

Tales of a Yorkshire Dales Three Peaks Expedition

by Stephen B Davis

On the morning of Sunday 5th April 1998, I lay in bed waiting for my alarm to go off at 5:30am. At 5:15 I could bear it no longer and got up anyway. A leisurely breakfast followed by a brisk walk to Chatham Station to catch the 6:45 train to Victoria. Then another early morning brisk walk past Buckingham Palace, exchanging greetings with the early morning police guard, through Green Park and on to Euston Station to catch the 9:00 Virgin Train to Manchester. Time for a quick can of Coke amid a station full of Newcastle United Supporters before boarding the train and discovering to my horror that they were heading for the same train. This was to be a slow frustrating journey of 4 hours and 10 minutes during which time the supporters managed to drink the buffet car dry even down to the last bottles of red wine at £11.50 a bottle! Funny how their idea of what constituted a good time and mine seemed to differ. Still, at least I was travelling on a £9.50 special value ticket!

It was spitting with rain in Manchester and what with the liberal sprinkling of Newcastle United and now Manchester United fans dotted around, I didn't stray far as I waited the hour or so to be met by my colleague Patrick Finucane who had been attending a Teacher's Union conference in Manchester that weekend. Somewhat relieved, Patrick and I met up and went for another stroll around the block to kill time whilst we awaited the arrival of the next Virgin Train carrying Patrick's friend Jonathan, the third member of our party.

It was after 3:00pm before we finally set off in Patrick's car in the drizzle towards the Yorkshire Dales. Mind you, the views certainly grew more and more spectacular. We were still considering our accommodation options as we drove on through the drizzle; would we find a suitable campsite, or would we weaken and go for bed and breakfast! Well after sussing out a couple of camp sites, I'm happy to say that we opted for a third campsite, Holme Farm, admittedly a bit on the wet and muddy side in parts but actually in Horton-in-Ribblesdale and within spitting distance of the Pen-y-Ghent café, the starting point for our expedition, if we were fool enough to proceed with it the next day; what is more every now and then when the clouds cleared we could see the foreboding outline of Pen-y-Ghent itself, the first of our peaks.

We eventually managed to erect our three tents, Patrick having admitted that the one which he'd borrowed from his son, he'd never actually put up before. Funny how the threat of more rain concentrates the mind though. We popped along to the Pen-y-Ghent Café to discuss our potential route for the next day and obtain the necessary paperwork to be filled in and posted through the door if we set off before 9:00am which we certainly intended to do.



Back at the campsite it was time to get our meal of corned beef hash started; I'd brought the food, cutlery, crockery as planned, Patrick had brought the Primus stove and NO saucepans, NOT as planned! Still he obviously managed to put his diplomacy skills to good use and managed to borrow one from the Campsite owner, a lady who up until now had not shown us a lot of humour. Food at last! It always does taste good outside, doesn't it? Time for a quick drink at the two local pubs: The Red Lion and The Crown, (actually Patrick and I had both given up alcohol for Lent, but at least Jonathan was able to sample the local ales). We really wanted to check out the menus for the celebration meal the next day! (Wishful thinking perhaps?)



Finally back to the tents and we settled down to the delights of the first night of the year on an airbed, the raucous and at times heated conversations from the party of youths in the large frame tent next door into the early hours, the odd hoot from an owl and more rain. Otherwise a comfortable night!

It seemed to rain for most of the night and quite hard since about 4:00am on the Monday morning. I had been lying awake for some time musing over how our expedition to walk The Three Peaks, one of the most well established challenge walks in the country had started with an idea of Patrick's during one of our college lunchtime constitutional strolls that he'd like to try it again. He'd managed it a couple of times before, although the last time was some twenty years ago. Slowly the idea had flourished. We'd be finishing college for the Easter break a couple of days ahead of the schools, so my wife and children would be otherwise occupied and Patrick would be in Manchester anyway for his conference at the weekend, so things just seemed to come together for Monday 6th, today in fact. When I'd mentioned our intentions to other colleagues at work, I was told that I should be sponsored. Having rejected the idea at first, I got to thinking that maybe I could bring in a pound or two for Tearfund (my favourite charity) into the deal. The result was that now I had nearly 150 sponsors, and was worth around £120 per peak! Mind you, I had a couple of good agents touting for business! But was I up to it? I'd been out on a few 8 to 12 mile walks the last three Saturdays, when it was fine. But this was 25 miles with 5000+ feet of ascent and it was still raining!! Aha, I could hear signs of life outside the tent; no more time for thinking about it; this was it!!

