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Walking Home

Written by Simon Armitage

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SIMON ARMITAGE

Walking Home

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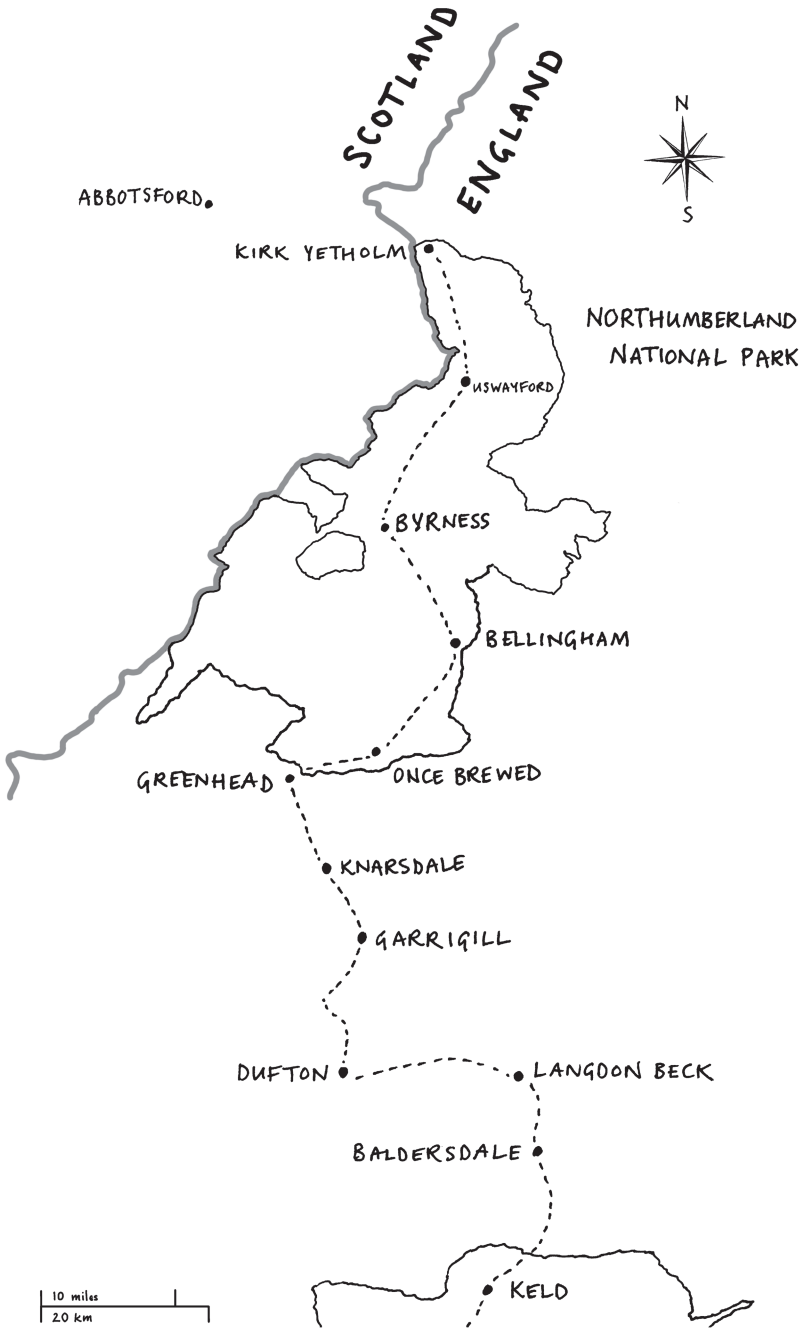
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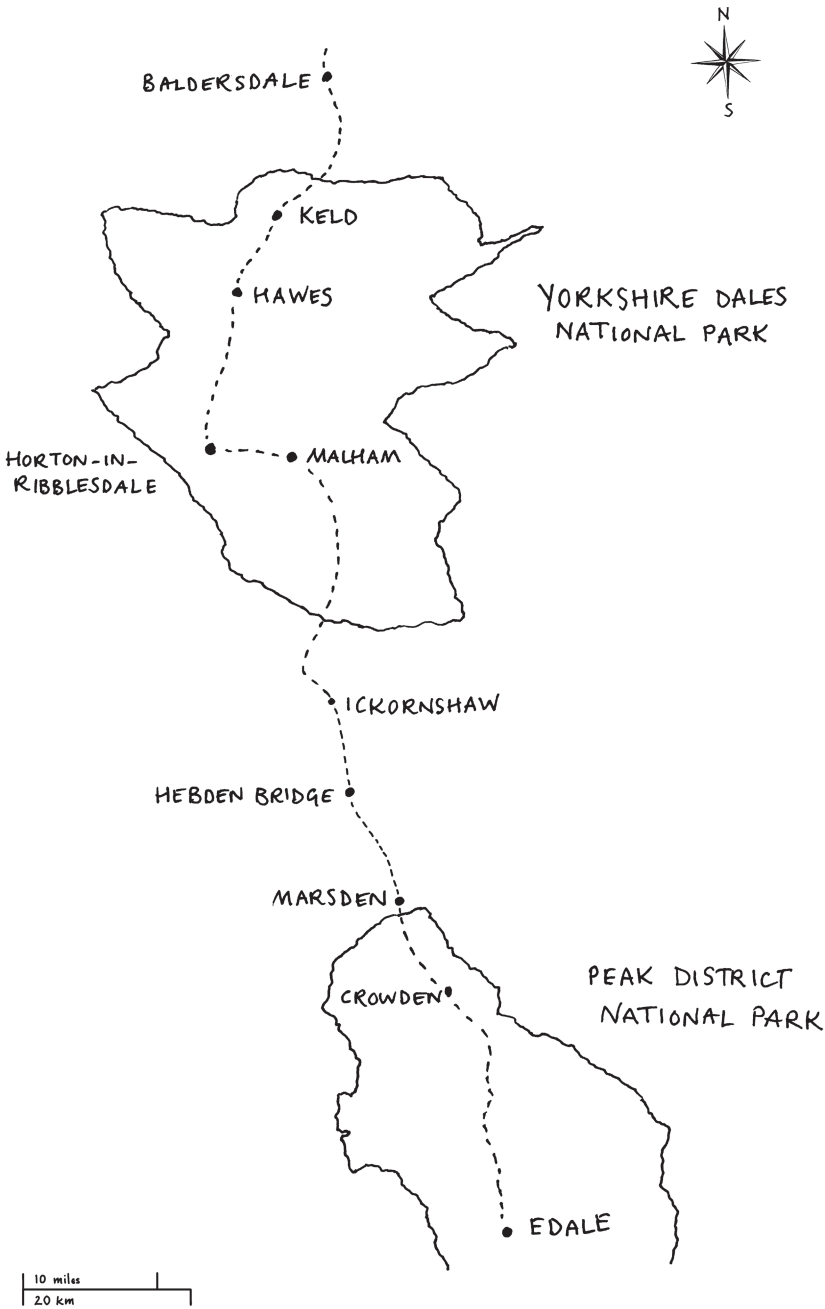
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Map of the Pennine Way from Kirk Yetholm to Edale


