

Hidden HOWGILLS

Myths and legends abound in these fells, which Wainwright described as resembling a herd of sleeping elephants

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



Carol Kubicki...

...and her partner, Anthony, use their 'van to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring historical and natural environments

RIGHT The beautiful Smardale Gill Nature Reserve with the viaduct

The thousands of years of human occupation in England have left traces in the landscape that are waiting for us to take the time to uncover. For me, exploring in our campervan provides opportunities to unearth these local histories and legends and gain a better understanding and deeper appreciation of a locality.

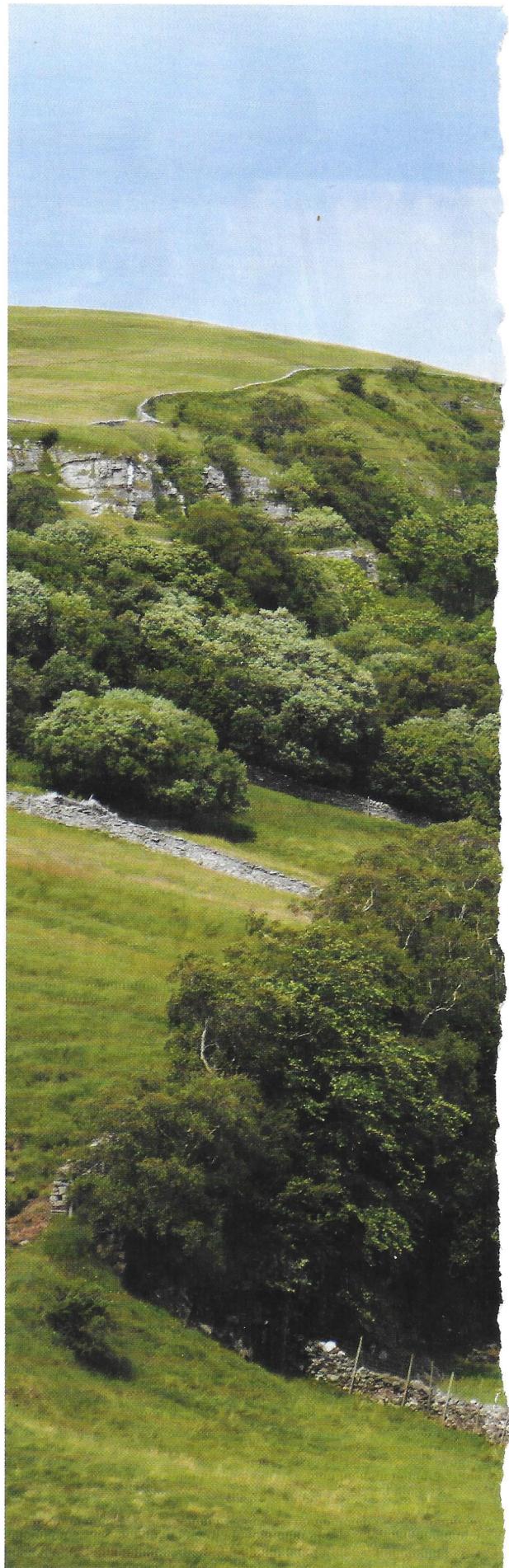
The Howgill Fells are just off the M6, but are often ignored for the neighbouring Lake District or Yorkshire Dales. I spent a few days with my partner, Anthony, following the footprints of our ancestors and seeking out what previous eras had left behind around these steep-sided, grassy hills.

The Howgills are within a triangle of three towns: Sedbergh to the south and Kirkby Stephen and Tebay in the north. In summer this is a green landscape of isolated sheep farms and fells. With few rock outcrops, the Howgills are not criss-crossed by walls and sheep wander without restraint. This gives the walker a sense of freedom and space as well as, perhaps, allowing the imagination to wander.

Orton, a pretty village near Tebay, was our first stop and we took a lovely walk up to Orton Scar, a limestone crag with extensive views, topped by a Queen Victoria jubilee memorial.

