

Stephen Goodwin

9 *Flat-capped fiend: Cross Fell, North Pennines*



‘Look at the icicles,’ said Lucie. ‘Fabulous!’ And so they were, a crystal curtain across a band of peat on a flank of Cross Fell. Nature had turned alchemist, so great was the contrast. The term ‘peat hag’ pretty well sums up the unloveliness of these faces of black earth under a fringe of rank and dripping grasses. But as the droplets, by some magic that seemed to me beyond science, had been plasticised and frozen into hanging tapers and full-depth columns, this ordinary bank was transformed with a sun-catching brilliance unmatched by any palace chandelier.

That’s really the story of Cross Fell. It may look a featureless hump from the distance of the M6, when most hill-goers will be focused on the opposite side of the motorway and the eagerly-awaited Lake District hills. But get its rough turf under your boots and there will always be some unexpected fold in the land, an unobtrusive alpine flower or quartering predator to wonder at.

Icicles, flank of Cross Fell





*Greg's Shop on Cross Fell,
one of England's most
remote buildings*

Of course, I'm biased through a kind of kinship. After a day wrestling with words, the walk from my back door that serves as my usual evening circuit follows the west bank of the River Eden. Across the meadows and farmland on the far side, the heaving line of the Pennines stretches from north to south as far as the eye can see, with the table top of Cross Fell pre-eminent.

At 2930 feet (893 m), it is the highest hill in all England outside the Lake District. Some years a line of snow braids its distinctive top until after the swallows have arrived to feed over the river. And often, at any time of year, the summit itself is capped – by Cross Fell's oddly personal cloud. 'Cross Fell's got his hat on,' we'll remark, though I have not adduced any useful piece of weather lore to accompany this phenomenon.

Little Dun Fell and its neighbour, Great Dun with the Ministry of Defence giant golf ball, will be visible on the south side, and Skirwith Fell forming a shoulder on the north. Between will be a veil of cloud, enveloping the mile-wide summit plateau. Just occasionally the 'hat' floats free, appearing as a lenticular flat cap poised above the bare pate of the fell.

Lime kiln above Kirkland

On that February morning of the icicles, we had set off from Kirkland to walk the 10 miles over to Garrigill in the upper valley of the South Tyne. It is a route of some antiquity. Until the 19th century, Garrigill did not have a church and its dead had to be carried across the spine of England for burial in the consecrated ground of St

Lawrence's church at Kirkland. How the people of Garrigill must have longed for their sick loved ones to cling to life until a spell of clement weather.

The Old Corpse Road quickly casts off the confines of moss-clad walls and ash trees beside Kirkland Beck and heads for the open fellsides, climbing steadily beneath the broken edge of High Cap, typical of the rocky scars which stand high on the broad ridges extending outwards from the main Pennine chain.

‘Open’ is the operative word anywhere along the escarpment known to Eden Valley dwellers as the East Fellside. It’s not just the huge view back across the valley to Lakeland and north to the Solway and Scotland, but the limitless skyscape and often scouring wind. England’s only named wind, the ‘Helm’, tears down these hillsides in spring and autumn, destroying blossoms and tender plants, yet by some meteorological freak curls on itself, dissipates and never crosses the river.

Always, as the track turns High Cap, my eyes are drawn to the cliffs of Black Doors at the head of wild Ardale. A band of broken dolerite columns and two deeply incised rocky gullies, Black Doors is an outcrop of the Great Whin Sill, that same volcanic sheet that gives us the more dramatic High Cup Nick further south in the Pennines. Cross Fell is a real mix of rock. Most of it is a mix of gritstone and shale, with its resistant cap girdled by scree, while on the Eden flank are limestone scars – with old kilns lower down.

Evidence of the Pennines’ mining past is everywhere. There is a disused level just behind my viewpoint of Black Doors. And from the same spot you can see lower down Ardale to where the trace of the Roman road called Maiden Way cuts down the grassy defile of Lad Slack, fords the beck and continues its straight line over to Kirkland. History has been busy below Cross Fell.

Snow covered the scree above Black Doors and we weren’t tempted to divert to its deep portals. In summer though this is a place for botany, with plants such as alpine scurvy grass mantling the rocks. The Corpse Road over Skirwith Fell can become truly glutinous, but with the ground frozen, we soon reached the tall cairn of Yad Stone, by the watershed, and descended to the open bothy of Greg’s Hut, a stone-built ‘cottage’ at an abandoned lead mine.



From the Yad Stone to Garrigill, the Corpse Road is also the line of the Pennine Way, so there would be more walkers on warmer days. This eight-mile stretch over the high moors must be a joy for Wayfarers, but for myself, the magic wanes on this side of the hill. This is kept land, managed for the red grouse, or rather for the benefit of their assailants, and denuded of the hen harriers, buzzards and peregrines that would naturally have a home here. The moor starts to feel sterile and the track, well maintained for the ease of the shooters, gets monotonous.

Better by far to turn uphill at Yad Stone, skirt the screes and head across the plateau to the stony windbreak and trig point on the summit of Cross Fell itself. It's said you can see eight old counties from up here on a clear day. Looking across Eden's patchwork of pasture, wheat and woodland, the Lakeland fells appear in blue-grey profile, alluringly mountainous, yet there is a feeling of satisfaction that I'm here, and not over there.

Perhaps because of the howling Helm, the plateau was believed in the Dark Ages to be the haunt of demons and was called Fiends' Fell until St Augustine banished the evil spirits by erecting a cross and altar on the summit. Both are long gone. Almost anything could be imagined in the mists, but in spring and summer any melancholy note is likely to be the 'tlui' of the golden plover which forage up here.

Heading home, we usually follow a little used track angling below Wildboar Scar – limestone this, with short-cropped turf and tormentil below. The buzzards are back, circling above the gorsy tangles by Littledale Beck.

And before Kirkland, Cross Fell's past has one more offering for us as we walk by the Hanging Walls of Mark Anthony. To the untutored eye these are nowhere near as exotic as the name on the OS map suggests, just hummocks in a field. But they were once cultivation terraces or strip lynchets; shadows in the grass left by pastoralists who knew the flat-capped fell 1600 years before the birth of Christ.



*Dun Fells from a cairn
high on Cross Fell*