SCOTLAND
ENGLAND
N
S
ABBOTSFORD
KIRK YETHOLM
NORTHUMBERLAND
NATIONAL PARK
USWAYFORD
BYRNESS
BELLINGHAM
GREENHEAD
ONCE BREWED
KNARSDALE
GARRIGILL
DUFTON
LANGDON BECK
BALDERSDALE
KELD
10 miles
20 km


N
S
BALDERSDALE
KELD
HAWES
YORKSHIRE DALES
NATIONAL PARK
HORTON-IN-
RIBBLESDALE
MALHAM
ICKORNSHAW
HEBDEN BRIDGE
MARSDEN
CROWDEN
PEAK DISTRICT
NATIONAL PARK
EDALE
10 miles
20 km

A Preamble

In the West Yorkshire village of Marsden where I was born and grew up, a peculiar phenomenon took place every year. Starting round about May, usually in the late evenings, foreign creatures in big leather boots and mud-splattered over-trousers began descending from the moor to the south. They carried on their backs the carapaces of huge rucksacks and, from a distance, silhouetted on the horizon, they looked like astronauts. Up close, they smelt of dubbin, Kendal Mint Cake and sweat. And having just completed the first and arguably most daunting section of the Pennine Way, they wore on their faces a variety of expressions.

When I was a child this regular arrival of hikers was a source of curiosity and entertainment. Sometimes they were looking for the now defunct Youth Hostel, a former Co-op with about a dozen beds and a pool table, which also operated as a hang-out for bored local teenagers. But more often they were looking for somewhere to pitch their tent. In the absence of any campsite, this was usually the football field, or somebody's garden, or, on one occasion, the roundabout at the top of Fall Lane. A couple of lads from East Kilbride liked Marsden so much they dropped their plan to hike north and camped at the back of the allotments for the whole summer, occasionally opening the flaps to emit great wafts of pungent smoke, to put their empty cider

bottles out and to allow some of the village girls in. One old boy who knocked at my parents' house in desperate need of water still sends a Christmas card thirty years later.

