



# Outdoor FOCUS

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE OWPG / SUMMER 2022

# Outdoor FOCUS Summer 2022

## From the editor...

David Taylor

The passings of the seasons is marked by festivals and other events. (Sometimes fictional. Am I alone in thinking of May Day as Wicker Man Day?) One event closer to members' hearts is of course the Big Weekend. In this issue Stan Abbott has news of what's to come on this important occasion. Further details will be forthcoming and the gathering will be something to look forward as the nights start drawing in. Until then, enjoy the summer sunshine. And don't accept invitations to visit strange communities on remote Scottish Islands...

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If you'd like to contribute to the next edition of *Outdoor Focus* please send an email with your article idea to [davidtphoto@gmail.com](mailto:davidtphoto@gmail.com). The copy deadline is 15 August 2022.



### **Cover star Alex Roddie**

Location: Beinn Eighe, Scottish Highlands

[www.alexroddie.com](http://www.alexroddie.com)

## New members



### **Kassondra Cloos**

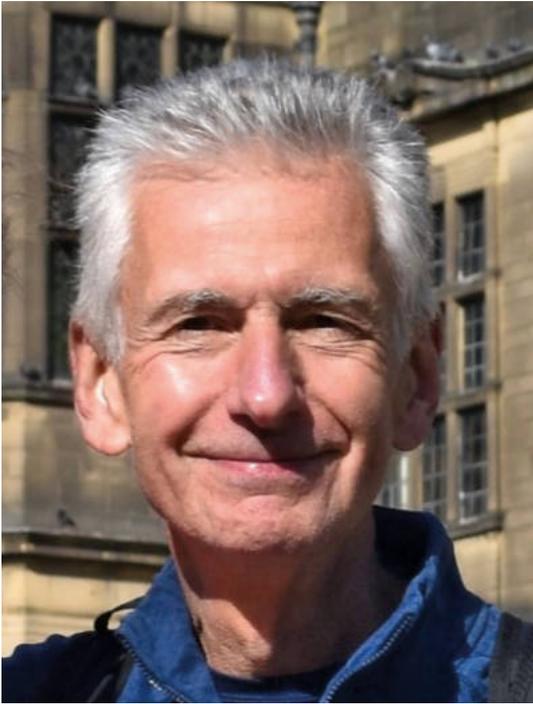
Kassondra is a freelance journalist who seeks to ignite a passion for people's immediate surroundings. Her essays and articles about slow travel, wilderness expeditions, and city-based outdoor adventures aim to inspire readers to live adventurously both at home and while traveling, and to find thrills in the otherwise mundane. You can find her work in *The New York Times*, *Outside*, *Backpacker*, *Travel Channel*, *Fodor's*, and *Flow Magazine*, among others. She writes a slow travel column for the *Denver Post* and a newsletter about full-time travel called *Out of Office* ([outoffice.substack.com](http://outoffice.substack.com)). She is originally from Rhode Island, which she talks about quite a lot.

When she's got a few spare minutes while traveling on assignment, you can usually find Cloos scribbling a stack of handwritten letters from within the cosiest cafe in town. Take care if you catch her at home in London—she might just suggest a "short" 10-mile meander around the city.

The Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild is the only UK-based association of media professionals working largely or entirely on outdoor subjects. Our members cover every field of activity and all corners of the globe. They include writers, journalists, film makers, photographers, publishers and editors, all with a passionate interest in the outdoors. For more information visit [www.owpg.org.uk](http://www.owpg.org.uk).

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## John Myatt

**For over 30 years, I worked as a teacher and school administrator, mainly based overseas.** Chronologically, my teaching career and wanderlust took me to the Blue Nile in Sudan, Cairo, Hong Kong, Amsterdam and Bahrain. When I returned to my homeland with my family, I began running over the fells, which prompted me to write a guidebook called *Lakeland Fell Runs for Mortals*, soon to be published by Pesda Press. I am currently writing a similar guide entitled *Eden Valley Fell Runs for Mortals*.

I run every day in the mountains close to my door, frequently to Bowscale Tarn and often over Bowscale Fell in the Northern Fells of the English Lakeland. My daily runs led me to embark on a new project, *A Year in the Life of Bowscale Tarn*, in which I am documenting, in written and photographic form, the subtle changes occurring at the tarn during an entire year.

## Emily Woodhouse

**Emily Woodhouse is a writer, adventurer and the voice behind Travelling Lines ([travellinglines.com](http://travellinglines.com)).**

She is also the editor of *Intrepid Magazine*: the magazine giving a platform for adventurous women to tell their stories, without the middle man.



## CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

### Dear members

**You should by now have received details of our OWPG Big Weekend in October, at Grange-over-Sands.**

The Big Weekend is the opportunity to meet up with fellow members, share experiences and participate in the Guild's AGM and our annual awards ceremony.

We have an exciting range of activities planned and hope to see as many members as possible.

Booking forms for the Big Weekend can be downloaded from the Guild's website. As Chairman I'm delighted that Kevin Sene, one of newer committee members is now sharing the work of organising the Big Weekend as part of the process of bringing new blood into the running of our Guild.

In similar vein, I have also set up a small ad hoc group to look at how we increase the value of the Guild to members and, indeed, in so doing, how we can improve our recruitment. I've been pleased to note a number of new and younger members joining our ranks so far this year but our membership profile is still towards the older end of the scale.

