



A hidden gem

Mark Elliott goes off the beaten track in the western Lake District to explore Ennerdale

SOMETIMES you have to work a little harder to get what you want. But, when you do, the rewards taste that much sweeter. That's the case with Ennerdale. It's not the easiest place to get to, tucked away on the western edge of the Lake District. But when you get there it makes all your effort worth while.

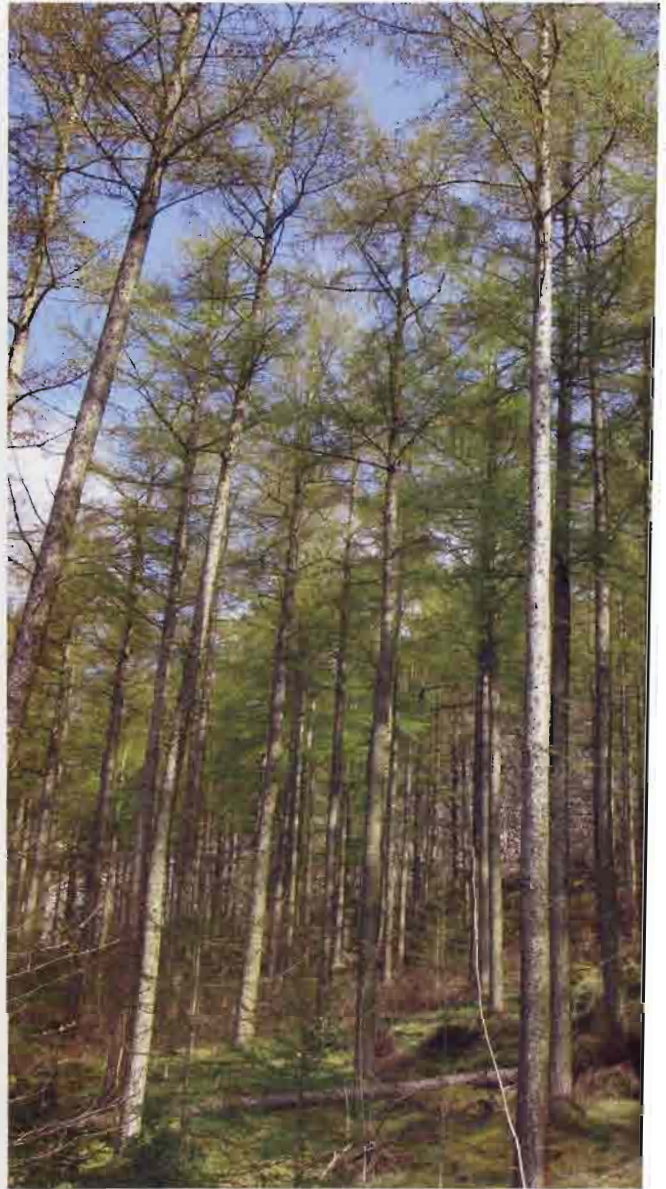
Why? For one thing, the views are magnificent: high mountains, rocky crags, a shimmering lake, secluded woodland tracks and two rivers. Add to that the valley's fascinating history and its diverse wildlife, and it makes Ennerdale a very special place.

Apart from a forest road, occasionally used by forestry vehicles, which lies along the north-western side of Ennerdale Water, there are no public roads along its edge. This is unique as far as the district's lakes are concerned; the area remains off the beaten track to all but the most enthusiastic visitors. It means the area is never crowded. Even on the busiest days, when the lakeside track is popular with walkers and mountain bikers, you can always find solitude higher up the dale or on the woodland tracks that wind through the valley.

Ennerdale is unspoilt. If you ignore the acres of conifers planted by the Forestry Commission in the 1930s, man's influence on the area has been low key. Even these non-native trees give the place a rugged feel and there are very few signs of modern-day habitation near the lake, only a couple of buildings are visible from its shore.

The Anglers Inn, which used to stand on the lakeside, was demolished in the 1960s, to accommodate a planned increase in the lake's water level, which never happened. Today, the only indication of the former hostelry is the broken slipway and a bench displaying a small plaque dedicated to its former owners. The place is an excellent spot for a picnic, with views up the full length of the lake towards the high mountains at the head of the valley.

These are not the only remains of the valley's captivating past. The area has been inhabited since the Bronze Age and because the valley has been subjected to limited, low intensity farming, many ancient remains have been left undisturbed. The archaeology of Ennerdale distinguishes it from other Lakeland valleys because of its diversity and survival of its archaeological remains.



Top left: Cyclists beside Ennerdale Water
Above left: Herdwicks in pen at Ennerdale
Above right: Larch trees beside Ennerdale Water
Right: Remains of a medieval settlement, Ennerdale

Archaeologists, surveying the valley between 1995 and 2003, identified 552 individual monuments during their research.

These included a cairn field, located at the eastern end of the lake, thought to be of Bronze Age origin; an Iron Age settlement on the south bank of the River Liza; double-walled medieval long houses at the side of Smithy Beck and several bloomeries – iron-smelting furnaces, fuelled with charcoal, which produced wrought iron.

While most of these sites are hidden among the trees and are very hard to make out with the untrained eye, the long houses next to Smithy Beck are certainly worth seeing. They are on the northern side of the lake in a small atmospheric clearing.

Ennerdale has diverse but elusive wildlife. Along with roe deer, which can be spotted near the lake in the early morning, the rarer red deer is slowly moving into the area too. Badgers, foxes and red squirrels live in the woodland around the lake.

Peregrine falcons nest on the nearby crags and salmon occasionally climb the fish ladder into the lake on their journey to spawn. A rare and genetically distinct species of arctic char lives in the lake, and can sometimes be seen

Ennerdale Water factfile

- It is 2.5 miles long and less than one mile wide at its widest point
- It is 150 feet deep at its deepest point
- It is the most westerly of the Lake District lakes
- Since 1864, it has been used as a water supply for West Cumbria
- In spring 1973, Bill Clinton asked Hillary to marry him on its shores. She said no, at the time



View down the River Liza, Ennerdale

flickering along the gravel beds of streams that enter the lake, which they enter at night to spawn. Heath spotted orchids are found at either end of the lake's southern shore.

More secrets lie in the bubbling waters of the River Ehen, which supports the largest population of freshwater pearl mussels in England. The black pearl was highly sought after during Victorian times and was poached to extinction in some nearby rivers. Today, the species is protected by law and is thriving.

In the future, the untamed valley of Ennerdale will become even wilder. There are plans afoot to replace many of the foreign trees with native species and allow nature to stamp more of its authority on the valley. A partnership between the Forestry Commission, the

National Trust and United Utilities has been formed to create 'Wild Ennerdale' whose vision statement is "To allow the evolution of Ennerdale as a wild valley for the benefit of people relying more on natural processes to shape its landscape and ecology".

A principal objective of the Wild Ennerdale project is to develop Ennerdale as a uniquely wild place, allowing natural forces to become more dominant in the shaping of the landscape and the ecology and therefore providing an inspirational visitor experience and special conservation habitats. The plan is a long one; major changes are likely to take decades but Ennerdale is a wonderful place to visit and enjoy right now. It may not be the easiest place to get to but it is certainly worth the effort. ■