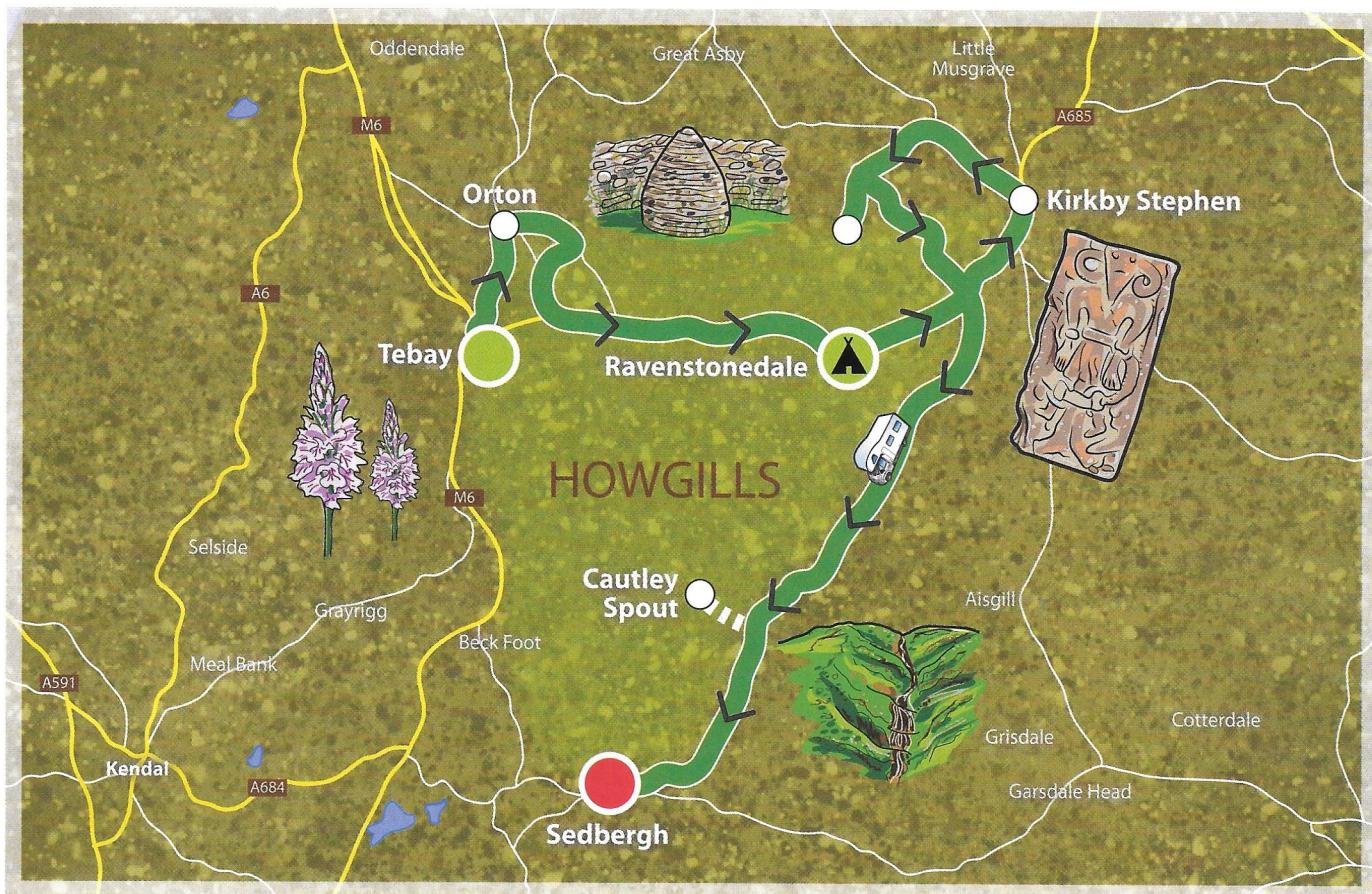
Returning to Orton we explored the village, admiring the stone and white-washed houses, some with external stone staircases that originally climbed to the living accommodation above the animal shed. We searched, futilely, for witches' stones – a holed stone that is thought to bring luck.

