



# Going dizzy in the Lakes

Helen Werin encounters the most dizzying drops and steepest roads in England in the Lake District

Pictures by Robin Weaver

You can hire rowing boats or go on a lake cruise from the lakeside at Keswick

Fellow passengers are cracking jokes about the iconic moment in the film *The Italian Job* to ease the tangle of tension in the bus. I'm sure you know the scene; the one where the bus hangs in a nail-biting balance over the edge of a cliff. The joking does nothing to help calm my nerves. And I'm not even sitting on the offside of the bus. The reason? We're right on The Edge, on the narrowest of roads clinging to Fleetwith Pike, nearly 2,000 feet above the Honister Pass.

I tell myself that the genial driver

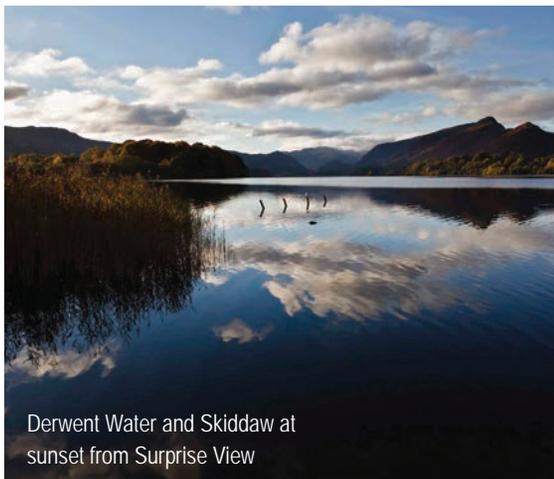
must know what he's doing. He makes this trip dozens of times each week. After all, he's still laughing, despite hearing corny references to the heart-stopping film scene thousands of times.

The nerve-wracking journey only takes about five minutes, but feels like an age. At last we're out and looking over The Edge. Thankfully, there's now a railing between us and the stomach-churning drop. We negotiate gravelly slopes and metal staircases around the side of the mountain, with me tightly gripping the

rail, as we near the entrance to the Honister Slate Mine.

If I thought this was breathtaking it's nothing compared to the experience of far more adventurous souls; the ones who don't get the vertiginous heebie-jeebies, that is. They can tackle Honister's amazing Via Ferrata, climbing ladders, scrambling and hanging on to the cliff face with the chance to 'zip' down from the summit of Fleetwith Pike – harnessed, of course.

It's certainly nothing compared to the lives of the miners who literally



Derwent Water and Skiddaw at sunset from Surprise View



View towards Keswick from Whinlatter Forest Park

lived on the edge in their tiny bothies. We duck our heads in to one of these damp, dark slate shelters. It's almost impossible to believe that anyone would want to spend a minute in there let alone their nights – and all after a back-breaking 18 hours or so at the face.

One of them, Joseph Clark, was famous for bringing down nearly 11,000lbs of slate from the mine in 17 journeys in one day. That was in 1891. Our guide Celia, whose son bought the mine in 1996, tells us that the family could not get Englishmen to work here to rive the pale green slate, which is on Buckingham Palace and most of Regent Street. Their last lot of miners were Hungarians.

It might be astoundingly bleak and swirling with a chill and penetrating mist during our visit, but that's the drama of these Lake District peaks and passes. We're among the highest mountains, most dizzying drops and steepest roads in England. The deepest lakes lie far below. We know that when the mist clears we are going to be in for a treat.

Our journey from Keswick, where we're staying near the shores of Derwent Water, to the 1,167ft summit of the Honister Pass is spectacular. This is one of Cumbria's highest passes, with a one in four gradient. I'm mindful that well-to-do Victorian tourists who used to set off from their posh hotels in Keswick in their liveried coaches to make the ascent might have reacted very differently. Think of the shock they must have got at being told to get off at the hamlet of Seatoller far below and walk the rest of the way, on what was then an unmade track! In those days this wasn't known as the worst road in England for nothing.

Later that afternoon our drop down towards Buttermere on the other

side is excitingly steep and made all the more atmospheric by cloying mist and rain. The safe descent of those early weary travellers would have depended entirely on the ability of the coachman and his boys placing 'slippers' in front of the wheels to help the coach to brake on the sharp downward path.

Our biggest dilemma in coming to the Lake District has been knowing just where to start. This is England's largest national park. Around us are more hiking trails than we can shake a walking stick at, plus far gentler strolls around those aforesaid lakes that have inspired poets and artists alike for centuries. We're only here for a week. You can appreciate our quandary.

