

PARK & STRIDE

with Mark Richards
on BBC Radio Cumbria

7 Eel Crag from Braithwaite

distance: 16 km/10 miles

time: 6.5 hours

ascent: 1,210m/3,970ft

grade: strenuous

PARK: GR 227237 From Braithwaite follow the Whinlatter road up the initial rise, passing the Hope Memorial Camp on the right, find a track access left (room for six tidily parked cars). Typically this free parking can reach capacity by 9:30 in good weather so an early start is recommended. Village parking is not plentiful.

WALK SUMMARY: One of the most popular round trips the Coledale Round culminates upon Eel Crag, taking in Grisedale Pike, Hopegill Head, Eel Crag, Sail and Outside en route. Walkers can include further scenic summits if inclined with Grasmoor, Wandope, Scar Crag and Causey Pike with Barrow a final flourish. In wet conditions the small rock-step on the east ridge of Eel Crag calls for care, in normal conditions you'll skip down!

MAPS: Ordnance Survey Explorer Map OL4 The English Lakes, North-western area; Harvey Lake District Outdoor Atlas and/or their new plastic Mountain Map.

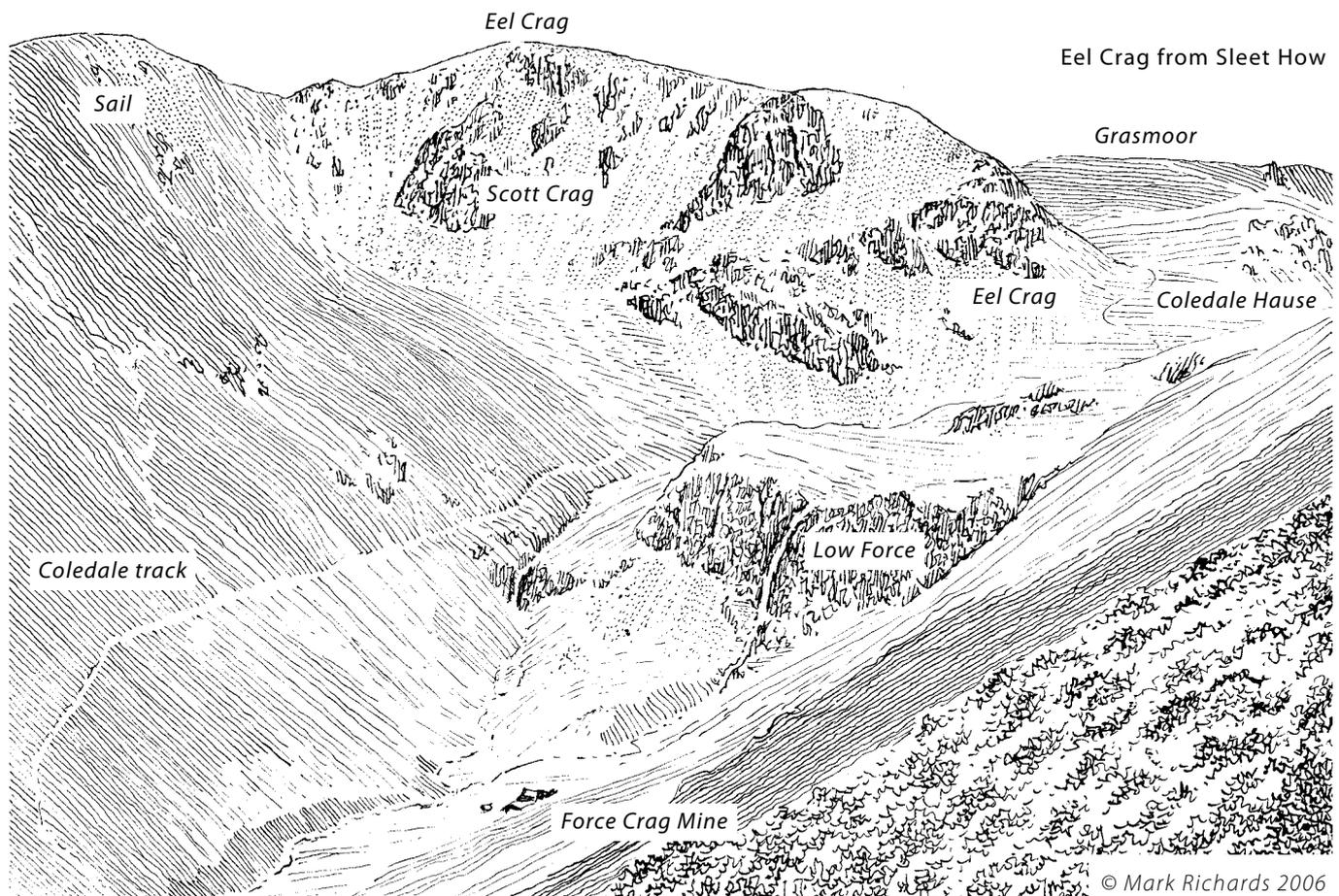
The Coledale Horseshoe

Approaching Keswick along the A66 rising mightily west of town it's the North-western Fells, principally Eel Crag and Grisedale Pike, that excite most attention. Visitors seeking a setting sun view of Castlerigg Stone Circle have these fells as a backdrop. This impressive walking tour tightly embraces the skyline of Coledale and includes the summits of Grisedale Pike, Hopegill Head, Eel Crag, Sail and Outside.

The walk begins from the village of Braithwaite, sited in a broad natural clearing, the origin of the place-name. The apparently large village of today, dominated by the camping ground, holiday lodgings and retirement homes was formerly substantially larger, certainly in terms of population. This had been an industrial community, home to miners, woollen millers and pencil-makers, the Cumberland Pencil Co. having a factory here from 1868-98, when a fire resulted in its demolition and the transfer of manufacturing to Keswick.

Coledale is a long straight, deeply entrenched, valley surrounded by shapely fells composed of various elements of Skiddaw slate. Where broken underfoot, the shards are angular and don't have the ball-bearing effect of the Borrowdale Volcanic of the central Lakes.

Located in the upper end of Coledale, the Force Crag Mine thoroughly merits the attention of fellwalkers and praise accorded the National Trust and English Heritage for their work on this industrial monument. While the buildings have been carefully secured and preserved, with the latterday machinery, visitors are only able to see inside during specific guided tours – pre-booking is essential, contact 017687 74649 [see page three].



