

Three Lucky Lads Loose in Lakeland23rd Feb 2021

In late February 1945 three boys from Barrow Grammar School set off for a few days adventure in the Lake District. Alan Marsh, Denys Vaughan and Dougie Williams; they were short of money and their kit was at best inadequate for the troubles they later met. An early workman's train from Barrow to Coniston was 1s7d, about 8p, and sandwiches would keep us going to Borrowdale Youth Hostel and supper for 1s 6d. We legged it to Great Langdale then over Stake Pass to Rosthwaite where we met similar boys escaping from the boredom of school.

Next day we had the rare treat of cooked breakfast, bacon, strangled egg (made from powder), porridge, bread and marmalade, all for 1s 6d. Packed lunch was a cheap 9d for sandwiches of cheese, horse and chicken meat paste, fruit cake and perhaps an apple. Our morning's hike took us up to Sprinkling Tarn (1) which Johnnie Sawtell, a great geography teacher said we MUST SEE, because it is the only rock basin lake in the county. We sat on a dry rock and ate the packed lunches, confident we would later get supper at Windsor Farm YH in Wasdale. That did not happen.

The next objective was Napes Needle and the Innominate Crack on the South face of Great Gable. We carefully set off along the Climbers Path below Kern Knotts (2). The day clouded over and in less than half an hour we were surprised by a wild looking chap in a flapping flying helmet galloping as if a bull was after him. "There has been a terrible accident" he said, and for a few seconds we thought his aircraft had crashed. "Get along as quick as you can and find some climbers, my chum has fallen on Shark's Fin and needs help, quickly. I am off to get help from Keswick."



He turned out to be a schoolmaster from a notable public school and must have been suffering badly from shock. Keswick is many miles away and Brackenclose, (8) the **Fell and Rock Climbing Hut in Wasdale is barely a mile away, within sight of Great Gable.** So off he galloped, we nervously picked our way westwards and in a few minutes were very relieved to meet a climber, one of the best in Cumberland. He wore real climbing boots with clinker nails, grey knee socks, breeches and a Grenfell jacket, 120 feet of manila rope draped round his shoulders, a short military moustache and a green Tyrolean trilby. It was **Colonel Rusty Westmorland**, every inch an experienced mountaineer and commander.

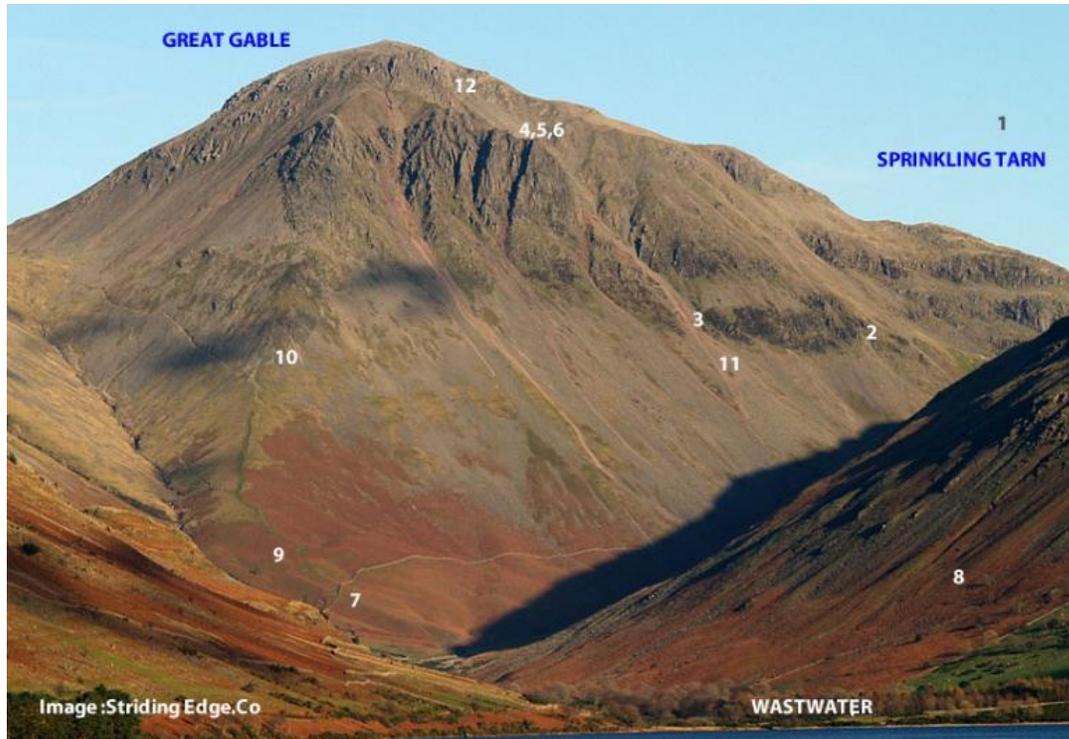
A black and white collie seemed to be with him. He asked if we had ever done any climbing and we shook our heads. He sized us up, then volunteered me to climb with him up Great Hell Gill (3). He took my blanket and stuffed it inside his jacket, told me to leave my rucksack and we set off up the gill. My first ever climb on a rope, with one of the most distinguished mountaineers in England began. In a few steps the dog caused a mini avalanche of large stones. One of them landed on his index finger and lacerated it to the bone. "Damned dog's been following me all day" was all he said and produced a clean white handkerchief for me to bind up his injury. The dog disappeared, it was not a good scene for dogs. We climbed about 50 feet or so up the technical bit and reached safe ground above Shark's Fin (4,5,6). Col. Westmorland tied me to a large gravestone-sized spike belay, climbed down to the casualty and I paid out the rope until he stopped.



