

WALKING THE TOUR OF THE LAKE DISTRICT

**A NINE-DAY CIRCUIT OF CUMBRIA'S FELLS, VALLEYS
AND LAKES**

by Lesley Williams

CICERONE

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL
www.cicerone.co.uk

© Lesley Williams 2021
Second edition 2021
ISBN: 978 1 78631 049 1
First edition 2007



Printed in China on responsibly sourced paper on behalf of Latitude Press Ltd
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
All photographs are by the author unless otherwise stated.



© Crown copyright 2021 OS PU100012932

Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. This guidebook was researched and written before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are not aware of any significant changes to routes or facilities at the time of printing, it is likely that the pandemic will give rise to more changes than would usually be expected. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1049/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

Register your book: To sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at www.cicerone.co.uk.

Front cover: *The descent to Buttermere (Stage 4)*

CONTENTS










Map key	4
Route summary table	6
Alternative schedules	7
Acknowledgements	8
Preface	9

INTRODUCTION	11
Landscape and geology	12
Plants and wildlife	14
Farming	16
History and culture	17
The Tour of the Lake District	18
Planning your Tour	20
When to go	21
How to get there	22
Local transport	22
Accommodation	24
Equipment	25
Maps and apps	26
Navigation and safety	27
Using this guide	29

THE TOUR OF THE LAKE DISTRICT	31
Prologue Windermere to Ambleside	32
Stage 1 Ambleside to Coniston	36
Stage 2 Coniston to Eskdale	44
Stage 2A Coniston to Eskdale: high-level route	52
Stage 3 Eskdale to Wasdale	61
Stage 3A Eskdale to Wasdale: high-level route	68
Stage 4 Wasdale to Buttermere	74
Stage 4A Wasdale to Buttermere: high-level route	79
Stage 5 Buttermere to Keswick	86
Stage 5A Buttermere to Keswick: high-level route	92
Stage 6 Keswick to Rosthwaite	100
Stage 7 Rosthwaite to Grasmere	107
Stage 8 Grasmere to Patterdale	113

Stage 8A	Grasmere to Patterdale: high-level route	119
Stage 9	Patterdale to Ambleside	127

Appendix A	Useful contacts	136
Appendix B	Accommodation	139
Appendix C	Facilities table	142
Appendix D	Place names	145
Appendix E	Further reading and resources	147

Route symbols on OS map extracts (for OS legend see printed OS maps)	Features on the overview map
 route	 route
 alternative route	 higher-level route
 start point	 alternative route
 finish point	 start point for stages
 route direction	

SCALE: 1:50,000
0 kilometres 0.5 1
0 miles 0.5 1

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/1049/GPX.

Mountain safety

Every mountain walk has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who walk or climb in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

International distress signal *(emergency only)*

Six blasts on a whistle (and flashes with a torch after dark) spaced evenly for one minute, followed by a minute's pause. Repeat until an answer is received. The response is three signals per minute followed by a minute's pause.

Helicopter rescue

The following signals are used to communicate with a helicopter:

Help needed:
raise both arms
above head to
form a 'Y'



Help not needed:
raise one arm
above head, extend
other arm downward



Emergency telephone numbers

Dial 999 or 112 and ask for 'Cumbria Police' then 'Mountain Rescue'
For the emergency SMS service, text 999 and send 'Police' + details of incident + location

Weather reports

www.lakedistrictweatherline.co.uk
www.metoffice.gov.uk
www.mwis.org.uk

ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Start	Distance	Ascent	Descent	Time	Page
Prologue	Windermere	10.5km (6½ miles)	350m	400m	2hr 45min	32
Stage 1	Ambleside	20km (12½ miles)	610m	610m	6hr	36
Stage 2	Coniston	18km (11 miles)	865m	855m	6hr–6hr 30min	44
Stage 2A	Coniston	22km (13¾ miles)	1200m	1190m	8hr	52
Stage 3	Eskdale	18km (11 miles) or 20km (12½ miles)	470m	460m	5hr–5hr 30min or 6–6hr 30min	61
Stage 3A	Eskdale	17km (10½ miles)	980m	970m	6hr 30min	68
Stage 4	Wasdale Head	12km (7½ miles)	780m	750m	4hr 30min–5hr	74
Stage 4A	Wasdale Head	16.5km (10 miles)	1150m	1110m	6hr 30min	79
Stage 5	Buttermere	16km (10 miles)	490m	515m	5hr	86
Stage 5A	Buttermere	17.5km (11 miles)	1020m	1050m	7hr	92
Stage 6	Keswick	15.5km (9½ miles)	560m	560m	5hr	100
Stage 7	Rosthwaite	14km (8 miles)	580m	600m	5hr	107
Stage 8	Grasmere	13km (8 miles)	610m	530m	4hr	113
Stage 8A	Grasmere	16km (10 miles) or 19.5km (12 miles)	1100m	1020m	6hr or 6hr 30min	119
Stage 9	Patterdale	18km (11 miles) or 15km (9½ miles)	750m	840m	5–6hr or 4hr 15min	127
Total (main route, excluding prologue)		144.5km (90 miles)	5720m	5720m	9 days	
Total (using high-level alternatives)		156.5km (97 miles)	7950m	7950m	9–10 days	

