

# The LANGDALE ROUND

*Vivienne Crow* spends a night wild camping combining some of the best day-walks in the Lake District.

Photos: *Vivienne Crow*

Three Tarns with the Scafell group in the distance and Bowfell Links up to the right



**IT'S STILL DARK WHEN WE SET OFF FROM ELTERWATER. AUTUMN** already has a hold on the woods, eerily silent in the calm, pre-dawn hour: where leaves had been hanging a week or so earlier, damp mist now clings to the melancholic branches, and the chill air holds just the faintest hint of decay. Wood smoke lingers in the air too, a sure sign that the Lake District summer is over.

I'd recently been overwhelmed by the urge to beat the elements: to get in as many long hill days as possible before the storms come and the protracted nights make wild camping a much less attractive proposition. With the forecast promising a couple of fine days and almost windless nights, this seemed like the perfect time to complete a high-level circuit I'd been eyeing up for several years.

The Langdale Round offered a chance to join together some of the best day walks I'd ever enjoyed in the National Park: Lingmoor Fell, Pike O'Blisco, Crinkle Crag, Bow Fell and, of course, the Pikes themselves. Just like old friends, each fell, each tarn, each ridge offers up its memories: moments of breathtaking beauty, of struggling along mist-bound, wind-battered ridges only to have the cloud suddenly part and reveal a glimpse of gnarled, craggy mountains; moments of fear, ☹️





of realising that one foot wrong on the ice-sheathed rocks could result in disaster; moments of comradeship, of complete strangers, walking companions for just a few hours, opening their hearts in a landscape that puts their own troubles into minute perspective. Good or bad at the time, these memories always take on positivity in retrospect – the only ‘bad’ walks are the ones we can’t remember: the dull, uninspiring ones.

## INTO THE SUN

It seems like my experience of Lingmoor Fell on this first day might fall into that latter category as the normally enjoyable ridge route is demoted to a lacklustre plod through the gloomy mist, but then, as we shake off our packs and edge through the rock squeeze on Side Pike, the early sun begins to make its presence felt through the dampness. Within minutes, the world emerges from its misty slumber: there are the green pastures of Great Langdale below, the pyramid-like peak of Bow Fell ahead and, as we begin our climb on to Pike O’Blisco, slow-moving figures on nearby paths. A few persistent clumps of cloud clinging to the sides of the gill ahead make it look more intimidating than it really is, but we quickly clamber over the moss-slickened rocks and emerge on the sun-soaked open fell.

↑  
Across the great gulf of Mickleden towards Bow Fell and Crinkle Crag

↘  
Looking down to Mickleden and Great Langdale from Bow Fell

The climb on to sturdy little Pike O’Blisco’s 705-metre summit gets the heart and lungs pumping. A few rocky ledges are tackled by a series of short, easy scrambles: nothing tricky, but enough to add a sense of excitement. The anticipation grows as we gain height, knowing that we won’t drop much below 500 metres for the next two days.

The summit cairn and a tiny shelter are perched on the north-west edge of the small, knobby top. Crag and boulders crowd the summit, which provides a superb bird’s eye view down into Great Langdale, while

Crinkle Crag looms seductively at the precipitous head of Oxendale. That image – the allure of that mile-long rocky roller coaster – keeps me going as we drop down the stony, boot-beaten path to Red Tarn and then pass between Cold Pike and Great Knott.

A broad, stony path crosses this featureless moorland, impossible to miss even in the thickest fog. And yet, every few metres, there is a cairn – not just little ones, but huge, sprawling towers of stones all taken, unnecessarily, from the already eroded path. Ahead of us, a walker is clearly expressing his opinion of the cairns: as he reaches each one, he throws his poles down on the ground and begins demolishing. Ripping stones from the top with his hands and smashing through lower layers

**CRINKLE CRAGS LOOMS SEDUCTIVELY AT THE PRECIPITOUS HEAD OF OXENDALE. THAT IMAGE – THE ALLURE OF THAT MILE-LONG ROCKY ROLLER COASTER – KEEPS ME GOING AS WE DROP DOWN THE STONY, BOOT-BEATEN PATH**

with the heels of his boots, he hurls the debris away from the path. As we catch him up, I warily suggest that it might be better to knock the stones back on to the path from where they originated. “I hadn’t thought of that,” he says, pausing, clearly giving it some thought. “But then if I do that, people will just pick them up and rebuild the cairns.”

After renewed activity, he turns to us again: “We have the same problem in North Wales where I live. And I really hate those twee little stones people place on top! If people need cairns to guide them, they shouldn’t be up here.” Fuelled by his anger, he marches on to the next cairn. As we catch him up again, I give him a wide berth, keen to avoid flying rocks. (We encounter him again later, flattening the lower of the two summit cairns on Crinkle Crag, an act that is met with cries of indignation from walkers lunching nearby.)

