

The Stone House
Upper Weardale
Far from Anywhere

Dear Aunt Constance,

Well I did make it to the North Pennines and I have been pootling around a small village called Wearhead and its environs. I say village but it bears no resemblance to what we know as a village – no village green, thatched houses, duck pond, pub called “The Blacksmith’s Arms”, surrounded by wheat fields like those you ran through with Theresa. The hills don’t roll as they do in Surrey. In fact they don’t move at all. They just stand there with their arms folded staring down at you. Taciturn is the word. However, give them a bit of time, let them get to know you, and they’ll nod a “good morning”. Perhaps they’ve seen too much over the years but put your walking boots on for a ramble and they’ll gladly step alongside and show you the high moors (where the whole world stretches before you), the huge skies, and narrow gullies. They’re proud of their scarred features and rugged charms (which are more battered boxer than Clint Eastwood) but they wouldn’t say so.

Now I would’ve written sooner but it took an age to get here. Kings Cross to Durham (1st Class) was pleasant enough (though I did find The Telegraph crossword frustrating) and Durham is quite splendid. It has all that World Heritage site stuff and students by the score (many from the south it would seem) and a plethora of decent coffee shops. I thought if this is the north then it’s certainly making a decent fist of it. Ah but then I had to catch a bus (yes, a bus, Aunt Constance). Now Durham must be embarrassed by the need for a bus

station so they've crammed it into the shabby part of the city. I was a little dismayed at the vista presented but I remembered the words of my father as I stood crying on my first day at boarding school, "Now steady on, old chap; remember you're from Reigate"

I caught a bus to Crook (where do they get these names from?) that diesel fumed its way through some unprepossessing neighbourhoods of squashed dull houses, shuttered shops, tanning salons, bookies, fast food and charity shops. At Crook I had to wait 15 minutes for a bus to Stanhope. I hid my Daily Telegraph and kept myself to myself. However, once you leave Crook and enter Weardale the scenery does improve. The hills enjoy a little roll as you head to Wolsingham, a somewhat sturdy town where you can see the remnants of a foundry and you can buy a Motor Home or two before reaching Stanhope (where I had to get on another bus!). This is, or at least it sees itself as, the capital of the dale. There is some industry (light and small and hidden away) and the market place is dominated by a fine castle (something to do with some chaps called the Prince Bishops). Not sure what they did but I know an ancestor of Lady Redcar lost heavily at cards to one of them. There is a striving to be "just so" with Stanhope but an industrial past still intrudes, sticking its tongue out at the remnants of heritage. Then onto the final bus – more of a minibus – that trundled the narrow road to where the valley carves into the hills. Not many people to be seen on or off the bus. However, the Dales Centre car park was busy - the cafe, tourist shop, the bijou businesses in the courtyard and the hill-walkers.

We passed a sign for the last working quarry, the cluster of houses at Eastgate and what I found out later was the site of the cement works. Once the major employer it now wastes away in limbo. Quarry

workings tumble down the hillsides and small packages of fields for sheep and hay jostle cottages that were once homes to the hill farmer and the quarryman. Many now are second homes for the urban dweller, for the commuter, for the retired, and the cottage entrepreneur. But let me warn you, Aunt Constance, that there lurk in the dale writers, artists, picture-framers, potters, knitters, all waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting native and visitor with the promise of hand-crafted thingummies at reasonable prices. The landscape has been battered by lead mining (long gone), quarrying (nearly gone) and hill farming (on the way out?) yet it is marketed as an "Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty" (AONB). Now I don't think it would describe itself as beautiful – lived-in and full of interest perhaps. Nor is it natural - it's had too many makeovers. Outstanding? Perhaps. But on weekends in the spring and summer it truly is an AONB – Arseholes on Noisy Bikes belt up and down the dale

When I alighted from the bus (after 2 hours) it was still and quiet, the occasional car, no shops, houses that cling to the road, a persistent wind, and Durham a teasing memory. Look at the map, Aunt Constance, and you will see Wearhead is no distance from Durham and one would think it would be the same as commuting from Reigate to the City. But Reigate and the City are essentially the same world whereas even Durham and Wearhead are worlds apart. When I get back, that's if I ever find my way out, I'm going to suggest that Reigate twins itself with Wearhead instead of some European town. That would be an eye-opener.

I found a billet at The Calf House, Cowshill, where the delightful landlady, Susie, regaled me with good food and observations about

identity, the need to know where you belong, the warnings she gives guests about no petrol station for miles, nowhere to dine of an evening without driving a distance, and no shop until St John's Chapel. An evening playing dominoes at the Cowshill Hotel confirmed that people drive miles for a night out yet despite, or because of this, they will soon find out who you are, and what you do, and whether you finished The Telegraph crossword.

Although the villages are not far apart you never escape the sense of isolation. There seems plenty to do if you have time on your hands, money in your pocket, and a car to drive. None of these and it's not so easy. You would enjoy it, Aunt Constance. You like writing, painting, crafting, volunteering, country dancing etc. There are also many people of your age who have moved up from the south and they are enamoured. You need your thermals in the winter and sometimes in the summer. You'd need to stock up for the bad weather and hope that if you fall ill during the winter months the neighbours are aware. They will be. They know how that to survive in places like this you need to look out for each other.

I popped into the primary school at Wearhead (where they speak Spanish). Such a small school but they love to tell stories about the Dale and their hopes and ambitions. Do they know that as they play in the magic of their landscape that secondary school is a long bus journey away, that they will need to rely on parents to furnish dreams of the teenage years and that, most likely, they will have to leave the Dale? And if they do will they ever be able to come back?

There is much more to tell and to discover, Aunt Constance, but I said I'd pop along to help feed the proggy mats before the community film

night. But I have one question that will keep me here for a little while yet which is *How do we live in a place such as this?* So I will resume my rambles and conversations and let you know when and if there is an answer. I hope your bunions are much improved and please give Uncle Reginald my regards when you next visit him in HMP Wandsworth.

Yours affectionately

Mr Nap