W H Auden walk circular walk from Rookhope

1. Front Street / Hylton Terrace junction

Hello, I'm Jeremy Vine. Welcome to Rookhope and the Never Never Land of W H Auden. This walk has been created for the 2022 Durham Book Festival, a Durham County Festival produced by New Writing North, with support from Durham University and Arts Council England. Durham Book Festival was established in the 1980s and is one of the country's first literary festivals. The walk follows in the footsteps of W H Auden exploring the landscape in and around Rookhope.

I became interested in the work of W H Auden when I was a student at Durham University studying English Literature. I told my tutor I didn't like poetry, considering it to be a fluffy, sentimental medium. I was sent away with a volume of W H Auden to read and told to come back a week a later and say if I still didn't like poetry. Reading Auden completely changed my mind as I explored an approach to poetry I hadn't experienced before. Discovering the work of W H Auden was a formative experience for me, just as discovering Rookhope was a formative experience for Auden.

Rookhope is one of many communities in Weardale and across the North Pennines where lead and other minerals were mined, an industry that dates to Roman times and reached its peak in the 19th century. By the mid-20th century most of the mines had closed, with cheaper lead imported from overseas. As we journey together on this walk, we will look at aspects of Auden's life and work, exploring his fascination with the Rookhope and the North Pennines.

As a child Auden's family had a holiday home in Keswick, in the Lake District, which they used as a base to explore Cumbria and other parts of Northern England. W H Auden first visited Rookhope in 1919 as a 12-year-old boy. It was a seminal experience, leading to a fascination with underground spaces and the post-industrial landscape of lead mining. He references this visit in his poem New Year Letter:

In Rookhope I was first aware
Of self and not-self, Death and Dread….

We will return to New Year Letter (1940) further on in the walk.

W H Auden described the North Pennines as his 'great good place', keeping a map of the area on his study wall wherever he lived throughout his life. Much of his work references North Pennines place names. He was influenced by poets such as Thomas Hardy where place was intrinsic to their work. Hardy's Dorset was his place of birth and where he lived for most of his life. W H Auden's North Pennines were adopted because of a life changing experience.

Auden writes of this life changing experience in the poem The Old Lead-mine. The middle verse reads:

I peered a moment down the open shaft
Gloomy and black; I dropped a stone;

A distance splash, a whispering, a laugh
The icy hands of feat weighed heavy on the bone
…

Wystan Hugh Auden was born in 1907 York, a city on lowland between the North Yorkshire Moors and the Yorkshire Dales. His family moved to Birmingham, in the Midlands, when Auden was 18 months old. Wystan attended private schools going on to study natural science at Oxford University, switching to English in his second year. He was introduced to Old English by one of his lecturers J R R Tolkien, author of the epic fantasy novels - the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings. Is it possible that Auden's recollection of dropping a stone down a mine shaft inspired his teacher and mentor, J R R Tolkien to create the moment in Lord of the Rings when the character Pippin drops a stone into a mine shaft with such devasting consequences?

The first part of the walk is along an eastward section of National Cycle Route 7 also part of Coast to Coast cycle route. Follow the sign towards Waskerly up the hill.

2. Rookhope Incline

As you wind your way north out of the village, turn round and take time to look back at Rookhope. Linztgarth Common sits above the village to the southwest.

After university Auden spent a short period in Berlin, and then taught at a variety of private schools, whilst writing poetry. His friend from Oxford and fellow poet Stephen Spender, printed some of Auden's poems privately, creating around 45 copies.

In 1929 a play by Auden, a charade called Paid on Both Sides, was published in The Criterion, a literary review edited by T S Eliot. Eliot was also an editor at the publishing company Faber and Gwyer, later to become Faber and Faber, who published a volume of Auden's work in 1930, simply called Poems.

Paid on Both Sides is set in the North Pennines. It depicts a feud with the two fractions from Lintzgarth, Rookhope and Nattrass, Garrigill, on opposite sides of the North Pennines watershed, sitting in different counties, one in County Durham, the other in Cumbria.
The title of the play is taken from the last line of the epic Anglo-Saxon Old English poem Beowulf, which reads, "That was not a good bargain, that they should pay on both sides with the lives of friends."

In Paid on Both Sides a character called the Announcer, proclaims, "The engagement is announced of John Nower, eldest son of the late Mr and Mrs George Nower of Lintzgarth, Rookhope, and Anne Shaw, only daughter of the late Mr and Mrs Joseph Shaw of Nattrass, Garrigill." The full cast responds with an "Hurrah."