Sadly, I do have to include myself among the "typical" older members, which is why I set myself two years to do my best to get the Guild to the best possible place to deliver a bright and confident future for all our members.

Another development is the idea of informal regional get-togethers in areas where we have sufficient members to enable this. Josephine Collingwood is exploring the possibilities in the South-West, while I hope to announce a day hike and pub meal somewhere in the North later in summer.

We are also looking to urgently recruit from our membership someone to take over the vacant post of "social media manager". Ideally this should be someone who already manages their own Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and/or other social media channels. Please express any interest directly to me: [stan@gravity-consulting.com](mailto:stan@gravity-consulting.com)



# Wales Coast Path 10

*Paddy Dillon celebrates a decade of Welsh wanderings*

Ten years ago the Wales Coast Path opened and I was furious. People had been talking about creating a coastal path, but I thought negotiations would drag on for years. It opened so suddenly in 2012 that I was caught on the back foot, believing that any hope of lobbying for a guidebook contract was lost. To my surprise, Cicerone asked if I would write and illustrate one, and the rest is publishing history. As Jonathan Williams said, 'I am delighted Paddy Dillon agreed to take on the project. His ability to describe long distances accurately and concisely makes him exactly the right writer for this project.'

I have a back-story with the coast of Wales, beginning in the early 1970s with a school field trip, closely followed by an exploration of north Wales as a teenager on an early solo backpacking trip. In later years I walked along the north Wales coast and made a circuit of the Anglesey Coast Path, followed by a couple of treks along the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, as well as chipping away at other coastal paths.

To cut a long walk short, I covered the 870 miles of the Wales Coast Path in 57 days, in exactly the same way as I offer the trek to prospective walkers in my guidebook. I added

four more days just for myself in order to visit the islands of Bardsey, Ramsey, Skomer and Caldey, which aren't included as part of the Wales Coast Path. I'd never visited any of them previously, so I thought I might as well make the effort in passing. After walking all the way from Chester to Chepstow around the coast, I couldn't resist adding the Offa's Dyke Path to make a complete circuit of Wales, but I don't expect my readers to feel obliged to do the same.

It's one thing to get a guidebook published, and quite another thing to get it sold, but the Cicerone sales and marketing team ensured that the initial print run sold out quickly, with the book being reprinted a couple more times in succeeding years. Every reprint gave me an opportunity to revisit Wales, checking for new coastal paths and re-routings, as well as keeping on top of all the services and facilities that walkers might use when they're walking for days, weeks or even months at a time. Some stretches of the coast path are also designated cycle-ways, and I always envied cyclists speeding past me while I trudged out the miles, so I took a bike one time and did some of my research at speed.



# 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

▲ The view from Ynys Llanddwyn to the hills of the Llŷn Peninsula

So, it's been a great decade for me, my guidebook, the Wales Coast Path, and now the trail is enjoying its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I knew it was coming, and Cicerone were ready for the book to move forward into a new edition, so last year I walked the entire coast again, checking the route for changes, adding and deleting services and facilities, refreshing most of the photographs and fiddling around with the maps. I even added another jaunt along the Offa's Dyke Path in order to wrap up Wales!

Visit Wales have a whole series of anniversary events planned for the coast path and they invited me to write something to encourage others to explore the path. Cicerone sponsored 'Tough Girl' Sarah Williams to walk the coast path and blog, vlog and flog it all over social media. Look her up on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and her own website at [www.toughgirlchallenges.com/walescoastpath](http://www.toughgirlchallenges.com/walescoastpath). Sarah started walking with the first edition of my guidebook and switched to the new edition as soon as it was published on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the trail.

I took delivery of my *Wales Coast Path* second edition complimentary copies at home while packing to start researching yet another

▲ The 'dragonshell' logo is incorporated into all Wales Coast Path signposts

guidebook. Flicking through the pages, it already seemed like ancient history, given that I was walking it a year previously. While the book had been moving steadily through the publication process, I'd updated another fifteen guidebooks, taking some into entirely new editions, while others only needed a little work to bring them up to date for reprinting.

One thing I've always admired about the Wales Coast Path is the unique logo they chose to brand everything to do with the path. The 'dragonshell' is a simple and splendid representation of a seashell that morphs into a dragon's tail. If you see this on a signpost, you know you're going the right way. Even on the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, which is a long-standing route marked with the usual national trail 'acorn' logo, you'll still find the 'dragonshell' confirming that you're on course.

The other thing I've grown to admire about the Wales Coast Path is how quickly walkers picked up on it and rose to the challenge of following it. In earlier decades, I'd noticed how diligently people prepared for treks along the South West Coast Path, but that only measures 630 miles, compared to the Wales Coast Path's 870 miles. That's a significant extra distance,



▲ Caernarfon Castle – one of several castles along the Wales Coast Path

and yet time and time again I've come across walkers who simply take it in their stride.

