



WINTER TOURING THE LAKE DISTRICT

Winter caravanning in The Lakes

WORDS Gary Blake
PICTURES Gary Blake and Wendy Johnson

WE STAYED AT...

HOLGATES
SILVERDALE
CARAVAN PARK



Middlebarrow Plain, Cove Road,
Silverdale, Near Carnforth,
Lancashire LA5 0SH
T 01524 701508

W holgates.co.uk
PRICE pitch £32 per night including
awning two people sharing

The Lake District's true self is revealed in a picturesque winter setting of snow capped hills, azure blue skies and crisp walking conditions. Cosy pubs become a luxury, hearty food a delight and a four-season caravan provides a centrally-heated refuge

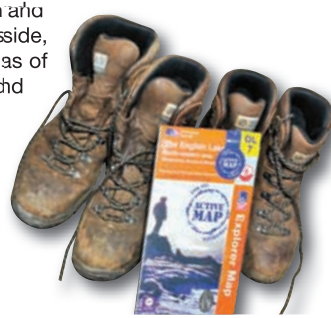
We had followed Cumbria's weather on the web for a fortnight and it looked as though we could expect snow. We really wanted some for our winter caravanning break. We packed cold weather gear, a snow shovel, and toboggan under the tarp of our Nissan Navara and set off. As we neared Preston in Lancashire an overhead motorway sign blinked ominously: 'Is your vehicle ready for winter?'

Ours certainly was – thinned engine oil (5-30), tow rope, jump leads, rock salt. With a 2.5-litre, four-cylinder turbo-diesel engine it made light work of the 5.6m Autosleeper Kensington caravan.

We had chosen Holgates Silverdale Caravan Park, Morecambe Bay, as it had just extended its opening times to four-season use for 2012. Having always re-opened at Christmas, Holgates has experience in dealing with winter conditions, providing good access roads, well-drained gravel hard-standing, and electric hook-ups with 16amp fuses and TV sockets.

Water standpipes on each pitch have double-sleeved polypropylene pipes which are less likely to freeze in cold weather. The modern loos, and showers have constant heating. Helpful maintenance men, in tooled-up vans, are on hand for any problems. The immaculate site provides good facilities for a winter break with a large, heated indoor swimming pool, lifeguards on duty, and a sauna, steam room and jacuzzi. It was no surprise to find out they were awarded the title AA National Campsite of the year 2011.

The site is just 12 miles from the M6 (junction 35), in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) once known as Lancaster over the Sands. It's set in 100 acres of woodland a rich undulating countryside, with sweeping vistas of Morecambe Bay and views of the southern Lake District. We sited the caravan on



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INFORMATION
FOR THE LAKE
DISTRICT
www.golakes.co.uk

Windermere viewed from Orrest Head. The tourist-free scenery and crisp air are breathtaking!

high ground, perhaps a mistake as westerly gale force winds gave us a couple of sleep-interrupted nights.

On our first day, we explored the local area, finding it a ramblers' and cyclist's delight. There were four walks starting from the caravan site, from two to five miles.

Within a 10-minute drive is the RSPB Leighton Moss nature reserve with the

Holgates Caravan Park



outandaboutlive.co.uk



Farmer Eric
Taylforth (right)
with one of his
many sheepdogs

largest area of reedbed in north-west England. We visited two of the five hides where, within an hour, we counted twelve different types of migratory and native ducks and geese. There's a programme of events. We enjoyed a riveting evening lecture by warden David Gibbon who showed us his stunning photographs.

Coastal cliffs are a rarity around Morecambe Bay, but it's one of the best places to walk in lowland Britain. It has everything: ancient history, unexpected vistas, and the scrub provides good sites for breeding songbirds such as linnets, whitethroats, and garden warblers. However, make sure you keep above the high-tide mark and beware of quicksands and incoming tides (information about tides is available at tidetimes.org.uk).

Prior to the arrival of the railway in 1857, the only direct route traversing the estuary at the head of Morecambe Bay was a precarious passage across the tidal sands. In the Middle Ages monks maintained the route, then a sand pilot was appointed by the Crown, to guide travellers across the shifting sands. Today's

pilot, the 'Queen's Guide to the Sands' is Cedric Robinson. Like Moses, he uses a stick and whistle to shepherd his flock past the quicksands but not in the winter! Guided tours take place May to September, and there are strong warnings against attempting the walk on your own.