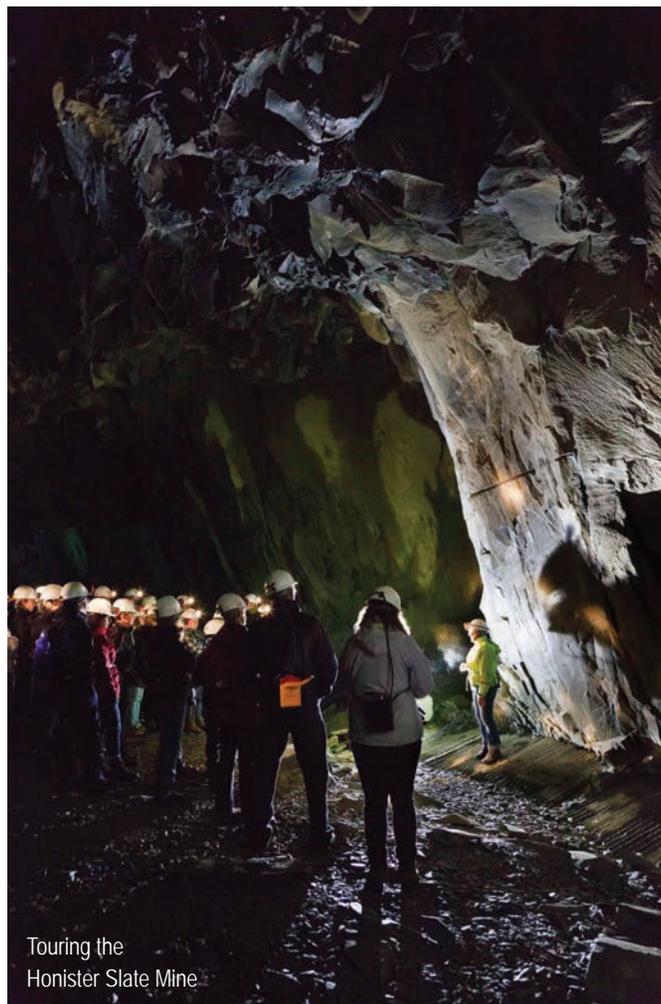
Alfred Wainwright – famous for his Pictorial Guides to the Lakeland Fells – recommended Castle Crag, above Borrowdale, for an “enduring memory of the beauty and atmosphere of the Lake District”. Eminent Victorian

John Ruskin reckoned the “best view in all of England” was the one from his house looking out over Conistone Water. As always seems to be the case in our family, it's our youngest daughter, Sophie, who decides for us. One look at the map and the words Cat Bells pounce straight off the page at her. The fact that, halfway up, are Kitten Bells, adds to the attraction.

I'd read Wainwright's description of the climb as a “family fell, where grandmothers and infants can climb the heights together”. The route up Cat Bells from beside Manesty Cottages on the shores of Derwent Water is quite steep, with steps cut in places. From the top we look to Skiddaw and further north to Bassenthwaite Lake. To the west are the Derwent Fells. To the east, our views are across to Bleaberry Fell and High Seat.

Our return to Keswick takes us across the old stone bridge at Grange and along Derwent Water's eastern shore. This journey takes us far longer than we had bargained for. It's not other tourist traffic that slows us down; we get sidetracked by footpaths enticing us through the Great Wood and down by the lake. Next day we return to walk in Lowcrag Wood and up to the much-photographed Ashness Bridge, the view from which has been described as “iconic Lakeland”. From here we planned to walk to Bleaberry Fell and up High Seat, but are thwarted by the famous Lake District weather. Perhaps we should have looked more closely for the Sop, the small cloud that develops at the head of Borrowdale. Apparently, if it goes towards St John's in the Vale, the weather will continue to be fair. If it heads towards Langdale, rain will follow within a day.

