

Lakeland Hunting Memories

Not too long ago I had a pint in the Wasdale Inn and sat soaking in the history of the place. Shortly after somebody sent me the following material which throws light on the place and perhaps its most famous inhabitant, the hunting mad Will Ritson.

SOME DALESFOLK YARNS

BY THE REV. JOHN HODGSON, Vicar of Wasdale

The word "Dalesfolk" is here used in its commonly accepted meaning, viz., the inhabitants of the valleys at the foot of the fells. There is a theory among etymologists that "dalesman" originally meant the cultivator of a "dale", an allotted piece of land "dealt" out; but the use of the word in that sense has long been obsolete, and it is doubtful whether the term was ever in common use. "Dalesfolk", however, is not a word employed by the inhabitants of these valleys to denote themselves; it is only applied to them by outsiders. There is no reason to think that they are much different frae any udder mak o' folk. Theer's ya particular thing about them that mebbly meks t' main difference, and that is, there's nut sea many on them. Being few in number they dunnat nurd togidder like toonsfolk, but they're scattered about in laal hamlets an farms amang't fells. They're lonely-like, and grow just like theirsels an' nut like udder folk. They're nut like bricks, aw t' same size an' form; they're mair like cobbles an' boulders, ivvery yan wid its awn scars an' corners. Twea cockneys mud be as like yan anudder as twea peas, but twea o' these fell folk ur as different as a tup fra a steg. All the characteristics of the inhabitants of the dales are to be found in people elsewhere and everywhere, and I now make reference to a few of those characteristics simply because of the humorous aspect in which they have sometimes been presented. Shrewdness is one of the qualities with which they are generally credited, and an instance of it may be related as displayed by Gaspard, the guide, who has so identified himself with Wasdale Head that he may be considered indigenous to the soil. One sultry day he was engaged to go with a ioo well-known author, Mr. B. Gaspard pocketed a flask of ginger wine for his own use and advised Mr. B. to take something to drink on the way, but Mr. B. said they would find plenty of water in Deep Ghyll. But they found the Ghyll dry; Mr. B. was hungry, but so parched with thirst that he could not taste a sandwich. Gaspard also was thirsty, but he had not told B. that he had brought any liquor. He told B. to remain where he was on the pretext of exploring the Ghyll further up. As soon as he got out of sight Gaspard took a pull at his flask, and then shouted to B. to come on. These tactics were repeated a few times; Gaspard's thirst was quenched but the improvident author's became a raging furnace. At last the climber suffered so much that he ordered a return from these arid upper regions and the pair made their way down Broad Stand. On the descent, as the guide stepped down the rocky stair, the liquor in the flask gave a cool, delicious gurgle and B. called out delightedly—"Gaspard, I hear water running beneath this gravel; we must find it," and accordingly they scratched up a space of gravel, but of course found no water. A little further down B. heard the beautiful sound again, and again they dug in vain. In desperation B. now asked how far away the nearest stream was. Gaspard thought there was a spring two miles away, across the Mickledore valley and over the Scawfell Pike: there was water nearer than that, but still further away than he cared to go, so he named a distance which put a visit out of the question. At the third sound of running water the super-thirsty B. located it. "Gaspard," he said, "have you some water on you?" Gaspard said, "I have half a flask of ginger wine; you can have that if it is any use." B. drained the flask, and was so delighted with his drink that he emptied his pockets and gave Gaspard all the money he had with him, amounting to three shillings and four pence. The habit of exaggeration is too common at the present day to be peculiar to any district, but its artistic use formed the staple of the humour of the late Will Ritson of whom so many anecdotes have been told. In his time, although the Church at Wasdale Head stood within an enclosure, there was no burying ground there. A visitor once remarked to Auld Will:—"I am surprised to see there are no head-stones in the Churchyard." Mr. Ritson: "What for should theer be any heedstones?" Visitor: "Why of course to mark where the people are buried." Mr. Ritson: "But theer is neabody buried theer." Visitor: "What do you do with people when they die?" Mr. Ritson: "Neabody iwer does dee here." Visitor: "Then what comes of them?" Mr. Ritson: "They leev here till they're varra auld, and then they wither an' wither and at last they git that thin t' wind just blows them away." There is a certain phlegmatic philosophy which prevents the people of our dales from becoming alarmed or disconcerted in the most adverse circumstances. A farmer of