We crossed the Morecambe Estuary where the Kent, Leven and Duddon rivers spill from Lakeland's southern uplands and divide the area into promontories on the southern fells. These fingers of land hold some of England's least-known countryside

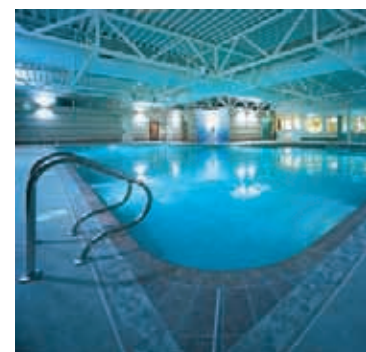
with small lanes linking sleepy towns, and ancient sites with high commons and edged by beaches. Grange-over-Sands, a Victorian town, has a micro-climate, with sunny weather and a promenade that has views over Morecambe Bay.

Next, we travelled on to the medieval village of Cartmel, which has one of England's prettiest racecourses and is deliciously famous for its sticky toffee pudding. We stocked up with microwavable deserts and called into Cartmel Cheeses with its array of artisan cheese. There we bought St James, a local cheese made on a farm at Holker Hall using milk from French Lacaune sheep. It's blinkin' expensive at £31 per kilo but well worth it as a little treat.

Holker Hall is at the heart of 17,000 acres of rural Cumbria. It's the country seat of the Cavendish family. The Estate has a long tradition of farming and its tenant farmers produce cheese, honey, prime Shorthorn beef, venison, game birds and the famous Holker saltmarsh lamb. The gift shop and food hall are open all year round excepting January, but the Hall and Gardens weren't going to open until April.

It seemed one of the tourist experiences denied to us in winter was the chance to visit a stately home or two (must be something to do with the cost of heating them). The National Trust's Sizergh Castle is also closed 'til April, though the gardens, café and shop are open at weekends.

Venturing further afield, the next day led us to Bowness-on-Windermere and Blackwell, 'the Arts and Crafts house,' which was open and well worth the trip. Built circa 1900, it is remarkably preserved, retaining almost all of its original decorative features. It's one of the finest British houses from the turn of the last century.





Above: Looking north from the top of Kirkstone Pass towards Brothers Water. Below, top to bottom: Holker Hall,Sizergh Castle and Levens Hall

Constructed as a holiday home for wealthy Manchester industrialist Sir Edward Holt and designed by Baillie Scott, Blackwell is an architectural icon of the famous Arts and Crafts Movement.

We made time for a meal in the tearoom which serves excellent local and home-made food. Its terrace has been listed by The Times as one of the '50 best places to eat alfresco' but as it was freezing



Dairy lovers delight at Cartmel Cheeses!

we stayed indoors.

Just seven miles from here is the Holehird Gardens, Windermere; 17 acres of hillside gardens run by the Lakeland Horticultural Society and open all year from dawn till dusk, with free entry.

As the weather had not improved, we decided to set off for Kendal and the largest indoor climbing wall in Europe. Kitted out in helmet and shoes I had a go at one of their beginner's walls and, with the assistance of an experienced instructor, I had soon scaled to the top. It's good indoor entertainment and an introduction to climbing for these whole family. A group rate for up to nine people costs £30 per hour for the instructor, plus the entrance fee of £8 per adult.

The following day, in better weather, we were off for a horse ride, our first for more than 30 years. We chose Bigland Hall Equestrian



Centre at Backbarrow. With slight trepidation we were kitted out with hard hats and riding boots and after two circuits of the indoor arena, off we set for an hour or so to experience the beauty of the Lakes on horseback. Bigland caters for any age of rider from four-years old. The rides follow the old pack-horse routes over the ancient high passes, and on walking routes favoured by Alfred Wainwright, the famous walker and author. Unused to being in the saddle, we returned thankfully to the sauna and jacuzzi at Holgates.

The next day dawned fair and we set off to find what we call the real Lakeland. There had been a fall of snow overnight so we engaged low gear for the Kirkdale Pass, climbing up to its



The terraces and lake at Blackwell Arts and Crafts House (in summer, by the way!)



saddle at 1500ft, where shafts of 'Turneresque' light beamed down onto the steep hills. Ullswater Steamers were our next stop with a two-hour cruise calling at various points around the lake. The climate and landscape was reminiscent of Austria, so we sipped mulled wine while an icy wind blew down from the snowy hilltops. Ospreys and cormorants were pointed out to us but alas we didn't set eyes on the elusive golden eagles.

A hearty lunch at the Inn on the Lake at Glenridding gave us energy for the dramatic walk to Aira Force waterfall, renowned in Victorian times as a beauty spot and which provided inspiration for Wordsworth to write Daffodils.

It was cold, with sleet coming down, as we set off the next day for one of our favourite spots, Elterwater, a tiny village beyond Ambleside, and a walk beneath the stunning alpine scenery of the Langdale

Pikes in the Great Langdale Valley. With the sun out on our arrival, we came across farmer Eric Taylforth with one of his many sheepdogs; he works the 250-acre Millbeck Farm and lives in a Lakeland farmhouse, built in 1621, set below dramatic screes and snow capped hills.

