

THE LUNE VALLEY AND HOWGILLS

A WALKING GUIDE



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Both native Lancastrians, Dennis and Jan Kelsall have long held a passion for countryside and hill walking. Since their first Cicerone title was published in 1995, they have written and illustrated around 50 guides covering some of Britain's most popular walking areas and regularly contribute to various outdoor magazines. Their enjoyment of the countryside extends far beyond a love of fresh air, the freedom of open spaces and an appreciation of scenery. Over the years Dennis and Jan have developed a wider interest in the environment, its geology and wildlife, as well as an enthusiasm for delving into the local history that so often provides clues to interpreting the landscape.

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THE LUNE VALLEY AND HOWGILLS

A WALKING GUIDE

by Dennis and Jan Kelsall

CICERONE

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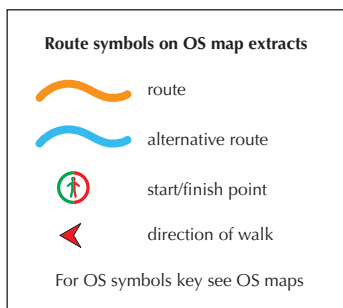
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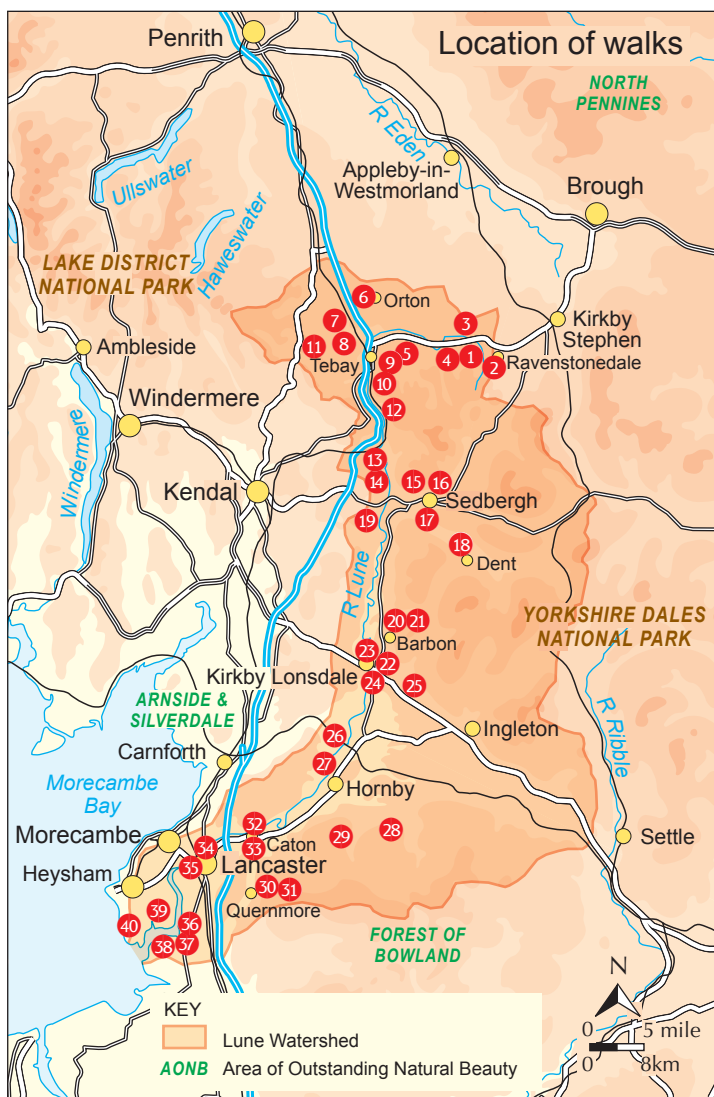
Front cover: Along the Whinfell Ridge from Castle Fell

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Through a gap in the wall along Borrowdale towards Blease Fell (Walk 11)

INTRODUCTION

The area of the Lune valley, nestled between the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales, begs discovery and presents no shortage of inviting walks to suit every taste and inclination. The selection of walks in this guide reveals its many facets, with routes that clamber onto the hills overlooking the main valley, delve into the tributary dales that feed it, or simply follow the River Lune itself. Further downstream the routes wander the two promontories between which the Lune finally meets the sea near Lancaster, seeking out the many picturesque and interesting corners there. In some walks, aspects of the area's rich history are revealed, while

few rambles lack opportunities to observe wildlife at any time of year. Walking is one of the best forms of physical exercise, and in a setting such as this, it cannot help but be good for the mind and soul too.