The village welcomed these walkers; they were a good source of passing trade and to a certain extent put Marsden on the map. And without doubt, the walkers welcomed Marsden. Having set off from the starting post opposite the Old Nag's Head Inn in Edale, they would have covered a distance of about twenty-seven miles. That's a hard day's walk even through pleasant meadows or along a gentle towpath, but the first leg of the Pennine Way is a grim yomp across the aptly named Dark Peak, incorporating, just to emphasise the point, the equally aptly named Bleaklow and Black Hill. As kids, we roamed around the moors looking for adventures. But we always knew that beyond the immediate horizon, even beyond Saddleworth Moor which Myra Hindley and Ian Brady had turned into a macabre children's cemetery, there was a more foreboding and forbidden place. Looking up towards those moors from Manchester in the west or Sheffield in the south, it's difficult to understand: they seem little more than swollen uplands, humped rather than jagged, broad rather than high. But people go there and don't come back. Even on a clear day they form a bewildering and disorienting landscape, without feature or vista, like walking on a moon made largely of black mud. In the thick, clammy mist, which can descend in minutes, it is a nightmare. The Moorland Rescue team, friends of my dad, would sometimes come into the pub at night celebrating pulling a hiker out of a bog or finding some shivering wretch before nightfall. On other occasions a more sombre mood hung about them, and they

sat quietly with their drinks and their thoughts. For those hikers arriving in Marsden after crossing the Dark Peak, the looks on their faces said it all. They had encountered something up there they hadn't anticipated, and the evidence wasn't just in their peat-clogged boots and their sodden coats. It was in their eyes. For many, the village of Marsden was not only the first stop along the Pennine Way, it was also the last.

*

The Pennine Way is about 256 miles long – no one seems to be able to put a precise figure on it – beginning in Edale in Derbyshire and ending in Kirk Yetholm, just the other side of the Scottish border. Britain's first official long-distance trail, it was formally opened in 1965, though hiker and journalist Tom Stephenson initially proposed the walk in a *Daily Herald* article published in 1935. Born out of the 'right to roam' movement, public disquiet after the great depression and the subsequent mass trespass on Kinder Scout in 1932, it was, in its conception, as much a political statement as a leisure activity, and no doubt there are members of the landed gentry with double-barrelled surnames and similarly barrelled shotguns who would still like to ban the common people from wandering across certain tracts of open moorland, especially during the month of August. According to the literature, many thousands of people hike some stretch of the Way each year, but of those who attempt the whole thing, only a fraction succeed. While taking in some of the most beautiful scenery in the country, it also passes through some of the bleakest. High above the

tree-line, beyond even the hardiest sheep, some of the longer, lonelier sections represent a substantial challenge not just to the body but to the spirit. Indeed, if much of the literature is to be believed, the Pennine Way is more of an endurance test or an assault course than a walk, and not something for a feeble-minded, faint-hearted tenderfoot.

*

In the summer of 2010 I decided to walk the Pennine Way. I wanted to write a book about the North, one that could observe and describe the land and its people, and one that could encompass elements of memoir as well as saying something about my life as a poet. I identified the Pennine Way as the perfect platform: a kind of gantry running down the backbone of the country offering countless possibilities for perspectives and encounters, with every leg of the journey a new territory and a new chapter. But I decided to approach it in two unconventional ways. Firstly, I decided to walk from north to south. This might not seem like such a revolutionary act; a walk is a walk – can it really matter which is the beginning and which is the end? And yet the majority of people who complete the Pennine Way start in Derbyshire and breast the finishing line in Scotland. The theory, it seems, is to keep the sun, wind and rain at your back rather than walking for three weeks with the unpredictable and unhelpful meteorological elements of the British summer full in the face. Accordingly, all of the guide books are written in that direction. But as a poet, I'm naturally contrary. If most writers are writing prose, then mostly I'm writing something else. Poetry, by definition, is

an alternative, and an obstinate one at that. It often refuses to reach the right-hand margin or even the bottom of the page. Prose fills a space, like a liquid poured in from the top, but poetry *occupies* it, arrays itself in formation, sets up camp and refuses to budge. It is a dissenting and wilful art form, and most of its practitioners are signed-up members of the awkward squad. So against all the prevailing advice, against the prevailing weather, and against much of the prevailing signage, I undertook to walk the Pennine Way in the 'wrong' direction. Walking south also made sense because it meant I'd be walking home. From what I'd read about the Way, almost every section of it offered multiple opportunities and numerous excuses to give up rather than carry on. I was going to need a consistent reason to keep going, and the humiliation of failing to arrive in the village where I was born seemed like the perfect incentive.

Secondly, and even more optimistically, I announced publicly that I would attempt the walk as a kind of modern-day troubadour, giving poetry readings at every stop, bartering and trading my way down country, offering only poetry as payment. Early in the year, I put the following page on my website.

The Pennine Way – Can You Help?

Hello. In July 2010 I'm walking the Pennine Way. It's usually walked from south to north but I'm attempting it the other way round, because that way it will be downhill all the way, right? I'm doing the walk as a poet. Wherever I stop for the night I'm going to give a reading, for which there will be no charge, but at the end of the evening I'll pass a hat around

and people can give me what they think I'm worth. I want to see if I can pay my way from start to finish on the proceeds of my poetry alone. So, it's basically 256 miles of begging.

