

Aberystwyth, Ceredigion – 1 March

1. Spring Constitutional



A day of sunshine, after the striking reversals of the weather in recent weeks, is something to be celebrated. Turning my back on the hills, I set out to walk to the coast a few miles distant.

Following days of cold, grey cloud, the injection of colour from the open sky was revelatory – the swelling buds and early catkins giving a hint that maybe, just maybe, winter was on the wane.

Cresting the hill above Aberystwyth opened up a panoramic view across the breadth of Cardigan Bay. I skirted the town along seldom-used paths and reached the sea just below the impressive mass of Constitution Hill. What little wind that remained from the storm was blowing offshore, leaving the sea tranquil and echoing the uneven blue of the sky. Small wavelets, surging and breaking in elegant crescents on the shoreline, reflected the wider story of the conditions far out to sea.

Above the surf-shaped beach of wet cobbles and shingle, the cliffs outlined the ancient, troubled geology of the region. Rocks laid down as muddy sediment under warm, Silurian seas have been crushed and distorted by subsequent movement. Almost vertical planes of rock stand sheer, sunshine highlighting the minerals arrayed within their structure, while arches of twisted strata speak of monumental forces acting over long ages of time.

A column of cloud edged over the sun, cutting the more vibrant colours, and suddenly the scene was returned to winter monotony. I walked south, past the wave-cut rocks where stalwart Victorians took up sea bathing.

Planed almost flat by erosion, they emerge just proud of the beach like the fragmented spines of some ancient beings – which, in a sense, I suppose they are.

Left: Constitution Hill.

3. History in the Landscape

Between the village of Llanon and the sea lies an area of flat land perhaps a kilometre wide, bordered to north and south by minor rivers.

On the large-scale maps of the area it is labelled Morfa Esgob – which translates roughly as Bishop’s Land. In contrast to the steep, thin-soiled hill pastures inland it is a favoured spot. Well drained and quick to warm in spring, thanks to the great heat store of Cardigan Bay, the land is now mostly grazed, but both map and landscape hint at a more complex past.

The tithe map of the local parish, recently digitised and interpreted as part of the Cynefin project, captures a snapshot of the land as it was in the 1840s. It reveals Morfa Esgob as

a collection of several hundred interlocking ‘slangs’ – narrow strips of farmland – each of a size that could be managed by a single household.

Looked at from the ground, many of these are effectively merged into larger fields fenced with posts and wire, but the low winter sunshine reveals subtle banks – evidence of the old alignments.

With scholarly caution, this field system is often termed ‘pre-19th century’ – the date of the first formal survey. Given that ownership by the church is recorded by the 1300s, however, the strips are almost certainly medieval – and just possibly much older. The turfed footpaths and tracks that give access to the slangs retain their sense of age, hinting at the centuries of daily journeys from homestead to field and back.

Right: Slangs outside the village of Llanon.





The thick, tangled undergrowth and fallen wood immediately beyond the path would make a quiet spot to lie inconspicuously.

Just below where I stood, slightly upstream of a bend in the river, some quirk of fluid dynamics caused an audible upwelling of the flow. The surface of the water was raised a fraction in a flattened dome, which spun off a line of eddies that slowly filled, like the disturbance caused by the movement of an oar blade. This looked similar to the passage of a submerged animal, but sadly wasn't. Nonetheless, I'm convinced otters were close by, and on a future visit I hope to catch a glimpse of one.

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Left: A robin sings in the woods of Cilgerran.
Right: Eddy marks on the surface of the Afon Teifi.



13. A Hot Day on the Coastal Path

The air was almost still, and only the smallest of ripples marked the edge of the receding tide; the only artificial sound was that of a single boat engine far out to sea.

At the back of the beach, a jumble of boulders lay at the foot of cliffs topped by tangled mature trees newly in leaf. I stuck close to the water on the hard, wet sand, keen to shorten the route around the bay as much as possible.

It was warm, and grew hotter still as I turned inland along the bank of the narrow Afon Llethi. The hedgerows, sheltered by the low hills, were rapidly gaining their bright, full-summer foliage, with violets and bluebells adding abrupt points of brilliance in the shafts of sunlight.

