

FLIGHTLESS BIRDS, GEESE AND MUSHROOMS

Long Meg and Her Daughters is one of the largest and finest stone circles in the whole country and, like so many others, it comes with its own particular legend: that the stones in the circle are a coven of witches turned to stone by a Scottish wizard. It is said that it's not possible to count the stones (there may be 59) and reach the same number twice. If you do, the wizard's spell may be broken. Watching over the circle from a slight distance is Long Meg herself, a menhir of red sandstone, decorated with cup and ring and other marks. But enough, for I do not wish to spoil the story for you.

Our route today, however, will take us via Lacy's Caves – a series of open-windowed chambers carved out of a red sandstone cliff above a picturesque stretch of the River Eden. Before locating the riverside path, however, we have to reach the village of Little Salkeld. And to do so requires the crossing of a field with a small herd of cows. The cows are a little frisky and Linda and Carol opt to stick close to the fence at the edge of their field, while I face down the herd in the centre of the pasture. It is a fact that many more people die beneath the horns and hooves of cows and bulls than are mauled by sharks. Five times as many are killed by cattle as by dogs. What the stats don't provide is an accurate split between death by cow and death by bull, but there are far more of the former grazing on our rights of way than the latter. And, until a few quite well publicised cases in recent years, it was generally presumed that cows were mild-mannered beasts. Indeed, even as I complete this work, an inquest is taking place into the 'unprovoked' killing of a grandmother by stampeding cows in Northumberland.

You are at most danger from cows when you have a dog and/or the cow or cows have calves. Today, neither of these is the case and so, while they are making me feel uneasy, I don't feel I am in danger. Soon the herd loses interest in me and I continue to the

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field gate. However, on turning round, I see that the cows have discovered Carol and Linda, the latter of whom is now climbing the barbed wire fence: I implore her not to, but she will have none of it and – when she eventually finds an exit from the adjacent field to which she has fled – cites numerous cases of death by cow. Well, although I have been a bit rude about some farmers and, specifically, their at times cavalier attitude to rights of way, any walker should expect to encounter cows from time to time. In that eventuality my strong advice is firstly to give them a decent wide berth so as not to appear threatening, and in no circumstances come between a cow and her calf. And don't take dog into a field of cows if you can possibly help it.

And so, with the partial exception of one person's now perforated leggings, we arrive in Little Salkeld in one piece. I recall that, on a previous visit to Little Salkeld, you could still work out which of the pretty cottages was once the village pub, but it seems now to have cast history aside and changed its name. Then again, I may have looked in the wrong row. Punnets of juicy redcurrants and an honesty box sit outside one gate, but we have currants aplenty back home.

A curious fact about Little Salkeld is that it is pretty much unconnected to Great Salkeld, which does have a pub, and a pretty fine one at that... not long after the pub died in Little Salkeld, the Highland Drove, in Great Salkeld, appeared to face a similar fate, until rescued by a villager, Donald Newton. He has turned it into an acclaimed village boozier, with real ales, open fires and awards that include Les Routiers' Northern Dining Pub of the Year. It is a truth that ought to be universally acknowledged that a pub in possession of a half decent location must be in want of a good landlord or landlady. Which, in my tortured perversion of Jane Austen, means that – even at a time when pubs are generally struggling and closing at alarming rate – the right team, with the

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right effort can cleave success from the jaws of historic failure. It will always help if they have ownership on their side for, to me, it is the greed of the pub leasing estates that has sown the seeds of decline in many cases. In what other industry would investment and innovation by the lessee be rewarded by higher lease charges to reflect the consequent increased trade?

But to get to the point, if Little Salkeldians wish to visit the hostelry that once provided refreshment to those driving cattle from north of the border, they will have to own or borrow a dinghy, or go all the way back to Langwathby to traverse the Eden. If you look at the map, you can see the stubs of lanes either side of the river and it appears that there was indeed once a bridge, but it may have disappeared early in the 19th century. The drovers continued to ford the river, just downstream from Nunwick Hall, and may well have found their way ultimately to the long drove road I took yesterday. It was a way of life that died with the coming of the railway.

At Salkeld, the station on said railway was in Little Salkeld and, though it remains in reasonable nick and is occasionally cited as a case for reopening, the simple fact is that it would be not much more than 2km from Langwathby and barely three from Lazonby. I note that the parish council over the river in Great Salkeld has consulted the public and produced a well-written, quite comprehensive Village Plan. Yet the document mentions neither the station nor a bridge across the river in its section on communications, despite exploring ways of better connecting the community with Penrith to help older residents. So, the only amenity that remains in Little Salkeld is its water mill. I know its little café won't be open, as maintaining any kind of social distancing would be close to impossible, but I also know that the mill has worked flat-out these last weeks to mitigate the disappearance of flour from supermarket shelves. We walk down towards the mill, but a lady in a garden tells us it's closed. So we abandon the short detour.

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Back home after my walk, I telephone Little Salkeld Mill and speak to Cheryl Harrison, who took over the working mill from Nick and Ana Jones, in 2014. The Joneses had run the place for four decades, so it has a long history of turning out high quality, stone-ground grains. It is not a very happy Cheryl who tells me that she and her husband, whom she calls simply ‘the miller’, are approaching the end of their tether. Frustrated city folk with no flour have, she says, scaled the gates of the mill during lockdown, been abusive when told there’s a waiting time for flour, and generally behaved badly.

