The Magic Cattle Grid

by

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I have christened it the magic cattle grid. I visit it so often that my friends and family now accept, and even on occasion use, that ludicrous name. In truth there is nothing remarkable about the grid itself, it rattles and rumbles under cars and tractors in the usual way and crossing it on foot requires the customary and vaguely embarrassing, dainty steps for coping with that mild peril.

As a destination 'cattle grid' might sound a little underwhelming for the foot-weary traveller, particularly as no matter from where they have arrived there is no doubt they have undertaken a walk of some effort. If from Slaidburn then they have traced for almost fifteen miles the footsteps of the famous Pendle witches, if from the edges of Lancaster then acres of endlessly yielding grouse moor and if from either of the villages of Hornby or Wray then a steep, unrelenting upward slope.

My own, personal, walk, is the least hard fought of all the routes. I live in the heart of Wray; opposite my house begins the incline of a lane that climbs up and out of the village. It a matter of seconds for me to be beyond the tiny village school with its 'gift of £200 for ever' from a local boy made good who was sold by his drunken father and returned to wreak his revenge years later – that revenge being to educate the village children beyond the reach of the grinding poverty and cruelty that afflicted his family. The lane is narrow – a single car width – meaning that while traffic is quite rare, if I do meet any vehicles I must meld myself into the hedgerows, prickly and sparse in winter, greener and softer in spring and full of plump, staining fruit in late summer and autumn.

There is a push upwards, tarmac threading through a patchwork of cattle and sheep grazing land where the warp and weft are a mixture of lush pasture, low drystone walls and field

bottoms that dip to rush-covered wetland. This varied landscape means the air is rich and thick with noise; skylarks, lapwings, cuckoos, curlews, ducks, geese, oyster catchers, owls and buzzards push their songs and cries into cacophonous, glorious competition. The Forest of Bowland is a strange place, an undiscovered country into whose bourn few venture. It sits on a map, like a disappointing sandwich filling, between the fresh and familiar slices of the Yorkshire Dales and Lake District National Parks. The acquired taste of reality is far more satisfying.

When the road finally flattens – if only temporarily – I am exactly one mile from my front door but, turning onto the final upwards section of my walk, I could be hundreds of miles from anywhere. Fell ponies tug insistently at the grass in the field ahead, half hidden by huge blooming gorse bushes. Largely unused to people they ignore me as I resist the temptation to pause there, allow my heart rate to slow to normal and my vision to adjust to the widening of the landscape. For me, walking this route, that moment must always be deferred until I have crossed the magic cattle grid and rested my arms on the stout wall that supports the bars. It's like opening the hot, wrapped paper round chips in the car after visiting the chippy, the gratification is instant but the payoff is awkward, greasy and unfulfilling. These are pleasures best savoured stationary where all the senses can appreciate the experience.

I grew up by the Irish Sea, watching the sunset when the tide was out was a wonder that never lost its thrill. The burning embers of the day streaking the sky with pinks and oranges above the apparently endless sands gave me a true sense of the vast that has only been matched when driving through middle eastern deserts. Landscape, however remote, rarely creates the same sense of limitless space. There is always a mountain or valley just over the next lip with an idea – however vainglorious – that with a little sustained effort you could get there relatively easily.

At the magic cattle grid two opposing sensations merge within me. The same awe-inspiring, humbling recognition of my own insignificance that the coast creates and the hugely

comforting sensation of being right in the centre of something, of the world wrapping itself around me, of my sinking as if into a hug.

Ingleborough as the nearest and most prominent mountain demands attention first, it stills the feet. There is no more walking until it has been appreciated. On a fine day the contrast between the cornflower-blue skies and Ingleborough's striking geology is at its most noticeable. Ask a child to draw a mountain and you expect rising, triangular peaks – here the peak is more of the flat cap variety, fitting perhaps for a hill in Yorkshire. The dark grasslands of the base narrow into limestone pavement, the grey streaks of grit stone sit on top and its weathered surface provides the unusual effect of a level summit.

