



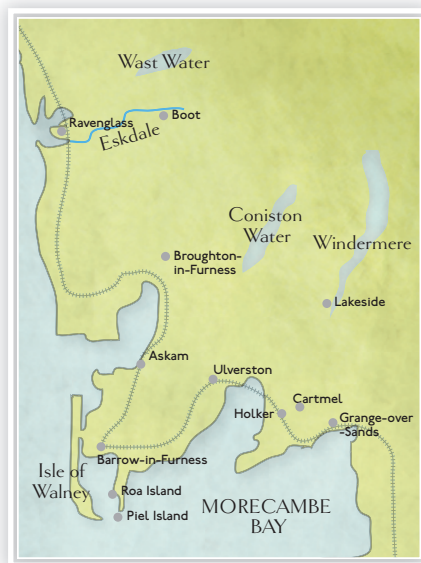
SQUIRRELS & GRAPES

SOUTHWEST CUMBRIA



THE VERY WORDS 'Lake District' are sufficient to guarantee one of two polarised reactions – either that this northwest corner of England is the epitome of picture-postcard loveliness as seen on countless book jackets and jigsaws, or that it's the ultimate symbol of overkill tourism saturating an area of great natural beauty. Mountainous fells and woodland reflected in mirror-surfaced lakes, Kendal Mint Cake and Beatrix Potter, the combinations are irresistible.

Intrepid late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century tourists found it savage, unkempt country, and couldn't wait to either put it all down on canvas or dose up on laudanum and write yards of poetry. The railways helped, of course, and, as soon as the tracks met up with lake steamers, the rugged untamed landscape came under the Victorian idea of landscape gardening; which meant planting foreign species of pine and building slate and granite hotels with pristine lawns to wander about on reading Wordsworth. Even in 1927, HV Morton was describing, in his marvellous and prescient *In Search of England*, how his blue Bullnose Morris was held up in a traffic queue, a train of motor vehicles playing a hot metallic follow-my-leader up the east side of Windermere. Sound familiar? It's the congregating in one place that's so depressing. Bowness on a rainy weekday in July, with every café full, every pavement crowded with bewildered holidaymakers wondering just when the sun's going to come out. To really get to grips with the Lake District you need to walk out and up, Wainwright guide in hand, good shoes on feet. However, if you're not into thermal underwear and Thermolite walking poles, take a look towards the coastal margins.



◀ OPPOSITE
Waterside Cottage, Cartmel

▶ ABOVE
Furness Railway bench end, Ulverston



This tour could just about be accomplished either by motoring or, almost, by catching trains. A big letter 'C' with the top stroke made by Eskdale, the quietest and least-frequented Lakeland valley; the bottom by the southern coastal peninsulas of Furness facing south out over Morecambe Bay. The down stroke is the estuaries and coast of the Irish Sea with its curious mixture of the rusting remnants of industry and exquisite beach landscapes. Through it all runs the Furness Railway, started here in the mid-nineteenth century, primarily to bring mineral resources to the coast and the rest of England. They emblazoned their activities with the usual flamboyant coat of arms, but curiously used a Lakeland squirrel eating grapes for their platform seat supports. Red squirrels must have been rife here before the greys got the boot in, but grapes? Probably to do with those Romans, who took full advantage of the accessible shores.

The start of our tour is high at the top of Eskdale, where the precipitous 'road' descends from the Wrynose Pass at Hardknott. A word of advice about this motoring nightmare: whichever way you approach this succession of impossibly steep and tight bends, make sure you're not in an articulated lorry and that you've not got a caravan in tow.

◀ OPPOSITE

Eskdale from Hardknott Roman Fort

▼ BELOW

Bath house, Hardknott Roman Fort





The Romans knew what they were doing when they decided on Hardknott for the location of their fort. Charmingly called Mediobogdum, it sits at the head of the valley, commanding a virtually uninterrupted view down what is now Eskdale, to their port at Ravenglass and the sea. What a posting for a legionary. After a reasonably short march (*sinister dexter, sinister dexter*) from the galleys they arrived at this bluff of land with its backdrop of dark brooding hills. A three-acre site with corner turrets, one of the first but welcome sights for the travel-worn soldier was the stone bath house, positioned outside the fort walls and consisting of the obligatory hot, warm and cold rooms. (*Caldarium, tepidarium* and *frigidarium* if you want to impress the children.) The fortress itself is obviously restored, but a course of slate in the walls shows where the original line of the remains was. Dating from Hadrian's time, around AD 122, it's part of a chain from his eponymous cross-country wall through Ambleside to this hillside. It was abandoned early in the third century.