Look at the slopes beneath Lintzgarth Common, with their scattering of farm buildings and dry-stone walls. Auden wrote two early poems called Stone Walls. The first one starts:

Where do they travel to

Sleepily wending
Over the waste fells,
Silent, unending?

Do they seek the Wind
As he calls and calls,
To the end of things,
Those creeping walls?

In the 1930s Auden made a trip to Iceland and later a trip to China. Between the journeys he wrote ‘Letter to Lord Bryon’, an epic commentary on modern life of the time, and how things had changed since Lord Bryon’s day. The extensive poem becomes autobiographical.

An early verse reads:

So if ostensibly I write to you
To chat about your poetry or mine,
There’s many other reasons: though it’s true
That I have, at the age of twenty-nine
Just read *Don Juan* and found it fine.
I read it on the boat to Reykjavik
Except when eating or asleep or sick.

A few verses later Auden explains:

With Northern myths my little brain was laden,
With deeds of Thor and Loki and such scenes;
My favourite tale was Anderson’s *Ice Maiden*
But better far than any kings or queens
I liked to see and know about machines:
And from my sixth until my sixteenth year
I though myself a mining engineer.

The mine I always pictured was for lead,
Though copper mines might, *faute de mieux*, be sound
To-day I like a weight upon my bed;
I always travel by the Underground;
For concentration I have always found
A small room best, the curtains drawn, the light on;
Then I can work from nine till tea-time, right on.

In 1947, Auden was asked to write an article for the magazine House and Garden. He called it ‘I Like it Cold’. In it he states, “Though I was brought up on both, Norse mythology has always appealed to me infinitely more than Greek; Hans Andersen’s The Snow Queen and George Macdonald’s The Princess and the Goblin were my favourite fairy stories and years before I ever went there, the North of England was the Never-Never Land of my dreams.”

The walk continues north up the track known as the Rookhope Incline. It's a former waggon way, built in 1846 by the Weardale Iron Company linking Rookhope and Tow Law, a settlement on the eastern fringe of the North Pennines. Waggons carried lead, limestone, and iron ore bringing coal on their return.

Auden's poem The Old Lead Mine refers to a track, most likely the Rookhope Incline. Auden's early visits to Rookhope took place when the mining industry was not that long closed. A national cycle way along the route of the incline was yet to come.

I turned and travelled quickly down the track
Which grass will cover by and by
Down the lonely valley; once I looked back
And saw a waste of stones against an angry sky.

Head to the top of the hill, stopping at the building set in the pass at its peak.

3. Bolt's Law Standing Engine

The building in front of you once housed the steam-driven engine that hauled the wagons up and down the track of the Rookhope Incline. Known as a standing engine, it is one of many derelict industrial buildings scattered across the North Pennines.

The waggon way weaves its way across the top of the moors. Southwards the route heads through Rookhope into Weardale and a few miles east to a village called Frosterly, famous for its black fossil filled limestone, which when polished looks like marble, full of sea creatures. Samson was a narrow-gauge locomotion built in 1874 to be used on a stretch of track one mile linking mine workings between Frosterly and Bollihope Burn. Sampson, with a silent 'p', is also the name of a character in a poem that Auden wrote in 1932 called In the Year of My Youth. It tells of a dream where Auden is taken on a tour of an unnamed city by the named Sampson. The poem was never published though many sections of it appear as standalone poems or have been adapted into other work.

One is such poem is The Witnesses, which also appears as dialogue within the a play called The Dog Beneath the Skin or Where is Francis?, a collaboration between Christopher Isherwood and W H Auden who first met at school.

You are the town and We are the clock
We are the guardians of the gate in the rock
The Two,
On your left and on your right,
In the day and in the night,
We are watching you

A further verse reads:

But do not imagine We do not know,
Or that what you hide with such care won't show
At a glance:
Nothing is done, nothing is said,
But don't make the mistake of believing us dead;
I shouldn't dance.

In the Year of My Youth, the Witnesses are watching a dreaming Auden and the fictitious Sampson. The Samson narrow gauge locomotion was retired in 1904, replace by horses. A replica of the engine has been created and is housed at Beamish Museum, County Durham.

W H Auden's poem the Age of Anxiety, with its subtitle A Baroque Eclogue, was published in 1947 in the United States. A UK edition followed in 1948, and the same year Auden was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for the work. The title of Auden's famous poem soon became a phrase commonly applied to the period after the Second World War, and into the stand-off of the Cold War, and the uncertainty it brought.