Downdale, Wasdale Head, had been to market one day accompanied by his man. On returning, perhaps unduly fortified with strong liquor, the man fell out of the cart and sunk almost out of sight in the deep sump which ran round the midden. He called to his master: "Jossy, coom an' plug us oot; its nobbut rayder damply in here." The speech of Dalesfolk is sometimes indirect, indefinite, showing hesitation to express a decided opinion, as in the case of the weather-wise man who, on being asked to give a weather forecast for the day, made a careful observation of the heavens and then said, "it might varra io easy be owder way." But on occasion their speech can be straight and direct enough, as in the following piece of repartee. At the close of a hard day's foxhunting the hunters sat down to a very relishing hot potato pot. One of the huntsmen who had not tasted food since morning, ten hours before, said to the hostess:— "Missis, if ye'd browt some o' this stuff to Middle Fell about two o'clock we wad ha thowt summat on ye." Hostess: "What wad ye hev gien meh if ah'd browt it aw t' way theer?" Huntsman: "Ah wad ha gien ye a kiss." Hostess (mother of a large family): "That's nea good to me. Ah've hed far ower mony o' them things." Huntsman: Its done you no harm. Ye've tekken nea hurt anyway." Hostess: "Nea, an if ah hed tekken any hurt a kiss fra thee wadn't mend meh." Huntsman thinks he is on the trail of a vixen that is too many for him and gives it up. Young men bred in these dales have proved their mettle in France, Flanders, and the Dardanelles. The war found them in no mood of indecision but they enlisted on the first opportunity after its outbreak. One enlisted the very day war was declared, and on being asked why he was in such a hurry replied: "Well they say the war will only last about three weeks and it would be a pity to miss it." That youth has been now nearly six months in the Mediterranean. Young men who return from the war will bring with them a widened outlook; education and increasing contact with the outside world is smoothing Cumbrian manners and modifying or destroying the dialect, but the isolated life of the fells and dales will always breed a certain rugged independence of character, and there will always remain homeliness of speech as an index to the load and homely hearts of the Dalesfolk

STORIES OF AULD WILL RITSON by W. T. Palmer

The shrewd, imperturbable features of Will Ritson— rugged as the fells around—catch the eye of the visitor, stepping into the smoke-room at Wastwater Hotel ; from his place on the wall he seems to fix a steady, quizzing gaze upon the new arrival, ready maybe to startle him with a shaft of rough humour as he bids him enter. Founder of the humble Huntsman Inn at Rowfoot at the head of Wastwater—now grown into the roomy Hotel and farm buildings, Will Ritson was the type of countryman to whom stories, more or less apocryphal, seem to become attached. He is said to have explained the fame of his fell head because it had the highest peak, the deepest lake, the smallest church, and the biggest liar in all England. Scafell Pike, Wastwater, the little church among the yew trees opposite his inn, and Will Ritson were indicated. He had boisterous moods, but his stories never deceived even a small child. He characterized them in this way: ' The lees Ah tell isn't malicious; they're nobbut gert big exaggerations.' Ritson used to say he could remember being christened, and this might be quite true; for in those days of periodical christening services, it was not uncommon for children several years old to be presented. It is his legend that when the time came for taking him to church he had bolted, had to be hunted for and run down; also that when the parson did the sprinkling, the boy responded with remarks which were more personal than courteous or respectful. ('If thou does that again, I'll pounce the ' is said to have been the main threat of the 'infant'.) Will received his first lesson in practical humour when he was a lad. He and a comrade were going to take a wasps' nest in a hollow tree, and a gentleman staying in Wasdale accompanied them. The entrance at the bottom of the tree was filled with dry grass and sticks for a fire, and the other boy climbed the tree to stop the top of the hole with sods. He said to Ritson: 'Mind thoo doesn't set fire tull't befoor Ah come doon.' The gentleman gave young Will a wink, and the fire was kindled. The wasps flew out in a fury, and the lad in the tree was terribly stung. He jumped down and ran up to the neck in an adjoining tarn. The gentleman gave the lads half-a-sovereign for his amusement. Very little is known or, at least, recorded of Will's father, John, except that he was provided with an annuity out of the estate when the property was left to Will by his grandfather. Judging by the following incident, however, the son must have been somewhat of a 'chip of the old bloc'. In Will's young days, father and son had occasion to visit Loweswater. On arriving at the Kirk Stile Inn, refreshment was found desirable. The younger man