If you live on or near one of the recognised stopping points on the Pennine Way and would be willing to host or organise a reading for me, be it in a room in a pub, a village hall, a church, a library, a school, a barn, or even in your living room, do get in touch. If you can throw in B&B and a packed lunch, sherpa my gear along to the next stop, point me in the right direction the next day or even want to walk that leg of the journey with me, so much the better. I'm pretty well house-trained and know at least three moderately funny anecdotes.

Here's the schedule, outlining where I'll be and when, blisters permitting:

Thursday 8th July: Kirk Yetholm to Uswayford
Friday 9th July: Uswayford to Byrness
Saturday 10th July: Byrness to Bellingham
Sunday 11th July: Bellingham to Once Brewed (No reading – World Cup Final!)
Monday 12th July: Once Brewed to Greenhead
Tuesday 13th July: Greenhead to Knarsdale
Wednesday 14th July: Knarsdale to Garrigill
Thursday 15th July: Garrigill to Dufton
Friday 16th July: Dufton to Langdon Beck
Saturday 17th July: Langdon Beck to Baldersdale
Sunday 18th July: Baldersdale to Keld
Monday 19th July: Keld to Hawes
Tuesday 20th July: Hawes to Horton-in-Ribblesdale (Reading in Grasmere)
Wednesday 21st July: Horton-in-Ribblesdale to Malham

Thursday 22nd July: Malham to Ickornshaw
Friday 23rd July: Ickornshaw to Hebden Bridge
Saturday 24th July: Hebden Bridge to Marsden
Sunday 25th July: Marsden to Crowden
Monday 26th July: Crowden to Edale

And even if you can't offer a reading, if you see a weather-beaten poet coming over the horizon early next summer, do say hello. Many thanks.
SA

A fortnight before I set off I traced out the route and the reading venues with a pink highlighter pen, and couldn't find enough room in the house to lay out the nine required Ordnance Survey maps end to end. As a geography graduate who once dreamed of becoming a cartographer, I pride myself on a certain amount of navigational ability. But seeing the walk sprawled out in front of me, like some great long stair-carpet, the enormity and ridiculousness of the task started to dawn on me. Or to hit me, rather, as a series of bullet points, fired from close range.

- It's a long way.
- It's not a straight line.
- Some of the maps have very little in the middle of them apart from spot-heights and the names of hills.
- The only maps I've looked at for the last ten years are A–Z street maps, and not many of them either since the advent of the SatNav. Will I be able to cope without an electronically voiced Sally or Bruce telling me to go straight ahead at the roundabout?

- These maps are not handy and useful like road atlases, but wide, spineless and unwieldy sheets. It's hard enough trying to open them, let alone fold them back up again. What will that be like in the wind?
- Or the rain?
- For three weeks I will be reading these maps upside down.

I had, in fact, walked one section of the Pennine Way before. Or attempted it. In 1987, three of us took a train to Edale, being quietly confident of arriving back in Marsden for opening time. We were young, fit, and in good spirits as we walked west along the sunken lane from Grindsbrook Booth, crossed the old packhorse bridge and climbed the steep, rocky path known as Jacob's Ladder. It was a clear day. Or at least for an hour or so it was. Then it got dark, and cold, and the wind picked up. We were probably only two or three miles onto the moor, but we'd already entered that perplexing and mystifying lunar landscape, and we had gone astray. The night before, a man in the pub had assured us that it was impossible to get lost on the Pennine Way because 'it's basically like the M1 up there'. That man, it transpired, hadn't actually been on the Pennine Way and hadn't been on the M1 either. We stumbled around for a while, hoping to pick up the path, which had been right there beneath our feet only a minute ago then had vanished. We sat down on a stone to take an early lunch, but we'd eaten our sandwiches on the train. It started to get brighter, but that's because it was hailing, zillions of white, small-bore ice-balls stinging our faces and hands, making the ground and the air all the same colour. The map came out

of the rucksack, got wet, and in the ensuing argument over who should take charge, was ripped into several soggy pieces. One of us thought we should find a stream and follow it downhill. Someone else said that was a bad idea and would lead us head first over a rock face or waterfall. Another suggestion was to stay put until we were rescued, which was voted on and passed, but after a minute or so of sitting in the silence and the chilly air and the frosty atmosphere, that began to feel like a very dispiriting option, and anyway, not one of us had thought to tell anyone where we were going. Finally we decided that the only thing to do, other than die, was to keep following the same compass direction until we came to a road. Manchester was on one side and Sheffield was on the other, it was just a case of holding our nerve and keeping to the same course. When we eventually stumbled off the hillside onto some minor road above Hayfield, we were only a few miles from our starting point, and Marsden felt a long way off, over impossible and impassable terrain.

