

The Stone House  
Upper Weardale  
Far from Anywhere

Dear Aunt Constance,

Be prepared for a shock. I have discovered the joys (I use that word advisedly) of hill-walking. I know, I know. This from a man who thinks pitch & putt at Bognor Regis is unnecessary exertion. But if I wanted to see what the Dale was like from "The Tops" (as the tops of the moors are called) I needed to get up on to The Tops to do so. I telephoned a local taxi company to arrange transport for this venture but my request was met with much amusement. He said, and I quote, "You'll need an effing tractor for that". An Effing Tractor must be, I believe, a type of tractor specific to The North. I'm curious so I will seek out a chap called John Deere who seems to own a few tractors hereabouts.

Once I knew that I had to walk I set my mind to it, thankful that I had packed stout shoes, some Rydale country shirts and Uncle Reginald's Barbour jacket (which still had traces of the cocaine he takes for his sciatica). My starting place was St John's Chapel which gets its name from the chapel named after John the Baptist who, as far as I can recall from my religious education, was not from Weardale and never visited the area. However, John Wesley, that Methodist chap, did so I wonder if there might have been a little confusion and the name of the village is really John Wesley Chapel after aforesaid John Wesley. This would make more sense as Wesley had a static caravan at White House & Hagg Bridge caravan site near Eastgate

and took regular holidays there. It is a beautiful, quiet, spot and handy for his preaching trips up and down the Dale

Chapel, as it is called locally, is blessed with a Co-op. Now this is a retail outlet that sells provisions and life's necessities but much to my chagrin it sells neither Gentlemen's Relish nor acceptable mustard. This is real deprivation, Aunt Constance. As you will not be familiar with the Co-op imagine if you will an under-nourished Waitrose; stunted growth, a hint of rickets, and a soporific countenance. I stood on the cobbles outside the Co-op and consulted my guidebook "Walks in a Strange Place" that I had purchased whilst working as a gigolo in Godalming. Much enamoured by the detailed descriptions of the ramblings I was lost in thought when an elderly gentleman approached and asked if he could help in any way. He had lived in the Dale all his life and claimed to have walked every footpath. He kindly suggested a path on the South side of the dale which I duly took. I'm sure he was chuckling to himself when I set off.

I started up a steep road (and let me assure you that you don't know the meaning of the word "steep" in Reigate) and after some 300 metres I was struggling for breath so I stopped to have a cigarette. I looked around at the landscape and realised that in a very short distance everything had changed. I now found myself surrounded by isolation. I could not see house or hut, animal or human. My only companion was a wind that would not leave me alone. That may sound strange, Aunt Constance, but when you think about it the wind in Weardale must get very lonely. It's never invited to parties at the village hall or for a pint at The Bluebell pub in Chapel. It's not welcome for Sunday tea or Country Dancing at Stanhope. So it just kicks about the moorland and the street.

In Reigate we don't think much about the wind do we? Now and again it can prove a little fierce and most unwelcome but once gone it's soon forgotten. Here a wind can keep people indoors, make it difficult to think and speak; damage outbuildings, drive rain through cracked and gaped tiles, push draughts through windows and under doors; it can bring torrential rain and blizzards and freeze recently fallen snow to treachery. Yet no matter how fierce the wind, how much it gusts, what weather it brings in and blows away, people still wait unsheltered for the bus, drive through road water gathered into lakes, battle and steer through cross winds, and tend to beasts in the field.

They say you get used to it but I'm not sure. I think you learn to strike a bargain with the wind and the weather; and like a lead miner's bargain (yes I have been to Killhope Lead Mining Museum; visitors are shot if they don't) it can prove costly. A good bargain brings fields of hay, clear flowing rivers and tumbling waterfalls, skies that never end, and a sense of belonging.

An incomer I spoke to said Upper Weardale was the closest thing to heaven. Yet I heard of a family who moved to the Dale in the late summer, beguiled by the light, the carnival of agricultural shows, the haymaking, and a Dale warmth, whilst not Mediterranean, has a certain British reserve in its polite and unobtrusive presence. They left the dale in the slush of a late spring thaw, having failed to bargain with the snow and the darkness. Entrapped by a climate they thought unforgiving they never worked out how to live in a place such as this.

Some (both natives and incomers) are smug when they hear such stories thinking "soft southerners with their soft southern ways and

their soft southern money who cannot hack life in the dale." Such sentiments fuel a certain mythology about how special a place is and the people are who stoically revel in a bleak and unforgiving winter. Far from the apparent ease of the south (though a Cornish winter might change their mind) some wear tough resentment like their Sunday best; worn for special occasions but worn with pride. Others wear it like thermal underwear; you cannot see it but you know it's there. I wonder if they revel in a mythology. Others couldn't care less where you're from, what you do, and why you're there. It's that warm indifference that makes you feel welcome

I was told that story of the family by the owner (a lady from Yorkshire, which is just north of Warwickshire) of one of the two cafe/tea-rooms in Chapel (both serve a good latte). She told me that since moving to the Dale she had become healthier and happier, thought the landscape wonderful and the weather never less than interesting. That move to the Dale, very much on a whim, was the best move of her life. She works very hard as the cafe is the focus for much tea & scone conversation and a popular stopping place for cyclists and walkers. The other cafe/tea room is equal in excellence but less "outdoor"; more of a read of the Weardale Gazette and quiet conversation establishment. I remarked to the lady who served me tea that the view from my table up to Sidehead was quite something. With a shrug she replied "It's there everyday" and wandered off into the kitchen. Both ladies are right. Perhaps the secret to living in a place like this is not to ask for too much and then you will be given a great deal.

Back to the walk. I left the road and followed a sign off to the left and headed east above Daddry Shield. The path led me across very boggy

ground which diminished the pleasure of the walk though the views were splendid to the north and because I could see Chapel, Daddry, and scattered farm and smallholdings isolation was not so pronounced.

I must stop now as I have soaked my feet sufficiently. I have some fine blisters, Aunt Constance. One is in the shape of the Isle of Wight. I will tell you more about farming, land ownership and the problem of water another time. Congratulations on first prize in the W.I. Craft Competition; send me a photograph as I think a bust of Boris Johnson facing two ways at the same time made from your week old ratatouille is quite an achievement. Is Uncle Reginald still in solitary? I sent him a picture of a dead lead miner to cheer him up but I've had no response

*Affectionately yours*

*Mr Nap*