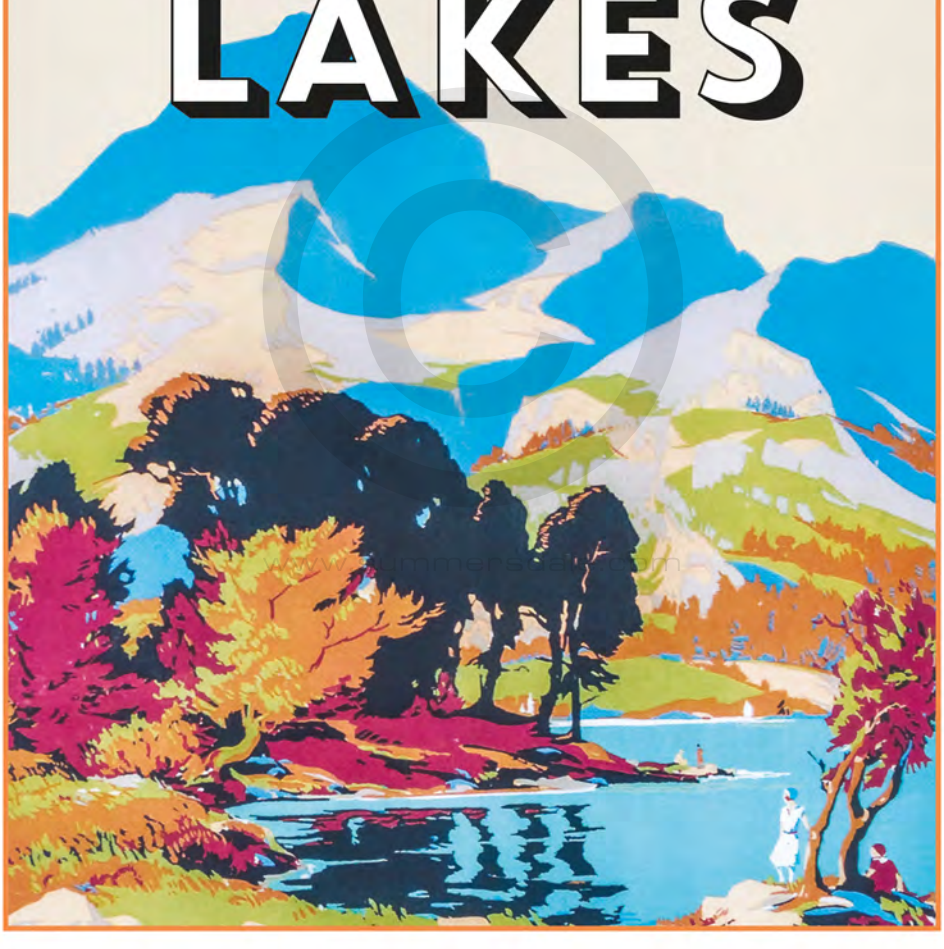
"A carnival of characters"
Christopher Somerville, *The Times*

LOST IN THE LAKES



NOTES FROM A 379-MILE HIKE AROUND THE LAKE DISTRICT

TOM CHESSHYRE

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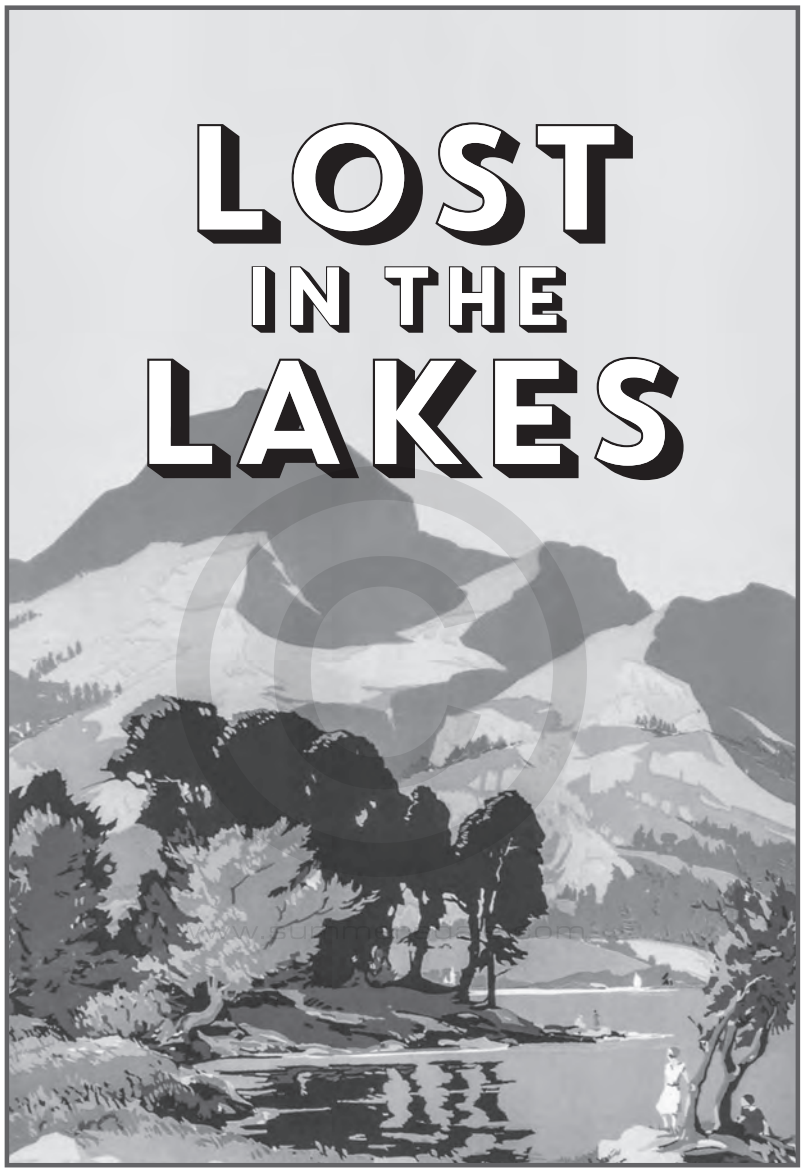


