

PARK&STRIDE

with Mark Richards

on BBC Radio Cumbria

1 Great Gable

from Honister Pass

including Green Gable

with optional return via Brandreth and Grey Knotts

ascent 1,950ft/640 m round trip 2,380 ft/725 m

distance – 2.4 miles/3.8 km round trip 5 miles

time – ascent 2.5 hours round trip 5 hours

PARK either in the National Park car park adjacent to Honister Youth Hostel or at the Honister Slate Mine, parking fee to pay in both instances. START 1,190ft/363m; grid ref. 225 136 and no later than 10.30 a.m. in winter months.

WINTER WALKING ADVICE essentials to wear and/or carry in your daypack: a reliable torch and spare batteries, a map and compass, a hot drink in a sturdy flask, energy snacks, thermal hat, gloves, cagoule and gaiters. On the clothing front layers are better than reliance on just one heavy item (jumper/fleece), being able to add and subtract to suit body comfort and conditions is an immensely sensible habit to cultivate.

MAPS Ordnance Survey Explorer OL4
Harvey Superwalker Lakeland West
and Harvey Lake District Outdoor Atlas

GROSSE GABELHORN

My good friend Geoff Bland, who has climbed this magnificent mountain every year since 1956 and recently wandered up alone to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday, calls it Grosse Gabelhorn. I think he picked up on the quip from his old chum Des Oliver, from the Keswick Mountaineering Club, who in turn has climbed a peak by this name in the Austrian Alps. I love the flamboyant inflection.

Geoff's not alone of course, there can be few fellow fellwanderers who don't share a comparable affection, the title suggestive of a certain alpine majesty, which is not that far from the mark. From so many angles Grosse Gabelhorn commands attention and is compelling, My own personal favourite aspect of the massive southern face all rock-ribbed and scree-ridden disclosed to such perfection from the summit of Lingmell. As a fellwalking objective its summit and the exquisite vantage of Westmorland Cairn are quite breathtaking places to stand. From here one may marvel at the sublime beauty of mountain Lakeland, peering over the deep wild gulf of Lingmell Beck towards the mighty Scafell. Certainly Great Gable comes out of the premier league of Lakeland fells, up there with the likes of Blencathra and Scafell.

For all the ferocity of its southern and northern faces the fell's neat square plan contrives to give four leading edges upon which ascending paths coalesce, precisely splitting the cardinal points. While Gavel Neeze (gable nose) stems all the way down to the irregular enclosures of Wasdale Head, three

of these ridges have comparatively high connections with neighbouring fells. Sty Head to the east, Beck Head to the west and Windy Gap to the north. It is the highest of these Windy Gap, linked to Green Gable and the simple ridge to Honister Pass, that so many fellwalkers bless the best. The walk from Honister Pass saving feet (legs) and metres by equal measure.

Each year on Remembrance Sunday members of the Lakeland Fell & Rock Climbing Club have made a tradition of conducting a special service originally as a mark of respect for fellow members who have given their lives for their country. Of more recent years they have thrown the occasion open to all. Years ago the club purchased several of the more famous fells including Gable and gifted them to The National Trust. This year, in unusually glorious weather, I attended with Geoff and several close friends, there must have been four hundred in the congregation including a guy who had travelled down from Orkney, his uncle, a keen climber who pioneered routes on Gable Crag in the early 1900s, being recorded on the plaque consecrated in 1924 - when you get to the bronze plaque look for the name Worthington.

The Honister Pass, which links the deeply entrenched valleys of Borrowdale and Buttermere, features on the summer circuit of Stagecoach's 'Honister Rambler' bus service. Seeing the little green buses chugging up the steep last rise to the top from Gatesgarthdale is like watching Postman Pat's little van. If you've not tried it then make a point next Spring. It is a lovely journey and very useful for carfree days on the fells from a Keswick base. The experience enjoyed all the more should you obtain one of the special From A to B to SEE leaflets I prepared in celebration of this 'splendiferous' scenery.

In February the Honister Mine Company will have been in dynamic operation for a full decade. Having stood derelict for a number of years previously, its stunning success is wholly the result of the energy and commitment of local lad Mark Weir. Like the Herdwicks themselves Mark is hefted to these fells and dales. Mark believes the future of the Cumbrian fells in particular lies in the past. He has a positive vision in the importance of traditional skills, using the innate hard working instincts of local people to breath new life into the local economy. What makes a place special is the character of the people who are moulded by the environment and the Lakeland fell's climate moulds characters right enough! Sound business sense and a genuine welcome for visitors are part and parcel of Mark's outlook. This is the only slate mine in England, efficiently extracting and cutting a brilliantly toned stone from high on Fleetwith Pike. Known as the Kimberley Mine thus nicknamed as it was considered Borrowdale's diamond mine! Thirty local people get genuine employment here, the ice of winter seldom hampering the steady extraction and workshop activity. Pay the shop a visit when you can and be inspired.

The adjacent Honister Youth Hostel has a fine situation for an elevated start to expeditions on the high fells, particularly with the short days of winter. Indeed, walkers are quite right to take advantage of the elevated start afforded by driving up to the top of the Pass, this generous step up leaving less than two thousand feet of steady walking to the top, with only the final four hundred feet in any way stiff, and only the most modest of rocky ground encountered. Mind you if the prevailing weather when you come is anywhere near the normal winter fare then you'll be very intent at this point. >>

LET'S GET CRACKING

The actual first priority is getting to the top of the Drum House incline. Known as the Lancaster Aerial it was a poor piece of equipment, the slate coming down painfully slow, the black jack oil spilling onto the clog gearing making it quite inefficient, inevitably it has all been cleared away. Nowadays the stone is carried down in half-an-hour quite elegantly.

