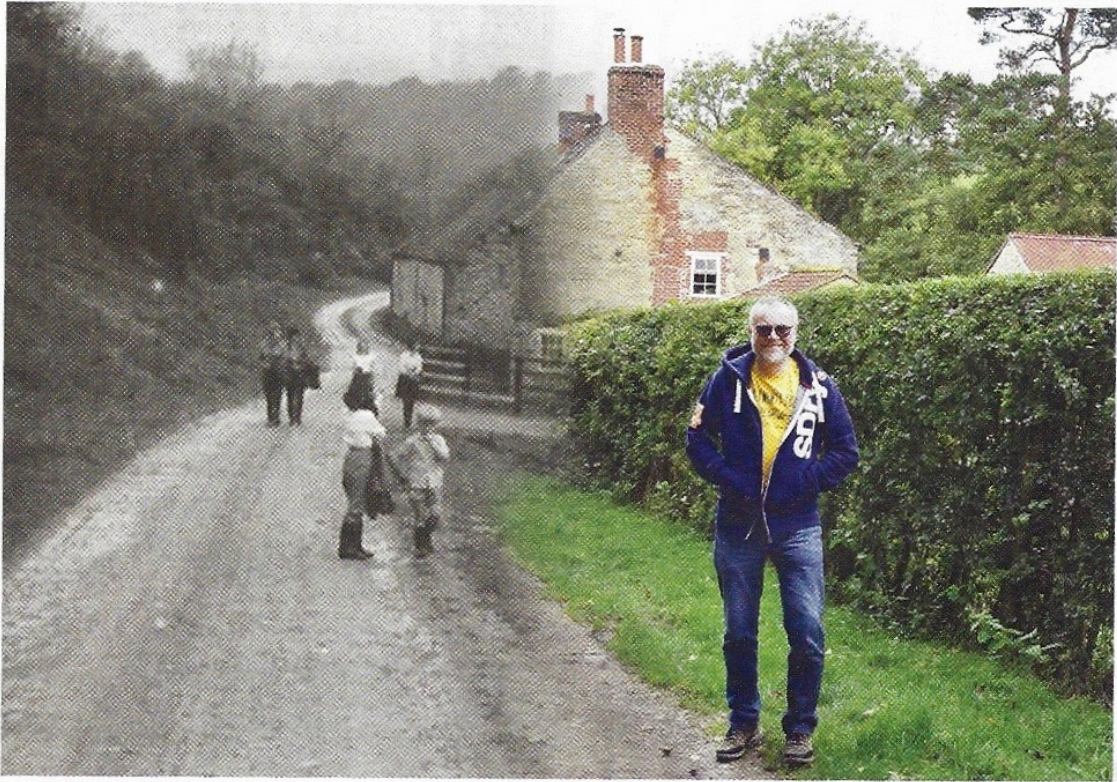


Return to le Dale



To the left is a picture from the author's 1967 holiday photo album. When he returned fifty years later, he posed in exactly the same spot, right, and, using some digital trickery, we have merged the two images together

I have vivid memories of my first camping trip to Thornton le Dale and Ellerburn. It was in May 1967 when I was four-and-a-half years old. Fifty years on, my wife Clare and I acquired "George", a VW orange and white campervan, so we decided to return to the place that holds such special memories. From our home in Cambridgeshire, we set off for my native Yorkshire with a

**Mike Trippitt
revisits a
picturesque
corner of
Yorkshire
exactly fifty
years after
his first
trip there**

sense of adventure and excitement.

Thornton le Dale sits on the crossroads of the Pickering to Scarborough A170 and the Malton to Whitby road. Once described as one Yorkshire's prettiest villages, its North Yorks Moors National Park status has helped to keep its character and appeal.

First impressions are important, and Thornton excels. A beck straddled by

small footbridges babbles along Maltongate – the way to the village car park – and the car park, though busy, is far from ordinary. Set within a former walled garden, it cocoons us in the heart of a village; the green just a short walk along a wooded path.

At its heart, two public houses, a number of tearooms and small shops, a newsagent and general store, and the deliciously named “Chocolate Factory” show that Thornton le Dale is both a tourist destination and a service village for residents and surrounding villages. It is alive and thriving, although largely unchanged since my first visit.