From my position, at the cattle-grid, across the valley where the Yorkshire Dales bleed into the Forest of Bowland, Ingleborough is flanked by a Praetorian guard. To the right sits Pen-y-Ghent, its own odd shape disguised from this angle, leaning its shoulder towards its bigger brother. To the left, half hidden, is Whernside, a purple shadow tapering away towards Ribblehead. I rarely see anybody at all exploring Roeburndale and it is strange to think of the hundreds of people on those nearby mountains undertaking the Yorkshire Three Peaks challenge.

The thing that strikes me every single time I visit the magic cattle grid is the variety in the landscape that spills out from this single point. Across the great bowl of grazing land, flecked with farms, woods and even castles, the Howgills rise in distant grassy mounds, silky smooth grass in undulating waves before they give way to the dark edges of the Lake District which ripples and rolls west in lead coloured dips and peaks to the coast. On the brightest day, I have discovered you can lean and peer into just the right spot to see a triangle of Morecambe Bay, splinters of fractured light the only real clue to this hidden watery surprise.

The immediately adjacent moorland in which this special place sits might seem prosaic set in opposition to the poetry of the green, sweeping vista. But as the months and years have passed since I first began to walk here, slipping through the kissing gate beside the cattle grid, and I have seen its shifting self I can properly appreciate the unique personality of such

land. It is where the curlews scream and the lapwings fight with the buzzards. It is where in the springtime the leverets sunbathe on the little lumpen islands of green that float above the wetter, boggy heather. It is where the grouse scratch and graze, hidden, until my presence sends them fleeing and flying in a panicked escape. There is a vaguely unloved feel to this moor; the grouse butts are almost comedically rudimentary – several posts stuck haphazardly into the ground with wire strung between them and the tracks leading from one to another no more defined than sheep trods. Where the ground is criss-crossed with streams planks have been jammed into the banks but the flaking wood has taken on a sponge-like appearance and standing on them feels like a move from a primitive video game where the player might find themselves tumbling downwards to wet feet and sodden calves. At various times of the year I find myself bathed in a kaleidoscopic range of colours. I have discovered that the muted browns and greens generally associated with grouse moor are, in fact, just camouflage for the reds, blues, purples and pinks that tip the sprawling heather. Though often a soft brown the peaty ground is an ever-changing carpet underfoot that bakes into a firm black cake like volcanic rock or becomes saturated with the iron orange sheen of the water so common in this area.

Before walking this landscape became something comforting and familiar I was slightly afraid of grouse moor; there are so few landmarks, the rise and fall of the ground is often hidden by the twisting, hardy wood and blooms of the heather and crossing such areas can be slow and hard-won. Now I have learnt that with close acquaintance this land has a character of its own, natural paths open between rambling roots, I can measure the easiest places to move through the ankle-twisting maze in relation to the leaning dry stone walls and the places where the fell ponies usually gather, I can ascertain the distance to the trig point that overlooks the last villages in the Lune Valley by the wetness underfoot and I know the precise moment at which the rise of the hill allows the sweeping majesty of Morecambe Bay to suddenly arrive in view. The fact that I have never seen a single other person on this moor unless I myself was with a walking buddy has led to a strange feeling of possession, as if the landscape is mine and as if I can supply the love that it lacks.

I decide that today, as on many days, the climb upwards to the top of Caton Moor to stand amongst the futuristic fingers of the windfarm as they claw endlessly at the sky feels a pointless endeavour. The ground can be so full of water that there is the danger that I might end up swallowed by the ground, stuck as fast as if I was navigating the treacherous sinking sands so far below in the bay. Instead I stick to the tarmac beyond the cattle grid and walk to the end of the valley. There are five or six farms – ending at the surprising cluster of a tiny Methodist chapel and Lower, Middle and High Salter, their names proclaiming their position on the historically important salt path between Hornby and Slaidburn. Nowadays the ribbon of tarmac reaches High Salter before fraying into the state it seems likely to have had when the traders drove their prized cargo on the winding road between the Tatham and Mallowdale hills.

