TOM CHESSHYRE

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A JOURNEY ON FOOT THROUGH ENGLAND'S FIRST NATIONAL PARK



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For the pioneers of Britain's national parks

CHAPTER 1

A WIGGLE TO DIGGLE

MANCHESTER PICCADILLY TO DIGGLE, VIA GLOSSOP, BLEAKLOW, HADFIELD AND MOSSLEY



At the end of platform seven at Manchester Piccadilly station, near an Accessorize and Costa Coffee, a man shuffled by with a strange camera fitted to a frame attached to his torso. This contraption seemed something to do with security. He looked extremely uncomfortable, not to mention odd, though nobody much batted an eyelid. Perhaps this was all quite normal for Manchester Piccadilly station.

Someone nearby was bashing an out-of-tune public piano. Twangy notes echoed across the concourse. Crowds streamed towards an escalator leading to a taxi rank and a road where cranes on a construction site rose beyond the Bulls Head pub. Across the way, a purple sign advertised the 'Freight Island Spring–Summer Free Festival'. Vehicles revved and honked. Planes buzzed above. Sirens wailed. It was busy and noisy, and you could not help but wonder, if you were about to walk 15 miles to Britain's first national park, whether there was an easier way to begin than this.

Of course, there was. A half-hour train would have whisked me from Manchester Piccadilly to the High Peak market town of Glossop, today's destination, no problem whatsoever (and a cheap fare).

Why not take the easy ride? The answer was that some peculiar (self-prescribed, self-flagellating) instinct lurking deep inside was instructing me otherwise. Something was telling me the best way to enter Britain's first national park was to experience Britain's third largest city slipping away as the moors beyond slowly emerged: to witness the transition from urban to rural; to leave big bad Manchester behind and move into the good hills on the horizon.

That was the general idea. Hence this somewhat unconventional start to a long-distance countryside hike. The reality would involve a 4 hour and 58-minute tramp, according to Google, which I was using as the Dark Peak map didn't begin until Hattersley. The route would cut through Gorton, Denton and Hyde, suburbs and satellite towns within the Greater Manchester metropolitan area (population 2.9 million). Much of it would, at the beginning at least, follow the A57.

I did not expect to be wowed by the natural beauty of this part of my journey, having predicted that the A57 would be a long way

from the misty moorland and gritstone trails along ridges and gullies to come. However, I was ready to be proved completely wrong.

'We're celebrating England today'

Manchester to Glossop, via Gorton, Denton and Hyde

With an open mind, I left the junction by the Bulls Head, the road soon leading me past a Marriott hotel and an old canal.

Traffic on the A57 was steady. This early stretch was marked by a succession of garages offering 'speedy services', VIP valet washes and 'quality used cars – best prices'. There was also a redbrick chimney from a former factory, an Esso petrol station and a self-storage depot. Near the latter, men in fluorescent jackets were drilling a hole in an empty yard. Adding to the aural mix, double-decker buses with 'Bee Network' on their sides roared by. Your ears soon tuned out the cacophony, however, although the fumes were dreadful. Graffiti on a wall read 'SMOKO' in large letters, summing up the poor air quality.

Curiosities began to appear. First, the crumbling art deco façade of O2 Apollo Manchester, where performances by Ocean Colour Scene, The Pogues and Gary Barlow were advertised. Next, the redbrick warehouse of Lancashire Eccles Cakes, promising a taste of 'Real Lancashire'. Then another redbrick building arose, complete with a Venetian-style tower and windows with gothic adornments. Stonework above the front entrance said this was Nicholas Hospital, built in 1879, though the front gate was locked and had a sign warning anyone considering breaking in: 'Live CCTV detection'.

Beyond the former hospital was the long, warehouse-like Metroline Manchester headquarters, and after that you soon arrived at a small rust-red public information board near a railway bridge.

If you were not walking by you were unlikely to notice this small board. But I stopped to read the inscription. It was headed by the words 'Fenian Ambush', beneath which a date was given:

'September 1867'. On 18 September of that year a group of 30-40 Fenians, many being members of the Irish Republic Brotherhood, had attacked a horse-drawn police van and freed two Brotherhood leaders at this location, shooting dead a policeman named Charles Brett.

Three of the attackers/rescuers were subsequently captured and executed in what were to be the last public hangings in the Manchester area that November. Around 8,000 people witnessed the execution of William Philip Allen, Michael Larkin and Michael O'Brien at Salford Gaol – the trio having been convicted on the grounds of being jointly responsible, although none was ever proven to have fired the fatal shot and historians regard the evidence against them as dubious. They were known by some as the Manchester Martyrs.

Not many hikes around the Peak District begin with that.

But most people in their right mind, I reflected, would have taken the train to Glossop.

Plodding onwards from the Fenian Ambush you came to the enormous Club 3000 bingo hall. Then you entered Gorton.

On the train to Manchester Piccadilly, glancing at the route of the day's hike ahead, I had looked up Gorton. Something about it rang a bell. Perhaps this was because the television series *Shameless* (2004–2013), about a working-class family on a Manchester council estate, had been set locally. It was also where Manchester City Football Club was founded in 1880; the team's current Etihad Stadium some 3 miles away.

The A57 became especially busy on this stretch with the Roots restaurant/bar offering 'African and Caribbean cuisine', a run of African grocery shops selling plantain and unusual root vegetables, hair extension, wig and suntan salons, a Bet Fred bookie, a probate and lasting powers of attorney specialist solicitors, a succession of redbrick terraced side-streets and Gorton Evangelical Church. There was also an Oasis community centre. Might this have had anything to do with the Manchester band Oasis and its frontmen,

the Gallagher brothers? It seemed unlikely judging by its plain façade and second-hand shop window featuring boxes of puzzles and used toys – plus lack of any mention of them. Nevertheless, I went over to see.

This was how I found myself in a large hall with a low ceiling and a lot of tables at which figures were hunched drinking mugs of tea and coffee. They wore woolly hats, baseball caps, Adidas tracksuits, hoodies and heavy winter coats, despite being inside where it was warm. They were mainly middle-aged and older. Some of the younger visitors to the Oasis centre were tapping on phones and scribbling notes. Most of the more elderly did not have phones. A few gripped their mugs with both hands and stared into their hot drinks, seemingly deep in thought.

Clothing was for sale in baskets by the entrance to the charity shop, where an assistant named Val told me, when I asked whether Noel and Liam Gallagher had anything to do with the centre or ever visited: 'I very much doubt they'd come.'

She paused to sell a *Guinness World Records* book (for 50 pence) to a youth in a hoodie who said: 'My dad will like that,' before asking: 'Is this a jobs centre? I'm looking for work.'

Val explained that Oasis only offered employment advice and, after he left, turned to me to say: 'There's emergency food parcels and free breakfasts,' she said. 'We do that. That's what we do. A lot of people come in as they live alone and want to be with other people.'

