

TAKE UP THE CLARION CALL!

The history of the famous Pendle Witch Trials is well known, but fewer people realise the same corner of rural Lancashire was once the birthplace of a mass movement to help people explore the countryside – and make the world a better place in the process.

John Manning goes in search of Utopia with a brew at the unique Clarion House Café, and walks the 22-mile Clarion House Way





LUNCHTIME, SUNDAY, AUGUST 26. The Clarion House – wooden walls, wooden ceiling, wooden floor, wood-framed windows – is thronged. Against one bunting-bedecked wall, on benches either side of a long dining table, cyclists scoff sandwiches and chocolate biscuits, laughing mischievously at a constant stream of jokes and banter. Across the way, smaller groups of walkers sit, less animated but conversation similarly intense.

The walls display photographs of walking groups, cycling clubs; notice boards inform of Clarion Cycling Club meets, Cyclists' Touring Club programmes and a recent appearance on BBC's Countryfile. A stained glass window, framed above a tiled fireplace and retrieved from Nelson's Socialist Institute, bears the initials of the Independent Labour Party; a 1985 photograph, on the mantelpiece beneath, next to a small bust of Keir Hardy, depicts it in situ.

Sierra, being a gregarious three-year-old, has engaged a number of the old-timers who share our table in conversation about muddy puddles; Steph's feeding eight-month-old Jack; my hands are wrapped around a pint mug of hot coffee. Beyond the condensation-rippled windows it's raining but, in here, it's bliss.

The tide of cyclists, walkers and their dogs ebbs and flows throughout our two hours at the Clarion, rarely dipping below two dozen at any time. Some share tables, others relax in the long, glass-fronted veranda, gazing through low cloud to Stansfield Tower on Blacko, beyond Happy Valley.

Surrounded by fields, hills and very little more, in the heart of Pendle Witch Country, the Clarion is the kind of warm, welcoming establishment you'd be ecstatic to chance upon during any Sunday hike. Along with chocolate bars kept in traditional glass sweet jars, pints of



tea and bags of crisps are served though a kitchen hatch in the corner, above which a banner proclaims: "CLARION – Cycling & Athletic Club – FELLOWSHIP IS LIFE".

A few of the older chaps reading newspapers, chatting, enjoying a brew, have difficulty crossing to the hatch, yet there's something about their utterly relaxed demeanour which suggests they're at home here, that part of their own fabric has gone into the Clarion House and some of their character has rubbed off on the building in the process. For many here, loathe to leave, the café is a destination in itself; thoughts of heading home probably won't occur until the kitchen closes and the door is about to be locked.

I've known of the Clarion for years but this is my first visit. What drew me was its reputation as a café to which walkers bring their own sandwiches, purchasing only drinks (though one rambler has even brought her own ☺

flask) and confectionery; what will pull me back this summer, and I hope long after, is what I can only describe as a glimpse of Utopia.

Escape to the country

The principle of the Clarion House was established by socialist pioneers in the Lancastrian mill town of Nelson way back in the late 1800s. Tens of thousands of unemployed people had been drawn to Lancashire from as far away as Cornwall and Ireland; here they found work in the booming cotton mills. The stench, noise and toxic grime of the Industrial Revolution, which had seen coal-fired steam power firmly overtake waterwheels as the primary source of power, ensured that life 'Up North' was indeed grim. According to contemporary reports, far-off Blackpool Tower could be seen from the summit of Pendle Hill yet Nelson, just four miles away, was invisible beneath a blanket of fog.

In 1899, conscious of the benefits of fresh air and escape from soot-laden urbanity, Nelson Independent Labour Party members took out a lease on a cottage in Thorneyholme, near Barley in Pendle, as a venue where mill-workers could enjoy outdoor activities before relaxing with a picnic and a brew. Its popularity was immediate – hundreds headed there on foot or by bicycle each weekend (records show 200 pies being supplied by the local Co-op on one occasion) – and four years later the ILP upgraded to a larger rented cottage, at nearby Nabs Farm. When that in turn became too small, the party bought land and opened its purpose-built Clarion House in 1912 and, still run by volunteers, it continues to serve walkers and cyclists to this day.