*

Can I actually walk the Pennine Way? I have contemplated this question many times over the preceding months, and the truthful answer is this: I don't know. I'm forty-seven, I weigh twelve stone and twelve pounds, and when I look in the mirror, I see a reasonably fit, relatively healthy person. And from my father I have inherited a stubborn streak. Some people have interpreted this as 'ambition', but it isn't, it's just a pig-headed refusal to give up or accept failure, particularly when the chances of success are microscopically

small or when defeat would be a far easier and more dignified option. On the other hand, I have an unspecified lower back problem that incapacitates me a couple of times a year, and although I wouldn't describe my lifestyle as sedentary exactly, it's certainly true that on certain days my legs do very little other than dangle under a desk or propel me from the multi-storey car park to the ticket office at Wakefield Westgate railway station. And from my mother I have inherited 'small lungs', apparently. I don't know if this has ever been clinically measured, but our poor capacity for storing and processing oxygen is family lore, and from an early age I was warned never to dream of being crowned King of the Mountains in the Tour de France or to take up a career as a pearl diver. In terms of training, I've done a bit of stretching and a bit of swimming, plus a few hours on a primitive cycling machine in my mother-in-law's back bedroom. I've also moved house. Only a couple of miles down the road, but hand-balling dozens of cubic metres of boxes containing thousands of books must count as some kind of physical conditioning. And I've been to Glastonbury, the original intention being to test my boots in the mud, though Glastonbury 2010 turned out to be a bit of a scorcher, so all I know is that my size ten GTX Mammuts are 100 per cent resistant to both dust and cider. 'I've done a lot of mental preparation,' I tell people, when they ask, and have reasoned with myself that I will undergo most of the physical training en route, preparing for day two by walking on day one, and so on and so forth. What could possibly go wrong?

Other people also seem to be in two minds about my chances of success. When I confide to a friend that I rate my

odds as no more than fifty–fifty, he says, 'I admire your optimism.' And when, during the week before I set off, I ask my wife if she truly believes I can do it, she folds her arms, leans against the wall, looks at the floor, and says, 'Simon, I'm very worried about you.' Which I take to be a less-than-wholehearted *yes*. Or an indication that she considers me to be in the grip of a midlife crisis, needing to prove my youthfulness and manliness by hiking an insane distance every day for the next three weeks without a break, then at night, when I should be recuperating, giving public readings. Couldn't I just cut to the chase and buy a Harley Davidson or grow a ponytail instead? We're having this conversation in the kitchen. I'm getting my 'kit' together, and I've just come back from the garage with a purple and pink rucksack, hers, which has been hanging on a rusty nail for as long as I can remember and is a little bit moth-eaten. With her 'very worried about you' comment still hovering in the air, and possibly as a way of holding faulty equipment responsible for my imminent failure, I shake the dust and cobwebs from the rucksack and say, 'Do you think this is up to the job?'

'Well, it got me to Everest base camp without any problems,' she says, then goes outside to build a wall.

So, no pressure there, then.

A day or two later, I walk over to my parents' house, about eight miles away across the moor, to give the rucksack a trial run, and find that it doesn't really have all the necessary pouches and flaps to accommodate the complex paraphernalia carried by the contemporary hiker. My mum goes upstairs and pulls her own rucksack out of the airing cupboard, a big blue one with badges sewn on the front

denoting her long-distance walking conquests. The fact that she completed the Pennine Way when she was fifty (carrying all her pack and with two dodgy knees, not to mention the small lungs) is just another reason why I MUST NOT FAIL. I remember going into the spare room before she set off, and seeing all her luggage laid out on the bed, including dozens of T-shirts compressed into a small dense block, and several weeks' worth of underwear which she had somehow managed to vacuum-pack into a couple of freezer bags, next to a travel-size packet of Fairy Snow. As well as the rucksack, she also gives me her Platypus, a soft, plastic water holder which sits in the side pocket of the rucksack and supplies liquid to the mouth via a tube, and I quickly try to suppress the Freudian implications of being lent such a teat-operated demand-feeding device by my mum.

My dad, who has been remarkably silent on the whole subject of me walking the Pennine Way, is sitting in the armchair watching *Cash in the Attic*, and is now ready to lend his opinion.

'Looks heavy, that bag,' he says.

'It's just a day bag,' I say. 'Everything else is going in a suitcase.'

'Give it here, let's have a feel.'

As if his arm is one of those spring-loaded hooks for weighing record-breaking carp at the side of a pond, he picks up the rucksack, then announces: 'Twenty-five pounds. Too heavy. You'll have to strip it down a bit.'