She paused and looked into the main hall, which was festooned with St George's crosses as though the England football team was about to play a final, and the game would be shown there.

'We're celebrating England today,' she said, matter-of-factly. 'We sometimes do this on Fridays. We celebrate all sorts of countries. It was Nigeria the other week. But it's England today. We'd never done England before,' she said.

Val wore glasses and had a kindly, almost supernaturally patient manner. She told me the Oasis centre had been going 25 years

offering community support, having been established by a student named Victoria.

'So many people in this area really struggle,' she said. 'It's one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the UK – in the top five.'

As she was saying this Victoria's husband Andy, who also wore glasses and had a kind, almost supernaturally patient manner, came over and began explaining how he had been Victoria's boyfriend when she was a student.

'In 2000, Victoria was studying Fine Art at Manchester Met University. There was drug addiction, alcohol addiction, vandalism here – there still is, but it's improved over the years. Being Christians, we felt from God that we should stay in this area and transform it.'

Victoria was not around, but Andy told me how Oasis had moved from smaller premises to the current hall, which had cost £1.2 million.

How had they raised that much?

'It was God,' he replied – adding, after a few moments' thought, that it was also partly down to some of the land on their site being sold to a property developer who had forked out a large chunk of the cash.

I asked him what problems visitors to the Oasis centre came with.

'Look over there,' he said, by way of reply. A skinny, disconsolate-looking man had shuffled into the hall.

'That man there has cancer. But he doesn't understand that, or what to do. When he got it, he just thought he was feeling unwell. He wouldn't have done anything, gone to a doctor, for maybe three or four weeks.'

Andy and the staff, however, had noticed he was ill earlier and made sure he had received treatment much more promptly.

'You get others in here who might receive something like a council tax bill,' Andy said. 'They just ignore it. They don't know what to do with it and it just goes on and on and the bill goes up and up. But, if they don't resolve it, eventually the bailiffs will come and then they'll get evicted.'

The Oasis centre would help in cases like these.

I had not expected this pitstop. Andy and I sat together for a while drinking tea at one of the tables. It was good to take off the backpack. He looked at it, seeming to visually assess its weight: it looked heavy (and was).

'I would take the number 201 bus,' he said, fixing me with a kind expression.

'The number 201. It goes from outside. It's only two pounds. I wouldn't walk to Glossop.'

But I had decided I was going to walk and told Andy so. He just shrugged, as if to suggest: 'don't say I didn't warn you'. And we drank our tea in silence for a while, listening to a compere with a microphone in a corner conducting a game of bingo that had something to do with celebrating England: 'Number 52, chicken vindaloo … number 68, pick a mate …' Paper plates loaded with crisps, perhaps chosen to symbolise English cuisine, were handed out among the tables to winners yelling 'bingo'.

In this manner, we passed the time for a while.

Soon, I thanked Andy and returned to the A57.

The road, as busy as before, continued beneath Hyde Road Bridge, beyond a sign asking: 'Are you lost? Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and life', past a Holiday Inn, McDonald's, Pure Gym and a run of larger semi-detached houses, after Gorton ended and Denton began.

It was here, near the 'Welcome to Denton' sign, that you noticed something: hills. Rolling hills, way ahead. On the horizon, beyond the spire of a church and a motorway flyover was a long sloping ridge: the Peak District, presumably The A57 would not, could not, go on forever: the Peak District was in the way.

As if in recognition of the greenery to come, birdsong broke out in the gardens of the semi-detached houses of Denton. But then the A57 reached its junction with the M60, and traffic drowned out the birds. I crossed a bridge, skirted a drive-in KFC and rejoined the quieter A57 on the other side as it passed a warehouse

where a company called Military Ops Ltd had a depot. Here, it was impossible not to notice a skip-load of second-hand military boots. It was an extremely odd discovery, and I stopped for a while just to stare at the old boots piled inside. Were they ex-Army issue? They looked pretty well used. It was as if you could enter this skip-with-boots in the Turner Prize (for avant-garde art) and maybe even have a decent chance of winning, along with an 'interpretation' on the pointlessness of war, perhaps. Then again, maybe I was beginning to overthink things near the A57's junction with the M60.

This was, I conceded, a distinct possibility.

The road beyond Military Ops led onwards to the centre of Denton, with its redbrick terraces, pizza takeaways, tattoo parlours and bookmakers, where my feet led me into the Red Lion pub on a corner, as if of their own accord. Inside, I was charged 70 pence for a pint of lime-and-soda and listened to some elderly men on the next-door table. They were by turns both jolly and solemn. They would greet fellow drinkers approaching their table flamboyantly with 'Alright squire!', shaking hands profusely before adding, 'How's the missus? She let you out?' and so on.

Whereupon the 'squire' would explain that his 'missus' had let him out but was hoarding money that might go for a holiday he was hoping for 'in her purse'. They would talk about the Champions League briefly and then proceed not to say much else for several minutes.

Finding their company to my liking – there was companionability in the silence and lack of compulsion to talk – I did not really want to move on. But, after a while, I heaved up the backpack, observed by the 'squires', who clearly thought I belonged to a parallel universe. And I plodded on, via an Aldi, an Iceland and a Kwik-Fit, arriving not long after in Hyde.

As with Gorton, something about Hyde rang a bell, though Hyde's backstory included three horrors. The first: it was where the 1960s 'Moors Murderers' Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, who had lived on its Hattersley housing estate, were arrested after the body of

Edward Evans, a seventeen-year-old, was found at their house. The second: Dr Harold Shipman, Britain's most prolific serial killer, had his doctor's surgery in Hyde and murdered an estimated 250 victims over 30 years before his arrest in 2000. The third: Hattersley had been the hideout of Dale Cregan, who murdered four people including two unarmed policewomen, Nicola Hughes and Fiona Bone, in 2012 – described by Prime Minister David Cameron as 'an act of despicable evil'.

A chilling trio.

The hills still seemed a way off. I was just over halfway, and it was 1.30pm. At this rate the walk from Manchester Piccadilly to Glossop would take seven or maybe eight hours.

For a while I sat, quietly aching, on a bench in Hyde's market square, where a few stalls sold old candlesticks, porcelain figurines, T-shirts with 'VOGUE' written on them and all sorts of toy car models. The backpack was way too heavy. Something would have to be done about it in Glossop.

Pondering this – how I'd misjudged the weight so badly – I looked around Hyde. The square faced a distinguished old town hall with a redbrick clocktower. A sculpture in front of the town hall commemorated the Chartist movement of 1838–48, which had campaigned for social and political reform, especially concerning the rights of the labouring classes and the need to protect workers against heavy-handed treatment in local cotton mills, where child labour in appalling conditions had been common. Many of the key activists and leading radicals were from Hyde, noted a panel attached to the statue, and on one famous occasion, on 14 August 1848, a group had attacked the town's mills in the dead of night. During this assault, the Chartists had drawn the plugs to stop the machines working, a ploy that had proved successful and the episode had become known as the 'Plug Riots'. This was how the expression 'pulling the plug' had passed into common usage – and was a matter of great local pride (never mind other dark events lurking in its more recent past).