↑ ABOVE
River Esk at Boot

To be up here in stormy weather is a rare treat, particularly if the skeletal wet remains of dead sheep lie in the ruins of a tower (very Ted Hughes), but to see a bright line developing out at sea to the west, the sun gradually lighting up Eskdale field by field, fell top by fell top, is to experience something almost spiritual. As the rough stone walls light up against the steep slopes of Bull How and Yew Crag, I always feel like singing a hymn, very loudly. To walk down into Eskdale is like coming indoors, under the trees arching over the lane between stone walls, into the bar of The Woolpack Inn and a welcoming pint of mild ale brewed just next door.

A little further down the road in Boot is a turning into a narrow track. You know it's going to be good because, very soon, you pass a George VI postbox attached to two lengths of iron and painted blue because it's for private use. At the end of the

track is the church of St Catherine's, typical of religious meeting places in the dales, hunkered down against the weather with just a small bellcote rising above the roofline. No towers and spires here. Some of the tombstones are in pink sandstone with a local vernacular of incised lettering and curious angel heads; one, with sculpted clasped hands, tells of members of the Tyson family all dying in Canada. Inside, an 1894 window of pale stained glass signed by Savells of Albany Street, London, depicts an almost photographic likeness of Theodora Lewin Taylor. Outside, one hears the sound of the River Esk rushing over stepping stones. The quiet dignity of a funeral here, heads bowed as the prayerbook words are uttered over the lowering of a coffin – 'Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live ...', and the thundering of the river providing evidence of the continuity of life.

A little further on is Dalegarth Station, the eastern terminus of the Ravensglass and Eskdale Railway (the 'Ratty') that runs for seven miles from here and through Miterdale to the coast. The navvies building it would fly down to Ravensglass in the evenings on one of those gangers' trolleys, fill themselves full of beer, and then pump themselves back up at closing time. Opened in 1875, the 15-inch gauge railway ferried iron ore down to the port at Ravensglass, but two years later it was bankrupt, finally closing in 1913. At various times, the little trains still ran, carrying both granite blocks and passengers, and local poet Norman Nicholson talks of being able to jump off a slow-moving train to grab wild roses and goldenrod from the embankments and then getting back on again. Presumably such an activity is now discouraged. In 1940, writer and social campaigner Doreen Wallace in her *English Lakeland* remembers the London Midland & Scottish Railway, calling it 'the smallest railway in the world', and by September 1960 the preservation society was rewarded by a local landowner and a Midland stockbroker stepping in with the necessary cash, thereby securing its future.

✚ **BELOW LEFT**
Churchyard angels, St Catherine's, Boot

✚ **BELOW**
1927 River Irt locomotive on the Ravensglass and Eskdale Railway





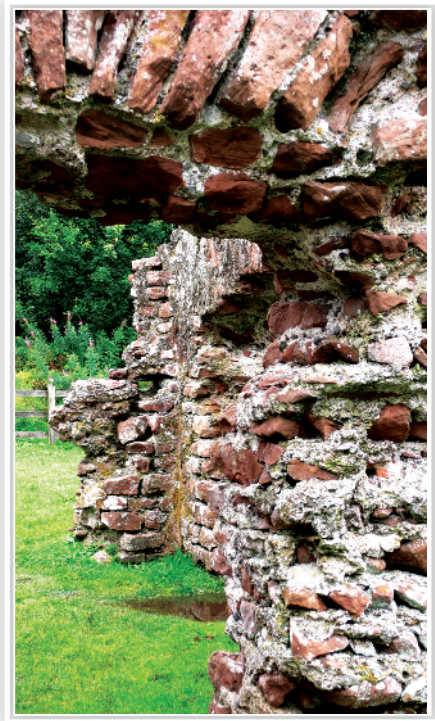
The indefatigable Doreen Wallace lived at a yellow Tudor manor farm near Diss and, when a sale was forced on her, she hung the Tithe Act from a gallows in the garden and set fire to it. She got into trouble for quite a few things she wrote, but her words about Eskdale are as true now as in 1940, that there are 'no flamboyant hotels and no shanties with picture postcards for sale'. I like that 'shanties'. The road has a tendency to narrow down severely, resulting in nervous moments when you think that opposing wing mirrors will engage and bodywork scrape against wet walls with ferns sprouting from the fertile crevices. Stone barns and farmhouses are glimpsed through the trees, willowherb and saxifrage stand sentinel next to imposing granite gateposts. Dark plantings of fir stir in the breeze on the ridges, and modern-day preoccupations are only really seen when a cagouled walker strides by in the rain, or a 4x4 is encountered outside a self-catering cottage, numerous mountain bikes being unloaded off the back bumper.