NOTES FROM A 379-MILE HIKE
AROUND THE LAKE DISTRICT

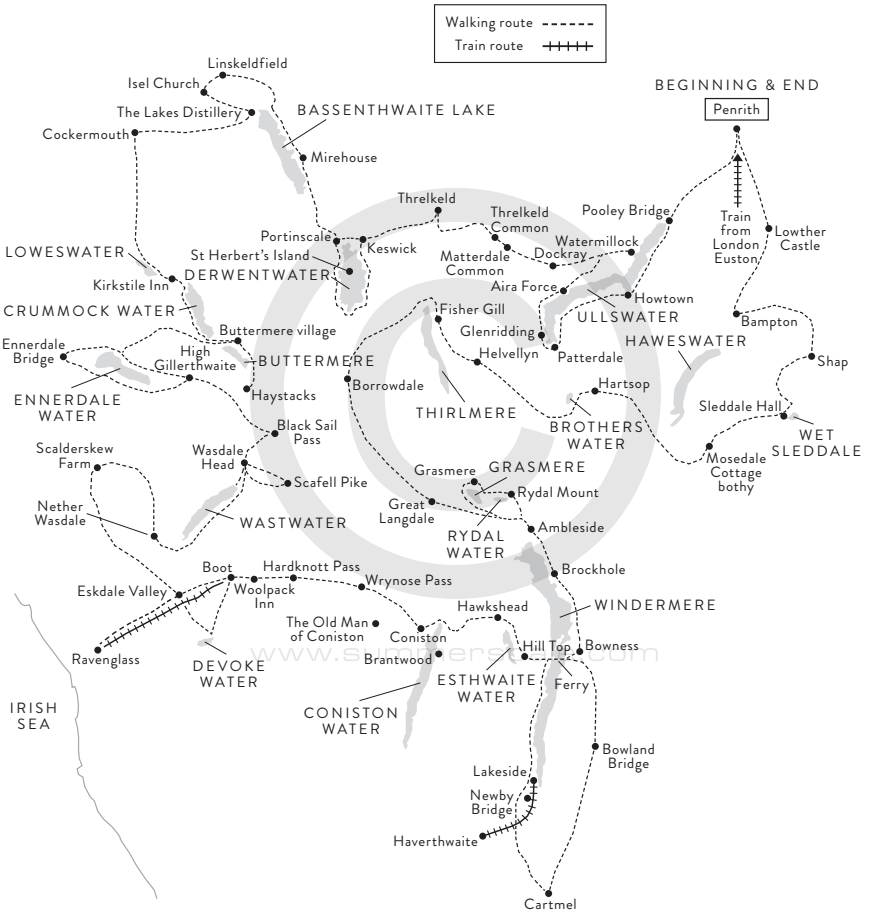
TOM CHESSHYRE

summersdale

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Chesshyre is the author of 11 travel books. He worked on the travel desk of *The Times* for 21 years and is now a freelance writer. His books are *How Low Can You Go?: Round Europe for 1p Each Way (Plus Tax)*, *To Hull and Back: On Holiday in Unsung Britain*, *Tales from the Fast Trains: Europe at 186 MPH*, *A Tourist in the Arab Spring*, *Gatecrashing Paradise: Misadventures in the Real Maldives*, *Ticket to Ride: Around the World on 49 Unusual Train Journeys*, *From Source to Sea: Notes from a 215-Mile Walk Along the River Thames*, *Slow Trains to Venice: A 4,000-Mile Adventure Across Europe*, *Slow Trains Around Spain: A 3,000-Mile Adventure on 52 Rides* and *Park Life: Around the World in 50 Parks*. He lives in Mortlake in London.

For Robert and Christine



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The fleeting hour of life of those who love the hills is quickly spent, but the hills are eternal.
Alfred Wainwright

PREFACE

Falling in love with the Lakes can happen in a flash – and most Lakeland lovers remember that eureka moment.

For me it happened in my late teens when visiting a friend in the village of Threlkeld beneath the jagged ridge of Blencathra. With little idea how to reach the summit other than proceeding vaguely in its direction, my friend being no mountaineer, we had plodded across the scree. Up, up, up we went into a misty Cumbrian mid-afternoon, pausing to puff on Benson & Hedges cigarettes or glug Paddy Irish Whiskey from a hip flask. Shocking now, looking back: 1) How unprepared we were (no compass, no map), 2) Quite how established in bad ways we had become at an early age (no thoughts of water or snacks).

Slowly, we stumbled along rocky paths, puffing and occasionally slugging. Not exactly lost, but winging it, for sure. Then the breakthrough came. The skies cleared, as they can so suddenly in the Lakes, and the sun blazed down in dazzling, heavenly shafts. Great sweeps of fells emerged all around in delicious shades of emerald and mauve marked with splashes of copper and mustard and streaks of silver-grey.

It was simply magnificent. There amid the dreamy patchwork was the sliver of Derwentwater beside the market town of Keswick (home to a famous pencil museum we never visited). There, we imagined, was the ghostly outline of Scafell Pike, England's highest mountain, at 978 metres. Mysterious smaller waters – tarns – glittered near peaks. Serpentine valleys slid between soaring slopes. Somewhere beyond the undulating horizon lay the Irish Sea.

It was not just the setting that tugged at the heart strings, though. It was the way of life, too. The camaraderie over pints and

darts by the fireside at The Sally (or Salutation Inn) in the village. Nights out "on the town" in Keswick in the company of new pals, ending up almost inevitably at Starlights, a nightclub playfully and perhaps not so subtly nicknamed "Starshites" (but much-loved, nevertheless).

You could, if you were sociable, get to know all sorts in a few days. Threlkeld's population was, and is, little more than 400, while Keswick's is around 5,200 – the Lake District's second largest town after the "metropolis" of Windermere/Bowness (8,359 inhabitants). Take away all the tourists with their windbreakers and laminated maps and the Lakes is a small world. The entire population? A mere 41,600.

Night skies were haunting; so dark it seemed the universe might engulf us. Constellations glittered above eerie silent slopes. This was a long way from the North and South Circulars, Piccadilly Circus and journeys on the Tube back home. The Lake District had "caught" me hook, line and sinker. I had fallen for the fells.

* * *

Much has been written about the Lakes – more than 50,000 books by the estimation of Hunter Davies, not only the Beatles' official biographer but also author of a series of his very own insightful tomes about the region. Staggering when you think about the sheer volume, and an awful lot to read. Yet it begs a question: why are so many people so fascinated by this watery corner of north-west England?

This is a matter with which many have grappled over the years, one of the most famous being William Wordsworth (1770–1850), the unofficial Lakeland Bard. For as well as being a groundbreaking poet, Wordsworth is perhaps less known for having penned an illuminating book entitled *Guide to the Lakes* in 1810, although the story goes that, back in his day, a parson once congratulated Wordsworth on his *Guide* and asked him if he had written anything else (a bit cheeky, if actually true).

This *Guide* was hugely influential. Wordsworth had been born in Cockermouth in the north-west of the Lake District and was, in his twenties, the leader of the pack of Lake Poets, who formed in the late eighteenth century and were known for their romantic streak of appreciation for nature at a time when industrialization was beginning to boom. This sea change to the British economy (and the world's) introduced a new threat to England's lovely Lakeland region: many a wealthy Lancastrian factory owner had taken to building big "statement" houses on the shores of Wordsworth's beloved lakes.

These were opulent, ostentatious retreats for the bigwigs who were as pleased as punch to have posh new pads away from the grind and grime of the hard streets of Manchester and Liverpool, where their fortunes were being made. Wordsworth, who like so many others adored the local scenery, looked on in horror.

"I do not know any tract of country in which, in so narrow a compass, may be found an equal variety in the influences of light and shadow upon the sublime and beautiful features of the landscape", he gushed in his *Guide*, before attacking all the gaudy country homes, "gross transgressions", popping up on the profits of mills. Humankind was encroaching on nature and doing no good, a theme not lost on modern readers of his *Guide* considering what humankind is up to in the twenty-first century. One section in his book is entitled simply *Changes, and Rules of Taste for Preventing their Bad Effects*. In other words: stay away you vulgarians! Leave us alone!

So intent was Wordsworth to block the invasion of the countryside by city folk of all ilk – wealthy factory owners with their fancy architects as well as mass crowds of ordinary people working in factories who might feel like a change of scene during their time off – he campaigned in his later years to prevent railways encroaching into his beloved Lakeland. And he succeeded. Were it not for his sermonizing on the subject, trains would undoubtedly have rolled on further than the eastern edge of Windermere, where tracks terminate to this day.

Yet the effect of Wordsworth's guidebook, in which he (rather high-handedly perhaps) hoped to educate the unenlightened on how to understand and enjoy the landscape of the Lakes, was, ironically, to begin the type of mass influx he had hoped to discourage, unsettling the peace of villages that had previously seen few holidaymakers. "Tourism" had begun, many of the first arrivals clutching Wordsworth's *Guide* or other similar publications that were soon on the market.

