

CHERNOBYL TRAVERSE REVISITED (19TH JUNE 2016)

I am now happily retired from the Rural Payments Agency, and the rules of the Agricultural Support schemes no longer weigh heavy on my mind. In fact, I live a fairly carefree existence – but every now and then it is good to challenge the status quo. And it was with this in mind that earlier in the summer I rang Andy Bradbury to see if he was interested in another crack at the Chernobyl Traverse. The last Chernobyl Traverse was in June 2012 and we encountered a summer storm on the overnight section over the Buttermere fells, so I was pleasantly surprised when Andy enthusiastically replied in the affirmative. It was reassuring to know that there is still a streak of madness in the RPA!

The Chernobyl Traverse is a fell walk in the western Lake District linking Loweswater to the Duddon valley. It traverses the high fells of Great Borne, Starling Dodd, Red Pike, High Stile, High Crag, Haystacks, Green Gable, Great Gable, Esk Pike, Bowfell and Crinkle Crag, and in total is 22.5 miles long with 7,000ft of ascent. It is called the Chernobyl Traverse because it was conceived as a fitting way to mark the end of 26 years of monitoring hill sheep for radiation in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. On that first traverse we sought sponsorship and raised £709 for the Chernobyl Children's Project (UK). Our aim was to better that amount in 2016 and also to visit all of the peaks – in 2012 the traverse was completed by side stepping into the adjacent valleys to avoid the worst of the weather.

This year we decided to do the Traverse in reverse i.e. starting in the Duddon valley and walking northwards and westwards to Loweswater. Somewhat pre-empting the success of the venture I arranged to meet up with our ex Chernobyl farming friends for a celebratory meal on Saturday evening 18th June at the Newfield Inn, Seathwaite. This weekend gave the longest daylight hours and also coincided with a nearly full moon so we just had to keep our fingers crossed that the weather would be favourable as well since we would be traversing the Bowfell range overnight. Come the 18th the forecast was for dry sunny weather, wind and rain moving in on Sunday but not until late afternoon. So it was with a light heart that we embarked on our adventure and this is how it panned out

10.30pm Saturday 18th June – suitably fortified by a splendid meal of Cumberland sausage, mashed potato and onion gravy followed by a couple of pints of Yates bitter we stepped outside the Newfield Inn into a still balmy evening with just enough daylight left to take a photograph. Bidding farewell to our friends and to Andy's wife Sarah we shouldered our packs and stepped out for Cockley Beck.



The road wends its way northwards and was gloriously quiet with only one car passing us in 4 miles. I say it was quiet but the passing of farmsteads resulted in a cacophony of barking as the farm dogs

announced our presence and continued long after we had passed, taken up in turn by neighbouring dogs across the valley. The longed for moon duly obliged us by appearing high to the east and bathing our way in moonlight. We felt a surge of confidence in the task that lay before us ... and that is probably why, as we struck out for the open fell beyond Cockley Beck, the moon decided to call it a night, promptly disappeared behind a cloud and was not to be seen again! The shapes of the mountains could still be made out but as we plateaued out on Great Knott and picked up the main path towards Crinkle Crag I ominously noted that a bank of white cloud was engulfing the summit of Pike O' Blisco the next peak to the east of us. And shortly after this a similar cloud moved in over Crinkle Crag and descended to absorb us and blot out any further landmarks.

My reasoning when planning the walk was that the footpath was so clear that once we'd found it, it would be easy to follow whatever the weather. This proved not to be the case – because the light from the head torches bounced back on the water droplets in the mist and as the terrain became rockier the path was at times indistinguishable from the surrounding rocks. Nonetheless the sudden appearance of the 'bad step', a 10ft rock wall ascended on hand and footholds confirmed that we were still on target and near the summit of Crinkle Crag. 15 minutes later at 2.00am we *think* we are on the summit because there doesn't seem to be any higher ground in the vicinity and there is quite a sizeable cairn.

The difficulty now is finding the way off since we can only see a few metres, the compass is swinging about wildly and there is no obvious footpath. We flounder about and after half an hour arrive back at the summit. And it's beginning to feel quite cold! We come to the regrettable conclusion that the only option is to stop put until the early dawn. Fortunately, Andy's experience of 4 years ago has instilled a healthy degree of caution and he has brought his storm shelter which we now pull over us. Inside it and rammed up against a large boulder, we are far from snug but at least the air inside is a few degrees warmer. I think we must have nodded off because when I next look at my watch it is 3.20am and sticking my head out of the shelter the scene is cast in a light grey light. The footpath is immediately apparent.

