Walk the Way in a Day

Walk 29 Great Shunner Fell and the Buttertubs

Although much of the route has been flagged, this is still a challenging hill-walk. Great Shunner Fell and Stags Fell offer extensive views, and there is an opportunity to visit Hardraw Force - England's highest waterfall. The return route passes the deep limestone fissures known as the Buttertubs.

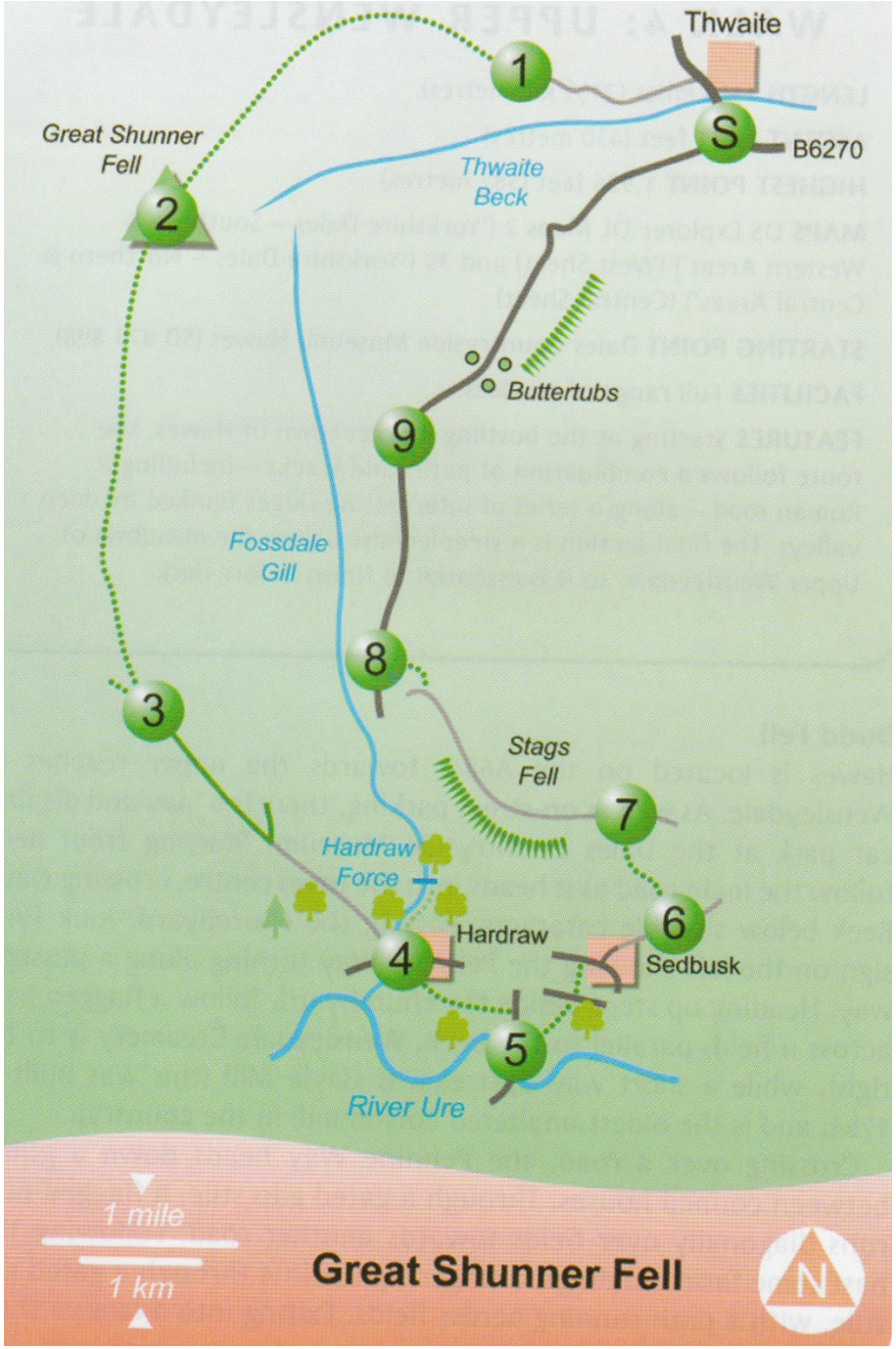
Length:	16¼ miles (26¼ kilometres)
Ascent:	2,576 feet (785 metres)
Highest Point:	2,349 feet (716 metres)
Map(s):	OS Explorer OL Map 19 ('Howgill Fells & Upper Eden Valley') (Howgill Fells [South] Sheet)
Starting Point:	Parking area beside Thwaite, Upper Swaledale (SD 893 980)
Facilities:	Refreshments.
Website:	http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/pennine-way/route/walk-way-day-walk-29-great-shunner-fell-and-buttertubs