Although it gives its name to Lancashire, the River Lune is born in what was Westmorland, a historic county that was swallowed up within Cumbria during the reorganisation of local government in 1974. The river's higher reaches fall from the Howgill Fells in a fold that separates the western dales of Yorkshire from the rolling hills of south-east Lakeland. The river enters Lancashire only below Kirkby Lonsdale, but immediately encounters



Beached boats indicate that the high tide covers the salt marsh (Walk 40)



some of the county's prettiest countryside. Lower down it skirts the Forest of Bowland before passing through Lancaster to find eventual release into Morecambe Bay and the Irish Sea.

Although surrounded by hills, it is the Howgill Fells to which the Lune is most intimately related, that distinctive massif of high ground rising dramatically to the east of the M6 as it passes through the deep trough of the Lune Gorge. The tentacles of the river's upper tributaries completely encircle this compact group and effectively set it apart from the neighbouring Pennine and Lakeland hills.

The Lune is a relatively short river, yet it embraces a considerable upland sweep that includes The Calf and all the other high tops of the Howgills, a corner of the Shap Fells, as well as the

southern aspect of Great Asby Scar. Further south, Whernside and most of Ingleborough also lie within its reach, the catchment curving around to include the northern slopes of the Forest of Bowland. But the area explored within this book is not confined to the high hills, and there is much of interest too within the main valley and its tributaries. Borrowdale, Dentdale and the secluded valleys of Bowland are particularly beautiful, while the estuarine marshes and coast reveal other aspects of the area's character.

Besides Lancaster, Kirkby Lonsdale and Sedburgh are the only towns situated by the river, and the area is largely untouched by conurbation or industry. The beckoning landscape ranges from the untamed,

expansive moorlands of the high tops to secluded woods, bucolic countryside and tide-washed coast, all combining to offer walking that is both varied and rewarding. Although there are undoubtedly challenges to be found, none of the routes included here is overly demanding. They focus upon walking for enjoyment to appreciate the scenery, wildlife and plants encountered while the text also offers background to some of the features and curiosities passed along the way.

Traditionally, the river is regarded as upwelling from the ground beside the mound of an ancient chapel dedicated to St Helen in the hamlet of Newbiggin-on-Lune, although higher and longer tributaries complicate any discussion of its source. The river's 50-odd mile journey to the

coast winds almost entirely through unspoiled countryside, and along its length the river subtly exchanges the wild scenery of rolling, deserted moorland hills for a more intimate pastoral setting of waterside meadows and woodland.

Scattered throughout the upper Lune Valley are attractive farmsteads, hamlets and villages, with only two settlements large enough to claim the status of town, Kirkby Lonsdale and Sedbergh (the latter being set back a couple of miles from the main flow). Both ancient market centres, they retain a delightful individuality that is becoming increasingly hard to find in today's towns. They make ideal bases for a few days' exploration of the area or convenient stopping-off points for those wishing to create an 'end-to-end' trek along the valley.



Looking back to Beckside from the path to Harprigg (Walk 19)

THE LUNE VALLEY AND HOWGILLS

The only major conurbation within the river's entire catchment is Lancaster, founded by the Romans as a garrisoned port at the river's lowest bridging point. Throughout the Middle Ages the County Palatine of Lancaster was governed from its intimidating medieval castle and, although the county's administrative centre has now shifted south to Preston, Lancaster is still considered the county town. During the 18th century it rivalled Liverpool as a great seaport, trading with the Baltic States, Africa and the Americas, but with a silting estuary and shifting centres of economic activity, Lancaster's maritime importance faded into history. Downstream, the city is quickly left behind and the river, tidal from this point, winds to a lonely estuary across an expanse of largely empty coastal

plain, where extensive salt marsh and mud flats attract a host of birds to feed at low water.