## OVER THE CRINKLES

The monotony of the moorland is shattered as we clamber on to the first Crinkle and the Scafell range suddenly appears. My eye is drawn, in particular, to the complicated topography of Scafell: above the impossibly steep grey rock of Cam Spout Crag, Green Cove is in ominous shadow; higher still, the tiny corrie that contains Foxes Tarn is bordered to the north by the bulbous protuberance of Broad Stand. It’s a scene that grows in grandeur over the next few miles.

Crinkle Crag is made up of a series of dramatic buttresses, scree slopes and knotted, rocky peaks. Definitions vary, but most observers agree there are five Crinkles, most of which seem to have lost any sense of individuality by being lumped together in this unseemly fashion. (Coming from a family of six, I know how they feel!) Taking in Shelter Crag too, it makes for a tough mile as we negotiate boulder piles, eroded gullies and potentially disorientating terrain. With a heavy pack on my back and several hundred metres of ascent already ‘in the bag’, I decide to bypass the Bad Step on this occasion, opting for the easier path to the west. Beyond the highest point on the ridge (859m) – on the second Crinkle – I lose count of the summits.

It’s a lovely afternoon by the time we reach Three Tarns and a long, lazy break in the sun results in a decision to make this beautiful mountain gap our home for the night. Before we pitch the tent, I trot off down The Band to get some pictures of Great Langdale in the fading evening light. All the day-walkers have gone and there’s not a hint of a breeze. The silence is briefly interrupted by the glorious nasal honking of a skein of geese flying high overhead. Without my pack weighing me down, I all but skip my way back up to the pass. ↻





Mighty Bow Fell is our first stop the next day. Its tremendous crags take on a silvery sheen in the early morning light; a detour across to the Great Slab, that excellently inclined smooth hunk of volcanic ash, reveals huge rocks glistening with almost golden hues. Memories of A-level geography lessons kick in as we pick our way over the boulder-strewn summit and I realise the shattered rocks are probably the result of freeze-thaw.

Beyond Angle Tarn and Rossett Pike, we know we're in for a dull stretch. We keep to the rocky edge of Rossett Crag and Black Crags for as long as possible, but are eventually forced back on to the path where the exposed peat clutches at our boots. I keep my eyes on the ground as we cross Martcrag Moor, ever mindful of the walker who, in 2008, stumbled across some unusual stones protruding from the eroded peat here. Archaeologists later discovered the site had been a Neolithic 'axe factory', where people had once hewn tools from the local greenstone. The stones discovered by the walker had been waste items, flakes of rock thrown aside by workers as they created their axes all those thousands of years ago and now uncovered as the combined actions of boots and water wear away at the peat.

There are no signs of this flint-like rock today, although I have heard stories of people finding flakes on Loft Crag and Thorn Crag, close to other axe working sites, including the better known 'factory' on Pike O'Stickle's steep scree-covered slopes. Here, high up on the exposed fellside, Stone Age people would have quarried the exposed seam of greenstone and roughed out axe heads from it. The end result must have been quite impressive because there was a significant trade in these tools, Langdale axes having been found as far away as Cornwall.

## HELD IN TRUST

Visits to the axe factory, located on precarious ground, are now positively discouraged by the National Trust, the careful guardians of so much of Langdale. The conservation charity owns or manages most of the area: a wide-ranging portfolio that includes almost all of the high ground covered

## THE MERZBARN

It may seem unlikely, but the Lake District honeypot of Elterwater has close links with an innovative German artist condemned by the Nazis as 'degenerate'. Hanover-born Kurt Schwitters, the originator of the Merzbau art movement, was forced to flee Germany in 1938 after he discovered he was wanted for 'interview' by the Gestapo. Travelling via Norway, and after a period of internment on the Isle of Man, he reached England and eventually settled in Ambleside.

He used an empty barn on the site of the former gunpowder works at Elterwater as a studio – or, more precisely, as a medium for his work. Over a period of 18 months, he sculpted its interior by creating shapes out of plaster and embedding items into its walls. Sadly, the work, known as the Merzbarn, remained unfinished and Schwitters died in poverty in 1948. Seventeen years later, however, the barn wall was dismantled and carefully transported to Newcastle University. It is now on display at the city's Hatton Gallery.