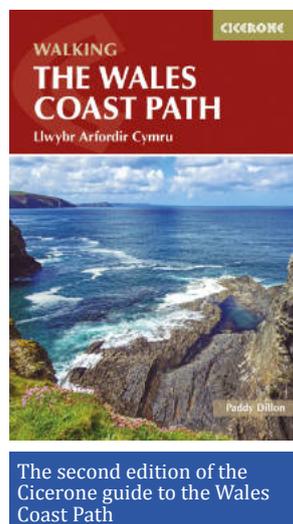
When I first walked the entire Wales Coast Path I met five other coast walkers face-to-face and I heard about many more. Last year, I started walking on the very day that Covid regulations were relaxed, and I didn't expect to meet anyone else walking the entire trail. I actually met two, which surprised me because the entire coast, not just the coast path, was eerily deserted for most of the time. The first time I walked the coast path I met Hannah Engelkamp leading a donkey in the opposite direction. The last time I walked the path, Hannah turned up on a remote stretch of coast to offer me lunch, walk with me and interview me for *Country Walking* magazine.

Again, looking back to when I first walked the coast path, I reached a place called Ferryside, where a ferry once operated a mere half-mile across an estuary. I'd spent the entire day wandering far inland to Carmarthen in order to cross a footbridge. It was the least coastal stage on the entire coast

path. There's now a new ferry service, for those who just want to crack on with the coast path and save a whole day's diversion inland. I can think of another handy place for a ferry, across the Dyfi estuary, which would save a two-day walk inland via Machynlleth, which is definitely not a coastal town.

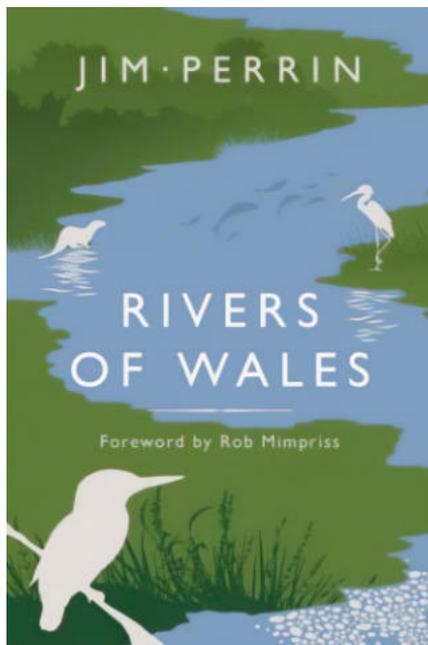
The Welsh Government have done a grand job of putting the Wales Coast Path together, and I've uttered words of thanks to them whenever a new footbridge has been provided across a tidal creek. Often, I don't declare which are my 'best bits' on a long trail, but I have grown to love the Llŷn Peninsula, because apart from it being beautiful, rugged and interesting, it also has many miles of new coastal footpaths that were put in place while the Wales Coast Path was being created. In fact, additional paths have been created there only in the past few years, opening up even more splendid cliff walks and views. It takes a lot of patient negotiation, time, effort and money to get this level of coastal access, so all credit to those involved.

Here's to the next ten years!



The second edition of the Cicerone guide to the Wales Coast Path

# Book Reviews / Roly Smith



## **Rivers of Wales**

**Jim Perrin**

*Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, £18.50 (hb)*

Following on from his previous affectionate reflections on his beloved homeland – *The Hills of Wales* (2016) and *Snowdon* (2012) both published by the now sadly-departed Gomer Press – multi-Boardman-Tasker winner Perrin now turns his meticulous, painstaking and passionate attention to the rivers of Wales.

Not all the Welsh rivers could be covered in a 300-page book, of course, and in a series of discursive essays Perrin covers his choice of seven of the great river systems of Wales which are, in his admittedly Welsh-chauvinistic view, “more beautiful than those of any other area of Britain.”

The rivers – the Afon Gwy (the Wye); the Afon Teifi (the Tivy); the Cynfal, Dwyryd and Glaslyn, and the Dyfi and Dysynni, with an affectionate look at his personal favourite, Afon Dwyfor, which rises in the beautiful surroundings of Cwm Pennant.

But this is much more than an historian’s and naturalist’s travelogue along the course of these lovely watercourses, although it accomplishes that with Perrin’s usual grace and style. As ever, Perrin is scathing in his fury about the catastrophic disasters which have sullied so many of our rivers, from unrestricted pollution to over-zealous riparian engineering.

He quotes liberally from some of his favourite Welsh nature writers, from George Borrow and Francis Kilvert to Robert Gibbings and William Condry, and praises their intimate and knowledgeable observational skills as they record riverine wildlife.

But he reserves most of his thinly disguised disgust on the new breed of so-called “New Nature Writing.” He describes their writing as “ego-infused, hothouse-lexis and rent-a-sentence syntax” and agrees with James Fisher, former editor of Collins’ masterful New Naturalist series, when he described “...authors whose excessive

consciousness of the exquisite nature of their prose, and the distinction conferred on the reader by a peep at their personalities, are so grotesque as to baffle description.”

That’s a criticism which could never be levelled at Perrin, who is surely a worthy successor to Condry and Kilvert.