The landscape through which the river flows boasts great beauty and diversity, yet much of the main valley, let alone its many tributary dales, is relatively unknown and little visited, overshadowed by the proximity of more well-publicised neighbours. Few of those passing through to the Lake District, the Yorkshire Dales or points further north afford it little more than a passing glance and most are largely oblivious to the loveliness of its uncluttered countryside. The Howgill Fells and the Forest of Bowland are among the country's least frequented hills, and few but locals are aware of the attractive hamlets and villages scattered along the length of the valley.



Across the Lune Valley from the top of Firbank (Walk 14)

The rewards of such relative obscurity are found in unfrequented hills and vales, an absence of the trappings of commercialism, and a freedom from the obligation to undertake a handful of 'must do' routes. In and around the Lune there are no 'highest peaks' to climb or 'longest ridges' to traverse, and the one or two spots that have gained a justified popularity have yet to succumb to over-exploitation. Travelling from one end of the valley to the other reveals an ever-changing scene that is constantly and subtly altering to offer something uniquely special.

Much of the upland catchment is open-access land where walkers can roam at will, while miles of paths, trackways and quiet lanes offer endless scope for inquisitive and uncrowded explorations. The revelation of far-reaching views from the tops contrasts with the intimacy of secluded woodlands and deep, winding valleys, while the abundance of plant and wildlife and endless wayside curiosities more than matches that to be found along the well-worn trails of the more popular haunts.

ORIGINS AND LANDSCAPE

The waters of the Lune

Identifying the origin of any river depends upon the rules by which you want to play – highest point, longest course, farthest from the sea and so

on. An unambiguous answer is rare, and the River Lune is no exception.

The first reference to its name on the map is the hamlet of Newbiggin-on-Lune, where the river is held to bubble up from the ancient and holy perennial spring of St Helen's Well. Other authorities point out that the stream below the village is called Sandwath Beck, and only beyond its confluence with Weasdale Beck, a mile downstream at Wath, does it become the Lune. Yet by the time it reaches Newbiggin, Sandwath Beck is already into its third name, having started life out as Dale Gill and then become Greenside Beck. Up the hill behind Newbiggin, Dale Gill issues from a couple of uncertain springs, just below the summit of Green Bell, and it is from here that longest meandering course to the sea can be traced.

However, the consideration of height adds yet another factor to the debate. Without doubt, at 723m Ingleborough is the river's most lofty source, although any rain falling on the summit is immediately sucked into the labyrinth of fissures, pots and caves beneath the mountain and only reappears much lower down its flanks. The beginning of the highest continuous stream is a shallow tarn at around 665m on the summit of Baugh Fell, from which flows the River Rawthey. Perhaps the only way to be certain of having dipped your toe in the river's source is to visit all five locations.



Whatever its beginnings, the River Lune has a catchment extending over 430 square miles (1114km²), but it is peculiarly one-sided in that, for much of its length, the western watershed is less than two miles from the river, so all major input is from the east. The only significant streams that contradict this lopsidedness are Birk Beck and Borrowdale, which fall from the Shap Fells on the fringe of the Lake District National Park, and Chapel Beck and Raise Beck, springs seeping from the limestone of Great Asby Scar, which overlooks the budding river from the north. The Lune's infant tendrils almost completely encircle the Howgill massif, with only a couple of streams that feed Scandal Beck escaping capture to flow northwards into the River Eden. Further south the

Lune's tributaries penetrate deep into the western dales of North Yorkshire, stealing all the rills and rivulets from Baugh Fell, Wherside and the majority of those from Ingleborough too. Even in its final stages, the Lune maintains its intimacy with the high hills, for the northern slopes of the Bowland fells also come within its grasp.

Landscape

While the Lune catchment lacks the unified identity that designation as a national park or AONB creates, it impinges upon the existing national parks of the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales, as well as the Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Since the national park boundary changes of 2016, virtually all the catchment north of Kirkby Lonsdale

now lies within one or other of the national parks and is a formal recognition of its special qualities. The catchment compares well with both the scale and character of such designated areas in Britain, for although only half the size of the Lake District, it is double that of the New Forest. The sheer variety of its unblemished landscape is compelling, and ranges from remote upland fell, crag and rambling moor through ancient woodland and rolling pasture to tidal marsh and coast. Threading through it all is the Lune itself, a river of ever-changing mood sustained by countless springs, becks, streams and lesser rivers, which each display a different facet of the valley's beguiling character.