I dropped by my second 'lion' pub of the day, the White Lion, for another (slightly more expensive) lime and soda, plus a chicken sandwich, in a gloomy backroom that was packed with diners and drinkers sitting on tables squeezed together. It was another good find, with a long, narrow wooden bar and lovely mahogany-coloured tiles on the façade featuring a Victorian lantern above the front steps, beside which a few mobility scooters were parked. The clientele, mainly of a certain age, spoke in bursts about this and that, sometimes falling into prolonged silences like the drinkers back at the Red Lion in Denton. Again, I felt like staying a while, but really needed to get back on the 'trail' (such as it was).

So, I left Hyde, side-stepping a dead rat on a pavement and watching a 201 bus glide by, almost mockingly.

The route, at this point, diverted off the trusty A57, cut through Hattersley housing estate (where I tried not to think of Hindley and Brady), passing many bungalows (some with neat-looking artificial-grass front gardens), before negotiating the A560, passing a large Tesco and a wasteland with electricity pylons, and plunging down a lane that wound beyond a bowling club and a row of grey-stone houses in a place called Broadbottom. At the end, I crossed a bridge over the placid, ink-black River Etherow, beside a soaring railway viaduct which occasionally rattled with a train to or from Manchester.

A sign on the other side indicated you had entered Derbyshire.

It was as this spot, as far as I was concerned, that it felt like you had left Manchester (properly) behind.

You had done so literally, of course, as you were no longer within the official metropolitan clutches of Greater Manchester, but it was more than just that. On the other side of the bridge was a woodland with a trail leading to a slope via boulders and crags. This pathway was marked, 'Trans Pennine Trail'. You had reached an official hiking path, no longer making it up thanks to dotted blue lines on Google. Instead, you could put your phone in your pocket and follow the green dotted lines of the Dark Peak Ordnance Survey map.

There was even another hiker on the trail.

This man passed and said in a convivial manner: 'Aye up.'

To which I replied, also convivially: 'Aye up.'

That was it.

That was all we had to say to each other.

So far on my journey from Manchester Piccadilly station to the small market town of Glossop I hadn't come across pleasant people saying 'Aye up.'

I regarded this as progress. Things were changing.

Walking on through a corridor of shiny-leaved holly trees, I admired the boulders, which were rust-streaked as though a metal ore was leaking from somewhere deep within. There was birdsong. There were brambles. From beneath your step came a crunch of twigs. Occasionally, you found yourself avoiding genuine Derbyshire horse manure. Actual real, genuine Derbyshire manure. More progress (of sorts). The air felt oxygenated. Black-feathered birds that might have been starlings flitted in the shrubbery. Little white flowers poked out of a hedgerow as though making an early dash to announce the seasonal shift to spring; it was the end of March.

I hiked up a hill, having joined a lane, following genuine Derbyshire drystone walls with genuine Derbyshire daffodils growing in clumps in the soil in front of them, soon reaching the village of Charlesworth, where a cluster of narrow lanes met. On a corner was the inviting-looking George and Dragon pub, which I dearly wished to enter and sit down in doing and saying nothing for a while as I was quite tired and the backpack was (I'll admit) killing me. However, I pushed on in the direction of Simmondley on the edge of Glossop, Range Rovers tearing by every now and then.

In this manner I continued, passing along another lane between arable fields as patches of sunlight appeared to glide across the moorland and hills ahead. It was a glorious stretch, even if the Range Rovers were frankly annoying. Chickens clucked in farmyards. Fresh eggs were available in roadside boxes for honesty payments. I saw chestnut horses in paddocks. I saw crumpled Red Bull cans. Proper fells rose beyond the fields, alternately golden with late afternoon

sunshine and piebald with the shadows of clouds. Long straight ridges slanted ahead with bleak, silently sliding beauty. A smell of coal emanated from a small grey-stone terrace. The sound of rushing water rose from a little river, drowning out the twitter of genuine Derbyshire birdsong.

I followed a few streets and finally entered Glossop. It was 4.55pm. The walk from Manchester had taken eight hours and 16 minutes. Covering 16.2 miles, it had involved 34,963 steps.

But I had arrived, on foot, as I intended to continue for the month to come.

The 'mean streets' were behind me. Britain's first national park was close at hand.

Romans, books and bogs

Glossop to Melandra and Bleaklow and back

In the centre of Glossop, where I had booked a room at the Norfolk Arms, you aren't yet within the boundaries of the National Park.

The official 'border' is just down the road on the way to the summit of Bleaklow, the Peak District's second highest peak at 633 metres, which I intended to ascend the next day. The mountain is renowned for being a high plateau of peaty moorland and for being home to the crash site of an American 'Superfortress' B-29 bomber, which had smashed into it in November 1948 during a routine flight in which 13 aircrew died. Its wreckage had been left as a poignant memorial. You can reach the site by hiking up a steep path along the course of an old Roman road known as Doctor's Gate, turning left onto the famous Pennine Way National Trail (which winds for 268 miles from the Peak District to the Scottish Borders), and then turning left again at a rocky spot called Hern Stones.

The Norfolk Arms was a solid stone structure dating from 1823 with pretty hanging baskets by a cobbled yard, next to the train

station (opened in 1845) and the war memorial in the main square. Inside, the smiley receptionist was having issues with her computer.

'You'll have to bear with me, it takes a while to log in,' she said, extremely pleasantly.

We stood around as the computer whirred and I took in the tartan carpet interior, the Lava Link Mega Eruption fruit-machine and a picture of John Howard, 1st Duke of Norfolk, after whose family – which had owned local land for 300 years from 1606 – the five-room inn was named. He bore a thoughtful, wary expression with a pallid complexion and a long thin nose. Having lived from 1425 to 1485, he had not had anything directly to do with the local area (and had died bloodily at the Battle of Bosworth alongside Richard III, his close friend). Next to him, however, was a picture of the more confident-looking, flamboyant and distinctly rotund 11th Duke of Norfolk (1746–1815). Dressed in a ruffle-necked collar with a flowing black tunic, he was a well-known bon viveur, once famously saying to the writer Thomas De Quincey: 'Next Monday, wind and weather permitting, I purpose to be drunk.' A suitable duke for the barroom setting.

The computer began to work, and the receptionist handed over a key to a simple corner room up a tartan staircase and said to me in a friendly way: 'There will be a DJ later. Karaoke.'

I thanked her and replied, 'That's good. I like music.'

To which she looked at me carefully to check whether I was being sarcastic, and, satisfied I was not, smiled informing me: 'Well, that's good. It's on till eleven.'