We joined the cyclists at Kennedys, maker of excellent chocolates, which has a village shop and café. From the café you can salivate at a window overlooking ▶



“The water falls **exquisitely** in small steps.
It’s like sparkling wine **bubbling**
down a pyramid of **champagne** coupes”





TOP TIPS

Cumbria Classic Coaches runs a number of services through Tebay, Kirkby Stephen and Ravenstonedale to Kendal and Barnard Castle, all using vintage buses

cumbriaclassiccoaches.co.uk

Follow the brown signs from Sedbergh to **Farfield Mill** to find the car park, rather than follow a map or your sat-nav, as these might take you up unsuitable roads

farfieldmill.org



ABOVE Colourful threads in Farfield Mill

Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our second Devon Conversions 'van. At 5.3m, we think it's enormous and, with a bathroom, also luxurious



2015 Devon Tempest

THE JOURNEY

We travelled from Salford via the M61 and M6, driving up via Orton and returning via Sedbergh. We spent three days exploring in July

THE COSTS

Fuel	£33
Average 34mpg	£33
Site fees	£28
Entrance fees	
Two adults; Farfield Mill	£7

220 miles

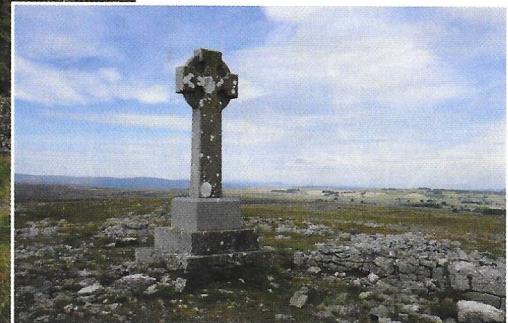
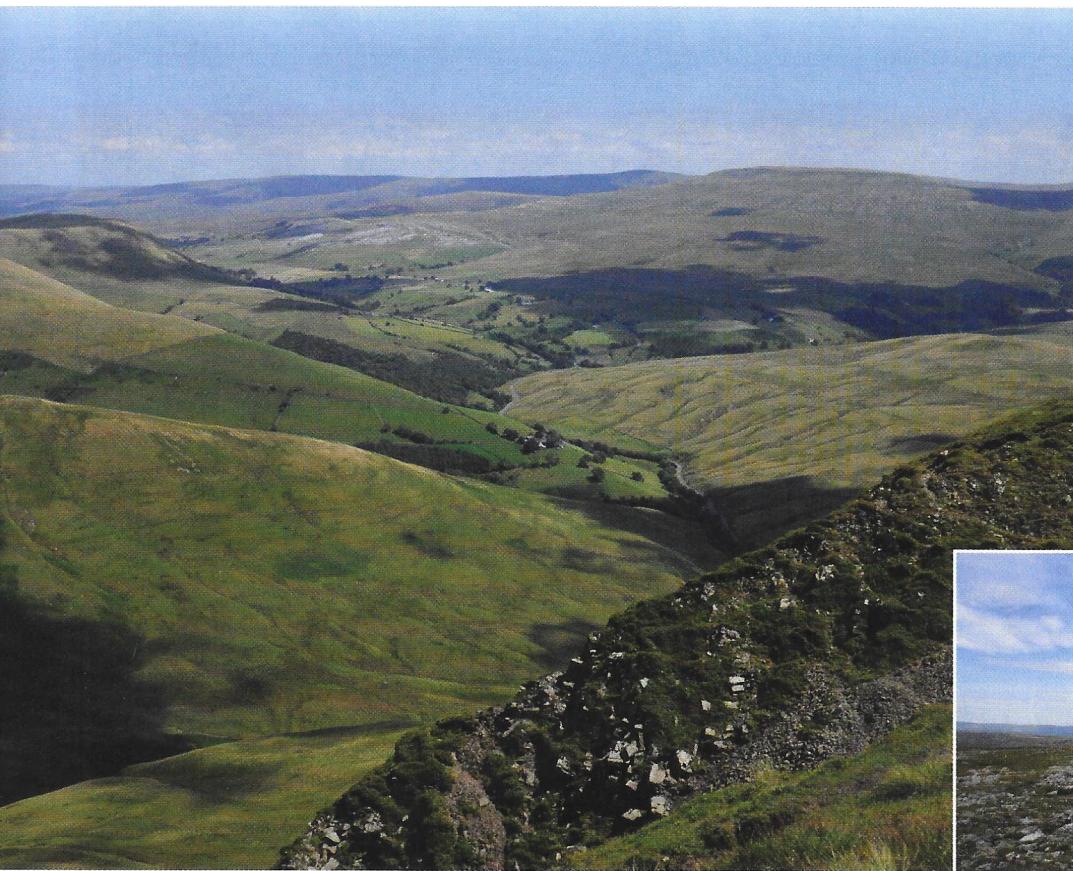
Total £68

