

The Borrowdale Yews

Walkers and climbers who are familiar with the Lake District will know of Seathwaite, in Borrowdale, gateway to the legendary peaks of the central volcanic region of Cumbria, Great Gable and Scafell Pike to name but two. Nestling in a steep sided glacial valley eight miles south of Keswick, the hamlet lies at the end of the macadam road and the start of the dramatic footpath winding its way into the heart of the mountains. It is a place of adventure. It is also the wettest place in England. Four traditional white cottages stand in a terrace facing a large barn across a cobbled yard. All the inhabitants are of the same family. I have now met three generations of them running the small café in the end cottage. I returned to Seathwaite on a sunny day in October to visit the Yews. It had been cold the previous night and as I drove up the valley the shadows of the mountains in the fields were white with frost. Fortified by coffee and toast in the cafe I crossed the yard and proceeded to the wooden footbridge over the stream which was sparkling in the autumn sunlight. After a short walk downstream I turned to climb the steep hillside, fighting my way through chest high bracken and over loose rocks until, after a few hundred yards, I reached my beloved Yews.

Protected from the ravages of sheep

The Borrowdale Yews are the only trees named on the Ordnance Survey map in Cumbria (grid reference NY 235126). There used to be four of them but sadly, one perished in a storm on the night of 11 December 1883. The remaining three (118, 144 and 212cm diameter) are situated on a well watered but well drained slope which protects them from prevailing westerly winds: they thrive in this environment. They are probably about 1500 years old. Recently, at the instigation of Thomas Pakenham, they were fenced to protect them from the ravages of sheep.



(Derrick Holdsworth)

This particular morning, sweating from the exertion of scrambling up the slope I saw the fence for the first time. My heart sank. Previously I could visit these trees without hindrance: after all my efforts would I be able to get close to them now? I began to follow the outside

of the fence, hanging on with both hands negotiating the bracken, the rocks and on at least two occasions scrambling down into a rocky stream bed and hauling myself up the other side. Silently I muttered to myself: was it really necessary to protect the trees with a fence when they had survived the attentions of sheep for at least a thousand years? After struggling round three sides of the fence I was relieved to find a small, single plank stile giving access to the enclosure. All is forgiven, Thomas!

Wordsworth's dramatic description

At last I was with my old friends. It was cool in the shade under the dense foliage. I sat on a rock to absorb the atmosphere. Small shafts of sunlight dappled the huge trunks with buttons of light which twinkled as a breeze caressed the foliage. It was like being in a cathedral. The trunks were as I remembered, beautiful contorted shapes. I ran my fingers over them and went round the back of the largest one to look into its hollow interior. I must have stayed for at least half an hour, taking photographs and thinking of Wordsworth's dramatic description of the scene:

“...but worthier still of note,
Are those fraternal four of Borrowdale,
Joined in one solemn and capacious grove,
Huge trunks, and each particular trunk a growth
Of intertwined fibres serpentine,
Up-coiling and inveterately convolved.”



(Derrick Holdsworth)

Reluctantly I left them. Once over the stile I found an easier way down. On the riverside path I stopped a party of walkers. Did they realise that they were passing some of the most remarkable trees in Britain? Should you decide to visit these Yews I suggest you go in winter. In summer they can be difficult to distinguish from the surrounding broadleaves; but in winter they stand out clearly, patches of green amid the otherwise leafless woodland. Make for the north east corner of the fence. This way you will find the stile and save yourself a lot of time and effort!