She left and I looked out of the window taking in a Cancer Research UK charity shop across the road, a bookmaker and the hoop-shaped entrances to the old market building, which was boarded up for renovations. I walked down the road and enjoyed a first-class, first-night curry at the Ruchi Indian Restaurant & Takeaway, lured over by a poster in the window that read: 'Our chef has won the Chef of the Year award at the prestigious National Curry Awards received at the House of Lords on 16 october 2023.' How could you not want to try out such as establishment?

The 'Ruchi Special' chicken with red peppers and chilli was generous and tasty, served in a long room with swirly gold wallpaper, spotlights that flickered between purple, red and blue on a loop and music videos playing on a screen at the far end. The proprietor himself came over at one point, a quietly spoken, modest man (despite his accolade) in a checked shirt, who said: 'There's good scenery round here. Nature. It's quiet. There is a lot of nature and scenery.'

Like his food, his observations were spot on. Soon a waiter who gave his name as 'Big John' joined me for a while. He told me the Warrington rugby league team came once a year to eat at the restaurant. I was the first person he had ever met who had walked from Manchester to Glossop.

'We drive round when it's quiet,' he said, travelling in cars with friends. 'We stay on the A roads mainly. In sports cars. Hatchbacks.' He bore a dreamy expression as he said this, as though these were the good times.

'During peak hours the roads are very busy,' he continued, so he and his friends avoided those. 'The Saddleworth Moor,' he said, even more dreamily. 'Ah the Saddleworth Moor. I like places where you can hear the birds chirping.'

I agreed with him on that, and we chatted for a while about the menu at Rushi. His favourite dish was the 'balti shaan' soft lamb. He recommended a curry house in London's East End, although he said: 'London's very nice but it's too much expensive.'

I agreed with him about that too and returned to the Norfolk Arms, watched a crooner in a white lounge suit singing 'Hello', by Lionel Richie and 'You're My First, My Last, My Everything', by Barry White, before getting a satisfying night's sleep in my good-value corner room – bang in the middle of Glossop.

* * *

On these ramblings there were no rules. I was beholden to no one. For a month, I could go where I wanted, when I wanted, with no

ties, no commitments. No 'freebies' had been accepted – so no 'payback' was required. I was paying my own way. No marketing manager nor PR knew my whereabouts. Britain was still a free country, after all.

I could not cover every inch of the terrain: there would be gaps, however thorough I tried to be. But I might as well make the most of it. In this spirit, before breakfast, I hiked a couple of miles backwards towards Manchester. I'll admit, this felt as though ground was being lost – which it was, literally – but I left my backpack at the Norfolk Arms to collect on my return and the going was, therefore, pleasantly light.

My target was the Melandra Roman Fort, situated on a hill overlooking Longdendale, a valley containing the neighbouring town of Hadfield. The hike required a route past various former mills. Glossop had been a major cotton producing centre, though the town had somehow managed to dodge insurrection from Chartists back in the nineteenth century. Maybe the cleaner country air by the moors meant locals were more relaxed, but there did not seem to be any conclusive reason (that I could find) why Hyde was a hotbed and Glossop not.

The name of the old fort was, I learnt, confusing. The old fort was also known as Ardotalia, which was probably its more accurate name as 'Melandra' was a name made up by Reverend John Watson of Stockport, who had an archaeological bent. He decided this in 1772, and there did not seem to be any conclusive reason (that I could find) why he had chosen the name other than he thought it sounded 'classical' and locals seemed to accept the decision of an Oxford-educated clergyman. 'Ardotalia' on the other hand, sometimes spelt 'Edrotalia', was believed to mean 'The Hill' or 'Brow overlooking Etherow'.

The trip to the fort took me out of town beyond the ex-mills. Soon I entered a woodland and passed a quiet 1960s housing estate dotted with satellite dishes. Then arrived at a circle of tumbledown stones marking the outer walls of the old fort. And I liked it very much.

Green-grey hills rose all around and leaden clouds ballooned in ominous, rainless plumes above clusters of houses in the scoop-shaped hollow of the valley. A sense of abandonment hung in the air, with a stillness and forgotten quality that let your imagination run free, picturing a garrison of Roman legionnaires going about their business on this hilltop in northern England a long way from Rome. What had they thought of this? Many of those stationed at the fort had, in fact, been Germanic and Portuguese. You could not have blamed them for pondering the vagaries of existence that had delivered them, at the hands of their Roman leaders, to this remote spot.

Between 500 and 1,000 legionnaires had been stationed at Melandra, which connected with Mamucium (Manchester) and the Roman route I would shortly be following to the top of Bleaklow. This ancient way ultimately led to what had been the Roman fort of Navio, near the villages of Castleton and Hope in the middle of the Peak District (where I'd be going in about three weeks' time). The Romans had been in the Peak District from approximately AD 70 to AD 410 and had built a settlement in Buxton, called Aquae Arnametiae, where they had been attracted by the warm spring water. Lead mining had been one of the principal reasons for setting up camp in the region, with the main mines near the market town of Wirksworth and the village of Carsington. Forts, such as the one at Melandra, helped keep the peace.

You can walk around the tumbling remains of the walls, read a plaque that says the Ministry of Public Building and Works recognises the fort is protected under the Ancient Monuments Acts of 1913-53, nod to the odd dog walker and enjoy the solitude, safe in the knowledge that you can stay here for a long time and not have to worry about overtourism. Melandra was unlikely ever to fall victim to that modern condition (which other parts of the Peak District were said to suffer); it was decidedly more of an undertourism sort of place.

It was also helpful to get a vague notion, at least – early on – where things had all started in the region. There may have been

nomadic hunter-gatherers, using flint tools and arrows to survive hunting deer, dating back many thousands of years, (from 8000–4000 BC, during the Mesolithic period), but Melandra was believed by some to be the precursor of the town of Glossop. However, I was on a hike, not a history lesson, although it was handy to understand a few of the basics about what the Romans had got up to from the beginning.

On the way back from Melandra, I met Mel.

She owned the Dark Peak bookshop, near the Norfolk Arms, and was bright and cheery, wearing Converse trainers and an oatmeal sweater, in her thirties. The shop had just opened and Mel was a good bookseller, so I rapidly found myself buying *The Melandra Meander*, a 'journal of archaeological wanderings', and almost put my hand in my pocket to purchase *The Walking Cure*, by Annabel Street (subtitle: 'Harness the life-changing power of landscape to heal, energise and inspire'), as well as *The Observant Walker*, by John Wright (subtitle: 'Wild food, nature and hidden treasures on the pathways of Britain'). Alongside all the local maps (which I already had) and local guides (ditto), there were many other titles offering insights into goings-on in the British countryside, focusing on hares, cuckoos, trees, streams, rivers, ponds, birdlife (in general, not just cuckoos), fields and seasons – and I looked at them all for a while with a mixture of bewilderment and bamboozlement. It appeared there was so much to learn before you could even begin to appreciate – in a true, deeper, gracefully educated manner – the British countryside. I wanted to be gracefully educated. I wanted to have a true, deeper understanding of the British landscape. And the books seemed both eminently sensible and potentially useful. But also heavy-looking.

