

Cumbria:

By Jonathan Broom

RESILIENT – AND BRILLIANT



Jim Downie, former Braithwaite Court manager, talks storm Desmond

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“CUMBRIAN FOLK DON'T DWELL ON STUFF. THIS IS NOT ALWAYS THE EASIEST PART OF THE WORLD TO LIVE IN – THOUGH I WOULD ARGUE IT'S ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL – BUT IF WE FACE A SETBACK WE TEND TO JUST SHRUG OUR SHOULDERS, ROLL OUR SLEEVES UP AND GET ON WITH LIFE.” **JIM DOWNIE**

Your former Braithwaite Court site manager knows whereof he speaks. But, along with his fellow north-westerners, towards the end of last year proud Cumbrian Jim faced an ordeal that would have given the most wild-eyed optimist pause.

The Lake District gets its fair share of rain – and last autumn was no different. Where the weather deviated from the established script, however, was in the arrival of storm Desmond, which over a 12-hour period dumped 14 inches of rain on Cumbria's already sodden Fells. The deluge cascaded down into Derwentwater, across the Newlands Valley, into Bassenthwaite Lake – and on into the pretty town of Cockermouth, by no means the only place that copped it, but one of the worst-affected.

Actually, Braithwaite should have escaped. Coledale Beck, the babbling stream that runs through the village, had become a raging torrent, but was deep enough, with banks high enough, to

channel even that massively increased volume of water safely away.

That Braithwaite got hit at all was down to an unfortunate, and unique, confluence of events. The weight of water on the nearby Fell caused a gigantic lump of mud to become disengaged. Down it came, taking five or six trees with it and coming to rest in the middle of the stream. An instant, and very effective, dam. The water, with nowhere else to go, took to the road. Through the village it raced, taking with it three cars and flooding the village shop, five of the six ground-floor properties at Gibson Court and, perhaps most calamitously, the Bond-owned Ivy House hotel.

Fast-forward three months. Never having visited HPB's oldest wholly-owned UK site, but mindful of what had gone on pre-Christmas, I decided it was high time to head up there. I went prepared for the worst. What I found was some of the best, and most heartening.



Nothing forges a community like having a common cause...



Main picture: At one with nature – Jim Downie in the heart of his beloved Lake District. Clockwise from above: Jim surveys the damage – one of the few areas yet to be cleared; one of the Ivy House ground-floor bedrooms tells the story of the flood – damaged curtains, filthy bathroom floor and a bath full of mud; the spot where Coledale Beck burst its banks; ruined furniture outside the Ivy House



Because Jim and his fellow Cumbrians have done what they always do: pulled together, rolled their sleeves up and got on with fixing things. No fuss, no unnecessary chit-chat – just a lot of hard work.

Intelligently done, too. As well as individuals and families, the various agencies and public bodies that have a presence in that glorious part of the world have obviously talked to each other, to make sure that what needs to get done gets done as expeditiously as possible. The results of this kind of joined-up thinking are astonishing. While there are still signs of what took place, and some repairs are yet to be finished, I would estimate that the area is 90% back to normal. A caveat: I was there for one whole day, and only saw a bit; but I'd be surprised if I'm far out.

The same goes for the Ivy House. Once the flood subsided, what was left was a thick carpet of noxious slurry throughout the ground floor. Cue Jim, and a scratch team of willing volunteers, who spent all of the next day clearing out the mess. "We were shovelling frogs!" Jim recalls. There followed a period during which the building was left to dry out – and insurance claims submitted – but meanwhile plans were afoot not just to restore your venerable hotel and restaurant, but to improve it, too.

"What could have been a disaster has turned into a fantastic opportunity," says Conker Interiors' Rosie Johnson, in charge of the Ivy House project. "The hotel has always been well-loved, and the restaurant popular both with Bondholders and the general public. But it always seemed a bit topsy-turvy, with accommodation on the ground floor and the restaurant upstairs – plus we were compromised on space. Moving the restaurant and kitchens to the ground floor has allowed us to increase the covers from 28 to 36, and to feature not one but two lounge-rooms.

