

## Archives



A family from Brighouse struck up an usual friendship with fell walker and guide book author Alfred Wainwright who declared there “are better places”.

“You live in alien surroundings, love. Don’t let your roots grow too deep. There are better places than Brighouse,” was how the author put it to Margaret Ainley during their correspondence.

Margaret Ainley was, by that time, used to Alfred Wainwright’s straight to the point responses, and dry sense of humour. She corresponded with him for almost 20 years, between 1971 and 1990, but they never met.

Despite Wainwright being a great correspondent who replied promptly to every letter, it was obvious 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 her whereabouts until members of the Alfred Wainwright Books & Memorabilia Facebook group, Maggie Allan, and Roger and Ann Hiley, from Loweswater, told of her.

# A relationship made in letters

*Alfred Wainwright’s Yorkshire archivist, **Chris Butterfield**, reveals a touching correspondence for the author.*

Within days, I had arranged to meet Margaret in Brighouse, West Yorkshire, where she had lived for 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 Alfred Wainwright was in early 1971, when 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.

He responded almost immediately

by thanking her for the up-to-date information. That initial letter sparked a writing relationship that was to last many years.

Richard and Margaret were expecting their first baby, and Wainwright was very keen for that child be introduced to the hills at the earliest opportunity. Catherine Ainley was born in the April of 1972 and Wainwright 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 the advice, and on October 10, 1972, Catherine had bagged her first summit. Margaret still owns the same first edition book used on the walk that day.

Wainwright insisted he would buy Catherine her first rucksack, and Margaret asked if Catherine could collect it in person when she was old enough – but the rucksack arrived in Brighouse in the next post.

When Catherine was a little older, she used the rucksack for all her outdoor adventures. Nearly

45 years later, she still has it in her possession.

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

Having been sending her letters to the *Gazette* office, one weekend, when Richard was playing cricket in Kendal, Margaret found Wainwright’s home address in the local phone book.

He issued a cheeky warning when her letter arrived.

“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 her Scottish holiday stories with the author and one spent at Cladich on Lock Awe, in Argyll was particularly memorable.

Hundreds of caterpillars were hanging from the trees, which Margaret said she found “loathsome”.

## Wildlife

## Keep an eye on treasures in sky

Jono Leadley

@YorksWildlife

Swallows, swifts and house martins feed and breed in the vicinity of our homes and we need to look up to see them as they spend most of their time on the wing.

We also see buzzards, sparrowhawks and increasing numbers of red kites soaring overhead. You don't need much beyond a comfy seat and a view of the sky to spot some of these swooping birds. Binoculars – or better still a good camera – will help, just in case something flies over that you can't immediately identify.

By mid-May we are coming towards the end of spring bird migration, although some species that breed in higher latitudes may still be on the move. Seabirds and wading birds are heading towards the Arctic where they will nest, and instead of following the coast they often cut across land to save on journey times.

Lots of wading birds such as whimbrels, common sandpipers and grey plovers have distinctive calls which can help identify them – whimbrels make a series of rapid, piping whistles, whereas grey plovers make a trisyllabic 'tee-loo-eee' sound.

Other charismatic birds like ospreys follow river valleys and even major north-to-south roads like the A1 which provide them with navigational cues.

An eye on the sky may reveal

a passing avian prize like this; several lucky observers have even seen white-tailed eagles passing over during lockdown. Also known as the sea eagle, this majestic giant is the UK's largest bird of prey and was once thought to be extinct – you don't get a much bigger bird-watching prize than a sight of a sea eagle.

Many migratory flights take place under the cover of darkness to avoid the attentions of predators. During this time, listening out for the calls of birds is a way of recording what is passing overhead. Some birders use specialist equipment to record what

passes over while they sleep.