‘I’m not sure what the miller’s thoughts are but I am a retired teacher by trade and I think that the behaviour of the human race is changing, and not very nicely,’ she says. ‘We feel a little rundown and disappointed.’

Running the mill, she reminds me, depends on the water level in Robbery Water, which turns the water wheel. This is a fact that some members of the public are not prepared to accept, so Cheryl is, in turn, minded to draw her own lines – to cut a long story short, the Harrisons may be selling up. While I dare say another enthusiastic couple may buy the mill and extend its tradition, it is a sad commentary on varying standards of behaviour during the difficult weeks and months of lockdown.

Even as she speaks, news bulletins report on wild campers in the Lake District chopping down trees for barbecues, camping on the dry beds of a reservoir and leaving behind them veritable truckloads of rubbish, and even equipment in good condition. I have struggled to get my head around this latter observation until my daughter observes that some festival-goers at Glastonbury abandon all their gear when they leave.

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Returning to today: as we retrace our steps from the mill road to the centre of the village, a car draws up and the driver winds down his window to ask us if we are headed for Lacy's Caves and warns us that there's a large sign on the gate advising that the path is closed. 'But it's okay, you can get through,' he adds.

On reaching said gate, we see that there is indeed a very large sign telling us to go no further. It's made of metal and painted red, with large block capital letters and it clearly means business.¹²

I can't say for certain what we might have done without the advice we received. We would, very possibly, have carried on anyway. Or perhaps we would have backtracked and gone via Long Meg.

As it is, we are now headed for another location that goes by the name of Long Meg: the former Long Meg gypsum and anhydrite drift mine. Once it had its own railway sidings and it actually closed as recently as 1976, nearly a century after it began work. As part of my team effort with *The Cumberland and Westmorland Herald* to get myself underground at Birkshead Mine, I acquired, following a reader's tip-off, a book called *The History of BPB Industries*, where BPB stands for British Plaster Board, and dates back to 1917. A little sticker inside its front cover reminds me rather sternly that the volume is 'for internal circulation only to employees and pensioners of BPB Industries Ltd and its subsidiary companies'.

The book tells me that, in 1916, 'what now [1973] substantially constitutes the northern regional division of British Gypsum ... was, in 1916, an ailing company ... operating under the aegis of the Carlisle Plaster and Cement Company'. This company had been formed in 1911 by the merger of three local businesses, including the Long Meg Plaster Company. Quarrying for gypsum

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at Long Meg began as early as 1879, with mining following in 1895. The latter, it seems, was not hugely successful in those early days as the gypsum seams were squeezed by layers of anhydrite to just two feet thick. Only later was it realised that mining the anhydrite was profitable in its own right. Nor was the merger, which combined the mine with interests in the production of cement, plaster of Paris and alabaster, entirely successful, as the combined concern merely brought into sharp relief the lack of capital that typified all three contributing companies.

Inevitably, the business went into receivership and was ultimately acquired by a concern called the Gotham Company. So, perhaps it was a case of Batman to the rescue, or – more probably – the intervention of the First World War, which brought a predictable spike in demand for some of the company's products, and the eventual conclusion of the takeover in 1918. However, the mine lease had lapsed and it only reopened in 1922, when A.V. Bramall began mining gypsum for the ICI plant at Billingham, on Teesside. A few years later, this production ceased, upon the discovery of easily accessible seams of gypsum. The newly formed Long Meg Plaster & Mineral Company built up a plaster trade of about 200 tonnes a week and this continued until 1940, when the business was acquired by BPB.

By all accounts, conditions for the 20 or so miners at Long Meg were fairly primitive, with illumination provided by paraffin lamps comprising quart milk tins with a string 'wick' inserted through the lid. 'Smoke so filled the air that it became ingrained into the skin,' the book says. 'Many a worker was highly embarrassed to find that when slightly sweating at a dance, his face would be streaked with black marks.'

This wasn't quite the end of the road for Long Meg mine: in 1954, anhydrite mining resumed for the production of sulphuric acid at a plant at Widnes, and output climbed to 300,000 tonnes a

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year – a figure which even today exceeds that of gypsum production at Birkshead. The mine only finally closed in 1976, by when it had yielded in excess of five million tonnes of mineral. The dedicated signal box, controlling the Long Meg sidings complex, on the S&C, closed a few years later and it fell into disrepair.

The way to Lacy's Caves weaves through the old industrial site and past a large electricity substation, before passing close to the relatively low viaduct that takes the S&C across the Eden. It's a popular photographic variation for those seeking to capture the passage of steam trains on the line, affording a pastoral rather than a rugged moorland setting. We pass a large and elaborate mosaic made from old bits of brick and depicting the journey of the Eden through the valley. The associated information is hard to find these days but my recollection is that it was produced by local schoolchildren. It would be nice to see it brought back to life.

Beyond the viaduct, our route follows an old tramway that would have served the anhydrite drift. You can still see the remains of the odd rail and sleeper. Apparently one of the old saddle tank locos now resides on the Bowes Incline preserved railway, on the edge of Gateshead.