"All involved are excited by the new colour scheme and the prospect of having a wooden floor in the restaurant (far more practical than a carpet). Painting the heavy beams will really open up the space and stop the ceiling feeling so low.

"Meanwhile, all the bedrooms are completely

different and the long-term plan was always to treat them as such. This plan has obviously been accelerated! We plan to use the same carpet, curtains and paintwork throughout, but the differences will come by way of a feature wallpaper wall, soft furnishings and upholstery elements. Colour schemes have been selected to best suit their individual geographical positioning and personality.

"My feeling was that the renovations happening inside should in some way be reflected on the outside – as a symbol of progress despite the devastation of the elements. So I'm looking at new signage, and a bit of a revamp. But nothing too radical, I promise!"

At the time of writing the Ivy House looks like a building site – which of course is what it is. But new Braithwaite Court and Ivy House site manager Alison Maddock is excited at the prospect of reopening, and confident that the place will be welcoming Bondholders in June.

Ali returned to Braithwaite shortly before Christmas after a three-year stint managing Lodge Yard – and has settled right back in. "Don't get me wrong, I loved the Yorkshire Dales," she says, "and it's the experience I gained there that's made me confident I can manage this place; I wouldn't have been up to it before. But for my partner and me, the Lake District is home – and we're delighted to be back."

One of Ali's long-term projects is to foster closer links between the Bond's Cumbrian home and the village in which it sits – "and oddly enough, storm Desmond has given us a great start. Nothing forges a community like having a common cause – in this case, putting our village back to rights. The villagers are really appreciative of HPB; for example

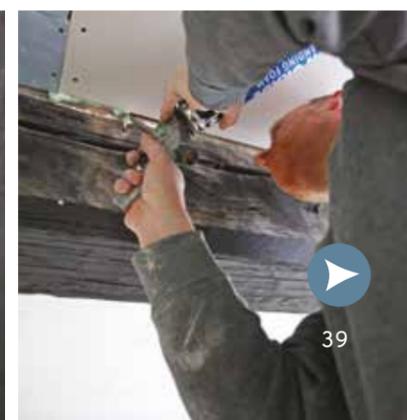
during term time the local schoolchildren have swimming lessons one afternoon a week in our pool. And we've always supported the local shop. The shop's currently closed – you can guess why – but I want us to be instrumental in helping owner Daphne get back on her feet; and, once she is, I want her to do our food packs. Things like that all help to foster good relations."

And what are Ali's hopes for the site itself?



Opposite from top: Ali explains: "This bench was under water!"; the Ivy House and hotel restaurant before the floods

This page: work is well underway to restore the Ivy House to well beyond its former glory



"What could have been a disaster turned into a fantastic opportunity"



From top to bottom:
Michael Jones, gardener;
Richard Nelson,
head of maintenance;
Kay Thornthwaite,
manager's assistant;
Andrea Alker, head housekeeper



“Braithwaite Court is one of the Bond’s most mature sites, and as such it needs a bit of TLC from time to time, a bit of refurbishment. But that’s already started, and it’s amazing what’s been achieved in so short a time – Desmond or no Desmond.”

Ali is full of praise for her staff. “My colleagues here have responded magnificently – not just to the flood, but to me starting here.”

Quite by chance we’re joined – briefly – by Richard, Ali’s head of maintenance, who concurs. “The flood was Ali’s baptism of fire – not quite the right words, but you know what I mean!” he laughs. “But there’s a fantastic team spirit here, that makes all the difference.”

“Going forward, I want to make Braithwaite Court less ‘one-dimensional,’” Ali continues. “Yes, people come here for the walking, of course they do, and the cycling, and all the rest. But there’s so much more to this area – you don’t have to be outdoors-y to get the most out of it. There’s great theatre, wonderful cinema, the best food and drink, loads of stately homes to visit... And the area’s fun for youngsters, too.”



