

TRAIL 2 - SOUTHWARDS FROM WHITEHAVEN

WHITEHAVEN itself was a late arrival as a town, planned in the 1600's and reaching its peak of prosperity around 1770. It is fitting, then, that in Whitehaven you should find the finest Georgian interior in Cumbria, where the church of St. James (1752-3) stands high on the north side of the town. It is a typical Georgian church with galleries, solid pews, and an apse at the east end with a painting by Procaccini of the Transfiguration.

Below, in the centre of the town a fire reduced St. Nicholas's church to a chapel under the prominent tower. To the south-east of St. Nicholas is the attractive simplicity of the Friends Meeting House of 1722; the Salvation Army has a bright new citadel in Catherine Street, the Methodists a towered, rock-faced church of 1877 in Lowther Street, and the United Reformed is in the Market Place. The Roman Catholic church St. Begh's by E W Pugin (1868) is in Coach Road. John Wesley made Whitehaven his Cumbrian base on several occasions and his journal has several pithy remarks on the spirit of religion there in the 18th century.

Four miles south along B5345, you will find by contrast at **ST. BEES** a church which speaks of the middle ages. Viking invaders after 900 found a church here already - there are remains here from their period. But most of the large church was built in the century after 1120 to serve a small priory of Benedictine monks. The building is longer outside than inside - leaflets inside will tell you why this is so. The doorway is perhaps the best Norman doorway in the county. Musicians will note that the organ, was the last to be built by 'Father' Willis, doyen of Victorian organ builders. Across the road is St. Bees School, founded by Edmund Grindal, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1583.

By way of Egremont you reach **HAILE**, a simple Georgian country church in a narrow valley. It finds its place in the trail more for atmosphere than anything else, but do not miss the monument in the churchyard to John Ponsonby with its strange inscription.

From Haile proceed to Calderbridge, passing the ruins of Calder Abbey (now open to the public) and on to **GOSFORTH**. There, in the churchyard, stands a Viking monument of national importance - the Gosforth Cross. Tall (14'), slender, and complete, it symbolises the tense times when pagan Viking invaders were settling in Cumbria and the very survival of Christianity was in doubt. The church gave a Christian interpretation to Norse myths: so on one face Christ crucified, and Vidar, slaying the wolf who killed his father Odin, both stand for the triumph of good over evil in the new world that will only be won through suffering.

If you carry on past Gosforth on the Wasdale Road, you come to the hamlet of **NETHER WASDALE** (Strands). The low church by the village green is timeless. It still has the royal arms once, by law, displayed in all churches. The panelling by the altar, pulpit and lectern is of the late 17th century. Three miles beyond, at **WASDALE HEAD**, is a church claimed by some as the smallest in England - it serves a community of four households and seats 50, and the local belief is that the roof beams came from Viking ships wrecked at Ravenglass.

Retracing your route by the shores of Wastwater, fork left at Nether Wasdale for Santon Bridge, then left and right for **IRTON**. Remote St. Paul's church is up a side lane. There is another important churchyard cross from more peaceful times under the Northumbrian kingdom. Inside the church (1856) the crusader Adam of Irton is commemorated.

Back to the coast road and southwards past Ravenglass and Muncaster Castle, a lane to the right takes you to the last point, lonely **WABERTHWAITE**. It stands today at a dead end, but traffic once took the ford across the Esk, and the vicar, who had charge of Muncaster also, on the other

side of the water, timed the services to suit the tides. The interior has hardly changed since 1807 when the box pews were put in. The pulpit has a Latin inscription which all preachers might heed - "Woe to me if I preach not the truth. 1630".