

One Hundred and Ninety Nine Steps by Glenn Malkin, Hornsea

On a dim November morning, with the wind blowing softly and the North Sea mist arching up the cliffs to the churchyard, a casual visitor to St Mary's Church at Whitby would be forgiven for thinking this would be a place for spirits to roam silently amongst the gravestones.

To me though, this is a place of beauty and tranquillity. The ancient Norman church steadfastly gazes over the mouth of the Esk in the shadow of the ruined Benedictine Abbey in this wonderful corner of coastal Yorkshire. Peering down onto the red tiled rooftops of old Whitby I can see the small cottage where I was born, overlooking the harbour walls and bathed in the aroma from the smoke house where kippers are sold to enthusiastic tourists and local restaurants owners.

And linking the two are the 199 steps, a steep incline of stone, trodden for centuries by worshippers, pilgrims and, more recently, tourists. It has been my custom for many years now to walk up those steps each morning, as today, usually pausing half way for a brief rest. I frequently turn around to look at the changing scene as the view unfolds below me with each step, the far side of the harbour revealing itself slowly. I continue upwards, towards the little church, its crenellated square tower looming proudly above its ancient walls. Surrounding the church is the graveyard. Sandstone markers are now frequently unreadable after centuries of rain and wind and snow. And beyond the gravestones, the grass leads to the edge of the shale cliffs, looming high above the waves crashing into their base in a constant taunt. I often go to the flimsy fence, erected to prevent small children from wandering too close to the edge, to look down towards the sea and the buildings at the edge of the town. It still thrills me to see the gulls flying below me, their white backs stretched out as they glide through the salt laden air before wheeling round and out to sea to find food in the dark expanse beyond the breaking waves. Below, on the rocky beach, I often see tourists searching the stones and rocks below for the fossils which can be plentiful after a storm has released them from the grasp of the east cliffs. It is a dangerous pursuit though, since rocks can fall at any time as the cliffs slowly erode their way back towards the churchyard. It is said that human remains have been released in this way from the cliff top near the church, tumbling down onto the narrow streets near the harbour wall, but I have never seen such a thing in all the years I have been climbing these steps.

As I reach the gate into the churchyard this morning, the sun trying to burn through the dark mist and the outline of the fallen abbey walls ahead of me, I notice a solitary figure stooped over a tombstone in the graveyard, close to the base of the tower. As I approach I can see he is dressed almost entirely in black, his bushy white beard standing out and framing an old and worn face. Leaning heavily on a walking stick, his dark overcoat wrapped around him against the cold morning air, he carefully studies the eroding words on an old headstone. I pause at a distance so as not to disturb him but there is something strange about the intensity of his gaze at those carved letters. I sit on a bench by the path and nonchalantly take in the view over the town whilst studying the old man. Beneath the heavy overcoat his sweater rolls beneath his beard and his battered peaked hat gives him the air of an old sea captain, or at least how the summer tourists would expect an old sea captain to appear. Still he stares at the stone, motionless and slightly stooped. A light wisp of the morning mist momentarily plays around his ankles, shrouding his worn boots before disappearing. I cough lightly as

I don't want to startle him if he suddenly spots me sitting here but he remains still and silent, deep in thought.

Then it is I who is startled as a small dog, a Jack Russell or similar breed, races around from behind the church yapping excitedly. He narrowly misses the feet of the old man as he runs straight towards me, yapping loudly. The dog halts abruptly a foot or two away from where I sit and stares at me, suddenly quiet. His head tilts expectantly, so I offer him my hand in the hope of a stroke of his white and tan coat. Instead he just looks at me and then slowly turns and walks back towards the old Sea Captain, as I have light-heartedly chosen to believe the old man to be. The stranger then moves for the first time, tilting his head to look at the dog who walks up to him and stands obediently by his leg. The man smiles through his great beard but says nothing and I only then realise the dog belongs to him. He slowly stands up straight and takes a final glance at the tombstone before turning away and silently walking down the path away from me towards the rear of the church.

I stand and casually walk towards the place where the old man had stood and turn to examine the stone which had been of such intense interest to him. The sandstone letters are beginning to erode but still quite legible: 'Cecilia Thornton Passed away 3rd November 1956 aged 23. Beloved wife of Captain John Thornton of Whitby. Taken tragically in . . .' there the erosion and dampness has caused the stone to flake and so the history of poor Cecilia now starts to fade into nothingness like her young bones beneath the grass.

