

Robert Walker

In late 2014 I posted an Encounters appeal on Facebook and was delighted to receive an email headed 'Yes, I knew him quite well' from Robert Walker, who said 'My father, also Robert (Bob) Walker, and Alf Wainwright were good friends and often went on holiday together ... He was a frequent visitor to our house.' This promised to be a significant story, but I was puzzled why the name was not one I recalled in connection with Wainwright.



The surname Walker is not listed in the index of Hunter Davies' Wainwright – The Biography, nor is there a letter to him in Wainwright – The Letters. I did, however, find a passing reference to Robert Walker, a policeman, on page 310 of the biography – an account of an act of kindness by Wainwright to another policeman. I also noted that Wainwright had dedicated Scottish Mountain Drawings: Volume Three: The Western Highlands to 'Bob Walker'. It transpired that this was the father of Robert, who had contacted me.

Robert Walker is an academic and sets Singapore O-level geography exams and, fortuitously, was shortly due to visit Cambridge, where I live. We arranged a meeting to hear his story in full, which sheds interesting light on how AW sometimes got to where he needed to do research for the Pictorial Guides:

When my father, Bob Walker, was a young man he used to drive up from home at Kirkham, in the Fylde district near Blackpool, to the Lake District. He developed a passion for walking the fells and for moss-collecting – an unusual combination. He was stumped as to what to do for a career but once the war was over he enrolled at Liverpool University as a student, but he couldn't make ends meet and he was wanting to get married, so he decided to join the police in Westmorland. His thinking was that wherever he was stationed he

would never be far from the Lakes. His first posting was at Workington. He made good progress in his career and in 1954 was put in charge of CID for Westmorland, based in Kendal. He would often have to go to court and attend official functions and my guess, because I'm not certain, is that is how he first bumped into Wainwright. They met either in late 1954 or early 1955 and certainly by 1956 they were teamed up and had started going out on trips to the fells together.

There were three reasons which combined to make Wainwright enjoy going out with my dad. First, when they went somewhere my dad would disappear up some mossy ghyll looking for mosses, while Wainwright was free to do whatever he wanted or needed to do in the area. They would meet up later in the day when they were ready to go home to Kendal. So, dad didn't interfere with Wainwright, having left him completely in peace all day. They both liked their own solitude. The second reason was that my dad had a car and Wainwright's only alternative for reaching the fells was to go by bus. If he wanted to go over to the western fells, he was rather stuck and my dad having a car was an ideal solution. It suited my dad to go there because there was more rain over there, so more mossy ghylls and tons of mossy stuff to look at. Dad was never happier than when hunting for mosses. He became an acknowledged expert on the subject and was also the subject of an article by Harry Griffin in March 1958, entitled *Inspector Moss* (this is reproduced in his book, *A Lifetime of Mountains*). They went to lots of places on the western side. And the third reason, which might have been the most important, was that after they had been out together Wainwright would come back to our house where my mum would have a Lancashire hotpot ready. He was very fond of that – reckoning that my mum cooked the best hotpot in Westmorland. He

was a regular visitor. He had a soft spot for my mum and her cooking, and in 1985 came to her funeral.



Robert Walker and Wainwright - Stac Pollaidh in the background

My dad used to take us on holiday up to the north-west highlands of Scotland, which has some of the most

spectacular scenery in the British Isles or even the world – they're equal to anything. As well as collecting mosses, my dad was keen on bird photography. He used to say to Wainwright that the Lake District was fine but he should see the Scottish Highlands. They had their first holiday there in 1960 or 1961 – they had a week together, just the two of them. They stayed at the Loch Maree Hotel and went out each day by car, my dad photographing birds and Wainwright off sketching. They had two further holidays in Scotland. I think they stayed the second time ten miles south of Lochinver. I have photographs of Wainwright and my dad, and another of Wainwright, taken about 1962. These are particularly interesting because you see a lot of photographs of Wainwright as an older man, but these were taken in his mid-fifties

In 1965 my dad was promoted to Superintendent and moved to Penrith, so for a few years he and Wainwright went out less often. However, in 1969 my dad became Chief Superintendent of what was the old Westmorland and returned to Kendal and their trips together increased. By then, Wainwright was friendly with Betty so she used to come round with him to our house. You hear stories of him being brusque and he could be. I remember one night at that period of time when the pair of them were round and my dad had just discovered Bailey's Irish Cream and very smugly put a glass of it in front of Wainwright. He sat back, expecting him to praise it. Wainwright sat back, tasted it, looked at my dad and said 'I've tasted better cough medicine'. It's the sort of thing he'd say in that way.



Robert, aged 11

I didn't speak to him very much because I was the little boy and the grown-ups were all talking together, but he would have a little word with me occasionally. When I went out on my own in the Lake District I would sometimes bump into him and we'd have a chat. He would ask how I was getting on at school. The first time I can remember him coming round to our house I would be about eight. I can remember going into the other room – the grown-ups were going to have a meal together – we didn't have a television and I was left to my own devices, playing with toy soldiers and things like that and I just heard conversations drifting through. I don't think he took much notice of me at all until I was about eleven and then he'd start talking to me when he came round and asking me questions, mainly about school.



I'd say that dad was probably Wainwright's best friend. My dad used to encourage him about the Pictorial Guides – I seem to remember my dad telling me that Wainwright wasn't all that confident that he should continue round about 1956/57, but my dad used to encourage him, telling him they were wonderful and praising him for the beautiful sketches and hand-written pages. Eventually, my dad had signed first editions of all seven Guides.



There was one story my dad used to tell which was very interesting about their relationship. Wainwright became upset about something to do with how the police dogs were being kept and treated. Rather than phone my dad, his good friend, he wrote a very sharp letter starting off 'Dear Chief Superintendent, I wish to let you know that I am very unhappy about ...' It was never mentioned afterwards. No 'did you get my letter or what did you think of that? Dad couldn't get over receiving a letter 'Dear

Superintendent' from someone he knew so well. There was a sad aspect to their relationship which was that Wainwright disapproved of my dad re-marrying two years after my mum died. I don't think they fell out over it, more that Wainwright was disappointed, but he did not attend my dad's funeral in 1989.

How would I describe Wainwright? I'd say he was a quiet person, he didn't speak a lot, he was softly spoken, gentle. When I was a boy he was rather distant, chatting and chuckling more with my dad and wanting to hear what my mum's opinions on things. Yes, quiet, reserved and gentlemanly. I never heard him expressing strong opinions or being raucous. He liked his own company – I remember once when my dad and I were walking by the car-park at the top of Haweswater where we had parked, and he was there sitting by the side. My dad went over and had a chat, but he spoke quietly, not wanting anyone to hear or even know he was having a conversation, so that we'd be looked at even. He tried to meld into the background, he didn't want attention drawn to himself. My dad was well-known in Kendal and would often stop to chat to people, but when he met Wainwright in the street it was a quick hello, no conversation, but he'd have a good chat back at home.