The road comes out on to the A595 at Gubbergill, and on turning left the tiny lost port of Ravenglass is reached after two and a half miles. Ravenglass: I always think it sounds like something in *Treasure Island*, but this was the Roman port of Glannoventa. It's not difficult to envisage the galleys riding at anchor here, sunlight flashing on the spread-eagled aquilas, the legionaries preparing to disembark prior to their slog up to Hardknott (*sinister, dexter*). On the slight rise behind, is another impressive Roman souvenir – the Bath House reached by a lane that runs due south next to the railway. They say that at 12 feet high, these are the tallest Roman remains still extant in Britain. Somehow the Jewry Wall in Leicester never gets considered, but these walls and arches are certainly impressive. Seen now in a slightly manicured setting, this was the leisure centre for the occupiers of the nearby fort, and, I shouldn't wonder, a few local cognoscenti too. Remarkably preserved are the niches that would have had little statues of their gods in them. Lit by citronella tea lights perhaps. On a rainy day, the grassy ground around the walls fills up with water, so you can have your own, albeit unheated, footbath up here.

Back down on the shore, Ravenglass is essentially only one street of cottages and houses, finishing at a shore strewn with stones and pieces of orange sea-rubbed brick. The frontages are much as one would expect in any Cumbrian village: rendered, painted, hollyhocks around doors. (And here the curious sight of a National petrol pump in a front garden, still with a price disc saying 1/5 a gallon. That's about 7p.) At the back of the western side of the street, it couldn't be more different. Yards and gardens protected by high walls from the sea, rusting or rotting steps and ladders reaching down to the foreshore. Storm doors and drain covers battened down, washing lines strung out between bleached posts. You want to hurry back to

◀◀ **OPPOSITE**
Gatepost in Eskdale

▼ **BELOW**
Roman Bath House at Ravenglass



the tea shop, to watch rain lashing the windows, little yachts bobbing up and down where the galleys rose and fell with the tides, or smugglers swung lanterns out in the dark. Ravenglass sees the outfall of three rivers: the Irt, Mite and Esk, and still received trading vessels up to the mid-nineteenth century. Now it will be the odd tourist turning up for teacakes, and gulls wheeling and screaming over the terracotta chimney pots. At one time, Ravenglass was reckoned to be the breeding ground of around two-thirds of England and Wales's black-headed gull population.

There are two stations in Ravenglass; the terminus of 'the Ratty' narrow-gauge railway and, at its side, the station serving the village on the Lancaster to Carlisle line that winds so spectacularly through Furness in the south and up the Cumbrian coast through Whitehaven and Workington. From Ravenglass, our road runs southwards after circumnavigating the Esk Estuary over Muncaster Bridge, the fells rising to our left, the Irish Sea and a long straight stretch of the railway running on reclaimed Ice Age mud to our right. The road then turns northeast and travels through the Whicham Valley in order to round the first of the Furness estuaries. The head of the Duddon Channel is marked for both motorists and railway passengers by the big airy signal box at Foxfield, but well worth a detour here is the village of Broughton-in-Furness.

Broughton still has the atmosphere of a little town at the hub of its community. Farmers in beaten-up Landrovers arrive to drop off or pick up tyres from a little back-street garage, a corner shop sells apples from brassbound wooden cases and birdseed from green tin buckets. On a warm summer's evening, the Market Place echoes to the conversation of drinkers outside the Manor Arms, as figures scurry to meetings in the cream corrugated iron Parsonage Room. The sharp contrast of colours used on the houses on one side of the Market Place may not be to everyone's taste, but in bursts of direct low light, they line up as dramatically as a set of scenery flats.