Alternative schedules

*B = Buttermere *WH = Wasdale Head

Kms from Ambleside	Kms from Ambleside	13 days plus prologue	9 days plus prologue	7 days plus prologue
Windermere ▶ 10	10.5	Prologue 10.5km 2hr 45min	Prologue 10.5km 2hr 45min	Prologue 10.5km 2hr 45min
Ambleside ▶ 0	8.8	Ambleside to Elterwater 8.8km 2hr 30min	Ambleside to Coniston 20km 6hr	Ambleside to Coniston 20km 6hr
Elterwater ▶ 5	20	Elterwater to Coniston 11.2km 3hr 30min		
Coniston ▶ 10	29	Coniston to Seathwaite 9km 3hr 15min	Coniston to Eskdale 18km 6hr–6hr 30min	Coniston to Eskdale 18km 6hr–6hr 30min
Seathwaite (camping) ▶ 15	38	Seathwaite to Eskdale 9km 2hr 45min–3hr 15min		
Doctor Bridge, Eskdale ▶ 20	(48.7)	Eskdale to Nether Wasdale 10.7km 3hr 20min	Eskdale to Wasdale Head 18km 5hr–5hr 30min	Eskdale to Black Sail 24km 7hr 45min
Nether Wasdale ▶ 25	56	Nether Wasdale to Wasdale Head 9.3km 2hr 10min		
Wasdale Head ▶ 30	62	WH to Black Sail 6km 2hr 45min	Wasdale Head to Buttermere 12km 4hr 30min–5hr	
Black Sail ▶ 35	68	Black Sail to B 6km 2hr		Black Sail to Keswick 22km 7hr
Buttermere ▶ 40	84	Buttermere to Keswick 16km 5hr	Buttermere to Keswick 16km 5hr	
Keswick ▶ 45	99.5	Keswick to Rosthwaite 15.5km 5hr	Keswick to Rosthwaite 15.5km 5hr	Keswick to Rosthwaite 15.5km 5hr
Rosthwaite ▶ 50	113.5	Rosthwaite to Grasmere 14km 5hr	Rosthwaite to Grasmere 14km 5hr	Rosthwaite to Patterdale 27km 9hr
Grasmere ▶ 55	126.5	Grasmere to Patterdale 13km 4hr	Grasmere to Patterdale 13km 4hr	
Patterdale ▶ 60	144.5	Patterdale to Ambleside 18km 5–6hr	Patterdale to Ambleside 18km 5–6hr	Patterdale to Ambleside 18km 5–6hr

Acknowledgements

The concept of a circular trek around the Lake District was first thought of by Jim Reid while working as a local youth hostel warden. Jim spent two happy years researching and writing the first Tour of the Lake District guidebook which was published by Cicerone in 2007. With other commitments filling his life, his original book was in need of a fresh approach. The basic framework for the lower-level main route remains similar for most of the stages, any alterations reflecting changes in the quality of the paths, access or signage on the ground. The stage between Keswick and Rothwaite now runs to the east of Derwent Water, enjoying fine views and a visit to Castlerigg Stone Circle, and the final stage from Patterdale now returns directly via Scandale to finish in Ambleside.

I am deeply grateful for the help and support of my husband Jonathan, who has accompanied me on many of my research walks, including undertaking many of the higher summit alternative routes while I walked or re-walked the lower route. His help and support also extended to helping me organise the mass of information collected, and patiently listening to my accounts of lone wanderings on the fells during some of the challenging stormy days of the winter of 2019–20.