Mel was a quite recent incomer to the Peak District. She was also talkative and, after taking payment for my book, she stood by a pile of Robert Harris novels and explained (in an almost uninterrupted impromptu flow).

'I moved here to Glossop in 2016. I wanted a better life for my children. I didn't want them to go to school in south London. It was

just overpopulated and very scary, especially with two young boys. I mean I survived it. But it was just getting progressively worse. Knife crime: a lot of knife crime.'

Mel paused as though searching for the right words. 'It was a jungle, a complex urban jungle,' she said, of south London. 'I had three brothers and two sisters. We were from quite a deprived background, but in an affluent area. We used to spend all our time travelling around on buses – to Lewisham and Greenwich. We were safe, on the whole, but we did encounter unsavoury things along the way. I didn't want my children to experience those. So, when my mum moved up here, following her sister who lives in Chapel-in-Firth [within the Peak District], she fell in love with it straight away – and we decided to follow her.'

Did she feel the same way as her mother?

'Oh yes,' Mel replied. 'The big thing is that you can walk for ten minutes and you'll be in nature. In London, I never saw lambs and chickens when I was a child. Back then it was different: I remember witnessing a stabbing when I was on the way to school. I saw it from the bus. There he was lying on the ground, and I remember his face. That has stuck with me.'

She paused, as though recalling that day. Then Mel continued: 'My brother saved someone's life – someone who had been stabbed. He found the guy in the stairwell of our block of flats. He was lying in the stairwell. It's been a culture shock coming here, as there are no ethnic minorities at all. Of course you do get it in Manchester. As a child I was used to having black and Chinese friends. It's so predominantly white here, but you get used to it. It's sad in a way, I was so used to being immersed in multi-culturalism. You don't have much diversity here. That's something you miss out on.'

Mel and I had a good, long chat.

People in the Peak District, at least the ones so far, were quick to open up. The feeling of having escaped the city was palpable – of turning away from London ('down south') in Mel's case, and Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham and Derby (so close by), plus

nearby towns like Oldham (Big John's hood), Macclesfield, Stockport, Stoke-on-Trent, Chesterfield, Huddersfield and Barnsley too. The 'urban', you could sense, was near at hand – but also, thankfully and happily and with a good dose of good riddance, one step removed.

* * *

Then I walked up Bleaklow.

To do so required following a row of terraced houses past a Thai restaurant and the entrance to Glossop and District Golf Course, coming to a millstone sign marking the official beginning of the Peak District National Park. Though things did not feel particularly park-like as cars revved up the hill towards Snake Pass, which crossed into the interior. Many of these vehicles were of the souped up (pimped up) variety, fixed with exhaust pipes designed to be noisier than normal and going at speeds that appeared way too fast. A broken wall near a sharp corner with remnants of a bumper and smashed lights provided sufficient evidence.

Keeping to a track alongside the road here for a while, I then cut left, taking a path between drystone walls in the direction of Mossy Lea Farm. The landscape spread out ahead, unadorned by human construction beyond the farmhouse (or any humans). And it was a revelation. The woodland before Glossop and the little section of the Trans Pennine Trail had merely been a warm-up act. The star had arrived in all its glory: the Peak District National Park proper.

You could not help stopping in your tracks to stare.

Rising ahead, lilac-tinted landscape tumbled this way and that with burrows and gullies divided by dark drystone walls that looked like streaks of treacle cutting across sheep and cattle-less fields. Hollows of sand-coloured grass rolled aside auburn-coloured bogland. Boulders and scree cascaded down slopes criss-crossed with busy little streams and dabbed with patches of coppery bracken. Clouds emitting a strange magnesium glow hung low above the marvellous patchwork of mauves, lilacs, shades of green and golden

meld of tan and caramel. While high above, beyond the silver-streaked vapours clinging to the hills, lay a sea of ice-blue light. It was uncomplicated, yet subtle, scenery with a pleasingly addictive quality. The longer you gazed, the more you seemed to notice and appreciate.

A path wound upwards, and I followed it. This was the Doctor's Gate way; named after Dr John Talbot, who had been involved in making improvements to the old Roman road towards the summit of Bleaklow in the fifteenth century. It curved, sometimes stoney and wide (were those old stones really as the Romans had laid them or had industrious Dr Talbot lined them up again?) and often narrow and springy with peat, with heather overflowing and brushing against your boots.

To the right was Shelf Brook, an inky, glinting waterway. The sound of rushing water rose from tall clumps of stiff, blond grass accompanied by a tantalising trill of unseen birds. You wanted to spot them but where the hell were they? Somewhere in all the heather and the reeds, hiding or simply minding their own business, no doubt. Perhaps I should have bought one of those birdwatching books.

Occasionally, you did spot wildlife of a sort, however: other human beings. Sometimes these took the form of enthusiastic hikers.

'Howdy mate! Hi, hi, hi!' said one fellow bounding downwards.

Other times, they were less effusive striders.

'Ey,' uttered another, hardly looking up.

I fell into step with and made the acquaintance of a couple: Mo, originally from Newcastle, and Andy, from Sale, Greater Manchester, where they lived. Aged 50, Mo worked 'in admin' for Manchester University while Andy, aged 65, held a job at an engineering company and was taking the ascent slowly as he had his right hip replaced four months ago. They told me all this quite freely and then Mo, surprising me, said: 'Turn around.'

I did as I was told – and there it was: Manchester, the United Kingdom's third most populous metropolitan area.

This was not an especially pretty sight and the city seemed quite close: a cluster of tower blocks rising out of a cindery haze. I looked at it for a while thinking, 'you don't get this in the Lake District'. But then again, the Peak District, as I was rapidly discovering, was a different type of national park. A delicate symbiosis between city and nature was at play, as those Kinder Scout trespassers had understood all those years ago.

'Is that really Manchester?' I somewhat foolishly, I'll admit, asked.

'You're not from round here are you,' replied Andy, more of a statement than a question.

He was smiling, wearing khaki shorts (though it was quite cold), sturdy boots that looked as though they had seen some service and a pair of fleeces with no jacket. While Mo wore a natty two-tone windbreaker, black leggings, equally well-worn boots and clasped a stick, as though it was she who had just had a hip replacement, not Andy. Well-organised gear for seasoned hikers. Mo was smiling away too.

As we walked on, all of us beaming, along Shelf Brook, crossing a little wooden bridge and rising, Andy told me about his work on the Thames Tideway Tunnel ('we did that'), Crossrail ('we did some of that'), nuclear power stations ('we do then too') and hydrogen energy projects: 'Carbon capture, that's the latest. The thing is hydrogen. It's the new energy.'