Hill farmers have a tough time in these valleys. The ancient Viking breed of Herdwick sheep is suited to the hilly, steep terrain. The animals have it in their nature to 'heft' (an instinct to remain in a particular part of the fells) so can be left to roam free.

We had an ideal opportunity to sample their meat's distinct flavour, which derives from a diet including moss and wild herbs. We came across Caroline Watson's Yew Tree Farm near Coniston. This chocolate-box cottage was once owned by Beatrix Potter, who as well as writing her children's books, preserved the Herdwick breed. Caroline now breeds Herdwicks and we bought Herdwick hogget leg steaks for cooking in the caravan. That evening we

Kirkstone Pass can be a challenge, but not with our winter-prepped Navara

THINGS TO DO...

Tourist information for the Lake District,
golakes.co.uk

♦ Bigland Hall Equestrian Centre
Backbarrow, Cumbria LA12 8PB
T 015395 30333

W biglandhall.com

♦ Kendal Ski Club
Canal Head North
Kendal LA9 7BY

T 0845 634 5173 (answerphone)

E sec@kendalski.co.uk

♦ Kendal Climbing Wall
Lake District Business Park, Mint Bridge Road,
Kendal, LA9 6NH

T 01539 721766

W kendalwall.co.uk

♦ Yad Moss Snow Slope
Pennines near Penrith

W yadmoss.co.uk

♦ RSPB Leighton Moss
Myers Farm, Storrs Lane, Silverdale,
Carnforth LA5 0SW

T 01524 701601





Ullswater... accessible all year round

would decide instead to eat at the Britannia Inn in Elterwater, where we could try beef from Caroline's other herd, Belted Galloway cattle. The pub serves it up in the form of a tasty steak, ale and mushroom pie.

While walking, climbing, and learning a little about Lake District food, farming and history, there's often the prospect of a thirst-quenching pint en route. Micro-breweries are a bit of a phenomenon here, with at least 30 in the region (we didn't manage all of them!). In Langdale we called in at Wainwright's Inn, where you're encouraged to take off your walking boots and put them by the roaring fire to dry out and get warm. There, we met Ben Clarke, who has put the eight Langdale pubs into a free smartphone app, offering beer discounts: langdale.co.uk/langdale.htm.

Meandering back towards Coniston, we were pleased that we'd left the heating on low for the day. We returned to a snug van.

Still with no snow at low level or on the Northern Pennines, we decided to go to

Kendal's dry ski slope where on Sundays they offer non-members a 'once-only' one-day taster course for £15 including equipment. Following a couple of energetic hours, refreshments were needed, so we called into Hawkshead Brewery in nearby Mill Yard, Staveley. The Brewery is about making proper beer. When it moved here from the village of Hawkshead, they made sure they were on the same water supply, to protect the consistency of their 15 beers. They have tours of the brewery, an active jazz club and beer festivals on the premises.

As I settled down into the cosy van that evening, I reflected on our wonderful week in the north, and what we had learned.

Don't dawdle in the mornings, but use the limited daylight to best effect (We explored from 8.15am-4.30pm each day).

Be prepared. The conditions in the Lakes can change in minutes.

Take a full gas bottle; running electric heating all the time limits what other appliances you can use.

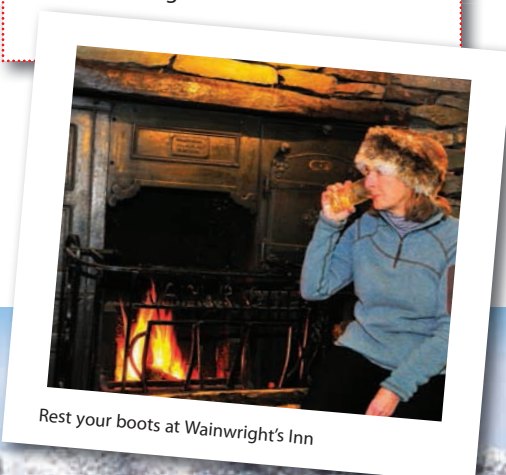
And above all, leaving the heating on low all day made the caravan a comfortable refuge on our return. Ultimately, this trip showed us that with more preparation and some more winterising of the caravan (see next page) we could confidently venture to the snow camps in Austria and France.

We set out dreaming of snow in Lakeland, and though there was snow around, it failed to fall on our campsite. Even so, the experience of being in the outdoors, without the crowds, was everything had we hoped for. And where better to learn about using the van in winter than on home turf?!

Stunning alpine scenery courtesy of the Langdale Pikes in the Great Langdale Valley

FOOD & DRINK...