## **The Women who saved the English Countryside**

**Matthew Kelly**

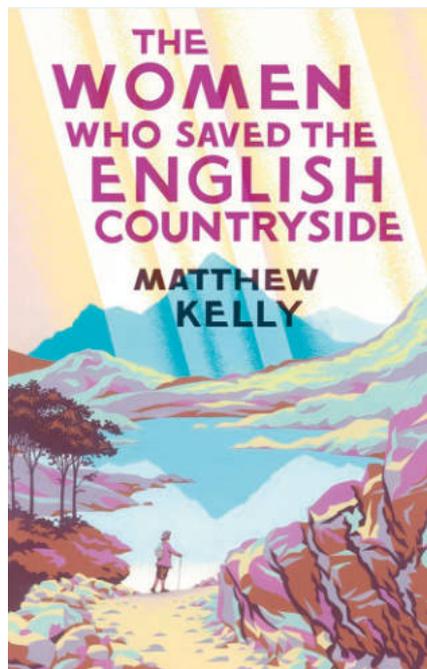
*Yale University Press, £20 (hb)*

It’s good to see some of our most formidable and often overlooked women conservationists given due credit for their tenacious defence of the English countryside.

No one could argue with the four subjects chosen by Northumbrian academic Kelly – Octavia Hill, Beatrix Potter, Pauline Dower and Sylvia Sayer. But other exceptional women activists, such as Ethel Haythornthwaite in the Peak, Esme Firbank in Snowdonia and in more recent times, Marion Shoard and Kate Ashbrook, immediately sprung to mind as notable omissions, surely worthy of much more than just a passing mention.

But Kelly’s exhaustive biographies of his chosen four do much to correct the balance of a usually male-dominated coterie. He classifies them as the Public Moralists (Hill); the Philanthropist (Potter); the Technocrat (Dower) and the Activist (Sayer) and goes on to describe in forensic detail their battles against the entrenched forces of the landed gentry, bureaucracy and societal values.

From Hill’s founding zeal in the



foundation of the National Trust in 1895; Potter's extensive land acquisitions later donated to the Trust in the Lake District; Dower's behind-the-scenes dogged diplomacy in the creation of our National Parks and later the Countryside Commission, and Sylvia Sayer's redoubtable defence of her beloved Dartmoor, Kelly faithfully relates the essential and pioneering roles they played in giving us the priceless protected areas we all treasure and enjoy today.

### **Ring of Stone Circles**

**Stan L Abbott**

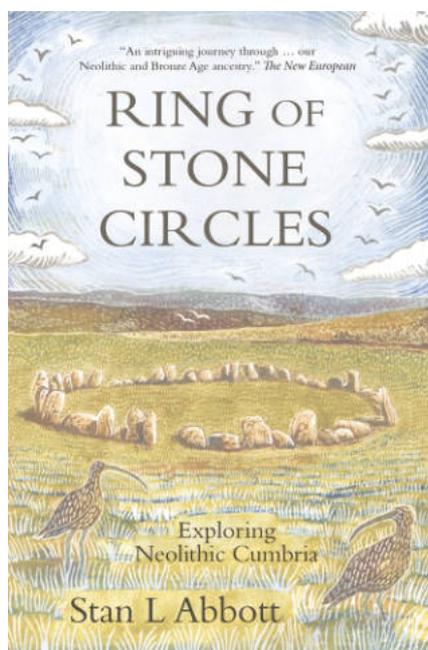
*Saraband, £9.99 (pb)*

In this beguiling travelogue LOWPG chairman Abbott admits from the outset that he is no archaeologist as he embarks on an ambitious odyssey to visit the majority of Neolithic and Bronze Age stone circles in Cumbria.

Originally envisaged as a walking route, Abbott eventually accomplished the feat with the essential assistance of what he affectionately dubs "The Beast" – an 18-speed electric hybrid bicycle.

Quoting extensively from archaeologists and their excavation reports, the author sheds new light on the importance and function of these enigmatic rings of stone, from the better-known sites such as Castlerigg and Long Meg, to many barely distinguishable circles which may have been prehistoric ritual sites or just as easily, the remains of cairns or hut circles.

And he agrees with archaeologist Paul Frodsham, who believes that Cumbria and in particular the Long Meg circles lay at the very heart of Neolithic



Britain, exactly midway between the better-known complexes of Stonehenge and Avebury in the south and Neolithic Orkney in the far north of these islands.

A common thread throughout the book is journalist Abbott's abiding interest in the communities and people he meets along the way. These include the entrants to Jane Hasell-McCosh's World Marmalade Championships at Dalemain; the World Gurning (face-pulling) Championships at Egremont, and the World's Biggest Liar contest, originally held at the Wasdale Head Hotel and now at the Santon Bridge Inn, Santon. Abbott gamely entered all of these, but unfortunately failed to win any.

The mystery of how and most importantly why these mysterious circles of stone were built remains unresolved, but the author concludes, as many have before, that they must have held a vital and overarching importance to the prehistoric populations of Cumbria which we have long since lost. And he asks himself the question: "Does the tingle I myself

feel at the heart of a stone circle represent the ephemeral vestiges of some long-lost gift?"