helped himself, and proceeded to charge his father's glass, saying, 'Thou mun say when, fadder.' Old John was silent, and Will filled the glass until it began to overflow, whereupon he remarked: 'Thoo niwer said when, fadder.' 'Nea, Will,' said John, 'a lucky man may mak his fortun be hoddin' his tongue. Will Ritson was born in 1808 at Row Foot, Wasdale Head, then a small farmstead, which he afterwards inherited from his grandfather—a Bill Ritson—the property having originally come into the family by purchase from the Tyson's.



Raw Foot Farm

Of Ritson's early youthful days not very much is to be gleaned, but he grew into a fine type of dalesman, tall, muscular, heavy-boned and athletic. In the wrestling rings of West Cumberland he was known as a powerful local champion and exponent of the ever-popular Cumberland and Westmorland sport. His prowess had to be reckoned with in many a doughty tussle. His favourite pastime was undoubtedly hunting, of which he was passionately fond. At a comparatively early age he was appointed huntsman to Mr Rawson, of Wasdale Hall, and subsequently to Mr Huddleston, of Gosforth, both gentlemen renowned for their love and enthusiasm for the local chase. Later in life, when Ritson entered on the duties of landlord of the Huntsman Inn, he was keen enough to form and maintain an effective pack of his own, and never were mountain hounds more deftly handled than were his. Even on his deathbed he expressed a wish to get up and see a run of the Black Coombe Beagles, then meeting in the locality. Prior to Row Foot becoming a licensed house (about 1856), the building was small and very primitive. When Ritson, who had by this time married his wife Dinah—one of the Fletchers of Nether Wasdale—conceived the idea of supplying tourists with ham and eggs, he built at the south end of the farm a small wing, which he believed would provide ample accommodation for all the tourists and travellers ever likely to come his way. However, thanks to his hard-working helpmate, the inn rapidly grew in custom and popularity. Several of the Lake Poets, other eminent men of letters, and students found Wasdale to be an unspoiled place in a situation of uncommon grandeur. They took delight in the old-time primitive methods of the people. They revisited the valley many times, and in Ritson always found a willing aider and abettor of their sport and frolics. Amongst the dalesfolk he held the sway almost of a local potentate. He was looked up to as their philosopher. Never was he at a loss when appealed to on any conceivable subject. Be the topic under discussion agricultural, sporting, or political, the landlord was ever ready with the last word, which was given at times with perhaps more emphasis than his knowledge of the subject warranted. As landlord he

