

# GRIT IN YOUR BOOTS

The mountains of the western Lakes are littered with stories of those for whom the hills provide solace and respite. Here **Andy Wasley** studies the area's history, on a 3-day trip with **Alex Roddie**

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** ANDY WASLEY & ALEX RODDIE





# Wasdale

MANY A HIKE starts in the porch of the Wasdale Head Inn, where Three Peaks Challengers mingle with those heading to the Gables or further, scoffing baps and coffee. Alex and I joined this ritual early on a crisp early spring morning, seated outside whilst coal tits, song thrushes and blackbirds made a fine chorus. Behind the inn, Great Gable's high grey face towered beyond Kirk Fell, tinted brass-bright by low early sunshine – a classic Lakeland morning.

"Yewbarrow first, then?" I asked. "Alex...?" My hiking buddy had disappeared indoors. I found him gazing up at the inn's collection of mountaineering ephemera. "Look at those ice axes," he said. "Classics! And those nails are Tricounis..." Behind a row of ancient, nailed boots – some reduced by age to lumps of desiccated leather – a pair of long wooden ice axes were crossed and fixed to the wall. One was stamped "Cassin" – a classic, for sure, bearing the name of one of Italy's greatest alpinists.

"I used an axe like this once," Alex said. "Boots with Tricounis, too – I took them up Bidean nam Bian in winter, in traditional mountain gear." He paused. "I don't recommend it."

Like Alex, the Wasdale Head Inn has a deep acquaintance with mountaineering culture. Long ago, the pub served as a watering hole for legendary mountaineers: great names such as Owen Glynne Jones, and Walter Parry Haskett Smith – the first climber to ascend Napes Needle.

For us, it marked a good base for a three-day hike that would take us into the silent embrace of Ennerdale, across Alfred Wainwright's favourite ridge, and back into Wasdale through a landscape whose every pub, fell and furrow seemed to speak of Lakeland history.

## ASHES ON YEWBARROW

Alex and I headed south-west along Wast Water to Overbeck Bridge, then on up Yewbarrow's unrelentingly steep spine to Bell Rib. There, we gazed south to the Screes – bright grey in broad sunshine, cascading steeply into the lake. "You can't beat this view," I said. "I wonder how many other walkers have stopped here over the years?"

Alex's focus was on dust and grit at our heels. "Wait," he said, "is that human ash?" We looked closely: no doubt about it. We found ourselves sharing the view with someone for whom it had obviously meant a lot. "What a place for a scattering," I said.

But for the departed soul, we had Yewbarrow to ourselves, and we made our way on over Stirrup Crag, Red Pike and Scoat Fell without meeting anyone. Plenty of time to get to know each other on this, our first hike together. We found a shared love of mountaineering history. "Pillar's really interesting," said Alex, as we caught our breath on Steeple. "While we're there we should see if we can get a view down to Pillar Rock. It's an important place in climbing history. There are tougher climbs around here, but that's a classic. I can't wait to see it."

We both had to wait; Pillar's summit lay inside a dense pall of white cloud. We dropped downhill, out of the white and into Ennerdale Fell Plantation. There, at last, we were rewarded with a stunning view of Pillar Rock, towering, impassive, above the trees.

"It's hard to believe George Mallory climbed that," said Alex, before talking me through a little of the rock's history. I found it



[previous page] Heading into Ennerdale from Pillar (archive image)  
[left] Andy looks out across Ennerdale [above from top] Camp at Wasdale Head Inn; Old ice axes and boots on display at the inn; Great Gable summit memorial (archive image)



difficult to imagine the technical challenges that must have faced 19th Century climbers, tackling routes that were then harder than any ever climbed in the Lake District.

THE FALLEN REMEMBERED

Look closely enough, and signs of the Lake District’s history are written into the very rock, in rusted pitons or brass plaques. Our path continued over the river Liza, across the memorial footbridge. On a boulder by the bridge, two plaques honoured members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club (FRCC) who died during World War Two.

Further up the valley, Great Gable loomed back into view,

glowering under grey cloud – home to perhaps the Lake District’s most celebrated memorial, dedicated to FRCC members who died in World War One. In a coincidence of startling emotional force, that plaque was dedicated on 8 June 1924 – the very day Mallory and Sandy Irvine disappeared on Everest. Mallory’s mentor, Geoffrey Winthrop Young, was among the 80 men and women on Great Gable that day.

