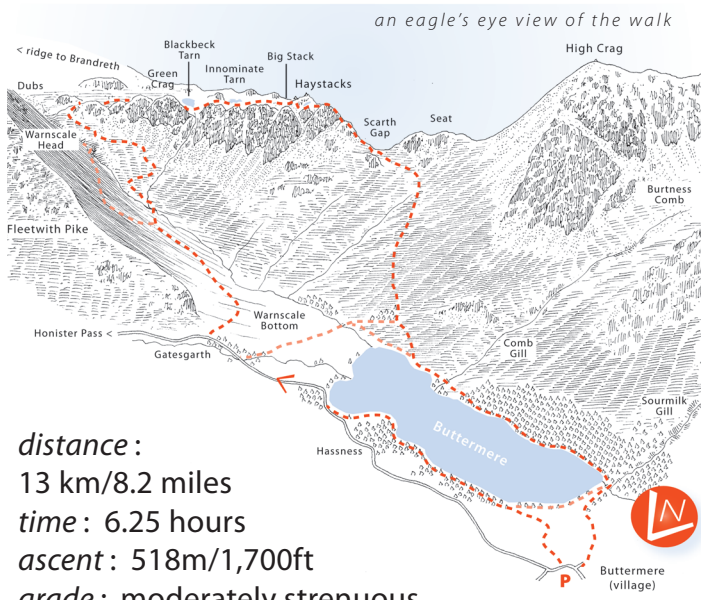


PARK & STRIDE

with Mark Richards
on BBC Radio Cumbria

9 Haystacks from Buttermere



distance :

13 km/8.2 miles

time : 6.25 hours

ascent : 518m/1,700ft

grade : moderately strenuous

PARK: Buttermere village has a choice of car parks; the National Park enclosure beyond the Fish Hotel GR 173169, the National Trust enclosure GR 173172 (both with pay meters), or on the broad verge above St James' church. Alternatively start the walk from Gatesgarth GR 195150, making a shorter round trip omitting the lake (farm car park £3 pay meter).

WALK SUMMARY: Combined with a shoreline circuit of Buttermere (lake), the ascent of Warnscale Head and the magical crossing of Haystacks itself, this expedition ranks as one of Cumbria's truly great little walks.

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 Beauty of Buttermere

The Buttermere valley, commonly accepted as running from High Lorton to Honister, is a gracious mountain beauty of wide renown. From Buttermere's tiny village, set at the edge of the green strath between Crummock Water and its lake, you can witness the most exquisite scenic crescendo. Stand on the verge above St James' Church to fully comprehend the grand parade of woods, crags, corries and fells encircling the valley, perfectly complementing the serene waters of the lake – peerless, spirit-lifting, restorative.

Spoilt for choice when it comes to which fell to climb, most walking visitors, even those who might claim to have only the vaguest knowledge of Lakeland, would probably think of Haystacks. Situated at the

head of the lake, like a corner-cupboard between the soaring ridge of Fleetwith Pike and the mighty High Stile range, its dark armour of cliffs suggest a certain impregnability. Observed from neighbouring heights the fell appears to promise nothing special and it may have retained its shy secrets but for one man.

Haystacks will forever be associated with Alfred Wainwright. His artistic, graphic and romantic descriptions of the fells gave his Pictorial Guides pre-eminence among recent generations of hillgoers, and he did more than pin his colours to Haystacks. It was without question his favourite haunt... his ashes were strewn along the shores of Innominate Tarn, fulfilling his wishes. AW's influence persists, his many pilgrims, clinging on to his 'Western Fells' or 'Coast to Coast Walk' traverse the fell in strict procession, tremulous to stray. Yet it was AW's favourite place to stray, and here his fellwandering spirit finds eternal liberty.

Just before you begin, perhaps you might visit the little church of St James, as much as anything to view the small plaque set into the south window by the door. this reads:

'PAUSE AND REMEMBER
ALFRED WAINWRIGHT
FELLWALKER, GUIDE BOOK AUTHOR
AND ILLUSTRATOR
WHO LOVED THIS VALLEY
LIFT YOUR EYES TO HAYSTACKS
HIS FAVOURITE PLACE
1907-1991'

Boots on? - Let's be gone...

Leave the road in Buttermere village above the Bridge Hotel and below the church, through the yard of Syke House Farm. The first image on the P&S gallery shows the homeward march of the farm's small herd of Ayrshire cows, pacing from pasture to parlour to provide the cream base for a distinctive array of flavoured ice creams to be savoured with relish at the farm tearoom – either now or at the end of the walk. What more appropriate continuity for this place, as the place-name Buttermere would appear to mean the 'mere by the butter-enriching meadows'.

Walk on through the yard via gates. The ensuing open track leads across the pasture to a gated passage down a rock exposure, then via further hand-gates to join the path emerging from the open western shore. In a park-like setting, the tree-lined shore path continues east beneath Pike Rigg with further hand-gates. The wooded shore path brings one surprise, a 35 metre-long tunnel, cut by miners at the behest of the Victorian Lancashire mill-owner for 'Hassness' – now a holiday haven, then a private mountain retreat. Anyone over six-feet tall must duck, or grouse!

Curving at a bay, pass stately pines with a marvellous command of the dalehead. Shapely Fleetwith Pike and sturdy Haystacks vying with the soaring mountain mass of High Stile and its compatriot shoulders High Crag and Red Pike; the high corries of Burtness and Bleaberry Combs respectively spilling fuming cascades of water via Comb and Sourmilk Gills. The path curves left drawing awkwardly under the road, and eventually onto the road passing the secretive Lower Gatesgarth.

