River Derwent

Thereat once more he moved about, and clomb
Even to the highest he could climb, and saw,
Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,
Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,
Down that long water opening on the deep
Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go
From less to less, and vanish into light,
And the new sun rose bringing the new year.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The Derwent is formed just north of Stockley Bridge in Borrowdale by the flowing together of Grains Gill and Styhead Gill, the latter having just descended Taylorgill Force. At this point the Derwent is 4km horizontally and 800m vertically from the peak of Scafell Pike, the highest point in England, and is overlooked by Seathwaite Fell, Great Gable, Glaramara and numerous other peaks which form the sides of Borrowdale. Here is the wettest place in England with an average annual rainfall of 3.33m.

At this point the river is a boulderfield and is totally unpaddleable. After a kilometre the river arrives at the road head and at the farm at Seathwaite which also houses a licensed restaurant, telephone box, mountain rescue centre and a daily notice giving a very detailed weather forecast. Below the confluence with Sour Milk Gill the river becomes possible but only if you have little respect for your boat as it is frequently necessary to slide over shallows.

The situation improves after the entry of Combe Gill but around the next corner there is a long series of falls dominated by large boulders outside Borrowdale. At Rosthwaite a line of boulders across the river act as stepping stones and need to be portaged. It is Stonethwaite Beck which brings the river volume up to the quantity required for all to paddle. The Derwent cuts through between Scawdale and Grange Fell, the jaws of Borrowdale, named after their appearance when viewed from down the valley. Castle Crag on the lower side of Scawdale is named after the old British fort built on it, the defensive ditches of which still remain. The woods of the valley contain a rich variety of mosses, lichens and ferns. The land, like much of the land in the Lake District, is owned by the National Trust.

Hidden from the river on the right bank is the Bowder Stone. This is an 11m high, 2,000t erratic which is balanced precariously on one corner but can be climbed by a flight of steps at the back to give a breathtaking view down the valley. The water is extremely clear, allowing the paddler to peer down into the depths of pools at the range of greys, blues, browns and whites which make up the bed of the river. Rapids are frequent but not of any difficulty.

At the centre of Grange is the bridge beloved of artists. Just before it on the left bank are public toilets while below it on the righthand side a local contractor removes coarse sand from the riverbed with an excavator. Hugh Walpole lived just outside Grange at Manesty and the village is featured in his Herries novels.

As the river moves out of wooded meadows the dipper may be seen perched on rocks in the river. Behind the Lodore Hotel climbers frequent the slabs of exposed rock.

The flatter land is the silted up bed of what was once part of the lake bed and the river is gradually forming a delta into the lake. Approaching the lake, the ground alongside becomes progressively marshier and Great Bay is seen over the reeds on the left. Paddling onto the lake, the canoeist runs onto a bar where the river’s speed is checked and it deposits suspended materials in times of spate.

The name Derwent Water is somewhat tautological, Derwent meaning White Water. The lake is second only to Windermere for popularity with visitors. In the centre, directly between the inlet and outlet points, lies St Herbert’s Island, site of the hermitage of St Herbert, friend of St Cuthbert. The remains of a summer house are a recent legacy.

While paddling across to it, the backdrop is dominated by the bulk of Skiddaw which does not quite reach to the mountains on each side of Derwent Water and leaves an unexpected gap in the skyline at each end.

Along with Bassenthwaite Lake, Derwent Water is host to the vendace, a whitefish not found anywhere else. It is home, also, for many water fowl and the honking of wild geese echoes across the water. Because it is only 22m deep, it is one of the first lakes to freeze over in winter.

Numerous smaller islands dot the northern end of the lake. In summer there can be one more formed by vegetation buoyed up by gasses from decomposing material on the bed. Derwent Island housed a colony of German miners from 1565 when the Company of Mines Royal began to work the minerals which were to result in the Lakeland pencil industry. Many of the pack bridges in the area were used for carrying these minerals. In the 1770s the island was inhabited by Joseph Pocklington, an eccentric who built a fort, church, battery and druids’ circle and organized regattas and mock sea battles and attacks on the island with a great deal of fire from guns, large and small.

On the right bank is the town which has been inhabited by half the poets in England at one time or another, Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, Lamb, Shelley and Ruskin. Ruskin is commemorated by a memorial on Friar’s Crag, as is Cannon Hardwick D Rawnsley who was a founding father of the National Trust.

The exit from the lake is not easy to find, being hidden behind a reed bed, but is best approached by aiming just to the right of the houses of Portinscale. Just before the exit, canoe dealers Nichol End Marine have a jetty on the left.

The low ground between the two lakes is sedimentary and bisects what was once a single lake. Even so, the River Derwent is not slow between the two lakes. The first rapids come quickly and the speed is retained over most of its length. The water is now less clean and the first notice banning canoeing is seen, an indication that it is, potentially, a popular canoeing spot.

A geodesic greenhouse adorns a garden in Portinscale.