The Age of Anxiety is set in 1940s wartime New York where four characters, Quant, Malin, Rosetta and Emble meet in a bar, later moving to Rosetta's apartment. Their conversation leads to an imaginary quest as they attempt to discover themselves. The poem explores themes of an ever-changing world and is spilt into six parts.

Part Three is a sequence of the imaginary quest. An extract reads:

And now one by one they enter the same valley and begin to ascend the same steep pass. ROSETTA is in front, then EMBLE, then MALIN and QUANT last.

ROSETTA says:
These hills may be hollow; I've a horror of dwarfs
And a streaming cold.

EMBLE says:
This stony pass
Is bad for my back. My boots are too small
My haversack is too heavy. I hate my knees
But like my legs

MALIN says:
The less I feel
The more I mind. I should meet death
With great regret.

QUANTS says:
Thank God I was warned
To bring an umbrella and had bribes enough
For the red-haired rascals, for the reservoir guard
A celluloid sandwich, and silk eggs
Fro the lead smelters; for Lizzie O'Flynn,
The capering cowgirl with clay on her hands,
Tasty truffles in utopian jars,
And dungarees with Danish buttons
For Shilly and Shally the shepherd kings.

Now ROSETTA says:
The ground's aggression is growing less.
The clouds are clearing.

EMBLE says:
My cape is dry.
I can reckon correctly.

MALIN says:
My real intentions
Are nicer now.

And QUANT says:
I'm nearing the top.
When I hear what I'm up to, how I shall laugh.

The Age of Anxiety received mixed reviews. It was loved by some, and not by others. It inspired a symphony of the same name by American composer Leonard Bernstein, and a ballet by American choreographer Jerome Robbins.

The walk continues through the pass, along the wagonway, leaving the track as it bends. Just before a sheepfold to the right, there's a wooden post on the left, marking a public footpath north across the moor. The path leads to another wooden post at a stile. Go over the stile and continue north, turning west as the path meets another that leads to the top of Bolt's Law. On the way there is a small mound with a wooden way marker post at the top.

4. View from Way Marker

Facing north east the views are far reaching and spectacular. In the distance are the hills of Northumberland. The foreground is County Durham moorland that slopes down to the River Derwent and the border with Northumberland.

Look for two stone towers sitting in the landscape either side of what looks like a small reservoir. It's a pond called Sikehead Dam which provided water for the Sikehead Lead Mine.

Auden's poem about betrayal, The Secret Agent, includes a reference to a dam, and is set on a desolate landscape. It starts:

Control of the passes was, he saw, the key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into the trap
For a bogus guide, seduced by the old tricks.

At Greenhearth was a fine site for a dam
And easy power, had they pushed the rail
Some stations nearer. They ignored his wires:
The bridges were unbuilt and trouble coming.

The protagonist, the Secret Agent, knows he is about to be killed. He reminisces about a companion yet to be met, perhaps a love unfulfilled. Auden finishes the poem with translation of the last line of the 10th century Old English poem Wulf and Eadwacer:

Parting easily two that were never joined.

There are many ponds in the North Pennines, like Sikehead Dam. Some were used to gather water to use in smelting mills and mining buildings. Others were used to create a hush. That is captured water, which is sluiced down a hillside, taking away the surface soil and rock, exposing lead ore. As the industry developed and became more sophisticated drift tunnels were dug horizontally into the hillside to extract more of the precious ore, and in time, shafts, vertical routes to the ore, were carved.

In 1939 Auden moved to the United States, and it was there he met the America poet and librettist Chester Kallman forming a relationship that would last throughout his life. Auden previously had an on-off relationship with Christopher Isherwood who remained his friend and collaborator.

In 1940 when Europe was being ravaged by war a 33-year-old Auden wrote his 'New Year Letter' to a friend.

The poem starts:

Under the familiar weight
Of winter, conscience, and the State,
In loose formations of good cheer,
Love, Language, loneliness and fear,
Towards the habits of next year,
Along the streets the people flow,
Singing or sighing as they go:
Exalted, piano, or in doubt,
All our reflections turn about
A common meditative norm,
Retrenchment, Sacrifice, Reform

The long poem is spilt into three parts and inevitable become a reflection of self. A section in Part III refers directly to the North Pennines and Rookhope.

