

Deep Snow

Alistair Pitty

Note: This is the last work Alistair ever composed towards the end of 2023. He could no longer type nor always think clearly, so he dictated it to me (Alice) while I prompted him for details. It recalls three of his enduring passions: landscapes, cycling, and locomotives.

For me, the most memorable rides are amongst the earliest, relating to my birthplace, Mottram-in-Longdendale where I lived until my mid-teens. This small village is right in the north-east corner of Cheshire, only a couple of miles to the east of Stalybridge, in Lancashire, and Glossop, in Derbyshire. Longdendale itself is a deep valley, running due east-west, and the head streams of its River Etherow in Yorkshire. The village was quite high above the valley. My infant school was at about 700 feet above sea level (asl), and in the heavy snow falls of 1947, the lee-side drifts came up to the upper windows at home.



Alistair's childhood home
photo from the family album

A feature of the crossroads at the centre of the village was the regular meeting place of local worthies outside the corner by the bakery. This was so exposed that the conductor wit of the local North-Western bus to Stalybridge, after grinding up the hill from Hollingworth, used to shout "Pneumonia Corner". This witticism was prompted by the collection of local retired gents who gathered there most evenings for a general chat. He was probably unaware that there was a grid down to the basement of the bakery so warm aromas wafted upwards to the gathering point.

Another key usage of Pneumonia Corner was to post a blackboard, when relevant in mid-winter, with the chalked instruction "Roads ahead blocked". This referred to the moorland routes, Woodhead and Snake Pass, over towards Barnsley and Sheffield. For a cyclist this was a tempting invitation to pedal on traffic-free gradients. On one occasion, up at about 1450' asl at Woodhead, with snow drifts about 3 feet deep, cut back on either side of the road, I gazed down to Dunford Bridge railway station. This was at the eastern end of the tunnels, and with Yorkshire beyond. Back home, I called in at near-neighbours who had recently bought a TV set, in anticipation of the Coronation. I was astonished to see that it featured the view of Dunford Bridge, exactly as I'd seen it a couple of hours earlier.

On reflection, I realised that a new tunnel on the railway line had been cut to allow new diesel locomotives to haul larger trains through the tunnel. This had justified a ceremony for this enlarged tunnel. These new diesel engines were replacing the older steam locomotives.

The first of these new engines had been named Tommy, a famous precursor of its class that, after its years of service was on display at the National Railways Museum in York, and from there went on tours on the continent as a working exhibit. I saw Tommy on display at the museum. I recognised its nameplate from earlier years. (Note: there should be a booklet at the YRM about where Tommy went on tour).

Dunford Bridge was a good vantage point to see the larger locomotives, not just passenger trains, but in particular heavy coal trains coming from Wath-upon-Dern to the Mottram sidings where coal trains were shunted into several different directions in the Manchester area. Even though the sidings were at a distance from the village of Mottram, they were well known as the Mottram Sidings. Throughout the night one could hear the backwards and forwards movements as these sub-divisions of the coal trains were shunted about.

The Western flank of the Snake Pass was a famous route because of the design by 'Blind Jack of Knaresborough' who designed a series of gentle curves up the hill which was a striking feature of the Glossop vista.

One of the features of this cycle route was being able to enjoy the brake-free descent through drifts either side of the road getting lower and less conspicuous. This was in contrast to the eastwards descent down a ravine with sharp twisting corners, which had nothing attractive about it and was not an enticing end to the ride.



Former Hull Uni student, Dr. Jim Milne, painted this watercolour of Snake Pass for Alistair as a Christmas present (2023)

Occasionally, and not in winter, I used to ride a circuit up the Snake Pass (the gradual gradient) and swoop down into the bottom of the upper Derwent valley, which was used to train the WWII bombers and featured in films of the re-creation of the Dambusters. From the base of the Derwent valley I would cycle up the lower slopes of the southern Pennines, into the moorland, before descending into Sheffield.

Completing this loop, I still have memories of the suburbs of Sheffield, and one of the main features was a new tower block right in the city centre. It was a new development of urban planning at that time. To the north was the Sheffield Wednesday football ground. It was quite exciting for me to go within a stone's throw of Sheffield Wednesday's football club. As a round trip it was about 50 miles.

Many thanks to Oliver Dixon, editor of Quondam, the 'very occasional' journal of the Oxford University Cycling Club, for allowing me to reproduce excerpts of my father's contributions.