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Much work is being done by the North West Water Authority in reinforcing banks. The bridge carrying the B5289 is an attractive structure finished in the local blue slate. Much of the main A66 between Keswick and Workington now follows the line of the disused railway, whose dismembered bridge follows soon after. A couple of farm access bridges are flimsy bow shaped steel structures, the second of which has its lower member just above head height at normal water level.
On the side of Skiddaw hangs Dodd Wood, a large conifer plantation. Broom Fell and Sale Fell dominate the west side of Bassenthwaite Lake but the north end and most of the east side have lower rolling hills for the first time.

Bassenthwaite Lake is the only true lake in the Lake District, all the others being waters or meres. Soon on the east bank is a white farmhouse, Mire House. Here, the owner, James Spedding, used to entertain Alfred, Lord Tennyson whose *The Idylls of the King* uses this site for his description of the lake where Sir Belvedere flung Excalibur and King Arthur’s body was carried away by the ladies in the black barge. Golden eagles might be seen above to add to the atmosphere.

The River Derwent leaves Bassenthwaite Lake at Ouse Bridge with a fast flow and not infrequent rapids. It is surrounded by rolling hills with regular wooded copses. Sheep pasture is the main land use and houses are rare although anglers’ huts are frequently seen. One of these is fitted with a substantial bow to fend off debris in times of flood.

At Iselgate, an island just below the road bridge is a sea of snowdrops in the springtime. Soon after, Isel Hall dominates a bend of the river and large rhododendron bushes edge the banks. On the following bend a large section of the bank has recently been washed away and such slips are seen from time to time further on down the river. Also seen are oyster catchers, herons, mallards and other assorted ducks and gulls.

Some 2km before Cockermouth the Derwent leaves the Lake District National Park. Castle Weir is met immediately before Cockermouth Castle but has now been reduced to a rapid either side of an island.

Cockermouth Castle was built in 1134 by Waltheof and suffered from attacks by the Scots. During the Wars of the Roses it changed from Lancastrian to Yorkist ownership after the Battle of Towton and during the Civil War the Royalists laid siege to it for two months until Parliamentary reinforcements arrived. It then fell into ruin and was rebuilt last century.

At the west end of the main street is the Georgian house in which Wordsworth was born. The Trout Hotel has attempted to solve the argument between drinkers who want a straight glass and those who want the handled kind with a tall, dimpled glass without a handle, suiting neither.

A sawmill next to the river gives an alternative choice of smell to the manures which have pervaded the air at intervals since the lake. Fitz Weir is a broken weir forming a grade 2 rapid.

Papcastle, seen on a hill on the right, is the site of an older fort, the Roman Derventio. Most of its stones were taken for the building of Cockermouth Castle. Melgram Fitz Weir, soon after, has now all but disappeared.

From Bridgefoot the A66 leaves the line of the old railway and remains on the south bank while the abutments of the bridges remain at the five places where the railway crossed and recrossed the river.

At Great Clifton a mine used to dominate the hillside. Nowadays the predominant feature is a bank where refuse is pushed down into the river.

Salmon Hall Weir at Seaton is a high weir with an apparently straightforward sloping face. However, the toe has been sheet piled with the piling burnt off proud of the concrete. A mill lade leads off to the right, passes under a delightfully asymmetric stone arched bridge and feeds a water mill complete with mill wheel, visible from the main river channel. Workington Weir, which follows soon after, is owned by the British Steel Corporation and is a large horseshoe shaped weir with sloping faces which end in vertical drops to the water below.

The water becomes tidal in the centre of Workington, a town which does not present its best face to the river. An inlet on the left after the railway bridge harbours a few fishing boats and is overlooked by the Ship Launch and the Coastguard Inn, just about all that remains of what was a 600 house estate until some three years ago. Most of the activity takes place in the dock on the right where medium sized freighters unload. Moored on its own in the river is the *Francis W Pocklington of Paisley*, the Workington lifeboat.

The final peninsula on the left is the site of an engineering works, formerly a steelworks, while a coastguard lookout point watches the final discharge of the River Derwent into the Irish Sea.

**Distance**

From Seathwaite to Workington is 58km.

**Transport**

There is a bus service between Workington and Keswick but no public transport upstream of Keswick.

**Campsites**

There are campsites at Seathwaite, Seatoller, Borrowdale, Grange, Keswick, Braithwaite, Bassenthwaite, Ouse Bridge and Cockermouth.

**Youth Hostels**

There are youth hostels at Longthwaite, Derwentwater, Keswick and Cockermouth.

**Access**

It is necessary to obtain permission from two angling organizations and this is unlikely to be given during the angling season.

**Licence**

Not required.

**OS 1:50,000 Sheets**

89 West Cumbria

Sheet 90, Penrith & Keswick, also covers the river to below Bassenthwaite Lake

**Admiralty Charts**

1346 Solway Firth & Approaches (1:100,000), Workington Harbour (1:10,000)

**Tidal Constant**

Dover + 35 mins at Maryport

**Sea Area**

Irish Sea

**Maritime Rescue Sub Centre**

Ramsey. Ramsey (0624) 813255

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