



West Cumbria Road Trip #2: South

Cleator Moor and the Red Hills

Take the road to Egremont out of Whitehaven, and [follow the signs to Cleator Moor on the road through Hensingham](#), a small suburb of Whitehaven. On a clear day approaching Cleator Moor by this route affords stunning views of the town with the backcloth of the Cumbrian mountains as you descend towards [Keekle](#). [Blink and you will miss it](#).

As you arrive in Cleator Moor there is not much sense of the atmosphere of days past, as [remembered by the writer David Gaffney](#) - abandoned spoil heaps, huge cavities in the ground where mines once operated, stagnant pools of water, and so on - whose novel, *All The Places I've Ever Lived*, is set here. The artist [Conrad Atkinson](#), too, also recalled its effect on the senses, and describes growing up in a town that had been

coloured red by “the vast hidden body of iron ore under the town,” which inevitably made its way into the air people breathed and, indeed, the cultural atmosphere in general. There were “paths lined with crystals from the mines, crushed red gravel on the footpaths through the town” and “doorsteps of polished hematite.” [Atkinson’s miner’s monument, from the 1980s](#), can be found behind the town library.

Other remains of that vanished world can be found scattered all over the place, but in the rather different form of the houses that line the streets of this town, many of which were located close to working mines that often operated so close to the surface that streets and buildings above were in danger of collapsing. [These former miners’ cottages](#), often laid out in long unbroken rows that crowd and enclose narrow streets on both sides

like some roofless tunnel into centuries past, offer up not only the most striking examples of a unique local adaptation of what we think of as the standard 19th-century terrace but also, more broadly, of the house as reflection of its world.

The main outward and observable difference between these terraced rows of houses and their counterparts elsewhere is that local practice - to help protect the houses from the elements - was to treat outside walls with render and finish off the exterior with certain details. It is common to see door- and window-frames in muted colours, which often seem to have been planned to vary the pattern with neighbouring houses. As you leave Cleator Moor and head towards Egremont, you will pass the [most striking example in the form of the long and curving Trumpet Terrace and Trumpet Road](#).



Egremont and Florence Mine

The small town of **Egremont**, despite its proximity to Sellafield - the driving force of the local economic that ensures that West Cumbria enjoys some of the highest median wages in the United Kingdom - looks like a less prosperous cousin of Cockermouth, which lies at the other end of the B5086 road that runs along the edge of the Cumbrian mountains. Host of the annual Crab Fair in September -which is also the occasion for the World Gurning Championships in town - this historic market town suffers somewhat from the fact that the local bypass carries the Sellafield traffic around the town. Nikolaus Pevsner described the main street as "quite a handsome sight for an industrial Cumberland town." At the end of the main street are to be found the ruins of **the 12th century castle and its grounds**. From the

loftiest vantage point the most significant sight in the near distance is the headgear of **Florence Mine - the last working deep iron mine in Western Europe** (mining ceased in 2007). Following the road out of Egremont town centre, the remains of Florence Mine are straight ahead and around a sharp bend to the left at the other side of the **St Thomas' Cross** roundabout. The latter named after St Thomas à Becket, the 12th century fugitive Archbishop of Canterbury whose defence of the Church against Henry II - who had him murdered - received support in these parts, was once the location of the toll booth entrance to Egremont.

On the site of Florence Mine today, the building formerly used by miners as a changing room is home to **Florence Arts Centre**. The pit-head and surviving buildings and equipment were given Grade II listed status by Historic England in 2018.

Inside the Arts Centre locally produced artists materials - including pencils and oil paints made using the red ore, called Egremont Red - are sold, making handy souvenirs from this now quite **otherworldly-looking setting**, which strikes one as a perfect location for some kind of post-apocalyptic sci-fi film. As the image above shows, this is a place that looks particularly fascinating in wet conditions, when the rain brings out the character of **ground that allows the evidence of the red ore to surface**. A reminder, if it was needed, that was once part of a landscape of countless mines extending to nearby Cleator Moor and beyond, which was known as the Red Hills. In the 19th century it became a home for waves of migrants who were said to have participated in something akin to the California Gold Rush, drawn in to mine iron ore that was of the highest in quality in the country.



Top: Classic Motorcycles at the Egremont Crab Fair.
Bottom: The Sellafield plant sits on the edge of the West Cumbrian coast between St Bees and Ravenglass.