Over to the washroom or should I say wash-shack, Three tiny hand-basins arranged around a corner with only room for one person. A nice bracing stripped to the waist wash in cold water! Jonathan even managed a shave, in it; (well you can't do the Three Peaks looking a scruff can you?) The loo cubicles were quite special too; the doors had to have appropriately shaped pieces cut out to enable them to swing open without hitting the loo-pans. This is really living!

The rain had stopped; we ate a cold breakfast out of the boot of Patrick's car whilst chatting to another more hardened, enthusiastic walker who also intended walking the Three Peaks that day with his son (or daughter, it was difficult to tell underneath all the gear!) They were heading the opposite way around to us, so it would prove interesting where, when and if we met up! But it was encouraging that we were not the only fools!

We'd filled in our safety service form with all our requisite details in the pub last night and now it was just a case of entering our start time and posting it through the letter-box of the Pen-y-Ghent Café who operated the service. Our start-time was duly entered as 7:20am (although this was the time by our watches and I'd noticed the day before that the official Pen-y-Ghent Café clock was 5 minutes slow).

So the three of us set off around the back of the church following the official map which we'd given Jonathon custody of firstly because, he and Patrick had only got one back-pack between them and Patrick was taking first shift and secondly



because with his deerstalker hat, appropriately complementary coat and boots with trousers tucked in socks he really looked the part! I must confess to being not a little concerned as to the appropriateness of his attire given the conditions, but in the event I think he proved to be the most sprightly and energetic of the three of us! Anyway, we'd gone not a few hundred yards and it started to drizzle again! But who cared, we were on our way, I was just so thankful we'd made it thus far! Over a few stiles which are more like large step ladders over chest height dry stone walls and then the walk started to get steeper. I remember thinking, this is going to be harder than I'd imagined; all of a sudden, my three 12-mile walks in Kent, seemed rather

pathetic as a training exercise! Clearly there was no point in trying to think too far ahead. But oh, the views that grew each time we looked back over our shoulders; wonderful! On through fields of Swaledale and Dalesbred sheep, black-faced with horns and thick woolly fleeces, the local predominant breeds, until we reached some limestone steps taking us on towards the summit. Limestone forms in layers which as it crumbles away appears to form almost natural stairways. These pathways and steps had been enhanced in places to help counteract the erosion that a century of walkers have contributed to. Still could one blame them?

We sat on the rocky steps for a few sips of water (which we had been advised should be taken *before* we felt thirsty), then it was the final ascent of Pen-y-Ghent which unfortunately was now rather misty at the top; it must have been around 9:15am. Another quick pause for a summit photograph by the Trig point so that I could claim my first £120 for Tearfund, before pressing on towards the long, slow



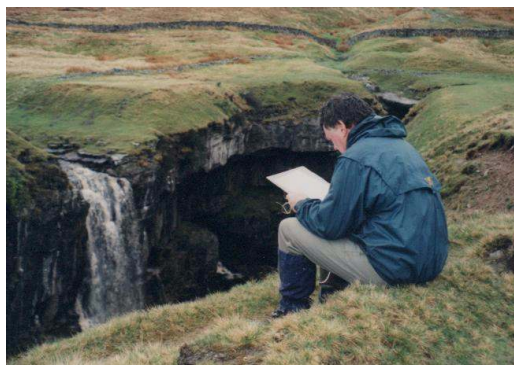
and drawn out descent through some very boggy territory. We'd opted to take the route via Hull Pot, to avoid, having to cross the beck which might be flooded given the recent weather. I hadn't appreciated until the previous night that these streams actually ran into the potholes or "swallow holes" as some refer to them rather than out of them as I had supposed. We saw Hull Pot in



the distance and headed towards it. It was very spectacular. A waterfall that disappeared into a cavernous hole in the ground. All around us we could hear the trilling cries of curlews and a couple of times saw them fly past with

their long downward curving beaks. Lovely birds. Another first for me was seeing pairs of red grouse, and so close up too.