There are few verge concessions for walkers along the road en route to embowered Gatesgarth Farm, in summer the site of a refreshment caravan.

Pass by the farmer-provided car park and the cottage, the hens and a cockerel play Russian roulette with Honister bound traffic. The name Gatesgarth meant 'goat enclosure', probably referring to the ancient enclosure of goats in the Gatesgarthdale valley leading up to Honister Pass.

Leave the shelter of trees, bear right onto the open bridle-track which leads beneath Low Raven Crag at the foot of Fleetwith Pike. Stride purposefully towards the Warnscale Bottom valley with the dark cliffs of Haystacks ahead. Drawing approximately beneath the Big Stack fork right off the main track, upon a grass path, leading to the wooden footbridge over Warnscale Beck. The ascent effectively begins. Cross the stony bed of Black Beck en route to a zig-zagging quarryman's path, with some loose stony stretches – but far less than those encountered on the main bridle-path to Dubs Quarry recently left. The impressive water slides and cascades of Warnscale Beck catch the eye, though the path never gets really intimate as it mounts to pass below the well-hidden stone bothy at Warnscale Head.

Formerly a slate-quarrymen's weekday shop (overnight shelter), the hut is kept in good order as a welcome, if draughty, sanctuary for climbers, by the sterling efforts of volunteers from the Mountain Bothies Association. Within the last year a new roof has been constructed and respectful over-night visitors welcomed – mindful that camping about Haystacks is not encouraged – it is no more than a stone tent, yet performs a distinct service. The nearby Dubs Hut, another stone tent, adopted and cared for by the Galloping Horse Mountaineering Club of Workington, comes into view to the left of Little Round How, once the path crests the ridge. Follow the path right weaving around the back of Green Crag, spot the silhouette of a boulder perched near the south-western edge, well removed from the path underfoot. Passing close to the outflow of Blackbeck Tarn, enjoy the sneaky view down the Black Beck ravine as it breaks through the cliffs. The common way, never in doubt, passes the beautifully irregular shores of Innominate Tarn rising by rocky knolls to the bare summit ridge.

The wandering spirit may perhaps follow my footsteps by visiting the top of Green Crag, breaking off at Blackbeck Tarn to visit the perched boulder through the rank heather. Weaving back from the ridge fence via the shores of Innominate Tarn to regain the northern cliff edge, making for the top of Big Stack, before stepping onto the summit ridge – placing hardly a stride on the popular path. Big Stack is a special place, its forward position gives it a privileged view down on Buttermere: the top knot a tight concave fold of lava emphasising the extra hardness and erosion resistance of the rock.

Innominate Tarn has a shy beauty all its own, not the biggest of its genre, nor perhaps the most attractive, though Great Gable at the very head of Ennerdale does make a stunning backdrop. However, thanks to AW this tarn now has a special place in many a fell walker's heart. You'll no doubt be checking the grit in your boot treads when you get to the summit... King Alfred the Grit.

The north/south summit ridge has cairns at either end, the northern frequently taken as the true summit, at 597m/1,959ft has a small tarn to its west. Take your time explore the summit and nearby edge, perhaps you too will spot the tiny memorial to Dennis Hobbs on the western scarp brink – a heavenly outlook into eternity.

The early westward descent reveals more attractive folded rock beds. The path is partially pitched, though there are some inhibiting loose stones on the quite abrupt descent to the broad Scarth Gap. The pass, marked by a large cairn near a fence-end, which arises out of Ennerdale from the remotely sited Black Sail Youth Hostel. Walkers with boundless energy and the time will accept the challenge of the High Stile range climbing via Seat and High Crag, now a well-pitched trail.

Well-pitched where needed, the popular descent from Scarth Gap to Buttermere provides lovely views back to the towering stacks of Haystacks. If opting for the abbreviated walk option, turn right on passing a conifer spinney, down to a gate and a fenced lane leading back across the meadows to the road at Gatesgarth Farm.

The route to Buttermere village has the joyful stroll along the southern shore in store. So bear left to meet and merge with the lower path, passing on via a footbridge spanning Comb Gill. Note the old bridleway splits at this point: the walkers' way keeping right passing through a hand-gate to enter the conifer plantation of Burtness Wood. On reaching another fork either stay on the broader path or bear right keeping close to the shore – enjoy those fine views across to Fleetwith Pike and Hassness backed by the rocky ribs of Goat Crag on High Snockrigg. A further hand-gate, short of Sourmilk Gill, leads to a footbridge over the lake's outflowing stream.

Buttermere Dubs is the connecting stream between Buttermere and Crummock Water. The term 'dubs' is Celtic for dark or black. You may remember that it crops up in the old nursery rhyme 'Rub a dub dub, three men in a tub', no doubt referring to the stream's function as a sheep wash.

In summer the western shore beyond the footbridge leading to Pike Rigg is a throng with families and couples, an appropriate National Trust roving recruiting Land Rover being set nearby. The lake has belonged to the Trust since 1930 and is sensitively cared for, fishing is permitted, but no boats, other than for angling.

The path soon enters a lane leading easily back into the village, passing the Fish Inn, once a farm and home to Mary Robinson 'The Beauty of Buttermere'. The story of her marriage at Brigham, and the death by hanging of her bigamous husband, John Hatfield, at Carlisle in 1803, embroidered in typically eloquent style was the inspiration for by Melvyn Bragg's book 'The Maid of Buttermere'.

After walk refreshment

Buttermere offers The Fish Hotel, The Bridge Hotel and two farm cafes at Syke and Croft.

Picture Gallery

Forty colour images can be viewed on the website evoking the character and romance of this superb walk.

(Copyright: Mark Richards August 2006)