Always my boy of wish returns
To those peat-stained deserted burns
That feed the Wear and Tyne and Tees,
And, turning states to strata, sees
How basalt long oppressed broke out
In wild revolt at CAULDRON SNOUT,
And from the relics of old mines
Derives his algebraic signs
For all in man that mourns and seeks,
For all of his renounced techniques,
Their tramways overgrown with grass,
For lost belief, for all Alas,
The derelict lead-smelting mill,
Flued to its chimney up the hill,

That smokes no answer any more
But points, a landmark on BOLTS' LAW,
The finger of all questions. There
In ROOKHOPE I was first aware
Of Self and Not-Self, Death and Dread:
Adits were entrances which led
Down to the Outlawed, to the Others,
The Terrible, the Merciful, the Mothers;
Alone in the hot day I knelt
Upon the edge of shafts and felt
The deep *Urmutterfurcht* that drives
Us into knowledge all our lives,
The far interior of our fate
To civilise and to create,
Das Weibliche that bids us come
To find what we're escaping from.
There I dropped pebbles, listened, heard

Look for the top of a third chimney, beyond Sikehead Dam, to the east of some trees. It is peeping over the crest of the hill which slopes away to the River Derwent. It is part of the Presser Engine House, close to the village of Blanchland which is on the other side of the river, a few miles downstream.

Continue up the path to the summit of Bolt's Law, go through the gate, walk to the trig point and then to the large pile of stones, a cairn or currick.

5. Bolt's Law Currick (Cairn)

Currick is a North Pennines name for a cairn, a pile of stones marking a place, boundary or route. In this part of Northern England they were also used to mark locations with good vantage points to watch for border reivers, the perpetrators of night time raids between feuding families both north and south of the English Scottish border from the 13th century to the 17th century. The reiver lifestyle died out after the ascendancy of James VI of Scotland to the English throne as James I in 1603 and the later Act of Union in 1707. Many reiver families moved into the valleys and hills, seeking employment in the growing industry of lead mining.

The view from Bolt's Law reaches far across the Tyne Valley and includes the famous Whin Sill a volcanic ridge that holds the Roman Wall built on the order of Emperor Hadrian in 122AD.

Auden wrote a radio play called Hadrian's Wall that was broadcast live on the BBC Home Service in 1937. It was a collaboration British composer Benjamin Britten who wrote music for the play. The script is lost, and the only part of the play we know of, is the song Roman Wall Blues. Auden took the words and published it as a poem as part of a set called Twelve Songs. It tells of the woes of a Roman soldier from afar, posted to the most northerly frontier of the Roman Empire.

It starts:

Over the heather the wet wind blows,
I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose.

The rain comes pattering out of the sky,
I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why.

The mist creeps over the hard grey stone,
My girl's in Tungria; I sleep alone.

In 1954 W H Auden wrote an article for the American edition of Vogue magazine, a suggested six-day travel itinerary from London to Edinburgh. He extolls the virtue of visiting the Pennines en route, "the chain of limestone hills which runs due North up the centre of England from Derbyshire to Northumberland."

He warns his readers, "It is not an area for those who like their landscape cozy. To qualify, one must have a proper moral sense about the points of the compass; North must seem the "good" direction, the way towards heroic adventures, South the way to ignoble ease and decadence."

Day Five of the itinerary reads:

To get its full flavour, take the road from Alston to Nenthead, the highest village in the Kingdom, turn right to Coalclough, bear left by a rather rough road till the river Allen is reached, then right to Allenheads, then left over into Rookhope, the most wonderfully desolate of all the dales, and finally, on reaching the Wear at Eastgate, turn left for Stanhope. The valley widens and the landscape becomes gentler; in the words of a Victorian visitor, "it's umbrageous riches and deep seclusion afford the highest delight to a lover of nature," but on turning north one re-enters the fells before reaching Blanchland. Blanchland was once a monastery, and one enters the village through a battlemented arch. It is a number of year's now since I stayed at the Lord Crewe Arms, but no other spot brings me sweeter memories.

Blanchland is a few miles north east of Bolt's Law, nestled in the Derwent Valley beyond the towers of Sikehead Mineworks and the Presser Engine House.

Auden's collaboration with Christopher Isherwood on the play The Dog Beneath the Skin, or as it is also known, Where is Francis? starts with a scene in a village called Pressan Ambo. The audience is left to decide exactly the village is.