Like a naughty schoolboy turning out his pockets in front of the headmaster, I start emptying out the bag. When I packed it, I genuinely thought I'd included the minimum

amount of gear for the maximum number of eventualities, but in front of my dad, everything now seems lavish and embarrassing, as if he's caught me with lipstick and mascara. So the camera gets a shake of the head, as does the notebook, the glucose tablets and the torch. Neither is he impressed with the GPS unit or the spare batteries or the packet of plasters, though the twelve-blade penknife does elicit a nod of approval. The last object in the bag, and one that takes up quite a lot of room, is a waterproof raincoat. Dismissing one of the fundamental tenets of hill-walking and demonstrating a complete lack of respect for the notoriously changeable Pennine weather he says, 'You don't need a coat.'

''Course I need a coat.'

'Nah,' he says.

'So what do I do when it rains?'

'Just take a bin bag,' he says. 'Cut a hole in the top and stick your head through,' he adds, before turning back to the television. For several days afterwards, I find myself thinking of the moment on *Look North* when I'm dragged from a ditch on some god-forsaken upland, wearing a refuse sack. Or wondering why my father would prefer it if I made my triumphant entry into my home village of Marsden, or perhaps more pertinently *his* village, dressed as rubbish.

Home to Abbotsford

Wednesday 7 July

On the morning of my departure, some kind well-wisher called James has emailed to point out that due to the centripetal forces induced by the rotation of the planet, the Earth actually bulges towards the equator, making the equator further from the centre of the Earth than the two poles, meaning that any journey from north to south in the northern hemisphere is not downhill, as I have commented on my website, but a climb. Thank you, James. And so it is with a heavy heart, a heavy rucksack, an even heavier suitcase and the laws of the universe stacked against me that I post the keys back through the letterbox and set off down the road. I have in my pocket enough money to get me to Scotland by public transport, and not a penny more. I am going for broke: from now on it's poetry or bust.

*

'I suppose I'll always be looked upon as the axe man, but it was surgery, not mad chopping.' So said Dr Richard 'Axe Man' Beeching when publishing his *The Reshaping of British Railways* report in March 1963, two months before I was born. I've only ever seen one photograph of Dr Beeching; in it he is wearing an Oliver Hardy moustache over his lip, a rather smug smile, and is sitting on a train – an irony that

couldn't possibly have escaped him. Many said that Beeching's drastic cuts to the nation's rail network were short-sighted, which I agree with. On the other hand, it could be that his faulty vision actually saved the Penistone Line, a single-track route so insignificant and overgrown that it was probably overlooked rather than spared. To this day, I even wonder if the authorities are aware of its existence, or if it might be one of those operations staffed entirely by volunteers and enthusiasts, or even by ghosts. My local station isn't so much neglected as abandoned, even by vandals, and is a station only in the sense that it has a name and trains stop there, albeit not very often. Whatever the reason for its survival, it means I can catch a train pretty much at the bottom of the garden, even if the conductor can't supply me with a one-way ticket to Berwick-upon-Tweed. 'Change in Huddersfield then pay again,' he advises. Then he looks at my boots and my rucksack, and adds: 'Good luck.' I presume from this comment that he's seen something about my walk in the local paper, and taking his remark as a comic reference to Richard Attenborough's calamitous blunder in *The Great Escape*, I reply, '*Danke schoen*.' I see then from his expression that he has no idea why this English-speaking hiker should suddenly be spouting phrasebook German, and he moves off down the carriage in search of less complicated fares.

Huddersfield isn't a difficult town to leave. There are obviously a great many things I love about the place, because I've lived here all of my life and will probably die here as well, which has to be the biggest compliment anyone can pay their home town. But is it too much to ask for a little reciprocity every now and again, or that as admirers we

shouldn't be required to work so very hard to justify our affection? On grey days like these, the view from the eastward-moving train is the organic architecture of an endless chemical plant with its elaborate and convoluted pipe-work set against the background of a dark and dirty hill. Leeds Road, in front of it, is a strip-mall of franchises and dealerships, and if the canal isn't actually clinically dead it's doing a very good impression of something no longer alive. The Galpharm Stadium is visually interesting, although its name is so ugly that even the most devoted Town fan rarely enunciates it, and the other two obvious landmarks are the red-and-black slab of the B&Q Superstore and the rocket-like chimney of the local incinerator. Huddersfield, I'm not running away, but just for a few weeks will you let me go?

The train is packed. It's odd to be a walker among so many workers, to put my rucksack on the luggage rack next to briefcases and umbrellas, and to see my big clomping boots lined up under the table next to pairs of shiny brogues and colourful high heels. But in some ways it reminds me why I'm making this journey, because thinking back, I was built for the outdoors. I had a childhood of moors and woods, of tree-houses and tents, of dens and camps. I went from the football field to the tennis court to the cricket pitch and rarely went home in between. I was a kite-flyer and a bike-rider. I stalked the undergrowth with an air-rifle. And I skimmed stones across the reservoirs, of which Marsden has dozens, as if the village had an inherent fear of dehydration which manifested itself in a mania for collecting and storing water, until every depression was flooded, every valley dammed, and every raindrop caught. The moor was