The next quarter of an hour seemed like a lifetime. I looked down on Wastwater where a cold black storm hurtled in from the West. It rained, it hailed and it snowed and I stood there with no hat, shorts, no gloves and only a cotton jacket between me and the elements. Then two saviours came up from the gill where Marsh and Williams had told them the story.

One was called Mr Yule and I think his friend was Morris. They tied onto the gravestone and Mr Yule, belayed by Morris went down to help Col. Westmorland. He was soon back with orders for me to run down to Wasdale to the Brackenclose Fell and Rock Hut and return pronto with a Thomas splint, stretcher and as many climbers as possible to carry the casualty off the crag to Wasdale and hospital. I carefully clambered down to recover my rucksack, only to find no sign of Marsh, Williams or rucksack containing all my spare clothes, wallet, waterproof and torch. Good mates I (wrongly) thought, they've rescued my rucksack. I galloped straight down the loose scree and ran all the way to Wasdale Head where I bumped into six more

saviours, the first mountain rescue unit from RAF Walney on their very first day of DIY training. It seemed the Almighty was answering the Colonel's prayers.



These were half a dozen redeployed aircrew, survivors of many operations over Germany, a mixture of sergeants and one officer. The officer, thick white aran jersey and expensive looking brown boots confessed to going up Snowdon once but we three naughty boys had more boots on the ground in mountains than all the RAF MRT trainees. Later I imagined the group had volunteered for “a good scrounge” off camp. Their hike from Cockley Beck, over the highest mountains in England carrying a state-of-the-art sled stretcher, uncounted yards of manila rope and first-aid kit was hard physical labour and they were not enthusiastic about another mountain in steady drizzling rain. No scrounge at all. Tea and buns in the farmhouse I'm sure they managed.

Their MT Corporal drove the RAF vehicle, possibly a 15cwt soft-top ambulance to Brackenclose to get help. There wasn't any. So much for esprit de corps. I'm in the lifeboat Jack was more like it..



The corporal delivered the message to a trio of dry well-dressed men warming their bums before a great log fire. “No we are not turning out in this rain.*” was the stony response.

“No we are not turning out in this rain. We’ve been climbing all day and there is no point, the Keswick people will have secured him by now (4:00 pm)” was the threadbare nonsense excuse offered by the smug, pipe-smoking spokesman. In fact the Keswick people did not arrive until midnight. The RAF runs on sensible corporals; this one kept his manners until we got back in the car. There was an eloquent appraisal of the fatherless FRCC lot in a spectacular outburst of anger. “Bloody Brown Jobs” was his least offensive term. “Wouldn’t like to depend on them in a fight.” I heartily agreed but my spirits fell when he said “You lad, are the only one who knows the way to this Shark’s Fin, you will have to come with us and show us the way.” They may not have been army men. Schoolmasters and conscientious objectors avoided the armed forces except as volunteers.

We met the team back in Wasdale Head farm-yard, disappointed that no experienced climbers arrived but confident that this wet 14 year old chap in short trousers would lead them to the casualty. Nobody had a torch. Mine was in the rucksack. To the rescue came the Wasdale Postman on his bike for his tea at the farm before riding back to Nether Wasdale. His bike lamp was requisitioned by the RAF.



Gavel Neese (nose), the steep ridge from Wasdale Head Farm up to the Climbers Path.

Led by this lad in the gathering gloom a fairly well-equipped rescue party trudged up the steep slope of Gavel Neese, (9,10,11), hours of ankle-breaking slow progress amid foul weather and foul language along, approximately, the Climbers Path. I had hoped to meet Colonel Westmorland, Mr Yule, Morris and the casualty, Wilfred Noyce soon . After hours of carrying, resting, much swearing and smoking we arrived at the bottom of Great Hell Gill (3). A heavy aircraft droned above and one of the sergeants said *"I would rather be sat in an effing kite like that over the effing Ruhr being effing shot at than on this*

bloody mountain.” (His first time on a mountain) I did take them to the right place and they set off up Great Hell Gill with instructions to keep shouting so the three able climbers could hear them. I was very anxious about being late for Windsor Farm YH, wet to the skin and hungry with nothing to eat or drink since lunch time.

I needed to reach the hostel by 10 p.m. or have a row and get fined. In a rainy, then starry, windy night I finally reached Windsor Farm Hostel, where all were fast asleep and the doors locked. Big Trouble.



The Old Windsor farm was a bleak old sheep farm in a bit of a state. This is Windsor Farm House today and it will cost you more than 4s6d (24p) a night. The YHA was just the middle building. I threw gravel at the visible window to waken the angry warden, and on my second night I made an emergency exit from the same window to the primitive rural lavatory. The conservatory covers the old farm yard and the lavatories and septic tanks were just in front. Rather better today.

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More next issue. Denys Vaughan.

