



A pack for your troubles...

Words and pictures by [Chris Butterfield](#)

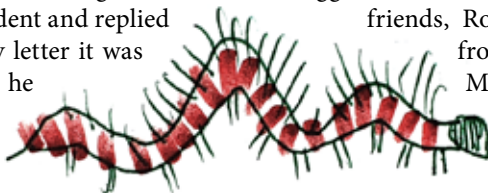
“**Y**ou live in alien surroundings, love. Don’t let your roots grow too deep. There are better places than Brighthouse.”

Margaret Ainley was, by now, used to Alfred Wainwright’s straight to the point responses, and dry sense of humour. She corresponded with AW for almost twenty years, between 1971 and 1990, but never met him once. Through he was a great correspondent and replied promptly to every letter it was obvious that he wasn’t a people person and

never entertained the idea of meeting in person.

I first read about Margaret in Hunter Davies’s Wainwright *Biography* published in 1995. Several of her early letters appeared in the book but I never knew of her whereabouts until a good friend and member of the Alfred Wainwright Books & Memorabilia Facebook group, Maggie Allan, mentioned that two friends, Roger and Ann Hiley, from Loweswater, knew Margaret well.

Within days, I had arranged



to meet up with Margaret in Brighouse, West Yorkshire, where she had lived for the most of her life with her husband, Richard, who had recently died, and their daughter Catherine.

Margaret and Richard were both keen walkers, and her first letter to AW was in early 1971. She informed him that when ascending Graystones, in the North Western Fells, it was now possible to reach Spout Force without the aid of a machete. AW responded almost immediately by thanking her for the up-to-date route information. That initial letter sparked a writing relationship that was to last many years.

Richard and Margaret were expecting their first baby, and AW was very keen that the child be introduced to the hills at the earliest opportunity. Catherine Ainley was born in the spring of 1972 and AW was delighted. He insisted that she should be taken to the top of Smearsett Scar, featured in his recent Walks in Limestone Country publication, before the end of the year. They took AW's advice and, on October 10, 1972, Catherine bagged her first summit. Margaret still owns the same first edition book they used on the walk that day.

AW insisted that he would buy Catherine her

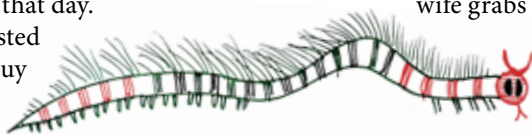
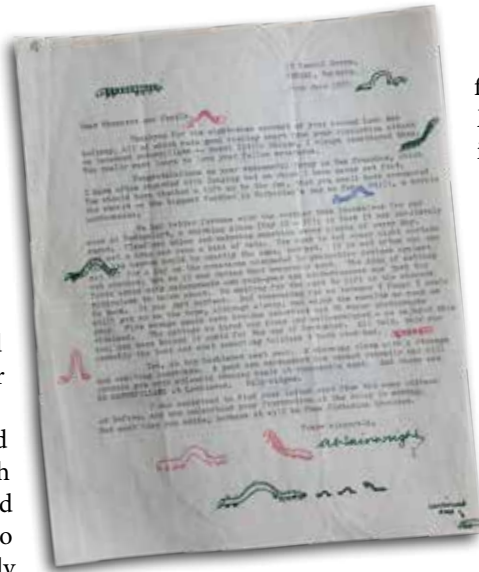
first rucksack, and Margaret asked AW if Catherine could collect it in person when she was old enough – but the rucksack arrived in Brighouse in the next post. Margaret smiled. When Catherine was a little older, she used AW's rucksack for all her outdoor adventures.

Nearly forty-five years later, she still has it in her possession. This is just one of many examples of the generosity of AW.

In the following years' correspondence, AW spoke openly about his passion for Scotland's spectacular mountains, and about the various projects he was working on, including his now famous Coast to Coast Walk book and Westmorland Heritage.

One weekend, when Richard was playing cricket in Kendal, Margaret found AW's address in the local phone book. AW didn't mind Margaret writing to him directly at home; he just about forgave her, with a cheeky warning: "Since you have discovered that I live in a house and not a room at the Gazette office there seems little point in further pretence. Yes, write to me here if you prefer but don't get too affectionate; my wife grabs the post first."