These boots were made for walking

Climb the flight of steps rising immediately to the right. NB: *The track beyond the barrier leads easily into Coledale proper and can play into your walk, if, later in the day the weather deteriorates and you have to retreat from Coledale Hause.* The path gives fine views over the Bassenthwaite Vale to the Skiddaw massif, as it rises to a stile. After this the path climbs a little further before levelling along the Kinn ridge overlooking Coledale, with eyes focused on the headwall drama of Force Crag.

The valley is of simple form, reserving all its visual drama for its upper reaches where a rockband intervenes causing the valley beck to step down two great mares tail falls. Pitching up again onto the heather bank of Sleet How, the ridge now overlooks the diminutive Grisedale Beck valley and Whinlatter Forest Park, where osprey's now regularly nest. Climb ever more sternly up the conical east ridge to the summit of Grisedale Pike. Path erosion is inevitable on such a singular and popular trod, any splintered rock encountered a minimal hindrance.

The summit has a block of tilted slate providing a naturally sheltered southern shelf, the outlook, whether to Skiddaw or Eel Crag, is superb. The Hobcarton valley dominates the westward view. The name is interesting, deriving from the Irish personal-name Cartan, with hobb meaning tussock, suggesting a fertile patch of land where the grass grew thicker.

A broken wall accompanies the continuing ridge path over a intermediate top ending where the path forks; the lefthand path leading directly down to Coledale Hause. Keep to the ridge, now above the remarkable craggy headwall of the Hobcarton valley, revelling in the views back along the edge to Grisedale Pike, climb to the beautifully peaked cairnless summit of Hopegill Head.

Hobcarton Crag falls majestically beneath one's feet, its grassy ledges threaded by perilous sheep trods. Within two inaccessible gullies on this crag cling patches of alpine catchfly, at the very end of its post-glacial history in Britain: known in Scandinavia as copper moss, in this spot, there is only manganese. At this tiny carnivorous plants only other British location, the mountains of Angus, serpentine is the notable element, hence one might have expected it to have lingered in the gullies of Wasdale Screes, showing that the Hobcarton site is indeed a chance survival.

To the west, the continuing narrow ridge extends to Whiteside, with Crummock Water peeping into view down Gasgale Gill. To the north the ridge steps down slabs towards Ladyside Pike, and looking down the heathery slopes of Hope Gill spy the verdant Lorton Vale.

