

# **Borrowdale Valley**

by

Tara Vallente

Come with me on my favourite walk. A walk we can do in every weather. It's a loop filled with memories and people and it has sustained me through life's ups and downs since I moved to Cumbria twenty-one years ago.

During lockdown, I couldn't do this walk. Driving the ten miles down the valley from my home in Keswick to the start in Grange in Borrowdale wasn't acceptable. So I had to imagine the route instead.

I'd like to say that the little lane that leads down past the cafe is unremarkable – but it is here that I find my balance, I loosen up with every step. My shoulders drop away from my ears. I take deep breaths in, hold for a second and blow the air gently out.

I can tell which season it is by what is growing in the gardens, hedgerows and fields. From the first snowdrops signalling the end of winter, to the daffodils shouting it's springtime, to the riot of wildflowers that appear in the summer and the ripening blackberries and quince in the autumn.

The first bit of the walk is down a lane made of tarmac, which if you look around you'll see the whole thing is built on a marsh or a bog, it's always damp, not matter what time of year.

Looking up to the right you can see Maiden Moor towering above us and moss growing on the drystone walls alongside us.

If you cast your eyes over your right shoulder, you'll see the unusual wall in the field made of huge slates standing on their edges. They look like gravestones.

Soon the tarmac gives way to a rough stone track, lined by trees on one side and another drystone wall on the other, a track that has seen footfall for centuries. Can you imagine all the people who have walked here before us?

There's a horse in the corner field who's always on the lookout for a handful of grass, and a shepherd's hut in the next one where sometimes there are signs that someone might be staying there.

While the track is simple underfoot, it is a challenge for vehicles. In the past, I have stopped to help a school minibus that had grounded itself on this spot. Off to the right, there are a few yurts which the farmer rents out. I imagine it is a peaceful place to spend the night once the passing walkers have left for the day.

I long for a little hut in the woods, a place of my own where I can write and think. I have been listening to Simon Armitage and his radio programme called 'The Poet Laureate has gone to his shed' – he is joined by random guests who loosely discuss his attempts to translate a medieval poem called 'The Owl and the Nightingale'. It feels like eavesdropping on a really lovely conversation and my favourite part is where he fires either/or questions at his guest like he is doing some sort of psychological profile. Questions like north or south? Poetry or prose? To be or not to be? He describes being in his shed as being in nature, but indoors. It's having somewhere to be inside, but outside. In my mind, I have built my own shed in the woods.

I think being in a house with three other people, two of them being teenage boys who haven't been to school for six months, has brought home to me how much I value peace and quiet. My daily walks, even the imaginary ones, are an escape from the walls that sometimes feel like they are closing in.

Don't get me wrong, I do love my boys, but they are so noisy.

Above the yurts we can see the tops of the fells appearing and soon the sweep in the bend of the river Derwent opens up before us. It's funny to think that this river, emerging from its source up the valley, feeds into Derwentwater, and that the same water can follow a route all the way out to the Irish Sea.

The river bed runs almost dry in places during the summer months and we can walk across to the other side without getting our shoes wet. But in winter the water thrashes up over the rocks and across the lower paths – it is only then that we appreciate, or use, the bridges. The wooden walkways make no sense at certain times of year, but at other times, they are the only safe way across.

It isn't a surprise that Borrowdale is said to be the wettest place in England. I have done this walk so many times in the rain. Today there are people swimming. It may be wet, but it isn't so cold.

Here's where the boys will take off up the low rust-coloured crag. It's easy to clamber up without a rope. Tree roots are knotted and gnarled and tucked into the crevices of the rocks making easy handholes. It's probably eight metres high – I will hold my breath until they reach safety.

Underfoot there is more slate than rock and it sounds almost musical. Hodge Close Quarry, long disused, opens up before us. There are russet and grey vertical stripes on the rock – hinting at the minerals that lie within.

There are bolted rock-climbing routes and the old quarry is filled with swampy water. A flimsy fence makes us pause before we explore. We can see the circular holes in the rock face where the explosives were packed in.

I once came across a man slack lining here – that is, walking on a piece of tape suspended from the walls from one side of the quarry to the other. He slipped and fell many times, dangling in his harness, held by his safety rope, catching his breath before easing his way back on to the line and trying again.

Once again the texture changes underfoot – earthy hummus, tree roots and leaves. The trees change too. Now tall pines loom above us and we can hear the sound of running water.

If you're up to it, the view from Castle Crag is worth the burn we will feel in our calves. You can see the lake and all the way to Keswick. If you look down to your knees you'll see little towers, or columns built from little bits of slate stacked one on top of the other, standing like little lemmings in a landscape made of stone.

This crag was given to the National Trust after the First World War by the family of Second Lieutenant John Hamer – given in memory of their son and all the men in Borrowdale who lost their lives in the war. When Sir William Hamer died in the 1930s, his widow Agnes gifted the rest of the land too. Some early philanthropy. Do people still do that? Gift their land to the nation?

The slate in this valley comes from Honister Slate Mine, which if you carry on up this miners' track, you'll find at its highest point.