Inviting steps guide you up from the western end of the car park off the quarry track. The pitching is excellent so a steady comfortable pace should be achieved, starting steep the gradient soon eases. Drawing near to the brow, a cairn invites you to branch left. The regular path now makes a far steadier ascent across the western slopes of Grey Knotts. As a fence hoves into view one may continue on the traversing line or better bear up left to cross a light stile in a fence. It would be most remiss not to mention that the path from Honister was attributed a nickname, Moses Trod. Tradition held that a man called Moses Rigg, a Honister quarryman, distilled whisky, conveying the illicit liquor down to Wasdale Head in loads of slate. Whether this was in pony panniers or a sledge is not known. His 'still' must have ranked as the highest building in England for it was located quite incredibly at the top of Gable Crag!

The preferred route crosses the fence and slants south-westwards across a somewhat stony pasture to Gillercomb Head, a broad hollow containing three irregular tarns, a joy to behold when laced with ice. The ridge south onto the summit of Green Gable is quite without incident. The summit cairn at 2,628/801m a place to pause and consider the shadowed precipice of Gable Crag. Pillar, Ennerdale and the rear of the High Stile ridge command attention westwards, as too Glaramara and Great End to the east, with the Langdale Pikes peeping over the shoulder of Allen Crag.

The ridge path plummeting hastily down to Windy Gap some 168 feet has become unsightly, so take your time and minimise stone disturbance. A large cairn rests in the dip from where paths break west into Stone Cove to link with Moses Trod and east down the Aaron Slack to Styhead Tarn.

Ready yourself for the big push of 490 feet/150m. For at last you are upon Great Gable, an elevated giant resting on the shoulders of its fellows! The path winds up the steepening rock slope, with a choice of several mild scrambly lines. An intermediate ridge gives scope to glance right at Gable Crag and back to Green Gable before tackling the final rocky section. Being a domed plateau the climb duly eases, making the final strides to the summit outcrop all the more confident and exhilarating.

Pay your own respects at the Fell & Rock Climbing Club Memorial and resting in the lee of the icy draught revel in the all round view from 2,950ft/899m, ok, it's as like as not beset with cloud! The most stunning viewpoint however is defined by the Westmorland Cairn, which is located due south-west a matter of 150 yards distant. The cairn stands precariously on the very brink overlooking the huge downfall of Westmorland Crag peering into Great Hell Gate and the jagged combed crest of Great Napes. Lingmell and the Scaffells are superbly seen as too Wasdale and Wastwater, while back to the west the Mosedale horseshoe beyond Kirk Fell, focused upon the striking outline of Pillar. Obviously good visibility is needed to see it all at its best and if you can see the Isle of Man then you know you've hit it right.

Turning back north-eastwards you've no choice but to

backtrack, preferably as far as Gillercomb Head. The worst going obviously the path off the summit, most walkers find descent more uncomfortable than ascent, when wet, icy and /or windy things get tense, so do take your time and watch your step.

From Gillercomb Head the choice is simple enough either, with light a concern, retrace the cairned path trending north-west across the flank of Brandreth and on down Moses Trod to the Drum House incline. Known ground is always to be preferred when visibility is in question or time at a premium.

Though I have to say the ridge route holds no ghosts. Brandreth summit at 2,346ft/715m is the first of the three apparent tops on a wide undulating rocky plateau encountered due north from Gillercomb Head. It is a fine viewpoint, Great Gable seen as a domed mass in stark shadowed outline, the setting sun glaring in your eyes from over Black Sail Pass. A new fence intervenes along the ridge and you will need to cross the stile to keep to the west side, passing pools en route to the west summit of Grey Knotts at 2,287ft/697m. For all bar the most particular summiteers this will suffice. That the east top, beyond the fence may be higher by the merest tad, is of little or no consequence. Anyway the view down into the Buttermere valley is so good all your attention will be cast that way, whether floodlit by late afternoon light, or if your luck is out, flooded with drizzly cloud.

The best of Grey Knotts should be reserved for a summer expedition, with all the scenic action down its eastern flanks, Gillercomb Buttress, the Plumbago Mines and Sour Milk Gill blue chip attractions.

Follow the fence right, then coming by a stile dip off half-left, a path is discernible, in snow this may not be the case, but steep ground is unavoidable, rocks are. The going has no pitfalls over mossy turf. Latterly the path descends by a gill traversing right to regain the track leading to the Slate Mine sheds and shop.

AFTER WALK REFRESHMENT

While the quarry site is open walkers can obtain a free cup of tea or coffee at the shop. Its a do-it-yourself service and a perfect end to the day. Otherwise you'll have to drive down to find pubs in Seatoller, Stonethwaite, Rosthwaite, Buttermere and Keswick. Note the Yewtree in Seatoller will be open from Boxing Day till the 5th January, closing for the remainder of January, opening for the season at half-term weekend in February. This is the nearest option for a good winter brew and fayre, so make a point of calling in if you can.

MARK'S PICTURE GALLERY & GUIDES

There are twenty colour images from this walk posted on the Radio Cumbria website that may just set the pulse racing enough to clinch your decision to head for the hills. Well we hope so – visit: info@BBC.co.uk/park&stride

Incidentally, Mark is the author of the Collins guidebook series LAKELAND FELLRANGER with four titles currently available: Central Fells, Mid-Western Fells, Near Eastern Fells and Southern Fells. Great Gable has yet to figure in the series. Regrettably aficionados have a couple of years to wait on that score! A signed copy of the Southern Fells will be sent to the first listener to send a .jpg photo of Westmorland Cairn to markrichards.walkfree@virgin.net. Listen in for news of the January PARK&STRIDE feature walk, when the lucky recipient of the guide will be revealed... they'll be walking on air!