“My colleagues have responded magnificently – not just to the flood, but to me starting here”

There really is something for everyone.”

And to tell them all about it, Ali is considering entering the publishing business. “When you’ve got a site that’s relatively spread out, as this one is, it’s easy for Bondholders in the outlying properties to miss out on events – Bond or otherwise. Despite the welcome meetings! So I’m thinking of producing a weekly bulletin, which we’ll distribute by hand to all the properties, alerting people to what’s going on, and where.”

Many of those events will take place in the refurbished Ivy House. Ali plans to use the hotel much more frequently for get-togethers. “I want to do information meetings there, coffee mornings, afternoon teas, and of course Bondholder Dinners!”

But Ali is aware she has big shoes to fill – or in this case, walking boots. Specifically, those apparently welded to the feet of Jim Downie: Lake District native, outdoorsman and, for 18 years, Braithwaite Court and Ivy House manager.

But Jim hasn’t gone, not quite. At 67 he may have retired from site management, but he will still be leading regular walks for Braithwaite Court holidaymakers around his beloved Lakes and Fells. Jim is generous with his time – and I was lucky enough to grab a morning of it, and to be shown just a little of what makes Cumbria so special.

Driving alongside the beautiful Newlands Valley en route to Derwentwater, Jim gave me a thumbnail sketch of the economy of the local area. Mining went some way towards the formation of the Lake District as we know it today, it turns out – during the reign of Elizabeth I lead, copper, gold and silver mines, and the drainage projects associated with same, were what created (*inter alia*) Newlands Valley. But those mines are long-defunct; what drives the economy now, Jim says, is sheep-farming (which predates the mines) – and tourism.

“The farmers have had to diversify,” says Jim. “So what happens now is that, as well as rearing sheep, farmers run tea-rooms, holiday cottages, bed-&-breakfasts, caravan parks... It’s good news for Braithwaite holidaymakers: the tea-rooms and

little restaurants that have sprung up are smashing, and the farmers are eager to share with visitors what they do, and what life is like around here. People can walk from tea-room to tea-room!”

There are other new attractions, too, among them the Lingholm Estate, a noble pile on the shores of Derwentwater, which people can visit by boat; and the Lakes Distillery – fascinating to visit, with a super bistro restaurant on site. And, as you’d expect, tastings; Jim particularly recommends the gin. And, of course, Keswick’s vibrant Theatre by the Lake where, thanks to Jim, Bondholders can enjoy a £2 reduction on published ticket prices. To check out what’s on over the next few months, visit www.theatrebythelake.com/whats-on.

Out of the car we got – Jim, me, and Jim’s labrador Molly – for a short but enchanting walk, taking in Catbells, one of the area’s most picturesque and popular Fells, overlooking the majestic Derwentwater; Manesty Wood, a National Trust-owned stretch of woodland on the shores of the lake, alive with birdsong in the spring and summer; and of course the lake itself, benign that day, with waters crystal-clear. And all the while Jim was pointing out different items of interest: “That’s Sir Hugh Walpole’s old house over there... See that tidemark? That’s where the flood waters came to... Hear that woodpecker?” It was really fascinating and, in its way, touching. Jim’s love for his home turf is transparent, and he can’t wait to communicate that to Bondholders.

“People say about us that Cumbrians go away on holiday, and spend the whole time wanting to go home,” he says. “That’s not entirely true – but it’s not entirely false either. Since I retired my wife, Anne, and I have been away a fair bit, and we’ve enjoyed it. We have become Bondholders, and so you may meet us at other HPB sites. But I’m always very happy to be back. This is where I belong, the place I know best – and I’m looking forward to sharing not just the Lake District’s obvious beauty with Bondholders, but some of its secrets, too.” ^B