- ♦ Millbeck Farm
Great Langdale, Ambleside, Cumbria
T 015394 37364
Supplies whole and half lambs direct or for collection from the farm
- ♦ Heritage Meats
Yew Tree Farm, Coniston, Cumbria LA21 8DP
T 015394 41433.
W heritagemeats.co.uk
- ♦ The Britannia Inn
Elterwater, Ambleside, Cumbria LA22 9HP
T 015394 37210
W britinn.net
- ♦ The Ramblers Bar
Inn on the Lake, Lake Ullswater, Glenridding, Cumbria
W lakedistricthotels.net/innonthelakes
- ♦ Hawkshead Brewery
Mill Yard Staveley Cumbria LA8 9LR
W hawksheadbrewery.co.uk/
- ♦ Blackwell, The Arts & Crafts House
Bowness-on-Windermere, Cumbria LA23 3JT
W blackwell.org.uk



Rest your boots at Wainwright's Inn



WINTER TOURING

THE LAKE DISTRICT



Winter use checklist

AUTOSLEEPER KENSINGTON

THERMAL SPECIFICATIONS

The Kensington has Grade III classification: NCC EN1645-1 Thermal Insulation & Heating. This is the highest official, industry-recognised standard for both insulation and heating. The interior of the caravan

can be kept at +20°C when the external temperature is -15°C.

Water pipes are routed inside the caravan for protection, along with Whale's 13-litre hot-water tank. Whale's 2kw space heater is mounted under the caravan along with the internal fresh-water tank.

Winter use



- ✓ Check with your insurance company that you have four-season road cover.
- ✓ Butane (blue cylinder) will not vapourise when temperatures fall below zero, so you need Propane (red cylinder). Take two 10kg cylinders for two weeks.
- ✓ Take a range of spare car type fuses for the vans DC supplies. Our fridge fuse blew on Day One, Hour One at 6pm on site.
- ✓ Take a large torch (wind-up if possible) and screwdrivers and a small tool kit.
- ✓ You may need to get inside your pitch's 240-volt hook-up-post fuse board supply and flick on the trip-switch, if it's over-loaded by mistake.
- ✓ Ours tripped three times: microwave on (5amps), 2k heating on full (8amps), and other appliances like a kettle maxed it to the limits of the site's 16amp fuses.
- ✓ Waste pipes lagged, and kept as straight as possible to avoid holding pools of water which could freeze.
- ✓ Fresh Water. Fit some sort of hot-water tank jacketing to the suspended internal fresh water tank. Bags2Cover jackets worked down to -8°C in Caravan mag's testing, and may go much lower.

- ✓ Fit a hot-water tank jacket inside a bin liner to the outside fresh water tank. (In extremes consider a water-heater suspended inside the tank)
- ✓ Position a secondary container inside the caravan, as the outside water container may well freeze in sub-zero conditions.
- ✓ Take off ALL filler pipe hoses and store them until needed, to prevent freezing up.
- ✓ Entrance door mats. We took two, with one drying while the other was in use.
- ✓ A porch awning is useful for storing wellies, winter coats, sledges etc, and acts as an 'air-lock' to prevent winter winds entering the caravan as soon as the door is opened.
- ✓ Take a waterproof 'golf club-head' type cover for your water standpipe.
- ✓ Wet floors can be a problem. Take a mop, roll up mats before leaving, then on your return, clean the floor before rolling out the carpets for the evening.
- ✓ Take weatherproof gardening gloves for outside work.



At night

- ✓ For extra heat, run your Whale space heater on low using 240 volts. Any gas appliance could be dangerous if left on overnight.
- ✓ Select good-quality, high-Tog winter duvets. We had one quilt on top and one quilt underneath (our hot-water bottles weren't needed).
- ✓ Make sure you fill the kettle at night, just in case! On a freezing morning, you can at least have a cuppa before thawing the caravan's pipes.
- ✓ Take a wind-up torch or spare batteries. Any problems are bound to occur in the dark.
- ✓ Keep said torch close at hand!
- ✓ Put a salt-water solution down your drain pipes at night to prevent freezing.



Clothes

Thermal underwear is a godsend as layers keep you warmest. Consider ski wear and wet weather clothes too.

- ✓ Remember, you'll need storage for all this bulky kit, and lots of hangers for drying/airing.
- ✓ Only tow in snow and ice with a 4WD. Select low-ratio 4WD and try to avoid towing in snow where at all possible.
- ✓ Avoid towing in high winds whenever possible. Keep your speed down if you have to tow, avoiding exposed routes.
- ✓ If your pipes do freeze, use a hairdryer to defrost pipes.

You may need an extension lead (and don't do it in snow, sleet or rain).

- ✓ Book a hard standing pitch.
- ✓ Consider taking snow chains for your towcar for proper Alpine touring.
- ✓ Alternatively, Milenco and Pyramid make Grip mats for pushing under the towcar's driven wheels for extra traction on icy and snowy surfaces. Corded ones are especially useful; they attach to the car, so you don't have to stop to walk back and retrieve them once you get moving.