Turn south, follow the path over Sand Hill, shards of slate not sand underfoot. Descend into the broad hollow of Coledale Hause, a path intersection. NB: *To shorten the walk follow the restored path left down to join the Force Crag Mine access track, leading easily along the north side of the valley directly to the car park.* Due south, the north ridge of Eel Crag rises in two abrupt craggy steps. It is far better to follow the re-structured path rising beside the

upper course of Gasgale Gill SSW on an easy gradient. The path, rising out of Coledale leading to the source of Gasgale Gill, had become so gullied by spate water that, as the image in the gallery shows, it was 12 feet deep, hence the imperative for mechanical restoration. Reaching the T-junction of paths by a pool, with the Grasmoor ridge connection right; *a worthy bolt-on for the extraordinary panorama from that summit, backtrack to continue.* Turn left still upon an engineered path climbing the plain slope, a brief traverse right reveals a sumptuous parade of fells over Addacombe Hole.

The OS column stands on the broad featureless summit of Eel Crag, stride the few paces north-east to peer down on the Force Crag Mine and upper Coledale. The east ridge descends with continuing grand views on either hand. There are two minor scrambly sections, one near the top and the other near the foot of the ridge. A small col leads to a steady climb onto Sail. The actual summit, bypassed by the common flow of fellwalkers, is marked by a tiny cairn in a shallow pool. Descend ENE to a lower more substantial hause. One may continue up the facing ridge onto Scar Crag en route to Causey Pike. However, the preferred route takes its leave of the ridge at this point, a clear path angles NE to descend beneath the outcrops on the western side of Scar Crag. Shortly after conversion to a track, legacy of the failed cobalt mine venture, veer smartly left across the marshy hollow of High Moss to climb the grassy ridge of Outerside.

Being a less frequented summit this is an excellent place to linger longer, the view devoted to Coledale. The heathery path descending the east ridge contends with minor gullyng. Reaching Low Moss one may stride over Stile End, advance via Barrow Door onto Barrow itself, a super viewpoint. The chosen way is mindful that many walkers will be quite tired by this point, and veers left beyond the pool on a turf path that slants gently down the western flank of Stile End. This leads sweetly down the pasture free of bracken passing to the right of the tree-lined enclosure of the ruined High Coledale then joins an open track alongside the gorse fringed Barrow Gill. A kissing gate heralds a tarmac road, lined with bluebells in late May, leading down into Braithwaite.

After walk refreshment

Braithwaite offers three worthy inns for weary walkers, the Coledale Inn, Royal Oak and Middle Ruddings, and don't overlook the general stores for walk provisions; while up the Whinlatter road The Cottage in the Wood country house hotel serves the walker in two ways, supporting the work of the Tourism & Conservation Partnership, for whom a lionshare of funds received goes directly into path restoration. The Partnership are currently seeking a business sponsor to finance a webcam on the osprey's nest from Whinlatter Pass.

Picture gallery and guides

Forty colour images can be viewed on the website, six were taken from neighbouring fell vantages confirming the grace and beauty of the Grasmoor group.

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

Introducing the Force Crag Mine

The last mineral mine to be working in the Lake District, Scheduled Ancient Monument, geological SSSI and most unusual of National Trust properties.

By way of a summary Force Crag was mined for lead, and lead only, from 1839 until 1865, and afterwards for barites and zinc intermittently from 1867, until it was finally abandoned in 1991.

The mill that we see today was built in 1908-9 and redesigned in 1939-40. The mill contains the ore-refining machinery that was in use during the 1980s and until is closed, along with some earlier equipment.

In the last ten years or so the site has undergone a remarkable transformation. From a relict mining landscape, which few had heard of, and even fewer cared for. To one of the North West's most innovative and celebrated heritage sites.

In the next hour I am going to be saying something about what makes this site special and pointing out a few interesting sites along the way. You will by no means get the full story as that would take days. Instead I am going to tell you a little about one or two of my favourite things.

The Recent History

It is perhaps worth starting by giving you some information regarding the recent history of Force Crag as background, before we start to delve too deeply into the past.

The National Trust has had the ownership of this particular valley since 1978. At the time the Trust took ownership of the valley Force Crag Mine was a working enterprise, and it continued to work unaffected by the change in land ownership until 1990.

