

On Top of England  
 With the post to Tan Hill  
 by F Heathcote Briant  
 (copyright Post Office Magazine, August 1936)



Ten lonely miles along the crest of the Pennine Chain - ten miles during which we met a shepherd and his dog, a few black-faced sheep and a dozen bullocks: nothing more.

The rural postman's delivery from West Stonehouse to Tan Hill in the North Riding of Yorkshire is said to be the loneliest round in England. Starting from Keld, a tiny hamlet of grey stone cottages encircled by bleak fells, the last houses in a dwindling Swaledale, it traverses wild sedge-covered wind-swept moors, dips into boulder-strewn ravines, passes derelict coal mines, climbs along a mountain ridge, and ends at the inn at Tan Hill, 1,732 feet above the sea, the highest and the most isolated of all the hostelries of England.

The Yorkshire Dales are unique: the race of men who rear the sheep in the hill farms is unique too. But the route over which Mr. Jack Rukin, the Keld postman, has tramped for more than thirty years deserves an adjective even more emphatic.

This morning I went with him across the moors and the fells to Tan Hill, and if there is a more extraordinary postal walk in this country I know not where it is to be found.

I am writing this article by the fireside in the Cat Hole Inn at Keld. I have chosen an easy chair, for those unaccustomed moorland miles were wearying: I am glad I have not to go with Mr. Rukin every day.

It was early morning when we left the Post Office at Keld and walked down the hill towards the Swale River. We turned off the road at once and took to the fields, for during the first half mile there was correspondence to be delivered at a few scattered farms up on the fells.

We climbed quickly: Keld was just a huddle of cottages below - a toy school and a doll's house with a splash of red that was the Post Office and its letter box. The murmur of the Swale came faintly to us, but soon we went higher and the noise of the river was hushed.

Fording a stream by leaping from boulder to boulder we scrambled up a steep field, came out on a track, passed the five cottages that are West Stonehouse and turned northwards towards Tan Hill. A gale was blowing and it was very cold.



On the track to West Stonehouse

"The route dips into boulder-strewn ravines"

There were now no houses, no farms, no trees, no smiling meadows. Nothing but the high undulating impressive moor and a distant wilderness of ridges and shadowy hills. Here and there were shaggy sheep each with its attendant lamb. Some of them took fright at our approach and as they ran across the road Mr. Rukin counted them. It was interesting to hear him use the old Swaledale numbering instead of the usual one to ten - "Yan, teen, tether, methar, pip, sezah, azah, catrah, horna, dick."

The road climbed yet higher and a mist came down and the countryside disappeared. Still miles to go along a path that could not be seen: miles on top of the Pennines to deliver a newspaper and a postcard.

All this land was once a forest, the home of wolves, wild boar and red deer. There is an old record that states that the Earl of Richmond once charged a William de Keld with chasing deer in the forest without permission.

We skirted peat crevasses and passed a long-disused lead mine. The mist lifted and we glimpsed Great Shunnor Fell, Whernside, and far to the south the outline of Ingleborough. The bleating of sheep, the cry of a peewit and the crunch of our shoes on the stones were the only sounds to break the silence.

As we walked along Mr. Rukin told us something about sheep rearing in the dales. Each farm has what are called so many gaites, that is, it can pasture a given number of sheep on the commons. To save bother among the farmers regarding the areas over which their sheep should feed, the local landowners elect shepherds who look after all the sheep in a district and see that each flock has its turn on the better meadows.

Life is quiet in Upper Swaledale, but last year Keld was in the news - or rather, Keld was on the air, for Mr. Rukin and his father and other folk from the village took part in a broadcast feature programme about the Yorkshire Dales.

Post Office people played an important part in this programme, which was so popular that enquiries have been received from Yorkshiremen all over the world asking whether a record was made of that lively forty-five minutes.

Among the singers and speakers who came to the microphone that night was Miss Blythe, the postmistress of Hawes over in Wensleydale, who told tales of her work in the post office and recited some old Yorkshire ballads; Mr. Tom Parker, the postmaster of Muker, the Swaledale village at the foot of Buttertubs Pass, surrounded by the babble of many rushing brooks, and Mr. Jack Rukin, who described his route to Tan Hill. Mr. Rukin's father spoke too. For sixty years old Mr. Rukin, who is a great "Swardill" character, worked in the Tan Hill Colliery - which used to supply coal to the whole district but has now been closed. There were several of these mountain collieries in the old days - the Kettle Pot, William Gill, and the King's Pit. None is worked today.