This was, however, always more than a place to enjoy fresh air and refreshment. As Stan Iveson and Roger Brown point out in the introduction to their ILP-published history *Clarion House: A Monument to a Movement*, it was the embodiment of an ideal, staffed and run by volunteers for the benefit of all. They envisaged a model of how society could be organised on non-profit ideals, without thought to personal gain other than that of leaving the world a better place than it was when they entered.

Such a dream might seem implausible in today's profit-obsessed, consumer-driven society but, for Nelson's Socialists, say Iveson and Brown, the Clarion was "a vision of the future, a vision of a socialist society, a commonwealth, based on co-operation and fellowship, not conflict and greed. And the Clarion, as the name implies, was to be the instrument by which their message would be spread. The message by which the world would unite under one banner, abandon blinkered self-interest, and material gain, and thus live in peace and harmony."

Though its foundation was as independent as the local socialist movement that spawned it, the Nelson Clarion House is intrinsically linked to the national Clarion movement, which thrived in Britain more than a century ago.

The next left

The Clarion newspaper, founded by journalist and campaigner Robert Blatchford in 1891, promoted a form of socialism based on principles of human justice and industrial co-operation for human good, along with a love of the countryside. It struck a chord with the working class, inspiring a dynamic movement that comprised choirs, the National Clarion Cycling Club and walking groups including Sheffield's formidable Clarion Ramblers.

Many of the cycling and rambling clubs had their own Clarion houses. Some were tearooms, others country guesthouses offering low-paid factory staff a night or two's respite from grim living conditions.

Romford's Clarion Cycling Club had a house at Broadley Common, Nazeing, in Essex; Manchester's was at Handforth, Cheshire; Liverpool's was in Halewood; Ribble Valley cyclists had a base in Barker Row, Ribchester, while the South East Lancashire Clarion Clubhouse was in Harwood Road, Tottington. Scores of Clarion houses, camps and tearooms were established across the country. Two more stand within





Walkers and cyclists relax in the Clarion House



The framed ILP stained glass window, on the Clarion House's mantelpiece



Pendle Hill, from Far Banks, above Newchurch in Pendle



THE CLARION HOUSE WAY

The walking tradition is inextricably linked with the history of the Nelson Clarion House. Indeed, when many of its founding ILP supporters became, through age and infirmity, no longer able to help with its running and maintenance, ramblers played a major part in ensuring it kept going until the ILP was able to recruit new, younger members to pick up the baton.

Appropriately, then, a titular walk around the Pendle area acts as a celebration of the Clarion House. It visits the Clarion House as well as the former Nelson ILP Socialist Institute and takes in a couple of other Clarion Houses, though neither operates today.

The walk's something of a paradox. The ILP, back in the late 1800s, established the Clarion House to offer mill workers an escape, albeit temporary, from their urban environment. Trail creator John Boardman, however, guides you into town, along canal towpath and over packhorse bridge, passing the mills and terraced houses in which the idealism that spawned the Clarion House was born. It might seem a shame that it doesn't instead explore more of Pendle's under-appreciated countryside – you don't even set foot on iconic Pendle Hill – yet it offers a glimpse of the Industrial Revolution, of a factory-dominated era that's all but gone; allow your imagination enough steam and you might just be able to sense the conditions that surely motivated those independent socialists.

Heading out

It might seem fitting to start the 22-mile Clarion House Way from the Clarion House itself. Unfortunately, however, though it's served by buses from either direction, there's no space for parking cars. That in itself is worth bearing in mind: back in its 1930s heyday, when as many as 400 folk a day flocked there, all would have arrived by cycle, bus or on foot.

Fortunately, as it's a circular trail, it can be picked up easily en route. The published start is in Nelson town centre but Robert and I started our clockwise exploration from Roughlee Booth, a few minutes east of the Clarion House.

We walked momentarily with Pendle witch Alice Nutter (or rather her statue), chained and bound for Lancaster's gallows. Beyond the Bay Horse Inn we hopped stepping stones over Pendle Water, to climb a steep knoll offering views across ➡



The Clarion House (SD831395), in Jinney Lane, Dimpenley, near Newchurch in Pendle, BB12 9LL, opens year-round on Sundays and some Bank Holidays, roughly between 10.30am and 4pm. The nearest convenient parking is at Barley (SD823403, small fee), about a mile away; there is also limited on-street parking near Happy Valley crossroads (SD836399) and Roughlee (SD838399).

