

## Christmas Tree Festival – Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2021

After storm Barra had blown through the area during the previous three days bringing a plethora of rain, this early winter walk set forth from Beckfoot Lane on a promising and dry morning. The seasoned walkers who had gathered were full of anticipation as they set out on a new adventure to the Christmas Tree Festival being held at St James' church in Thornton. Although none of the group felt able to admit it, I guess some did hold the secret hope that they might also be able to meet Santa but he would not be in attendance until the evening and we would unfortunately be too early to see him!

Kevin the walk leader was first to arrive having walked the five miles to the start from Idle, leaving at 6.00am! Chris was next to arrive and we saw a skein of geese fly over, we assume heading south for the winter? Soon as the dawn arrived the whole group had assembled, with Vera after a mad dash just about making the 8.00am start. The picturesque Beckfoot Bridge was soon reached, allowing us to cross Harden Beck, without using the ford, which was raging from the recent rain and thus keeping our feet dry. Turning east we quickly crossed Shipley Golf course to reach Ruin Bank Wood, with its' severe climb, but it being early in the day we were able to scale the hill with long strides and the group managed to stay together. Crossing Lee Lane, we were soon dropping down into Wilsden, only to face a second climb of the day over Wilsden Hill via Nab Lane which was unfortunately blocked by council workmen carrying out repairs to the road. After a little negotiation, they kindly reversed their vehicle back along the narrow road to allow us safe passage. A steady descent brought us to Hallas Bridge, where we took Hallas Lane towards Hewenden Reservoir. Picking up the railway trail towards the viaduct, we took the path towards East Manywells Farm, before leaving the reservoir and following Milking Hole Beck along the woodland trail through Buck Park Wood, where the ground was covered with autumn leaves still crisp and in places laying undisturbed. On exiting the woods we crossed the A629 by Field Head House and followed meandering paths through at times boggy fields to reach Thornton Moor Reservoir, where we picked up the Bronte Way to Denholme Clough. Keeping on the Bronte Way, through Morton End and Well Heads we were soon dropping down into Thornton village and our much anticipated lunch stop.

Passing the house in Market Street, where the four Bronte children, (Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne), were born, we reached our destination, St James' church, where Patrick Bronte was the priest before taking over the parsonage at Haworth in 1820. The present day church was built in the 1870's opposite the old Bell Chapel, where Patrick preached between May 1815 and April 1820. The font where all the children were baptised was moved to the new church and is still being used. Today's walk though was not a Bronte sisters' walk but a Christmas tree walk and inside the church, there was a magnificent display of 50 Christmas trees, decorated by local and national charities, primary schools and guide/scouting groups. With it also being 12.15 pm, a well-earned lunch stop was also needed and there was a busy café in the church providing hot roast sandwiches along with teas, coffees and cake. This is where experience came to the fore. The old heads choose table three and were served quickly. The novices sat on table eight, and might still be waiting to be served for all I know! I'll let the reader deduce who sat on which table from the photographic evidence!

Fortified by the food and drink consumed and relieved of all our loose change in the collection boxes, we were quickly on our way heading back towards Cottingley. The main aim for the afternoon was to arrive back at our starting point before nightfall to alleviate the need to use our head torches and with it being December darkness would start to fall about 4.00pm. Fortunately we had walked two thirds of the way getting to Thornton and it was a shorter more direct route back, but nevertheless as the walk leader pointed out as we departed the church, time was of the essence. Climbing out of Thornton the pace had quickened and we were now moving swiftly as the group felt the sting of the words push into their aching feet. We were soon passing Salt Pie Farm, dropping down to the footbridge over Pitty Beck before climbing again to Aldersley Farm. Crossing Moorhouse Moor we were greeted by a field of Alpacas at Sandal Farm. We then cut across to Back Lane via Shay House Farm passing Gazeby Hall, which is presently being renovated to reach Shay Gate. Initially following Shay Lane we cut through the riding stables to Norr Hill which provides panoramic views across the Aire Valley. As we stopped for a final photograph at the trig point we were bathed in the late afternoon sunshine. We were though now on our final descent back to Cottingley, crossing Lee Lane for a second time and completing the walk in daylight, arriving back at our cars by 3.20pm.

We had again been lucky with the weather, it had rained the three previous days and was forecast to rain again over the coming days. GPS's were checked and 17 miles agreed. Another fantastic Thursday walk completed with banter and good humour. It was pleasing to see so many old faces from the autumn series out again plus three newbies, Sue, Iain and Julia, who were intrigued to see what they had been missing!