3 Gelt Gorge

Theme: Rivers, seas and life

Location

3 Gelt Gorge - St Bees Sandstone and Roman carvings. Walk up the gorge from the car park at Low Gelt Bridge [NY 520 592].

Description

The River Gelt flows down from the northern Pennines and then, to the northwest of Castle Carrock, descends into a beautiful red sandstone gorge. The rocks in the gorge were once sands in a desert, but that was 250 million years ago.

These sandstones, red but sometimes white and green, are from the Triassic period of Earth's history. Geologists call them the St Bees Sandstone formation because they occur there too. The sandstones were mostly deposited by water flowing into temporary lakes in the desert, but some of the rocks were deposited by wind as well.

There are at least two Roman quarries in the sides of the gorge. The stone is easily shaped and carved and, as well as for building Hadrian's Wall, may well have been used for monuments and architectural purposes. The soldiers who worked the quarries left many wonderful carvings that are visible from the path — letters, names and even caricatures of their officers.

The area has a gruesome history. In the 16th century there was a bloody battle near Hell Beck Bridge between the armies of Elizabeth 1st and Leonard Dacre, a local rebel lord. Nearby, at the Capon Tree, six of Bonnie Prince Charlie's men were hanged after the 1745 rebellion. That turmoil is in the past; today the gorge is a beautiful place to walk. The River Gelt has cut winding channels, chutes and potholes in the sandstone and Gelt Woods is one of few surviving ancient woodlands in East Cumbria. Even though the canopy trees are much-altered by human activities, the shade and humidity provide ideal conditions for mosses, ferns, fungi and a varied ground-flora.
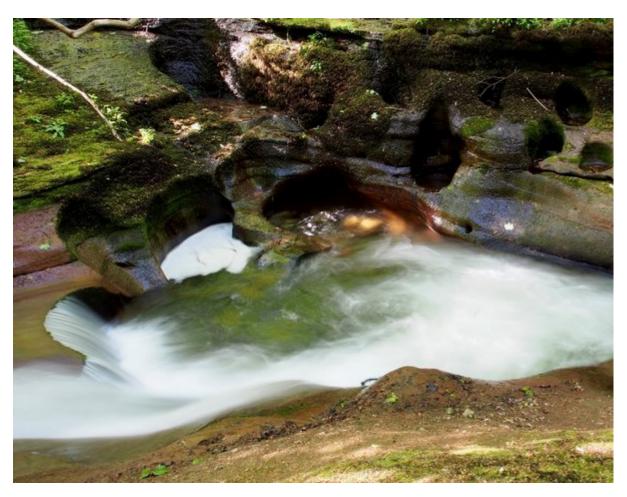
Photographs

(Photo 03-1) 3 Roman carvings in a quarry in St Bees Sandstone in the Gelt gorge.

(Photo 03-2) 3 Gelt Gorge.

(Photo 03-1) Roman carvings in a quarry in St Bees Sandstone in the Gelt gorge.

(Photo 03-2) Gelt Gorge.