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I Never Knew That About the Lake District

Christopher Winn

CHRISTOPHER WINN



*I Never Knew That
About*

THE LAKE DISTRICT



ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Mai Osawa



EBURY
PRESS

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Preface

'No part of the world possesses so many charms for the contemplative mind as the admirable scenery of our English Lake District.'

So wrote Lorenzo Tuvar in his *Tales and Legends of the English Lakes* in 1852, confirming the view of poets and painters before him and of innumerable artists, thinkers and visitors since.

In fact, the Lake District inspired its very own style of Romantic poetry, as fashioned by the Lake Poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey and William Wordsworth, who wrote their finest verse while under the influence of the Lake District's striking combination of lake and mountain, water and sky.

So superbly did the Lake Poets capture the beauty of the Lakes, that thousands came to see it for themselves, threatening the very beauty they had come to admire. First Wordsworth, then Ruskin and finally Canon Rawnsley fought to save their beloved landscape, and it was largely the desire to preserve the Lake District that brought about the founding of the National Trust. The Trust now owns over one-quarter of the Lake District.

This compact corner of north-west England claims far more than its fair share of England's natural treasures. The Lake District National Park is England's largest national park, possessing all the land in England over 3,000 feet (914 m), with England's highest mountains, highest passes and steepest roads, biggest and deepest lakes, largest population of rare red squirrels and England's only golden eagles.

Man has also contributed to the scenery with picturesque packhorse bridges, tiny churches, stone cottages and luscious gardens.

People come to the Lake District to ride on the oldest steamboats in the world, to see the home of Peter Rabbit and Mrs Tigglywinkle, to discover the places they have read about in *Swallows and Amazons*, to seek out that famous 'host of daffodils' and to pit themselves against the very mountains that gave birth to the sport of rock climbing. The lakes may not be the biggest or deepest in the world, and the mountains may not be the highest or most awesome but, as Wordsworth said, 'they are surpassed by none'.



The Lakes

It was something of a challenge to decide how to order the chapters in *I Never Knew That About The Lake District*.

The obvious solution was to devote a chapter to each lake but this resulted in some very short chapters when dealing with the smaller lakes. So I have given the larger lakes their own chapter, Windermere, Ullswater, Coniston, and grouped a number of the smaller lakes together in the same chapter according to the points of the compass, i.e. The Western Lakes, The Far Eastern Lakes etc. The North-Western Lakes, which are more numerous, I have further subdivided into those joined by either the River Derwent, or the River Cocker.

Furness, which is distinct and was once part of Lancashire, I have divided into North and South. The Lakeland Coast speaks for itself.

I have featured a number of places, Carlisle, Kendal, Barrow-in-Furness, that do not lie within the boundaries of the Lake District National Park, but are nonetheless close to, influenced by, or generally associated with the Lake District.

THE CENTRAL LAKES

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH + WORDSWORTH COUNTRY +
GRASMERE + RYDAL WATER + ELTERWATER +
AMBLESIDE



William Wordsworth, the doyen of the Lake Poets

Wordsworth Country

A Poet's Inspiration

WORDSWORTH COUNTRY, the area of the Lake District around Grasmere and Rydal Water, is so called because it was where the poet William Wordsworth lived and wrote for

over 50 years. Here is the scenery that immersed him and inspired his romantic poetry, the poetry that was the greatest influence on, perhaps even the creation of, the way we see and treat the Lake District today. No study of the Lake District can really be appreciated without at least a brief look first at Wordsworth and Wordsworth Country.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, the most renowned of the Lakeland poets, was born on the edge of the Lake District in Cockermouth, spending most his childhood there or in his mother's home town of Penrith. After his mother died he attended Hawkshead Grammar School for eight years, during which time he wandered far and wide through the countryside of the southern lakes developing a love and appreciation for the beauties of the Lake District. He later went to St John's College, Cambridge, and then spent some years exploring the Continent.

In 1799 Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy undertook a tour of the Lake District in the company of SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, whom they had met a few years earlier while staying in the Quantock Hills in Somerset, and with whom Wordsworth had first toured the Lake District in 1797.

The Lake Poets

Passing by Grasmere they came across a small, abandoned 17th-century inn called the DOVE AND OLIVE BOUGH, set in the hillside at Town End, five minutes' walk from the centre of GRASMERE village. They fell in love with it, and in December 1799 Wordsworth and Dorothy moved into their first Lakeland home, calling it DOVE COTTAGE. Coleridge took up residence nearby at Greta Hall in Keswick, and was joined there shortly afterwards by their mutual friend

ROBERT SOUTHEY. THE LAKE POETS, as they became known, were gathered.

