



One day I was browsing the online sales catalogue of a rare books seller and chanced upon a used set of Wainwright's Lake District guides. The eight books had a price tag of £275. At first glance this seemed expensive but then I realised they had belonged to another famous Lake District author. They were the copies that had once belonged to the late *Postman Pat* creator John Cunliffe and included his personal annotations.

I was drawn to them because of fleeting encounters I'd had with both Wainwright and Cunliffe. Also I had worked as a journalist for the publisher of the guides, *The Westmorland Gazette*.

Both writers were Lancastrians – Wainwright was from Blackburn, Cunliffe Colne – and each made Kendal his home and used the Lake District as a springboard to literary fame.

Wainwright lived in the town from the 1930s until his death in 1991, while Cunliffe spent a decade living at Greenside, close to Beast Bank Post Office, which had helped to inspire the world-famous television and book character.

So, the two men had been Kendal contemporaries during the 1970s. It was also precisely the time when I was growing up in the town.

Intrigued, I ordered the books. When they arrived I undid the bubble-wrapping and carefully lifted out the guides one by one. Most were scuffed, some had tattered

covers. All were well-used and had been much loved. Inside, on the end-papers, was John Cunliffe's handwriting, a distinctive copper-plate in black ink. He had recorded the date of each book's purchase and where he had been living at the time, for example: 'John and Sylvia Cunliffe, 25th May 1973, 32 Greenside, Kendal, Westmorland'.

Scattered across random pages were notes Cunliffe had jotted down after completing a walk. One read: '12 April 1976: Crinkle Crag & Bowfell. Ascent by Red Tarn. Descent by the Band. With Dennis.'

I assumed 'Sylvia' was Cunliffe's wife. But who was 'Dennis'? And, intriguingly, had Cunliffe ever met Wainwright? I wanted to know more.

I called the bookseller, Christian White in Ilkley, the Yorkshire town where John Cunliffe had lived out his final years before his death aged 85 in 2018. Christian was a former BBC journalist who had given up reporting to follow his passion for old and rare books. Today he is fascinated by hunting down what are known as 'association copies' – books previously owned by significant historical figures.

The most spine-tingling discovery he made came when he bought a 17th century edition of George Chapman's translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Inside the book he spotted strange vertical pencil marks at the end of quotations. After some research, he realised this was one of the books used by Dr Samuel Johnson in the creation of his

# A very SPECIAL DELIVERY

**JEREMY CRADDOCK** bought a set of Wainwright's walking guides with links to another famous Lake District author. This is what he discovered

**above:**

John Cunliffe's beloved creation, Postman Pat, at the Post Office inspired by the one just a few yards from the author's home in Kendal

**right:**

John Cunliffe with his wife Sylvia pictured in 2016, two years before John's death.

Photo: Courtesy of Sylvia Cunliffe







## ‘I don’t think John ever met Wainwright when we lived in Kendal’

famous *Dictionary*. Unsurprisingly, the book was snapped up for a significant amount of money by an American dealer.

I told Christian of my interest in the guidebooks, and of my fleeting personal encounters with Wainwright and Cunliffe.

In 1987, when I was a sixth former in Kendal, I was walking home from school. A silver car pulled up alongside me. With the engine still running, the driver jumped out, a small, sprightly grey-haired woman. She slipped a letter into the slot of a red post box next to me. She looked vaguely familiar, so I turned to look at the figure in the passenger seat. It was Alfred Wainwright, with thick white hair and metal-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a grey anorak and a lugubrious expression on his face. I realised the driver was his wife, Betty.

I recognised Wainwright because this was when he was making his celebrated BBC television series with broadcaster Eric Robson. These programmes had turned him into a reluctant celebrity.

The year after Wainwright died I was taken on as a trainee reporter at *The Westmorland Gazette* in Kendal. I remember seeing engraved printing plates to Wainwright’s books lying in the dust in the newspaper’s now-dismantled press room. (I later kicked myself for not salvaging one.)

In the late 1990s I interviewed John Cunliffe about how his time in Kendal inspired *Postman Pat*. His fictional Greendale was based on the nearby Longsleddale valley. It was a phone call I have never forgotten because John was such a lovely man.

I remember telling him there should be a plaque on his former home at Greenside.

‘That would be very nice,’ he replied. Christian White explained that after John died in 2018 he was invited by his widow Sylvia to visit her home in Ilkley as she was trimming down the thousands of books in John’s collection. The Wainwrights caught his keen eye as interesting ‘association copies’.

I tentatively emailed Sylvia to tell her of my purchase of the books. Now aged 85, she proved just as lovely and accommodating as her late husband. She was thrilled John’s books had gone to a fellow writer and somebody from Kendal, ‘John’s favourite place on Earth,’ she told me.

Over the coming weeks, she and I struck up a fascinating email correspondence as we realised we had various Kendal-related things in common, for example their son Edward was a pupil at Stramongate Primary School around the same time I was there.

I knew the basic outline of John’s life and career, but Sylvia sent me further details in long, flowing emails, beautifully composed, demonstrating that John was not the only writer in the Cunliffe family.

Her explanations little by little explained some of the notes in the Wainwright guides now in my possession.

At the start of John’s career he was a children’s librarian in Brighton – several of the guides have ‘Brighton’ labelled in Cunliffe’s handwriting – and he had discovered a brilliant gift for telling stories to children. His first published books were about Farmer Barnes.

In the early 1970s, he decided to give up his job and move to the Lake District to train to be a teacher. In one of John’s guides, he had inscribed: ‘John Cunliffe: 1 February 1973,



**above left:**

The eight Wainwright guides, annotated by John Cunliffe

**above:**

The former Beast Bank Post Office, at 10 Greenside

**right:**

The former Beast Bank Post Office, at 10 Greenside, today commemorates John Cunliffe’s work with a plaque, while knitted Postman Pat and Jess the cat figures adorn the red postbox.

Photos: Jeremy Craddock

Windermere. Bought the day following my interview at Charlotte Mason College of Education, Ambleside. I will look forward to climbing these peaks!’

Sylvia recalled: ‘We had to live on a student grant which meant we had to find the cheapest house we possibly could in Kendal and 32 Greenside was a mere £6,500 pounds! So we promptly bought it!’

He went on to become an inspirational teacher at Castle Park Primary School in Kendal. It was here that he heard that the BBC was looking for ideas for new children’s television programmes. He pitched his idea for *Postman Pat* and the rest, as they say, is history.

Shortly after I began corresponding with Sylvia Cunliffe, I was visiting Kendal. I took photos of 32 Greenside and the former Beast Bank Post Office that inspired *Postman Pat* and which now sports a smart red Kendal

Civic Society plaque in John’s honour.

On the red postbox were knitted figures of Postman Pat and his black and white cat Jess.

I sent the pictures to Sylvia. She was thrilled, especially as the day of my visit had, coincidentally, been the fifth anniversary of John’s death.

Sylvia and I continue to correspond. Two questions remained. Who was Dennis? And did John ever meet Wainwright?

It turns out Dennis was a friend from John’s days training to be a librarian.

Of a possible encounter between the two great authors, Sylvia said: ‘I don’t think John ever met Wainwright when we lived in Kendal, but he was certainly one of Wainwright’s admirers.’

That is evident in the precious set of Wainwright guides which now have pride of place in my book collection. ●