Welcome patches of dappled shade cooled the long climb through the low woodland beyond Cei Bach. Pausing at a familiar gate, I noted how far removed the scene was from the harsh February day I first passed this way decades ago, buffeted by the storm-force winds and bitter, wretched sleet that had roared in from the west.

Above the woods, the route cuts across the steep, open slopes towards Craig Ddu. Rafts of dead bracken still covered much of the rough ground, but stunted hawthorn trees in full leaf and blossom, carved into strangely elongated shapes by the wind from the sea, stood out against the dull brown detritus.

Stonechats called from the cover of gorse bushes, moving quickly away when approached, before circling back around to their preferred perch.

Right: The direction of the prevailing wind is clear.



11. Stone Walls and Upland Lambs

My late start meant that the sun was already much further west than I had hoped. The light had moved on from the eastern slopes, and deep shadows lay across the shoulder of Cadair Idris, with the summit outlined in sharp relief against the deep blue of a flawless sky.

I took the lane that runs gently uphill between stolid banks of mossy stone towards a band of low woodland. As I walked, I tried to roughly calculate the mass of the stonework I passed, and before reaching the top of the rise, less than a mile distant, I had accounted for several hundred tonnes.

Most of this would have not been brought far, just prised from the ground and heaped to form

boundaries in an attempt to improve the rough grazing either side of the lane. Today, ewes and their small upland lambs grazed unconcernedly among clumps of soft rush as I wandered past in the spring sunshine.

Even in this landscape of rock, and little else, the scale of the effort needed to build these walls is impressive. Yet trees, growing unchecked from the field margin, have heaved the massive blocks aside in places – leaving parts of the structure in a precarious state.

Beyond the crest of the hill, the lane dipped between patches of pleasantly unkempt woodland. Small streams, rock bedded, flowed only gently due to the lack of rain, and the dry moss and lichen that covered the boulders at the margin formed a crisp, matted carpet.

Right: Landscape near Cross Foxes.





A flash of blue seen fleetingly in the corner of my eye made me wonder if there was a kingfisher nearby. Although I paused at the spot and waited, I saw nothing else, but another walker asked me later if I had seen one – and, to my chagrin, reported seeing it perching in full view.

Despite the recent rain the blackberries were still hard, small and unripe, but the blackthorn bushes alongside the path were heavily laden.

The sloes were already darkening from green to the deep blue of remembered childhood ink, their skins mottled with a characteristic lighter bloom. As the afternoon heat grew stronger the breeze also strengthened, filling the air with the floating, invasive seeds of the rosebay willowherb. Summer might not yet be over, but the signs of its demise are building rapidly.

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Above: Geese explore a creek in the Teifi marshes.

Llyn Pendam, Ceredigion – 31 August

26. A Lake in the Hills

East of Penrhyn-coch, the single-track mountain road climbs relentlessly along the spine of the ridge.

As the ground rises, the steep, close-cropped pasture and views of distant windfarms give way to the tightening grip of dank blocks of forestry cut through by gravel tracks. Under the shoulder of Banc y Garn, the road, winding unpredictably around outcrops of rock pitted with heather, emerges on to the open panorama of a high plateau.

Away from the trees, the strong wind from the west was keener than I had expected, flattening tall stands of dry grass and raising short, abrupt wavelets on the surface of Llyn Pendam. In the shallow water close to the margin, long strands of water weed moved just below the surface

in sympathy with the waves, creating the impression of a vibrant school of fish. Bright red against the dark of the conifer forest, the berries of a rowan tree worryingly devoid of leaves sent a strong reminder of the advancing year.

Squat clusters of heather plants in vivid flower dotted the open scrub, where trees have been harvested since my last visit. Tree stumps and fence posts alike hosted diverse communities of moss and lichen – some elements threatening to peel from the substrate as the strengthening gale hissed across the landscape. To the east, sunshine cut by the rapidly advancing clouds lit first one then another range of hills in sequence, picking out both familiar features and places I have yet to explore.

Joining a sunken track between steep turf banks, I climbed towards a prospective vantage point. The layers of rock – the edge-grain of the country – beneath my boots dipped at a sharp