

The Corpse Way

To descend into Swaledale over the pass of Buttertubs is to enter what seems like a hidden country, a remote and secret kingdom.

There is an ancient path, still used by walkers, which has become known as the Corpse Way, passing down the dale from Keld to Grinton Village, a distance of sixteen miles, and traversing some of the finest scenery in England.

There is no doubt that this is a very ancient trackway used for many thousands of years. Prehistoric flint arrowheads have been found along its route. The path avoids what were once the wetlands of the valley bottom, taking the sunnier side of the dale. Itinerant packmen carried salt, corn and cloth along its length and when lead mining came to prominence in the dale it ran to the tread of the miner's clogs and the clapping of pony trains laden with smelted lead ingots bound for Richmond and beyond.

In years gone by the path was used by funeral parties carrying their dead from the upper dale down to Grinton Churchyard for burial. For many hundreds of years the burial ground there was the only consecrated ground in the upper dale and in those far off years a churchyard burial meant more perhaps than it does today, though it is not certain that every corpse from the upper dale found its way down to Grinton. A small, walled-in piece of land attached to a barn in Angram is said to have been used as a burial-ground in the days when funeral processions had to follow the Corpse Way.

Walking down with the wicker coffin from the head of Swaledale to Grinton would often take two days or more depending upon the weather and the season. We must imagine the dale in the days of the Corpse road a little differently from the dale of today, a place where bridges and stone walls were fewer, where tarmac was unknown and roofs were thatched with heather. We should not think of it as a deserted place though, for it seems likely that there were more people then living and working in Swaledale than there are today.

Little is known for certain about the Corpse Way, and the folklore which attaches to it seems to have built up as an oral tradition. There is a tradition for instance that the long stones to be found at points along the route were coffin stones upon which the wicker biers were placed while the pall bearers rested along the way. It is said that when a shepherd was buried a fleece of wool was placed in his coffin so that on Judgement day his occupation would thus be proved and his irregular church attendance forgiven.

The earliest extant written reference occurs about 1820 in the writings of Dr T.D. Whitaker. He describes how the bodies of the dead were conveyed for burial upon men's shoulders upwards of twelve miles to the parish church, not in coffins but in rude wicker baskets.

The Corpse Way Swaledale



A path from Keld
to Grinton





Local Heritage *initiative*



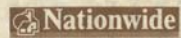
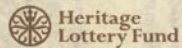
Keld



Kisson

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June 2002
a funeral procession
re-enacted from Keld to Grinton



Punchbowl Inn

Also available: *The Corpse Way*: a 15 minute VHS video film.