Finally, my thanks to the team at Cicerone, for ensuring that I have enjoyed all the help, guidance and support afforded to all our authors, despite being an ‘in-house’ author!

PREFACE



A perfect winter morning for photography – Elter Water

‘I wandered lonely as a cloud
that floats on high o’er vales and hills,
and all at once I saw a crowd
a host, of golden daffodils’

William Wordsworth

Like many English schoolchildren, I learnt Wordsworth’s poem, inspired by the Lake District’s scenery, by heart – but it wasn’t until my first visit on a walking holiday as a teenager that I fell in love with the Lakes. It was a typical week of ‘summer’ weather: warm and humid one minute, interspersed with driving wind and torrential rain giving rise to swollen streams and boggy ground ready to seemingly swallow you whole. But for the first time I understood that the colours, the views and the unspoilt wildness was everything I needed to make me happy. The freedom of the mind and body as you wander among the Lake District fells and valleys is something to be experienced and cherished at any age, and in my research for this book, whether walking alone or in company, I have genuinely enjoyed every minute – whatever the weather!

However you choose to use this book, whether for a series of long weekends, or for an adventurous high mountain expedition, I hope you enjoy your experiences as much as I have enjoyed discovering new paths and views while researching this book.

Looking west from just below the summit of Whiteless Pike, with Rannerdale Knotts and Crummock Water below (Stage 5A)



INTRODUCTION



Still waters on Buttermere provide stunning reflections (Stage 4)

The Lake District National Park is one of England's most popular mountain regions, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site, welcoming millions of visitors every year. For fell walkers, experiencing the beauty of the mountains and lakes happens at a relatively slow pace, giving time to admire all that the national park has to offer, away from the crowds that throng the valleys and lakesides. Whether you are an experienced fell walker or are considering your first visit, the Tour of the Lake District will reveal many rewarding views and memorable experiences – the best of the Lake District in a circular tour.

The Lake District is the name given to the mountains and lakes of Cumbria, a region of north-west England that forms a roughly circular bulge in the coastline before the border with Scotland is reached near Carlisle. It's a region that has been settled by man from ancient times. Neolithic stone circles, the distinctive local Celtic and Norse names, ancient packhorse bridges, castles and medieval farmsteads, quarries and the open fells themselves all bear testament to the fascinating history and landscape that can be explored while walking this multi-day route.

In just one day you can experience a cross section of history and landscape. One bright winter day I explored a new route to Rosthwaite from Keswick. A steady climb brought me first to the atmospheric setting of the world-renowned stone circle at Castlerigg, then on through farmland and sunken tracks to Walla Crag to take in the extensive views of the northern and western fells, and a bird's-eye view of two lakes – one natural, one man-made. I crossed several ancient packhorse bridges, literally no wider than a horse, passed through the dappled light of the oak and ash woodlands of Ashness, and into the 'hidden' valley of Watendlath, at the head of which lies a small lake and one of the more remote hamlets in the entire region, the pastures still grazed by Herdwick sheep whose ancestors grazed these same slopes centuries ago. A final climb over open grassy fells brought me down to Rosthwaite in Borrowdale, the Norse name meaning 'The clearing with a cairn'. This village lies at the junction of three great valleys surrounding the Borrowdale fells, now a stage point for walkers on the Coast to Coast walk, the Cumbria Way and the Tour of the Lake District.

It's perhaps astonishing that the idea of a circular walking route taking in the best of the Lake District is just that – an idea, with no fixed route, and no signposts of any kind. This guide can be followed exactly, or it can be used as the basis for your own route around the Lake District.

The route described takes in most of the major valleys of the region, staying away from many of the tourist honeypots near Windermere, preferring to explore ancient routes that link one valley with the next, one village with another. There are both high-level and lower-level options described for some stages; the high-level routes start and finish at the same points as the lower-level options, so it's easy to mix and match as you go, according to weather conditions, energy and time available.

LANDSCAPE AND GEOLOGY

A quick glance at a map of the Lake District suggests two obvious things: that it is a mountainous area, and that it is interspersed by a network of long thin 'finger lakes' which spread in a radial formation from roughly the centre of the region. But this is a complex landscape. The geology of the region is roughly divided into three broad zones. In the north, the most ancient rocks of the region are the Skiddaw slates, today forming the bulky rounded fells to the north of Keswick. In the middle are steeper, craggy mountains made of much harder volcanic material, while to the south and forming a rim around the edge of the Lake District are lower, undulating hills made up mainly of sedimentary rocks.