Regarding the latter, he had immediately completely lost me, though I asked him if it would work.

'I think so. The problem is hydrogen cars. What do you do when they run out of hydrogen. How do you fill them up?

The pair stopped for a sandwich and told me that it was 'dead easy' to find the B-29 crash site at the top of Bleaklow and that if I was in doubt I should 'just Google it'. They smiled a lot again and I smiled back and traipsed upwards through the beautiful, increasingly rugged scenery of isolated tan-and-green hillside on a rocky path that met a flagstone route, where a sign said this was a part of the beginning of the famous Pennine Way to Scotland. Cars were

parked a few hundred metres to the right, but I turned left, following the flagstones across a wide, flat, golden-coloured boggy plateau: the moorland at the top of Bleaklow, which only lived up to the first half of its name as this was the second highest part of the National Park. The sky had turned into a luminous canopy of grey and a few other walkers were around, many wearing pristine-looking trainers rather than sturdy well-worn walking boots.

Skylarks flickered and squeaked on the plateau, hovering as though assessing the risk posed by the intruder (me). It was pleasant being watched by these fluttering little friends, even though they seemed to regard me as the enemy, and simply enjoying the sensation of walking along an elevated bogland not far from Manchester I continued for a mile or two to a stone cairn on a boulder-strewn section of the plateau, where I clambered to the top, just to be able to say I had conquered the Peak District's second highest 'mountain' (633 metres, as previously mentioned). A feat I had managed in just a couple of hours or so. This was another big difference between the Peak District and the Lake District, which although known for and named after its lakes was also beloved, of course, for its more challenging summits (the highest at 978 metres) that Alfred Wainwright, the legendary hiker/author/illustrator (1907–91) had so carefully chronicled and come to be known as the 'Wainwrights'. The Lake District was lofty and sometimes mighty; a place of real 'peaks'.

The Peak District was different.

It was lower, clearly flatter at the top and boggier. It also held a mystique, largely connected to the latter quality, which I was about to encounter up close and personal. For it was not difficult to find a Peak District bog.

At Hern Stones, a cluster of gritstone boulders, I bumped into another couple: Liam, aged 26 and a soldier in the Royal Engineers, and Natasha, 24, who worked in 'administration accounts'. They lived near Stafford, but Liam wanted to show Natasha a bit of orienteering in the wild, with a military target (the B-29 plane), while sharing 'quality time'. Natasha, whose previously pristine New

Balance trainers were not so pristine anymore, just looked at me as Liam mentioned this, saying nothing but conveying much.

Anyway, with Liam leading the way, without the assistance of Google, we trudged across the moorland bog, which had a deep, dark, coal-like colour into which your feet sometimes sank so far you needed to yank them out sharpish, occasionally using your hands to clamber up banks. However, we soon arrived at the American 'Superfortress' B-29 crash site, where the fuselage was scattered as it had lain since 1948 and Stars and Stripes along with Union Flags fluttered from parts of the engine and a wing, where messages on little wooden crosses read: 'RIP Our Allies' and 'In Remembrance' of the 13 fatalities. The plane had been descending through cloud, and it was 'doubtful the crew ever saw the ground', according to a brass plaque.

Liam, Natasha and I looked across Bleaklow's bleakest site, with moorland rolling many miles away to the north-west: 'civilisation' (the modern world, at least) seemed to have disappeared.

Liam said: 'People have respected the site. That shows they respect history.'

Natasha responded: 'It's nice to see so many people showing interest.'

There were about 20 of us there. Then we said our goodbyes, and they clambered back to Glossop one way and I retraced my steps – at least I attempted to, but almost came up to my right knee in a squelchy black bog that was definitely not where we had been earlier. This bog had seemed to come from nowhere and required a long manoeuvre to avoid a deep 'grough'.

It began to pour.

I did not have my waterproof trousers with me.

Soaked, I returned down Doctor's Gate, collected my rucksack from the Norfolk Arms, posted my small tent, sleeping bag and inflatable mat from the station post office to the inn where I would be staying in a fortnight and – the backpack feeling pleasingly lighter – hiked up a long hill to the Windy Harbour Hotel, on the edge of the little village of Padfield, about a mile north of Glossop. Checking into

a small comfortable room, with pictures of mountain hares and deer, facing the car park, I went down to the restaurant/bar to discover from Lee, the owner-manager, that 'there's no menu on Saturdays.'

Instead, I ordered a kebab delivery from Lee's recommendation – Glossop Pizza (which also did kebabs) – and a large, steaming, delicious, perfect chicken creation soon arrived, which I ate in the empty restaurant/bar, reading *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë (I would be going to Peak-land spots mentioned in the book) and listening to Luther Vandross and Kool and the Gang. It would be busy the next day at Windy Harbour Hotel as 'there's a funeral,' explained Lee. The hotel was close to a cemetery, and the wake would be held there. Lee disappeared and I returned to my room to discover I had walked 19.4 miles since setting off to see Melandra.

I had covered roughly the distance of a marathon in two days.

Hilary Mantel, the Notorious B.I.G. and a diversion

Padfield to Diggle, via Hadfield, Millbrook and Mossley

You can tell a great deal about the standard of any form of overnight tourist accommodation from its breakfast. Windy Harbour passed this test with flying colours with piles of kiwi fruit and bananas, mango yoghurts, decent muesli, first-rate avocado and poached eggs on toast (with hot sauce on the side) and good cappuccinos from a proper machine. Walk 25 miles in two days and you become continually ravenous and your appreciation of breakfast standards is instantly raised to another level.

Lee came over to my table. He was pallid faced (perhaps the wake was weighing on his mind) with a broad smile and inquisitive manner. I complimented him on the breakfast, and we chatted for a while, with me explaining the walk through east Manchester to Glossop.

'And you've still got your bag?' he asked, before proceeding to mention 'cop killer' Dale Cregan's connection to Hattersley and

various pubs on my route from Manchester (none of which I had visited) that were 'full of druggies' before adding, 'oh yeah, it's always kicking off in there, someone got bottled last week.'

Regarding Glossop, he said: 'The thing is, either you like it or you don't. People will ask: "how's your day?" Well, you don't get that in Manchester, where it's head down, walk on by, head down in your phone. So, some people think: "Oh you're a bit of a nosy sod," if they're asked how their day has gone. That said: you can get two double vodka and Cokes and two chickpea curries in Glossop and still get change from twenty quid.' Lee paused after naming the (vegan) pub, The Globe, adding: 'Maybe I am going back two or three years with those prices.'

