

## **Founder and Creator of The Lyke Wake Walk 1955 Chief Dirger Bill Cowley**

Much has been written about the creation of the LWW but I believe little has been written on the life and times i.e. a biography to one of Teesside's most famous sons. I was delighted but not surprised to find that this was a shared view by the authors of [www.scoutingmilestone](http://www.scoutingmilestone.com) (Mike Ryalls and Colin Walker)

Born: Middlesbrough 1915 (birth date unknown)

Much of his childhood years were spent tramping the high moors, sleeping often in the heather or at a friendly farm. This was a prelude to the walking and climbing that was to dominate his adult life. From early school days he also showed a keen interest in the Boy Scouts.

Bill's education started at Middlesbrough High from where he won a place to Jesus College Cambridge, and then on to the School of Oriental Studies. University years would be circa 1935 – 1937. During these years Bill was the founder of the Cambridge University Yorkshire Society. The girl who was the then secretary of the CUYC was to play an important but tragic part in Bills life. Her name was Mary Dyson. In 1936 a team from the CUYC walked part of what was to become the Cleveland Way. In 1938 Bill spent several months in France hiking around the countryside and using Paris as a base. Shortly after that he applied for and was accepted into the Civil Service, possibly the foreign division.

In 1939 Bill was a member of a team that walked almost the entire Cleveland route as it is to this day. Also in that team was Mary Dyson with who Bill was now romantically involved but who was not to become his wife as yet.

In that same summer war was declared, and on 24hrs notice Bill was posted to India as part of the Indian Civil Service. His duties were to include being a magistrate and the storage and selling of grain. One of his social activities was to promote and encourage the scouting tradition of the then Rover Scouts. This also was the beginning of the Himalayan climbing treks. He (Bill) would not to see the moors or Mary Dyson again for five years.

Bill returned to Yorkshire in March 1944 where he and Mary married. They returned to India together and a series (three) of Himalayan treks followed. Sadly in June 1946 Mary died following a short illness at Simla. Bill was to return home in 1947 having completed eight years in the Indian Civil Service.

Part of an original walking group with Mary in 1935 was Jean and Peggy Warren. Now they and Bill were back together in 1947 walking the Cleveland Hills section. In the same year Jean accepted Bill's proposal of marriage and in 1948 they set up home at Over Stilton. This was a 21-acre smallholding sat below Black Hambleton on the North York Moors. Here it seems began the first stirring of an idea for what was to become the Lyke Wake Walk.

In 1951 now with two sons John (three) and David (one) they moved a short distance to Goulton Grange, a 250acre farm just above Swainby. Potto Hill nearby, which was to feature much in the LWW history, was added in 1955. The Grange and Potto Hill were to become their respective homes for the next forty years. Potto Hill was to act as a venue for LWW "Wakes" and a centre for the Cleveland Search and Rescue Teams. Bills family had now grown to include a daughter Heather (1955) and later another son William (1960) The early years were given over to his family and the farm but he had now acquired partners in this quite large financial venture. One of these was Derek Heath, a farm machinery salesman who had met Bill when he sold him a tractor!

Walking however was still his passion and in particular the Cleveland Way. In 1955 the Lyke Wake Walk was born for which Bill was to be most remembered. What may not be common knowledge that Bill apparently considered it first only as a training route for his Himalayan treks (which he returned to in 1957 to lead the Yorkshire Himalayan expedition) He (Bill) had no intention of walking the route (LWW) himself but got carried away with the preparation and his own enthusiasm! He is also on record in later years when the walk became overly popular possibly causing some erosion, that perhaps he should never have started it!

Bill started to get very busy with other things and Derek Heath was now taking over the running of the farm. He (Bill) was becoming an author of books, dialect prose and poems. The books in the main were about walking and farming in North Yorkshire and some have run to many editions. Through these books it is also recognised that he had a deep understanding of the archaeology of the North York Moors. The poems came about through his love and knowledge of his northern dialect, which was recognised in his appointment as treasurer of the Yorkshire Dialect Society. He had joined the BBC as a presenter and interviewer. One such was Alfred Wainwright a famous fell walker and author. They apparently did not hit it off! Bill also wrote many articles in the "Dalesman" and local and national newspapers (much of his writings were very small print runs for family and friends)

What more is there left to say? I think there are more questions than answers into the life and times of this very talented man. I came across an interesting description of him written by Nicholas Rhea (author Peter Walker) who is probably best known for his Constable books, which form the basis of the popular TV Heartbeat series.

Nicholas's recollections are of a tall slender man with a firm jawline and heavily rimmed spectacles upon a very character-filled face. Nicholas came to know Bill through his membership of the Dialect Society and his lasting description of Bill was "allus thrang" dialect for always busy! It was also from Nicholas's home village of Glaisdale in 1955 that Bill, who had acquired another small farm and grazing rights in the area, decided that the crossing of the moors was a suitable challenge.

Bill and Jean left the Grange and Potto Hill in 1991 and settled in the Northallerton area. Sadly on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1994 Bill died of cancer at the age of 78. A natural stone with his name and dates engraved sits on the Coalmire trail (GR 475005) about a mile on from the cattle grid that crosses the Swainby road.

Bill was not interned but cremated. His ashes do not lie on his beloved Cleveland Hills but in a private place. I am confident that all who met him especially the company of walkers and mountaineers will always have a special place in their hearts for Bill Cowley.

Bill's widow Jean and sons John and William still live close to the North Yorks Moors. Daughter Heather is residing in Newcastle and furthest afield is David who lives in Ireland. Derek Heath the ex working partner and friend lives at Pickering.

Fellow walkers and climbers may now be hard or impossible to find due to the advancing years. However I hit a virtual "gold mine" in my search for knowledge of Bill Cowley when I recently visited Goulton Grange. Here I met Marian and Robin Cornforth who bought the Grange from the Cowley family in 1991. Marian knew the family well and ran the LWW administration for a number of years. Through them I have made contact for some of Bill's family and friends. I recently met John Cowley who has been most helpful and more importantly approves of this modest work.

I also am hopeful of making contact with Colin Walker and Nicholas Rhea whom I mentioned earlier so that perhaps our combined effort and knowledge could produce a more fitting tribute to the life and times of Chief Dirger Bill Cowley.