We pressed on with our long, boggy and undulating descent. At times there were puddles which required careful inspection to judge their depth before risking a step through them. To cap it all it was raining. Several times I found myself dragging behind. Actually though, the three of us made a good team; there were times when each of us needed the other's encouragement. Also it enabled two to chat whilst the third could be lost in their thoughts either up front or behind as I was on this occasion. It was when the three of us were walking together that Patrick tripped over an invisible rock that just happened to be in his path and did the most spectacular head-first dive and slid along in the mud, he was plastered! He washed off the worst in a handy puddle and we pressed on. Patrick's made of stern stuff really! We identified Ingleborough our third peak across the valley in the distance but where on earth was Whernside, our second?



On and down, and things were getting better, and drier too, and there in the distance was the Ribble-Head Viaduct; very encouraging! Finally on to a farm track and then a two mile walk along a road towards Ribble-Head and way in the distance we just fancied we could make out the outline of Whernside. At last we arrived at Ribble-Head for a very welcome lunch and dry out by the stove at the Station Inn. Time to

inspect my heels for blisters. Yes, as I thought; lucky I'd found out how good Scholl Blister Dressings were during my training walks and had come well prepared!

Three plates of egg and chips, several ginger beers and a couple of local ales later (about half an hour) we



set off again along the length of the Ribble-Head Viaduct, off up the well made up pathway alongside the Settle to Carlisle railway and commenced the roundabout ascent of our next target Whernside, at 2414 feet, the tallest of our peaks. It was along this path before we'd really started to climb that we met our two fellow walkers from the campsite who were going the opposite way around to us. They'd already completed two peaks! Coorhh! But then, we weren't going for any records were we? All the same, we hoped to complete it within the twelve hours which would qualify us for membership of the Three Peaks Club. The Whernside path was long but very well made up with large limestone slabs set into the ground. At the steepest parts



far as we could see in all directions and in the far west, the sun glistening on the sea;



of it but Patrick was finding the going down rather painful on his toes. Taking off one's wet, mud laden gaiters, boots and socks was quite an



anyway? I asked Patrick who looked a little weary how he felt about carrying on to the third. "I'm not a quitter" was the reply. There was no answer to that, but I felt confident from that moment that somehow or other we were certainly going to finish come what may.

though, my legs really started to feel like jelly! But, it was Jonathan's turn to attend to a blister now which he'd got on the ball of his foot; nasty, but again a credit to Dr Scholl! The best part was that the rain had stopped and the sun was coming out. That last walk along the ridge of Whernside was so spectacular. With light wispy clouds floating up the valley below us, little lakes or tarns halfway up but now also below us and mountains or dales as far as we could see in all directions and in the far west, the sun glistening on the sea; would it be Morecambe Bay? We were on top of the world! The time was around 2:30ish.

A very steep and tortuous descent of Whernside, this time it was Patrick that was worst hit. Jonathan was making fairly light work

going down rather painful on his toes. Taking off one's wet, mud laden gaiters, boots and socks was quite an ordeal in itself but Patrick was obliged to do so to reveal a rather raw, blistered little toe! Dr Scholl to the rescue again. I suppose working relationships can never quite be the same after you've applied antiseptic to and wrapped a dressing around your colleague's little piggie halfway down a mountain!