wrung for its supply, brooks and becks were tapped and siphoned, rivers decanted into dye-pans and dams by the mill, and 'catch-waters' were dug out along the contours of the hills, like drip-trays a couple of yards wide and several miles long, drawing off every last droplet of moisture. Along with the railway and the canal it made the area a vast theme park of tunnels and bridges and shafts and tracks, an immeasurable, unsupervised playground. I imagined when I was younger that I'd spend my days and earn my living outside, and when I swapped social work for poetry, part of the idea was to get out of the office and into the wider world again, to rejoin the adventure. But the sediment has built up. The stodginess of routine has set in. So even if I'm writing about the Sahara or the Antarctic I'm usually doing it in a chair, in a room, behind double glazing. The Pennine Way is about getting OUT THERE again. It's about taking the air and clearing my head.

The commuters disembark at Leeds. I fall asleep against the window, wake up to see York Minster go past, then Sutton Bank with the Kilburn White Horse floating in the landscape. Then Durham Cathedral. The next time I look up it's towards sand dunes, the sea, then Holy Island and the superstructure of Lindisfarne Monastery, beached by a low tide. Familiarity dissolves with distance.

*

Al picks me up from the station. I've met him twice before, at a couple of Hogmanay parties about a decade ago. On each occasion we were both less than sober or we were hungover, but he'd spotted my SOS on the website, and recognises me

on the platform, and we drive for an hour or so through the Scottish Borders, from one neat and tidy town to the next, across low, stone-built bridges and alongside wide, shallow rivers. I don't know this part of the world at all. It seems very orderly, very picturesque, and very empty. I once tutored a residential poetry course in a big farmhouse somewhere hereabouts. The lady of the house was generous and welcoming, but her husband didn't seem completely comfortable with the idea of poets poking around his yard and lounging on his settees, and made it his business to drive past the sitting-room window every five minutes on his mini-tractor while we were scrutinising some delicate piece of versification. Was that just down the road or a hundred miles away? The place names are familiar, but that's because when I see them I hear the voice of rugby union commentator Bill McLaren, saying, 'They'll be dancing on the streets of Hawick/Melrose/Galashiels tonight,' after some tousle-haired dairyman- cum-prop-forward had galloped half the length of the field and touched the ball down under the English posts.

With Al's wife Judith we eat posh fish and chips in a gastropub in Selkirk, then it's off to Abbotsford. Abbotsford isn't the start of the Pennine Way, but it is the home of Sir Walter Scott, and venue for the first reading. Al tours me around the formal gardens, past the glasshouse, in and out of the sculpted hedgerows, then across a mown stretch of meadow to the bank of the Tweed. There's a marquee on the lawn; Abbotsford might be the spiritual home of one of Scotland's most famous sons, but like most historic sites and country piles it needs money and plenty of it, so for the right price you can get hitched here. I imagine the amplified strains of Whitney Houston or Tom Jones bouncing off the ornate

masonry and echoing around the walled vegetable patch. In the house itself, we pass through a corridor decorated with Scott's collection of weaponry: swords, pistols, daggers, pikes, armour, plus the heads, horns and hides of many an unfortunate beast. Scott was unable to fulfil his ambitions as a military man because of a bout of polio when he was two which left him lame, but what he lacked in physical ability he obviously made up for in arms and artillery. Like Lord Byron with his club foot, he clearly wasn't embarrassed by the concept of over-compensation. The galleried study is marvellous, a wonder, and somewhere in the background I can hear Al pointing out the wax seals, the quill pen, the lavish handwriting and the handsome spectacles . . . But I'm not looking. Or listening. My mind's drifting. I'm thinking of the 256 miles and nineteen consecutive poetry readings stretching away to the south. I've made a big song and dance about this venture, talked about it on the telly and the radio, written pieces for the papers, roped in dozens and dozens of volunteers to cart my bag and lay on events and give up their beds. The whole project is based on the kindness of strangers, the entire itinerary held together by nothing more than a loosely connected chain of names and addresses and telephone numbers of people I've never met and who don't know me from Adam. But the weakest link in that chain, I now realise, standing here among the trappings and trophies of Sir Walter Scott's epic deeds and dazzling accomplishments, is me. What the fuck was I thinking? Failure seems unavoidable, with humiliation and shame the inevitable consequence.