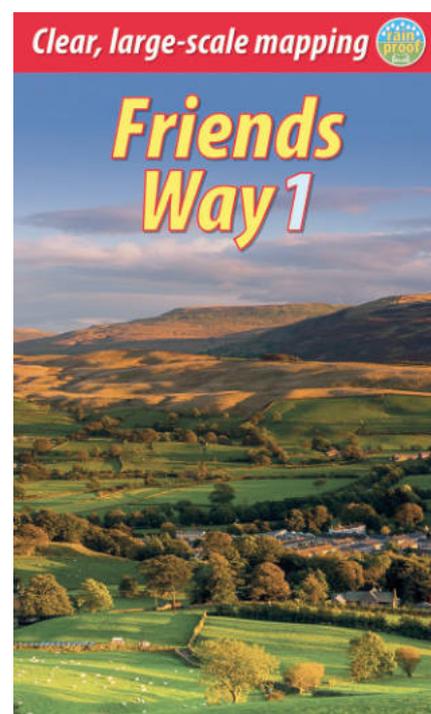
### **Friends Way 1**

**Martin Budgett & Jacquetta Megarry**

*Rucksack Readers, £14.99 (pb)*

The "friends" of the title are the Society of Friends, otherwise known as Quakers, and this 62-mile route follows the journey of founder George Fox from Barley, Lancashire at the foot of Pendle Hill, to Sedburgh, a town rich in Quaker heritage, in Cumbria.

Witch-haunted Pendle Hill is where Fox was "moved by the Lord to go atop of it" and where he had his vision of "a great people to be gathered" in 1652. Later a crowd of 1,000 gathered at the crag known as Fox's Pulpit on Firbank Fell, and the Society of Friends was inaugurated. The latter part of the route between Sedburgh and Swarthmoor Hall, Ulverston, his wife Margaret's family home, will be the subject of



a forthcoming *Friends Way 2*.

But there is much to enjoy on the first part of the route, which can easily be accomplished in a week. As usual with Rucksack guides, there are useful and informative sections on history (including a brief but fascinating account of England in the 17th century and a biography of Fox and Quakerism), geology, and the varied habitats which support the flora and fauna of Cumbria and the Yorkshire Dales.

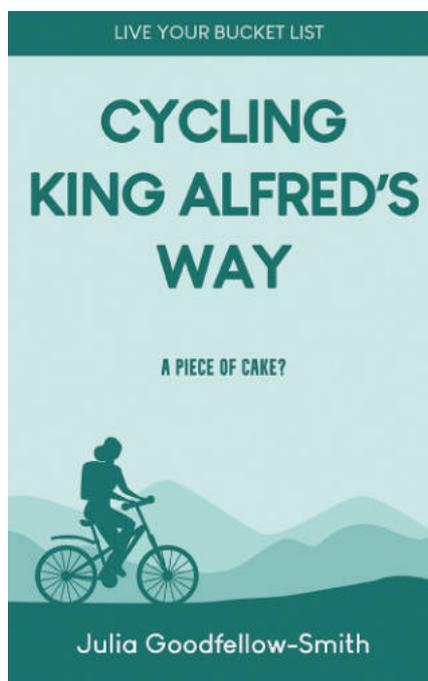
Clear Lovell Johns 1:35,000 scale mapping should ensure an easy and safe passage to the experienced or even the not-so-experienced walker, but it's a shame that the previous excellent Rucksack ring-bound format seems to have been abandoned, presumably on grounds of cost.

As an extra bonus, there are two day walks based on Sedburgh, one to the famously-temperance Cross Keys Inn at the foot of the Howgills, and the other a circular route to the Grade 1 listed Brigflatts Friends Meeting House, built in 1675 and where Fox preached to about 500 'Friends' in 1677. I have seldom experienced the peace and tranquillity I felt when I first visited this simple, unpretentious building.

### ***Cycling King Alfred's Way*** **Julia Goodfellow-Smith**

*Self-published as e book and audio book*

This is a personal description of one of Guild secretary Julia Goodfellow-Smith's 'Bucket List' ambitions as outlined in her previous book, *Live Your Bucket List*. When she heard about the 217-mile King Alfred's Way, a circular route based on the historic cathedral city of



Winchester, she thought it was the ideal way to fulfil her dream of a long-distance cycle route which would be manageable for a novice cyclist such as herself.

The route, only set up a couple of years ago by Cycling UK, encircles Alfred's Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex, and takes in historic monuments such as The Ridgeway, Stonehenge, Avebury, several Iron Age hillforts, and the two cathedral cities of Winchester and Salisbury.

Goodfellow-Smith undertook the route with her keen mountain-biking friend Alison, who proved to be an encouragement during some of the more difficult days.

But this is in no sense a day-by-day route guide description of King Alfred's Way, and much of the book is taken up with the author's six-week preparation and training, and latterly on tips on how the reader should prepare themselves for such a journey.

So the first thing you will need if you intend to follow in the author's bike-tracks will be the

appropriate OS maps, in addition to Cycling UK's comprehensive guide (which includes OS mapping) covering the route.

### ***The Cambrian Coast 2: Harlech to Aberystwyth***

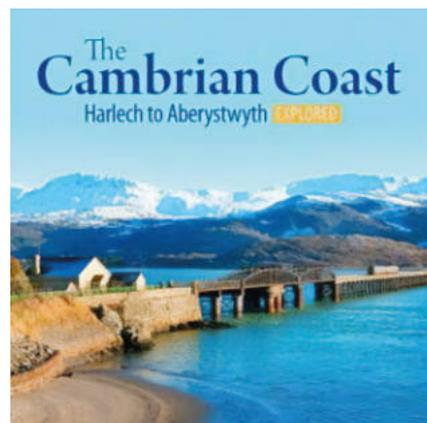
**Des Marshall**

*Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, £6.95 (pb)*

The latest in Gwasg Carreg Gwalch's comprehensive series of guides to the Cambrian Coast follows the southern section of the line of the picturesque Cambrian Coast Railway between Harlech and Aberystwyth.