would sometimes play off his humour on his guests. One morning he had been out fishing, and caught some fine trout. In the afternoon some tourists came in, and said they would like some trout at tea-time. The landlord said it was a bad time of day for catching fish, but if they would wait half an hour he would see what could be done. He called his man in and told him to take his fishing rod to the beck, and come back in twenty minutes. At the end of the time Ritson of course exhibited to his guests a dish of fine trout, caught to order! Another fishing yarn is this: three young men complained that they could not catch the trout which were plentiful enough in a tarn they had tried. They asked the landlord's advice: 'How is it,' they said, 'when we are fishing on yon side of the water all the fish are rising on this side, and when we come to this side they are all rising on yon side?' 'Well,' said Ritson, 'two of you stay on this side and the other go yonder and stone them across to this side.' They did so, with no better result to the basket. The owner of a telescope turned it on an adjacent peak, and declared that so excellent was the glass that not only could he see the cairn at the top, but also the stick inside the stone pile; yes, and a fly had settled on the pole. 'Gi'e the glass to me,' asked Will; turning the instrument the wrong way round, he feigned astonishment. 'Aye, by gum, it's a fly; and a pi' e'ed one' (one-eyed fly). He was caustic with a Bishop who had him as guide to Scafell Pike, and who complained sorely at Will's speed. 'Well, here ye are, Mister Bishop,' as he handed him up the pile of rock, 'as near Heaven as ye ever will be.' Another prelate was told to look round on a crystal-clear day, and note that seven kingdoms were in sight. 'Scarcely so many, Will,' was the reply. 'Why then, count 'em as I tell 'em off, and ye'll see that I am right.' 'All right.' 'Yonder's the Mull of Galloway, the Kingdom of Scotland—one; then, west are the Mourne Mountains, Kingdom of Ireland—two; then south is Snowdon, the Kingdom of Wales—three; off St. Bees Head is the Isle of Man, a kingdom of its own—four. This top you are standing on is in the Kingdom of England—that's five.' 'But you said seven, Will, you know.' 'Of course I did, and I'm not wrong. Don't ye, a priest, preach that the Kingdom of Heaven is above, and that of Hell deep below us? There's six and seven for ye.' Many of the stories I have repeated here have come from the collections of George Seatree (in his young years, of Penrith), and John Wilson Robinson, of Lorton, both of them pioneers in the sport of rock climbing. In 1874 these two walked over from Keswick to get some information from Will Ritson about the proper and safe route up Pillar Rock. 'We found the cautious old guide very reticent and chary about imparting information. Perhaps he was right. That autumn, with the same friend, we solved the mysteries of the Pillar Stone, reaching the top by the Slab and Notch and the Curtain routes. 'On that second visit we inquired of Auld Will if he knew of a climb we had done to the right of Mickledore which led to the top of Scafell (the course has since been known as the North, or Penrith, climb). ' "No," was the reply, "an' if it's t' seeam pleeace as Ah mean Ah doan't think ye've been up. Nowt but a fleein' thing cud git up theer." Then he blurted out, "What's makkin' ye fellas fash yer'sels seea mich about climmin' t' crags? Isn't t' fells big enough for ye?" 'When Seatree's party scaled the Pillar Rock, Ritson criticized their description: 'Ye heddn't gitten up t' reet way. Mr Baumgarten an' t' shepherds a' went up t' tudder side, but Ah hev heard that sum reading chaps had gitten up t' saem way as ye did.' A discussion on the subject of marriage arose in the inn kitchen one night, when a youth who aspired to the joys of the connubial state delivered himself in favour of the advantages accruing where there was a monetary consideration accompanying the object of a man's choice. Whereupon Ritson observed: 'That's the varra warst thing thoo cud think o' deein'. Our auld Dinah theer hed a five pund nwoate, an' Ah niver 'eard t' last on 't.' A brewer's traveller called upon Ritson, who said, 'Ah didn't think much o' t' last twea casks o' yal thou's sent us.' 'How is that?' replied the traveller; 'it should have been something extra. We had the malt all the way from Scotland.' 'Fra Scotland, hed ye? Than t' next time ye brew, Ah think ye'd better git t' moat at heeam, an' fetch t' watter fra Scotland.' Will used to tell of a farmer in Nether Wasdale who had finished the building of a high haystack, and his servant lad shouted down from the top: 'Ah say, meeaster; hooo is Ah to git doon?' The farmer looked up at him, and shouted in reply, 'Shut thee 'ees and walk about a bit.' A Cockney once received an answer from Ritson which was not remarkable for its elegance. He was watching the old man trying to wile a few trout in the beck which runs behind the hotel. Said the Cockney tourist, 'Mr Ritson, what do these little fishes live on in the winter?' 'Well, thoo knaas,' was the cutting reply, 'we git a lot o' visitors here i' t' summer time, maistly fra t' sooth. We git a terble lot o' Lndoners, an' they gah to dook an' wesh theirsels up i' t' ghyll. Well, they're about as loosey as whelps, an' t' laal fishes catches t' flees an' leeves on them i'