This was a time when Napoleon's nefarious affairs on the Continent meant that holidays abroad, the almost exclusive preserve of the grand-touring well-to-do back then, were tricky; the first vogue for "staycations" had nothing to do with pandemics or watching pennies during cost-of-living crises. And Wordsworth, who was in later years almost besieged by curious travellers hoping to catch a glimpse of the, by then, Poet Laureate at his house, Rydal Mount, was to make a tidy profit from the book. It proved to be a stroke of luck: more lucrative than much of his "higher" poetry (as his sister, Dorothy, had cannily predicted).

All of this was quite a turnaround. Just 50 years before Wordsworth's birth, the novelist Daniel Defoe had reached the Lake District in the 1720s, during a journey for his entertaining travel book *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, and had found the way blocked by what he regarded as "unpassable hills". It was all too much, even for the man who had dreamed up Robinson Crusoe. Defoe decided there and then that "all the pleasant part of England was at an end", the mountains were "horrid" and he would have nothing to do with them. This, at the time, was the conventional wisdom; the region was deemed rough and, frankly, dangerous. That it was sparsely populated was quite understandable: who on earth would want to live there?

Fast-forward to now, however, and things are slightly different. As many as 20 million visitors annually are attracted to the Lakes, as of 2017 a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and thousands swarm to see Wordsworth's childhood home in Cockermouth as well as his later dwellings in Grasmere and Rydal. Horrifying, you might think. Impossibly overrun. Wordsworth must be spinning in his grave – et

cetera. On the other hand, this continuing massive influx just goes to show that the poet's concerns about outsiders destroying the beauty of the Lakes have yet to come to pass. Sure, the extraordinary tourist figures might make us think otherwise, but it seems Wordsworth's "sublime" landscape somehow must have retained its glorious sublimity: why else would so many people still want to come?

This said, for me, there has always been a quandary about visiting the Lakes. Yes, there may have been many, many guides explaining where to go and what to see, dating back many years. So many, as Hunter Davies pointed out, it is almost overwhelming. And sure, they are all usually extremely helpful, even those penned before Wordsworth's try.

The first proper book – after a short journal by another Poet Laureate, Thomas Gray, in 1769 in which he falls for the "peace, rusticity and happy poverty" of Grasmere – dates from as early as 1778 and is written by Thomas West: *A Guide to the Lakes: Dedicated to the Lovers of Landscape Studies and to All Who Have Visited, or Intend to Visit the Lakes in Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire*. A "clickbait" title well ahead of its time, with a rousing opening passage encouraging readers to visit the region's:

> Alpine finery, finished in nature's highest tints… the pastoral and rural landscape, varied in all the stiles: the soft, the rude [as in rough and craggy], the romantic, the sublime. [That word cropping up again.] Such as spend their lives in cities, and their time in crowds, will here meet with contrasts that enlarge the mind by contemplation… whoever takes a walk into these scenes, will return penetrated with a sense of the creator's power and unlearnable wisdom in heaping mountains upon mountains, and enthroning rocks upon rocks… [bringing] at once rapture and reverence.

Enticing stuff. Yet the Lakes, despite so much helpful literature of this sort going back so far, from the days of quills and inkpots to the slick and informative Rough Guides and Lonely Planets of today, have always seemed such a tricky place to visit and see *in one go*.

Looking at a map of the Lake District National Park with its fells (mountains) and peaks, dales (valleys) and forests, screes and passes – ancient glacial ribbon lakes twisting every which way – a question had long lodged in my mind: *so where exactly do you start*? Unlike with a river, the rambler has neither a "source" nor banks to follow. Unlike with a coastline, there is no obvious way. Unlike with Hadrian's Wall, not so far away to the north, you have no marked beginning or end on one official "trail".

* * *

Since around the mid-twentieth century, the approach to the Lakes common among walkers has been to bite off one section of the wild terrain at a time, normally covering an ascent, often in a loop beginning and ending in the same place. This way of "conquering" the landscape was famously advocated by Alfred Wainwright (1907–1991), the Lakeland rambling guru who described the routes to no fewer than 214 summits in his fabulously precise and elaborately named *A Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells: Being an Illustrated Account of a Study and Exploration of the Mountains in the English Lake District*, published in seven smart volumes between 1955 and 1966.

This first-rate series of guides was to take on almost legendary status, the 214 ascents quickly becoming known in mountain-climbing circles as "the Wainwrights". Soon, many folk set off to Britain's Lakeland, intent on ticking off – or "bagging" – as many summits as possible. Nothing wrong with that.

Alternatively, requiring less strain on the knees and fewer worries about weather in the mountains, the casual rambler could simply take a leisurely circuit of one or more of the lakes. With well-signed

lakeside tracks and little chance of getting lost, these walks make perfect day trips: the pleasant 10 miles round Derwentwater, perhaps, or a joyful stroll by the shores of beautiful Buttermere (4½ miles) or beside lovely little Grasmere (3 miles). Nothing wrong with that approach, either. Highly recommend it.

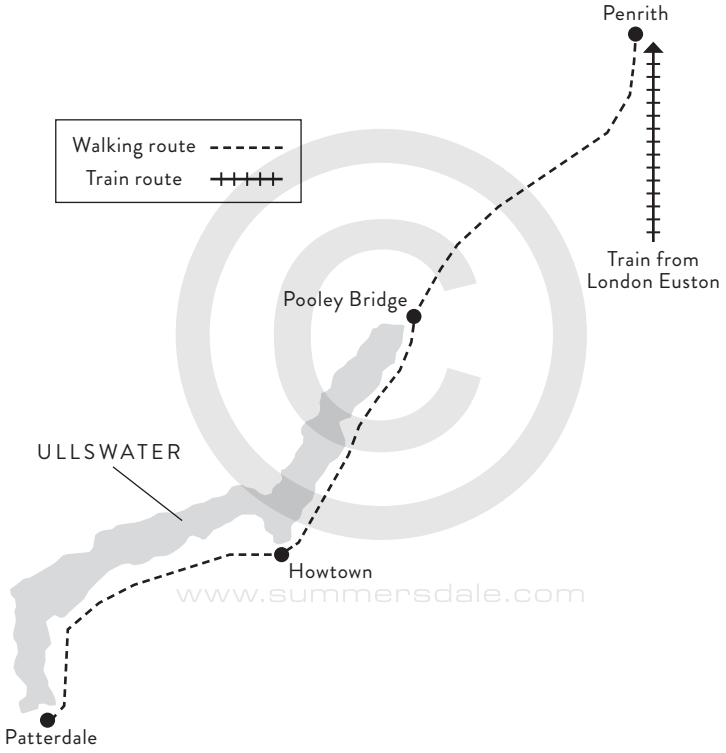
But how about a long cross-country walk around the whole of the Lakes, exploring hidden corners while covering the main sights, getting a real feel for the region, scampering up the odd peak yet not feeling any pressure to bag the mountaintops?

Having visited many times as a reporter, it has been my great fortune to dip into the Lakes over the years for work, ever since that first memorable trip to Threlkeld. Each time, whether exploring the fells in Langdale Valley for a day, investigating a tarn above Grasmere or visiting waterfalls in the foothills of Helvellyn (writing stories for newspaper columns with names like *The Great British Weekend* or *Britain at its Best*), hiking and the Lakes have always seemed to go hand in hand. Notebook, pen and guidebook are, of course, always packed – and walking boots, too.

On each visit, my curiosity about this hallowed landscape so eulogized by the poets – "the loveliest spot that man hath ever found", said Wordsworth – has been piqued. How, though, to see it all, not as a serious climber, but as an "average Joe" walker interested in Wordsworth's "sublime" scenery, the villages and towns, as well as the people, along the way?