There are no detailed routes in these guides, just enticing descriptions of some of the attractions to be found en route. In this latest guide they include Aber Mawddach; Harlech and its commanding castle; the port of Barmouth; Dolgellau and Penmaenpool; Aberdyfi and Tywyn; Owain Glyndŵr's capital, the market town of Machynlleth, and "the capital of the Welsh language," Aberystwyth.

The potted essays on subjects which range from the Tal-y-llyn narrow gauge railway to one of Wales' greatest poets, the 14th century bard known as Dafydd ap Gwilym, who lived at Llanbadarn Fawr, just to the north of Aberystwyth.



# A PHOTOGRAPHER'S VIEW

Simon Whaley





## **Loweswater Fell reflected in Loweswater, Lake District, Cumbria**

My dad and I had a week in the Lake District, and this was our first trip to Loweswater. Everything about the day was perfect. We'd slipped into the last space at Maggie's Bridge car park, the air was clear, the sky cloudless, with only the softest of breezes to shimmer the reflection. There was so much to photograph, it took us over an hour to walk the mile to Loweswater's bothy.

We both sat by the shoreline and gazed at Loweswater Fell's reflection.

"Life doesn't get much better than this," said my dad.

And he was right.

[www.simonwhaley.co.uk](http://www.simonwhaley.co.uk)



# CANYON COUNTRY

*David Bellamy is inspired by light of the Middle East*

**N**orth-west of the town of Al Hamra lies Wadi an Nakhar, the Grand Canyon of Oman, one of the most spectacular landforms in the country. The wadi begins low down as a narrow breach in the mountain. Sheer rock walls of ochres, oranges and reds rise on either side, in places allowing stunning views of the crags and buttresses higher up the cliffs, their features softened by the dizzying height while the wadi itself displays luxurious vegetation that offers some relief from the sheer wildness of the rock scenery. Deep pools of still water reflected these images. I spent hours sketching here, enraptured by the sublime scenes.

The wadi climbs into the vastness of the mountain until it opens out to its full grandeur, best viewed from high up on the rim of the plateau some 2,000 metres altitude. Vertical cliffs plunge over a



thousand metres to the bottom, the immensity of the place taking our breath away. On the far side Jebel Shams rose to some 3,048 metres, the highest mountain in Oman, its soaring ridges festooned with jagged pinnacles, cliffs riven with enormous gullies, framing one of the most sublime mountain scenes in Arabia. Here and there juniper and wild olive trees softened the harshness of the rugged grey-green karst scenery, but not a shred of cultivation punctuated the supreme savagery.

This vast sublimity would truly hearten the brush of Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) the Italian painter renowned for the utter horridness of his rock-strewn scenery, often peopled by bandits and characters of the most savage countenance. As we hiked on each step brought new gasps of astonishment and wonder. A couple of goats attached themselves to us, presumably hoping my rucksack was full of goat-goodies.

Evenings up here are a time to relish, and however tired you are the sheer inspiration of being in this monumentally spectacular place keeps you entranced by nature in its most dramatic manifestation. Painting watercolours at sunset is prone to messy results, as you have to work fast, while the paint is slow to dry. An unwary brush-stroke can cause washes to run into one another where you may not want that to happen. To stay ahead of the game I try to draw in some of the most vital features of the scene before the actual sunset effect begins, otherwise the pencil has to be abandoned and I work directly with paint from the word go. Watercolour pencils greatly enhance the speed with which the washes can be controlled, simply by drawing into the wet washes. Slowly the shapely peaks became redder, the plunging precipices a deeper purple as they gathered that magical atmosphere of mysterious darkness. Rocks flushed pink and rose-coloured as they caught the last glimmer