Although surrounded by mountainous ground, the abrupt mass of

the **Howgill Fells** stands apart and is obviously different from all around. Severed from the volcanic rocks of the Lakeland hills by the Lune Gorge, and from the Dales limestone by the Dent Fault, the daunting flanks guard a citadel of high plateau grounded on ancient shales and sandstones, which is deeply incised by steep-sided, narrow valleys that penetrate its heart. Any approach from the south demands a stiff climb to gain the broad, grassy ridges that radiate from its high point, **The Calf**, but if you settle for a longer walk the more gently inclined fingers that extend to the north offer something less energetic but equally rewarding. The tops have been rounded smooth by erosion over countless millennia to leave few crags or rocky faces; however, where



A moment's pause to enjoy the view along Bowderdale (Walk 4)

WALK 1

Weasdale and Randygill Top

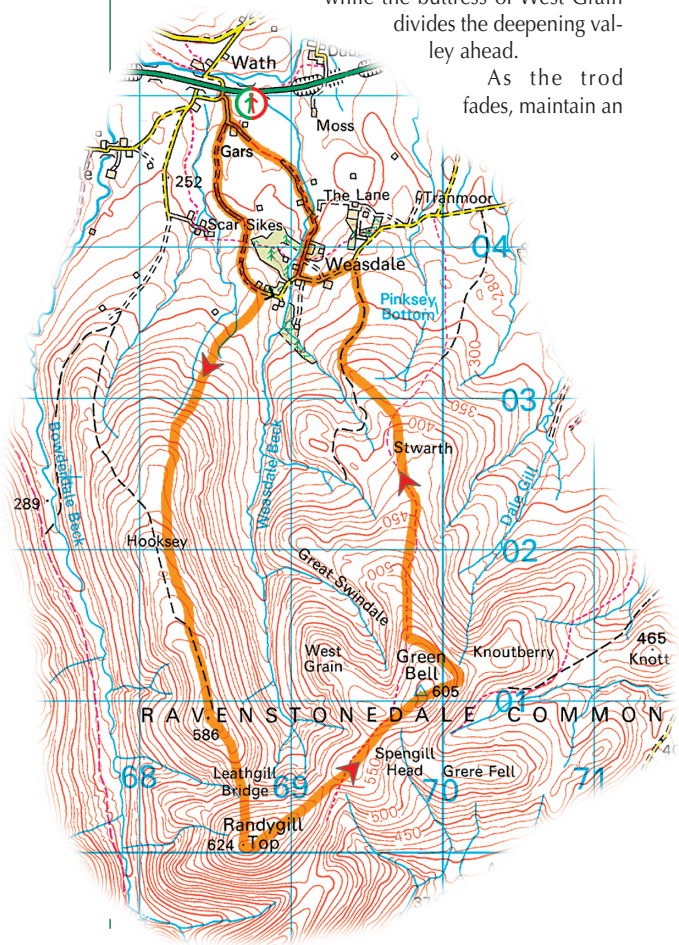
Start Point	Wath (NY 685 050)
Distance	8 miles (12.9km)
Time	4¼hr
Terrain	Rough tracks and upland trods
Height Gain	560m (1837ft)
Maps	Explorer OL19 – Howgill Fells and Upper Eden Valley
Refreshments	Lune Spring Garden Centre café at Newbiggin-on-Lune
Toilets	None
Parking	Roadside parking at start
Note	The route is not recommended for inexperienced walkers in poor visibility, when map and compass are essential.

All but one of the Howgills' major streams find their way into the Lune, although the one credited as being the river's source, on the basis that it has the longest passage to the sea, is Dale Gill. It seeps out of the rock below the summit of Green Bell and flows down to join the rivulets bubbling from Newbiggin's springs. Aficionados determined to walk the river in its entirety will follow the course of the peaty stream off the hill. However, more satisfying for those appreciative of striking landscape (and a drier path) is this more circuitous route, which ascends the eastern ridge defining Bowderdale and returns from Green Bell along its northern snout.

