

The Great British

Walk

National Trust

In partnership with
PRUHEALTH

A great walk for kids!

A secret walk at: Sizergh

Mark Rowe, our walking pro, has discovered this secret walk for you to explore. Now you can follow in his footsteps...

He fell in love with walking in the wilds of Hertfordshire, while growing up in the suburbs of north London.

Today, Mark has worked regularly for the Trust's Great British Walk and The Independent on Sunday. He is also a contributing editor to BBC Countryfile Magazine. He is however, still learning how to fold an OS map in a force eight gale.

A bit of background

Just south of Kendal, Sizergh Castle and its wider estate of ancient and semi-natural woodland, see more than 100,000 visitors a year.

And this autumn, there's hopefully the possibility of Sizergh becoming a part of an expanded Lake District National Park.

"Sizergh has lots of wonderful walks, especially for families, that don't involve walking up high fells - and that's unusual for the Lake District."

– Tom Burditt, Lead Ranger

THE SECRET



A mesmerising, unfathomably old yew tree, tucked away deep in a dark, shaded wood.

Of all the secret walks in this year's Great British Walk, Sizergh's is the hardest to seek out. You have to look hard for this ancient yew tree. The path to it is not signposted and is more of badger or a sheep track than an obvious footpath. You'll find it by turning right off the main path on our map, by a smaller, younger yew tree.

There is a magnetism to this tree, which is reckoned to be 1,600 years old. It's the most wonderful shape and is enormous, perhaps 10m in circumference.

Then there is the tree's ancient association with pagan religions, which led to a reverence that deemed it inauspicious or taboo to cut down. Apart from being used for making longbows, yew trees offer few other uses for humans. Their hand was strengthened by the fact that productive forestry only really started in the 16th century, so the trees that grew for perhaps 1,000 years before their uselessness in a utilitarian world was identified.



The walk

To start this walk turn left immediately after you're through the visitor centre, onto Bank Lane, a wide stone track. Carry on until you see a wooden finger post. After a five minute walk across two fields we come to a lovely stretch of woodland, known as Rash Spring Wood. There's a long history of coppicing at Sizergh, with wood used for making charcoal for gunpowder, tools and fenders for the ships produced at Barrow-in-Furness.

Medieval barns



We reach a gatepost made from limestone. The geology of this part of Cumbria is utterly different from the volcanic origins of much of the rest of the Lakes.

Then we pass two wonderful medieval barns that remain semi-derelict remnants of Holeslack Farm. Barn owls can swoop down here and there's an old piggery.

Views of the Lakes and Yorkshire Dales



We take a diversion of some 500m to a rather special vantage point. To the north-west across the Lyth valley much of the Lakes' iconic topography is lined up for inspection; Bow Fell and the Langdale Pikes, and a side-on view of the Old Man of Conistone. We turn to look south-east across the Yorkshire Dales and the ridgeline of the Pennines, including the distinctive rather slumped contours of Ingleborough.

High and low walls

As we walk along, Tom points out something I would otherwise not notice at all; how the drystone walls are fixed in height.

On one side the walls are four ft high to enclose sheep and are perhaps 200 years old – but on the other side they're six ft high and much older. These were designed to prevent the deer from straying.

THE SECRET The yew tree



We return to the barns and turn right through a dreamy orchard - pears, apples and plums in the middle, damsons on the outer edge - and enter Holeslack Wood. There are gooseberries here, one of 100 or so key indicator species of ancient woodland (bluebells are another one). After three or four minutes we turn right up an unpromising path for 100m and there it is: the yew tree.



What is striking is how the ground below the yew is bereft of cover - nothing grows in the shade of the great arms of this yew, and the roots rise a metre or more out of the ground. This is because the tree is so ancient - it began to grow when the Romans were just pulling out of Britain

Magical pool

How to follow the thrill of our encounter with the yew tree?

Easy: we come across Holeslack Pond, which rises enchantingly out of the limestone.



It's a bit like Narnia, and is the sort of place where your footsteps grow slower. There's a tranquil spot to watch dragonflies, kingfishers, mallard and moorhens while roe deer lapping at the water.

Hollows in the old ash

There's one final delight as we turn for home... a wonderful, gnarled ash tree, standing just to the west of the appropriately named Ashbank Lane. Full of holes, its truncated branches thrust upwards and remind my son Thomas of the Far Away Tree in the Enid Blyton classic, *The Enchanted Wood*...

"Look out for the rabbits with measles, catching weasels..."
- Enid Blyton

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