I consulted a series of Ordnance Survey maps. There were 1,342 miles of public footpaths and 544 miles of bridleways to explore across 912 square miles of land (the national park is 32 miles across and 40 miles from north to south). I read a large number of books, Wordsworth's included. I plotted a vague route: a big wobbly circle taking in all 16 main lakes, which would form the focus of the hike, and some of the principal mountains. I bought a train ticket to Penrith.

With a month free, a backpack and a spring in my step, off I went. This is the story of what happened next.



CHAPTER ONE

LONDON EUSTON TO PENRITH AND ONWARD TO PATTERDALE, VIA POOLEY BRIDGE AND ULLSWATER

INTO THE ENGLISH ALPS

On the train to Penrith, a trio of businessmen – colleagues – sat at my table (mostly) in silence. Perhaps there was hidden tension between them, maybe they had had an unsuccessful outing to London, or it could simply have been they knew each other so well no chatter was required. It seemed the latter was most likely. Every now and then, one would say: "Sandwiches?" The other two would nod and sandwiches would be produced. "Tea?" Nods. One of them would fetch tea. "Biscuits?" Nods. Biscuits were offered round. My Lake District map, half unfurled on the table, scattering of Lakes books and backpack, had clearly caught their attention, but not one of them commented: "Off for a hike then?" or "What route are you planning?" It was, it struck me, extremely English behaviour, lasting the entire 2 hours to Preston, whereupon they quietly disembarked.

Behind me, a pair of businesswomen who had only just met were discussing relationships. The older woman, whose work involved the "integration of smart meters", said that the problem with her ex-husband was he had not been "career-focused or driven, we split seven years ago". She was raising a daughter alone. The younger woman, involved in "import/export", sighed. "Men," she said. "At first my partner was very laid-back." He had since become quite the opposite. The older woman said that was a pity and told the younger woman about a disastrous date with a man in Bristol who had turned up late, drunk. They both had a good laugh about this, whereupon they too had disembarked at Preston.

The newspapers were full of gloom. "WE'LL FIGHT FOR EVERY METRE VOWS ZELENSKY AS HE FEARS NEW ASSAULT", ran a headline referring to the war in Ukraine and the determination of Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian president, to keep Russian troops out of the eastern Donbas region. "NOW THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS REALLY BITES", declared another story, pointing out that VAT on eating and drinking was due to increase and highlighting that cucumbers were about to triple in price while 30 pence would soon be added to the cost of a dozen eggs. In other news, the number

of Covid cases in London hospitals was at its highest for two months. Meanwhile, in a prominent article, "ROCK BREAKS SILENCE OVER OSCARS SLAP", the comedian and actor Chris Rock said he was "still kind of processing what happened" after being slapped by fellow actor Will Smith at the weekend's Oscars ceremony. Pictures of this shocking event had gone viral on social media during the past couple of days, with just about everyone seeming to have an opinion. The world may have been slowly falling apart, but it was this Hollywood slap that seemed to be grabbing most attention, news-wise, that day – with a photograph of Chris Rock looking distressed glaring out on the front page of the *Evening Standard*.

Our Avanti West Coast train spun onward, tilting into turns and devouring distance.

Then something wonderful happened on the left-hand side of the track.

Gentle rolling hills began to rise; gentle, heart-leaping rolling hills with coppery contours of old bracken and snow-dusted tops. Drystone walls spread out in a spider's web across the landscape, punctuated by sheep beside a glinting winding river. Great beams of early-April sunlight lit up the frost-tipped hills, filtering between clusters of clouds. The landscape (my destination) was bathed in orange light and the horizon had turned apricot and indigo. The train slowly pulled in to Penrith Station at 7.30 p.m., a 3-hour ride from Euston (though geographically it felt much longer than that).

"Have you got far to go?" asked the conductor, watching me lug the backpack on to platform two. I explained where I was staying. "That's just round the corner, close to all the pubs," he said. "Have a good one!"

With that, the strange silence of the businessmen, the relationship woes on the seats behind, the downbeat news headlines and all thoughts of Big City life seemed to float away. I had begun my hike in the Lakes – the first few steps at least, with a very long way to go. I left the station, passing the jagged silhouette of the medieval ruins of Penrith Castle before crossing the street by a shiny National Farmers'

Union building and a McDonald's with a Drive Thru. I was ready. Ready to walk for mile upon mile in "Britain's number-one tourist destination", as so many refer to this small north-west corner of the country. Ready to lose myself in the foothills and fells. Ready, happily ready, for whatever might come my way.

"You can always take the bus"

Penrith

Station Hotel was indeed just round the corner, a looming red-brick building beside the castle. Inside was a lounge with a long wooden bar, a pool table and darts, plus a divided-off restaurant. The pool table, busy on a Thursday night, was surrounded by signed pictures and shirts of sports stars, mainly England footballers: Harry Kane, Wayne Rooney and Stuart Pearce.

"Tony, the owner, is a sports fan," said Kathleen, the manageress.

She gave me my key and asked me about my trip.

"My husband, if he were here, he'd know the way, he's a postie," she said, on hearing about tomorrow's target: Patterdale at the southern tip of Ullswater, the second largest of the lakes after Windermere in the south. "He pretty much knows everywhere. I don't have a Scooby-Doo. I'd quite happily walk with the dog round here, but it's busy roads and heavy car-parking fees."

Kathleen and her husband, it turned out, lived in a village to the east of Penrith, a town of around 15,000 people just outside the boundaries of the Lake District National Park on its north-east edge, and by far the biggest place on my route.

My main concern for the next day was picking the best way out of town: by "best", I meant the quietest. Having perused the Ordnance Survey map on the train up, I had an idea that this was via a street behind a large leisure centre, across the A66 and over Eamont Bridge, before turning sharply right across fields.

Merv, the chef, was consulted. Merv was sitting by the bar drinking a pint as the evening's food service was over. He seemed to think the route was OK. "Just walk from there to Pooley Bridge, get the steamer to Glenridding and have a couple of beers along the way," was his advice. He had ruffled grey hair and wore a wrinkled old blue jumper, looking extremely content to be drinking a beer after his shift.

I explained I was on a hiking trip and that catching long boat rides would defeat the purpose. "You can always take the bus," he replied, as though this made even more sense.

Kathleen nodded: "Take a bus!"

Merv and Kathleen seemed to be ganging up on me (in a nice way).

I asked if many walkers came by the Station Hotel.

"Oh yeah, we get loads," Kathleen replied. "They come here first before heading into the middle of the Lakes, coming off Junction 40 [of the M6]. We get loads of elderly hikers. They're absolute diamonds. A lot of them come on their own and they're very knowledgeable."

The Station Hotel also attracted cyclists. "Last week we were absolutely chocka with coast-to-coast cyclists," she added; this route covers about 140 miles between the west-Cumbrian coast and the sea at the mouth of the river Tyne, beyond Newcastle.

Kathleen, who was dressed in a shimmering silver dress as though about to attend a cocktail party, brought me a pint of lager.

Apropos of nothing, Merv told me he used to play cricket for Glenridding, the village next to Patterdale. "It's regularly voted the most scenic ground in the country," he said.

Then he talked walking for a while. "Striding Edge," he said, referring to a notorious rocky ridge leading to the top of Helvellyn, the third highest Lake District peak, at 950 metres. "It can be dangerous. Very. I've done it a few times. First, you get a weather report from the information centre in the car park at Glenridding. It may be a gorgeous morning, but then the wind and the clouds could come in. So you need to know."