"We reached the Inn; we were on top of England"

The coal was carried down to Lancashire and into Westmorland by pack-horse and donkeys. The old collier is still alive and our postman colleague told us, "Dad is eighty-eight but he don' feel it and he don' look it."

Mr. Tom Parker, by the way, is one of the Swaledale Veterans' Choir which has broadcast in the "Owt abaht Owt" programmes. He is also the postman on the Muker-Keld route.

The last half-mile to Tan Hill was the bleakest stretch of the whole journey. It is here that the snow packs in the winter. "Sometimes," says Mr. Rukin, "the drifts are higher 'n my head and I have to go on a pony when it is too bad for walking." Only on one occasion has he failed to get through. One occasion in thirty years on a walk like this!

We reached Tan Hill Inn: we were on the top of England. The correspondence that had been carried so far was handed over, and outgoing letters were stowed away in Mr. Rukin's pouch. The inn is a lonely, unpretentious hostelry, but its owner, Mrs. Peacock, gave us a real Yorkshire welcome.

For thirty-five years she has kept the inn. Her children have had to walk daily to school at Keld.



"We were snowed up for days on end"

It has not always been so deserted as at present. The inn was used at one time by farmers fetching coal from the mines, by lead miners and by pedlars on their way to Westmorland. In the mining days hound trials were held at Tan Hill and attracted crowds. Bare fist fights too were popular once. Even the war made its influence felt at Tan Hill, for people came to gather sphagnum moss for shell-wound dressings.

"It is a bit quiet," said Mrs. Peacock in answer to my questions about life at Tan Hill, "and we always look forward to Mr. Rukin's visit. I have not got a wireless set and the post is my only connection with the outside world. I have had visitors from many countries here, and they write to me sometimes. Winter is our worst time as we get snowed up for days on end. Still, we manage somehow. We keep hens and goats, and dig out our own coal and peat from the moor. The postman brings up food parcels from Keld. Since hiking became popular trade has increased."

We sat down on a long settle in front of a blazing fire and drank tea. It was very cosy and the flickering flames were reflected in well-polished brasses hanging from the walls. We put away the thought that we had still to face those long miles back to Keld.

I came across a reference to Tan Hill Inn in a book on the old inns of England. The writer was hardly complimentary. "It is in the midst of a ghastly hill-top solitude in the North Riding," he wrote. "You get to it - I will not say most easily and conveniently, for convenience and ease in this connection are things unknown, but with less discomfort and fatigue - by way of Richmond, and, when you have got there, you will curse the curiosity that brought you to so literally a howling wilderness. For there the winds do generally blow, and when they do, heaven send you have not to face them, for it is a shelterless common where the inn stands in loneliness, and not a tree or a hedge is there to break the stinging blast."

Down on the road to Westmorland stand the ruins of a toll-house, a silent witness that at one time it paid someone to live here and collect tolls from the traffic that used this mountain pass.

The inn was first established for the sake of likely custom from the mines, and before the Bowes to Barras railway was built the innkeeper was kept busy.

A track leads from the inn to Bowes - a desolate ten miles away on the other side of the great Stainmore Forest. Bowes is the nearest town and is on a Roman highway that runs eastwards to Greta Bridge with its memories of Nicholas Nickleby and Mr. Wackford Squeers. The one time Bowes Academy is pointed out as the supposed original of Dotheboys Hall.

It was time to leave. We said good-bye to Mrs. Peacock and started on those bleak miles to Keld.

To-morrow Mr. Rukin will go out to Tan Hill again: it takes a hardy dalesman to make that journey daily in all conditions of weather.

Perhaps I could conclude no more appropriately than by giving a verse from a genuine Swardill song broadcast by Mr. Tom Parker, postmaster, postman and singer, and the other veterans of the Muker Choir.

A song I sing o' t' Yorkshire Dales,  
That winnd frae t' moors to t' sea;  
Frae t' breast o' t' fells, where t' cloud-rack sails  
Their becks flow merrily.  
Their banks are breet wi' moss an' broom,  
An' sweet is t' scent i' t' thyme;  
You can hark to t' bees safe, dreamy soom,  
I' t' foxglove bells an' t' lime.

Source: [www.gunnerside.info](http://www.gunnerside.info)