We folded up the shelter and headed on our way – pleased to be moving and to get the circulation going again. The path zig-zagged downhill with rocky outcrops suddenly looming out of the mist at us and seemed to go on endlessly but eventually led down to Three Tarns and the start of the climb up to Bowfell. Sunrise would have been at 4.33am but we were enveloped in a world of uniform greyness and emerged onto the summit of



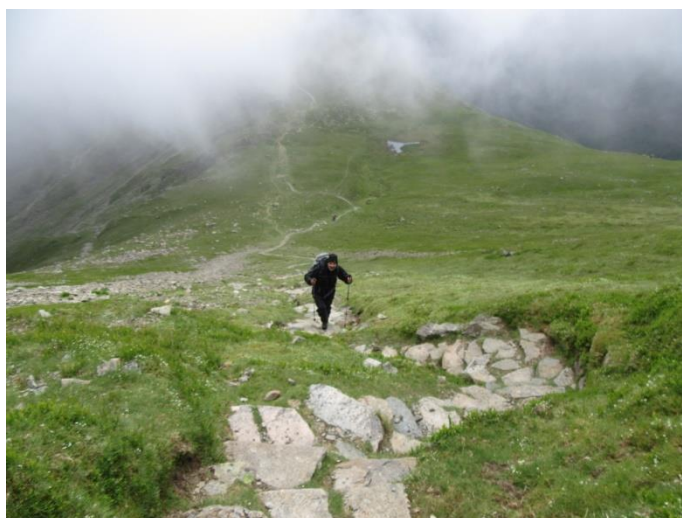
Bowfell at 4.45am. On the way down to Ore Gap, the breeze got up and dispersed the cloud so that we could at last take in the dramatic scenery of upper Eskdale and the Scafell range beyond.



6.15am and we have arrived at Esk House shelter, an ideal place for a brew of tea and a bacon butty, courtesy of Andy's Trangia stove. It would not be exaggerating to say that this put new life into us. The rest of the descent to Sty Head pass was made in good time and we were able to start climbing Great Gable just before 8.00am. The path has been renovated as a series

of rocky steps which steeply climb over 1300ft in under a mile. Near the top we disappeared into cloud again which sadly blotted out the fine view of Wasdale but nonetheless it was good to stand on the summit and know that we were now half way as regards distance and two thirds of the way as regards ascent.

The summit of Great Gable is very rocky and we picked our way gingerly down to Windy Gap, there being no paved steps on this section. Green Gable was a short leapfrog and thence onward to Haystacks. The weather now was bright and blowing a gale on the summit where we stopped for an early lunch. We looked straight across Scarth Gap to High Crag our last big climb and gateway to the Buttermere fells – it looked formidable, straight up for over 700ft. And on closer



inspection it did not disappoint(!) – providing $\frac{3}{4}$ hr of unrelenting toil for already weary limbs. We rested on the top safe in the knowledge that the hardest work was behind us and without mishap we should reach Loweswater by mid-afternoon. In fact, we did have a slight mishap on the very next peak, High Stile. The cloud had blown back in and was making route finding difficult with the result that instead of continuing along the ridge to Red Pike we managed to swing north-east onto the



descent route to Birkness Combe. I only realised this error as the path continued to go down and down instead of levelling out to go up Red Pike. Andy's GPS confirmed our suspicion so we turned around and added another 300ft of ascent to our total – just for good measure!

On top of Red Pike, it started to rain (a little bit sooner than predicted) but this was now the homeward straight so we strode out for Starling Dodd in fairly upbeat mood. Great Borne looked much bigger than I remembered but it was the last peak and we battled away until we were on the heathery top – and were pleasantly surprised to be greeted by Sarah with Andy's two dogs Molly and Monty who had walked out to meet us. It was a steep and tricky descent down to Floutern Tarn

and a long and boggy tramp through Whiteoak Moss but a tired, wet and bedraggled pair of fell walkers made it to journey's end at High Nook farm just after 4.30pm (18hrs after setting out from the Newfield Inn).

So this year we did complete the whole of the Chernobyl Traverse with all its peaks and I am pleased to say that we also exceeded the 2012 sponsorship total. Following the walk, we have forwarded a total of £916.33p to the Chernobyl Children's Project (UK). A big thank you to all who generously sponsored us on the 2016 Traverse and best wishes to you all.

Steve Pottinger