Recommended reading: Clarion House: A Monument to a Movement, by Stan Iveson & Roger Brown (Independent Labour Publications/Lancashire Polytechnic Community History Project, 1987) – out of print but available in PDF format on a CD-Rom of the same name from the Clarion House



Roughlee's stone halls and farmhouses to Pendle Hill's whaleback. Slipping down through the mud of a long wet summer to Water Meetings, we took the Pendle Way into Barrowford, entering over its 16th century packhorse bridge.

Much of the CHW makes use of the Pendle, Burnley and Brontë Ways as well as, we found, plenty of surfaced track and blacktop. The climb out of Barrowford followed the B6247, though the subsequent Leeds and Liverpool Canal towpath, met as it passes beneath the M65, offered respite carrying us us into Nelson before depositing us among mills and terraces. That transition from country to traffic, shopping crowds and sirens was somewhat disorientating; the walk out, an uphill trudge along Railway Street, past endless rows of terraced housing, offered a chance to nip up Vernon Street to see the former ILP Socialist Institute (now the Ithaad Community Development Trust's community and multicultural resource centre), original home of the Clarion House's stained glass window.

Beyond an industrial estate, back among fields, we lunched above Walverden Reservoir's ornamental outflow channel. Ancient vaccary fencing led up to Southfield House, Pendle behind our shoulders, before we dipped to stepping stones over the ford at Catlow Bottoms. The next climb, through some of the muddiest farmland I've encountered, carried us to within shouting distance of Colne's Clarion House, now a private dwelling.

More blacktop led past Coldwell Activity Centre and the two Coldwell dams, before the Brontë Way bore us west, through secretive Thursden Valley and past the tumulus on Pike Lowe before slipping into the green, winding gorge between Beadle Hill and Twist Hill. To our right, among a few scrubby trees, stood the crumbling remains of Burnley's Clarion House.

By the time we reached Burnley we'd run out of steam. We caught a



bus to Barrowford, intending to walk from there to Roughlee, but were lucky and picked up another bus back to the van.

Return to the Clarion

When we returned in mid-January to complete the circuit, the landscape couldn't have been much more different. In place of blue skies was low, grey cloud; the green fields were hidden beneath snow. Instead of T-shirts and shorts we wore down jackets, but at least much of September's debilitating mud had frozen hard.

Town centre navigation is invariably trickier than rural map reading. Using traffic lights, office blocks and TK Maxx as handrails, we felt our way from Burnley Bus Station back to the towpath of the semi-frozen

It offers a glimpse of the Industrial Revolution; allow your imagination enough steam and you sense the conditions that surely motivated those independent socialists



Spence Moor and Pendle Hill provide a white backdrop for the trail above the Sabden Brook