I have walked the path all the way to the pretty riverside cottages and welcoming sight of the pub, the Hark to Bounty, in the Ribble Valley but most often I stop at the final fell gate and gaze at the summits of the evocatively named local hills with their echoes of darkness and magic; Gallows Hill, Blanch Fell, Hell Crag, Wolfhole, the Ward Stone. There is something distinctly other worldly up here, perhaps it's the way that on those frequent days of inclement weather the wind drives the rain horizontally across the ground so that it never seems to land or perhaps it is the sheer isolation but I frequently feel as if the chill of history is creeping its way inch by inch across my flesh. It is hard not to conjure the image of the Pendle Witches slogging their way towards me as I stand at the gate.

For me the clang of the gate's rod driving home is the signal that I am about to walk back to warmth and comfort, a hot shower or a cup of tea but it serves as a brutal reminder that those pitiable, victimised woman passed through the site of that very gate just over four hundred years ago and that they were heading towards the crashing bolts of the Lancaster Castle dungeons and, ultimately, a death sentence. For me the ability to walk alone and comfortable on this path is a daily expression of my personal freedom, my fierce sense of independence while for Old Demdike and her co-accused walking this path was part of a punishment for expressing a degree of independence from the norms of their day by practising healing and midwifery, practices that attracted notice and the hysterical

accusations of witchcraft. Their presence in my consciousness only heightens my sense of gratitude.

This feeling has been one that has taken on a greater importance for me in the last few months. I am ashamed to admit the truth, I have spent my life taking good health, and my ability to largely do as I pleased, for granted. Then last November my body seriously let me down. I slipped two discs in my lower back. This was not the comedy clutching of the spine bent double and yelping for two minutes so beloved of this injury's representation on television. This was, for me, catastrophic incapacitation.

'Walk,' said the doctor as he wrote me a sheaf of prescriptions. My silence on the other end of the phone was lengthy and sceptical. He was insistent. 'Walking will help.'

And so began a whole new regime built entirely around following that advice. Sitting down was impossible and sciatica pulsed through my legs like an electric fence was wired across my pelvis whenever I tried to lie down. I lived to walk; my doctor was right, the only relief I ever experienced was as my hips loosened and there was a brief, glorious pain free moment at the top of every shallow leg swing. Time took on a strange, elastic quality as I visited the magic cattle grid through the storms of January and February and into the odd, lonely months of early Coronavirus lockdown irrespective of the time of day or night. Walking became something utterly integral. It was the only thing I could do. I felt more connected to this landscape and the birds and animals in it than I did the life on hold back in the valley floor at work or with friends.

I no longer cared about any weather conditions, any escape from the pain was a price worth paying no matter how wet, cold or sunburnt I might get. I quickly dispensed with a head torch at night, the curves and dips of the walls so familiar now that I needed no artificial light. When, in April, the pink super moon made its appearance I discovered a whole new delight in my walking.

At just before midnight on the night of the full moon I strolled up to the magic cattle grid. As I crossed the bars and rested my arms on the wall the sight that met me sent a visceral punch to my core. The light was an ethereal burnished steel but oddly bright enough so that the Lakes, the Howgills, the Dales and the shallow stirrings of the Pennines behind me were all traced out as if in the shadow and the light of a charcoal sketch. There was no indication that there was another person or creature awake anywhere. Every light in every farm and hamlet was extinguished, a tractor hitched to a slurry tank lay waiting for daybreak in the next field, the birds were silent. I could see for tens of miles and I could name and claim everything in the milky vista that spread out before me and I felt a sense of belonging so strong it surged through me like adrenaline.

I was not born here. My accent is slightly 'off' with its fractionally longer Cumbrian vowels. When I walk, I walk up on the 'mo-or' not the 'more' as those with a greater birth right claim might. But this walk has become mine and it feels like home.

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'The Magic Cattle Grid' © Loren Cafferty 2020 is one of three podcasts sent in to Litfest in response to our public call-out in July following publication of the two 'Walking Solo' podcasts by Jenn Ashworth and Polly Atkin, which were commissioned by Litfest with support from an ACE Emergency Covid-19 Fund grant.

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