The origin of the Skiddaw slates dates back to when the area formed a tiny part of a tectonic plate that lay south of the equator, submerged in



Penny Hill Farm nestles in Eskdale (Stage 2)

a shallow sea. Mud, sand and silts were deposited, but around 475 million years ago these deposits were subjected to immense heat and pressure as the plate on which the 'Lake District' lay began to move north, colliding with neighbouring continental plates. The resulting changes from muds to rock led to the formation of incredibly hard slates of the Ordovician Skiddaw Group.

Around 460 million years ago continued movement of the continental plates caused violent volcanic activity, with layer upon layer of molten lavas of various viscosity and ash building up to form a central core to the region, characterised by the steep crags seen surrounding Thirlmere, High Rigg, Walla Crag, Kirk Fell and on into Wasdale and Eskdale. These volcanic rocks are also threaded with rich veins of minerals,

the result of highly mineral-rich liquids and gases which penetrated tiny fissures within the rock.

Over the next 400 million years the region continued to move north, crossing the equator and undergoing a series of periods of erosion and deposition both above and below the sea to form limestones, sands, and even coal deposits. Many more periods of deposition and tectonic activity repeatedly squashed and buckled the region to form a dome. This shape led to the formation of a radial drainage system as rivers carried away the softer sedimentary rocks, exposing the underlying older Skiddaw and Borrowdale rocks, leaving just a fringe of the sedimentary deposits.

Finally, two and a half million years ago, along with much of northern England and Scotland, the region was covered in a huge ice sheet up to