Exterior of the Clarion House



Foxen Dole Lane, near Higham



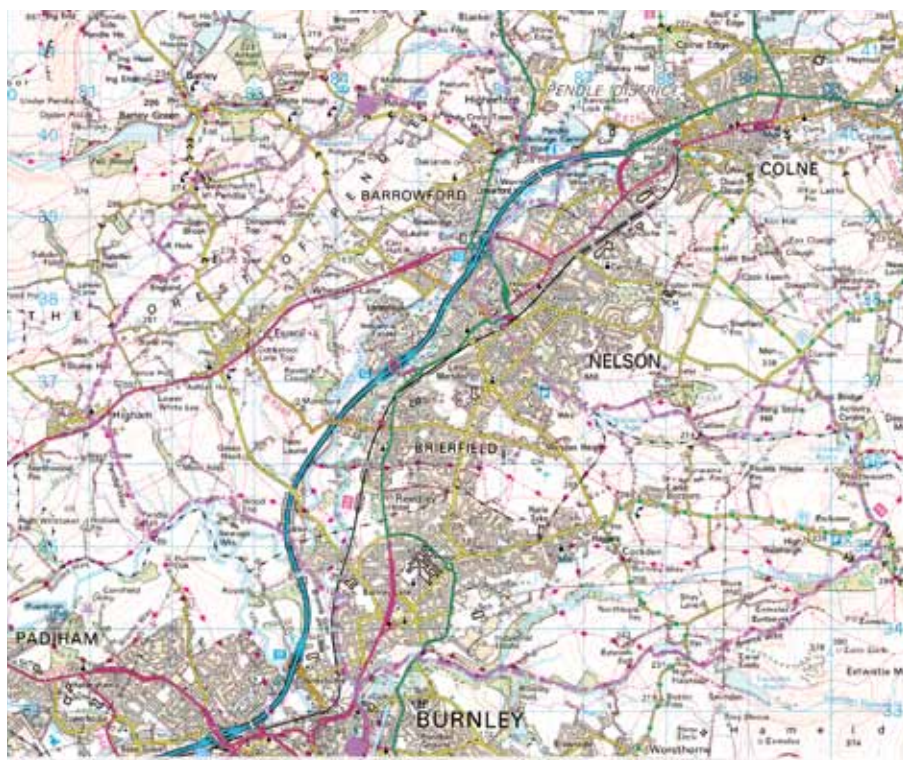
Leeds & Liverpool, letting it guide us out of town past graffitied industrial units, shells of red-brick mills and canalside warehouses. “S’grim up north,” muttered Robert, to a backing track of rumbling M65 traffic.

Eventually, the factories and gas holders gave way to terraces, which in turn gave way to modern housing estates offering a grand view of Pendle Hill. We threaded past smallholdings, crossed a wider Pendle Water and, beyond a malodorous water treatment works, found ourselves back in the countryside by the peaceful River Calder. Here, our warm layers proved too much but after the Pendle Way lifted us swiftly away from the river to above the snowline at Higham, hats were replaced, gloves donned and coats re-zipped.

In Sabden Brook’s valley the cold really hit home. The temperature in this broad-bottomed, water-logged little valley was truly bitter – perhaps 10°C below what we’d experienced by the Calder – lending the place a bleak atmosphere. Rope-tethered, snarling dogs lunged at us from farmhouse doors; faeces-smearing sheep barely had the energy to scuttle away from our advance.

At Newchurch in Pendle, on a bench next to the Witches Galore shop and tearoom, we ate a late lunch, sipped reviving coffee from Robert’s flask, then slipped down through Barley Bank’s trees and fields to the Clarion House. It stands on land sold to Nelson ILP by the descendants of convicted witch Alice Nutter, exactly 300 years after her execution.

Condensation still streamed down the window; the doors, however, were locked. In place of swallows, a lone kestrel perched on a telephone wire, shoulders hunched against the bitter cold. Bunting still adorned the Clarion’s adventure playground, though, and multiple bootprints in the snow suggested the building is a focal hub for walkers whether the kitchen is open or not. Five minutes later, in Roughlee, our walk was over. ▲



INFORMATION

START/FINISH (OFFICIAL)

Nelson town centre, Lancashire (SD860377). Note: CHW guide divides route into seven sections, each of which is accessible by public transport

DISTANCE 36km/22.5 miles

ASCENT 735m/2410ft

MAP OS 1:25,000 Outdoor Leisure sheet 21 (South Pennines)

GUIDE *The Clarion House Way*, by Gwyndon (John) Boardman (downloadable PDF from clarionhouse.org.uk)

TRANSPORT traveline-northwest.co.uk, 0871 200 22 33

INFORMATION visitpendle.com; 01282 856186 (Colne); 01282 677150 (Barrowford, passed on route); 01282 698533 (Nelson, passed on route)

DAY ONE

START Roughlee Booth, Pendle (SD843403)

FINISH Burnley Bus Station (SD841323) (then bus to Barrowford & Roughlee)

DISTANCE 24km/15 miles

ASCENT 480m/1,570ft

DAY TWO

START Burnley Bus Station (SD841323) (by bus from Roughlee via Nelson)

FINISH Roughlee Booth, Pendle (SD843403)

DISTANCE 12km/7.5 miles

ASCENT 285m/930ft