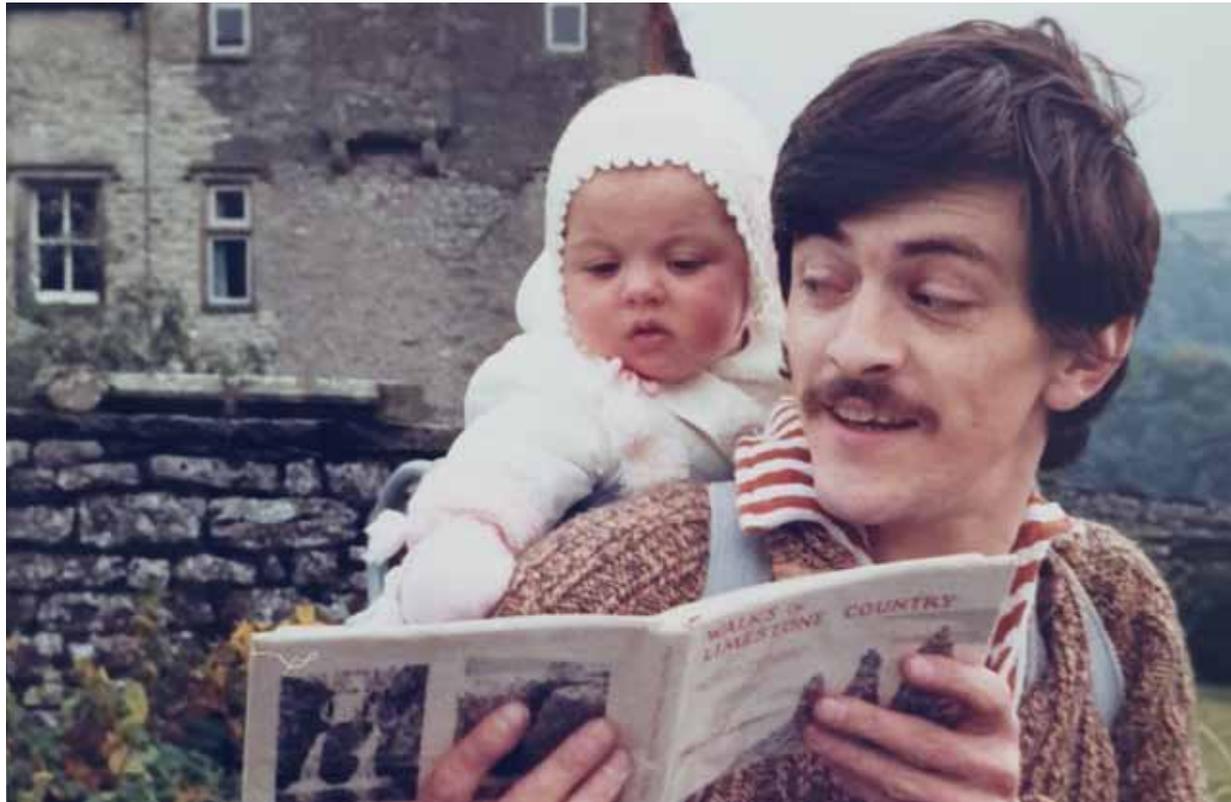
This careful sound mapping has revealed a wealth of information about bird migration which was until recently unknown.

At the beginning of April, birders recorded an incredible movement of common scoters (a small dark sea-duck) over Yorkshire. The scoters were moving from their wintering grounds off the west coast of England and Wales, across to the North Sea to their breeding grounds in the far north of Europe and Russia.

For a few nights, thousands of scoters were tracked heading inland just after dusk and then along three major routes across country, one of which passed from the Fylde coast along the M62 to the Humber. This led to many Yorkshire birdwatchers adding common scoter to their garden list.



**PRIZED SIGHTING:** Above, the sea eagle, the UK's largest bird of prey, has been seen recently along with ospreys, inset, on their travels.



**WONDERFUL LAND:** Main picture, Smearsett Scar which Alfred Wainwright had encouraged the Ainleys to take their daughter up as her first fell climb. Above, Richard with Catherine. Left, the trusty rucksack and, right, Margaret Ainley.



## WAINWRIGHT

- Alfred Wainwright was born in Lancashire in 1907
- An avid fell walker, he created the first guide to the Coast to Coast Walk – a 192-mile trek which passes through three national parks, the Yorkshire Dales National Park, North York Moors National Park and the Lake District National Park.
- It remains popular as a guide today.
- Alfred fell in love with the Lake District and moved to Kendal where he wrote the seven-volume Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells published between 1955 and 1966.

despite his earlier misgivings about Brighouse.

“Norfolk is not the place to fritter away your life. You are a creature of the hills and should be amongst them. Norfolk is a foreign country and you are an exile.”

As it happened they returned to West Yorkshire 16 months later,

Wainwright teased her saying: “Thank you for the eight-page account of your second Lock 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.”

He would then go on to litter his pages with beautifully coloured caterpillars just to wind her up.

It wasn't long before Margaret revealed to Wainwright her love for steam trains, but he was horrified at the thought of the smoky trains tearing round the countryside.

In 1983, Catherine then aged eleven, wrote the first of her own letters to the man who had furnished her with her first rucksack. Receiving a lovely letter in return.

“Do you remember the first hill you climbed?” It asked.

“I 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. The whole family was uprooted from Brighouse and moved south. Wainwright was not impressed,