winter.' Another Londoner fared little better. He spoke disparagingly of Wasdale Head. 'Fancy livin' 'ere all yer life; why down't ye come up to town an' see the sights?' 'There's nea 'cashion, my lad, for us to cum up to London,' replied Ritson, 'cos sum o' t' seehts cums doon here to see us.' The old, quaint, wooden-benched kitchen of the inn was a popular meeting-place of farmers, shepherds, guides, stray wayfarers, and not infrequently in Will Ritson's time of the local parson. Ritson reigned supreme. He was landlord, waiter, and customer by turns. He was still hale and active when George Seatree visited the place, 'full of fun, and the faculty of creating it when in the humour, but brusque, blunt, and even uncouth when out of it. During the last six or eight years of his occupancy it was my good fortune to visit the inn frequently. On those occasions we had many interesting cracks together. More than once out of the season, we appeared to have the house to ourselves, save for old Dinah, who went quietly about her work and said nothing. Many of Ritson's best stories were not original, and therefore cannot be ascribed to him, or quoted as such; but the inimitable way in which he related them in the pure local vernacular, his smart repartee, and his sly sallies were entirely Ritsonian, and never failed to bring down the house. The late Dr A. Craig Gibson told a story which Ritson heard, appropriated and gave with stolid gravity. After a dalesman in the kitchen had reeled off a 'thumper' about an enormous vegetable he had read of in East Cumberland, the host gravely chimed in: 'O, that was nowte tull a crop o' turmets at was grown aboun twenty year sen be Clem Mossop o' Prior Skeal, nar Co'der Brig. It's guddish grund theer, and what wid that, and heavy muckin' an' wide thinnin' oot, he rais't sec turmets as nivver was heerd tell on ayder afooar or sen—they wer' sa big. 'Fowk com fray o' parts to leuk at them; an' about Martinmas a young bull fairly eat his way untul yan o' them, as a moose mud intul a cheese—an' bead theer. They thowt t' beast was lost till a while efter Kersmas, when he woak't oot on t' a gay bit fatter ner he went in. Clem was sa plees't t' he lied t' skell o' t' turmet carriet yam, an' mead a famish hen hull—t' hens o' sat in't at neet—while next winter, an' than it soffen't an' fell togidder efter a hard frost.' An amusing sidelight is thrown on Auld Will's character in the following incident. During a visit to Keswick in his later days he called up an eminent Lake District photographer, and whilst sitting for his portrait looked very serious and glum. 'Now then, Will,' said the artist, 'let me see you smile; it's not a funeral, you know.' 'Smile,' replied the sitter, 'hoo can a fellow smile when he's nobbut gotten a beak to leuk at? Now, if thoo'll fetch me a mug o' yal Ah'll smile for the reet eneof.' The photographer departed for the desired stimulant, and on his return Auld Will's countenance brightened up wonderfully, and the smile was duly 'taken' before being buried in the mug. In the evening, when the plate was developed, it was found to be all fogged. During the artist's absence, Auld Will had opened the dark slide and laughingly boasted afterwards that 'it was a gey good jwoke for t' likeness takker hed lost beath his beer and my smile.' Auld Will and Dinah retired from active business in 1879, and after their retirement took up residence at Nichol Ground, Nether Wasdale. The old warrior died in 1890, and was interred in Nether Wasdale churchyard, the faithful companion of his life having been taken about twelve months earlier. They had two sons, but both predeceased them, leaving four grandchildren.

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Will Ritson