Thwaite Common

There are a few rough parking spaces to the east of Thwaite, near the junction of the B6270 and the Buttertubs road. The first part of the walk follows the Pennine Way from the village centre up onto Great Shunner Fell, a total of 3½ miles (5¾ kilometres), with 1,500 feet (457 metres) of ascent. To the north of the village, a finger sign shows the Pennine Way turning onto a stony track heading up a walled lane. Arriving at the head of the lane, a gate leads to open moorland (1 = SD 876 984).

Thwaite

Thwaite is a lovely little village of stone-built cottages. It is another



place established by the Vikings - 'thwaite' being the Old Norse word for a woodland clearing. The village is famous for its association with the Kearton brothers, Richard and Cherry, who pioneered wildlife photography. They were born at the Corner House, the sons of a gamekeeper. The house can still be identified by the animals and birds carved into the lintel over the front door (the brothers' initials and years of their birth - 1862 and 1871 respectively - are below). At the centre of the village is the Kearton Country Hotel. Scenes from the television series 'All Creatures Great and Small' were filmed around the village.

Joining a flagged path at some old mine workings, this follows the crest of a broad ridge as it swings around in a wide arc, crossing cottongrass mires and threading through peat hags crowned with heather and bilberry. The flagstones give out as the path heads south-west, passing a couple of cairns and dropping into a shallow dip. Heading steeply uphill towards a beehive cairn, stone steps climb towards the summit (2 = SD 848 972), which unsurprisingly offers exceptional views. To the west are the fells around the headwaters of the River Eden (the precipitous scarp of Wild Boar Fell being prominent), while to the south are early views of the three peaks.

Great Shunner Fell

Great Shunner Fell reaches 2,349 feet (716 metres), its summit being marked by a cross-shaped stone shelter built around an OS pillar. The fell is capped in Millstone Grit, which resisted erosion as the surrounding valleys were formed by the passage of ice. Crow coal was mined on the flanks of Great Shunner Fell until the early 20th century, with the pits being temporarily re-opened during the General Strike of 1926.

The Long Ridge

From here the Pennine Way is followed down a long, broad ridge, 4¾ miles (7¾ kilometres) to Hardraw. The path initially continues south-west, with more flagstones and stone steps. As it levels-out, the route swings around to head south over grassy moorland terrain. Dunlin and golden plover are common hereabouts. Flagstones provide passage of cottongrass mires, although the going is generally easy. Looking to the left, the deep valleys of Hearne Beck and Fossdale Gill converge beneath the steep scarp of Stags Fell. To the right is the valley of Cotterdale Beck. Approaching a drystone wall, a finger sign points through a gate (3 = SD 847 932).

Joining a stony track running south-east, ahead are fine views over Upper Wensleydale. Passing through another gate, the track enters a walled lane, heading down through pasture towards Hardraw. Arriving at an unclassified road, turn left and cross a stone bridge leading into the village centre. Beside Hardraw Beck is a pleasant public garden with tree-shaded benches offering an opportunity to stop for lunch (4 = SD 867 912).