It might be a surprise to some that Force Crag Mine only ceased work in 1990, after the New Coledale Mining Company decided to pull out after a collapse in Level 0 that proved impossible to clear. The mine was finally declared abandoned by the mining inspectorate in the following year. Since that time the mine has been in the care of the National Trust.

It is fair to say that no one was clear on exactly what should be done with Force Crag in the years that followed. There were various voices who expressed an opinion that the mining landscape should be swept away and the valley returned to its natural state. I am glad to say that the National Trust recognised the cultural and historic value of Force Crag very early on and a decision was made to conserve and interpret this fascinating site for visitors.

The story of Force Crag, the National Trust property, really starts in May 1999, when the Trust invited English Heritage to undertake a detailed survey of the surface remains at Force Crag. The aim of the survey was to identify and record the surface archaeology of the mine in great detail and provide the National Trust with the information it required to recognise what was important about the site and move forward with its management.

It was as a result of that survey that Force Crag mine was designated a Scheduled Monument by English Heritage. This means that it is regarded as being a piece of heritage of national importance and is afforded statutory protection in law. You might be interested to know that it was scheduled on the basis of its intrinsic worth as a piece of industrial archaeology and also for the fact that Force Crag is the only former mineral mining site in the country that has retained its processing equipment in something approaching complete order.

Now back in 1999 the mine and mining landscape was subject to all sorts of abuses. The mill buildings were often vandalised and used as overnight accommodation. The mines were being accessed on an occasional basis by groups and objects and material from inside the mine was being removed on an ad-hoc basis. Obviously all of these issues need to be tackled in turn.

Our first job after the English Heritage survey was complete was to stabilise the site and surrounding landscape. The main issue being the spoil heaps and natural scree slopes that sit above the mill. These had been cut into for roadstone quarrying in the 1960s and there was a danger that overhanging material could collapse and engulf the mill. To avoid this happening machines were brought onto site in 2000 to stabilise the slopes and create a more sustainable gradient.

The next job was to undertake repairs on the building itself. This involved making repairs on the brickwork and structural timbers inside the various levels of the mill building. Windows and doors were either repaired or renewed. The biggest single task was to replace the roofing sheets on the office and mill. Given the wind and extreme weather that affects this valley this was no small undertaking. Various phases of building work took place between 2001 and 2004.

Throughout the various phases of building work every effort was made to complete the repairs causing minimum change to the overall appearance of the site. This was to and retain an air of tatty authenticity that Force Crag has always had. One of our main aims during the project was to retain the sense of place the site possessed before we started work and avoid any needless changes that might give the site the feel of a stuffy museum or sanitised heritage centre.

Once the mill buildings were weather proof and water tight we could then turn our attention to conserving the equipment inside the buildings. This work was undertaken by a firm of specialist metalwork conservators who set about cleaning, oiling and waxing the machinery, conveyers and moving parts to ensure that it did not rust or corrode as it lay idle in this damp atmosphere.

In some cases machines had been removed or displaced after the mill ceased operation in 1990. As a result some heavy components had to be lifted and returned to their original positions. While this was ongoing the various machines and components were recorded and labelled and an inventory created to enable the condition of the machinery to be monitored in the future. You might see the inventory labels hanging from the machines as you walk around inside the mill.

The project to record and conserve the machinery and equipment inside the processing mill was truly challenging. However, the team from Context Engineering, working under the direction of Tim Martin did just that. The approach taken at Force Crag was seen by the conservation industry to be so good that it was nominated for the National Conservation Awards and was eventually awarded first prize at a ceremony held at the British Museum last November!

The final stage of the project was to get in ready for public access. The first task was to make the mill buildings safe for public access. This involved installing new steps and reinforcing existing gantries and platforms so that people had safe access to all parts of the mill. A new lighting system also needed to be installed so people could move around in safety.

While this was ongoing work started on the interpretation for the site. The interpretation for the site was designed in four parts; a leaflet, the display boards, the flip books and the actual tours themselves.

The first visitors passed through the door in 2004, although last year was our first year of running at full capacity. Access to Force Crag Mill is through a booking system with groups of 14 or so being given the tour by our team of wonderful volunteers who have developed a tremendous knowledge of the site.

There are three tours left to run in the remainder of the year. 8th July, 10th August, 2nd Sept. Bookings can be made by calling the National Trust's Borrowdale Property Office on 017687 74649. Further details about conservation work at Force Crag can be found on the websites of the National Trust and English Heritage.