Dove Cottage

The lovely cottage in the guardian nook
Hath stirred me greatly with
its own dear brook,
Its own small pasture,
almost its own sky!
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH



DOVE COTTAGE was a surprisingly modest abode for a man of Wordsworth's stature, but he lived here for eight years and here wrote much of his greatest poetry, 'Ode to Duty', 'The Excursion', 'The Prelude', and 'Intimations of Immortality'. From the moment he and Dorothy arrived Dove Cottage became a social hub, always bursting with an assortment of poets and artists, many of them staying for days even though there was hardly room for the two of them. Coleridge came over from Keswick and would be a permanent fixture sometimes for weeks. Southey often came too, and the shy, sickly author THOMAS DE QUINCEY, who so adored Dove Cottage that he bought it for himself after Wordsworth left, and lived there for ten years.

How they all fitted in is a mystery, and it only got worse in 1802 when Wordsworth got married in Yorkshire to MARY

HUTCHINSON, whom he had known at school in Penrith, and brought her home to Dove Cottage. It all proved too much for Dorothy, who locked herself in her room and sobbed with hysterics for hours. The first three of Wordsworth's five children were all born at Dove Cottage.

When SIR WALTER SCOTT came to stay he found Dove Cottage so lacking in certain comforts that he would climb out of his bedroom window and sneak off to the SWAN INN up the road for a fortifier. Scott's subterfuge came to light when he and his host went to the Swan to hire a pony and the landlord insisted on ushering them into Scott's 'usual' seat by the window, expressing consternation that Scott had taken him surprise by arriving earlier than normal.

Whenever the cottage was full, Wordsworth would take himself out into the garden to write, and the maelstrom seemed to work for him. Some of his finest lines emerged as he sat or paced under the trees, shouting above the hubbub: 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' or 'My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky' or 'The child is father of the man' ...

Today it is possible, in clement weather, to walk in the wild gardens of Dove Cottage where Wordsworth wrote his immortal lines. The cottage was acquired by the Wordsworth Trust in 1890 and opened the following year as a museum in his memory, and is largely unchanged since Wordsworth and his family lived there. The Wordsworth Museum is next door.



Swan Inn

Allan Bank

By 1808 Dove Cottage had become quite seriously too small to contain Wordsworth's burgeoning family, which consisted of not just his wife, three children and sister Dorothy, but also his sister-in-law Sara and permanent house guests de Quincey and Coleridge. Wordsworth swallowed his pride and moved them all into a larger house called ALLAN BANK at the foot of a craggy hill on the other side of Grasmere, which he had previously described as an eyesore. Two more children arrived in the two years they spent at Allan Bank, after which they fell out with the landlord over his failure to have their smoking chimneys attended to, and they moved on to the Old Rectory opposite the church in Grasmere.

In 1833 DR THOMAS ARNOLD, headmaster of Rugby School, rented Allan Bank while building himself a summer home near Ambleside, and later, in 1915, Allan Bank was bought by CANON RAWNSLEY, founder of the National Trust, who left it to the Trust. It is currently privately let and not open to the public.

Old Rectory

The Wordsworths' time at the OLD RECTORY was not a happy one. The house was cold and damp and two of their children, Thomas and Catherine, died there in 1812.

Rydal Mount



In 1813 Wordsworth and his surviving brood made their final move, to RYDAL MOUNT, set on a hillside above the church at Rydal, rented from Lady le Fleming of Rydal Hall. Here he laid out the spacious gardens which he called his 'office', and built himself a 'writing hut', in truth a bench with a bit of roof, from where he could see both Windermere and Rydal Water.

In 1843 Wordsworth was appointed Poet Laureate, on the death of his friend Robert Southey who had held the position for 30 years.

Wordsworth also bought a small field next to the churchyard, with a thought to build a guest-house on it, but after his beloved daughter Dora died of tuberculosis in 1847 he renamed it DORA'S FIELD and planted hundreds of daffodils in her memory.

One evening in 1850 Wordsworth went out for a long walk and caught a cold, and he died at Rydal Mount of pleurisy a few days later, on St George's Day, 23 April, the day of Shakespeare's passing.

Rydal Mount was acquired by Wordsworth's great-great-granddaughter Mary in 1969, and has been open to the public ever since. Dora's Field belongs to the National Trust.

Wordsworth's Grave



Wordsworth was buried in the churchyard of ST OSWALD'S in Grasmere, and was later joined by his wife Mary when she died in 1859. Their simple headstone lies within sound of the River Rothay, beneath one of the yew trees Wordsworth himself had planted there, and the grave has become one of the most visited literary shrines in the world. As Matthew Arnold wrote:

Keep fresh the grass upon his grave,
O Rotha, with thy living wave!
Sing him thy best, for few or none
Hear thy voice right, now he has gone.

Nearby are buried Wordsworth's sister Dorothy, four of his children, Dora, William, Thomas and Catherine, his sister-in-law Sara and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's eldest son Hartley.

River Rothay

Wordsworth Country watered by the RIVER ROTHAY, which rises at 1,500 ft (457 m) up in the high fells above

Grasmere, passes by DUNMAIL RAISE, then flows through GRASMERE and RYDAL WATER, past AMBLESIDE and out into Windermere beside GALAVA ROMAN FORT.