the chocolate production area. On the day of our visit, a comforting sweet smell oozed out of every stone in the old chapel. I commented on this as I picked out a delicious selection of chocolates for later and the assistant laughed and said she could no longer smell chocolate; probably just as well!

We took the lanes through lush fields to Gamelands Stone Circle. Thanks to a gushing burst water main we had to remove our sandals and paddle through deep water along the track to get there, feeling our way carefully with our feet. The stone circle might not be worth so much trouble

for everyone. The remaining 33 of the 40 stones have all fallen flat in a large oval but, on a sunny day and with the Howgills shimmering blue over the fields, it felt a good place to be.

The lanes took us through Raisbeck and we pulled in to find one of the nine stone cones created by the artist, Andy Goldsworthy. Around 20 years ago, Goldsworthy rebuilt or restored over 40 Cumbrian stone animal enclosures called pinfolds and sheepfolds. In nine of the pinfolds he also constructed a stone cone-shape to celebrate the nine standards – the mysterious cairns that can be seen on an ►



INFORMATION

-  brigflatts.org
-  edenbenchmarks.org.uk
-  cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/smardale-gill
-  walkeden.org
-  sedbergh.org.uk
-  orton.org.uk

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Views over the Rawthey Valley from Cautley Crag; a common orchid at Smardale Gill; the memorial on Orton Scar

BETWEEN Andy Goldsworthy's stone cone in a pinfold near Raisbeck



escarpment above Kirkby Stephen. The cone south of Raisbeck, hidden among flowering meadowsweet, is a beautiful and flawless construction sheltering inside the circular pinfold.

From charming Ravenstonedale we headed across the fields to Smardale Gill Nature Reserve. At County Bridge we watched swifts flying low over the water before continuing to the focal point of the reserve, the spectacular Smardale Gill viaduct standing high above the stream and spanning 14 arches across the valley. A relic of the industrial past, the County Durham to Lancashire railway line once crossed here carrying coke over the Pennines to iron and steel furnaces in the northwest.

It's now an idyllic and popular nature reserve well-known for its butterflies. We spotted plenty of these flitting around the wild orchids in the sunshine.

Old limekilns are a common sight in these parts, but the ones built into the embankment at Smardale Gill are enormous. With the old quarry behind, they give an indication of the scale of the long-gone industrial operation.

We were camped just 15 minutes' walk from Ravenstonedale at Low Greenside Farm in a beautiful position on the edge of the fells. The site has wonderful views, but few facilities. The next morning we breakfasted outside to the background

sounds of haymaking.

Kirkby Stephen, the nearest town, is unpretentious but attractive. I stepped into the red sandstone church to find the Loki Stone; an eighth century myth-laden stone tablet. The stone's carved with an image of the Norse god of mischief, Loki, bound in chains. Found discarded in the churchyard, the heritage of the stone is unknown.

Kirkby Stephen's church has a tradition of ringing the 'taggy' bell at eight o'clock every night as a curfew and chiming the hour and the day of the month. Locals tell their children that, if they are not home by eight, the 'taggy' man will get them!

We followed a man with his morning paper down to Frank's Bridge on the River Eden. He settled on a bench in this lovely spot to read and I watched a dog paddling in the shallow water. Frank's Bridge is an ancient corpse road bridge and the stones for resting the coffins can still be seen.

On a sunny day this is a blissful spot and I saw no sign of 'Jangling Anna', an escaped prisoner who drowned here and reputedly haunts the bridge.