PROLOGUE

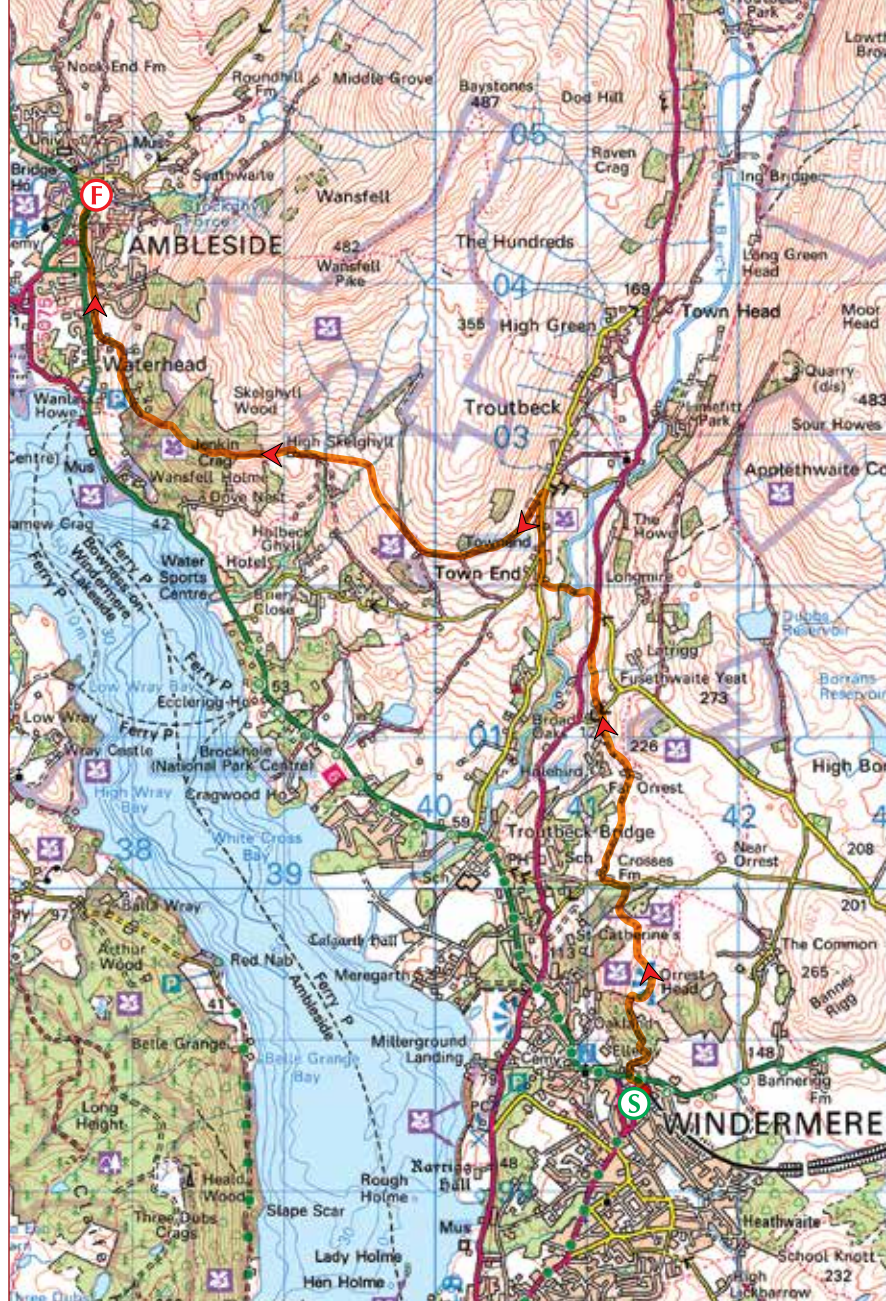
Windermere to Ambleside

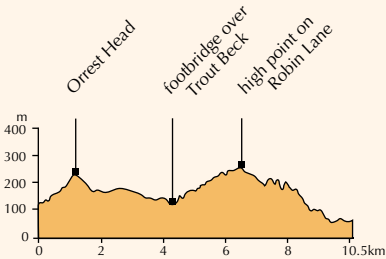
Start	Windermere railway station
Finish	Ambleside
Distance	10.5km (6½ miles)
Total ascent	350m
Total descent	400m
Time	2hr 45min
High point	Robin Lane, 240m
Refreshments	Small shop on the route in Troutbeck; pubs off the route on the A592
Transport	555 bus to Ambleside; lake launch from Bowness-on-Windermere to Ambleside Waterhead
Accommodation	Ambleside has all services and plentiful accommodation

A surprising way to link these two big Lake District centres, and a good way to get a first taste of the lower fields and hills as you move towards the start proper of your Tour of the Lake District. The route is usually very quiet, with good views across to the Old Man of Conistone and the Langdale Pikes and down to England's largest lake. Halfway along, Townend is an interesting and well preserved old Lake District farmhouse and gardens, now owned by the National Trust.

From **Windermere station**, walk up to the main A591 road and cross over at the pelican crossing, then 10 metres to the left take the small road signed to Orrest Head that climbs steeply past houses. Stay on the tarmac through several switchbacks until you find a sign straight up to Orrest Head. Follow this and continue steeply to Windermere's great **viewpoint** (238m).

From the summit, head north down a steep rutted path. Take a stile through a wall and continue on the path across a meadow and descend into woods, coming out at a small road. Turn left and then right past cottages





and enter open fields. The route here is fairly level. Cross three fields and come to the farm at **Far Orrest**. Pass through the farm and continue to meet a tarmac road. Almost straight across this, pass through another farm, then keep to a clear pathway across fields, meeting the **A592** Troutbeck road at Thickholme Bridge.

Cross the road and turn right along the pavement, which becomes a path alongside the road. Take the first left turn and descend steeply to **Trout Beck**. Cross a

*View from Orrest
Head towards
Troutbeck and
Red Screens*

bridge then climb the track to a road and turn right past **Townend**. ▶ After five minutes, come to a small general store and a well-placed bench.

Turn sharp left on Robin Lane. This old turnpike is clearly signed and runs all the way to Ambleside. The climb is steep at first on a well-made track between field walls, but soon levels out. Wide views open up across Windermere and to the higher mountains. At a point where the main track appears to continue, take the descending path to the left signed for Ambleside. Cross the bridge at Low Skelghyll, pass the farm at **High Skelghyll**, and gradually descend into woods (**Skelghyll Wood**). ▶ If you want to visit Waterhead (for buses and steamers), drop down on a path to the left shortly after Jenkin Crag and a stream crossing, otherwise continue down through the woods, looking down on the garden centre, and soon reach a quiet road near the A591.

Turn right on the quiet lane that runs north parallel to the main road. It climbs slightly before dropping into **Ambleside**. The bus station is the first turn left. Otherwise continue along the road into the centre of the town for all shops and facilities.

Townend is a traditional Lake District stone and slate farmhouse dating back to the 17th century, displaying tools, furniture, a library and cottage garden.

Jenkin Crag, just off the trail, gives another fine viewpoint.

*Approaching Far
Orrest Farm*