On the green, next to the medieval market cross, a sight brings memories flooding back. Fifty years earlier, like thousands of children before and after, I had sat at the village stocks with my feet through the yoke, whilst my father crouched beside me to explain what they were. Today, just like half a century ago, they are a fascinating reminder of how local and summary justice was once administered.

Strolling around the green, past stone cottages and three-hundred-year-old almshouses, then along the path where the famous thatched “Beck Cottage”



Ellerburn valley



Then and now: the author pictured at Ellerburn in 1967 and in the same spot fifty years later



One of the most photographed cottages in England, Beck Cottage in Thornton le Dale, above

Right, the author's VW campervan, "George", parked in Thornton le Dale



slumbers quietly on the bank of Thornton Beck, I wonder where the last fifty years have gone. Thornton stands immutable, at least to the casual observer or occasional visitor.

But the village that welcomes our 2017 VW camper is different to that which welcomed Dad's Austin A40 in 1967.

"It has changed tremendously since I was small," says John Garbutt (sixty-two), fifth-generation-owner of the family-run village newsagents and general store Wardill Brothers.

John, a parish councillor and founding member of the village history society, has

lived in the village most of his life. He says that farming in the area has declined significantly in recent years.

"Agriculture is still a major activity, but there are a few large farms around the periphery of the village, whereas when I was growing up there were a lot of small farms working within the village.

"It has changed from a working village to more of a dormitory village, and also a retirement village in many ways. That's the biggest change."

But it must still be a great place to live?

"It is a wonderful environment to grow up in. Crime rates are low; it is a very

safe environment. There are still the opportunities for young people to make their own enjoyment,” says John.

Later, in Priestmans Lane, just past the old mill, I am perplexed. It was here, or so I thought, that in 1967 I saw something I had not seen before; a stream running across a road! I recall the sense of wonder and apprehension when Dad first drove the car through the ford and later, his words of caution when I waded in up to my wellington tops.

Sadly, the ford was replaced with a bridge in the 1980s. But, rather quaintly, the “Ford” and “Try Your Brakes” signs remain. One day, I guess, unlike my memories, they will be taken away.

When we leave the car park and turn right off Whitby Gate onto Ellerburn Road for the drive through the valley, a boyish excitement wells within me.

Ellerburn, the sleepy hamlet nestling on the edge of Dalby Forest, is just one mile from Thornton le Dale. Some call the shallow, wooded valley “the garden of the village”. Once we have pitched the campervan on Low Farm campsite, the sights and sounds of life outside this idyll simply disappear.

Fifty years previously we had camped just fifty yards away across the beck behind a little cottage that looked much the same. That campsite is now closed, and old Mr and Mrs Skipper who owned the cottage and ran the site passed away more than thirty years ago. It would have been a thrill to find their family still living there, but they left no children and the cottage has changed hands a number of times since they died.

Gary Kendall and Val Colegate live at Low Farm; Gary has lived in Thornton and Ellerburn all his life and farms

livestock, while Val runs the campsite. Gary recalls that in the 1960s and '70s he and his friends would stand by the side of the gated road opening the gates for motorists in the hope of a modest tip. He was a regular visitor to Ellerburn.

“We used to come down here on our bikes. I remember Mr and Mrs Skipper. They used to open the stable door into their cottage and sell ice cream from it. If someone had been kind enough to give us a sixpence or three-pence piece for opening and closing the gate we’d go there and get something with it.”

My conversation with Gary, exchanging memories, telling stories, gives me a real connection to this beautiful valley and its past, but I can only imagine what it must be like to live and work in such a peaceful, special place.

Val tells me that they never take Ellerburn for granted and always

It has changed from a working village to more of a dormitory village

appreciate it. “I like the winters best,” she says. “We get a lot of frost down here, but temperatures are very localised. At one point last winter it was five degrees cooler in Ellerburn than in Thornton le Dale. Once the campsite closes down for the winter, a lot of heron come down onto the site for the fish in the beck.”

My reunion with Thornton le Dale and Ellerburn has been what I had hoped: happy, rewarding, informative and nostalgic. Even so, I need to return. We must come back again in all seasons, to see for ourselves the many faces of this sublime village, and the stunning valley beyond. ♦