▲ ABOVE
Garage, Broughton-in-Furness

➡ OPPOSITE
Steps to the shore, Ravenglass

★ BELOW LEFT
Houses, Broughton-in-Furness

▼ BELOW
Brick and pebbles, the Ravenglass shore









Road and railway line swing across eastwards, but a loop in both through Askam takes in Barrow-in-Furness. This is the outpost, the runt of the litter, the poor music-hall joke – ‘Barrow’s like a mortuary with the lights left on’, but it really does deserve a closer look, a rummage about beneath the surface. Now dominated by the massively out-of-scale submarine ‘shipyard’ building, in 1843 there were only 32 cottages and two pubs facing Walney Island across the Piel Channel. However, mineral ore brought down from the fells by the 7th Duke of Devonshire (1808–91) resulted in an iron and steel industry that quickly expanded into shipbuilding. Dark red tenement buildings rose up on Barrow Island, manufacturers Vickers created their own enclave of housing on Walney. Docks resounded to the blast of steam whistles and workers streamed out of factory gates in their thousands. The Duke and his compatriot, James Ramsden, created a new community with new buildings that used the red Furness brick for not only the tenements but chapels, libraries and a classic fire station.

Tough people, tough lives. A police uniform outfitter said that Barrow men had the largest chest sizes of anyone in the country. Shipbuilding dominated Barrow life, champagne bottle launchings of everything from battleships to liners – the last being the original cruise ship *Oriana* in 1960. Vickers even built ill-fated airships here. The absorbing Dock Museum, built over a graving dock, tells it all and shows us the proof. Among the most jaw-dropping artefacts are the big glass and mahogany cases holding ships’ models, with mid-blue painted battleships built for Japan showing every minute bolt screwing down a capstan, every safety railing in thin gold wire.

Now it seems that everything is going on behind enormous closed doors, or even underwater I suppose. Workers clocking in, soldering motherboards into Tridents and then, perhaps after looking at the weather outside through a periscope, running out for a quick trolley dash round Tesco Extra next door. Rivets must come into it somewhere, but there is also a sad air here of past greatness replaced by punishing deprivation. The housing estates you could find anywhere, but in Barrow they seem incongruous, turning their backs to the sea that surrounds them. A sea that is always just over a dune or across a pavement. On the eight-miles-long Walney Island, you can walk past iron and timber sheds clustered together as if in

↑ **ABOVE**
Cast-iron street sign, Barrow-in-Furness

← **OPPOSITE**
Hollyhocks, Askam Station

rusty conversation, and then enter an open landscape reaching out to Biggar and the white lighthouse on the nature reserve in the south, acrobatic flights of dunlins looping over the intervening creeks and marshes.

South of the town, a lane runs past a curious forgotten beacon light at Rampside and on to the Roa Island causeway. Wrecked and not-so-wrecked ships lie at angles on the shore, anchor chains lie across mud. At the end, the parking spaces are marked out for the lifeboat crew and, next to their state-of-the-art station high above the water, a jetty leads down to the ferry for Piel Island. A short but exhilarating boat journey across Bass Pool, past red buoys and moored yachts with the tide thumping the boat sides, saltwater spraying your back, brings you to another jetty, the ferryman probably having done a spot of fishing as he brought you over. The ferry will return, he promises, and on disembarking, a grassy path through Oxford ragwort takes you first in front of an inn and then past a row of four atmospheric pilot houses that appear to cower against big racing clouds.

The southern tip is dominated by the silhouette of Piel Castle. It appears to grow out of the landscape, and indeed the stones of the beach built the keep and corner towers, with the local red sandstone brought over for the details. You can immediately see why a castle was built in this position. Apart from anyone else wanting to keep out undesirables, the rich monks of Furness Abbey needed a place of safety and a monitoring point for cargo going in and out of the Walney Channel. Once Henry VIII had dissolved the abbey, the castle was left to fall into the ruinous state we see today, but it's well cared for, and in 1920 the whole island was given by the 7th Duke of Buccleuch to the people of Barrow as a memorial to the dead of the First World War: local workers who had been sent to war in local ships. But this is now a Famous Five paradise, with sea, blue mussel-shelled shores and dark interiors just begging to be the backdrops for children's adventures.

➡ **OPPOSITE**
Beacon, Rampside

▼ **BELOW**
Vita Nova at Roa Island









To the north of Barrow town centre is another wild expanse to explore, the dunes of the Sandscale Nature Reserve. From the car park (with its green hut selling ice cream), you can walk right round the peninsula on the Cumbrian Coastal Way. However, be warned: this is no sanitised path with pictures of flora and fauna and environmentally friendly recycled signposts every five minutes. You can walk round the peninsula on the fringes of the dunes among marram grass and clusters of blue sea holly, or on the beautiful empty beach that gives breathtaking postcard views over Duddon Sands to the western Lakeland fells; but venturing into the core of the peninsula can be very disorientating and paths marked on the map difficult to find. One big sand dune can look very much like another, and on following a post-and-wire fence I had a Ray Bradbury moment, fully expecting to walk over a sandy rise to find the fence suddenly stopping, the skeleton of the erector slumped over his last post, hammer still in hand. A silver birch bent by the westerly wind looked so out of place it had to mark the way, and indeed it did. On cresting the dune by the tree, a gap opened out to the northern beach again. A big 99 Flake has never been so welcome.

