

The Stone House
Upper Weardale
Far from Anywhere

Dear Aunt Constance,

I am so sorry for not writing sooner but after the incident with the baling twine I've not been feeling myself. Now I must tell you about The Breakfast Club. I know there was a Hollywood Brat Pack film from the 1980s (see I can still get "down with the kids" though it has become increasingly difficult to get back up again) but that is not what I'm talking about. Nor is it a pre-school club for poor children who do not have enough to eat. If one of those ever opens up in Reigate then I know the country is well and truly scuppered. No, this is a gathering at Cowshill Village Hall every Saturday Morning and run by volunteers involved in the village hall. No community would survive without such people.

I arrived just after 10.00 and there was already a queue for a bacon sandwich and a mug of tea. And let me tell you, those bacon sandwiches were the Badger's Bollocks as Uncle Reginald was wont to say. They do indeed "shake a canny pan" in Coswhill. Unfortunately my request for a macchiato was met with a stony stare before I was taken to one side by one of the older men (whose hush puppies designated him as a Committee Man) who said "Watch your language, bonny lad. There are lasses present". I asked if people knew what a macchiato was and he replied that of course they did but they only drank it in the company of consenting adults.

I was made to feel very welcome; people were only too willing to talk to me. That label you made for me to wear around my neck saying "Please talk to me" has proved surprisingly useful. Again I was in the company of older people. Where are all the younger people I asked? We ate them last winter came the reply. For one moment I was back at the Reigate W.I. and we know all about their eating habits. They have this particular sense of humour in the Upper Dale; it's what I would call "accepting" – accepting the weather, each other, the perceptions of outsiders etc. They live with how it is, not how they have been told it should be.

There's a lot of #history in the Upper Dale, Aunt Constance. It loiters on "the tops" and on the street corners; it sits on benches and watches you walk past. #history will have a pint in the pub, shop at the Co-op, and catch the bus to Stanhope. It will regale you with story and insight but only if you ask politely. Otherwise it will stay quiet and get on with life.

On the other hand #heritage, which is making its presence felt in the Dale in the last is a noisy bastard (please excuse my language, Aunt Constance but "noisy" was the only word I could think of). And it's getting everywhere; striding through the towns, it's loud voice and garish dress bouncing off the surrounding hills. You have to notice #heritage, admire it as it poses with guidebook and brown road signs, ready for visitor centres and selfies, whilst #history sits with a bag of crisps and a pint of Stella and looks at the hills and clouds; or sits by the river watching the wind bend the trees as it ponders stuff that needs to be pondered. #heritage thinks it knows. It doesn't. But #history does. If you want to know a place, talk to #history. If you want to just pass the time with "an experience" then #heritage is your man (or

woman). It must be said in its defence that although I find Heritage a troubling presence it does bring occupation and money to the area.

The weather was not clement; it was grey, damp, and misty with remnants of snow and ice refusing to acknowledge a supposed change in the season. I warmed myself in the company of an elderly lady who had always lived in the Upper Dale who described the weather as "Rouky"; a strange but perfect word to describe the outside conditions. It is cold up the top end of the Dale and this lady, let us call her Annie, said the difference between Lanehead and Coswhill at the top end and Stanhope some 10 miles down the Dale was a "top coat difference". I understand that.

There were other Weardale born-and-bred sat at the table. One gentleman had started his working life at the Eastgate Cement works and only moved out of the dale when they closed. He was relocated to southern Scotland but was home every weekend and felt "an excited contentment" when his car crested the hill at Lanehead. There was another who left the dale as a youngster to work in Middlesbrough. He ran his own business and but was back every weekend until he retired and moved back permanently. Unless you are very lucky or willing to take what work you can (sporadic and low-paid) you must work away from the dale in order to live in the dale. Perhaps it has always been like that and perhaps it always will. Does this landscape sabotage aspiration? A theme I shall return to in later letters. But I will say this. When the Eastgate Cement Works closed there was much talk of turning this extensive industrial site into an Eco village. As you can imagine, there were many for and many against. Money was earmarked and then it wasn't. Political decisions made elsewhere thwarted the proposal and the site remains derelict. It now

sits beside the road, resentful and morose. It had aspirations to be something other than what it was and was frustrated, not by the landscape, but by the indifference of the powers that be who maybe have no idea where Weardale is.

Sorry, Aunt Constance, I know that you disapprove of politics since you became secretary of the local Tory Party but it has to be said. It is a different world to Reigate. I know there are some who think that if the work doesn't come to you, you must go to the work. But how can you move Weardale down south? Where would it live? I know you have a spare room but it's not big enough to fit the whole of Weardale in. A landscape is not just a geographical feature; it is a relationship between people and space, a repository of memory that cradles future intentions. Take the people away and you are left with just a geographical feature that people drive through and never experience.

That is enough for now, I think. And what a strange thing to happen to your bunions. Have you talked to the council? You might get a grant. I was surprised to hear that Uncle Reginald has been transferred to Peterhead. It's in Scotland I believe which is not too far from here.

Yours affectionately

Mr Nap