It was here with Ingleborough, our third peak now well in view but still looking somewhat distant that we realised we were not going to make our twelve hour target. Ah well, what did it matter





Back down at road level, we found the second conveniently placed pub to be closed. Still, a few more swigs of water and a Mars Bar outside was enough to set us on our way again. An altogether different terrain across (or at least alongside) limestone pavement formations. After what seemed an endless trek without the peak getting any nearer we started along a long boardwalk which got steeper and steeper. We could see folk in the distance

descending Ingleborough and when they finally reached us we were able to exchange intelligence with them of our respective encounters. Our boardwalk eventually took us across a bog and we sat on a bridge that crossed a stream with our feet dangling over the edge, eating an orange whilst we contemplated our last and final very steep, zigzagged ascent. Actually a rest immediately before a steep bit I found was much more beneficial than flogging yourself until you reach the top before flaking out! We strode on. This time I led the way; it was a case of saying to myself: come on, you can do it, yes, yes, YES with each step and guess what happened as we went up? IT HAILED!! The top was more of a plateau than a peak, but there, now in amongst the mist again was our final trig point. The time was 6:05pm as we left. I had read that there was now a two hour walk back to the Pen-y-Ghent Café ahead of us which would mean that it could be getting dark before we reached our destination. Jonathan led the way. I asked Patrick if he thought Jonathan might be contemplating making a run for it and if so did he think it might be an idea for him to get his waterproof out of the backpack that Jonathan was in possession of? Jonathan certainly looked disgustingly sprightly. But there was no way any of us could be back for 7:20pm, was there?



The next thing I knew was that the wet, sloping, rocky path beneath me was more slippery than I'd anticipated and down I went on my back, bouncing a couple of times in the process. I'd cut my hand and grazed my arm which was smarting a bit. I bathed it in a nearby stream. Now I lagged behind and felt rather sorry for myself.

We pressed on, the other two up ahead, but then all seemed to meet up again crossing a dry-stone wall stile which seemed to take all the more effort to get across than the ones previously encountered. Now it seemed to be my turn to take the lead. I was looking forward to getting back and kept putting a bit of a spring into my step. I heard Jonathan saying that there was about another three miles or so to go. There was no way we were going to be back within the twelve hours, we'd already been through that; why did I have to keep reminding myself of the fact? It didn't matter, did it? This was stupid! I consoled myself that the fact that I wasn't going to make it

within twelve hours would provide all the more incentive for my son (who is a keen walker) to try at some future date.

But on the other hand, I thought, ordinarily I could jog the distance quite easily and make it back in time. And anyway what was the point of me going out early on Sunday mornings at home for a jog around the block if I couldn't put it to use at such a time as this. I looked back at the other two, now some 300 yards in the distance? What would they think if I made a run for it? Would they ever forgive me? But what about all my sponsors I thought, they'd pay up the £360 anyway since I had managed all Three Peaks; all the same it would be nice to be able to tell them I'd completed the challenge "properly". I would after all sort of be doing it, (if indeed it could be done within the time), for all three of us, and for England, (and sorry, Ireland too Patrick, but then you've already done it anyway!) Besides, Patrick and Jonathan did have the map back there, I didn't have anything they needed, and I figured it was pretty straightforward from here on! I looked back again. If I waited for them to catch up, more time would be lost. Patrick put up his hand and gave me a wave. Was it a wave of encouragement to go on? I don't really know, but gave it the benefit of the doubt and waved back. Quickly I took off my waterproof and fleece jacket and stuffed them into my rucksack, then tightened up all the straps and started to hoof it. On past a sign that said Horton-in-Ribblesdale 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ miles. I was now running for all I was worth. This was no time for prayers like "Oh Lord, if it be thy will..." my prayer was now firmly "Come on Lord, we can do it!!!!" And for the next half hour, the only thing in the world that mattered to me was the trophy of completing within the twelve hours! I thought about the Pen-y-Ghent Café clock that was five minutes slow. Did this mean I had an extra five minutes? My conscience, and I figured the God whom I serve thought not! If this was to be real, I'd have to clock 7:15pm by the Café clock and it as now 6:45 by my watch.