We were one day into our hike. We’d found scattered ashes on Yewbarrow. Mallory’s spirit was stalking the fells. And we had arrived at our stop for the night – Black Sail Hut. I had missed this tiny and charismatic hostel during the pandemic, when its shared dormitories were off-limits. Alex had never visited, and

I was excited to introduce him to it.

Black Sail is the most remote as well as the oldest hostel in the YHA’s network. Built as a shepherd’s hut in the 19th Century, it was converted into a hostel in 1933, and has since offered beer, bed and breakfast to thousands of weary walkers. To stay there is to join a community of adventurers who have shared in its hospitality, and marvelled at the night sky outside: on earlier visits I had caught sight of the Milky Way stretching up into the infinite.

We were greeted by Rachel and Steve, seasonal wardens who were clearly in love with their job. As always, we were made to feel at home: an easy feat, as we were the only two in for the evening. We settled in for Scrabble, chat and Wainwright golden ale.

IN WAINWRIGHT’S FOOTSTEPS

Our second day’s walk took us along the length of the High Stile ridge, and included Haystacks – Wainwright’s favourite fell. We found its jumble of boulders and tarns busy, even early in the day, as fell-runners, dog-walkers and families made their way to its summit.

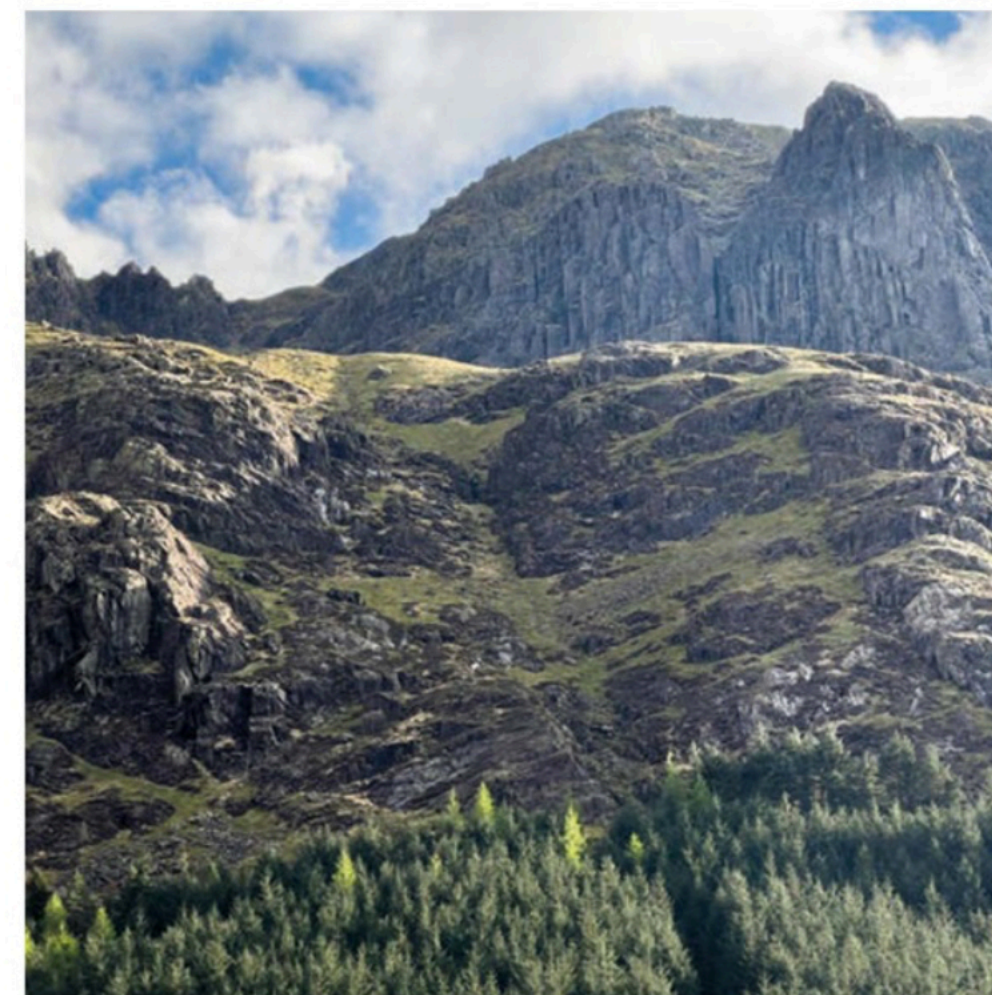
Wainwright said Haystacks was “the best fell-top of all – a place of great charm and fairyland attractiveness”. Famously, his ashes were scattered here. I was able to recite his wishes: “If you... should get a bit of grit in your boot as you are crossing Haystacks in the years to come, please treat it with respect. It may be me.”