He paused and sipped his pint. "When the wind comes you just lie flat and wait. You could quite easily get blown off the edge. It's a sheer drop. You shouldn't even attempt to stand up in a storm. The wind. It's atrocious. If you see it coming, you should lie down."

He paused once again and said more brightly: "On a clear day, mind you, it's fantastic scenery."

Merv's real name was David, he went on to say: "But everyone just calls me Merv." He did not elaborate. He was aged 55 and had worked at the Station Hotel for 18 years as chef.

He gestured for me to come close so he could impart what appeared to be top-secret information. "When Kathleen calls time [which could happen early on a quiet night], you can sit here in the gentleman's club." He pointed to a couple of seats beside the entrance to the restaurant.

"Aye," said Kathleen, overhearing Merv. "There's a guest who stays here every week on business and I serve him there, three pints he has each night. You can have what you want there."

For food, Kathleen recommended crossing the street to the Agricultural Hotel, known to locals as The Aggie. Then she talked pubs. There were a lot of pubs in Penrith. "There used to be fifty-seven in my dad's day, now there are about twenty," she said. "The Aggie, The Cross Keys, The George, The Woolpack, The Royal, The Druids Arms, The Dog Beck, The Board and Elbow…" She reeled off almost all of them.

I asked her what she thought of William Wordsworth and what the poet meant to the Lake District. Wordsworth's grandparents had lived in Penrith, close to Market Square, and William and Dorothy had often come to visit. Their mother died in the family house there in 1778 (when William was eight).

"I think that if you mention him to anyone young, they wouldn't have heard of him," she replied. "I did a bit at school, so I know."

Then Kathleen talked housing. "The house opposite mine [in her village] was just bought by an incomer and he's rented it out," she

said. The practice of buying as an investment for holiday lets was getting her down. "It's making it more difficult for the younger generation to get on the property ladder. A lot of houses are being bought by outsiders now."

This, I already knew, was a hot topic across the Lake District and the county of Cumbria within which the Lakes falls, recently raised in the House of Commons by the local MP, Tim Farron of the constituency of Westmorland and Lonsdale. He had called on new laws to allow local councils to introduce tough limits on second homes across Britain as well as to ensure that council tax is paid to cover local services. Many second-homers were dodging the latter by setting up ownership as a "small business", a technical loophole allowing them to avoid the tax. The net result was a "catastrophe", Farron said, with a "collapse of affordable housing" and "communities at risk of dying".

Kathleen agreed: "Before [all the outsiders], everyone knew everyone. A lot of us would drink and socialize together. It's not like that now."

* * *

Up a staircase covered in a tartan carpet and surrounded by purple walls with grainy pictures of locomotives, I dumped my backpack in a small room with a fine view of the castle. The mattress sagged. The TV was the size of a cereal box. The bathroom fan made a sound like ice being crushed in a kitchen mixer. But I had not come to the Lakes to hang about in hotel rooms. Anyway, I was hungry. I went out to eat.

Across the street, The Aggie had stopped serving, too. Down a hill of tightly terraced houses on a road that alternated between being dead quiet and akin to a Formula One racing track (the people of Penrith, that evening at least, seemed to drive like demons), I passed a Mexican restaurant (too late for orders) and the Little Chippy fish-and-chip shop (closed). The Romanian World Ltd grocery shop was also shut. So was the Polish grocery shop. Aside from the many open

pubs, none serving food that I could find, there was also an open Bargain Booze shop. Alcoholic beverages were plentiful in Penrith. Solid substances for consumption at 9 p.m. were not.

Close by, however, I came to Deniz Food, a kebab shop, just beyond the house where Wordsworth's grandparents lived. This building is now home to an old-fashioned clothing business named N Arnison & Sons and faces the market square beside the old George Hotel, where Bonnie Prince Charlie is said to have stayed in 1745 on his ill-fated expedition down south. Plenty of history in Penrith: it was the capital of the independent kingdom of Cumbria up to 1070 and Penrith Castle, by my hotel, was once the northern headquarters of Richard III.

By some small miracle, Deniz Food was open. I ventured inside to find walls decorated with pictures of Istanbul and rock formations in Cappadocia. I had not expected to eat a kebab on my first night in Cumbria. I ordered and got chatting to Ken, originally from Kent, who was in charge.

"We moved up here three years ago," he said, as my chicken shish kebab sizzled. "Kent was getting me down. Too crowded and the schools were going downhill." He had three children aged thirteen, eight and three. He was 34 and his family roots were from near Ankara, although he was born in Britain. "The kids love it, the nature, and it's calmer and safer in Penrith. We were a bit worried about moving." But he had had a taste of living in the north of England when his parents moved from Lewisham in London to Chester when he was a boy. "So I knew the North and I thought: *just go a bit more up to the Lakes*. We'd never been before. We like it. There's more community. Down south you don't get hellos. It's better round here. The world down south is too fast."

Were there downsides? Ken thought about this for a while: "There's not so much big-brand shopping." He paused and thought a bit more. "And it's difficult to get Krispy Kreme doughnuts. In Penrith you can't find them. I have to go down the M6 to get them from a service station." His children loved Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

Ken returned to his earlier topic. "Down south, you can't even ask people for directions. Down south, they'll just ignore you, or they'll get suspicious and worried," he said, thinking of the difference between Kent and Cumbria. Ken looked extremely relieved to have made it to Cumbria.

I said goodbye. I ate Ken's top-notch chicken shish kebab beneath an awning on a little square known as Great Dockray. I returned to the Station Hotel, where Merv, sitting in the "gentleman's club", advised me again to take a bus to Patterdale. I declined once more, saying I wanted to walk. Merv's drinking companion said: "But every other bugger takes the bus!" And with that I returned to the little room facing the old castle, reflecting on just how open and sociable Penrith seemed to be. The world down south did feel "too quick and fast" – and withdrawn – by comparison. Tomorrow, things would be even slower still.

First glittery glimpse

Penrith to Pooley Bridge

Before setting forth, a little explanation of my intended route and my (very limited) credentials as a mountain walker.

Regarding the way ahead, the plan was to drop briefly south to Ullswater, cross north-westward to Keswick and then Cockermouth via the shores of Derwentwater and Bassenthwaite Lake, the only "lake" in the Lake District officially known as a lake, i.e. having the word "lake" in its name. The rest were referred to as "waters" or "meres", although the word *mere* comes from Old English and means "lake". So, not confusing at all.

From Cockermouth, Wordsworth's hometown up in the far north-west, my feet would lead south via lonely Loweswater and tucked-away Crummock Water to Buttermere, said to be an especially charming mere. It was on a mountain overlooking Buttermere

(named Haystacks) that Alfred Wainwright chose to have his ashes scattered – he said he enjoyed the scenery there so much. Lake District endorsements do not come higher than that.

After Buttermere, the aim was to pop westward to remote Ennerdale Water, where I had pencilled in a rest day at a hostel by a forest. Afterward, it would be southward to Wastwater, beside England's highest mountain, Scafell Pike, which I had half a mind to climb. Next, the route would weave further south still to Devoke Water, officially a "tarn" rather than a lake, and the largest such tarn in the Lake District. The difference between a tarn, which derives from the ancient Scandinavian word *tjorn* (pond), and a lake is a grey area, the deciding factor seemingly being that tarns are generally smaller and higher than ordinary lakes. That said, some meres and waters may be smaller than the largest tarns. So, not confusing at all, again.