Before we leave Barrow and rejoin our road eastwards, Furness Abbey is certainly worth a detour, hidden in the appropriately named Vale of Nightshade that encloses the deep pink ruins. Extensive, impressive and appearing to be carved straight out of the sandstone cliffs that surround it, the abbey was once one of the most important in England. King Stephen (1135–54) gave land for Cistercian monks to build here, and bundled it with not only the surrounding acres but vast estates in Cumberland, Lancashire and Yorkshire, and one as far away as

↑ **ABOVE**
*Dunes and beach at Sandscale, on
the Duddon Estuary*

← **OPPOSITE**
Piel Island, pilot cottages



Lincolnshire. What wealth. At the time of the Dissolution, the monks ran their own ships and traded in the local iron, and the whole enterprise brought in an income of £900 a year. That's about £300,000. No wonder Henry VIII wanted to get his pudgy hands on it all.

For all the magnificence of what is undoubtedly an important and edifying corner of our heritage, my eye kept wandering to the old custodian's ticket office next to the outer railings. Superseded now by a retail opportunity that looks like a health centre, this little building seemed so much less pretentious and, well, honest. This says Ministry of Works, the contemporary administrators. A roll of pink paper tickets at one end, a coal fire at the other, and perhaps a small stack of plain white paper-covered books with the royal coat of arms and the legend *Ancient Monuments: Northern England*. A little girl running around the cloisters said: 'Can we see the Witch's House now?', and ran up to peer through the dusty windows.

Just down the lane, and past the excellent tea rooms that do a good line in chocolate cake, is the hidden Bow Bridge over the Mill Beck. I have repeatedly torn my trousers on barbed wire trying to get a shot of this medieval three-arched bridge, and on every occasion rain has formed big pink-blushed puddles in the adjacent field. It's always worth opening the iron gate, with its closure relying on a loop of baler twine, to see another demonstration of how those loaded monks liked to put a bit of panache into their architecture.

Closing the circle we join the A590 at Thwaite Flat (look out for Rainbow Bungalow on the right) and head for Ulverston, home to a lighthouse memorial to Sir John Barrow (1764–1848), Secretary to the Admiralty and a founding member of the Royal Geographical Society that – at the time of writing – is shrouded in Christo-style restoration wrappings. Ulverston appears to appreciate its past; on one of the shopping streets a well-lettered sign for Abbey Sauce is still extant on a wall, and down a side street is the restored dark sandstone Furness Railway station. Finished off in green and red paint, this is how town stations should be, a building to be proud of, imbued with civic pride. The iron supports of the platform seats are fashioned from the ubiquitous squirrels and grapes, and there's a waiting room with wooden wall seats. The only really jarring note is the livery of the trains that arrive and depart under the glass canopies, in this case First TransPennine Express (*sic*); this week's franchise. It is a source of increasing dismay that railway companies – and buses for that matter – show no consideration for the environment their trains run in when agreeing colour schemes.



▲ **ABOVE**
Original Ministry of Works ticket office,
Furness Abbey

◀ **OPPOSITE**
Furness Abbey and quarry face

▼ **BELOW**
Saucy Ulverston





The railway makes a shortcut across the Cartmel Sands over the Leven Viaduct (if you're a passenger, then hope that the tide's in so you get the impression of sailing on a train), but motorists must plough on up past Greenodd Sands before turning down on to the Cartmel Peninsula. The lane is long but rewarding, dim tunnels of trees, sheep grazing on green fields once swept by high tides. A couple of lattice-windowed cottages with bright blue paint announce the estate village of Holker. The Cavendishes' great Victorian Elizabethan Holker Hall – the family home for over four centuries – and Joseph Paxton's park are off to the right behind walls with blue doors, the village a delightful amalgam of school, barns and cottages, all smartly lined in pristine blue paint. Our road goes off to the left at the Rose & Crown in Cark, winding through to the tiny town of Cartmel. The countryside is quieter here, certainly less traffic, and these gentler green hills enfold buildings that look so at home in the landscape. Low-built farmhouses, white-walled cottages, everything in scale.