The relationship between Manchester and Glossop had long been somewhat strained, often due to weekend day trippers. These, I already knew from displays at Glossop's railway station, which had played a big part in the uneasy association ever since the 1840s. By 1912, matters had reached a head with a local newspaper editorialising that 'cheap excursionists should behave themselves', and that Mancunian 'sixpenny trippers' who turned into 'Sunday delinquents', believing they were 'at liberty to turn Glossop into a beer garden', ought to feel the full force of the law. These trains, still attracting day trippers (paying a little more these days), had survived Dr Beeching's 'Reshaping of British Railway' cuts of the 1960s partly because the line connected to so many housing estates of workers with jobs in Manchester along the route. Other lines touching the Peak District had not been so lucky.

Lee, who had a refreshing tell-it-how-it-is manner, showed me a place on my Ordnance Survey map where 'If you're going to have a bad accident, it's there, you've got a 100-foot drop, we've been on quad bikes to rescue guests at night who've got stuck.' This point was near Sykes Moor and Torside Clough, along a section of the Pennine Way known as Clough Edge. I put an 'X' on my map along with '100ft drop' and vowed not to go there – not that it was on my route.

* * *

From Windy Harbour you passed sloping farmland divided by drystone walls to the centre of sleepy Padfield, where someone in a pink bib stating 'Please pass wide and slow' was riding a horse through town, although there was no other traffic. You skirted the Peels Arms and a few grey-stone terraces then turned down a hill into a valley of tiled roofs with hazy wooded hills beyond. This was Hadfield, where you soon arrived at a sign on the corner of Brosscroft street announcing that the 2009 and 2012 Booker Prize-winning novelist Hilary Mantel (1952–2022) had been brought up at number 20. It had been a tough working-class neighbourhood during her childhood, home to 'July barbers', Irish Catholics who had arrived for summer haymaking, with some marrying local women, but who were 'treated with disdain' by others working in the mills, according to the sign.

What the information board did not explain is the unusual, at the time locally scandalous, living arrangements at number 20. Hilary Mantel's mother lived with both her lover (Jack Mantel) and cuckolded husband (Henry Thompson), who for four years had allowed this set-up to continue until he departed in 1963, when Hilary was eleven, never to return. The celebrated author of *Wolf Hall* was given the surname 'Mantel' (really she should have been known as Hilary Thompson), and the rest was history, including her cool depictions of living arrangements of monarchs, including Henry VIII, and others during Tudor times in her fiction. She never saw her own Henry again after he fled, as described in her autobiography *Giving Up the Ghost*.

Oh, how the curtains on Brosscroft street must once have twitched. I went to look at Mantel's narrow terraced house, with its worn stone steps and past intrigues, and then passed down a hill and along a road called Waterside, once home to cotton mills, where a factory owner named Ralph Sidebottom was prosecuted under the Factories Act of 1835 for overworking child labourers. Cotton production continued, including a period of making parachutes and barrage ballons during the Second World War, until 1976 when Waterside Mill finally closed and the site became Hadfield Trading

Estate. I knew all this from a couple of graffiti-daubed information boards.

I continued via the estate, crossed a bridge over the River Etherow, with the stone barrier of a flinty-watered reservoir to east, going up quiet Arnfield Lane into farmland with cattle along a path marking the Peak District National Park border.

Here, you were back in the moors, having skirted the 'urban' Hadfield, back among brambles and holly and drystone walls with russet colours rising in the hills and another flinty reservoir appearing, Swineshaw Reservoir, followed by Brushes Reservoir and Walkerwood Reservoir – there were loads of them.

The 'urban' did not, however, totally disappear. From Walkerwood Reservoir, the skyscrapers of Manchester suddenly reappeared, closer than up on Bleaklow – looking like a nightmarish vision from one spot, although as you plunged down the scene fell out of your eyeline. No other hikers were about, until I met a dogwalker named Andy, aged 55, who lived in the local town of Millbrook, but who worked in Manchester in a private lettings agency. He was tall, bald and bespectacled, wearing jeans and a hooded jacket – and he began to fill me in on local history, and how he believed it connected subtly to twenty-first century life, as we walked along a track by the reservoir, stepping over dead frogs that had been squashed by tractors after leaving the water.

'Obviously, Manchester has a huge industrial past, but so did Millbrook,' he explained. 'There were four mills although only one remains and that's derelict, although it's listed. Sadly, it's beyond the economic point of anyone doing anything about it. For 150 years, there were massive cotton manufacturers here, and that heritage affects the mindset still today: the mindset of industrialisation, of grafting and doing a hard day's work. That attitude. I think there's quite a link. And if you look at the housing round here – a lot of it came from that era: stone terraces, two-up, two-down type environments that people still live in today, though there might have been modifications.'

Andy also told me about a botanist named Jethro Tinker (1788–1871) who had lived locally: 'This valley is famous for him. He used to live at a farm that's ruins now. He was born in this corner and worked in the cotton mills. He was a wanderer around these parts too, a bit like you, looking for plants in their habitat in his spare time.'

Tinker left a collection of more than 800 specimens of local wildflowers, mosses, moths, butterflies and insects that was displayed in local museums.

I had to disavow Andy of his notion that my ramblings bore any similarity to those of a nineteenth century natural history enthusiast – and when I told him of my destination that evening, he was perhaps more accurate in his understanding of where my interests lay.

'There are some good pubs in Diggle,' he said.

Through a council estate, via a blue plaque dedicated to Tinker at the entrance of a narrow park, and along a long, wide cobbled road that must have had something to do with old mills, I arrived at the tranquil Huddersfield Narrow Canal, with shiny olive-green water lined by reeds. This route had taken me out of the Peak District National Park, but it followed the edge, leading towards Diggle. The setting was so entrancing I quite happily followed the towpath, passing an electricity substation and arriving at a dilapidated, bridge-like structure that looked as though it had once been used as a chute to transport industrial materials. I stood for a while staring at this, wondering how a pully system would have connected to barges on the canal, when another middle-aged walker, this one dog-less, stopped and introduced himself.

As I have already said, people in these parts were especially talkative, even more so than in the Lake District, based on my various wanderings around there. Maybe it was the often overwhelming number of tourists in the Lakes that meant that some up there – and who could really blame them – might sometimes be a touch stand-offish. On the Huddersfield Narrow Canal, a 'holidaymaker' appeared to be something of a novelty.

Mark Richardson wore walking boots and a green jacket with a metal military badge on it that said: 'Ken Richardson, HMS Orestes, Algerines Association.' This referred to his father, who had worked on a minesweeper in the Royal Navy. He had a neat, grey side parting, held his hands in his pockets and was rocking back and forth contentedly on his feet as though he was a lower league football manager on a sideline watching his team win quite comfortably.

'That was for a coal-fired power station from the 1960s,' Mark said. It had closed in the late 1980s and was derelict.

Then he told me there had been a recent flood on the canal and a wall had collapsed a little further on. This meant that the waterway had been closed to traffic: 'It's utterly devastated up there.'