From Devoke Water, it was to be east to Coniston Water, passing Esthwaite Water and Hill Top, Beatrix Potter's old house. From there the route would lead further east into the heart of Lakeland tourism – Windermere, the biggie of the Lake District at 11 miles long and 1 mile wide, and the town of Bowness-on-Windermere. Then I would duck south to the pretty town of Cartmel, with its famous Michelin-starred restaurants, and return up Windermere to Ambleside, the walkers' HQ on the lake's northern tip.

Grasmere and Rydal Water could be explored from Ambleside, before I slipped across into Langdale Valley, traversing north into Borrowdale Valley and visiting Thirlmere, Brothers Water and Haweswater, moving steadily eastward between the three. All that would be left would be a dozen miles north back up to Penrith, thus completing the loop. I would have touched upon the 16 main lakes/waters/meres and given the region a thorough investigation one way or another. It would take about 30 days and I had booked accommodation in advance, putting pressure on myself not to slip up. I had a schedule to keep to, or the chain of bookings would fall apart.

So far as my walking ability was concerned, this was where worries crept in.

Hiking in steep and rugged terrain with a heavy backpack was something I had never tried. Yes, I had ambled along the Thames for a previous walking book, *From Source to Sea: Notes from a 215-Mile Walk along the River Thames*, but that was on the nice flat Thames Path. My backpack for the Lakes weighed 11 kilogrammes when I set off to Penrith, containing guides, maps and notebooks, as well as an emergency storm shelter, a first-aid kit, waterproof overtrousers, a compass, whistle, torch, laptop, sleeping bag (for a night planned in a bothy), various chargers and some spare clothing.

I was wary of gaining altitude, getting stuck and having to turn back, especially early on. So, I would not be cutting across 800-metre fells, at least not at the start. If the weather came in, as Merv mentioned, anything might happen. I was heading off as a very cautious casual rambler, who might – who knew? – gain confidence along the way. I hoped so, anyway. It was also cold in early April; 1°C overnight in Penrith with snow on the mountaintops ahead looking dreamy at a distance, but perhaps not so great close up.

Those were the basics. I was aiming to amble in a big, long lazy loop. Let the Wainwright summits be the Wainwright summits. All those peaks poking into the clouds would be a (delightful) sideshow. I was heading into the hills and letting the lakes of the Lake District lead the way… doing my own thing.

* * *

Penrith to Patterdale is 15 miles, according to Google Maps. A decent distance with a bulging backpack stuffed largely with books, but that was the whole point: I wanted to push myself early on to see what I could do.

Leaving Station Hotel at 6.30 a.m., I cut across the castle grounds and continued beyond the leisure centre and the A66 roundabout.

The sky was luminous grey. The temperature was chilly. Beyond the stone arches of Eamont Bridge, the Ordnance Survey map's trusted green dotted line – designating a public right of way – soon slipped beneath the M6, a symbolic moment of sorts as this felt like a boundary. Behind lay the Big Bad World, while ahead awaited remote dales, mighty fells and trickling becks (streams), to use the Lake District lingo. It did not take long after leaving Penrith to disappear into countryside.

In this state of reverie, I almost immediately, true to the title of this hiking book, became quite thoroughly lost.

How, I am not sure, but I soon found myself in a cattle field, following what I believed to be the dotted green line into a muddy passage leading to another pasture. Large brown cows defended this passage at both ends, every which one regarding me with whatever thoughts they may then have been thinking.

On my long Thames walk, such cattle occasionally barred the way, so I reasoned: *this is quite normal,* and I ambled onward, discovering that several of the creatures appeared to have taken against being disturbed that April morning. They moved toward me with what looked like narrowed, angry eyes. I moved away from them, not quite running for fear of triggering a stampede, but going fast. It was then I discovered a railway line, the one from Euston, blocking the way. Within 2 hours of departing, and after weeks of planning, I had already messed up. Not wanting to retrace my steps past the cattle, I followed the fence along the railway and found a track going under it that led to a farm. There, I hopped over a gate and slipped back to the official footpath, whispering *apologies, apologies, apologies* (to the farmer) and vowing to pay more attention from then on.

Not the best start. Proceeding with caution beyond the village of Sockbridge and a church with a sturdy stone tower, I tramped onward beside a tea-coloured river. Dogs barked. Woodpeckers pecked. Startled grouse flapped away. A chestnut horse and two Shetland ponies observed me. I strode across a field on wispy grass

and the first glittery glimpse of "lake" appeared ahead: Ullswater, all 7½ glorious miles of it stretching beyond the hills and eventually leading to Patterdale in the south.

I stood for a while, transfixed, staring at this little slate-grey corner of water: 1 down, 15 more of the "big ones" to go. There was something enticing about Ullswater. It had a secretive, intangible allure.

After this field, the path turned abruptly into the grounds of a holiday camp called Hole House Farm Caravan Park. This consisted of a cluster of pistachio-coloured holiday homes shaped like cargo containers. There were 65 of them, each had a name (*Rio Sierra*, *Knightsbridge*, *Bordeaux*), and they cost from £50,000 to £80,000. I know this because I met Dave Coulston, who runs the farm and who was fixing boards on one of the patios.

"My grandad began this sixty years ago," said Dave, wearing a lumberjack shirt, hammer in hand. He explained that prices depended on views and whether the holiday homes, known as "static holiday homes", had views of Ullswater with patios. "You get them with a fifteen-year lease," he said.

"So buyers do not actually own their static holiday homes," I asked.

"That's right," Dave said. "Most caravan parks work like that."

For this deal, static-holiday-temporary-homeowners got use of a kids' play area, a football pitch and an on-site laundry. Wi-Fi was also available.

I asked if Hole House was a working farm as well as a caravan park.

"Oh yes, it's a proper farm too: beef and sheep," said Dave, and just as he was about to go into this, Tony arrived.

Tony was shuffling down the lane in a duffle jacket and a cap. He was on assignment for *The Durham Drinker* magazine, produced by the Durham branch of the Campaign for Real Ale, and was about to catch a bus from Pooley Bridge, a village just down the hill by Ullswater, to Penrith, where he was reviewing pubs. He was of retirement age and had a twinkle in his eye. He asked me where I had stayed in Penrith.

"That's the farmer's pub, that is," he said. "No ales there. All the young farmers, all they drink is champagne. Ain't that right, Dave?" Tony seemed to know Dave.

Dave just laughed and began hammering the deck.

Tony said he was visiting The Royal, The Aggie and "a few others" for *The Durham Drinker*. Penrith, he said, was good value for beer drinkers. A pint could be had for £2.80, half of "down south in London". He especially praised Penrith's Fell Bar: "It's famous throughout Cumbria for its ales." He had been a pub reviewer for 12 years, and also contributed to the *Good Beer Guide*. He recommended the White Lion in Patterdale. Then he tipped his cap and tootled off down a lane, looking quite content with his lot in life, as well he might.

After a pleasant stroll down a path along the river Eamont, I reached Pooley Bridge, the head of Ullswater.

Pooley Bridge was a tiny village set around a high street, and it had a recent sad story.

In December 2015 the old stone bridge – which had crossed the usually peaceful river Eamont since 1764 and had given the village its name – collapsed during flooding caused by Storm Desmond. Pooley Bridge for a while had no bridge, causing great traffic trouble in the north-eastern Lakes. A temporary bridge was, however, soon erected and then, finally, a strong new single-span stainless-steel bridge was completed in October 2020. Across the Lake District, more than 450 bridges had been damaged by Storm Desmond, presenting Cumbria County Council with an enormous headache, but steadily all repairs had been completed. To celebrate the official opening, a local farmer had driven his flock of Swaledale sheep across the elegant new structure.