In early 2011, Cumbrian drystone wallers created a replica of the Merzbarn in the courtyard of the Royal Academy of Arts in London. It formed part of the Modern British Sculpture exhibition, standing alongside work by Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and Damien Hirst. The original Elterwater barn, meanwhile, has been restored and is home to modern interpretations of Schwitters' work.

during our walk, two of the valley's pubs, a campsite and several farms. Its relationship with Langdale dates back to 1929 when the wealthy historian, George Macaulay Trevelyan, gifted the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel and 50 acres of adjoining land to the Trust. It was their first property in the valley. Later, Trevelyan also bought the farms of Stool End, Wall End, Mill Beck and Harry Place, all of which were eventually donated to the Trust.

By the time we approach Pike O'Stickle, Bow Fell's east-facing slopes are completely in shadow and the head of Mickleden looks like a dark, bottomless chasm. We sit for a while near Loft Crag and watch the climbers on Gimmer Crag below, brightly-coloured helmets standing





out against the green of the valley bottom. The rocky dome of Pike O'Stickle is covered in walkers trying to find a way to the top: with people back-tracking, hitting dead-ends and scratching their heads in frustration, it resembles, from this distance, a Rubik's Cube-type conundrum. The path up to Harrison Stickle is busy too, but Loft Crag seems to be forgotten. I could sit here for hours, watching fellow fells-folk sucking what they can from this brief spell of fine weather, realising, if only sub-consciously, that this is probably the last time they will feel the warmth of the sun on bare skin for many months. I could sit here for hours, but I don't...

Pushing on, we climb up and over each of the Pikes and then on to Thunacar Knott and Sergeant Man. I've heard the latter derided as an inconsequential, even boring summit on many occasions, but, for me, it holds a very special memory. Long before I moved to Cumbria, during what was only my second trip to the Lake District, I climbed Sergeant Man from Easedale. My geography of the National Park was still rather limited – I could name just a handful of the surrounding fells, and I had only a vague sense of the extent of the mountains. I stood on Sergeant Man, close to the hub of Wordsworth's 'wheel', and was totally overwhelmed by the seemingly chaotic layers of hills marching off in each and every direction. It was a provocative landscape, crying out to be explored – mountains, valleys and tarns that I wanted to visit; ridges that just had to be walked. It held mystery, potential.

Much of that mystery has dissipated over the years – I've visited most of those mountains, valleys and tarns, walked dozens of those ridges – but Sergeant Man remains special. Nearing the end of our two-day Langdale round, I stand on its summit and marvel again at the far-reaching view. Now, I could scan the horizon with an immense sense of satisfaction, delighting in the jumbled recollections of literally hundreds of fell walks. And, as we descend Blea Rigg, slowly dropping back to Elterwater where our journey began, much of the skyline of the previous 36 hours reveals itself, each experience and each moment of joy already safely deposited in an already rich bank of memories. ▲



#### IN THE NEXT ISSUE

We're back in the Lake District in the November issue with a look at Lakeland's finest scrambles

## ROUTE DESCRIPTION

**1** Turn L out of car park. After 300m take narrow lane on R. Bear right at fork. Drawing level with solitary cottage, take

rough path on L. Turn R along forest track. Turn L at waymarker about 500m beyond quarry gate.

**2** Go through gate in wall and turn R along ridge – past cairn on Brown How, the highest point on Lingmoor Fell, and down other side to base of Side Pike. After climbing beyond rock squeeze, bear L and drop to road.

**3** Cross over and pick up faint path heading SW, later joining clearer path from R. Beyond pitched gill path, continue to summit of Pike O'Blisco.

**4** Descend eroded path, roughly SW. At bottom of slope, keep straight on, crossing Red Tarn's outlet stream. Clear path leads to Crinkle Crag.

**5** Keep to main path along E edge of ridge, choosing between 'bad step' and easier option on climb to second Crinkle. Path continues to Three Tarns and up to Bow Fell.

**6** Turn R at Ore Gap (saddle between Bow Fell and Esk Pike). Go R at junction. About 300m after crossing Angle Tarn's outlet stream, turn L at large cairn and climb to Rossett Pike.

**7** Head NE along pathless ridge, later

swinging N to pick up clear, peaty path that eventually swings around top of Langdale Combe. Soon after passing to R of small tarn, turn R along clearer path and then L at fork.

**8** Just beyond Pike O'Stickle, path swings L at cairn and climbs to Harrison Stickle. Continue NE to Pavey Ark and then head away from edge (NW) to Thunacar Knott. Take faint path NNE. As this begins climbing, turn R along grassy path to reach Sergeant Man.

**9** From summit, head generally SE along complex Blea Rigg, keeping to highest part of ridge as much as possible. Pass to R of damp ground at Swinescar Hause and tarn below Lang How. Cross top of Megs Gill and continue SSE.

**10** Descend from Dow Bank's summit cairn and turn R, dropping SW from the ridge. Turn L along minor road near woods. Take next road on R. Go straight over at crossroads to return to Elterwater.