Dunmail Raise

DUNMAIL RAISE sits on the high point where the road north from Grasmere (A591) passes from the old county of Westmorland into Cumberland and begins to drop down towards Thirlmere. In AD 945 there was a battle here between DUNMAIL, the LAST KING OF CUMBRIA, and Alfred the Great's grandson KING EDMUND THE ELDER. Dunmail was killed by Edmund himself, who afterwards ordered Dunmail's warriors to gather together rocks and place them over the body of their dead king, forming a large cairn that remains there to this day.

Grasmere

Focal point of the area described by Wordsworth as 'the loveliest spot that man hath found', GRASMERE, the lake, is 1 mile (1.6 km) long, ½ mile (800 m) wide and 75 ft (23 m) deep. There is a small, wooded island in the middle to where Wordsworth would row for fishing and picnics with his sister Dorothy. Nowadays the island is privately owned and closed to the public, although it can be viewed from a rowing boat or canoe - powered boats are banned on Grasmere.

Grasmere Village

The most popular village in the Lake District thanks to Wordsworth's grave, GRASMERE, the village, is geared for tourists but nonetheless has some hidden charms.

The 13th-century church of St Oswald, where the Wordsworths lie buried in the churchyard, serves as parish

church for the three villages of Grasmere, Rydal and Langdale, each village having its own separate gateway into the churchyard. Beside one of these gateways is a small building from 1630, which was once the village school where Wordsworth, his wife and his sister all taught. Today it houses SARAH NELSON'S GRASMERE GINGERBREAD SHOP.



Across the road from the church is CHURCH STILE, a beautiful pink 17th-century cottage with bulging walls that was at one time ROBERT NEWTON'S INN, where Wordsworth and his fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge stayed on their first tour through the Lake District in 1797.

Buried in the churchyard, not far from Wordsworth, is SIR JOHN RICHARDSON (1787-1865), a doctor and naturalist who settled in Lancrigg, just north of Grasmere, in 1855, after surviving two expeditions to the Arctic Circle with Sir John Franklin in search of the North West Passage in the 1820s, and a third, in 1847-9, to search for Franklin himself. His books on the fauna and wildlife of the Arctic are still considered essential reading.

Every summer, on or near St Oswald's Day (5 August), Grasmere stages a RUSHBEARING CEREMONY, when a procession of clergy and children carry a cross made of rushes through the village to the church. It is an ancient custom that celebrates the days when sweet-smelling

rushes were used to cover the earthen floors of the local churches.

Rydal Water

Like a fair sister of the sky
Unruffled doth the blue lake lie
The mountains looking on
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

RYDAL WATER is fed from Grasmere by the River Rothay and was once known as Rothaymere. It is one of Lakeland's smallest lakes, just $\frac{3}{4}$ mile (1.2 km) long, $\frac{1}{4}$ mile (400 m) wide and up to 55 ft (17 m) deep. It is also one of the most placid of the lakes, and in the right conditions can create a perfect mirror-image reflection of the surrounding landscape.

In the hill above the lake, on the southern shore, there is a huge cavern known as RYDAL CAVE, the remnants of former quarry workings.

Rydal Hall

Sixteenth-century RYDAL HALL at the eastern end of the lake was for 400 years the home of the Le Flemings. In 1963 it became a retreat for the Diocese of Carlisle. The formal gardens of the hall, which are being restored, were designed by THOMAS MAWSON, a leading landscape architect of the late 19th century (*see* Windermere). There are waterfalls in the park, and at the foot of one of them is the FIRST KNOWN PURPOSE-BUILT VIEWING HOUSE IN BRITAIN, put there in 1669.

Rydal Church



In 1824 Lady Le Fleming had the church of St Mary's built below Rydal Mount, on a site chosen by Wordsworth. The gallery inside was reserved for the Le Flemings, while the Wordsworths had two family pews at the front. Wordsworth was churchwarden for a while in 1833-4.

At the western end of Rydal Water is a small rock reached by some steps, where Wordsworth used to sit and look out over the lake. This was reputedly his favourite viewpoint and is known as WORDSWORTH'S SEAT.

Nab Cottage

'Little Peggy Simpson was standing at the
door catching hailstones in her hand'

DOROTHY WORDSWORTH,
on walking past Nab Cottage in 1802

By the road that runs along the northern shore of Rydal Water, beneath the towering Nab Scar, is NAB COTTAGE, displaying the date 1702 over its front door. Farmer's daughter 'LITTLE PEGGY SIMPSON' soon grew up and caught the eye of author THOMAS DE QUINCEY who was living up the road at Dove Cottage. He married her in 1816 and she became a loyal wife to him despite his debts and his opium habit (see [page 21](#)), and bore him eight children before her death in 1837.