The village was home to three pubs, a tea room, a gift shop selling unusual bamboo socks, an award-winning restaurant-with-rooms named 1863 and the jetty for the steamer ferry south to Glenridding that Merv had recommended. This was not really powered by steam but used an old boat that once was.

There was also a brand-new bookshop named Verey Books. Being so new, this was spotless and shiny, with everything just so. A bright café on one side offered pastries, brownies, lattes and cappuccinos, and a board advertised "Words on Wednesday" evenings with readings. An assistant, noticing me poking around, quizzed me and said: "Let me get you Al! Al is the owner! Al is a poet!"

Shortly afterward, she returned with a tall, skinny man wearing a stripy jumper: Al. His full name was Al Verey and he invited me for a coffee, telling me he had previously been an English teacher as well as a guide at Dove Cottage, Wordsworth's Grasmere home, before changing career and realizing his long-held ambition to open a bookshop. Al was modest about his poetry: "I'm not published." So, switching tack, I asked him what he thought of another poet: Wordsworth. Ullswater was, after all, prime Wordsworth territory. "The happiest combination of beauty and grandeur which any of the lakes affords" was how he had described Ullswater in his *Guide*, and it was by a south-western stretch of the lake that the poet had found inspiration for his famous verse about daffodils, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud".

Al chose his words carefully as he considered what he liked most about the Lakeland Bard: "I think it's that sense of putting grand words to grand scenery. That's what Wordsworth did."

Al paused and seemed to look inside himself for a moment, as all good poets, no doubt, must. Then Al said: "The still, sad music of humanity, that rolls through all things."

And after a second of letting that sink in, Al admitted: "I nicked that."

It was from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey".

We drank coffees and discussed books about the Lake District for a while, Al saying that his shop had been having a "good start, everyone is very positive, we're just gearing up". I wished him well and went across the lane to dip my hand in my first lake.

"Dehydration is the mother of all disaster"

Pooley Bridge to Patterdale

Ullswater was captivating from Pooley Bridge, with boulders and driftwood scattered by the shore while a vast luminous pool of gently swelling water reflected the soft-blue sky and tiny cotton-bud clouds. On the horizon, russet-green fells capped with snow tumbled into the distance like hidden Himalayas. I was quite blown away by the "beauty and grandeur", too.

A tourist noticeboard said the shape of Ullswater was "like a crooked finger". Looking at the Ordnance Survey map this description seemed just right. Further on, down the eastern shore, another sign soon warned: "DANGER TO SWIMMERS: YOU ARE STANDING ON PART OF A WATER INTAKE STRUCTURE." This operation was run by United Utilities, it said, which was pumping water from Ullswater to Haweswater, a reservoir 3 miles to the south-east. Muffled commentary from one of the steamers drifted across the lake, the red funnel of the sleek vessel drawing the eye. I entered a campsite by the waterfront and stopped for a break at The Gathering café.

Cath, who ran this café/kiosk, brought over a mango smoothie, and paused to talk. There were no other customers. As it was still cold, people were staying away, she said, but it was not as nippy as yesterday: "It was perishing yesterday. Big fluffy snowflakes. Then we had hail stones. But then it's beautiful when it all stops, and you can see the snow on the hills when it's sunny and clear."

Cath told me her business had thrived during the Covid-pandemic lockdowns as "outdoor catering was top of the tree". As she was saying this, Steve approached. Steve worked at Waterside House Campsite. One by one, I seemed to be meeting a large proportion of the folk who ran Ullswater's tourism industry.

"Very popular pitches by the lake," he said. "Very. You have to book them months in advance. Every pitch there." He pointed to the best spots facing the water. "Each one is reserved every night this summer."

Cath and Steve began talking about rising business costs, which were putting pressure on them to increase prices. Steve thought this was to do with Brexit. Without the influx of European Union workers for low-paid jobs, there were staff shortages across the Lakes, he said, and this was pushing up wages.

"I voted Remain," he said, sounding stoic. "But now we've just got to get on with it."

Things did not sound great. We talked about this for a while, then another customer came to the kiosk so Cath departed, and Steve went off to get a coffee too.

I walked on along Ullswater.

Further on, beyond Ullswater Yacht Club, the way ahead followed a narrow lane with the occasional farmer driving by in a pickup truck pulling a sheep trailer. Along this lane was a sign for Sharrow Bay, a renowned Lakeland hotel. "OPEN TO NON-RESIDENTS", it said, but I already knew this was not true as when I tried to book, I found the hotel had just gone into administration.

This failure had shocked many in the hospitality industry, prompting one prominent hotel reviewer, Fiona Duncan of *The Daily Telegraph*, to pen an "Ode to Sharrow Bay", no less. The semi-legendary property had been opened originally in 1948 by two men, Francis Coulson and Brian Sack, and was considered Britain's first country house hotel, run "like a benign mini-fiefdom", said Duncan in her ode, with chintz galore, "garish flower arrangements", formal teas, and "pink swirly carpets". Sticky toffee pudding had allegedly been invented in its kitchen, which had gained two Michelin stars at its height.

During a visit in the 1970s, Hunter Davies had been blown away both by the cooking as well as by learning that a diner on the next-door table had come up that day from London just to have lunch, a return journey of 600 miles. "One thought Northerners would not encourage such nonsense", he commented dryly. Both Coulson, in 1998, and Sack, in 2002, had passed away, moving on "doubtless to

velveteen armchairs in the sky", said Duncan, and the company that had taken over had failed to survive the pandemic.

Curious, I walked down a mossy driveway lined with azaleas. A Range Rover was parked outside and some of the windows of the hotel, originally a fishing lodge from 1814, were boarded up. A tattered Union Jack hung on a pole by a crumbling wall. The front door, flanked by flamboyant stone angels, was locked. I went round the side to see if I could find anyone to ask about the famous old hotel, but nobody was about.

From the terrace, looking south-west, the snow-capped ridge of Helvellyn arose. What a location for a hotel. What a sad, but perhaps inevitable, outcome. The owners who had taken over from Coulson and Sack had hoped to freeze time and maintain the hotel's original twee appeal, but as Duncan had pointed out, old-fashioned places in the Lakes merely offering a comfortable bed and good food were being outstripped by designer spa hotels with flashy cocktail bars, programmes of activities and "buzz and glamour". No chance for fusty old Sharrow Bay up against all that, Lakeland legend though it may have been.

I walked on along Ullswater once more.

A path soon led inland, linking to another, higher trail that was parallel to the lake and passed between pine trees and golden-yellow gorse before crossing the gently winding water of Swarthbeck Gill (a *gill* or *ghyll* is a narrow stream, also in local lingo, though the difference between what makes a gill and a beck is tricky to discern precisely, as often they are quite similar in size, though gills/ghylls tend to flow through ravines). It was a secretive, contemplative woodland. I was all alone – most hikers seemed to have taken a lower path closer to the lake – and on my way "proper" in the Lakeland wilds. I could already tell I was going to have plenty of thinking time in the weeks ahead and I had much on my mind: tricky work decisions (I had recently lost regular shifts at a newspaper making cutbacks), big life moves (maybe moving out of London), family

matters (my father sadly had early-stage Parkinson's), the question of children (were my partner, Kasia, and I ever going to have any? I, for one, was knocking on).

Quite apart from these personal matters, the world seemed so uncertain on so many levels, as the headlines on the train up had captured: Britain's place in affairs having "left" Europe and the economic turmoil that may or may not be connected to that decision (depending on your take; Steve at the campsite's becoming increasingly prevalent); the many frankly depressing examples of incompetence at government level (and aloof responses to criticism); the sad goings-on in south-east Europe. What was Vladimir Putin capable of in Ukraine? Anything seemed possible. Without wishing to sound melodramatic, the potential for further – nuclear? – disaster put everything in perspective; all else was small fry, really. Along the trails ahead, it would not just be the scenery and the encounters that carried my thoughts.