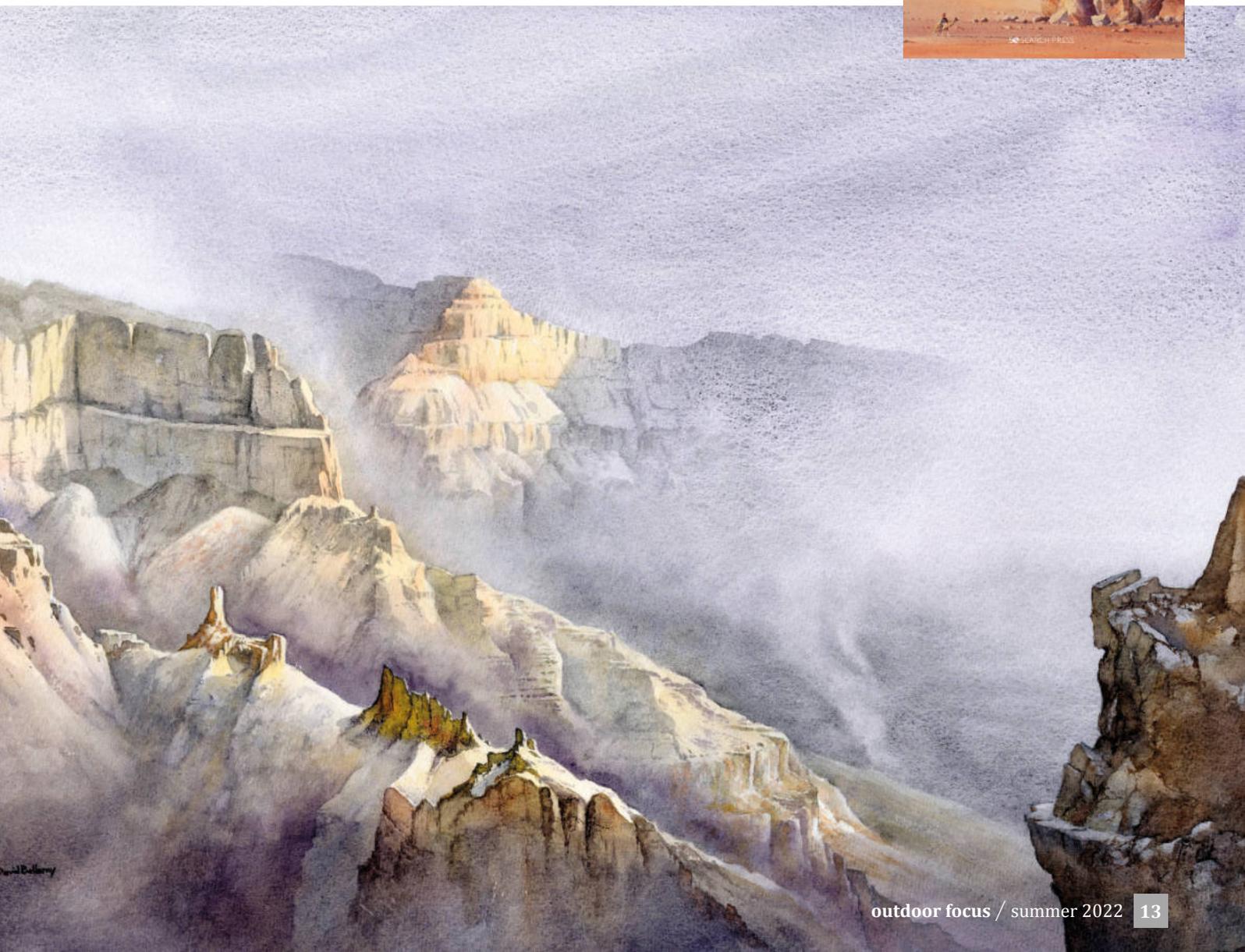
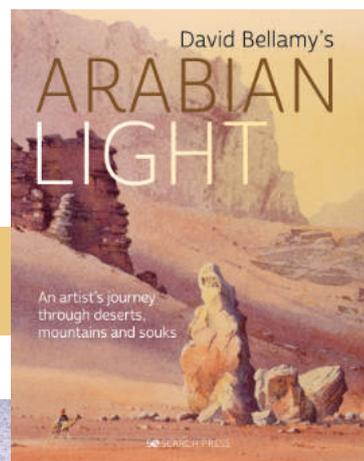


of warm light in the dying glow. Stark crags took on a more menacing countenance as their detail blended into dark silhouettes against what was left of the light. Then all the light had gone, dark as the menacing gloom of Tartarus, leaving us to blindly grope our way back across the rock-strewn plateau to our base.

This is based on a chapter in my book, *Arabian Light*, to be published by Search Press in May 2022. It is packed with sketches and watercolours of the Middle East, a result of my many visits there. An exhibition of the paintings from the book will take place at the Osborne

Studio  
Gallery at  
2 Motcomb  
Street, London  
SW1X 8JU (tel. 020  
7235 9667) from  
18 to 28 May.

Further details can be found at  
[www.davidbellamy.co.uk](http://www.davidbellamy.co.uk)



# LECCY BIKES

*Stan Abbott finds himself in love with an electric bike, or a power-assisted cycle as he prefers to call The Beast...*



Love, if not at first sight, can simmer undetected for a while before exploding into the consciousness. So it was with me and electric bikes (or one such machine in particular), which I had previously cubby-holed somewhere marked “only for the older citizen”.

Just one short ride on a track through Norwegian woodland (now there’s one for nostalgic Beatles fans) sowed the seeds of a change in attitude that would eventually turn to love.

It was Spring 2019 and I’d been leading a small group of adventure journalists on a press trip to southern Norway, which was mostly focussed around water: white water rafting on the one hand and hopping among the myriad little islands and skerries off the coast on the other. We were offered the chance to try out the electric cycles just to fill in a spare hour.

I suspect I am not alone in having imagined that adding an electric motor to a pedal cycle would give a constant source of supplementary power and, indeed, the primary source of power should you choose to be lazy.

That’s not the way it works: if you don’t make an effort yourself, the cycle will grind to an unceremonious halt, because the power the electric motor puts in is pretty much in

proportion to the rider’s own exertions.