↑ **ABOVE**
Bow Bridge, Furness Abbey

Cartmel is a delightful small village presided over by an impressive twelfth-century priory with the top half of its tower set on the diagonal in order to cleverly spread the enormous weight more effectively. Built in the twelfth-century Transitional style, that is between Early and Late Norman, it escaped the Dissolution when the local population of fisherfolk and cockle gatherers complained that this was their only church. This may seem odd for a village that's at least three miles from the



sea, but wasn't always so. A characterfully lettered signpost on the corner of a lane gives distances 'over sands', a reference to the routes to Ulverston and Lancaster that avoided much longer road journeys. Sit for a while in the church and, if you're lucky, girls may start practising madrigals, their voices lifting up and around the big round-headed arches.

↑ **ABOVE**
Barns below Hampsfield Fell, near Cartmel

↓ **BELOW**
Estate cottages, Holker



LANCASTER

OVER SANDS 15 MILES

ULVERSTON

OVER SANDS 7 MILES



GRANGE

CARK



I only knew three things about Cartmel before I first came here: there was a betting scam at the racecourse in 1974, my brother chose it for his honeymoon, and Mavis Riley of *Coronation Street* retired here to a less dramatic Cartmel street. The Cartmel Racecourse is so near to the village that you can almost touch the white rails from a stone wall that must provide a free vantage point for watching races. There's a surprise on every corner: a tin Raleigh Cycles sign, a classic barber's shop with hot towels next to a Spar, the slate-floored Cartmel Gallery and a bookshop that used to be a Martins Bank in Doreen Wallace's day and is about the size of two telephone boxes. (Buy your HV Mortons here.) The little market place has a fourteenth-century gatehouse tucked in next to the bookshop, a market cross, a village pump and slabs for slapping fish down on. Norman Nicholson said it all looks remarkably like the stage set for an Edwardian musical comedy. I know what he means, I once stayed in an eccentric hotel on the square and shared a room with a rocking horse and a row of black books on a dressing table that turned out to be every individual book of the Bible. I recall that as Obadiah's a bit thin he was lumped in with Joel and Amos.

Just down the road is Grange-over-Sands, the 'grange' bit being a reference to this being the site of big granary barns for those enterprising Furness monks. Created largely by the railway, it reminds me of Great Malvern without Elgar – grey stone, a bandstand and the Victorian planting of evergreen trees and shrubberies. And once again an impressively restored 1857 station for the Furness Railway that sits almost in Morecambe Bay and has its companion Grange Hotel opposite. Beware taking photographs on the platforms, as you will be immediately suspected of terrorism under a new dictat from 'head office'. Just down on the narrow promenade is one of those coin-in-the-slot telescopes. Usually, the clockwork mechanism of such things cuts off just as I've got it focused, but here I managed to get a superb view across the bay to where I was able to pick out both the Art Deco Midland Hotel in Morecambe and the preposterous Ashton Memorial on its hill behind Lancaster.

◀ **OPPOSITE**
Cast-iron signpost, Cartmel

✿ **BELOW**
Grange-over-Sands station, overlooking
Morecambe Bay



Back up to Haverthwaite via Lindale, it's always worth a look at yet another railway: the Lakeside & Haverthwaite at the side of the busy A590. You might catch the little oddly named saddle tank *Repulse*, pulling a rake of blood 'n' custard carriages (I think all franchisees of today should be made by law to adopt either this or Maunsell Green as their livery) up to Lakeside on the bottom end of Windermere. Which is where we came in, with HV Morton's Morris overheating in a queue on the opposite bank. After everything else on this tour, Lakeside comes as a bit of a shock. Passengers disembark from a real steam train to see a plastic coin-operated locomotive doing virtually nothing for 50p. Gin palace launches nose up to a posh hotel, children hire bikes to ride about the car park, and tawdry souvenirs are sold next to an aquarium that's in a building as out of character here as the timeshares and condos down the road. Out on the lake, though, it's pretty much as it's been for 150 years or so, big-sailed yachts tacking against towering hills reflected in blue water. The Lake District: beautiful, commanding, inspiring. The annual rainfall is just under 200 inches, but the rain clears quickly from the coastal fringes, lighting up Barrow at the same time as Walney Island, Ulverston as quickly as Cartmel. Hardknott takes a little longer as the sun's rays searchlight up from Ravenglass, but it's all worth the effort, all immeasurably worth the wait.

➡➡ **OPPOSITE**

*Lakeside & Haverthwaite Railway,
Haverthwaite*

⬇ **BELOW**

Yachting on Lake Windermere



