

Echoes of a Bygone Age - Eskdale Chapel

I stand, in contemplative mode, and study the ruin before me, that is known as Eskdale Chapel.

As I watch, and listen, I imagine that I can hear the echoes from distant times; singing of the well-known, and well loved, hymns; listening to the sincere tones, and sentiments, of the preachers, and all delivered with a backdrop of bleating lambs and ewes concernedly calling their young.

Thirty two years living in the Esk Valley, it has taken the Coronavirus to wake me up to the fact that Eskdale Chapel exists, discovered during a desire for fresh air and exercise.

Built in 1224, and originally utilized as a Hermitage, it was subsequently used for worship between 1394 and 1764. A mere shell of the original building exists, but there are sufficient stones to demarcate the outline of the chapel, now overgrown by weeds and nettles and occupied by grazing sheep. A true Thomas Hardy scene.

Dramatically, so the story goes, a murder took place here, over a wild boar, which was being pursued by local, hunting landowners, when the said animal took sanctuary in the Hermitage. Feeling robbed of their quarry, the hunters attacked the hermit, who eventually died. Apparently this incident led to the local tale of the planting of 'The Penny Hedge,' a tradition continued to this day.

My imagination continues to run riot as I depart from the Chapel and tackle the steep climb up to Eskdaleside. Legs aching and pace slackening, I dwell on what it must have been like for members of the congregation, young, old and possibly infirmed, who had to conquer these slopes, all in the name of religion. Whether on foot, horseback or pony and trap, it must have been a challenge, especially in winter. Sounds of those long-gone, local denizens' voices, call out to me now.

Magic moments are ever present in this place, creating a connection with nature and a wider, more profound purpose. Hopefully we will learn some valuable lessons from recent challenges, and appreciate more fully what has been bestowed upon us.

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