But it's too late now, because the glasses from the champagne reception are being collected, and I'm being

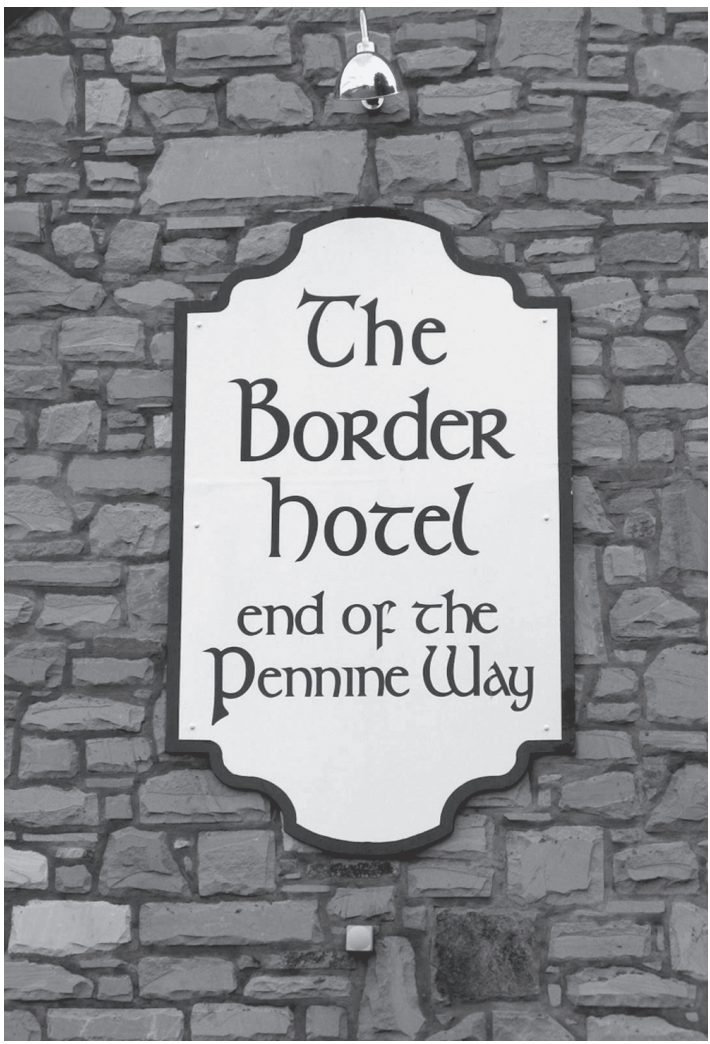
introduced, in the library, with a white marble bust of Scott staring down on me in judgement from the mantelpiece. In front of the great bay window, I explain what I'm doing here, and how I'm leaving a hat by the door – all contributions welcome. In fact I've decided to leave a sock instead, still a clean one at this stage, on the basis that it allows for more discretion when making a donation and even offers the possibility of taking something out rather than putting something in, should the reading offend. Then I launch into the first poem, one hand on my book, one hand on a display case containing a lock of Bonnie Prince Charlie's hair and Rob Roy's sporran. Towards the end, several people in the audience seem moved to tears, covering their eyes with their hands and bowing their heads. One woman takes a handkerchief out of her bag and lifts it to her face. But it's just the sun, setting directly behind me, streaming into the library, blazing around my head and behind my back, reducing me to flames.

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I'm staying with Catherine and John in Kirk Yetholm. Or is it Town Yetholm? Or perhaps even Thirlestane? In the twilight, through the car window, one place seems to bleed seamlessly into the next, but as every villager knows, at the local level these kinds of distinction are fundamental. To the Town Yetholmer, Kirk Yetholm may as well be Timbuktu, an elsewhere, a place unlike their own, where they do things differently. A cork comes out of a bottle of wine and Catherine takes an order for my breakfast and packed lunch. A conversation gets under way around the

kitchen table on the relative merits of the treasure-trove system, John's land having recently yielded up some historic artefact. I tell them a story I heard on the news, about a man with a metal detector who unearthed an exquisite Anglo-Saxon torc. He knew he had to hand it in to the authorities, but just for one night he gave the golden necklace to his wife, and she wore it for dinner. I embroider the tale, so she enters the candlelit kitchen in a flowing white gown and satin slippers, and he carves and serves the specially prepared dish of a wren inside a quail inside a guinea fowl inside a turkey inside a swan. Then they toast their good fortune with a goblet of mead, royalty for a day, king and queen of their own little world.

In the guest bedroom there's no signal to call home, not even if I stand on a chair or lean out of the window. I get under the sheets, drift off dreaming about buried treasure and hoards of gold, then wake up realising I haven't counted the takings from the reading. With the rest of the house asleep, I empty the sock onto the bed as quietly as I can. It's a scene I wouldn't want to explain, the awakened householder bursting in with his gun and his dog to discover the avaricious and perverted northerner standing there in his underpants and T-shirt above an eiderdown glittering with money. I count the coins into piles. There are notes as well, some bearing the face of Sir Walter Scott. In my notebook I write, 'Abbotsford: Attendance, 72. Takings, £167.77.' Then with the money scooped back into a Tesco's carrier bag I go back to sleep, and wake up five hours later when the alarm goes off, not sure where I am and with a two-pence piece stuck to my bare thigh.


The
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Pennine Way