Across the road is the Green Dragon Inn, which provides access to Hardraw Force (this involves a there-and-back detour of ¾ mile / 1¼ kilometres). Just past the public garden, a sign shows the Pennine Way turning through a gate on the right, joining a flagged path running across meadows. The River Ure can be seen beyond a stand of mature broadleaf trees on the right. Passing through a gated gap stile, head down Burnt Acres Road. The Pennine Way continues down the road towards Hawes, although we cross over to join a path signed for Sedbusk (5 = SD 877 905).

Hardraw Force

At the Green Dragon Inn, payment of a modest fee secures access to Hardraw Force, which is reached by following a path leading to the head of a wooded gorge. Hardraw Beck here drops nearly 100 feet (31 metres), creating the highest above-ground waterfall in England (there are bigger drops underground, notably at Gaping Gill). The original lip was washed away in the floods of 1890, but was subsequently restored by the landowner, Lord Wharncliffe. The surrounding cliffs offer an interesting cross-section of the different layers of rock, while the gorge has provided a venue for brass band concerts since the 19th century.

Stags Fell

Heading north-west, the faint path crosses a tree-shaded stream before continuing over meadows towards a road. Straight over the road, a gated gap stile leads to pair of finger signs. Taking the route signed for Sedbusk Lane, head north over rolling pasture towards another road. Note the mosaic embedded in the drystone wall opposite. To the left the lane connects with the Buttertubs road, offering a shortcut if daylight is failing, although we turn right and head towards Sedbusk. Passing through the village, a finger sign marks the start of a track heading up a walled lane. Just before reaching a gate, turn over a ladder stile on the left (6 = SD 888 915).

Heading north-west up the steep scarp of Stags Fell, the rough track passes a walled enclosure of stunted sycamores. Pausing to look back, the height gained affords fine views over Upper Wensleydale, with Hawes sitting encamped beside the River Ure - a fair-sized town given the remoteness of the location. Looking ahead it is the crags of High Clint that dominate the view. Passing through a couple of gates, continue up a grassy track until a finger sign marks a sharp turn to the left (7 = SD 884 925).

Joining a quad track heading west over the springy turf of North Rakes Hill, the plateau reaches 1,750 feet (533 metres), with a short diversion to the cairned top being rewarded by wonderful views. The track swings around to head north-west, passing beehive cairns marking the steep scarp. High quality sandstone mined here was used in the construction of Manchester Victoria Station. Arriving at a gully, ignore a hardcore track turning downhill, and instead continue around the edge of the plateau, with marker posts providing guidance. Crossing another gully (Shiveny Gill), a finger sign shows the path turning down towards the Buttertubs road (8 = SD 866 937).

Buttertubs Pass

The final part of the walk follows the unclassified road as it runs over the Buttertubs Pass, 3¾ miles (6 kilometres) back to the starting point. Turning right, head up the road, which runs above the deep valley of Fossdale Gill. The road is normally quiet, and the views towards Great Shunner Fell are splendid. The watershed between Wensleydale and Swaledale reaches 1,726 feet (526 metres), with the height of the snow poles beside the road hinting at the severity of winter conditions (9 = SD 869 957).

As the road starts downhill, fenced enclosures on either side mark the location of the famous Buttertubs. Continuing down the road, the deep gorge of Cliff Beck is to the right, with the flanks of Lovely Seat beyond. Ahead are early views of Kisdon Hill. For a way there is no verge, and beyond the crash barriers on the right are steep slopes, so stay alert for traffic. The road runs steeply downhill, passing through a belt of walled pasture before arriving back at the starting point.

The Buttertubs

The Buttertubs are a group of large fissures, up to 90 feet (27 metres) deep, created by the erosion of limestone. The name probably refers to their shape, although there is a story that farmers returning from Hawes market used to lower unsold butter into the holes in order to keep it cool until the following week. Care is needed when approaching the unfenced holes.

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