I look up and peer along the path but the sea captain and his dog have disappeared around the corner of the church. I walk on a little further into the graveyard behind the church. It is larger than the area at the front, but the stones are far more eroded, many leaning slightly, some having fallen completely. Here they are exposed directly to the North Sea weather, no ancient walls to protect them from the rain and wind. In the summer you will see tourists milling around these tombs, children playing between the monuments and all peering at the disappearing words to find the oldest or most interesting tale, only to shout their companions to come and take a look. There are hints of stories of heroism and love, sadness and tragedy, exploration and glory, some dating back over three hundred years. So many lives lost at sea, monuments erected above boneless graves. Family names are repeated on multiple stones, generations living and dying in Whitby and the surrounding villages. But somehow, despite the gloom of this autumn morning, this place always lifts my spirits. Such beauty surrounds this quiet resting place. The laughter and shouts of the children in the summer remind me of the joy of the life we have, and that although we will all end up beneath this turf, or somewhere similar, we are blessed to be able to smell that sea air, warm our skin with the golden light of the sun and gaze across the cliff tops to the broad horizon of water dreaming of distant lands and exciting adventures.

As I walk further around the church I look around for the old man and his dog, but I can see none. The morning sunshine is rapidly burning off the mist and my eyes search for the Sea Captain in vain. The gentle breeze caresses my face as I look along the path towards the gate and on towards the entrance to the Abbey but there is not a soul to be seen. It is as if the old man and his dog have just disappeared along with the morning mist. A solitary gull circles overhead, screeching a sombre greeting before gliding off over towards the Abbey ruins on the lookout perhaps for tourists with sandwiches or other titbits to beg for. But the cold season and early hour disappoint him.

Intrigued, I walk slowly back around the church to the front, pausing briefly only to look impassively at a crumbling and cracked tomb, now being taken over by grass and weeds almost masking the little

iron rail around the once fine memorial. I turn the final corner expecting to see the old man either sitting on my bench or even back at the grave of Cecilia, but he is nowhere to be seen. I walk up to the heavy oak doors of the church and turn the handle thinking they may be within, but it is locked and bolted.

Am I losing my mind? Can it be I imagined the old Sea Captain? But his dog approached me and I heard its barking, so it surely can't just be a trick of the light or my imagination playing games with me. I walk on, back around the building to the rear graveyard once more. I stand peering around the crumbling tombs in case the old man was stooping to read, hidden by the toppling stones. A seagull calls again over the clifftops and I look over towards the little fence. There, stationary and quiet, stands the old Sea Captain. His dog sat faithfully and quietly by his side as the old man stares across to the wide watery horizon. I can't explain why, but I am relieved. Perhaps he is dreaming of his past adventures. Perhaps he is mourning the loss of his young wife Cecilia (for my imaginings have linked their pasts in love, happiness and sorrow). Or perhaps he and his companion just breathe in the bleak but powerful beauty of this glorious spot, high above the breaking waves and the rooftops of this wonderful place.

I turn again, back the way I came, and walk slowly along the path back towards the bench feeling the growing warmth of the sun on the back of my neck. As I do, a tombstone catches my attention and I turn my head. I walk carefully towards it, avoiding stepping on the resting places of my townsfolk, though they will have ceased caring centuries ago. The stone is large and old and very badly eroded. I touch the etched words on the side facing the church, but even here, sheltered as it is by a nearby wall on one side and the church on the other, I can't make out the inscription. Somehow only the date is recognisable – 1801. But it doesn't matter to me that the words have eroded, though others who peer at the grave will never know whose memory lays here. This stone was erected by a mother and father to their son, William, who, like so many in the history of this town, was taken by the sea. He was only young. Twenty eight. But he loved the sea and could have been nothing other than a fisherman like his father and grandfather. But now he spends his mornings slowly climbing the 199 steps up from his cottage to the church, walking around the quiet graveyard and taking eternal pleasure from this beautiful place.

The sun shines brightly now. The old Sea Captain and his dog walk slowly back past Cecilia's resting place towards the steps, comforted, peaceful and alone except for a silent soaring gull above.