We would show you at first an English village: You shall choose its location
Wherever your heart directs you most longingly to look; you are loving towards it:

There is no doubt, which village Auden had in mind as he worked on the play. Pressan is most likely taken from the name of the Presser, as in the Presser Engine Works and its tower which we can just see. An ambo is a pulpit used in the early and contemporary orthodox churches positioned to one side. It often has a counterpart on the other side. Ambo translates as edge or rim. Blanchland is on the opposite side of the Derwent Valley to the Presser Engine Works and is just across the border into Northumberland, on its edge.

The village of Blanchland was originally a monastery and was turned into a delightful, designed village in the 18th century by Lord Nathanial Crewe, a former Bishop of Durham. The Lord Crewe Trust remain the landlord of the village, The Lord Crewe Arms and surrounding farmland. The surname of the family central to the story is Crewe.

Early in the play, the Vicar of Pressan is speaking:

The ancient family of Crewe
(It may perhaps be known to you)
For generations owned the land,
The farms, the fields on which we stand.
Sir Bingham Crewe, who was the last,
(God rest his soul for he has passed)
We touched our hats to, had a son,
A handsome lad, his only one,
Called Francis, who was to succeed him.
Would he were here! We badly need him.
They quarrelled, I am sad to say,
And so, ten years ago today,
Young Francis packed and ran away
Leaving behind him no address.
Where he has gone, we cannot guess;
For since that day no news at all
Of where he is has reached the Hall.
In fact, we do not even know
If he be living still or no.

Turn and retrace your steps back past the trig point. Make a right turn onto the path. Continue along the path to where it meets a gate through a fence.

6. View of Cuthbert's Hill

Follow the line of the fence with your eyes to the west. It marches across the moorland to the slope known as Cuthbert's Hill. Cuthbert is one of two saints whose tombs are at Durham Cathedral. The other is the Venerable Bede.

In 1940, fairly new to America, Auden joined the Episcopal Church, part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. This was a return to Christianity. Something he had abandoned as a teenager.

Auden died in 1973. His last volume of poetry was Thank You, Fog, a collection of poems he wrote in 1972 and 1973. One is a short poem called A Thanksgiving which includes the following two verses:

Finally, hair-raising things
that Hitler and Stalin were doing
forced me to think about God.

Why was I sure they were wrong?
Wild *Kierkegaard*, *Williams* and *Lewis*
Guided me back to belief.

Auden references Hilter; the German Nazi dictator and instigator of the Second World War and all its horrors, and Stalin the 20th century Russian dictator. The second verse refers to the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, the British theologian and author Charles Williams, and CS Lewis creator of the Chronicles of Narnia, who having declared himself an atheist as a young man, turned to Christianity in the 1930s.

Several of Auden's poems adopt titles and take their form from Christian worship. Between 1949 and 1955 he wrote a series of seven poems called Horae Canonicae, with each poem taking its name from one of the fixed prayers of the day, still used in many denominations: Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, Compline and Lauds.

Horae Canonicae concludes with Lauds, a prayer said at Dawn as the cycle of daily prayer continues. Its final three verses read as:

Already the mass-bell goes dong-ding;
The dripping mill-wheel is again turning:
In solitude, for company.

God bless the Realm, God bless the People;
God bless this green world temporal:
In solitude, for company.

The dripping mill-wheel is again turning;
Among the leaves the small birds sing:
In solitude, for company.

W H Auden was born in the city of York, with its famous Minster. A sequence in his unpublished poem In The Year of My Youth describes a cathedral on a rock, most likely to be based on Durham, perched on top of its hill. Sections also appear in the play The Chase.

But now let your eyes walk other thoughts
For there ahead is Cathedral rock."

As lava on the east of the Eden valley
Has thrust up along the line of a fault
At Knock and Dufton enormous cones
The hill I looked on was of like slope
Though sudden dimly in the darkness rising.
But upon the peak by arcs flood-lit
Casting the shadows upward was a cairn so noble
That I though born in earshot of the Minster
Learnt all my standards to be second-rate
As without more talking we continued our way
Feeling the steepness of descent in our knees
Till reaching the noisy road which ran
Along the bottom of this little valley
We crossed its tramlines and traffic and entered
An iron swing gate that screeched on its hinges

Climbed a dark stairway cut out of rock
And stood at last on the summit we sought,
Close to the West Front, craning our necks.
Built on a small scale, breathless and marvelling
At that quarried curtain covered with carving

In 1962 W H Auden was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Literature from Durham University. The ceremony took place at the University's campus in Newcastle, as at that point in time, Newcastle wasn't yet a separate institution from Durham.