Margaret would go on to share many of

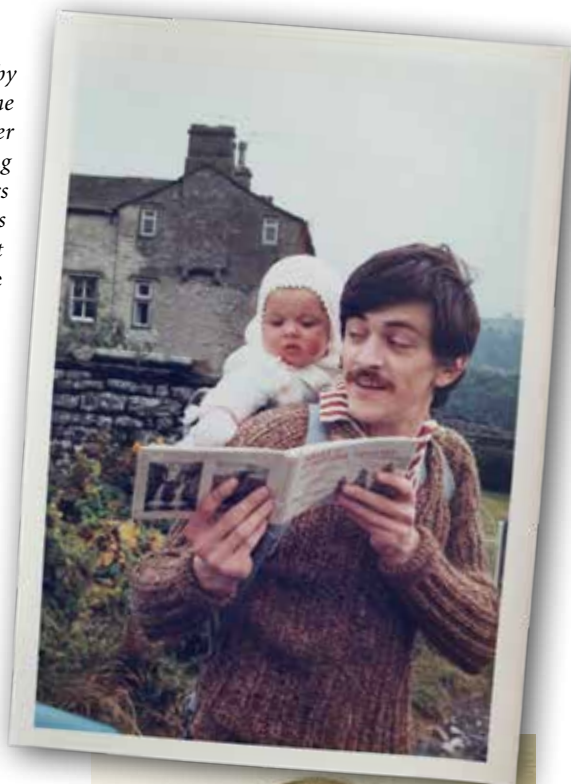


Opening page: the rucksack given by Alfred Wainwright to young Catherine Ainley. Clockwise, from top left: the letter from AW, dated June 25, 1980, teasing Margaret Ainley about the caterpillars of Loch Awe; Richard Ainley prepares to take Catherine up her first summit guided by AW's Walks in Limestone Country; Margaert Ainley today; one of AW's handdrawn "innocent caterpillars"

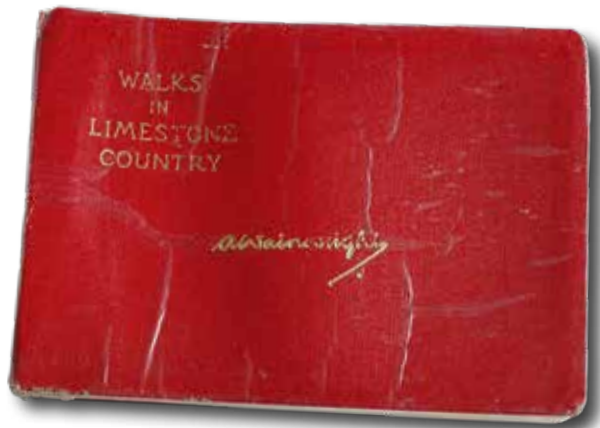
her Scottish holiday stories with AW. One was spent at Cladich on Loch Awe, in Argyll. It was made memorable by hundreds of caterpillars hanging from the trees, which Margaret found loathsome. AW teased her: "Thank you for the eight-page account of your second Loch Awe holiday, all of which made good reading apart from your vindictive attack on innocent caterpillars – sweet little things, I always considered them. You must really learn to love your fellow creatures." AW would then go on to litter his pages full of coloured caterpillars, just to wind her up.

It wasn't long before Margaret revealed to AW her love for steam trains but he was horrified by the thought of the smoky trains tearing round the countryside: "Trains are a pre-occupation of advancing years. The fells are for the active and young in heart. You have suddenly become middle-aged. A happy Christmas. Sorry I haven't a card with a train on it. Mine are all of mountains."

In 1983, Catherine, then aged eleven, wrote the first of many letters to AW. She received a lovely letter in return, "Do you remember the first hill you climbed? I



Right: Margaret's treasured first edition copy of Alfred Wainwright's Walks in Limestone Country. Below: another letter from AW, dated July 12, 1980



do. It was Smearsett Scar in Ribblesdale. In those days your mum used to like me.”

In 1984, Richard was offered a new job in Norfolk and the family uprooted from Brighouse and moved south. AW was not best pleased: “Norfolk is not the place to fritter away your life,” he wrote. “You are a creature of the hills and should be amongst them. Norfolk is a foreign country and you are an exile.” Things did not work out in Norfolk, and they returned sixteen months later, to AW’s delight. “Dear Margaret, Great news!! Back to the hills and moors and steam engines. Now you can start living again.” AW suddenly started to like Brighouse.

The correspondence continued until February 20, 1990. AW was pleased that Margaret enjoyed his new Coast to Coast TV series. He had had fun making the series but was disappointed that he could not reply to every letter that came flooding in afterwards. He acknowledged that his walking days were over and that he had to sustain himself on memories alone. His final words of wisdom to Margaret were: “Enjoy this wonderful

life we have. But take my advice – keep away from Norfolk.”

After AW’s death, Margaret went to meet Betty at Kapellan, the animal rescue centre at Grayrigg, near Kendal, to which AW devoted much of his time and money. She gave Betty some King Alfred daffodil bulbs to plant there and was given a tour of the premises and spent time with the animals. She asked if she thought AW would have agreed to meet up. “Perhaps he would have,” Betty replied.

During the few hours I spent with Margaret, I could sense that she cherished her friendship with AW during those years; she even named her cat after him. It was a joy to hold all those original letters, which have been filed neatly, in date order. Seeing the rucksack that AW had bought for Catherine all those years ago gave a human side to the story: it appears that the man often accused of misogyny and of being unsociable was capable also of being a kind, generous and gentle soul. ■

