



Mosedale on my mind

Andy Wasley takes an affectionate look at the lesser-known fells of the eastern Lake District, and makes a return to a much-loved bothy...

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDY WASLEY

Mosedale Cottage

IT WAS NEARLY MIDNIGHT. Countless tiny white moths danced in the beam of my head torch as I squelched across a misty bog. I'd been going for two hours since leaving Haweswater, and my destination lay just a few minutes ahead.

It was my first visit to the Eastern Fells in two years, and an odd way to begin my first post-lockdown hike. Back in November 2019, I'd joined a group of bothy first-timers, maintenance volunteers and a hyperactive pug at Mosedale Cottage, a squat, white bothy tucked beneath an abandoned slate mine.

This time around, I'd set off from London hoping I would find the bothy occupied but had left myself little time to enjoy whatever company I found. Lockdown had left me complacent, too reliant on a conked satnav and the goodwill of city traffic.

Night fell long before I arrived at Haweswater and began a damp, hood-shrouded stomp up Gatescarth Pass. Quickly, I found myself cocooned by cloud: a million droplets of water swirling in my head torch beam, swallowing the light and drifting off into the shadows.

I paused for a moment, turned my torch off, and immersed myself in darkness for the first time that evening. A light wind had dispersed the fog. Gatescarth Beck trickled furtively in the dark. As my eyes adjusted to the night, I could just see Branstree's high black bulk looming above me against a dimly glowing sky studded with stars.

The glimmering sky beckoned me uphill. I turned my torch back on, leant into the rocky path, and pressed on.

HIKES GONE BY

I've developed 'a bit of a thing' for Mosedale Cottage since my first visit in 2017, on a mountain skills course, in the final years of my RAF service. It's one of four Lake District bothies maintained by the Mountain Bothies Association (MBA), and it offers shelter in a lesser-trodden part of the Lake District. It's a good base for picking off five of the easternmost Wainwrights – Tarn Crag, Grey Crag and Harrop Pike to the south of Mosedale valley, and Selside Pike and



[previous spread] A mountain biker descends past Mosedale Cottage [right] Looking back towards Gatescarth Pass from Mosedale



[opposite page; from top] Ill Bell seen from Froswick; A frozen pond near Harter Fell [above] Kentmere viewed from Ill Bell



Branstree to the north.

On my second trip, I'd worked in my visit to the building as part of the Kentmere Horseshoe. Kentmere felt lean and chilly that day as I set off towards the Pike on the first leg of the round; but across the valley Froswick, Ill Bell and Yoke blazed brightly in the early sunshine beneath clear, powder-blue skies.

Winter had an early grip on the landscape. Black puddles lay below thick, glistening ice as my boots crunched through already half-frozen mud. I paused at Harter Fell to catch my breath. A more conventional round of the Kentmere Horseshoe might have seen me turn west for the Nan Bield Pass, but my route took me north-east, to Harter Fell Gully and a spectacular view of Haweswater.

Beyond Haweswater, clouds the colour and texture of iron filings were dissolving into curtains of snow above Bampton Common. A fell runner dashed by wordlessly, her face flushed red by the cold and exertion, white plumes of breath racing away in the wind.

I made my way through Brownhowe Bottom, scarred with old quarry workings and mossy drystone walls, and then uphill along a wire fence line to the gaunt landscape around Tarn Crag. A bitter wind chased me across the icy bogs, and when I reached Harrop Pike my eyes were gritted with snow.

A HILLSIDE SHELTER

Between the thickening snowfall and gathering dusk, I lost both visibility and the will to tackle Selside Pike and Branstree. They'd have to wait for another time. I took a compass bearing and struck out directly across Seavy Side for Mosedale Cottage, moving from one tussock to the next. The bothy slowly hove into view between dancing snowflakes. Two maintenance volunteers greeted me in the forecourt, apparently surprised to see a lone hiker advancing from the trackless moorland. They had use of the cottage's outbuildings, and wouldn't hear of me going into the main building without promising I'd join them later for a hot stove and cold beer.

The bothy looked cold, dark and silent, in strong contrast to warm memories of my previous stay with the RAF. But as I started to unpack, three students arrived shaking snow from their kit. I lit a fire in the stove and took a seat on a creaky leather sofa I remembered from last time.

Another thing hadn't changed since then – the ease with which strangers fell into a fleeting friendship within

the confines of four walls. One of my new friends, a history student, explained his weekly routine to me: "Monday: study. Tuesday: out. Wednesday: get smashed. Thursday: big night. Friday: rest. Saturday: get obliterated. Sunday: not good for much."

Today was Saturday. The students unpacked rations and beer, stereo speakers and a techno playlist. This was their first ever bothy. I remembered the volunteers' invitation and headed back out into the night.