I followed a track across an open space which was punctuated with the odd yellow post sticking up from the ground. As the track dwindled, I looked for the yellow posts. Crossing a stile I ended up in a field of sheep, the track had run out and so had the yellow posts! I thought I saw a way over a dry stone wall in the corner. I ran towards it. It was very muddy and my feet sank into the ground. Worse still, there was no way over the wall when I got there. I could no more have climbed it than flown over at this stage - and it was topped with barbed wire! And even if I could get over, which track would I take; was it the one I could see through the local quarry? Surely after all this effort I wasn't going to be beaten. Oh, how I wished I'd got the map! No time for sulking; quickly I retraced my steps, took some deep breaths, looked carefully around and spotted the way over the wall. I squelched my way to the top of a grassy hill trying to avoid frightening too many sheep in the process; (they can shoot dogs for that can't they?). There in the distance, I could see the Horton-in-Ribblesdale train station. Surely that had got to be a good bet. I ran towards it. Over the level crossing and into the end of the village. I didn't know at first which end of village I was in and hence where the Pen-y-Ghent Café was. If it was the far end, I was sunk! I flew around the corner and there to my delight, it was.

So with boots that felt as if they were full of concrete and a slow motion action finish that was worthy of "Chariots of Fire" I ran up to the Café and almost fell against the door bell: ring, ring, ring, RING! (They close at 6:00pm to all but registered Three Peaks Walkers). Casually and patiently the Café owner opened the door to me as I panted and perspired profusely! She sorted me out my clocking ticket from the counter, (I guess I must have found the energy to give her my name,)

and I slammed it into the clocking-in machine and hit the lever. It registered 7:11pm! I'd made it to my own and I trust God's satisfaction with just *four minutes to spare!*

A steaming pint mug of tea was served to me; I had never tasted better. My two companions arrived some thirty minutes or so later. We didn't say much to start with. Apparently it had been Jonathan's turn to slip over during the last half hour! But I guess I was miles away in my thoughts. I'd made it within the time, but only through a fine team effort. We'd supported and encouraged one another along the way, and I suppose I'd just gone on to score the winning home run for the team!

We hobbled back to the campsite, got changed and went to the Red Lion for supper. My companions tucked into a plate of steak in ale with more chips followed by sticky toffee pudding. I settled for a jacket potato and cheese. Strangely, I wasn't that hungry; perhaps it was the two Mars bars, Kit-Kat, Nutrigrain bars, or the final dash, or the exuberance of victory, or maybe a bit of each!

It felt good lying in my sleeping bag that night with my thick pyjamas, track suit, and thick woolly socks on. I had a warm glow about me. Which was just as well, because it was a clear night and jolly cold outside. I got up in the night having been woken by some strange falcon-like screeches. The tent door was crisp with frost!

By the time I emerged the next morning Patrick was pretty well packed up; (doesn't it make you sick!). Jonathan was already off for another shave! Yes, I was the last to be ready. We had thought we'd have breakfast at the Pen-y-Ghent Café to pay our last respects, but it stays closed all day on Tuesdays. Instead we left the campsite for home at 9:00am, stopping a few miles later in Settle, real Last-of-the-Summer-Wine country. Here, it was Jonathan's initiative that arranged us a Full-English breakfast at an old stone-built hotel for just £4.50 a head. Mind you, he was wearing a tie! (He really is the last bastion of the British Empire!) Perhaps if they'd seen Patrick or me beforehand with our slightly more unkempt appearance and whiskered faces they would have thought twice about admitting us. We were led into a very elegant dining room with plush blue velvet chairs edged with red. The good-humoured, smartly uniformed waitress invited us to help ourselves to cereal. She then brought us the most handsome plates of egg, bacon, sausage, beans, fried bread, and what looked like miniature roast potatoes fit for kings!

"Keep bringing the toast" ordered Patrick. And she did, until we were full! Such a very fitting conclusion to an almost perfect expedition and indelibly etched memory.

"Aw, yer be able t'do Three Peaks after that!" she said as her parting remark.

Phew! Not likely, I thought as I belched my way back to the car!