Footpaths radiate from Frank's Bridge, including to the Nine Standards, but we chose to cross the fields towards Stenkrith Park. Here, the Eden drops into a rocky gorge and partially collapsed cave system. The river's worn away the rock with pebbles, leaving unusual, cup-shaped pools.

I leaned over the bridge and tried to follow the path of the rushing river through the beautiful and complex cascades. Known locally as the Devil's Mustard Mill and Coopkarnel (Danish for cup-shaped cavern), it is said that druids performed ceremonies near this chasm.

We followed the River Eden below the distinctive shape of Wild Boar Fell along the beautiful Mallerstang Valley. The story goes that the last native wild boar in England was killed here in the fifteenth century by Sir Richard de Musgrave. The isolation of the valley makes the story probable and, when his tomb in Kirkby Stephen was opened, a boar's tusk was found inside.

On a bend of the Eden stands Pendragon Castle, the mythical home of Uther Pendragon (King Arthur's father). The castle remains are from the twelfth century – a few hundred years later than Arthurian times – but the truth (or otherwise!) of these legends doesn't always matter as each story adds another layer to a glorious landscape.

Taking the narrow road over Wharton Fell to Sedbergh, we were surprised to find Sedbergh shrouded in cloud. No matter; we were heading indoors to Farfield Mill.

After lunch in the café, we explored the four floors of this old mill. Saved from demolition by the community, the mill now balances cultural heritage with innovation

and is a vibrant space that both celebrates the local textile and wool history and also enables new arts and crafts to flourish. I learned about the history of the mill and the local rough fell sheep, as well as admiring the gorgeous items for sale.

We had the most fun on the top floor, where visitors can try weaving on two table looms. Although at first my weaving was hopeless, with the help of a volunteer I was soon in the swing of this satisfying and creative skill. As I watched the expert demonstration weavers I pondered on fitting a loom in the 'van!

Just beyond Sedbergh is the hamlet of Brigflatts and the Friends Meeting House, a Quaker worship space purpose-built in 1674 in the style of a local farmhouse to blend in with the surrounding weavers' cottages. It wasn't far from here that George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, preached to an open-air gathering of one thousand dissenting Christians.

Fox had a vision to build a meeting house at Brigflatts and it's a well-cared for building with a lovely garden. As the only visitors, we could sit and enjoy the quiet in the Quaker way. Anyone is welcome to use the library, help themselves to refreshments (for a donation) and use the toilet, which is twinned with a toilet in Burundi!

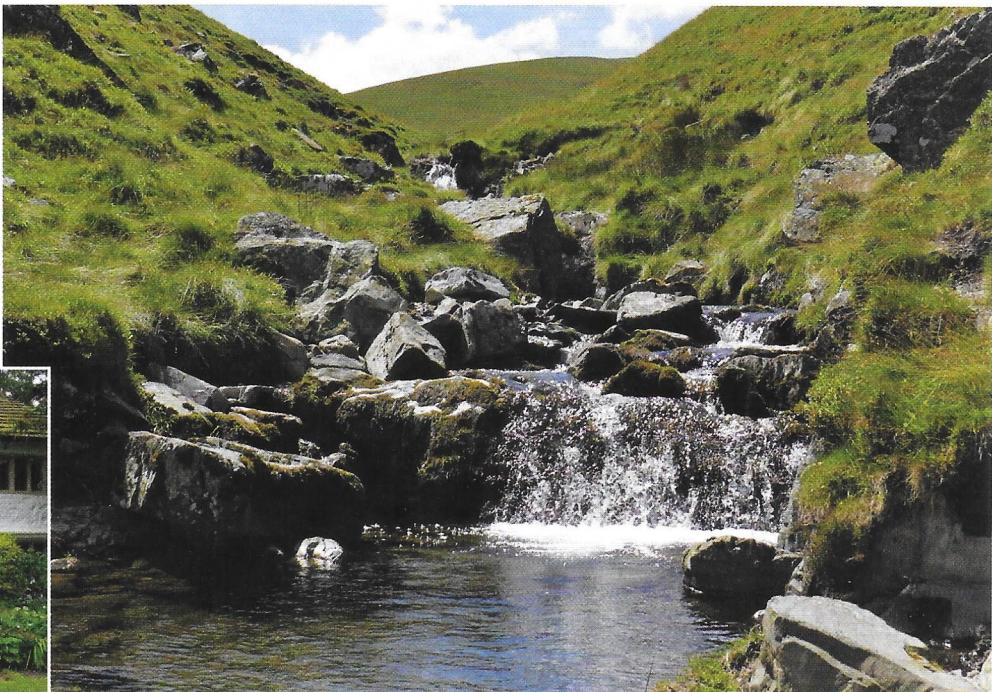
The following morning, we set out early ►



