

As you leave Patterdale through the “narrows” by the White Lion on your way to Kirkstone, you might easily miss the turning to your left, just before you negotiate the wiggle where the road does a U-bend round the big pool in Goldrill beck near the Youth Hostel. This turning takes you across the valley through fields to the the small huddle of houses that is Rooking. It seems an unlikely spot for a Neolithic settlement. Delightful as it is, this is not much different from any of the thousand other delectable corners of the Lake District . Yet it turns out that it’s quite unique.

Sunday 27th of May proved to be an excellent choice for Appleby Archaeology’s first summer walk of the 2018 programme. It was a Bank Holiday weekend so there had been some concern about parking. But in fact, Patterdale wasn’t over-busy and we were blessed with the most perfect weather you could have wished for – brilliantly sunny with a cool breeze. The trees were all in first leaf and everything looked like a scene from a Lake District National Park promotional video!

Quite a crowd of us assembled in the White Lion car park and after a bare minimum of faffing we were off. We had four sites to visit and were labouring under the tiny handicap that nobody, least of all the leader, knew exactly where they were!

The first port of call was Place Cottage which distinguished itself by being completely hidden in the trees and declining to provide a house-sign. The owners had already informed us they’d be away for the weekend so for a while it looked as if the best we could hope for was to be arrested for trespass. However, the leader hadn’t got where he is without general experience of breaking and entry so it wasn’t long before we were looking at our first cup-marked rock – a long whale-back in the middle of a lawn liberally sprinkled with round cup-marks and strange lozenge shaped indentations.

Now it has to be admitted that the Neolithic Rock Art at Rooking isn’t exactly in the same league as Kilmartin, say, or even Northumbria. There **are** cup and ring marks, but as we were to discover they are rather shy and weren’t ready to reveal themselves to Appleby Archaeology without a fight. But what the Rooking rock art lacks in style it easily makes up for by its ubiquity and by the novelty of its presence in such an unlikely spot.

The second site was rather easier to find and we were warmly welcomed by the owner of the property wherein it lay. We were shepherded into the garden and were directed to inspect a monstrous slab some fifteen feet high and lying at an angle of 30 degrees or so . Now this **ought** to have been the highlight of our trip. According to Stan Beckensall, author of *Prehistoric Rock Art in Cumbria* “the profuse decoration on this slab is almost unprecedented in Great Britain”. And indeed it may be so, for here is a photo taken by Harry Hawkins in 2015. As you can see the whole slab is a mass of cup marks and weird, writhing grooves. Unfortunately, in the intervening years, the moss had grown back again – groan!

The history of the Rooking Rock Art is that nothing was known about any of this until the gentleman who owns Place Fell cottage was tidying up his garden and thought the cup marks on the whale-back rock he’d just cleaned up looked unusual. He wrote to Stan Beckensall who confirmed that they were in fact rather more than unusual and, once word got round, everybody in the area began cleaning the moss off boulders and finding more and more evidence of prehistoric activity.

Eventually four sites were selected as representative and were thoroughly cleaned, registered as listed monuments by Historic England and recorded by Stan in his book. Here is Stan’s drawing of the big slab at site 2 – rather impressive, I think you will agree.

Historic England has since advised owners that no further cleaning should be considered and that any moss-covering that regenerates should be left well alone. Thus the Rock Art at Rooking is now rapidly becoming invisible once more.

Fortunately, at site 2 one corner of the slab was still moss-free so we were able to get a glimpse at least of a neat line of cup-marks and a nice clean groove running alongside. And, as we all agreed, “it’s a jolly big rock”.

The remaining sites were all a bit wilder, being situated in the middle of fields. Site 3 was quite extensive and still relatively moss-free. Theories abounded about what all these mysterious marks might signify. Although it was now quite a hot day and water was in both heavy demand and short supply we were sufficiently engaged by the mysteries to explore at least one theory, namely that they formed part of a prehistoric water-feature. Water was poured onto the top of a slab and we watched entranced as it wiggled down grooves and cascaded from one cup mark to another. Well it’s as good an idea as any!

These sites seemed to be associated with the ancient track that leads south from Rooking towards Hartsop on the eastern side of the valley. In ancient times Ullswater apparently came right up to Rooking and the bottom of the valley would have likely been marshy and heavily wooded. The track to Rooking would have been well above all this and would have provided an obvious route for anyone heading south over Kirkstone .

Site 4 was a good kilometre further on down this track and it wasn’t clear whether Apparch still had the energy to contemplate this one, especially since, once we got there we’d just have to retrace our steps in order to get home. But the levels of enthusiasm on display were nothing less than impressive and so on we went.

And it was a good thing we did as this site was as impressive as anything else we’d seen so far with much larger, clearer cups on an enormous glaciated outcrop.

And so ended a delightful day, with a gentle amble back along the winding, ancient track way, now populated in the imagination by bands of Neolithic travellers wandering though this idyllic but inscrutable prehistoric version of the Tate Art Gallery.

It had been a good day but it was now time to find the pub!

Martin Joyce