Mark had been born in east Manchester and had moved to Glossop for six years but: 'It's so expensive there: the houses. I couldn't afford one. Now you can get a three-bed house with a drive and a garage and a back garden and a front garden round here for the same price as a one-bed place in Glossop.' Property prices were cheaper round the Millbrook area.

Mark and I stood and chatted for about twenty minutes, with him rocking on his feet with his hands in his pockets, gazing in the direction of the derelict power station. I learnt that his wedding reception had been at the Norfolk Arms in Glossop, that he got married in 'that church across from the Queens Arms,' that he had worked in the 'oil and gas industry, I'm not really allowed to say, official secrets and all that,' and that there was a good pub named The Roaches Lock coming up ahead on the canal. 'I've been in there,' he said, by way of endorsement.

Another Peak District gabber.

Mark warned me to 'be careful in the tunnel,' which lay somewhere ahead, and then we parted.

Passing the drained part of the canal and some graffiti reading 'RUFFCUT' and 'Like the fire needs the air … I won't burn unless you're there,' I went through the long, dripping, cobble-stoned Scout Tunnel, emerging at a section that ran through Mossley town. Here, a

tall, skinny man smoking a large joint while walking two dogs said 'Alright, Bob' as we crossed paths and I replied that I was indeed 'Alright', and inquired about his 'alright-ness', to which he replied: 'Alright.'

Realising that it might be a good idea to cut back into the Peak District National Park itself rather than continue along the canal stopping and talking to everyone I met, I took a path eastwards into the centre of Mossley and promptly found my feet taking me into a pub named the New Bridge Inn.

Inside, rap music was quietly thudding and twanging, connected to a television showing rap music videos. To the left, two other customers were playing darts, accompanied by a small grey dog. Sun streamed through large windows capturing swirling dust of a spacious bar with cranberry-coloured banquettes and a rose-pattern carpet. Near a black-and-white picture of some historical buses was a black-and-white picture of Oldham Football Club's team from the 1926–7 season. Bottles of Smirnoff Ice, Budweiser and Desperado were available for £5 for two, said a sign, or five shots were £10, as were five 'bombs', while 'all double ups only extra £2' and you could 'ask at the bar for more details.'

I bought a pint of lime-and-soda (£1.20) from a cheerful barmaid named Eve, who said the New Bridge Inn would be 'having a refurb soon' and who asked me to help fix a remote control for another television closer to the door as she wanted to put on Aston Villa versus Preston in the FA Cup, but was having trouble. I offered some advice and one of the darts players came over, named Tom, wearing a 'Guinness Dublin' T-shirt. After a while, we established there were no batteries in the remote and Tom told me how: 'Me and my missus are from Oldham but it was too rough there.'

So, they had moved to Mossley and he was playing his father-in-law, wearing an 'Audi Sport' polo shirt, at darts.

'We're a bit crap,' said Tom. 'I did say I'd let him beat me at darts, if I can beat him at pool.'

They were in the middle of a multi-sports challenge.

Eve, Tom, Simon and I discussed my route up to Diggle and they thought I should join part of the 'Tame Valley Loop', behind the pub before heading to the 'beautiful' Dove Stone Reservoir, back within the national park's boundaries, and continuing to my destination from there. They went back to their darts and I enjoyed the strains of Notorious B.I.G. while finishing my lime-and-soda. I liked the New Bridge Inn.

Then I hit the Tame Valley Way along an old disused railway line – part of the 1960s cuts to remote corners of Britain successfully pulled off by Dr Beeching, coming to a junction where some women (who had just exited the Royal George pub) said that I should go back to the New Bridge Inn to continue to Diggle 'if I was going that way.' This much I knew was completely wrong, however, I thanked them and found a narrow path behind houses up a hill back into the moorland on the edge of the national park.

Heather sprang up all around here and it was pleasing to peer down at Mossley and all its pubs playing Notorious B.I.G hip-hop hits below, joining a narrow lane named the Oldham Way and then clambering up a steep contour above fields to a sunny windswept trail that I believed led to Dove Stone Reservoir. You could also see Manchester and what I took to be Oldham from this rocky path, although I realised after a while that the route was curving in the wrong direction for the reservoir, and a fellow hiker coming in the opposite direction said I was taking a long, though exceedingly pretty and spectacular-looking, detour round some high hills topped by ridges, rather than going directly to the reservoir.

As I began to feel exhausted – it was 4pm and I'd begun at 9am – I took this hiker's advice to cut down a vertiginous trail between fields ('I believe you can go that way' were his parting words), down to a lane that led to the reservoir, which I did and about 20 minutes later found myself at a juncture needing to cross a field to reach this lane. This I did, stepping between rocks and traversing an old fence … before I saw them.

'Them' came in the form of a pair of Highland cattle standing by a gate. The gate to which I was heading. They had elongated horns and reddish coats. They were about 100 metres away down the slope. I looked at them and assessed the situation: 'They might be bulls; if they are bulls, they might charge at me; even if they are not bulls, they might charge at me too; in either scenario, I'm in trouble.'

I decided to retrace my steps up the vertiginous hill to the contour where I had met the hiker, returned a long way down the Oldham Way, found the lane via another route and trudged alongside a row of terraced houses in a settlement near Fern Lee Farm to the edge of Dove Stone Reservoir, at one point passing the gate guarded by the cattle, although the cattle were no longer there. Then I leant against a wall by the glorious, glinting reservoir, where lads with pimped up cars were lolling about in the car park and some well-dressed Asian couples and families in traditional, Sunday-best costumes of glittery gold, lime green, tangerine and scarlet paraded by serenely.

Somewhere up above, peregrine falcons might have been soaring. Ravens and curlews dwelled in the surrounding grasslands of Saddleworth Moor, according to a sign beside me. Swallows, swifts and ring ouzels were in these environs, dragonflies and damselflies, too. But I saw none of these.

It was 6pm. I had just descended and re-ascended a steep section of Peak District National Park to avoid some cattle that might or might not have been bulls and had consumed two energy bars and a pint of lime-and-soda since 9am. A mounting sense of desperation, bordering on dread, mixed with deep-seated fatigue and pure straightforward knackeredness, was creeping into my appreciation that more than 3 miles of hilly terrain on the north-eastern edge of the park lay ahead. Somehow, I had messed up.

But this was just the way it was, no point dwelling on it – and no way was I catching a taxi, although the thought did (I admit) cross my mind. There were to be no vehicles on this hike.

I followed the curve of the reservoir wall, went up a lane passing an obelisk and then continued down again, before coming to a dreamy

little glade near a place called Pobgreen where a dreamy church bell-tower poked up next to a dreamy pub called the Church Inn.

However, and this may offer the truest gauge of my state of being: I was too tired to go into the pub, as wonderfully enticing and perfect as it seemed. I was, frankly, worried that if I stopped, it might take quite a while to un-stop.

So, I did not stop.

I kept going along little lanes via farmland and many drystone walls, after some time arriving at the Diggle Hotel.