

# Traquair and the Three Brethren

By Andy Crawford

## WALK FACTS

**Distance:** 15½ miles/25km

**Map:** OS 1:50,000 Landranger Sheet 73 or OS 1:25,000 Explorer Sheet 337

**Start/parking:** There is a large car park beside the village hall in Traquair at Grid Ref NT331345. The access road is opposite the War Memorial Cross at the junction of the BB709 and B7062 signposted to the school.

**Grading:** This uncomplicated walk is in the rolling hills of the Scottish Borders countryside and includes sections of both the Southern Upland Way and the Minchmoor Road. It is suitable for fit adults and older children, allowing some 5-6 hours plus time for stops.

There is very little shelter from the elements, besides trees, therefore care must be taken to ensure proper footwear and protective clothing is worn. A good summer route but in winter weather or low cloud, a map and compass, and the ability to navigate with them effectively may be required due to the many paths which intersect the route. Sheep and cattle graze so dogs must be kept on a lead. It is not suitable for mountain bikes.

The tiny hamlet of Traquair is home to the oldest inhabited house in Scotland with deeds dating back to the 12th century. Traquair House was a castle for the Kings of Scotland and its structure remains basically unchanged from when it was built in the 17th century. The loyal, Jacobite Fifth Earl of Traquair - of the Maxwell Stuart family who are still in residence - closed the impressive Bear Gates at the top of the drive when Bonnie Prince Charlie departed from the castle after the Jacobite uprising was crushed at Culloden in 1746. He swore then that they would not be opened again until the Stuarts were restored to the throne. They have remained closed ever since.

At the farthest out point of the walk stands a cluster of cairns that resembles three old men conducting an earnest conversation on a street corner. Each cairn stands around 10 feet/3 metres high and marks the summit of a hill that bears their name - Three Brethren. The carefully constructed cairns, that dwarf the white Ordnance Survey triangulation pillar, symbolise the meeting of three old states: Yair and Philiphaugh districts and the Burgh of Selkirk. Each year the Selkirk Standard Bearer and his entourage ride on horseback to the Brethren as they engage in the common riding tradition, marking out the traditional boundaries.

The Minchmoor Road is an ancient droving and trading route dating back at least to medieval times and is now a recognised Right of Way forming part of a network of tracks including the Southern Upland Way long-distance route that continues east to Cockburnspath. Near to the highest point on this route, above Traquair, the road passes a spring called the "Cheese Well," haunted by the fairies. It is said that travellers passing the well should leave an offering, usually cheese - hence the name - to the Fairies or "Wee Folk" who are supposed to haunt the area, to assure themselves of a safe and successful journey. The Cheese Well may have been a pagan shrine in the past, whose veneration has since fallen to superstition. As the Minchmoor Road was notorious for bandits, travellers probably needed all the luck they could get!

The Southern Upland Way's future is under review as the planners seek to make it less of a "wilderness experience" and change the route so that it takes in more places of habitation, where walkers can enjoy a good meal and a shower during the long expedition. The theory is that more would use it, as is the case with the vastly more popular West Highland Way from Glasgow (Milngavie) to Fort William.

The most physically demanding part of the walk is encountered at the start - almost immediately after leaving the car park through a gap in the hedge beside the Southern Upland Way Information Board and turning left. The road rises past a fingerpost indicating the route to the School and Birkinshaw to the right and continues ahead on the Minchmoor Road. Follow the wide path as it rises steadily uphill for just over a mile crossing first one intersection and then up to a second at Grid Ref: NT347336.

From here, the wide track that continues straight ahead is surfaced with small, sharp stones and is uncomfortable to walk on - even in stout boots - so, unless a visit to the Cheese Well on the south side of the footpath is preferred, follow the way-marked Southern Upland Way, just to the right, through a newly forested area. The way marks bear a thistle carved within a hexagon and usually have a yellow direction arrow beneath.

The climb ends at Grid Ref NT360335, at just below 1,800 feet/549m (*the OS 1:50,000 Landranger Sheet 73 shows a spot height of 512m at this point, but the GPS read 549m*) and 1.8 miles/2.9km into the walk - a gradient of almost 1:8 - where there is a rest area offering good views of the vast area back towards Traquair now that a large expanse of the forest has recently been felled (July 2004). The enthusiastic 'purist' can bear right up to the trig point on the summit of Minch Moor a modest 60 feet/18m higher.

A welcome, if somewhat short descent amongst tall, shady trees leads to an intersection of roads where a way-marker on the opposite side, ahead, indicates the route continuing upwards at first through a break in the forest, then over Hare Law and out onto the open moor to reach a fingerpost sign at Grid Ref NT388326.

Follow the left-hand track from here to the summit of Brown Knowe that is marked by a small cairn (more a pile of stones). Negotiate either the gate or the stile then begin the descent - gentle at first then becoming slightly steeper to reach the northwest end of a small stand of trees in a 'trench'. Once through another gate, a pleasant grass track leads uphill and then contours more gently to the north side of Broomy Law passing a ladder stile across the wall where a signpost indicates the route to the Broadmeadows Youth Hostel.

Less than a mile east from here is the summit of Three Brethren. To reach it, head towards the conifer plantation and continue along the track to its right. Enjoy the vista at the summit then return to the ladder stile, this time crossing it and descending, quite steeply at times, to reach a walled enclosure confining a stand of trees where a way-marker post indicates a right turn. A couple of raised wooden walkways over what was formerly a boggy section lead alongside the wall to a gate into a pleasant birch wood and terminating at the Broadmeadows Youth Hostel - the first SYHA hostel, opened in 1931. It is open March to October. Click [here](#) for more information.

Follow the wide, rough road past and away from the hostel, downhill, to reach the busy A708 road at Yarrowford. Just before this, however, be sure to look over into the untidy-looking pond on the right to see the giant carp swimming!

On reaching the road, turn right then right again a few steps farther on where a SROW Right of Way sign indicates the route to the Minchmoor Road. Continue up this road and to the right some wooden garages, to where a steep flight of steps rises up, left, through trees to reach a rough, wider track. Keep on this track until reaching a gate leading out onto a grassy track through pastureland and following alongside a wall.

From here on, the route of the Minchmoor Road is easy to follow as it wends its way gently uphill to the fingerpost sign passed earlier in the walk at Grid Ref NT388326. Turn left, westwards, from here and follow the route back to Traquair.