It's at the steepest parts that I think of the miners bringing the slate down on sleds from the mine opening to the track – one man running in front using every bit of strength, balance and agility to control his heavy load. One slip would mean serious injury or death.

The slate mines are cavernous – they open up like a Cathedral and the acoustics are wonderful. There is enough room inside for a game of cricket and it's the place where the world's first underground game was played. For the record, Caldbeck won against Threlkeld.

When I think of Honister I think of the late Mark Weir and how his determination to bring the slate mine back to life, means that there is still a working mine in the valley today.

I also remember interviewing him on the road up to Honister, a truck full of explosives had left the road and was lying in the river. It was in the days before risk assessments and health and safety. Which is a good job, because we all know that you don't mix TNT with water...

The fells in this valley are full of the remnants of mines that once were. If you battle upwards you can find the entrances and if you are brave you can explore inside. Some look like they were abandoned yesterday.

It's a highly treasured stone – you can find Borrowdale slate on the roof of Buckingham Palace and on the headstone of Barnes Wallace – the man who invented the bouncing bomb.

The high point of my usual route – from the miners path has long views both ways – if we turn around we can see Derwentwater and Skiddaw and if we look ahead – the valley opens up with Rosthwaite down to the left and the tops of all the Borrowdale fells including Glaramara (which to me looks like the spine of a stegosaurus) and Great End with its head in the clouds and beyond that you'll find England's highest mountain Scafell Pike.

We are now being closely watched by the Herdwick sheep.

But our eyes are drawn to the drystone walls that follow the contours on the fellside.

They remind me of the Norman Nicholson poem 'Wall':

The wall walks the fell –  
Grey millipede on slow  
Stone hooves  
Its slack back hollowed  
At gulleys and grooves  
Or shouldering over  
Old boulders

Too big to be rolled away  
Fallen fragments  
Of the high crags  
Crawl in the walk of the wall ...

There are so many ways down to the valley. I'll take you down the grassy path, through the gate and into a field which looks like it is full of buttercups or dandelions. But look closely, they are called Cats Ears, if you look under the flower head along the stem, you'll see how they get their name.

See that crag in the distance? That's Eagle Crag, where so many walkers on the coast to coast follow the wrong track and end up in Langdale rather than here in Borrowdale.

As we reach the valley bottom, you'll see the ancient pollarded ash trees. Once the pollards were used to make wooden sticks. They still cut back the trees today. The ash whips that sprout from the sturdy trunks look all out of proportion. Wafting almost like willow from a solid base.

We'll look for a stick on the ground here, maybe one abandoned by a dog on a walk, because it's always worth a little detour to the packhorse bridge for a game of Pooh sticks. If you are smart, you'll see where the river runs quickest and you might win.

Back on our track, I will try to get you to bite into a crab apple and then I will laugh as the sourness makes you wince.

But I will make it up to you with hazelnuts gathered from the trees lining the gravel track.

Here it feels like we have fallen into a French woodland or been transported into a scene from the Lord of the Rings. It is damp again and there is a smell of damp earth.

The ever-changing land underfoot is one of the fascinating things about this walk, we're back on slate and the series of three cairns – or piles of slate – warn of something. There is a deep cave to the left, but that was not the home of the valley's most famous cave dweller.

We need another short detour for that.

The two-storey cave has great views. On the wall Millican Dalton has engraved 'Don't waste words' and then below 'jump to conclusions' – his story changes, depending on the author. But the self-styled Professor of Adventure is said to have lived in this cave for fifty years. He wasn't a hermit, just a cave-dweller. But how much of the stories about the man who baked his own bread and made his own clothes is true? And how much is legend?

He certainly was one of the first tourist guides to the lakes, and he is said to have been charming company around a campfire, making anyone who met him feel a sense of peace and relaxation.

In a newspaper article in 1941 he said: 'I don't sleep much, and while I am awake I lie and listen and think. There's a lot to think about just now, isn't there? All the sounds of the nights, the roar of the mountain stream, the barking of our dogs and foxes, the cries of birds, how can I be lonely with such company?'

Again my thoughts turn to solitude and how being alone isn't the same as being lonely. And how in lockdown I lost my ability to think in words, how I stopped dreaming, how my daily walk helped to fill my mind with bursts of nature. How taking one step after another gave a rhythm to my life which no longer felt normal. How watching the hedgerows change every day gave me hope that all this will pass.

Our path is made of stone now, a little staircase, leading us back to the river, where we can follow its course and retrace our footsteps past the yurts, past the horse and head home.

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'Borrowdale Valley' © Tara Vallente 2020 is one of three podcasts sent in to Litfest in response to our public call-out in July 2020, 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.

If you enjoyed Tara Vallente's 'Borrowdale Valley', you might also like to listen to or read:

Jenn Ashworth: 'The Lost Pencil'

Polly Atkin: 'The Road North Through'

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Mary Ainsworth: 'Williamson Park – My Exercise Yard'

Loren Cafferty: 'The Magic Cattle Grid'