ABOVE The eighth century Loki Stone shows the Norse god of mischief

BELOW CLOCKWISE The atmospheric Wharton Chapel in Kirkby Stephen church; the top of Cautley Spout is perfect for a paddle; the eighteenth century Brigflatts Quaker Friends Meeting House

"A vibrant space that both celebrates the local textile and wool history and also enables new arts and crafts to flourish"



for the small car park by the Cross Keys Temperance Inn, a 400-year old inn now owned by the National Trust and still run as a no-alcohol establishment.

The Howgills are not craggy fells like their Lake District neighbours; instead, they drape in folds like heavy curtains. We were walking up Cautley Spout to the Calf, the highest point of the Howgills.

Passing an Iron Age settlement site, we joined the fell sheep on the steep path beside the long drop of Cautley Spout, England's highest waterfall. Here, the underlying rock makes an appearance. Thanks to the thin layers of gritstone, the water falls exquisitely in small steps. It's like sparkling wine bubbling down a pyramid of champagne coupes.

At the top we left the spectacular open views and followed the grassy steep-sided valley of Red Gill, passing one of the Andy Goldsworthy sheepfolds and spotting a dipper in the babbling stream. I only noticed how pervasive the sound of running water had been from the waterfall and stream when, suddenly, like switching a tap off, it stopped.

For a moment I experienced almost magical perfect silence, hearing only the whisper of the welcome gentle breeze.

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BELOW LEFT Looking down Red Gill to the restored sheepfold

BELOW RIGHT Sheep being moved in the afternoon

Eventually, my ears tuned in to the sound of the wheatears flitting around the grassland and then a bleating lamb broke the spell.

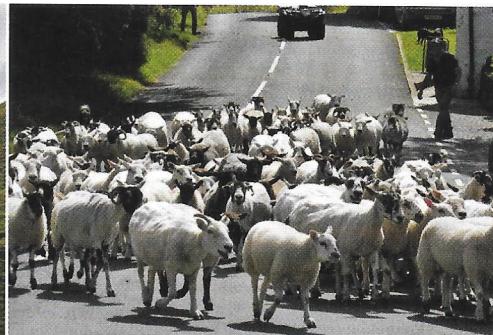
The Calf is just a grassy pimple with a trig point on the ridge, but the views to Morecambe Bay and the Lake District are panoptic. We had the summit to ourselves and I scanned the ridge to Bush Howe but couldn't make out the legendary shape of the Black Horse of Busha some claim to see on the slopes.

We descended towards Brant Fell and followed an indistinct trail, eventually picking up an airy narrow path above the precipitous edge of Cautley Crag.

The views along beautiful Bowerdale and over the Rawthey Valley were fantastic with the fluffy white clouds creating a procession of shadows across the vibrant landscape.

Reaching the stream at the top of Cautley Spout, we paddled across it to cool our feet and then followed the rocky path back to the motorhome.

It was hot back in the valley and we were glad that we had remembered to close the blinds to keep the 'van cool. We had a brew and lazily watched a flock of sheep being moved down the road, the dogs vigilant and disciplined, before we drove to Sedbergh in search of ice creams. 



WE STAYED AT

Low Greenside Farm Campsite,
Greenside Lane, Ravenstonedale, Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria CA17 4LU

 01539 623217

 lowgreensidefarmcampsite.co.uk

 Easter – October

 Two adults, pitch and electric: £23

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