Sellafield to Ravenglass

A mile or two south from Florence Mine on the A595, the [Sellafield](#) nuclear reprocessing plant looms into view on the horizon. Depending on the light and atmospheric conditions what you see may strike you - in Paul Theroux's words - as a kind of "Martian Castle." This site is Britain's most extensive nuclear landscape and was, as such, first the home of Calder Hall (1956) and Windscale (1951) - the former producing electricity, the latter plutonium. It was renamed Sellafield in 1981, although pre-20th century maps reveal a place by that name existing here long before. The once popular Sellafield Visitor Centre is now permanently closed, so the best way to get as close to the site and to feel its presence on the landscape is to diverge from the A595 and [head through the picturesque hamlet of Beckermets](#).

If Sellafield - and what were described in its early days as its legions of "Atomic Men and Women" - has often represented a kind of futurism in the popular imagination, this is something brought neatly into focus by its proximity to certain prehistoric relics (and other ancient and medieval remains). A few miles on the southern edge of Sellafield, near Seascale, is [Greycroft Stone Circle, an arrangement of Bronze Age standing stones](#), which sit in a field opposite the site of Sellafield. Here, the prehistoric faces a vision of the future born of the 20th century.

From the road that winds its way south inland from the coast, it soon becomes easy to forget what century you are in. Indeed, the traveller passing through the villages of Gosforth, Holmrook and Bootle, and entering what road signs declare to be the [Western Valleys of the Lake District](#) (the route opens into

breathtaking views of the Lake District fells), might feel as if they are going backwards in time, and into a place that looks and feels much like mid-20th century Britain. An exit from the A595 back to the coast is found at [Ravenglass](#), once an important base through which the Romans delivered supplies to its forts and bases in what we know today as Cumbria, where small boats lie dotted around its estuary at low tide (pictured here). Even today, the old Roman road from here through [Hardknott Pass](#) is a remote and difficult road to negotiate without the right kind of vehicle, due to the steep and snaking line it cuts through the mountainous terrain.

Ravenglass today is a popular destination for its [miniature railway](#), which runs into the Western Valleys, and for its proximity to nearby [Muncaster Castle](#), another popular tourist destination.



Millom and Haverigg

Driving south to Millom on the A595 one can easily understand why it was thought of as almost an island unto itself. Its hemmed-in position on the [Duddon estuary](#), looking out in all directions to natural boundaries - the sea, and the imposing form of [Black Combe](#) - when combined with inadequate overland transport networks, had people imagining for a time that newly developed hovercraft could be a means of keeping it connected to other places.

Like Cleator Moor, Millom experienced an unprecedented boom in the mid-19th century, as a result of the speed with which the iron and steel industries took off, making it what was once described as “a small mining Kingdom.” Besides its steel, the most well-known product of Millom, was the poet [Norman Nicholson](#), whose

attachment to his hometown seemed to have been matched by the methodical labours devoted to his work. “I like to think that when I’ve finished a poem you can drop it on the floor and it won’t break,” he once said. Perhaps the same was said of the other products of Millom, the steel that flowed beneath the smoke and flames that lit up the sky around the clock. After the ironworks that spurred on the growth of the community in those boom years closed in 1968, there was a steadfast refusal to do as many economic and industrial experts advised, and simply abandon this town, a little world unto itself.

Nicholson’s work, of course, was often concerned with the Lake District, but that tends to obscure his obsession with life in the [Millom that faced out towards “the dying Atlantic’s edge”](#), where he was able to see ships falling “beyond the

horizon where the sunset dips” as if, indeed, they had reached a point of no return, disappearing with the sun into a mythic west beyond all sight.

To get close to this sense of being right on the edge, head to [Hodbarrow Point and Lighthouse, Haverigg](#), just outside of Millom. As well as being the location of an extensive holiday village today - with teepees and a sort of caravan riviera rising up around the edge of what locals know as the Lagoon - [Port Haverigg Marina Village](#) sells itself as a place to enjoy water-skiing and wakeboarding. Still offering protection to the location is the sea wall. Originally running to 6870ft in length, it was designed by dam engineers and erected at the turn of the 20th century in an attempt to hold back the rising waters that threatened to engulf the Hodbarrow Iron Company’s workings.



Top: Looking out over the Duddon Estuary from the old Millom dock.
Bottom: Holiday homes at Millom Lagoon, next to Hodbarrow Point nature reserve.