Though perhaps that's not so unusual. Isn't one of the reasons for a very long walk to take time out, to tease out your thoughts and let the landscape bring you a sense of calm and consideration and even, if you are lucky, a few conclusions? Wasn't that what drew people to pilgrimages so many centuries ago (and indeed today, too)? That sense of inner peace that, maybe, waited down the footpaths, in my case, the footpaths of the Lakes ahead.

Or perhaps I was just overthinking it all a bit.

Into the cool woodland air I stepped, enjoying the solitude for a while. Across the glittering surface of Ullswater, a fell arose called Gowbarrow, looking handsome and immense with expanses of brooding, shadowy bracken, perilous crumbling cliffs and great cascades of inhospitable scree. Rough landscape. Despite the tourist hordes, the Lake District is home to tough, treacherous terrain aplenty (as well as Beatrix Potter and Peter Rabbit, of course).

* * *

The path led down a slope through more woodland, arriving at Howtown Hotel in Howtown, which seemed to comprise not much more than Howtown Hotel and a pier for steamers. I stopped for a sandwich at the old-fashioned-but-open hotel, beginning to feel quite tired from the long walk. Worn out and ready to take off my backpack, which really was heavier than anything I had lugged around any distance before, I was looking forward to slumping at a table and zoning out as you do after a long walk (and I still had 6 miles to go to Patterdale). At the café counter, however, before I could place my order, an assistant who reminded me of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple asked an unexpected question.

"Are you meeting a young lady here?" she said.

I said that I was unaware that I would be.

"There was a young lady in here who was wanting to meet someone and couldn't find them: it wasn't you?"

Not me, I answered, feeling put under (gentle) interrogation.

"She was doing the Ullswater Way," Miss Marple continued, eyeing my reaction.

I said that I was doing the same – the Ullswater Way is the official name of the 20-mile path that rings Ullswater – but I had no plans to meet a young lady.

Miss Marple examined me once again, seemed satisfied, and then said "oh fiddlesticks" when she could not get the till to work properly.

Quite what all that was about, I wasn't sure.

I enjoyed a half-hour of "nothing", other than eating a ham sandwich and glancing at the map. Then, after a nose around the ivy-clad hotel's front lounge with its blazing fire, gilt-framed landscape paintings and porcelain figurines, I was soon moving on along a rocky path above the lake again, falling in stride with three ex-rugby players from Wilmslow. They had caught the boat from Glenridding to Howtown and were walking back to Glenridding along Ullswater, having had a drink at the Howtown Hotel. Their names were Tari, Sammy and Keith. Tari was a property investor,

Sammy a project manager and Keith was "doing something in finance".

"Dehydration is the mother of all disasters when you're walking," said Tari, referring to their refreshments at the Howtown Hotel bar, which he said was "a right hidden gem".

They had come to the area both to walk and to watch Wilmslow play Penrith at rugby the next day.

When asked what they enjoyed about Ullswater, their answers were as follows.

Tari: "The walking."

Keith: "There is a sociability when you walk."

Sammy: "The beer."

With that they hiked onward and two new walkers emerged in the opposite direction, one wearing fluorescent orange shorts, a woolly hat, a fleece and walking boots, the other in an identical ensemble except his shorts were fluorescent yellow. How their legs were not cold I do not know.

"Aye up," said the man in orange shorts.

"Aye up," I replied, to match his greeting.

"Aye up," said the man in yellow shorts in reply to my "aye up".

"Aye up," I replied once again.

And we continued on our ways.

Another walker, a solitary man dressed head-to-toe in black with a long grey beard, a stick and a slight limp came along from the direction of Patterdale.

"All right," he said.

"All right," I replied.

"All right," he said as though to confirm my "all right".

We continued on our ways.

A pair of walkers, a man and a woman in matching olive-coloured North Face jackets were next to appear ahead.

"You OK?" the man asked, making me wonder whether I did not look OK.

"I'm OK," I replied. "You OK?"

"Yeah, OK," he said.

Hiker talk, I was noticing, could be limited at times. But at least we were acknowledging one another; more than could be said in some parts of Britain, as Ken had mentioned in the Penrith kebab shop.

I came to a row of cottages on the edge of Patterdale, soon after discovering that my hostel, just up a street from Ullswater, was shut. A sign said that there was a private booking, as though it was closed to everyone else that night. The door was locked, and no one was around. I took off the backpack, slumped on the front step and wondered what to do. I had no phone reception, so could not check the internet or call. Had I really somehow got the second night's booking wrong? I supposed this was possible. My feet, I noticed, ached quite badly. I imagined that I might have a blister on my left big toe but was too lazy to check. My shoulders felt raw from the backpack. I had run out of energy, water and snacks, and seemed to have nowhere to sleep for the night. In this state I sat for a while, I am not sure how long. After this indeterminate period, a man wearing a red jacket appeared.

"Do you know anything about this hostel?" I asked.

"Yes, I work here," he replied.

The hostel, I learned, would open for check-in at 5 p.m., the sign for a private booking was left over from the day before. It was 4 p.m., however, the man in the red jacket said I could wait in a lounge. This I did, in a space with a large atrium and chesterfield armchairs: Britain's most comfortable chesterfield armchairs if you have just completed an 18-mile walk, which was the length my phone estimated; Google Maps' 15 miles had been along a more direct route, following main roads.

At 5 p.m., a charming receptionist with purple hair apologized about the front door being locked when I arrived, apparently it was "policy" to let early arrivals wait in the lounge.

"After Covid everyone decided they didn't want to do it any more," she said, by way of explaining why there had not been enough staff

around to allow the lounge to be open. By "it" she had been referring to working in the hostel. "It's been the same in all hospitality. We're very short-staffed."

I thanked her, took my key and checked in to a small room with a bunk bed, bare brick walls and a sink; a shared bathroom was down the hall. Leaving my bag, I walked stiffly – my body seemed to be seizing up – to the White Lion pub, where I was met, inside, by a large wooden carving of a lion that the barman said had once been at South Lakes Safari Zoo; the landlord of the White Lion had heard the zoo was getting rid of it and picked it up for a bargain. I ordered and quickly drank a pint of Wainwright ale. Then I ordered and quickly ate an enormous Cumberland sausage and mash with Yorkshire-pudding dinner. Both excellent.

The barman told me that Patterdale is "a very quaint little village, not like Windermere. If you don't know about it, you might not come" and said that a lot of coast-to-coast walkers, covering more or less the same route as the cyclists visiting Station Hotel in Penrith, stay at the White Lion.

He pointed to a group of four guys in the corner: "Coast-to-coasters." The pub, which was about "three hundred or four hundred years old", served Coast to Coast pale ale to such guests. I listened to some Oasis and R.E.M hits for a while quite contentedly (happy simply to be still). I inspected the eclectic interior: the coat of armour, a collection of old gin bottles and a sign by the bar that said: "SAVE WATER, DRINK BEER". Then I shuffled slowly back to the hostel and promptly fell into a deep slumber on my bunk. It was around 9.30 p.m. and I was whacked, but glad to be on the move. In little over 24 hours, I had moved from Britain's biggest city and now found myself surrounded by fells in the heart of Wordsworth's old stomping ground. Amazing the places you could get to by trains and green dotted trails (no need for all the security queues of an airport or squeezing into a pesky plane).