Leave the corner of the southbound slip road by its junction with the A685 at **Wath**, following a narrow lane signed as a Public Way. The tarmac ends at the entrance to **The Gars**, but the way continues through a gate ahead as an intermittently indistinct track across rough pasture. Eventually reaching the restored farmhouse at Cow Bank, it resumes as a lane. Descend towards the Weasdale Beck valley, but after 100m turn sharp right to double back across rough grazing, meeting a wall.

Follow the wall right, in time passing through a gate out of the intake. Where the wall later swings to the left, pick up a trod that rises across the eastern flank of **Hooksey** above Weasdale. Gaining height, the vista opens across to the Northern Pennines, while the buttress of West Grain divides the deepening valley ahead.

As the trod fades, maintain an



upward slant, soon joining a more distinct quad track. Continue along the rising crest, the views revealing the complex geography of the ridges and valleys of the Howgill massif, while the more distant scene ranges from Lakeland, on the one hand, to Wild Boar Fell. Beyond the high point, the ground abruptly falls to the narrow saddle of **Leathgill Bridge**. The steep climb beyond is soon accomplished, the gradient suddenly easing to reveal a small pile of stones marking the summit of **Randygill Top**.

The greatest elevation of the walk, **Randygill Top**, is a marvellous vantage point. The panorama encompasses most of the major Lakeland peaks, while in the other direction, two of Yorkshire's Three Peaks are visible – the third, Pen-y-ghent, hides behind Baugh Fell. Cross Fell, the highest top of the Northern Pennines, lies to the north beyond the Eden Valley, but, being undistinguished by a transmitter, it is less distinctive than the nearer Great Dunn Fell.

A distinct trod descends north-east to another narrow waist of high ground separating the head of Weasdale from Stockless Gill. Gently climbing, carry on for another ½ mile (800m). Having passed the falling promontory of West Grain over to the left, watch for the path dividing. That to the left contours the hillside above the head of Great Swindale, while the path ahead rises to the summit of **Green Bell**.

Although slightly lower than Randygill Top, Green Bell boasts a trig pillar. For survey purposes, it offered a better prospect to the eastern and northern hills, and it too is a grand tarrying place from which to enjoy the landscape.

To find the source of the Lune, keep with the path ahead, losing height fairly rapidly north-eastwards towards the much lower top of **Knoutberry**. As the gradient eases, bear off left, passing the ruin of a sheepfold and walking a short distance beyond it to find a couple of springs seeping from the ground.

Dale Gill is probably the least remarkable of the valleys cleaving the Howgills, with Langdale, Bowderdale and Weasdale all possessing much greater scenic appeal. But those wishing to trace the river's course will find a developing path above its right bank to take them down the valley. Later becoming a track, it eventually hits the lane just west of Greenside.

The way back to Wath, however, drops along the ridge running north from Green Bell. To avoid the climb back to the summit, contour north-west around the steep flank of the hill for $\frac{1}{4}$ mile (400m) to intersect the main path from the summit at a waypost. If you have time to spare, it is worth wandering back a short distance around the north-western slope of Green Bell for the views into the head of Great Swindale.

*On the summit of
Green Bell*

Return to the waypost and take the leftmost of the two descending paths, which bypasses left of **Stwarth**. Stay with the left branch past two more forks, and a track





soon develops that winds above the intake wall and finally meets a lane east of **Weasdale**.

To the left the lane heads down into the small settlement. There, take a bridleway on the right, which leads to Weasdale Nurseries. Keep ahead through a gate beside the front porch of Low Weasdale Cottage, walking forward through a second gate to join Weasdale Beck. Over a footbridge, continue through a gate beside a barn, remaining briefly with the river before moving away across the fields towards the house at **Gars**. Leave the corner of the penultimate field through the left gate, walking across to a small gate in the property's rear wall. The Right of Way winds through the yard, or, alternatively, follow the boundary left to the lane. Turn right back to **Wath**.

*From the flanks of
Green Bell into
Great Swindale*