Professor Karl Britton spoke at the ceremony and said of Auden, "In some of his earliest poems and in some of his latest poems he celebrates the landscape of Northern England. The fells and their minerals have a fascination for him; both the workings of the old high-born mining captains and the abandoned shafts of this century. He has not forgotten the peat-stained deserted burns that feed the Wear and the Tyne and the Tees. He is today in his own country."

Not in Baedeker is a poem Auden wrote in 1949, playing with the title of the famous German 1930s worldwide travel guides. The poem includes a description by an unnamed Victorian traveller.

The removal of the ore, he writes*, bless him,*
Leaves a horrid gulph. The wild scene is worthy
Of the pencil of Salvator Rosa.
The eye is awe-struck at the extraordinary
Richness of the deposits and the vast
Scale of the operations.). …

This is a description of a valley worked for lead and other minerals at the height of the mining in the North Pennines Ore Field. Auden compares it to the wild, savage landscapes of 17th century Italian painter Salvator Rosa.

Other lines from the poem infer that when Auden was discovering the North Pennines in the early 20th century, the landscape was changing, being reclaimed by nature.

When engines and all stopped. Today it would take
A geologist's look to guess that these hills
Provided roofs for some great cathedrals
(One irrevocably damaged by bombs)
And waterproof linings for the coffins
Of statesmen and actresses (all replaced).

The path continues west, to a remote road with its snow pole markers, warning of cold winter weather. The road links Blanchland and Rookhope across the moors.

Walk south, down the road to a twist, where a stream passes underneath continuing into a deep ravine.

7. View of Stogel Cleugh

The ravine with its stream that starts high on the moors is called Stogel Cleugh.

Stogel is derived from two words, the old norse word ‘stokkr’ meaning the trunk of a tree, and vel, old norse for well. Cleugh has its orgins in the old English word ‘cloh’ meaning steep sided valley. We are looking at a place with tree trunks by a well or stream, in a deep ravine. There are no longer trees in this high valley, but its possible when Vikings moved through the North Pennines westward settling in the Eden Valley the tree line was higher than today. The ravine’s name has its origins in both Old English and Old Norse, ancient languages much loved by Auden.

Auden’s father was interested in Icelandic and Norse mythology passing this love onto his son. Auden Senior believed the name Auden was derived from Old Norse, possibly from the name of the god Odin. He approached a renowned Icelandic academic with his theory which was dismissed. When Auden was a boy, Auden Senior read him Icelandic folk tales. Auden believed his blond hair and tall stance were evidence of Norse ancestry.

In 1937 Auden published a volume called Letters from Iceland, in collaboration with the Irish poet Louis MacNeice. The collection includes a poem called Journey to Iceland which includes:

These plains are for ever where cold creatures are hunted
and on all sides: white wings flicker and flaunt;
under a scolding flag the lover
of islands may see at last,

in outline, his limited hope, as he nears a glitter
of glacier, sterile immature mountains intense
in the abnormal northern day, and a river’s
fan-like polyp of sand.

Here let the citizen, then, find natural marvels,
a horse-shoe ravine, an issue of steam from a cleft
in the rock, and rocks, and waterfalls brushing
the rocks, and among the rocks birds.

Letters from Iceland includes a letter to Erika Mann, the German actress and writer, also the daughter of novelist Thomas Mann. Erika’s father was christened in the Lutheran protestant church, and her mother was Jewish. Erika spoke out against 1930s Nazi Germany. She wrote and took part in anti-Nazi cabaret performances in Germany and later in exile in Switzerland.

In 1935 Auden and Erika Mann were married. It was one of convenience and they never lived together though remained married throughout their lives. Auden was gay, and Erika Mann, who had had a short-lived marriage to a male German actor, was a lesbian. The marriage enabled Erika Mann to escape. She travelled to the United States raising awareness of what was happening in Europe, returning when war broke out as a war correspondent.

A volume of Auden’s poetry called Look Stranger was published in 1936 and is dedicated to Erika Mann. A year later the same volume was published in the United States under the title On This Island. Auden was in Iceland, not easily accessible, when the British volume was being prepared. Auden’s publisher chose the title Look Stranger, from the first line of one of the poems. Auden renamed the collection for the American edition On This Island, which is the title of the poem that starts with the words Look Stranger. The specific poem called On This Island, has the following as it’s middle verse:

Here at a small field's ending pause
Where the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges
Oppose the pluck
And knock of the tide,
And the shingle scrambles after the suck-
-ing surf,
And a gull lodges
A moment on its sheer side.