Keswick proves a great base. From the edge of town we can follow the



Touring the Honister Slate Mine



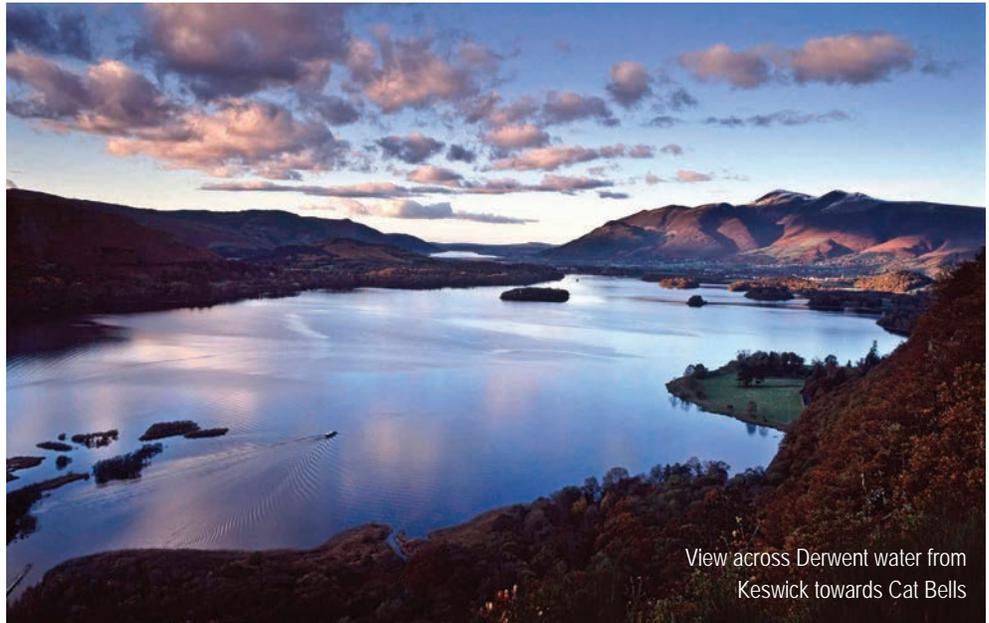
Cumbria Way to climb Latrigg Fell with its views down the length of Borrowdale. Castlerigg stone circle is just a couple of miles' walk. Standing in the centre of this 4,500 year-old circle, 1,000 years older than Stonehenge, we take in a panorama of Cat Bells, Red Pike, Crag Hill, Grisedale Pike, Skiddaw and Blencathra.

En route for a fun day out at Trotters World of Animals, eight miles further north, we're treated to glorious views over Bassenthwaite. We're welcomed back to Keswick by the towering hulk of Skiddaw glowing such an incredible shade of red that it reminds me of the world-famous sunsets at Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Australia.

Later that week we follow the road voted Britain's 'most scenic', the A591 south from Keswick. The road runs alongside Thirlmere and past Grasmere to Rydal Water. This is known as the Wordsworth route and we stop off at Dove Cottage, the poet's home from 1799-1808, to take a guided tour. Wordsworth loved Grasmere, where he swam and fished. We joined the path around the lake, through surprisingly quiet White Moss woods, trailing the river Rothay which connects Grasmere and little Rydal Water with the largest of the lakes, Windermere.



Dove Cottage (former home of William Wordsworth), Grasmere



View across Derwent water from Keswick towards Cat Bells

On the other side of the A591 we followed a stream up a steep path to a waterfall and along the contours of the hillside beneath Nab Scar. Rather creepily for such a tranquil and picturesque spot, this is known as the Coffin Route. It was used to carry the dead from Rydal and Ambleside for burial in Grasmere Church.

On our last day, our slippery upwards path towards Stickle Tarn, below the beautiful Langdale Pikes, quite suddenly becomes a stream. We take it all in our stride. It's all part of the excitement of being in the 'adventure capital' of England.

## WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

\* For information on the Lake District and all its attractions; [www.golakes.co.uk](http://www.golakes.co.uk)

\* For the Via Ferrata and Honister Slate Mine, Borrowdale. (017687 77230; [www.honister.com](http://www.honister.com))

## WHAT ELSE TO SEE AND DO

\* Watch flying displays of owls and hawks, feeding demonstrations and get the chance to handle snakes and a tarantula at Trotters World of Animals, Bassenthwaite. (017587 76239; [www.trottersworld.com](http://www.trottersworld.com)) Open all year.

\* The views over Coniston Water from Brantwood, Coniston. (015394 41396; [www.brantwood.org.uk](http://www.brantwood.org.uk)), are wonderful. Former home of John Ruskin. Beautiful gardens and woodlands. Open all year (Wednesdays to Sundays from November to March).

\* Prepare to be amazed by the anti-gravity room and dozens of other illusions and sense-defying puzzles at the Keswick Puzzling Place, Museum Square, Keswick. (017687 75102; [www.puzzlingplace.co.uk](http://www.puzzlingplace.co.uk)) Open all year; closed Mondays from November to March except for school holidays.

\* Whinlatter Forest Park, Braithwaite, has easy, scenic trails and is a designated red squirrel refuge.