

*The Stone House
Upper Weardale
Far from Anywhere*

Buenos días tía Constanza.

¿Cómo estás?

You weren't expecting that were you, Aunt Constance? Little old me doing the old Spanish lingo when I'm nowhere near Spain and you don't speak Spanish; (despite those private flamenco lessons with Pepe the Plumber with his fine fandango). I've come over all Iberian because I've been to Wearhead Primary School in the village of, you've guessed it, Wearhead, where the speaking of Spanish is encouraged. A bold move considering some locals, as far as I can tell, cannot yet speak English (certainly not English as spoken in Reigate.)

This is a school striving to open the eyes, ears, hearts and minds of each child so they can taste what the world can offer and become the best they can be. They encourage aspiration, looking after each other, hard work, and the enjoyment of both learning and life. They want their pupils to see the hills, not as a barrier but as a gateway to a wider world. I find such an attitude invigorating in these times when certain people want to turn away from the world and look only to their own ways.

There is something idyllic about the school, a stone building at the west end of the village nestled in the Upper Dale. There is a signpost on the main road (at least what passes for a main road hereabouts) to Alston. You take a left turn and cross a stone bridge over the beck and

into the playground. It is not a big school – perhaps 25 children attend – but it has big ambitions for its pupils; the teachers see to that.

But the idyll can often be tempered by the cold winds of reality. Possibilities and aspirations are dampened by many things, family expectations for one. If you're from a family of hill-farmers you might feel destined for and, if you've grown up to love the land and the beasts, welcome that destiny. But what if that life is not for you? What pressures, couched as they may be in love and warmth, will you endure? You are, as a child, limited by remoteness, infrastructure, and topography, reliant upon the willingness of adults in your life to ferry you hither and thither. Can you become a professional cricketer (as one young lad does) when it's a 70 mile round trip to the nearest professional facility? It can't be done by public transport for that takes an age, if not longer, and if adults aren't willing or unable to oblige, that ambition departs as quickly as the joys of summer.

Can you become a beautician/hairdresser when you are in competition with established businesses for not that many customers or people prefer to go to the nearest large town – Bishop Auckland or Hexham – to have their highlights and shop at the supermarket? Is it better just to become a farmer and a farmer's wife (though hill farming is not what it was)?

I have said before that you can't stay in the Dale if you want to make something of your life. Children learn this very quickly when they discover that secondary school is either over the tops in Alston or Hexham (a travellers joy in the winter snows) or down the Dale in Wolsingham (a school seemingly always threatened with closure) journeys of some considerable distance. The move to secondary school

tramples over the idyll of the village school, the playing by the river, the ways through the fields, the bridge where the troll lives, and the woods where adventures grow. You can stay in the Dale if you are lucky enough to find work that suits. You can stay in the Dale if you have already established credentials elsewhere and are willing and able to commute or even work from home. You can stay in the Dale once your working life is over and you have either secured the way you want to live or you have learned to live with what you have managed to secure.

I do wonder about filling children with aspiration and possibility in an economic time when, and a place where, opportunity is limited. I think back to my prep school where, from a very early age, it was assumed pupils were destined for the higher echelons of society (almost irrespective of ability). We were rigorously prepared for the common entrance exam (designed specifically to keep the common people out) so that we could secure a place at a decent public school (e.g. a school designed to keep the public out). Many of my contemporaries are now "something in the city", "something in government" or entrepreneurs, landowners, or simply good eggs doing very nicely., I would rather not dwell on this part of my life; suffice it to say that although my contemporaries tootled off to Eton and Repton etc I discovered that I had more freedom and better food at the my Young Offenders Institute. I certainly learnt a lot of very useful skills there. And the chaps were very decent in their "watch your back" way.

Perhaps it is an attitude to children, common throughout the land that is the real block to aspiration. We encourage their dreams to be doctors, nurses, astronauts, pilots, engineers, fashion designers and then as they approach secondary school we insist those dreams be packaged

up and confined to childhood. I'm not saying this is done out of malice. It is perhaps the result of an adults' bitter experience that in their desire to protect their child they limit aspiration. That way disappointment does less damage to self-esteem.

Speaking of disappointment I was sorry, and surprised, to hear that Mrs Alabaster-Keighley lost in the final of the Surrey Over-60s Mixed Martial Arts competition. I still remember recall the ferocity of her high-kick on 5 year old Tabitha Thompson at the St Edelweiss toddlers' Christmas party. She really took exception to Tabitha having the last vegan vol-au-vent didn't she? I'm glad that Uncle Reginald is now settling into the life of Rule 43 and that your bunions are better. Who'd have thought sharp sand and jelly would do the trick?

Yours affectionately

Mr Nap