Rounding a corner in the Norwegian wood, we were confronted by a steep incline, with hairpin bends. This, I imagined, was where we’d have to dismount. How wrong I was. I slipped down the gears and pedalled hard, only to find that the machine was singing along to the same tune. It wasn’t that no effort was required; more that the machine was quite happy to turn a climb that would at best have set my pulse racing and, at worst, brought me to a juddering halt on a normal

human-only cycle, into something quite enjoyable.

I quickly realised that, with this kind of helping hand, a pretty lengthy and hilly off-road route would be within easy reach. And then I filed that realisation away somewhere and scarcely thought more about it.

Fast forward two years to a country stumbling out of lockdown. I had a commission to write a book based on a journey around stone circles in Cumbria and my original intention had been to walk between all the sites. Two things had intervened to begin to persuade me of the impracticality of this plan. Firstly, lockdowns had robbed me of the possibility of getting at least some of the route completed in the Autumn of 2020, as originally planned, and secondly, my research was locating an ever-

If you don't make an effort yourself, the cycle will grind to an unceremonious halt

increasing number of stone circles dating from Neolithic to Bronze Age times. I had originally thought these numbered no more than 20 or 25, but the reality was closer to 50, with more than 30 of these being sufficiently intact to merit inclusion in my route.

The realisation began to dawn that I was now contemplating a walk of at least two weeks if I was to do all the circles justice. And so I thought of doing it on my mountain bike, a rather long-in-the-tooth Specialized Rockhopper of 1980s vintage, from the days when I was publishing how-to books about the new cycle craze from California.

And then I remembered Norwegian Wood and decided to explore making the journey on an electric bike. It feels an age ago, but some may remember that fitness-related shops were permitted to carry on trading during lockdown. Indeed, a friend with a cycle shop in Carlisle had done a brisk trade throughout the COVID months, selling cycles just as fast as he could get them in through the door and assembled for sale. Strong demand was further aggravated by supply chain issues and there was no guarantee I'd be able to get the kind of bike I wanted.

My friend only had a couple of electric machines in stock when I visited and I'd need to make a decision pretty much then and

there if I wanted one. I rode the first machine round the back streets of Carlisle and it was pleasant enough, but my pal had forgotten all about the mean black machine lurking at the back of his shop. It proved to be love at first turn of the pedals, as I felt the extra power from the motor adding a real kick. The machine was a Chinese-made Giant hybrid: fine on the road but with decent off-road capability too. It might be days or weeks before my friend got another one: we agreed a price and soon I was a four-figure sum lighter in the wallet but the proud owner of an 18-speed machine I quickly dubbed The Beast.

The more I cycled the more my confidence in the machine grew

I sorted my circles, ring cairns and henges into a route that would take me around the Lake District in a kind of starfish shape and began to practise on the many cycleways on County Durham's one-time railway network. The more I cycled the

more my confidence in the machine grew: I ordered panniers and a handlebar bag with a see-through panel for my meticulously copied map fragments. I elected to make the journey across six days of no more than 50 miles cycling per day, about half of it off-road to a greater or lesser extent, and found accommodation for the first five nights after the end of lockdown in May of last year.

May 2021 began with unseasonably cold and wet weather and on my very first day my





The Beast at Devoke Water ▲

plans were already falling apart, quite literally: my map fragments turned to papier maché behind their little window as the heavens opened as I rode from Dent station via Barbondale towards a small but perfectly formed embanked stone circle on the fells above Casterton. Then I quickly learned that a fully laden cycle on rough terrain would swallow juice at least 50 per cent faster compared with a lightly laden one on gently graded cinder tracks. I just as quickly learned that my daily routine would inevitably include a lingering lunch and battery recharge.

I was also reminded that there's quite a bit of extra weight in the electric motor and, when combined with two full panniers and a top bag, the bike and rider's combined centre of gravity is pretty high, as I discovered to my cost when I caught a pedal on a hidden tree stump and was thrown over the handlebars near Center Parcs. Cue much embarrassment and quantities of blood. The Beast was unhurt.

On another day, on the fells by Devoke Water, above Eskdale. I found myself on a footpath instead of the peat hags that constituted the intended bridleway. It was an extraordinary landscape of Bronze Age burial cairns and hut foundations reminding me that parts of West Cumbria were settled and cultivated in Neolithic times and right on

I reckon The Beast has surely extended my cycling career by some years

through the Bronze, Iron, Roman and Medieval ages. Today the overused soil is sparse and acidic and temperatures, even in the age of global warming, a couple of degrees cooler than back then.

Eventually, having lugged The Beast across endless peat hags, dwarf hazel and tussock grass, I encountered a loan signpost planted defiantly in the middle of a huge bog: Public Footpath, it proclaimed. No country for man or Beast, I reflected. On another day I was relieved to discover that the motor housing on

the The Beast was well waterproofed, when fording a mountain beck that proved substantially deeper than I had anticipated. Perhaps the ducks should have provided a clue, I reflected.

Well, in case you hadn't guessed it, notwithstanding such misadventures, I am now a fully

licensed electric cycle convert and am looking at other routes that may take me deeper into my Neolithic explorations. Just for the record, I kept The Beast in "Normal" setting on my tour, as Eco feels better suited to when travelling light and Sport is just too thirsty. I reckon The Beast has surely extended my cycling career by some years – but that doesn't mean to say that power-assisted bicycles are only for the "oldies".