment from Wet Sleddale, Swindale and even Ullswater. The water flows from the draw-off tower under Gatesgarth Pass and down Longsleddale to the Watchgate Water Treatment Works from where it runs by gravity, at some three miles an hour, down a pipe 8ft 3in square the 80 miles to Greater Manchester.

An interesting local history exhibition is available this summer at Shap Parish Rooms headlined 'Over Shap Fells, by track, road and rail'. This show includes material supplied by John Graham who holds the largest photographic record of Mardale and co-incidentally was married to the grand-daughter of the last licensee at the Dun Bull Hotel, Bob Daffen.

After walk refreshment

Haweswater Hotel 'Walkers' Bar' is only two miles back along the reservoir road, and is well situated to serve hungry/thirsty fell folk. For a more traditional village inn go the extra four miles to the Mardale Inn in Bampton, or for a lighter snack, support the village co-operative initiative by patronising the Post Office/shop tearoom.

Picture gallery and guides

A set of thirty colour images can be viewed on the Radio Cumbria website. Taken in early May these pictures really do show off this walk's dramatic qualities.

If you have enjoyed this walk you might care to sample another expeditious PARK & STRIDE high fell outing and you may also find further exciting walk ideas in my four Collins LAKELAND FELLRANGER guides: Central Fells, Mid-Western Fells, Near Eastern Fells and Southern Fells.

Walkers with a fascination in the historic environment may seek out my new guides to Hadrian's Wall Path (cicerone.co.uk) and The Roman Ring (shepherdswalks.co.uk).