The collection Look Stranger or as Auden preferred On This Island can be interpreted as an anticipation of the increasing disorder of 1930s Europe.

The wildlife of the North Pennines appears in Auden's work. His poem Missing written in 1929 starts:

From scars where kestrels hover,
The leader looking over
Into the happy valley,
Orchard and curving river,
May turn away to see
The slow fastidious line
That disciplines the fell,
Hear curlew's creaking call
From angles unforeseen,
The drumming of a snipe
Surprise where driven
Had scalded to the bone

Auden wrote the poem when he was in Berlin and can be read as a lament for the dead of the First World War 1914 - 1918.

Continue the walk down the road to the floor of the valley and the course of Rookhope Burn. Just to the left of the Rookhope and Stanhope road sign there is a stile and a path to a footbridge crossing Rookhope Burn. Go over the bridge and turn left over another stile. Look back at the view.

8. Rookhope Burn

The abandoned arch is referred to as the Rookhope Arch, but to be accurate it is a remaining part of the flue of the Lintzgarth Smelting Mill. Smelting was the process of turning lead ore a purer metal bars known as pigs.

Poisonous fumes from the furnace were funnelled away and released high up. The Lintzgarth works had a six-arch raised horizontal flue leading across Rookhope Burn, a road, and a railway track before heading underground up the hill side for a mile and a half, to a chimney. You can see the route of the flue burrowed under the surface of the hillside. A horizontal flue meant that tiny fragments of lead and other minerals including silver would stick to the inside of the

chimney. Small boys would be sent up to scrape the sticky substance from time to time, so that nothing was wasted.

Rookhope was one of the first places where Auden discovered the industrial past of the North Pennine valleys and fell tops, but he soon became familiar with the whole area.

Cashwell is to the west of Rookhope, across the top of the moors, on the east side of Cross Fell, the highest of the North Pennines hills. Like Rookhope, it is a post-industrial lead and mineral landscape, with scattered remains. It sits between the watershed for two rivers. The South Tyne, which heads northwards to join with the North Tyne becoming the mighty Tyne that flows through Newcastle. The other is the River Tees, heading south east into Teesdale and onwards to Teesside. Close by to the east is the source of the River Wear, which Rookhope Burn joins.

W H Auden used Cashwell as the setting for his poem, The Watershed, which starts:

Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,
On the wet road between the chafing grass
Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,
Snatches of tramline running to a wood,
An industry already comatose,
Yet sparsely living.

The poem continues, telling of a coffin being taken on its final journey down from the fell through mine works because of a vicious storm. A young stranger is looking at the landscape which will not tell its secrets.

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,
Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
This land, cut off, will not communicate,
Be no accessory content to one
Aimless for faces rather there than here.
Beams from your car may cross a bedroom wall,
They wake no sleeper; you may hear the wind
Arriving driven from the ignorant sea
To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm
Where sap unbaffled rises, being spring;
But seldom this. Near you, taller than the grass,
Ears poise before decision, scenting danger.

A railway used to run alongside Rookhope Burn, bringing coal to the smelting works and taking away the lead.

Trains are a recurring theme in Auden's poetry. One of his most famous poems is 'Night Mail' written as a commentary for a GPO film. In the 1930s the General Post Office had a film unit, making documentaries to promote its work. Throughout his life Auden collaborated with composers, working with the likes of British composer Benjamin Britten, the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky and German Hans Werner Henze.

In 1936 Auden paired with Benjamin Britten and filmmakers Harry Watt and Basil Wright on 'Night Mail', a celebration of the overnight post train from London to Glasgow, along a route operated by the London, Midland and Scottish Railway that runs west of the North Pennines

passing north through Cumbria. Benjamin Britten composed the soundtrack and with W H Auden writing a commentary which is heard toward the end of the film. Here's an extract:

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from girl and boy,
Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or to visit relations,
And applications for situations,
And timid lovers' declarations,
And gossip, gossip from all the nations,
News circumstantial, news financial,
Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in,
Letters with faces scrawled on the margin,
Letters from uncles, cousins, and aunts,
Letters to Scotland from the South of France,
Letters of condolence to Highlands and Lowlands
Written on paper of every hue,
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,
The chatty, the catty, the boring, the adoring,
The cold and official and the heart's outpouring,
Clever, stupid, short and long,
The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong.