Treading perhaps a little lighter, we scrambled on along Seat, ➡

[below] Alex striding below Seatallan







[left] The Black Sail Hut at sunset [above] Pillar Rock

High Crag, High Stile and Red Pike, whose terracotta-tinted rocks boiled water vapour into the chilly air. Then Starling Dodd – another Wainwright classic, and the last fell he visited when he completed the *Pictorial Guides*. We shared his good luck, enjoying an expansive view from the summit before pressing on to Great Bourne.

Our planned wild camp lay on the other side of Ennerdale. Heckbarley's small plantation lay silent in the gathering twilight as we tramped uphill from the valley. Wainwright had written with disdain about the Forestry Commission's work here, complaining about the "little trees that will grow into big ones, all looking exactly the same, trees without character".

Thankfully we found Heckbarley in early stages of recovery after decades under Sitka spruce – and, for a special treat, a grasshopper warbler's trill chased our footsteps on to Grike. From there, we had a view out to sea – then deep into night, as the clouds cleared, and stars lit the sky.

### MOUNTAIN GIANTS

Day three took us back to Wasdale, via Lank Rigg, Caw Fell, Seatallan and Middle Fell. Easy navigation there, as we picked up the drystone wall that links Whoop to Haycock, where we turned south. The ascent to Seatallan looked wearying, so we stopped and gazed out to sea from Stockdale Head – surely one of Lakeland's finest views.

Soon, we stood on Middle Fell. A cloudless day, now. Across Wast Water the Screes were lit silver-grey. All about us stood fells whose names echoed through Lakeland history: Scafell and Scafell Pike, Great Gable and Yewbarrow. Mountain giants, all.

Mountaineering giants, too, crowded in on our thoughts. In three days, we had recalled great names who remain twinned with the Lake District, however momentous their achievements elsewhere: Wainwright, Jones, Mallory and Young, Haskett Smith and – unnamed – a walker whose ashes had welcomed us back to the fells. ▲

## Pillar Rock

Alex Roddie shares some early mountaineering history

■ Although it's often claimed that rock climbing began in June 1886, when WP Haskett Smith made the first ascent of Napes Needle on Great Gable, Lakeland climbing heritage goes back another 60 years – and owes much to Pillar Rock, a gargantuan rock buttress that dominates the Ennerdale flank of Pillar fell.

■ In the 1820s, Pillar Rock – known then as the Pillar Stone – was deemed unclimbable until John Atkinson, an Ennerdale shepherd, made the first ascent of what became known as the Old West Route (now graded Moderate, or a top-end scramble). The next three people to climb it were all Lakeland shepherds, and their motivations for climbing have not been recorded.

■ Not until 1850 did Pillar Rock come to the attention of the well-heeled mountaineers who were climbing 4000-metre peaks in the Alps at the time. CAO Baumgartner, who had made the first recorded traverse of Crib Goch two years earlier, is thought to have taken what's now known as the Old Wall Route on Pillar Rock.

■ In 1870 Pillar Rock was first climbed by a woman, Miss A Barker. By the 1880s, when Haskett Smith's generation of wealthy, educated 'rock gymnasts' came on the scene – who were mainly focused on the athletic sport of climbing and had less regard for traditional mountaineering routes that ended at summits – it's thought that Pillar Rock had already been climbed hundreds of times and by many different lines.



## Route information

Andy and Alex followed a three-day circular route from the Wasdale Head Inn

**Distance:** 42 miles/68km

**Ascent:** 4367m/14,330ft

**Accommodation** Camping pitches at the Wasdale Head Inn cost £10 per person per night. Self-catering accommodation and hotel rooms are available in the inn too (tariff and booking via [wasdale.com](http://wasdale.com)). YHA Black Sail Hut bed spaces are available seasonally (tariff and booking via [yha.org.uk](http://yha.org.uk)).

**More reading** ■ You can read more about Pillar Rock's history in *The First Tigers*, by Alan Hankinson.

■ The history of the Great Gable war memorial is recalled vividly in Wade Davies' excellent history of the 1920s Everest expeditions, *Into The Silence*. ■ Volume 7 of the *Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells* has Alfred Wainwright's timeless idiosyncratic advice on the fells covered by this route.