By a quirk of luck, both bothy nights at Mosedale were united by clear skies. On my first visit, military mates stood huddled beneath a full moon, sharing a hip flask. Now, I gazed at the constellations again, this time with the volunteers. A third man arrived from Shap, bearing a pug that tore around the courtyard, scattering small puffs of snow. We all stared upwards in silence before retreating to the volunteers' bunk room, warmed by a fire that cast a deep orange glow on old armchairs and wooden bunks. The pug settled in my lap as I sat before the fire, joining the volunteers in a long

conversation about this lonely cottage, the desolate fells and the deep dark sky.

Different people, but the same sky and the same stars.

COMPLETING THE HORSESHOE

I woke early. The students had stayed up late, but thoughtfully had turned their music off when I returned for bed, and tidied their scattering of ration bags and beer tins away. The bothy smelled of stale smoke but was otherwise silent and spotless.

Outside, a deep blue dawn chased the last few stars away as I crossed Mosedale Beck to scramble up to the old blue-slate quarry. The stream's rocks were slick with black ice; I slipped and found myself sprawled and winded in the freezing water. Hoping no-one had seen my tumble, I scurried back into the bothy. The students hadn't stirred; I could hear snoring from a side room.

After coffee and porridge, I struck out again and retraced my steps to Harter Fell. Cold winter sunlight revealed a landscape bleached ash-grey by frost and snow. ➡

Mosedale Cottage



[above] Andy in the Lakes [below] Strangers enjoy a fleeting friendship at Mosedale Cottage [right] Three fells of the Kentmere Horseshoe (left to right Yoke, Ill Bell and Froswick) seen from the Nan Bield Pass



Mosedale Cottage

Mosedale Cottage is one of four Lake District bothies maintained by the Mountain Bothies Association (MBA). There's scant information about its history: at some point in the 1800s it was home to a shepherd and his family, and its last recorded use as a permanent dwelling was in the 1930s. It's marked on OS Landranger and Explorer maps at **NY495095**. Several footpaths converge nearby, including routes from Wet Sleddale Reservoir, Haweswater, Harter Fell and Longsleddale. Please check the MBA's website for Covid-19 restrictions before planning a visit, and always follow the Bothy Code: mountainbothies.org.uk

Other Kentmere accommodation

Andy also stayed at Maggs Howe in Kentmere, which offers a camping barn bunk at £15 per person per night, or B&B for £35 per person per night. Bookings: (01539) 821689.

For further Kentmere accommodation options and information on parking visit kentmere.org/visiting-kentmere

'Cold winter sunlight revealed a landscape bleached ash-grey by frost and snow.'

My boots left clear prints, the only sign that anyone had passed this way. Soon, though, dog-walkers and hikers joined me on the western edge of the Kentmere Horseshoe. This was their perfect winter morning too.

Later, I joined a few others at High Street to take in Scafell's twin peaks, snow-capped and proud on the horizon. Getting to Froswick involved a tiring climb, sweaty in the sunshine and slick underfoot. From its summit I took in a panoramic view of Kentmere, grown pale and cold, and of Ill Bell's steep grey cliffs plunging into Over Cove. Kentmere reservoir flared gold with reflected sunlight. For a moment it was as if sky and land had been inverted.

The path wound on over the rock-littered and busy summit of Ill Bell, downhill to lowly Yoke and on to

Troutbeck. The sun had dropped low enough to cast the valley's green fields into an undulating carpet of light and shade, and set Windermere shimmering four and a half miles to the south.

Across muddy Sallows and the tussocky hump of Sour Howes, I made my way back to the bunkhouse in Kentmere. Settling into my sleeping bag, I looked forward to my next visit to Mosedale Cottage. Of course, I had no idea what would happen in the meantime.

RETURNING

Like most of us, the pandemic cut me off from friends and family, but I also found myself missing unmet friends – both friends, strangers who'd come together to share a remote patch of time and space and to gaze wordlessly at a cold black sky.

And that's how I ended up making my third visit, a pilgrimage in the dark after lockdown. Cloud had descended again, drawing the horizon in to within a few feet; at Brownhowe Bottom even the solid drystone wall melted quickly into a depthless, torchlit murk. I was afraid the spell would be broken, and third time unlucky, I'd find the place empty.

Just a few minutes from the bothy. The moths danced in my torch beam. I turned off my headlamp and was instantly unmoored. The darkness wasn't giving anything away. I couldn't bear it.

I turned my torch back on. The moths resumed their nocturnal waltz as I walked on. And there it was – solid and unchanged – Mosedale Cottage. A warm fire lit its windows, casting strangers' silhouettes on the dusty panes. 