Follow the footpath east along the south side of Rookhope Burn. Burn is an Anglo-Saxon word for stream. Another word for stream, common in the North Pennines, is Beck. It's a Norse word and many streams became known as Becks once the Vikings and subsequent Scandinavian settlers arrived in the North of England in the 9th and 10th centuries.

There are a few scattered dwellings along the valley on the way back into Rookhope. One of significance is the Old Miner's Hall. It is the large house set back off the road across the burn, accessed via a bridge about halfway between the Linztgarth Arch and the village.

9. The Old Miner's Hall

These days the property is known as The Old Miners' Hall and is an up-market holiday rental. In lead mining days it was a bothy, a hostel where itinerant miners slept.

Auden wrote about Rookhope throughout his life. His early poem Rookhope, Weardale (Summer, 1922) starts:

The men are dead who used to walk these dales;
The mines they worked in once are long forsaken:
We shall not hear their laughter or their tales
Now, as in bygone days, all these are taken.

Auden's poem Amor Loci written in 1965 starts:

I could draw its map by heart
Showing its contours,
strata and vegetation,

name every height,
small burn and lonely sheiling,

A sheiling is a hut, usually on high ground. It comes from the Ord Norse words Skjol meaning shelter and Skali meaning hut.

Not long after his arrival in America in 1939, Auden met and began his relationship with Chester Kallman. Auden earned a living as an academic whilst continuing to write. For a period in 1945, after the war, Auden assisted with the US Strategic Bombing Survey, recording the effect the allied bombing had on the German population. He became an American citizen in 1946.

Chester Kallman and W H Auden remained companions until Auden death. In 1948 they started to spend their summers in Italy and from 1958 at Kirchstetten in Austria, where Auden bought a farmhouse.

Auden was made Professor of Poetry at Oxford University in 1956, giving three lectures a year, and travelled from New York to do so. In 1963 Chester Kallman decided to live in Athens each winter, spending every summer with Auden.

When in Kirchstetten, Auden attended the Roman Catholic parish church whenever he could, though remained an Anglican. In 1962 he wrote a poem called Whitsunday in Kirchstetten. It concludes:

Down a Gothic nave
comes our Pfarrer now, blessing the West with water:
we may go. There is no Queen's English
in any context for Geist or Esprit: about
catastrophe or how to behave in one
what do I know, except what everyone knows -
if there when Grace dances, I should dance.

In February 1972 Auden left New York and moved back to England. Christ Church, Oxford offered him a cottage. Auden once again spent the summers of 1972 and 1973 with Chester Kallman in Austria.

Auden dedicated several poems to Chester Kallman. The first was in 1940, a volume of poetry called Another Time. A particular work in the volume has become one of Auden's most famous poems, Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks). The last two verses are:

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song,
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong

The stars are not wanted now, put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

The poem is famously read in at a fictious funeral, in the 1994 film, Four Weddings and a Funeral.

Auden's own funeral took place in Kirchstetten, on the 4th October 1973, with a simple burial in the village churchyard. Though the funeral was proceeded with a procession to the church led by the village band and Chester Kallman.

W H Auden died in the early hours of the 29th September 1973. He had given a lecture to the Austrian Society for Literature and evening before and passed away in his sleep in his hotel room, age 66.

Auden's last poem complete poem is called Archaeology, written in August 1973. It forms part of the collection Thank You Fog. A section reads:

When Norsemen heard thunder,
did they seriously believe
Thor was hammering?

No, I'd say: I'd swear
that men have always lounged in myths
as Tall Stories,

that their real earnest
has been to grant excuses
for ritual actions.

Only in rites
Can we renounce our oddities
and be truly entired.

A poem written sometime earlier is In Praise of Limestone. Auden wrote it in Italy in 1948 staying on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples with Chester Kallman. The island is formed of limestone, as are Auden's beloved North Pennines. The poem refers to both landscapes. It starts:

If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones,
Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly
Because it dissolves in water. Mark these rounded slopes
With their surface fragrance of thyme and, beneath,
A secret system of caves and conduits; hear the springs
That spurt out everywhere with a chuckle,
Each filling a private pool for its fish and carving
Its own little ravine whose cliffs entertain
The butterfly and the lizard; examine this region

The final lines of In Praise of Limestone are:

To death as a fact, no doubt we are right: But if
Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead,
These modifications of matter into
Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,
Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:

The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know of nothing of
Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.

Continue along the path by Rookhope Burn. You'll cross a bridge into main part of the village, at Boltsburn. Follow the path to the road and go right, back to the bottom of the Rookhope Incline and onto Front Street.