

## The Journey from Highmost Redmanhey

Yesterday, I ticked a box that's been waiting a long time. I must have been nine or ten years old when my father gave me his copy of Alan Garner's novel "The Weirdstone of Brisingamen." It captivated me, as it has done so every time I have re-read it since. I read the Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings around the same time but it was Weirdstone which affected me most. Re-reading it now, some passages still have the power to terrify me and excite me with equal measure. The journey through the Earldelving, in particular, almost makes me want to stop reading every time, unable to bear the thought of the triple horror of being underground in a small tunnel, under water, and chased by an unknown foe. But I have to make myself read to the end, just to make sure it ends!

Ever since reading it for the first time, I have always wanted to see the Cheshire landscape where it is set. Like all of Garner's writing, the narrative is rooted in the landscape, driven by old legends and places, yet placed in the post-war Cheshire of the 1950s. The characters are good but it is the land which is really evocative. For me, that is the edge it has over Tolkien - that it takes place in a real place, on a real map, somewhere you can go to, that exists beyond the imagination of the author and the pages of a book.

The first half of the book is set in and around Alderley Edge, picking up the local legend of a band of knights sleeping under the hill and ready to awaken when the realm is in peril. The second half is dominated by a journey from Alderley Edge to the summit of Shutlingsloe, some nine miles away to the east, and then to the lonely pillar of Cluelow Cross, another two miles away. It is this journey, that has drawn me for years. It is what brought me here this week. It is the box I finally ticked yesterday.

The book is set some seventy years ago and the landscape has changed. But not as much as you might think. The landmarks are still there, the beginning, the end, the waypoints still crossing the countryside. But, even seventy years ago, Colin, Susan, Gowther and their escort of dwarves didn't stick to rights of way, certainly very few that are marked on the Ordnance Survey's finest. So, the original route is not possible to follow today, even if it was then, and compromise, improvisation is required. Even so, although the straight line distance is some eleven miles, the route as described in the book is indirect and comes to around fourteen miles on the ground. It takes them three days and two nights. The nearest equivalent route today is even longer, just over seventeen miles. A big ask for a day's walking, even for someone not carrying my fifty eight years.

From my hotel, a short walk at 8am brought me to the Wizard Inn, which I took as my start point. The real start point, the farmhouse at Highmost Redmanhey, is not identified exactly in the book but is very close, somewhere off in the countryside between The Wizard and the Congleton road which goes south from Alderley Edge. Starting down Bradford Lane, I struck off into the fields to try to reach the abandoned quarry which is behind the farmhouse, only to discover the first obstacle in the new house built recently across the path. Not wanting to tramp through someone's garden at such an early hour, I was forced to detour. The route took me through fields, past farms and eventually skirting the southern edge of Alderley Park to the Congleton Road, just north of Dumville's Plantation, a major feature in the book.

About a mile down the road and off into the fields again, to skirt Redes Mere. It is impossible to recreate the crossing of the lake on a floating island! So onwards again through fields, round the south of Thorneycroft Hall and Pyethorne Wood, and eventually to Gawsworth. The travellers in the book spend a lot of effort trying to avoid Gawsworth where, as Gowther observes, "Some might queer things happen theer (sic!) at the best of times, without all this." These days, there is no easy route past, so through I went and on across the fields to Danes Moss, now a nature reserve, a strange expanse of bog and moss, crossed by raised paths and duckboards. Then across the railway, the west coast mainline into Manchester, and to the bank of the Macclesfield canal. The crossing of neither is mentioned in the book because the travellers receive some magical assistance...

At this point in the novel, one almost gets the sense that Garner was a little bored with the journey and just needs it to finish. So, in true *deus ex machina* style, he conjours up a new character,

Gaberlunzie, who is possessed of a magic horse. They all climb aboard and he gallops them swiftly the remaining three or four miles to the edge of Macclesfield Forest. No such steed for me!

Instead, a few very pleasant miles along the towpath brought me to Gurnett, from where it was mostly a boring trudge along roads to the edge of the forest at Ridgegate reservoir. On reaching the forest visitor centre at Trentabank reservoir, I had already been walking for over six hours but the final five miles of the journey were to prove the hardest. Shutlingsloe is not a large hill but it is steep and cruelly placed towards the end of the trek. I suppose I could have done the walk in reverse but the title of the book is not "Brisingamen of Weirstone The" and it just wouldn't have been right. That said, the walk up through the forest is beautiful, steadily climbing in the cool shade of the trees and on well maintained forest paths. Emerging at the top onto an expanse of open moor is exactly as described in the book, with the hill of Shutlingsloe suddenly appearing straight ahead. The path is paved and, as it steepens very sharply up the hill, provided with flagstone steps. Even the steps don't prevent you from needing the help of hands to scramble up the last few feet.

The summit is pleasingly small and the view from the top is wonderful. The Cheshire plain stretches miles in all directions. I struggle to identify Alderley Edge, far too many miles away to the west. In the book, the final two miles to Cluelow happen in a whirl, a desperate race across the fields to the west. Then, as now, there are no paths to follow so the law-abiding trekker is forced to descend south into Wildboarclough and then trudge along roads, off across the small hill of Hammerton Knowl and finally to a crossroads, almost the definition of "in the middle of nowhere", just a farmhouse and a strangely deserted motel.

Cluelow Cross represents the final destination in the novel, where the final struggle takes place, where Durathror perishes, and the forces of evil finally vanquished. For me, it is the final disappointment. For today, it stands in a small wood, on a small hill about a hundred yards off the nearest road, on private land and fenced off. There is no access to it. I have to make do with a picture, taken from a hundred yards away, of a small, featureless, headless cross. It is a heart-breaking moment not to be able to reach it and touch it.

In the back of my mind, through all of the day, has been the thought that I have no idea how to get back to Alderley Edge! There is no public transport here and no one to help. Hitching a lift crosses my mind but, in these pandemic times, doesn't seem wise or likely to be fruitful. So, I start out down the road to Macclesfield, four miles away, to look for a train...

Finishing the journey, completing the walk in one day, following the text as closely as I could, brings a peace. A peace of completion, accomplishment, closure, and extreme tiredness. I have wanted to do this for so very, very long. It feels deeply peaceful finally to have done it.

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